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***Engaging boys and men to empower girls:  
Reflections from practice and evidence of impact***

Prepared by \*  
**Gary Barker**

\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

## Introduction

What can be done to change the social norms that drive the behaviors of men and boys that leave girls vulnerable? The vulnerabilities and disadvantages that girls face emerge directly out of social constructions of gender – identities, attributes, socially expected roles and the social structures set up to enforce those roles. These social norms and identities are internalized by young women and girls and translated into cultural practices and individual actions of those who should protect girls and young women (for example, by parents who may encourage or ignore early coerced sex, allow their daughters to establish relationships with much older men, or allow their daughters to be sold into sex work). These social norms create the conditions in which some young and adult men (in the family or outside of it) sexually abuse girls or use physical violence against them, the preference by some adult men for younger female sexual partners, and the practice of sexual coercion by too many men and boys against girls.

In bringing men and boys into the question, we want to make it clear that this is not to propose an either-or argument, of whether we should devote more time and resources to engaging men and boys in redressing gender inequalities versus working directly with girls to protect and empower them. Both must happen.

The global discourse for empowering girls has generally focused on, among other things, girls' enrollment in public education, reducing or prohibiting early marriage, and economic empowerment. While all of these are key, even when they have been achieved (no small feat to be sure), girls and women are still too often vulnerable. In Latin America and Caribbean on the whole, for example, we see girls enrolled at nearly universal rates at the primary level (in some countries at rates higher than boys). But this enrollment does not leave girls immune to harassment and unwanted sexual advances. In a recent population-based survey in the Caribbean (where girls' rates of enrollment in primary school approach 100 percent, and are higher than those of boys), nearly 50 per cent of young women ages 10-18 reported that their first sexual experience was "forced" or "somewhat forced" (UN Millennium Project, 2005).

Similarly, in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and much of South Asia, girls studying in mixed sex schools report harassment and sexual violence at the hands of male students and male teachers (Barker & Ricardo, 2005). Girls in Nepal describe being harassed by boys on their way to school; if girls report this harassment, they are often punished and withdrawn from school (Mathur et al 2001). Thus, even if empowered to be in public spaces (such as workplaces, schools or universities), girls are too often subject to harassment and abuse. This reinforces the need both to change how social institutions treat girls, but also to change the underlying gender norms that continue to encourage boys and men to treat women and girls as objects for their sexual gratification.

This text will reflect about the ways boys are socialized to see girls and women as sexually subservient and document lessons learned from some of the emerging experiences in engage boys and men in empowering girls and women in diverse settings. It will draw in part on research and program development as part of Promundo's direct work in low income areas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and our research and technical assistance and partnerships in other settings, including India, and sub-Saharan Africa. It will also draw on the preliminary results of a

review we recently carried out with WHO on program interventions with men and boys in promoting gender equality (Barker, Ricardo & Nascimento, 2006).

### **How boys are socialized to view girls**

The socialization of boys and views about what men and women should and should not do are rooted in childrearing practices from the first moments of life onward. By the age of two or three, children imitate the behavior of same-sex family members. Family members usually encourage boys to imitate other boys and men, while discouraging them from imitating girls. Boys who observe fathers and other men being violent toward women, or treating women as inferior or as objects for their sexual pleasure and use may believe that this as “normal” male behavior.

Research carried out in a number of settings finds that many boys and young men view women as sex objects, as being sexually subservient to men and show little respect for the right of girls and women to bodily integrity and autonomy. In a study carried out by Population Council and colleagues in collaboration with Promundo in slum areas in Mumbai, India, 80 percent of 107 young men ages 15-24 reported having practiced “eve-teasing” in the previous three months. Young men frequently described these incidents with pride. Sometimes, specific forms of teasing or harassment were targeted at girls who challenged the young men in some way. Young men acknowledged the powerlessness that young women faced when teased, and the sometimes passive acceptance of this harassment by those who witness it:

Manish: I do tease girls. If I am standing on the road then I tease passing girls. But I only tease those girls who are extra smart and to such girls I tease even in front of their parents.

Sanjiv: Some of these youths even go in the crowded area and do fingering with the girls. Touch any part of their body. And what can women do? Can they say that this man has touched me here? If they say so, then these boys make fun of them (Verma, et al, 2005).

These acts of sexual harassment were nearly always carried out with other young men present, providing mutual support. Some young men also reported group support for instances of coercive sex, including group coerced sex, as well as using blackmail to obtain sex. Similarly, young men interviewed in Brazil and other parts of Latin America, low income urban areas in the US, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa frequently show a generalized lack of respect for girls and believe that young women only seek them out for their money (Barker, 2005; Barker & Ricardo, 2005). Rather than understanding how the collective economic advantages that men have may be used to dominate and subjugate women and girls, many boys and young men blame the victim – they accuse girls and women of “using” men and boys by trading sex for money and gifts. Said one young man in Kaduna, Nigeria: “ ..... if a girl has any problem, they become harlots and get what they need (by trading sex for money)” (Barker & Ricardo, 2005).

Young men interviewed in Uganda viewed male-female relationships (in the context of brideprice) as contractual: men and boys paid for sex and girls or women, once paid or paid for,

had to provide sex. If a girl accepted favors or said she would go out with a young man, sex was expected. As one young man related, it would be acceptable to use violence against a woman: “at times when you take her out, have negotiated (that you would have sex) and then she refuses (to have sex)” (Barker and Ricardo, 2005).

Another common practice among young men is that of categorizing women and girls, into those seen as sex objects and those seen as eligible or desirable for marriage. Young men frequently distinguish between girls who are seen as suitable for marriage (“girls of faith” as young men in Rio de Janeiro called them, referring to girls one would have as girlfriends), and “girls of the street”, referring to girls with whom they had short-term and often purely sexual relationships, and who may be subject to even greater harassment and coercion.

In some parts of the world, many young men have their first sexual encounters with a sex worker, in part at least to affirm their manhood before the male peer group. In Thailand, 61 percent of young men report having had their first sexual encounter in this way (Im-em, 1998). In Argentina, 42 percent of secondary school boys interviewed in one study said their first sexual experience was with a sex worker (Necchi & Schufer, 1998). In India, between 19 percent and 78 percent of men report having had sex at least once with a sex worker (Jeebhoy, 1996). In most such sexual encounters with sex workers, young men go in groups that include male family members or peers, frequently out of a sense of obligation to fulfill a socially proscribed role. Such practices reinforce -- and may lead to lifelong patterns -- of men viewing women as their sexual servants.

Even more subtle and perhaps more widespread is the exchange of sex for gifts, and the encouragement or acquiescence of parents to younger girls going out with older men. In a sample survey we carried out in low income settings in Rio de Janeiro with approximately 600 parents, nearly 25 percent of parents agreed with the statement: “I would let my 15-year-old daughter go out with a 29-year-old man.” In a recent group discussion with mothers of teenage children in one of the neighborhoods, when asked this same question, nearly all the mothers acknowledged the power differentials of a 29-year-old man compared to a 15-year-old girl, but said that such behavior was “natural” -- in effect that girls “naturally like older guys who can buy them things.”

Indeed, if boys are socialized in much of the world to believe they have sexual rights over girls (particularly those seen as sexually “loose” or available), we also know that girls are frequently socialised to accept male control of sexual decision-making, as has been confirmed in numerous studies on sexual violence (Jeebhoy and Bott, 2003). A study in South Africa found that young women identified their ideal relationship as one in which the male made the decisions, including the use of condoms and the timing of sex (Harrison et al., 2001). Among 11 to 15 year-old school-going young people in Jamaica, 69 per cent of boys and 32 per cent of girls agreed with the statement that ‘if you really love your [partner], you should have sex with them’ and more than half (58 per cent) of boys and 30 per cent of girls said that if a boy ‘spends a lot of money on a girl’ she should have sex with him (Eggleston and Hardee, 1999).

For both young men and women, economic disempowerment has important implications for their sexual behavior and the resulting vulnerabilities. An ethnographic study in an Eastern Cape township in South Africa, suggested that the lack of economic and recreational

opportunities for youth led to sexual relations being used as a means for gaining respect and social status (Wood and Jewkes 2001). In addition, low-income young men in many settings in Africa frequently express frustration over the fact that young women are largely attracted to those young and older men with income. Older men, who tend to have more money, also seem to be “watching and showing off their money” to compete with younger men (Mataure et al. 2002). Young women in turn may pursue sexual relations with older men, who generally have jobs and more resources. In other cases, social structures that determine when men receive land and are socially sanctioned to marry, mean that mostly older men are able to marry. This can contribute to inter-generational tension, in which young men see older men as having access to women (particularly young women who are their age-mates), jobs, resources and subsequently greater power (with widely discussed implications for HIV vulnerability).

### **Finding, understanding and promoting resistance**

In analyzing these findings related to the socialization of boys and men, there are always some young and adult men who question these inequalities. Some young men are able to recognize that their own discourses and actions – carrying out sexual harassment with and before the judging eyes of their male peers – were partly performative. A few young men make an effort to understand the difficulties that young women face. Some young and adult men are keenly aware of the negative treatment that girls face, and while their attitude may not be entirely empathetic, they often believe that the sexual harassment that women face is unjust. A few young men go beyond simply observing the unjust treatment and sexual harassment of young women and openly state that such treatment is wrong. A young Muslim man in Nigeria, for example, when his peers were criticizing women and saying that they were untrustworthy, said: “Girls should be the given same opportunities, just as boys have” (Barker & Ricardo, 2005).

As we analyzed this research, it is precisely these “cracks”, inconsistencies or performances of resistances to traditional views about manhood that offer entry points for intervention. One key component of the research has been individual interviews with young men who showed these resistances to seek to understand pathways toward or factors associated with more gender-equitable attitudes. Such young men generally show a high degree of self-reflection, some awareness of the personal benefits of embracing gender equality, and generally had others around them (family members, a valued peer or peer group, or an adult male who modeled gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours) who also questioned gender norms. They sometimes also had seen or experienced some of the worst forms of gender violence – violence against a mother or sister, or perhaps had themselves used violence against a female partner – and had seen the resulting emotional pain (to themselves and others) and thus had come to oppose or question such violence. Most of these more gender-equitable young men had both reflected personally about such issues, but also found their viewpoints supported or reinforced by someone else in their social context.

This formative research has provided several program implications: (1) the need to offer young men opportunities to interact with gender-equitable role models in their own community setting; and (2) the need to promote more gender-equitable attitudes in small group settings and in the greater community. This research also confirmed the need to intervene: (1) at the level of individual attitude and behaviour change, by engaging young men in a critical reflection to

identify the costs of traditional versions of masculinity; and (2) at the level of social or community norms, including among parents, service providers and others that influence these individual attitudes and behaviours.

### **From resistance to programme interventions**

This “natural” variation in young men’s views about gender inequalities and gender violence provided the operating strategy for a global initiative called Program H. The Program H initiative -- “H” for homens (men in Portuguese) and hombres (men in Spanish) – was created by a consortium of Latin American NGOs who sought to encourage the voices of resistance, referring to young men who question traditional norms. Specifically, we created, tested and evaluated a set of interventions that promote a critical dialogue and reflection about gender norms on the part of young men, including a questioning of men’s use of violence against women. These interventions build directly on insights gained from listening to the voices of those young men who openly question gender injustice. While born in Latin America, the program has been implemented, tested, adapted to local cultures and built on by project partners in India, and in parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

The cornerstone of the intervention model is group educational activities designed to be carried out in a same-sex group setting, and generally with men as facilitators who also serve as more gender-equitable role models for the young men. The activities consist of role plays, brainstorming exercises, discussion sessions, a no-words cartoon video series about gender socialization and individual reflections about how boys and men are socialized, positive and negative aspects of this socialization, and the benefits of changing certain behaviours. First and foremost, the group educational process focuses on creating a safe space to allow young men to question traditional views about manhood. The activities were field-tested initially in six settings in Latin America and the Caribbean and subsequently in two settings in India and in Tanzania and Uganda. This testing confirmed that the workshop process, building on Paulo Freire’s ideas about conscious-raising, and its core principles of promoting a critical reflection work across these diverse settings. Adaptation has focused on included context-specific examples for discussion and analysis by the young men.

In addition to the manuals, the partner organizations also tested a “lifestyle social marketing” process for promoting a more gender-equitable lifestyle among young men by tapping into youth culture and engaging youth themselves in developing messages – becoming activists for gender equality. This involves working with young men to identify their preferred sources of information, identify young men’s cultural outlets in the community and craft messages - in the form of radio spots, billboards, posters, postcards and dances -- to make it “cool and hip” to be a more “gender-equitable” man. In the case of Brazil, this campaign encouraged young men to reflect about how they act as men and enjoined them to respect their partners, not to use violence against women and to practice safer sex. Several major rap artists were engaged in the campaign and lent their voices to promoting gender equality.

The campaign was called Hora H, which translates as “In the heat of the moment.” The phrase was developed by young men themselves who frequently heard their peers say: “Everybody knows you shouldn’t hit your girlfriend, but in the heat of the moment you lose

control.” Or, “Everybody knows that you should use a condom, but in the heat of the moment ....” Campaign slogans use language from the community and images are of young men from the same communities – acting in ways that support gender equality.

These concepts, initially tested in Brazil, have since been adapted in other settings. In the case of India, a community-based campaign was developed included comic books, street theatre, posters, and a cap and t-shirt (worn by peer promoters) with the campaign slogan, developed by young men, called the “Real Man Thinks Right”. The logo shows a young man pointing to his head, as if thinking. One comic book shows a young man questioning another man who repeatedly uses violence against his wife. Campaign slogans reinforce the message that it is possible for men not to use violence against women. For example, one campaign poster reads: “Raju (a man’s name) never uses violence against Rakma (a woman’s name). This happens.” Pre-testing found that given widespread acceptance of violence against women, we needed to affirm that there are men in the community who do not use such violence. Similarly, another poster reads: “When Anju does not want to (have sex), Sandeep does not force her. This is possible!” Both are followed with the campaign slogan: “The Real Man Thinks Right.” These messages are acted out in street theatre reaching more than 500 community residents (many of those out-of-work young men).

Impact evaluation with more than 750 young men in Brazil found a significant change in attitudes related to gender-based violence (compared to a control group that showed no change), increased condom use, lower rates of STIs. Qualitative components of the evaluation included interviews with female partners who confirmed positive changes in how their male partners treated them. In the case of India, while still in the testing phase, the number of young men who reported sexual harassment of girls after the intervention dropped by more than half.

At the current stage in the process, the partner organizations are starting work in Brazil, India and Tanzania with groups of young women and men together – forming partnerships based on equality – and designing messages and carrying out group educational activities with mixed groups of young men and women.

Program H, of course, is not the only initiative using this approach to engaging men and boys to question masculinities. There are dozens of emerging examples of organizations carrying out similar efforts in several parts of the world, engaging boys and men in critical reflections about masculinity, both in group educational sessions and via community and mass media campaigns. Here are just a few examples:

- In Canada, the White Ribbon Campaign was founded as a movement of men questioning other men about violence against women and has since spread to more than 50 countries.
- In the US, the organization, Men Can Stop Rape, has developed a campaign called My strength is not for hurting and engaged local sports figures to speak out against violence toward women. Impact evaluation found that young

men who participated in the program reported a greater willingness to question or act on incidents of gender-based violence that they witnessed.

- In India, the NGO Sahayog has started a multi-state effort to engage men at the community level to start local efforts to reach men with messages to end violence against women and girls. Qualitative evaluation with men acting as promoters found significant change in how they treated their female partners, but also resistance to their changing behaviors and attitudes by family members.
- In South Africa, the Men As Partners initiative engages men via the police force, the military, trade unions, universities and schools to carry out activities in these settings to reach men with messages about gender equality.

While evaluation data is often lacking, there is increasing evidence that such efforts work to achieve attitude and behavior change among men and boys. An ongoing literature review we carried out in collaboration with the World Health Organization identified 57 interventions with men and boys in the areas of SRH, MNCH, GBV, fatherhood and HIV/AIDS prevention that had some impact evaluation and in some way applied a gender analysis – a recognition of salient versions of manhood as being part of the problem – in the intervention. Of the 57 studies analyzed:

- 24.5 percent were assessed as effective in leading to attitude or behavior change;
- 38.5 percent were assessed as promising in leading to attitude or behavior change; and
- 36.8 percent were assessed as unclear.

Those programs reviewed that were classified as gender transformative (meaning they in some way specifically and deliberately addressed underlying gender norms and masculinities) were found to be even more effective. Overall 53% of the programs were assessed as either promising or effective. Among those programs that showed evidence of gender transformative elements, 64% were either effective or promising and 44% were effective. In sum, programs that took an approach of addressing gender norms – within messages, staff training, educational sessions and campaigns with men and boys – were even more likely to be show an impact in changing attitudes and behavior.

Emerging lessons from such programs that have explicitly addressed gender with such a ecological perspective point to the importance of (i) promoting critical reflections of gender and socialisation in educational activities, (ii) the creation of environments in which individual and group-level changes are supported by changes in social norms and institutions and (iii) broader alliance-building across government, civil society and local communities to contribute to and reinforce positive changes in norms around gender and sexuality.



## **Taking such experiences to scale and remaining questions**

The programs reviewed for WHO provide ample evidence that men and boys can and do change attitudes and behaviors in the short-term as a result of programme interventions, and that such outcomes are, in nearly all cases, positive for the well-being of women and girls, and men and boys themselves. There are no magic bullets found among the program interventions. Instead, comprehensive, multi-theme interventions that include specific critical discussions about salient, social meanings of masculinities show the highest rates and levels of effectiveness. Nonetheless, there are a number of challenges that remain:

- Almost none of the programs were longer term, following men and boys for more than two years, and nearly all have been relatively small-scale.
- Only a few of the interventions ask women and girls directly about how men and boys changed.
- Few of the programs go beyond measuring individual attitude and behavior change to assess changes in social institutions and practices (in the health sector, the public school, and other public institutions).
- Few if any of the programs have included cost data, that is an analysis of what it costs to achieve large scale change in social constructions of gender.
- Only a few programs have engaged men, boys, girls and women in a comprehensive, integrated approach that understands gender as relational.

In returning to the question at the beginning of this document: There is evidence of positive impact of efforts to engage men and boys in gender-based health inequalities. More evidence is needed, to be sure, and such programs have been mostly small-scale and short-term. But the evidence confirms that slow change among men is not inevitable, but neither is quick, lasting change easy to achieve in terms of gender norms and structures.

In concluding this document, it is important to affirm those issues that have been left out and questions that remain. First, we affirm that there are thousands of programs reaching men and boys with messages or reflections about masculinities that were not included in the review because they do not have evaluation data (or published evaluation data that meets WHO-defined criteria of rigor) or because existing evaluation data was not readily available. These unevaluated programme experiences deserve attention as we explore ways to scale up work with men and boys to reduce gender inequalities.

**In terms of remaining questions, the following are just some that emerge from this review:**

- *Are some attitude and behavioral outcome indicators more important than others in terms of men, boys and gender equality?* For example, might there be some key “gateway” behaviors that create pathways to broader gender transformation among

men? Many of the studies reviewed focus on one specific outcome: couple communication, contraceptive/condom use, or contraceptive intentions. There is little discussion about whether this single behavior, attitude or intention is connected to broader gender relations and norms. Greater analysis would be useful to prioritize indicators. There is a need for more longitudinal research that seeks to understand and assess the impact of earlier gender transformative practices, for example men's involvement as fathers in early childhood. Might such behaviors create pathways among children that promote gender equality?

- *How can programs take a more relational perspective, engaging men and boys in an integrated fashion with efforts to empower women and girls? What is the evidence of impact of such relational perspectives? In which instances is it useful to work only with men and boys (or only with women and girls) and in which is it useful and effective to work with men and women together?*
- *What are the necessary conditions for such program interventions to be able to scale up and sustain their efforts? What are the common factors, conditions or operating strategies of those programme interventions that have been able to scale up or sustain themselves?*
- *What kinds of structural changes and policies have or could lead to large scale change in terms of men and masculinities? It could be useful to review, for example, existing policies related to fatherhood (father leave, for example), family policy, SRH and laws related to gender-based violence to measure or assess the results of such policies. Similarly, what do we know about naturally or spontaneously occurring change, or long-term trends in terms of men's behaviors and attitudes related to SRH, HIV prevention, use of GBV, and participation in child and maternal health and well-being? It could be useful as well to review what we might call "natural experiments" or naturally occurring differences, such as factors that seem to explain higher rates of men's use of GBV in one setting versus another as a way to understand pathways or factors that lead to change.*

There is, understandably, skepticism about whether men and boys, and masculinities, can change, precisely because change on the part of men and boys means giving up power and privilege. But there is evidence of men and boys changing in meaningful ways in some settings as a result of program interventions. The challenge is how to scale up and imbed it in public institutions and practices that go from reaching a few dozen men and boys to reaching millions.