



Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality Series:
Man in the Mirror—reflections on men and boys
engaging gender work in development

BRIEF 3



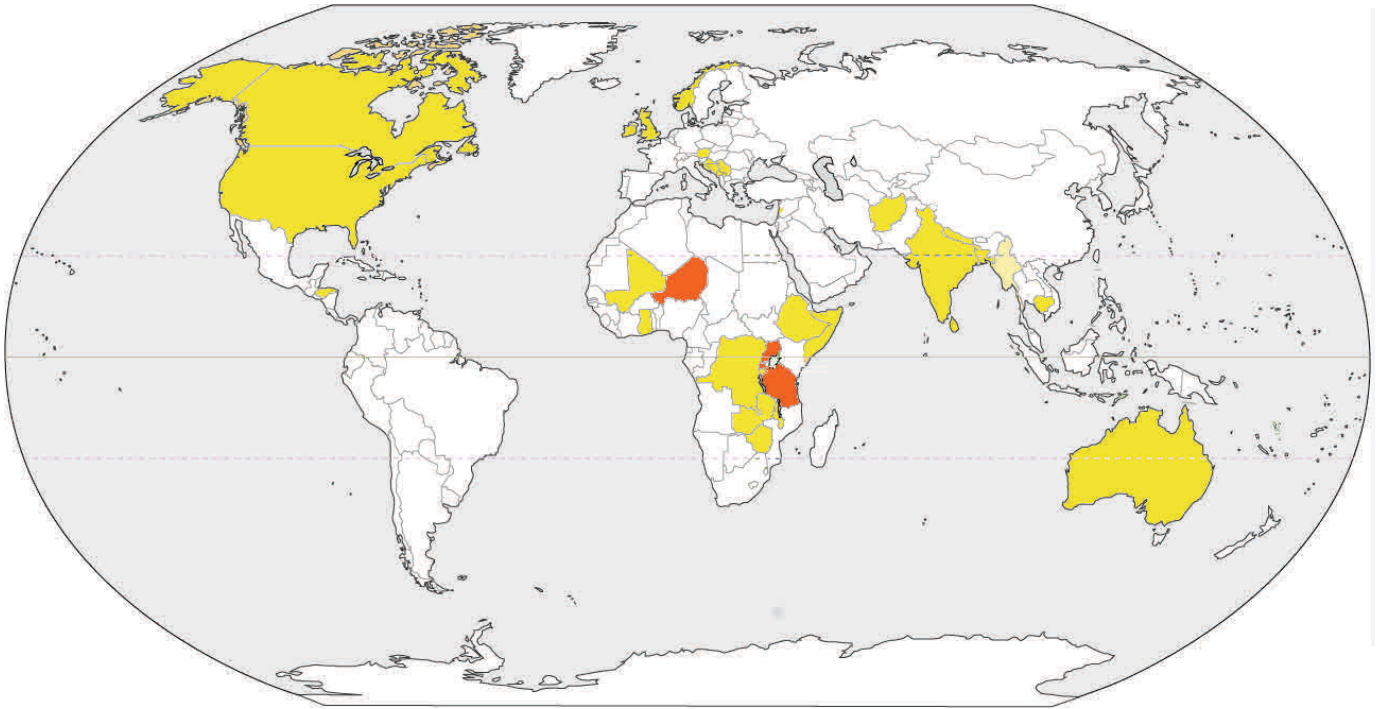


Figure 1. Map of countries from which the learning initiative included resources and research

The Question

The 2015 Engaging Men and Boys Learning Initiative explored the experiences of men involved in the struggle for gender equality. How did they first get involved? What sustains men and boys' engagement in this work? How can men better support women and women's organizations in the fight for gender equality? And how can organizations like CARE support them?

The Process

This initiative has been about building CARE's knowledge about engaging men and boys in gender equality work through facilitating exchange and learning across CARE staff. It involved a broad range of teams across CARE in a 2-pronged analysis process that included meta-analysis of document review and key informant interviews alongside community analyses in Niger, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.

The Catalysts for Male Engagement

Men and boys engaged in gender work represent a diversity of individuals. In CARE's programming areas, what brings them to the table is often influenced by CARE's own targeting and approaches. For example, one set of engaged men was comprised of existing local influencers and leaders, driven to fulfill their responsibilities to communities; another comprised youth and young adults targeted as individuals whose values and identities are taking shape; others still were targeted as spouses of female participants in existing CARE programming.

Some men and boys came into gender programming because of a personal commitment to change. One group of men and boys chose to engage in this work because they experienced oppression themselves (e.g. economic exploitation and/or social exclusion based on ethnic/caste groups, sexuality, ability, race, and household status) and saw a link between gender injustice and their own struggles for social justice. Others discussed past experiences with gender-based violence, conflict and genocide as the catalysts that drove their commitment to become agents of change for social and gender transformation.

Overall, men and boys reported a range of sentiments behind why they chose to first become involved in gender equality work, from guilt for perpetuating gender inequality, to curiosity about programming activities, to a desire to secure family welfare and build more trusting, collaborative and non-violent relationships at home. Within their communities, men and

boys expressed a desire to advance economic and social development, as well as contribute to cultures of peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion (see word cloud, right).

Their Experiences

CARE's work with men and boys on transforming gender norms has made great strides in exploring and expanding ideas around what it means "to be a man" and definitions of masculinity within their communities. Many participants have characterized this as a liberating process as it has helped deconstruct dominant narratives of masculinity – meaning men are no longer expected to be solely responsible for household well-being and are able to enjoy more engaged and positive relationships with their wives and children compared to those prescribed by traditional gender norms. Men also report growing recognition of, and appreciation for, women's contributions as economic and development actors. This has led to greater acceptance and support among men for women's rights in their communities, including: women and girls' education, women's mobility, and access to income generating activities. These shifts also tied to more shared work across genders, in terms of caregiving, household maintenance, economic activities and community engagement – though the depth and sustainability of this change remains uneven across sites. While many sites reported more consultative decision-making and better communication with wives, authority over these decisions appears to remain in men's hands.

RELATIONSHIPS THAT MATTER

There is no single story of men and boys' experiences as part of this process. Male participants describe a range of reactions from household members, kin, peers and communities to their participation in this work. However, there were trends around who men and boys identified as key sources of resistance or support for their engagement in gender equality, highlighting which relationships mattered most for them. Household members – particularly spouses and children – were important influencers and inspirations for men. Wives were often seen as key to supporting, sustaining and abetting male engagement in gender work.¹ In contrast to this, broader family (e.g. parents and in-laws) often resisted men's engagement in an effort to uphold family honor and tradition.

On a daily basis, we had fights and quarrels in my family. I think my husband wanted to change this situation. –Spouse of engaged man, Uganda

Similarly, at the community level, men and boys also described losing friends as a consequence of their decision to challenge gender norms. Initially within the community, engaged men and boys faced resistance and backlash, and many women (as spouses) reported being blamed for men's changes. Men across 6 countries felt they lost friendships both because of a need to avoid the influence of those adhering to traditional and/or harmful ideas of masculinity, as well as because of others' rejection of them for reneging traditional gender roles. However, in areas where tangible household benefits began emerging as a result of men's engagement in gender equality work, participants reported that they slowly started gaining respect from peers in the broader community. Men and boys across 13 countries also described gaining a new cadre of like-minded peers through gender equality activities. These new peers and relationships offered engaged men and boys additional emotional support, mentorship and networks that sustained them through their engagement process. This peer support offered important strategies and insights for navigating challenges, as well as the necessary support to continue despite any difficulties encountered.



Figure 2. Motivations for men and boys' engagement

BENEFITS AND TRADE-OFFS OF ENGAGEMENT

In the collective story of CARE's experiences, the benefits for men's engagement in gender equality work are clear – though they also come with trade-offs. At the personal level, men involved in gender organizing from Afghanistan to Uganda reported gaining confidence, pride and motivation by living in line with their values, feeling less constrained by dominant masculinities, bearing witness to community changes they have encouraged and gaining recognition for their work. At the same time, some questioned how tenable their work as community change agents would be given issues of burn-out, stress, and personal insecurity in the face of resistance. Lack of secure livelihoods and resources also inhibited male engagement in project activities. In their households, many report deeper intimacy, trust and communication with their wives and children. Men were happy to see both economic and health gains for their households resulting from their work to change harmful gender norms, though many viewed their increasing responsibilities and work within the home as a burden.

I was called cursed in my community but when I see those men I used to fear as very important persons coming to me to seek advice on how to address issues of poverty, I feel proud of my change. -Male participant, Rwanda

A broad range of engaged men, wives, community members and staff saw changes around communication, women's income generation, health and financial education, non-violence, marital relationships and consent, and overcoming alcoholism as important factors that have led to men's personal transformation. For example, CARE staff – and participant couples in 7 countries – reported better sexual intimacy with partners as a result of their work to improve communication and challenge harmful gender norms in marital relationships.² Some men in Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Uganda expressed the opposite, however – that their sexual satisfaction decreased given their shift toward consent-based and monogamous relationships. While points of resistance remain within communities, men also described gaining recognition, status, trust and praise at the community level. Men and boys' new reputations as leaders – and the relationships gained through their engagement – also represented important motivators compelling them to continue their engagement in gender work.

The Implications

So what has CARE learnt? At one level, this learning initiative serves to reinforce what we know to be promising practices for Engaging Men and Boys in gender equality programming:

- a. The importance of engaging thoughtfully across personal to community levels, with people of all genders
- b. The need to ensure ongoing long-term change processes are guided by clear, long-term goals for social change and articulated assumptions about what it takes to realize that change. This reinforces the Engaging Men and Boys Program Elements Framework (left). For a more robust and detailed discussion on each element within this framework, and lessons from



Figure 3. Engaging Men and Boys Program Elements Framework

programming, see: [Brief 2, Engaging Men and Boys Learning Series](#). The learning initiative also surfaced several provocative questions that gender equality practitioners should take into account if we are going to advance our work in this area:

ECONOMIC INCENTIVES AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Poverty and food insecurity are very real threats facing women and men in nearly all of the contexts where CARE works. Providing an economic case for supporting women and girls can offer expanding opportunities for their development, shift the dominant narrative of men as sole providers for households, dismantle views of women and girls as dependents, and support them as economic actors and agents of change. Despite this, CARE staff raised the question of how to weave men's and women's practical economic interests into programs with the political goal of gender transformative social change; for example through village savings and loans associations. Where men have themselves formed savings and loans groups, staff fear that their economic activities may monopolize people's efforts and activities, diluting any gender transformative political aims these groups might have held. Conflating poverty alleviation and gender equality objectives may also hurt gender transformative efforts long-term when these two ends no longer align (Jackson, 1996). To deliver on transformational change, programming should center gender equality goals and dialogues at the heart of all activities in order to maintain their political edge, anchoring practical activities in a broader social change agenda.

WORKING HOLISTICALLY WITH MEN AND BOYS AS DIVERSE INDIVIDUALS

Working with men and boys around gender equality requires starting with an understanding of their experiences as individuals, including:

- Acknowledging the oppressions they may face (based on ethnic/caste identities, age, marital status, sexuality, abilities, educational attainment and class/experiences of economic exploitation), as the basis for program development.
- Considering and responding to self-care needs for men so as to guard against potentially instrumentalizing individuals in order to meet development/change agendas and, as a consequence, potentially disregarding their human rights in the process. This is particularly important if participants are dealing with their own experiences of oppression and violence. This includes economic/ethnic disempowerment, depression and traumas that may affect them (and struggles with addiction and substance abuse linked to this), as well as supporting men and boys' discussions and actions for personal health. This is particularly relevant in post-conflict contexts.
- Another question that arose was whether programming was able to adequately respond to the realities of men and boys' sexual health and relationships and the impacts of that on men's engagement. Some examples showed how programming promoting a transition toward monogamous relationships had been frustrating for men and harmful for certain women who had been chased out of homes/communities where they were secondary wives or partners. Rather than prescribing monogamy as the pathway toward gender equality, there is an opportunity for programming to foster critical dialogues with people of all genders on informed consent, communication, negotiation, sexual health and services with a focus on gender equality and rights.

TAKING MEASURED RISKS

Across interventions, men, some of their wives, and boys have reported facing exclusion, derision and threats as a response to their involvement in organizing for gender equality. This has cost men, their wives and/or household members their social networks, status, and occasionally safety – raising questions about the need to guard against potential harms that may arise from this work. Social change organizing comes with risks, and certain individuals may face more threats than others due to their organizing work and/or their positions in society – for example those already stigmatized due to their caste, ethnicity or livelihood status.³ While CARE should work responsibly with participants to assess and mitigate risks, ultimately it must also honor people's agency. While backlash

represents real threats, backlash can also be a sign of movement towards social change. Based on experiences to date, NGOs should also document risk assessment, mitigation and response strategies for minimizing harms to participants, their households and communities.

RISKS OF INDIVIDUAL RECOGNITION

Respondents recommended public rewards and recognition to celebrate and encourage engaged men and boys, and promote a more supportive environment toward gender equality. Though this can be an effective motivator, there is recognition that men may engage in gender equality activities for recognition rather than because of shared values or commitment – thereby compromising base-building efforts for social change. Others feared that some men may gain titles as ‘champions’ or ‘role models’ for gender equality, but fail to live these standards, or relapse in ways that compromise the legitimacy of the work. While acknowledgement of progress is important, it may be wise to reward actions (i.e. how people’s behaviors or decisions have advanced gender equality) rather than labeling people with honorary titles (i.e. naming certain people as ‘role models’). Male participants, like all people, are not static - some will and do regress to former behaviors. The question then is how to plan and respond effectively. In some cases, men who violate ‘male role model’ principles are stripped of their titles and group membership. In others, men’s groups offered peer support to hold men accountable and help them get past relapses. It is worth reflecting on the possible approaches and consequences for working with men through their processes of change and their cycles of progression/regression. This will help organizations like CARE to work more intentionally with men’s groups to incorporate this into their processes of reflection, analysis and change.

CONCERNING VIOLENCE

Many project examples from the engaging men and boys learning initiative involve working with men to prevent and respond to cases of violence. This has includes activities such as counseling on peaceful resolution of conflicts, intervening, counseling households affected by violence, providing referrals to survivors, mediating cases of violence through community-based mechanisms and/or reporting cases of violence to police and courts. This learning initiative raised a number of important questions regarding engaging men and GBV work:

- In Zambia, experiences raised questions regarding the roles men should play in GBV work – particularly as some survivors of intimate partner violence have come to associate men with violence and do not feel safe relating with them about this topic.
- In Rwanda and Uganda, overcoming GBV began with male participants reflecting upon their own past actions and taking accountability for them by acknowledging harms they have inflicted and asking forgiveness from those they have hurt. Taking this as a starting point, programming may benefit from taking a more systematic restorative approach. Such an approach also includes a focus on transforming root causes of violence, including the use of policing and state violence by elites/power-holders. Given CARE’s focus on marginalized and poor communities, this resonates with the issue of intersecting oppression facing diverse men and women in programming areas. From this perspective, [Transformative](#) and [Restorative Justice](#) approaches may provide useful insights for practice.⁴

LINKAGES WITH RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND LEADERS

Across country experiences, religious and traditional influencers expressed both positive and negative reactions to men’s changing behaviors. While most interventions saw religious leaders as generally combative against men’s changes, there were exceptions. In Niger, some men saw their changes as a step toward deepening their faith, and used passages from the Koran to promote their messages. Women and men in Uganda also described men’s engagement as a step toward religious salvation (‘being saved’). In an Oslo seminar convening engaging men and boys practitioners (2015), CARE staff and partners also highlighted the positive potential religious leaders and institutions represent for promoting peace-building norms within communities and curbing backlash against those involved in gender equality organizing. These experiences offer interesting opportunities to document how CARE staff and engaged men are interacting and can further collaborate with religious institutions and religious leaders as stakeholders and change agents for working with men to build gender equality.

LINKING WITH GENDER EQUALITY MOVEMENTS AND THEIR LEADERSHIP

Some women's groups, though appreciative of men's support, fear that men's existing social positions and privilege will give them more space and access to resources in ways that co-opt women's own gender organizing efforts. Just as women's groups fear men might 'take over', men also expressed uncertainty over what their roles should or could be in organizing for gender equality. In terms of programming, there is an opportunity to foster trust-building and collaboration among women's human rights defenders and male allies in ways that build toward a common movement. Articulating more clearly how male allies can support and/or abet women's rights and gender equality movements can clarify men's roles in gender change organizing.

Conclusions

As noted above, engaging men and boys often starts through a practical entry point that appeals to their aspirations for economic and/or social development – for their communities, their households and for themselves. While entry points have been proven effective for garnering male engagement in gender equality work, the effectiveness of using these entry points to achieve transformative gender justice goals is less clear. This is particularly true where “entry point” projects appeal to men's practical interests in ways that are divorced from larger social change or gender justice processes. While evidence shows that projects have success pursuing development and welfare targets, evidence also shows that the approaches used to engage men and boys can risk perpetuating paternalistic ideas of masculine dominance and feminine vulnerability, by appealing to men as 'leaders' to support women and girls' rights. Current approaches to engaging men and boys also risk reinforcing the concept of a gender binary,⁵ though replacing dominant notions of masculinity and femininity with newer and more progressive versions. The approaches used do not, currently, acknowledge how masculinities and femininities exist in different combinations across diverse individuals. This raises questions on how programs might address these questions through more transformative and inclusive approaches to gender equality that acknowledges diversity of gender expressions and identities.

Overall, this review calls to question the goal of engaging men and boys programs. Is it to curb domestic violence or establish enabling environments for women as social and economic development actors? To support men in deconstructing traditional notions of masculinity and articulating alternate (and hopefully more progressive) options for males? Toward political education and fomenting a movement for gender equality/dismantling patriarchy? To date, it appears organizational work to engage men and boys for gender equality is achieving more success in the areas of community and economic development than it is in achieving social justice goals. While this is commendable and might be the result of the approaches being used, it is also likely a result of the short time that this work has been implemented. There are several examples of budding gender transformative changes beginning in communities, households and engaged individuals that – as with any social transformation – have the potential to grow, deepen and coalesce over time.

Endnotes

1. While this was the general story, in some cases, men described spouses' insecurity and resistance to changing household dynamics. Some men also described women abdicating household responsibilities/reversing roles as men take on more work.
2. Given the contexts where CARE works, this view is limited to heterosexual couples and often within the context of marriage. Conclusions and learning would certainly vary if inclusive of diverse forms relationships take around the globe – particularly those that may fall outside of traditional social mores.
3. People who face social marginalization and exclusion (e.g. women, people with disabilities, etc.) might also be at more risk because their social positions are not as protected, networked and/or are more vulnerable. Conversely, certain marginalized groups of men may be exposed to more violent backlash and greater threats to personal security within communities where dominant culture portrays them as dangerous or threatening to society (e.g. pastoralists in Tanzania, US narratives of black and brown people, migrants from MENA in Europe).
4. Kershner, et al. (2007). “Toward Transformative Justice: a liberatory approach to child sexual abuse and other forms of intimate and community violence.” GenerationFive: http://www.generationfive.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/G5_Toward_Transformative_Justice-Document.pdf ; Zehr, H. and Gohar, A. (2003). The Little Book of Restorative Justice. Intercourse, PA: Good Books: <http://www.unicef.org/tdad/littlebookrjpakaf.pdf>.
5. The gender binary refers to the tendency to classify gender in a binary fashion (men and boys / women and girls), though identities and cultures often contain a spectrum of gender identities and expressions. According to Wikipedia, “it can describe a social boundary that discourages people from crossing or mixing gender roles, or from identifying with three or more forms of gender expression altogether.” ([Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_binary)).



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