



An advocacy brief:  
Policy  
recommendations for  
Gender-transformative  
approaches

International agreements, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, recognize the ongoing inequality between men and women, and the power aspects of gender. [1] It is acknowledged that by engaging boys and men and addressing harmful attitudes and practices and rigid gender norms, the lives and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) of women and men, boys and girls can be improved.

## CHALLENGING RIGID GENDER NORMS

Gender refers to society's widely shared norms and expectations about the roles, characteristics and accepted behaviour for men and women. In most contexts, norms support men's superiority over women. Heterosexuality is the norm, women's sexuality is often ignored and sexual diversity is in many cases not respected. Rigid gender norms can encourage men to engage in high-risk behaviours affecting their own health and the health of their partners. Unsafe sex is a major contributor to global morbidity and mortality through the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and through unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. Gender norms in many contexts also legitimize the acceptance and use of violence against women and girls, and violence against other (gay) men.

## ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS

For many years, gender equality has been seen as a woman's domain and sexual and reproductive health as a woman's responsibility. However, SRHR practitioners increasingly understand that, due to gender and power dynamics, men and boys are crucial to overcoming the barriers that hinder women and girls' SRHR and to end violence. This is also recognized by a number of international agreements. [2] As stated in the agreed conclusions of CSW57, we need to engage men and boys to take responsibility for their behaviour, to ensure that men and adolescent boys take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behaviour, and to refrain from all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls. This can be done with comprehensive sexuality education programmes to increase their understanding of the harmful effects of violence and how it undermines gender equality and human dignity. But engaging men and boys is also highlighting positive aspects of respectful relationships, better health and increased happiness and being a caring father. [3]

## MEN'S ROLE AS CAREGIVERS

Men's role as caregivers is often ignored. Globally, women and girls continue to carry out the majority of domestic activities, doing 2–10 times more than men depending on the country, even though women now represent 40% of the paid workforce worldwide. Men's limited participation in care work continues to be a major barrier to gender equality and women's empowerment, leaving women with a greater burden of unpaid care and keeping their income lower than men's. Achieving gender equality is essential to fulfilling women's SRHR and achieving SRHR for all will contribute to gender equality. These dimensions have been neglected in programming for too long.[4]

## SRHR PROGRAMMING

It is essential that SRHR programming and policy efforts address the 'gendered'

vulnerabilities and specific SRHR needs of girls and young women, boys and (young) men. By leaving men and boys out of the gender equation we may fail to effectively challenge the norms and systems that often legitimize gender-based violence (GBV), control women's bodily and reproductive autonomy, and restrict their access to sexual and reproductive health services and commodities. Research confirms that boys who experience, and/or witness violence against their mothers are 2.5–3 times more likely to use violence against partners when they become adults. [5] Furthermore, a significant proportion of men who use sexual violence do so for the first time as adolescents. [6] Thus it is key to reach boys (age 10+) and young men when their attitudes and beliefs about gender are developing and before some of them start using gender based violence. This should be part of gendered SRHR programming.

### GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES

Research shows that well-designed gender-transformative programmes involving men and boys are effective at reducing GBV and improving SRHR. [7] [8] Gender-transformative approaches seek “to reshape gender relations to be more gender equitable, largely through approaches that free both women and men from the impact of harmful and rigid gender and sexual norms”. [9] Gender-transformative programmes aim to accomplish the following: (1) raise awareness about harmful gender norms, (2) question the costs of adhering to these norms (e.g. negative SRHR outcomes for women and men), and (3) replace unhealthy, inequitable gender norms with redefined healthy, positive and equitable ones.

Gender-synchronized approaches can play a key role. Gender-synchronization emphasizes the need to reach both women and men with gender-transformative efforts. Not all programmes will apply this approach, but linkages can be made across or within programming. However, engaging men and boys should not be at the detriment of programming for women and girls. [10] [11] [12]





Gender-transformative approaches are crucial for the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and well-being of women and girls, men and boys.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve full gender equality and sustainable development, and to realize the SRHR of women and men, boys and girls, it is recommended that governments:

- Scale up evidence-based **gender-transformative interventions which integrate GBV prevention**, in strategic partnerships with key public sectors (i.e. health, education, social welfare, justice) and civil society groups (youth, religious groups, cultural groups, etc.).
- Implement gender-transformative programmes that **engage boys and men to prevent GBV and improve SRHR**. These programmes should: (1) ensure women's safety, (2) be developed and implemented in collaboration and consultation with women's rights groups, and (3) hold themselves accountable to women, to women's organizations and to the women's movement.
- Scale up programmes and policies to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, while **encouraging men's greater contribution to caregiving**, and improving parental leave (maternity and paternity) and other state support for the care of children. Such programmes must engage men as fathers and caregivers.
- Ensure ongoing **public awareness campaigns and education** aimed at transforming men's and women's perceptions of gender norms. Public awareness and education can focus on the promotion of more equitable relationships – including negotiation of sex, contraceptive decision-making, and men's support of women's reproductive autonomy. And these campaigns should also address that men and boys need to respect sexual diversity. Similarly, publicly supported fatherhood courses/campaigns focusing on the role of men in the lives of children and in the household can address men's reported feelings of being unprepared for caregiving and fatherhood. They can also help men understand the benefits of engaged fatherhood and participation in family life.
- Engaging **men as supportive partners and allies in the promotion of SRHR**, particularly in maternal health services; the implementation of youth-friendly services, and in the roll-out of HIV and STI prevention programmes. This includes promotion of safe motherhood; prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV; and encouragement of the use of contraceptives, safe abortion and post-abortion services.
- Increase the focus on **men's health within national policies and guidelines**, as well as international agreements. Efforts to better address men's health and health-seeking behaviour should include interventions to transform gender norms that equate risk-taking with manhood and illness with weakness. Health systems must play an active role in promoting healthy behaviour to men. This will have benefits for the lives of women, children, men and communities in general.
- Ensure implementation of Sustainable Development Goal target 4.7, which states that all learners should acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including through **education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights and gender equality**. This includes challenging harmful stereotypes about men and women, by adapting school curricula to promote healthy notions of masculinity and femininity. Education programmes should incorporate basic principles of gender-equitable teaching and learning. All teacher training curricula should contain gender training and an emphasis on engaging parents, including fathers, in school governing bodies and through community outreach.
- Implement, as part of Sustainable Development Goal targets 3.7 and 4.7, **comprehensive sexuality education, with specific reference to gender and power relations, as well as the engagement of boys and young men**. Comprehensive sexuality education for boys and adolescent men increases awareness about safe sex, sexuality, healthy relationships (including gender and power) and human rights, and educates boys and adolescent men about the needs and rights of others. This education should also provide knowledge and skills on a range of SRHR issues, such as contraceptive methods, positive and pleasurable sex and sexuality, communication, anger management and respect for sexual diversity.
- **Engage men who have been using, or are exposed to violence** in programmes aimed at changing their attitudes and violent behaviours. This should be done while promoting care and equity, and by using gender-transformative and positive masculinity approaches. Given the high exposure to multiple forms of violence during conflict, **large scale roll-out of psychosocial support** that enables men, women, boys and girls to heal their traumas is urgently needed. Efforts should be made to transform societies by changing gender norms and harmful notions of manhood. Perpetrators need to be held accountable.

## NOTES

[1] Sustainable Development Goals: preambular 20." We will work for a significant increase in investments to close the gender gap and strengthen support for institutions in relation to gender equality and the empowerment of women at the global, regional and national levels. All forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls will be eliminated, including through the engagement of men and boys. The systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Agenda is crucial."; 2015.

[2] The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the 48th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

[3] Commission on the Status of Women, Fifty-seventh session, The elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls / Agreed conclusions; 2013; 11 (pp).

[4] Adolescent health: boys matter too. *The Lancet*. 2015;386(10010):2227 ([http://thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)01160-5/fulltext](http://thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)01160-5/fulltext)).

[5] Barker G, Peacock D. Working with men and boys to promote gender equality: a review of the field and emerging approaches; 2012.

[6] Heilman B, Hebert L, Paul-Gera N. The making of sexual violence: how does a boy grow up to commit rape? Evidence from five IMAGES countries. Washington, DC, USA: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and Promundo; 2014.

[7] World Health Organization, Engaging men and boys in changing gender-based inequity in health: evidence from programme interventions. Geneva: 2007.

[8] Dworkin S, Fleming PJ, Colvin CJ. The promises and limitations of gender-transformative health programming with men: critical reflections from the field. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2015; 17(2):128–143.

[9] Idem.

[10] Rolleri LA. Gender transformative programming in adolescent reproductive and sexual health: definitions, strategies, and resources. In: Practice matters. Ithaca, New York, USA: Act for Youth Center of Excellence, Cornell University; 2014.

[11] World Health Organization, Engaging men and boys in changing gender-based inequity in health: evidence from programme interventions. Geneva: 2007.

[12] Greene, M.E. and Levack, A. for the Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG), Synchronizing Gender Strategies. A Cooperative Model for Improving Reproductive Health and Transforming Gender Relations, 2010.

[www.men-care.org](http://www.men-care.org)

[www.facebook.com/mencarecampaign](https://www.facebook.com/mencarecampaign)

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