



MenEngage Alliance

working with men and boys for gender equality

Summary Report

MenEngage on the spot: An Accountability Dialogue on the work of the Alliance, past, present and future, after 10 years of existence

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Background

Over the years, MenEngage Alliance has observed increased interest and uptake in initiatives that engage men and boys for gender equality. While we welcome this, because we believe in its importance, we are also aware of challenges, concerns and potential risks involved with this increased uptake, if it is not carried out in human-rights based, feminist-informed, gender transformative ways, fully accountable to women's, girls' and SOGI voices. MenEngage Alliance works hard to ensure our work is carried out under this framework and is deeply committed to fostering critical reflection and ongoing dialogue with feminist activists, organizations, alliances and movements. We welcome these dialogues as an important means of airing challenges and concerns, increasing mutual understanding, building trust and identifying commonalities that can build bridges.

During CSW62, MenEngage Alliance invited feminists, women's rights, SRHR, LGBTIQ+ rights, social and gender justice activists to an open dialogue about our work to dismantle patriarchy, transform masculinities and engage men and boys. At the gathering we turned the focus upon ourselves in a critical, solution-based dialogue on our accountability practices - past, present and future - with the broader gender justice field. This space provided an opportunity to discuss gaps, challenges and opportunities regarding how we can best contribute to advancing the objectives set by the women's rights, gender Justice, human rights and social justice movements.

As part of the preparatory phase for the event, in order to ensure that it would respond to the needs and expectations of feminist, women's rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, and social justice colleagues, MenEngage Alliance undertook a consultative process with a number of activists, many of whom were unable to attend CSW62 or the event but provided feedback in writing. Their inputs have been included in this report to give a more comprehensive overview of the discussion.

MenEngage Alliance presentation

MenEngage Alliance, Global Secretariat Director, Joni van de Sand, opened the dialogue by briefly presenting on the Alliance's strategic process in recent years. She commented that in the last decade, there has been increased interest and uptake of work with men and boys by CSOs, governments and UN agencies - a trend which is reflected in this year's CSW. She explained that MenEngage Alliance, as a network that seeks to transform patriarchal masculinities for women's rights and gender justice, welcomes this trend - but are concerned about the potential risks this brings, when initiatives that engage men and boys are not based in a clear women's rights and gender justice framework and with meaningful participation and in support of women's rights and feminists activists and groups. She added that a number of concerns around this work have emerged, including those recently described in a series of papers by the Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM). These concerns centre around visibility and resources, whether organizations that engage men and boys have more access to powerful stakeholders, and whether this work is done in a way that supports women's leadership

and is in collaboration with women's rights organizations, and actually contributes to advancing women's rights. She stressed that this feedback has been extremely important for MenEngage Alliance and that the purpose of the event is to have an honest dialogue and safe space to hear about participants' experiences, and to collectively set ways forward.

Laxman Belbase, Networks Manager with MenEngage Alliance Global Secretariat, then posed the question: 'What does accountability mean in the context of engaging men and boys for gender justice?'. For MenEngage Alliance, being "accountable" means being critically aware of one's own power and privilege and open to constructive criticism; taking action to address personal and institutional practices that go against our principles of gender equality and human rights, acknowledging any harm caused and making amends; respecting and promoting women's leadership in the gender equality movement, and creating structures of consultation and partnerships with women's rights organizations. Accountability requires the development of a receptive capacity in men and others who have been placed in positions of power and privilege so that they can listen to the perspectives of marginalized groups in order to become authentic allies.

A brief history of the Alliance served to share key moments and trends in its development over the last decade, such as the establishment of an independent Global Secretariat to coordinate the network, and its deliberate strategy to include feminist voices in its leadership in the Global Board, Secretariat and Regional Steering Committees, to rotate leadership and diversify public representation, and move towards a bottom-up, decentralized, 'community of practice' model.

The Alliance recently revisited its mission, putting the transformation of patriarchal systems and masculinities at the centre of its work. The network supports work that goes beyond merely engaging men and boys to really challenge the harmful social norms that are part of the root causes of gender inequality. In addition, the Alliance is a network and is based on the principles of partnership and collaboration, in particular with women's rights and other social justice movements, and seeks to work from a movement building approach rather than a development project approach. The Alliance believe in engaging men and boys, not just as programme beneficiaries but as activists for social justice and feminisms, and is committed to unpacking exactly what that means. The Alliance increasingly seeks to add a 'men and masculinities' lens to a broader range of issues that concern feminist movements - including LGBTQI rights, climate change, militarism and capitalist economics. In its collective advocacy initiatives, the Alliance is increasingly being called on to put its weight behind difficult discussions, and has been trying to understand better how to add value to the feminist agenda from a men and masculinities perspective.

Strengthening accountable practices is a core and cross cutting area of focus for MenEngage Alliance. The Alliance has [Core Principles](#) and a [Code of Conduct](#) each member must sign on to. In addition, the Alliance has developed [Accountability Standards and Guidelines](#), as well as an [Accountability Training Toolkit](#) in order to help its members strengthen their understanding and implementation of accountable practices. MenEngage Alliance has gone through a rapid growth process in recent years, however, and ensuring these accountability standards are implemented in practice by its members is an ongoing challenge. As part of the Alliance's new Strategic Plan, it is taking a step back after 10 years of growth to revalidate all members' interest and alignment with the Core Principles and institutionalize accountability.

Personal comments from Mary Ellsberg, founding Director of the Global Women's Institute of the George Washington University and member of Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM)

Mary began by acknowledging the spirit of the event and clarifying she is speaking as an individual and not as part of any organization. She shared that she has considered herself an ally to MenEngage Alliance for many years and appreciates the Alliance's updated strategy and accountability tools. She shared, however, that in a number of instances she has attended panels on engaging men and boys that included no women and this has shaped how she approaches MenEngage Alliance.

She highlighted that it is difficult to separate MenEngage Alliance and the broader field of engaging men and boys. She stressed that many feminists believe that engaging men and boys is extremely important, and want MenEngage Alliance to stand up and be allies in these difficult conversations. Engaging men and boys should not be done instead of working with women and girls, or without women and girls, although in many cases this is how it has happened. She shared that twenty years ago women would say "don't tell me that, tell it to our husbands" and people began to take note. Now, there has been a pendulum shift in the opposite direction and in many cases it is seen as acceptable to just talk to the men and boys in a particular community. Instead, she argued, initiatives must seek to create discussion and communication between men and women.

One concern she shared was that there is little evidence that working exclusively with men and boys is effective in changing norms and behaviors. Mary shared that there is little evidence that these programs are more effective than programs that work with men and women. In a recent [systematic review](#) of violence prevention initiatives, no rigorously tested intervention, with the exception of the Indian initiative Yaari Dosti, was successful in reducing violence working only with men, whereas there are several examples of community based, couple-based, or women-centred programs that have reduced violence against women and girls. Another concern she shared centred on fairness and respect, and how, although this is never the intention, this work can end up silencing women's voices.

She remarked that she finds this growing focus on toxic masculinities problematic as it focuses on individuals, not structures. Analyses focusing on a 'crisis of masculinity' in certain contexts can ignore wider societal crises and the fact that women and girls are bearing the brunt of these.

After the #MeToo movement, she shared that she constantly hears people asking, 'what about male victims?' which can be exhausting. She compared this to the 'All lives matter' backlash to the Black Lives Matter movement in the US. She argued that it has taken a lot of conversation to get us to a place where it is acceptable to say that there are groups of people who are specifically being marginalized, and that all of us should ensure this progress is not lost.

She concluded by urging MenEngage Alliance and its members to be generous with their visibility and resources towards women and women's rights, and stand up together as MenEngage Alliance against misogyny.

Audience discussion

Participants shared comments and questions on what had been shared so far. Some of the key points raised include:

Concerns

- There is considerable emphasis among the international community on the men and masculinities discourse and advocacy, but the actual implications and implementation of this work and language are not as adequately addressed.

- The focus of this work shifting too much towards male victims of sexual violence. In order to be politically correct, it has become common to include male victims in the conversation, yet we cannot discuss the fact that the majority of perpetrators of all violence are men.
- There is a risk that men who work on violence against women end up appearing as saviours of women, instead of allies with women, and reinforcing traditional gender roles.
- There is a risk that policies and programming become gender neutral with an increased focus on engaging men and boys and erase the gains made by women's rights organizations to draw attention to women's issues.
- There is a risk that, as engaging men and boys becomes more prominent in the gender equality discourse, it becomes 'softer' and depoliticized.
- Donors are increasingly asking organizations to engage men and boys in their work, in order to secure funding.
- It is difficult for MenEngage Alliance to ensure the accountable practices of all its members, especially following the growth and expansion of the network in recent years. More work is needed to ensure mechanisms are in place to properly respond to accountability concerns.

Recommendations

- It is important that engaging men and boys work does not get stuck at the individual level, but rather seeks to influence the broader structures that enable violence. The Alliance must work across the socio-ecological model from the individual level to transforming institutions and policies.
- One potential example of working in an accountable way with men is the initiative 'Men and Accountable practices' by the International Rescue Commission (ICRW) which begins with engaging women in the community, and these conversations then inform the work that is done with men.
- It is crucial not to remove the gender component in any work but rather to assess and seek to transform the gendered power dynamics in any context.
- It is important not to lose sight of the scale of violence against women in this work and to put the onus on those men who perpetrate violence.
- MenEngage Alliance should expand its intersectionality, including on sexual orientation and gender identity, and its intersections with masculinities.
- The Alliance needs to shift from merely engaging men and boys to dismantling patriarchy and creating a critical mass of mobilized gender justice agents who back up tough women's rights struggles.
- The Alliance must ensure its work supports women's voices, visibility and leadership, including by actively collaborating with women's rights organizations in all its initiatives, supporting and amplifying women-led initiatives, and including women's rights and LGBTQI rights voices in its leadership at all levels.
- The Alliance needs to establish ways of using these techniques of engaging men and boys to change systems and engaging the powerful men controlling these systems to change them from within.
- The Alliance should also engage with men in the development sector and multilateral institutions, where the majority of programmes are designed by men, to increase their understanding of gendered issues and enlist their support to move money from within the development sector towards gender equality initiatives.

- The Alliance should educate donors on accountability in this work, push donors to fund women-focused services and women-led initiatives, and stress the importance of ensuring this work does not take resources away from programming with women and girls.
- The Alliance needs to establish a process for dealing with members who it perceives are not practicing accountability in their work, and whether these members should be asked to leave or supported through strengthening accountability processes.
- The Alliance's work on accountability should include the individual level and members' self-reflection on how they use power, and then be filtered up to the organizational level.
- The Alliance should be a strong voice against anti-feminist 'men's rights' groups, without crowding out voices or being paternalistic.
- The Alliance should ensure that the language it speaks is understood at every level and make sure people are truly living what they speak, rather than assuming everyone is on the same page.
- The Alliance should continue to articulate the links between masculinities, macroeconomics and the care economy and working to institutionalize gender equality in the private sector.
- The Alliance should continue make an effort to enter into more intimate and authentic conversations about these issues with women's rights activists who have concerns, not only through public events but ongoing conversations where there can be meaningful dialogue.
- Recent sexual misconduct scandals in the aid sector have shown it is important for everyone to be self-critical and examine how much our gender equality rhetoric is matched in practice, and have prompted many in the sector to rethink our own understandings of power, vulnerability and entitlement. It is important that MenEngage Alliance undertakes an examination of its own work and processes, and raises these critical concerns – particularly as the ultimate aim is dismantling patriarchy, transforming masculinities, and engaging men and boys (Comments by Lina Abirafeh Phd, Director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University, shared during the consultation process with women's rights organizations prior to the event.)

Closing

MenEngage Alliance thanks participants for a valuable conversation and for sharing openly the challenges and concerns they experience and observe. MenEngage Alliance will share the recommendations emerging from this dialogue with its leadership and membership, and will work further to put its accountability standards into practice, including by piloting this with the regional networks so that mechanisms are developed at all levels. At the global level, the Alliance is in the process of establishing mechanisms for complaints around members' accountability. The MenEngage regional networks are currently undertaking strength and needs assessments in their own contexts, and developing work-plans for the coming years. This includes embedding accountability within regional plans and identifying regional accountability focal points to take this issue forward.

The Alliance will continue to politicize our work, promote efforts to transform masculinities and engage men and boys within a feminist, human rights-based framework and ensure that this work contributes to our collective aim of dismantling patriarchy and the structures that sustain it. We will put our weight behind solidarity calls by women's rights and feminist activists and continue relationship-building and listening to the voices of women's rights allies through ongoing, meaningful dialogue and collaboration.