

Transforming Male Gender Norms to Address the Roots of HIV/AIDS

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It is widely recognized that gender norms—societal expectations of men's and women's roles and behaviors—fuel the global HIV epidemic. Women's low status in many societies contributes to limiting the social, educational and economic opportunities that would help protect them from infection. At the same time, traditional male gender norms encourage men to equate a range of risky behaviors—the use of violence, substance abuse, the pursuit of multiple sexual partners, the domination of women—with being manly. Rigid constructs of masculinity also lead men to view health-seeking behaviors as a sign of weakness. These gender dynamics all play a critical role in increasing both men and women's vulnerability to HIV.

A model for working with men

Over the past decade, a growing number of innovative HIV-prevention programs around the world have worked with men to challenge traditional gender norms. They are unique in allowing men to participate in a reflective process that explores how gender inequities and rigid messages about masculinity contribute to HIV, STIs, unintended pregnancy, gender-based violence and other health-related problems. These programs share a “transformative approach” that allows men to challenge harmful gender norms and embrace alternative models of masculinity that support their own health and that of others. This can lead to improved communication with partners, increased condom use, reduction of sexual partners, delayed initiation of sex, increased utilization of HIV services, and an increased role in the care and support of people living with HIV/AIDS. Transformative approaches also encourage men to take an active stand for gender-equality, addressing a key root cause of the HIV epidemic.

Transformative approaches share a set of operating principles. First, they view men in a positive light. Rather than portraying men as vectors of disease, these programs recognize that many are already playing a constructive role in the lives of their families and supporting the rights of women. They also recognize that masculinity can be defined and expressed in a variety of ways. Using the term “masculinities,” suggests that gender norms are diverse, complex and dynamic. Transformative programs explore how masculinities are deeply intertwined with culture, race, class, age, socioeconomic status, and sexuality. Finally, all transformative programs recognize the need to work with women's groups to ensure partnership with and accountability to women. In the end, the goal of this work is to develop respectful, trusting and egalitarian relations between men and women that will enhance the lives of both sexes.

Implementing Transformative Approaches

Transformative programs for men exist in many countries, with most initiated by local and international NGOs. However, as this work expands, programs are being adopted by local and national governments in settings such as schools, prisons, police wards and military bases.

Most transformative programs offer some type of intensive group educational process that encourages a very personal reflection on values about gender, and examines the costs to both sexes of gender dynamics. The workshops also provide an opportunity to explore progressive views of gender relations in a safe and supportive environment. Following the initial activities, participants are given information on a range of health issues, including HIV, and engage in exercises that constantly refer back to the issue of gender. For example, an activity about HIV transmission would explore what societal messages men receive that put them at higher risk for HIV.

Transformational educational processes can work with men alone or bring men and women together. One of the best examples of the latter is Stepping Stones, a participatory gender-focused process that brings together men and women from a community to engage in a discussion and analysis of factors in their environment that make them vulnerable to HIV. This training methodology was designed in 1995 in Uganda and has since been adapted and modified to suit the needs of populations in varied settings throughout the world. Stepping Stones uses a series of 18 workshops with each of four groups of older men, older women, younger men, and younger women. At the end, the groups come together and the entire community entertains “requests for change” as the groups perform dramas reflecting the lessons learned. A great strength of the Stepping Stones approach is that it works directly with a diverse group of community members to challenge harmful social norms that exist within that environment.

An Ecological Model

Workshops with small groups of individuals in a community can be very powerful, but they are often limited in creating large scale social change. Once a workshop ends, participants return to a patriarchal society where change is not supported. To address this, many transformative programs with men have adopted an ecological model that addresses multi-faceted aspects of an environment to effect personal and social change. This includes implementing small workshops, mobilizing communities, supporting local institutions such as schools, NGOs, and religious bodies to implement this work, working with media partners to conduct large scale campaigns, and supporting government structures to develop supportive policies and legislation.

There are many excellent examples of this holistic ecological model in different parts of the world. In South Africa, for example, EngenderHealth’s Men as Partners Program establishes Community Action Teams. During five-day group

workshops, participants are invited to plan and join Community Action Teams that are designed to promote and sustain change in their personal lives and in their communities. The teams work closely with trained staff from NGOs to support events such as health fairs, community theatre, and mural paintings with gender-related themes. Working together, team members reinforce a new social norm in which men take an active stand for HIV/AIDS prevention and the elimination of gender based violence, also introducing this norm in the environments where they live.

Other NGOs have adopted a variety of creative ecological efforts. In Brazil, Instituto Promundo's Project H implemented a lifestyle social marketing campaign that disseminated messages about gender equality through advertisements, peer promoters, and magazine articles. The campaign also associated gender equality with a specifically-designed brand of condom.

Another example comes from India, where a coalition of local NGOs and gender activists established a statewide campaign called Men's Action for Stopping Violence Against Women, creating a social movement of men taking an active stand against gender-based violence. The campaign involves marches, rallies, and large community events that reach thousands of men.

Larger media efforts are also starting to take hold. In South Africa a consortium of NGOs working on men's issues has convinced the South African Broadcasting Corporation to devote news coverage and public service announcements to gender issues. Meanwhile, MenEngage – an international alliance of organizations working on gender issues – is recruiting national and international male celebrities to serve as gender equality ambassadors who will be mobilized to reinforce progressive gender social norms.

The Evidence Base of Transformative Work

There is an emerging base of evidence for the effectiveness of transformative approaches with boys and men such as the study from the Horizons Program and Instituto Promundo that is covered on p. xx in this issue. The World Health Organization recently commissioned a systematic review of the evidence base for health interventions that target men and boys. The review analyzed the findings from evaluations of 57 interventions. The majority confirmed attitude or behavior changes with men. In addition, the 27 interventions within the study identified as gender transformative were found to be more effective in achieving attitude or behavior changes than the other interventions in the sample.

Challenges for the Future

The emerging movement of work with men and boys brings optimism and also challenges. As the field grows, programs are being challenged to scale-up their interventions to reach larger numbers of men while also accounting for the complex nuances involved in adapting to different regions, countries, and communities. Programs cannot be generically replicated in new settings, and

communities are initially likely to resist the idea of challenging existing gender norms. To address this, programs must identify gender activists and professionals from within communities to champion this work and navigate it in an appropriate manner. As these leaders initiate new male programming, they should always retain the shared operating principles of this important work: to always serve the shared interests of women and men, and to view men as positive resource in creating a healthier more gender-equitable world.