KoGe Community of Cooperation

KoGe Learning Brief No. 3: Masculinities and Men Engagement for Gender Equality
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1. Short Introduction: Changing roles of men and boys

There is growing interest today in the changing role of men and boys in the progression towards gender equality. Gender roles and relations have been evolving, though at varying paces. For example, the availability of safe and effective contraceptive methods has started to influence relationship dynamics and family planning choices, affecting both men and women. New relationship models are emerging, entailing redefinitions and changing conceptions of fatherhood, in some contexts with more involvement of fathers in raising children. While the progressive questioning of male dominance has weakened its traditional legitimacy in many contexts, it has also provoked backlash movements across the globe.

Historically, the notions of gender and gender equality has been primarily associated with women, reflecting men's dominant position in the social hierarchy. Today, there is a growing recognition that men's involvement in promoting gender equality is essential, as inequalities are deeply connected to patriarchal power structures, gender practices and identities, discourses about masculinities and femininities as well as cultural norms.

This learning brief explores how to engage men and boys as partners, advocates, and stakeholders in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment.

ⓘ Important

"DO NO HARM"

Keep in mind the goal of working with men and boys, which is to achieve gender equality and equal rights for women and girls:

The commitment of men to gender equality, as outlined in this Learning Brief, is focused on improving the rights and situations of marginalised gendered groups, particularly women and girls. To ensure no harm is done, it is essential that programmes aimed at engaging men in gender equality are funded in addition, and not at the expense of, initiatives that support women and girls and their rights. Additionally, care must be taken to avoid strengthening men's rights movements that seek to undermine or diminish women's rights.

Pay attention to the safety of the women involved:

Women's safety and autonomy must remain a priority. In view of unequal power relations and the use of violence by some men, men's participation must first and foremost be approached in such a way as to guarantee women's rights, safety and autonomy. In some contexts, their prior agreement is necessary for their partners' participation in programmes, in order to guarantee their safety and ensure that the intervention will not aggravate the situation of violence for the woman.

1.2 Definitions

Here are some basic definitions about masculinities:

Masculinity refers to societal and legal definitions of what it means to be a man. It refers to sets of characteristics socially attributed to men, which evolve over time and across cultures. Within a society, multiple forms of masculinities co-exist, positioned in relations of power to each other (see hegemonic masculinity below). Forms of masculinities are expressed through behaviour, language, attitudes, gestures, social interactions, roles and responsibilities. These social constructs are shaped by multiple

actors: individuals, institutions, laws, religions, states, the media, communities and families. *(UN WOMEN'S Training Centre. (2014). Looking inside: understanding masculinity and violence against women and girls. A guide for facilitators. UN WOMEN)*

Including men and boys into the **gender perspective** on a society makes it possible to address the root causes of gender inequalities by identifying social norms and practices that define gender relations and that are harmful to all genders.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant cultural model of masculinity of a specific society. Different types of masculinity stand in hierarchical power relations to each other, the hegemonic masculinity being the idealised prototype, the norm. Other forms of masculinity are typically devalued, considered subordinate or even unmanly. In societies across the globe, the hegemonic masculinity is nowadays a **problematic or misogynist masculinity** that legitimizes discrimination and subordination, not only of women, but also of men who don't fit its criteria (due to age, social class, origin, etc.). They are a source of psychological suffering (depression, stress) and can lead to violence against women, children, other men and oneself *(Pan American Health Organization. (2019). Masculinities and health in the Region of the Americas. Washington: PAHO).*

Egalitarian masculinities refer to context-specific masculine identities, knowledge, attitudes and practices that are not detrimental to self or others, and are based on a commitment to gender equality, non-violence and equitable relationships respecting the rights of women. Men who adopt such positive masculinities may engage for equality in the domestic and public spheres and foster the fulfilment and rights of women. They may support women's autonomy and leadership, while sharing power to build a more equitable and fulfilling society for all. (*Tearfund. (2017). Transforming masculinities. A training manual for gender champions. England: Tearfund).* Transforming masculinities could hence mean to expand the space for new forms of masculinities, transform the power hierarchies among masculinities, and enable egalitarian masculinities to replace problematic masculinities.

The multiple masculinities perspective is an approach that confronts men with different ways of embodying their masculinity, more respectful of themselves, of women and of other men. This approach positions men as agents of change in the redefinition of masculine roles *(Alliance for solidarity (2020). Good practice guide: guidelines for work on masculinities. Alliance for Solidarity).* It can equally be combined with a multiple femininities perspective.

2. Practical examples how to involve men in gender equality initiatives

Intervention programmes for men are more effective if they adopt a **transformative approach to masculinities.** This approach is based on two essential pillars: challenging misogynist behaviour and raising awareness of the impact attitudes that undermine the rights of women have on the family, the individual and society as a whole.

Interventions must aim to **deconstruct misogynist norms of masculinity while promoting positive role models that foster equality and empowerment**. It is important to **continue working with men throughout their life cycle,** involving them at every stage of their biographies, in order to promote women's rights-oriented behaviours and lasting change.

In what follows you will find a few examples of how to involve men in our programmes:

Responsible Parenthood Programmes (* See example, manual Appendix 9. Case Studies: MenCare Brazil programme)	
Involving parents from the prenatal period onwards	The involvement of fathers must begin as early as the prenatal period. This early involvement, initiated before the birth of the first child, promotes active participation in parenthood and helps establish egalitarian, non-violent family dynamics.
Positive parenting and resourcefulness	Enhancing the parenting skills of both fathers and mothers requires a positive approach to parenting. To encourage paternal involvement, it is essential to create dedicated spaces that combine reflection on the parental role, the acquisition of practical skills in caregiving, non-violent education and positive discipline, the sharing of experiences between parents and concrete activities that encourage the active participation of fathers.

Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) programmes (* See example, manual Appendix 9. Case Studies: LCI project in Uganda)	
The role of men in SRH	Men's active involvement in their own health is essential, both as beneficiaries of services and as supporters of their partners. Their involvement makes a significant contribution to health promotion and gender equality.
Facilitating men's participation in SRH services	Adapting sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services to men's needs requires specific adjustments: organizing dedicated men's days, creating separate reception areas, extending opening hours and recruiting trained male staff.
Impact of awareness campaigns on SRH and addictions	Awareness-raising strategies highlighting economic benefits are particularly effective with men. Demonstrating the financial benefits of contraception, preventive maternal and child health care, and addiction prevention can positively influence behaviour. However, be careful not to reproduce stereotypes, such as the image that men are mainly involved financially in fatherhood.
An integrated approach to raising awareness	A holistic approach, integrating SRH services, mental health coaching, continuing education, peer education, discussion groups and awareness campaigns, is more effective than isolated interventions.
Peer education and awareness in the workplace	Peer education and awareness-raising interventions in the workplace are effective strategies for reducing risky behaviour. These initiatives encourage open discussion of responsible sexual practices, addictions, violence, mental health and gender equality.
Adapting services to the needs of marginalized groups	Services must be inclusive and accessible to all, with particular attention paid to vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, people living with HIV, adolescents and sex workers, thus ensuring equitable access to care.

Gender-based violence (GBV) prevention programmes (* See examples in the manual Appendix 9. Case Studies: H programme in Brazil and Stepping-Stones/Creating futures programme in South Africa)	
Early prevention of violence	Early prevention of violence is fundamental to laying the foundations for positive, non-violent masculinity, even before adulthood and fatherhood. Interventions with boys, young men and teenagers are crucial to reducing violence against women and girls. These programmes, reinforced by social activities such as sports and residential stays, are effective in reaching these groups.
Violence prevention and skills development	Transforming gender norms and power relations is the central objective of prevention programmes, particularly by questioning "toxic" masculinities. Training men to develop constructive emotional skills - empathy, anger management, conflict resolution - is crucial to reducing violence and building healthy relationships.
The role of religious institutions in combating violence	Religious institutions, through their influence on leaders and within communities, represent strategic allies in the transformation of harmful social norms. Their commitment to combating gender-based violence can catalyse lasting behavioural change among men. It should be noted that these alliances can only be implemented if religious leaders are themselves committed and convinced of the need to combat gender-based violence.
Interventions targeting harmful masculinities	A global approach is needed, extending beyond merely modifying individual behaviour to addressing the social norms and cultural expectations associated with masculinity. This comprehensive strategy involves challenging deeply rooted gender stereotypes, promoting new models of positive masculinity, and fostering structural changes in institutions, policies, and communities. By encouraging men to critically reflect on traditional notions of virility, this approach seeks to create more equitable gender dynamics, reduce gender-based violence, and promote healthier, more inclusive relationships between all genders.
Politicising men's participation	The political dimension of men's commitment to combating gender-based violence is essential for lasting societal change. By mobilizing men in concrete actions, we promote the evolution of social norms and gender equality on a collective scale.

Programmes to combat gender-based violence (GBV) and support victims (* See example, manual Appendix 9. Case Studies: domestic violence prevention programme in Chile).	
Safe spaces and services for male victims of violence	Support programmes need to create safe spaces where men can rebuild and heal, while developing their awareness of health and violence issues. These places of exchange and psychological support are essential for men who have suffered or witnessed violence, facilitating their healing process.
Specific services for male perpetrators of violence	Where possible, specialized care (psychological, psychiatric, medical, legal and social) should be offered to male perpetrators of violence, particularly those who are voluntarily committed to change. This approach combines therapeutic and preventive dimensions for optimum support.
Training and support for professionals working with men	Professionals working with perpetrators of violence need in-depth training, regular psychological support and appropriate supervision. The organization of exchange forums between professionals encourages the sharing of experiences and the continuous improvement of practices.
Mental health or addiction interventions	For men with mental health problems or addictions, specific interventions that take these vulnerabilities into account are needed. The aim of these programmes is to reduce violent behaviour and promote reintegration.
Increasing the visibility of male victims of sexual violence	The visibility of male victims of sexual violence requires particular attention, especially in terms of research into their specific needs. Programmes need to consider the particular impact of such trauma on victims and witnesses of violence, particularly on their masculine identity, while offering them a platform for expression, thereby compensating for the current lack of support services adapted to their situation. Ensure that programmes for male survivors are funded in addition, and not at the expense of, initiatives that support female survivors.

Women's economic empowerment programmes (* See example, manual Appendix 9. Case Studies: CARE and Promundo programme in Rwanda)	
Economic empowerment and gender equality	Economic empowerment programmes need to include men as agents of change, engaging them in a shared vision of family goals. This approach aims to encourage their active support for women's economic independence, foster the equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities and promote concerted financial decision-making.
Microcredit and women's empowerment	The process of empowering women implies a profound transformation of socio-economic structures, requiring the conscious commitment of men. Programmes must therefore promote their active participation and egalitarian attitudes, encourage the sharing of responsibilities and strengthen marital communication, while raising awareness of the need to prevent domestic violence. This comprehensive approach not only helps to achieve women's economic emancipation objectives, but also to create a more balanced, prosperous and harmonious family environment.

3. Intervention strategies: Overcoming resistance to gender equality

Here are some **intervention strategies** for dealing **with men's and communities' resistance** to gender equality.

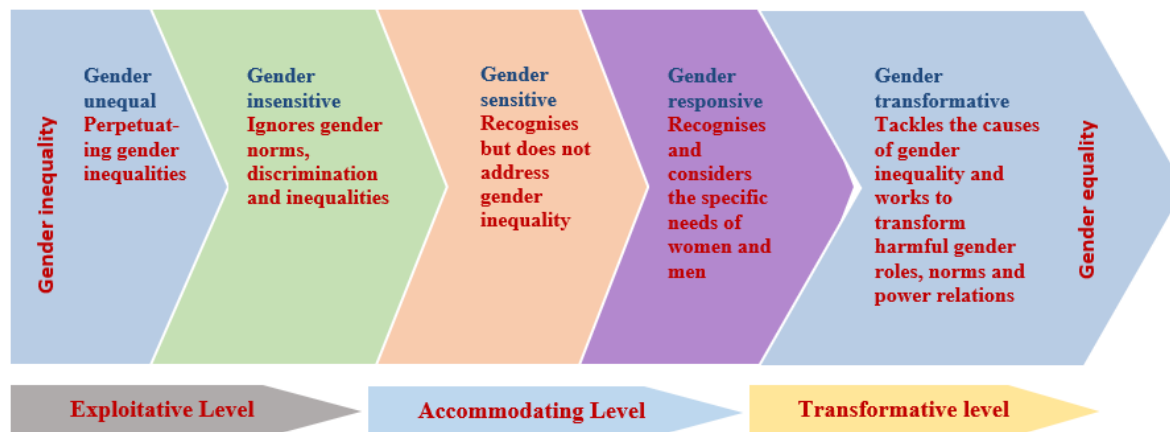| Intervention strategies to overcome resistance to gender equality	
Using a harmonised approach	A gender-harmonized approach is advocated, allowing simultaneous or sequential work with men and women, in mixed or single-sex groups. (Example: mixed discussion groups (men and women) to discuss gender roles, gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health). Be aware that single-sex groups are in many contexts preferable.
Creating "safe spaces" for men	The creation of safe spaces encourages exchanges between men in a constructive environment, favouring a peer-to-peer approach while maintaining professional support. Example: sessions led by male peers in places where young men felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

Promoting alternative and positive masculinities	Positive messages that value men as agents of change are more effective than guilt-inducing "shame and blame" approaches. This constructive approach, enriched by open discussion, enables men to reflect on the concrete application of the messages in their lives, and to take responsibility for their own behaviour.
Using male role models and advocates	The identification of male role models within communities contributes to the evolution of norms towards greater equity. The use of mentors, influential personalities and community leaders to advocate for gender equality, promotes the transformation of gender norms (e.g. male community leaders trained to become role models for committed fathers).
Recruiting and training animators	Recruit male role models who are open to gender equality. They will be able to effectively convey messages about alternative masculinities.
Studying how masculinities and femininities manifest themselves	Programme evaluation must take into account all the factors influencing results, going beyond the simple observation of changes in behaviour. Tracking changes in standards over the long term provides a better understanding of the reasons for these changes and their sustainability. For example, an NGO in Brazil found in its project evaluation that gender norms were influenced men's access to health services. Men who actively participated in prenatal care were more likely to support their partners and make joint decisions about family health, highlighting changes in male health behaviour.
Convincing problem formulation	Successful policy change in favour of gender equality depends in part on how issues are framed in a way that women and men find logical, convincing and beneficial to all.
A good understanding of men	Interventions with men need to reflect their aspirations, concerns, goals and dreams as individuals, fathers and partners, while recognizing the challenges and obstacles they face in their relationships. Understanding their goals can help create effective engagement messages.
Ensuring an accessible venue for participants	The practical organisation of activities requires particular attention to the accessibility of locations, as well as to the compatibility of schedules, timetables and the time required for work involving men. Evening or weekend sessions may in some contexts be better suited to their availability. In contexts of high male unemployment, daytime may however be the time of void.
Working with local values	Services must be aligned with local notions and practices to ensure their acceptance and effectiveness.
Use participatory methods	It is important to favour active, reflective and participative methodologies to maintain the commitment of participants, avoiding purely directive approaches that risk generating passivity.
Convivial parenting programmes	Parenting programmes need to be designed with inclusive, father-friendly language, tailored to fathers' interests and needs, avoiding language aimed solely at mothers, and avoiding topics that concern women exclusively. This can discourage fathers' participation.
Special efforts to bring men together	The training of professionals in the education, health and social services sectors is crucial to valorising the important role that men can play. Facilitating workshops in places frequented by men (sports areas, workplaces, prenatal services) and home visits are effective strategies.
Groups can provide valuable mutual support	Observing the positive transformation of other participants reduces fear of social judgment and encourages behavioural change. The group will encourage participation and enable men to feel less concerned about the fear of ridicule or other negative reactions from those around them when they make a change.
Including men as supporters in microcredit programmes can contribute to gender equality	A one-size-fits-all approach that excludes male partners from microcredit recipients can exacerbate gender-based violence and hinder joint decision-making within the family. Family support is essential in shaping women's experiences of economic empowerment. Sometimes, women who try to make changes encounter resistance from men in the home. The role of men is crucial to women's empowerment, and it is important to understand how men can be both 'obstructive' and 'supportive' of such programmes.

CHECKLIST
Gender-transformative approaches to supporting gender equality

Gender Integration Continuum (based on WHO):

The checklist below will help you position your initiative on the continuum of gender approaches and guide its evolution towards a transformative approach:

1. **Gender unequal approach** This approach perpetuates gender inequalities	
1. Unequal treatment of participants based on existing gender norms	☐
2. Communication strengthening existing gender norms	☐
3. Naturalise and justify differences in behaviour or treatment through biology or culture	☐
4. Response to gendered needs in ways which potentially increase gender inequality	☐
5. Interferes with traditional gender roles and norms in a way that further oppresses women	☐

2. **Gender insensitive approach** This approach ignores gender dimensions and risks reinforcing existing inequalities.	
6. Gender-neutral treatment of participants	☐
7. Gender-neutral communication	☐
8. Lack of gender-disaggregated data	☐
9. Failure to recognize the impact of gender norms on behaviour	☐
10. Does not distinguish between the needs of different genders	☐
11. Does not intervene in established gender roles and norms	☐

3. Gender sensitive approach
Identifies gender inequalities but remains at the observation stage without implementing corrective actions

1.	Recognition of the influence of gender on individual and collective paths and opportunities.	☐
2.	Identifying gender-specific needs.	☐
3.	Taking gender dynamics into account in interventions.	☐
4.	Introduction of gender-disaggregated data collection.	☐
5.	Acknowledging inequalities without implementing corrective actions.	☐
6.	Willingness to expand options, skills and opportunities for different genders.	☐
7.	Ambition to reduce barriers to the participation of different genders.	☐
8.	Insufficient concrete action to change systems that perpetuate inequality.	☐
9.	Application of the precautionary principle to prevent harm (avoid reinforcing existing inequalities).	

4. Gender responsive approach
Acknowledges and addresses inequalities

1.	In-depth analysis of the causes of gender inequality	☐
2.	Tailored to gender-specific needs	☐
3.	Targeted actions to strengthen disadvantaged groups	☐
4.	Contextualized interventions based on gender realities	☐
5.	Identification and treatment of gender-related obstacles	☐
6.	Developing gender-differentiated strategies	☐
7.	Active promotion of equitable participation and equal opportunities	☐
8.	Application of the precautionary principle to prevent harm	☐
9.	Limited impact on the wider context and on systemic power structures and gender relations	☐

5. Gender transformative approach
This approach aims to systematically change power relations and social structures in order to achieve gender equality.

1.	Analyses and challenges power relationships	☐
2.	Promoting positive, egalitarian models of masculinity	☐
3.	Building equitable and respectful gender relations	☐
4.	Transformation of social structures and institutions	☐
5.	Promoting systemic gender justice (macro-level)	☐
6.	Changing gender norms and associated behaviours	☐
7.	Development of egalitarian relational dynamics	☐
8.	Advocating legislative reform for equality	☐

Appendix: Examples of **gender responsive (4)** and **gender transformative (5) approaches**

The examples mentioned in the following approaches can be found in detail in the manual *(Appendix 9. Case Studies – Gender Transformation Programmes).*

4. Gender Responsive Approach
Acknowledges and addresses inequalities

1. In-depth analysis of the causes of gender inequality

   Example: Programme H in Latin America studied the relational and power dynamics linked to gender. It concluded that men and boys also suffered from gender-specific vulnerabilities that affected their own health, but which were rarely taken into account in health projects.

2. Tailored to the specific needs of each gender

   Example: A sexual and reproductive health (SRH) programme in Brazil specifically addressed the needs of men, focusing on often-neglected issues such as male reproductive health and prostate cancer prevention. In addition, the creation of protocols to encourage men to participate in prenatal visits illustrated an effort to address men's health needs.

3. Targeted actions to strengthen disadvantaged groups

   Example: In the "Stepping Stones/Creating Futures" programme in South Africa, men from rural areas were trained in economic skills such as beekeeping and animal husbandry, enabling them to develop livelihoods. This approach has had a positive impact, reducing gender-based violence in particular, as it has given men the resources they need to support themselves.
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4. Contextualized interventions based on gender realities

   Example: The H programme in Latin America took into account the social realities of young men from disadvantaged backgrounds, addressing the negative effects of traditional masculinity, such as domestic violence and risky behaviour. Activities such as role-playing and group discussions were used to encourage healthier, more egalitarian behaviour.

5. Identification and treatment of gender-related obstacles

   Example: In Uganda, the LCI project created a space where men could openly discuss barriers to sexual health, including the shame associated with seeking SRH care. The programme addressed these challenges by training service providers to make them more welcoming and accessible to men.

6. Developing gender-differentiated strategies

   Example: A women's economic empowerment programme in Rwanda included men in training courses on decision-making and negotiation within the home, in order to strengthen their role in women's economic empowerment. This approach enabled men to better understand and support their wives' economic initiatives, notably by improving the division of domestic responsibilities.

7. Active promotion of equitable participation and equal opportunities

   Example: The MenCare+ programme has encouraged men's participation in parenthood as well as in maternal and child health. It has encouraged young men to become more involved in childcare and sexual and reproductive health decision-making, while emphasizing the importance of gender equality in the home.

8. Application of the precautionary principle to prevent harm

   Example: The "Stepping Stones/Creating Futures" programme in South Africa adopted a cautious approach to avoid men feeling stigmatized or blamed for their role in gender-based violence. Activities were designed to encourage men to change their behaviour without making them feel guilty. The programme also encouraged men to support their wives in their participation in the project, preventing situations of violence that could result from their economic emancipation.

9. Limited impact on the wider context and on systemic power structures and gender relations

   Example: The Stepping Stones / Creating Futures programme has shown positive results at individual and community level. However, this impact remains limited. Indeed, the economic empowerment and training provided under the programme have not had a significant effect on reducing economic inequalities between men and women in South African society. Furthermore, legislative reforms aimed at protecting women against domestic violence and promoting gender equality have not always been effectively implemented nationwide.

5. Gender Transformative Approach
This approach aims to systematically change power relations and social structures in order to achieve gender equality.

1. Analyses and challenges power relationships

   Example: As part of the LCI programme in Uganda, discussion groups with men and women helped to challenge traditional power relationships in terms of sexual and domestic decision-making. By tackling themes such as gender-based violence and the division of tasks, men were encouraged to reflect on their behaviour and the impact of their actions on equality within the couple.

2. Promoting positive, egalitarian models of masculinity

   Example: Male facilitators in the H programme acted as role models to promote non-violent, egalitarian models of masculinity. Educational activities encouraged young men to reflect on positive aspects of masculinity, such as parenthood and respect for women's rights, while encouraging them to move away from norms of violence and domination.

3. Building equitable and respectful gender relations

   Example: The "Stepping Stones/Creating Futures" programme aimed to improve gender relations by teaching men communication and active listening skills, in order to promote relationships based on mutual respect. The training included discussions on non-violent conflict resolution and the importance of sharing domestic responsibilities.

4. Transformation of social structures and institutions

   Example: In Brazil, the creation of a men's health policy was an effort to transform health institutions to better include men in health services. The programme introduced protocols to integrate them into prenatal care, aiming to change the institutional structure to better meet their needs while supporting their active participation in women's and children's health.

5. Promoting systemic gender justice

   Example: A programme in Rwanda advocated gender justice by involving men in the economic empowerment of women. By training men in egalitarian practices within households and communities, it sought to redefine traditional roles and promote a more egalitarian environment in both economic and family structures.

6. Changing gender norms and associated behaviours

   Example: The MenCare+ programme has encouraged changes in gender norms, particularly around parenthood, by encouraging men to become more involved in childcare and family health decisions. The programme has changed behaviours by raising awareness among young men and fathers of the importance of their active and egalitarian role in maternal and child health.

7. Development of egalitarian relational dynamics.

   Example: The LCI programme's educational sessions in Uganda fostered more egalitarian relationship dynamics between men and women, by addressing topics such as sharing household responsibilities and contraceptive decision-making. The aim was to reduce power imbalances within the household and encourage more harmonious cooperation.

8. A plea for legislative reform in favor of equality.

   Example: A men's health programme in Brazil, in addition to working directly with men, also advocated legislative reforms, such as the introduction of protocols to involve men in prenatal health care. The programme supported policy reforms to include more men in reproductive health and SRH services, in order to promote gender equality in the health system.