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PANEL II

The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality

Written statement submitted by

R. W. Connell

R.W.Connell
University of Sydney, Australia

1. Taking account of men and boys

In addressing "the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality" as a major theme, the Commission is taking an important step in gender equality policy. This meeting has the task of giving substance and detail to the brief statements of principle made in earlier documents, such as the Political Declaration of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly, that "men must involve themselves and take joint responsibility with women for the promotion of gender equality".

This discussion opens up broad new perspectives on how we might move towards a gender-equal world. It contains exciting possibilities for action.

The fundamental change here is that men and boys, who have always been present as background in gender equality discussions, are now present in the foreground, alongside women and girls. Our task is to consider men and boys not just as beneficiaries of women's work or holders of privilege or perpetrators of violence against women, but also explicitly as agents of change, participants in reform, and potential allies in the search for gender justice.

Taking this step in gender equality policy means speaking to men and boys in ways that acknowledge their problems, consider their interests, and seek the motives that can lead towards gender equality. This requires us to consider carefully men's and boys' situations, identities, and practices in relation to women and girls.

In recent years there has been an upsurge of social-science research, from many parts of the world, that provides help with this task. We now have considerable knowledge about gender identities and practices among men, about gender socialization and development among boys and youth, about cultural definitions of masculinity, and therefore about the bases of support for, and opposition to, gender equality. The Expert Group Meeting of 21-24 October 2003 drew extensively on this research, which can be accessed through the documents prepared for the expert group meeting.

One of the main findings of this research is that gender identities and gender practices among men and boys are diverse. There is no one pattern of "masculinity" that is found everywhere; rather there are many specific models of masculinity around the world. There are also differences in patterns of masculinity within specific cultures and institutions. Examples are differences between ethnic groups, between social classes, between men of different sexual orientation, between the able-bodied and the disabled, and between generations.

It follows that there is no single path of development for boys, and no single strategy for engaging men. We must develop policies that acknowledge differences among men, as we already acknowledge differences among women.

It is not surprising, then, that men have divided interests in relation to gender equality. Many men currently gain from the disadvantages of women. Such men make profits from the under-paid labour of women, or benefit from unreciprocated domestic work, or wield power over women. Much of the resistance to gender equality comes from such men. Other men's resistance takes the form of defending an identity, in the belief that gender equality would make them less manly. This may occur where there is a clearly defined hegemonic or dominant definition of masculinity, and where men are accorded greater social honour than women.

Yet in all parts of the world there are other men who reject narrow views of masculinity, and are more open to change. Many men and boys suffer from the consequences of gender inequality and rigid gender divisions - in different ways from women and girls, but with real effects, including health and economic costs. The very acts that sustain men's privileges may also narrow men's human experience. Stereotyped views of masculinity may narrow boys' education and distort boys' emotional and social development.

It is therefore very important that we should recognize, and publicize, the good reasons men and boys have for supporting gender equality. These reasons are multiple and will be given different weight by different groups. They include:

- Ethical, religious and political principles that support human equality in general. Many men and boys hold such principles and apply them to gender relations.
- Personal gains from more equality with women and girls. Among them: health benefits and lower occupational stress for men; broader education and career paths for boys; and benefits in human relations and experience, such as fathers having closer connections with their children.
- Gains in community life from gender equality. For instance, breaking down rigid gender divisions offers poor communities better prospects of economic survival in times of economic stress. Gender equality is likely to improve peacemaking capacities and reduce the risks of violence and war.
- The value to men and boys of improved quality of life for women and girls. As the poet Donne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself". All men live in relationships, and we participate in each others' lives across gender divisions. It is a benefit to men and boys when their mothers, wives, partners, daughters and co-workers are free of the fear of violence, have productive economic lives, have fulfilling emotional and sexual lives, and have rich cultural lives.

The more widely these shared gains from gender equality are recognized, the firmer basis there will be for alliances to realize the "joint responsibility" of which the General Assembly spoke. I will now discuss how this may happen in two policy areas, education and the workplace, before returning to questions of strategy.

2. Education

Education is a vital arena for gender-equality policy. Gender inequalities are reproduced from one generation to another as gender stereotypes are transmitted to young people, different levels of literacy and technical skills are produced among boys and girls, and different career goals and life expectations are created. These educational effects readily turn into economic and social inequalities in later life.

At the same time, education is a key means by which gender inequalities can be redressed. New skills can develop through schooling and higher education, new attitudes can become normative among young people, and teachers have often been prominent in movements for gender equality. The spread of literacy among the world's women, and the movement towards universal primary education for girls - in vast international campaigns coordinated by UNESCO - are among the greatest achievements for gender equality in recent generations.

Most educational action towards gender equality has taken the form of gender-specific programmes for girls and women. This has been necessary, simply to equalize the level of social investment in the education of women and men. As current data on the millennium goals of "Education For All" show, gaps still exist on a world scale requiring more action of this kind.

In most of the developed countries, however, rough parity in levels of education between men and women as aggregate groups has now been reached (though access to specific fields, and the economic return to education, remain unequal). Here, gender-equality policy has become increasingly concerned with the education of boys and the roles of men. In developing countries, the "gender and development" perspective has also opened up questions about the education of boys.

To engage boys and young men in the process of achieving gender equality, we must have education that speaks to their situations and concerns. Lecturing boys from afar, simply telling them that they should support gender equality, is not education - and it is not effective. Education starts where the pupils are. Effective education for gender equality must start by thinking about boys' educational needs in a gender-equal world, and in moving towards it.

The Expert Group Meeting report and the Secretary-General's report have a number of useful suggestions on these lines. For instance, a major task in achieving a gender-equal society is a more equal sharing of unpaid care work (for children, for the sick, for the old) between women and men. Such work requires skills. So there is an educational need for boys to learn techniques and practices which at present, in many communities, are only taught to girls - feeding young children, basic health care, cooking, etc.

Another case is education about sexuality. Male youth are a key group in the pathways of transmission of HIV/AIDS. Educational programmes which help young men reflect on their situation and take responsibility for prevention, contribute to gender equality and

the empowerment of women, by meeting young men's real needs for knowledge, discussion and support.

In such cases it is crucial that we do not treat "women" and "men" as separate groups in separate boxes. The relationships between them are the keys to gender equality.

The diversity of boys and young men, revealed in research on masculinity, is important in education. We cannot expect a single syllabus to work for all groups of boys. We should, rather, design policies which encourage a range of educational programs for gender equality. Some may be "gender-specific", designed for a group of boys or a group of girls. Others may be "gender-relevant", designed for a mixed group but dealing with gender equality issues. Some may be school-based, while others (including successful peer education programs) are based in health centres, neighbourhoods or social movements.

Since changes in education must find support from teachers, an effective gender-equality strategy in education must be teacher-friendly. There is much debate, in this field, about pedagogic methods, curriculum, and even assessment. Educators are far from resolving all these questions. However we can confidently say that teachers pursuing education for gender equality need background knowledge and skills, good materials, and continuing support in their classroom work. Therefore gender-equality policies in education must provide for teacher education, and for development of curriculum and materials.

Many other groups have a role as educators, especially parents. The family is usually the first, and continues to be an important site of gender socialization and source of strong influence on children's ideas about gender. As children grow older, mass media are also likely to be important sources of gender images and models. For young men in many countries, the military have an important educational role. An effective educational policy for gender equality must take account of these multiple sites of informal education, and propose ways to support and guide their work.

Effective education strategies are based on adequate knowledge, and remain open to revision and improvement. We must, therefore, foster the growth of knowledge in this field. On the one hand we need basic research about boys, youth, and gender, in the vastly diverse situations that educators encounter around the world. On the other hand we need careful evaluation of gender-based programmes addressing boys and male youth (there is, as yet, only a little evaluation research in this field), so we can build on experience in a systematic way. Both of these research tasks can be undertaken via an inclusive and participatory, rather than merely technical, approach.

3. Work and the labour market

In the world of work, many of the gender patterns reproduced in childhood and youth harden into gender inequalities. The economic dimension is a crucial part of the whole gender order (the total set of gender arrangements) of any society.

For many men, the workplace is where masculine identity and men's social importance are affirmed. Historically, this led to many efforts by groups of men to exclude women from the workplace, or to confine women to a narrow range of "feminine" occupations. In contemporary economies there is still a massive level of occupational gender segregation, an important basis of income inequality. Such segregation remains common in technical education, and is therefore still being reproduced in the new generation.

The open exclusion of women from specific occupations is now widely regarded as a violation of human rights. "Equal employment opportunity" measures have helped reduce occupational segregation in the formal labour market, especially in public sector employment and some professions.

Nevertheless large income inequalities between men and women as aggregates persist. In some parts of the world these inequalities have increased, rather than declined, in recent history. Some other economic trends are unfavourable to gender equality, including rising average hours of work among employed people in developed economies. Long hours in the workplace make work/life balance, and better participation in domestic work, harder to achieve for men defined as "breadwinners".

Men have already played a role in combating these inequalities. "Equal pay" and "equal employment opportunity" measures have often resulted from coalitions between women and men in government, or in union confederations. The de-segregation of occupations has sometimes been achieved at a grassroots level by union branches entirely composed of men, who were convinced by women's arguments for economic justice. There are, thus, significant precedents for working men's participation in the search for gender equality.

Men have also played a role, and can play a larger role, in changing workplace culture in support of gender equality. For instance promotion barriers can be removed, if enough men support fairer promotion procedures and then put in the effort to make new methods effective. Sexual harassment and the intimidation of women in the workplace can be ended, if men define such behaviour as damaging and contemptible rather than trivial and amusing. Changes in laws help such reforms, but they also require grassroots initiatives by men. Supporting such initiatives through workplace education is an important contribution that unions and employers can make.

The current difficulty of achieving work/life balance is an important reason for men to support moves towards gender equality in the economy. Young fathers, in particular, often wish for greater participation in family life and better contact with their children.

To achieve this without a collapse of family income, they must arrange a trade-off with women in their households. This is an issue where employers and legislators - who are mostly men - can make a difference.

"Family friendly" policies do not necessarily improve gender equality. They may simply reinforce the gender division of labour in child care, by making it easier for women to do the "double shift" (i.e. paid work plus a full load of unpaid housework). But flexible employment policies can be designed to encourage men to share in child care and domestic labour. Paternal leave for childbirth, expanded carer's leave, work-based child care available to men, and work-based education programs, are among the possibilities.

These programmes apply in the formal labour market. However on a world scale huge numbers of workers are in the informal sector, or are unemployed. Unemployment is a trauma with gender dimensions for men, especially those who have defined themselves as "breadwinners", or who have migrated from traditional rural cultures to the city, or who in other ways are caught up in economic and social turbulence. The difficulties of establishing masculine identity and gaining respect in such stressed conditions, can be an important source of violence, family breakdown and dangerous sexual practices.

In such conditions men may benefit from moves towards gender equality at a community level, intermediate between household and nation. By dealing with issues at the community level the trauma of unemployment may be reduced, other sources of respect for men can be found, and men's capacities for equality and cooperation can be mobilized. Whether the community is a village or an urban neighbourhood, this is a context for action by men that may be strategic for gender equality.

Finally, we must recognize that broad economic policies - which in almost all countries are decided by negotiation among groups of men - also have important consequences for gender equality. Taxation policies, for instance, can create incentives or disincentives for equal workforce participation by men and women. The way that wages are determined (legislation, collective bargaining, arbitration, individual contracts) affects income inequality between women and men. The way that credit is controlled affects its availability to women-headed businesses. Such mechanisms need to be studied, audited in gender terms, and where relevant changed; and it is mostly men who have the power to do this.

4. Promoting change

In education and workplaces, and in the other policy areas that will be discussed by my colleagues on this panel, there are both opportunities and responsibilities for men and boys. Literally everywhere that we can detect gender inequalities, there are opportunities to change them. No gender inequalities whatsoever are fixed by natural differences between men and women. Rather, inequalities are created by the way societies deal with natural differences. We can learn to deal with difference more equally, more justly.

The men who hold most of the levers of power in the world - political authority, control of corporations, religious authority, land ownership, military force - have by that fact a responsibility to use power in accordance with ethics and human rights. Of course, most men do not personally hold top executive power. But most men do participate in cultures that give men collectively greater authority and economic benefits than women have. The facts of the contemporary gender order, i.e. the overall pattern of gender relations in the world, create a gendered responsibility for men to act in support of gender equality.

A variety of men have already made significant contributions to gender equality. Some male intellectuals were among the pioneers of equal rights for women; some male political leaders have introduced key practical reforms, such as equal employment opportunity; men of diverse sexual orientations have created "fair families" as real, working households; some grassroots movements among men have changed local cultures, for instance reducing sexual violence. These are initiatives that men can be proud of, and they need to be better known so other men can build on them. Circulating such information is one of the simplest, and most useful, policy initiatives we can take.

"Men's movements" in the contemporary world are very diverse, and they have conflicting agendas for change. Regrettably, some men's movements are concerned with defending men's privilege and resisting reforms that benefit women and girls. There are, nevertheless, other men's movements that contribute directly to gender equality. They include national and international anti-violence campaigns, and youth movements concerned with sexual health and better relationships between young men and young women.

To encourage more men and boys to support gender equality is partly a matter of advancing reasons for change that they can recognize and that connect with the real issues they face in their lives. A short list of such reasons was given above, and more detail can be found in the reports of the Expert Group Meeting and the Online Discussion of June-July 2003.

We also need to consider the principles that policymakers, organizations and social movements should follow, if they are to expand the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. The principles guiding reform should include:

- naming men and boys as agents of change, with identities, experiences and interests that should be acknowledged;
- recognizing men's and boys' capacity to change the social relations they are involved in, and therefore their responsibility in changing gender relations;
- acknowledging difference and diversity among men and boys, which lead to diverse interests and commitments;
- recognizing men's and boys' capacities for equality, and potential or actual commitment to ideas of social justice and gender equality.

For men and boys to become more effectively and more widely involved in achieving gender equality, the cause must engage their passion, and their vision of themselves and their societies. It is that vision that will make the policies and programmes come alive.

We should therefore recognize the role of the creative arts, entertainment and popular culture - and the men as well as the women active in these realms - in creating a climate favourable to gender equality. Precisely because it is creative, cultural production has rich opportunities for going beyond stereotypes and exploring better ways of living.

Helping men and boys to see themselves in a gender-equal future, and to see themselves as active in reaching it, is a strategic step towards gender equality. This meeting of the Commission itself makes an important contribution to awareness. I am confident this meeting will continue to have a world-wide influence, articulating issues, defining policy directions, and encouraging local action on these strategic tasks.