

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 women”. Efforts focused on compiling data and statistics and analyzing the situation of women around the world. Work on the empowerment of women and on securing the human rights of women, for example political rights, was given importance at an early stage.

Women in development:

By the mid 1960s - particularly with the increased number of developing countries in the United Nations - attention was given to what became known as “women in development”. The initial focus was on ensuring that women were involved in development efforts and that the benefits of development reached women as well as men.

As this work progressed, it became increasingly clear, however, that women were already participating in development efforts – in fact they were the mainstay of development in many parts of the world, particularly in rural areas. Awareness grew that sustainable development could not be achieved unless the contributions of women were recognized and build upon and unless all development efforts took into account the priorities and needs of women as well as men and the potential impacts of actions on them.

Frameworks and mechanisms in place:

Over the past six decades, strong global policy and legal frameworks on gender equality have been put in place - The Platform for Action adopted in consensus in Beijing in 1995 and the human rights treaty, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 and now endorsed by 185 states. Specific mechanisms have been established at international, regional and national levels to support the implementation of these critical frameworks.

Since much of the earlier efforts for gender equality had taken place through separate activities for women, apart from and on the margins of the mainstream development efforts, a strategy – “gender mainstreaming” - was established to bring women’s perspectives to the centre of attention (the mainstream) by working to ensure that all policies, programmes and

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

need for change and engaged in the process. This was particularly so in societies where men control family decision-making, including on family size and access to contraceptives.

Many well-intentioned empowerment efforts – such as giving women access to income-generating activities and cash - led to backlash, including increased violence against women, since men were not brought along in the change process and felt that their role as “family provider” and “head of household” was being undermined and that they were losing their control over their wives. This was particularly problematic in areas where men themselves had difficulties accessing employment or other income-generating activities since issues of male status and prestige came into play.

Other development efforts under the gender mainstreaming strategy which attempted to increase the participation of women also ran into difficulties when men were ignored in the process. For example, in a water project in Africa, efforts of an aid agency to involve women more effectively as pump attendants met stiff resistance from men, particularly when it was proposed that women pump attendants should also be given bicycles to allow them to carry out their work. Men objected first on the grounds the women could not learn to ride bicycles. When that was proven wrong, the real objections emerged, that is, that bicycles – a clear status symbol in a poor community – should not be given to women if men did not already have them. The aid agency learnt the important lesson that efforts for gender equality and the empowerment of women must include awareness raising and engagement of men.

Care was needed in efforts to increase women’s involvement, through the gender mainstreaming strategy, not to simply increase the work burden of women without giving them increased access to decision-making and lead to the disengagement of men. As some experts warn in relation to efforts to increase food production in rural areas in Africa, the focus should not be on increasing the inputs of women who are already making significant contributions but increasing the responsibility and inputs of men in food crop production.

Women’s lack of resources, power, time and the constraint of violence:

Addressing many of the constraints and challenges women face require a focus on men and the relations between women and men. Women have unequal access to resources compared with men which constrains their involvement in and access to the benefits of development. An illustrative example is the fact that women in all parts of the world continue to earn less for work of equal worth. In many parts of the world, women have few rights to land, property and inheritance and less access to credit and other financial resources. Change in these areas directly affects men and will require their involvement in the change process.

Around the world, men dominate in decision-making positions in all areas. Women in 2007 still constitute only around 16% of Parliamentarians, and similar or worse situations exist in relation to women’s representation in decision-making in key areas, such as in the executive, economic decision-making, media, academia and the judiciary. In many of these areas reliable and comparable global statistics still do not exist. For an illustration of this close to home, take a look, for example, at the photograph of the 10 Republican candidates for the presidency in the New York Times last week – not a woman to be seen.

The unequal sharing of domestic responsibilities between women and men remains a serious impediment to gender equality and constrains women’s involvement in and benefits from, for example, education, employment, political participation and decision-making.

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

as fathers, have been implemented by institutions ranging from Governments and large international organizations to small community-based groups.

Aware and committed men take leadership roles in increasing understanding of the gains of gender equality for themselves as individuals and as a group, as well as the benefits for society as a whole. This requires identifying the constraints men face under the current “gender order” – i.e. the way relations between women and men are structured in different societies - and the current definitions of masculinity in different contexts. Many efforts focus on men who are already committed to gender equality and can offer positive role models to other men and boys, while others give attention to young men who are less firmly entrenched in their attitudes and behaviour.

IV. AREAS WHERE CHANGE IS NEEDED

I would like to focus briefly on two areas where change is urgently needed.

Sharing of family responsibilities

There is wide recognition of the need to increase the participation of men in domestic work and family responsibilities by encouraging the reconciliation of family and working life for both men and women, including through the adoption of family support policies and programmes. Men as well as women suffer negative consequences from work/life imbalances and have much to gain from better contact with children and participation in family life.

While women’s access to employment has increased in many countries, in most cases men have not proportionately increased their share of domestic responsibilities. Regardless of the extent of women’s involvement in paid work, they often shoulder the main responsibilities for domestic work and childcare, and care for older, disabled and sick family members. This situation has been exacerbated in many places by the increased numbers of older persons and HIV/AIDS infected persons needing care, as well as increases in working hours in some sectors, which have created greater conflicts between work and family life.

Expanding the role of men to include caring requires removing the institutional and cultural barriers that currently make it difficult for men to fully engage as fathers, and by promoting policies and practices that allow for shared care. Actions required to allow women and men to share these responsibilities include closing the gender pay gap and ensuring that family-friendly measures, such as parental leave, part-time employment and flexible working hours, are available to both women and men.

Some countries have adopted parental leave systems in which part of the leave is only available to fathers in order to encourage greater involvement of men. Policy changes in some countries with respect to the presence of fathers at childbirth have allowed men to establish early contact with their newborns. Education programmes for fathers facilitate men’s involvement in and greater responsibility for household duties and childcare.

Men as agents of change in the workplace:

Securing work and earning an income is considered essential in most societies for acquiring the status of male adulthood and social recognition, and is a prerequisite for establishing a family. Changes in the gender division of labour, as well as increasing unemployment, may pose challenges for men in terms of their masculine identity. Given the cultural acceptance of the role of men as the breadwinner in some parts of the world, the limited prospects of employment for young men may be devastating to their sense of self-worth. Unemployment and work insecurity impact negatively on the social and mental well-being of men and boys and can lead to increased violence against women.

In recent decades women have increasingly entered the formal labour market and have taken on more economic responsibilities. In many parts of the world, families are now dependent on women's as well as men's earnings. Men have had to adjust to changes in the resulting changes in relations within the family.

The workplace can be a major site of inequality and discrimination against women. Shifts in organizational culture towards more positive gender relations, particularly in corporations and organizations with deeply entrenched cultures of male privilege, require strong leadership from senior management levels, as well as changes in attitudes and behaviour of both individual men and women.

Men have an important role in promoting women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions, control of economic resources and full participation in decision-making. Male leaders in government institutions, the corporate sector, trade unions and non-governmental organizations can provide positive role models on gender equality by introducing fair employment practices, anti-discrimination measures and gender-inclusive decision-making and by combating sexual harassment in the workplace.

V. CHANGE WILL NOT BE EASY

The lessons of the past decade have shown clearly that change in the relations between women and men and the greater engagement of men in promotion of gender equality, while critical, will not be easy.

Opposition and inaction from men:

While there are many examples of men's support of gender equality, it is also clear that significant resistance remains. A majority of men and boys must be persuaded that the benefits under the current gender order (the current system of gender relations in society) are less valuable than many now think – or that they come at too high a cost.

Resistance may be based on what has been termed “the patriarchal dividend” to men from gender inequalities – i.e what men gain from the current situation, including material benefits (such as control over resources) and power. This simply means that men as a group receive formal benefits such as higher incomes as well as informal benefits, including care and domestic service from women in the family.

If social definitions of masculinity in societies include being the breadwinner and being "strong", then men may oppose women's employment and professional development because it may undermine men's status and prestige. In many parts of the world ideologies

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 example, for the "good" men to be able to declare that they do not commit violence against women and girls themselves; they must also be willing to take active steps to ensure that no other men commit such violence.

Opposition from women:

Opposition to greater attention to men and boys in gender equality has also come from women. Some women fear that men will take over the leadership of what has been, until now, a movement of women. Others fear, sometimes rightly, that the attention to men and boys will distract attention and resources from the empowerment of women. This has already happened in some contexts, for example in some countries in the Caribbean the fact that girls and women are more educated than men and boys has led to calls to give attention to men and boys, without taking into account the fact that the increased access to education for women has not led to increased employment or access to decision-making.

Efforts to work with men and boys must be placed in the overall context of the promotion of gender equality. A meeting of experts from around the world emphasized the need to ensure that men work with women as allies and recognize the leadership and contributions of the feminist movement. They also emphasized the need to ensure that funding for gender equality work with men and boys is not at the expense of existing or future funding for the empowerment of women and girls.

VI. THE WAY FORWARD

Moving forward will require increasing awareness of the costs of the current gender equality situation for men as well as women and highlighting the benefits for men of a more gender-equal society. This will entail identifying and addressing prevailing and well entrenched stereotypes about both women and men, including by challenging existing concepts of "masculinity" and offering alternative ways of being a man.

A better understanding of prevailing stereotypes and expectations about men's roles and responsibilities, and how they influence male attitudes and behaviour, as well as the ways in which boys are socialized to become men, is required for effective policies and actions to increase men's roles in achieving gender equality. The way boys are socialized determines the way in which they will, as young men and adults, relate to women, to men and to gender equality.

The costs of the current situation for men:

Men pay significant costs in terms of quality of life within the current structure of gender relations. There are enormous health disadvantages to men including occupational

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 influence children's perception of ways of being a man or a woman, in addition to parents and other close relatives. These include friends and peers, schools, youth clubs and sport groups, the mass media and male-dominated groups such as the police and armed forces.

Research has also shown that changes in socialization processes should begin at an early age when values and attitudes that shape identities as women and men are being formed. **Families**, including both mothers and fathers have a responsibility for setting examples of behaviour that promote gender equality in raising and educating boys.

Boys and girls who grow up in families without strictly enforced stereotypical gender roles, that is, where the father is involved in caring for children and in domestic tasks, and the mother provides economically for households and/or holds leadership positions in the workplace or community, are more likely to be flexible in their perceptions of the roles of men and women. On the other hand, boys who observe fathers and other men treating women as inferior or being violent towards women may believe that this is "normal" male behaviour and view subordinating and undervaluing women as a mark of masculinity. Gender-based violence, which occurs across all social, economic and cultural settings, is strongly influenced by the socialization of boys and men.

Schools can be important sites for positive learning about gender equality and can facilitate a shift towards a culture based on gender equality. Gender-sensitive curricula, classroom discussions on gender equality, teacher education that promotes positive role models, and sensitization of school administrators and parents are critical in promoting greater contribution of men and boys to gender equality. School environments can, however, also contribute to perpetuating gender stereotypes through biases in school curricula and materials as well as teachers' attitudes and behaviour.

Mass media, particularly advertisements that target children and youth, can play a powerful role in providing exposure to positive gender roles, or alternatively can perpetuate or exacerbate gender stereotypes. In many countries the Internet is an important space for youth socialization, which can have a negative impact, but could also be more effectively harnessed for positive change.

Male dominated arenas: Sports groups, while often promoting positive aspects of teamwork, may contribute to competitive and aggressive forms of masculinity. The police and the armed forces – while in many parts of the world reinforcing notions of aggressive forms of masculinity associated with violence - could also be an important venue for gender-sensitive education for men. A challenge is to develop the spaces where men frequently interact as sources of more positive gender-sensitive attitudes and models of behaviour.

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.