

ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS IN EMPOWERING WOMEN IN THE ROHINGYA COMMUNITY IN BANGLADESH



Table of Contents

01

Introduction

03

Education: Current Status of women and girls and Contribution of Men

05

Decision-Making Authority: Current Status of women and girls and Contribution of Men

07

Gender-Based Violence: Current Status of Women and Girls and Contribution of Men

09

Recommendations

02

A growing trend in engaging men and boys in women empowerment and entrepreneurship interventions

04

Participation and Leadership: Current Status of women and girls and Contribution of Men

07

Access to Resources: Current Status of women and girls and Contribution of Men

08

The Challenges in Women's Empowerment and in engaging men and boys in improving gender equality



Introduction

If half the population does not participate in empowering the other half, then the empowerment will neither be comprehensive nor sustainable. The contribution of men is necessary to empower women and girls from their households and communities. Men, boys, and influential male leaders can contribute not only to empowering women but also to reducing gender-based violence. Engaging men, boys, and religious leaders are gaining more popularity in gender transformative approaches taken by governments, women empowerment agencies, and humanitarian organizations. The gender transformative approach refers to the process of addressing the root causes of gender inequalities, including harmful gender norms and stereotypes, to create sustainable change toward gender equality (Heise et al., 2019).



Engaging men and boys in a gender transformative approach can offer three-fold benefits.



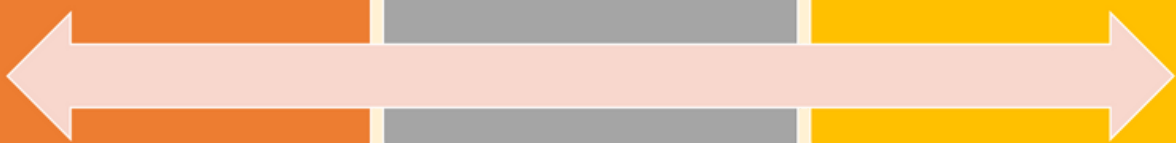
Change negative attitudes and behaviors towards women and girls, which are deeply ingrained in patriarchal societies.



Improve gender relations within families and communities, promoting more equitable power dynamics and decision-making processes



Challenge harmful cultural norms and practices



A Growing Trend in Engaging Men and Boys in Women Empowerment and Entrepreneurship Interventions

According to the 'Engaging Men in Women's economic empowerment (WEE) and women entrepreneurship development (WED) Interventions' issue brief by ILO, more and more organizations like the United Nations Agencies, International Labour Organization, UKAid, are seeking to engage men and boys in women empowerment activities and women entrepreneurship development activities. Women-focused WEE and WED activities are proving to not be sustainable.



In contrast, in some cases, they have increased gender-based violence from husbands and male household members. This negative response from men can be the result of feeling women's empowerment and greater financial independence is a threat to their masculinity. Therefore, it is necessary to better understand the concept of men and their masculinities and also to communicate that WEE and WED are beneficial for both men and women. Men can contribute to women's empowerment in various ways, such as by supporting women's education and career development, sharing domestic responsibilities, promoting women's participation in decision-making processes, and advocating for gender-sensitive policies and practices. They can also challenge harmful cultural norms and practices that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination against women. The "Thematic Study on Engaging Men, boys, and religious leaders to improve gender equality and Women's Empowerment in Rohingya Camps and Host Communities in Bangladesh" conducted by Innovision identified the following five areas to assess the role of men and boys in women empowerment and in improving gender equality.

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Education



Participation,
leadership, and
social capital



Decision Making
Authority



Access to
resources



Gender-Based
Violence

Education: Current Status of Women and Girls and Contribution of Men

According to the World Economic Forum, as of 2021, most women are unable to complete post-primary education and the focus of investment by families for post-primary education is still on boys. Girls are more prone to getting engaged in household activities, and income-generating activities when in school which leads to absenteeism and eventually dropping out of school. Other than that, child marriage is still prevalent across many communities which stops the education of girls.

As per the findings of a thematic study conducted in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazila (host community) and in the Rohingya community, in the Rohingya community, the concept of education for girls is comparatively new among the men and women in the Rohingya refugee camps. In Myanmar, the Rohingya people did not have access to education that led to any fruitful outcome so they prioritized religious education for the early years but did not let the girls study further. The girls gained religious education up to the age of around 11, which gains its significance from the fact that girls reach puberty at this age. After the age of 11, the girls are expected to stay home and participate in household chores until they get married at around age 14 or 15. Child marriage is highly prevalent in the Rohingya community and the main reason behind it is financial constraint and social/religious norms. In the Rohingya community, since the men and women from the community are not aware of the benefits of education or its importance, the main contribution is made by the NGOs, government organizations, and other humanitarian bodies in raising awareness about the importance of education.



The girls from the camps participate in the learning centers established by BRAC. These centers usually impart education for up to Class-7. The Majhis and religious leaders play a role in raising awareness about the importance of education. While the fathers and boys from the households comply and let the girls go to the learning centers, they still have the perception that marriage is more important for girls than education and that education will not bring much improvement in their lives. From the account of the status of education in both Bangladesh and the Rohingya community, it is evident that child marriage or the precedence of the importance of marriage for girls acts as a barrier to girls' education. Furthermore, the father or the male members of the household decide for the girls whether they will continue their education. Thus, to change the condition of girls in both communities, the decision makers of the household (fathers and male members) must understand, that education for girls can bring financial stability not just in the girls' life but also in the family. This will eventually lead to a higher standard of living for the whole family. However, acceptance of education for girls is not enough alone to empower girls and women, without agency over their mobility, education will not lead to employment and better quality of life for girls.



Participation and Leadership: Current Status of Women and Girls and Contribution of Men

While girls are receiving more primary education, their participation in the economy is not increasing at the same rate. According to World Bank's data, female labor force participation increased from 10 percent to 36 percent from 2003 to 2016. Over 70 percent of rural women are small-holder farmers and own poultry and other livestock due to the effort to create an enabling environment for girls by the government and other organizations working to empower women. However, while many women are benefitting from this enabling environment, many others have been unable to access this enabling environment.

Child marriage, high fertility, domestic responsibility, unpaid care work, lack of agency over their mobility, and other crucial life decisions are the main reasons behind women not being able to participate in economic activities. According to the World Bank article titled "Bangladeshi women are rising-onwards and upwards!" by Mercy Tembon, while the female entrepreneurship rate has been growing, women still make up only 7 percent of the over 7 million entrepreneurs in the country, and, women-led businesses continue to be small. Furthermore, according to the 2017 Global Gender Gap Report, 15 percent of Bangladeshi firms have women as owners or co-owners, while only 5 percent have women as top managers. Therefore, the leadership status of women is not in the best position.

According to a study by COAST Foundation study in 2022, in the Rohingya community, only 7 percent of Rohingya women are involved in economic activities inside the camps. According to the Thematic study findings, the adolescent girls from the camp are very shy and they do not usually have ambitions to engage in any income-generating activity outside their households. There are no existing groups of women or girls in the camps with any women/girls playing a leadership role.

15%

Bangladeshi firms have women as owners or co-owners

5%

women as top managers

The main reasons behind such lack of participation are women's lack of agency over their mobility and crucial life decisions backed by the values and norms set by a patriarchal society. Men usually control the crucial decisions in a woman's life. Furthermore, the women mainly bear the burden of unpaid care work which makes it difficult for them to engage in economic activities outside their households.

Decision-Making Authority: Current Status of Women and Girls and Contribution of Men

According to a speech by Ms. Dipu Moni, the Minister of Education of Bangladesh, in the seminar titled "Gender Equality in Sustainable Development: Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) and SDG-5", a very small number of women have and exercise decision-making authority in their lives. For sustainable development and empowerment, women must be involved in the decision-making process. Women exercise authority in decision-making regarding certain aspects of their household decisions like cooking, washing, and other domestic decisions. However, whenever money is involved, men play the role of the decision-maker. Furthermore, one of the crucial components of empowerment for women is agency over their mobility.

In the Rohingya community as well, the men are the main decision maker in the household. Furthermore, men try to restrict women's access to institutions. One reason behind such attempts to restrict may be the chances of women/girls coming in contact with men from outside their households.

Apart from that, the girls are expected to stay home and not come in contact with other boys and men outside the house after the age of 11. While women and girls go to their neighbor's houses for various purposes. They usually go to nearby locations like a neighbor's house, or grocery shop, etc. However, the women and girls who commute alone have been subject to eve-teasing or negative remarks from boys, men, and neighbors.



The men in the households dictate the mobility and crucial life and financial decisions of girls and women. One of the reasons men think that they have to make decisions is they think women do not have enough experience or knowledge to make their decisions. Furthermore, they also consider giving power to women to make decisions a threat to their masculinity. In the case of mobility, the girls depend on their fathers to get permission to go outside the house while the married women rely on their husbands for permission in the Rohingya community.

Men are concerned about women's safety in the community when they commute alone as they are aware of the negative remarks and eve-teasing passed towards women. However, they are not concerned about making the community a safer place for women and girls. Apart from that, in the Rohingya community, there have been cases of abduction of girls and threats to girls' families.

Access to Resources: Current Status of Women and Girls and Contribution of Men

According to the UN Women in 2022, women have limited access to resources like capital, skills, and marketing know-how. In both the Rohingya and host communities (according to the Thematic Study), married women do not have access to resources.



The majority of them have no savings of their own and the men in their family exercise authority over the financial resources in the family. The women who are the heads of their households have access to resources and they also have authority over the resources. However, these women would give authority to the male adults of the family if they were present in the household.

As stated earlier, men are usually the primary decision-makers when it comes to matters related to money in households. Men also have more rights and control over resources like capital (land). Since men control the crucial decisions of a woman's life, they also control their access to skills development opportunities.

Gender-Based Violence: Current Status of Women and Girls and Contribution of Men

According to UNDP's article on 'Gender-based violence: taking stock of Bangladesh's shadow pandemic' in 2022, the main victims of GBV are women and girls. 60% of sexual assaults in 2020-21 were experienced by girls including children. Women, girls, and children account for 88.2% of GBV cases. Men are usually the perpetrators. Many of these GBV incidences are not reported. These GBV incidences often arise from stress induced by financial reasons and conflict.

60%

sexual assaults in 2020-21

88.2%

of GBV cases

In the Rohingya community, the men practice polygamy which leads to conflict with their wives. Very often, the men who are remarrying do not divorce their former wives and go back to their wives for financial support. When the wives do not want to provide such support, the men resort to various forms of violence (verbal, psychological, physical, and sexual). In general, the elders in the community try to resolve these issues. If the elders fail to resolve the issues, in the Rohingya community, people go to the Majhi or CiC for help. In the host community villages, the people go to political leaders like members or the chairman for resolution.

The Challenges in Women's Empowerment and in Engaging Men and Boys in Improving Gender Equality

Based on the findings the main challenges in engaging men and boys in improving gender equality and promoting women's empowerment are:

01

Persistence of patriarchal norms and beliefs: One major challenge in engaging men and boys in women's empowerment efforts is the persistence of patriarchal norms and beliefs. These longstanding cultural values often prioritize men's authority and perpetuate gender inequality, leading many men and boys to question the need for women's empowerment. In some cases, they may view efforts to promote gender equity as a threat to their traditional gender roles and cultural identity.



It is important to acknowledge that men and boys themselves can be negatively impacted by patriarchal norms and expectations. For example, rigid expectations of masculinity can discourage men from expressing vulnerability or seeking help when they need it, leading to mental health issues and other negative outcomes.

02

Misconception about Masculinity: One common misconception about masculinity is that it is synonymous with dominance, aggression, and emotional stoicism. This narrow view of masculinity has harmful consequences for men, women, and society as a whole. This limited view of masculinity can perpetuate gender inequality and violence against women. Men who feel pressure to conform to rigid gender roles may resort to violence to exert their dominance or prove their masculinity. In addition, women may be devalued and objectified, with their worth measured solely by their ability to meet men's desires.

03

Gender equality is considered a zero-sum game: Men think that they must lose something for women to gain something. This leads to resistance and defensiveness among men, who may view efforts to promote gender equality as a threat to their status and power. Instead of being aware of the benefits of women's empowerment through shared responsibility, men focus on the loss of power and status due to women's empowerment.

FIVE Recommendations

FOR ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS IN IMPROVING GENDER EQUALITY AND PROMOTING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT



PROMOTING POSITIVE ROLE MODELS



Based on the current state and male-centric barriers that are existent in women's empowerment and engaging men and boys in women's empowerment and reducing gender-based violence, the following recommendations are recommended:

PROVIDING EDUCATION AND AWARENESS-RAISING



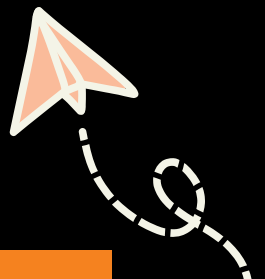
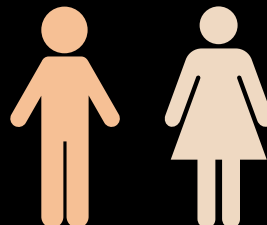
ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS IN EMPATHY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES



CREATING INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS



PARTNERING WITH MEN AND BOYS



Recommendations

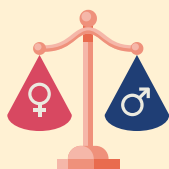
Based on the current state and male-centric barriers that are existent in women's empowerment and engaging men and boys in women's empowerment and reducing gender-based violence, the following recommendations are recommended:

PROMOTING POSITIVE ROLE MODELS

One effective way to engage men in women's empowerment is to promote positive role models who challenge harmful gender stereotypes and promote respect for all genders. This can include highlighting the achievements and contributions of women, as well as showcasing men who support gender equality and respect.

ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS IN EMPATHY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Engaging men and boys in activities that promote empathy and understanding can help to challenge harmful gender norms and promote respect for all genders. This can include activities such as group discussions, role-playing exercises, and community service projects that promote gender equity and inclusivity.



PARTNERING WITH MEN AND BOYS

Finally, partnering with men and boys is an important step towards promoting gender equality and empowerment. By engaging men and boys as allies and advocates, we can build a more inclusive and equitable society for all genders.

PROVIDING EDUCATION AND AWARENESS-RAISING

Education and awareness-raising can help to challenge harmful gender stereotypes and promote a more inclusive view of gender roles. This can include providing training and workshops on gender equality, as well as incorporating gender-sensitive content into school curriculums and public awareness campaigns.

CREATING INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

To effectively engage men in women's empowerment efforts, it is important to create policies and programs that are inclusive and responsive to the needs of all genders. This can include policies that promote equal pay and opportunities for women, as well as programs that provide support for men and boys who may be negatively impacted by harmful gender norms.



Overall, the scope of work in engaging men in women's empowerment efforts is broad and multifaceted and requires a sustained and collaborative effort from a range of stakeholders. By prioritizing the recommendations outlined above, we can work towards building a more inclusive and equitable society for all genders

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