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**The role of men and boys in achieving gender  
equality**

*Written statement\**

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## Introduction

1. Let us recall first that the conceptual shift from Women in Development to Gender and Development, which has been underway since the 1980s, came out of the recognition that focusing on women in isolation, is not the optimal way to advance equality between men and women. The gender and development paradigm promised a new focus aimed at transforming the socially and historically constructed relations between women and men. Let us honestly ask ourselves to what extent this conceptual shift has been translated into practice in our gender equality work. We must admit that many gender equality programmes still continue to focus exclusively on women rather than trying to transform the unequal gender relations which drive and maintain women's subordination. Slow progress, stagnant situations and a sort of gender fatigue, has contributed to the surge of interest in the subject of men and boys' role in achieving gender equality - much like discovering the missing piece of the puzzle.

2. Nonetheless, this interest in men and boys reflects several different perspectives: those who understand that reaching out to men is necessary so that interventions for women and girls are not undermined by male resistance; those who see specific initiatives targeting men and boys, such as awareness campaigns to end gender-based violence as strategies that enhance gender equality; and those who realize that meeting certain needs of men and boys will actually enhance an equity and equality agenda.

3. If men are to play a critical role in achieving gender equality, it has to be a win-win game. The potential for men to gain from gender equality needs to be clearly articulated, particularly in societies where men's power and social hegemony remains largely uncontested or in places where the day-to-day privileges that men enjoy, far surpass those of women. In such contexts, men's role in achieving gender equality cannot only be seen as a vehicle to improve women's situation, the fulfillment of men's specific needs and rights, especially those who are marginalized by poverty, deserve greater attention as well. The first step is to overcome the resistance of men. Resistance by men to positive involvement in gender equality stems from the male relation to power. Gender equality entails redefining and balancing power dynamics between men and women; it also clearly leads to loss of privileges for many men. Certain men resist gender equality in active, hostile and sometimes organised ways, while for others, resistance is part of their practice, even if they profess otherwise. At the level of institutions and states, budget allocations for gender equality programmes, are valuable measurement tool that can be used to gauge commitment beyond political window-dressing. To understand men's resistance, it would be useful to understand men's relations to power in personal life, power in politics, economics and policy-making.

4. Resistance from men to positive involvement in gender equality comes from a wide variety of reasons: patriarchal practices, sexism, maintenance of power, perception of gender equality as 'women's business' and the belief that gender issues are not the 'main or most important concerns in Development. Therefore, changing men's relations to women entails changing men's relations to power as they are both hierarchical and

patriarchal. However, many men feel threatened by direct challenges to their own definitions of manhood.

5. Furthermore, men are not the only ones resisting their participation in gender quality programmes. There has been much resistance on the part of many women activists against the involvement of men in gender and development work as well. Fears about the dilution of the feminist agenda and by anxieties over the diversion of limited resources, away from women's empowerment initiatives and back into the hands of men, who already hold high positions of power and control the resources, keep some women activists opposing the idea.

What is the gain for gender equality?

6. The beneficial impact of involving men and boys is likely to be felt in the longer-term. Such an approach will contribute to rearing of the next generation of boys and girls in a culture of gender equity and equality as well as respect for human rights. Shifting the attitudes and behaviour of men and boys should also improve the lives of women and girls in the home, the workplace, and the community. Involving men may help to create wider consensus and support on issues which have previously been marginalized as 'of interest to women only' (in relation to family, violence, sexual and reproductive health, for example). Targeting men, especially those who have a powerful role within institutions, may also unlock additional financial resources and improve the overall funding levels available to meet the needs of women and girls. Such efforts may also help to undermine the position of those men who are working to preserve men's power and privilege while denying rights to women and children.

### **Specific areas of partnership with men**

#### Reproductive health

7. In fact, involving men has been a prominent part of the shift from family planning to the broader reproductive health agenda. Men obviously make up a significant new clientele for programs. They constitute an important asset in efforts to improve women's health. And efforts to involve them in ways that transform gender relations and promote gender equity contribute to a broader development and rights agenda. While international family planning programs were essentially about women's health, reproductive health as it has now been formulated - goes beyond just health and onto broader development issues. Nonetheless, men still find it difficult to work in reproductive health centers as many are not yet prepared to address their specific needs.

### Fighting gender based violence

8. Gender-based violence is related to the construction of masculinities informed by belief systems, cultural norms and socialization processes. And as the case is in many societies, men are central to most acts of violence. Therefore, engaging men is a critical component of any effective prevention strategy to end gender based violence. The social pressures to perform as males can encourage them to compete, resort to violence or take sexual risks to demonstrate their "manliness". Although such gender norms are often rigid and limiting, they are not static. Positive alternatives can be cultivated. The notion of strength, for example, can lead to violent behaviour, but it can also find expression in resisting peer pressure or in protecting oneself and loved ones.

### Reinterpreting Masculinity

9. Sometimes the way the message is framed can make all the difference. In several Latin American countries, telling young men that they have the right to be involved in their children's lives has had a positive impact, while framing their involvement as a duty or obligation – proved to have the opposite effect. Research shows that many men in all parts of the world express an interest in supporting and becoming more involved in the reproductive health of their partners. But negative feedback from other men, family members and employers, as well as resistance by health providers, may prevent men from putting their interest into practice. They may be uncomfortable with rigid gender norms, but at the same time, unable to challenge them on their own without the support of peers and a conducive social environment.

### Reaching out to boys during their formative years

10. Connecting with boys and young men offers the greatest opportunity to instill gender equitable values early on. Boys who grow up around positive male role models are more likely to question gender inequities and harmful stereotypes. Another justification and urgency for addressing youth: males between the ages of 15 and 24, have the riskiest behaviours related to HIV transmission, including having multiple sexual partners and injecting drug use. In addition, most school curricula do not provide the opportunity for young people to learn relationship skills, discuss norms and peer pressures, or raise questions. Furthermore, while school might be a strategic place to target certain adolescent boys, special considerations have to be made to reach impoverished or marginalized adolescents boys. These boys, at risk of HIV, drug abuse and violence, may have dropped out of school thereby requiring that programmes move beyond the school setting and into places such as sports clubs, bars and other male dominated socialization spots.

### Men as political and community leaders

11. The majority of political leaders are men. Men are often called “gatekeepers” because of the many powerful roles they play in society—as husbands, fathers, religious leaders, media owners, policy makers, health service providers, and local and national leaders. They can control key decisions and access to reproductive health information and services, finances, transportation and other resources. Some men who are national and community leaders may be reluctant to promote policies that will enhance the status of women because such policies are perceived to threaten the status of men. However, current research and operational experience indicate that male leaders who are provided with relevant data and alternative models of behaviour can become allies in resolving problems, including the prevention of maternal mortality and morbidity, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies and violence against women. Furthermore, men continue to dominate the leadership positions in most of the world’s religions. Religious leaders are capable of mobilizing and empowering communities to demand attention and seek solutions from government and other decision makers on issues ranging from gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, maternal deaths to family planning. Working closely with these spiritual leaders, to find common ground can be achieved through dialogue, networking, advocacy on gender issues, and provision of reproductive health services.

12. For instance, in Senegal, UNFPA helped create a network of religious leaders who interpreted the Koran and its precepts regarding sexuality, family planning and reproductive health. As a result, imams addressed family planning and sexuality in their Friday sermons, particularly with men who had previously been left out of the discussion, despite them being the decision-makers in the family.

### New family paradigms

13. Supportive fathers play an important role in the love, care and nurturing of their children. Often times they are the primary providers for their families. In fact researchers have begun analyzing the links between paternal absence and poverty. Children's psychological, social and cognitive development can suffer from paternal abandonment and lack of affective and material support. Thus the many benefits that a father's supportive involvement in family life, underscore the pressing need for effective policies all the more. Social norms and institutions that assume women are primarily responsible for children's well-being and care may discourage men from getting involved during pregnancy and childbirth. Yet this early involvement may be associated with men's later roles in supporting their partners.

## **UNFPA - supported projects**

14. In past years, many UNFPA-supported projects have emphasized men's role in various aspects of reproductive health. The projects target many different groups of men from soldiers to religious leaders to achieve different goals, from preventing and treating sexually transmitted diseases to making reproductive health services available to youth.

15. In response to the high prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, a UNFPA-supported project in Cote d'Ivoire expanded the military health centres to include diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases as well as family planning services. The project was based on the idea that the military can be motivated to adopt responsible sexual behaviour and improve reproductive health of their families if they are fully aware of the threats that unprotected sex poses and if quality reproductive health services are available. The initiative went on to sensitize high-ranking military of these issues, conduct research, upgrade military health centers, train service providers in contraceptive technology and communication skills, and distribute condoms to soldiers. The results included more reported usage of condoms among military personnel and an increased number of treatments for sexually transmitted diseases

16. Another project, which took place in the Dominican Republic, worked with barbers to relay messages about prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases to almost half a million men. With the help of Asociacion Dominicana de Planificacion Familiar (ADOPLAFAM), the barbers were provided with condoms for distribution and basic training on proper condom use, refresher courses, and informational materials. The barbers - who had been selected based on literacy, leadership skills and interest in community development - found that the extra services they provided increased the flow of customers for haircuts. In fact, even after the project ended, the barbers continued to sell subsidized condoms through a social marketing mechanism while providing referrals and information.

17. Similarly, a pilot project in the Southern Muslim communities of Pattani Province of Thailand promoted adolescent health and reproductive rights. Due to prevailing conservative norms, the women and adolescents in the area where the project took place, had been prohibited from learning about sexual health issues in the past. Initiated by Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand (PPAT) and with the support of UNFPA, the project focused on out-of-school Muslim youths, by using peer educators. The project has enlisted the co-operation of religious leaders and by taking an Islamic perspective on issues of reproductive health and male responsibility, helped sensitize the influential Provincial Islamic Council on the importance of reproductive health education.

## **Lessons Learned**

18. Over UNFPA's years of experience working with men, we learned the following lessons:

19. Understanding the cultural, religious and social backgrounds, are key elements in ensuring successful outcomes. Programmes need to be guided by honest assessments of men's and women's needs, existing social norms, perceptions of masculinity and expected gender roles. Programmes must also identify local traditions and cultures that might be conducive to promoting and perpetuating gender injustices, such as gender based violence.

20. Men need to be engaged with positive messages. Language that leaves men feeling blamed can not only alienate them, but can even create a backlash. Men who stand up for women's rights are not always supported by their peers, in fact they are often ridiculed. They need special support and must be connected to other supportive men networks.

21. In order to help promote alternative forms of masculinity, gender training must encourage men to address their fears, change their behaviours and even challenge the dominant ways of experiencing manhood. Programmes should encourage men and boys to be empathic and understand the negative impact of gender inequality on women. One critical way of doing so is to open up dialogues between women's organisations and supportive men groups.

22. Programmes must address men's particular needs and concerns. For example, sexual and reproductive health services should become more 'male-friendly', by changing attitudes of health care providers and hiring more male staff.

23. Working with youth is fundamental. Adolescence is a time when attitudes and values are acquired. Working within schools, including revising the curriculum to make it more gender equality oriented, is critical.

24. Alternative ways of relaying messages, such as through celebrities, might be explored when trying to reach male youth. This exercise should be initiated with caution when selecting 'mentors' however, as care must be taken to avoid perpetuating 'macho' stereotypes which could further reinforce sexist stereotypes.

25. In conclusion, we must admit that efforts to involve men and boys, could bear some pitfalls. Shifting the focus of gender equality programmes towards men and away

from women runs the risk of furthering empowering men and perpetuating the cycle of inequality. Additionally, investing money into programmes that target men may lessen the already under-resourced funding available for women's initiatives. Perhaps the way ahead however, is to work on addressing these concerns and not towards ending such projects because as past experience has shown - men can actually be good news for gender equality programmes.



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