



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

UNESCO Bangkok
Asia-Pacific Programme of
Education for All



Advocacy Brief

Role of Men and Boys in Promoting Gender Equality

Role of Men and Boys in Promoting Gender Equality - Advocacy Brief

Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All (APPEAL)

Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok, 2004.

15 pp.

1. Gender equality. 2. Men. 3. Boys. I.Title.

305.31

ISBN 92-9223-029-8

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Third Printing April 2009

This reprint is supported by the Japanese Funds-in-Trust.

Published by the
UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education
Mom Luang Pin Malakul Centenary Building
920 Sukhumvit Road, Prakanong
Bangkok 10110, Thailand

Chief editor: Caroline Haddad

Design/Layout: Pongsuda Vongsingha

Cover photo: © Atipthep Chainara, Thailand

Printed in Thailand

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Introduction: Scope of this Study

There has been an increasing emphasis internationally, in policy and in practice, on engaging men to promote and achieve gender equality. Beginning with the Beijing Declaration¹, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, a number of intergovernmental platforms, such as the World Summit on Social Development (1995), its review session (2000), and the special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS (2001), have focused on this issue. The importance of education systems in shaping the gender perspective of boys was underscored in the landmark Dakar Framework for Education for All (UNESCO, 2000). An explicit goal (goal 5) of the Dakar Framework is to ensure that education systems contribute to and promote gender equality, instead of reinforcing gender stereotypes. Most recently, in its 48th session in March 2004, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women specifically focused on the theme: ***The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality.***²

According to UNESCO, the term gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed meanings and roles assigned to persons of different biological sexes: males and females. The concept also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and behaviors of both women and men. The notion of gender equality, thus refers to all human beings developing their personal abilities and making life choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid roles and prejudices. In other words, gender equality means that the differences in behaviors, aspirations and needs of women and men should be valued and treated equally. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same; but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Hence, gender equality starts with equally valuing girls and boys. It is based on women and men being full partners in their home, their community and their society.

While the concept of ***gender equality*** is not new, what is relatively new is the concerted effort to revisit men's roles and identities in order to significantly increase men's involvement in working towards gender-equal societies. This policy brief aims to present key rationales, identify principal challenges, and recommend actionable strategies for engaging boys and men³ in efforts to achieve gender equality. The goal of this brief is to provide policy makers, gender-related practitioners, business people and civil society leaders with a framework for developing strategies, implementing programmes, and evaluating progress in gender equality efforts that engage men in all spheres of life.

1 Beijing Declaration, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, Para. 35, "Men's role in promoting gender equality."

2 Commission on the Status of Women 48th Session, "The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality." 1-12 March 2004. Discussion papers prepared can be found at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/men-boys2003/index.html>, and agreed conclusions: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw48/ac-men-auv.pdf>

3 Henceforth, the term "men" will be used to encompass all males from boyhood to adulthood, unless indicated otherwise.

The Rationale: **Why Men Have a Stake in Gender Equality**

Men Have Much to Gain

Despite dominant rhetoric about manhood, many men suffer from socially-constructed gender stereotypes and, hence have much to gain from a gender equal society. Such stereotypes put pressure on them to be 'tough' and to be the 'breadwinner'; resulting in conditions of labor that are often harsh and that may involve injury, violence, crime, and imprisonment (military service, policing, firefighting, etc.). Macho images of masculinity also lead men to engage in unsafe sex that jeopardizes their partners' and their own well-being. Men are victims of many forms of personal and institutional violence – primarily at the hands of other men – and have a great deal to gain from moving towards gender equality: it is an important step towards reducing violence. Tackling homophobia and other forms of discrimination against men because of their sexual orientation, will undoubtedly have very positive effects on promoting gender equality between heterosexual men and women, since in both cases a repressive 'status quo' is challenged.

Men also miss out on a whole range of emotions and experiences that are immensely rewarding and socially valued due to gender stereotyping. For example, in most cultures men are not expected to play a significant role in caring for children and sick parents, or to show affection and express their vulnerabilities in distress. Societal pressure to uphold stereotyped notions of masculinity means men must often suppress this aspect of their human persona. Of course, moving toward gender equality does not mean loss of masculinity. *It does mean that men as a group will be able to share and be part of a broader, healthier, safer, and richer cultural experience.*

Society Benefits as a Whole

The formation of dominant and violent military masculinities in conflict zones around the world creates extreme forms of gender oppression. The active involvement of men and boys in promoting gender equality is a critical resource in peace-building, peacekeeping and social reconstruction. Men's violence against women – in times of peace as well as war – produces staggering economic, health and social costs that detrimentally affect economic performance and efficiency.

Domestic violence in Canada, for example, is estimated to cost some \$1.6 billion per year, while for the United States, the losses are as high as \$67 billion. In New Zealand, the cost of family violence in 1993 was at least \$1.2 billion – more than its wool export earnings.⁴ Much of this violence is rooted in dominant-oppressive relationships delineated along gender lines, which in turn, reinforce overall societal inequities. Thus, in promoting gender equality, societies fundamentally benefit by working towards an environment where arbitrary inequalities of all kinds are rejected.

Although there could be short-term struggles for men to share power, men and women both win in the long term if society is gender equal.

4 R. Hayward (2001), INSTRAW Virtual Seminar Series on Men's roles and responsibilities in ending gender-based violence, Seminar 3: "Linking an end to gender violence with gains for additional human rights concerns and development goals," 2001. For further information, see: www.un-instraw.org/en/research/mensroles/vss/vss_3_3.html

Men Can Make a Difference

Achieving gender equality requires systemic changes in policy and modes of social interactions at all levels of the society: home, work place, school, public services, media, and so on. Men continue to occupy positions of power and privilege in patriarchal social systems, and without their active involvement, a gender equitable society will neither be achievable, nor be sustainable. Yet, when men take an active role in promoting gender equality, the entire society benefits. Education is a particularly important area where men can have an impact on disparity. Recent World Bank figures, for example, indicate that an increase of 1 percentage point in the share of women with secondary education can translate into a 0.3 per cent gain in per capita income.⁵

Challenges: Why It is Difficult to Involve Men in Achieving Gender Equality

Peer pressure, social norms, and available institutional/organizational rules (such as basing on-site child care facilities on the number of female employees only) influence adherence to gender-specific stereotypes. In many parts of the world, men's supremacy is justified on grounds of religion, biology, cultural tradition or organizational mission (for example, in the military or police force). Since men continue to benefit from these 'patriarchal dividends,' there remains a strong resistance to gender equality among certain men. Areas where the role of men has received the most attention are violence and sexual/reproductive health. Indeed, these two issues are manifestations of much larger underlying social processes (such as socialization in the family, at school, and in the workplace) that reinforce gender stereotypes and assign expected gender roles. Such issues, which manifest in a multiplicity of challenges in all aspects of life, are addressed through the strategies that follow.

Strategies: How to Engage Men to Promote Gender Equality

Basic Working Principles

1. **Human Rights Framework:** Given the deep-rooted socio-cultural factors that perpetuate gender discrimination, there is a tremendous need to reframe the issues and create a new vocabulary to formulate effective strategies for change. Framing gender equality issues in the language of human rights and social justice enables men to see their engagement in gender issues as an action that helps improve human rights of all, as opposed to diminishing their own privileges. The human rights framework also provides a strong instrument to fight for the equality and social justice of non-heterosexual men and women.

5. Heller, Peter, "Can the IMF Contribute to the Promotion of the MDGs Relating to Gender Equality?" presented at a meeting in Dubai, 20 Sept. 2003. For full text, see: <http://www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2003/092003a.htm>

2. **Integrated Social Vision:** There is an urgent need to move from an adversarial role to a partnership between men and women in achieving the goal of gender equality. Policies should articulate an integrated social vision of gender where men and women play complementary roles. The Pakistani NGO Rozan⁶ seeks to do just this by employing and addressing both men and women in its community work focused on combating gender-based discrimination and abuse. In its development of a national network of gender trainers, activists, and counselors, Rozan further integrates men into this process.
3. **Life Cycle Approach:** Since gender stereotypes are pervasive and operate throughout a lifetime, a life cycle-based approach is needed to affect the socialization of men and boys in relation to a whole range of social arenas: home, education, workplace, economy, sexuality, sexual orientation, health, work/life balance, etc. Life cycle-based strategies should start with early childhood education and care. Within the home environment, interaction with adults who reinforce broader and alternative roles is critical for gender-sensitive socialization. Mothers have a crucial role in educating boys in how to treat their future spouses and female partners. Moving through various phases of adolescence and adulthood, the strategy should take into account age-specific psycho-social needs: self-esteem, school-to-work transition, singlehood to parenthood, and so on. In this vein, innovative approaches can prove widely successful. Seeing their male peers advocate for the prevention of violence against women on a popular MTV show, for example, motivated other adolescents because the youth-oriented show made it 'hip' to act against gender violence.
4. **Multi-sectoral Partnerships:** Strategies to achieve gender equality should both address ways men need to change, and encourage men to become agents of change. Concrete structured opportunities should be created so that men can become and stay engaged. This requires involving a whole range of stakeholders in the process: governments, multilaterals, the private sector, trade unions, civil society, religious organizations, non-governmental organizations, the army and the police, research institutes, community agencies, the media; to name a few.
5. **Pragmatic Incrementalism:** Since values and social norms do not change overnight, a pragmatic and incremental approach is imperative. The goal should be to get men into action by identifying their common points of concern. Often men might be enlisted for some other concern, perhaps to support the suffering of other men, but they might eventually see the underlying issue of gender inequality as the root cause and join in that fight. For example, the Stepping Stones⁷ approach developed by Action Aid helps to bring the underlying issues of gender inequality out in the open. Stepping Stones is an award-winning training package on HIV/AIDS, gender issues, communication and relationship skills. The training works with women and men, challenging misconceptions through role-plays and exploring what the issues are for each gender group. By sharing and comparing their learning and experiences, each gender group sees how its needs clash or fit with the needs of the other groups and how to work to improve things for everyone.

6 See Rozan website: www.rozan.org

7 ActionAid International. "Inform, Inspire, Encourage: A guide to producing effective HIV/AIDS materials," 2004. See http://www.actionaid.org.uk/wps/content/documents/effectivehivmaterials_0504.pdf

Education Strategies

- Education, in all its diverse formats and contents – formal, non-formal, supplementary, informal, lifelong learning, etc., – is widely recognized as a key contributing factor to the social reproduction of gender inequality. By the same token, education also is the key towards achieving a gender-equitable society. While their delivery mode, governance structure, or programmatic content may vary, both formal and non-formal educational programmes should incorporate some basic principles of a gender equitable teaching-learning experience. Through specially designed texts and learning tasks, curricula should allow boys to examine notions of masculinity and gender relations.
- Whether it is a formal school or a community-based non-formal learning center, a perceived lack of safety for girls (both inside and on the way to such facilities) often makes parents withdraw their female children from education. In Pakistan, a specially designed programme has boys act as ‘big brothers’ to accompany girls to school. In Nepal, research and advocacy activities supported by Save the Children have engaged girls and, increasingly, boys in mapping and campaigning for a ‘safe space’ for girls to learn and live in local community environments.⁸
- Very often in the countries of South Asia, formal schools are gender-segregated, reflecting long-standing social traditions. Deliberate efforts should be made so that young men from ‘boys only’ schools get opportunities to work with girls, both inside and outside school (such as in summer camps).
- Even when learning environments have students of both sexes; gender differentiated learning assignments, learning tracks and teacher expectations continue to exist. Strategies should include professional training for teachers and programme coordinators to interact with learners in gender equitable ways, both in the learning environment and in broader social settings.
- There are widespread practices in many societies where boys are typically favoured over girls for education. Boys and men should be mobilized by aligning their support for girls’ education with other rational priorities. In the Indian state of Haryana the boys and their parents recognized that an educated bride has more earning potential, and this made them strong supporters of girls’ education.⁹ It furthermore significantly slowed the practice of early marriage and female withdrawals from school.
- Research shows that boys who are strongly connected to school or excel in various activities such as dance, music, and sports, also seem to have a greater freedom to explore gender equitable behaviors. These realms of competency seem to counter the social pressure to adhere to a traditional version of masculinity. Boys should be presented with such extended opportunities to excel and define themselves through formal and non-formal education and developmental programmes.
- Health education, specifically education about HIV/AIDS and reproductive health for men, should be integral part of any formal or nonformal education offering.

8 Gautam, Irada; Pokharel, Sulochana; and Rajbhandary, Jasmine, “Safe space for girls?” Save the Children, UK, 28 Jan 2002. For further information, see <http://www.id21.org/education/EgveRajbhandary.html>

9 Govinda, R. (ed.), *India Education Report*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Institutional Strategies

- The workplace, including the education sector, is a major site of inequality between women and men that thrives on gender stereotypes of work roles. Special legislative changes, including tax incentives, targeted hiring practices should be considered as mechanisms to engage men and women to work in roles traditionally considered to be for the opposite sex. Employer policies such as training gender competencies for staff, paternity leave (leave for men to stay home with the newborn, as in Scandinavia), flexible work hours, enforced anti-sexual harassment policies, and childcare facilities for male employees should be considered too.
- Similarly, training programmes for men in childcare and other professions considered as feminine would enable them to accept opportunities outside of gender stereotypes.
- There is a clear power differential across the gender divide. Hence it is critical to work with men in positions of power and have them publicly endorse and enforce gender equality in their own practices to mobilize others. Male dominated institutions such as police force and military can play a positive role in promoting and protecting gender equality through appropriate education and sensitization campaigns.

Communication Strategies

- Most Asian societies are more accepting (or less vindicating) of men having multiple sexual partners, while women are widely expected to be sexually submissive and monogamous. Male sexual practices, such as unsafe sex with multiple partners, play a crucial role in spreading HIV/AIDS. The risk is also acute for men who have sex with men. The myths about AIDS, men's crucial role in spreading the epidemic, its fatal consequences, and the behavioral changes necessary to prevent the disease, should be communicated with utmost urgency and cultural sensitivity.¹⁰ The same applies for violence against women. UNICEF's Let's Talk Men educational videos for adolescent boys in Asia help explore issues of masculinity and its relationship to violence against women.¹¹
- As in any social campaign, allies should be identified using the existing forms of social network: churches, mosques, microfinance agencies, school principals, government officers, community elders and so on. A campaign by Buddhist monks in Thailand (Sangha Metta) is having a significant impact on raising awareness on HIV/AIDS among men and women.
- Strategies should be context-specific, and responsive to local cultural measures. For example, in Yemen: instead of using the word 'gender', the idea of equality of all people was emphasized in efforts to reduce gender discrimination against women. In Canada where public discourse of gender is more accepted, *The White Ribbon Campaign* organizes a highly visible advocacy event, where men and boys wearing white ribbons publicly display their commitment to end violence against women.¹²
- Often a typical argument is: *"Men cannot do that, it is a woman's job"*. However, under unemployment pressures, men have joined the nursing profession, once considered solely a woman's job. It is important to keep sight of this capacity of men to change and while devising communication strategies for engaging men.

10 Based on UNAIDS findings in "Men and AIDS: A Gendered Approach," 2000.

11 UNICEF's *Let's Talk Men* educational videos: <http://www.unicef.org>

12 White Ribbon Canada: <http://www.whiteribbon.ca>

- A vital step in affecting behavioral change through communication is to ensure that men are listening to the concerns of women. In the case of the NGO *'Promundo'* in Brazil, which engages young men to work with other young men against gender violence, such communication was facilitated with professional counseling.¹³ The key is to view young men not only as participants in a problem, but also as participants in a solution. With adequate training, they can act as potential change agents for other men.

C onclusion

There is a subtle, yet critical, distinction between communicating the 'role of men in achieving gender equality' as opposed to advocating 'benefits of greater equality of women in society'. Any effective strategy to engage men in promoting gender equality must first and foremost appeal to male policymakers as a pragmatic and rational framework with clear dividends for men, and not as a moral verdict on the status quo.

¹³ Promundo in Brazil: <http://www.promundo.org.br>

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