

Engaging men in improving sexual and reproductive health and rights and in preventing gender-based violence in conflict affected areas



1

Vulnerability of women and children

In an increasingly fragile world, women and girls are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of conflict. Partly as a result of their traditional tasks in the family, they are less prepared or empowered to survive, or to recover. Yet, they are often forced to take on additional and new responsibilities, particularly when men in their families are killed or are absent. (Young) women often experience poor sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) knowledge and services. Children's health is particularly compromised.

A global study by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)¹ indicates that women and children are 14 times more likely than men to die in disasters. Gender-based violence (GBV) is highly prevalent in conflict affected situations, however, it is too often unseen and unheard.

In response, humanitarian aid organizations focus strongly, and often exclusively on women and children. These care programmes are accompanied by women's empowerment strategies, in situations of internal displaced people, international temporary shelters, in refugee camps etc. No doubt: much more support for women and children is still urgently needed to meet their needs and to build their resilience for post-conflict situations.

2

What about the men? They often seem to be absent in the response to poor SRHR and prevention of GBV? What do we miss when leaving men out of such aid interventions?

- **Men and boy's sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs are often embedded in a context of severe gender inequality.** A lack of adequate knowledge and communication around SRH may further reflect and exacerbate such gender inequalities, particularly when their knowledge is mainly based on male dominant (pornographic) information. It is often said that men don't talk about sex, they just do it. Sexual consent may be a particularly troubling area, in which inequitable attitudes lead to sexual violence. Women's ability to negotiate contraception is often very limited, and their attempts to do so may be perceived as disrespectful, provoking further violence. In Bangladesh, for instance, when men return from migrant work abroad, some women are concerned about the possibility of their partners having sexually transmitted infections, and propose using condoms. For some men, it is difficult to deal with this assumed mistrust. In combination with a lack of open communication and traditional gender roles, these situations can escalate into forced sex or violence.

What are the risks of leaving men out?

- The underlying root causes of gender inequality, poor SRHR and GBV remain unaddressed.
- SRH and relationships between men and women do not improve, and may even deteriorate, and perpetration of violence goes on.
- Boys and men's needs are not addressed.



Where should we start when engaging men?

Engaging men starts with gaining a better understanding of their perceptions on issues like health, work, gendered division of labour and income earning, care roles, the position of women, and the reasons why they use violence.

This requires an understanding of local culture, traditions, social interactions and peer pressure. Men and particularly young men in many parts of the world, consider themselves victims and under great pressure to uphold expressions of manhood, which they are not comfortable with.

Whether or not you agree with this, it is important to listen to their life stories, experiences and needs as a starting point for further action.

This is an example of migrant workers, but could easily be applicable to any other situation where men coming back from war. Engaging men in SRHR and gender equality is urgently needed. This must include sexuality education for boys and girls, with a strong focus on gender and opportunities for changing rigid norms and patterns.

- **The role of men as caring partners and fathers seems to be absent.** As a result of disasters or conflicts, men may become single parents, because their partners have been killed. Where can these men go with their children? Few facilities or trained health staff are prepared to support these men and their children in their new roles as father and carer. In the case where a couple is still together, failing to engage men as caring partners is a missed opportunity. Growing evidence shows the positive health and social impacts of engaged fatherhood – for women and children, and for men themselves.²
- **Men are also victims of sexual and gender-based violence.** Recent research (IMAGES) shows the experience of men with violence during their childhood, and as a result of organized rape as a political act of ‘unmanning’ and humiliation during war. Although women suffer a higher proportion of sexual violence, it is important to acknowledge male victims too.³ Little support is available for these traumatized men. Where men have witnessed or suffered violence themselves, it is likely to lead to violent behaviours on their own part. If men do not get a chance to recover, their unhealed trauma may fuel the next endemic of domestic violence. Healing programmes are urgently needed, in order to break the circle of violence.
- **Men can be agents of change.** By engaging men and boys in the agenda for gender equality they can be active supporters and allies in promoting necessary social change, supporting SRHR of women and in preventing GBV, ultimately to the benefit of women, girls and boys and the men themselves.

3

Why do men feel like victims?

- **Poverty, frustration and a sense of failed masculinity.** In many settings, and more so in conflict affected situations, men report not having enough means to support their families. For many men, respect for their position as breadwinner and protector of the family is fundamental; that is how they are raised, and what is expected of them by their communities, also by the women in their communities. If they are no longer able to perform this role due to poverty, they feel that they lose their masculinity. If they don’t have enough money they cannot even marry, and will hence remain a boy. This feeling of failed masculinity can result in a crisis, linked to humiliation and a loss of personal value.

How can we move forward?

Reshaping gender relations can free both women and men from the impact of destructive gender and sexual norms.

This is an interactive, long-term process that allows men and women to learn new behaviours through action.

We must accept that women and men have unmet SRH (information) needs, and that GBV happens, despite the lack of data.

- For effective interventions, women and men's experiences, perceptions and needs have to be taken seriously, and serve as a starting point for further action.
- An adequate gender perspective must be included. This is not referring to women or men, but to the relational aspects between women and men and the diversities in gender as they exist.
- Any work with boys and men has to be accountable to girls and women's rights and safety.
- Where possible a gender transformative approach should be applied.

Some men use sexual violence as a coping mechanism to restore their sense of power. Using drugs or alcohol is another way for men to ignore their vulnerabilities and humiliation, and can be an important trigger for violence. In such settings men can also easily get attracted by terrorists groups that can provide instant 'manhood' and power positions. Women, by contrast, are more likely than men to bear their trauma through silence or turn to religion for solace. Coping strategies in post-conflict settings are uniquely gendered and require interventions that are designed accordingly.

- **Little focus on men in aid programmes.** Many international organizations focus on investing in women, giving less attention to the needs and interests of men. This creates frustrations among men and resistance to projects aiming for gender equality, while in practice only focussing on women's care and empowerment.

A quote from a Congolese man: "Men are always accused. We have never seen an NGO that does work on men."

This frustration about being ignored may translate into an increase in domestic violence, as men seek to restore power and position.

4

What are the root causes of GBV?

Let us be clear: rape and sexual violence is a tragic human rights abuse, too often accompanied by impunity. Poverty, frustration of failed manhood can never be an excuse for any form of violence. Perpetrators must be prosecuted, for which a security and legal system, resources and capacity are needed. But this is not enough.

Disasters and conflicts tend to exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities and patterns of inequality and discrimination, including for ethnic minorities, the disabled, the poorest, and women and children. In societies where violence is endemic, it is likely that people who are at risk of violence before a disaster or conflict are even more at risk during and after the conflict or disaster. This is particularly so if they have been displaced or if the social networks that used to protect them are damaged. The perpetrators of such violence are often driven by witnessing or experiencing violence during their own childhood, gender inequitable beliefs and traditions, power inequalities, economic stress and insufficient alternative coping mechanisms. The likelihood of these factors resulting in violence is further strengthened by peer pressure, traditions of dominance, or the experience of fear, humiliation or rape in war. Gender inequalities are among the most persistent and dominant factors.

If we are serious about ending GBV, improving SRHR, and restoring relationships between men and women in all their diversities, adequate gender transformative policies and programmes are essential in disaster and conflict affected areas.

Watch *The Story of Abby and Kyalu*

Abby and Kyalu were abducted by a rebel group in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2008. Abby was forced to do hard labour for the rebels. Kyalu, his wife, was raped, and had a child as a result. Once Abby was able to escape from the rebel group, he expelled Kyalu from their home.

The film tells their journey of recovery as part of an initiative called Living Peace, led by Promundo. This is the story they wanted to tell.

<http://promundoglobal.org/2015/09/14/living-peace-the-story-of-abby-and-kyalu/>

5

How should we work with boys and men⁴?

- Create a safe space for boys and men and listen to their stories.
- Use a group therapeutic approach that critically questions and challenges harmful concepts of masculinity, using culturally appropriate framing (such programmes have been shown to be effective by MenCare+⁵ and Living Peace).
- Identify current coping mechanisms, strengthen positive ones, and reshape negative ones (those reliant on violence, alcohol or isolation).
- Approach men as diverse and complex actors – not only recognising them as perpetrators, but also as victims and witnesses of violence, as agents of change, partners, fathers and clients.
- Acknowledge that men are not born violent, and that learned violent behaviour can be unlearned.
- When conducting programming to end sexual and gender-based violence, include information and training on SRHR, family planning, consent and contraception.
- Use an ecological model to support individual-level change with community and structural support, encouraging the healing of trauma and the restoration of the individual to the family and to the community.
- Encourage a locally owned and driven approach by building capacity within local organizations, as well as by training trainers and facilitators from within the community.

¹ Unseen, unheard: Gender-based violence in disasters. Global study. Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC); 2015.

² Levtov R, van der Gaag N, Greene M, Kaufman M, and Barker G (2015). State of the World's Fathers: Executive Summary: A MenCare Advocacy Publication. Washington, DC: Promundo, Rutgers, Save the Children, Sonke Gender Justice, and the MenEngage Alliance.

³ Slegel, H., Barker, G. and Levtov, R. Gender Relations, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Effects of Conflict on Women and Men in North Kivu; Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) Promundo-US and Sonke Gender Justice. May 2014.

⁴ Based on lessons learned from Living Peace (see footnote 3, and MenCare+ (see footnote 5).

⁵ MenCare+ program, is a three-year collaboration between Promundo and Rutgers, created to engage (young) men ages 15-35 as partners in maternal and child health, in sexual and reproductive health and rights, in preventing gender based violence and promoting gender justice. Transforming harmful masculine norms into positive ways of manhood is key. The program is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and is being implemented by partner organizations in Brazil, Indonesia, Rwanda, and South Africa.