

# CSW 59 NGO Parallel Event Report Working with Men and Boys: A Critical Dialogue (12 May 2015)



Image: J Peskett, JERA International (2014)

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## Introduction

The following is a report from the workshop, 'Working with Men and Boys: A Critical Dialogue' hosted by JERA International as part of the CSW 59 NGO Parallel Events. The workshop took place in New York on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, 2015 and was attended by over 30 participants.

Senator the Hon. Michaelia Cash, Australian Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women, gave the opening address in which she spoke about the importance of engaging men and boys in gender equality and the Australian Government's commitment to work in this area.



*“Engaging with men and boys is critical, if we don’t want to have to wait another 20 years to achieve gender equality.”*

Senator the Hon. Michaelia Cash,  
Australian Minister Assisting the Prime Minister  
for Women

Senator Cash's opening remarks were followed by a panel discussion that drew together women from the Asia Pacific region and America. The panel represented a cross section of women working in the sector including those working with men and boy at the grassroots level; with government and business leaders; and, in feminist academia. Panel members included:

Ms Elizabeth Broderick: Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner

Ms Kathryn M. Relang: Executive Director, Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI)

Dr Diana Anders: Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University

Ms Ofa-ki-Levuka Guttenbeil-Likiliki: Director, Women and Children Crisis Centre, Tonga

Dr Chris J. Cuomo: Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies, University of Georgia

The panel discussion was framed by a number of questions which were designed to explore the discursive tensions around working with men and boys and also the practical possibilities and challenges of incorporating men and boys into already existing women's spaces.

The objectives of the workshop were to:

- Explore current trends around working with men and boys and the global shift towards this approach in the push for gender equality
- Provide a platform for panellists to critically discuss the discursive tensions of working with men and boys within a feminist framework
- Explore the possibilities and challenges that arise when working with men and boys
- Provide an opportunity for participants to engage with panellists by asking questions and sharing experiences
- Identify linkages and opportunities for further collaboration / discussion around working with men and boys

The panel discussion was followed by a Question and Answer session where participants were able to raise points that had been discussed, ask questions, and to share their opinions and experiences around working with men and boys.



Panel members left to right : Kathryn Relang, Ofa-ki-Levuka Guttenbeil-Likiliki, Dr Chris Cuomo, Dr Dianna Anders, The Hon Senator Michaelia Cash, Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick answering questions from the audience during the workshop.

## Background

Involving men and boys in the push for gender equality and women's empowerment has gained momentum in Australia and globally, as evidenced by recent high profile forums and campaigns such as the Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner's Male Champions of Change initiative; the 2014 MenEngage Global Symposium in Delhi, India; The International Conference on Masculinities: Engaging Men and Boys For Gender Equality in New York; the White Ribbon campaign; and, the UN Women HeForShe campaign.

The increasing focus on engaging men and boys in gender equality and women's rights as a strategy in the struggle for women's empowerment, is largely framed by two arguments:

- that characterising 'gender' as solely female marginalises women; and
- that owing to existing patriarchal structures, men and boys are positioned as 'gatekeepers' of the prevailing social order, and therefore leaving them out of the movement is an ultimately ineffective strategy.

While these arguments may be valid and appear to be at the centre of the gathering global momentum around engaging men and boys in the struggle for gender equality, there seems to be a lack of critical analysis that discursively engages with the inherently patriarchal context in which the push for gender equality and women's empowerment exists. As a result the struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment has arguably become increasingly depoliticised, with current discourses failing to account for the ways in which engaging with men and boys manifests within already existing patriarchal power relations that continue to frame social discourse and action and oppress women's voices.

The 'Working with Men and Boys; A Critical Dialogue' workshop was put together firstly as a way of critically engaging with this global trend and secondly in response to growing concerns raised through the Australian civil society Beijing +20 review, regarding the constraints and challenges of working with men and boys in the push for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Throughout the Australian Beijing +20 review process participants felt that working with men and boys in the move towards gender equality had advanced in two key thematic areas over the past five years, namely in:

- addressing violence against women and girls, and
- the promotion of women's leadership on government boards.

However, they also identified what they perceived as major challenges when working with men and boys and expressed reservations and / or resistance towards the increasing focus on working with men and boys as a central strategy in achieving gender equality and realising women's empowerment. Many of the issues raised by participants seemed to be driven by concerns about the allocation of scarce resources and the perceived diversion of very necessary funding and attention away from women's programs and services to programs and initiatives focused on men. Another key area of concern was the challenge of measuring the effectiveness of working with men and boys as a strategy to address gender inequality and effect cultural shift.

Although there is a substantial body of research which supports strategies and campaigns that seek to engage men and boys—and while there is broad agreement that men and boys must be integrated into current feminist work—there exists a gap in current discourses which do not adequately recognise and account for the patriarchal context in which the push for women's empowerment exists. As such, it is hoped that going forward the 'Working with Men and Boys; A Critical Dialogue' workshop will provide an opportunity to facilitate and promote a discussion which will begin to fill this gap in the current discourse surrounding working with men and boys.

### Panel Questions / Discussion

- 1. The development of the working with men and boys agenda in the push for gender equality and women's empowerment seems to be giving rise to what could be considered an emerging working with men and boys 'industry', complete with the emergence of new 'specialist' organisations working specifically in this area.**

**In your opinion is this new focus on working with men and boys drawing limited resources and attention away from an already underfunded women and girls sector? And is there a discursive problem with this work (not always but increasingly) being done outside of already existing feminist women's organisations?**

In response to this question there seemed to be a consensus among the panellists that working with men and boys must be done within a context which recognises the hard work that feminist and women's organisations have done to address gender inequality to date. With this in mind, panellists agreed that in moving forward there was a strong need to engage with men and boys in order to further advance women's rights and achieve gender equality. It was acknowledged that gender does not refer exclusively to women, and as such, we need to engage men and boys to ensure that both genders have equal rights.

Where possible, it is preferable that this work be done through or alongside existing feminist women's organisations, and the women's sector needs to lobby donors to make sure that in engaging with men and boys, the focus remains on women's empowerment and the realisation of women's rights. It was also argued that a more productive approach to the shift towards working with men and boys may be to focus not so much who is doing the work, but on the quality of the work. As such it becomes a question of not what kind of organisations, but what kind of programs are we talking about; what kind of work they are doing; who is involved; what kind of message are they sending; and, who speaks for who. It becomes a question of whether a given program is doing good, progressive, valuable and transformative

work, rather than merely asking if these new organisations are drawing from existing women's organisations. This discussion points to the concerns around the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of programs that work with men and boys to address gender equality.

In line with this it was also argued that any existing or emerging organisations that are working with men and boys, and forming part of this new 'industry', must do so within the framework of a feminist and women rights approach. It was also suggested that at this point, feminist and women's organisations have a good opportunity to set a precedent as to how working with men and boys is done. For example, this would include questions such as how is this work being done, who is doing the work, and what are the standards by which this work is evaluated. It was noted that good examples exist as to how 'allies' have worked effectively in relation to other social justice struggles; for example, white people doing anti-racism work alongside the civil rights movement. In a similar way when engaging with men and boys, this work needs to be about unlearning sexism, unlearning stereotypes, challenging gender norms, and challenging certain understandings of masculinity.

On the question of funding, Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick noted that many women's organisations are under funded, and as feminists we don't want to see resources pulled away from these organisations, as such, working with men and boys funding should be additional to existing funding. However, it was noted that the rise of the working with men and boys 'industry' presents an opportunity to carve out a feminist space in those organisations which have historically been run and ruled by men and therefore have untapped sources of funding (such as industry groups and sporting associations). The Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner's Champions of Change program in Australia shows that this work can be done for example within industry bodies without necessarily drawing resources away from existing women's organisations.

- 2. Much of the work being done around engaging with men and boys focuses on gender based violence. Part of the work being done in this space includes drawing particular attention to how gender based violence not only affects women and girls negatively, but also the ways in which it affects men negatively; increasingly conceiving of men as the 'victims' of their own masculinities. As such, men who are, generally speaking, the perpetrators of gender based violence, are being encouraged to re-conceptualise their subject position, and increasingly being called on to act as agents of change in this area.**

**Is there a tension when engaging with men and boys, as both perpetrators and agents for change, around issues of gender-based violence? If so can this tension be overcome and how?**

**Does encouraging men and boys (who commit acts of violence against women and girls) to understand themselves as victims of patriarchy colonise or obscure women's experience as victims of this violence?**

The discussion of this question focused mainly on the work done by Ms Ofa-ki-Levuka Guttenbeil-Likiliki in the Pacific Islands. Ms Guttenbeil-Likiliki spoke about the initial "leap of faith" that the Pacific Network against Violence against Women and Girls took when they invited men in the community to have an open and honest discussion about the reality of violence against women and girls in the Pacific. Following this discussion the Women and Children's Crisis Centre developed the Male Advocacy Pacific Program, a five year intensive program to bring men to a point where they could articulate and communicate women's human rights issues. After completing this program male advocates were empowered to enter male dominated spaces such as kava circles, and challenge patriarchal norms and sexism, by effectively communicating women's human rights to other men.

This prompted a question from the panel about how the program was developed. It was explained that the Pacific Network against Violence against Women and Girls developed the training modules collaboratively with male participants and Stephen Fischer, a male masculinities specialist from Melbourne, Australia.

Ms Guttenbeil-Likiliki explained that by bringing in the male masculinities specialist the Pacific Network against Violence against Women and Girls created a safe space for the male participants to actively engage with and question what was meant by 'masculinity' and other gender concepts. However, the masculinities specialist was brought on very intentionally as a 'co-trainer' rather than a lead trainer to ensure that the Pacific Network against Violence against Women and Girls led the program. The women in the Pacific Network against Violence against Women and Girls were vigilant to ensure that the inclusion of the male masculinities specialist did not unintentionally shift the focus of the program exclusively towards men and masculinities, resulting in the colonisation or obscuring of women's experience as victims of this violence. Ultimately, the intention was for the program to be one run by a feminist women's organisation as a strategy to prevent violence against women and girls and support the recognition and protection of women's human rights.

- 3. One of the focuses of the working with men and boys agenda has been for men and boys to not only become advocates for gender equality and women's empowerment but to take on a leadership role in the struggle for gender equality. A recent and high profile example of this discourse can be seen in UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, Emma Watson's, speech at the launch of the HeForShe campaign, where Watson spoke to men and boys inviting them to "step forward, to be seen, to speak up, to be the "he" for "she."**

**Does promoting men and boys as leaders in the struggle for gender equality support women's leadership, or work counterproductively against the promotion of women as leaders and make women's leadership less visible?**

**Does the implication of engaging men and boys as leaders in the struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment, or implying that this engagement is a necessary condition for change, undermine the work of the women's movement up to this point?**

*"We need decent powerful men to stand up beside us, not taking over the agenda, not trying to save us, not speaking for us, but stepping up beside us and taking on responsibility for the advancement of the women's rights movement and the advancement of gender equality in the nation."*



– Elizabeth Broderick,  
Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner

Panelist began discussing this question by again emphasising that it has been women's engagement with other women and the strong advocacy of the women's movement that is what has gotten women to where we are today; "women's voices, women's agitation, women's strength." However, Commissioner Broderick argued that at the leadership level, the less we engage with men and boys the more our progress will be hampered. If the women's movement wants to engage with 'power' and power structures in society, they need to engage with men, as it is still with men that most power in society sits. In this sense, working with men and boys is as much about engaging with power as it is with engaging with

men. As such, it is important that in order to further gender equality the women's movement is able to take the gender equality message into these places of power. Having men who are able and willing to take the gender equality message to other men is an effective way of engaging with power in society. As an example of this, Commissioner Broderick went on to discuss the Male Champions of Change program in which men already in leadership positions can be engaged effectively in the push for gender equality within a robust feminist women's rights framework.

By engaging men and boys as leaders within a feminist framework in the way that the Male Champions of Change program does allows for the recognition that within a patriarchal society, men "invented the system" and "largely run the system." Accordingly, a transformative approach to engaging with men and boys as leaders and advocates requires that men acknowledge their own privilege, and start working with women to change the system for the benefit of women and that this needs to be done in a way which recognises and honours the contribution of women.



Kathryn Relang (left) Executive Director, Women United Together Marshall Islands, Ofa-Ki-Levuka  
Guttenbeil-Likiliki (right) Director, Women and Children Crisis Centre, Tonga

Following from this Ms Kathryn Relang spoke about the challenges of shifting long established patriarchal systems and structures of power in the Pacific and discussed the way in which Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI) has been able to draw on culturally specific understandings and notions of leadership in order to engage with men and boys in spaces where women are traditionally unable to effectively speak due to cultural understandings of gender and respect.

By engaging male educators as advocates Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI) were able to enter spaces where it is culturally disrespectful for women to stand up in

front of men and speak out. While WUTMI engaged with already existing patriarchal structures of power, through these male educators as advocates, WUTMI ensured that the message that the male advocates conveyed was firmly embedded in a feminist women's rights framework. Ms Relang also described how through the male advocacy program women's organisations were able to draw on and emphasise traditional cultural perceptions of women's leadership and respect embedded in the traditional pre-colonial matrilineal property inheritance system in the Marshall Islands. This example from the Marshall Islands further highlights the approach in which working with men and boys as leaders can be used to change the system for the benefit of women in a way that recognises and honours the contribution of women.

- 4. One of the argued strengths of the emerging working with men and boys agenda is that it is able to tap into the privileged position of men and boys as 'gatekeepers' of the prevailing social, political and economic order, in order to advance gender equality.**

**To what degree, if any, does this approach counterproductively give legitimacy to and reinforce the prevailing social, political and economic order which gave rise to women's disempowerment? In other words, is it reasonable to expect men to use their existing privilege in order to do away with this very same privilege?**

## **And is the effectiveness of working with men and boys to bring about cultural change being sufficiently measured?**

Once again the panel addressed this question by emphasising the importance of approaching working with men and boys through a feminist women's rights framework. The risk of failing to address the issue of privilege through a feminist and transformative lens is that, rather than challenging the prevailing social, political and economic order, we are in danger of replicating old models of privilege. For example, when talking about leadership, we must ask ourselves: what kind of leadership we are talking about, and who should be leading who. When tapping into the privileged position of men and boys and promoting them as advocates and leaders, we need to ensure that this strategy gives us the opportunity to discuss respecting women's leadership and to build girl's leadership. Without redefining leadership as being about shared and collaborative power, then tapping into existing structures of privilege risks perpetuating existing structures of oppression. Furthermore, failing to redefine leadership through a feminist and transformative lens in this way may lead to a situation in which many campaigns engaging men and boys become little more than a vehicle for 'gender washing'.

Dr Chris Cuomo argued that there is a discursive problem in the concept of men and boys as 'gatekeepers'. While it is certainly the case that male privilege has, and continues to, stand in the way of and block the realisation of women's empowerment, simply challenging and diminishing male privilege is a necessary but insufficient condition for women and girl's empowerment. Rather, empowerment is always available to the individual and the group; and must therefore come from the individual or group. As such, women and girls need to be recognised as the 'gatekeepers' of their own empowerment.

The discussion then moved onto the discursive significance of the semantic meaning of 'for' in the UN Women HeForShe campaign. Dr Dianna Anders noted that when we look at the preposition 'for' we have to ask who speaks for 'she' in the HeForShe campaign, and what are they speaking. The discursive significance of 'for' can be seen in a few different ways. For example, 'He' becomes the condition *for* 'she' to be visible, to speak; or, as she cannot be, he has to be *for* her. In other words, 'He' represents or speaks *for* 'her'. However, what is meant by 'speaking for' is open to interpretation. He speaking for her could be either empowering for women (in that 'He' supports 'Her'), or silencing ('He speaks for, or instead of, 'Her').

### **Question and Answer Session**

In the open question and answer session that followed the panel discussion, among the key themes that were raised by the audience was whether maternity protection (including breastfeeding programs) is on the agenda of male leaders such as the Male Champions of Change.

Commissioner Broderick addressed this topic by sharing findings from the recent Australian Sex Discrimination Commission report into pregnancy discrimination. The report found that 1 in every 2 women face discrimination when they tell their employer that they are pregnant, go on leave, and when they return to work. 27% of men also reported experiencing discrimination when accessing parental leave. Commissioner Broderick reported that when this report was presented to the Male Champions of Change participants, they expressed anger at the situation and made a commitment to address the issue. However, the issue remains difficult to address as it is still hidden, with only 5% of women speaking out about this discrimination.

Another key area addressed in the question and answer session centred around the inclusion of diversity in the women's movement, and whether the current model of feminism

is able to sufficiently account for intersectional structures of oppression. In light of the fact that so many women from diverse and minority communities are marginalised, questions were asked about the inclusion of men and boys from diverse communities in work being done to engage with men and boys.

In response to this Dr Cuomo spoke about anti-racism in feminism. She suggested that feminism should be seen as a struggle against oppression, but one which places the oppression of women and girls at the forefront of its analysis. Inherent in this approach to feminism is the recognition that women are a diverse group, and therefore must also address questions of racism in society and within its own discourses. Any feminism worthy of the name must stand firm and push against multiple and interlocking forms of oppression. Accordingly, this approach must be carried through to any work engaging with men and boys.

Dr Dianna Anders also addressed this question by firstly expressing a hope that contemporary feminism had taken on board the criticisms of post-colonial, anti-racist and third world feminists. Secondly, Anders drew attention to the situated ways in which to speak out against inequality always involves self-reflection, and that to speak out about inequality means to ask who is being excluded. This requires feminism to acknowledge that when talking about gender we are not just talking about men and women but an intersectional and multifaceted subject. While this can be at times difficult, this acknowledgement must be central to the contemporary feminist project.

## Reflections and the Way Ahead

The 'Working with Men and Boys: A Critical Dialogue' workshop covered a diverse range of issues and topics, and demonstrated the need for further discourse and analysis of the shift towards working with men and boys as agents of change and gender equality advocates.

While the workshop highlighted some of the positive and progressive work already being done in this area, the panel discussion served as a reminder that, as feminists working within the women's sector, we cannot become complacent and assume that all work being done with men and boys is framed by and situated within a progressive and transformative feminist agenda. Accordingly, there is a need for feminists in the women's sector to come together and collectively strategise around how we can direct and set a precedent as to how work engaging with men and boys should be done. Part of this collective work would need to include lobbying donors and governments in order to ensure that the focus when engaging with men and boys remains on women's empowerment and the protection of women's human rights.

Key messages that emerged through the workshop, and which can be used by feminists in the women's sector to inform their continued engagement with the discourse around engaging men and boys in the push for gender equality and women's empowerment, are:

- That when engaging with men and boys there needs to be an acknowledgment of the hard work that feminists, women's rights activists, and women's organisations have done and continue to do to address gender inequality;
- As gender does not refer exclusively to women, the struggle for gender equality is a struggle that necessarily encompasses men and boys; and it therefore takes both men and women to achieve gender equality. However, when engaging with men and boys in this work we need to ensure that the focus remains on women's organisations and that men and boys are positioned as allies in this work;

- As feminists we need to set a precedent about how work engaging with men and boys is done, especially when we are trying to transform gender norms and stereotypes. A central aspect of any work engaging with men and boys needs to include unlearning sexism and stereotypes;
- When engaging with men and boys as leaders and agents for change in the struggle for gender equality we need to be clear about what kind of leadership we want to encourage, ensuring that emphasis is placed on modeling collaborative forms of leadership in order to avoid the dangers of 'gender washing' and reinforcing men and boy's roles as allies;
- While there is, by and large, consensus around the need to include men and boys in gender equality work, as feminists we need to remain vigilant about the discourse within which this engagement is undertaken and ensure that it is firmly embedded within a women's rights framework;
- To be effective in its continuing critical engagement with discourse surrounding men and boys, feminism and the women's sector must acknowledge that when talking about gender we are not just talking about men and women, but an intersectional and multifaceted subject. As such, feminism and the women's sector needs to commit to and foster a critical and self-reflective analysis in order to allow it to address and work towards the elimination of multiple and interlocking forms of oppression.

JERA International would like to thank the workshop rapporteur, Ms Erin-Claire Barrow, and all the panellists for their time and insights into this critical dialogue.