



**Engaging men and boys in gender equality  
as a key approach of feminist foreign policy**

**Perspectives from CARE based on practical  
evidence from around the world**

## I share power I challenge my behaviour

These are two of the feminist principles<sup>1</sup>, and they are to be kept in mind when developing a feminist foreign policy and engaging men and boys.

## Executive summary

This policy brief by CARE Nederland advocates for the engagement of men and boys (EMB) in advancing gender equality. As the Netherlands is developing a feminist foreign policy (FFP), with one of the focus areas being 'engaging men and boys', this brief draws on decades of experience in CARE's programmes worldwide and intends to bring evidence of the benefits of engaging men and boys, from family and community level up to international (policy) levels.

Engaging men and boys is essential, because it:

1. enables addressing deep-rooted social norms
2. enhances programme effectiveness
3. helps prevent gender-based violence
4. prevents backlash against women for gender equality gains, and
5. promotes psychological well-being of men and families.

Additionally, engaging men and boys has shown to offer a pathway to sustainable and locally led change by transforming power structures. At the same time, it is important to recognize that emphasising this approach should not take away attention from pertinent systemic issues related to gender equality or compromise resources and space for women, women-led and women's rights organisations.

Both general and practical recommendations are provided for ministries, donors and NGOs. The recommendations emphasize the need for gender and power analyses in policy and program design as well as collaboration with and between women's rights or women-led organisations and organisations focusing on EMB. In addition social norms change should be included in policy and program design, and locally led and context-specific approaches should be adopted to do so. Focusing on education and youth is another important component for successful policy and programme design.



Erik and Olive received couples' training on positive power relations as part of a CARE project on preventing gender based violence (GBV) by working with men and women. Photo by Peter Caton.

## Introduction

In May 2022, the Netherlands Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that the Netherlands is developing a feminist foreign policy (FFP). The Netherlands follows in the footsteps of a number of countries. Sweden, France, Spain, Mexico, Chile, Canada, Luxemburg and Germany preceded with their FFPs, and countries like Liberia and Mongolia have stated their intention to make gender a central point in their foreign policy. The Dutch FFP is intersectional, focuses on Rights, Representation, Resources, Reality check (the 4Rs) and has two focus areas: LGBTIQ+ rights and engaging men and boys.

Over the past decades, CARE has advocated for the engagement of men and boys as a crucial part in the fight for gender equality and creating social justice. The purpose of this policy brief is to showcase the relevance of engaging men and boys in achieving a more equal and just world, not only abroad but also in the Netherlands. It will present key arguments for this, augmented by illustrative case studies.

While discussing the issue of engaging men and boys for gender equality, it is important to recognize its relation to the broader system of inequality. Emphasising the approach should not take away attention from pertinent systemic issues related

to gender equality. Notably, women's rights and women-led organisations are highly underfunded, receiving only 0.13% of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) and 0.4% of all gender-related aid (AWID, 2021)<sup>2</sup>. Funding and engaging women's rights and women-led organisations to ensure women's needs and rights are centralised and ensuring women's space and funding is not compromised while engaging men and boys are crucial steps for sustainable and just outcomes.

Many organisations, such as the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP), and others have contributed and shaped the discussion on FFP. This policy brief highlights a small but pertinent part of this discussion: engaging men and boys in gender equality as a key approach of FFP.

## Feminist foreign policy

The ICRW defines an FFP as a policy that:

- defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality and environmental integrity;
- enshrines, promotes, and protects the human rights of all;

- seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures;
  - allocates significant resources, including research, to achieve that vision;
  - is coherent in its approach across all of its levers of influence, anchored by the exercise of those values at home;
  - is co-created with feminist activists, groups and movements, at home and abroad.
- (Thompson, Patel, Kripke, O'Donnell, 2020)<sup>3</sup>

Making a foreign policy feminist means putting gender equality at its core. As foreign policy impacts, among other areas, aid, trade, and diplomacy, an FFP can provide a unified framework that incorporates different strategies related to gender equality under one banner with the aim to improve its efficacy in implementing its policies, as well as the coordination between departments within and across ministries and with their partners.

In a letter to Members of Parliament that outlines the Dutch FFP, the Netherlands government stated that the principle of equality, as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a universal value. It states that the pursuit of equality is a key point for the Dutch government in the Netherlands as well as abroad. However, major steps still need to be taken to

“There are a lot of restricting norms that have bearing on interventions. To shift these norms, we need to work with custodians of the norms who are mostly men.”

*Ronald Ogal, expert on engaging men and boys at CARE Uganda.*

Because of the positive results engaging men and boys yielded in stand-alone projects, CARE Uganda now incorporates EMB into all its programmes. Whether it is projects about gender justice, climate justice or livelihood, EMB is incorporated to yield the most effective and long-lasting results.

prioritize gender equality when other interests are at stake, including in the Netherlands itself. This is where the FFP comes in with its aim to not only reduce gender inequality, but inequality in post-colonial power structures. Part of this is breaking down male-dominated power structures, which include harmful social norms, as stated by Thompson et al. Men sharing their power and changing their behaviour is a key part in challenging the social norms that keep gender inequality in place, from the individual up to the global level.

Arben was part of the Super Dad Campaign by CARE Kosovo, a campaign focussing on promoting healthy relationships between father and child and encouraging men to take a more active role in raising their children. Photo by Arben Llapashtica



“If we only help women and not work with men and boys violence will continue to be endured. By understanding where this behaviour comes from and working with men and boys to address it, violence can be stopped at the source.”

*Rita Berisha, CARE Kosovo*

“Say you bring in a savings association for women and intimate partner violence goes up. How do we make sure that our programs aren't doing harm? If we're putting women's rights at the heart of everything Do No Harm is a clear principle for everyone engaged in this work and to do that we have to be engaging men and boys.”

*Jenny Conrad, Knowledge Management & Communications Lead, Gender Justice at CARE USA*

“Without the support and understanding of men and boys we won't be creating enough ways for women and girls to claim their rights, and enjoy the opportunities that life has to offer.”

*Niva Shakya, Coordinator Gender Justice, Health and Education Rights, CARE Nepal*

“Women often enjoy less education so there are skills they might not have. Engaging men and boys helps build their capacity and abilities.”

*Prakash Subedi, Coordinator – Women's Economic Empowerment and Climate Justice, CARE Nepal*

## Why engaging men and boys should be an important element of an FFP: Fix the system, not the women

### Social norms change

Social norms keep the status quo and thus inequality intact. These norms tell us who should act and how. Where does the power lie in a country or community, or in a family? Who makes the policies that affect individual lives? Who controls the finances in a household? Who does the household chores? Norms around these questions exist in all parts of the world and set expectations on how people of different genders should act. Some of these norms stand in the way of gender equality, because they limit the extent to which women can exercise their rights, for example the rights to education, work and own property. In order to increase gender equality, these harmful norms need to change. The gatekeepers of these social norms are not only women, but also, and in many cases predominantly, men. Therefore, engaging men for gender equality is inevitable in any policy that aims to change the underlying system of power relations that keep (gender) inequality in place.

The Be a Man Club (by CARE in Kosovo) is a project supported by the Young Men Initiative, the YMI was launched 15 years ago by CARE. The Be a Man Club gives young men the opportunity to discuss ideas about gender and masculinity in a safe space and helps them address harmful social norms and give a positive meaning to masculinity, one that is not tied to violence.

Nikola Vesić used to solve his problems through violence. Through the Be a Man Club Nikola went through a great change. In his own words, “a real man sorts his problems out in a conversation.” The club helped him be able to express his emotions in a more constructive way.

“We had programmes where we only worked with women. These women approached us and said it was good that we support women but to really achieve change we also need to engage their men. The idea to engage men and boys really came from the women in these communities that we were helping.”  
*Prudent Michel Gatoto, CARE Burundi*

### Programme effectiveness

Engaging men and boys makes programmes more effective. In many cases it is necessary from a practical point of view, with men being the gatekeepers for women’s participation. In certain contexts, a woman needs permission to participate in projects, needs to ask her husband for money to participate in a savings group, or depends on men who have skills like writing and bookkeeping that a woman may not have. The gatekeepers are present at the household level, at community level and at the national (policymaking) level. If changes are not made at a household level, then any policy or law that hopes to contribute to gender equality will not be as effective. If men are engaged, programme outcomes are better, for example in cases where men take over tasks in the household like dressing children and bringing them to school or cooking, so that their wives can engage in income generating activities outside the house. Similarly, without laws or policies to support household level change, this change will not be as far reaching or effective. For example, religious authorities and leaders hold a lot of power in many countries and communities. In Rwanda, CARE works with religious leaders to address issues regarding masculinity and gender by discussing and using holy scriptures. These leaders then engage with the members of their congregations to challenge existing harmful ideas. Through changing the perception of men and boys of the social norms that dictate people’s lives these norms themselves can be changed. Examples of reports on effectiveness are CARE’s evaluation on engaging men and boys in climate justice<sup>4</sup> and the evaluation of Women Lead in Emergencies<sup>5</sup> programming that addresses gendered power structures.

### Gender-based Violence and victimisation

Women in all their diversity have the right to security of their person, but they are often victims of gender-based violence, mostly perpetrated by men. This violence affects large numbers of women, girls and the LGBTQI+ community all over the world. It is a problem that cannot simply be solved by those experiencing violence, though it is of the utmost importance that they have access to care, legal and other services. However, without working with men and boys, victimisation will continue as men and boys will continue to be perpetrators, or are in danger of becoming perpetrators, if they do not change their convictions and behaviours and get the opportunity and support to do so. The system in which men are perpetrators needs to be fixed.

“Many women were not fully benefiting from the programmes due to household gender inequalities. Some of them suffered backlash, and sometimes men were violent against them because they were seen to be challenging gender norms by engaging in income generating activities outside the house. This informed our decision to start engaging men and boys in our programmes.”  
*Janvier Kubwimana, CARE International in Rwanda, Project Manager*

### Do No Harm

There is a real risk for women (or other marginalized groups) who start exercising their rights to get a negative reaction from those around them including their husbands or fathers—from disapproval to control to violence, physical or otherwise. In a number of monitoring reports, CARE has found that women who were supported to gain their own income, for example by participating in VSLAs (Village Savings and Loans Associations), were more likely to experience intimate partner violence.

To prevent this backlash men and boys need to be engaged. If they are, at the least, accepting and ideally fully supportive, then women and girls will have an

“It’s important to raise a new generation that does not use violence as a reaction to a problem. “Boys will be boys” can no longer be used to cover up the wrongdoings of men and boys.”  
*Rita Berisha, CARE Kosovo*

environment which enables them to stand up for their rights. This in turn will enable them to, for example, more effectively engage with saving groups that support their financial stability and entrepreneurship.

### Psychology

Moreover, men and boys also suffer because of gender inequality. It is less accepted for them to talk about their emotions. In many communities’ men feel the pressure to achieve and to provide income and protection. It is also less accepted for them to care for their families which can lead to less connection and more negative behaviour. This can result in psychological issues as well as in violence as an outlet for these unexpressed emotions. Sharing stories and working on relational issues, which often include reconsidering a redivision of household chores, has proved to be an effective way of reducing violence at household and community level.

### Sustainable and locally led change

When individuals change in a context that is not receptive to that change, the results are difficult to maintain. It is through the change of social norms that gender equality outcomes will be more sustainable.

The call to engage men and boys has, in CARE’s experience, often been community driven. Women would sometimes get negative reactions from those around them such as their husbands or fathers if they were engaged in programmes that enabled them, economically or otherwise. These women would approach CARE with the request to also engage the men around them. However, it is not just women who think men should be engaged in the fight for gender equality. In Burundi, the Abantangamuco, a group of rural men—and their eponymous approach—wanted to change

their own behaviour and work towards achieving more gender equality. The Abantangamuco movement started as a component of CARE's programming, has since developed with CARE support and is now widely used in Burundi. Transformative change is achieved by this community driven and locally led initiative.

To further increase effectiveness, working with boys and other youth is especially important as harmful social norms are less entrenched in the young. Engaging with youth and boys, in particular when working towards gender equality, can help raise a generation for who gender equality is a normalised part of life. CARE Balkan's programming has managed to institutionalise youth engagement, getting is accredited with authorities and included into school curricula.

"The Abantangamuco approach, used for all CARE programming in Burundi, is about sharing and accountability. A man sharing his story, is supported and held accountable by his wife. He discusses the changes he's made and how this has positively contributed to their household. By doing this, it encourages more men to change and share their stories as well. By sharing their stories, they will also be held accountable by their Abantangamuco communities. In this sense, this approach leads not only to household participation but also community participation, they are mutually reinforcing."

*Domitille Ntacobakimvuna, MEAL Specialist, CARE Burundi.*



Participants of the Young Men Initiative, a CARE initiative working with young male adults to provide them with alternatives to the patriarchal stereotypes that exist in their societies.

Photo by Claudia Adolphs

## Recommendations

### General recommendations

- Gender analysis as well as power analysis should be part of any (design of) policy and programme/project, and Engaging Men and Boys should be considered as a part of any policy and programme/project on the topic of gender equality.
- While engaging men and boys, be careful to ensure not to shrink the space for women or to decentre their needs. Funding women's rights and women-led organisations to address gender inequality in all its shapes and forms is crucial. These organisations should be included in and compensated for their time in providing feedback on or engaging with approaches that engage men and boys for gender equality.
- Policies and programmes should not only be evaluated on their impact on women, girls and LGBTQI+ persons, they should also be evaluated based on how it engages men and boys on the topic of gender equality, and how interventions have (or have not) led to shifts in power relations and gender norms. So, in evaluation of impact, do include indicators on systemic change: change in formal structures, like policies and legal frameworks, and informal structures, i.e. social norms and relation.
- Facilitate dialogue between women's rights and women-led organisations and organizations that focus on EMB.
- Consider that EMB in policy and programme design may increase effectiveness in reaching objectives on gender equality and women's rights, and may increase chances of doing no harm, if applied in consultation with the broader community, including women's rights organisations.

### Recommendations to ministries

- When developing an FFP and a handbook for its implementation, proper power analysis of its context, cross-party consolidation and broad buy-in are crucial for the sustainability of such policy itself, as the Swedish foundation Kvinna till Kvinna has argued. This can be done - in part - by engaging men and boys both abroad and domestically, both within the relevant ministries and at the level of the government itself.
- Include indicators related to engaging men and boys for gender equality within a feminist MEAL framework for the FFP.
- Include men and boys and/or the perspective of engaging men and boys within a civil society Advisory Group for the implementation and monitoring of a FFP in order to ensure a feedback loop with diverse perspectives on its implementation.
- To the extent possible: appoint two gender focal points (of two different genders) at the departments implementing the FFP as well as at embassies.

## Recommendations for programme design and implementation (donors and NGOs)

- Engage men and boys in considering rights that promote gender equality, because such rights may imply breaking down their privileges (e.g. monopoly in decision making processes, land inheritance, access to loans), and because engagement enhances their full potential as husbands, fathers, human beings, by having access to a combination of masculine and feminine approaches and roles. Also think of mobilising men and women around advancing rights for men, for example the right to paternity leave.
  - Emphasize the need for sufficient support to women's rights organisations and women-led organisations and reserve specific budgets for them. Also think of collaborating with organisations that engage men and boys for gender equality, because power structures are normally dominated by men – EMB is needed to transform these structures.
  - Include considerations on the need for social norms change in policies and programming around gender equality and women's rights, as many of the behaviours that restrict and otherwise negatively affect women are guided by social norms. And realise that, in many contexts, men are the gatekeepers of social norms and that, as a consequence, EMB is again needed in any design of programmes that touch on change in social norms that contributes to gender equality.
  - Be realistic about progress in changing harmful social norms as the work is often slow and iterative. And be innovative in measuring social norms change, share experiences openly (dare to fail forward) – CARE has some tools including the SNAP tool.
- Programming that touches on rights, power relations and social norms, as EMB programming does, needs to be locally driven and adapt to context. The specific context will define the scope and content of interventions of the programme. This implies that context sensitive gender and power analysis are key in programme design.
  - Collaborate with and support locally led organizations that work with EMB. Often community-based discussions and initiatives lead to innovative and transformative steps towards EMB and gender equality.
  - Meaningfully engage, collaborate with and support youth(-led) organisations. Support and advance policies and programmes that include youth to engage men and boys for gender equality. Educational and other programmes can help raise a generation for who gender equality is normalised. Research indicates that gender norms are more easily changed at a younger age.
  - Plan realistically for possible failure and backlash. Include scenarios that involve the need for protection (and even evacuation) of women's rights defenders and workers on social norms change. And recognise that there is a real risk for men who decide to change of being confronted with negative reactions from peers and the wider community.
  - Recognise that there is work to be done internally with staff in organisations working on these issues to ensure staff understanding and buy-in.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Oxfam GB. 2020. *Feminist Principles*. <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621064/ogb-feminist-principles-091020-en.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). (2021). *Where Is The Money for Feminist Organizing? Data Snapshots and A Call to Action*. [https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/AWID\\_Research\\_WITM\\_Brief\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/AWID_Research_WITM_Brief_ENG.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, L., Patel, G., Kripke, G. and O'Donnell, M. (2020). *Toward a Feminist Foreign Policy in the United States*. International Center for Research on Women. <https://wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/FFP-USA-v9-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Sarah G. (2022). *CARE's experience of Engaging Men and Boys in programming for Climate Justice. A learning review*. CARE Climate Justice Center. <https://careclimatechange.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CARE-EMB-Learning-Review.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Luisa D. (2022). *Women Lead In Emergencies. Global Learning Evaluation Report*. CARE International UK. [https://careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/WomenLead\\_GlobalEvaluation.pdf](https://careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/WomenLead_GlobalEvaluation.pdf)

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Efulazia and Kato are farmers in the village of Kigando and work together to be able to feed their eight children and send them to school. Photos by Josh Estey.



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