



Discussion papers of the 3rd MenEngage Global Symposium

Executive summary



MenEngage Alliance
working with men and boys for gender equality

The 3rd MenEngage Global Symposium (the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium) represents the most ambitious collective activity that MenEngage Alliance has ever embarked on as an international alliance working to transform patriarchal masculinities and engage men and boys for gender, social, and climate justice.

The symposium's overarching framework, as determined collectively by Alliance members and partners, was 'Ubuntu': 'I am because you are.' As the [Ubuntu Declaration & Call to Action](#) explains, 'Ubuntu' is a Nguni Bantu term from Southern Africa that speaks to the universal connection between all humans—a shared sense of compassion, responsibility, and humanity for all. The Alliance collectively sought to honour this wisdom and to build with it in full recognition of its origins, roots, traditions, and thought leadership arising from the African continent.

MenEngage Alliance co-organised the symposium with the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre, the Rwanda MenEngage Network, and MenEngage Africa. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the convening was adapted from a three-day in-person event in Kigali, Rwanda, to a seven-month virtual event. It was an unprecedented journey for the Alliance and the over 160 members and partners who were instrumental in making this happen, as well as for everyone involved: 5,000-plus registered participants from 159 countries and 600-plus speakers involved in 178 global sessions (plus many more at the regional, country, and local levels).

The symposium provided a meaningful opportunity for MenEngage members and partners to build on their values and advance in their resolve to 'walk the talk' under three objectives:

1. Make 'men and masculinities' work more effective and impactful for gender justice through collective sharing, questioning, learning, and knowledge-strengthening
2. Strengthen a global community that acts responsibly, purposefully, inclusively, and in solidarity with our partners, friends, and each other—across social justice movements
3. Inspire, develop, and renew a common political agenda and strategy to meet the urgency of today's existing and emerging challenges

These discussions took place within the context of five key frameworks, which were determined over the two to three years of preparation by Alliance members and partners: **feminisms, intersectionality, accountability, 'power with', and transformation**. Using the lens of these five core topics and the [Ubuntu Declaration & Call to Action](#), the symposium particularly honed in on intersectional feminisms, decolonizing, feminist systems change, 'power with' and movement-building, transforming patriarchal masculinities, accountability, and youth.

The six symposium synthesis papers—written by subject matter experts in the respective fields—provide an overview of key experiences, evidence, and insights from the symposium on **how to effectively challenge and dismantle oppressive patriarchal norms and systems and how to transform masculinities**. While no single paper could fully capture the rich diversity of the conversations and sessions that took place across seven months, these knowledge products do provide an entry point to conversations on the current state of the field and the path forward.

The MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium's six synthesis papers cover:

- *Backlash and fundamentalism*
- *Engaging men and boys in ending gender-based violence*
- *Men, masculinities, and climate justice*
- *Peacebuilding and countering militarism*
- *Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)*
- *Unpaid care and economies of care*

“The patriarchal backlash we’re witnessing today is deep, it’s insidious, and it’s complex. It’s both online and offline and has spread deeply into all areas of our lives.

— NIKKI VAN DER GAAG (SENIOR FELLOW, PROMUNDO),
[*BACKLASH, BODY POLITICS AND ONLINE MISOGYNY*](#)

Backlash and fundamentalism

While resistance to feminism and gender equality has always existed, patriarchal backlash is a relatively new form of opposition to gender justice that has become increasingly popular, organised, and well funded in recent years. All around the world, in fact, there has been an intensification of anti-gender rhetoric; regression in women’s reproductive rights and rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) individuals; and the shrinking of civil society space—all underpinned by a rise in authoritarian populism and fundamentalist movements both online and offline.

The symposium sessions involved discussions on several key forms of backlash: online, offline, in United Nations and global policy spaces, and in country and regional spaces. After breaking down these forms of backlash, the synthesis paper on backlash and fundamentalism discusses four core domains and narratives of backlash against gender justice: rising ethnonationalism and narratives around the ‘national family’; men as victims; family and nation; and ‘natural’ gender order, individual freedom, and social hierarchies.

In today’s context—the symposium showed—efforts to realise gender equality and justice require an awareness of patriarchal backlash and its adaptability. The paper ends with specific steps that progressive movements could take to stay informed and prepared, and it provides specific recommendations for the gender justice movement as a whole—including for MenEngage and its partners.

“We need to look into the totality of how patriarchy operates.... As long as we work on the margins of tinkering with patriarchy... and do not have the courage to work with feminist theologians, to work with feminist cultural gender experts...we will continue to be measuring the instrumentalistic indicators without being transformative to the fundamentals of patriarchy.

— NYARADZAYI GUMBONZVANDA (FOUNDER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ROZARIA MEMORIAL TRUST), [INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST MOVEMENT VOICES PANEL](#)

Engaging men and boys in ending gender-based violence

The MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium set the stage for reviewing and assessing the effectiveness of work to transform masculinities and to engage men and boys in gender-based violence prevention and response. It offered the space to engage in critical conversations on the importance of specifically addressing the social norms, stereotypes, and gendered power dynamics relating to patriarchal masculinities that lie at the root of gender-based violence against women, girls, and LGBTIQ individuals. For this, symposium speakers and participants offered practical guidance on developing integrated plans that incorporate the links among various forms of violence and exploitation in their totality. The exchanges by experts and practitioners from around the world demonstrate the need to measure and evaluate the impact of work to transform masculinities, dismantle patriarchy, and prevent and respond to violence.

The synthesis paper on engaging men and boys in ending gender-based violence looks at the global context in terms of meta-trends and where and how the work on engaging men and boys fits into the broader social justice work taking place. Then, it brings forward analysis on five key areas shaping masculinities and violence: militarization, militarism, and war; the diversity of masculinities; the humanisation of male violence as a structural problem; the links between cyber-violence and gender-based violence; and drivers of intimate partner violence. Before offering recommendations, the paper also assesses the state of the field of men, masculinities, and gender-based violence prevention, honing in on:

- Ethical considerations, based on the evidence emerging from the field
- Accountability to feminist and women's rights movements
- The problem of 'men' as a homogeneous category
- Effective programme approaches
- Working with Indigenous men and boys and with men and boys from subaltern groups/ socially marginalised communities



We need to be radical dreamers and radical listeners. We need to dare to move into uncomfortable places to make things move in the right direction.

— MARCELO SALAZAR (HEALTH IN HARMONY EXECUTIVE COORDINATOR IN BRAZIL AND AMAZON RAINFOREST CLIMATE ACTIVIST),
MASCULINITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Men, masculinities, and climate justice

Before the wider population became aware of the climate crisis, feminist movements—especially those from Global South—were already applying a gender-power analysis and exploring the interconnections with systems of oppression, domination, and extraction. Indeed, most women and girls face double injustice due to climate change and gender inequality in all aspects of their lives: women and children are more likely to drown during disasters than men, for example, and more often live in poor conditions that make them more vulnerable during crises.¹

The synthesis paper on men, masculinities, and climate justice consolidates the symposium's lessons, experiences, and discourses on men, masculinities, and the climate crisis using the five core themes (feminisms, intersectionality, accountability, 'power with', and transformation), also offering recommendations specifically targeting each of those themes.

Feminist and eco-feminist organisations have developed numerous practices that engage women and girls in the environmental movement. However, practices working with men and boys on environmental topics from a transforming masculinities perspective are much less common. To shine light on promising work in this area, the paper highlights [men's reflective groups](#) in Sweden addressing gender transformation within the context of the climate crisis; a photo exhibition placing a spotlight on fathers and children involved in nature protection and also a men's discussion group initiative, both in Russia; and the [Coastal Youth Action Hub](#), a space for the co-creation and knowledge management of youth-developed [innovations and solutions](#), in Bangladesh.

¹ Syazwani, H. A. F., Hafizah, S. N., & Noraida, E. (2016). *Women, gender, and disaster: A case study of flood victims in Kota Bharu, Kelantan*. http://eprints.usm.my/31296/1/Farah_Syazwani_Hayrol_Azizi.pdf; also see: Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., Davis, I., & Wisner, B. (2004). *At risk: Natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters* (2nd ed.). Routledge; UN WomenWatch. (2009). *Women, gender equality and climate change*. https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf

“Military institutions not only rely on but also perpetuate images and narratives of patriarchal masculinities.

— ALAN GREIG (COFOUNDER, CHALLENGING MALE SUPREMACY PROJECT)

Peacebuilding and countering militarism

Research tells us that socially constructed gender norms that associate masculinities with power, violence, and control play an important role in driving conflict and insecurity worldwide.² These norms are enabled by individuals, institutions, and ideologies that glorify violence and fund the war system. To advance feminist peace, it is critical to transform the currently accepted gender norms, ideologies, and institutions. This is particularly important with the increased complexity of violent conflicts and humanitarian crises, including the various means by which state and non-state actors engage in violent conflict, the rise in military spending, and increased tensions over the use of resources.

The synthesis paper on peacebuilding and countering militarism explores this vital issue by describing key themes explored over the course of the symposium and providing related recommendations. The themes include:

- Understanding current political, economic, social, and technological forces and factors
- Focusing on systems and structural change
- Changing systems in solidarity
- Addressing military systems of power and culture, including war culture
- Moving beyond the individual towards institutional change
- Focusing on institutional power brokers and decision-makers
- Using digital communications and online spaces
- Meaningfully engaging with young people, including as leaders
- Building peace and countering militarism through better interventions

² Wright, H. (2014). *Masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding: Perspectives on men through a gender lens*. Saferworld.
<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/862-masculinities-conflict-and-peacebuilding-perspectives-on-men-through-a-gender-lens>

“The field of sexual and reproductive healthcare has tried to involve men and boys in family planning and sexuality education for the last 30 years, but the field is fraught with assumptions and stigma about gender and sexuality. To complicate things, healthcare is a very power-driven sector with its own hierarchies, and SRHR touches the heart of the male-female binary that defines patriarchy as a system. So, the first thing we need to do is to acknowledge this complexity as we work to transform patriarchal gender norms and improve SRHR.

— MAGALY MARQUES (SENIOR ADVISOR, MENENGAGE ALLIANCE GLOBAL SECRETARIAT), [*WHAT IS THE RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE AGENDA FOR ADDRESSING MASCULINITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF SRHR?*](#)

SRHR and SOGIESC

The ‘shared vision of gender, social, economic and environmental justice for all, everywhere, now and in the future’ described in the *Ubuntu Declaration & Call to Action* relies on the realisation of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for all. It also requires the freedom to be our full selves in all our diversity of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Now more than ever, it is clear that (as the declaration puts it) ‘the only path ahead is towards inclusion, equity and justice’ and we must ‘cherish the diversities that exist among us’.

The symposium sessions reflected a breadth of SRHR and SOGIESC issues, shaped by elements such as the current context, political and economic factors, and the priorities of participating organisations and individuals. Key conversation points described in the synthesis paper on SRHR and SOGIESC include pushback against gender and conservative backlash, COVID-19, bodily autonomy, harmful practices, SOGIESC flashpoints, toxic masculinities, safe abortion, and critical and emerging SRHR conversations.

Alongside a discussion of recommendations, lessons learned, and the path forward, the synthesis paper contains promising practices and examples shared across the symposium that offer guidance for continuing, expanding, and enhancing the work to engage men and boys in SRHR and to uphold the rights and dignity of LGBTIQ people. These examples include—among others—programming with gender-synchronised approaches in Zambia, Uganda, and Georgia; a community-based approach to reduce child marriage, school dropout, and harmful practices among adolescent girls in remote Indigenous communities in Guatemala; and regional work in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to address harmful gender norms and gender-responsive family policies.



By virtue of being a human, we care and care for others. There are hypermasculine ways that say you don't need care and you don't need to give care. It translates into relationships and the type of work that we do. We are not taught to care. Care is not a feminine trait; it is a human trait. Do everything with love; have love at the centre of all your work.

— ASHLEE ALEXANDRA BURNETT (FEMINITT CARIBBEAN AND THE CARIBBEAN WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO NATIONAL CHAPTER), [YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND MOVEMENT BUILDING PANEL](#)

Unpaid care and economies of care

Much of the symposium's specific focus on care in the field of men and gender equality—and by many feminists over the years—has been on the gender division of care work at home. More specifically, it has been on the unequal way in which unpaid care and domestic work is divided, with women and girls bearing the responsibility for most of the care work needed for the family's survival and with this unequal burden acting as a major barrier to women's full participation in public life. However, the concepts of 'family' and 'the home' are intrinsically problematic, in that they are often portrayed or seen as binary and nuclear—Eurocentric notions that were enforced through colonization and do not reflect the family structures in Global South contexts. The symposium's [Contexts and Challenges paper](#) addressed this issue head-on, challenging the field to 'transcend the masculine-feminine binary separating production from social reproduction.'

The synthesis paper on unpaid care and economies of care addresses the symposium discourse across seven topics—intersectional feminisms, decolonizing, feminist systems change, 'power with' and movement-building, transforming patriarchal masculinities, accountability, and youth. Along with an analysis of gaps, recommendations, and the path forward, the paper provides five vibrant examples of promising practice:

- In Nicaragua, research into advocacy in the MenCare campaign
- In the Philippines, Oxfam's WE-Care Programme
- In Palestine, a positive deviance approach to working with communities on unpaid care
- In South Africa, advocacy for improved parental leave for all
- In Uruguay, the National Care System

Cross-cutting recommendations

The MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium brought together a diverse range of speakers and participants from around the world: activists, researchers, practitioners, and advocates—among others—from civil society and the international development sector, policymaking entities, the private sector, United Nations bodies, and the donor community. From these speakers and participants, the summary paper authors each derived recommendations for the MenEngage Alliance's members, its partners, and others working on men and masculinities. Looking across all six papers, several key themes consistently emerged. These cross-cutting recommendations include:

- **Become more intersectional in our conceptions of 'men and boys'.** Work on men and masculinities must acknowledge that 'men and boys' are not a homogenous group. Best practice involves focusing on particular groups of men and boys that vary by country and context. We must also consider—and apply—our learning on how race, class, caste, sexuality, gender identity, geography, ability, and age (among other facets of identity) influence men and boys, and thus, the work on men and masculinities.
- **Work as allies with, collaborate with, and be accountable to feminist women's rights, LGBTIQ rights, and youth movements, as well as other movements led by underrepresented or marginalised groups across various contexts.** Organisations working on transforming masculinities and engaging men and boys in gender and social justice must link up with national or local women's rights or feminist organisations. This must be done in a collaborative, humble, and accountable way and under the leadership of feminist movements' agenda. In the same way, men and masculinities work must be accountable to—and take the lead from—advocacy movements surrounding other facets of identity, such as LGBTIQ and youth movements, among many others.
- **Address underlying feminist systems change alongside individual change.** The majority of the work with men and boys focuses on individual behaviour change. While this is important, it is equally vital to ensure that work on men and masculinities centres the systems change agenda in order for this field to meaningfully add value to advance the broader feminist agenda of equality and justice. For systemic shifts to take place, we must transform the very structures that underlie our economic, political, and legal decisions and institutions. The 'glocal' perspective (global connection and local action) is key to any transformation and is the scale of our ambition.
- **Decolonize knowledge, fostering and prioritising learning from the Global South and locally owned solutions.** Opportunities for South-to-South learning have the potential for significant impact through movement-building and mutual learning. However, the focus on 'South-to-South' often ignores the crucial work of 'South-to-North'—or simply 'South' without intervention by the Global North. We must decolonize the knowledge base for this work and build movements that not only develop locally owned solutions but also prioritise that local ownership and knowledge versus handing down prescriptions on 'what works' from the Global North.
- **Incorporate a focus on the climate crisis and its manifold effects.** Across the symposium, the climate crisis emerged as an existential concern. Among the recommendations related to climate (with many more in the summary paper on climate justice) were to carry out gender-transformative work with men and boys on how to relate and behave in ways that can help achieve gender equality and climate justice, as well as to develop climate responses that centre human rights and gender justice.
- **Think through how gender-transformative work with men and boys can be implemented digitally**—through digital communications and in online spaces—frequently, strategically, and in a much more targeted way. This should include contemplating how digital platforms could be used in advocacy against rising backlash.
- **See youth as key stakeholders, not beneficiaries,** with meaningful participation at all stages and in all spaces. This diversity of voices and leadership enhances our collective work. Youth leadership can be better supported by recognising the efforts of young people, and LGBTIQ youth must be explicitly and meaningfully involved.



MenEngage
UBUNTU
SYMPOSIUM

**I AM
BECAUSE**
You are

