

# Learning Brief on Engaging Men and Boys to Address Gender Based Violence

Irish Joint Consortium on Gender Based Violence

LEARNING BRIEF NO.6

Gender Based Violence (GBV)<sup>1</sup> is a global phenomenon, existing in various forms in different contexts and cultures. Even during times of peace and economic stability GBV prevails and is accepted within communities and society. During times of conflict and crisis, levels of GBV tend to increase and greater degrees of tolerance can become prevalent. One of the main factors reinforcing the prevalence of GBV is the existence of patriarchy which gives power to men over women. Therefore it is of critical importance that men and boys are engaged to end the cycle of gender based violence.

## Introduction

The information in this brief is based on a learning event organised by the Irish Joint Consortium on Gender Based Violence in January 2011, where a number of invited speakers<sup>2</sup> and practitioners shared experiences and research findings in engaging men and boys to address GBV. The data and research findings highlighted in this brief are sourced from the 2010 International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)<sup>3</sup> which was conducted by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) and Instituto Promundo.

## Unpacking Masculinities

To understand the effectiveness of approaches developed to engage men and boys in addressing GBV, it is important to identify and comprehend the factors relating to masculinity which contribute towards and shape such violence. What are the factors that influence what it means to be a 'man'? To answer this we need to unpack the meaning of masculinities.

In order to understand the behaviours of men it is essential to understand the social construction and different versions of masculinities, bearing in mind that masculinities vary and differ across countries, cultures and contexts. There is no one 'Universal Man' therefore it is critical in our programming to understand the factors that define masculinity and drive certain behaviours and attitudes in our specific operational contexts.

Connell (1995)<sup>4</sup> draws on the concept of hegemony to theorise gender as a form of power. This power is in two forms. Firstly power is exercised between genders, where men have power over women. Being a man confers power and with it certain patriarchal dividends, such as a higher status in society or a better income. Secondly Connell also describes a form of power within genders where people of the same gender assume subordinate roles to one another. In regards to these two types of power, Connell delineates four different kinds of masculinity:

<sup>1</sup> Gender based violence (GBV) is any act or threat of harm inflicted on a person because of their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, therefore women are primarily affected. GBV refers to an act that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual and psychological harm or suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. It encompasses sexual violence, domestic violence, sex trafficking, harmful practises (such as female genital mutilation/cutting), forced/early marriage, forced prostitution, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation to name but a few.

<sup>2</sup> Key Note Speaker was Gary Barker, International Centre for Women, see [www.gbv.ie](http://www.gbv.ie) for video of Gary's presentation. Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila, Lecturer in Masculinities from School of Social Justice, UCD and Tendai Mandingua Madondo, Christian Aid.

<sup>3</sup> The International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) was a household survey conducted by the ICRW and Instituto Promundo and administered to more than 8,000 men and 3,500 women aged between 18-59 in Brazil, Chile, Croatia, India, Mexico and Rwanda. The Survey inquired into such areas as existing definitions of masculinity, contributive factors of GBV such as work stress, previous experiences of violence, sexual experiences, and substance abuse. <http://www.icrw.org/publications/international-men-and-gender-equality-survey-images>.

<sup>4</sup> Connell, R.W. (1995) *Masculinities*, Cambridge, Polity Press

**Hegemonic Masculinity:** is the idealised notion of masculinity, the dominant thinking of what is a 'real man' in a given context.

**Subordination and marginalisation** occurs when men do not behave in a way that is in line with what has been culturally translated into what it means to be a 'real' man. It is not therefore being male in itself that is associated with dominance and power but rather certain ways of behaving. In most contexts men who show alternative masculinities are often rejected and not seen as 'real men'. For example the marginalisation of homosexual men which is common place globally.

**Complicit Masculinities:** is embodied by the many men in society who do not themselves live up to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, yet benefit from its dominant position in the patriarchal order.

Not all masculinities are equal. Instead cultural groups construct ideal notions of masculinity (hegemonic) against which men measure themselves and are measured against. Some men have more power over other men who as a result are subjected to subordination and marginalisation. In fact most men do not perceive themselves as powerful as they see themselves as holding less power than other men. This is particularly the case for men with low incomes. The resulting sense of insecurity and powerlessness, coupled with frustration with other men's abuse of powerful positions, often drives men's use of violence, which is used to compensate for socially constructed 'male inadequacies'.

While there are different interpretations of masculinity, rigid gender norms that associate masculinity with power over women and the use of violence continues to be a significant factor in leading men to engage in gender based violence. The world continues to work within a frame of patriarchy that not only entitles men to greater power than women and deems women subordinate, but also creates differing categories or levels of power for men vis-a-vis other men. This same power structure requires that men fulfil gender norms and this can, in and of itself, make men feel insecure if they do not or cannot be 'masculine' as defined by their specific social and cultural context.

It is vital when programming that we understand the dynamics of masculinities at play, in order to understand the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men in a given context.

### **Factors contributing to GBV as highlighted in the IMAGES research**

- **Childhood Experience of Violence:** The link between witnessing and experiencing violence and using violence with partners is significant. The IMAGES study found that the percentage of boys and men surveyed that were engaged in GBV who experienced violence during childhood was very high.
- **Economic and Work Stress:** This has significant ramifications on men's attitudes and behaviour. The IMAGES study revealed that higher stress levels in relation to work and economic matters correlated with higher levels of GBV.
- **Masculinities and Conflict:** Societies in conflict are far more vulnerable to GBV. It is well documented that armed groups prey on men and boys to get involved in violence, especially those who are experiencing economic and work stress and are unable to fulfil their socially prescribed role of provider. The IMAGES research also showed those who were owners of a gun were involved in higher levels of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).
- **Attitudes to Gender Equality:** attitudes to gender equality hugely affect the acceptability of GBV. A key part of achieving gender equality is changing the social norms that men and women internalise and that influence their attitudes and behaviour.
- **Alcohol Abuse:** Alcohol is a significant factor contributing to increased levels of GBV. According to the IMAGES research, alcohol abuse is also linked to work stress and gender inequitable attitudes.

### ***Childhood Experience of Violence***

The most significant factor associated with men's use of violence found by IMAGES research was in relation to men's experience of violence during childhood, whether at home or in school.

The research found a strong correlation between witnessing violence within the home during childhood and perpetrating IPV in adulthood, which confirms previous research in this area. The IMAGES survey found that, in all 8 countries, the incidence of men who had perpetrated IPV was between 19-32% higher among men who had witnessed their father beat their mother than it was for those who had not witnessed this kind of violence during childhood.

### ***Economic and Work Stress***

There are many ways of interpreting masculinities and understanding what it means to be a man, yet the role of men as providers prevails as a universal norm and the issue of work is core to an understanding of masculinity. Unemployment, low income or lack of status in the workplace can fuel low self esteem and a sense of failure in fulfilling a predefined male role as provider. Statistically across income ranges, work stress and the challenge of fulfilling the role of provider can contribute to the use of IPV. In the Global South for example, where economic stress is a major factor for 20% - 30% of *young* men alone, secure employment and income ensure a successful passage into adulthood, marriage, fatherhood and ultimately the acquisition of wealth. Without adequate or sufficient income and the associated status, young men are obstructed from fulfilling socially defined adult male gender norms or expectations and the associated power dynamic and become stuck in 'perpetual youth hood'. Feelings of inadequacy can lead men and boys to turn to alcohol and drug abuse, migration, depression, dangerous sexual behaviour, and fatalism to bury economic and work stress. GBV can be a result of such behaviour whereby violence is used by the male perpetrator as a means of demonstration or reassertion of power in order to re-establish his status in society, according to the construction of masculinity in that context.

### ***Masculinities and Conflict***

Societies in conflict are far more vulnerable to GBV. It is well documented that armed groups prey on men and boys, especially those who are experiencing economic and work stress and are unable to fulfil their socially prescribed role of provider, to secure or further their hold on a country, community, village or tribe.

Besides the threat of death on themselves and/or on their families for not joining an armed group, men and boys are manipulated with promises of sex, status, income and power when they join. Women are especially physically and economically vulnerable during conflict. Armed groups exploit this vulnerability by presenting it as an opportunity for new recruits to exercise their newly established power and status. When conflict ceases, or they escape from the armed group, returning to past civilian lives and the associated loss of status and power, can prove challenging. The process of unlearning such instilled practice of violence or perceived demonstration of power and status once they return to civilian life is difficult, and can itself spill over into further violence.

### ***Attitudes to Gender Equality***

The IMAGES survey found that men with higher educational attainment and married men had more equitable attitudes, whereas unmarried men had the least equitable attitudes. This study also clearly showed that adult and younger men who adhere to more rigid views about masculinity, for example that women are responsible for domestic tasks and that men should dominate women are more likely to report use of violence against a partner than those who hold more equitable attitudes. Of the countries involved in the IMAGES research, responses from men in India and Rwanda showed the most inequitable attitudes.

### ***Alcohol abuse***

The IMAGES research showed that men's alcohol abuse is much higher than that of women, and that men with more gender inequitable attitudes are more likely to abuse alcohol. For example, in Chile, 69% of men who held the least equitable attitudes regularly abuse alcohol compared to 35% of men who held more equitable attitudes and abused alcohol. In India, men with incomplete primary education and those who reported work stress were more likely to report alcohol abuse. There are a number of women's movements in India specifically aimed at banning alcohol consumption in villages in order to prevent GBV.

These statistics clearly show the inter-linkages between contributing factors that may lead to or perpetuate high levels of GBV.

## Engaging Men without losing focus on Gender Equality

While it is important to understand and pay greater attention to men's lived experiences which often leads to an increase in GBV, this is not to make excuses for the violent and oppressive practices of some men. Practitioners stress just how crucially important it is that programmes designed to engage men and boys to address GBV never lose sight of global women's inequality. Programmes that communities choose to initiate should still place the focus on women and girls' experiences of GBV while engaging men and boys *within those experiences*.

### Snapshot of Global Women's Inequality

- Women have not achieved equality with men in any country<sup>5</sup>
- While it is estimated that women perform two-thirds of the world's work, they only earn one tenth of the income, and own less than one per cent of the world's property.<sup>6</sup>
- Of the world's nearly one billion illiterate adults, two-thirds are women.<sup>7</sup>
- Almost 70% of the one billion people living in extreme poverty across the globe are women and girls<sup>8</sup>
- One girl in 7 in developing countries marries before age 15.<sup>9</sup>
- Women do up to ten times more care work than men
- Girls spend approximately 85% more time per day on unpaid care work than boys.
- 1/3 of women experience physical violence from a male partner during their lifetime
- GBV is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer, and a greater cause of ill-health than traffic accidents and malaria combined.<sup>10</sup>

## Lessons From Practice

### Human Rights as an Entry Point

Practice demonstrates that focusing on human rights as an entry point gains more traction and enhances the potential to engage men and boys on issues of social justice, equality and GBV.

The vast majority of men have not been violent but the majority have been silent. There is a need to speak out and denounce violence and engage with the issues not out of guilt but out of respect for human beings and the benefits for everyone.

### Creating spaces for men to develop alternative masculinities

In addition to understanding the factors associated with men's use of violence, it is useful to examine why some men, despite exposure to high risk factors, do not engage in violent behaviour. Working with men to explore different forms of masculinities and ways of being a man that don't equate with the need for violence has proved effective. Developing alternative male identities, social sanctions or negative social consequences for perpetrators in their communities and the presence of role models and peers who portrayed gender-equitable attitudes, have helped to prevent the continued cycle of violence. It is useful to engage with these men who have positive attitudes to equality, in the design of programmes that aim to promote gender equality and to support them to become peer educators.

### Individuals and personal power

An often overlooked aspect of engaging men to address GBV is simply asking men how they feel about it. Developing men's higher levels of emotional intelligence so that men can verbalise their emotions in safe spaces has shown changes in attitudes towards GBV, for example the Oxfam 'We Can Campaign'.<sup>11</sup>

Acknowledging that GBV and IPV are real issues can be the beginning of a broader articulation, allowing for a range of means to engage men.

<sup>5</sup> UN Department of Public Information - <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/women/women96.htm>

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF - [http://www.unicef.org/gender/index\\_bigpicture.html](http://www.unicef.org/gender/index_bigpicture.html)

<sup>7</sup> UN Department of Public Information - <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/women/women96.htm>

<sup>8</sup> UN Department of Public Information - <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/women/women96.htm>

<sup>9</sup> The Population Council - [http://www.popcouncil.org/topics/youth\\_childmarriage.asp](http://www.popcouncil.org/topics/youth_childmarriage.asp)

<sup>10</sup> The World Development Report 1993, World Bank - <http://econ.worldbank.org>

<sup>11</sup> [www.wecanendvaw.org](http://www.wecanendvaw.org)

For example, appealing to men's own self-interest and self-image by illustrating how GBV might lead to imprisonment, familial relationship breakdown, and cyclical emotional instability. Opening the channels of communication with men regarding GBV can further lead to conversations about gender equality and the benefits this presents for men.

Once these channels are open it is important to use positive messaging, rather than blaming and alienating men: to invite rather than indict and thus engaging men as complex human beings and not oppositional figures when it comes to gender equality.

### ***Inclusion of men in programme development processes***

Programmes aimed at empowering women should consider the context for both men and women and actively engage with men when designing the programme in order to avoid negative reactions and increased levels of violence at the household level.

For example, whilst well-designed women's economic empowerment initiatives are proving effective in enhancing women's financial independence, they have not necessarily altered their care-giving roles within the household. Women's increased participation in the public sphere can not only greatly increase their workload, but it can also threaten men's perceived role as head of the household, which can potentially lead to increased levels of violence against women.

*"The concept of 'universal man' that is implemented in these programmes falsely assumes that men are all alike and inimical to women's rights. On the other hand, this framework also assumes that once the woman starts earning, her husband as the 'universal man,' will inevitably start to value her and things will improve in the household. But this imposition of sameness ...is a belief as yet unsupported by any evidence."*

*(Ahmed, 2008)<sup>12</sup>*

Household dynamics in patriarchal societies where the male is deemed the primary provider can be disrupted when his role is challenged or undermined, potentially leading to violence as a means by which to demonstrate or reassert authority or power. We need to be mindful of these dynamics when developing programmes and mitigate against any intervention increasing GBV. We need to be mindful of these dynamics when developing programmes and mitigate against any intervention that may lead to an increase in GBV.

### ***Community and men as power brokers***

The fundamental power imbalance that exists between men and women means that it is essential to systematically engage with men to address GBV. Engaging men on the basis of their relationship with women in their lives, for example as husbands to wives, fathers to daughters, sons to mothers or brothers to sisters is one such approach. Using politics of compassion in engaging men to address GBV can result in male power brokers to accept that women's issues are men's issues and vice versa. If programmes can engage men to address GBV under this *theoretical umbrella* of human rights for all, then men themselves, as power brokers and role models to young boys, can influence the changes needed within social constructs that have allowed for GBV to prevail.

### ***Importance of Secondary Education***

The IMAGES research found that educated men are more likely to have gender equitable attitudes than uneducated men. The research also shows that secondary education is a critical aspect of reducing girls vulnerability to sexual violence, and is an important focus for working with boys and girls to promote gender equality. Ensuring access and parity for girls and boys in secondary education will support more gender equitable outcomes whereby girls and women are empowered to take key decisions which affect their lives.

### ***Community Processes***

It is vital that community processes are put in place to address issues of impunity and ensure that there are sanctions for boys and men who perpetuate GBV. The creation of agreed community processes instils a system of holding perpetrators to account for their actions.

### ***Public group education programmes***

These are particularly important as changing attitudes is crucial for social changes to take place.

## Program H an initiative of Instituto Promundo ([www.Promundo.org.br](http://www.Promundo.org.br))

Program H focuses on helping young men question traditional norms related to masculinity. It consists of 4 components;

1. A field tested curriculum that includes a series of manuals and an educational video for promoting attitude and behaviour change among men.
2. A lifestyle social marketing campaign for promoting changes in community or social norms related to what it means to be a man.
3. An action research methodology to reduce barriers to young men's use of health services.
4. A culturally relevant, validated evaluation model for measuring changes in attitudes and social norms around masculinities.

Programmes that facilitate participants to reflect on how boys and men grow up within prescribed male gender norms and comprehensive GBV prevention programmes that include deconstructing deeply entrenched stereotypes, have been effective and provide evidence of successful strategies which can be replicated in other contexts. Well designed group education programmes such as Program H (see below) take participants through a process of critical reflection on masculinities, and has shown to be effective in changing gender related attitudes of men and boys.

### ***The Challenge of Scaling up to the Policy Level***

Linking local initiatives to the policy level can often be challenging. Important work taking place at the community level is often not reflected in overall policies, resulting in ad-hoc initiatives which are not comprehensive. This presents a challenge for the sector in influencing the higher level structures and institutions.

## Conclusion

In general, gender related social constructs reinforce and support the structures of male power and stereotyped masculinities, constrain women, limit men and discriminate by maintaining power imbalances. Key to addressing this imbalance is through engaging men in positions of social and cultural influence and power.

These change agents act as important role models for boys and thus influence perceptions of GBV within their respective communities. With peers who carry strong gender equitable attitudes, even boys and men with high risk factors, can address and confidently question the acceptance of GBV in their communities without feeling their masculinity threatened.

GBV is a complex issue and needs to be portrayed in a way other than just shaming perpetrators. Developing programmes with communities in a context sensitive manner which moves beyond simplistic portrayals of GBV as images of men beating women are crucial. Programmes that deconstruct masculinities, that provide a comprehensive support system, that encourage the practice of males in care roles and that illustrate the positive impacts on human rights and equality, both for men and women are key to effectively engaging men and boys to address GBV in a more nuanced and positive manner.

The Irish Joint Consortium on GBV comprises Irish Human Rights, humanitarian and development organisations together with Irish Aid and the Irish Defence Forces working together to tackle gender based violence.

For more information on the Consortium please go to [www.gbv.ie](http://www.gbv.ie)

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