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# Peacebuilding and countering militarism

Piotr Pawlak

A summary report of discussions at the 3rd  
MenEngage Global Symposium (the Ubuntu  
Symposium), 2020-2021



**MenEngage Alliance**  
working with men and boys for gender equality

## About the symposium

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

The convening (also known as the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium) was adapted from plans to meet for three days in person to a seven-month online event. It was an unprecedented journey for the Alliance and 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).

MenEngage Alliance members and partners came together to take stock of the work being done and assess what is needed going forward. The symposium provided space to share experiences, evidence, and insights on how to effectively challenge and dismantle oppressive patriarchal norms and constructions of masculinities; to identify new goals, frontiers, and strategies; and to create a forum to rearticulate a political agenda that seeks to transform unjust and deeply embedded power structures.

The [Ubuntu Declaration & Call to Action](#) is one of the key outcome documents from the symposium.

## About MenEngage Alliance

MenEngage Alliance is an international social change network harnessing the collective energies of its members towards ending patriarchal power and supporting women's rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) rights; and human rights—and achieving gender justice and social justice for all.

The Alliance is a space for organisations to come together, in solidarity with those most targeted by gender injustice and patriarchal systems, to collectively dismantle structural barriers to women's rights and gender equality. As a global network, MenEngage Alliance brings together people and organisations with a shared vision of a world in which gender justice and human rights are recognised, promoted, and protected and in which all people are equal and free from discrimination and oppression.

The mission of MenEngage Alliance is to transform unequal power relations and dismantle patriarchal systems by transforming patriarchal masculinities and rigid, harmful norms around 'being a man'; by working with men and boys on gender justice through intersectional feminist approaches; by building inclusive collaborations from the local to regional to global levels; and by developing joint actions in partnership with and accountable to women's rights, gender justice, and other social justice movements.

As members, and as a collective, the Alliance aims towards a shared vision and mission for positive change and to transform unequal power for the benefit of all.

This paper was authored by Piotr Pawlak for MenEngage Global Alliance and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), with reviews from Muthaka Alphonse, Mpiwa Mangwiro, Dean Peacock, and Jennifer Rodriguez Bruno, and copyediting by Jill Merriman. Design by Sanja Dragojevic based on the Ubuntu Symposium branding by Lulu Kitololo.

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# 1. Context and problem analysis

Research tells us that socially constructed gender norms that associate masculinity with power, violence, and control play an important role in driving conflict and insecurity worldwide.<sup>1</sup> These norms are enabled by individuals, institutions, and ideologies that glorify violence and fund the war system. Institutions of war—and the people who hold power within them—are highly masculinized: war is built on mobilising men's bodies to fight, and it exploits ideas about manhood to encourage and pressure men to engage in conflict. Men and boys, together with women and girls, need support to better understand these dynamics and be resilient to political strategies that harm them.

To advance feminist peace, it is critical to transform the currently accepted 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. With large numbers of internally displaced persons and the doubling of the number of refugees in recent years, more and more people are being affected by conflict.<sup>2</sup> Among women, this situation is exacerbated by conflict's links with increased rates of violence against women and girls (including political violence and hate speech), weak rule of law, and drastic cuts to funding for Women, Peace, and Security programmes globally.

Feminist activists and scholars have noted the ways in which the nationalist rhetoric of control and protection is both masculinized and militarized; nationalism, militarism, and patriarchal masculinities have always been closely linked. Addressing conflict and militarized masculinities requires drawing attention to the political and economic forces that drive the war economy and that exploit and manufacture ideas around militarized masculinities.

The online sessions on peacebuilding and countering militarism during the 3rd MenEngage Global Symposium (also referred to as the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium) allowed for an unprecedented level of discussion, reflection, and knowledge-building around how gender-transformative work with men and boys can best address militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities. This document consolidates lessons, experiences, and discourse from those sessions, analysing the state of the field of engaging men and boys in peacebuilding and countering militarism, as well as presenting the opportunities, challenges, and gaps in continuing to advance this thematic area. This document can help shape the programmatic, campaign, and policy agenda of the MenEngage Alliance and of members and partners engaging men in peacebuilding and countering militarism. In this way, the MenEngage Alliance, its members, and partners can strengthen their engagement, position, and clarity on these issues and on supporting the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.

<sup>1</sup> 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>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2019). *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2018*. <https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf>



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## 1.1. Militarized masculinities

Around the world, militarized masculinities take different forms but share several key characteristics. Across the sessions, panellists generated a loose consensus that ‘militarized masculinities’ are a combination of traits and attitudes that are hypermasculine, hegemonic, violent, and associated primarily with military members and other militarized institutions (like the police, private security, and border patrols). The panellists also conveyed that militarized masculinities are not the exclusive domain of men in formal military institutions; they are also practised by ordinary citizens who have internalised the dominant values of militarized societies. Examples of militarized masculinities shared by the panellists include:

- In **Rwanda**, a study on the gender, masculinities, and reintegration of former combatants found the prevailing perception of masculinity was directly linked to men’s involvement in the 1994 genocide of members of the Tutsi ethnic group.<sup>3</sup> In this sense—as Fidele Rutayisire (founder and executive director of the [Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre](https://promundoglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/A-Study-of-Gender-Masculinities-and-Reintegration-of-Former-Combatants-in-Rwanda.pdf)) said—conceptions of Rwandan masculinity during these catastrophic times were linked to the idea of ‘killing as many Tutsis as possible’ as an expression of power and manhood. Today, this ideal of violent, militarized masculinities manifests in the widespread phenomenon of men using violence against women and girls, Rutayisire said.
- **Brazil** has a long history of military rule, and the prevalence of militarized masculinities has recently intensified, with violence being channelled into a form of political power. In 2018, Jair Bolsonaro’s victory in the presidential election helped consolidate right-wing populism and, consequently, restored and glorified militarism and militarized masculinities. Brazil’s

<sup>3</sup> LOGiCA & Promundo. (2014). A study of gender, masculinities and reintegration of former combatants in Rwanda: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES). <https://promundoglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/A-Study-of-Gender-Masculinities-and-Reintegration-of-Former-Combatants-in-Rwanda.pdf>

military plays a major role in Bolsonaro's government. 'Around a third of Bolsonaro's cabinet is composed of retired or active-duty military, with dozens more in key government positions elsewhere.'<sup>4</sup> Over the years, Bolsonaro has not only embodied and praised hegemonic and militarized forms of masculinity but also actively projected himself as a crusader against 'gender ideology', with rhetoric targeting women and the LGBTIQ community.

- In the **Middle East and North Africa**, the concept of militarized masculinities comes directly from the widespread patriarchal values that shape and reinforce patriarchal masculinities. It is characterised by obedience to the hierarchy of power, with 'power over' valued more than 'power within' and national propaganda detailing the sacred notion of fighting and dying for one's nation. In Syria, for instance, President Bashar al-Assad emphasised the relationship between national 'belonging' and military service in a landmark July 2015 speech, saying: *'The fatherland is not for those who live in it or hold its nationality, but for those who defend and protect it.'*<sup>5</sup> In Lebanon, the concept of militarized masculinities is born out of decades of conflict and a military regime that has shaped what it means to be a man today—which is 'masculinity on steroids', as Anthony Keedi (masculinities technical advisor at [ABAAD](#)) suggested.<sup>6</sup> It is also gradually becoming dangerously central to all characteristics of being a man, as jointly concluded by speakers in the [second part of the Men and Masculinities panel](#).

Such a militarized version of masculinity strives for dominance over others (men and women alike). It devalues others' political and social assertiveness, and when its superiority is contested, militarized masculinities demand and justify the use of repression, aggression, and violence rather than offering opportunities for peaceful dialogue. According to Gabrielle Jamela Hosein (senior lecturer at the [Institute for Gender and Development Studies](#) at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago), this reflects a global turn towards authoritarianism, ethnonationalism, and neoliberalism, from the election of President Donald Trump in the United States to Brexit in the United Kingdom, from the nationalist policies of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the success of far-right parties in Italian, German, and Austrian elections in 2017 and 2018.<sup>7</sup> It symbolises the rise of fascism, racism, xenophobia, supremacist ideologies, and fundamentalism, as well as militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities. This, in turn, creates the social, political, and economic contexts for our gender-transformative work with men and boys, and it results in specific challenges ahead for the field of men and masculinities.

<sup>4</sup> Winter, B. (2019, December 16). "It's complicated": Inside Bolsonaro's relationship with Brazil's military. *Americas Quarterly*. <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/its-complicated-inside-bolsonaros-relationship-with-brazils-military/>

<sup>5</sup> *يُمَجِّدُ دَوْلَهُ عِزَّادِي دَوْلَ لِب دِي ف نَكْسِي نَمَل سِي ل نَطُولَا: دَسْرَالَا* [Assad: The homeland is not for the one who lives in it, but for the one who defends and protects it]. (2015, July 26). Al Jazeera. <https://mubasher.aljazeera.net/news/miscellaneous/2015/7/26/نملاطربديفدكلكسيتنملاطربسيتنطولاالدسالا>

<sup>6</sup> ABAAD is a non-governmental organisation based in Lebanon 'that aims to achieve gender equality as an essential condition to sustainable social and economic development in the [Middle East and North Africa] region...ABAAD advocates for the development and implementation of policies and laws that enhance women's effective participation through a rights-based approach that would bring about tangible change to gender justice.' See: About. (n.d.). ABAAD. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://www.abaadmena.org/about>

<sup>7</sup> Bremmer, I. (2017, May 11). The wave to come. Time. <http://time.com/4775441/the-wave-to-come/>; Whither nationalism? (2017, December 19). The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2017/12/19/whither-nationalism>

## 2. Key conversation points on peacebuilding and countering militarism

### 2.1. Understanding current political, economic, social, and technological forces and factors

Speakers and panellists recognized the rise of extremely conservative, authoritarian, ethnonationalistic, and neoliberal powers and leaders globally as the issue of highest concern and an area that needs to be strategically tackled. As Alan Greig (cofounder of the [Challenging Male Supremacy Project](#) and lead author of a key symposium discussion paper<sup>5</sup>) said, these forces thrive on homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny; they reinforce and promote an anti-gender, anti-feminist, and anti-human rights agenda and rhetoric in the name of 'family values', organised around a patriarchal binary of masculine authority and feminine domesticity. By doing so, the prevalence of militarism and its associated militarist cultures escalates around the world. As Anthony Keedi from ABAAD argued, this reinforces the dominant, controlling versions of patriarchal and militarized masculinities, in which men hold control and power over other men and women are perceived—and subordinated—as subservient.

<sup>5</sup> MenEngage Alliance. (2021). Contexts and challenges for gender-transformative work with men and boys: A discussion paper. <http://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Contexts-and-Challenges-for-Gender-Transformative-Work-with-Men-and-Boys-A-Discussion-Paper-English.pdf>



Symposium speakers agreed that around the world, forces such as authoritarianism, ethnonationalism, and neoliberalism are threatening progress on all women and girls' human rights and on gender justice more broadly. In the context of peacebuilding, as speakers collectively affirmed during [Networking and Advocacy for the Integration of the African Great Lakes Regional WPS-YPS Agenda](#), the rise of militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities has reversed the progress made since the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325; the Women, Peace, and Security agenda; and other international declarations and agreements since the Fourth World Conference on Women and its adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995.

In many ways, the growing influence and impact of these circumstances are '*crises that have been long in the making*', as articulated by Netsai Mushonga (commissioner of the [Zimbabwe Electoral Commission](#)), and are being intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, research suggests that in countries such as the Philippines, India, Uganda, Kenya, Qatar, Hungary, and Russia, militaristic approaches have been used to exploit COVID-19 as a pretext for repressive measures by the state. This includes justifying violence, violating human rights, and undermining democratic institutions.<sup>9</sup>

In [Conflict, Militarism and Securitization of the Virus](#), speakers said COVID-19 and public health measures have been used as an excuse to strengthen the notion and prevalence of militarism and its associated militarist cultures. This, in turn, has created a milieu conducive to control and repression and to the dominance of militarized versions of masculinity, according to Anthony Keedi from ABAAD. In Syria, Salma Kahale (founder and executive director of [Dawlaty](#)<sup>10</sup>) said COVID-19 has been used to increase the state's power to control content and access to information among citizens, as well as to repress and restrict democratic, liberal, and progressive civil society. Under the umbrella of public health measures, male-dominated, militarized groups—including police and other security forces—have been empowered to exercise aggressive authority and control over citizens' mobility.

The global turn toward authoritarianism, ethnonationalism, and neoliberalism have (re) introduced, strengthened, and sustained militarist cultures and militarized masculinities.

Against this backdrop, the field of men and boys for gender equality—and gender justice more broadly—is greatly concerned for those doing work on men and masculinities. It is urgent for the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners to tackle these forces as part of the gender justice movement and broader efforts to promote social, political, and economic justice and equality.

<sup>9</sup> Mapp Frett, L. (2020, April 29). *COVID-19 poses an existential threat to human rights activists worldwide*. openDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/covid-19-poses-existential-threat-human-rights-activists-worldwide/>; United Nations. (2020, April 27). *'Toxic lockdown culture' of repressive coronavirus measures hits most vulnerable*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062632>, as cited in Ruxton, S., & Burrell, S. R. (2020). *Masculinities and COVID-19: Making the connections*. Promundo-US. <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/masculinities-and-covid-19-making-the-connections/>

<sup>10</sup> Dawlaty is a non-governmental organisation based in Lebanon that 'works on suggesting alternatives and on democratic transition, building capacity, transitional justice, human rights and conflict management in Syria.' See: *Salma Kahale*. (n.d.). Bond. Retrieved November 16, 2021, from <https://www.bond.org.uk/person/salma-kahale>



## 2.2. Focusing on systems and structural change

The symposium sessions on peacebuilding and countering militarism emphasised the importance of the link between the current systems of power—political, economic, and sociocultural—and their contribution to the rise of militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities. These sessions also highlighted that although the current social and economic systems are profoundly based on hegemony and patriarchy (and, consequently, reinforce and sustain these ideologies), those in the field of men and boys for gender equality—including MenEngage and its members and partners—have largely overlooked systems change.

Feminist groups around the world have long drawn attention to many of the systemic issues faced not only by women, girls, and gender-nonconforming people but also by men and boys. They have long advocated for the systems and structural change needed to address widening gender and other inequalities, as reflected in several symposium sessions. The symposium speakers and panellists acknowledged the wealth of existing transformative work on culture and society's role in reinforcing and sustaining patriarchal masculinities. However, they also concluded that the work needs to move beyond that focus. Systemic issues intertwine in complex ways, requiring us to expand beyond the subjects of culture or society; we must look at them in relation to each other and develop multilevel, multisystem strategies to create a system of equality between men and women. This suggests the MenEngage Alliance, its members and partners, and the field of men and boys for gender equality more broadly must develop a radical, strategic agenda to address systems and structural change. Gabrielle Jamela Hosein of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies said any further articulation of the meaning and practice of gender-transformative work with men and boys on patriarchal and militarized masculinities must reflect on the political, economic, and sociocultural forces shaping gender hierarchies and relations of power.

A clear and critical point emerged from the symposium: **For systems change to take place, the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners must focus on transforming the systems of power underlying the social, economic, and political systems, institutions, and decisions that shape the current state of the world.** Furthermore, to tackle the patriarchal backlash that has emerged against progress on gender justice, the field needs a bold agenda that prioritises social and economic justice. The concept of social and economic justice is not only a cross-cutting concern for a broad group of individuals and their communities but also resonates with those who may not be concerned with gender justice and those who may oppose gender equality and women's empowerment.

To this point, Mary Ellsberg (founding director of the [Global Women's Institute](#) at the George Washington University) discussed the importance of understanding the context in which political, economic, social, and technological forces and factors justify and sustain militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities before addressing them. In Nicaragua, for example, Ellsberg said much of the current backlash against gender equality has roots in the backlash decades ago against the work of the feminist movement addressing violence against women and girls. Moving forward, the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners must better understand the context in which the powerful forces and factors against gender equality and justice operate.

## 2.3. Changing systems in solidarity

Speakers in the [first part of the Men and Masculinities panel](#) concluded that **to more effectively do gender-transformative work with men and boys on transforming unjust, unequal systems of power, a new kind of ‘men and boys for gender equality’ movement is needed.** Such a movement must engage with feminist movements more strategically, more closely, and more inclusively, as well as work in solidarity with broader gender and social justice movements.

A fundamental understanding and a strategic tackling of contemporary global issues are needed, said Nick Galasso (head of research at [Oxfam America](#)). To do so, Alan Greig of the Challenging Male Supremacy Project argued, the field of men and boys for gender equality—including the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners—must build new and strengthen existing engagement with feminist, LGBTIQ, climate, and other social justice movements. This includes building intersectional partnerships with antiracist movements (e.g. Black Lives Matter<sup>11</sup>) and movements for the rights of Indigenous people, immigrants, and refugees (among others) to confront and address militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities. A stronger intersectional perspective on all genders must be part of the ‘new’ kind of movement, which must also tap into and use the local knowledge, experiences, and priorities of Indigenous movements. For example, experience in local gender and social justice movements in the Caribbean can be an asset in developing global strategies, as Gabrielle Jamela Hosein of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies noted:

*Collaboration between men and women groups is a tradition in the Caribbean. The inherent tradition of intersectionality among cultures, races, gender, sexuality is a key legacy that offers opportunities for better connection between movements in order to address global crisis.*

Overall, the symposium also highlighted a need for more strategic engagement with leaders and organisations working on gender and on social, political, and economic justice to build cross-movement solidarity. This also includes mobilisation across feminist civil society, men and boys for gender equality organisations, national governments, and multilateral institutions. This cross-movement solidarity would allow for powerful global efforts to transform patriarchal structures and to challenge the inequalities produced by the current socioeconomic and political order. This process must move beyond the responsibility of one network, one organisation, or one individual issue, said Annie Matundu Mbambi (president of [Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom \[WILPF\]](#) Democratic Republic of Congo). Referring to her organisation’s work in mobilising men for feminist peace, Madeleine Rees (WILPF’s secretary-general) said we should no longer play the role of a women only feminist- organisation but instead must work with men against structures that inform inequality and reinforce militarism and militarized masculinities that inherently threaten women in peacebuilding, their empowerment, and the progress on gender equality.

Changing systems of power in solidarity requires pursuing objectives through interconnected, clear, and consistent language around countering militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities. Uniform messaging around ‘men and boys for

<sup>11</sup> The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation is ‘a global organization in the US, UK, and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.’ See: *About - Black Lives Matter*. (n.d.). Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

gender equality' among the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners—shared understanding, consistent vocabulary, and harmonised messages—is central to this pursuit. Too often, across the field of men and masculinities, organisations are inconsistent (and sometimes even conflicting) in the type, format, and most importantly, content of issue-based policy advocacy statements, campaign messages, and language describing the reasons for engaging men and boys. This includes, for example, messaging that promotes men as agents of change, statements that present men as saviours of women, and even language based on shaming and blaming men and boys for perpetrating violence.

This leads to neutralisation, and often polarisation, of the shared goals and objectives, said Sanam Naraghi Anderlini (director of the [LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security](#)) during the [Political Contexts](#) panel. What is needed, symposium speakers and panellists concluded, is for the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners to ensure synergy and consistency in the messages and language used at the global, regional, and country levels to shape gender-transformative work with men and boys for gender and social justice. During the session [Digital Contexts](#), speakers agreed that countering militarism and transforming patriarchal, militarized masculinities require uniform and consistent messaging and a shared language to speak to all kinds of men and boys worldwide.

Symposium speakers and panellists also concluded that multi-movement solidarity, and subsequent collaborations among networks and partners, are necessary to develop and implement global, regional, and national policy agendas that address existing power structures. This is particularly important along the fault lines of resource and wealth disparities between countries, between rich and poor, and between men and women. To change systems of inequality, according to Gary Barker (founder and CEO of [Promundo](#)), much more needs to be done in terms of collaborative interventions across feminist civil society, organisations focused on men and boys for gender equality, national governments, and multilateral institutions. One example of effective collaboration referenced during the [first part of the Men and Masculinities panel](#) was the [companion programme to Brazil's Bolsa Familia](#)<sup>12</sup> initiative developed by Promundo. The companion programme 'promotes women's economic empowerment by engaging men as allies in transforming harmful gender attitudes and behaviors that impact progress in Brazil',<sup>13</sup> and it is an example of a long-term collaboration between civil society and the national government to address resource and wealth disparities and inequality.



Anthony Keedi, Rida Altubuly, Salma Kahale and Rasha Jarhum speaking at "Conflict, militarism and securitization of the virus: feminist peace and states' accountability"

<sup>12</sup> Established in 2003, Brazil's Bolsa Familia Program 'is one of the first and largest conditional cash transfer programs in the world, with around 1 in 4 Brazilians registered in the program nationally. The Bolsa Familia Program aims to eliminate extreme poverty and increase access to services among the country's most economically and socially vulnerable populations. The conditionalities of the program, which include ensuring up-to-date vaccinations, regular school attendance, and annual medical checkups, are all child-centered.' See: *Bolsa Familia Companion Program*. (n.d.). Promundo. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://perce.lse.ac.uk/about-us/about-perce-programme/about-bolsa-familia-companion-program/>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## 2.4. Addressing military systems of power and culture

One important conclusion that emerged during the symposium was that to counter militarism and transform the associated militarized masculinities, we must also reach and change the institutional systems and cultures of military institutions and organisations themselves. Speakers highlighted a strong connection between military institutions and hegemonic representations of masculinity. For example, Alan Greig of the Challenging Male Supremacy Project said, '*Military institutions not only rely on but also perpetuate images and narratives of patriarchal masculinities.*' Yet, as concluded, the field of men and boys for gender equality has seldom focused its work on these institutions in a strategic and continuous way. Calling on the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners, Ingrid Tatiana Abril Peña (lecturer at [Universidad Central](#) in Colombia) said that collectively, the alliance and its members and partners need to look at international industries, security forces, and paramilitary groups to counter militarized masculinities. Other speakers also made this argument, including Dean Peacock (director of the Confronting Militarized Masculinities Initiative for WILPF).

To this extent, the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium's speakers and panellists concluded that a strategic, deliberate agenda must be in place to work with military institutions and organisations. According to Alan Greig of the Challenging Male Supremacy Project, this means addressing institutional structures of militarization—from values and norms to codes of conduct, from budgets and spending to recruitment strategies and recruitment and retention messages. As Dean Peacock of WILPF said, the field of men for gender equality has historically targeted men who do not have the institutional power to change structures and cultures that reinforce and sustain militarized masculinities.

Several symposium sessions highlighted that the field of men and boys for gender equality has been effective in understanding, and subsequently implementing, what works in transforming masculinities at the individual and community levels. However, according to panellists in [Political Contexts](#), the field has not yet fully focused on or been effective in addressing organisational systems and institutions of power, including the military. Panellists agreed that the next chapter in transformative work with men and boys must engage power brokers and decision-makers within these institutions and organisations. In addition, the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners must look beyond holding individual men accountable for their patriarchal and 'militaristic' behaviour to include holding institutions and organisations accountable for their respective roles and responsibilities in transforming patriarchal and militarized masculinities.

## 2.5. Moving beyond the individual towards institutional change

The MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium highlighted the need for gender-transformative work with men and boys to move beyond its current focus on individual-level change. There has been a recognition and acknowledgement that the framework for gender-transformative work with men and boys needs updating to include a focus on the institutional and organisational structuring of male power, privilege, and supremacy.

During the symposium, speakers and panellists emphasised that many effective approaches have been developed to work with individual men and their local communities. Programmes and interventions in both the Global South and the Global North have been effective in changing personal attitudes around violence and building more equitable interpersonal behaviours. A growing body of evidence also shows that well-designed interventions can increase men and boys' gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours, including regarding violence. Over time, as Gary Barker of Promundo said, programming with men and boys has also expanded to include strategies to address change in patriarchal social norms through social action campaigns. However, Dean Peacock of WILPF made a point about a longstanding critique, both within and of the 'men and boys for gender equality' field, that its work remains too focused on the attitudinal and behavioural change of individual men. Individual-level changes are important but not enough to build a more democratic, equitable, fair, and peaceful world; a focus is needed on changing the structures of inequality, Barker said.

The majority of symposium speakers acknowledged a growing recognition of the need for more emphasis on working with institutions to change their patriarchal (and often militarized) and male-dominated structures and cultures. Several symposium presentations focused on expanding the gender-transformative work with individual men and boys and on designing, testing, implementing, and evaluating strategies, approaches, and interventions that address institutional change. The [first part of the Men and Masculinities panel](#) referenced some efforts attempting to do that. For example, since it launched in 2011, the [Portal Equidade de Gênero nas Escolas](#) (Portuguese for 'Portal for Gender Equality in Schools') has provided online training for teachers to implement gender-equality education with students in Brazilian public schools, with the goal of taking [Program H and Program M](#)<sup>14</sup> to scale in partnership with the public education sector. Similar efforts are clearly instrumental for institutional change and for transforming patriarchal and other limiting, restrictive versions of masculinity. However, Gary Barker of Promundo said this experience suggests a process that is complex, multifaceted, and full of challenges—a lesson learned for the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners.

<sup>14</sup> Program H and Program M were developed to engage youth in critical reflections on gender and help them build skills to act in more empowered and equitable ways. The complementary interventions use educational workshops, community outreach strategies and a multi-media campaign to empower young women to feel a sense of agency and control over their lives and to sensitize young men to some of the harmful ways they are socialized and introduces ways to take on more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours. Program H and Program M have been carried out in diverse contexts in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and the Balkans. See: Pan American Health Organization & Promundo. (2010). *Program H and Program M: Engaging young men and empowering young women to promote gender equality and health*. <https://promundoglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Program-H-and-Program-M-Evaluation.pdf>

## 2.6. Focusing on institutional power brokers and decision-makers

The MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium's speakers and panellists concluded that any approach that does not consider work with men who hold institutional and organisational power may not yield the desired results or transformative changes. In *Political Contexts*, panellists suggested the field of men and masculinities needs a new strategy, a targeted agenda, and concrete approaches focused on the role of military institutions and leadership in embedding positive gender norms into their structures and organisational cultures.

Dean Peacock of WILPF said to address the forces that shape our ideas and options related to gender, we will have to expand our strategies beyond a primary focus on working with men in local communities. We will have to augment the approaches our field has historically used to also focus on holding men in the institutions that foment and profit from war accountable. This includes governments, the arms industry, the extractives sector, and other multinational corporations that are involved in the proliferation of weapons or in dispossessing communities from their land to extract natural resources, thereby creating the conditions that generate violence, conflict, and war. In addition to changing social norms at the community level, we will also have to connect with other social movements, use national and international law, mobilise public pressure, and work together to advance gender equality and social justice more broadly.

The symposium's speakers and panellists agreed that the field of men and masculinities needs a multipronged strategy that:

1. Engages with men in military institutions who are power brokers and decision-makers
2. Holds these men accountable and requires them to take institutional responsibility for their roles and responsibilities in transforming patriarchal and militarized masculinities
3. Requires accountability to feminist organisations leading the work on feminist peace, and promotes the leadership of and coordination with these organisations

In turn, as jointly agreed throughout the symposium, this calls for more focus on united movement and cross-movement solidarity among stakeholders working to advance gender equality.





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## 2.7. Using digital communications and online spaces

Across all symposium sessions on peacebuilding and countering militarism, one key theme was the role of digital communications and online spaces. Digital communications and online spaces are particularly important to men and boys around the world, and they are increasingly the main environment in which men and boys connect with one another, feel safe, and conceptualise and form their attitudes, ideas, beliefs, and practices. They facilitate not only interpersonal communication but also specific actions, panellists and speakers said. In many cases, also at work on the internet are the forces that reinforce and promote an anti-gender, anti-LGBTIQ, anti-feminist, and anti-human rights agenda and rhetoric, as well as propel authoritarianism, ethnonationalism, and militarism. The internet is also terrain for mobilising fundamentalism and the rise of militarism, with an extraordinary volume of social media content celebrating war and militarism.

Political and other ideologies that fuel the rise of militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities are shared through digital communications and manifested in the online ecology of websites, memes, and message boards. This is where, according to one panellist, 'misogynistic notions of gender roles and shared beliefs about heterosexuality, male supremacy, and the need to violently re-establish "traditional" gender norms are shared.' Today, young men and boys from both the Global South and the Global North are recruited into such ideologies online, and several speakers sounded the alarm on the increased proliferation of far-right messaging and memes online. In the context of militarism, the internet is where many men and boys are encouraged and enticed to join militarist agendas, where they are deliberately groomed to become protectors and defenders of social values, and where they are successfully recruited into specific ideologies, groups, practices, and behaviours. It was concluded that the field of men and masculinities cannot underplay international connections or the global online presence of militarism and its associated militarist cultures. Yet, as the symposium's speakers and panellists concluded, the internet remains untapped by the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners in gender-transformative work with men and boys.

Select sessions of the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium highlighted an urgent need to think through how gender-transformative work with men and boys can be implemented through digital communications and online in a frequent, strategic, and much more targeted way. Several speakers suggested methods to do this:

<sup>15</sup> One speaker described 'manospheres' as the online ecology of sites, memes, and message boards constructed around a narrative of feminism's oppression of men and a rejection of the evidence of men's patriarchal oppression of women. 'Incel forums' are online forums where men speak about their inability to have sex with women ('involuntarily celibate') and blame it on feminism.



1. **Establish dedicated online spaces and share them widely.** This includes discussion forums, groups, chats, and websites in which men and boys can connect with one another and in which positive, healthy, nonviolent versions of masculinity can be promoted as alternatives to militarized masculinities.
2. **Focus on strategic outreach in the places where authoritarianism, fascism, nationalism, xenophobia, supremacist ideologies, and fundamentalism thrive.** This includes confronting and addressing online spaces where dangerous misogyny is being reinforced and sustained. Part of this process should include identifying manospheres and incel forums<sup>15</sup> and targeting online spaces where militarized masculinities thrive. It is crucial that this strategy places in the centre positive alternatives to patriarchal and militarized masculinities.
3. **Use visuals in digital communication and online advocacy.** More needs to be done to intervene with individuals' behaviours through online media-based visual elements. Exploring the connections between visual communication design and behaviour change and creating persuasive visual communication designs and elements are important strategic steps forward in countering militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities.
4. **Infuse positive role models into digital communication and into online spaces and advocacy.** Panellists achieved clear consensus on the overpowering examples of negative role models that men and boys are exposed to online, including role models representing strong, dominating, controlling, aggressive, and militarized versions of masculinity. At the same time, the symposium's speakers and panellists said, there are few positive alternatives. Recent years have witnessed the rise of 'strongman' leaders around the world, manifested through the repression of democratic institutions and free press, the lack of separation of powers, and the complex arrangements of patronage and nepotism on the one hand and aggression, repression, and coercion of individuals and communities on the other. With the abundance of negative examples of being a man and a vacuum of positive ones online, one priority is identifying and presenting positive alternatives that are attractive to men and boys.
5. **Nurture a community of knowledge.** This includes countering the rise of digital misinformation and tackling falsehoods about feminism, human rights (including LGBTIQ rights), and climate justice, all of which have significant implications for gender justice. The production and circulation of factual, evidence-based information to counter the deliberate spread of false information online should centre around affecting users and not merely sharing facts.

In addition, the symposium's speakers and panellists concluded, offline and digital communications need to be much more inclusive in terms of language and vocabulary, reflecting a balance between 'academic' language and the language used and understood by 'ordinary' men and boys (as well as women and girls). The language of engaging men and boys to advance women and girls' human rights and fundamental freedoms must change depending on the recipients. The MenEngage Alliance must put more effort into developing shared and well-understood language around male engagement in peacebuilding and countering militarized masculinities. It needs to learn how to speak the language of youth, the working class, and those with opposing views. This includes using more specific, nuanced statements about the particular roles and responsibilities of individual (and specific groups of) men and boys in promoting peace and security, as opposed to general—and sometimes vague—phrases such as 'engaging men'.

At the same time, greater attention is needed on how specific language—for instance, the language of male victimhood and vulnerability or the anti-feminist messaging of men's rights organisations—gradually migrates to the mainstream vocabulary, where it becomes normalised and legitimised in schools, peer groups and forums, media, and online spaces. This also includes war-like rhetoric in response to various global crises—for instance, 'beat the disease' or 'fight climate change'—that has a strong imprint of militarized masculinities. Additionally, panellists and speakers collectively recognised the need for greater attention to safety and security in digital communications and online activism when developing new methods of digital communications and online-based gender-transformative work with men and boys.

## 2.8. Meaningfully engaging with young people

Young people are powerful agents for resolving and preventing conflict. They also have a role in building peace, and their leadership in this process is a potential force to counter militarism and its associated militarist cultures. Yet the field of men and masculinities has engaged young people more as passive recipients of knowledge or sometimes as active bystanders in programmes rather than as activists and leaders in peacebuilding and countering militarism.

The MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium's speakers and panellists concluded that the first step towards more meaningfully and effectively engaging youth as activists and leaders in peacebuilding and countering militarism is better recognising their essential role in addressing structural issues that impede gender justice, such as economic and environmental injustices, militarization, and conflict. This involves moving away from seeing youth as disengaged, removed, and unconcerned with global issues. On the contrary, research suggests that most young people are resilient and peaceful; they can and do represent a vast source of innovation, ideas, and solutions around peacebuilding and countering militarism.<sup>16</sup>

Across subcultures and geographies, young people have connected and formed communities on- and offline. Increasingly connected to one another, they can—and in many cases, already do—drive social progress, act at the forefront of environmental activism, and inspire global political, economic, and social transformation. The symposium speakers and panellists concluded that the MenEngage Alliance and its members and partners, as well as organisations working on men and masculinities, must support young people in fulfilling their full potential as a positive force for building peace and countering militarism. While doing so, these actors must ensure the process is inclusive, empowering, effective, and efficient.

The intersectionality of the process must receive special attention, panellists and speakers emphasised throughout the symposium sessions on peacebuilding and countering militarism. This area's lack of diversity in youth engagement has been one key shortcoming and challenge; cisgender white men dominate youth leadership movements around the world, often excluding groups such as LGBTIQ youth and gender-nonbinary individuals. The symposium's speakers and panellists concluded that the MenEngage Alliance needs to develop and implement a comprehensive youth leadership and engagement strategy to support young people's meaningful participation and leadership in building peace and countering militarism.

<sup>16</sup> Simpson, G. (2018). *The missing peace: Independent progress study on youth and peace and security* (A/72/761-S/2018/86). United Nations General Assembly & United Nations Security Council. <https://www.un.org/peace/teledelaware/teledelaware-2018-progress-study-on-youth-peace-security-A-72-761-S-2018-86-ENGLISH.pdf>

## 2.9. Building peace and countering militarism through better interventions

By supporting effective interventions, enhancing the efficacy of promising programmes, and disseminating results with members and partners globally, the MenEngage Alliance plays a pivotal role in (re)shaping the discourse and agenda for gender-transformative work with men and boys around the world. Deliberations during the symposium sessions concluded that the alliance should ensure that all of its current and future programmatic efforts to engage men and boys intensify their feminist orientation. To this extent, and in the context of peacebuilding and countering militarism, the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium's speakers and panellists suggested critically rethinking and revising the concept of 'male champions'. While it is widely considered effective, 'male champions' may be a problematic idea that centres men in a way that fuels the tendency to engage men and boys as protagonists, overshadowing the needs and voices of women and girls.

Engaging men and boys to advocate for the rights of women and girls is not new, including in violent conflicts and humanitarian crises, and many of the men and boys involved have been chosen by their communities because of their passion for gender equality. However, not all of these men and boys have a solid track record of a commitment to feminist values and principles of gender equality (or, more broadly, to principles for maintaining peace and security). 'Male champions' and similar conceptual approaches risk being '*liberal self-betterment initiatives for men and boys*' as opposed to truly feminist-informed, gender-transformative efforts to counter militarism and transform patriarchal and militarized masculinities, as feminist activists and panellists explained.

Another important point made by symposium speakers and panellists was the need to rethink and revise how interventions and programmes in violent conflicts and humanitarian crises attempt to counter militarism and associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities. These interventions and programmes focus only on conflict-affected or conflict-involved men and boys (and often, those who are poor and marginalised). Programmes must focus more on the institutions—and their leadership—that propel and sustain the use of violence as a means to achieve the ideal of militarized masculinities. Furthermore, interventions often overlook and do not hold accountable men with institutional power who endorse militarism and militarized masculinities through institutional structures. These men, as symposium speakers and panellists concluded, are the engine of why and how patriarchal and militarized masculinities prevail. Alan Greig of the Challenging Male Supremacy Project said, 'Interventions tend to place attention on the "*bad guys*"—those men considered aggressors or troublemakers, members of street gangs, and others who directly carry out acts of violence—'*and not on men in positions of power who are left out.*'

# 3. Recommendations

From the symposium sessions on peacebuilding and countering militarism, 10 specific recommendations emerge. While they apply more broadly to actors in the gender justice movement, these recommendations also include specific steps that the MenEngage Alliance can take.

1. **Tackle the rise of authoritarianism, ethnonationalism, and militarism**—which (re) introduces, strengthens, and sustains militarist cultures and militarized masculinities—as part of the gender justice movement and through broader efforts to promote social, political, and economic justice and equality. To do so, the MenEngage Alliance must develop and continuously advance a radical and strategic systems change agenda.
2. **Focus on transforming systems of power** that underlie the social, economic, and political systems, institutions, and decisions that shape the current state of the world and give rise to militarism and militarized masculinities. To start the process, the MenEngage Alliance must better understand the context in which the powerful forces and factors against gender equality and justice operate. The alliance must also strengthen existing engagement and build new connections with feminist, LGBTIQ, climate, and other social justice movements.
3. **Ensure synergy in the messages and language shaping gender-transformative work with men and boys for gender and social justice**, including against militarism and its associated militarist cultures and militarized masculinities. This alignment must take place at the global, regional, and local levels.
4. **Work with sectoral institutions to change their patriarchal, male-dominated, (and often militarized) structures and cultures.** To do so, the MenEngage Alliance must:
  - Expand the gender-transformative work with individual men and boys into designing, testing, implementing, and evaluating strategies, approaches, and interventions that address institutional change.
  - Develop a dual strategy to engage with men in military institutions and those who are power brokers and decision-makers in the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration process (for ex-combatants). These men should be held accountable and take institutional responsibility for their roles and responsibilities in transforming patriarchal and militarized masculinities.
5. **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.
6. **Develop and implement a comprehensive youth leadership and engagement strategy** to support young people's meaningful participation and leadership in building peace and countering militarism.
7. **Enhance the efficacy of promising programmes and share results with members and partners globally, in addition to supporting effective interventions.** To shape the discourse and agenda for gender-transformative work with men and boys around the world, the MenEngage Alliance should pay better attention to ensuring all current and future programming to engage men and boys intensifies its feminist orientation.



8. **Foster multistakeholder and multisectoral engagement**, including collaboration with feminist organisations and other social justice movements, to strengthen initiatives countering militarism, its cultures, and militarized masculinities.
9. **Unpack how militarized masculinities play out similarly and differently across contexts.** The characteristics uncovered in this process must be nuanced and be described more clearly than they are now. For example, greater analysis is needed on how aspects of one context (e.g., a conflict-affected setting or situation) differ from another using the lens of militarized masculinities; resistance, victimisation, protectionism, and control of wealth might be important factors (among others) to analyse each case. Motivations are not always similar. Some men and boys forced to carry guns choose to never use them, for example, while others do choose to use them for glory, wealth, or dominance.
10. **Take an intersectional feminist approach to studying militarized masculinities.** There is a tendency for work in militarized masculinities to stay quite binary in its rhetoric and analysis. Further analysis must unpack, for example, what this discussion means for gender-nonconforming people.



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# Annex 1. Links to the symposium sessions on peacebuilding and countering militarism

1. 10 November 2020: [Opening plenary](#)
2. 11 November 2020: [Youth Leadership and Movement Building panel](#)
3. 11 November 2020: [Intersectional Feminist Movement Voices panel](#)
4. 11 November 2020: [Men and Masculinities panel \(part 1\)](#)
5. 12 November 2020: [Men and Masculinities panel \(part 2\)](#)
6. 14 January 2021: [Conflict, Militarism and Securitization of the Virus: Feminist Peace and States' Accountability](#)
7. 26 January 2021: [Why Is the Oldest Women's Organization Mobilising Men for Feminist Peace?](#)
8. 2 February 2021: [Political Contexts: Authoritarianism, Ethnonationalism and Militarism](#)
9. 11 February 2021: [La Humanización de la Violencia Masculina Como Problema Estructural](#) (The Humanization of Male Violence as a Structural Problem)
10. 2 March 2021: Social Contexts: [Anti-Feminism, Normalized Violence and Politicized Religion](#)
11. 8 April 2021: [Networking and Advocacy for the Integration of the African Great Lakes Regional WPS-YPS Agenda into Beijing +25 and Generation Equality Global Forum, and the Inclusion of Men and Boys in Advancing the Agendas](#)
12. 20 April 2021: [Digital Contexts: Media, Attention Economies and the Manosphere](#)
13. 13 May 2021: [Deconstructing the Logic of Masculinist Protection](#)
14. 20 May 2021: [Masculinidades del Conflicto Armado en el Cine Colombiano](#) (Masculinities of Armed Conflict in Colombian Cinema)
15. 17 June 2021: [Deconstruyendo el Establecimiento de Masculinidades: Una Experiencia Interseccional](#) (Deconstructing the Establishment of Masculinities: An Intersectional Experience)



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