



Engaging men and boys for gender equality

Key terms

Masculinities refer to the socially constructed ways of being and acting, as well as the values and expectations associated with being and becoming a man. These socially constructed ideas are not fixed or tied to biology, they are shaped by culture and can change over time. There is no single version of masculinity. Instead, there are different constructions of masculinities that vary across countries, regions, ethnic groups, economic status, age...¹

Hegemonic masculinity* is the dominant idea of what it means to be a man in most cultures. It legitimises men's dominance over women and people of diverse gender identities. It highlights the privilege of masculinity over femininity, supported by social norms, expectations, shared beliefs.² This rigid concept of masculinities translates into a range of harmful behaviours that oppress women, people of diverse gender identities and men who do not conform to hegemonic norms. Harmful behaviours may result in violence against them and control over their bodies, mobility, assets and resources. It also pressures men and boys to engage in risk-taking behaviour to assert their masculinity, often at the expense of their health and well-being.

Patriarchy is a system of power that promotes male-dominance and devalues women and anything perceived as "feminine". Patriarchy is the root cause of gender inequality. Hegemonic masculinity is both a product of patriarchy and actively sustains it. While masculinities are diverse, each exists within the spectrum of the hegemonic model. The closer a form of masculinity fits within the hegemonic model, the more 'normal' it will seem to most people.³

Positive and non-violent masculinities refer to constructions and expectations of masculinities that promote gender equality and equitable power relations between all genders.

Working with men and boys to dismantle patriarchal structures and unequal gender power dynamics. Embracing positive and diverse masculinities is essential to achieve gender equality.

Exercising positive masculinities means letting go of harmful gender stereotypes, challenging patriarchal institutions, laws and policies and adopting:

- Flexible gender norms,
- More equitable and fairer power relations,
- A commitment to non-violence,
- Human rights for women, children and people of diverse gender identities.

*Hegemonic masculinity is also called patriarchal masculinity, toxic masculinity, harmful masculinity or restrictive masculinity. The term "hegemonic masculinity" is more widely used in the field of social sciences, while "toxic, harmful, restrictive" masculinities embody a more normative approach and belong to the field of activism and feminism.

Why is it important?

Shifting systemic gender inequalities requires the mobilization of everyone

Rigid constructions of femininity and masculinity are embedded everywhere in society and are shaped and reinforced by everyone. As a result, transforming this unequal system and shifting gender norms requires a collective effort. It is a constant effort, as it means counting on the engagement of everyone in rejecting this system, and challenging unquestioned beliefs, biases, and stereotypes that shape how societies define masculinity and femininity.⁴ Working with men and boys, along with women and girls, is essential to achieve gender equality.

Hegemonic masculinities are also harmful for men

Social expectations often pressure men to suppress their emotions and neglect some of their essential and basic needs, such as engaging in thriving relationships or prioritizing their mental health.⁵ This can lead to an inability to recognise and express emotion, and difficulty in connecting with others. Men are also pushed towards adopting risky behaviours that harm their own health, and the well-being of those around them. Such behaviours contribute to higher rates of traffic injuries and deaths, homicides, smoking and alcohol abuse, unsafe sexual behaviours and a reluctance to seek timely medical care.⁶

While men and boys are affected by gender stereotypes and norms, women and girls, people with diverse gender identities and non-heteronormative sexuality, face significantly higher levels of violence and discrimination perpetuated by the existing systems. Engaging boys and men is about transforming unequal social systems that reinforce patriarchy rather than focusing on men's vulnerabilities. Programmes aiming to involve men as allies should encourage them to embrace positive, thriving and non-violent masculinities and support gender equality and girls' empowerment.

Promoting positive and non-violent masculinities also benefits men and boys

When men actively challenge norms of sexist domination, they often experience the personal and social benefits of gender equality. They may enjoy richer family relationships, reduced stress in decision-making, stronger connection with others as equals, and greater capacity for self-expression and empathy.⁷



Men and boys can be gatekeepers to women's and girls' empowerment

Programmes that focus on women and girls only can effectively increase their agency, well-being, skills and foster solidarity. However, unequal gender relations often position men and boys as “gatekeepers” to women's and girls' empowerment. Without their engagement they may resist gender equality efforts, create backlash, or undermine activities, making interventions ineffective.

For example, a project promoting girls' access to school might raise awareness among girls and women about education, offer scholarships and provide materials to girls to encourage their enrolment. But if fathers or other male figures hold negative attitudes about girls and devalue their education, they might prevent them from attending school or even punish them if they advocate for themselves. Similarly, if local leaders and community members share the same negative attitudes towards girls' education, they may retaliate against girls who challenge this norm by harassing, harming or excluding them. In short, because of the position of power men enjoy, their attitudes shape the choices made in favour of girls' empowerment.

To drive meaningful change and achieve positive outcomes for women and girls in a programme, engaging men and boys is essential – and this can be done with different levels of involvement. A gender-sensitive intervention raises awareness among parents and community leaders on the importance and benefits of girls' education. A gender-transformative intervention goes further by engaging men and boys to question negative hegemonic masculinities, adopt supporting attitudes and actively promote and advocate for gender equality in all areas of life.

The central question of norms and stereotypes

How do hegemonic and restrictive masculinities impede girls' and women's empowerment?

Gender inequalities are sustained by a complex web of structural, cultural, and social factors. Among them, hegemonic masculinities play a crucial role in reinforcing and perpetuating patriarchal norms. While not the sole driver of gender inequality, restrictive masculine norms shape expectations of what it means to be a “real man” and a “proper woman,” limiting both men's and women's opportunities, autonomy, and choices.

Norms are culturally grounded, perpetually shaped by legal, economic, and institutional factors. The most recurring forms of restrictive masculinities roles include⁸:

1. The **breadwinner norm** - it dictates that a “real” man should be the primary provider for his family, reinforcing the idea that men deserve job opportunities more than women. This belief, held by 1 in 3 people, makes it harder for young women to enter the workforce and achieve financial independence. All in all, girls and their families are discouraged from investing in education and career ambitions, pushing them toward financial dependence on male relatives or early marriage as an economic survival strategy.
2. The **“manly” jobs norm** pushes women out of higher-paying, male-dominated industries like technology and engineering. These stereotypes take hold early in life: only 1 in 100 girls express interest in ICT careers compared to 1 in 12 boys. This stereotype, ingrained from a young age, limits girls' exposure to STEM subjects, reduces their career

aspirations, and traps them in traditionally “feminine” and lower-paying sectors, more typically associated with care, reinforcing economic inequality.

3. The **leadership norm** promotes the belief that men are naturally better suited for positions of authority. This restricts women's access to leadership roles. In the UK, 1 in 3 girls avoid pursuing political careers due to the sexist treatment of female politicians. Without representation in decision-making, young women's interests remain marginalized in policies and governance.
4. The **avoidance of unpaid care work norm** dictates that household chores and care giving are girls' and women's responsibility, leaving them with little time for education, successful careers, personal development and leisure. Women do 3 to 10 times more unpaid care and domestic work than men.⁹ In no country does the majority of women report that their male partners “share daily childcare routine equally.”¹⁰
5. The **domination of sexual and reproductive choices norm** suggests that men should take the lead in initiating sexual relationships and making decisions about reproduction, such as the number of children and birth spacing. This undermines young women's right to make decisions about their own bodies, and eventually leads to restricted access to reproductive healthcare, forced pregnancies and unsafe abortions.





Key facts & figures on the impacts of hegemonic masculinities

Health and life expectancy impacts

- Compared to women, **men are 4 times more likely to die from external causes** and **7 times more likely to die from homicide**. The main causes are interpersonal violence, reckless driving, alcohol consumption, and drug abuse as well as risky sexual behaviours, high-risk sports and leisure activities.¹¹ The global suicide rate was **over twice as high** among men as among women in 2021.¹²
- While men continue to experience higher mortality rates from external causes and homicides compared to women, women and girls continue to suffer from femicide. Globally, approximately **51,100 women and girls were killed by their intimate partners or other family members in 2023**.¹³

Impacts on women's and girls' rights

- Out of the 189 countries examined by the World Bank, **45 countries do not have laws on domestic violence**. The majority of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰
- Women and girls **internalise ideas of female subordination** in relation to hegemonic masculinities as part of their socialisation, which leads them to hold the same beliefs that harm them.¹⁴

Common misconceptions

Misconception 1:

“We engage men and boys in our programmes so they do not feel excluded and we do not discriminate against them.”

Why it is false: Communities where we work are deeply embedded in patriarchal norms, in which laws, customs and services benefit men and boys while disadvantaging women and girls. Generally, men and boys enjoy many privileges, including the freedom to move around without major restrictions or fear, more access to positions of power, greater influence over the decisions that affect them, greater participation in formulating laws, a lower domestic workload and greater access to employment opportunities. Meanwhile, women of all ages experience different types of violence and discrimination on a daily basis. They face many restrictions on their mobility, and limited influence on the decisions that affect them. They also experience the full burden of domestic work, and significantly fewer opportunities for quality employment.¹⁵

Why it is harmful: Although men and boys from marginalized groups, especially those living in poverty, experience hardships, women and girls remain the most disadvantaged under the patriarchal system and are most in need of systemic change. To achieve meaningful gender and social justice, efforts to engage men and boys should be driven by women’s needs and priorities and remain accountable to them. Overall, the objective of engaging men and boys is to encourage them to embrace positive and non-violent masculinities, as allies for gender equality, while responding to the needs of those most at risk

Misconception 2:

“Engaging men and boys is THE key to achieve gender equality”

Why it is false: While engaging men and boys alongside women in gender-transformative programming is essential to achieve gender equality, it is not sufficient on its own. Such initiatives need to be intentional in challenging unequal power structures and harmful gender norms, including those shaping hegemonic masculinities. This involves orienting men and boys to challenge male power and privilege in the patriarchal society, and working at all levels to overcome structural gender inequality.

Why it is harmful: A review of studies on engaging men and boys in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) interventions found that only 8% actually addressed hegemonic masculinities and challenged unequal power relations and harmful norms (i.e. were



gender transformative). Some interventions even unintentionally reinforced inequalities by upholding men’s dominance over women.¹⁶ For example, educating fathers on SRHR more than mothers can give men greater control over family planning decisions, which further undermines women’s rights and autonomy.

We advise that engaging men and boys should be done carefully to avoid reinforcing negative gender norms and power relationships or depriving women and girls from their agency and autonomy. Plan International is aware of the high risks of perpetuating patriarchal systems and reinforcing harmful norms when working with men and boys if programmes are not properly adapted to the context and if staff are not fully trained and prepared to conduct such activities.

Plan International's response¹⁷



Working with men and boys is **one of the six key elements of our gender transformative approach**, which consists of working with and supporting boys, young men and men to embrace positive masculinities and to promote gender equality, while ensuring meaningful benefits for them. However, this approach is always integrated in projects that prioritise girls and young women. **Engaging boys and men is not the ultimate goal, it is a strategy to achieve gender equality.**

We use **different approaches** at several levels to engage men and boys in our projects. Choosing the approach depends on many factors: the focus of the programme, the local culture and the particular situation. Our interventions are designed with clear and specific objectives and results that define why Plan International should engage with men and boys. They include the following actions:

→ Societal/structural

- **Engaging with government officials** (primarily men) at various levels to advocate for legislation and policies that take girls' and women's issues into account, and ensure proper implementation.
- **Raising awareness** among policymakers and authorities (on gender equality, girls' and women's rights, empowerment).
- **Facilitating connections** between girls' and women's organisations and predominantly male-dominated government institutions to amplify their concerns and policy recommendations.

→ Community

- **Engaging community leaders, teachers and influential persons** to support men's and boys' involvement, promote positive gender norms and encourage dialogue.
- **Training and supporting service providers**, including schools, to foster positive attitudes towards women and girls.
- **Mobilising boys and girls** to challenge gender stereotypes through campaigns, dialogue, sports and art.

→ Relational

- Working with **men and boys in couples, parenting or mixed groups** for critical reflection and dialogue to promote equitable gender relations, taking their personal and social contexts into account.
- Facilitating **mixed-gender activities** (theatre, media production, sports and debating competitions) when the context allows it, to promote interaction and reflection, ensuring that staff guide discussions to prevent reinforcing hegemonic masculinities.

→ Individual

- Engaging men and boys directly through **groups, home visits, mentoring and outreach** to raise their awareness on gender equality, strengthen their life skills, and encourage them to challenge harmful gender norms and discriminatory behaviour.

Essentials for engaging men and boys in our programmes

Accountability to women and girls

We ensure that our programmes do not engage men and boys at the expense of women and girls (i.e. shifting resources away from those most in need). Instead, we engage men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality while centring women's voice in decision-making. We regularly assess the impacts of the intervention, respecting the leadership of women's rights organisations in the gender justice movement and the fight against Gender-based Violence (GBV) and address and de-construct power and privilege that men and boys bring with them when involved in the intervention.

In-depth understanding of the context

Without a gender analysis, including an analysis of gender norms and power dynamics, all activities engaging men and boys in non-mixed groups, are at risk of perpetrating patriarchal systems and radicalising men in their positions.

Clear strategy

Define the objective of the engagement of men and boys at the beginning of the intervention. All activities and sessions should be tailored to the specific group of targeted men and boys and have a progressive learning approach to avoid tackling too many subjects at the same time. A typical pitfall is limiting engagement to a single session on gender and GBV or just including men and boys in general training sessions on gender equality without a targeted approach.

Qualified and engaged facilitators

Select facilitators carefully, considering their commitment to gender justice and who can engage, mobilise and be accepted by communities. Invest in thorough and ongoing coaching, ensuring staff are well-prepared before implementation. Regular reflection sessions should refine the approach and curricula. Without proper training, facilitators, especially men, risk reinforcing the very same patriarchal notions the intervention seeks to challenge.

Working at all levels of the ecological system

Avoid focusing solely on individuals – address the broader social structures that maintain inequitable power relations in place. For instance, engage men leaders to combat violence and discrimination; create spaces where gender equality efforts comply with community and customary law.

Engaging with women and gathering evidence throughout the project

Continuously check with women and girls during and at the end of the action to assess the impact of the intervention on their life. Violence prevention programmes can initially lead to increased violence, making it crucial to monitor and mitigate risks in line with the Do No Harm principles.

Adopting an intersectional approach by ensuring the expertise is available

Appropriately frame messages in a way that takes into consideration how hegemonic masculinities intersect with other identities. Applying an intersectional feminist lens when challenging hegemonic masculinities must take into account the “non-monolithic character of masculinities” and how they are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, social class, age, status, dis/ability, and sexuality.



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About Plan International Belgium

Plan International Belgium is an independent humanitarian and development organisation founded in 1983, which defends children's rights and the equality of girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child. But this potential is often stifled by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected. Working with children, young people, our supporters, and our partners, we strive to create a just world by tackling the root causes of the problems faced by girls and all vulnerable children. In more than 80 countries, we defend girls' rights from birth to adulthood. So that every girl can feel safe. So that she can tell the world who she is and what she wants. So that she can fulfil her dreams. Until every girl is free.

About Gender Equality Essentials

Gender Equality Essentials are a collection of concise, informative guides designed to shed light on the critical issues impacting girls' rights and gender equality globally. Each guide provides an overview of a specific theme, ranging from girls' education and child marriage to girls' leadership and beyond. By providing these resources, we aim to empower peers, advocates, policymakers, and our broad community with the knowledge and tools necessary to drive meaningful change.

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