



MenEngage Alliance
working with men and boys for gender equality

Policy Agenda

Generation Equality Fora (GEF)

Feminist Movements & Leadership AC

MenEngage Alliance Joint Recommendations for Action Coalition Leaders

Rationale

Recognize and support feminist movements

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence in movement mobilization and the rising of their voice and visibility. From youth climate activism, to MeToo/Ni Una Menos protests, to the Black Lives Matter movement, there are renewed political energies ‘from below’, which reflect a **profound intersectional feminist challenge to the failed status quo.**

As commentators have noted recently, the feminist-strike movement, which began in Poland in October 2016, when over a hundred thousand women staged walkouts and marches to oppose that country’s ban on abortion, has been central to this challenge. As Arruzza et al, authors of the book *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto* made clear in 2018:¹ **“For the last two years, its slogans have resonated around the globe: Nosotras Paramos, We Strike, Vivas Nos Queremos, Ni Una Menos, Feminism for the 99 percent. At first a ripple, then a wave, it has become a global phenomenon.”**

Crucially, this resurgence of intersectional feminist activism has focused on the relationships and infrastructures of collective care and social solidarity, whose undermining by the global neoliberal political economy the COVID-19 pandemic has so clearly exposed.

Backlash and response

Intergovernmental processes such as the UN-sponsored Generation Equality initiative, the UN Climate Change Conferences, the Agenda 2030 and SDG framework, Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW process all provide an architecture within which to give voice and visibility to demands for political transformation. But the pressure for such transformation must be maintained. **For many years, such intergovernmental processes and spaces have also been sites for patriarchal backlash, a backlash which in recent years has been intensifying.**

As scholars have recently noted, “[a]ntifeminist mobilisation is growing in the United Nations”, uniting a diverse range of forces around “the aim of restoring the ‘natural family’ and opposing ‘gender ideology’.”² **The need to counter such regressive “family values” and the anti-feminist politics they support is**

¹ Arruzza, Cinzia, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser. 2018. "Notes for a Feminist Manifesto." *New Left Review* 114 (November-December): 113-34. p115

² Cupać, Jelena and Irem Ebetürk. 2020. "The Personal Is Global Political: The Antifeminist Backlash in the United Nations." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4):1-13. p1

pressing; Cupać and Ebetürk warn that we are “looking at a group with the potential to alter not only the global course of women’s rights but also how politics is done within the UN.”³

The political uses of a discourse of traditional family values can also be seen in a growing ethnonationalism in many parts of the world. Calls to protect the nation-as-family often rely on racialized narratives and images of the sexually violent male Other. Building stronger partnerships with anti-racist movements, indigenous people’s struggles and immigrant and refugee rights organizations to confront this use of racialized masculinities is an urgent priority for those working with men and boys to transform patriarchal masculinities.

As well, the shrinking of civil society spaces and resources has increased in recent years. This disempowers CSOs and feminist and SOGIESCs groups from carrying out their critical function of serving as watchdogs of State actions. There is also an increased criminalization of dissent, with women’s human rights defenders⁴, LGBTQIA activists⁵, SRHR activists and their organizations being subjected to targeted attacks⁶ and having seen their access to direct funding decrease.

In response, both inside and outside of formal political structures and processes, feminist movements are organizing around a transformative vision of gender justice, grounded in commitments to social justice, human security, and economic and political transformation. Increasingly, as Arruzza et al note, this feminist resurgence is joining “forces with other anti-capitalist movements across the globe—with environmentalist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist and LGBTQ+ movements and labour unions, and above all with their anti-capitalist currents.”⁷

Feminist-informed work with men and boys

It is imperative to center that work with men and boys stems from and must honor the pioneering work and ongoing leadership of women’s rights organizations and feminist movements. These efforts to engage men and boys were borne out of local women’s rights organizations, carrying out gender-transformative community work. This work with men and boys must always build on the precious heritage of feminist vision and analysis, which includes placing the elimination of inequalities in privilege and power that result from patriarchy at the center.

Accountability to the women’s, feminist, SRHR and LGBTQIA+ rights movements - and to movements for justice for other historically-oppressed groups - must be central to work with men and boys and organizations working on these efforts. It must focus on joining as allies and in partnership with other activists, organizations, networks and movements in order to add value to the ongoing struggles for women’s autonomy, empowerment, equality and rights. In a context of intensified patriarchal backlash and renewed gender conservatism in many countries, to achieve significant change depends on progressive organizations coming together in movement for social change. It is the collective strength and vitality of movements that can shift laws, policies and norms.

³ Ibid. p1

⁴ OHCHR (2010), Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Human Rights Council 16th Session

⁵ OHCHR (2015), Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General, [Follow-up to and implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action](#), Human Rights Council-Twenty-ninth Session, 4 May 2015

⁶ Women’s Rights and Gender Section, OHCHR (2014), One Pager on [the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders](#)

⁷ Ibid. p133

Engaging men and boys for achieving gender equality has evolved from an innovative proposal to what is now understood as a necessary integral strategy. In recent times, the work with men and boys has garnered considerable interest in international policy mechanisms and discourse. At the national level, there has been an increase in policies that focus on, or integrate, the strategy of engaging men and boys towards advancing the human rights of women, girls, non-binary and queer people.

Executed well, strategies that engage men and boys can create opportunities for impactful allyship where the privileges that cisgender men and boys hold are named and patriarchy in all its forms is challenged, making way for gender transformation. Alternatively, such strategies may fail to center those most affected by gender inequality, which may cause real harm.

Findings to improve policies on men and masculinities

Against the backdrop of rising tides of right-wing populism, and backlash against the human rights of women, non-binary and queer people, **a critical review of male involvement strategies is more important than ever in order to better assess if these efforts are doing good or causing harm.** A recent review of 10 national policies that engage men and boys for gender-transformative change [by MenEngage Alliance, forthcoming] assesses and concludes that:

- **No policy reviewed demonstrated practices that were consistently aligned with feminist and human-rights based approaches at every stage** of the policy process. Instead, many governments embraced elements of each approach to varying degrees, some more meaningfully than others.
- Nearly all governments committed to **stakeholder engagement** in at least one aspect of their policymaking, and in doing so created opportunities for civil society participation. **Success in facilitating participation across a diverse range of stakeholders varied greatly.** In some more successful cases, consultations were organized which included rural women, afro-descendent women, transgender women, lesbians, indigenous women, teenagers and young women, women with disabilities, with HIV, and women sex workers. According to stakeholders, this contributed directly to robust and intersectional policy proposals. In other cases, stakeholder participation was the result of advocacy or facilitated by external support: for example only after facing sustained pressure by civil society; or technical and financial support from the UN system was it helpful in ensuring that community-level consultations were held.
- **The exclusion of LGBTQI groups and organizations from policymaking processes was disturbingly common,** due to criminalization and other forms of discrimination, and subsequent concerns that the inclusion of issues affecting the rights of LGBTQI people would prevent the adoption of policies commonly cited, as well as a lack of understanding that non-binary and queer people are key stakeholders affected by gender inequality.

- **Governments utilized a wide range of approaches and strategies to address gender inequality in their countries. Many strategies addressed power imbalances and challenged harmful norms and behaviors that fuel inequality, violence, and discrimination.** Some strategies integrated male involvement through the provision of sexuality education. The inclusion of sexuality education as a key policy strategy created important opportunities to disrupt harmful gender norms, or it additionally opened space for work towards sexual rights and citizenship, and co-responsibility.
- **In some cases, both gender-transformative and regressive tactics sit within the same policy.** In one country, for example policy includes a focus on attitudinal changes, promoting positive gender relations, and engaging men in denouncing sexual and gender-based violence, but in order to adopt the policy, a critical analysis of masculinities was excluded, and the policy stops short of stating that laws criminalizing same-gender sexual activity should be repealed, and that marital rape should be criminalized. In other countries, the strategies included in policies altogether fail to focus on empowering women, or utilize strategies that diminish accountability to those most affected by gender inequality and violence.
- **Limited financial resources and funding opacity** for policies on gender equality, GBV or sexual and reproductive health was a significant barrier in many countries. In some contexts only proposed and not actual budgets are routinely disclosed, and in other cases the lack of a specific budget for the implementation of the policies inhibits implementation efforts and undermines accountability. Other times, a lack of funding for the implementation and monitoring of policies is not simply owing to deficient resources, but also to lack of political will or prioritization for gender-related policies.
- The possibility of successful implementation and monitoring of a policy often rested, in part, on the **availability of technical expertise and capacity.** Promising practices include developing a cadre of government officials trained to better understand harmful and positive masculinities. In other instances, the implementation and monitoring of policies were greatly hampered by a lack of technical expertise and capacity, for example to develop measurable activities and monitoring and evaluation frameworks which prevents meaningful collection of data, and measuring progress towards meeting policy goals.
- **Robust monitoring and evaluation of policies** is critically important for measuring progress towards goals, adjusting interventions as needed, and ensuring accountability; however, many countries performed poorly in this respect.

Other Tactics

- A strong commitment is needed to ensure that policies and practices to engage men and boys do not marginalize women-led and women-focused initiatives. This includes not taking away funding and other resources, such as visibility and spaces for engagement, that are increasingly shrinking for civil society – in particular for women’s rights and feminist groups.

- Solidarity and meaningful partnership from those working with men and boys on transforming patriarchal masculinities are essential, as feminist and LGBTQIA+ organizations are confronting a period of tremendous backlash in national and regional policy spaces, movement building efforts.
- As more stakeholders take-on work with men and boys, the need to work strategically together to ensure this work upholds the frameworks of women’s human rights and intersectional feminist political agendas is crucial. There is risk involved when initiatives that do work with men and boys are neither feminist-informed, gender transformative, human-rights based nor politically oriented.
- Therefore, policies targeted at men and boys must be gender transformative in nature as well as informed by feminist approaches. They must be mindful of gendered-power relations, and prevent reinforcing male power and privilege. Recent knowledge-generation shows⁸ it is essential that work with men and boys is done critically, and tackles holistically the issue of male power and privilege as part of the process of transformation.

⁸ [OHCHR Report](#): Review of promising practices and lessons learned, existing strategies and United Nations and other initiatives to engage men and boys in promoting and achieving gender equality, in the context of eliminating violence against women