

Engaging boys and men

Lessons from the Girl Power Programme 2011–2015



Girl Power Alliance



Engaging boys and men

PROGRAMMES THAT TRY to improve the lives of women and girls often focus only on the female half of humanity. That is sometimes necessary: women and girls face many problems, ranging from rape to forced marriage to limits in the types of work they are allowed to do. They are often neglected in government budgets and ignored in policies. Laws to protect them are often not implemented well.

But many such programmes miss out a vital piece of the puzzle: they ignore boys and men. The result: the programmes are not as effective as they might be, and they may even be counterproductive. If girls become more visible and vocal in society and within their homes and families, boys may feel discriminated and threatened. This is not a trivial issue: reactions to changes can be powerful and violent.

This happened in several projects under the Girl Power Programme. A project in Nicaragua, for example, gave schoolgirls training in life skills, and tried to empower them to say “no” if their boyfriends wanted sex when they did not. That backfired: some boys reacted violently and forced themselves on the girls.

Why involve boys?

Many donors, policymakers and NGOs do not see why they should spend money on boys and men in programmes aimed at girls. Here are some reasons we believe involving boys and men is necessary:

- **To get their support.** Many programmes would not be possible without the permission or active support of men. A girl may need her father’s permission to take part in after-school activities – or even to attend school.
- **To keep girls safe.** Programmes that cater solely to girls may leave boys hostile and resentful. They may feel threatened if girls and women challenge existing norms. For girls to be safe, it is necessary to avoid or deal with negative and violent reactions.
- **To improve understanding.** When boys and men understand the goals and methods of girls’ programmes, they are less likely to see them as a threat and instead realise how everyone will benefit. Increasing their understanding can turn such hostility into active backing.
- **To influence their behaviour.** Boys and men are the perpetrators of most violence against girls and women. Involving them in girls’ programmes can help reduce such threats. Being part of a girls’ project may also help boys and men to shun other risky behaviours, such as drug taking, unsafe sex and joining gangs.
- **To increase effectiveness.** Boys tend to listen to other boys, while men can act as role models for other men. Many opinion leaders in society are male. Their open support for a project can help change broader attitudes in society. Instead of being treated as the problem, boys and men can become part of the solution.

Key messages

Leaving boys and men out of programmes that aim to improve girls’ welfare reduces their effectiveness and may be counterproductive.

The best way to involve boys and men **depends on the circumstances**. Sometimes it is sufficient merely to inform or consult them; at other times they may be more closely involved or even co-lead.

For some types of activities (such as lessons on menstruation), it is best to have **separate groups** for girls and boys. For others (such as theatre and media work), mixed groups are best.

If the initial project plan does not include boys, it may be possible to **adjust the activities** to involve them in suitable ways.

“While some men are part of the problem, all men are part of the solution.”

– Michael Flood,
Men and Masculinities

Four ways to involve boys

Programmes aimed at girls may involve boys and men in several ways (Figure 1):

- **Exclusion.** The programme concerns itself exclusively with girls; boys are not involved in activities. **Example:** Girl's club at school.
- **Separation.** The programme holds separate but parallel activities for girls and boys. **Example:** Separate competitions at sports events.
- **Integration.** The boys take part in some, but not all, of the activities. **Example:** Lessons on sexuality for both boys and girls, but special sessions for girls on menstruation and pregnancy.
- **Inclusion.** Boys and girls take part equally in all activities. **Example:** Theatre group involving both boys and girls.

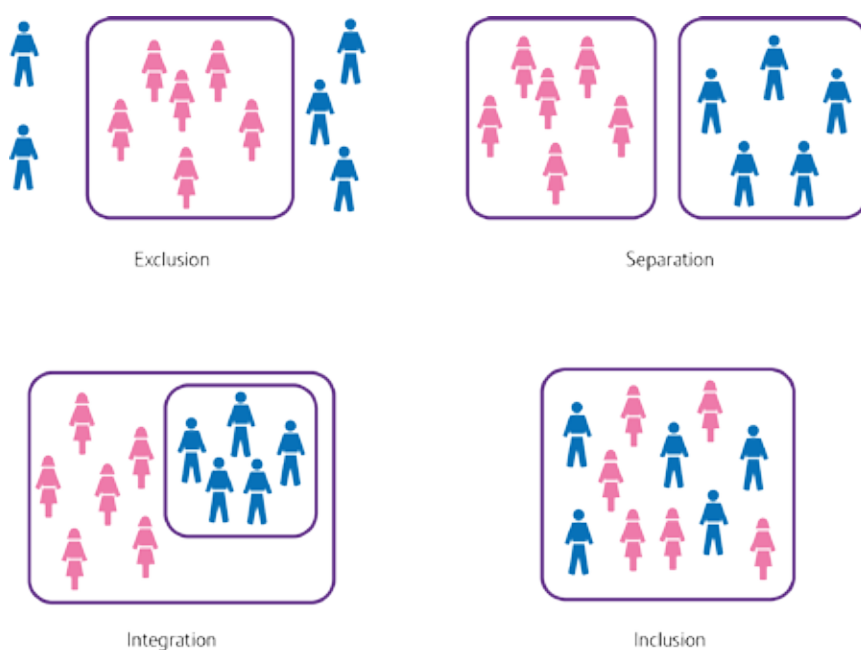


Figure 1. Four ways of involving (or not involving) boys in programmes aimed at girls

Box 1. Girl Power

The Girl Power Programme (2011–2015) fought the injustice that girls and young women face every day. It did so by trying to ensure that they have equal rights and opportunities. It worked in 10 countries: Bangladesh, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Sierra Leone and Zambia. Local organizations in each country implemented the activities.

Girl Power focused on four main themes:

- **Protection** against violence and abuse
- Access to post-primary **education**
- Socio-political **participation**
- **Economic empowerment** of girls and young women.

The programme was supported by the Dutch government and was coordinated by the Girl Power Alliance, a group of six Dutch non-governmental organisations.



Including boys in discussions on “girls’ issues” has many benefits.

Levels of engagement

Boys and men can be engaged to varying degrees in girls' projects. The Girl Power Programme worked at various levels.

Inform and consult. In many communities, informing and consulting men is a necessary first step. Girls will only go to school if their fathers approve, and women only join income projects if their husbands agree. In one project in Bangladesh, it was no small feat to get fathers to allow their daughters to participate in karate training.

Many of our projects taught boys and men about girls' rights. Others launched media and public awareness campaigns to challenge norms and behaviours that affect girls and women.

Engage. Many of our projects went a step further by involving boys and men, for example in community-protection groups and school-management committees. And Girl Power helped civil society organisations to practise what they preach. These organisations developed gender policies and now work in a more gender-sensitive way.

Collaborate and co-lead. Men also took on more active roles. After participating in community sessions, some took it upon themselves to convince other men to support their wives, sisters and daughters to go to school, attend training, and take part in sports or other activities. Some projects encouraged men to perform such roles, or got older women and mothers-in-law to persuade their sons to manage activities. In Zambia, several chiefs became active and powerful champions against early marriages. They openly speak out against the practice and intervene when such marriages are planned in their areas. In 274 villages in Bangladesh, local leaders, the police and the civil registrars declared their villages to be "child-marriage free" and actively collaborate to prevent and dissolve illegal marriages.

It is not always easy to engage boys and men in programmes aimed at girls. Common problems include:

- **Boys and men may fear the impact on girls.** They may fear the girls will get too confident or arrogant, or behave in culturally inappropriate ways. Fathers may be concerned that nobody will want to marry their daughters.
- **Boys may not want to be associated with activities that are seen as "girly".** Projects must be designed so they are attractive to boys, and must support boys and men who are willing to stand up for girls and young women so they can deal with peer pressure and resistance. It may be better to label a project as aimed at youth rather than girls.
- **Organisations lack the skills to deal with boys.** Organisations that focus on girls' and women's issues are not used to dealing with boys and men. They lack the necessary knowhow and experience.

Many Girl Power projects worked with boys and men right from the start. Others started out working only with girls and young women, but when they reviewed their progress, they realised that they would be more effective if they also included boys. In some cases, it was the girls themselves who suggested that boys be involved.

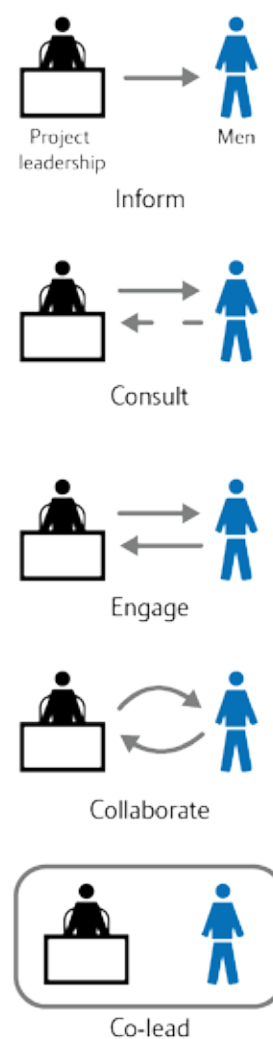


Figure 2. Five levels of engagement

"Please also include our men and boys in your activities so that they may also learn from these trainings, until they are not sensitised on gender based violence and equal rights, they will not allow us to come in sessions and trainings"

– Girl (16), Vehari district, Pakistan

Box 2. The “Brigadistas” agents of change programme in Bolivia

School children in El Alto, a poor and rather violent city near La Paz, Bolivia’s capital, look forward to an occasional break from their regular lessons. That is when they get a visit from the “Brigadistas” – a group of young people who perform plays and organise sports events.

The performances and events carry a message: they draw attention to sexual and reproductive rights, violence, and other issues that concern girls and boys.

The Brigadistas are about 300 young men and women, aged 14 to 20 years, organised into an association that arranges the school visits and manages their other activities. They undergo a year of training on sexual and reproductive

rights, education, political participation and violence. They learn how to communicate these topics through sports, theatre, street art and video. About 120 graduate each year: about 80 girls and 40 boys.

The original idea of Gegoria Apaza, the Girl Power NGO running the project, was to work just with girls. The idea was that they would then pass on their new knowledge and skills to other young people, their male and female friends, and especially their boyfriends. But that ran into problems: boys and young men in Bolivia who see themselves as macho often reject ideas that come from girls. In some cases, the boys even broke up

their relationships. The Girl Power team decided to expand the programme to cover boys too.

That succeeded. The male Brigadistas are an integral part of the group, and they act as valuable sources of information and ideas for their peers, as well as vital role models and an alternative to the dominant macho culture.

The Brigadistas have had a much larger impact than just on a few schools. For instance, in 2012–2013 they helped formulate Law 342, which aims to ensure that women and girls can enjoy a life free of violence.

Approaches

We used various approaches to engage men and boys in our projects. The most effective approach depended on many factors: the focus of the programme, the local culture and the particular situation. We found the following to be useful.

Training and awareness

We put a lot of emphasis on raising the awareness among boys of girls’ issues, and in making sure they have the right skills. We aimed to help boys find the courage to speak up and act against harmful social norms, and to ensure that they are seen as role models among their peers and in the community. We held individual and group meetings with boys, and trained groups and committees on gender issues. We gave certificates to the boys who took part in the training to express appreciation for their engagement.

Safe spaces for interaction

In some cultures, girls and boys live such separate lives that they do not know what acceptable behaviour with the opposite sex is. Research by the Girl Power member International Child Development Initiatives revealed that this is an important reason behind harassment of girls in Pakistan. By creating safe spaces and organising culturally acceptable mixed activities, we gave girls and boys an opportunity to meet, talk and interact positively. Such activities included debating competitions, quizzes, song festivals and theatre (Box 2).

Theatre and media

Theatre and media perform two roles:

- **They offer a safe space** for boys and girls to interact (see above) and learn useful skills such as planning, management, scriptwriting, acting and media production.
- **They carry a message** to a wider audience. Because the actors, interviewers and producers are young, the audience is more likely to be receptive than with similar programmes produced by older people. They can discuss gender issues and taboos in a way that is entertaining and non-threatening.



Street theatre on child marriages in Vehari, Pakistan

Theatre can be especially effective in challenging gender stereotypes, especially if boys are given female roles and vice-versa.

In seven countries – Bangladesh, Bolivia, Ghana, Nepal, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone and Zambia – weekly **news broadcasts** produced by adolescents reached large audiences. The programmes sparked lively discussions on topics that are important to boys as well as girls, such as teenage pregnancies, education for girls and relationships. In Nicaragua, the programme included a regular item on girls. In many countries, **discussion programmes** on the radio attracted millions of listeners and had an important influence on attitudes and opinions.

Sports

Sport is not only an effective tool for empowering girls; it can also be a great way to engage boys. **Mixed-gender sports activities** teach boys and girls to cooperate with each other in a cohesive team. Female coaches and team captains can help break gender stereotypes and demonstrate to boys that girls and women can be leaders.

Boys and men who support female athletes and sports teams in their community send a powerful statement, increasing the status of the players and encouraging more girls to join.

Schools

Schools are key to promoting girls' welfare for many reasons. A decent education opens up the way to careers and life choices for young women. In many societies schools are one of the few "safe spaces" where boys and girls can meet. Schools therefore have vast potential for changing attitudes in society as a whole. If girls' empowerment is included in the curriculum and the boys are exposed to good examples and supportive teachers' attitudes, they grow up with alternative, positive and less discriminatory images of both girls and boys.

Leaders and role models

We sought allies within the community who could help abolish harmful practices and promote positive attitudes. These included school teachers, religious and traditional leaders, and influential elders.

"We were thinking that you are teaching our daughters and wives against us, but you are not doing this. I will send women of my home to attend your trainings and sessions"

– Father (58), Chakwal district, Pakistan



Girls and boys discussing with "okada" (motorbike taxi) drivers in Sierra Leone. These are known for seducing school girls, often resulting in teenage pregnancies.

Men's and boys' groups

We formed **men's action groups** to identify, report and refer cases of sexual and other abuse against girls, and to help to prevent violence against them.

Similar **boys' groups** worked with girls to raise awareness on girls' education, early marriage, teenage pregnancies and other issues that affect both girls and boys (Box 3).

Girls and women

Of course, we also involved girls and women in our work with boys and men. We trained them how to negotiate with their husbands, boyfriends and fathers for a new, more equal and safer set of relations, and for new opportunities.

We also brought in older women: the girls' mothers. They can help break the cycle of oppression, for example by raising their sons to do some of the household chores.

Government

We worked at various levels to incorporate boys and men into our girl-oriented programmes. All the organisations in the Girl Power Programme trained staff responsible for children's issues about girls' rights and services for girls, and how to engage boys. The trainees included police, teachers, and health and social workers. We also worked with ministers, policymakers and administrators at different levels of government to advocate for new legislation and policies that take girls' issues into account, and to ensure that they are enforced. These activities aimed to improve services and policies for girls, but they also helped to raise awareness among thousands of male professionals on girls' issues and strengthened their engagement with girls' rights.

Civil society

Organisations that focus on girls' rights do not necessarily know how best to engage with boys. We built the capacity of our own organisations and our partners to do so. In Nicaragua, the University of Managua developed a course on boys' engagement for partner organisations. In Sierra Leone, our partners trained trainers; as a result, nearly 18,000 boys and more than 700, mostly male, traditional leaders are now actively promoting the rights of girls and young women.

We linked girls' and women's organisations to mostly male-dominated government institutions. For example, in Bolivia we supported boys and girls to bring their ideas and opinions on their own future to the attention of presidential candidates. In Nepal, we worked with more than 90 women's cooperatives and thousands of savings-and-loan associations, many of whom stepped up to their local government and successfully demanded attention and budget for girls' activities.

We tried to be as practical as possible by making use of existing materials. For example, we adapted a manual, **Champions of change**, developed by Plan International in Latin America. Girl Power projects in Asia and Africa used this methodology to train and

Box 3. Boys support groups in Sierra Leone

"Boys support groups" have reached thousands of people in Sierra Leone. Girl Power projects trained groups of boys in eight communities in the Western Area (around the capital, Freetown) how to discuss gender equality with their peers, families and neighbours. Together with girls clubs, the boys organise meetings and campaigns on girls' education, teenage pregnancy and other topics.

During the Ebola outbreak in 2014, schools in the area were closed for eight months. When they reopened, many parents kept their children at home, fearing infection; many schools

were in very bad condition. This was yet another barrier to education for many adolescent girls. The boys support groups and girls clubs together visited markets, fairs and community gatherings to convince parents to send their daughters to school.

The boys support groups and girls clubs try to attract attention in various ways. They develop their own messages, and use megaphones and posters to announce events. They combine serious topics with songs, music and football matches – all involving both girls and boys.

"Girl Power will make the whole Bolivian population better! That is why I join this project."

– Leonardo Mateo (13), Girl Power project managed by Pico, Bolivia

support 14- to 18-year-old boys to encourage their friends to challenge harmful gender norms and practices.

The members of the Girl Power Alliance (the Dutch organizations that initiated the Girl Power Programme) joined with like-minded organisations, movements and experts to spread the word on boys' engagement. Meetings and discussions with policymakers and donors helped to shift minds. We included messages on boys' engagement in all our reports, newsletters, press releases, magazines and campaigns.

Recommendations

- **Do it!** Boys and men are a vital element in achieving lasting changes for girls and women. Programmes that focus on girls should consider how best to involve boys.
- **Create spaces** where boys and girls can interact but where the girls and their parents are confident that the girls will be safe.
- **What works depends on the situation.** There is no one size that fits all. For example, mixed sports can engage boys and empower girls, but in some countries, girls and women who do sport in public risk harassment and aggression. There, separate, indoor sports may be better for girls. Similarly, while joint sessions on rights and gender roles are a good idea, including boys in discussions on menstruation or sexual violence may not work.
- **Find allies.** There is much experience and knowledge out there, and there is much to gain from the support from powerful players at different levels: other organisations, government institutions, researchers, the media. We can do more together than we can alone.
- **Engage leaders** who are influential in the community. They include teachers, chiefs and activists.
- **Be creative.** Explore new ideas. For example, how about looking for opportunities for men and women to start businesses together? Or involving boys in making decisions on girl projects? Can we find role models to join our cause – international celebrities, local politicians, or successful businesswomen?
- **Learn from experience,** and scale up what works. Projects should take the time to reflect and keep track of progress, challenges and failures, and to share their successes and lessons with others.

Resources

MenEngage. An alliance of NGOs working together with men and boys to promote gender equality: menengage.org/resource

Mobilising men. Tools, studies and lessons from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex: unfpa.org/publications/mobilising-men-practice

Men, masculinities, and changing power. A discussion paper on involving men in gender equality: unfpa.org/resources/men-masculinities-and-changing-power

Engaging men. Plan International's "Champions of Change" programme: plan-international.org/engaging-men.

The Girl Power Alliance

- Child Helpline International
- Defence for Children-ECPAT
- Free Press Unlimited
- International Child Development Initiatives
- Plan Netherlands
- Women Win

tinyurl.com/ppzueun (in Dutch)

Lessons from the Girl Power Programme 2011–2015

Briefs in this series

- Empowering girls: Learning what works
- Making child protection systems work better
- Engaging boys and men
- Helping girls get organised
- Building alliances on girls' issues

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