



Photo credit: Man marches in solidarity at an International Women's Day march in Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elena Baryshnikova, Shutterstock, March 2020

# Preventing GBV Through Positive Masculinities: Fathers' Clubs—A Grassroots Bottom-Up Approach

Plan International Canada

Globally, about 1 in 3 women experience gender-based violence (GBV) at the hands of their intimate partners or others.<sup>1</sup> This has serious ramifications for any country: It is a violation of women's and girls' fundamental human rights, and it has considerable costs in terms of a country's socioeconomic objectives and systems.<sup>2</sup>

All forms of GBV have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>3</sup> clearly illustrating the following: (1) Deeply rooted gender inequality and harmful social norms

can intensify quickly in a crisis. Unless addressed holistically, this can derail progress made on gender-specific issues such as GBV. (2) Global GBV response actions, which focus predominantly on top-down normative and systemic approaches, are not enough, as they don't address the root causes of GBV.

Some 155 countries have passed laws against domestic violence<sup>4</sup> that focus on punitive actions and providing services to survivors. Yet enforcement of these laws continues to remain a challenge,<sup>5</sup> while

## About the Series

Gender-based violence (GBV) affects one in three women worldwide, making it an urgent and important policy challenge. Many countries around the world have passed laws intended to protect women from violence, yet violence persists. Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the perils women face from gender-based violence—what has come to be known as the “shadow pandemic”—but it has also aggravated risk factors while increasing barriers to protection, support, and justice.

This publication aims to focus on the intersection of gender-based violence and the rule of law by examining how legal frameworks, judicial system responses, and public policy contribute to the ways in which gender-based violence is—and is not—addressed around the world. Each piece addresses the complicated challenge of gender-based violence and the successes and failures of various public policy responses globally, and offers recommendations for a path forward.

bottom-up prevention of GBV has received less attention in governments' policy agendas. GBV is rooted in unequal power relationships, entrenched gender inequality, and discrimination against women and girls, exacerbated by intersectional factors such as age, race, ability, gender identity, etc. To eliminate all forms of GBV, governments need to adopt both top-down and bottom-up approaches, equally prioritizing systemic measures and other measures that tackle the root causes. The latter includes building the inherent agency of women and girls in all their diversity, engaging men and boys in positive masculinities, and fostering a broader social environment that rejects GBV in any form.

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A critical approach neglected in GBV responses is the systematic engagement of men and boys in positive masculinities broadly and in addressing gender-specific issues such as GBV. Globally, there is growing momentum behind men's engagement as a programmatic and policy measure in several sectors. However, operationalization of these objectives requires consideration of the various barriers to men's meaningful engagement in different contexts.

## PLAN INTERNATIONAL CANADA'S EXPERIENCE IN ENGAGING MEN IN GENDER EQUALITY: LEARNINGS FROM A REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH PROGRAM

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### **The Vision**

As a core element of our gender-transformative approach, our extensive experience in implementing male engagement interventions views men and boys as partners and beneficiaries of gender equality. This vision is of sustainable attitudinal, behavioral, and relational changes that encompass men's experiences, motivations, relationships, and active participation—rather than a list of actions or decisions in which men should participate.

### **The Approach of Fathers' Clubs**

As part of the comprehensive Gender Equality Strategy of the multicountry program funded by Global Affairs Canada, Strengthening Health Outcomes for Women and Children (SHOW) (2016–2021), Plan International implemented an evidence-informed male engagement strategy in Bangladesh, Ghana, Haiti, Nigeria, and Senegal in support of good outcomes in reproductive health. The project established 1,041 Fathers' Clubs, engaging 15,105 fathers in a course of 20 reflective sessions to broaden men's understanding of gender equality, motivate them to question what it means to be a man and a father, and promote their equitable and nonviolent involvement in households.<sup>6</sup>

### **Phased Process**

The approach comprised three components: (a) development of the Fathers' Clubs curriculum, (b) training/mentoring of local male facilitators, and (c) recruitment of men's groups willing to undergo all sessions.

## The Content

The Fathers' Clubs Manual sets out 20 participatory sessions covering topics such as gender and power, nonviolent relationships, and equitable distribution of roles and decision-making. These sessions motivate men to challenge inequitable gender norms and power imbalances in their personal lives, and to promote sustained changes in their relationships with spouses and children. The sessions are strengthened with homework to encourage discussions with spouses, family members, and peers.

## The Effects

In 2019, Plan International Canada conducted a qualitative study<sup>7</sup> in four SHOW countries with men from Fathers' Clubs, their spouses, adolescent children, and community leaders, to examine their experiences and perspectives around changes in men's household caregiving and couple relationships. The findings revealed Fathers' Clubs members were more positively and nonviolently engaged with their spouses and children. Key findings are:

- **Challenging rigid norms:** Men started to challenge traditional social norms that perpetuate gender hierarchies and unequal power relations. They changed attitudes and practices regarding their roles in their homes.
- **Self-restraint:** Men demonstrated improved self-control linked to a perceived reduction in GBV. Respondents reported being more open communication and peaceful conflict resolution in their personal relationships.
- **Joint decision-making:** There were shifts in decision-making patterns, indicating improved collaboration between spouses.
- **Improved spousal and family relations:** Perceptions of increased bonding, respect, love, and humor were identified, as well as spending more quality time in the house. There were also improved

father-child relations, including equal treatment of girls and boys.

- **Internalization:** Men appear to have internalized learnings from the Fathers' Clubs and started to share these lessons with the next generation in their homes. This points to the potential for socialization of gender equality intergenerationally and with peers.
- **Role of Fathers' Clubs:** Study respondents universally identified that Fathers' Clubs learnings have triggered positive changes in the attitudes and behaviors of men.
- **Sustainability:** Respondents overwhelmingly believe that the adopted positive behaviors will be sustained, as they are linked to perceived benefits to men and their families.

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## ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Our experience and results establish that well-designed and implemented male engagement interventions have positive outcomes and should be applied in complementarity and systemic approaches. As a bottom-up approach, male engagement tackles the root causes of GBV and contributes to its prevention. However: (1) There is no generic approach to meaningfully engaging men; they are not monolithic, and neither are the barriers they face. Contextual relevance is key to an increased acceptability

of gender transformative change. (2) To be lasting and sustainable, care should be taken to promote a holistic understanding of men's engagement as a change in men's attitudes, values, and relationships, rather than men's specific actions alone. (3) Engaging men in positive masculinities can lead to stigmas for participating men and their spouses, as well as conflict with community and household influencers. A parallel broad communication strategy to enable men's engagement is important. (4) Engaging men can have unintended negative outcomes by further reinforcing men's power and privilege. This requires risk-cognizant planning and execution of interventions informed by women's and girls' voices, along with good monitoring and evaluation. At no point should male engagement lead to the disadvantage of women and girls.

## NOTES

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