

Position paper on Gender Equality

Engaging boys and men for gender equality

Introduction

“Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls”, is the theme of the upcoming 58th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The Millennium Development Goals provided a stand-alone goal on promoting Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, resulting in inclusion of gender in the broader development agenda and increased political support for improving women’s and girl’s rights. However, causes and symptoms of gender inequality were not sufficiently taken into account.

Dominant cultural norms and values on manhood undermine gender equality and Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) for all. Not including boys and men in gender equality is not only a missed opportunity for men’s own health and wellbeing, it may even lead to a deteriorating position of women and their (Sexual and Reproductive Health) Rights.

Our Call

The new global Post-2015 Development Agenda aims for gender transformation by looking at the root causes of gender inequality. Patriarchal norms and values are to be addressed by questioning harmful notions and practices of manhood. This includes creating safe spaces for men and women to redefine concepts of manhood, relationships, sexuality and caregiving.

Therefore, MenCare+¹ calls for:

- 1) A greater focus on engaging men as supportive partners in the promotion of SRHR, particularly in family planning, prenatal and antenatal maternal health, the prevention of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI’s) and HIV/AIDS.
- 2) Programmes and policies focusing on preventing Gender Based Violence (GBV) to include a focus on engaging men as partners, allies, potential victims. For men who are abusive, counselling services are to be offered.
- 3) Programmes and policies enabling fathers to take up a greater care-giving role, such as paternity leave.

Engage men as supportive partners in the promotion of SRHR, family planning, maternal and child health and in the prevention of HIV

In many parts of the world, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is largely considered the sole responsibility of women. This leaves women and girls to bear the burden of their own and their families’ SRHR, allowing too many men to neglect their SRHR needs and responsibilities and that of their family.

While support and promotion of SRHR for women is to be continued, attention must also be placed on the specific needs and role of men and boys as partners and clients in SRHR. Men, as well as women, will benefit from such attention: SRHR interventions for men and boys have been shown to effectively decrease men’s risk-taking behaviour, increase men’s support for partner’s SRHR, addressing gender inequality and reducing violence.

¹ The MenCare+ Program, developed from the tenets of the MenCare Campaign, is a 3-year, 4-country collaboration between Rutgers WPF and Promundo-US, created to engage men, ages 15-35, as caregiving partners in maternal and child health (MCH) and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR).

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Health systems must play an active role in promoting improved health-seeking behaviour by men. An important pillar in the MenCare+ programme is to achieve change in attitudes of health personnel towards gender sensitive behaviour. Gender sensitive behaviour needs to be at the forefront of national gender policies and programs. This transformation will have benefits for the lives of women, children and men.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education in informal and formal learning settings should open up and question rigid gender norms and include a strong focus on gender equality, based on a gender transformative approach. Comprehensive Sexuality Education can lead boys and girls to make positive, healthy, and safe choices about sex and promote equal relationships.

Work with men and boys to prevent gender based violence

Gender based violence is a violation of human rights, and compromises physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. The high levels of gender-based violence around the world are inextricably linked to stereotypical masculine gender norms and unequal power relations between men and women.

Inequitable gender norms socialise men to think that it is acceptable to respond to problems with violence and to control and dominate their partners. Inequitable Gender norms make it also difficult for men to seek help or to express feelings of fear or vulnerability. As evidence shows that witnessing violence in a household of origin is associated with men's later use of intimate partner violence (IPV), creating space for men to heal from past trauma can encourage trauma healing and the development of positive, non-violent coping strategies. This, in turn, can help men become an equal partner in happy, healthy relationship, as well as an engaged, equitable father.

Support to survivors of violence, in most cases women, is to be intensified in order to stop Gender Based Violence. Boys and men are to be engaged in changing social norms in order to address the root causes of violence. This should include providing alternative and non-violent role models for young men and boys and supporting men to take a stand against Gender Based Violence. For men who are abusive, counselling services are to be offered.

Caring Fathers

Fatherhood, and more generally, men's contribution to caregiving and domestic labour, provides a tangible opportunity to improve gender equality. Women carry out a disproportionate share of care-related activities worldwide², including domestic work and child care, thus limiting their potential to earn income, and perpetuating income and social inequalities between men and women. Care for children is a shared responsibility and offers an opportunity to increase gender equality. That is why men's participation in care work should increase. When fathers are involved in their children's lives at an early stage, preferably starting at the stage of conception, there is a higher likelihood that they will remain connected to their children throughout their lives. Research shows that when men are involved, women report calmer birth experiences. Furthermore, men's presence at birth leads to greater father involvement in the long run. Finally, Father involvement and equitable relations between parents emerged as key factor reducing boys' exposure to violence.

² Women represent **40% of paid workforce** and more than half the world's food producers. Yet average time women spend on unpaid care work is **2 to 10 times that of men**.

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Closing words

Engaging boys and (young) men is as crucial as strategic for improving SRHR for all, reduction of gender based violence and equal relationships. Transforming masculinities forms an important element of the approach. Becoming a father is a 'life'-event and offers an exceptional opportunity to get through to young men with a new perspective on manhood. When men become more caring and engaged fathers, gender based violence goes down, women's sexual and reproductive health outcomes improve, children develop better, and men become happier and healthier. This allows a unique and global tipping point in the equality between men and women to become a reality. Men are part of the solution!

RutgersWPF



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