CASE STUDY VIII
Engaging men in prevention of gender-based violence, Liberia
Men’s Resources International and International Rescue Committee

Background
For over 15 years, Liberia was at the centre of a number of interrelated civil wars in West Africa resulting in 270,000 deaths among a population of three million and the displacement of millions across the region. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable during armed conflict when rape is used by fighting forces to terrorize, destroy and humiliate communities. Women may be forced to exchange sex for their survival. And when war forces them to flee their homes, the risk of rape follows them and the threat of domestic violence grows. A 2005 World Health Organization survey found that 90 per cent of women suffered physical or sexual violence, three out of four women were sexually violated or raped, and large numbers of women were abducted and turned into sex slaves, gang raped or forced into survival sex during the 15-year conflict. In the post-conflict setting, violence against women and girls continues to be perpetrated at alarming rates, contributing to the challenges of social and economic healing and reconstruction.

Key beneficiaries
Men and women in Liberia.

Objectives
- To involve men in gender-based violence prevention programmes as partners and allies with women.
- To educate men about the role of male socialization, power, privilege and control as root causes of violence, and enable them to reflect on their own role in maintaining gender norms and inequality.
- To train gender-based violence programme staff to facilitate male involvement initiatives and support the development of men’s action groups.

Methods
- Building support and investment from key constituencies. This was done by first undertaking a consultation with the International Rescue Committee to identify the needs and concerns of existing stakeholders, build support for the Male Involvement Project among these key constituencies, advise International Rescue Committee staff on programme development strategies, and provide materials and coaching to newly hired project staff.
- Group formation and leadership training. Using strategies and materials from a consultation with Men’s Resources International, the Male Involvement Project staff recruited men to form men’s action groups in nine communities where the International Rescue Committee had already established women’s action groups. A street survey about men’s views on women and other men was conducted in three counties. A second consultation then took place to provide training of trainers for male and female International Rescue Committee staff who would be responsible for implementing the project. The training had three stages: classroom training, a practical and follow-up coaching.
- Awareness campaign called Men as Partners to End Violence Against Women. The International Rescue Committee brought together leaders from all the action groups for a two-day planning session to develop a coordinated awareness plan. The campaign organized actions in each community including street parades, performances, sports programmes and speeches. Materials were developed that included T-shirts, hats and posters reflecting themes of positive masculinity and men as partners. The Lonestar cell phone corporation also sent a text message about the campaign to 150,000 Liberian subscribers.

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• Field assessment, follow-up training and monitoring. Men’s Resources International aimed to assess the initial effects of the project on men and women in the communities, provide follow-up training and support on gender-based violence to staff involved in the project, help project staff develop monitoring tools and discuss strategies for continuing to develop the project. A two-day staff training focused on building a strong team, identifying programme successes and challenges, increasing capacity to present the Male Involvement Project curriculum, improving facilitation and cross-gender dialogue skills, and designing recommendations for programme development.

Results
• Both women and men reported that ‘men are changing’. Staff and community members of both genders expressed surprise and optimism at the willingness of men to engage with this project, and at the changes in attitudes and behaviours already demonstrated.

• Violence against women and children is decreasing. In every project community, both women and men reported a reduced use of violence by men and an increased awareness of women’s rights. Women reported that they are seeing and experiencing less blaming, verbal assaults, sexual assaults, and whippings and beatings since the formation of the men’s action groups. International Rescue Committee social workers reported a reduction in women’s complaints about men’s violence and an increased number of men reporting cases of gender-based violence.

Good practice and lessons learned
• Acknowledge and address women’s misgivings about the process of engaging with men. Women may understandably feel defensive and mistrustful about involving men in what has traditionally been considered a woman’s issue. Fear about men taking over or competing with women for attention and resources can generate resistance.

Female members of the women’s action groups in Karnplay, Ganta and Saclapea
“The men who are in the programme are changed. Not only have they changed their own thoughts and actions, but now they go to talk with other men who do those things. It makes me feel good.”

“Before the training, women did not have a voice. Now, the men in the programme listen to us.”

“The men work with the women and talk with other men. Even when there is no transportation, they walk a long time to talk with men who need to hear.”

“People used to cover up rape. Now victims can get help and feel less shame. Men are talking with other men about how rape is wrong and needs to stop.”

“Some men would not allow their wives to attend the women’s action group meetings. Now these husbands are part of the programme. Both husband and wife attend meetings. It is so much better now.”

Male members of the men’s action groups in Karnplay, Ganta and Saclapea
“Men and women are meeting on Sundays to talk. The men help out with the cooking even though we get called names like ‘Woman-Man’.”

“I used to walk to the fields with my wife. She carried a child under her arm and a heavy load on her head. I carried nothing but my machete. When we returned, she would put down her load, and go out to fetch water for me to bathe. I saw nothing wrong with this. Now, my eyes are open and I can no longer let my wife bear this work alone. Now when we walk, we each carry the child and the load. I get water for both of us. I help in the kitchen and in the home.”
- Pay attention to both balancing supporting and challenging men. While cultivating compassion, understanding and empowerment for men about their own experiences of violence, it is also necessary to hold men accountable for their behaviour and help them recognize their unfair status of power and privilege. Members of men’s action groups are likely to reveal their own patterns of violence and abuse as they become more aware and learn to break the silence. Balancing support and accountability within the group, and establishing guidelines for group member behaviour, is an ongoing challenge.

- Beware of reyling traditional gender roles in meetings that involve both women and men. Despite significant changes and good intentions, patterns of gender inequality, power and control will continue to influence programme participants, both in interpersonal dynamics and in group attitudes and behaviours.

- Be prepared to deal with perpetrators. Groups will have to balance values of accountability and compassion, while negotiating safety issues, legal systems, and the impulse for a strong and immediate intervention. This is often made more difficult by the lack of social consequences for perpetrators of gender-based violence.

- Challenge the mindsets and attitudes of staff members who are facilitating the process. Provide a safe and reflective space for staff to examine and challenge their own attitudes and mindsets as men and women.

Recommendations for the future
- Validate men’s caring nature and desire for positive masculinity. A belief in men’s capacity for love and compassion for women, children and other men is an essential foundation for engaging men effectively. Although this compassion is often buried under layers of mistrust and fear, and protected by male privilege, we know that with support, safety and encouragement men can reclaim their ability to be open and connected. Affirming this belief creates an environment where this aspect of men’s nature is validated, encouraged and reinforced.

- Understand how men’s violence is caused both by male privilege and men’s feelings of powerlessness. Understanding men’s dual nature, as both privileged and damaged, validates the full reality of men’s experience, and is central to developing effective engagement strategies.

- Affirm the critical role men can play as partners with women and agents of social change. Men have an important part to play in challenging rigid gender roles and dominating forms of masculinity, and becoming positive male role models. Building relationships between men and women as allies is necessary to create a strong movement for social change. Many men are eager to learn how to join with women in ending violence, and are waiting for an invitation.

- Teach men to listen to women. Give men explicit instructions on how to listen with attention and compassion but without judgement, advice or interruptions. Identify appropriate verbal and non-verbal ways of expressing comprehension, engagement, connection and support. Create opportunities for men and women to practice listening and being listened to.

- Teach men to break the silence about their own experiences with violence. A code of silence often surrounds violent experiences, and we have learned to be afraid to speak out. One of the most powerful things we can do is create an environment that supports men talking together about their own experiences, confronting others about their attitudes and behaviours, and taking a stand publicly in their communities.

- Provide specific actions for men to take towards ending violence against women. Explore what types of actions men should, and should not, take in order to start making a difference in their families, communities, countries and in the world. Appropriate actions can be broken down into three categories: personal actions that change men’s own attitudes and behaviours, interpersonal actions to change the attitudes and behaviours of other individuals, and group actions that involve groups of people working together to change attitudes and behaviours of a community or society.

- Engage women from the beginning as advisors, participants and monitors for the male involvement initiative. The creation of the Male Involvement Project has practical and psychological impacts on existing gender-based violence programme staff and participants, who are often mostly women. Because of their key roles in programme leadership, community connections and service delivery, it is vital to have their understanding, acceptance and investment in any initiative for engaging men. Deliberately cultivating trust and accountability with
female staff and community members must be a priority throughout this and similar projects.

- Provide a model for how male involvement is integrated into existing gender-based violence programmes and other women’s programmes. The overall programme mission (women’s safety and empowerment), and the programmes for women (survivor services and empowerment activities) remain the same. The male involvement initiative adds programmes for men (awareness programmes and training as allies), and programmes for women and men together (cross-gender dialogue, community interventions and initiatives, and collaborative campaigns). The mixed gender programmes will require both men and women to learn skills for communicating and working together.

**Analysis of gender perspective**

The Male Involvement Project used a gender-transformative approach to achieve the aims of preventing gender-based violence and educating men about the root causes of violence through reflecting on masculinity and cultural norms. This approach challenged the unequal power relations between men and women, held men accountable for violence they themselves had committed, provided space for men to open up about their own experiences of violence, encouraged men’s caring nature, and brought men and women together to build a greater sense of partnership.

As one of the few projects to also involve women as participants with men, it is clear how this increased the effectiveness of the project and encouraged the establishment of partnerships and communication between men and women. By challenging harmful expressions of masculinity, while also validating men’s caring nature and partnership with women, this programme has taken a unique approach which seems to be having a profound impact on the men and women who took part.

**Assessment of programme effectiveness**

Based on the evidence presented, this programme was assessed as showing effective results.