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## Engaging Men on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment

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*With multiple, intersectional, and contesting masculinities, there are barriers and challenges to engaging men on gender equality. What are the opportunities for a feminist, intersectional, and gender transformative way forward?*

While in recent years a consensus seems to have emerged that men should be engaged on gender equality and empowerment of women, there seems to be less clarity on the appropriate strategies and approaches to engage them (Glinski et al. 2018). The recognition of male engagement to empower women as a critical element of gender equality work happened as early as in 1979 with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN General Assembly 1979).

However, serious gender transformative work engaging men gained momentum much later, after the United Nations’ 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (UN Women 2015), and the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2004 (UN Women n.d.). More recently, the case of Andrew Tate, a popular social media personality amongst young men and a self-proclaimed misogynist, has revived the global debate on the need to promote healthy masculinities (Verma and Khurana 2023).

In this article, we will reflect on the complex realities of men and masculinities and discuss the key barriers and challenges in engaging men on gender equality. We highlight what we are learning from various studies and experiments in this field and what the opportunities are for a feminist, intersectional, and gender transformative way forward.

### Gender is not equal to women

The discourse, policy, and programmatic approaches around gender in the development sector had, for long, equated gender with women’s empowerment, and did not engage with men to collectively challenge the inequitable norms and practices that legitimise men’s power over women. These approaches largely failed to recognise that the rigid gender expectations that advantage men over women also disadvantage men in many complex ways, with serious adverse implications for women, men, and people of other genders.

One can understand these contradictions and disempowerment well when masculinity is viewed within the context of other layers of inequalities such as caste, class, age, race, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and so on.

Viewed against this background, the emerging body of work on men and masculinities has tried to theorise and deconstruct masculinity and present man as a gendered being who, while on the one hand is privileged compared to women, but on the other hand is also conflicted and suffers from contradictions and disempowerment as women do (Michael 1994).

One can understand these contradictions and disempowerment well when masculinity is viewed within the context of other layers of inequalities such as caste, class, age, race, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and even marital and employment status, and so on. While men, owing to their gender, may feel entitled and powerful against women, other social hierarchies, power structures, and material conditions may contribute to men’s feelings of powerlessness or disadvantage amongst other men.

For example, a man from a socially dominant caste in India may enjoy greater privileges than a man from an underprivileged caste (Chopra 2006), but may experience discrimination and subordination if his sexual identity is not acceptable in a given context, or if he does not earn money and support his family in a community that values men for their roles as earners and providers. R.W. Connell’s theorisation of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities offers a useful framework in this regard, and pushes the boundaries of the masculinity discourse beyond the binary categories of women and men.

According to this, masculinity is as much about men versus men as it is about men versus women, with multiple, intersectional, and contesting masculinities. At the same time, scholars point out that while a multiplicity of contesting masculinities exist, there is some degree of universality and hegemony that cuts across the various masculinities, and that the relative privilege and power of men as a gendered group must not be understated (Dowd 2010).

### Hegemonic masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity must be understood as a set of socially constructed attitudes, roles, and behaviours around manhood internalised by men (and women) within the context of existing gender norms and relations. It is not unusual to find a description of a 'real man' (*asli mard* in Hindi/Urdu) in day-to-day conversations or media imageries, as someone who is dominant, aggressive, unemotional, and sexually powerful. In this imagery of masculinity, controlling women and violent behaviour are important ingredients (Pulerwitz 2006).

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Every boy and man must learn to perform and adhere to these expectations in a particular context and social structure. In schools, for example, rites of passage for boys to become men include rough, violent, and often abusive ways (Achyut et al. 2016). The patriarchal idea of male privilege and supremacy demands that men and adolescent boys engage in risk-taking behaviour, including violence that harms both women's and their own health.

One of the key implications of this kind of masculinisation is that adolescent boys and men see women's empowerment and gender equality as a zero-sum game.

While myriad factors are responsible for disempowering women, the patriarchal assumption that men are superior to women is at the root of individual, community-level, and institutional norms, processes, and practices that systematically deprive women and girls of the opportunities for growth provided to boys and men. At the same time, boys are prepared and socialised to play the eventually aggressive and tough roles of being achievers and providers.

The most serious implication of this entrenched idea of male supremacy is that it views gender equality as a zero-sum game and that it propagates the idea that women's empowerment essentially means a loss of power for men. As a result, individual men may not value gender equality efforts, and may even be antagonistic towards them.

Data from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES), developed by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and Promundo (now known as Equimundo), shows that men who committed violence against women felt that rights for women meant a loss of rights for men, and that men with economic stress (those who were unemployed and/or underemployed) were less likely to be gender equitable (Barker et al. 2011). The relationship between masculinity and gender equality is thus complicated by men's own vulnerabilities and the continual pressure to exert male dominance and power, to prove one's masculinity, and to perform as a man.

## Men pay a heavy price

Expectations of masculinity or norms on it take a toll on boys' education, especially those coming from underprivileged and resource-poor settings. Most girls drop out between the primary and secondary levels to wait for marriage but boys drop out during and after the secondary level to look after the family and to earn (Jere et al. 2022).

Norms on masculinity take a toll on men's health and well-being too. Death rates among men are higher in almost all age groups than women. They also tend to suffer more from serious mental health problems.

Boys often experience forms of violence different from girls' in the form of corporal punishment, bullying, sexual abuse, and in punishments from parents and teachers if they do not meet scholastic expectations. And if they are first-born or with younger sisters, the expectation is that they will earn soon and help their parents to marry their sisters off. More of them say, 'I don't enjoy studying' than girls while dropping out. They are pulled into more exciting things very early in life—running errands, managing money, taking responsibility, and so on rather than studying (Achyut et al. 2020).

Norms on masculinity take a toll on men's health and well-being too (Khan et al. 2020). Death rates amongst men are higher in almost all age groups than women. They also tend to suffer more from serious mental health problems and more of them attempt suicide than women. In most countries, women are more likely to be attuned to health problems and seek health services, whereas men are more likely to ignore them or diminish their importance.



Rigid ideas and expectations about masculinity also mean that males abandon and undervalue the traits that are typically associated with women such as being caring, expressive, and valuing emotions. They go on to create “emotionally limited and stunted” lives for themselves (Dowd 2010).

Despite the heavy price males pay, they do not yet see that it is the same patriarchy that disadvantages women that disadvantages them as well, and that it is not a zero-sum game of men vs women. This shows that efforts need to be focused on the structures – social, political and economic – that produce and reproduce multiple inequalities, including gender inequality, and have sustained the attraction to male power, hierarchies, and privileges (NFHS-5 2019) much more than the attraction to being equal and equitable.

### Transforming masculinities

Given the challenges discussed above, how does one work with men on issues of gender equality? What are the most appropriate approaches? Working with men to promote gender equality is evidently problematic because if it is not done thoughtfully, the effort may reinforce the privileges and power of men.

Geeta Rao Gupta (2000) proposed a gender integration spectrum ranging from gender neutral approaches to gender transformative approaches, which critically examines and questions gender-related norms, including those associated with masculinities. Over the past two decades, there have been sporadic yet concerted efforts largely within specific areas of reproductive health, including family planning, HIV/AIDS, and violence against women. They have been largely confined to civil society organisations developing, testing and validating gender transformative programmes with men and boys and women and girls (Coley et al. 2021; Ruane-McAteer et al. 2020).

Gender neutral approaches on the other hand build on existing power relations rather than challenge them. They address symptoms such as reducing violence [?] but not the root causes.

These programmes or interventions have generated a wealth of learning. Broadly speaking gender transformative approaches are different from gender neutral or instrumentalist approaches in that they are intentional about challenging and changing existing inequitable power relations. They pause and reflect on men’s realities, and go beyond giving and receiving information. They create dissonance as an approach using critical and reflective thinking as a major methodology and establish safe spaces and a supportive environment for reflection and action for men and boys and women and girls.

Gender neutral approaches on the other hand build on existing power relations rather than challenge them. They address symptoms such as reducing violence, promoting the acceptance of family planning methods, or reducing child marriage rates but not the root causes.

They mainly position gender as “women’s issues” rather than as a relational concept. They engage with men to produce better outcomes for women; and seldom focus on men’s own realities and need for transformation.

Gender synchronisation is a key approach within the transformative process, which seeks to address the needs of men as well as women, in tandem with each other, through varying participatory methodologies that leverage single-gender and mixed-gender groups to strategically transform gender norms (Glinski et al. 2018).

An ecosystem based gender transformative programme works at multiple levels. For example, at the individual level the programme builds an open-minded foundation for a conversation around power and privileges. One of the key characteristics of such a programme is that while it remains appreciative of the change makers, it refrains from making heroes. The conversation is about an ongoing change process and self-critical thinking. While discussions centre on the pressures of normative expectations, they also focus on fixing accountability for male privileges.

Structured, well-designed, and intentional gender transformative programmes have shown positive outcomes on some of key parameters of boys and men’s engagement in gender equality issues.

At the institutional level, a multi-tier engagement helps to build ownership of the system and its sustenance through mainstreaming of gender, capacity building, and a shift in the pedagogy.

Structured, well-designed, and intentional gender transformative programmes have shown positive outcomes on some of key parameters of boys and men’s engagement in gender equality issues. For example, school-based programmes show positive results in terms of an improved attitude amongst boys, girls, and teachers towards gender norms and violence. There is more peer interaction and communication; more communication with teachers; more reporting of violence perpetrated by peers and teachers; improved bystander intervention; and an improved school environment.

Stories of change that emerged from Parivartan, the ICRW’s sports-based gender transformative programme implemented in Mumbai between 2008 and 2012, highlighted the nuances and complexities of the ways in which men experience and participate in the change process (Das, 2014).

In one documented story of change (ESubden 2019), a former Parivartan coach reflects on how his own attitude and behaviour began to shift through participating in programme trainings, and the ways in which these changes were perceived by his peers and other men, highlighting the importance of group-based approaches that promote safe spaces for vulnerability and reflecting amongst men. As his female partner suggests, there need to be more opportunities for engagement and more spaces for men to think, reflect, and learn about gender and equality.

Another story of change documents the journey of a Parivartan programme participant, who shares his experience about the pressures on men to provide for their families and challenges the notion of what a “real man” should be (ESubden 2019). Although gender norm change is a long-drawn process, transformative interventions can play a key role in destabilising the foundations and assumptions of patriarchy and encouraging men to collectively re-imagine masculinities and gender equality.

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