



Feminist Pocketbook

TIP SHEET #6:

Men as allies and activists

The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), created in 2017 to reassert a feminist perspective in violence against women and girls (VAWG) work, is a collective of activists, academics, and practitioners working globally to end VAWG.

This Tip Sheet is part of the COFEM Feminist Pocketbook. For access to the full Pocketbook, go to: www.cofemsocialchange.org.

Tip Sheet 6 presents some of the challenges in engaging men in feminist activism and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention efforts, and underscores the need for accountability to women and girls in all work with men and boys to end GBV.

Key points

- Ending GBV requires a joint effort among allies, partners and activists, including men and boys.
- Male involvement in GBV programming presents challenges, including but not limited to the risks of depoliticising GBV work and diverting funding and capacity from women's organisations.
- When male allies do not follow or engage with women-led GBV efforts, they perpetuate gender inequality — the very problem they aim to address.
- To be effective, male involvement programmes and male allies and activists must be accountable to women's rights activists, women leaders and women-centred programmes.

What is the issue?

Ending GBV requires working with men and boys as allies, partners and activists. However, engaging men in feminist-oriented GBV work involves risks and challenges. The feminist GBV community needs to be clear, vocal and united about how to engage men and boys in women-led GBV efforts in a safe and ethical way, and how male allies can be accountable to women's leadership and activism.

Why does this matter?

There is a growing demand in humanitarian and development settings for GBV programming to involve men and boys; programmes that engage men and boys are often considered 'innovative'. However, men's engagement programmes have in some instances promoted the de-politicisation of GBV work, i.e. they have contributed to a discourse that overlooks gender inequality as the root cause of GBV.¹ In addition, these programmes can divert

¹ See Tip Sheet 1 for further discussion of the de-politicisation of work to address violence against women and girls.

limited funding and resources from an already under-resourced field, resulting in fewer financial and human resources for women's rights organisations and GBV programming that prioritises women and girls.

Increased investments in programmes to engage men may result inadvertently in serious harm to women and girls. Practice and implementation show clearly that some men's engagement efforts not only de-centre the experiences and voices of women and girls, but also are disconnected from ongoing women's efforts to end GBV. Such programmes replicate the patriarchal structures of men's power over women that feminist activism and GBV prevention seek to transform, perpetuating the very problem they seek to address. In other words, male engagement without a feminist political agenda can erode an already fragile space and further marginalise women's rights organisations and activists.

What are the challenges in engaging men in GBV work?

Shift in focus, funding and resources

A trend in some male engagement programming is the shift away from a specific focus on ending men's violence against women and girls and promoting women's rights toward addressing male priorities and concerns. For example, growing attention in male engagement work to the harms of gender norms for men has shifted attention (and funding) from men's responsibility for women and girls' gender-based oppression to the specif-

ic experiences of men. Some male engagement programmes focus on the pressures men face to provide for and protect their families as a key characteristic of masculinity. Although this work is indisputably valuable in addressing men's needs, it often fails to include discussion of how women also face financial pressures as well as an unequal burden of household chores and responsibilities. Efforts to engage men on the reality of harmful masculinities is important, but in order to be accountable to women and girls, these efforts must lead to more transformative work that challenges the broader social structures that support power imbalances between women and men.

For GBV programmes, this trend has translated further into a push by some male engagement partners for GBV interventions to address not only men's perpetration of GBV, but also the impact of GBV on men, including men's experiences of violence and as victims of patriarchy. This is partly a result of the de-politicisation of the term 'GBV'. Although patriarchal structures harm everyone, this shift in the framing of GBV is another example of how male engagement work can pull focus and funding away from women and their experiences of GBV, affecting investments to address the immediate needs of women and girls, including safe spaces for girls and women and livelihoods efforts to build their financial independence.²

Failure to address gender inequality and patriarchal structures

When men's engagement in GBV efforts fails to address gender inequality, it can reinforce norms

Case study: Uganda

In 2017, the Government of Uganda launched the National Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence in Uganda. This new national policy prioritises male involvement in GBV prevention and response as the key strategy for national GBV work. The policy aims include:

- Guidance on integrating male involvement into GBV policies and programmes;
- Transforming male gender norms and practices;
- Providing male-friendly services to men who experience GBV;
- Awareness raising among duty bearers (e.g. medical professionals, teachers) to provide gender-sensitive GBV services;

- Building strategic partnerships to engage men and boys in prevention and response to GBV; and
- Strengthening research to build evidence for 'male involvement' on GBV prevention and response.

Without an evidence base supporting its approach, this policy shifts the national agenda on GBV work toward men and seeks to engage men in GBV programming as the end goal. There is little consideration of how building men's engagement in these ways will actually improve women and girls' ability to live free from violence. By shifting the national GBV focus and funding priorities toward men, attention and resources are diverted from the long-standing women-led and women-centred efforts that have been essential to keeping women and girls safe.

² See Tip Sheet 7 for clarification of the differences between VAWG and violence experienced by men and boys.

around men's power over women. It is fairly common for male engagement programming to focus on changing the behaviour of individual men rather than transforming gender inequality in society. These programmes also reference women's rights in their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters — and engage with men around their behaviour toward women in these roles. This approach positions women in relation to men, which fails to recognise them as individuals deserving of full human rights.

Male engagement programming's failure to address gender inequality can also occur when men do not follow women's lead in GBV work. Men's leadership has the potential to reflect dominant beliefs and norms that men are leaders and women should support and follow men's direction. Men who work in violence prevention are not immune from failing to recognise the privileges they hold in society due to their gender. When this happens, these men may directly or inadvertently reinforce unequal power structures between women and men, undermining the potential efficacy of their GBV prevention work.

Accountability matters

Accountability means that people with privilege — in this case, males who are privileged as a result of gender inequality — must be led by those who experience oppression by them, in this case, women and girls.³ Feminist activists have witnessed some male engagement programmes gain credibility from their associations with local women's movements without honouring this relationship through meaningful accountability. Lack of accountability to basic feminist principles and transformative women-centred work privileges men who already benefit from patriarchy rather than dismantling the systems of power that underpin GBV.

Some male involvement initiatives do have accountability frameworks and attempt to op-

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erationalise them. For instance, MenEngage, a network of 600 non-governmental organisations working with men and boys to promote gender equality, provides accountability standards and guidelines to help their members put practice accountability. However, the focus tends more towards individual reflection and accountability rather than organisational and structural accountability. Self-reflection is important; men must hold themselves accountable and responsible for centring the voices and experiences of women and girls and ensure their work does not replicate or further embed unequal power and male superiority. Nevertheless, accountability at the individual level is not enough. Rather, accountability needs to infuse all levels of work, from the individual to the institutional and beyond to broader structural change. For those organisations engaging men in GBV work to be truly accountable, there must be consistent critical action, evaluation and self-reflection, as well as support of, and bridge-building with, women's rights movements.

² See Tip Sheet 4 for further information and guidance on accountability to women and girls.

Practical tips



Practitioners, researchers, donors and policy-makers

- Ensure that work to prevent GBV is firmly women-centred.
- Apply a gender-power analysis to all GBV programming.
- Ensure that male engagement programmes are not prioritised over women-centred GBV prevention and response programmes.
- Prioritise feminist-informed leadership and women-led interventions so that male allies do not detract from the limited spaces for women's leadership and decision-making.
- Partner with women's organisations in men-only interventions throughout planning, implementation and evaluation so that women's voices remain the focus of male-led GBV work.
- Develop monitoring indicators to ensure the focus of GBV programming does not shift to male-dominated activities or priorities.
- Develop clear women-centred standards and systems for accountability to women and girls for GBV work, including criteria for male engagement programming.



Practitioners and donors

- Allocate time and resources to operationalise standards of accountability in all GBV programmes, including integrating checks and balances so that projects remain accountable to women.



Male practitioners

- Reflect critically on personal positions of power over female colleagues and community members.
- Support transformative change of patriarchal structures and operationalise accountability to women's rights movements.

Donors and policy-makers

- Avoid perpetuating or replicating the shift toward male-centred GBV discourse and practice.
- Promote a women-centred and pro-feminist framing of the discourse, strategies and resources around GBV.



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Suggested citation: Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), Men as allies and activists, *Feminist Pocketbook Tip Sheet 6*, 2018.

COFEM would like to acknowledge the Equality Institute for its role in writing the Feminist Pocketbook and the many COFEM members who contributed to it.