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PHOTO: KATE THOMAS

Development cooperation has an increasing focus on gender equality with the aim to improve women and girls' disadvantaged position and status. The focus is mostly on women and girls as target groups, but there is now a clear trend for a greater engagement of men and boys in these efforts. Evidence shows that the involvement of supportive men and boys contributes to lasting socio-cultural changes in favour of gender equality.

Work with men and boys within development cooperation started in the 1990s, but it is since the last ten years that there has been a major increase in this type of interventions.

Generally there have been two main reasons for working with male involvement and responsibility for gender equality: to improve Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and in the prevention of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Lately, the importance of involving men in promoting women's economic and political empowerment has been more widely acknowledged, specifically addressing the role of men in the unpaid

care work in the home as a support for women's productive engagement outside the household.

Work with men and boys has since the beginning been integrated by organisations with broader agendas. A major factor in the current trend is the increase in gender organisations focusing solely on the role of men and boys. They are increasingly linking up in national and regional as well as global coalitions. The MenEngage Global Network is the main international organisation with nearly 700 member organisations, including a number of affiliated UN organisations.

Another aspect of this trend is the development of a solid body of cross-cultural research on gender relations and masculinities, with the subsequent development of participatory methodologies. In terms of measurable outcomes, interventions are increasingly showing shorter-term positive results, particularly as organisations use baselines and more stringent measurement methodology, such as control groups.

Not all men, or all women, welcome the new trend of increasingly working with men and boys for gender equality. Backlash reactions to women and girls' advancement can be found among individual men, as well as formally organised within religious fundamentalist, social or cultural conservative movements and politics, including the emergence of 'men's rights' groups. A further sticking factor is the ambivalent attitudes among a fair number of feminists and women rights activists.

What needs to be underlined is that gender equality has benefits for men and boys, as well as for women and girls. Men have lower life-expectancy and often higher mortality than women due to risk-taking life-styles and violence. They have higher levels of substance abuse than women and often lack supportive social networks. Poor men report being stressed and depressed at not being able to live up to the role of the providing household head. Men have thus much to gain in developing more equal gender relations.

Ideally, work in the future should not be split between organisations focusing on either women's rights or men for gender equality, rather women and men should be working together for gender equitable societies. ■