

Promoting Male Responsibility for Gender Equality

**Summary Report of Research from
Bangladesh, India and Vietnam**

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August 2006

Introduction

How do men define masculinity? How do men perceive their role in the family and in reproductive health? Are men (and women) really open to the concept of gender equality? This report presents a summary of results from research on gender equality from three countries: Bangladesh, India, and Vietnam.

While vast differences in the conditions of the sexes, in both perception and reality, exist between the three countries included in this report, those differences themselves may prove educational in our work on gender equality. On various measures of women's status, South Asia lags far behind Vietnam, yet women in Vietnam hardly enjoy equality with men. That is, achieving nearly universal education for women and better access to jobs and political positions will not necessarily, as the Vietnam experience suggests, mean that men are willing to help relieve women's household burdens, or to treat women as equals.

Given the greater power men have in household decision-making and in society, men's involvement in promoting gender equality is critical, yet much current work addressing gender issues focuses on women. This report, as part of a three-year, three-country gender program, focuses on the potential involvement of men in working towards greater gender equality.

The research collected in this volume consists of:

A survey, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions undertaken in ten locations in eight districts of Bangladesh on the perceived worth of women, the acceptability of violence against women, and perceptions of a positive marital relationship;

- ✿ A survey of married men and women in a slum in westernmost India on ideas, practices, and level of knowledge/awareness regarding reproductive health, reproductive rights, and gender equality;
- ✿ A survey of fathers, mothers, and grown sons in a rural area of Vietnam on the roles and responsibilities of men and women in the household, in productive labor, and in reproductive health; and
- ✿ Qualitative research with fathers, mothers, and grown sons in urban and rural Vietnam on the views of people of different sexes and ages about gender roles.

The research reveals many similar findings across the three countries, including men's reluctance to play a significant role in reproductive health, childcare or housework, and the belief of both men and women that men's key roles are in income generation and social relations. Possibilities for, and obstacles to, greater gender equality emerge from each of the studies, making it clear that, in both research and programming, much remains to be done.

While this report highlights many problems and difficulties faced by men and women in sharing responsibilities for housework, income earning, and reproductive health, it also offers many suggestions for interventions.

We hope this report will prove useful to people in Bangladesh, India, and Vietnam, and elsewhere, as they seek to better understand gender issues generally and the role of men in gender equality specifically. An understanding of current roles and beliefs can help to promote positive change, by countering negative beliefs and encouraging positive ones about the role of men.

For more information about HealthBridge's program to promote male responsibility for gender equality, or for the full version of this research report, please visit our website: www.healthbridge.ca or contact our Regional Director, Debra Efroymsen, debra@healthbridge.ca.

Executive summary

The research in Bangladesh focused on violence against women and women's perceived worth. The research in India focused on reproductive health issues, and in Vietnam on both reproductive health and common conceptions of masculinity. Due to the intricacies of understanding people's perception of men's roles, a separate qualitative study was conducted in Vietnam to complement the survey that was more focused on reproductive health.

Main findings by country:

Bangladesh

Men and women in Bangladesh condemn violence against women in general, but believe that it is acceptable as a disciplinary measure in many specific cases. Bangladeshi women feel undervalued, and themselves fail to value the work they perform, despite long hours carrying out essential housework and childcare. Men and women believe that men should be involved in childcare, but it is unclear what form that involvement takes. While both men and women dream of more harmonious relationships with their spouses, with disputes being resolved through communication rather than fists, few people can imagine how such a relationship could exist in marriage.

India

For residents of a slum community in India, illiteracy and intense poverty are facts of life. Contraception, rather than being perceived as a key to improving one's situation, is feared as unsafe. Men play a limited role in reproductive issues, and are far more likely than women to spend their money on themselves rather than their family members. While people state that child marriage is wrong, the practice is common in the community. Women believe that their husbands have the right to beat them. While most men say they do not beat their wives, most wives report being beaten.

Vietnam: qualitative research

Men and women share stereotyped ideas about the sexes, with men considered to be the earners of income while women are expected to take care of housework and

children. Women express dissatisfaction with sex, men with their wives' inability to share in their problems and frustrations. Both women and men fear gender equality as a threat to their own position, and regard male contraception negatively. While some women encourage men to engage in housework, men report being actively discouraged from domestic tasks by other significant women in their lives.

Vietnam: quantitative research

While people were receptive to the idea of women engaging in paid work, there was much resistance to men being involved in housework; this suggests that gender equality will result in a greater burden on women, if also in greater opportunities. Men and women lack information on contraception, and prefer mass media to personal communication for information on reproductive health.

While different issues arose in each country, many common themes and needs also emerged. Although it is far more common for women to engage in paid work in Vietnam than in either Bangladesh or India, women are perceived in all three countries mainly as undervalued housewives, and in all three countries the main role of men is perceived to be financial and social rather than domestic. Both limited inclination for and resistance to men's increased involvement in reproductive health, housework and childcare emerge, and similar programs may prove effective in all three countries.

While indicating the extent of the problems to be addressed, the research also raises many hopes for improvement, particularly by recruiting men to work with women for a more gender-equal society in which all members benefit.

The Role of Men in Improving Husband-Wife Relations, Bangladesh

--Buddhadeb Biswas, Shakila Ruma, and Debra Efroymson¹
WBB Trust and HealthBridge

Introduction

Women are frequently the victims of violence at the hands of their husbands. Primary obstacles to reducing violence and improving women's rights include reluctance on the part of men to change their behavior and to incorporate women into decision-making. It is unlikely that we will achieve significant improvements in women's status without also working towards more positive male roles and behaviors; yet most organizations focusing on gender work mostly or exclusively with women.

Women have very little decision-making power in Bangladeshi families; they are also not given opportunities to express their views. It is thus not realistic to expect that men will grant women the right to make decisions or to voice opinions simply because women have become more aware of their right to do so. It is critical to work with men to prepare them to accept a full and equal role for women in the family and society. Such a role would actually improve men's situation, rather than take away from their own power or rights. The research presented in this report looks at the

¹ Research conducted by: WBB Trust, Save the Coastal People (SCOP), MultiTask, Young Power in Social Action (YPSA), Shahid Nazrul Sriti Sangho (NSS), Bangladesh Integrated Community Development (BICD), Sylhet Jubo Academy, Nowzowan, Service of Helping In-land of Poor Agency (Shipa), PULSE, and Chadpur Community Development Shangstha (CCDS).

potential for male involvement in reducing violence against women and in increasing gender equality.

Research objectives

The focus of the research was how men can be involved in reducing violence against women and in increasing gender equality, more specifically:

1. How does society measure the contribution of women?
2. Do people think it is ever acceptable to be violent to women?
3. What are the qualities of a good husband-wife relationship?

These questions were defined based on our beliefs that:

1. If people valued women and the work they do, they would treat them better and be less likely to be violent towards them.
2. People might consider violence in the abstract unacceptable, yet acceptable or even necessary under certain circumstances. In order to create specific messages, we need to understand those circumstances.
3. It is important to gain some understanding of how people perceive an ideal marital relationship.

Research methodology

The study consisted of a survey of 1,010 people (619 men and 391 women), 300 in-depth interviews (IDIs) (210 men and 90 women), and 90 focus group discussions (FGDs) (60 with men and 30 with women).

Findings: survey

Women's work, decision-making, men's role in childrearing

Most men and women reported that women work 5-8 or 9-12 hours a day. Interestingly, far more men (54.3%) than women (35.8%) reported that women's household work had economic value.

Most people agreed that it was important to educate children; however, while 100% of women and men said that boys needed an education, only 94.1% of women and 92.4% of men said that girls needed an education.

Fewer women (62.9%) than men (75.1%) said that women are involved in general decision-making. Only 28.1% of women said they were allowed to make decisions without their husbands' input or permission.

Most (64.2%) women said that men helped with childrearing. When asked what type of help men provided, the most common response was very non-specific: "men give all kinds of help" (including advice and money).

Violence

When asked about violence against women in general, virtually all of the women and men said that it is unacceptable. However, when prodded, they said that it was acceptable in specific situations. This suggests that people use the term "violence" to refer to unprovoked aggression, while the term "discipline" refers to acceptable violence.

- 49.8% of women and 68.8% of men said that it was acceptable to beat a woman if she failed to take proper care of the children;;
- 47.8% of women and 55.7% of men said that was acceptable to beat a woman if she went out without her

husband's permission;

- 63.4% of women and 81.6% of men said that it was acceptable to beat a woman if the meal was late;
- 34.0% of women and 36.7% of men said that it was acceptable to beat a woman if she failed to listen to her husband.



Husband-wife relations

In terms of people's opinion of what a husband-wife relationship should encompass, most people replied that they should be life partners. Far more women than men felt that it should be a working relationship, and far more men than women felt it should be mostly based on economic assistance.

Findings: In-depth interviews and focus group discussions

The value of women's unpaid work

All of the participants took it for granted that women did the housework, including cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. Oftentimes, this work is seen to have no economic value. As one man said, "Women's job is to do all the housework... Everyone does the work assigned to them; why should we put a value on it?" However, others insisted that the many

activities women engage in do have economic value, such as taking care of the house and the children, teaching children, and helping with children's emotional development.

In terms of women's involvement in decision-making (buying land or domestic animals, decisions about their children's weddings, etc.), one man said, *"What is the point of asking my wife's opinion?"* However, many participants put forward different views, stressing that women's education allowed them to play an important role in the family and society. In the words of one woman, *"The key to the family is woman."*

Regarding women's social situation, women in an FGD responded, *"Women are trapped in the home", "Women can't earn a living", "Whatever abuse our husbands inflict on us, we have no choice, we have to stay"*. In terms of the lack of involvement of women in decision-making, one woman said, *"If I could do something [earn money], then my word would have value."*

Is it ever acceptable to be violent to women?

The results showed that in many cases, economics, social expectations, religion, culture, education, rights to land, dowry, drugs, and large age differences between spouses contributed to violence against women. Since women usually did not hold a paying job and inherited little or no land, they were considered weak and worthless. Men felt that since they earned a living, women should always be subservient to them. While these were the primary causal factors of violence noted by the research participants, many minor factors that triggered violent outbursts were also mentioned. Misunderstandings leading to violence sometimes arose due to communication problems. Problems understanding each other were due in part to large age differences and possibly the traditional separation of the sexes from childhood.

On the other hand, many people also made positive remarks about this issue; a low-income rickshaw puller said, *"If someone hits his wife, he's not human. A wife is a beloved thing."*

As for the kind of behavior women hoped for from their husbands during arguments, a woman said, *"A man should not be insulting when addressing his wife, and should speak gently with her."* Another woman said, *"He should explain with words, not with his fist."* Women also tended to look at men as their guardians. Women believed themselves to be weak and felt their husbands were superior to them; they were thus often willing to accept violent behavior, or consider it normal.

The ideal husband-wife relationship

In terms of how the relationship should or could be, one woman replied, *"One accepts facing many problems in the outside world, but one can't accept it if the family is not peaceful."* Most men and women said that the marital relationship should consist of mutual assistance, although this seemed to not reflect reality in many instances. One woman commented, *"He helps, but by hitting me!"* When asked if men or women could exist happily without the other sex, almost all men and women replied that both sexes need the other. Others felt that the main role men play was economic support; if that weren't needed, women could easily live without men.

One woman said, *"When the spouses understand each other, everything is possible."* For most, however, the idea of a husband and wife living together like friends was unheard of. Some men expressed the view that women's main role was to do housework and provide sex; they could not think of their wife as a friend. Many did, nevertheless, feel that the ideal situation of couples should be to live as friends, supporting each other.

Conclusion

As long as one sex is considered inferior to the other, with no thoughts or views worth listening to, and perceived to be performing no useful work despite many hours of daily drudgery, how can families be happy? When both women and men consider it acceptable in many circumstances for men to beat their wives, how can families be happy?

Increasing the status of women through better education, access to jobs and other income-generating activities, and recognition of the value of the unpaid work they do, would help not only women themselves, but also families to become more peaceful and happy.

Given that violence against women is usually carried out by their husbands, and that women have very little power in the family, it is important to involve men in reducing the acceptability of violence against women. Men should be encouraged to involve their wives in decision-making and to take more seriously their wives' thoughts and feelings.

Rather than focusing on reducing the acceptability of secondary causes or triggers of violence, such as the dinner being late, both men and women need to understand that violence against women is *never* acceptable, and that so-called disciplining and educating, with the fist, are in fact manifestations of violence. Men need to be actively involved in learning to resolve family conflicts peacefully, in resisting violence against women, and in promoting gender inequality. As men are still the main decision-makers, they need to learn to respect women, working together for a more gender-equal society. The government, media, and communities all have a role to play in preventing violence and creating peaceful families. In this regard, it is critical to disseminate positive

images of men's role in the family.

Recommendations



Government

- ❑ Implement the law for female inheritance of property, in order to improve women's economic status and thus strengthen their position.
- ❑ Identify weaknesses in existing law for prevention of violence, and work to implement the law effectively;
- ❑ Work to abolish child marriage.

Electronic and print media

- ❑ Widely publicize positive images of men and of happy families; positive images of men would include men as involved in raising children, speaking in a gently and friendly way to their wives, respecting their wives for the work they do, and listening to their wives' opinions;
- ❑

- ❑ Recognize and publicize the important roles women play through their unpaid work, and give women social recognition for their contributions;
- ❑ Educate people about women's rights and illustrate what positive roles men can play in their families, including non-violent approaches to resolving disputes;
- ❑ Show how men and women can live together in mutual respect;
- ❑ Speak out against child marriage.

Community

- ❑ Involve men in programs aimed at increasing women's rights and status, and in promoting positive images of men;
- ❑ Work to increase women's access to education and income-earning opportunities;
- ❑ Conduct various activities with school children in order to increase their positive thinking about gender equality;
- ❑ Enlist children in creating more equal ideas of family living, for their future and so they can educate their own parents;
- ❑ Involve men in campaigns to increase women's rights and to increase their respect for women, through seminars, discussions, and other activities;
- ❑ Involve community members in fighting dowry.

The more successful people are at involving men in ending domestic violence, the more violence will decrease. As men learn to respect women's rights, women's status will rise, with benefits to themselves, their family, society and the nation.

Greater gender equality will benefit both sexes, as families will be happier, and the nation will further prosper with the greater contributions made by women.



Gender and Reproductive Health Concerns in Sanjay Nagar Slum, Bhuj, Gujarat, India

--Phaeba Thomas, Evangelical Social Action Forum (ESAF)²

Introduction

While there is much debate about the concepts of “male responsibility” and “male involvement,” and what they mean in terms of programs and service provision, there is a general realization that initiatives aimed exclusively at either men or women are not desirable. To achieve reproductive health and gender equality, there must be full communication, participation and partnership between men and women.

Despite the commitment to promote gender equality in reproductive health programs and the well documented unmet needs of men for information, counseling, and services, barriers to the expansion of male involvement continue to exist: most modern contraceptive devices are female methods; most family planning and reproductive health programs have been designed for adult women; reproductive health care providers have been trained to counsel women; and program planning for increasing male involvement is impeded by a lack of up-to-date information on male attitudes, knowledge, and practices related to family planning and reproductive health.

This research provided an initial assessment of a community’s perceived ideas, practices and level of knowledge/awareness regarding reproductive health, reproductive rights, and gender equality, as a part of a project which works for more

² Research conducted by Beena George, Shoba John, Phaeba Thomas, and Shailesh Vaite.

balanced gender roles in reproductive health.

Study objectives

- To learn about current gender role preferences and practices in the family.
- To assess the level of knowledge/awareness of married men and women regarding reproductive health issues, such as contraception and child spacing.
- To understand the community's attitude towards women's role in the family, including her reproductive decision-making rights.
- To understand the level of male /father's involvement in family affairs such as childrearing.
- To assess the level of contraceptive use in the community.

Research Methodology

Both a broader survey of 203 people (140 men and 63 women) and a more detailed survey of knowledge, attitudes, and practice (KAP) (among 40 men and 44 women) were carried out among married people in Sanjay Nagar, a small slum in the walled city of Bhuj, the westernmost city of India in Gujarat.

Results: KAP Survey, Married Men and Women

Among the respondents, 27.5% of males and 65.9% of females were married before or upon attaining the legal age (18 for women and 21 for men). Early marriages and absence of family planning usually meant younger age at childbirth and more children: about 72.5% of the men and 62% of the women had more than two children.

Most of the respondents (70% of men and 81.8% of women) were illiterate. The men were involved in a variety of unskilled or semi-skilled occupations. Meanwhile, most (90.9%) women were homemakers, with little freedom of mobility or economic independence. Daily earnings were higher among employed men than employed women. On average, employed men worked about 23 days per month, while the employed women worked every day.



Both men and women reported spending their money on food, children's education, and family health needs. None of the women reported spending on contraceptives, tobacco, alcohol, entertainment, or on their or their spouse's personal needs. None of the men reported spending money on contraceptives or entertainment either, but 80% of men reported spending money on tobacco, and 17.5% on alcohol.

Contraceptive Knowledge

Slightly more women (84.1%) than men (75.0%) had heard of contraceptives. For men, the main sources of information were friends, newspapers, TV and radio. For women, main sources were friends, TV and health workers. Media had a tremendous role in sensitizing both men and women about family planning. None of the respondents had heard about contraceptives from their spouses.

Knowledge about contraceptive methods was also quite different among men and women. Overall, women were more aware of methods than men, with over half knowing of three methods (IUD, tubectomy, and the Pill), while most men knew only about condoms and to a lesser extent the Pill and vasectomy. Less than half of those who had heard of contraceptives considered them safe.

Only about 30% of either sex reported actually using contraceptives. While 25% of the men considered vasectomy safe, none of them had actually had a vasectomy, though 25% of the women reported having had a tubectomy. Reasons given for not using contraception by men included religious factors, personal convictions, and lack of need for contraception. Reasons given by women included fear of health problems, not needing contraception, and lack of availability.

Sexual life

Only 10% of men and no women said they had had sex before marriage; similarly, 92% of men (the question was not asked to women) said that sex before marriage is not acceptable. Ten percent of men said they coerced their wives for sex, but only 2.3% of women said they were coerced. Almost everyone said that men did not have the right to coerce their wife for sex. Since the question "Do you feel free to refuse sex?" was not asked, the questions did not necessarily reflect the actual extent of coercion.

Slightly more women (93.2%) reported that they are sexually satisfied than the percentage of men (87.5%) who believe their wife is sexually satisfied. A full 10% of men said they did not know if their wife is sexually satisfied. Far more men (87.5%) than women (65.9%) said that it is important that the wife be

sexually satisfied. The very high non-response rate among women (29.5%) to the question could indicate discomfort with the issue and/or a lack of understanding of what sexual satisfaction involves. Meanwhile, most women (72.7%) believed their husband is sexually satisfied, though over 11% did not respond to the question.

Pregnancy, delivery and care

Almost all (95.5%) of the women said they did not plan before having their children; the remaining 4.5% were yet to have a child. Less than half of the men and women said that it was necessary to plan before having children; 65% of men and almost 37% of women said that the ideal gap between children was just 1-2 years. Age at birth of first child was very low for both men and women. Over a third of both men and women had their first child before or at the legal of age of marriage.

In terms of men's participation in their wives' pregnancy and childrearing, men showed some willingness to accompany their wives to health clinics, particularly when the wife or their children were unwell. Men were less likely to accompany wives during pregnancy check-ups, delivery, and children's immunization. As most of the families surveyed in this research lived in nuclear families, this could imply the woman has no one to accompany her to health clinics during pregnancy.

With the exception of the last delivery, women reported far lower rates of men's involvement than men themselves: while 70% of men said they accompanied wives during pregnancy check-ups, only 56.8% of women said they did; and 92.3% of men and 59.1% of women said their husbands accompanied them when their children were unwell.

Men and women gave somewhat different responses in terms of men's willingness to pay for various costs related to childbirth and child-rearing. For example, 95% of men and only 63.6% of women said that men gave money for medicine during the wife's pregnancy; 72.5% of men and only 38.6% of women said that men gave money for the newborn's vaccination.

Gender and family roles

Most people believed that God was responsible for the sex of the child; almost twice as many men as women believed that both husbands and wives were responsible. Most men (77.5%) said they did not expect their wives to bring dowry, while most women (86.4%) said they agreed with the dowry system. The high incidence of favoring dowry could be because they see it as a security for life. Only 22.5% of men agreed with the system, and only 13.6% of women disagreed with it. The situation in this community is different than in certain other parts of India, as the local tradition is not to give cash but material goods, which can assist the wife in establishing a home.

While 85% of men said they helped their wives around the house, only 27.3% of women said their husbands helped them. The difference may be due to what people consider to constitute help. Men and women again had different perceptions on the extent to which men helped their wives in various ways. Almost half (45%) of men but only a third (30%) of women said their husbands earned money for family needs; far more men than women reported that men did household chores or were involved in childrearing or purchasing household items. Almost half of the men and most of the women felt that household chores should be done by the wife. Slightly more men than women thought that

childrearing was mainly the duty of the wife, but 65% of men felt that men should have some involvement.

Most men and women felt that earning a livelihood was the man's responsibility. Half of the men and over 80% of the women felt that both husband and wife could spend the money; far more men (37.5%) than women (6.8%) believed that the woman should handle the family finances. Twice as many women (43%) as men (20%) believed that women should be responsible for contraception; only 16% of women and 7% of men believed both should be responsible. About half the respondents did not answer the question about who should be responsible for contraception.

Respondents tried different methods of conflict resolution. The most common, although reported by far more women (93.2%) than men (64%), was talking out differences. Women were also more likely to report using verbal abuse and being beaten by their husbands. Far more women said they were beaten (40.9%) than men said they beat their wives (27.5%).

Although just over half of men (55.0%) reported that they never beat their wives, most women (93.2%) reported that they are beaten when they do not obey, although, interestingly, only 2.5% of men reported beating their wives for that reason. It is important to ask not only about beating in general, but under specific situations, as far more people admit to beating or being beaten under specific circumstances than overall.

Discussion and Conclusions

Being illiterate and uninformed homemakers limits women's exposure and interactions with the outside world. Their limited mobility and independence makes it difficult for them to access information. The concept of gender equality would indeed be remote and incomprehensible to these Indian women. Most of them support the dowry system, seeing it as one of their few chances to gain personal possessions. While they said that household responsibilities are or should be shared, the reality is clearly different. And though they and their husbands said that it is wrong to beat a woman, most of them accept the beatings, feeling it is their husband's right.

While the study suggests some promising trends towards increased male involvement in household activities, it also puts forward many disturbing facts and figures. Since children do not go to school, they join the world of adults long before the average city child. As a result, they get married before the legal age. The men in the community believe that family planning is the responsibility of women, a belief reinforced by government campaigns which have continually targeted women. Knowledge about contraception and belief in its safety is quite low among men and women, and men play a very limited role in supporting women in major reproductive events.

Media could play an even greater role in sensitizing people to family planning, as well as provide other important information to improve their lives. The fact that nobody had heard about contraceptives from their spouses, the discomfort with sexual issues, and the gap between male and female perception of male participation in the household suggests a large gender divide that makes it difficult for men and women to cooperate on various issues.

Recommendations

1. Health and well-being, and reproductive and sexual health, need to be approached in a holistic manner in which the family is seen as a unit. Comprehensive health services should recognize people's multiple needs and specifically, provide relevant information to men.
2. Government should extend their reach to men, and utilize men as field workers to reach men with contraceptive information and services.
3. Gender equality programs must address husband-wife relationships. It is essential to involve men, as they chiefly make decisions and exert strong influence over women. Greater understanding between the sexes and sharing of responsibilities would improve quality of life as well as familial harmony.
4. Media interventions that target both men and women should be utilized to promote gender equality. The high rate of illiteracy needs to be taken into account when designing materials.
5. All training and awareness targeting men should focus on positive models, and be non-threatening and empathetic to men, as the aim should be to involve men, not alienate them. Male facilitators and role models can play an important role.
6. There are large gaps between information and stated attitudes, and actual practices. Training and awareness for both women and men should focus on attitudes and practices, not just on information.
7. While virtually all respondents said they do not agree with aborting a female foetus and do not prefer sons, there is a marked distortion in the sex ratio, suggesting

that practices do not match stated beliefs. The problem of missing girls should be addressed.

8. Women's income-generating activities should be supported, as women spend money on the education and health of their children, while men often spend it on drink, tobacco, or personal needs. Women are more likely to save money than men. Economic empowerment of women in the community will result in their greater social standing and voice, to the betterment of all.
9. Adolescent boys and girls should be involved in gender equality programs.



Role of Men in Reproductive Health, Family and Society in Vietnam

--Vu Pham Nguyen Thanh for HealthBridge³

Introduction

In many societies, women as well as men show much resistance to the concept of gender equality. When people are unhappy, they often fear change, as they imagine that change would make their lives even worse. Often victims are the greatest opponents to change. Women do gain something from the current situation of gender inequality - for instance, a feeling of superiority that they can do housework better than men, or moral superiority in their ability to sacrifice. They fear that a change in their position would simply mean a greater burden and even more opposition from their husbands.

In order to work to improve women's situation globally, as well as lessen some of the burdens on men, we need to understand the reasons behind resistance to gender equality and seek positive solutions. In doing so, there are a number of factors that we must take into consideration: a) working towards greater gender equality is not a simple task; b) the support of men is critical, and must be enlisted partly by showing how men would gain from greater gender equality; c) the concerns of both women and men must be taken seriously and solutions developed that address those concerns.

Purpose of the Research

This qualitative study sought to find common messages and lessons about masculinity and the responsibility of men. Specifically, its objectives were:

1. To identify the different beliefs and concepts of young and grown men about masculinity, and their responsibilities in reproductive health and the family;
2. To examine societal viewpoints of men about their various roles;
3. To describe young and grown men's interest in and knowledge of reproductive health, and their difficulties in sharing responsibilities in these areas with women; and
4. To define young and grown men's perceived needs and wishes for women's assistance and sharing.

Research Methodology

The research was carried out utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 father-son pairs, four young men, four grown men, and seven women. Young men were unmarried, ranging in age from 18- 25. Fathers were less than 57 years old. Interviewees had different jobs and education levels. Some lived in Hanoi, some in the countryside, and others in Bac Ninh province.

³ Research conducted by Vu Pham Nguyen Thanh, Nguyen Nga My, Truong Thuy Hang, and Doan Kim Thang, with assistance by Nguyen Thi Hoai An, Pham Hoang Anh, Tran Thi Minh Khanh and Le Thi Thu.

Research Results

Perceptions about men: Man is strong, generous, and free

Men were considered to be noble, decisive, independent, dignified, generous, and able to protect others; able to face difficulties, ready to take risks and to conquer, thirsty for freedom and willing to sacrifice. Interviewees said that men have broader knowledge and understanding than women, that they are often successful and hold important positions in society, and that men represent all that is beautiful and strong. Contrary to men, women are defined by their role in the household.

Men are encouraged to pay attention to what they consider "great" or "important" matters, while women should manage such "trivial" matters as keeping the home and clothes clean, the household fed, the children taken care of, and so on. Neither men nor women considered the societal contributions of women through their daily household tasks important.

Men are expected to persist in the face of failure, but the idea that men cannot acknowledge failure would suggest the importance of involving women in decision-making. After all, strength is only part of what is needed in making good decisions, and women's ability to compromise and reflect on their errors would presumably balance well with men's assertiveness.

Men are considered generous in behavior and social relations, and even in wasting money and time. When a man does not have a generous character, he is considered not only a narrow-minded person, but also a dangerous one. While it is good for a woman to be frugal, it is considered unacceptable in men; men have the right to waste money partly because they have the ability to earn it. Naturally the very different

expectations of men and women in this regard, and women's concerns about maintaining the family on the husband's income, cause much conflict.

Many men consider freedom to be a male prerogative. Men are considered to be clumsy, to not know how to care for others, and to have no knowledge of cooking. They are thus exempted from domestic duties. At the same time, women are given little credit for possessing these skills. Just as there is great peer pressure on men to go out drinking and gambling, so there is great pressure on women not to object to those "characteristically male activities". Peer pressure also means that men who actually wish to stay home and help their wives find it very difficult to do so.

Gender training starts young, with boys learning, among other things, to be independent and generous/extravagant, and girls to be family-oriented, eager to sacrifice, and careful with money. From when they are small boys, males have more freedom than their sisters.

Sexuality

According to both men and women, young and old, sex is men's pride, the basis for his self-confidence, generous actions, and ability and confidence to conquer. Men seemed unaware that women place less importance on male sexual performance than they themselves do.

Many men and women stated that they greatly value sexual life. While men felt that a steady sexual life would help them stay healthy, peaceful and confident in carrying out big jobs in the outside world, women felt that if they could have sexual harmony with their husbands, they would gain not only happiness, but also be a string to "tie" their husband to the family. Some women stated that it is difficult for them to achieve sexual satisfaction. Most women endured quietly if their sexual life was not pleasant.

Women's dissatisfaction with sex is further aggravated by their inability to discuss it with anyone. For some women, only age brings relief, as the needs of children and other concerns distract them from their sense of loss: *"I don't dare to talk about this matter or ask somebody, only I know my dissatisfaction, it's terrible. I am lucky to have children, it's better now that I am no longer young, I don't think of this matter anymore"*.

Although men attribute great importance to sex, and to making their partner happy, most couples are uncomfortable talking about sex with each other, and have strict ideas about women's innocence. This is a very clear example in which greater gender equality, in the shape of losing expectations of women's sexual innocence and encouraging dialogue on sexual matters, would be of great benefit to both sexes. Of further benefit would be the acceptance of women as sexual

beings, and an encouragement to women to learn to enjoy their bodies and their sex lives. Such a change could greatly increase men's pleasure as well as women's, not to mention that much coveted husband-wife intimacy.

Growing gender equality, or men's changing social position

There appears to be progress being made in women achieving some basic rights and privileges within the family and society. For instance, more women hold paying jobs (though this also leads to a double burden, since most housework still falls on women). Women also seem to be gaining a little more say in the home. Men pointed to changes in the division of work.

The unrealistic or difficult expectations that society places on men, as the main income earner and person involved in social relations, would seem to offer an opportunity for men to benefit from greater gender equality. However, many men indicated that they felt threatened by an increase in women's status, and perceived women as competitors. In discussing their "lost" privileges, male participants seemed unaware that women have long been repressed, and that women may well not just enjoy but also deserve the new opportunities they are experiencing.

Women's expectations of husbands and sons

Almost all married and single men mentioned that their wife or lover needs their faithfulness most. Women often saw it to be more important than earning money. Many men said that men can be faithful and understand its value, but dislike women's suspicions.

Men also mentioned conflicting expectations from different women. While a mother wants her son to know how to do housework, his girlfriend does not. A husband may want to

care for his wife, but is afraid his mother and mother-in-law will call him “effeminate”: *“When we share housework, we’ll be teased that we’re a man in skirts”*. Gender equality programs should, therefore, address women and men in order to try to encourage more positive behaviors in men.

Men’s and women’s perspectives on family

Family is the nest, the place people can rely on for sharing, and the most secure place to raise children. Women felt that family is something that cannot be changed. They would rather live alone with their children than remarry. They also believed that they are able to live alone and take care of their children: *“Men cannot survive without a wife, but women can live alone.”*

There is also a perspective wherein, for some men, family is like property: *“Family is very valuable to men, but only in the same way as their career, or not equal to it.”* According to most participants, family has a more special meaning to women. Children are the most valuable assets to women, the goal and meaning of their life. Children also keep women close to family, no matter how their husbands are. Some men said that they see the family's meaning through their children. If the man can have a large effect on his children or teach them how he wants them to be, he will be closer to his family, with a higher position in it.

Who needs gender equality?

Although many people do not think directly in terms of “gender and gender equality”, all had thoughts about the different roles of men and women. Most of the participants understand that equality meant a cessation of all differences, rather than a more just distribution of rights and responsibilities.

Most men thought that given the current social condition, encouragement or appeal to gender equality would only create more disadvantages for women. Men said that even in developed nations, women’s equality has only added more heavy burdens and responsibilities. This suggests that rather than using such vague terms as equality of the sexes, specific goals need to be mentioned - such as equality in rights and opportunities. The media, here as in other countries, has apparently contributed to negative perceptions of equality, as indicating for instance that women will refuse to marry, or be sexually loose.

Some of women’s objection to gender equality was that they were unlikely to receive any support from men, and in fact were likely to encounter direct, if unspoken, opposition. Women perceived their lives as sufficiently difficult without risking further trouble. Men’s first reaction to women’s increased involvement in other sectors may be to leave all the housework for their wives. Men indicated that they took it for granted that women would continue to carry out their traditional roles.

Unknowingly, the research participants identified one key problem with so-called gender equality, when it means greater burdens for women without bringing a similar increase in opportunities. When women are expected to earn money as well as do all the housework, or find themselves working as hard as men but earning less and having no role in decision-making, they may well be frustrated with so-called equality!

Men and women also appear to underestimate men’s ability to be effective with childcare. Many men were confident that women would soon oppose any advance in their position, once they realize the disadvantages such advances inevitably

bring. Before gaining support for gender equality, a widespread educational campaign is needed to explain what equality actually means, and how it will benefit men as well as women. Possibilities are indicated in the few positive remarks that emerged from the research: that women's lives would be happier when they become involved in social activities, that the burden on men would be lighter when women have greater knowledge and awareness; that women's advancement would mean many advantages for men.

Male contraception

Most people said they do not like condoms due to inconvenience, reduction of pleasure, and lack of need if the couple is faithful and has no disease. The quality of locally available condoms was also questioned. The association of condoms with disease prevention (and thus prostitution) caused troubles for people who wished to use them in marital relations. Some men felt that if their wives suddenly mentioned using condoms, it would mean they had lost trust in their husbands, or that they had no desire to have sex.

None of the research participants approved of vasectomies. However, it was also clear that they did not know the meaning of sterilization. In many instances, those opposed to vasectomies believe that sterilization violates nature, because it involves cutting a part of the body. People considered male sterilization as a cause of familial disintegration, when the husband loses his ability to satisfy his wife.

From a more positive perspective, some of the participants indicated that people would not be so opposed to sterilization if it could be better explained and more widely advertised. There is also a role for the media in raising fear and dislike: *"Men's sterilization is a really good thing, but because the*

promotion hasn't been widespread, people are still reluctant to get it. Newspapers don't say clearly in what ways sterilization is good or bad, but they always publicize the problems following it."

What assistance and sharing do men expect from women?

Men identified their career as their biggest social responsibility. Many men felt they lacked women's assistance and sharing in their social duties and income earning. Men also admitted that they often resort to avoidance once problems arose with their wives. Unfortunately the subject of whether they listen to their wives when they wanted to discuss problems encountered during their working days, or frustrations in housework and childrearing, did not come up in the research. Another very important task for men is having and children. Sexual ability defines masculinity, and having children is the expression of it. Many men confirmed the continuing usefulness of lessons about economizing, altruism, tolerance, fondness for learning, and determination, and said they wished to teach such lessons to their children.

Men admitted that they were reluctant to look after small children. Some men said they did not know how to do so, as children often cried and small children preferred their mother to their father. They said they lacked the skills to cradle, soothe, or feed them - yet with the explanation that it is "natural" for women, they saw no need to give women credit for this work. On the other hand, though it is also "natural" for men to earn a living, they expected their wife's sympathy and support — despite being unwilling, at least in some cases, to offer it in terms of childcare.

Discussion and Conclusions

Men and women share stereotyped views of masculinity and femininity. Men are expected to be strong, independent, and free, with their main role in the family being to provide economic support, while the entire burden of housework and childcare is expected to be borne by women. These stereotypes contribute to much dissatisfaction among both men and women, who find it difficult to be close and share in various aspects of their lives.

Although it will be difficult to counter such entrenched notions of gender, the dissatisfaction expressed by both sexes provides an opportunity for intervention. Greater gender equality, if presented as a benefit for both sexes, could become a popular concept rather than the currently feared notion of masculine women surpassing men. By challenging gender stereotypes and allowing greater closeness between the sexes, everyone would benefit, but that benefit needs to be made clear to the target recipients of messages promoting gender equality.

Recommendations

1. Negative perceptions make it important not just to promote the term “gender equality”, but to explain what it means and how it will benefit men as well as women. Campaigns can educate men about their roles, showing how more sharing can help achieve greater happiness. Misconceptions must be challenged — for example, that all women will become better educated or better paid than men, that women will neglect the children or leave the entire household burden to men, etc.
2. Both men and women need to improve their communication skills, so as to be able to discuss family

matters, including sex, with their spouse. Women and men need the opportunity to express their needs, to be listened to, and to have their opinions valued.

3. Positive conceptions of men should be promoted, by putting forward good examples of men’s thoughts, attitudes and behavior. A similar change is needed in strategies for promoting contraceptive methods, especially condoms and vasectomy.

Gender equality should be something positive, illustrating that men and women will be better able to fulfill their responsibilities, with the advantages of sharing and better communication with their life partners. It is only when both sexes perceive the benefits of gender equality that they will work together to achieve it. By understanding the obstacles, we can better promote the solutions.

The Role and Responsibility of Men in Family and Reproductive Health

--The Research Institute on Gender and Family and
HealthBridge Canada in Vietnam⁴

Introduction

Although the Vietnamese government has acknowledged its commitment to gender equality, and rates of education and job opportunities for women in Vietnam are far higher than in other Asian countries such as India and Bangladesh, gender equality remains far from a reality. From the family through to the workplace and into government, gender inequality is manifest. Women are poorly represented in both politics and major household decisions. While 27.3% of Parliament seats are held by women, only 11.5% of officials at the Ministerial level are women. At the same time, little sharing exists between women and men at the household level in terms of household work, decision making, and reproductive health and family planning.

While 57% of women of reproductive age use the IUD, only 7.5% of men use condoms, and only 0.5% have had a vasectomy. Meanwhile, programs on reproductive health and gender issues tend to focus exclusively on women. The significant role that men must play to achieve gender equality is not generally recognized, and there is little motivation or encouragement for men to change. In order to address such imbalances and to strengthen the role of men in promoting gender equality, we must better understand the existing

attitudes and behaviors of both men and women. Only then can we create successful programs to increase the positive involvement of men in gender equality.

Objectives

The overall objective of this study was to improve understanding of the role that gender plays in family relations and reproductive health in Vietnamese society.

The specific research objective focused on identifying interventions that would increase men's knowledge and positive behaviour related to sharing responsibility with women in reproductive health and increased family harmony. This objective was addressed through the following activities:

- ✓ Collecting information on the concepts and beliefs held by both grown and young men on their responsibilities in the family and their understanding of masculinity;
- ✓ Learning about the different roles and responsibilities of men and women in the family;
- ✓ Assessing knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and responsibilities of men and women in reproductive health; and
- ✓ Understanding which types of mass media and messages may be most effective in designing communication programs to increase male involvement in reproductive health.

⁴ Research conducted by Tran Thi Van Anh, Le Ngoc Lan, and Nguyen Phuong Thao, with assistance provided by Nguyen Thi Hoai An, Pham Hoang Anh, Tran Thi Minh Khanh and Le Thi Thu.

Methodology

Two hamlets, representing high and low average income per person, were selected in each of three districts in Bac Ninh province. Within each hamlet, 50 households containing a non-married son over the age of 17 were selected randomly, for a total of 600 households. In each household, one father of reproductive age and one unmarried son over age 17 were interviewed. If the son was not available, the wife was interviewed instead. In-depth interviews were conducted utilizing a questionnaire form. Data was analyzed using SPSS/PC+.

A total of 1,196 people were interviewed, consisting of:

- ↻ 604 grown married men of reproductive age with a son over 17 years old;
- ↻ 299 single males over 17 years old;
- ↻ 293 married women.



Findings

Profile of research participants

Grown men generally had more education than did grown women, while young men were the most educated. Most of the adult research participants were employed as farmers (over half of grown men and women, but only 8% of young men). Most of the young men were students (52.8%).

Role and responsibility of men and women in the family

As is common elsewhere in the world, strong gender divisions of labor exist in Vietnam across the various professions. Thus, even though both men and women have access to the same general professions, men are more likely to take responsibility for working the soil, engaging in service or home craft employment, or being a laborer or government employee. Women are far more likely to cultivate rice, raise livestock and agricultural produce, and engage in business.

The gender division of labor is also strong in the household. Women were far more likely to take responsibility for cooking, laundry, and cleaning, and caring for children, the elderly, and the sick. Men were slightly more involved than women in helping children study, and were far more likely to purchase expensive household items. Men and women shared equally in purchasing tools and in attending school meetings for their children.

Men were far more likely to make decisions involving money, while women had more say about certain domestic issues. In only two areas did women have a greater role in decision-making than men: contraceptive use (35% of women versus 22.3% of men) and day-to-day expenditures (87.8% of women versus only 7.8% of men).

In many cases young men accepted similar gender divisions of labor as what they observed in their own families. Thus 66.9% of young men thought that the husband should be responsible for production, 73.9% thought that men should take the lead in communication with authorities, and 92.3% thought that women be responsible for laundry and cooking. Young men were far more receptive to the idea of husbands being involved in overseeing children's study (73.9%) than in doing laundry and cooking (7.7%).

Most (65.6%) of the young men felt that husbands should make decisions about economic activity; while a third felt that both spouses should, only 2% felt that women alone should make such decisions. Most (75.9%) felt that the women should make decisions about daily expenditures, and about half felt that men should make decision about fixing or building a house and conducting external relations. In terms of issues regarding contraception and children, young men were more likely to believe that the decisions should be made jointly.

Most parents believed that both men and women should be involved in both money earning and housework. However, about a fifth of both women and men – and twice as many rural (24.2%) as urban (11.2%) people – felt that the husband should earn the money while the wife should do the housework; meanwhile, only about 1% of men and no women felt that the woman should earn the money while the man should do the housework. As with parents, almost no young men considered that men should bear the major burden for housework.

Awareness of gender equality

While most people had heard of the concept of gender equality, very few understood it. Many believed that gender was the same thing as sex. The most common belief was that gender equality meant that both women and men could do the same work and enjoy the same rights. By work people meant paid work; there was little or no acceptance of the possibility of men being more engaged in housework and childcare.

Contraception, abortion, and safer sexuality

The most common place mentioned that could provide contraceptive service, for both sexes and age groups, was health facilities, mentioned by over 70% of participants. Over 70% of young men knew about common contraceptive methods, with the better educated having more information than the less educated. About 10% of young men thought that abortion was a contraceptive method. The methods most commonly known by participants were condoms, the Pill, and the IUD.

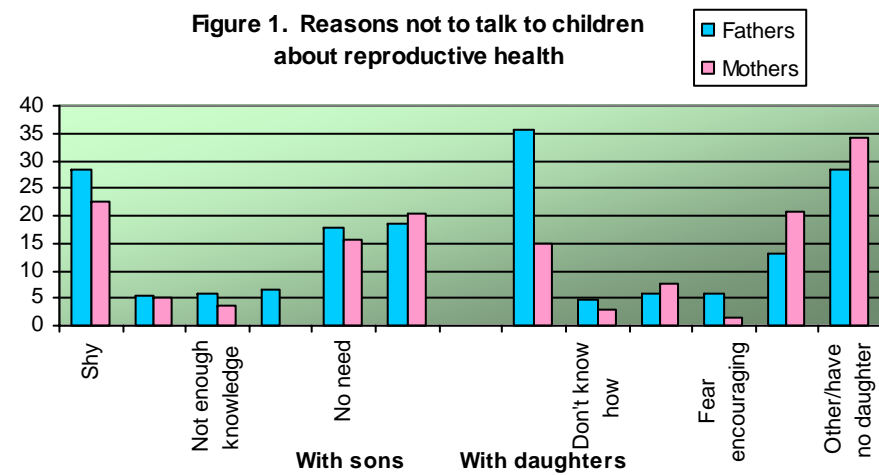
Almost half of participants thought that men should be responsible for preventing unwanted pregnancy. While adult men and women tended to receive reproductive health services from the commune health center, young men were more likely to use counseling centers, pharmacies, telephone counseling centers, or even the Internet.

As abortions are very common in Vietnam, and are often considered a method of family planning, we asked grown men their opinion of abortions. Most (91.4%) said that they thought that abortion had a significant effect on women's health. More than half (61%) said their wives had never had an abortion, while over one third (37.1%) said their wives had

previously had an abortion (this question was not asked of women); for those saying their wives had had an abortion, in most cases (68%) the decision was joint, while in 18.2% it was made by the husband alone and 13.3% by the wife alone.

Sexuality education

This research revealed that parents felt more comfortable discussing with their sons changes in psychology and physiology and advising them to keep "pure" friendship, than other sexuality-related topics. Relatively few parents discussed hygiene except with daughters at puberty, and even fewer discussed safe sexuality. About a third to a half of adolescents had nobody to speak to them about love, sexuality, and contraceptive methods.



Both men and women expressed an interest in gaining more information on a range of topics, particularly reproductive health in adolescence, guiding children about friendship and love, and production and business. Many were interested in information on reproductive health for grown men and on STD prevention; just over a third said they needed more information on pregnancy prevention.

Most parents obtained information about various reproductive health issues by TV, radio, internet, and newspapers. Young men, like their parents, were most likely to obtain information through impersonal means, particularly radio, TV, the Internet, posters and pamphlets. Newspapers were mostly consulted for information on STDs, and posters/pamphlets for contraception.

Conclusion

Young men, like their parents, support strong gender division of tasks. Men believed they should be the main income earner and participant in social affairs. While they freely accepted women engaging in paid labor, they believed that most or all the burden of housework and childcare should continue to be on women. So too with family decision-making; while women were expected to worry about day-to-day issues, men considered it their responsibility to decide "major" issues such as those involving large purchases.



In terms of gender equality, the general understanding was that women and men would both engage in paid work, while resistance continues to male involvement in household activities. So-called "gender equality" could therefore result in an increased burden on women, as well as expanded opportunities.

Neither men nor women had sufficient information about contraceptive methods; women and men, young and older, prefer mass media to personal communication for information on reproductive health issues. For young men, teachers and friends were also a significant source of information.

It is clear that much remains to be done in giving men a positive attitude towards their potential involvement in housework and in sharing large decisions with spouses. Existing positive attitudes and practices could be supported through targeted programming aimed at delivering positive messages that highlight the advantages men will gain from their increased involvement in housework and the family. The media can play a vital role in encouraging men to assume a fuller and more positive role in sharing family responsibilities.

Recommendations

This research suggests many areas in which men could be encouraged to share responsibility in reproductive health, and potential messages:

- ❖ Acknowledge that women often engage in income generating activities and encourage men to avoid putting the entire burden of the household on women: just as both men and women earn money, so both men and women should take care of housework and childcare. Such contributions by men include but

should not be limited to helping children study, attending school meetings, and purchasing expensive items. That is, men should also be encouraged to engage in other domestic activities, such as cooking, cleaning, and hands-on childcare.

- ❖ Since both men and women earn money and look after the family, decisions about economics and house repair/building, including large decisions about money, could be made jointly, and this should be seen as *lessening* men's burden.
- ❖ Men should contribute to decisions about contraceptive methods, and play a bigger role by themselves using contraception..
- ❖ Positive images of husbands and fathers should be portrayed, showing men sharing decisions and household labor with their wife, and showing the pleasure of actively engaging in childcare.
- ❖ The term "gender equality" needs to be explained as something that benefits both men and women. That is, it doesn't mean women becoming the major income earner, or men doing most of the housework, but rather a more even sharing of responsibilities, to the benefit of both sexes.
- ❖ Utilize the media (radio, newspaper, TV) and books to reach men and women with messages on reproductive health and gender equality. Men and women expressed a preference for mass media rather than interpersonal messages, so the role of mass organizations might best be in working with mass media.

- ❖ Encourage men to play a more active role in reducing unwanted pregnancy, such as through messages about how men can help reduce the abortion rate by themselves using a method of contraception. Since methods for men are few, it is important to recommend both condoms (for young men and those planning to have more children in future) and vasectomies (for those who never wish to have more children).
- ❖ Where programs already exist to work with parents, help parents to discuss sexuality and reproductive health issues with their children, by showing them the importance of doing so and suggesting ways of overcoming shyness and discussing topics beyond psychology, physiology, hygiene and “pure” friendship.
- ❖ When designing messages, consider people’s preferred mode of receiving those messages. Since many people are uncomfortable with personal communication on sensitive topics, and young men were more likely to learn about STDs from newspapers, and posters and pamphlets for contraception, written messages and mass media will often be preferable to interpersonal messages. However, as maternal health is little discussed in the media, it either needs to be addressed via media, or continue to be addressed through the health services/interpersonal means.
- ❖ The most popular media may be TV, particularly VTV3 in the evening time, but other TV channels, radio, and loudspeaker will also reach significant audiences at a much lower cost.

Final note

Men and women, albeit united in marriage, often live very separate lives. Sharing of daily tasks, concerns, responsibilities, hopes and fears, are all impaired by gender stereotypes that direct men and women into different channels and reduce the possibility of mutual understanding and support. While women’s lives are more deeply affected by gender issues, men and children suffer as well.

Overall, there appears to be much cause for hope given existing if limited positive trends and common themes of dissatisfaction among both women and men about existing circumstances. While it may not be easy to successfully encourage men to assume a more positive role in promoting gender equality, the rewards will be significant in terms of improved situations for women, children, men, and society overall. The urgency of helping men play more positive roles in their homes and families cannot be overstated. It is important to make use of this and other existing research and project experience, to work together around the world to promote greater male involvement in promoting gender equality, and to continue to share our lessons learned in order to build strong models for achieving success.

