UN WOMEN

WORKING WITH MEN AND BOYS FOR GENDER EQUALITY: STATE OF PLAY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

SUMMARY

A quarter century on from the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, at which the need for gender equality work with men was clearly articulated, it is time for a critical assessment of the 'men for gender equality' field. This brief takes stock of this work and proposes new directions for programming and policy on men and boys. Work with men and boys has often remained too focused on individual men's identities, attitudes and behaviours, rather than on the structures and systems that sustain gender inequalities. It has relied on reductive understandings of the category 'men', social psychological accounts of gender norms, and organizational forms that, together, have limited its ability to contribute to intersectional feminist mobilizations. Work with men and boys must focus on the gendered operations of power and injustice, press for political and policy change, focus more on anti-patriarchal social action in solidarity with and accountability to intersectional feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ+) movements and reorient evidence-based practice toward social change.

Taking stock of work with men and boys for gender equality

A field of programming and policy focused on men and boys and directed toward the goal of gender equality is now visible in countries across the world. The term 'field' is used here for a range of organizations, initiatives, publications and agendas united by a set of shared assumptions about, and common commitments to, working with men and boys for gender equality. To describe these as a discreet field is to highlight the processes by which this multiplicity of organizations, initiatives, publications and agendas constitutes itself as an actor within gender equality work.

The 'men for gender equality' (hereafter MFGE) field seeks to engage men and boys in the promotion of human rights for all, irrespective of gender identity and expression and sexual orientation; the prevention and reduction of gender-based violence; the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights; parenting and care work; and contributions to gender justice in other domains.[1] It operates within the processes and spaces of international development and humanitarian assistance, as well as health promotion and community development. The MFGE field comprises the work of a wide variety of organizations, from small advocacy- and service-focused groups running local campaigns to large-scale organizations operating not only nationally but also regionally and globally. The latter includes the MenEngage Alliance, a global civil society network focused on working with men to transform patriarchal masculinities. This brief looks at the progress made by the MFGE field in the 25 years since the

Beijing conference and considers three factors constraining such progress: the turn away from structural change, the turn towards social norms and the implications of NGO-ization.

The evidence of impact

As the MFGE field has grown, so has an accompanying body of scholarship regarding the effectiveness of its efforts. There are debates over the kinds of methods best suited to assessing the impacts of interventions as well as constraints on gathering evidence of the impacts on wider communities and populations. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of evidence that well-designed interventions can increase men's and boys' gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours, including with regard to sexual and reproductive health, parenting and care work and intimate partner and sexual violence.[2]

The evidence base for work with men and boys also has important limitations. Most interventions are focused only on micro- and meso-level change, their evidence itself is uneven and few evaluations examine wider shifts in gender relations or structures of power. These reflect wider limitations of the MFGE field, as described in the next section.

The turn away from structural change

Some of the earliest anti-patriarchal work with and by men grew out of broader struggles for social justice, from the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua to the socialist feminist organizing of the 1970s in the United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere. But a common critique of the MFGE field now is that it "focuses at the individual level—with some work also

being done at the community level—without addressing the broader structures of patriarchy within which individuals and relationships operate."[3] How did this happen?

A closer look at the ways in which the MFGE field has addressed the gender injustices of the care economy is instructive. From its earliest days, anti-patriarchal work with men highlighted the importance of men's involvement in parenting and care work.[4] Reflecting the feminist insight that the 'personal is political', this insistence that transformation must 'begin at home' responded to feminist analyses of the centrality of feminized care work, both inside and outside the home, to the systemic subordination of women.[5] Yet, the expansion of work with men on the care economy over the last 25 years, usually under the rubric of fatherhood programming, has tended to focus on changing personal behaviours, from men's parenting skills to their uptake of parental leave.

In doing so, structural analyses of men's (differing) positions within systems and relations of social reproduction have been neglected.[6] This emphasis on personal behaviour at the level of the heterosexual 'nuclear' family has domesticated and depoliticized work with men on issues of gender, power and social reproduction. The emergence of such an emphasis should be understood in relation to the hegemony, over the same time period, of neoliberal approaches to social care and welfare provision, which rely on a discourse of personal and familial responsibility to justify the state's retreat from social provisioning.

This focus on the personal over the structural reflects the difficulties the MFGE field has had in centring questions of power in its analyses and strategies. One explanation for this may be the frequently un-interrogated use of the category of 'men' itself, whose universalist claims tend to be reductive, flattening differences and inequalities among men and foregrounding domesticated framings of gender transformative work with men at the levels of personal behaviours and interpersonal relationships. The pluralized term 'masculinities' has been used to highlight men's heterogeneity, but here too understandings of men's complex positions in social hierarchies are too often reduced to an implicitly personal, and often explicitly behavioural, conception of men's multiple practices and performances of masculinity.[7] In effect, the MFGE field calls on men to be agents of change in the project of gender transformation, at the same time as abstracting actual men from the relations of power that are the object of that transformation.

The turn towards social norms

Difficulties with centring questions of power are also linked to the MFGE field's frequent tendency to explain gender injustices in terms of 'harmful gender norms'. The use of social norms

theory[8] to underpin the design of gender-transformative work with men has, in practice, favoured social psychological accounts of men's behaviours over sociological perspectives on patriarchal conditions. The field's emphasis on changing gender norms has directed its attention more to men's shared beliefs and interpersonal relationships and less to patriarchal hierarchies of power, and the embedding of gender norms within them.

Nowhere is this clearer than in work with men on the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV), in which social norms theory has been particularly influential. Understanding GBV as a fundamental expression of gender oppression makes clear that gender-transformative violence prevention work with men must be concerned with transforming unequal relations of power and the social, economic and political institutions through which such power is structured. Yet, the social psychological biases implicit in the implementation of the social norms paradigm have directed attention away from the structuring of GBV in social hierarchies and toward an emphasis on attitudinal and behavioural change.[9]

This paradigm, together with the domesticated framing discussed above, has tended to privilege attention to, and a behavioural understanding of, men's interpersonal violence against women, especially in the home. The MFGE field has given much less attention to other forms of GBV and their structuring by and of hierarchical social relations, not least such violence perpetrated by and in male-dominated law enforcement and military institutions.[10]

Responding to the systemic nature of GBV requires analysis of patriarchal relations of power as they are shaped by intersecting forces of marginalization and oppression, linked to class, race/ethnicity, citizenship status, gender identity and sexual orientation. But the behavioural emphases of the social norms paradigm have limited the MFGE field's capacity to undertake this kind of systemic intersectional analysis, as has its aforementioned framing of intersectionality in terms of pluralized behavioural masculinities. The result is a continuing emphasis on behaviour change interventions and a relative lack of focus on social change strategies. On paper, the field recognizes that it should include efforts at social action such as coalition-building, policy advocacy, community mobilization and strategies aimed at macro-level accountability on the part of leaders and governments.[11] On the ground, however, many of the MFGE field's interventions comprise small-scale education and awareness-raising initiatives. Where social action initiatives are implemented, often these are omitted from published accounts of the field and fall outside typical assessments of the work's evidence base. This is because they do not fit within the paradigm of 'projectization' that dominates

donors' and evaluators' expectations of time-bound projects with discrete outputs and short-term measurable impacts.[12]

The implications of organizational form

The MFGE field's partial neglect of social action for structural change can also be linked to the ways that this field has developed and is organized. There have been long and lively debates within feminism over processes of professionalization, managerialism and bureaucratization and their implications for feminist advocacy and activism. With growing institutionalization and professionalization, advocates and organizations may show a greater dependency on and complicity with state and market institutions, the depoliticization of their activist orientations to systemic change and the demobilization of social movement advocacy.

The extent to which such processes of NGO-ization have helped drive the expansion of programming to 'engage men' merits closer attention for at least two reasons. First, the field faces some of the same dangers expressed in critiques of the NGO-ization of feminist struggles, even as feminist mobilizations and militancy in many countries provide an opportunity for anti-patriarchal alliances. Second, the emergence of the MFGE field may itself have contributed to the depoliticizing of feminist work, being linked with a marginalization or silencing of women's voices and leadership and delegitimizing of women-only and women-focused programming.[13] Indeed, the MenEngage Alliance, the global network of organizations working with men for gender equality, has warned of such dangers.[14]

Countering the depoliticizing effects of NGO-ization is an urgent priority for the field. A 2019 strategy meeting of feminist activists in preparation for the Beijing +25 Generation Equality Forum called for "a radical transformation of a world in crisis, putting women, people, and the planet over profit".[15] Yet, an orientation toward contributing to the movement and coalition building required for such a radical transformative agenda has been neglected until recently in the MFGE field. A focus on skills and processes for personal and organizational accountability is now more widespread among MFGE stakeholders, thanks in large part to the work of the MenEngage Alliance, but practices of accountability oriented toward helping to build movements for gender justice remain underdeveloped in the MFGE field.

Constituting itself as a 'field' may be part of the problem. Organizing and describing work with men and boys as a distinct field is valuable in promoting this work and its contribution to progress towards gender equality. But the need for social action for structural change, outlined above, requires work with all genders and across communities. Gender transformative work with men can and must contribute to collective organizing for structural change in patriarchal systems, but as part of gender justice movement building; demarcating itself as a separate field risks undermining this collective effort.

Four future directions

In response to the issues and concerns raised above, the following four directions for the MFGE field are vital.

Focus on the masculinity of hegemony: A clearer focus on the gendered operations of power and injustice is needed, and specifically on the uses to which masculinities are put in the maintenance of social hierarchies and the rule of economic and political elites. The last decade has seen the rise of increasingly authoritarian forms of political thought and practice that draw on the language and imagery of patriarchal masculinities. Developing gender transformative work with men on the patriarchal masculinities that maintain and normalize the rule of economic and political elites will help clarify the contributions that this work can make to broader movements for gender equality and social justice. Oxfam America's (2019) report on the global far-right's use of narratives and representations of racialized masculinities in its ethno-nationalist authoritarian politics highlights the need to link this gender transformative work with the community programming and policy advocacy of anti-racist and immigrant rights movements.

Press for political as well as policy change: Gender transformative work with men must press for political and policy change, in collaboration with and accountability to intersectional feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements. Such work must tackle institutional inaction and impunity, building both 'inside' capacity for and commitment to institutional reform and 'outside' pressure for and accountability to a reform agenda, as feminist activists have done for decades. This work ranges from addressing gender equality issues in democratic governance and political participation to supporting women's rights advocacy and increasing men's support for gender equality policy measures. It should also include working directly with male political actors, including politicians, party members and civil servants, holding those in power to account and challenging the patriarchal organizational cultures of many political parties. There are inspiring examples on which to draw, which highlight the potential for accountable advocacy by organizations involved in gender transformative work with men. For example, Men's Action to Stop Violence Against Women (MASVAW) in India has worked to encourage men's support for domestic violence legislation; the Men's Association for Gender Equality in Sierra Leone lobbied for new laws on marriage, divorce and domestic violence; and, in

South Africa, Sonke Gender Justice has worked with women's rights organizations to hold the police and other state institutions to account.[16]

Engage in more 'movement' and less 'field': There is a need for a greater orientation towards anti-patriarchal social action in solidarity with and accountability to intersectional feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements. Work with men and boys should involve greater efforts to build movements for social change, strengthen civil society organizations and coalitions and contribute as one stream of activity to broader social justice struggles. It must also broaden its approaches to the issues and domains it addresses, such as paying greater attention to the political economy of care work and to institutionalized forms of patriarchal violence. The new strategic plan for the MenEngage Alliance emphasizes that "[s]ignificant social change to address entrenched inequalities and patriarchal hierarchies depends on progressive organizations coming together in a broad movement for structural change". With this recognition, its strategic plan commits the network to "promoting social and economic inclusion through meaningful participation, deepened partnerships, and joint actions among social justice movements".[17]

Reorient evidence and evidence-based practice to social change: Finally, such social action requires that evidence building and evidence-based practice be re-oriented toward the extended timelines and complex processes of social change. It is important to measure not only short-term change in small-scale programmes or settings but also long-term change in large-scale populations and settings, and call on donors to support such evidence building.[18]

Thus, the question, "What works?" remains very relevant, but it must be answered not only at the level of individual projects but also at the level of social change in communities and societies.

The policy brief series synthesizes research findings, analysis and policy recommendations on gender equality and women's rights in an accessible format. This brief was written by Michael Flood and Alan Greig. It is a summary of the UN Women discussion paper: "Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality: A Review of Field Formation, the Evidence Base and Future Directions".

Endnotes

1 Kimball et al. 2013.
2 Edström et al. 2015.
3 ICRW 2018: 92.
4 Segal 1997.
5 Bhattacharya 2017.
6 Bedford 2007.
7 White 2000.
8 Cislaghi and Heise 2018, 2020.
9 Dworkin et al. 2013.
10 du Toit and le Roux 2020, Ward 2016.
11 Casey et al. 2016, Peacock and Barker 2014.
12 Tendler 2002.
13 COFEM 2017.
14 MenEngage Alliance 2017.
15 NSWP 2019.
16 Peacock and Barker 2012.
17 MenEngage Alliance 2021: 101.
18 Abramsky et al. 2016, Ellsberg et al. 2020.

Additional resources

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