



WORKING TOGETHER FOR EQUALITY

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

WORKING WITH MEN AND BOYS

ENGAGING MEN IN BUILDING GENDER EQUALITY

By Dr. Michael Flood – 18 January, 2010

BACKGROUND

In the *Beijing Declaration* adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), governments expressed their support for encouraging men to participate fully in all actions towards gender equality (para 25). The Declaration emphasised that equal sharing of responsibilities and a harmonious partnership between women and men were critical to their well-being and that of their families).

The *Beijing Platform for Action* (1995) also emphasises the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality including the principle of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities (para 1). It stresses that gender equality can only be achieved when men and women work together in partnerships (para 3), and that the principle of equality of women and men has to be integral to the socialisation process (para 40). The *Platform for Action* identifies gender stereotypes as a major obstacle to the attainment of gender equality.

The *Beijing Platform for Action* document (2000) contains several strategies specifically targeting men and boys. It also contains several strategies designed to involve men and boys in the pursuit of increased gender equality, including policies and programmes on changing stereotypical attitudes and political will and commitment at all levels. Specific actions aim in particular at promoting harmonisation of work and family responsibilities for men and women (para 179); and encouraging men to share equally in child care and household work (para 107c).

A key objective of Australia's *Beijing Plus Five Action Plan 2000-05* is to increase the involvement of men and boys in addressing discrimination and inequalities, including challenging negative attitudes and behaviours that harm women.

As part of this 15 year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action, JERA International has included a short study into 'Engaging Men in Building Gender Equality' in Australia. Following is an Information Paper written by Dr Flood as part of this review. This paper focuses on men's roles in progressing gender equality; the longer and ongoing dialogue following on from this process is how can women's agencies better engage with men to build gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

This Information Paper focuses on men's roles in progress towards gender equality. It answers two questions:

- 1) To what extent are men supportive of gender equality?
- 2) What can be done to engage men in progress towards gender equality?

While this paper focuses on Australian data in relation to men's attitudes towards gender equality, it draws on both local and international experience in identifying effective strategies for engaging men.

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY AMONG MEN IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, as in many countries, men's attitudes towards gender equality show five patterns.

1. Most men are supportive, in broad terms, of gender equality.

There is widespread agreement among men in Australia with broad principles of gender equality. Most men, like most women, take for granted that women and men are equal, should have the same rights and responsibilities, and women should be treated fairly and justly in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities. This is evident in recent national surveys of community attitudes (VicHealth 2009: 66).

This support among men, like that among women, reflects the success of the women's movements in establishing norms of gender equality. However, this does not mean that men support or identify themselves with feminism. Instead, most are ignorant of or hostile to feminism, and they have been influenced by popular stereotypes of feminism as 'man-hating'. Men's discomfort about or hostility towards feminism is fuelled by many of the same factors as women's, but also above all by feminism's challenge to sexism and male power and the unease and defensiveness this can generate.

2. Men are less supportive than women of gender equality.

There is a persistent gender gap in attitudes towards gender equality. Men consistently show less support than women for women's and men's equal treatment and access to resources. This gender gap is evident across age groups. For example, in a 2001 survey of over 5,000 young people aged 12 to 20, 37 per cent of young men aged 12 to 20 but only 12 per cent of young women agreed that "Men should take control in relationships and be head of the household", while 25 per cent of males but only 14 per cent of females agreed that "Girls prefer a guy to be in charge of the relationship" (NCP 2001: 74). Among school and university students, there is a consistent gender gap in attitudes towards sharing housework, a pregnant woman's right to choose an abortion, the acceptability of pornography, and the relevance of feminism (Bulbeck 2004).

3. Young men tend to have better attitudes towards gender equality than older men, but progress is uneven.

Boys and young men have better attitudes to gender equality than older generations of men. Patterns in Australia are likely to be similar to those in the USA, in which both women's and men's attitudes towards gender equality have improved over the past 30 years, although men's have changed more slowly and as a result the gap between women's and men's attitudes has widened (Ciabattari 2001: 574-575). Improvement in men's attitudes reflects two processes. First, as individual males' attitudes improve, the attitudes of cohorts of men improve over time. Second, younger generations of men have less conservative attitudes than older generations. (At the same time, at least on some issues, younger boys, e.g. those aged in their early teens, have worse attitudes than older boys (NCP 2001: 75-95).)

Progress towards support for gender equality is uneven among men. While expectations about involvement in fathering have shifted, there has been little change in the actual gender division of child care (Baxter 2002: 409-410). There has been more progress on some issues such as women's participation in paid work than on others such as interpersonal violence (Ciabattari 2001: 576).

4. Men's attitudes towards gender equality vary according to other factors including race and ethnicity, education, and region.

Men's support for gender equality is shaped by other social factors, particularly the gender roles and relations of their local contexts and communities. These vary markedly in Australia: some communities are characterised by strong norms of gender equality, while others are characterised

by conservative gender norms of male dominance and female subordination. Even in a single community or context, there is diversity in men's peer cultures and groups (Flood and Pease 2006).

5. Some men are public advocates for gender equality.

Small numbers of men have become public advocates for gender equality across the world. Some take part in men's groups focused on stopping violence against women, others advocate for gender equity in their schools, and others work for change in their workplaces and institutions (Flood 2005a).

Men develop powerful commitments to gender equality through various paths: close relations with particular women, relationships with relatives or friends or others who modelled non-traditional gender roles, involvements in other political or ethical activities and networks, membership of peer groups or workplaces with more gender-equitable norms, university study, and a host of other experiences (Flood 2005b).

However, most men do not take part in advocacy for gender equality. Most stay silent, while a minority are involved in an energetic anti-feminist backlash (Flood 2004a). One of the reasons why men do not join efforts towards gender equality is patriarchal investment and resistance, but it is not the only reason. Further important reasons include a sense of helplessness, a lack of knowledge about how to help, and a fear that they will not be welcome (Crooks *et al.* 2007: 219).

ENGAGING MEN IN PROGRESS TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

Effective strategies for engaging men in work towards gender equality are emerging.

There is a rapidly developing body of experience and expertise in engaging men in progress towards gender equality. While this work is diverse and evolving, there is some degree of consensus regarding the strategies which are most effective in engaging men. This work is supported by a growing collection of frameworks, curricula, community publications, and scholarly examinations.¹

Although the discussion below cannot do justice to the detail or complexity of these efforts, it distils key principles and strategies from them. These are relevant for a variety of actors, from NGOs to governments.

Key principles and strategies are as follows:

Frame policy and programming with men within an agenda that promotes human rights, including women's rights.

In engaging men in progress towards gender equality, the first task is to identify the principles which will guide this endeavour.

Policy and programming on men and gender must: (1) Promote the rights of women and girls; (2) Enhance boys' and men's lives; and (3) Be inclusive of and responsive to diversities among men. These three interrelated commitments should guide the engagement of men in gender equality work. Programming and policy must be framed within a women's rights agenda, and intended to further women's and men's full access to and enjoyment of their human rights, and guided by the primary goal of furthering gender equality. Programming and policy must also be committed to enhancing boys' and men's lives. They should embody support for men's efforts at positive change and the affirmation of positive and health-promoting formations of manhood. Finally, they must be sensitive to diversities among men, and the ways in which men's lives are shaped not only by gender but also by class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, literacy and age.

Policy and programming on men and gender should be conducted in partnership with women, women's groups and organisations. While engaging men is vital, male inclusion should not be seen as a universal imperative, and women-only and women-focused programming and resourcing must be maintained.

Given that gender inequality operates at individual, relationship, community, institutional, and societal levels, efforts to engage men in building gender equality must also address these multiple levels. This has been articulated in such frameworks as the 'ecological model' and the 'spectrum of prevention' (Flood 2010). The most effective efforts are comprehensive, that is, intended to generate change at multiple levels, using multiple strategies, and in multiple settings.

Reach, engage, and educate men.

The most immediate practical challenges in involving men in work towards gender equality are to reach them and to engage them – to foster their interest, support, and commitment. A wide range of strategies can be used to reach men, whether by going to them or bringing them closer: education, whether in formal educational institutions or in the groups and contexts in which men cluster, and including peer education; communications and social marketing, whether through mass media or local means; service provision (including making services more 'male-friendly'); community development and mobilisation; and political advocacy.

In engaging men, several strategies are widely identified as appropriate. Begin with the positive, approaching men as partners in solving the problems of gender inequality. At the same time, retain a feminist-informed critique of those practices, understandings, and relations which sustain inequality. Speak to men's own experience and concerns. Highlight the shared benefits for men and women and, in particular, the ways in which men will gain from gender equality (while also emphasising men's ethical obligation to support the elimination of unjust privilege). Appeal for example to men's relational interests (their love and care for the women and girls in their lives), personal well-being and the costs of traditional masculinity, collective interests (benefits to communities), and principle (their ethical, political, or spiritual commitments). Anticipate, and work to minimise, defensive and hostile responses.

Particularly in face-to-face strategies such as community education, there are various elements to effective practice. Create safe environments for open discussion and dialogue. Construct learning experiences which are intensive and participatory. Tailor efforts to the needs and characteristics of participants and their communities. Address cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains: what men think, how they feel, and what they do. Draw upon and foster men's personal support for and commitment to gender equality (Flood 2004b). Match the intervention to men's stage of change, to men's different levels of awareness and commitment. Focus on the action men can take, and build the skills to do so (Flood et al. 2009).

Mobilise men and communities.

Achieving progress towards gender equality requires going beyond working with men as isolated individuals and working towards broader forms of change in the communities in which they live. It is necessary to shift social norms, gender roles, and power relations.

Men can be engaged through community development strategies which involve local communities in building gender equality, invite community leadership in gender justice, and link gender inequalities to other issues which influence community well-being. We must involve male community leaders in such efforts, holding them accountable.

Strategies of community mobilisation are necessary to organise men for collective action and generate broader social change. We must mobilise men, through events, networks, and campaigns: community events, work with influential groups and 'gatekeepers', cultural tools of art and theatre, and grassroots men's and women's groups and networks committed to advocacy for gender equality. Pro-feminist and anti-sexist men's groups and networks may be formed out of, in alliance with, and/or as part of women's groups and networks.

Address men and masculine cultures in organisations.

Transforming formal institutions is vital given their role in perpetuating gender inequalities. Organisational and workforce strategies should be used to address men and masculine cultures in

sports organisations, faith-based organisations, local councils, the military and police, media, and other institutions. Such strategies influence both internal cultures and the communities which surround them.

However, to truly transform gender inequalities, we must go beyond scattered, small-scale interventions and efforts (no matter how effective), towards systematic, large-scale, and coordinated efforts. Law and policy are crucial tools in engaging men in work towards gender justice, at both state and national levels.ⁱⁱ

Integrate men into gender policy.

Policies involving men and boys in achieving gender equality should be integrated within national and state gender equality policies (rather than existing as separate policies), both in terms of their location within policy-making structures and their content, and framed by the broader agenda of gender equality. Such policies should complement, not replace, dedicated measures and mechanisms such as women's units. All policies addressing gender inequalities should address men's positions and roles at some level. Women's rights groups and gender experts should be involved to assist in crafting such policies.

Policies addressing men and gender equality must learn from existing experience of adopting and implementing policy on women's rights, including the mixed outcomes of gender 'mainstreaming', and its lessons for advancing gender equality through policy (Flood *et al.* 2010).

Scale up successful initiatives and strategies.

Governments must support taking successful initiatives and strategies to scale, through funding and other forms of institutional support, and incorporating them where appropriate into government policies. Curricula for men and boys addressing gender inequalities can be included in relevant school and professional development curricula, while successful methods of engaging men can be incorporated into gender initiatives. Governments can use existing structures – education systems, health provision, and training for example – to implement policies on gender equality.

Build political will and sustain momentum.

Policies aimed at men's roles in building gender equality require energy and sustainability if they are to generate social change. Several steps are relevant. Men must be encouraged to take responsibility for advocating agendas of gender equality, including policy initiatives for women's rights. Senior policy-makers and decision-makers in government (most of whom are men) must endorse gender equality in their public roles, model gender-egalitarian practices, and hold each other accountable.

Work collaboratively and build partnerships.

Policy-making on engaging men in gender equality is more likely to be effective and appropriate if it is developed and implemented in collaboration and consultation with civil society organisations, particularly women's organisations (Flood *et al.* 2010).

Build institutional capacity and expertise.

Policy makers can play a vital role in increasing the capacity and expertise of both governmental structures and civil society organisations to address issues of men and gender inequality. Through training, programme planning, and organisational development, governments can enhance the quality, coverage, and sustainability of work engaging men in gender equality.

Support efforts with research and evaluation.

Finally, research is needed to investigate men's involvements in gender relations and the ways in which they can be engaged in progress towards gender equality. Interventions themselves must be subjected to rigorous scrutiny, through evaluations of impacts and outcomes (Flood *et al.* 2009).

CONCLUSION

Building gender equality will require sustained and systematic efforts at the levels of families and relationships, communities, institutions, and societies. Men must be engaged in this work: as participants in education programs, as community leaders, as professionals and providers, and as advocates and activists.

The rationale for involving men in work towards gender equality is well articulated, and key educational and organisational strategies are well developed and well documented. What is needed above all is the expansion of this work, as well as its refinement. This requires community commitment, institutional development, and policy support.

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ⁱ See the following webpage for a useful list of resources, both community-based and scholarly:
<http://www.xyonline.net/content/men-masculinities-and-gender-key-resources-scholarship-and-education>.

ⁱⁱ The following draws on Flood *et al.* (2010).

Note on the Author

Dr Michael Flood is a researcher at the University of Wollongong. Flood is a co-editor of the *International Encyclopaedia of Men and Masculinities*, and the author of academic papers on men and gender, violence against women and its prevention, heterosexual men's sexualities, fathering, and youth and pornography. Dr Flood has also worked as a profeminist educator and activist on issues of men and gender. In particular, he is involved in community advocacy and education addressing men's violence against women.