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REWRITING THE SCRIPT: POSITIVE MASCULINITIES FOR PEACE, HEALTH, AND EQUALITY

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THE HAGUE, OCTOBER 2025

> Photo cover: Mohammed (right) and his brother. Mohammed is a participant in the value chain and sustainable livelihoods programme of Cordaid in Mali. Mohammed owns a fish farm on a rooftop in Bamako's city centre.

What does it mean to “be a man”? Across cultures all over the world, ideas about masculinity shape how men see themselves and relate to others, or how the rest of society (especially women and gender diverse people) sees what it means to “be a man”. These ideas aren’t biological traits but learned through and shaped by traditions, media, and institutions. Too often, they limit personal freedom and reinforce inequality. To build a more equal and inclusive society, we need to question these negative assumptions and ask: how do cultural expectations of manhood affect everyone, and what kinds of positive masculinities do we want to promote to create a more equal and inclusive society?

The purpose of this policy paper is to examine the impact of harmful or restrictive forms of masculinity on topics such as peacebuilding, health, and equality, and to highlight the transformative potential of positive masculinities. By rethinking and reshaping gender norms, values and roles, this paper aims to provide a framework for policies and practices that foster more inclusive, caring, and equitable societies.

The paper begins by introducing the concept of masculinities, contrasting dominant and toxic forms with more positive alternatives. It then examines the relationship between masculinities and peacebuilding, as well as between masculinities and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This is followed by case studies that showcase practical approaches and lessons learned from various contexts. The paper concludes with concrete recommendations to guide policymakers, practitioners, and partners in embedding positive masculinities into their work.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS MASCULINITY?

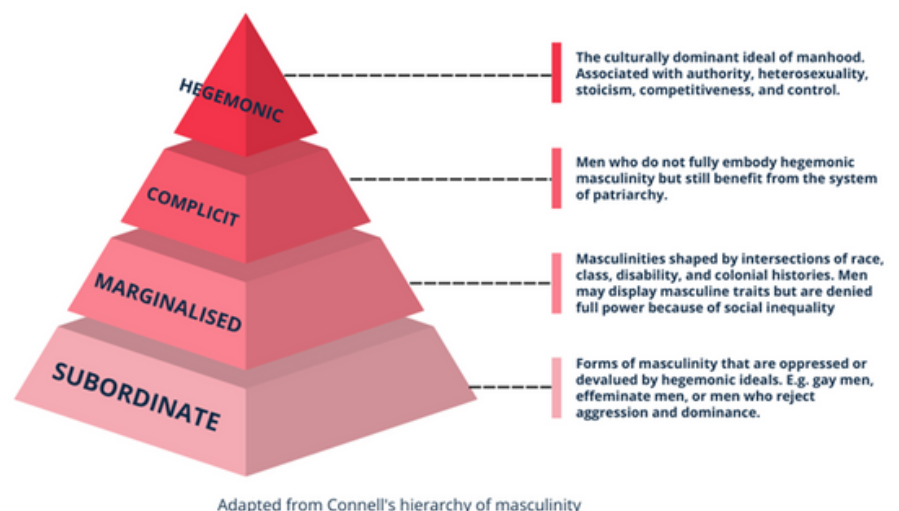
Masculinity is not a fixed concept. It refers to a set of traits, behaviours, and roles typically associated with being male – yet these ideas are constantly evolving[1]. These widely accepted norms shape societal expectations of how modern men should think, act, and live. Like femininity, masculinity is shaped by cultural norms and expectations. However, it's essential to recognise that the male-female binary itself is a colonial construct rooted in Eurocentric socio-religious ideals[2]. Indeed, many now-colonised cultures had more than two genders and different ways of living in families and communities. European colonisation of indigenous lands imposed the model of a nuclear family (mother, father, and children) to control relationships, land, and identity. Institutions such as schools, churches, and museums disseminated these beliefs and helped mainstream them. While sometimes a by-product of exporting European cultural and religious frameworks, this imposition was also tied to racist “civilising” ideals that framed indigenous cultures as inferior and gave colonisers a familiar framework through which to enforce control. While these colonial legacies continue to shape societal norms, contemporary understandings of gender are also influenced by modern media, globalisation, and social movements. Rather than existing as opposites, masculinity and femininity are part of a spectrum, and people of all genders may express or embody traits traditionally considered masculine.

At the same time, masculinities are not lived or experienced in the same way by all men. An intersectional perspective shows that factors such as class, race, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality, and location shape how masculinities are constructed and valued. For instance, the behaviours expected of a wealthy urban man may differ significantly from those of a rural farmer. In contrast, men from marginalised ethnic groups or men with disabilities may experience additional stigma when they do not (or cannot) conform to dominant masculine ideals. Understanding masculinities in their intersectional complexity is essential to avoid generalisations and to recognise both privilege and vulnerability within diverse male experiences.

These social constructs have tangible impacts. They are reinforced through media, cultural narratives, religion, policies, institutions, and sometimes even through education, and they have real-world consequences. In truth, there is not just one type of masculinity, but several. We will present some of them here.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that upholds male power not only over women and gender minorities, but also over men who do not conform. For example, homosexual men are seen as less than men who are heterosexual. Indeed, masculinities operate on a hierarchy (see illustration) where a man of physical strength, authority, power, and control sits at the top. On lower levels, men who show vulnerability or defy conventional norms risk being judged, excluded, or ridiculed by peers. As a result, many experience internal conflict, isolation, and pressure to meet unrealistic ideals[3].



[1] UN Women, 2016, [Understanding Masculinities and Violence Against Women and Girls](#)

[2] Sandy O'Sullivan, 2021, [The Colonial Project of Gender](#)

[3] Gender in Geopolitics Institute, 2021, [La masculinité hégémonique, entre déconstruction et résurgence](#)

TOXIC MASCULINITY

Toxic masculinity can be understood as an extreme expression of hegemonic norms, where expectations of dominance, control, and emotional suppression are taken to harmful extremes for both men themselves and those around them. Toxic (or patriarchal) masculinity teaches men to suppress emotions, assert dominance, and avoid perceived weakness. While often seen as signs of strength, these behaviours can cause significant harm. Some men turn their frustration inward, leading to higher rates of self-harm, suicide, and substance abuse. Others direct it outwards[4], often targeting women, LGBTQ+ people, or men perceived as “lesser”[5].

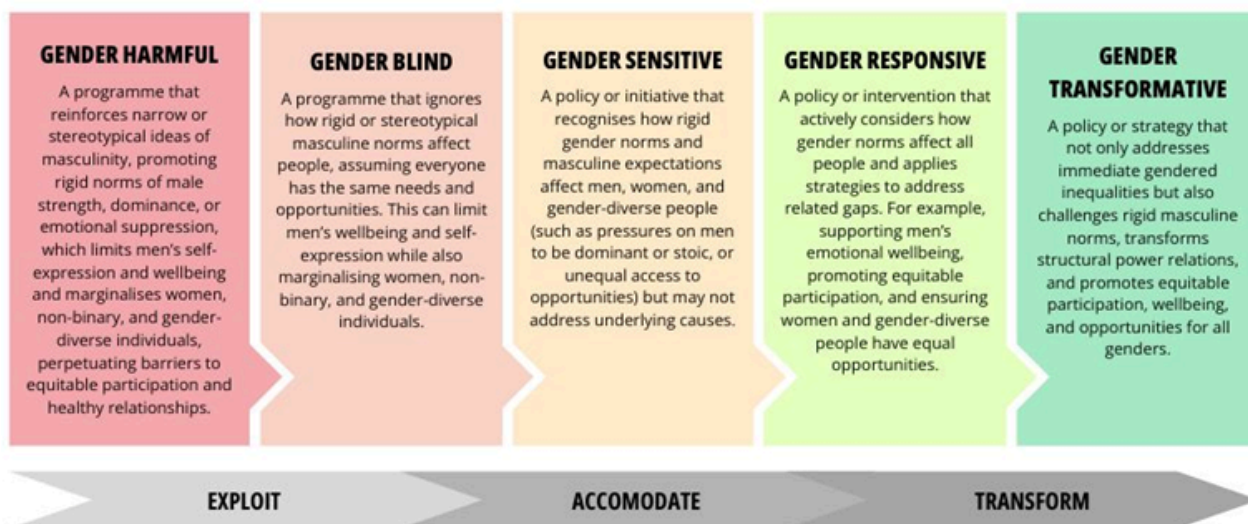
An Australian study found that men who more strongly identified with toxic masculine ideals were six times more likely to sexually harass women and more likely to bully others physically, verbally, or online. They were also less likely to intervene when witnessing violence[6]. These behaviours not only perpetuate inequality – they normalise it[7].

POSITIVE MASCULINITIES

Positive (or transformative) masculinities are not about rejecting masculinity altogether, but about reshaping it in ways that promote empathy, care, equality, and non-violence. They emphasise that there is no single way to “be a man” and that masculinities are diverse, flexible, and shaped by context. For example, programmes like MenCare, a global fatherhood initiative, encourage men to take an active role in caregiving and domestic responsibilities. It challenges the traditional notion that caregiving is only a woman’s duty, and evidence shows that men’s own health and happiness are enhanced[8]. Positive masculinities encourage men and boys to engage in caregiving, allyship, and peacebuilding; to share responsibilities and decision-making; and to express emotions without stigma. By redefining strength as cooperation, respect, and responsibility rather than dominance or control, positive masculinities contribute to healthier relationships, more resilient communities, and more equitable societies.

ADOPTING A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH

A key concept underlying this paper is the gender-transformative approach. Unlike gender-sensitive or gender-responsive approaches, which acknowledge gender differences but often leave existing power relations intact, a gender-transformative framework explicitly seeks to challenge and change harmful norms, structures, and inequalities. In the context of masculinities, this means moving beyond simply engaging men and boys to critically addressing how power and privilege are constructed, sustained, and can be reshaped. Linking positive masculinities to this framework allows us to see them not just as individual behaviours, but as part of a broader strategy for transforming social norms, advancing gender equality, and building more just and peaceful societies.



[4] See the incel movement. For more information, see Safeguarding Network, [Responding to the incel ideology](#).

[5] Swiss Peace Foundation, 2022, [Masculinities, Violence, and Peace](#)

[6] Michael Flood, 2018, [Australian study reveals the dangers of 'toxic masculinity' to men and those around them](#)

[7] Michael Flood, 2022, [Toxic masculinity: what does it mean, where did it come from – and is the term useful or harmful?](#)

[8] MenCare, 2018, [Driving evidence-based campaigns and advocacy for a transformation in fatherhood and caregiving](#)

MASCULINITIES AND PEACEBUILDING

Gender in peacebuilding is often viewed through the lens of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, where “gender” is equated mainly with “women”. This is the case even though two WPS follow-up resolutions explicitly refer to the roles of men and boys. Similarly, the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda recognises the specific needs and contributions of young people in peace processes. Yet, it rarely unpacks how masculinities shape the experiences and choices of young men and boys in conflict-affected settings. Even in programmes described as gender-sensitive, discussions of masculinities are frequently missing. Yet growing evidence shows that addressing how masculinities relate to conflict is essential for reducing violence in all its forms [9][10][11].

Across many societies, to varying degrees, men and boys are socialised into dominant and combative behaviours. From a young age, they are often encouraged to play with weapons and engage in ritualised aggression, such as contact sports. During violent conflict, institutions (including militaries, armed groups[12], community elders, and media) pressure men and boys to perform specific violent roles, often rewarding them for doing so. Those who refuse or cannot conform are usually mocked as “cowards,” “useless,” or not “real men.” These forms of masculinity justify male dominance, reinforce the marginalisation of women and sexual and gender minorities, and stigmatise men who don’t fit the mould[13].

By understanding how male roles narrow in conflict, peacebuilding organisations can open up spaces for reflection and change. Programs can adapt existing peacebuilding efforts to actively include (young) men at risk of joining armed groups, offering alternative skills and opportunities. While contexts where violence is absent or minimal allow men to pursue more constructive forms of masculinity – through education, work, family life, or caregiving – armed conflict disrupts these pathways[14]. Schools close, jobs disappear, sporting events are cancelled, and families are displaced or destroyed. As opportunities for some male roles disappear, others are emphasised. In northern Nigeria, for instance, bride prices and dowries became unaffordable for young men at the height of the conflict. Their inability to marry kept them in a prolonged state of adolescence, which they could only escape by joining armed groups[15].

Men are also at the receiving end of violence, though patriarchal masculinity often prevents this from being acknowledged. Male survivors of, for example, torture, sexual violence, or displacement frequently face stigma and shame, as asking for help is seen as weakness. Legal, medical, and psychosocial support systems are rarely equipped to meet these needs. Former soldiers or members of armed groups, in particular, may struggle with identity loss, as their sense of self was tied to violent, militarised masculinity. Without addressing this trauma, some turn back to violence or criminal activity as a familiar way of proving manhood[16]. Good practices can be found in CARE’s Engaging Men and Boys initiatives in conflict-affected areas, such as South Sudan and the DRC. They address harmful masculinity norms and support psychosocial healing. Community-based, trauma-informed programmes help men process violence and loss, while reflecting on identity and emotions [17].

For peace to be sustainable, peacebuilding must indeed confront the connections between violence and destructive gender norms, roles and values. A great example of transforming harmful gender norms for peacebuilding comes from PAX, an organisation working in South Sudan to promote positive masculinities and non-violent conflict resolution. Their programme, Leaders of Peace, engages men and boys in reflecting on traditional gender norms linked to dominance and aggression, encouraging traits such as emotional intelligence, caregiving, and non-violent conflict resolution. Through community dialogues and workshops, PAX fosters awareness of how harmful masculinities contribute to violence and how alternative roles can strengthen families and communities. They also train men to become local peacebuilders and work with traditional leaders to integrate peaceful masculinities into local practices. These efforts have led to reductions in gender-based violence and a growing acceptance of men as agents of peace and care[18].

[9] MenEngage Alliance, 2025, [Victims, Perpetrators or Agents of Change? Gender Norms and Protection](#)

[10] Conciliation Resources, 2021, [Integrating Masculinities In Peacebuilding: Shifting Harmful Norms And Transforming](#)

[11] Swiss Peace Foundation, 2022, [Masculinities, Violence, and Peace](#)

[12] Recent (and striking) example from DRC: since M23’s takeover of Goma and Bukavu in early 2025, gender-based violence against women is worryingly worsening. For more information, see [The Conversation, Fighting in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo is worsening gender-based violence against women](#).

[13] Conciliation Resources, 2021, [Integrating Masculinities In Peacebuilding: Shifting Harmful Norms And Transforming](#)

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Henri Myrtilinen, Chloé Lewis, Heleen Touquet, Philipp Schulz, Farooq Yousaf, Elizabeth Laruni, 2025, [Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict, and Peacebuilding](#). For more information on how to prevent and address conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, see [All Survivors Project’s work](#). Especially, this checklist. UNHCR also offers specific guidance for working with men and boy survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in forced displacement.

[17] CARE, 2021, [Engaging Men & Boys For Gender Equality: Guidance Note](#)

[18] PAX, [Leaders of Peace](#)

MASCULINITIES AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Harmful masculine norms and attitudes can have a negative influence on health and well-being, often shaping men's behaviours in ways that have a direct impact on the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of their partners, their families, and themselves. For example, research by Promundo Institute showed that men and boys who adhere to harmful masculine norms tend to have negative attitudes toward condom use, greater chances of contracting STIs, and are less likely than women to seek healthcare, to take an HIV test, or to initiate and adhere to HIV treatment[1]. These harmful norms also contribute to boys and men perpetrating violence, as well as being subjected to violence themselves. Therefore, challenging and changing harmful gender norms and addressing gender inequality can positively impact the health and well-being of men and boys[20].

Traditionally, approaches to engage men and boys in SRHR have focused on men as partners in opposite-sex or same-sex relationships or on specific behaviours that are viewed as typically male. Few have focused on men as diverse individuals with their own SRHR needs and rights, or as part of an uneven playing field. It is critical to look at individual men and boys as sexual beings, and consider how they connect with their identities, expectations, and behaviours when they relate to peers and intimate partners[21].

Men's limited involvement in SRHR stems from a combination of a lack of information and harmful social norms and expectations around masculinity. For example, in many cultures, reproductive health is viewed as a woman's responsibility. At the same time, it is men who hold decision-making power over condom use, and women are often unable to negotiate the terms of sexual activity. Sometimes, this leads to limited male participation in family planning discussions or prenatal care, even though their support can significantly impact outcomes. In the opposite case, in families where men are seen as dominant decision-makers, women may hide pregnancies or face barriers to seeking safe abortion care. Additionally, gender norms influence healthcare providers, often excluding men from working in reproductive and maternal health care, reinforcing the idea that these responsibilities fall solely on women[22].

Engaging men and boys alongside women and girls is a vital part of the solution for improving SRHR for all. Early and lifelong comprehensive sexuality education can help promote gender equity, and it needs to start early with boys. Specifically, one that seeks to identify, challenge, and change harmful gender norms and relations, as well as access to and control of resources, and power dynamics[1]. A good example can be found in the Rwandan NGO Rwanda Men's Resource Center's Boys 4 Change initiative. These clubs, established in each secondary school of Karongi District, comprise 30 girls and 30 boys[23]. They meet once a week to discuss how to think and talk about gender equality, sexuality, and non-violent relationships. It engages adolescent boys in schools to challenge gender norms and support girls' rights, SRHR, and caregiving. In partnership with MenCare, RWAMREC also promotes men's involvement in caregiving and maternal health. Results have shown increased contraceptive use and greater participation in maternal health and care, such as encouraging and accompanying their partners to doctor appointments[24].

[19] Equimundo, 2020, [What We Know About Masculinity and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights](#)

[20] MenEngage Alliance, 2022, [Masculinities, Youth and SRHR: An International Collaboration for Change](#)

[21] Global Fund, 2023, [Technical Brief Gender Equality](#)

[22] The Lancet, 2024, [Masculinities and sexual and reproductive health and rights: a global research priority setting exercise](#)

[23] Equimundo, 2018, [Prevention+ Program Works to End Gender-Based Violence in Rwanda Through School-Based Clubs](#)

[24] Equimundo, 2020, [What We Know About Masculinity and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights](#)

CASE STUDIES

LIKE JOE

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Published by Cordaid in 2021, Like Joe is a story-based educational resource created for young people aged 12 to 16 in West and Central Africa. It was developed with input from young men and boys in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), and Burundi, ensuring that the content reflects their lived experiences and cultural realities. The [package](#) includes a narrative storybook, a comprehensive facilitation and activity guide, and a series of fact sheets that provide further information and context for learners. The central aim of the resource is to support young boys as they navigate the transition from 'boys' to 'young men', addressing critical topics such as puberty, sexuality, peer pressure, and emerging identities. The facilitation guide is designed for use by teachers, youth leaders, and community facilitators to deepen the themes addressed in the storybook.

In our case, the Like Joe package stands out as a relevant gender-transformative tool because:

- It encourages self-reflection and open discussion around what it means to grow up and 'become a man', by using relatable characters, everyday scenarios, and fostering a sense of connection between readers and the protagonist.
 - It helps create a safe and supportive environment where boys can express themselves, explore complex emotions, and engage with one another respectfully.
- It promotes interactive and participatory approaches to learning (storytelling circles, guided discussions, role play, creative drawing exercises, reflective journaling).
 - It incorporates safeguarding principles, with clear guidance for facilitators on how to handle sensitive topics and respond appropriately to disclosures.



S3G PROJECT

CORDAID

The S3G project started in 2023 as a holistic, multi-generational response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in North and South Kivu (DRC). The project is grounded in the understanding that combating SGBV requires not just immediate response mechanisms, but also profound, systemic change in how individuals, communities, and institutions address gender inequality and violence. Primarily through sensibilisation sessions for young people (using tools such as [Like Joe](#)), community dialogues with families and religious leaders, and micro income-generating activities (e.g. in Goma, young men have started a construction materials business, chicken farming and eggs trade, and purifying water), the project engages and enables men and boys to transform social and cultural norms, and to find positive ways to express their masculinity.

In a nutshell, S3G stands out as a relevant gender-transformative tool because:

- It introduces gender concepts and promotes domestic participation, respectful relationships, and



empathy, aiming to pre-empt the internalisation of harmful gender norms before adulthood.

- It replaces silence and harmful peer influences with accessible, age-appropriate information about puberty, emotional development, and respectful masculinity. It also addresses how boys can express strength through care, responsibility, and nonviolence
- It involves religious leaders, parents, and health workers, encouraging broader acceptance of evolving masculine roles.
- It includes income-generating activities for young men, offering constructive, nonviolent pathways to self-worth and status, especially in conflict-affected areas where violence is often linked to masculine identity.

"By supporting boys to start small businesses, we're showing them that being a man isn't about control or violence, it's about contribution and responsibility. Some young men told us: 'Thanks to this project, we're no longer tempted to join armed groups, even when they come to recruit us. Now we have something else to do.' The income-generating activities make them feel useful and valued."

Immaculée Mulamba Amisi, Project Coordinator, Cordaid DRC

JIGIYA

CORDAID

Covering the period from 2019 to 2027, the Jigiya program is being implemented by the Malian NGO CAEB and Cordaid across a large part of Mali. It aims to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for young people, while addressing the social and cultural norms that shape gender inequality. In a society where traditional and religious values deeply influence gender roles, Jigiya works not only with youth but also with religious leaders, elders, and families to foster respectful, empathetic, and responsible forms of masculinity.

The programme creates safe spaces for men and boys to reflect on their roles, understand the consequences of rigid norms, and reframe their identities in constructive, non-violent ways. Jigiya is a relevant gender-transformative programme because:

- It builds trust through religious frameworks, using a guide based on liturgical texts to demonstrate how gender equality and positive masculinities align with faith.
- It frames masculinity as a social construct with real-life impacts, including on maternal and community health. It uses practical examples (e.g., men accompanying their wives to health centres or sharing household tasks) to demonstrate how small shifts in behaviour can have a significant impact.
- It encourages critical reflection on gender roles and traditional norms through intergenerational dialogues, discussing issues such as domestic responsibility, female genital mutilation, and early marriage.



"We can't transform youth behaviours without involving those who hold the power – like religious leaders and grandmothers. They are the ones who make the decisions [for their children and in-laws] about marriage, childbearing, and gender roles."

Awa Sidibe, Project Leader Jigiya, Cordaid Mali

- It normalises communication and emotional awareness, helping men and boys access age-appropriate, respectful information on puberty, sexual health, and relationships – filling a gap where silence and stigma previously dominated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively address masculinity in programmes, a gender-transformative approach is essential. One that challenges harmful norms and promotes positive male engagement. We recommend the following key strategies:

1. Transform gender-harmful norms, not just “engage” men

- a. Engaging men and boys does not automatically transform gender relations. Without an approach centred on redistributing power, resources, and opportunities, such efforts can unintentionally reinforce inequality and stereotypes.
- b. Support peer-led men’s groups that promote respectful, caring masculinities through critical self-reflection and participatory activities, creating safe spaces to challenge harmful norms and foster lasting change.
- c. Work with religious leaders and traditional authorities, elders, and male leaders in business, government, and civil society, for long-term impact using familiar and respected frameworks.
- d. Recognise that women may also reinforce patriarchal masculinity, sometimes out of fear or internalised norms. Engage women and girls in the process as supporters, co-learners, and change agents.

2. Start early and engage continuously

- a. Target boys and adolescents before harmful gender norms are fully internalised. It starts when they’re told “boys don’t cry” or when being called a “girl” is used as an insult. Early engagement allows space for emotional development and identity formation.
- b. Use school-based interventions like Like Joe and Boys 4 Change to foster critical thinking, empathy, and open dialogue among youth.
- c. Promote lifelong learning, offering age-appropriate and evolving content as boys become men.
- d. Extend early engagement into digital spaces by creating safe, peer-led online communities, countering toxic content, and using digital media, gaming, and storytelling to promote diverse, positive masculinities.

3. Addressing masculinity in fragile and conflict-affected areas

- a. Recognise how conflict can reinforce harmful masculinity norms, such as hyper-aggression and emotional suppression, and provide trauma-informed psychosocial support that addresses the emotional and psychological impacts of militarised masculinity – especially for former combatants or displaced men and boys.
- b. Offer alternative livelihoods, education, and leadership opportunities to counter recruitment into violence and harmful behaviours.
- c. Use strength-based approaches by highlighting positive male roles (such as caregiving, emotional openness, and non-violence) rather than focusing solely on negative behaviours. Framing men as capable of contributing to gender equality fosters engagement without alienation.

4. Promote men’s involvement in SRHR and health programmes

- a. Create interventions that encourage men to take responsibility for their own health and support their partners through shared decision-making in sexual and reproductive health.
- b. Tackle stigma around men seeking healthcare by promoting self-care as a form of strength.
- c. Programmes must consider men and boys as sexual beings, and address sexuality and male sexual attitudes and behaviours (e.g. hypersexuality) – especially as it links to sexual harassment and violence against both women and the LGBTIQ community.

5. Use intersectional and context-specific approaches

- a. Recognise that masculinities are experienced differently across ethnicity, class, age, ability, sexuality, and location. Interventions must be tailored to the context and informed by the lived experiences of men facing structural discrimination.
- b. Ensure diverse representation in programme design, including marginalised voices – e.g. men with disabilities, Indigenous men, or sexual minorities.
- c. Ensure intersectional and participatory monitoring by involving men, women, and young women and young men as co-researchers and disaggregating data by age, class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and location.

6. Strengthen policies and advocacy on positive masculinity

- a. Advocate for policies that promote men's roles in caregiving and non-violent conflict resolution.
- b. Work with government, civil society, and donors to institutionalise gender-responsive peacebuilding.
- c. Promote systemic change by addressing root causes of inequality, including poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and violence. Programmes must be integrated with broader efforts for justice and equity.

7. Measure change in attitudes, behaviours, and structures

- a. Use mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) to capture both visible outcomes and subtle shifts in norms, relationships, and practices.
- b. Track indicators across domains such as attitudes (e.g. rejection of violence as part of manhood), behaviours (e.g. men's participation in caregiving), relationships (e.g. improved communication and shared decision-making), and structures (e.g. adoption of policies supporting positive masculinities).
- c. Include digital spaces by monitoring participation in online communities, reduction of toxic content, and shifts in online narratives.

8. Ensure capacity strengthening on masculinities within the various Cordaid programmes

- a. Ensure enough time and resources for (local) gender experts to support programmes.
- b. Facilitate trainings on positive masculinities with (programme) staff.
- c. Ensure regular opportunities for staff to critically reflect on their own gender attitudes, privileges, and practices.
- d. Encourage linking with (local) experts and organisations, and fellow NGOs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper has been enriched by interviews with external experts, to whom we offer our sincere thanks. We are grateful to Sofanit Mesfin, Regional Gender and Social Inclusion Coordinator at [Ripple Effect](#) in Ethiopia, with whom we exchanged valuable insights on their [Transformative Household Methodology](#). We also thank Cassie Lindsey, Programme Director at the [Champions of Change Coalition](#) in Australia, whose leadership strategy continues to inspire gender justice efforts across workplaces. Our analysis has benefited greatly from Rebecca Mayabi, SRHR and Gender Justice Coordinator at [Faith to Action Network](#) in Kenya, particularly through the impactful [YW4A](#) initiative. We extend our gratitude to Amy Dwyer, Head of Gender and Peacebuilding at [Conciliation Resources](#) in England, whose expertise has informed our understanding of the intersections between masculinities and peacebuilding. Their collective insights have meaningfully contributed to shaping this paper and align closely with the values Cordaid upholds in promoting inclusive, equitable, and peaceful societies.

ABOUT CORDAID

Cordaid is a value-based international development and emergency relief organisation, based in the Netherlands with offices in 14 countries. We work on and in fragility, supporting communities in their efforts to improve healthcare, education, food security, and justice & peace. Where disaster strikes, we offer humanitarian assistance.

Cordaid is deeply rooted in the Dutch society with more than 260,000 private donors. The Christian values of human dignity, justice, compassion and care for the planet guide us in our work. Cordaid is a founding member of Caritas and CIDSE, and a member of the ACT Alliance.

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