

**The role of men and boys in promoting gender equality  
Presentation at the Harvard Club, New York  
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I welcome the opportunity to discuss with you this evening this most important topic. I would like to begin by briefly outlining the evolution of the attention to men and boys in the gender equality work and then outline some of the challenges we face in moving forward.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

**Early efforts for the advancement of women:**

The goal of promoting gender equality (or equality between women and men) has been on the agenda of the international community since the founding of the United Nations. It is well established in the UN Charter. World leaders assembled at the 2005 World Summit at the UN here in New York affirmed that “Progress for women is progress for all”.

The initial work of the United Nations in this area was labelled “advancement of

activities take the contributions, priorities and needs of both women and men into consideration. This strategy is considered essential to ensure achievement of gender equality but also critical for achieving sustainable development goals in all areas, such as those related to poverty, education, health, agriculture and environment.

### **Gaps in implementation:**

Despite all these efforts at global level, and subsequent actions at regional and national levels, there remains today a significant and serious gap in implementation at national level. Change has happened and achievements have been made but the pace of change has been too slow. There are many reasons for this discrepancy between policies and commitments/obligations at global level and action on the ground – including insufficient awareness and capacity, political will and resource allocations.

One other important reason for the slow progress in achieving equality between women and men is the failure to adequately raise awareness of and involve men at all levels. Gender equality cannot be achieved by women alone or by focusing exclusively on women. Gender equality concerns both women and men and change in this area requires the involvement of men as well as women.

## **II. MOVING TO ENGAGE MEN AS WELL AS WOMEN**

### **Shift to relations between women and men:**

While the initial focus on the advancement of women was exclusively on women as a separate group, a category unto themselves, it became evident that information and data on women without comparison with the situation of men are not useful.

Statistics – whether on, for example, access to credit, inheritance and land rights, access to different levels of education, or involvement in decision-making in different areas - need to be sex-disaggregated so that it is possible to identify and address constraints and challenges to the achievement of equality between women and men.

By the mid 1970s, experts were pointing to the fact that it is not possible to work with women's advancement in a vacuum. Much of the inequality and discrimination women faced was directly linked to their relations with men – particularly in terms of access to resources and decision-making. A clear distinction was made between biological differences between women and men (sex) and differences and inequalities that are socially constructed and which can differ over time and in different contexts (gender). This opened up the way for greater attention to men as well as women and to the relations between them.

### **Examples of the need to involve men from development cooperation:**

Many examples from work in development cooperation in the 1980s and 1990s illustrated the need to increase the focus on men as well as women. The achievement of reproductive health goals – an area involving intimate relations between women and men - is one clear example. While women in many countries could be trained on their reproductive health needs and provided access to clinics and contraceptives, full utilization of the information and services by women was only possible if men were also made aware of the



Although this was raised as a critical issue in the Platform for Action adopted in Beijing in 1995, change in this area has been very slow. The Commission on the Status of Women, will however, focus specifically on this topic for the first time in 2009. This will provide an opportunity to learn what measures are already being taken to address this around the world and what more needs to be done.

Work on the scourge of violence against women provided other important examples of the need to actively engage men in addressing the inequalities and discrimination against women. Violence against women is increasing being more adequately named male violence against women. The recognition that violence against women and girls is rooted in inequality and discrimination is critical for finding adequate solutions. Efforts to eliminate violence must clearly focus on eliminating the discrimination on which it is based.

Effectively identifying and addressing the causes, manifestations and consequences of the violence against women requires men's engagement.

### **III. RISE OF MEN'S ADVOCACY AND ACTION**

Over the past decade the important role that men and boys can play in empowering women and achieving gender equality in the home, the community, and the workplace has become increasingly recognized. Achieving gender equality is acknowledged as a societal responsibility that concerns and should fully engage men as well as women and requires partnerships between women and men.

A growing body of research related to men and gender equality has emerged. Academic journals have been established, research conferences have been held, and there is a rapidly growing international literature on the topic of men, masculinities and gender equality.

Initial efforts to understand the role of men and boys and to increase their involvement in promotion of gender equality focused largely on men as perpetrators of discrimination and subordination of women. Advocacy and programmes emphasized the need for men to change their attitudes and behaviours to order to improve the situation of women. In the areas of violence against women, sexual exploitation in armed conflict and trafficking men the focus was on the criminal activity of men and their prosecution and punishment.

Over recent years, particularly as more men have come out actively in support of gender equality and against male violence against women, there has been increased attention to the positive role of men as partners and allies in building a more gender responsive and just society. Male researchers have also called for a focus on the well-being of men and boys as a legitimate concern of gender equality work.

#### **Men's active support:**

Men's active support for gender equality has taken a variety of forms, including advocacy, alliances and campaigns, and educational programmes for young men. Men's advocacy and action on male violence against women have included networks of men who challenge existing stereotypes and men's roles in sexual relationships. Projects and programmes related to working with men and boys, for example on reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, violence against women and men's roles





exist that justify men's supremacy on grounds of religion, biology, cultural tradition or organizational mission, for example the military.

Male inaction can also be a serious constraining factor. Researchers have pointed out that all men, even the "good" men, benefit from the existing patriarchal system and the discrimination and inequality that women face, whether they like it or not, and whether they are willing to acknowledge it or not. All men must therefore be involved in dismantling the system. Men holding positions of power and influence have a particular responsibility to become actively engaged. It is not enough, for ex

health and safety costs (men predominate in dangerous industries such as mining), greater vulnerability to alcoholism, imprisonment and homicidal violence. In many contexts men may feel oppressed by the need to be competitive and ambitious and to avoid expressing their emotions.

There is enormous pressure on men to spend longer hours in the workplace, away from their families. Frequent travel, relocation to different cities or countries, and new technologies, such as e-mail, have extended work hours and have worsened the balance between work and home life. In some occupational groups this results in a life practically consumed by "work". The negative side to a poor "work/family life balance" is that there is little time to share with partners and children, and it is difficult to be a good father in any way except as economic provider.

The conventional divisions of roles narrow men's educational and cultural experiences for many men. In education, boys and men predominate in "technical" courses and natural sciences, but are under-represented in humanities, creative arts, social sciences and services.

Outlining the costs of gender inequality for men does not, however, remove the fact that men are predominantly advantaged within patriarchal systems. It is clear therefore that involving men and boys is not a simple matter of requesting their participation, especially if this means giving up the privileged positions they occupy within patriarchal structures. The benefits of change must be made very clear.

#### **Benefits for men of a more gender-equal society:**

Men are likely to benefit from broad social and cultural changes associated with gender equality. Less rigid stereotyping of masculinity can increase options for men and yield benefits in psychological well-being for men and boys.

Research has shown that the value-added for men of increased involvement in families includes improved bonding and relationships with children and improved relationships between women and men, leading to greater emotional maturity in men and more enjoyment of life..

In a gender-equal society, there will be less risk for men in experiencing and expressing the full range of human emotions. Men will be able to enjoy more intimate, trusting and respectful relations with women and other men. Men will have more opportunity for sharing the care and contributing to the growth of young children – both as fathers and as professional caregivers.

Research on violence, both personal and collective, has shown a persisting connection of violence to men as a group. Men are victims of many forms of personal and institutional violence, primarily at the hands of other men. Achieving gender equality will not totally end violence, but moving towards gender equality is an important step towards reducing violence.

#### **Challenging stereotypes:**

The concept of masculinity involves the societal understanding of what man can and should be and do. In many contexts "masculinity" is understood to imply being stoic, self-reliant, tough, brave, daring and aggressive. In many countries men are taught that to be competitive and aggressive is "manly". In such contexts boys can be



ridiculed if they show interest in caring for younger siblings, cooking or other domestic tasks, have close friendships with girls or display their emotions.

There is, however, significant diversity among men, shaped by local contexts and cultures, and many men act in responsible and caring ways. Many men are actively challenging stereotypes. There are many male groups and networks that actively promote alternative, more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviour.

**Engaging a range of actors to promote a new gender order:**

Research has shown that many actors in society, including men, women, and children, are actively challenging stereotypes and promoting more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours. For example, in many communities, men are taking on more domestic responsibilities and caring for their families, while women are becoming more economically active and participating in decision-making processes. This is leading to a more balanced and equitable gender order.

## **VII. CONCLUSIONS**

The achievement of gender equality is still to a large extent considered a women's issue. It is important to increase awareness that gender equality is a societal issues which concerns and should engage both women and men. There is a need to develop a greater understanding of the importance of gender equality for men and boys a well as women and girls, and of the important roles that men and boys can play in promoting equality.

There is today a greater understanding that it is important to look beyond the attitudes and behaviours of individual men to the structural processes that perpetuate the existing inequalities between women and men.

Where men are key decision makers and holders of economic and organizational power and public resources, they have a particular responsibility to systematically identify and address gender inequalities and discrimination.