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Pune, March 4, 2025— Why Working with Boys is Key to Ending Gender-Based Violence

A 14-year-old boy watches his older brother tell their sister not to stay out too late. He hears his uncle say that men do not cry. He sees his father make decisions for the household without discussion. His peers also reinforce these lessons, nudging him to prove his masculinity through dominance, control, or even casual acts like street sexual harassment. The pressure to conform is real, and without intervention, these norms continue unchallenged. And somewhere in these moments, he learns consciously or unconsciously what it means to be a man!

From a young age, boys absorb messages about power, control, and gender roles. These messages shape behaviors, relationships, and entire communities.

But what if these messages were different?

What if boys learned that masculinity is not about dominance, but about respect?

That strength lies not in control, but in support?

Why do we need to talk about boys?

Gender equality is often framed as a concern only for women and girls, sidelining the reality that men and boys, too, are shaped by patriarchal norms. This limited perspective not only reinforces the idea that gender equality is a zero-sum game but also ignores how these structures define masculinity in restrictive ways.

When we talk about gender-based violence, we often focus on survivors—rightfully so. But addressing violence only from the perspective of those who endure it leaves a critical gap: the need to work with those who have the power to change it.

At Equal Community Foundation, our decade-long experience with the **Action for Equality** programme shows that engaging boys and men in conversations about gender equality promotes critical shifts in their attitudes and behaviours. By addressing the ways in which gender norms impact them, we create space for change, reducing the likelihood of violence and challenging the rigid ideas that harm everyone.



If we continue to view gender-based violence as a series of individual incidents rather than a systemic issue rooted in social norms, we miss an opportunity to create lasting change. True gender equality requires shifting the way boys and men see themselves, their relationships, and the world around them.

What happens when we engage boys ?

Meet Prathamesh. A 16-year-old participant from our **Action for Equality** programme not only transformed his own perspective but also ignited conversations at home on topics often left unspoken. He initiated discussions about menstruation, helping normalise the subject within his family. His father, once distant from household responsibilities, now creates an environment where open conversations are welcomed. *“When my mother comes home tired and in pain, my father and I make sure she rests. We cook, clean, and take care of things just as she does. My father and younger brother also now sees this as normal,”* he shared. His mother added, *“This has been a learning experience for all of us. Our sons look up to their father as a role model, and we are growing together as a family.”*

Stories like these remind us that change begins with questioning what we have always known.

Meet Adil. At 15, he believed that being tough and in control made him a ‘real’ man. Then, through our gender equality programme (*The Gender Equality Programme by ECF was developed and executed in partnership with the government, reaching over 100+ schools in Pune*) at his school, he participated in discussions that challenged his understanding of masculinity. For the first time, he questioned why showing emotions was seen as weak, or why household chores were considered ‘women’s work.’

When boys engage in conversations about gender, they begin to question long-held stereotypes and recognise the impact of social norms on their lives and relationships. This awareness encourages empathy, critical thinking, and a sense of shared responsibility in challenging inequality. Investing in such learning spaces not only reshapes their perspectives today but also drives the way for a future where respect, equality, and collaboration define their actions.

Over time, Adil’s perspective can evolve, allowing him to share these insights and contribute to raising a generation of boys who value equality.

What do you think?

The Work That Needs to Be Done

Change does not happen overnight. It requires deep, continuous engagement conversations that help boys unlearn harmful norms and relearn them with values of equality and care. It requires schools, communities, and families to provide safe spaces where boys can reflect, question, and grow.



At Equal Community Foundation, our team is committed to the Gender Transformative Approach. Through structured programmes, boys are encouraged to critically examine gender norms, build empathy, and develop the confidence to challenge injustice. They do not just learn about equality, they practice it in their daily lives.

Beyond Awareness: Taking Action Together

Raising awareness is not enough; action is needed. We need to move beyond conversations and actively create environments where positive masculinity can thrive. This involves engaging parents in conversations about raising boys differently, integrating gender-sensitive equality discussions, and ensuring boys have role models who demonstrate respect and equality.

Whether you are a teacher, a parent, a sibling, or a friend, you can help challenge traditional ideas and create safe space for a new kind of masculinity which is rooted in respect, kindness, and fairness.

We all have a role to play — isn't it?

The time is now!

Ending gender-based violence is not about protecting women and girls, it is about building a better world for everyone. A world where boys do not feel pressured to conform to rigid gender roles. A world where strength is measured by integrity, not aggression. A world where every individual, regardless of gender, feels valued and safe.

This change starts with the conversations we have today, the behaviours we challenge, and the examples we set. *"I have always believed that 'ACTION' speaks louder than words. By teaching our boys, first my elder son Ashutosh, and now my younger son Ayush, about respect and equality through ECF sessions, we are building a future where both boys and girls know that their voices matter. I hope every parent in my community understands this."* – Asha Santosh Kamble, the mother of alumni, added.

The time to act is now.

So, let's ask ourselves: What messages are we passing on to the next generation of boys? And how can we ensure they grow into men who choose respect, not control?

The answers begin with us...!



About Author

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