

# Working with Men and Boys to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Approaches, Challenges, and Lessons

## Sector Brief: Social Development

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Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is the most widespread form of abuse worldwide, affecting one third of all women in their lifetime [1]. It is widely acknowledged that men and boys have a key role to play in eliminating VAWG. However, not only does ending VAWG require the engagement of men and boys, but it also requires coordinated work with men and boys across multiple sectors [2, 3].

Such approaches are grounded in understanding the links between social constructions of masculinity and men's use of violence. Social constructions of gender almost always confer a higher social value on men than women, and privilege the masculine over the feminine. Male VAWG is born of this privilege. The term "positive masculinities" has emerged in recent years as a way to characterize the values, norms and practices that gender-based work with men and boys seeks to promote in order to end VAWG.

### Background and Methodology

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) commissioned a literature review to investigate documentation of work with men and boys on VAWG outside the health sector in the Global South; and to identify promising approaches to, and emerging lessons from, this work that can guide future funding priorities and program development. The review covered the following five sectors:

- 1- Economic Growth, Trade, and Agriculture
- 2- Education
- 3- Governance, Law Enforcement, and Justice Systems

4- Conflict, Post Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance

5- Social Development

**Search Methods.** A broad definition of violence was used, including physical and sexual violence against intimate partners and non-partners as well as harmful traditional practices such as child marriage, bride abduction, honor killing, acid throwing, burning, and female genital mutilation (FGM). The review conducted a search of general online sources, published literature databases, and relevant organizational websites and research platforms. Email queries to select key informants were also used to gather information.

**Inclusion Criteria.** The review focused on interventions that seek to be "gender transformative," in that they seek to transform gender norms and promote more gender-equitable relationships between men and women. Programs were included in the review on the basis of evaluated impact, lessons learned documentation in the absence of evaluated impact, and/or innovative program design that can guide future programming.

This brief summarizes the findings from the **social development** sector.

### Social Development

In many communities, inequitable gender norms and cultural practices that constitute acts of VAWG are sanctioned and supported by community leadership structures. Since these structures continue to be male dominated in most societies, engaging men and boys in collective

conversation and action with women and girls is key to changing these norms and eliminating these practices at the community level. Thus, the report identified **two** approaches to working with men to end VAW in this sector: **1) Harmful gender norms** and **2) Harmful traditional practices**.

Under each approach, this brief highlights the context within which male engagement work is conducted, identifies the areas of work with men and boys used to address VAWG, touches on select program examples, and summarizes relevant evidence base findings for the areas. The brief concludes with a list of the key challenges and lessons learned to help guide future programming and implementation.

### Approach 1 – Harmful Gender Norms

| Areas of Work                          |
|--|
| (1) Community conversations and action |
| (2) Male-focused interventions         |

Over the last decade or more, a growing body of work has focused specifically on changing men’s attitudes and behaviors as part of efforts to prevent VAWG and to create community norms supportive of gender equality. Much of this work has taken the form of male-female and male-only group-based education as well as community mobilization to improve understanding of and changing harmful gender norms that fuel VAWG.

*Community conversations and action* was identified as a major element of engaging men at the community level. Two rigorously evaluated examples included Stepping Stones, a globally implemented gender transformative training package covering gender, HIV, life skills, and community action on gender norms, and *SASA!*, a community mobilization intervention that seeks to change community attitudes, norms, and behaviors that drive gender inequality, violence and HIV vulnerability for women in Uganda [4]. Key components of this work centered on group-

based work with women and men, promoting community dialogues about positive and non-violent masculinities and complementary community action interventions.

*Male-focused interventions* were identified as single-sex group-based education with men and linked with community mobilization activities. In India, Program H worked with community leadership, youth groups, and advocacy campaigns to educate men and youth about GBV and GBV prevention [5]. Key components used were group-based gender education that engaged men in critical reflection about rigid norms related to manhood and community events developed and implemented by male participants to engage other men in action against VAWG.

There is a strong evidence base – reinforced by the Stepping Stones and *SASA!* project evaluation results – highlighting the effectiveness of such community level interventions in promoting attitudinal and behavioral change and, in some cases, in decreasing intimate partner violence. There is also an emerging consensus that both single-gender and mixed-gender discussions are necessary to change harmful gender norms [6]. Furthermore, a growing evidence base strengthened by Program H evaluation results suggests that male-focused group education linked to community mobilization activities shows promise, especially at the level of improving men and boys’ gender-related attitudes – a risk factor for violence perpetration [7].

### Approach 2 – Harmful Traditional Practices

| Areas of Work                                     |
|---|
| (1) Male engagement programming FGM               |
| (2) Male engagement programming on child marriage |

With respect to VAWG, harmful traditional practices are a product of social norms that many community members defend as traditional,

culture or religiously ordained. In some societies, these practices include sex-selective abortion, early marriage of girl children, and FGM and are perpetrated with men's involvement and complicity. Since patriarchal constructions of masculinity and unequal gender relations sustain these practices, men do have a role to play in eliminating such practices.

*Male engagement programming on FGM* identified included engaging male community leaders to eliminate FGM. In Senegal, Tostan used a combination of education and social mobilization to empower communities to reduce FGM and child marriage. Tostan's strategy was to seek the buy-in of male village leaders, employ local facilitators to teach education sessions, tap into local communication channels, use community dialogue to ensure that abandoning FGM was a collective and explicit decision, target men to enlist their support, and mobilize male community and religious leaders to issue religious edicts and lead efforts against FGM [8, 9].

*Male engagement programming on child marriage* has also been argued to be a promising strategy to reducing child marriage [10]. The TESFA (Hope) program in Ethiopia organized young girls into discussion groups facilitated by peer educators. Three key components were critical to the program's success. First, TESFA recruited male village elders, religious leaders and health workers and trained them on issues covered in the peer groups. Second, TESFA held one-on-one meetings with parents and male leaders to gain support, held education sessions with men on the consequences and alternatives to child marriage and formed parental and adult committees as guides to life skills and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) curricula.

The evidence base for male engagement programming in relation to both FGM and ending child marriage is mixed. With respect to FGM,

evaluation results from Tostan's work showed positive changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, which ultimately led to a public declaration against FGM and early marriage, as well as a slight reduction in early marriages. Similarly, results from the evaluation of TESFA and other programs aimed at preventing child marriages show positive change in young girls' lives such as improved couple communication, mental health, and knowledge of SRH services, more equitable division of household labor, and decreased levels of GBV, among other positive changes [11]. There are concerns, however, that seeking the support of male community leaders downplays the gender equity and empowerment goals of anti-FGM efforts. Furthermore, a study of programs engaging men and boys to delay early marriage were ambiguous [12]. Thus, programs that seek to end child marriage by engaging men may be better served to unpack the reasons why men seek marriage with young girls and to ensure young boys understand the consequences of child marriage [12].

### Challenges Faced

The review identified the following challenges faced by the different programs:

- Redefining masculinity at the same time as challenging male privilege
- Working 'with the grain' of male community leadership to open space for broader gender transformative work
- Maintaining clear lines of communication with and accountability to women's empowerment work

### Lessons Learned

It is clear that engaging men and boys is crucial to changing harmful gender norms and eliminating harmful traditional practices. The review identified the following lessons from male engagement programming:

- Build solidarity between women and men to

work collectively for gender justice through the use of single-gender and mixed-gender spaces

- Address the specificity and diversity of men's interests in change
- Strengthen program capacity to work for institutional level change
- Strengthen civil society movements for gender justice to sustain work to end VAWG
- Link gender justice with social justice

Although more research and evaluation is necessary to better understand actual impact, applying the lessons learned from this review may prove beneficial from programs working in the social development sector to address gender inequality, change violent forms of masculinity, and end VAWG.

**To read the full report—*Working with Men and Boys to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Approaches, Challenges, and Lessons*—please visit [<http://www.usaid.gov/engaging>].**

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