



Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)

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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.

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1. Context and problem analysis



So, in terms of the learnings on the field of engaging men and boys, or [what] gender equality broadly needs to do, the first thing we must do is begin with the questions: What have I learned? What have I learned that has harmed people? What can I unpack? In my experience, when we start to do a deep dive on power and privilege, it's easier to realise the harmful things we have learned in our life's course and the ways we can work to unpack the power that we have. Oftentimes, this disempowering, decentring, and violence happens to the world's most marginalised communities, including Black people; Indigenous people; young people; sex workers; people living with HIV; queer, trans, and nonbinary people; and intersex people. In the field of engaging men and boys, one thing we must continually interrogate is how we show up for those that are not men and boys, and doing so in a way that doesn't necessarily affirm the gender binary, which has contributed to so many of our understandings of harmful and/or toxic masculinity. Once we do that, it becomes just a little bit easier to engage in gender justice and be in solidarity with women, trans, and nonbinary people.

— PRESTON MITCHUM (FORMER DIRECTOR OF POLICY, URGE: UNITE FOR REPRODUCTIVE & GENDER EQUALITY), [OPENING PLENARY](#)

1.1. Background

The 3rd MenEngage Global Symposium (also referred to as the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium) took place in a moment of great complexity, challenge, and disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which formed a unifying thread throughout the symposium discussions. Across panels, topics, and debates, similar experiences emerged around COVID-19's impact: The pandemic and its consequences have exacerbated harmful gender norms and undermined years of progress in work to achieve gender equality.¹ Moreover, the pandemic has brought efforts to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for all to a standstill. And together within this, the work toward inclusion, health, dignity, and equity for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) people continues to be a site of contest and debate. Continued country-level efforts to criminalise people based on who they are, whom they love, and how they express themselves are now aligning with a specific and intentional effort by conservative actors to deny the rights, agency, and humanity of LGBTIQ people in United Nations spaces, frameworks, and beyond.

As we finalise this document in late 2021, we are nowhere near through the COVID-19 pandemic. The toll has been greatest on those already carrying the burden of inequality, who are facing multiple layers of marginalisation and oppression and are also shouldering the greatest burden of disease and death. Not only are efforts to advance SRHR at a standstill, but we are also witnessing an accelerated rollback of any gains and a deprioritisation of SRHR worldwide. Frontline community health advocates and human rights defenders are citing, and global networks are documenting, increases in unintended pregnancies among young people, reports of violence, the collapse of HIV prevention programmes (including programmes to prevent vertical transmission), and ever-more challenges to accessing safe abortion.² COVID-19 lockdowns have disrupted livelihoods and made seeking services or commodities even more difficult, with individuals finding some services are no longer available and stockouts of essential commodities becoming routine. Notably, symposium panellists from across Africa cited stockouts of contraceptives, sexually transmitted infection prevention tools such as condoms, and antiretroviral drugs for those living with HIV as key concerns.

The MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium provided a space where policymakers, programme managers, community advocates, researchers, and frontline human rights defenders from around the globe could come together and jointly consider what this moment means for our collective work. Against a backdrop of a global pandemic that needs, yet still lacks, a globally coordinated and just response, there is a key political moment and recognition that, as the *Ubuntu Declaration & Call to Action* states:

¹ Azcona, G., Bhatt, A., Encarnacion, J., Plazaola-Castaño, J., Seck, P., Staab, S., & Turquet, L. (2020). *From insights to action: Gender equality in the wake of COVID-19*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-covid-19#view>

² ATHENA. (n.d.). *Action alert: Adolescent girls and young women are watching: Our rights and lives matter*. Retrieved November 23, 2021, from <https://us18.campaign-archive.com/?u=1d26f7842344ac89d18ee4bb7&id=d7d52e7d6f>

We are all deeply interconnected in a world of profound injustices that can no longer be hidden...[We also see] resistance, hope, resilience, vision, and disruption from women-led and grassroots movements, no longer willing to accept injustice as the norm. We hear them raising their collective voices for transformation in politics, economies, culture, and mindsets.

The 'shared vision of gender, social, economic and environmental justice for all, everywhere, now and in the future' described in the declaration relies on the realisation of 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'.³

Five cross-cutting themes shaped the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium, each of which contributes to and furthers our understanding of SRHR and SOGIESC in the context of men and masculinities: feminisms, intersectionality, accountability, 'power with', and transformation. Both SRHR and SOGIESC are broad topics (as the definitions in the box indicate), and 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. Many key issues within SRHR and SOGIESC came through strongly in the symposium, including youth leadership, harmful practices, dignified menstruation, the global gag rule, safe abortion, and the rights and dignity of transgender individuals. Other, equally critical issues received less focus in these discussions but are nonetheless a core part of the ongoing conversation.

This knowledge product aims to provide an overview of the presentations and discussions on SRHR and SOGIESC throughout the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium, drawing on 22 symposium sessions and wider conversations. It is neither a full record of the symposium nor a complete picture of the role of men and masculinities in addressing SRHR and SOGIESC. Rather, this document is a snapshot and jumping-off point to continue building this vital, complicated, and multifaceted conversation.

³ MenEngage Alliance. (2021). *Ubuntu declaration & call to action*. http://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Ubuntu-DCTA-Advanced-Edited-Version_eng.pdf

Definitions

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) has two key elements:⁴

1. **Sexual and reproductive health** 'is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Therefore, a positive approach to sexuality and reproduction should recognize the part played by pleasurable sexual relationships, trust and communication in promoting self-esteem and overall well-being. All individuals have a right to make decisions governing their bodies and to access services that support that right.'
2. **Sexual and reproductive rights** must be achieved to realise sexual and reproductive health. These rights are based on all individuals' right to 'have their bodily integrity, privacy and personal autonomy respected; freely define their own sexuality, including sexual orientation and gender identity and expression; decide whether and when to be sexually active; choose their sexual partners; have safe and pleasurable sexual experiences; decide whether, when and whom to marry; decide whether, when and by what means to have a child or children, and how many children to have; [and] have access over their lifetimes to the information, resources, services and support necessary to achieve all the above, free from discrimination, coercion, exploitation and violence.'

SOGIESC includes sexual orientation (SO), gender identity and expression (GIE), and sex characteristics (SC):⁵

- **Sexual orientation** refers to 'each person's capacity for profound emotional, affectional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender.'
- **Gender identity** refers to 'each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms.'
- **Gender expression** refers to 'external manifestations of gender, expressed through one's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, or body characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression align with their gender identity, rather than the sex they were assigned at birth.'
- **Sex characteristics** 'include primary sex characteristics ([e.g.,] inner and outer genitalia and/or the chromosomal and hormonal structure) and secondary sex characteristics ([e.g.,] muscle mass, hair distribution and stature).'

⁴ Definitions of 'sexual and reproductive health' and 'sexual and reproductive rights' from: Guttmacher-Lancet Commission on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. (2018). *Accelerate progress: Sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: Executive summary*. https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/page_files/accelerate-progress-executive-summary.pdf

⁵ All definitions adapted from: ARC International, International Bar Association, and the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. (2016). *Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics at the Universal Periodic Review*. https://ilga.org/downloads/SOGIESC_at_UPR_report.pdf; definitions of gender identity and gender identity adapted by those authors from: Yogyakarta principles on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity. (2007). <https://yogyakartaprinciples.org/>

1.2. Current threats and challenges identified during the symposium

“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 (GLOBAL SRHR COORDINATOR, MENENGAGE ALLIANCE GLOBAL SECRETARIAT), [*WHAT IS THE RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE AGENDA FOR ADDRESSING MASCULINITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF SRHR?*](#)

The MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium took place in an intense and tumultuous point in history, and it provided a space in which those who are actively working to create a better world could be in active dialogue to identify challenges and their solutions. Any roadmap we thought we had—or any understanding we shared—had been pushed and pulled by this moment.

So, COVID-19 was top of mind in the symposium discussions on SRHR and SOGIESC. Panellists and participants discussed how they were struggling to envision, adapt to, articulate, and influence how we as a global community navigate COVID-19, learn from earlier pandemics such as HIV, and build resilience and new strategies to rise to the moment. COVID-19 has only intensified the headwinds faced by change agents committed to gender justice, 'power with', accountability, and intersectional feminism. A global environment of conservatism and backlash continues, even as bright spots for feminist leadership have taken place in tandem with the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium, notably the Generation Equality Forum in Mexico City and Paris.



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The key ongoing threats related to SRHR and SOGIESC that were discussed across the symposium panels include:

- Threats to civic spaces and to the ability to assemble
- Attacks on human rights defenders
- Conservative backlash, growing opposition to feminism and women's rights, and the promotion and preservation of toxic masculine ideals
- Increased resourcing and investment in anti-rights efforts⁶
- Violence and discrimination against, as well as the criminalisation of, LGBTIQ people, who are left out of conversations about violence, harmful practices, and SRHR
- COVID-19's disproportionate impact on the most marginalised, who are the most affected in all settings and for whom the economic impact is devastating, both now and in the medium to long term
- Harmful practices, including female genital mutilation, child marriage, and bias against girls, which continue to be widespread and impact millions of girls each year
- Toxic masculinity, which both is rooted in and perpetuates harmful gender norms

These global trends are reflected and replicated at the regional, national, and local levels. They impact the work of promoting and protecting SRHR and SOGIESC, as well as those committed to doing this work. A critical thread weaving through many symposium panels was the burden carried by change agents doing this work, exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has uprooted support systems, increased care responsibilities, created deep, lasting anxiety and financial insecurity, and compounded the challenges in working to create change in the face of backlash and opposition.

⁶ Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). (2021, August 11). *Key anti-rights trends: 47th session of the Human Rights Council*. <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/key-anti-rights-trends-47th-session-human-rights-council>

2. Key SRHR and SOGIESC conversation points

The discussions across the symposium were far-reaching, cross-regional, multigenerational, and intersectional. With such a vibrant and diverse tapestry of sessions, we have identified notable conversation points to provide a sample of the range and breadth of discussion. However, it is important to note that these conversation points do not fully capture the depth of the analysis shared across dozens of sessions.

As UN Women Deputy Executive Director Åsa Regnér noted, the world is not on track to achieve the SRHR aims of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, although there has been demonstrable progress in the area of maternal mortality. Coupled with being offtrack even before COVID-19—which has stalled and reversed progress—we are witnessing a moment of conservative backlash and of reckoning across justice movements, including racial justice and environmental justice. Despite this, panellists across sessions evinced a shared hope for learning from the past to collectively build a better future, looking ahead with both realism and optimism.



PHOTO CREDIT: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment

2.1. Pushback against gender and conservative backlash

“Gender is a form of programming. If we think of ourselves as a computer, then gender is more software than hardware. It gets tipped into our operating systems by our surrounding environments at almost every turn, in almost everything we do. We have to disrupt that software wherever it is malware—wherever its messaging promotes inequality or is dehumanizing, wherever it is so fixed and rigid that it’s imprisoning.

— KATE GILMORE (CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES, INTERNATIONAL PLANNED PARENTHOOD FEDERATION),
INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST MOVEMENT VOICES PANEL

Conservative backlash, retaliation against advances in gender equality, and increasing violence against women and girls are threatening to roll back any progress that has been made in achieving gender equality. This backlash is joining forces with those who oppose diversity and migration to gain ground around the world. Across Europe and the United States, for example, fundamentalist anti-sexual and -gender rights actors are forging links with those focused on nationalism and anti-immigrant rights to advance agendas against universal human rights and comprehensive sexuality education.

Gender is part of every aspect of people’s lives, and the inequalities built on stigma, harmful gender norms, and restricted gender roles are ingrained in societies and communities worldwide. Despite this, panellists described being inspired by diverse, intersectional feminist movements, including LGBTIQ movements, and by the possibilities to further expand work that engages men and boys through engaging critically and reflexively with gender norms and roles.



Kate Gilmore (présidente du conseil d'administration de la Fédération Internationale Pour La Planification Familiale) s'adressant à panel « les voix du mouvement féministe intersectionnel ».

2.2. COVID-19

As panellists spoke to COVID-19's impact on SRHR—particularly in terms of reaching youth—we saw patterns of prior pandemics and epidemics repeating themselves: long-standing inequities being exacerbated, and those already marginalised being pushed further to the margins. However, we also saw innovation, resilience, and shared humanity rising to meet great challenges and complexity.

COVID-19 has brought into sharp relief long-existing inequalities, namely in terms of who is providing care and caregiving. It has also led to insecurity and school closures globally, and there is concern that girls will not return because of heightened family duties, families' economic fragility, large numbers of orphans, and unintended pregnancies due to contraceptive stockouts. Panellists called for prioritising efforts to ensure women and girls aren't left at the centre of the storm of COVID-19, as has been the case with HIV and Zika.

Panellists also held a broad consensus that an ongoing gendered analysis and centring women are key to a just COVID-19 response and recovery. One panellist in [Impact of Covid-19 on the SRHR Rights of Women & Girls](#) made the distinction between 'protecting women's rights' and 'protecting women', though, with the latter increasing subjugation and inequity. The speaker described this as the risk of COVID-19 becoming a 'law-and-order' pandemic rather than a health pandemic.

2.3. Bodily autonomy



Work with men has to be done carefully and with accountability. We need to focus on practice not just on principles. We need to be guided by and accountable to women at all levels whether individual or structural.

— MARCOS NASCIMENTO (FIOCRUZ), [POWER, BODILY INTEGRITY AND SRHR](#)

The right to bodily autonomy and the right to be free from harm and rights violations belong to all human beings, including children. Any nonconsensual intrusion is a violation of bodily autonomy, from unwanted touch to forced marriage. Harmful practices that violate bodily autonomy are often perpetrated or supported by family, friends, and communities, and they are wrongly seen or understood to be in the 'best interest' of the person whose bodily autonomy was disregarded or violated. Respect for bodily autonomy is foundational to SRHR and to the rights and dignity of LGBTIQ people.

Symposium panellists highlighted the need to centre not just the concept but also the ethical commitment to intersectionality in addressing gender justice and bodily autonomy. They described the need to talk about vulnerabilities and inequalities through an intersectional lens that addresses power and inequities within and between communities, countries, and regions. This includes—for example—addressing conflict, migration, health emergencies, and other coexisting crises.

2.4. Harmful practices



We know that [child marriage is] largely banned, yet it occurs thousands of times a day around the world—cutting across countries, cultures, religions, and ethnicities—we see this practice happening. We understand it's closely linked to poverty and the context is very important, but the unfortunate truth is that it doesn't just limit a girl's education; it affects her life into the future, in the long term, and it limits and inhibits her from making autonomous choices about her own body.

— LEYLA SHARAFI (SENIOR GENDER ADVISOR, UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND), [POWER, BODILY INTEGRITY AND SRHR](#)

In Power, Bodily Integrity and SRHR, speakers highlighted more than 90 widespread harmful practices that violate human rights and are carried out against girls' will with the consent of families and communities. These practices include breast ironing, virginity testing, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and bias against daughters in favour of sons, among many others. Each practice continues to affect huge numbers of girls every year, and the rates are anticipated to increase in coming decades due to population changes unless action is taken to mitigate these risks, according to the session's speakers. COVID-19 has also seen an uptick in harmful practices and made interventions to reduce the risk of such practices harder to implement. The United Nations Population Fund estimates an additional 13 million child marriages and 2 million cases of female genital mutilation will take place over the next decade due to disruptions caused by the pandemic.⁷

Engaging men and boys is at the heart of changing social and gender norms, both because of their roles in communities and because religious, traditional, and community leaders are mainly men. It is broadly recognised that ending harmful practices yields benefits for everyone, but the field must now shift to generating more evidence on how to do this effectively and how to move from intention to action among individual men. Gender-transformative approaches that challenge underlying power dynamics are key to this, and effective programmes are multipronged and include education (small, mixed-sex workshops or programmes with community members), wider community engagement, and a longer-lasting, gender-synchronised approach to shifting gender norms (at least three months).

Harmful practices are contextual, and intersectional approaches are necessary to address the economic, social, and other drivers behind these practices. In some settings, child marriage is effectively compulsory for the status and economic survival of girls from low-income households, and so an approach addressing drivers and norms is essential.

⁷ United Nations Population Fund. (2020, April 28). *Millions more cases of violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, unintended pregnancy expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://www.unfpa.org/news/millions-more-cases-violence-child-marriage-female-genital-mutilation-unintended-pregnancies>

2.5. SOGIESC flashpoints

Symposium panellists mapped how much of the LGBTIQ architecture and movement-building grew out of the HIV movement and response in the past three decades. Even as a health threat, HIV opened conversations around sex and sexuality that had not been possible before in many countries, particularly across the African continent. Moreover, investment in the HIV response and HIV movement over the past few decades has enabled LGBTIQ organisations to grow and new leadership to emerge. Panellists noted that even as LGBTIQ organisations are opening space for new momentum and leadership around gender justice, there is a continued risk of replicating patriarchy and toxic masculinity in these spaces. For example, one director of a leading LGBTIQ organisation in Africa noted during LGBTIQ Rights, Masculinities and Patriarchy that she was one of the few women leading an LGBTIQ organisation on the continent.

Panellists called to make violence against, discrimination against, and the criminalisation of LGBTIQ people a more central part of conversations about violence, harmful practices, and SRHR. When we consider men as allies who are part of and accountable to feminist movements—engaging with those demands and recognising the challenges of men as leaders—a key question posed was: Where is the space for the voices of dissident masculinities and of LGBTIQ communities and masculinities? Queer young people, in particular, said they are being left out of decision-making in civil society; they reflected on the significant barriers to their participation and tokenism by organisations, with risks to their safety, when taking on leadership roles.

A final—yet key—flashpoint raised by some MenEngage Alliance members adjacent to and within the symposium was around the role of transgender people in feminist movements and in the gender justice community. While there was a clear call for intersectional and inclusive feminisms and feminist movement-building across the panels, there remains a vocal questioning of transgender women and transgender children that suggests this will be a flashpoint for the MenEngage Alliance to directly navigate in order to uphold a community that is fully LGBTIQ-inclusive.



Leyla Sharafi (senior gender advisor, United Nations Population Fund) speaking at “Power, bodily integrity and SRHR”

2.6. Harmful practices

Messages from toxic masculinity are rooted in and perpetuate harmful gender norms: that men should be strong, refuse to show fear or emotion, be in control, and be aggressive. This has an impact on the health and well-being of men and boys directly and on the rights and welfare of women and girls, including through increased perpetration of violence and harmful practices. Panellists identified traditional and faith leaders as key actors in shifting toxic masculinities practices, as educators for their communities, and as peers engaging with each other and holding each other accountable. While it is challenging to convince such actors to cede power, panellists said working through peer networks and with those willing to bring change has been successful.

2.7. Safe abortion



Our pushback is to remind people that women have the right to choose and that it is not subject to men's ratification on what is it that women can choose for themselves and what is good for them, their health, and for their bodies.

— BAFANA KHUMALO (CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SONKE GENDER JUSTICE; CO-CHAIR, MENENGAGE GLOBAL ALLIANCE)

Access to abortion is a human right. Everyone should have the right and dignity to make choices about their bodies, their health, and their lives. Though the [global gag rule](#) has been rescinded, its impact continues to be felt, with speakers describing how the rule had limited SRHR services in many countries. Restrictions persist in abortion access beyond the global gag rule, with abortions possible in many places only if strict criteria are fulfilled and in limited circumstances. Health worker bias and misinformation are another barrier, with inadequate training and capacity an ongoing issue.

Additionally, nongovernmental organisation providers of abortion and related services often lack the needed secure, long-term funding. As we move beyond the global gag rule, new funding approaches and solutions are needed to ensure continued access to safe abortions for all women and girls everywhere, despite any future policy shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and barriers to access, and this must urgently be addressed, both now and in forward planning to mitigate the impact of future pandemics and disease outbreaks.



2.8. Critical and emerging SRHR conversations



The use of euphemisms [for menstruation], where there's that silence around menstruation, further propels silence about anything regarding the body, anything regarding sexual and reproductive health.

— MILI ADHIKARI (DIRECTOR, DIGNIFIED MENSTRUATION NORTH AMERICA CHAPTER), [*ROLE OF BOYS/MEN: RECONSTRUCTION OF POWER FOR DIGNIFIED MENSTRUATION*](#)

Calls to involve men in sexual and reproductive health have been articulated through global frameworks since at least the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. So, the conversation is not new on working with men and boys to advance SRHR or on how to achieve SRHR for men and boys. The following symposium conversation threads illuminate the current discussions and points of consensus across the field and where flashpoints and crossroads exist:

- Sessions broadly called for MenEngage Alliance members and partners to talk about ecosystems—such as feminism, SRHR, land, and Indigenous rights—and build connections. Stigma and discrimination are interwoven with issues of power and intersect with the climate crisis, health, and education. Thus, panellists highlighted the need to start speaking about SRHR and gender justice as norms in these sectors.
- Gender justice requires full equality and equity in all spheres of life. Panellists established a clear relationship between gender justice and SRHR; one cannot exist without the other. Yet at the operational level, the discourse and language around SRHR dilute the goal of gender justice even as we are working for it: framing our goals around health or maternal mortality, for example, without directly using the language of gender justice to make our case more acceptable to power structures rooted in patriarchy.
- There is a critical distinction between the laws widely in place to protect SRHR and the reality of women's SRHR regressing, driven by growing conservatism and regression in social norms and by resistance to implementing comprehensive sexuality education.



- In terms of gender-transformative sexuality education, new attention centres on what inclusive and rights-affirming education looks like. Even as comprehensive sexuality education continues to be an important component of cultural change, it can also discriminate and exclude large numbers of people—particularly when the experiences and needs of LGBTIQ people are absent.
- Panellists also considered the relationship between gender justice and education beyond sexuality education, citing growing conservative forces and their impact on the health and education sectors. In Brazil, for example, national and local plans for education had to remove the word 'gender'. While this affects everyone in Brazil, the greatest impact is on those who most need public health and public education (both formal and nonformal).

As a young human rights defender from Zimbabwe pointed out from her work with diverse adolescent girls and young women, engaging men and boys helps to dismantle harmful gender norms. Structural drivers of gender inequities are rooted in patriarchal community norms, and so these same communities need to engage with changing norms. The work with men and boys needs to be accountable to feminist and women's rights leadership by supporting, not prescribing, and by recognising the risks of reinvigorating gender inequities if 'engaging men and boys' further facilitates their control over women and girls. This must also be set against the backdrop of the potential harm in engaging men and boys within families and communities where conservative and regressive views are the norm. Male involvement can directly lead to harm and violations of SRHR, and so it must be approached carefully. One example given during the opening plenary was an intervention that taught men the value of folic acid for women, leading some men to force their wives and daughters to take it. Engaging men and boys must be done cautiously to avoid reinforcing gender norms or overriding the autonomy, agency, and choices of women and girls.



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3. Promising practices and examples

As we consider the way forward, promising practices and examples shared across the symposium offered 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. The following are examples of what has worked in practice and what holds promise for impact:

- The MenEngage Alliance SRHR Changemakers is an initiative to promote youth leadership in SRHR, and it brings together young activists in regional and global forums to collaborate, cross-pollinate learning, and develop shared agendas. In symposium workshop sessions, Changemakers shared promising practices from different countries and regions. In Bangladesh, for example, Changemakers developed a gender-sensitive curriculum to end early and forced marriage and conducted advocacy to ensure its implementation. In the Caribbean, Changemakers led regional engagement with civil society, United Nations agencies, and others to develop a regional declaration on SRHR and the need for comprehensive sexuality education. In Africa, Changemakers developed a strategy to determine how MenEngage members and allies could advocate for SRHR with a focus on safe abortion, which remains a taboo topic with access highly restricted in many African countries.
- Programming with gender-synchronised approaches at different levels (including individual and community) has been impactful. This includes, for example, a United Nations Population Fund programme in Zambia to reduce the risk of child marriage for vulnerable adolescent girls by creating (separate) safe spaces for boys and girls; by building life skills, health, and social and economic assets; and by fostering individual-level norms change. Additionally, the SASA! initiative in Uganda is an example of 'good practice' in shifting social gender norms away from harmful attitudes and behaviours. The SASA! approach has demonstrated a significant impact in participants' perceptions of gender inequality and in their attitudes towards HIV and violence against women. In Georgia, the United Nations Population Fund, MenEngage, Promundo, and other partners are working on community-level initiatives to challenge norms on reproductive health and unpaid care.
- Sonke Gender Justice and MenEngage Africa developed a regional campaign to engage men and boys in advocating to end female genital mutilation. The campaign has reached men and boys in all their diversity, and implementers have seen increased receptiveness among men and among women's rights organisations over the years. However, this work has sometimes been misinterpreted as 'restoring men to their legitimate place' or rejected by men



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as taking away their rights with no benefit to themselves. The campaign experience demonstrates that policies alone are not enough; it takes time and community-level initiatives to effect change, as well as interventions at the policy level.

- Regional United Nations Population Fund work in Eastern Europe and Central Asia has been effective in addressing harmful gender norms and gender-responsive family policies. This has involved a range of activities, including advocacy and knowledge products, awareness-raising campaigns, partnership, policy advocacy, curriculum-based interventions, research, and a regional MenEngage platform as a knowledge management tool.
- In Guatemala, a Population Council initiative has used a community-based approach to reduce child marriage, school dropout, and harmful practices for adolescent girls in remote Indigenous communities. The Abriendo model has provided safe spaces for girls to meet regularly in culturally relevant sessions led by young women mentors from the community. It has been implemented at scale, with 50 groups in a single district, which has led to visibility. Weekly meetings are provided over 12 months, with capacity-building and regular training for mentors. Building on the initiative's success with girls, the mentors adapted and contextualised the approach and materials, with activities in secondary schools to reach and engage boys.
- In terms of COVID-19-specific programming, community health workers and advocates in Uganda began transporting antiretroviral medication for HIV treatment to young people in hard-to-reach places or who were unable to travel long distances.

Across programmes, several general lessons learned during the symposium include:

- Setting up a new global queer-youth network and structure would be beneficial, both to take ownership of issues and to collaborate as queer feminists working with other groups and networks across health and justice movements.
- 'Phones are our revolution': Online movement-building and connection among young people show that virtual advocacy and global connectivity will continue to build strength and momentum going forward.
- Telemedicine and self-care interventions are also increasingly important: for example, using SMS, phone calls, and WhatsApp for SRH information, mental health counselling, and linkages to SRH services.
- Gender-transformative approaches that question power and inequitable gender norms are effective in programmes on gender-based violence, maternal health, and access to contraception.
- Investments in financial empowerment, creating opportunities, and strengthening agency, quality education, and related interventions are key for girls and women.

4. Lessons learned, recommendations, and the path forward

4.1. Lessons learned

When we look across the tapestry of sessions and diversity of voices that constituted the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium, we see emerging consensus and key conversation points on what works, what does not work, and why. While we have woven this analysis throughout this paper, several elements are worth pulling out for consideration in future work, research, advocacy, and collaboration.

First and foremost, what works is clear: carving out more time and space for dialogue, using self-reflection, learning across regions and generations, building new alliances, and creating collective spaces to see a global picture, recognise trends, and learn with and from one another. As we learn from one another and strengthen our means of virtual collaboration, panellists noted, we need intentional space for South-to-South learning and leadership. For far too long, our work across the health, development, humanitarian responses, and justice movements has replicated and perpetuated colonialism.

To meaningfully advance SRHR for all and create a world where LGBTIQ people enjoy equality, we must centre rights, justice, equity, and inclusion in our work. Otherwise, we risk SRHR programmes, policies, and initiatives that replicate harmful gender norms and undermine the dignity, autonomy, safety, and well-being of those who already face marginalisation, stigma, and discrimination.

Working to advance the SRHR of men and boys is one enterprise; working to engage men and boys to advance the SRHR of women and girls is another—one that can generate as much risk as potential benefit. As the field of engaging men and boys evolves, we must be clear in our definitions and assumptions so that we can speak a shared language. Panellists pointed to feminist scholar Gita Sen's call for a more inclusive approach to the right to health, a call that MenEngage has the opportunity to uphold and realise. One potential pitfall, though, is assuming that involving men and boys in SRHR is automatically beneficial without clarity on why, how, or to whom.

We are still struggling to achieve social norms change at scale. Too many of our efforts, initiatives, workshops, and educational materials are time-bound, small, limited, and neither documented nor measured—and sometimes not measurable—in their impact. How do we catalyse a bigger movement (or movements), especially to address discriminatory norms? A louder, more impactful voice for change? The United Nations Population Fund has published guidance on achieving social norms change at scale, and it is critical now that this work is at scale. The Generation Equality Forum has opened a new door, with heightened attention to



Mili Adhikari (director, Dignified Menstruation North America chapter) speaking at "Role of boys/men: reconstruction of power for dignified menstruation"

and conversation on feminist leadership and movement-building, and the COVID-19 recovery requires that we think bigger and with greater boldness.

Impacted communities should be leading change, with community leaders as key stakeholders and change agents. Within this approach, transformation requires ongoing support and space—as SAfAIDS has demonstrated—for community and other leaders to safely learn, grow, and shift their own attitudes first.

Naming vulnerability is not the same as silencing it: Measuring and uncovering who is affected and who is left out are part of making the systems of oppression visible for what they are. Racism, sexism, patriarchy—systems of discrimination that deliberately make life precarious—need to be named and uncovered to break cycles of vulnerability. Part of doing this work is considering our own individual roles and privileges so we learn to talk with, listen to, and join the change. Change efforts do not work when awareness, capacity, knowledge, and training on gender and issues of power are absent. Panellists shared anecdotes of competitions for people to submit photos of how badly they have been beaten, which advances vulnerability and victimhood rather than transforming power. Panellists also spoke of how men are sometimes unaware of their power and so cannot use it to support gender justice. At other times, men are very aware of their power and use it to harm or violate rights, such as when spousal support or permission is required to access healthcare.

Ultimately, panellists across the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium pointed to systems of power, systems of harm, and the need for structural, systemic change. Too often, we collectively fall back on individual blame and/or individual responsibility, forgoing an analysis of—or attention to—the systems and structures that each of us is part of. A painful but telling analysis was made underscoring that even as men are the primary perpetrators of gender-based violence—and protests have taken place saying ‘men are trash’—‘This man was a boy growing up in a system that is broken.’ To change the system, we must all be collectively committed to doing so. Further, we need to ensure that the work with men and boys toward gender justice, inclusive of SOGIESC rights and realising SRHR for all, is about changing systems together.

4.2. Recommendations



Now, we are daring to be transformative in co-creating a new world, a new language, a new thinking.

— NYARADZAYI GUMBONZVANDA (FOUNDER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ROZARIA MEMORIAL TRUST)

Drawing from the depth and breadth of conversations on SRHR and SOGIESC through the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium, a number of recommendations and key considerations emerge for those involved in transforming masculinities and working with men and boys in gender and social justice. An overarching and unifying recommendation is to ensure that COVID-19 does not turn the clock back on SRHR and on rights for LGBTIQ people. In the rhetoric around a 'new normal', we must collectively stand firm to demand that the regression and disruption too often engendered by COVID-19 do not solidify into a new—but worse—normal. We must also carry forward our learning from living through a pandemic, recognising and embracing the messy reality of full human lives and that caregiving, advocacy, and work are all interconnected and all of value.

Many speakers also highlighted the need to continuously evaluate and re-evaluate our own positions, particularly for men involved in this work. Being aware of power structures and problematic norms that we may (inadvertently or intentionally) replicate or reinforce is critical to keeping the work of transforming masculinities and working with men and boys in gender and social justice accountable.

Speakers across panels and sessions also brought forward specific recommendations in relation to each of the organising themes and key priorities of the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium. Again, this is not a complete list but rather a summary and suggested path forward informed by the symposium.

Intersectional feminisms

- **Recognise backlash and build intersectional and cross-movement alliances to bolster our resistance.** Increasing conservative forces, traditional/regressive norms, expectations around 'family', and growing religious fundamentalism are fuelling a pushback and regression on SRHR and LGBTIQ rights in national and international spaces, including United Nations settings. Informed, intersectional, and broad alliances are needed to resist these changes.
- **Recognise diverse experiences and intersecting discrimination and how these impact SRHR differently in different settings.** This recognition is critical to a reflexive and impactful movement. The MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium demonstrated growth in the adoption of intersectional analysis, the integration and cross-fertilisation of social movements, the strengthening of allyship, and the solidarity across movements. These positive trends must continue.
- **Expand the tent in feminist movements to bring in diverse LGBTIQ people,** and work to normalise and mainstream queer youth issues with meaningful inclusion, including in decision-making at all levels. Similarly, queer movements need to step up to be true allies in return, such as by speaking up on reproductive justice.

Decolonization

- **Address unequal power dynamics in our own movements.** This is hard but important work: Racism and white supremacy are pervasive ways of thinking. Decolonization and intersectionality are critical to addressing, understanding, and overturning racism and white supremacy. We must reflect on our own positions and how they affect our work.

Feminist systems change

- **Recognise whose burdens are greater.** The systems we are working in are toxic and hard to engage, and so it is important to recognise the increased burden carried by those doing this work who are women, who are LGBTIQ, or who are otherwise marginalised. Changing a system that devalues you exacts a heavy toll, and our movements must be safe and supportive to offset this.
- **Ensure systemic change is a core mandate and priority across our movements.** Systems are not designed for collectives and organisations to be viable. Structural, funding, and systemic barriers restrict the reach and impact of our work, and so systemic change should be a core mandate and priority across our movements.

‘Power with’ and movement-building

- **Meaningfully address the barriers that LGBTIQ people face.** Violence and discrimination against LGBTIQ people persist, including within our movements. LGBTIQ people are often left out of conversations about violence, harmful practices, and SRHR. Critically, they are also left out of decision-making and meaningful participation in civil society at all levels. Work to understand and address specific barriers, prevent tokenism, and ensure meaningful participation is key.
- **Encourage fruitful collaboration and partnership.** Cross-movement collaboration, building shared agendas, and allyship are vital to movement-building. This should include cross-movement issues and priorities, such as the climate crisis, HIV, and safe abortion. Partnerships are also important, especially with feminist movements and organisations that have a feminist objective and are key interlocutors for those most left behind and excluded. It is critical to reach the systemic level and engage governments, both for scale and for changing norms: Patriarchy must be tackled from all angles.
- **Foster South-to-South learning and locally owned solutions.** Opportunities for South-to-South learning have the potential for significant impact through movement-building and mutual learning. We must build movements that develop locally owned solutions, mitigate dependence on governments and international funding streams, and bolster against the impact of policy impositions like the global gag rule.
- **Avoiding repeating mistakes of the past.** We must recognise the existing barriers and that public spaces are masculinised. To promote dignity and human rights, we have to create spaces that allow us to create change. This must include change to the system and efforts to link with other issues, including climate justice. We need to learn from what did not work in the past and what can be done differently.

- **Explicitly conceptualise men's power.** Given power imbalances, failing to explicitly conceptualise men's power could mean our work actually does harm (for example, when addressing male involvement in contraception). Addressing power, acknowledging complexity, and conceptualising power relations are key to gender-transformative approaches. The field of interventions to involve men and boys in SRHR is growing, but we must recognise the gaps and work to build the field in a more substantive way. Building the evidence base and ensuring that community-based knowledge is taken up in the evidence base are both critical priorities.
- **Recognise the geographical specificity to developing masculinities.** War, conflict, genocide, social norms, societal structures, and other factors mean the impact is different, and so the required response is different.

Accountability

- **Build accountability between and across movements and generations—as well as among men, women, and gender-nonconforming people—and recognise that this applies to everyone.** The issue of leadership and voice is ongoing. Addressing power imbalance and inequitable access includes ensuring that the quality of analysis and insight determines who gets the platforms and who gets to speak. Men are critical as allies and accountable to feminist movements, but it is important to avoid praising men for the basics. An accountable movement must engage with the demands for accountability and recognise the challenges of men as leaders, including through holding space for the voices of dissident masculinities and LGBTIQ masculinities.

Youth

- **See youth as key stakeholders, not beneficiaries,** with meaningful participation at all stages and in all spaces. Panellists described youth-led movements emerging to add to existing movements, networks, and spaces—'not taking the reins but joining the ride'. This diversity of voices and leadership enhances our collective work. Youth leadership can be better supported by recognising the efforts of young people, from community-level volunteering on up; we must provide space for their ideas to be heard.
- **Address barriers to youth participation.** Youth movements are also emerging in response to the inaccessibility of existing feminist or women's movement spaces, with barriers including those related to cost, access, and inclusivity. Some speakers highlighted a pushback against progressive views around SOGIESC in some feminist spaces, indicating a need for our collective movements to reflect on and address barriers.
- Explicitly and meaningfully involve queer youth. Meaningful participation of young queer people at all levels is more essential now than ever. Recognising privileges and diversity within our movements requires making space for the depth and breadth of community needs and issues, including those of queer youth. It also requires recognising and addressing where spaces are dominated by unrepresentative voices.
- **Learn from youth movements' work during COVID-19.** Youth movements have spearheaded good practices throughout the pandemic, such as conducting virtual organising and meet-ups, ensuring access through means such as closed captioning, and providing platforms for diverse voices. These efforts offer invaluable learning for all.

4.3. The path forward

Looking beyond the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium, we can build on the learning and collaboration it generated to create an agenda for where the movement should go next. This includes issues that were raised in the symposium that require more thought, as well as issues that were underrepresented in the sessions but are worth prioritising.

The former includes the need for more evidence and a clear research agenda, bringing in both community knowledge and formal quantitative and qualitative research. Linked to this is the need to develop measures to gauge the costs and harm to men of gender norms and masculinities, as well as the impact of gender-related inequalities on all people. Thematic issues such as harmful practices and maternal health can be gateways to working with men and boys to address underlying gender inequalities; however, failing to explicitly name gender justice in SRHR efforts can risk depoliticising and removing gender justice from this work. Nuanced, careful, and contextualised approaches are needed, and more discussion on how to achieve these approaches would have value.

The symposium featured a focus on youth, which was evident in sessions on issues such as dignified menstruation and comprehensive sexuality education. Missing, however, was a life course approach recognising the shifting but constant impact of gender inequalities on girls and women throughout their lives. Menopause appeared to be absent from the symposium, and it would be fruitful to explore how to engage men and boys in supporting dignified menopause; access to informed, high-quality, and evidence-based menopause care; and upholding rights in the home, workplace, and community for women and others experiencing menopause.

Additionally, in sessions focused on and providing a platform for youth voices, there were sometimes suggestions of an ahistorical analysis or a gap in learning from experience. Intergenerational and multigenerational approaches would also yield important conversations, recognising overlapping priorities but also distinct priorities and issues.

The consensus across symposium panellists is that the work on men and masculinities needs to embrace a feminist analysis and look at issues around agency, autonomy, choice, and power when it comes to SRHR for all. This is important with regards to girls and women in their diversity. This is important with regards to the dignity and fundamental right to exist for people across the LGBTIQ community. This is important when considering people who face multiple layers of marginalisation, such as people of colour, people living with a disability, people who are Indigenous, and many others. Too often in the SRHR sphere, the work with men and boys reproduces harmful gender norms and power relations.

Moreover, we are in a moment of historic challenge with a once-in-a-century pandemic and in a moment of tremendous transformation. The work with men and boys must bring in a more political and reflective analysis to avoid perpetuating and reproducing systems of harm, including colonialism, and to effectively navigate a world changing even during the course of the convening. The time is now for bold action and for a bolder vision of what a more equal, healthy, just, safe, and vibrant world can be.

The challenge and opportunity for the MenEngage Alliance is to translate the dialogue into action: for example, through members considering how they show up in their spaces or how the policies, programmes, and decision-making in their sphere of influence put principles into practice. This could include questioning why there are no women at a table discussing women's health, for example, or asking how an all-male panel of experts could have definitive analysis

without the meaningful inclusion of diverse lived experiences.

The symposium provides a roadmap for how to navigate a rapidly changing landscape and complex historic moment through:

- Creating space for cross-regional dialogue, experience-sharing, and learning
- Putting a spotlight on emerging issues and areas of contest/concern
- Focusing on human rights issues and analysis that are emerging or contentious
- Building more links between theory and practice, practice and theory
- Providing cross-generational conversation, collaboration, learning, and alliance-building
- Developing and working with clear definitions across the field
- Thinking big to address changing contexts and growing backlash, and being louder and bolder in advocacy
- Promoting a research agenda bringing in both community knowledge and formal research
- Adopting a life course approach to understanding gender equality/inequality and SRHR
- Embracing a feminist analysis that interrogates agency, autonomy, and power
- Translating principles into practice



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5. Selected resources on SRHR and SOGIESC

Child marriage. (n.d.). United Nations Population Fund. Retrieved November 26, 2021, from <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage>

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International Center for Research on Women Asia [@ICRWAsia]. (2021, June 17). #UbuntuSymposium Watch Hemlata Verma, ICRW analyze how gay men and trans men inhabit and perform hegemonic masculinity or how queer women may reinforce hegemonic masculine norms. Thrilling conversation! Join us. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/ICRWAsia/status/1405516175728017412?s=20>

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Annex 1. Links to the symposium sessions on backlash and fundamentalism

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. 19 November 2020: [*Impact of Covid-19 on the SRHR Rights of Women & Girls*](#)
7. 26 November 2020: [*Empowering Youth With SRHR Information and Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic*](#)
8. 2 December 2020: [*SRHR Changemakers' Workshop*](#)
9. 8 December 2020: [*Power, Bodily Integrity and SRHR*](#)
10. 17 December 2020: [*LGBTIQ Rights, Masculinities and Patriarchy*](#)
11. 14 January 2021: [*What Is the Research and Evidence Agenda for Addressing Masculinities in the Context of SRHR?*](#)
12. 21 January 2021: [*Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Justice and Ending Harmful Practices*](#)
13. 11 February 2021: [*Engaging Young Men in Gender-Transformative Relationship & Sexuality Education in South America, Africa and Europe*](#)
14. 18 February 2021: [*Changemakers Working to End Stigma, Exclusion and Harmful Practices*](#)
15. 25 February 2021: [*Africa Experiences: Working With Men and Boys in Advocating for SRHR for All*](#)
16. 4 March 2021: [*Shifting Gender Norms and Narratives, Championing Partnerships and Linkages to Promote Sexual Health Amongst Young People*](#)
17. 10 March 2021: [*How to Recover From the Global Gag Rule*](#)
18. 15 April 2021: [*Addressing Gender Transformative Approaches: What Does It Mean for Men and Boys?*](#)
19. 15 April 2021: [*Engaging Traditional & Religious Leaders as Gender Equality Champions: A Stepping Stone to SRHR*](#)
20. 22 April 2021: [*Intervenciones Creativas y Participativas de y con Jóvenes*](#) (Creative and Participatory Interventions by and With Young People)
21. 29 April 2021: [*Role of Boys/Men: Reconstruction of Power for Dignified Menstruation*](#)
22. 13 May 2021: [*The Past, Present, and Future of Engaging Men In Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights*](#)



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MenEngage Alliance
working with men and boys for gender equality



MenEngage
working with men and boys for gender equality
Africa



MenEngage
working with men and boys for gender equality
Rwanda

