

WORKING WITH MEN AND BOYS TO ADVANCE GENDER EQUALITY

**IWDA Position Paper on
Working with Men and Boys to
advance Gender Equality**

NOVEMBER 2025

This paper outlines IWDA’s position on working with men and boys to advance gender equality. **In line with our Strategic Plan 2025–2035¹, IWDA exists to defend and advance the rights of women, girls and gender-diverse people, and work towards gender equality for all.**

IWDA recognises that engaging men and boys is an important strategy for achieving sustainable and transformational progress towards gender equality, including by challenging restrictive and harmful gender norms and masculinities. Across the Pacific and Asia, IWDA works in solidarity with women’s rights organisations that take rights-based and intersectional feminist approaches to engaging men and boys in diverse contexts and thematic areas. Women’s rights, safety, and leadership remain central to all engagement with men and boys.

This paper outlines why working with men and boys is a critical component of advancing sustainable, transformational change towards gender equality and provides key considerations and recommendations to guide this approach.

WORKING WITH MEN AND BOYS IS AN IMPERATIVE FOR GENDER EQUALITY

It is essential to work with men and boys to advance gender equality because they are uniquely advantaged by patriarchal systems that shape the unequal distribution of power, opportunities, and resources between men and women, and people of all genders². This unequal distribution of power happens within households, communities, institutions, and political structures, and in its most harmful form is expressed through gender-based violence (GBV)³. While not all men and boys enact violence, the behaviours of men and boys, their relationships with women and

¹ [IWDA Strategic Plan 2025-2035 | IWDA](#)

² USAID (2015) ‘Working with men and boys to end violence against women and girls: approaches, challenges and lessons, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/Men_

³ USAID (2015) ‘Working with men and boys to end violence against women and girls: approaches, challenges and lessons, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/Men_

gender-diverse people, and their interactions with other men are shaped by patriarchal norms, expectations, and privileges that can reinforce and reproduce gender inequalities⁴.

Advancing gender equality therefore requires working with men and boys to transform the underlying norms, beliefs, and systems that sustain male privilege and uphold inequitable power relations⁵. Approaches that seek to shift harmful masculinities, engage men and boys in understanding their own positioning within systems of power, and support them to contribute to equitable, non-violent relationships and communities are critical for sustainable and transformational change⁶.

Men and boys often hold greater structural and social power, engaging them is critical to challenging the norms, behaviours, and systems that sustain gender inequality and harmful masculinities⁷. Work with men and boys must therefore begin with a clear analysis of power, privilege, and the ways patriarchal systems shape gendered experiences across contexts⁸.

Global commitments reinforce this need. Advancing gender equality is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁹, and international frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action (1995)¹⁰ call on governments and organisations to engage men and boys as part of this work. These mandates provide a foundation for rights-based, feminist approaches that seek to shift unequal power relations, not simply raise awareness.

IWDA supports rights-based, feminist approaches to work that actively involves men and boys. This means that programs with men and boys do not divert attention, funding or power away from women and other marginalised genders, women's rights organisations and networks or women and gender-diverse-focused programming. IWDA and our partners' work with men and boys also takes an intersectional approach, recognising that women and girls are not a homogenous group and experience the impact of gender inequality differently.

⁴ Edstrom and Shakaroah (2016)

'Reframing Men and Boys in Policy for Gender Equality: Conceptual Guidance and an Agenda for Change', EMERGE Framing Paper, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton: IDS

⁵ [Insights on Engaging Men and Boys in Creating a More Gender Equal Future in Canada - PMC](#)

⁶ [Our Watch | Men in focus](#)

⁷ [Our Watch | Men in focus](#)

⁸ [Male-dominated workplaces and the power of masculine privilege: A comparison of the Australian political and construction sectors - Galea - 2022 - Gender, Work & Organization - Wiley Online Library](#)

⁹ [United Nations: Gender equality and women's empowerment](#)

¹⁰ [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Beijing +5 Political Declaration and Outcome | UN Women – Headquarters](#)

Factors, such as age, religion, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex-characteristics impact on women's experiences and the realisation of their rights. Similarly, we know that men are not all the same, and recognising their diversity and varying levels of privilege is important when understanding masculinities and encouraging men to act in solidarity with women to support gender equality.

Background

Since the early 1990s, growing attention and resources have focused on engaging men and boys in advancing gender equality and understanding how to do this effectively¹¹. Over time, thinking about men's roles has shifted. Men have often been positioned as gatekeepers who can facilitate women's access to opportunities, or as allies and partners in gender equality efforts¹². However, these roles do not necessarily lead to tangible shifts in power from men to women, and women's rights organisations note that this framing does not fully capture men's responsibility or stake in gender equality¹³. Increasingly, men are understood as stakeholders and co-beneficiaries, recognising that gender equality is also in men's best interests¹⁴.

Programming with men and boys occurs along a spectrum:

- **gender-reinforcing**, which upholds existing inequalities
- **gender-neutral**, which overlooks gender norms and inadvertently sustains them
- **gender-sensitive**, which recognises but does not address inequalities
- **gender-transformative**, which critically examines and seeks to shift harmful norms and power relations

While the benefits of engaging men and boys have been widely promoted, progress has been uneven, particularly regarding feminist, rights-based approaches. Stronger evidence is needed on how and why engaging men and boys contributes to improved outcomes for women and structural changes not only shifts in individual men's attitudes and behaviours¹⁵.

¹¹ International Center for Research on Women (2018) 'Gender equity and male engagement: it only works when everyone plays', https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ICRW_Gender-Equity-and-Male-Engagement_Brief.pdf

¹² WHO (2010)

¹³ MenEngage and UN Women (2014)

¹⁴ International Center for Research on Women (2018)

¹⁵ International Center for Research on Women (2018)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1:

Governments, donors, and development actors should prioritise the inclusion of diverse men from different demographic backgrounds, with varying experiences of power and privilege, in male-engagement work.

Recommendation 2:

Donors should fund longer-term and innovative evaluations of male-engagement programs to better understand how these programs contribute to transformational change to advance gender equality—beyond measuring changes to individual men’s attitudes and behaviours.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR WORK WITH MEN AND BOYS TO ADVANCE GENDER EQUALITY

Whilst work with men and boys is an important strategy for advancing gender equality, there are risks, complexities and challenges associated with this work. These need to be considered to maximise the effectiveness of this approach and to ensure that male engagement programs ‘do no harm’ to women, girls and gender-diverse individuals and efforts to advance gender equality.

1. MEN’S VIEWS ON GENDER EQUALITY

What men think about gender equality, and their role in advancing gender equality, is highly contextual. There is also tremendous variation when it comes to men’s ideas of gender equality, highlighting the importance of working with experienced local partners when undertaking this work¹⁶.

For some men, gender equality is an externally imposed agenda that is hostile to men¹⁷. Others may view gender equality as a ‘women’s issue’, or lack understanding of the different forms of control male privilege affords them. Others may be reluctant to be involved due to perceived and/or actual male peer pressure to conform to norms of masculinity that emphasise dominance rather than equality. Others may be supportive of the idea, but feel they lack the awareness or tools to advance gender equality. This highlights that training and support must be provided to men to unpack these issues and build their capacity to respond.

Considering the many different ways that men may think about gender equality, and their role in supporting this, one strategy to facilitate their involvement in this work is to incorporate gender equality training into other programs and activities. In 2019, at the WAVE Male Engagement Workshop, IWDA partners in four countries described how including training sessions about women’s rights in other workshops that might be more appealing such as leadership, or peacebuilding, was a successful strategy for getting men to attend these sessions. In women’s economic empowerment (WEE) programming, changing how men view gender equality and their role in gender equality has proven effective¹⁸.

¹⁶ MenEngage and UN Women (2014)

¹⁷ Diversity Council Australia (2017)

¹⁸ [Women’s Action for Voice and Empowerment | IWDA](#)

Women's participation in economic empowerment activities often changes household dynamics between men and women. This can lead to increased tensions and acts of gender-based violence (GBV) perpetrated by men within couples¹⁹. However, the IWDA research project, 'Do No Harm' found that actively involving men in WEE programming that aims to shift ideas about gender norms and responsibilities, can change men's ideas about the importance of gender equality and lead to better outcomes for women²⁰.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Recommendation 3: Governments and donors should prioritise the central involvement of local organisations and individuals in work with men and boys for gender equality, considering the highly contextual nature of how men's role in gender equality is perceived, and how this can influence the effectiveness of this approach.

2. Notions of Masculinity

Dominant ideas about masculinity and how men should think and behave is shaped by the patriarchal system and can undermine men's willingness to act in support of gender equality.

A key factor that undermines gender equality is gender-based violence (GBV)²¹. GBV is rooted in unequal power relations, and dominant constructions of masculinity play a significant role in shaping attitudes and behaviours that normalise, justify, or enable violence²².

Addressing GBV therefore requires approaches that support men to critically examine these norms, understand the impacts of their behaviours, and cultivate respectful, non-violent, and equitable relationships. Importantly, this work must remain grounded in women's rights to ensure that engaging men does not divert resources, attention, or power away from women's safety, leadership, and agency.

Challenging existing ideas about masculinity can be difficult, as this can be viewed by men as challenging their own sense of self. Programs that promote positive ideas of masculinity are also

¹⁹ USAID (2015)

²⁰ IWDA (2018) 'Do No Harm: integrating the elimination of violence against women in women's economic empowerment programming. Briefing Note'.
<https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/Do-No-Harm-Research-to-Practice-Briefing.pdf>

²¹ [Gender-based violence | UNHCR](#)

²² Flood, M (2011) 'Involving men in efforts to end violence against women' Men and Masculinities, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 258-377, DOI: 10.1177/1097184X10363995

not often inclusive of sexuality, transgender and gender non-conforming identities, and continue to employ a heteronormative model of gender relations that can be counterproductive²³.

Programs which are gender-transformative, promote positive masculinities that are relevant to different cultural contexts and social settings, and which engage boys and young men from a young age have proven to be more effective than other types of programs that aim to prevent VAWG²⁴²⁵²⁶.

IWDA supports partners in working with men and boys as allies and stakeholders to prevent VAWG where women and girls remain the primary focus of the initiative. We recognise the importance of engaging men, particularly young men, to challenge harmful attitudes, behaviours and gender norms.

IWDA partner example: The Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation (NCfR) in Papua New Guinea, through the From Gender Based Violence to Gender Justice and Healing project, successfully built the capacity of male advocates to work with women human rights defenders (WHRDs) on awareness raising initiatives to promote gender equality and prevent VAWG. Male advocates supported the Bougainville WHRDs to lead responses to and prevention of VAWG through working with government and communities to promote shared power and decision-making between women and men. The program has trained 752 male advocates in Phase 1 and 1,211 male advocates in Phase 2²⁷.

²³ MenEngage and UN Women (2014)

²⁴ USAID (2015)

²⁵ Barker, G., et al. (2010) 'What men have to do with it: public policies to promote gender equality', International Center for Research on Women and Instituto Promundo, available at: <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/whatmen-have-to-do-with-it-public-policies-to-promote-gender-equality/>

²⁶ Flood, M (2011)

²⁷ iwda.sharepoint.com/sites/Partnerships-Team/PNG/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2FPartnerships-Team%2FPNG%2F05%2E%20NCfR%2F08%2E%20GBV2GJH%2024-27%20Ph%20III%2F08%20Yr%201%2F06%2E%20Reports%2F6%20Month%20Reports%20for%20PNGWL%2F2%2E%20Jan%20to%20Jun%202025%20Report%2FFor%20PNGWL%2FRevised%20Report%20to%20PNGWL%2FNCfR-IWDA%20Jan-June%2725%20Narrative%20Report%20Revised%20Final%2Epdf&parent=%2Fsites%2FPartnerships-Team%2FPNG%2F05%2E%20NCfR%2F08%2E%20GBV2GJH%2024-27%20Ph%20III%2F08%20Yr%201%2F06%2E%20Reports%2F6%20Month%20Reports%20for%20PNGWL%2F2%2E%20Jan%20to%20Jun%202025%20Report%2FFor%20PNGWL%2FRevised%20Report%20to%20PNGWL%2FNCfR-IWDA%20Jan-June%2725%20Narrative%20Report%20Revised%20Final%2Epdf

Recommendation 5

Promoting positive and healthy notions of masculinity is essential to addressing the rigid gender norms that shape power relations between and amongst men, women, and gender diverse individuals. This work must prioritise the safety of women and girls, explicitly hold men accountable for their violence, and be carefully monitored and evaluated to ensure a do-no-harm approach. Approaches that broaden understandings of masculinity to include sexuality, transgender, and gender-non-conforming identities can support more equitable relationships and help reduce gender-based violence.

3. FRAMING MALE ENGAGEMENT

How the role and purpose of engaging men and boys is framed has a significant influence on the effectiveness of this work. When male engagement is positioned as the primary pathway to gender equality, it can unintentionally reinforce perceptions of women as vulnerable and in need of men to protect or 'save' them. Conversely, if men feel blamed or targeted, they may be less willing to support efforts towards equality²⁸.

Balancing these dynamics is essential. Framing men as partners in advancing gender equality can help increase their willingness to participate, but care must be taken to avoid approaches that reinforce male privilege or replicate harmful norms. Similarly, simplifying messages to appeal to men can make engagement more accessible but risks reinforcing stereotypes and dominant ideas of masculinity.

Feminist approaches that clearly articulate how men are harmed by the patriarchy also and position men's involvement as supporting women's rights and leadership rather than centring men are more effective. This framing helps ensure that male engagement contributes

[27 Ph III%2F08 Yr 1%2F06%2E Reports%2F6 Month Reports for PNGWL%2F2%2E Jan to Jun 2025 Report%2FFor PNGWL%2FRevised Report to PNGWL](#)

²⁸ MenEngage and UN Women (2014)

meaningfully to gender equality without reproducing the very power imbalances it aims to transform²⁹.

IWDA partner example: Male engagement in the WAVE program

The Women's Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE) program was a women's leadership program supporting feminist movement building in Asia and the Pacific region from 2016-2020. In 2019, five IWDA partner organisations in four countries, PNG (VfC), Cambodia (GADC and Banteay Srei), Timor Leste (Alola) and Myanmar (TWO) implemented male engagement projects. Through these projects, 128 men were formally trained as male advocates who worked with over 3,000 community members to advance gender equality and to advocate for women's leadership and prevention of violence against women and girls. Key lessons from the WAVE experience include the importance of pairing male engagement with strong feminist leadership, working through trusted local organisations, and supporting men to challenge harmful norms while reinforcing women's rights and agency. These approaches contributed to more supportive environments for women's leadership and helped shift community-level attitudes towards gender equality.

Recommendation 6: Governments, donors and development actors should ensure that women are involved as active and equal partners in programs that work with men and boys to advance gender equality.

4. ALLOCATIONS OF RESOURCES AND POWER

It is essential that work with men and boys to advance gender equality does not take resources and power away from women and instead intentionally aims to shift power to women from men. When men speak for gender equality and to other men about gender equality male dominance can be perpetuated³⁰. Men currently dominate leadership positions at all levels of

²⁹ OurWatch (2019)

³⁰ Mulder et al (2019) 'Public perceptions of women as political leaders: a multi-country study', https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/Public-Perceptions-of-Women-as-Political-Leaders_A-Multi-Country-Study-1-1.pdf

society in most countries³¹ so engaging them in efforts to advance gender equality in leadership and civil and political participation in particular is necessary.

Whilst men in leadership positions can facilitate women's access to opportunities and information, this approach rarely results in tangible shifts of power from men to women. Furthermore, it can result in men being seen as taking a lead in, and credit for, this work, at the expense of recognising the work led by women towards gender equality.

It is also important that funding allocated to men's support of gender equality does not detract funds from women and women's rights organisations. Work with men and boys to advance gender equality should always be funded separately from, and in addition to, gender equality work led by women³².

Aligning the work of men and boys with the leadership and efforts of the women's movement can help reduce the risk that men's voices will dominate and undermine women's voices and power³³. Evidence confirms that building alliances between work with men and boys and work led by women towards empowerment can improve the impact and effectiveness of male engagement in this work³⁴. This includes ensuring that efforts to engage men and boys in gender equality are developed and implemented in ongoing consultation with women's rights organisations and groups working to protect women's rights³⁵.

Recommendation 7:

Governments, donors and development actors should build and maintain strong alliances between work with men and boys and the women's rights movement. All engagement with men and boys must remain accountable to women and feminist movements and ensure that:

- Efforts to engage men and boys do **not elevate men's positions or visibility at the expense of women**, and instead explicitly aim to advance women's empowerment and gender equality outcomes; and

³¹ Mulder et al (2019) 'Public perceptions of women as political leaders: a multi-country study', https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/Public-Perceptions-of-Women-as-Political-Leaders_A-Multi-Country-Study-1-1.pdf

³² MenEngage and UN Women (2014)

³³ Diversity Council Australia (2017)

³⁴ UUSAID (2015)

³⁵ International Center for Research on Women (2018)

- Funding for male-engagement work **does not divert resources, funding or power from women and women's rights organisations**, and is provided separately and in addition to funding for work led by women and WROs.
-