

Feminist perspectives on addressing violence against women and girls: **How a lack of accountability undermines work to address violence against women and girls**

Executive Summary

Feminist analysis and activism have been instrumental in achieving gains in women's rights, including action to address violence against women and girls (VAWG). Over the past two decades, strong local, national and international women's movements have brought VAWG, including in armed conflict and natural disasters, into the public domain as a development, public health, international peace and security and women's rights issue.

Although the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed positive developments regarding VAWG, many of these gains are now under threat. In many countries, we are witnessing the erosion of women's human rights to live free from violence and exercise their full and equal rights in all domains; women's rights organisations' efforts to address VAWG face mounting challenges. Further evidence of this trend is the shrinking space for women's movements and women's rights work across local, national and global contexts.

This paper considers a specific concern linked to this trend: accountability to women and girls in the programming, policy and support of male involvement efforts to prevent and respond to VAWG. The paper discusses four practices that reduce accountability to women and girls, all of which result from a lack of feminist analysis: 1) investment in male involvement programming without demand or evidence; 2) male-dominated efforts that do not support women's leadership; 3) shifts toward men's priorities and needs; and 4) failure to transform patriarchy. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations for increased accountability to women and girls across VAWG prevention and response efforts.



The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), created in 2017 to reassert a feminist perspective in violence against women and girls (VAWG) work, is a collective of over 80 activists, academics, and practitioners working globally to end VAWG. The *Feminist Perspectives on Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls Series* is a collection of papers written by COFEM members to articulate concerns and aspirations for the shrinking space for feminist analysis in VAWG efforts in development and humanitarian settings.

Introduction

Involving men and boys as partners to achieve women's empowerment and gender equality is an important component in VAWG prevention. Feminist activists have engaged men for decades and at multiple levels to both reform and dismantle patriarchal structures. However, over the past 15 years, many additional efforts have emerged from new actors. Some of these efforts have considered men's accountability to women, yet critical concerns have developed about the lack of accountability to women and girls among this body of work.


Accountability to women and girls at every level of male involvement efforts is critical to ethical and effective VAWG programming and to securing women and girls' full and equal rights. Within this context, accountability means:

- Promoting and ensuring women and girls' leadership in work on VAWG;
- Listening to the demands and advice of diverse women and girls when undertaking male involvement efforts;
- Recognizing the existing gender hierarchy, and striving to transform a *system* of inequality from which men have benefited and continue to benefit;
- Working at both individual *and* structural levels to change personal behaviour *while* transforming patriarchal systems;
- Ensuring that male involvement efforts demonstrably empower women and girls; and
- Examining funding decisions to ensure that gender hierarchies are not inadvertently reproduced.

Without accountability, the danger that men are in charge persists; in this case, of women's rights and well-being, which further undermines women and girls' agency, voice and leadership, thereby reproducing the very inequality that VAWG work is attempting to shift.

Problem Analysis

Feminism offers a critical examination of how intersectional inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, colour, and sexuality impact power and identity. The gender-power analysis – long the foundation of Global South feminist movements – forms the basis of accountability for anyone working to prevent and respond to VAWG. Lack of accountability to these basic feminist principles, particularly in male involvement work, results in privileging men who already benefit from patriarchy rather than dismantling the very systems of power (including gender inequality) that produce VAWG. Therefore, a feminist frame is crucial in all organisational relationships, programs, policies and practices to challenge the gender hierarchy.



It is important to note that some male involvement initiatives have established accountability frameworks and mechanisms and made positive attempts to operationalize them (e.g. Partners for Prevention, MenEngage Alliance, White Ribbon, etc.) and are reflecting on how to strengthen their accountability practice.¹ The Director of Programmes at Sonke Gender Justice, for example, wrote recently:

Have we made a difference in women's lives? The golden accountability question. This is a key question that remains mostly unanswered when it comes to the strategy of engaging men and boys for gender equality and to end gender-based violence . . . We have been asked in several forums: what about the women? What do they say about the men in the community? Do they experience less violence? As we move forward and try to instil a feminist culture at Sonke, we need to increase our efforts to credibly respond to this question.²

The process of continuous internal reflection and dialogue will likely support improved accountability to women and girls. However, some of the current policies, frameworks and practices that purport to increase accountability within male involvement programs, organisations and networks too often remain at the micro (i.e. individual) change level, without regard for larger social and political questions of the impact of these initiatives on the women's rights landscape.³

Four common challenges in male involvement policy and programming that result from a lack of feminist analysis and reduce accountability to women and girls – and therefore require further attention to increase accountability – follow.

Investment in male-involvement programming without demand or evidence. An increased commitment to address VAWG as a development issue emerged in the early 2000s; shortly thereafter the field witnessed a surge in male-involvement initiatives and organisations⁴ despite two key facts. First, many women's organisations and feminist strategies had been engaging men as part and parcel of their efforts for decades. Despite this, many male involvement efforts were created by self-identified male 'allies' disconnected from women's movements while other 'stand alone' programming sought to engage men in local communities without any involvement of or demand from local women.⁵ Second, the evidence base for the effectiveness


¹ MenEngage Alliance, *Accountability Standards and Guidelines*, MenEngage, 2014: <http://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/MenEngage_Accountability-Standards-and-Guidelines_FINAL.pdf>.

² Pino, A., 'Engaging men and boys for gender equality: What do women have to do with it?' *GREAT Insights Magazine*, 6(2), 2017: <<http://ecdpm.org/great-insights/she-drives-change/engaging-men-boys-gender-equality-women/>>.

³ MenEngage Alliance, *Accountability Standards and Guidelines*, 2014: <http://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/MenEngage_Accountability-Standards-and-Guidelines_FINAL.pdf>.

⁴ Minerson, T., Carolo, H., Dinner, T. and Jones, C., Issue Brief: Engaging Men and Boys to Reduce and Prevent Gender-Based Violence, Status of Women Canada, 2011.

⁵ Flood, M., 'Work with Men to End Violence against Women: A Critical Stocktake.' *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 17, 2015, pp. 1-18: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1070435>>. This paper highlights that approximately 1 in 5 male engagement organisations do not have links with any women's organisation.



of these types of male involvement initiatives is weak.⁶ In a 2014 systematic review of VAWG prevention programming, male engagement models were described as showing some promise in shifting attitudes although behavioural impact on male perpetration of VAWG was limited.⁷ Some types of male involvement work receiving considerable investment are high profile global ‘awareness’ campaigns (e.g. HeforShe, MenCare, WhiteRibbon, etc.) yet programs using a general awareness-raising approach have been found to have weak or no impact on reducing VAWG.⁸

Despite this, male involvement programming flourishes within the humanitarian and development fields. Whereas evidence is often a pre-requisite for women-led initiatives, the weak evidence base for male involvement programming has done little to reduce the enthusiasm or funding for the approach. Insofar as funders and other decision-makers continue to privilege males, this reality raises the question of whether the dominance of male engagement programming in VAWG prevention efforts illustrates and perpetuates the very problem of gender discrimination that feminists aim to address.

Male-dominated efforts that do not support women’s leadership. Research on social movements shows that the involvement of dominant group members can reproduce inequalities by playing out the power and control issues present in the broader societal context of unequal relationships.⁹ This is particularly pertinent in women’s movements:

It should not surprise us that some men involved in the counterhegemonic project of ending men’s violence against women are also complicit in patriarchal masculinities. Men in gender carry an ‘invisible backpack’ of privilege, a taken-for granted set of unearned benefits and assets, and gender norms and inequalities shape patterns of male-female interaction. Men involved in violence prevention are not immune from these.¹⁰

Effective efforts to address VAWG and the inequalities that drive and perpetuate it require that men work alongside and in support of women and girls, not as leaders. White Ribbon has recently published a comprehensive guidance paper on the principles and practises for promoting accountability for men as allies in violence prevention. The main premise of this paper is:

⁶ Jewkes, R., Flood, M., and Lang, J., ‘From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls.’ *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 2015, pp.1580-1589:<[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(14\)61683-4/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(14)61683-4/fulltext)>.

⁷ Ellsberg, M., Arango, D. J., Morton, M., Gennari, F., Kiplesund, S., Contreras, M., and Watts, C., ‘Prevention of violence against women and girls: what does the evidence say?’, *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 2015, pp. 1555-1566, <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61703-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61703-7)>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Messner, M., Greenberg, M. and Peretz, T., *Some Men: Feminist Allies and the Movement to End Violence Against Women*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015.

¹⁰ Flood, M. ‘Men’s Anti-violence Activism and the Construction of Gender-equitable Masculinities.’ In Carabi, A and Armengol, J. (Eds.) *Alternative Masculinities for a Changing World* (pp. 35-50), Palgrave Macmillan US, New York, 2014.

[I]t is inappropriate for men to take on leadership roles in violence prevention. Being an ally means having a supporting role in relation to campaigns under women's leadership rather than as leaders or equal partners. This is because of men's dominance and privilege and the structural gender inequalities within which men's violence takes place.¹¹

In other words, men are responsible for ensuring that their institutional privilege does not thwart true partnership with women and accepting women's leadership as foundational to being accountable to women and girls. In practice, this has not been realised in many male-involvement efforts which, instead of leveraging women's right organisations (WROs) and incorporating ideas within existing infrastructure, have established male-led institutions. As a result, a parallel system now exists of male engagement campaigns, programmes, organisations and networks that, although allied theoretically to feminist principles, stand largely independent of the women's movement.

A shift to male priorities and needs. Male involvement efforts are increasingly tackling issues beyond VAWG or women's rights.¹² Relatedly, there is an increasingly common discourse within this work about men as victims of patriarchy. For example, some groups have begun using the term 'gender-based violence' (GBV) to talk about violence against men and boys, reframing GBV away from an analysis of gender hierarchy as it informs VAWG and toward an analysis of hegemonic (patriarchal) masculinity as it influences violence against males. With other groups, this reframing can be more subtle, for example focusing on more comfortable change such

Box 1. Violence against Men Hijacking Violence against Women.

The discourse in Uganda on VAWG has changed dramatically over the past few years with the rise of new male engagement programming and male-led organisations working on gender and human rights. A reconceptualization of women's rights vis-à-vis "men's rights" has crept into government and civil society making it difficult to participate in a public meeting where gender equality or VAWG are addressed as legitimate problems. The pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction that it is not uncommon to hear prominent figures perpetuating anti-women sentiments. For example, in 2016, the Inspector General of Police made regular public pronouncements that shelters are needed for men and that the proposed Uganda Police Force one-stop centre for victims of violence must deal with the "epidemic of violence against men". This confused, confusing and increasingly dominant discourse has generated significant backlash against women-centred programmes, yet few male allies speak out about it.

¹¹ Pease, B., *Men as allies in preventing men's violence against women: Principles and practices for promoting accountability*, White Ribbon Australia, Sydney, 2017: <https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/WhiteRibbonResearchPaper_LR.pdf>.

¹² See the MenEngage Declaration for the Sexual Violence Research Conference: <<http://menengage.org/rio-declaration/>>.

as more gender equitable distribution of household labour or men as caregivers rather than challenging male dominance or violence. In so doing, this work supports a shift in the overarching frame for VAWG/GBV away from women and deconstructing gender hierarchies to men and their priorities. This sets back rather than advances VAWG work (see COFEM Series Paper 2 for further discussion of this issue).¹³

Further, framing men's experiences as patriarchal oppression 'reinvents patriarchy'. These analyses belie what oppression actually means and fail to acknowledge how males benefit from patriarchy.¹⁴ These efforts can equate men's experiences of violence, for example, to women's experiences of violence. This obscures the profound differences between VAWG and violence against men and boys – the nature and frequency of the violence, the primary aggressor, and the wider system of patriarchy. The feminist community does not refute the importance of addressing violence against men. However, it is problematic that when some groups undertake research and action on violence against men and boys, and/or shift into "male rights" work, the discourse on violence against men and boys is pitted in competition with and even compared to VAWG.¹⁵ This framing is both unhelpful and unethical.

Failure to transform patriarchy. Feminist activists have argued that men working on issues of VAWG must always acknowledge male privilege at *both* the individual and societal levels and understand that they are working to transform a system of inequality from which they benefit.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the framing of much male involvement work focuses solely on the individual and relational aspects of masculinity rather than engaging in more transformative work that challenges the fundamental assumptions upon which masculinities are constructed. For example, male engagement programs often point to the legitimacy and importance of women's rights within relational gender roles, i.e. women as mothers, wives, sisters, etc. This contributes to instrumentalising women's rights, and in effect assures male identity within the patriarchal structure.

A recent 16 Days of Activism campaign in Zambia, 'I care about her', encourages men to remember that a woman experiencing violence could be their daughter, sister, mother and called on men to be 'champions' for women.¹⁷ Such an approach is employed to appeal to men as


¹³ This community may not be the only driver of this shift, but they are a critically important one. See MenEngage, *Working with Men and Boy Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Forced Displacement*, 2012: <<http://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Working-With-Men-and-Boy-Survivors.pdf>> and MenEngage, Sonke, Promundo and UNFPA, *Sexual Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict: Engaging Men and Boys*, 2014: <<http://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/MenEngage-Advocacy-Brief-Sexual-Violence-in-Conflict-FINAL.pdf>>.

¹⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences. A/HRC/26/38, United Nations, New York, 28 May 2014. Available at: <<http://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/26/38>>.

¹⁵ Refugee Law Project and International Human Rights Law Clinic University of California Berkeley Law, 'Promoting Accountability for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Against Men: A comparative legal analysis of international and domestic laws relating to IDP and refugee men in Uganda.' *Refugee Law Project Working Paper* No. 24, 2013: <[https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/Sexual_Violence_Working_Paper_\(FINAL\)_130709.pdf](https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/Sexual_Violence_Working_Paper_(FINAL)_130709.pdf)>

¹⁶ Flood, M., 'Work with Men to End Violence against Women: A Critical Stocktake.' *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 17, 2015, 1-18: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1070435>>.

¹⁷ See <<http://icareaboutthecampaign.blogspot.ug/2015/05/village-headman-seeks-justice-for-his.html> retrieved August 29, 2017>.



protectors in their capacity as brothers, fathers or husbands, and fails to assert women's rights as inalienable human rights regardless of their relationship with men. For decades, feminists have invested considerable intellectual and political capital in asserting women's rights based on justice and equality rather than male largesse.

Implications

De-centring of women and girls. There is value in including men as partners in efforts to achieve women's rights and gender equality. There have been efforts by some male engagement actors and networks to establish accountability to the women's movement, including in leadership roles (e.g., as board members, senior staff, etc.) and as operational and strategic processes. However, the current conceptualisation, funding and execution of male engagement work requires deeper reflection and analysis. Approaches that fail to centre women and girls in advancing a transformative agenda of gender equality instead reproduce the dynamics of patriarchy, where women and girls are relegated from the role of agents of their own well-being, and are instead reliant on men. Such approaches clearly regress rather than enhance women's status and agency.

It is critical to recognise that women's participation can only be meaningful if the gender hierarchy that denies them this space and authority can be transformed.¹⁸ Male engagement without a political agenda erodes this already fragile space and crowds out women's movements and activists, particularly from the Global South. Among the most serious consequences of lacking a strong culture of accountability in this work is that it both fails to address patriarchy and reinforces the very power imbalance that leads to VAWG.

Increased investment in male involvement at the expense of women's equality. In the current geopolitical climate with surging nationalisms and fundamentalisms women's rights programming and organisations are under siege. Within this environment, it is even more essential to build on the success of the women's movement in creating progressive policy reforms and challenging regressive social and cultural norms.¹⁹ Rather than funding new actors or male involvement efforts that are unaligned with the women's movements, the emphasis for transformative change should be to analyse and use more proactively the existing evidence to build on processes and partnerships with gender transformative content prioritising women's organisations.

Lack of collaboration and coordination. Many women's rights activists feel that some of those working on male involvement are not accountable in any meaningful way to the women's movement while gaining credibility from association with the women's movement.

¹⁸ Domingo, P., O'Neil, T., and Foresti, M., 'Women's Participation in Peace and Security: Normative Ends, Political Means.' *ODI Briefing*, 88, 2014, pp. 1-6: <<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8961.pdf>>.

¹⁹ Htun, M., and Weldon, S., 'The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975–2005.' *American Political Science Review*, 106 (03), 2012, pp. 548-569: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0003055412000226>>.

If those engaged in the work with men to prevent VAWG are truly committed to the rhetoric of accountability, there must be genuine concessions, reflective engagement with the critique, bridge-building overtures to demonstrate good faith and accountability that moves beyond the individual and involves their own organisations and efforts in transformation.²⁰

Recommendations

- **Policy makers must promote female-centric and female-led framing of the issue, discourse, strategies and resources.** VAWG is fundamentally an injustice against women and girls; as such, the central protagonists for this cause must be women and girls.
- **Funders should invest in women’s rights organisations and ensure their work is not being usurped.** Funders must analyse their portfolios to ensure that male engagement groups are not usurping the role of WROs. They must also ensure that any male engagement work supported has practical, measurable accountability mechanisms to local women’s movement/ organisations.
- **Researchers should develop better indicators and monitoring systems to assess progress in male engagement work,** and place more emphasis on supporting social and structural changes, rather than the current dominant focus on attitudes and behaviours of individual men and boys.
- **Male allies must demonstrate good faith and speak out.** When there is a genuine critique advanced about the nature in which an ally, including male colleagues and partners, is undermining work to address VAWG, male engagement groups must dedicate energy and resources to meaningfully engage and challenge these critiques. Accountability should not be a responsibility of WROs and women’s movements.
- **Feminist VAWG community needs to be clearer, vocal and united** about what we want from the men and boys’ community, i.e. to frame what we envisage as effective male involvement that will help advance a feminist agenda and accountability.

²⁰ Meer, S., *Struggles for Gender Equality: Reflections on the place of men and men’s organisations*, Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, Cape Town, 2011: http://www.osisa.org/sites/default/files/sup_files/open_debate_2_-_reflections_on_the_place_of_men_and_mens_organisations_in_the_struggle_for_gender_equality.pdf.

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