



Photo Credit: Sam Phelps/CRS 2016

Gender-Equitable Masculinities? Yes, they're helpful for women, but men are happier, too.

LEARNING REPORT FROM GENDER-EQUITABLE MEN'S PROJECT IN NORTHERN GHANA

Background

Worldwide, inequitable gender norms impact the opportunities and potential of men, women, boys, and girls. Although men and boys benefit from norms that confer enhanced power and social status, some masculinities – what it means to be a man – also increase risks for men and boys. Rigid gender norms perpetuate this inequitable distribution of power, decision-making, and responsibilities in many patrilineal societies, such as Ghana.

Gender norms are widely held expectations about the differences between men and women, as well as accepted behaviors and roles for men and women. They also include widely held conceptions of masculinity and femininity. As

part of ‘becoming a man’, adolescent boys are expected to remain within the “man box”¹ and frequently fall victim to cultural expectations, such as dropping out of school to fulfill family obligations or being forced to become family heads at a young age. In Ghana, studies have shown that one of the main aspects of being a man is seen as the ability to have a biological child and provide for members of one’s household.² Traditionally, men are expected to provide, lead and protect their families while women are expected to do housework and care for children. Men tend to exercise control and domination over their partners and children, and this sometimes culminates in domestic violence.

Negative social norms such as Gender-Based violence, early marriage, and underage pregnancies continue to have a detrimental effect on opportunities and potential, particularly for women and girls. This is because men and boys are raised in various communities throughout Ghana, particularly in the Middlebelt and northern regions, with cultural expectations and unequal power dynamics, reinforcing gender inequity and ultimately contributing to poor human development outcomes.³ Additionally, these dominant forms of masculinity jeopardize the well-being of boys and men, wreaking havoc on their physical and psychosocial health, undermine the well-being of boys and men, causing harm to their physical and psychosocial health. These expected roles deny boys the opportunity to enjoy adolescence and make the most of this critical period of personal growth and development, compounding gender disparity and reinforcing harmful masculinity and violence.

Due to this, CRS and partners, Youth Empowerment for Life (YEFL)-Ghana and Sharing Education and Learning for Life (SELL), held discussions with its male staff and young male program participants to define what it means to be a man in Ghanaian society, as part of a formative assessment to help inform design of the project. Respondents cited that, as in most parts of the world, Ghanaian men are expected to serve as the primary financial providers and decision-makers in households and communities and recognized that they are accorded more power than women and girls given the value placed on these roles. Respondents also expressed limitations in expressing emotions that show vulnerability, saying that men must not cry, while expressing the expectation to act aggressively, courageously, and assertively, including practices associated with abusive and controlling behavior towards women and girls.

CRS Approach

Building on the premise that for transformational development to take place in Northern Ghana, men and boys need to explore new ways of being and doing ‘manhood,’ CRS adapted and integrated its Journey to Peaceful Masculinities curriculum into its discretionary-funded program that builds youth’s vocational skills. This journey is inspired by Catholic Social Teaching, the principles of CRS’ peacebuilding framework, and theories from numerous evidence-based positive masculinity approaches. The Peaceful Masculinities program, guided by male mentors and facilitators, sought to develop avenues for participants to identify, reflect on, and challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes and to adopt new attitudes and behaviors in support of gender equality, such as being an involved father, communicating and making important household decisions with their partners, sharing household chores and responsibilities (childcare, cooking, cleaning), supporting women in economic, political, and social spheres, and employing and promoting non-violent conflict resolution techniques. CRS Ghana also included male staff in the program, as well as methods to reach community members more broadly in an attempt to reach both individuals and Northern Ghana communities with the program.

The program took place from January to September 2021, beginning with a formative assessment that engaged project partners, community leaders, CRS male caucus⁴ staff, potential project participants and youth ambassadors. The objectives of the assessment were to identify how masculinity is perceived and performed by young men in Northern Ghana and to understand its effects. Upon completion of the assessment, CRS convened a 3-day design and data validation workshop with project partners to adapt its Journey to Peaceful Masculinity curriculum to the Ghanaian context as well as to build capacity in the area of gender-equitable masculinity programming to include in future program design and implementation plans. CRS then held a 3-day training of trainers (ToT) with 27 male peer leaders, partners and staff. The ToT followed the sequencing, approach, and objectives of the curriculum that participants

¹ The ‘Man Box’ activity is a visualization of the real life set of norms, rules and expectations which men must abide by to ‘be a man’ in their contexts. These norms, rules and expectations place men in a ‘box’ that they must live and act within. The man box activity has been used widely in positive masculinity work and was first created by Paul Kivel during his workshop documented in his book ‘Men’s Work: How to Stop the Violence that tears our lives apart.’ 1992.

² Akosua Adomako, Ampofo, Michael, Okyerefo, Michael Pervarah. Phallic Competence: Fatherhood and the making of men in Ghana. 2009. [Available here.](#)

³ Dery. Ghanaian men and the performance of masculinity. 2019. Available [here.](#)

⁴ In 2020, CRS Ghana male staff formed the Male Caucus, a group dedicated to looking at cross cutting issues around gender within the professional and personal lives of male staff. The group meets monthly, addressing topics around how best to support female staff and reflect on masculinity.

would use in their future facilitated discussions with youth. In addition, there were introductory sessions on the creation of the approach, gender-equitable masculinity and CRS' guiding principles, action planning, MEAL processes, and the need for this type of work based on the assessment. The sessions allowed ample time for participants to reflect personally and professionally on the topics being discussed, while also allowing time for the group to bond over these issues and ideas. Participants discussed how the program is not designed to change what it means to be a man, but rather to modify the negative norms society perceives as masculine. It also served as an avenue to ask more clarifying questions to be able to roll-down the training sessions to project participants.

Peer Leaders in turn used CRS' curriculum to guide 171 young men on a journey towards a more positive masculine identity. Participants made commitments on inequitable norms they were willing to transform to live harmoniously within themselves, their families and the community at large.

In addition, a two-day training was conducted for 32 CRS Ghana male caucus members using the Peaceful Masculinity curriculum, with the additional objective of encouraging participants to reflect on aspects of the curriculum they could include in their project activities.

During the project evaluation, participants cited many areas when asked which sessions of the curriculum piqued their interest the most. They included the process of developing the Man Box, with a particular emphasis on conversations about emotional consciousness and healthy relationships; role play on persons treating other persons as objects and vice versa; and activities such as debates aimed at raising participants' awareness of negative norms and stereotypes prevalent in Ghanaian society.



Youth Life 2.0 participants having discussions with CRS staff on the Man Box, as part of the training of young leaders. Photo Credit: CRS Ghana/2021

In addition to engaging young men in the Peaceful Masculinities critical reflections and discussions, CRS held community fora with 130 community members including chiefs, sub-chiefs, religious leaders, parents, youth, peer leaders and partners. These fora engaged community members in dialogue to develop and share their vision of positive, peaceful masculinity and how they can continue to support and transform ideas relating to inequitable norms in households and society more broadly. The chief of Choggu found the community forum so beneficial that he convened a community durbar - together with his elders and in partnership with CRS and YEFL-Ghana - at the Choggu Chief Palace to mark the journey of his community towards positive masculinity. Both men and women together with the chief and community elders were present (70 participants) and keenly contributed to the topic and pledged to transform some inequitable gender norms, starting in their homes. Another impact of the community forum was a local Imam embracing the concept, affirming that it is in line with the teachings of Islam and the Prophet, and committing to including the concepts in his Friday sermons.

Finally, to further extend the reach of the Peaceful Masculinity program to those from remote communities across the Northern Region, CRS and its partners held 8 – one-hour long radio discussion sessions dubbed '*the man box hour*'. CRS project staff, YeFL partner staff and youth leaders who have completed the training led discussions about key norms, with listeners calling in to discuss and debate. Topics included what is the 'man box', the effects of the 'man box' rules on young men's mental health, relationships and self-confidence, masculinity and fatherhood, power, and non-violent conflict resolution. The radio programs provided community members the opportunity to appreciate the positive attributes they consider as part of their masculine identity, such as being hard-working and confident, while also inputting on norms they felt should be modified to promote healthy relationships in their families and the larger community.

Spotlight: Mohamed Al-Hasan

“I used to shout a lot, but now I’ve totally changed.”

Mohamed Al-Hasan participated in CRS’ YouthLife program to gain vocational skills as a bio-technician, and subsequently joined the Peaceful Masculinity training. Mohamed said he has “totally changed” as a result of the discussions, citing that he no longer shouts at his wife but rather wakes up early to make breakfast and bathe his daughter so that she’s ready for school on time. When asked if it was hard to make these changes and undertake work normally reserved for women, he said “at the beginning, I wasn’t used to it. I started little by little. Then I saw [these chores] only take a few minutes, so why not do it?” He also said he’s learned that men should be patient with their wife and children: “patient, humble, respectful, and responsible.”

As a result, Mohamed experiences more collaboration and trust in his home. He recounted how before the training, when his wife would ask for money to buy food and he didn’t have it, she wouldn’t prepare a meal. After the more collaborative attitudes and communication Mohamed adopted from the training, his wife now uses her own resources to buy and prepare food if Mohamed doesn’t have the money.

Mohamed said that CRS should reach more people with the Journey to Masculinities program, so that “little by little spouses will get along better, which will promote peace in the longer term.” Even now, his wife’s friends are approaching him to counsel their husbands and boyfriends, and want them to participate in the program as well.



Results

For its final evaluation, CRS held 80 interviews with male youth participants and two partner staff, one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with male youth program participants, and another FGD with trained Positive Masculinity Facilitators (peer leaders). In addition, CRS applied 13 statements from the Gender Equitable Men Scale, originally developed by Population Council/Horizons and Promundo, with which participants would indicate their level of agreement with selected norms directly before and after the Peaceful Masculinities program discussions.

All project participants showed an increase in attitudes towards gender equity and positive masculinity after the Peaceful Masculinities program. Where a score of zero indicates no support for equitable gender norms and 1 equals a full embrace of equitable norms, the score of young men increased from 0.68 at the baseline to 0.89 at the endline, while the male caucus members went from 0.74 to 0.93. All young men and male caucus members reported practicing personal commitments to promoting positive masculinity that they made during the training.

Interviews with participants shed further light on these changes. One area of improvement noted by participants is a shift in men’s perceptions of responsibility and power in relationships:

“The session on power dynamics impacted positively on my life after the training. I realized power should be at both receiving and giving points. When I practice these power changes at home by trying to engage my siblings most especially females to exhibit what was also in my control, it brought my attention to see the capabilities they had but was not given the privilege and from then onwards they have developed and are using the centralized base of power.”
Youth Life 2.0 Project Participant

“There were certain household decisions I initially thought should be made by the man, however, after the training, I realized that almost all decisions should be shared.” - Partner staff

Respondents also reported increased ease with having candid conversations with and soliciting input from their wives and sisters. They reported overall improvements in their relationships, contributing to more peaceful and healthy homes:

“Significantly it has improved my communication skills with my wife. I used to communicate without considering some sensitivities. I am now able to say sorry to her if I mistakenly do something. For instance, this morning as I was ironing, she came around to pick something from under the board, so when I turned my elbow hit her and I said I was sorry, she was so surprised and said I have improved. Also, when I get back stressed from work and she brings in some demands, I wouldn’t comment, I will stay quiet and respond to her later when I have well rested.” - CRS staff

“I think that it has strengthened my relationships especially with my wife. I have begun to see my wife differently. I show more care and love to my kids and wife now. I understand that I have more roles and responsibilities and it makes me feel more responsible now because I was not paying attention to certain things.” - CRS Male Staff Person and a leader of the Male Caucus

Respondents’ awareness of gender discrimination in males’ and females’ work responsibilities also increased, and men became more receptive to performing tasks traditionally associated with femininity:

“I now assist my wife in the house without embarrassment. I bathe and transport children to school. When my peers notice my support, they are taken aback, and I explain my experience to them.” - Youth Life 2.0 Project Participant

“I can also see that the training has impacted positively on some colleagues who were initially stereotyping gender roles... a close friend after attending the training now allows both sexes of his kids to perform household chores irrespective of gender”. Male Partner Staff

Another impact has been a resolution to shift away violence; after the trainings participants made commitments towards an appreciation of power dynamics in relations and the harmful effects of using force.

CRS staff members have also reported changing their behaviors in the workplace. For example, one male caucus member reflected on how he uses power during the program: “Prior to the positive masculinity training, I used to assign duties to my colleagues without necessarily making room for any of them to give ideas on how we should go about it. But after the training, I learnt to make all roles inclusive, and this has helped in producing efficient work output. Also, leadership positions at the workplace are no longer imposed on some selected people. We now elect them and hold them accountable when they do not deliver as promised. We do this in a democratic way for everyone to be involved.”

During the final evaluation, all respondents cited that the major impediment to practicing more equitable norms are the entrenched attitudes and practices in their communities. As one participant put it, “more often than not, members of the community who adhere to traditional norms speak negatively about young people who practice positive norms.” Respondents also expressed that many of their peers take pride being “in the man box” (practicing inequitable masculinities) and being reprimanded by peers for practicing “out of the man box traits.” However, respondents related that they felt they are playing the role of change makers, which motivates them to continue.

Spotlight: Abdul-Baaki Ibrahim

“After this project, I said, ‘I have a talent, let me go back and do it.’”

CRS staff also report making changes as a result of the Peaceful Masculinities program. Baaki started with CRS as a Peer Leader in its youth vocational skills building program before successfully applying to become a Program Assistant for the Peaceful Masculinities project. Despite being teased by male peers for working on “ladies’ things,” Baaki is resolute about the virtues of equitable masculinities, including the opportunities breaking out of the Man Box provides for his personal happiness. “I did home economics [in school], and though I had a fair idea about it, I didn’t take it into consideration because that’s not something a man does. But after this project, I said, ‘I have a talent, let me go back and do it.’ And to be honest... now I’m perfect, I can cook.” Baaki continues to develop his skills to start a pastry business and hopes it will reduce unemployment in his community.

The Peaceful Masculinities program has brought happiness into Baaki’s family’s life as well. Baaki recounted how he purchased a washing machine to alleviate time and labor associated with his female relatives’ duties, as well as how he helps sweep the compound and tidy up dishes after meals, given his mother’s and sister-in-law’s other tasks such as going to market and cooking.

Baaki also carefully considers the amount of power a man holds in Ghanaian society, and how that is coupled with restrictions on emoting vulnerability. “It’s just a phenomenon within this place. A man is not supposed to cry when you’re hurt. You’re not supposed to share [feelings]; you should keep it to yourself, or you should retaliate. And when you keep it to yourself, it pains you, it depreciates you...” He went on to discuss how men can wield that authority in conflict resolution without compromising anyone’s dignity, saying, “We [men] have a lot of authority; when someone does wrong, you will call the person and give it to him all kinds of ways. But they [the Peaceful Masculinities program] say we shouldn’t abuse our power... So sometimes someone could be right, but the way you approach the person can make them feel guilty. So when you give them the chance to talk [explain themselves], then you see that person was right. So I don’t abuse that power.” Baaki now reaches out to his colleagues – male and female – if it seems something is weighing on them, and invites them to share their feelings, in turn spreading peace in his family, workplace, and community.



Project Reflections (Good Practices, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations)

Based on its experience with implementation and from the final evaluation, CRS staff believe the Peaceful Masculinity program made a significant impact in shifting participants’ attitudes and practices towards more equitable versions of masculinity. Good practices and lessons learned that future programs should consider include the following:

- While holding the Peaceful Masculinities program with young men (individuals) was impactful, evaluation respondents and program staff recommended (1) increasing its reach to individuals (i.e. reaching more individuals with the training) and (2) **increasing focus on enhancing a supportive environment** by increasing outreach to community leaders, religious leaders and participants’ peers and families. This outreach could include holding additional community fora, radio “man box hour” programs, as well as specifically including chiefs, religious leaders, parents and family members, and other community influencers in the individual Peaceful Masculinity training program and engaging them and other male youth as Peaceful Masculinity Ambassadors.
- Program staff noted that women could be invited to participate in the discussions held during community fora, and that the fora could be held at a low cost by providing minimal logistical support such as water, furniture, and a public address system. Staff also recommend that the project last at least 12 months to adequately include the Peaceful Masculinity training as well as community outreach. These types of transformative approaches take time and it is necessary to roll-out over a longer time and plan accordingly.

- While the initial steps of **conducting an assessment to contextualize the curriculum, then hold a design and data validation workshop**, took considerable time, program staff believe they also proved the most valuable. These steps allowed project partners and potential participants to ask questions about the program, validate the findings and make critical adaptations to the curriculum and the program’s implementation plan. During the first day of the design and data validation workshop, there was some push-back and misunderstanding from staff who were concerned that the project was aiming to change men into women or promote radical ideas. Through discussion and further explanation of the assessment during the workshop, as well as elaboration on the need for Peaceful Masculinities programming, staff gained better understanding and recognized the importance of this type of gender transformative programming and became committed to the project. Partners expressed their appreciation for their involvement from design through implementation and the capacity building that resulted from the accompaniment.
- While the final evaluation indicates strong initial successes, it was conducted shortly after the Peaceful Masculinities training ended. Ideally programs would allocate funding to hold an ex-post evaluation to more adequately measure sustained attitudinal and behavior change as a result of the program.

The Peaceful Masculinity training facilitators also had suggestions on how to improve their delivery and use of the curriculum, as follows:

- Including additional engaging methods to demonstrate key messages of the curriculum, such as role plays, videos, and graphics that demonstrate specific actions and their impacts to participants.
- Holding the training sessions weekly (as opposed to a condensed format that holds sessions on a daily basis) to provide time for participants to reflect, practice the promoted behaviors, and share their experiences before reuniting for subsequent sessions.
- While translating training content into local dialects more familiar to participants was a good practice, it was also challenging since some concepts assumed different meanings when translated, hence generating debates in the process. Additional time should be allocated to this during future training of trainer sessions.

To read other articles written on the program, see: <https://www.gna.org.gh/1.21147029>

To learn more about the approach please contact Caroline Dery, CRS Ghana Gender Focal Point at caroline.dery@crs.org or Jimi Hummer, CRS Technical Advisor for Gender at james.hummer@crs.org