

Policy Brief

Jurisprudence of CEDAW and General Recommendations

On an Intersectional Feminist Framework on Engaging Men & Boys and Transforming Patriarchal Masculinities

This policy brief was adapted from the collective analysis developed alongside: IWRRAW, ARROW, Rwamrec, ABAAD, WILPF, Amsher and Instituto WEM.

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Political context analysis

In every region and context, ideologies of men's entitlements and privileges over women, girls and LGBTIQ peoples, rigid gender & social norms regarding masculinities, and enforced stereotypical gender roles and practices, socialize men and boys to respond to conflict with violence and to dominate their partners and others in their lives. As such, work with men and boys is an essential and complementary element in efforts to transform deeply entrenched gender inequalities across our societies, in all spaces and spheres of human interaction, whether public or private.

Work with men and boys can have a positive, transformative impact on the lives of women, girls and LGBTIQ people. Boys and men can play relevant roles as partners, allies, supporters and advocates for gender equality and in eradicating stereotypes,

prejudices, customs and practices that condone or promote GBV against women and girls and underpin structural inequalities, including to end the culture of impunity that currently exists around VAWG/GBV.

In order to realize the normative framework established within CEDAW's mandates, the SDG's and other human rights treaties and international human rights and development frameworks, there is a growing consensus worldwide that the work with men and boys is necessary. In the past two decades, governments, UN agencies, non-governmental and civil society organizations in global norm-setting and policy-making spaces have shown considerable recognition of the need to engage men and boys in women's rights and gender equality and have increasingly included engagement of men and boys in their policies.

As more stakeholders take on this work, there is need to work strategically together to ensure it upholds the frameworks of women's human rights. There is risk involved when initiatives that do work with men and boys are neither informed by intersectional feminist approaches, nor gender transformative and accountable to feminist, LGBTIQ, youth and other marginalized communities. There is need to ensure that policies targeted at men and boys are both gender transformative in nature as well as informed by intersectional feminist approaches, and must be mindful of gendered-power relations, reinforcing male power and privilege.

In recent years, there has been a steady uptake of language on engaging men and boys towards advancing women's and girls' human rights and fundamental freedoms, across international human rights instruments, from CEDAW General Recommendations to CSW Agreed conclusion and HRC and UNGA Resolutions.

Commitments within such frameworks are **showing an increasingly deepened and nuanced discourse on engaging men and boys,** going beyond the need to merely engage this critical constituency, to establishing the parameters for how to do so transformatively, in order to challenge and eliminate harmful social norms, practices, stereotypes, and dismantling patriarchal power inequalities as impediments to the realization of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women, girls and LGBTIQ people. As MenEngage Alliance, we welcome this deepening global normative framework - although more work is needed moving forward.

Political recommendations towards an intersectional feminist framework to transform patriarchal masculinities

- **Work with men and boys in gender equality and social justice must be feminist-informed, human rights based and transformative, while being anchored to the feminist movements & centered on accountability**
- Work with men and boys in gender equality stems from the **pioneering work and ongoing leadership of feminist organizations and movements, hence the need to honor, learn from and build on the history.**
- **The work with men and boys should center accountability to feminist, women's rights and LGBTQIA+ rights movements - and to movements for social and environmental justice. This applies to all the organizations and networks working on the efforts to align their politics to the broader feminist agenda for gender justice.** We have seen that some programs and organizations look at this work from a need based approach rather than having clear feminist politics informing their vision.
- **Work with men and boys is not an end goal in and of itself, but rather it's a means to achieve something, i.e. gender and social justice.** Hence it is recommended that all men and boys who are part of any programs, initiatives and organizations need to be made clear on this long term objectives of the work, so that the vision of what we are all working towards is clear from the beginning. We have come to realize that this work must focus on adding value to the ongoing struggles for women's autonomy, empowerment, equality and rights, as allies and solidarity partners.
- **A strong commitment is needed to ensure that policies and practices to work with men and boys do not marginalize women-led and women-focused initiatives.** This includes not taking away funding and other resources, such as visibility and spaces for engagement, that are increasingly shrinking for civil society - in particular for women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and feminist groups.
- **We recommend that, at its core, gender transformative work with men and boys should always seek to destabilize patriarchal masculinities and male supremacy, and to support manifestations of non-violent, equitable and inclusive notions of manhood in order to advance women's rights and gender justice.**

Policies, programs, interventions, advocacy and research around the roles and responsibilities of men and boys to transform patriarchal masculinities and support

women, girls and gender diverse people everywhere can fully enjoy their human rights must be:

Gender transformative: seek to critically reflect on and transform social norms and institutional practices that create and reinforce gender inequalities. This requires a holistic and systemic approach.

Feminist informed: embrace a women's rights perspective and feminist analysis, including by placing inequalities in privilege and power that result from patriarchy at their centre. This also includes centering feminist calls for systemic transformation, beyond transformation at the individual level.

Human rights-based: promote and respect the fundamental human rights and bodily autonomy of all women, men and people of diverse gender identities.

Accountable & Intersectional: be carried out in consultation and partnership with feminist, women's rights, LGBTQIA+ and other social and environmental justice movements and are fully accountable to the most marginalized groups in society, centering the margins of the margins, their voices and agendas and critiques on the systems which disproportionately oppress them. We must also take more account of the heterogeneity among men and boys themselves. Patriarchal power and privilege is shaped by many forces and factors of marginalization and oppression and intersecting forces of oppression spread the gains and costs of gender relations very unevenly among men and boys.

Language recommendations

We can provide more concrete technical drafting support based on the preliminary text. Alternatively, please advise if we wish to formulate a few paragraphs ourselves to share with you instead.

In particular, it is important to continue to **progress the normative framework on men and masculinities through nuanced language on:**

- **Accountability:** Centering accountability to feminist, LGBTIQ, youth, climate, indigenous, racial and other social justice activists, organizations, movements and their voices and political agendas – in efforts to transform patriarchal masculinities

and work with men and boys for gender justice. Work on men and masculinities should always have the aim to achieve the realizations of the rights of all women, girls and LGBTIQ individuals.

- **Nuancing of roles and responsibilities of men and boys:** Language addressing a nuanced analysis of the multiple roles of men and boys in gender-informed power inequalities and gender norms transformation and their roles and responsibilities in shifting them, in order to avoid missing valuable opportunities to transform the very patriarchal system that is at the basis of gender injustices.
- **Feminist systems transformation:** At its root, gender injustice is linked to deep-rooted patriarchal masculinities and patriarchal systems based on domination, exploitation and unequal power relations. As such, there is a need to move beyond merely engaging men and boys to addressing patriarchal masculinities and social, cultural, economic and political patriarchal norms and systems that perpetuate gender inequality. Systemic transformation is key to the achievement of gender equality and the links between systems of oppression, including patriarchy, and patriarchal masculinity norms must continue to be unpacked.
- **Ending impunity:** It is important to address ideologies of men's entitlement and privilege over women, girls, and LGBTIQ individuals, as well as social norms regarding masculinity, and the impunity often experienced by men and boys. It is imperative to hold men and boys accountable, especially men in positions of authority and power, including politicians and policy makers, private sector leaders and law enforcement officials, accountable for not complying with and/or upholding laws and regulations relating to gender justice.
- **Concrete policy proposals on violence prevention and response programs and interventions to transform social norms centered on intersectional feminist approaches** to work with men and boys and to transform patriarchal masculinities for gender justice are key (please see Resolution 35/10 below, as the most advanced normative framework to date).

We specifically recommend:

- We recommend the inclusion of language moving beyond men and boys as beneficiaries of gender equality as a limited frame to support in the dismantling patriarchal power, to include an articulation of their roles and responsibilities of men and boys as agents of change, alongside women, girls and gender

non-confirming individuals, including through:

- **Refraining and condemning all forms of discrimination and violence against all women, girls and gender non-confirming individuals**
- **Taking responsibility and being held accountable for their behaviour, including behaviour that perpetuates gender stereotypes and harmful social norms, including misconceptions about patriarchal masculinities that underlie discrimination and violence against women, girls, and gender non-conforming individuals**
- **By increasing their understanding of the harmful effects of patriarchal violence and their role in violence prevention and response.**
- **Ensure that men and boys take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behaviour and equal share of unpaid care and domestic work.**
- **Commit to working jointly in partnership with women, girls and gender non-conforming individuals at all levels and at all levels**
- We recommend the inclusion of language beyond ‘men and boys’ as a constituency to the address of the social-cultural and systemic level, including by **naming the need to transform patriarchal masculinities and patriarchal systems and how work with men and boys can work towards this aim.**
- Centering accountability in work on men and masculinities, **ensuring that all initiatives on preventing and ending violence against women and girls aimed at engaging men and boys are designed and promoted with the aim of ensuring that the concerns of all women and girls and gender non-conforming individuals, their rights, their empowerment, their safety and their equal and meaningful participation in decision-making, their voices and political agendas at all levels are prioritized.**

Mapping of the Jurisprudence of CEDAW and General Recommendations on existing language on work with men and boys for gender justice

Inclusion and Gaps: An Analysis of the Normative Framework of CEDAW & GRs

The CEDAW Convention and accompanying General Recommendations centre a strong framing around addressing root causes of discrimination against women and girls through gender-norms transformation and eliminating gender-based stereotypes and harmful practices. This includes detailed references and recommendations on the need and strategies to engage men and boys to end all forms of discrimination and violence against all women and girls, and in gender equality more broadly.

We welcome the articulation of these issues across the body of work of the Committee, noting the influence which the work of the treaty body has in setting the international normative framework for the attainment of the rights and fundamental freedoms of all women and girls worldwide.

The following policy analysis will lay out the treaty body's jurisprudence on advancing a transformative framework for the work to engage men and boys in social norms transformation, noting inclusions and potential gaps. This assessment will include a review of thematic articulations on the roles and responsibilities of men and boys in combating the gender inequalities present across a variety of issues of central importance to advancing a feminist and women's rights agenda.

It will also assess the incorporation of key points in the promising practices framework for the engagement of men and boys as detailed in the [OHCHR Report: Review of promising practices and lessons learned, existing strategies and United Nations and other initiatives to engage men and boys in promoting and achieving gender equality, in the context of eliminating violence against women](#).

Gender transformative approaches to engaging men and boys

From the earliest articulation, the **CEDAW Convention** lays the burden firmly on the state to:

*“modify the **social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women**, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on **stereotyped roles for men and women** (article 5a)”.*

In subsequent General Recommendations, progressive discourse-setting drives an analysis of patriarchal structures, power dynamics and harmful social norms, stereotypes and traditional practices that underpin gender inequalities and elaborates a theory of rights-based social norms change. The recommendations refer to **'patriarchal structures'**, **'patriarchal traditions and attitudes'** as root causes of gender inequality, and specifically mention **“social norms, attitudes and expectations that are associated with traditional femininity and masculinity”**, **“the assertion of male power and control”** and **'violent masculinities'** as key elements to be addressed. The recommendations place the responsibility for addressing social norms and stereotypes firmly on states, and call for the

engagement of men and boys in this effort. They urge states to engage men and boys in a range of issues including gender-based violence, harmful practices, unpaid care work, conflict prevention, HIV prevention and women's access to justice, in varying degrees of detail.

The definition of the term "gender" in **General Recommendation No. 28** is welcome, expressed as ***"socially constructed identities, attributes and roles for women and men and society's social and cultural meaning for these biological differences resulting in hierarchical relationships between women and men and in the distribution of power and rights favouring men and disadvantaging women. This social positioning of women and men is affected by political, economic, cultural, social, religious, ideological and environmental factors and can be changed by culture, society and community."*** Likewise, the treaty bodies' articulation of the definition of a "social norm" is equally welcome, which makes note of the great forces of pressure that hold social norms in place and which therefore require holistic, multi-pronged and long-term strategies to dismantle.

General recommendation No. 25 on Temporary Special Measures, deepens the understanding of the great task at hand, stating that ***"the position of women will not be improved as long as the underlying causes of discrimination against women, and of their inequality, are not effectively addressed. The lives of women and men must be considered in a contextual way, and measures adopted towards a real transformation of opportunities, institutions and systems so that they are no longer grounded in historically determined male paradigms of power and life patterns"***. In order to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, we must not only transform individual men and boys or harmful masculinities that condone and perpetuate ideologies of the superiority of men and boys, we must also transform institutions and systems of power, including patriarchy in political and public space, and dismantle paradigms of power over, oppression and exclusion.

Recommendations

In future language formulations we would welcome an articulation of how patriarchy manifests in these spaces and systems, as well as how the work with men and boys, no matter how well intentioned, if not carried out properly can replicate these harmful social norms.

Accountability to Women, Girls and Gender Non-Conforming People

Accountability in the work to engage men and boys and transform masculinities - from policy to programming - is of central consideration in order to ensure that efforts to dismantle harmful social norms, stereotypes and traditional practices do not end up

reinforcing paternalistic, protectionist or patriarchal notions of masculinity or replicate patriarchal power dynamics within institutions.

General Recommendation No. 35 on Gender-based violence against women, in general terms, stresses the need for ***“active participation of all relevant stakeholders, such as women’s organisations and those representing marginalised groups of women and girls, to address and eradicate the stereotypes, prejudices, customs and practices, laid out in article 5 of the Convention, that condone or promote gender-based violence against women and underpin structural inequality of women with men”***.

Joint General Recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices deepens this thinking while specifically recommending ***“that the States parties to the Conventions ensure that any efforts undertaken to tackle harmful practices and to challenge and change underlying social norms are holistic, community based and founded on a rights-based approach that includes the active participation of all relevant stakeholders, especially women and girls.”*** The Joint General Recommendation also notes the importance of mobilizing critical constituencies in these efforts, noting that the ***“most effective efforts are inclusive and engage relevant stakeholders at all levels, especially girls and women from affected communities and boys and men. Moreover, those efforts require the active participation and support of local leaders, including through the allocation of adequate resources. Establishing or strengthening existing partnerships with relevant stakeholders, institutions, organizations and social networks (religious and traditional leaders, practitioners and civil society) can help to build bridges between constituencies”*** - which must always be carried out in ways that centralize the needs and rights of women and girls, per their recommendation noted prior.

Recommendations

We welcome the Committee’s jurisprudence on the need for accountability, and encourage the Committee to further lay out an articulation of the central importance of ensuring that all efforts to engage men and boys are carried out in consultation with women’s rights and feminist organizations, that they encourage the leadership of women and girls, that they do not divert funding away from initiatives focused on women and girls, centralizing the rights and fundamental freedoms of all women and girls as their key outcome.

As well, we recommend that the Treaty Body consider deepening an assessment of the need for accountability in all efforts to engage men and boys, transform harmful

masculinities, stereotypes, male entitlements, traditions and customs, and the risk of reinforcing existing power dynamics in such efforts.

Advancing Feminist Systems Change: Transforming patriarchal masculinities and engaging men and boys across all levels of society

When seeking to dismantle deeply held and historical societal norms, laws, beliefs, and patterns of conduct, it is not sufficient to do so by working at just one level of society. Working across a socio-ecological framework (from the individual, to the community, to institutions, to the policy sphere), is critical, including carrying out transformative processes at all levels.

In General recommendation No. 25 on Temporary special measures, we see a firm reminder by the Committee of this imperative requirement if we are to realize the goal of gender equality for all. The recommendation states that: ***“The position of women will not be improved as long as the underlying causes of discrimination against women, and of their inequality, are not effectively addressed. The lives of women and men must be considered in a contextual way, and measures adopted towards a real transformation of opportunities, institutions and systems so that they are no longer grounded in historically determined male paradigms of power and life patterns.”***

How to effectively begin to ensure that men and boys are engaged in transformation at all levels is elaborated upon in the **Joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices**. It notes that ***“one of the primary challenges in the elimination of harmful practices relates to the lack of awareness or capacity of relevant professionals, including front-line professionals, to adequately understand, identify and respond to incidents or the risks of harmful practices. A comprehensive, holistic and effective approach to capacity-building should aim to engage influential leaders, such as traditional and religious leaders, and as many relevant professional groups as possible, including health, education and social workers, asylum and immigration authorities, the police, public prosecutors, judges and politicians at all levels. They need to be provided with accurate information about the practice and applicable human rights norms and standards with a view to promoting a change in the attitudes and forms of behaviour of their group and the wider community.”***

Recommendations

Calling attention to the need for gender transformation of men, especially those in positions of authority, power and privilege, as is the case for men working across the

judicial, executive and legislative branches, is welcome and we encourage the treaty body to continue to call attention to this need.

Human-rights based approaches

Noting an increased uptake globally in work to engage men and boys, and having detailed the need for this work to be done in accountable ways, ensuring that efforts to engage men and boys in social norms transformation is done from a human rights-based approach, is equally central, in order to ensure that these efforts are centred around the realization of the rights of all women and girls.

Joint General Recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices notes that ***“One of the first steps in combating harmful practices is through prevention. Both Committees have underlined that prevention can be best achieved through a rights-based approach to changing social and cultural norms, empowering women and girls, building the capacity of all relevant professionals who are in regular contact with victims, potential victims and perpetrators of harmful practices at all levels and raising awareness of the causes and consequences of harmful practices, including through dialogue with relevant stakeholders.”*** It also firmly calls upon an understanding of the centrality of ***“adopting a rights-based approach that is founded on recognition that rights are indivisible and interdependent”***.

Recommendations

We welcome a more explicit articulation of why a rights-based approach is of particular importance in all efforts to engage boys and men in social norms transformation, especially as this work is predisposed to replicate patterns of male dominance as these efforts are carried out within still present patriarchal systems. Engaging men and boys is not the end goal, rather the means to an end, being the realization of the rights of all women and girls. Compelling the State parties to ensure that all efforts to engage men and boys be realized from a human-rights based approach, centered on the rights of all women and girls, and men and boys, is key.

Thematic address of the roles and responsibilities of men and boys in key issues of the feminist agenda

In addition to the Convention itself, many subsequent General Recommendations have articulated the need to engage men and boys at all levels of society in social norms transformation. Given that Article 5 of the Convention lays out this clear structural prescription for the attainment of a more just and equitable societies, we note the need for

deepening definitions, articulations and understanding on the role and responsibility of men and boys in transforming our societies through their own transformation.

In addition, many General Recommendations have deepened the exploration of the role of men and boys in all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls and in gender-based violence. General Recommendation 19 and following, General Recommendation No. 35 do so, in addition to the general call alongside other Recommendations on the obligation of the state to encourage social norms transformation as a root cause that sustains and upholds VAWG/GBV more broadly. Across this jurisprudence, the treaty body has made tremendous strides in laying out the “how” and “why” of engaging men and boys in these efforts.

As is observed across other international policy spaces, from the Human Rights Council, Agenda 2030, CSW, and others, a recommendation is made to the committee, to deepen an articulation of how to both engage and hold to account men and boys across other critical thematic areas of focus for the advancement of the rights of women and girls, including SRHR, Climate Justice, unpaid care, SOGIESC, and the Women Peace and Security Agenda.