

# Women's Empowerment &

# Engaging Men

The Strategic Impact Inquiry put a clear and intentional focus on women – their beliefs, their dreams, their capabilities, and their experiences with the relationships and institutions that shape their lives. And yet one of the SII's most important messages is that lasting empowerment for women requires a more serious and honest effort to understand and support change among the men who are so integral to their lives. Across the SII studies, women around the world iterated the importance of men to their own empowerment:

*"The main efforts being exerted by women are to unchain themselves from oppression, work to have properties under their command, and change their life standards. Women can be successful when they get support and acceptance from the population for any activity they do...Women can attain their goals if they get help and support from males, females, their husbands and the community at large." (Ethiopia SII)*

*"[Empowerment means] being respectful and respected, especially by customers, her boss or owner of the brothel or karaoke and her husband; knowing how to protect one's health especially from HIV and also from violence through a variety of ways that may involve being 'non-provocative' to the husband, being sweet and non-confrontational." (Cambodia SII)*

So how to engage men, who seem to have "so much to lose," and such power to prevent women's empowerment?

There is no tougher question in women's empowerment work. Fear of getting the balance wrong - of women taking over, of men taking over – has blocked us from fostering the kinds of interdependent, mutually supportive relations that most of the SII's participants were seeking.

Over the years, gender work has engaged men as "the authorities" whose permission we need in order to help women learn new skills, as "the partner" whose support is needed in order for women to thrive, and "the oppressor" whose abuses and privileges must be ended in order for women to be free. Each of these approaches however reduces men, their relations to women, and the institutional forces that shape them on a societal scale, to a thin slice of a more complex reality. And each sets women and men apart, in opposing camps, competing for visibility, support and authority in their communities, and in our own projects and programs.

As with so many of the SII's key messages, the lessons on engaging men remind us that such oversimplifications undermine the possibility of lasting change. In reality, men and women in Rangpur, Bangladesh, remind us that rather than viewing power as something transferred from men to women, we must begin to reshape how power is perceived and exerted:

## CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry

At CARE, we view women's empowerment through the lens of poor women's efforts to achieve their full and equal human rights. Along the way, women strive to balance practical, daily, individual achievements with strategic, collective, long-term work to challenge biased social rules and institutions. Through a three-year Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII) on women's empowerment, thousands of women across dozens of research sites shape a rich and authentic story of empowerment, one that challenges many conventions about what it is, how it happens, and what the development sector's project activities have to do with it. Central to this story is an awareness of interdependence – that the lasting empowerment of any given woman relies on a combination of changes in her aspirations and achievements (agency), in the societal rules and customs that shape her choices and possibilities in life (structure), and in the nature of relationships through which she navigates her life (relations). This brief highlights the importance of engaging men for a dramatically deeper impact on women's empowerment and gender equity.

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*"I support changing the way power is seen, and the process whereby it is used. Until now, men have consumed this power. [A transfer of this power to women] would lead to fights. This would be war. It is better to change attitudes."*

*"It is not a sustainable solution to transfer power from men to women. The rights and dignity of men as well as women require this attitude to change. Everyone's potential will be respected equally, and this will lead to the household being better off, not just economically, but also as a family. If we respect each other equally, if we value each other, then there will be love and happiness. Rather than taking power away, it is preferable to talk of the empowerment of women so that they have equal power."<sup>1</sup>*

The voices of these women and men remind us that if we seek systemic change, we must engage all parts of the system, and support each in the ways that allow them to make change possible.

This brief discusses the SII's findings on the role of men in women's empowerment programming. It explores:

- Why are men so important to women's empowerment?
- What are key challenges and considerations in working with men?
- How can we engage men more effectively?

## Why are men so important to women's empowerment?

**Relationships. Power. Identity.** Reflecting upon our own lives, our identities are shaped by the relationships that we hold with others and the (often prescribed) roles we take on within these relationships. As a father, we may be defined by our ability to provide for and protect our children, spouse and parents. As a daughter, our sense of success may hinge on our ability to marry into a ‘respectable’ family, bear a son, care for our children and support the family. Similarly, for the women that CARE works with, their roles and relationships shape their own sense of identity. Many of these key relationships, against which they measure their own worth, are with men:

*“An empowered woman looks after her family, respects her husband.” (Lesotho SII)*

*“An empowered woman has a husband and children (or the ability to have them one day) who are productive and capable of taking care of her.” (Mali SII)*

*“She is a wife discussing together with her husband on their daily, monthly and yearly income. She and her husband plan for the future together and make decisions together.” (Tanzania SII)*

As a result, the key relationships and assigned roles in people’s lives can shape and define habits, fears, preferences, prejudices, ambitions and needs. In this system of expectations and relationships, we not only depend on one another but also seek support, intimacy and fulfillment with others. This is evident through the SII’s exploration of women’s decision-making around condom use to prevent HIV. When considering whether or not to use condoms with their husbands, women weighed a number of considerations before making their decision.

- Will my partner react in violence or anger? How will condoms alter trust in the relationship? How might it affect my children?
- How does my community view women who use condoms? What stereotypes are linked to condom use?
- What are the risks of HIV infection?

**Imagine being a man in Mali.** The unemployment rate has reached 30 percent.<sup>2</sup> While you used to work on others’ land, the landowners could no longer afford to pay you and you cannot find another job. Each day you sit at home, the large blank and hungry eyes of your 5-year-old son remind you that you are not fulfilling your responsibility as the man of the household. Though she says nothing, you feel your wife’s disappointment in her silence.

Then, CARE enters your community. Your neighbors say that CARE has come to offer loans and help households make money. This may be your opportunity to work again. When CARE staff visit your home, however, you learn that they have no interest in working with you. They came to meet with your wife. She has no idea how to compete in the marketplace; in fact she has hardly left your home and can barely write her own name. Ignoring your doubts, your wife begins to meet regularly with CARE and other women in the community. In time, she starts earning income for the family – something you have failed to do.

**How might you react in this situation?**

In weighing possibilities, the SII found that most women chose not to use condoms with their husbands or lovers. In Peru, only one in five respondents reported consistently using a condom their partners. In India, the figure was one in six; and only about one in 37 women in Burundi reported using condoms consistently with partners.<sup>2</sup>

When asked why, women gave a spectrum of reasons:

*“I fell madly in love, and at that moment [I] forget about protection, [and] say ‘No, because it’s my partner, plus I love him and I trust him.”*

*“It’s the man that sleeps with me, the man that gets up [with me], the father of my children, the person I trust...”*

*“...sometimes we’re afraid of being abandoned because we’ve been living with him for years, so we have the fear of him leaving us, or he might have someone else somewhere, and we accept it, sometimes because of our financial needs.”<sup>3</sup>*

Beyond sexual health, the influence of men on women’s choices has reached across programs and contexts to affect women’s freedom of mobility outside the home, ability to pursue work opportunities and influence in household decisions ranging from money management to children’s education.

## **What are key challenges and considerations in engaging men?**

Just as relationships with men influence women’s participation with CARE, CARE’s work with women also influences men.

**The Impact of our Women’s Empowerment Work on Men.** Often we neglect to take into account the impact our programs have on men. In Mali, for example, CARE’s work in microfinance fundamentally shifted the roles of men and women. Initially in some cases, women’s increased contributions to the household from village savings and loans gained them more respect in the home as men saw visible improvements from their wives’ participation. Overall, however, CARE found that men responded negatively to the changing roles of women paired with their own struggles to act as providers for the household.

*“If a woman has more power than a man she will overflow herself. Women are no longer violated, no longer marginalized, but if she wants to exceed the limits we have to bring her back into line. We do not want to be dominated by women because of their wealth.”*

*“It’s the man who makes all the decisions; that is part of the responsibility of being a man.”<sup>4</sup>*

These views were reflected from men across CARE's work. In Uganda, men expressed fears that their wives would overtake the role of household provider, no longer listen to men, become proud and disrespectful, or might find other men and abandon their husbands. In response, some did not give permission to their wives to join village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) or took control of women's earnings. In some cases, domestic violence, separation and divorce increased. In El Salvador, men involved in projects did not really understand what women's empowerment was. Some saw it as an abusive power and threat to the established order in their communities. These fears and suspicions showed how CARE's work with men must address their own sense of what it means to be a man. Without changing expectations of masculinities, as women expand their abilities and confidence it threatens the position of men and their ability to fulfill the demands of manhood.

### How Men's Roles Interact with Projects

However, working to promote men's development and gender equity is difficult.

In Yemen, men's involvement in CARE's work failed to recognize their needs to fill male roles as leaders. As a result, men's involvement dominated groups as they took over leadership roles and association responsibilities, undermining women's agency. As noted in its SII report:

*"Samira's husband helps her with running the association, he markets the eggs, goes to the bank, write the receipts for membership fees and fills in the book, as she is not really literate. During our first visit, Samira was hardly saying anything. ...He says the women cannot go for marketing the eggs because it is difficult with the men in the hired cars and holding and carrying the boxes with eggs is difficult for them."*

Partners for a Healthy Life in Bangladesh also faced challenges in working with men and women to spread awareness around violence against women and women's rights. Mobilizing groups within communities, the project was able to provide a space to raise awareness on issues like dowry, early marriage and violence. However, it did not discuss or treat the root causes of these issues. While its work sought to reform men's behaviors as 'abusers of women,' it did not try to change the relationships between men and women or acknowledge the pressures that men face in their roles as husbands or fathers. Without re-envisioning gender roles, the SII found that some women became more vulnerable to violence in the home as public awareness raising placed pressure on men to stop violence, but household dynamics remained oppressive toward women.

## How can we engage men more effectively?

Beyond the gaps, the SII found a number of projects that did engage men more fully in their work. Each of these projects shared a number of key components toward more robust work with men:

- Using effective entry points for male engagement;
- Facilitating space for men and women to discuss gender roles and sexuality; and
- Supporting alternate role models.

**Using Effective Entry Points for Male Engagement:** To work toward social change, we must first offer a gateway initiative that appeals broadly to men and women, the elites and marginalized, and whose benefits are clear and whose returns are swift. In Mankira, Bangladesh, CARE's *Nijera* project first undertook extensive context analysis to identify the best entry point for its work. From community responses, the team identified hamlet-wide demand for a sanitation system. Bringing together men and women, the poor and elites, Muslims and Hindus, CARE launched a community-led total sanitation initiative that required cooperation across groups to achieve 100 percent sanitation in their community. While working together toward their sanitation goals, CARE staff began discussions on gender roles and power with participants.

#### **A Note on Entry Points:**

Whatever the method, entry points generally share a number of key characteristics. Entry points are non-political, do not challenge 'the powerful' and serve to benefit the majority of households within the community. Entry points initiate collective analysis, planning, strategizing and action without the use of external inputs in order to begin to build solidarity among diverse participants. In CARE Bangladesh's experiences, the realization among participants that their collective efforts can transform communities without external inputs, "opens the way to further collective action independent of outside agencies."

-Bode, Brigitta (2007)

While for Mankira the entry point was community-led sanitation, entry points vary by context and local demands. Most commonly, VSLAs serve as an effective entry point to engage men and women. In Tanzania, where CARE worked with households – women and men – on livelihood security, women discussed how VSLAs made them feel respected by the community and led to greater shared decision making with husbands. Men saw immediate benefits from their wives' participation. Money women earned often supported children's education, improved the quality of homes and made women less dependent on their husbands' income. The study found that husbands of microcredit borrowers were more accepting of women's participation in activities outside of the home, as they

began to see the value of more equitable relationships with their wives.

**Creating Space for Discussion on Male and Female Sexuality:** Bringing together men and women is just the first step that must also be accompanied by open discussions on gender, power and sexuality. In Mankira, as men and women gathered to plan for the sanitation initiative, staff also facilitated discussions on gender, rights and power.

However, it is important that these discussions take place not only with project participants but also with staff. How can we expect to work with couples to confront violence against women and gender equity when we ourselves beat our spouses or look down upon women? How can we work to create safer spaces for sex workers when we are embarrassed to be seen with sex workers?

CARE launched the Inner Spaces Outer Faces Initiative (ISOFI) to confront these questions and work with staff, partners and program participants on gender and sexuality. The initiative was guided by three main principles:

- Development practitioners need space to explore and understand their own values, attitudes, beliefs and experiences of gender and sexuality.
- Personal learning and change in relation to gender and sexuality will be critical to enhancing organizational effectiveness in addressing gender and sexuality.
- Processes and practice in the professional sphere should encourage people to recognize and maximize their lived experience of gender and sexuality.

Through awareness raising and sensitivity workshops, and structured reflection on what gender and sexuality learning mean for our work and lives; offices develop plans to integrate gender and sexuality topics more strategically and robustly in our work. Participants involved in ISOFI have discussed how it has changed the way the work and live:

*"In the beginning, I felt so uncomfortable talking to the sex workers when we engaged in participatory exercises. I couldn't bear to hear their language. Although I made it through each day, I couldn't sleep at night. I had nightmares until I suddenly realized that they were like me— they were mothers with children to feed."* (CARE Staff, India)

*"Sometimes I used to beat my wife. It was difficult...my ego is the main problem. Now I am practicing what I have learned in [ISOFI] trainings at my home, too."* (NGO Worker, India)

*"[Now] we understand each other. [ISOFI] gave us an opportunity to open our hearts and share our feelings. We talked about things that we never mentioned in the past."* (Participant, Vietnam)

#### **Beyond the SII: Innovations in Engaging Men**

While the SII offers a slice of CARE's work in Engaging Men, our portfolio encompasses diverse approaches in working toward gender equity. Following from ISOFI, a number of CARE initiatives have worked toward transforming gender norms by working with men at multiple levels of entry. These approaches engage men not only as individuals who can benefit from gender equity, but also work with men as agents of change in households, communities and with key structures and policies that influence people's lives and choices. Under this integrated model women and men are both agents of transformative change towards greater gender equity. Approaches under this integrated model include:

- Personal reflection by staff on their own gender values and ideas prior to starting to work with the community and the institutions;
  - Individual peer-to-peer gender-equal work with youth in and out of schools focusing specifically on hegemonic masculinity and violence;
  - Home-visits and group sessions to improve couple communication, especially as it relates to decisions about seeking health care services, mutual consent about sex, and parenting;
  - Campaigns, interactive theater and radio and other public events to promote community mobilization and public dialogue around the acceptability of equitable gender norms (such as men who act as family care-givers);
  - Capacity-building and awareness-raising of health service providers, community leaders and other key individuals associated with structures and organizations to improve sensitivity to gender issues (such as welcoming men in reproductive health, maternal/newborn health, and child health care services); and
  - Policy analysis and advocacy to transform structures and institutions for greater gender equity for men and women.
- Further information on CARE's work with men and masculinities can be found at [gender.care2share.wikispaces.net](http://gender.care2share.wikispaces.net) and [www.care.org/reprohealth](http://www.care.org/reprohealth).

In order to confront gender-assigned roles and their affect on our values, choices and preferences, it is very important to name and reflect upon how gender and power affect women's and our own lives. ISOFI achieves this through making space to discuss sensitive topics and focus on reflection. As one staff in India noted:

*"ISOFI doesn't tell you what to do. It just lets you grow and helps you to learn with your mistakes. It has helped us to actually take ownership. I think that this is what it has done for the entire ISOFI team."* (India)<sup>5</sup>

#### **Supporting Alternate Role Models— Male Allies for Women's Empowerment**

Even with heightened sensitivity to gender and sexuality, however, men face considerable pressures against bucking gender norms to form more equitable relationships with women. In Vietnam, male ISOFI participants found that their heightened sensitivity to gender led to tensions in their families and communities.

*"People around do not have the same orientation as me. For example, my wife's knowledge and awareness on gender and sexuality is different than mine. She agrees that we should share household duties, but says that I am the one in charge. I don't think that's right."* (CARE Staff, Vietnam)

*"What will people think if I [a man] bring the clothes to wash in the river, in front of all to see?"* (Vietnam)

Just as women face risks in their community for ‘coming out of the kitchen,’ male allies also face such criticism. In Ethiopia, many men expressed appreciation and respect for their wives. However, few dare to openly support their wives in the community.

*“Here in this village, the idea of having rights is not an easy subject. Some have total acceptance for the system and have no idea they could have rights, and others think about it but keep it to themselves. There is no idea of the right of women to speak out. If a man supports that idea, the community shuns him. Sometimes a man is willing, but mostly he is marginalized by the community if he does that. For instance, there were two households where the men supported the women and helped them too. It was difficult for the men. The community, particularly the [other] men, did not approve and they [the men] eventually left for another place because they wanted a better life.”<sup>6</sup>*

To address this issue, a dimension of CARE’s work in Burundi has been to develop and support alternate male role models for gender equity. In their approach, staff identified ‘extraordinary people with extraordinary stories.’ The compelling storytellers, known as *Abatangamuco* (literally ‘those who bring light’ in Kirundi), use their stories to promote positive change in their communities. Through group meetings, men and women discuss issues of gender equity facilitated by *Abatangamuco* who share their own stories of positive change. Faustin, a resident of rural Burundi, took part in one of these meetings:

*“My name is Faustin Ntiranyibagira and I am 36 years old. Last year, CARE organized discussions with groups of the men and women separately. I took part in the men’s group. The discussion focused on the sharing of the decision making within the household, and was facilitated by a man of my generation, a farmer who had come from a nearby hill of our township. He related his life story, a story that perfectly resembled my own, except that he had changed his behaviour and was now making decisions together with his wife. His history touched me very deeply. I decided to tell my story immediately to the whole group of men, and although we were neighbours for years, no one really knew what occurred in my household.*

*“I also decided to speak with my wife about the benefits of sharing in decision making concerning all household issues. Deep inside myself I began to realise that my father was not right in his cruel actions, that a woman is not a child, that she is in fact intelligent and capable of making good decisions.”*

Just as Faustin’s story of change was spurred by another man’s story from a nearby village, CARE works with male allies in Burundi to share their stories in village meetings and identify other key participants as potential role models for change to share their own stories and motivate others to change behaviors. The cycle repeats.<sup>7</sup>

In order to support the *Abatangamuco* against community criticism and pressures, CARE has begun to network *Abatangamuco* to work in groups. However, the initiative now struggles with how to ensure that the changes *Abatangamuco* undergo toward more equitable relationships are lasting. In villages where CARE works, *Abatangamuco* are at times targeted by conservative residents who seek to discredit their stories as unfeasible and false. Facing these pressures, staff expressed fear that if an *Abatangamuco* relapses to his or her former behaviors, credibility of the movement could suffer immensely.

## Key Lessons

Across the nearly 30 countries and thousands of women that comprise the three-year study, CARE gained key insights on how to work smarter, better and with greater impact toward women’s empowerment. In engaging men, the SII uncovered the importance of:

<p><b>Understanding the complexities of male-female relations</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include thorough analyses of power and gender.</li> <li>• Train and support staff to learn about gender equity and how to engage it at all levels. This requires that we reflect on our own values, biases, blind spots and fears surrounding gender, power and sexuality.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Taking men seriously as central players in advancing gender equality, and investing time in facilitating their opening to more gender equitable identities and competencies</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remain sensitive and aware of key relationships that influence women’s choices.</li> <li>• Work with these important relations in programming workshops and training.</li> <li>• Explicitly include strategies and resources for working with women’s empowerment and masculinities in program design and planning – empowerment cannot be an add-on.</li> <li>• Develop and support male role models and allies for gender equity through groups, trainings and broader rights movements.</li> <li>• Do not limit men’s role to either perpetrator of injustice or a vehicle for “women’s empowerment” rather than as fully engaged champions for social change for gender justice. We have missed many opportunities to fully engage men as champions for social change, including acknowledging men’s stories of survival, witness, as a “first responder” to gender discrimination and violence.</li> <li>• Formulate a plan for advancing gender equality that includes everyone.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Creating valuable entry points</b> and safe staging grounds for men and women to grow into change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harness non-threatening entry points to bring men and women together in a shared space to collaborate toward a common goal and to serve as a platform for fostering conversations on gender and power.</li> <li>• Prepare women with the space, skills training and support to enter mixed-gender initiatives as equal members with equal responsibilities.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recruitment, training and retention</b> of key staff for men's engagement work can be time-consuming and a little challenging</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many of the settings where we work don't have very supportive environments for men to publicly take on the work of advancing gender equality.</li> <li>• Build in additional time needed in the program timeline to identify and recruit leaders for the work and also for building capacity of the individuals and local partner organizations that we work with.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Building the space for personal reflection about how society's expectations for gender</b> (for both men and women) influence our own choices and opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build in the budget and schedule time and resources to bring this opportunity to our own CARE staff and our partner agencies and to our program volunteers.</li> <li>• Learn to create those transformative moments (finding a safe space for men as well as women) to reflect on the issues of stigma, discrimination, violence etc. that accompanies a society's normative expectations for gender, and to make personal changes in their own lives.</li> </ul>

## Resources for Further Learning

CARE's Gender Wiki ([gender.care2share.wikispaces.net](http://gender.care2share.wikispaces.net)) holds a number of important resources on engaging men and masculinities for gender equity:

- [Engaging Men and Boys in GBV prevention and Reproductive Health in Conflict and Emergency-Response Settings: A workshop Module](#)
- [Engaging men and boys in changing gender-based inequity in health: Evidence from programme interventions](#)

CARE's Sexual and Reproductive Health site ([www.care.org/reprohealth](http://www.care.org/reprohealth)) also offers important resources for reflecting on gender and sexuality.

- [Ideas and Action: Addressing the Social Factors that Influence Sexual and Reproductive Health](#)
- [ISOFI Toolkit: Tools for action and learning on gender and sexuality](#)

For the full SII Country reports on this topic and others, please visit: [pqdl.care.org/sii](http://pqdl.care.org/sii)

### Key Websites on Addressing VAW:

[www.icrw.org](http://www.icrw.org)

[www.who.int/gender](http://www.who.int/gender)

[www.menengage.org](http://www.menengage.org)

[www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org)

[www.acquireproject.org](http://www.acquireproject.org)

[www.partners4prevention.com](http://www.partners4prevention.com)

[www.genderjustice.org.za](http://www.genderjustice.org.za)

[www.promundo.org.br](http://www.promundo.org.br)

[www.hsrc.ac.za/RPP-Fatherhood-1.phtml](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/RPP-Fatherhood-1.phtml)

<sup>1</sup> M Drinkwater (2005). *"We are also Human": Identity and Power in Gender Relations*. CARE International.

<sup>2</sup> CARE India (2008). *Gender, Sex and Power: Understanding implications of empowering women at risk of HIV/AIDS*, p. 34.; D Ntacobakimvuna and J Iredale. (2008). *Gender, Sex and Power: The Implications of Empowering Women at Risk of HIV/AIDS*. CARE International in Burundi, p. 14; CARE Peru. (2008). *Strategic Impact Inquiry on Sex Worker's Empowerment*, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> CARE Perú (2008). *Strategic Impact Study on the Empowerment of Female Sex Workers – Perú: With Emphasis on HIV/AIDS Prevention – Results: Qualitative Component*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> F. Maïga, AK Coulibaly, RF Ngampana, M Fofana, O Keita, B Diallo, and A Koné, (2006). *Micro Systems for Macro Changes: The impact of the MJT systems on women's empowerment and the socio-economic improvements of their households*. CARE International in Mali, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> CARE and ICRW (2007). *Inner Spaces Outer Faces Initiative (ISOFI) Toolkit: Tools for Learning and Action on Gender and Sexuality*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> K de Boodt (2007). *Empowering Approaches for Understanding Empowerment*. CARE International in Burundi.