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How and Why Should Boys and Men Engage in Building Gender Equality through the Lens of Gender-Based Violence, Reproduction, and Education?

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Abstract: Recently, growing global attention to the fundamental principles of gender equality has encouraged progressive social movements aimed at promoting comprehensive health and well-being through the establishment of equitable gender norms. As a critical and pervasive social issue, achieving true gender equality requires the active, sustained participation from all segments of society, explicitly including men and boys. Given their historically dominant position within existing social and institutional structures, men and boys represent a crucial, transformative force in challenging and dismantling entrenched patriarchal norms. This paper focuses specifically on men and boys, comprehensively discussing how and why they should actively engage in advancing gender equality across three primary domains: gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and education. As potential allies and advocates, men can offer vital informal support to victims of gender-based violence and proactively intervene to prevent abusive behaviours, noting that men are also indirectly affected by the pervasive consequences of such violence. Furthermore, since gender-based violence is a significant contributor to the spread of sexually transmitted infections, men possess a profound public health responsibility to help reduce their transmission. Respecting women's reproductive autonomy is absolutely essential, as women's reproductive health is closely tied to sustaining the global labour supply and fundamentally contributes to a more balanced, equitable socioeconomic system. Additionally, men and boys should collaboratively work to dismantle harmful stereotypes that hinder girls' educational opportunities, particularly given the alarming prevalence of gender-based threats in educational settings and the highly influential role that male guardians play in shaping girls' schooling trajectories.

Keywords: gender equality; education; gender-based violence; reproductive rights; patriarchal norms

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1. Introduction

Gender equality is a matter of equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for individuals regardless of their gender differences. The progressive movement fighting for gender equality for girls and women, as well as gender norms that encourage health and well-being for all, including gender minorities, has received substantial attention in recent times. However, in analysing the aspects of gender-based violence, reproduction, and education, achieving gender equality faces massive challenges. Gender equality is a societal issue that necessitates the active involvement of all individuals, including men and boys. Boys and men can speak out against misogynistic and sexist behaviours wherever they see them and push for more extensive institutional and social reform [1, 2]. It is just as important to include men and boys to break down the deeply embedded structures of patriarchy and gender discrimination.

Many societies accept traditional and unexamined social norms that determine their views about power distribution and responsibilities, together with collective identity. In this case, in academic and social spaces, boys should be encouraged to develop gender-

fair attitudes from an early age. Consequently, engaging men and boys is crucial for advancing gender equality since they constitute an important segment in the challenge of patriarchal norms. This is because patriarchal agreements have a significant impact on how women's gendered subjectivity is shaped and defines gender ideology in various settings. Thus, this essay will look at why men and boys should be involved in promoting gender equality in the areas of gender-based violence, reproduction and education. Firstly, this essay will analyse gender-based violence to explain the significance of males' participation and specific measures that men should take to advance fair social adjustments. Secondly, men's influence on women's autonomy of reproduction will be discussed [3]. Lastly, the analysis will focus on male participation in education, including barriers in education, traditional gender roles in society, and fatherhood responsibilities. All three sections will discuss 'how' and 'why' men and boys should be engaged in building gender equality.

2. Methods

In response to the aim and the objectives of the study, the literature review was carried out to obtain relevant papers written in English. Due to the broad temporal scope of the academic literature relevant to the topic and the limited availability of related studies, no specific time restrictions were set for the literature search. Scopus and Google Scholar were used to search for academic literature. To obtain literature, the following search string was employed: gender equality, men and boys, reasons for gender equality, and approach for gender equality as keywords to select literature [3, 4]. Additionally, education and reproduction were separately added to search for relevant literature in these two aspects. The analysis of the literature aims to determine the paper's objectives: how men and boys can achieve gender equality and why males should participate in building gender equality [5].

3. How and Why Should Boys and Men Engage in Building Gender Equality through the Lens of Gender-Based Violence, Reproduction, and Education?

3.1. Addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) through Male Involvement

One of the key areas where men and boys can be gender equality change drivers is in gender-based violence (GBV). Violence committed against someone because of their gender is known as GBV. Gender-based violence is still a phenomenon everywhere, and men can play a part in preventing and addressing it by challenging toxic masculinity, which refers to harmful, traditional male gender roles that can negatively impact men, women, and society, by adopting survivor-centred approaches. Research indicates that a significant proportion of women confide in someone about the violence they are enduring, typically seeking support from informal sources like family and friends. However, many women do not report the violence, as the environment, which often blames women and lacks adequate support, prevents them from reporting violence against women or seeking assistance. Moreover, studies on help-seeking behaviours after GBV indicate that family and friends remain the most common informal support sources [4]. These informal support networks play a vital role in reducing the risk of further violence, particularly in cases of less severe abuse. Women generally turn to unofficial sources first, such as family, acquaintances, and colleagues, before addressing formal institutions like law enforcement or counselling agencies. For informal support to be effective, it should include actions such as encouraging women to seek legal or emotional support, offering safe housing, or directly confronting the abuser to demand they stop and outlining potential consequences.

Involving boys and men in initiatives to stop violence against women and girls is essential. Reports show that group-based seminars give boys and men a safe place to think about the reasons behind and effects of violence against women. These workshops enable participants to take responsibility and become change agents by promoting candid communication, increasing knowledge, and imparting useful skills for reducing violence. This demonstrates the feasibility of a survivor-centred approach for men to help GBV

victims [6]. Thus, considering the requirements of GBV victims, as a more influential group, who are more effective in providing support to the victim and in demanding that the perpetrator stop the violence, men should participate in GBV support with a victim-centred approach.

In addition, many men have been directly affected by violence inflicted on them or their female loved ones. Consider boys who have lost their mothers to murder, fathers whose daughters have been victims of rape, or male partners of women who have faced sexual harassment at work; males are indirectly harmed by GBV. Meanwhile, tackling sexual violence also assures the protection of males, as the main cause of death among young men globally is violence committed by other men, which is frequently linked to behaviours associated with gender-based violence. Considering the widespread spread of GBV harms, a shift in interventions should move from altering attitudes at the individual level to ones that concentrate on changing the hegemonic masculinities connected to violence perpetration. Thus, for prevention to be successful, women should be empowered as individuals, in relationships, and society at large, and the reformation of masculinities should be presented as an adjunct to these goals.

The intersection of gender-based violence and sexual risk behaviours has profound implications for the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV. GBV affects one out of three women, which makes the risk of HIV transmission substantial. Specifically, anal rape is particularly significant in this risk context due to the high efficiency of HIV transmission through anal intercourse, especially when it occurs through force, along with emerging evidence connecting it to gender-based violence. When women get sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), the men who engage in sexual encounters with them possess an elevated risk of contracting infections. Moreover, while antiviral drug combinations—highly active anti-retroviral therapy (HAART)—have been developed for nearly all HIV infection treatments, this form of HIV medicines is non-curable. The incurability of HIV, the high transmissibility of GBV, and the high proportion of women affected by sexual violence make it a significant threat to public health. Furthermore, many countries face financial and technical limitations in providing treatment for sexual violence survivors. For instance, investigations into access to health for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan discovered that the government has continuously failed to prioritize funds for the public health system. In one fiscal year, merely 1.2 per cent of the national budget was allotted to the entire public health system, with no specific amount directly allotted to STD treatment. By challenging GBV and its consequences, stopping GBV and building gender equality can help men play a crucial role in reducing the spread of STDs and improving public health for all.

3.2. Male Involvement in Reproductive Rights and Responsibilities

Gender roles and relationships often position women as subordinate to men. This reinforces male-dominated patterns, perpetuating male dominance over women, especially in less developed regions. Concepts of masculinity are prevalent in many areas, equating manhood with dominance over women, sexual conquest, and risk-taking, which are associated with lower condom use and more sexual partners. These behaviors demonstrate male dominance in society. However, for males who fail or refuse to conform, such notions of masculinity can be equally repressive. A survey of 2,000 males, half of whom are sexually active, indicated that 50% feel under pressure to perform masculinity, and eight in ten believe there is societal demand for men to behave in a certain way. This creates a common tendency for males to disregard women's autonomy. Since women are often financially dependent on men in some regions, this dependence diminishes their influence in sexual relationships, particularly when negotiating terms such as condom use [7, 8]. Due to men's lack of contraception, women bear the burden of unwanted pregnancies. For instance, a study on condom utilization conditions in Malawi found that women had little influence over their husbands' use of condoms to protect themselves from HIV infection, as using condoms was perceived as a sign of infidelity. Without their male partner's permission, they were also unable to space or stop having children. Men's

disregard for women's consent in contraceptive decisions forces women to endure unintended pregnancies and reproductive risks continuously. Therefore, to promote gender equality in reproductive rights, men should respect women's autonomy in reproduction and adopt effective contraception methods.

Females' reproductive health is directly related to labor availability. Historical data from America demonstrates that a reduction in the impact of maternal conditions explains approximately 50% of the rise in married women's labor force participation. This underscores how advancements in medicine and reproductive health have enabled women to balance work and motherhood, resulting in greater workforce participation. Furthermore, studies on the impact of contraceptive pills illustrate that improvements in birth control technology give women the ability to control the timing and number of children, allowing them to adapt their reproductive plans at critical moments in their careers. For instance, in America, women who could lawfully acquire the birth control pill at age 18 had a 20% higher college enrollment rate. This highlights that when women have reproductive autonomy, they are more likely to invest in education and participate in the labor market, contributing to economic growth. For men, women's participation in the labor force helps alleviate labor shortages, lessen the work pressure on male workers, and reduce the financial burden on men within the family. Therefore, better female reproductive health can have a ripple effect on women's participation in the labor force, reducing the pressure on male labor force participation and men's family economic burden.

This can further corroborate that women's reasonable reproduction enhances female labor participation and fosters a more balanced economic system where both men and women can share financial responsibilities. Moreover, as dual-income structures contribute to better living standards and improved family well-being, 49.7% of married-couple families had both spouses working in 2023, up from 48.9% the year before, in the U.S. Combining the benefits of dual-income structures and the link between women's reproductive health and labor availability, it is evident that men should be engaged in building gender equality in reproduction. Ensuring access to reproductive healthcare and promoting gender equality in reproductive decision-making is not just a women's issue but a societal and economic necessity. By supporting women's reproductive rights, men can contribute to healthier families, stronger economies, and a more equitable society.

3.3. Men and Boys in Promoting Gender Equality in Education

Education is an important instrument for equality between men and women. It empowers people, widens economic opportunities, and challenges discriminatory norms. It provides quality learning to both boys and girls, who are then more likely to become financially independent, make informed decisions, and continue contributing to society. However, despite global efforts to close the gender gap in education, much remains to be done, with substantially larger disparities in many low- and middle-income countries. As a result of persistent differences in the quality of teaching and learning, the support provided by teachers, parents, and community members often differs markedly between girls and boys [9–11]. Traditional gender roles and cultural norms often act as barriers to girls' education, reinforcing biases against their intelligence and capabilities. A deeply rooted bias against girls persists in perceptions of gendered capabilities. For instance, a study on educational inequality between genders in Malawi revealed that approximately 64% of men and 56% of women believed boys were more intelligent than girls. The authors showed that teachers considered boys bright, diligent, driven, and collaborative, whereas girls were viewed as easier to control, quiet, calm, and submissive [12, 13]. Teachers may regard girls' engagement in class as a poor use of time, resulting in different expectations for girls and boys. Yet, in Raynor's survey of students' academic performance, more girls in most of the surveyed schools passed the exams than boys. This provides evidence that educational equality should be upheld in terms of learning capacity. With the significant impact of feminist educators, the creation of gender-sensitive resources, and other initiatives promoting gender-sensitive knowledge in education, women now outnumber

men in higher education in many Western countries. In many OECD countries, women also make up over 40% of the workforce. This further demonstrates that the claim that girls are less intelligent than boys is merely a subjective bias rooted in gender discrimination. This reinforces the need for men, especially teachers and male students, to challenge these stereotypes and support equal opportunities for girls in education.

Girls in many regions continue to face significant barriers to education, including gender bias, discrimination, and unsafe school environments. A study on gender equality in education in Malawi found that misconduct by some male educators is not uncommon and has a significant negative impact on girls. Specifically, some male teachers sought to establish inappropriate relationships with girls, treating them more favourably in the hope that the girls would not reject their advances. This undermined girls' educational achievements, reducing them to potential partners and contributing to serious abuse within teacher-student relationships. Meanwhile, the risk posed by such misconduct is also one of the key reasons why parents are reluctant to provide extracurricular tutoring for girls. Such behaviour reinforces gender-based discrimination and discourages girls from pursuing education. Male educators should actively create safe and welcoming learning environments by denouncing discriminatory behaviour and promoting zero tolerance for sexual harassment in order to address this problem and advance gender equality in education.

Girls still face significant barriers to education despite global progress. Despite major efforts to make quality primary education available to all children, thereby reducing global gender disparities, girls account for more than 50% of children who are out of school. Girls' failure to attend school stems from cultural practices, limited financial resources, and safety concerns, all of which substantially restrict their educational opportunities. Gender roles that have traditionally favoured boys' schooling work against girls' empowerment by burdening them with domestic responsibilities, thereby perpetuating social inequalities. Fathers and male guardians play a crucial role in ensuring that their daughters attend school rather than being directed into early marriage or household labour. A research study conducted at M.S. University of Baroda showed that postgraduate female students, along with 50 participants and 30 educated, employed women, received better educational and career support from their progressive fathers, which resulted in higher aspirations among their daughters. Another study notes that girls' more ambitious professional goals and labour market participation have been linked to fathers in the home modelling gender-equitable interactions. The evidence confirms the crucial role of fathers in girls' education, which is significant in breaking down barriers that prevent girls from receiving a proper education. Thus, considering the importance of males in girls' education, enlisting men and boys as partners in achieving long-term gender equity in school reform is essential [1, 6].

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the indispensable role of men and boys in advancing gender equality across areas such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and education is highlighted. Regarding gender-based violence, harmful masculinities must be challenged, and survivors must be supported to foster safer communities. Achieving reproductive autonomy not only improves women's health outcomes but also promotes economic stability for families globally. Male engagement is crucial in challenging stereotypes and ensuring safe learning environments, which significantly address systemic barriers for girls in education.

Men and boys must act as allies in the pursuit of true gender equality. Their involvement can transform societal norms, foster healthy relationships, and create a future that is equitable for all. Collective action is essential to dismantle patriarchal structures and move beyond viewing equality as an abstract ideal to making it a lived reality. Gender equality is not solely a "women's issue"—it must actively involve men and boys. Their commitment as allies and advocates in education, reproductive rights, and combating violence against women is vital. Promoting gender-fair attitudes among boys,

challenging toxic masculinities, respecting reproductive autonomy, and addressing violence are key steps. Research and practical interventions demonstrate that male involvement contributes to creating safer, more equitable environments and helps dismantle patriarchal norms that impact all genders. To achieve lasting and meaningful gender equality, education campaigns, community programs, and policy reforms must be supported by active male engagement.

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