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Men's accountability for gender equality

Guidance document of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls

Summary

Over the past 12 years, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls has documented progress, gaps and challenges in the realization of the human rights of women and girls. The Working Group considers it important to mobilize and activate a broad range of actors to advance the human rights of women and girls and change gender norms. Gender inequality is an expression of deeply entrenched systemic discrimination based on unequal power relations that must be transformed to advance gender equality. Pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 50/18 and 15/23, the Working Group has prepared the present document on the role of men in achieving gender equality.



Introduction and context

1. Over the past 12 years, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls has documented progress, gaps and challenges in the realization of the human rights of women and girls. In the context of fragile gains, slow progress and growing backlash, the Working Group considers it important to mobilize and activate a broad range of actors to advance the human rights of women and girls and change gender norms. Gender inequality is an expression of deeply entrenched systemic discrimination based on unequal power relations that must be transformed to advance gender equality. The engagement of men and boys in achieving gender equality is critical. The notion that men and boys have a role and responsibility, or indeed accountability, for ending gender inequality has a long history in feminist activism, as part of which men have been called upon to support women in ending violence, discrimination and gender injustice.¹

2. States have made normative commitments recognizing the critical contributions of men and boys to the achievement of gender equality. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action envisioned men's engagement in gender equality as a necessary means of challenging and transforming the structures, norms, practices and institutions that sustain male privilege and power. This reinforces article 5 of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, under which States must take measures 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 that are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.

3. Several different approaches of engaging men and boys in gender equality have emerged in recent decades, reflecting a range of different initiatives. As programmes and strategies have proliferated, questions have emerged regarding how to engage men and boys in advancing gender equality. This includes how such initiatives and programmes work with women's movements, their support for women's representation and participation in decision-making, and the potential impact on resources for women's rights organizations.²

4. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls considers that achieving gender equality requires a significant shift, from men's mere engagement to focusing on men's accountability for gender equality to redistributing power and dismantling systems of male privilege.³ The present document contains an outline of the Working Group's position on men's accountability for gender equality and sets out lessons from emerging approaches and promising practices and key principles underpinning men's role in advancing gender equality.

I. Key concepts

1. Gender

5. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, in its position paper on gender equality and gender backlash, affirmed the understanding of gender as the socially constructed identities, attributes and roles of women and men and society's social and cultural meaning for those biological differences, resulting in hierarchical relationships between women and men and in the distribution of power and rights that favour men and disadvantage women. In that same paper, it emphasized that women's experiences of discrimination were

¹ Michael Flood, "The turn to men in gender politics", *Women's Studies Journal*, vol. 31, No. 1 (July 2017), pp. 48–58.

² See [A/HRC/38/24](#) and [A/HRC/38/24/Corr.1](#).

³ The Working Group understands gender on a continuum beyond the male/female binary and is concerned about all people harmed by structures of male privilege, including non-binary persons and gay, transgender, intersex and queer persons. The present document is focused specifically on men's accountability towards gender equality as it affects the elimination of discrimination against women and girls, as aligned with the mandate of the Working Group.

also determined by other social identities (race, ethnicity, disability, age, sexuality, etc.) and recognized that gender could be expressed and experienced on a continuum.⁴

2. Power and privilege

6. Gender inequalities are perpetuated by unequal power relations. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls understands power as deeply gendered and relational, shaped by broader social, institutional and structural contexts. Unequal power relations and privilege are established and perpetuated through discriminatory stereotypes and gendered roles that devalue women, thereby privileging men as a group while disadvantaging women as a group. While current systems of power reflect male dominance and privilege, the Working Group recognizes women's agency and the dynamic nature of power. Power is also imbued in "interlocking systems of oppression" that shape inequalities between and among women and men.⁵

7. While men receive a collective advantage as men, they may also be disempowered or privileged depending on their position in other intersecting relations of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality or migration status. On a global scale, the men who benefit from corporate wealth, physical security and expensive health care are a very different group from the men who dig the fields and the mines of developing countries. Class, race, national, regional and generational differences cut across the category "men", spreading the gains and costs of gender relations very unevenly among men.⁶ Recognizing the ongoing impact of colonization and the effects of neoliberal capitalism that have entrenched racialized, gendered and class-based hierarchies is also critical for working with men and boys to advance gender equality.

8. Engaging men in advancing gender equality is often positioned as a "win-win". While men have an ethical responsibility to change the systems that grant them power and privilege, they will also gain from doing so, in terms of their personal well-being, their relational interests and the benefits to the communities in which they live.⁷ Gender equality can be transformational for men through their greater participation in care, more holistic experiences of fatherhood, more equal and fulfilling intimate partner relations and a closer relationship to dependants.

9. However, gender equality will necessarily involve some men losing some of their privileges. For example, at the household level, these privileges may include decision-making authority over the use of resources or the benefit to themselves of women and girls undertaking all the unpaid care and domestic work. In the context of intimate relationships, these privileges may include a sense of sexual entitlement or not taking equal responsibility for contraceptive use.⁸

3. Masculinities

10. Masculinity has been described as the multiple positions of men in the gender order, characterized largely by dominance and control over women and embedded and normalized through interaction with boys and men. The concept of "hegemonic masculinity", also known as "patriarchal masculinity", refers to the form of masculinity that informs the patriarchal system and, explicitly or subtly, values and naturalizes men's dominance over women and

⁴ See <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WG/Gender-equality-and-gender-backlash.pdf>.

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins and others, "Symposium on West and Fenstermaker's 'Doing difference'", in *Doing Gender, Doing Difference: Social Inequality, Power and Resistance*, Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West, eds. (New York, Routledge, 2002), p. 82.

⁶ R.W. Connell, "Change among the gatekeepers: men, masculinities, and gender equality in the global arena", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 30, No. 3 (spring 2005), pp. 1801–1825.

⁷ Alan Greig and Michael Flood, *Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality: A Review of Field Formation, the Evidence Base and Future Directions* (New York, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), 2020).

⁸ MenEngage Alliance, *Men, Masculinities, and Changing Power: A Discussion Paper on Engaging Men in Gender Equality From Beijing 1995 to 2015* (2015).

protects men’s disproportionate access to power.⁹ Such forms of masculinity, along with unequal power relations, are a key driver of violence against women and girls in all spheres of life. Hegemonic masculinity is found across different cultures and is expressed in diverse ways. For example, in some cultures, honour – that is, where the sexuality of women and girls is a matter for the family – is central to masculinity; in others, the violation of women’s sexuality has a strong connotation to manliness.¹⁰

11. Hegemonic masculinity is often referred in public discourse or in shorthand as “harmful masculinity” or “toxic masculinity”, although there is no clear definition of these terms.¹¹ Patriarchal masculinity is also increasingly being facilitated by increased access to digital platforms. For example, there is growing evidence of how radical, far-right movements and incels engage in the manosphere to promote misogyny, sexism and gender-based violence.¹²

12. There is often a gap between hegemonic masculinity and the reality of men’s lives. This is particularly the case for men who experience poverty, racial discrimination and socioeconomic inequality, or men who identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer. The pressure to conform to dominant masculinity is significant and the consequences and costs of not conforming can be severe. As a challenge to hegemonic masculinities, the concepts of “alternative” and “healthy” masculinities are emerging, with the acknowledgement that there are multiple ways of being a man, with no homogenous portrayal of ideal masculinity.¹³ However, concerns about the concepts of “alternative” or “healthy” masculinities include that they reaffirm the gender binary by suggesting that masculinity is the only expression of gender that men and boys can engage in.¹⁴

4. Allyship

13. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls observes that the increasing focus on the role of men and boys in gender equality in recent years has proliferated the discourse on male allyship and male feminism.¹⁵ In general, an ally is defined as a person who works for equality and justice from a position of privilege. Allyship can be conceptualized and exercised in different ways – for example for self-interest, where men’s advocacy is personal rather than about addressing systematic gender inequality, for altruism, where men take action because they want to be heroes or to “save” women, or for social justice, where men move beyond individual action to dismantling oppressive social systems and elevating the voices and perspectives of marginalized groups without being in the spotlight themselves.¹⁶

⁹ R.W Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept”, *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, No. 6 (December 2005), pp. 829–859.

¹⁰ Yakin Ertürk, “Considering the role of men in gender agenda setting: conceptual and policy issues”, *Feminist Review*, vol. 78, No. 1 (November 2004), pp. 3–21.

¹¹ Michael Flood, “‘Toxic masculinity’: what does it mean, where did it come from – and is the term harmful?”, *The Conversation*, 21 September 2021.

¹² The manosphere describes a loose online network of men’s interest groups, notable for its extreme misogyny. See Debbie Ging, “Alphas, betas, and incels: theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere”, *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 22, No. 4 (2019).

¹³ Andrew Gibbs and others, “Reconstructing masculinity? A qualitative evaluation of the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures interventions in urban informal settlements in South Africa”, *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, vol. 17, No. 2 (October 2022), pp. 208–222.

¹⁴ Andrea Waling, “Problematising ‘toxic’ and ‘healthy’ masculinity for addressing gender inequalities”, *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 34, No. 101 (October 2019), pp. 362–375.

¹⁵ Michael Flood and D’Arcy Ertel, “Concluding critical commentary: men’s experiences as agents of feminist change”, in *Masculine Power and Gender Equality: Masculinities as Change Agents*, Russell Luyt and Kathleen Starck, eds. (Cham, Switzerland, Springer, 2020), pp. 181–199.

¹⁶ Meredith Nash and others, “‘It’s not about you’: how to be a male ally”, *The Conversation*, 5 April 2021; and International Center for Research on Women, “Gender equity and male engagement: it only works when everyone plays” (Washington, D.C., 2018).

Box 1

Performative allyship

Growing attention has been paid to “performative” allyship in recent years. This is where men’s role in gender equality is reduced to surface-level actions to increase the perception of being an ally rather than deep reflection and sustained action to dismantle systems of power and privilege. Performative allyship is also when men engage in exceptionalizing themselves as different from other men, making only rhetorical rather than real change, taking up undue space in feminist circles, whether in person or online, or using feminism as an alibi for sexism.^a

^a Michael Flood and D’Arcy Ertel, “Concluding critical commentary: men’s experiences as agents of feminist change”, in *Masculine Power and Gender Equality: Masculinities as Change Agents*, Russell Luyt and Kathleen Starck, eds. (Cham, Switzerland, Springer, 2020), pp. 181–199.

5. Men’s engagement and accountability

14. The engagement of men and boys in building gender equality involves men and boys examining the roles they play in the lives of women and girls, in their communities and cultures, in the economic realm and in politics and political processes. Through this engagement, men and boys identify how their roles are guided by highly gendered norms and expectations and how these gendered norms and expectations relate to and exert power and privilege.

15. While engaging men and boys to understand and work to transform gender inequality is important, attention to how they engage is critical. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls considers that men and boys and the organizations that work with them need to be accountable for ensuring that engagement is constructive, respectful and centred on women’s and girls’ human rights. “Engagement” refers to the practice of involving or addressing men, while “accountability” refers to how it must be done. At its most basic level, accountability to women means that women’s and girls’ human rights should be at the centre of the work with men; strong collaboration, engagement and dialogue with women’s organizations are essential.¹⁷ This means accountability to eliminate discrimination against women and girls by actively contributing to changes in attitudes, norms, systems and structures and in gender roles across all spheres. While the principle of accountability is widely endorsed among actors working with men and boys to advance gender equality, in particular in work by men to counter violence, its practice is more uneven.¹⁸

16. Accountability to the “women’s movement” is critical, as is accountability to beneficiaries and communities at large.¹⁹ Men’s accountability can be considered at three levels: (a) personal; (b) interpersonal; and (c) institutional.

¹⁷ Our Watch, *Men in Focus: Unpacking Masculinities and Engaging Men in the Prevention of Violence against Women* (Melbourne, Australia, 2019), p. 90.

¹⁸ Michael Flood, *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 92–93.

¹⁹ MenEngage Alliance, *Accountability Training Toolkit*, 2nd ed. (2018).

Box 2

Men's accountability

Personal accountability involves men addressing their own practice and striving to ensure that they behave in gender-equitable ways. Interpersonal or relational accountability involves strategies to build gender-equitable dynamics and processes in interaction. Institutional accountability involves structures of consultation and collaboration with feminist women and women's groups and others concerned with gender and sexual justice and/or with other forms of social injustice and oppression.^a

^a Michael Flood, *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 92–93.

17. “Mutual accountability” can be a useful concept for organizations working with men and boys, in particular when considering their responsibilities to the women's movement. Mutual accountability means holding those working with men and boys especially accountable to women's rights organizations, while highlighting the imperative of mutual accountability, respect and learning among all gender justice actors. These actors' accountability to one another is grounded in their accountability to feminist principles, to a shared set of values and to the overall goal of gender justice that underpins their work.²⁰

18. Men's accountability to other men, or community accountability, is another important aspect of engaging men and boys in gender equality. Community accountability means that men should be asking each other and themselves how their work both benefits and centres on women's rights, upholds feminist ideals, challenges patriarchy and sexist power relations and includes intersectionality. People working with men and boys need to engage in ongoing discussions on these questions, raise them with other men when they act harmfully, and listen to women and women's organizations when they offer their perspectives on the work that men do.²¹

II. Emerging approaches to the role of men and boys in gender equality

19. Many different approaches for engaging men and boys have emerged in recent decades. Research has found that gender-transformative programmes show more effectiveness in instilling support for gender equality among communities, and among boys and men in particular.²² Gender transformative approaches challenge and redress harmful and unequal gender norms, roles and power relations that privilege men over women.

1. Grassroots and community-based and community-led campaigns

20. Many of the initiatives to engage men and boys in gender equality efforts have been undertaken at the grass-roots and community levels. Emerging good practices have several key features, including: (a) group education sessions focusing on shifting gender roles, masculinities and women's rights; (b) evidence-based and targeted communication campaigns that explicitly address gender inequality; (c) service-based interventions (e.g. sexual health) that enshrine gender equality and help men to see the benefits of gender equality; and (d) multisectoral approaches to make gender equality a part of everyday life and demonstrate the many ways that men can change their behaviour.²³ A limitation of these approaches has been that they have had a limited focus on micro- and meso-level changes in

²⁰ MenEngage Alliance, “Critical dialogue on engaging men and boys in gender justice: summary report” (2016), p. 9.

²¹ Chris Linder and Rachel Johnson, “Exploring the complexities of men as allies in feminist movements”, *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, vol. 4, No. 1 (2015).

²² World Health Organization, *Engaging Men and Boys in Changing Gender-Based Inequity in Health: Evidence from Programme Interventions* (Geneva, 2007).

²³ Ibid.

the short term, rather than longer-term social change that focuses on system-wide changes to gender norms, structures and processes.²⁴

Box 3

Case studies

Participants in the United Nations Partners for Prevention programme, which is a joint regional programme for the prevention of violence against women and girls in Asia and the Pacific,²⁵ are engaged in transforming harmful forms of masculinity and social norms and promoting gender equality and women's rights by building the capacity of local facilitators, running year-long participatory workshops and promoting volunteerism to sustain the project's results. Participants in the programme in Viet Nam reported having more respectful and equitable attitudes towards their wives as a result of their participation in the workshop, as well as greater knowledge about gender-based violence, positive masculinities and gender equality.^a

SASA! facilitates discussions about power between men and women as a way to help community members achieve more gender-just relationships (in particular to reduce domestic violence). After the programme, male participants reported increased equitable decision-making in the family, as well as greater appreciation of their partners' work inside the household, among other outcomes. Similar outcomes were observed for women, including that they were more likely to report joint decision-making.

^a See https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://www.partners4prevention.org/sites/default/files/resources/executive_summary_eng_final.pdf.

^b Beniamino Cislighi, "The potential of a community-led approach to change harmful gender norms in low- and middle-income countries" (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2019).

2. Approaches focused on different cohorts of men and different settings

21. Strategies to engage men and boys often target specific cohorts of men and boys, on the basis of their role or identity, such as young men and boys, fathers, men in specific communities, such as First Nations or Indigenous men, and men in leadership roles, including political, traditional, community, religious or youth leaders, among many others. These approaches enable targeted strategies to appeal to and leverage the specific identity or role of these cohorts of men and boys. For example, in some contexts, faith leaders can play a key role in reinforcing positive messages on gender equality to men and boys. Further, over the past decade, an increasing number of strategies have emerged to engage private sector leaders in gender equality efforts, both within and outside the workplace.

22. Programmes and initiatives targeting men and boys to advance gender equality have emerged from sports clubs, workplaces and faith-based institutions, in recognition of the important role that these settings play in shaping attitudes about gender equality. For example, sports-based programmes engage men and boys at the club level in gender transformative programmes and often involve key sporting figures to share the messages. There is also increasing recognition of the critical role that workplaces can play in engaging men in gender equality by promoting and fostering respect at work and challenging harmful and unequal gender norms.

²⁴ Greig and Flood, *Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality*.

²⁵ See <http://www.partners4prevention.org/>.

Box 4

Examples of strategies to engage men and boys in different settings

The African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage, held from 2014 to 2017, engaged traditional and religious male leaders in garnering faith-based support for ending child marriage. Community awareness campaigns led by chiefs involved thousands of public declarations to stop celebrating child marriage.^a

The Action for Equality Programme, which is the Equal Community Foundation's behaviour change programme, engages boys aged 13–17 with a view to changing their attitudes and behaviours through a series of structured interventions over 12 months. The programme supports boys to bring about change at the individual, family, peer and community levels.^b

The Champions of Change Coalition is a high-profile coalition of corporate and public sector leaders who lead and are accountable for change on gender equality issues in their organizations and communities – be they local, national or global. The Coalition has successfully engaged more than 260 leaders, predominantly men, across a diverse range of large private and public sector organizations since 2010 to step up beside women and take action to increase women's representation in leadership, remove the structural and systemic barriers to gender equality in their organizations and advance gender equality.^c

During the 2014 Fédération Internationale de Football Association World Cup, 1 million stickers that read “O valente não é violento” (“The brave are not violent”) were distributed throughout Brazil. Each included 1 of 10 different soccer-related slogans in Portuguese and were aimed at educating soccer fans about the responsibility that men have to end violence against women and to combat gender stereotypes.^d

^a A/HRC/35/5, para. 34.

^b See <https://ecf.org.in/afe/>.

^c See <https://championsofchangecoalition.org>.

^d UN-Women, “Innovative campaign tackles soccer and violence against women together”, 11 July 2014.

3. Legal, institutional and policy approaches

23. While much focus has been placed on working with and changing the behaviours and attitudes of men at the individual and social levels, legal, governmental and policy change is critical for addressing the systemic nature of hegemonic masculinities and gender inequality. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women²⁶ and the Human Rights Council²⁷ have established State obligations to engage men and boys in policies and actions to end violence against women and girls, realize women's sexual and reproductive health and rights and recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work.

24. For example, in recognition of the importance of the equal sharing of paid and unpaid care work between women and men to shift gender norms around work and care, many countries provide universal paid parental leave for all parents and implement specific interventions to increase men's uptake of parental leave, including provisions that a proportion of the leave may be used only by the father. According to 2022 data, 37 countries

²⁶ 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 (2019) on harmful practices; and general recommendation No. 35 (2017) on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19.

²⁷ Resolutions 35/10 and 44/17.

have adopted paid leave for fathers in the past decade.²⁸ However, significant gaps in paid leave coverage remain for all parents, in particular for those in informal and insecure work.

25. Men’s accountability for advancing gender equality should also extend to changing the patriarchal norms embedded in institutions. For example, holding male political leaders and masculine political institutions to account should be a key aspect of the role of men in advancing gender equality. This can include supporting women’s representation in decision-making, taking action to address the informal and formal barriers to women’s political voices and visibility and ensuring support for gender-equality measures.²⁹

Box 5

Redistributing unpaid care work between men and women

Nordic countries offer between 40 and 69 weeks of parental leave, at a remuneration rate of 70 to 100 per cent of pay. Some countries earmark weeks for fathers (the so-called daddy quota), which is specifically designed to distribute caring responsibilities between women and men. Studies have shown that “use it or lose it” leave provisions are more effective in increasing the proportion of fathers taking parental leave.^a

^a [A/HRC/44/51](#), box 3.

4. Advocacy

26. Individuals and organizations working with men as agents of change to transform hegemonic masculinities have a role to play in supporting a human rights-based and non-discriminatory policy agenda. In many contexts where men have disproportionate access to power, and may also be deemed more credible in their advocacy for gender equality. It is critically important that men’s advocacy for gender equality is developed in partnership with feminist women’s rights and social justice actors and movements, that it creates space for women and feminist movements and that it does not replicate or perpetuate gender-unequal power dynamics inside or outside the movement for gender equality.

Box 6

Building the capacity of male advocates

The Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, successfully built the capacity of over 900 male advocates to support women human rights defenders to lead responses to and prevent violence against women and girls through working with governments and communities to promote shared power and decision-making between women and men.^a

^a <https://iwda.org.au/nazareth-centre-for-rehabilitation/>.

III. From engagement to accountability: lessons to inform principles underpinning men and boys’ role in gender equality

27. Current approaches to engaging men and boys in achieving gender equality demonstrate a number of key features, which are set out below.

28. First, approaches to working with men and boys that do not embed a feminist approach based on the redistribution of power, resources and opportunities risk reinforcing gender inequality. Focusing too heavily on the ways in which gender inequality harms men and boys can neglect the personal investments that men might have in taking advantage of the

²⁸ Pedro Magariño and Liang Shen, “Four revealing graphs on paid family leave”, World Bank Blogs, 16 May 2022.

²⁹ Greig and Flood, *Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality*, pp. 46–47.

privileges they get from society.³⁰ Further, initiatives that focus on “good men” in an effort to address the concerns of men feeling blamed for the violence of a few men can also reinforce patriarchal norms by implying that “good men” must save women from violence and oppression without challenging the power relations that perpetuate the oppression of women.³¹

29. Second, in an environment of scarce resources, the increased focus on engaging men and boys in gender equality efforts risks diverting resources from women’s services and feminist movements. Indeed, programmes focused on men and boys may receive instant credibility and “excessive gratitude”, resulting in the unequal distribution of resources in comparison to those focused on women.³² This can be compounded for smaller, grass-roots organizations in the Global South.

30. Third, in the context of shrinking space for civil society and women’s organizations to engage in national and international processes, strategies and programmes, initiatives to engage men and boys that operate in parallel, rather than in partnership, with feminist and women’s coalitions and alliances may occupy the limited advocacy space for feminist and women’s coalitions and alliances.³³

31. Finally, approaching men and masculinities as a single identity and common experience risks alienating marginalized men whose experiences with their own privilege are complicated, for instance, by their racial identities, sexual orientation, class or migrant status.³⁴ A further consideration for the engagement of men and boys is also the potential reinforcement of the gender binary.³⁵ This is particularly the case in the promotion of “positive masculinities” to ensure that such work is inclusive of different sexualities and transgender and gender-non-conforming identities.

32. On the basis of these lessons, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls considers that the following principles should guide policies, programmes and initiatives to ensure men’s accountability for gender equality:

- (a) Grounding in women’s and girls’ human rights and substantive equality;
- (b) Challenging patriarchy and dismantling male privilege;
- (c) Supporting and showing solidarity with women’s movements and women’s human rights defenders;
- (d) Transparency.

1. Grounding in women’s and girls’ human rights and substantive equality

33. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls considers that grounding policies, programmes and initiatives in the realization of women’s and girls’ human rights must be at the core of policies, programmes and initiatives focused on men’s accountability for gender equality. This means recognizing that socially prescribed gender differences have served to legitimize and enforce discrimination against women and girls and the unequal enjoyment of human rights. As such, men’s accountability for advancing gender equality must also recognize women’s specific differences and needs in order to ensure respect for dignity and the equal enjoyment of human rights of all individuals. Central to this is the principle of substantive equality, which encompasses: (a) equality of access and opportunity; and (b) equality of result upon access and opportunity to ensure the practical realization of rights.

³⁰ Andrea Cornwall, Henry Armas and Mbuyiselo Botha, “Women’s empowerment: what do men have to do with it?”, in *Men and Development: Politicising Masculinities*, Andrea Cornwall, Jerker Edström and Alan Grieg, eds. (London, Zed Books, 2011).

³¹ Linder and Johnson, “Exploring the complexities of men as allies in feminist movements”.

³² Ibid.

³³ Greig and Flood, *Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality*.

³⁴ International Center for Research on Women, “Gender equity and male engagement: it only works when everyone plays”, p. 20.

³⁵ Greig and Flood, *Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality*.

34. For men's accountability for gender equality, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls stresses the importance of avoiding protectionist approaches that end up reinforcing women's unequal status by focusing on protecting women from harm or wrongdoing, while not challenging discrimination. Protectionist approaches also result in the denial of autonomy and reflect the ways in which patriarchal norms, structures and systems deny women equal rights and their humanity. In this respect, men's accountability for gender equality must be grounded in a substantive equality approach focused on transforming power relations and collecting and redistributing benefits equally among genders, while taking account of intersectionality. This is about not just equal power, resources and opportunities for women and girls, but also equal results from those opportunities.

2. Challenging patriarchy and dismantling male privilege

35. Achieving gender equality is ultimately about the equal redistribution of power and resources between genders. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls considers it critical that approaches to engaging men and boys are centred not only on changing the values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of individual men and boys but also on equipping and encouraging them to transform the structures and systems that create and perpetuate gender inequality. Initiatives should avoid engaging men and boys as a goal in itself, but rather focus on the goal of transforming gendered power relations and challenging patriarchy through the elimination of gendered stereotypes and norms and ensuring women's equal representation and role in decision-making.

36. As well as working towards broader social change, government action must also be focused on strategies for men and boys to transform their own personal attitudes, beliefs and behaviours as part of fulfilling their obligations to realize women's and girls' human rights. At the individual level, this involves strategies, such as through human rights-based education and school curricula, to ensure that men and boys recognize and challenge how male privilege, and the power arising from that, shapes men's life experiences. This education should highlight the role of men and boys as allies or stakeholders in gender equality.

37. Challenging the patriarchal structures, practices and institutions that sustain privilege and discriminatory norms and practices is essential. This includes men and boys becoming aware of how gender norms affect them and others and taking action to challenge norms and structures to promote explicit norms of equality. The process of self-awareness is a critical foundation for transformation. For instance, male voices may be given more authority over women's, reinforcing male dominance and women's invisibility. It is therefore vital for men engaged in gender equality work to explicitly support women's leadership in the movement.

38. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls considers that challenging hegemonic masculinities is critical to achieving gender equality and changing dominant notions of femininity that are based on discriminatory stereotypes. The concepts of "healthy" and "alternative" masculinities, under a broad and inclusive conception of masculinities, are useful notions to emphasize the importance of making men and boys aware of the costs for men who conform to, or try to conform to, rigid social expectations of hegemonic masculinity.³⁶

39. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls considers that an intersectional approach to addressing power and privilege is vital. As stated above, neither men nor women are a homogenous group, and their experiences of privilege or inequality under patriarchy are mediated by factors such as age, race, religion, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, ability, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.³⁷ Connecting patriarchy with other manifestations of social injustice can support men in reframing their ideas about gender equality, and policies that recognize intersectionality can reach those who are marginalized by traditional approaches and create change on a larger scale.³⁸

³⁶ Greig and Flood, *Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality*.

³⁷ International Women's Development Agency, "Working with men and boys to advance gender equality", p. 1.

³⁸ MenEngage Alliance, "Critical dialogue on engaging men and boys in gender justice", p. 11.

3. Supporting and showing solidarity with women's movements and women's human rights defenders

40. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls considers it important that programmes and organizations working to engage men and boys in gender equality learn from and build partnerships with feminist and other social justice movements and women's human rights defenders. It is essential that work with men and boys to advance gender equality does not take resources and power away from women. Instead, Governments and donors should expand the pool of gender equality funding available to ensure adequate and sustainable funding for women's organizations and funding for gender transformative approaches to ensure men and boys' accountability for advancing gender equality.

41. Being accountable to feminist and other social justice movements goes beyond collaboration. It is particularly important that men and boys in gender equality movements are open and responsive to constructive criticism and scepticism from women's movements. Organizations working with men and boys have described the value in women's groups coming to them with concerns about their work reinforcing paternalistic gender roles, centring the gender equality conversation around men, occupying leadership positions that could be held by women and competing with women's organizations for funding.³⁹ Organizations and movements focused on engaging men and boys should have systems and processes for consulting and collaborating with feminist and women's movements, and other movements concerned with gender and sexual justice and/or with other forms of social injustice and oppression.⁴⁰

42. An "alliance approach" between organizations working with men and boys and women's organizations can also help to alleviate competition for funding by facilitating dialogue and the equal, equitable and fair distribution of limited resources.

4. Transparency

43. In the context of men's accountability for gender equality, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls considers that transparency about actions taken, impact and remaining gaps, thereby enabling those affected to access information and raise questions, is important for ensuring that initiatives are aligned with women's human rights principles and based on collaboration and engagement with women's movements. Such an approach reinforces men's accountability to women's movements, in their diversity, rather than to individual women. In this respect, the Working Group considers that organizations and initiatives working with men and boys on gender equality should be transparent in their actions and impact through regular public communication and information on the following:

- (a) Alignment of their efforts to work with men and boys on gender equality with the realization of women's and girls' human rights;
- (b) Collaboration and engagement with and feedback from women's and girls' rights organizations;
- (c) Support for women's and girls' leadership and voices in decision-making in the organization or in other decision-making bodies (e.g. governing bodies and advisory groups);
- (d) Use of resources and funding to the benefit of the human rights of women and girls and their participation in decisions on such resources and funding;
- (e) Impact of programmes and initiatives on women's and girls' human rights, as well as the role and perspectives of men and boys.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴⁰ Flood, *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention* (pp. 93–94).

Conclusion

44. In this position paper, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls reaffirms the importance of the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. This is particularly critical in the context of ongoing backlash and regressions on women's and girls' human rights. The Working Group acknowledges that women's and girls' movements and women's rights organizations play a critical and leading role in advancing gender equality. However, to dismantle systems of power and privilege, men and boys must also be accountable for transforming gender norms, stereotypes, systems and structures to deliver gender equality.

45. The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls calls upon all organizations, programmes and initiatives working with men and boys to ensure that their work is clearly grounded in women's and girls' human rights and substantive equality with the goal of transforming unequal power relations and dismantling male privilege through an intersectional lens. Support for and solidarity with women's and girls' movements and women's and girls' human rights defenders is critical, as is transparency on the approach and actions taken as part of initiatives for men and boys.
