

# Report: Policy Seminar on Men and Gender Equality, 6 December 2016

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## Purpose of the seminar

The Government Equalities Office (GEO) has taken a number of steps over the last few years to engage men in actions promoting gender equality. We hosted an academic seminar on the issue in 2014 (the report on which can be found [here](#)) and have generally focused on actions by men who are business leaders to create inclusive environments where women can thrive alongside their male peers.

This small, high-level seminar will inform the next phase of GEO's work programme, specifically aiming to engage men and boys in preventing violence against women and girls.

Participants shared their experiences of what works in engaging men and boys and provided insights on key challenges, discussing possible strategies and interventions.

By bringing the group together, we hope to establish an informal group of experts in this area who work closely with government to provide advice and act as a sounding board for future policies.

## Participants

1. Rebecca Asher, Author of 'Man Up: Boys, Men and Breaking the Male Rules'
2. David Bartlett, Chief Executive, White Ribbon Campaign
3. Rebecca Collins, Executive Director, The GREAT Initiative
4. Michael Conroy, Development Co-Ordinator, A Call To Men UK
5. Lyndsey Dearlove, Violence Against Women and Girls Manager, Hestia UK
6. Michael Flood, Professor, Wollongong University
7. Peter Grant, Co-Director, RESTORED
8. Chris Green, Founder, White Ribbon Campaign UK

9. Jessie Kirk, Policy Advisor, Violence Against Women and Girls Team  
Department for International Development
10. Lana McDonagh, Coordinator, Ditch The Label
11. Tina Miller, Professor, Oxford Brookes University
12. Hilary Spencer, Director, Government Equalities Office
13. Tara Kaufmann, Head of Gender Representation, Government Equalities  
Office
14. Andreas Heraclides, Policy Adviser, Government Equalities Office

## Report

The seminar started with a round of introductions and opening remarks from the Minister for Women, Equalities and Early Years, Caroline Dinenage MP. Michael Flood, global expert on masculinities and gender equality, gave a presentation based on his research findings and David Bartlett, Chief Executive of White Ribbon Campaign UK, talked about some of the key challenges in this area, kicking off the first part of the conversation. The discussion that followed focused on three themes: early years' interventions; the role of schools and, involving adult men in efforts to promote gender equality.

### Presentation by Michael Flood

Professor Flood first set out why it is necessary to engage with men if we are to make progress on gender equality: men are gendered and they, too, need gender equality. As the other half of the population which is usually in positions of power, we need to involve them to change inequalities. However, it is still the case that these inequalities are largely sustained by them.

He pointed out that there have been improvements in this area:

- More and more community organisations are getting involved and champions of this agenda have become better at networking and sharing their knowledge;
- Interest in this agenda goes beyond the community level and includes change in organisations as well as policy development;
- Areas of intervention have grown and now include VAWG; HIV/AIDS; education; care;
- Methodologies exploring this area have become more sophisticated;
- Diversities among men are now acknowledged and gender-transformative approaches are recognised.

Nevertheless, scaling up of one-off projects and initiatives is needed to address the social and structural determinants of gender inequalities.

Regarding the effectiveness of interventions in this area, Professor Flood said that evaluations of such programmes are rare, however three important reviews of published studies point to the following characteristics of effective programmes. Firstly, they are informed, adopting an appropriate theoretical framework and a theory of change and addressing key risk factors or determinants of the issue. They are also designed to be gender transformative. Secondly, effective interventions are comprehensive, using multiple strategies, in multiple settings and at multiple levels. Thirdly, they engage participants through effective learning and teaching methods and have sufficient intensity and duration. Face-to-face education is a good example. Lastly, interventions that work are relevant to the communities and contexts in which they are delivered.

Michael Flood identified three ways in which Governments can promote this work:

- a. By addressing men in policy, taking into account the specific ways it will affect them and whether any measures must be put in place so that they are not disadvantaged or neglected;
- b. By setting standards in the engagement of men and boys, for example for school programmes aimed at promoting gender equality;
- c. By building the capacity of organisations active in this area.

### **Key challenges**

David Bartlett kicked off this conversation about some of the key challenges around talking with men and boys about violence and respectful relationships; toxic masculinities and anti-feminism; and working with the women's sector.

#### *Talking with men and boys about violence and respectful relationships*

Participants agreed that while a large majority of men are in favour of gender equality, taking responsibility for the current state of gender relations is essential for progress to be made. Some indicated that many men feel uncomfortable about conversations around gender equality and that gender and feminism are still difficult terms for men. The group also recognised gender based violence disproportionately affects women and girls, yet we need to engage men and boys as victims and survivors of violence and abuse too.

While it is not always obvious how best to engage men and boys in the conversation around gender equality and gender-based violence, some 'entry points' were identified:

- explaining how gender inequality affects men and boys and how it shapes their role in society;
- discussing the impact that inequalities or gender-based violence have had on men and women who are related to the other person;
- raising questions about social justice and making the case for building alliances (between genders based on respect for what is different).

Stakeholders also stressed the importance of language used by policy makers and service providers, especially in communication campaigns. It usually targets potential victims, aiming to make them change their behaviour to protect themselves, rather than teach and give people the opportunity to discuss healthy relationships. Some also suggested that the Government needs to address cultural differences when designing programmes promoting gender equality.

#### *Toxic masculinities*

The group briefly discussed what is often termed as toxic masculinities, i.e. specific behaviours by men that do not promote gender equality and are also often the cause of unhealthy relationships between men themselves. It is easy to point to violent behaviour and aggression as the key determinants of toxic masculinities. However, toxic masculinities also manifest in behaviours that are not readily recognisable as harmful. On the contrary, some of them are seen as desirable male traits. A few examples are: risk-taking, the fear of vulnerability, the unnecessary displays of

strength and competence, assertiveness over other men and women. This often leads to cases where violence is not even regarded as such or is seen as an acceptable display of masculinity. Strongly rejecting femininity, a sense of entitlement, and a continuous pursuit for money, power and status can also be indicators of harmful masculinities.

Participants agreed that parents have a primary role to play in shaping children's views of masculinity. Fathers, for example, can see that their children are exposed to different, competing visions of masculinity. High-quality research is needed (rather than randomised control trials) to understand what interventions are appropriate and what can effectively shape positive masculinities.

### *Working with the women's sector*

The group also identified some of the concerns of the women's sector when engaging with men and trying to involve them in campaigning. These included fears that male activists would want to take control of the process and behave in a patronising way. There also appears to be some distrust of men among women campaigners and a concern that their participation will dilute the feminist orientation of the movement.

While there are many women's organisations who have male members, there was broad agreement that a lot more must be done by the third sector to involve men who have the potential to become agents of change. Men and boys are crucial partners for preventing as well as responding to violence against women and girls. Third sector activity in this area will therefore ensure that more men are reached and the messages around equality are amplified.

The Government should also play a role in encouraging and facilitating this debate. Officials noted the Government is committed to working with and harnessing the effectiveness of women's rights organisations, civil society organisations, and coalitions and networks of actors, all with a strong commitment to gender equality and advancing women's social, economic, political and legal rights.

### **Engaging men in children's early years**

Some attendees suggested that fatherhood provides a great opportunity to engage with men. While women are almost universally considered as the primary carers of children, many of them wish to play an equal role in their upbringing, including caring for them at the ages of 0-3. However, some of the participants observed that fathers realise soon after their baby is born that care is more demanding than they thought and it is also undervalued. In addition, there appears to be a social cost associated with ideas of a loss of masculinity for men who dedicate time to their children or who are professional carers. Such perceptions can act as barriers to men's involvement in children's care<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Levtoy R, van der Gaag N, Greene M, Kaufman M, and Barker G (2015). State of the World's Fathers: A MenCare Advocacy Publication. Washington,

It is therefore important to make the case for men's care of children: the World Health Organization has conducted research that demonstrates that increased involvement can benefit them, as well as women and children, in better health<sup>2</sup>. The research carried out by MenCare<sup>3</sup> and EMERGE were also referred to as useful resources.

The group noted that men are generally a lot less prepared to deal with parenthood than women and little support is offered to them for this purpose. Maternal and child healthcare services should be set up to be inclusive to men and ensure they are active in reaching out to them, as well producing resources in the same way they often do for the mother. Training must be provided to staff, including gender awareness training, which, while not taking attention away from the mother, will effectively involve fathers. This will help give them a better understanding of what will be needed in the first few months and years of the life of their child so that they are better prepared and feel less excluded by relevant services. It will also help address entrenched societal beliefs that women must be the primary caretakers, that they are better in caring than men or that men do not have much to gain from sharing family responsibilities with women.

Regarding related government policies, stakeholders mentioned that mandatory paternity leave, i.e. leave that cannot be shared between mothers and fathers, has succeeded in Scandinavian countries in involving fathers in early years' children care where other policies have failed. There are therefore merits in considering its adoption in the UK.

Lastly, some of the respondents mentioned the importance of political will and appropriate funding for relevant programmes to achieve impactful and sustained change.

### **The role of schools and teachers**

A lot of the discussion in the seminar focused on schools' approaches to sex and healthy relationships education. There are concerns among stakeholders that if these are not discussed in the classroom and schools do not foster environments that are hostile to disrespectful behaviour among students, including gendered bullying and harassment, a great opportunity to promote healthy social norms and gender relations is missed. Very importantly, the prevention of violence is likely to be most effective when targeted to young people when their perceptions of acceptable behaviour are being shaped and before any offending behaviour occurs.

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DC: Promundo, Rutgers, Save the Children, Sonke Gender Justice, and the MenEngage Alliance. [https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/state-of-the-worlds-fathers\\_12-june-2015.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/state-of-the-worlds-fathers_12-june-2015.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Fatherhood and Health Outcomes in Europe, WHO, 2007

[http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/69011/E91129.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/69011/E91129.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The 2015 State of the World's Fathers report, cited above, can be found here:

[https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/state-of-the-worlds-fathers\\_12-june-2015.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/state-of-the-worlds-fathers_12-june-2015.pdf) and EMERGE resources are posted here: <http://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/>

Children's increasing exposure to pornography was also expressed as a worrying issue, and one that should perhaps be dealt with in the context of sex education. Many campaigners fear that it promotes the sexualisation of children, creates false expectations among young people and even normalises violent behaviour.

Stakeholders do recognise that teachers are inundated with guidance on different school subjects and that non-academic requirements, such as safeguarding and reporting duties can be daunting. However, there seems to be agreement on the necessity for the adoption, by schools, of a whole school approach to healthy relationships and sex education, harassment and gendered bullying. In practice, this will involve schools:

- having in place policies to ensure adequate responses to and reporting of incidents of sexual harassment in the school environment;
- teaching age-appropriate sex and relationship education using informed and up-to-date, high-quality learning resources; and
- ensuring teachers are well trained to teach this often delicate subject but also well equipped to deal with incidents of inappropriate behaviour by students and staff. Fostering the right culture and developing a helpful vocabulary for use by teachers as well as strategic engagement with teaching staff were all mentioned as key actions. Indeed, the role of teacher training and teacher training colleges and their involvement has been highlighted as crucial.

Some of the seminar participants also pointed to international evidence and research that suggest single component approaches, such as one-off seminars and workshops in schools that are not part of an overall approach, are not effective. Furthermore, many of the violence prevention projects that were successful were deemed to be so because of the effective involvement of men, among other reasons.

The group also agreed that any evidence produced from effective schools' programmes in this area should be collected and shared to facilitate mutual learning.

### **Involving adult men in activities promoting gender equality**

The last part of the discussion on men and gender equality focused on ways to advance the participation of men in activities promoting gender equality and help them take responsibility and drive change. Many participants stressed the importance of high-profile and visible role models that ordinary men can relate to. They pointed out that while a significant number of senior corporate executives have been reinforcing positive messages about gender equality, they do not always take action themselves – for example, they do not take parental leave or work flexibly.

The Australian Male Champions of Change initiative<sup>4</sup> has been mentioned as a good example of men driving change in their organisations. The group's members are 30 leading male figures from business, government and the military. In addition to acting as agents of change for their organisations, share experiences and hold each other accountable for actions they have (or have not yet) taken. They also encourage the

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<sup>4</sup> More information on the initiative can be found here: <http://malechampionsofchange.com/>

development of other groups and provide them with the resources they need to drive change. The initiative is highly visible in Australia and its impact and resources are well documented, which are essential elements of success for this type of initiatives.

One of the seminar participants noted that in today's gig economy, where employment is frequently offered on a temporary and/or contracted basis, it can be more challenging bringing about change to organisations and their staff and interventions must take that into account.

Some stakeholders also expressed concerns that companies often see and treat diversity and inclusion programmes as tick-box exercises. They said that these employers having no real appetite to use such programmes to create a fair and inclusive working environment where staff can succeed independently of gender or other characteristics. They have therefore cautioned that the gender pay gap regulations that are coming into force later in the year may not bring a fundamental change to how organisations approach equality. Companies and Government must work together to ensure private and public sector organisations use this opportunity to take the necessary steps alongside implementation of the regulations and act as champions of workplace equality.

### Next steps

Government Equalities Office Director Hilary Spencer explained that the seminar report will be circulated and will inform the Government's programme in this area. GEO's aim is to ensure that the policy seminar marks the start of a conversation with key stakeholders, including participants and other stakeholders concerned.

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