

## BRIEFING NOTE

# THE MALE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY IN SIERRA LEONE: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS



**By Aisha Fofana Ibrahim and Susan Shepler**

September 2022

[www.alignplatform.org](http://www.alignplatform.org)

# About INGRADOC

The Institute of Gender Research and Documentation (INGRADOC), earlier known as the Gender Research and Documentation Center (GRADOC), was established in 1992 by the University of Sierra Leone and linked with the Center for West African Studies (CWAS) of the University of Birmingham. It offers graduate courses and a degree in Gender Studies with a feminist focus. Its mission is to develop national human resources for the empowerment of both men and women and to promote peace and social justice nationally and internationally. Over the past 20, INGRADOC has grown in terms of its size, visibility and influence on campus and the wider community and now offers undergraduate, graduate and short courses in all aspects of women and gender studies.

The Institute has embarked on a variety of studies, continues to host academics from other institutions (especially Fulbright Scholars) and has trained the majority of gender experts working in Sierra Leone today. Our graduates can be found in Government ministries and agencies, academic institutions, national and international non-governmental institutions and community-based organisations.

## Acknowledgements

The idea for this study came from a stakeholder analysis of those working on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, conducted in 2020 for medica mondiale, a feminist organisation based in Germany. We thank medica for the opportunity and for permission to use data from that consultancy work. This specific study would not have been possible without a grant from the ALIGN Project that enabled us to observe male engagement workshops and interview organisations that claim to engage men in their work. Many thanks to the Fambul Initiative Network for Equality Sierra Leone (FINE-SL) for making it possible for us to observe five of their trainings/workshops in different parts of Bombali district as well as the numerous organisations that spared their time to talk to us about how they engage with the National Male Involvement Strategy For The Prevention Of Sexual And Gender-Based Violence In Sierra Leone. These organisations include: Don Bosco Family, the AVSI Foundation, The Association of Language and Literacy Educators – Reading Sierra Leone (TALLE-RSL), Cordaid, Brac SL, Caritas SL, Childfund and Forut.

# Key findings

- There is a gap between the gender transformative meaning of male engagement at the donor level and a more gender conservative meaning of male engagement at the implementation level.
- The trainings often reproduce patriarchal structures by telling men that it is their duty to protect women, thereby reinforcing the idea that women are weak.
- The trainings are not geared towards empowering women or transforming gender roles, men are not held accountable for their actions.
- Local organisations have appropriated the concept of male engagement and made it into a more 'pragmatic approach' that 'softens' patriarchy in exchange for slightly better outcomes for women and girls.
- The focus on getting men to support their wives in seeking ante- and post-natal care is yielding some dividends.

# Introduction

Male engagement and involvement, as well as an acknowledgement of the central role of men in gender-based power inequalities, have gained traction in recent years. Male engagement strategies aim to engage men to become agents of change through their active promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. Elements of such a strategy include interventions to combat gender-based violence (GBV) and to improve ante-natal care as well as new-born and child health services.

As the male engagement strategy becomes a programmatic mainstay, researchers continue to debate its merits. The strategy has been presented as a model for ally development (Casey and Smith, 2010); as essential in preventing GBV (Jewkes et al., 2015); and as being in the interests of both men and women (Peacock et al., 2006). Others, however, have cautioned that male engagement should be conceptualised as a process (Casey et al. 2018); that any male engagement effort must be grounded in intersectional feminist analysis of power relations (Colpitts, 2019) and that it has to be gender transformative (Gupta, 2000).

In 2020, we were consulted by medica mondiale, a feminist organisation based in Germany that works on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), to conduct a stakeholder analysis in three countries: Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. We interviewed various stakeholders, including international and multi-national organisations, national and community-based organisations, religious leaders, government officials of various institutions and male-led organisations to understand their varied approaches to addressing SGBV.

We found that all three countries had some form of a male engagement strategy. We also noticed that many of the organisations were enthusiastic about and vested in this strategy because of a donor focus on men as being integral in the fight against SGBV and as being best-placed to convince other men to transform and discard norms and practices that fuel such violence. However, the responses elicited in these interviews and our own experiences in Sierra Leone made us wary about framing and conceptualising male engagement by donor partners and the implementation of such strategies by local partners as a truly gender transformative approach. We wanted, therefore, to understand how the male engagement strategy works, in practice, in the Sierra Leonean context.

In response to an unacceptable rise in SGBV cases, as reported by the Rainbo Initiative non-governmental organisation (NGO) and the state-run Family Support Unit in 2018, the Government of Sierra Leone declared a National State of Emergency in 2019, promulgated an amended Sexual Offences Act (2019) with harsher penalties for perpetrators and, under the leadership of the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, developed the National Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone (2020). This encourages

'the participation of men and boys as change agents and champions of women's and girls' rights, in their families, communities, schools and work places.' (Government of Sierra Leone, 2020)

Organisations were encouraged to use the strategy in the design and implementation of their SGBV prevention and women's empowerment projects. Before the strategy, there were two main male-led and focused organisations: the Fambul Initiative Network for Equality Sierra Leone (FINE-SL) and the Men's Association for Gender Equality (MAGE), an associate of Sonke Gender Justice. These have worked mostly with organisations like the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on projects designed to encourage and train men to participate actively in maternal health issues within their families and communities.

The positive response of interviewees in Liberia and Sierra Leone to the concept of male engagement prompted our interest in the further investigation of the conception and application of such a strategy in Sierra Leone. We noticed during our cross-country interviews that the framing of male engagement by international NGOs differs somewhat from its framing among national organisations, as discussed below. We wanted, therefore, to understand the transformative nature of this approach, whether it is an imposition by outsiders and whether it is purely donor driven.

In this study, we ask some 'feminist questions'<sup>1</sup> about the so-called 'male engagement strategy' to combat SGBV as practiced by government and local NGOs in Sierra Leone and as theorised by international organisations and donors in European and West African capitals. Our interviews in Liberia and Sierra Leone revealed that while the international donors understand the goal of male engagement as transforming gender roles and expectations around violence, some local practitioners seem to use a strategy that emphasises traditional masculinities.

This study sought, therefore, to interrogate how male engagement is framed, conceptualised, and implemented at the donor, NGO and community levels in Sierra Leone. Our argument is that, based on a Sierra Leone where patriarchal bargains<sup>2</sup> predominate, a gender-transformative approach could easily have unintended and adverse effects. Our hypothesis is that while the focus at the international donor level is likely to be on gender transformation, by the time the strategy is implemented at the community level, we are most likely to see approaches that reproduce or enforce patriarchal structures.

1 'Feminist question' is an idea from Cynthia Enloe (Enloe, 2004).

2 The term was coined in 1988 by Kandiyoti (Kandiyoti, 1988), which describes strategic and coping mechanisms that women use to navigate the given terms in their favour and highlights the fluidity and tensions within the set rules and scripts that regulate gender relations.

# Background

Many people in Sierra Leone were alarmed by disturbing data from the leading service providers for SGBV victims – the Rainbo Initiative and the Family Support Units (FSU) of the Sierra Leone police<sup>3</sup> – on the increase in reported cases of SGBV from 4,000 in 2017 to 8,500 in 2018. Most of these cases involved under aged girls. This alarm led to interventions and actions by civil society actors, national and international NGOs, and the Government of Sierra Leone. The Government introduced a number of measures in quick succession, including the declaration of a national emergency on SGBV in 2019, the enactment of an amended Sexual Offences Act in 2019, and the enactment of the National Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone in 2020.

The amended Sexual Offences Act prescribes harsher sentences for offenders ranging from 15 years to life imprisonment. In addition to the amended law, the President also announced the creation of a police division, a special magistrate court to try sexual abuse cases, and a public hotline for the reporting of sexual violence, but with no secure funding.

The National Male Involvement Strategy aims to transform gender relations and change gender norms. It adopts:

**'... a socially transformative approach that seeks to accelerate implementation by encouraging the participation of men and boys as change agents and champions of women's and girls' rights, in their families, communities, schools and workplaces' (Government of Sierra Leone, 2020, p. 6).**

Organisations were encouraged to use the Strategy in the design and implementation of their SGBV prevention and women's empowerment projects. However, this Strategy, like the FSU, does not yet have a sustainable funding plan.

As noted in the introduction, there were two male-led and focused organisations in operation in Sierra Leone before the launch of the Strategy: FINE-SL and MAGE, a member of the Men Engage Global Alliance. They focus on engaging men and boys on women's human rights, sexual and reproductive health rights, gender justice and other social issues through the transformation of gender social norms and masculinities. And as noted, both have received funding from UNFPA to support male engagement in maternal health projects.

<sup>3</sup> The Rainbo Initiative runs 'Rainbo Centres' in five districts in Sierra Leone. These provide free medical and psychosocial services to victims, while the FSU is an office of the Sierra Leone Police entrusted with investigating and prosecuting cases of SGBV, as well as providing counselling and protection services.



# Conceptual framework

The core concepts for this study are gender equality and women's empowerment and gender transformation through male engagement. As such, its focus is informed by the argument that engaging men and boys in combating all forms of discrimination against women and girls creates opportunities for men to challenge gendered social norms as well as power inequalities.

GBV is seen as a societal issue based on patriarchal beliefs, norms and practices that cannot be seen exclusively as solely a women's or men's issue. Addressing GBV as a societal issue, therefore, enables the empowerment of women, the reclaiming of safe spaces, the deconstruction of masculinity and the dismantling of gendered power relations and privilege. Within this framework, it is argued that men need to be seen as part of the solution, not just as part of the problem and that they need to be involved and challenged, through education and awareness raising, to critically reflect on the pervasiveness of patriarchy, male power and privilege and the costs of violence against women to men and boys, as well as women and girls (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Waling, 2019).

## Methodology

This two-fold study is qualitative in nature. Some of the data used for analysis were collected between February and March 2020 in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone during a three-country stakeholder analysis of organisations working on SGBV. This aimed to map and analyse the interventions of various actors providing SGBV and related women's empowerment services in the three countries, as commissioned by medica mondiale.

A total of 72 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders: 32 in Sierra Leone, 23 in Liberia and 17 in Côte d'Ivoire. This included interviews with individuals and organisations in government, other public institutions and service providers across the health, legal and other sectors, NGOs, civil society and community based organisations, networks of feminist organisations, international development cooperation bodies (governmental and non-governmental), German development cooperation bodies (governmental and non-governmental), UN organisations and donors.

The second part of this study was conducted between June 2021 and March 2022. This portion of the study was funded by the ALIGN project and conducted only in Sierra Leone. Here we used key informant interviews and participant observation methods to understand the conceptualisation of male engagement by some organisations and how they mobilise the male engagement strategy. Interviews were conducted with programme managers of 10 organisations, both national and international, to better understand how male engagement is understood and practised by these actors. All 10 organisations were interviewed in Freetown, but work in different parts of the country specifically on gender equality and women's empowerment projects.

The intention was to observe at least five different organizations, including the two that are male-led and focused, as they delivered trainings and engaged with communities. Unfortunately, we were only able to observe five trainings in various communities in Bombali district by one organisation: FINE-SL). None of the other organisations were conducting male engagement training at the time.

The interviews with organisations lasted for 45-60 minutes and observations of the FINE-SL workshops lasted over 2 hours. Our interviews and engagements with stakeholders were guided by feminist praxis and theory and we ensured that feminist ethics prevailed in all steps of the process.

A content analysis of the training manuals of the two male engagement organisations in Sierra Leone, FINE-SL and MAGE-SL was also conducted to examine how gender and power differentials between women and men are presented and analysed and whether this is done in a gender transformative or re-enforcing manner.

In this study, we tried, in essence, to understand the ways in which various actors implement the male engagement strategy and if they are doing so in ways that are gender transformative or gender re-enforcing. We focused on the delivery, content, and impact of these trainings (measured by the responses of some of the spouses in connection with the changes they have experienced since their spouses became members of the pamama groups), to understand the ways in which they have been able to transform gender relations and change gender norms in their communities.

#### **Key research questions:**

- In what ways has male involvement changed community perceptions about gender equality and the rights of women?
- In what ways have male involvement workshops been gender transformative or gender re-enforcing?
- In what ways does the global conception of male engagement differ from local implementation?



# Key findings

- The trainings often reproduce patriarchal structures by telling men that it is their duty to protect women; thereby reinforcing the idea that women are weak.
- The trainings are not geared towards empowering women or transforming gender roles: men are not held accountable for their actions.
- Local organisations, particularly FINE-SL and MAGE have appropriated the concept of male engagement and made it into a more 'pragmatic approach' that 'softens' patriarchy in exchange for slightly better outcomes for women and girls.
- The focus on getting men to support their wives in seeking ante- and post-natal care is yielding some dividends.

While many of the organisations we interviewed before the development of the National Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone (2020) were enthusiastic about engaging men in the fight against SGBV, this did not translate into the design of projects or activities that engaged men and/or the strategy actively within these organisations. Work on engaging men continues to be championed by the two main male-led and focused organizations, FINE-SL and MAGE.

Our observations and the available literature revealed that the main focus of FINE-SL is encouraging men to participate in pre- and ante-natal care for their pregnant wives. According to the Director of FINE-SL, the aim is:

**'to get the men to understand what it means to protect women, support women, and then girls will have access to services when they need it because the men have to make most of the decisions. Since men say, "my wife won't go to the hospital for examination because a man will examine her." Or "no birth control because she will bambot (be promiscuous)." So, the goal is to get the men to understand, for example, why it's good for girls to go to school, why it's good for your wife to get medical services, etc.'**

Even though participants, mostly stakeholders in the community who include the chief, teachers, medical staff, etc., are encouraged to explore how masculinities are constructed and reinforced in daily life, they are not taught to question male privilege or discuss how men and boys benefit from the status quo. Instead, they are cajoled to escort their wives to clinics, listen to the heartbeats of their unborn children and to encourage women to keep up with the schedule of vaccines.

There is a very dominant discourse about men as heads and leaders of the family who should take pride in protecting their women. The presentation of women as subjects in dire need of male care is detrimental to their full empowerment, as it encourages dependency and lack of agency. However, in a country with such high maternal and child mortality rates, this form of male engagement has helped to reduce the numbers of women who are dying.

This is because men are in complete control of the lives of women in many of these communities and a man can deny his spouse permission to seek medical care, with often disastrous consequences. It is not surprising, therefore, that people see the involvement of men in reproductive health issues as a great success even though gender norms and roles are not actually challenged but rather re-enforced.

The same paternalistic view is applied in programmes to combat SGBV. According to the FINE-SL Country Director:

**‘Our approach is engaging men and boys on the issue of GBV. We look at it as a very serious security issue. Apparently, men and boys are the lead drivers of violence against women in the society. They are also the lead in political violence. So, if you want the issue of GBV to be resolved you have to talk to the perpetrators and let them see that women and girls are their mothers, their sisters, their wives. They should provide a security corridor to protect them.’**

There is nowhere in this quote or in the trainings themselves where power is deconstructed or the rights of women discussed. The paternalistic approach predominates. The focus is on making men feel good for doing the right thing, rather than challenging the entitlement discourse that makes SGBV possible in the first place.

In one workshop we observed, the message to the men in attendance was:

**‘Let’s help our women. They’re not our slaves. Encourage them. They are our women. Show love to your child, to your woman. Woman noto bata (drum to beat).’**

Notice that women are still somehow ‘ours’. One of the Sierra Leonean research assistants reported on a meeting she observed, that

**‘This has shown that men in that part of the country have still not considered women as helpmates, but rather as subordinates that are just there to receive from their husbands.’**

There were no discussions about the rights of women, but rather a reinforcement of gender roles and norms that make men the owners and women the owned.

# Conclusion

There is widespread recognition in Sierra Leone that the prevention of violence against women and girls and the reduction of high infant and maternal mortality rates require working with men and boys as allies, partners and activists. We set out to understand the discourses around the gender-transformative nature of engaging men and the differences between conceptions at the donor level and the practitioner level.

We found out that even though the male engagement strategy is designed to work with men in questioning and reflecting on their own individual behaviours on gender inequality and violence against women, this is far from the reality in practice. The workshops we observed and interviews conducted indicate that some aspects of gender stereotyping are addressed. For example, men no longer saw it as shameful to carry babies or go to maternity clinics with their wives. However, unequal power relationships between women and men persist, which hinder women's ability to insist on safe and responsible sex practices, make independent decisions about contraception or take action against GBV.

A gender-transformative approach to development should go beyond working on the 'symptoms' of gender inequality, such as GBV, to address underlying norms, attitudes, behaviours and social systems. Having men be active participants in maternal health and allies in addressing GBV – though commendable – falls short of being gender transformative because there is no active promotion of men's critically reflection or their questioning of the individual practices, institutional dynamics and norms that create and reinforce gender inequalities and vulnerabilities for men and women. The idea that men 'should help their wives when they are pregnant' rather than it being an obligation to do so, reinforces the gendered roles of women's dependency and men's leadership.

# Recommendations

- The Government's Male Involvement Strategy For The Prevention Of Sexual And Gender-Based Violence should be revised to move from a heavy focus on responding to SGBV to include the transformation of gender norms and practices.
- An intersectional approach to addressing gender equality and equity issues should be central to this process.
- Women should be active participants within, rather than the passive recipients of, these initiatives.
- Power analysis and feminist theory should inform the design and implementation of these initiatives. This would involve a conscious decision and a demand by international development partners/funders for national organisations to include these elements in every step of the implementation process.

# References

- Casey, E., and Smith, T. (2010) "How can I not?": men's pathways to involvement in anti-violence against women work'. *Violence Against Women*, 16(8), 953-973.
- Casey, E., Carlson, J., Two Bulls, S., Yager, A. (2018) 'Gender transformative approaches to engaging men in gender-based violence prevention: a review and conceptual model'. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 19(2), 231-246.
- Colpitts, E. (2019) 'Engaging men and boys to prevent gender-based violence in South Africa: possibilities, tensions and debates'. *Revue Canadienne D'études Du Développement*, 40(3), 423-439.
- Connell, R. W. and Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005) 'Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept'. *Gender and Society*, 19, 829-859.
- Enloe, C. (2004) *The curious feminist: Searching for women in a new age of empire*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.
- Government of Sierra Leone (2020) National Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone. Freetown: Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs.
- Gupta, G. R. (2000) 'Gender, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS: The what, the why, and the how.' *Can HIV AIDS Policy Law Rev*, 5, 86-93.
- Jewkes, R., Flood, M., Lang, J. (2015) 'From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls'. *The Lancet*, 385(9977):1580-1589.
- Kandiyoti, D. (1988) 'Bargaining with Patriarchy'. *Gender and Society*, 2(3), 274-290. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/190357>).
- Peacock, D., Khumalo, B., McNab, E. (2006) 'Men and gender activism in South Africa: observations, critique and recommendations for the future'. *Agenda*, 20(69), 71-81.
- Waling, A. (2019) 'Rethinking Masculinity Studies: Feminism, Masculinity, and Poststructural Accounts of Agency and Emotional Reflexivity'. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 27: 1, 89-107.

**About ALIGN**

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

**About this research**

This piece of research was funded by Global Affairs Canada and is licensed to the public subject to the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence.

**ALIGN Programme Office**

ODI  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom

Email: [align@odi.org.uk](mailto:align@odi.org.uk)

Web: [www.alignplatform.org](http://www.alignplatform.org)

**Disclaimer**

This document is an output of Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN). The views expressed and information contained within are not necessarily those of or endorsed by ODI or Global Affairs Canada, and accepts no responsibility for such views or information or for any reliance placed on them.

**Copyright**

© ALIGN 2022. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

**Cover photo**

George Buannie giving the 'Husband School' a lecture on livelihood skills training ©George Buannie

ALIGN is funded by Global Affairs Canada and the Ford Foundation, and is led by ODI.