



Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND
PRACTICE NOTES FROM THE FIELD



BEST PRACTICE NOTE ON MEN’S ENGAGEMENT IN GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

Nutrition International (NI) aims to improve the nutritional status and health of vulnerable people, especially women, adolescent girls and children. The gender barriers these groups face often take place within societies with deeply entrenched patriarchal structures and traditional gender norms where men control access to health and nutrition services. Men and boys, who themselves have specific gender needs, can proliferate or reverse discriminatory structures, practices and behaviours in their society through the various roles they play and the attitudes they adopt with respect to health and nutrition.

As stated in NI’s Program Gender Equality Strategy, “Men have many roles in society, as fathers, partners, brothers, teachers, health care providers and leaders. When children and adolescents see male role models displaying positive masculinities that enable more equitable distribution of household nutrition, health decision-making, caregiving or professional health-related responsibilities – it can have a multifaceted effect on promoting gender equality, women’s empowerment and nutrition in the short and long term.”

Men can experience health and nutrition-related vulnerabilities as a result of socially constructed models of masculinity (e.g. low nutritional intake due to alcohol or substance abuse, etc.). Men are also under-represented in the gender equality discourse at large, hence their engagement is crucial in achieving social change. This guidance note attempts to provide a summary of best practices in engaging men’s agency across the plurality of entry points for consideration in health and nutrition programs. The document includes the rationale for men’s engagement, common misconceptions, a conceptual model, guiding principles, strategies and ethical considerations. Specific examples of men’s engagement in health and nutrition and additional resources are also presented.



Engaging Men in Children's Nutrition. Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Alliance in Malawi²

In Malawi, strong commitment was found across the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) alliance partners, including government officials from a range of departments and local NGOs, for male involvement in child nutrition. There, in collaboration with local SUN partners, the team has scripted a documentary film to reinforce positive images of men participating to improve their children's nutrition (e.g. learning about nutrition, participating in cooking, feeding children, etc.). The belief there is that with more positive role models, men can be more engaged—and it is vital for the success of the project that they are.

Understanding the Rationale for Engaging Men and Boys

Much of the literature about men's engagement and behaviour change for gender equality has arisen from the programmatic area of violence against women and girls (VAWG), including movements such as the White Ribbon Campaign³, UN Women's HeForShe⁴ and the comprehensive behavioural change work of international organizations such as Promundo⁵. Nevertheless, the health and nutrition sectors also feature a growing body of practices, experience and evidence emerging from research that suggest that men's engagement in health and nutrition specifically contributes to positive outcomes for women and girls, as well as for communities more broadly, including boys and men. For example:⁶

- Research has shown that involving fathers in maternal and newborn health services in low-income settings can improve key health determinants, including reduced maternal workload during pregnancy and increased postnatal health care attendance⁷
- Other research shows that involving fathers in breastfeeding education and counselling helped to improve important outcomes, such as initiation of breastfeeding and exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months⁸
- There is evidence that involved fatherhood with an active role in caregiving can actually improve men's own physical and mental health⁹
- Men's engagement has also proven effective in reducing cardiovascular disease risk for male and female patients with type 2 diabetes and/or hypertension¹⁰

Despite this growing body of evidence, there remains pervasive misconceptions that limit the interest and capacity of organizations to engage men in gender equality, health and nutrition.

Table 1. Common Misconceptions About Men’s Engagement in Gender Equality, Health and Nutrition

Misconception	Reality
Gender equality is a women’s issue	Gender equality is the responsibility of both women and men. Women and men both have the potential to eliminate or exacerbate gender issues. Some gender equality issues even put men at greater risks (e.g. excessive intake of salt or saturated fat, alcohol, tobacco) than women. Everyone can benefit from gender equality, not just women.
Women’s and children’s health and nutrition are a women’s responsibility	While health and nutrition are roles traditionally assigned to women and girls, this is a gendered social construct. Men can and should engage in the promotion and practice of health nutritional behaviours for their own sake and their family’s.
Men have nothing to gain from engaging in gender equality, health and nutrition.	Men, women, their families and society at large have a lot to gain from men’s participation in gender-sensitive health and nutrition, notably: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater knowledge, skills and autonomy as caretakers • Better physical/mental health and nutrition outcomes for themselves/their family • Better self-esteem and social recognition • Better relationships with their spouse and children Furthermore, <i>gender equality is not a zero-sum game</i> . When men relinquish privileges, they do not lose benefits to women. Instead, they produce benefits for everyone involved.
Men are not nurturing and caring	Masculinity (e.g. attributes, behaviours and roles associated with men and boys) is a social construct. Men have as much potential to be nurturing and caring (as they have to be violent or careless) if they are brought up and socially encouraged to behave this way.
Men/men’s groups cannot be trusted as partners and agents of change.	Most men welcome opportunities to participate in health and nutrition. Generating such opportunities builds mutual trust between women and men and reinforces men’s beliefs in their potential as agents of change.

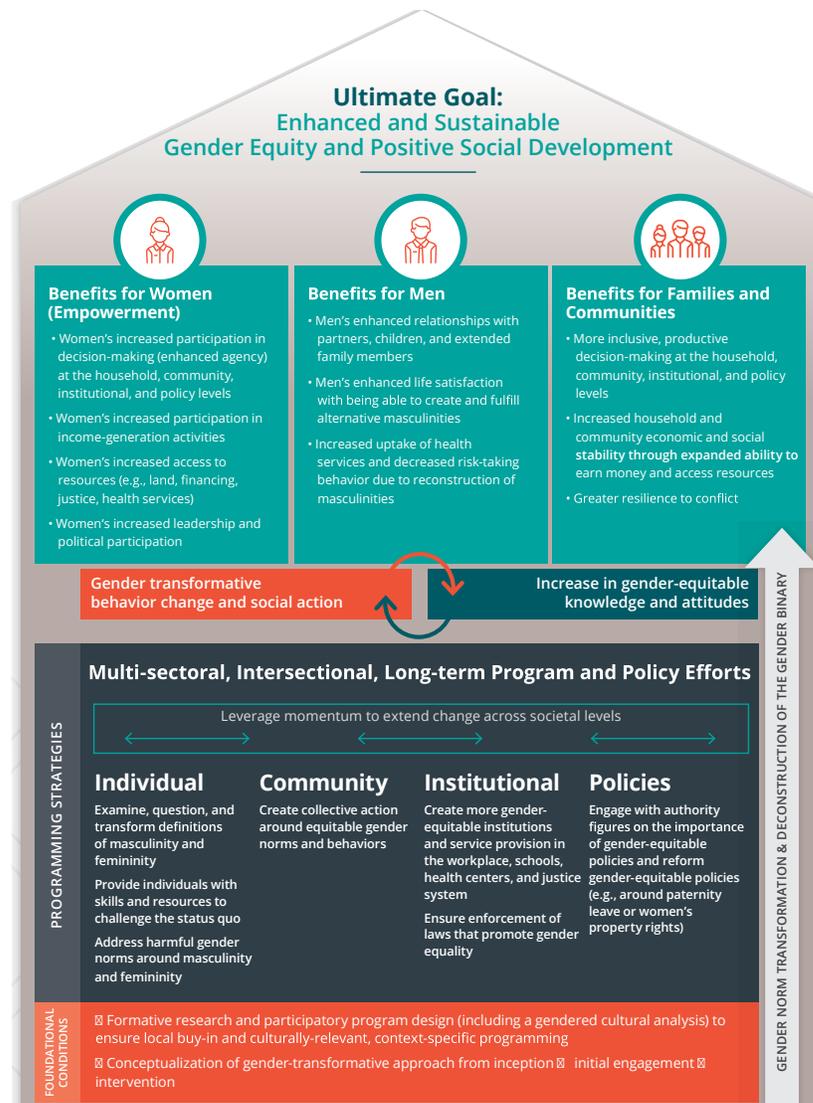


Understanding the Scope of Issues and Strategies Covered Within Male Engagement

Engaging men in promoting gender equality through health and nutrition happens at many levels. Men are not a homogeneous group. Individual men occupy different professional positions and roles in society, often simultaneously. They are at times fathers, husbands, sons, clients, beneficiaries, health service providers, parliamentarians, agents of changes, allies, etc. This means that the programmatic entry points for engaging men in health and nutrition are as diverse as those positions and roles.

Strategies to engage men can indeed focus on changing the knowledge, behaviours and attitudes of individual men. But comprehensive multi-sectoral, long-term strategies are more likely to generate benefits for women, men, families and communities through approaches that combine efforts at the individual, community, institutional and policy level. The following model by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) shows how a combination of interventions to challenge gender norms and masculinity and engage men in gender equality at different levels can lead to sustainable social gains.¹¹

Figure 1. The ICRW Conceptual Model for Male Engagement¹²



Where and How Men's Engagement in Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Takes Place

While there is wide diversity of interventions focusing on men's engagement at individual, community, institutional or policy level (or a combination of these), several trends have emerged with respect to the thematic areas, spheres and modes of engagement in which this work takes place.



The **thematic areas** under which men's engagement generally takes place includes:

- Gender equality with a focus on men's roles, interests and needs;
- Violence prevention;
- Fatherhood and caregiving;
- Health, sexuality, early pregnancy prevention and HIV prevention
- LGBTQ issues

Currently, **spheres** of men's engagement in gender equality and empowerment of women occur in institutions in which discrimination is most likely to take place, for instance:

- Health facilities
- Home
- Schools
- Sports
- Religious institutions
- Public institutions
- Media outlets

The **modes of engagement** or types of activities may include:

- Individual counselling
- Group work with men
- Group work with men and women
- Men as allies to women
- Men as brothers
- Men as fathers of girls or allies to girls' issues
- Research
- Policy/political engagement
- Campaigns
- Networking
- Media work
- Publications/website

Guiding Principles

- **Start young.** Engaging boys or young men to revisit stereotypical ideas around masculinity and men's roles in the household is most effective when done at a young age when individuals have fewer preconceived notions of gender norms and roles. Nevertheless, remember that even young boys are active participants in perpetuating or dismantling gender stereotypes.
- **Men are not a monolithic and homogeneous group.** Beyond a diversity in social roles, they are diverse by virtue of their class, status, position, age, religion, sexual orientation and attitudes, etc. Intersectionality operates just as much within male gender identities as they do in women's (e.g. for instance, experiencing acute discrimination and marginalization as a homosexual black man in an underprivileged neighbourhood).
- **Behaviour change does not occur in a vacuum.** For men to adopt new models of masculine gender identity, they need to be in an environment in which they can exercise behaviours and express attitudes associated with those identities safely. Peer pressure plays a huge role in confining men into retrogressive forms of manhood, regardless of their willingness to change.
- **Engage with men and boys as potential agents of change** instead of "shaming and blaming" them. While it is important to hold men accountable for their behaviour, valuing their contribution to interventions that promote gender equality has proven beneficial in increasing health outcomes.
- Develop messages on men's engagement and gender equality that **avoid a zero-sum game mentality** (e.g. the notion that gender equality and women's empowerment leads to losses for men). Rather, messaging should confront power imbalances and set realistic expectations.
- **Promote alternative and positive forms of masculine gender identities** that recognize:
 - Men's role in caring and nurturing
 - Gender as a dynamic social construct, rather than static biological fact
 - The diversity of masculine identities, needs, interests and opinions
 - Men's and boys' emotional and physical vulnerability and needs
 - Empathy, compassion and altruism as a core value
 - Feminism as an instrument of social progress, and that boys and men can—but are not obligated to—be feminist to support gender equality and feminist movements





- Encourage men and boys to openly **discuss the opportunities and constraints of traditional masculinity.** For instance, consider the following questions: ¹³
 - What rules define masculinity and how are they imposed?
 - Does the concept of masculinity limit men’s life choices?
 - How can traditional masculine norms be challenged?
 - How should a “contemporary masculinity” be defined?
 - How are boys’ food consumption linked with gender norms and body image?
 - How do young fathers integrate a nurturing role into their masculine identity?
 - What role can women play in broadening men’s options?
- **Promote accountability to women’s organizations, gender equality, and women’s empowerment by:**
 - Acknowledging women’s existing contributions
 - Creating opportunities to leverage this work and to collaborate with women and women’s groups
 - Ensuring that men’s efforts are accountable to women’s rights and empowerment, women’s organizations and women themselves

Programmatic Strategies, Practices and Entry Points

In addition to the guiding principles mentioned above, there are practical strategies, practices and entry points that are recognized as good practice and that NI staff and partners can integrate as part of their work. Some of these focus on specific phases within project cycle management (e.g. project design, etc.) while others are approaches to be considered as part of specific activities (e.g. trainings). These include:

- In addition to engaging women and girls, engage men and boys in gender analysis to get a more nuanced, multi-perspective and sophisticated portrayal of gender dynamics and gender barriers.
- Identify issues within nutrition that men may face by virtue of their gender identity. This makes for more informed policies and programming and contributes to getting buy-in from men for gender equality and women’s empowerment.
- Engage men in training on nutrition and child care to strengthen nutrition outcomes AND raise men’s awareness of their domestic role and responsibilities.
- Use training to unpack gender norms among male role models, teachers, health service providers (e.g. health workers), etc.

- When possible, use a gender-synchronized approach, meaning that stakeholders of various gender identities collectively discuss gender transformation. For instance, holding discussions about the benefits of gender equality for men and toxic masculinity with women, also allows women to challenge their own preconceived notions of what it means to be a man.
- Support the development of policies that facilitate the engagement of men in the domestic sphere (e.g. male parental leave, etc.).
- If you seek to target men or boys' group, engage "exceptions to the rule" as "change model" or "champions". These are particularly open-minded boys and men who are likely to be able to act as role models in the community.
- Engage with progressive men's groups such as the Men's Network for the Social and Political Rights of Indigenous Populations in Guatemala or nutrition research initiatives focused on men such as World Food Programme (WFP)'s Participatory Action Learning (PAL) project in Senegal.¹⁴
- Identify and collaborate with community leaders/influencers. These might include influential youth, adults, religious leaders and local authorities.

Examples of Men's Engagement in Health and Nutrition Programs

Engaging men in health and nutrition can be done through a variety of strategies. Some are comprehensive, all-encompassing strategies that capitalize on men's agency and invite them to revisit their preconceived notions of power and gender roles at home and in the community. Others focus on men's role in formal employment. Text boxes 2 and 3 present two examples of men's engagement in health and nutrition with significantly different scope.



Men, Domestic Partnerships and the Gender Champion Approach. USAID's SPRING in Senegal ¹⁵

USAID's multi-sectoral nutrition project, Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally (SPRING), is cultivating gender champions in Senegal to promote gender-sensitive best practices for improved nutrition. The intervention uses the Gender Champion Approach as part of its behaviour change strategy to work with men.¹⁶ The innovative element of this approach is that it focuses on couples and capitalizes on male/female relationships in the household. By conducting community visits (usually guided by local organizations), SPRING project officers can recruit candidate couples who are identified as potentially effective change agents. Couples are then invited to take part in a gender training and are provided with a space to share domestic skills and unpack gender roles. Facilitators explain the implications of collaborative/egalitarian relationships on nutrition outcomes to training participants. They are also provided with advocacy skills and a training certification, which means that upon their return in the community, they can voice and demonstrate positive behaviours to other citizens and promote more equalitarian household practices to influence others.

Ultimately, male participants contribute significantly more to traditionally feminine tasks such as collecting water, gardening and enforcing hygienic practices with family members (meanwhile, women were encouraged to play a larger role in decision-making on finances, food purchases, etc.). This has practical implications on the amount of time available to women to breastfeed, cook healthy meals and rest while pregnant. Benefits generated by this approach include greater cohesion within the household, improved health and nutrition outcomes for the whole family and a visible challenge to gender stereotypes and traditional gender norms in the community.

Engaging Men in Paid Care Work Opportunities¹⁷

In Lesotho a study was conducted to understand the gender dimensions of the Early Care Child and Childhood (ECCD) program, which takes the form of community-based nurseries or preschool where children are supplied with mid-morning snacks and lunch by WFP. ECCD caregivers are sourced from within the community and are paid a nominal fee for their work. Even though the posts are open to both women and men, the majority of caregivers are female because many men feel it is not a suitable role for them. When men are involved, they do not usually engage in cooking or other “female” tasks, even though all tasks are supposed to be shared among the ECCD caregivers.

Community leaders, district authorities, ECCD caregivers and parliamentarians are all making efforts to encourage more men to engage in these paid care work opportunities. This has resulted in an increasing number of men becoming ECCD caregivers. Mofuta, a male caregiver at in one of the ECCD centres argues that these men still face a lot of criticism from other men since caregiving is considered to be women’s responsibility. He said, “despite the criticisms, I always engage in discussions with young boys in my area to consider taking this career. It may take time but with more advocacy it will soon be uniform.”

The project also benefits men as fathers and their children. In particular, it provides an opportunity for them to build intimacy with their sons and model new skills and caring behaviours that ultimately help boys to develop their own self-confidence.¹⁸

For additional case studies and tools pertaining to engaging men in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), maternal newborn and child health, fatherhood, HIV/AIDS prevention and gender-based violence, please consult “Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Equality and Health: A global toolkit for action.” (UNFP, Promundo and MenEngage. 2010)¹⁹



Ethical Considerations

In closing, there are some ethical considerations and risks which NI staff and partners should carefully navigate when pursuing engagement practices with men and boys:

- **Shift in focus.** A focus on men's engagement runs the risk of lessening the attention and investment paid to practices and strategies focused on women and girls. Both are important and are part of the Gender and Development (GAD) approach but there must be a recognition that much of the limited gender equality focus and resources have to date been centered on the strategic and practical gender needs of women and girls because they have historically been discriminated against.
- **Portrayal.** NI staff and partners should avoid portraying men in a stereotypically negative light. For instance, fathers can be portrayed as playing a limited role in food purchase, preparation and distribution or they can be recognized for their potential as caring and nurturing family members. Similarly, they can be portrayed as the main perpetrators of violence against women or as change agents with the power to stop street harassment, domestic violence, to protect their daughters from early marriage etc.
- **Tensions.** Identifying and challenging traditional gender norms, male privileges and toxic masculinity (e.g. as part of a gender training) often initially produce a certain degree of social tension as some men can react defensively. This is a normal reaction, even for open-minded men, because examining one's own gender identity and position in society is a long-term process, that is fueled by emotions and is often uncomfortable, particularly for men who are not traditionally encouraged to express emotions and vulnerability. Acknowledge and welcome discussions around these tensions and stimulate a climate of self-reflection, respect and mutual accountability between men and women.
- **Stigma.** Similarly, encouraging men to revisit their gender identity, to adopt new behaviours (caring, nurturing, protective, etc.) and roles (purchasing food, cooking, providing health care for children, etc.) that are traditionally seen as feminine may initially result in them being stigmatized, mocked or even threatened by other men, especially those who resist such changes. NI staff and partners are encouraged to be cognizant of this risk and supportive of men who courageously challenge deeply entrenched social norms, particularly in patriarchal and religious societies.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Breakthrough's Tools for Men's Engagement
<https://us.breakthrough.tv/tools-for-action/>

Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Equality and Health: A global toolkit for action. UNFP, Promundo and MenEngage. 2010. <http://www.unfpa.org/publications/engaging-men-and-boys-gender-equality-and-health>

Engaging Men, Changing Gender Norms: Directions for Gender-Transformative Action. Men Engage-UNFPA Advocacy Brief. 2014. <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/brief-engaging-men-changing-gender-norms>

Gender Equity and Male Engagement: It Only Works When Everyone Plays. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). 2018. https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ICRW_Gender-Equity-and-Male-Engagement_Brief.pdf

Maternal and child nutrition: What about men? By Kim Harding, Technical Advisor, Supplementation in Pregnancy. Nutrition International. June 25, 2015. <https://www.nutritionintl.org/2015/06/maternal-and-child-nutrition-what-about-men/>

Men and Gender Equality: Online Discussion Report. European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). 2014. <https://eige.europa.eu/rdc/eige-publications/men-and-gender-equality-online-discussion-report>

Men and Violence: Resources to engage men and boys. Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women. <http://www.octevaw-cocvff.ca/resources-how-engage-men-boys>

MenCare: A Global Fatherhood Campaign. <https://men-care.org/>

Promundo's Gender Equality in Aquatic Agricultural Systems (AAS). The program integrates gender-transformative approaches into development initiatives, including approaches to engaging men for women's economic empowerment. <https://promundoglobal.org/programs/gender-equality-aquatic-agricultural-systems/>

State of the Worlds' Fathers. <https://sowf.men-care.org/>

The Aim Framework: Addressing and Involving Men and Boys to Promote Gender Equality and End Gender Discrimination and Violence
<http://www.michaelkaufman.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/kaufman-the-aim-framework.pdf>

The Involvement of Men in Gender Equality Initiatives in the European Union. Study Report. European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). 2012. <https://eige.europa.eu/rdc/eige-publications/involvement-men-gender-equality-initiatives-european-union>



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3. <https://www.whiteribbon.ca/>
4. <https://www.heforshe.org/en>
5. <https://promundoglobal.org/>
6. <https://www.nutritionintl.org/2015/06/maternal-and-child-nutrition-what-about-men/>
7. <https://jech.bmj.com/content/69/6/604>
8. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0890334413491833>
9. <https://sowf.men-care.org/>
10. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26438195>
11. Alternatively, the Ecological Model from the Prevention Institute breaks is broken down into six similar areas, namely: Strengthening individual knowledge and skills; creating supporting peer and family structures; strengthening social institutions by educating health and social service providers and teachers; mobilizing community members; changing organizational practices; and influencing policy legislation at the societal level. (Source: Engender Health Manual)
12. Gender Equity and Male Engagement: It Only Works When Everyone Plays. International Center for Research On Women (ICRW). 2018. P.3. Available online: https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ICRW_Gender-Equity-and-Male-Engagement_Brief.pdf
13. Men and Gender Equality: Online Discussion Report. European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). 2014., p.9
14. Innovations from the Field. Gender mainstreaming from the ground up for the World Food Programme. Synthesis Report. Alyson Brody et al. WFP, IDS and Bridge. 2014. P.12.
15. For more information about SPRING, please visit: <https://www.spring-nutrition.org/>
16. For a comprehensive explanation of the Gender Champion Approach, please visit: <https://www.spring-nutrition.org/publications/briefs/couples-champions-gender-equality>
17. Example extracted from “Innovations from the Field. Gender mainstreaming from the ground up for the World Food Programme. Synthesis Report.” Alyson Brody et al. WFP, IDS and Bridge. 2014. P.12.
18. https://www.hivsharespace.net/sites/default/files/resources/MSH%20Success%20Story%20Lesotho%20ECCD%20Teboho%20Ralitlhare.web_.pdf
19. Available online at: <http://www.unfpa.org/publications/engaging-men-and-boys-gender-equality-and-health>



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