10 Ways to Engage Men & Boys to Counter Backlash:

Fact sheet and guidance for activists, academics and practitioners in gender equality, human rights, democracy and climate justice.

MenEngage Alliance
working with men and boys for gender equality

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COUNTERING BACKLASH
RECLAIMING GENDER JUSTICE

This resource is for activists, practitioners, and civil society organizations who want to engage men and boys in addressing anti-gender and anti-rights backlash. It's designed to help you advocate for and amplify messaging on gender, social, and climate justice by working with men and boys as a key constituency.

This document was developed by the *Men, Masculinities and Countering Backlash Collective*, a group of civil society organizations committed to addressing the backlash against gender justice and rights. As a collective, we believe that engaging men and boys is a key part of the solution.

This document explores the connections between men, masculinities, and backlash. To help navigate this topic, it is organized into three sections:

The Problem
An overview of the anti-rights backlash.

The Solution
The rationale for why engaging men and boys is a crucial strategy.

The 'How'
Practical guidance on how to do this work effectively.

The problem:

Masculinities are deeply implicated in the rising backlash

Masculinities - the socially constructed ideas, expectations, and behaviours about what it means to be a man - are deeply tied to the growing backlash against gender rights.

- Ideas, norms, and structural factors relating to masculinity are not just passively caught up in anti-gender movements. Rather, they are actively constructed, mobilized, and weaponized to uphold systems of patriarchy, nationalism, capitalism and social control.

- These ideas about masculinity often serve as both the emotional fuel and the cultural or political justification for many anti-rights movements.

We highlight five significant features or aspects of this problem below.

Restoring Traditional Power Hierarchies

Many anti-gender and anti-rights movements (especially those targeting feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial justice) are driven by a desire to reinstate traditional gender roles and power orders, where hegemonic masculinities (Connell, R.W., 1995) are linked to male dominance, heterosexuality, and patriarchy (hooks, b., 2005) in order to justify holding power and authority.

- Anti-gender movements often idealize a past where men were "providers and protectors" and women were "nurturers and homemakers."

- Changes brought about by feminist and queer movements are seen as threats to this "natural" order, and to men's social status.

> **Hegemonic masculinity** is a sociocultural practice that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of the common male population and women, and other marginalized ways of being a man.
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> Masculinities (plural) refers to the recognition that "manhood" isn't a single, universal experience but a diverse spectrum of socially and culturally defined behaviors, practices, and identities that vary across time, place, and different groups of men. Instead of a single model, many different ways exist to express what it means to be a man, with some forms of masculinity being more dominant or powerful than others within specific social contexts.

Mobilization of "Aggrieved Masculinities"

Anti-gender movements often portray men and boys as "victims" of feminism or gender equality, suggesting that men and boys have been "emasculated" (deprived of their male role or identity, made weaker) by liberal, egalitarian values.

- The "crisis of masculinity" narrative claims that men and boys are losing their identity, economic power, and societal roles, thereby making them powerless.

- This has fueled movements like the men's rights movement, incel and manosphere communities, and broader populist rhetoric that frame "manhood" as under threat, an attack which must be defended against.

Masculinity as a Tool for Authoritarianism and Nationalism

Authoritarian and nationalist leaders frequently perform hypermasculinity - toughness, emotional detachment, militarism, violence and control - as a part of their political identity.

- Leaders like Putin, Bolsonaro, Trump, and others often project "strongman" images that align with traditional, patriarchal masculinity.

- Their rhetoric frequently includes anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-migrant stances as well as climate crisis denial, positioning these groups as threats to "the nation" and its so-called "manly" protectors/defenders.

- Authoritarian ethno-nationalists also weaponise racialized masculinities, with anti-immigrant racist rhetoric portraying migrant men as sexually violent, and the need to "protect women" to justify their racism.

Gender Justice and Feminism framed as "Anti-Male"

Anti-gender movements often directly target feminist and gender rights policies and discourses, framing them as harmful to society, particularly to men and boys, using terms like "gender ideology" to fuel the backlash.

- Masculinities are tied to resisting perceived liberal gender ideological overreach (for example with statements like "gender equality has gone too far"), often under the guise of protecting children, family, cultural or religious values.

- This promotes a binary view of gender as a sex-based dichotomy, dismissing gender non-conformity and fluidity or equality as dangerous, perverse and not-natural.

Online Masculinities and Radicalization

Online spaces have become fertile ground for the construction and spread of patriarchal masculinities.

- Platforms like YouTube, Reddit, X and 4chan amplify and profit from voices that equate masculinity with dominance, control, misogyny, and anti-feminist sentiment.

- These actors and voices on such platforms, which often mirror offline social dynamics, collectively function as coordinated systems that build support for sexism, misogyny and male supremacy. Many content creators target young men and boys with messages that encourage, condone and often glorify violence against women, girls, gender diverse populations and other marginalized groups.

- Echo chambers such as the online digital "manosphere" and incel (involuntarily celibate) groups can radicalize young men into broader far right and misogynistic ideologies.

The Solution:

Why working with men and boys is essential

Working with men and boys is a critical strategy for countering the rising anti-rights and anti-gender backlash. Because these reactionary movements often rely on and reinforce patriarchal power inequalities, both at interpersonal and structural levels, and rigid gender norms around manhood, i.e. patriarchal masculinities. Men and boys, in allyship with women, girls and LGBTIQ people, must work towards dismantling these.

Men and boys are often the primary targets and enforcers of anti-gender ideologies: Far-right and anti-gender movements frequently appeal to men and boys —especially those feeling disempowered— and capitalize on feelings of isolation and dislocation in a changing world, by promising a return to a glorified, hierarchical version of masculinity and social order. Without engagement, these narratives go unchallenged and can gain dangerous momentum.

Men hold disproportionate power as gatekeepers in politics, religion, media, and business, where men often occupy key leadership positions. Without their active involvement and support in advancing gender justice, efforts remain limited or face resistance from within these institutions as well as individually.

Men and boys can have the capacity and a shared stake in actively supporting a vision of gender, social, and climate justice. As gendered beings, men and boys can denounce and challenge patriarchal norms, and can fully develop their capacities for empathy, care and peace. Once they can connect with their full human self, they can mobilize to support in countering conservative, regressive, anti-rights narratives, actors and politics, alongside other movements for gender and social justice.

How?

10 ways to work with men and boys in countering backlash

To effectively counter the anti-gender backlash, strategies must focus on engaging men and boys in solidarity with feminist and gender justice movements. This requires an intersectional approach, addressing the political, economic, and social disaffection experienced by men and boys in different contexts. The challenge lies in reaching the 'movable middle'—those who may be disaffected but not yet fully aligned with anti-rights narratives.

1. Reframe the Male Victimhood Narrative

Develop strategies to push back against harmful narratives about "male victimhood" and the so-called "crisis of masculinity" by addressing men's concerns in ways that are empathetic, inclusive, and rooted in feminist and intersectional values. This includes clarifying men and boys as gendered beings, highlighting the benefits of gender equality, unpacking the racial and class dimensions of men's experiences. I can also include preventing the manipulation of male crisis and victimhood narratives by anti-gender forces. In doing so one can share examples of how the patriarchy also harms men; or attempt to expose how anti-gender narratives are essentially more harmful to men and boys than narratives in favor of gender equality and rights.

2. Shift Patriarchal Entitlement

Engage men and boys in being aware and recognising (including conscious efforts to unlearning) systemic patriarchal entitlement and reframing perceived loss of privilege as a shared societal gain. This involves supporting men and boys in processing shifts in social and gender norms, fostering accountability, and actively dismantling the backlash against gender justice.

3. Foster Allyship and Accountability

Motivate men and boys to become accountable allies and agents of change in movements for gender and social justice, and human rights. Fostering allyship requires helping men, boys, and people of all genders to understand the deep connections between gender equality, human rights, and social justice. Engaging elite men—those in positions of power, such as politicians and business leaders—can be a critical strategy to dismantling patriarchal structures at the societal level, which can bring about lasting changes in the spaces these men occupy.

4. Monitor and Counter Anti-gender Narratives

Men and boys can play an active role in monitoring the efforts of anti-gender actors and identifying strategies used to manipulate and recruit them. By actively tracking these efforts, men and boys can contribute to activism and advocacy campaigns aimed at exposing the harmful narratives promoted by anti-rights groups and providing alternative, more progressive understanding on transforming patriarchal masculinities.

5. Create Spaces for Dialogue and Support

A key component of reaching men and boys is providing spaces for open dialogue about their emotions, frustrations, and experiences. Group-based education and consciousness-raising efforts that address the harms of patriarchal masculinities and support personal and social change are critical to transforming men's attitudes and behaviors. Such spaces can challenge the emotional grip of anti-gender narratives by connecting with men's deeper concerns and redirecting their energies toward feminist causes. These spaces can include college campuses and other school settings, workplaces, sports communities, community centers, etc.

6. Use the Right Messengers

Recruit and support influential peer educators and influencers to engage men and boys in conversations on patriarchal masculinities. Effective messengers should create spaces for dialogue across gender identities, exposing men and boys to diverse experiences and perspectives while fostering critical reflection and accountability. It is important to ensure, beforehand, that the educators and influencers have full understanding and are wholeheartedly supportive of the efforts on transforming masculinities, feminism and gender justice, including conducting workshops with them before mobilising them to reach out to men and boys.

7.

Focus on Sexuality Education, Mental Health and Care

Given the increasing attack on sexuality education by anti-gender movements, it is vital to continue addressing issues of sexuality, consent, and power in male-focused gender equality work. This includes addressing the rising rates of online sexualized violence and harassment and fostering more spaces for men and boys to discuss how patriarchal masculinities contribute to many of their mental health issues, which is often ignored in discussions about men and masculinities. Discussions on care, for men themselves, for other people and for the planet are also critical. Sustaining this work requires attention to collective care, healing, and emotional resilience. Creating spaces for reflection, mutual support, and healing may help reduce the emotional pull of anti-gender narratives and help sustain engagement with gender justice work over the long term.

8.

Engage in Creative Media for Shifting Narratives

Anti-gender actors have skillfully utilized media, both traditional and digital, to disseminate misogynistic and homophobic content. In this context, pro-gender equality movements must develop creative media strategies to promote positive, inclusive representations and narratives around masculinities. Using accessible language and connecting emotionally with men and boys will be crucial in shifting narratives around gender and masculinities.

9.

Utilize Spiritual and Religious Entry Points

Spirituality, religion or faith-based beliefs significantly influence the lives of many people and communities. Such belief systems and associated practices can, in turn, strongly influence believers' norms and value systems, both positively and negatively. Some faith-based and religious groups play a crucial role in anti-gender organizing. It can therefore be important to work with people of faith to promote positive interpretations of spiritual, faith and religious values, supportive of gender rights. Engaging men and boys on a spiritual level can be an entry point to reach them. This involves opening conversations about values, justice, and gender equality within religious or spiritual frameworks that resonate with them. This is also crucial for better holding powerful actors within religious communities to account.

10.

Focus on Men in Positions of Power as Targets of Change

Working with men and boys to change their attitudes and behaviors has a long history, but rarely is this work targeted at elite men in politics and the corporate sector. Engaging men to develop strategies to work with male powerholders and decision-makers is imperative to countering backlash through politically resilient leaders committed to feminist ideals.

Want to learn more about this work?

Initiatives to engage men and boys to push forward for gender justice

The Story Kitchen (Nepal)

Defensoras Digitales
(#LeyOlimpia) (Mexico)

Broders
(Spain - in Spanish)

Let's Breakthrough (India)

Tales of Turning
(South Africa)

White Ribbon's
"My friend, Max Hate" (Canada)

Resources on Countering the Backlash Through a Men & Masculinities Approach

Discussion Paper: Digital Contexts: Media, Attention Economies and the Manosphere (MenEngage Alliance)

Manosphere Rewired: Understanding Masculinities Online and Pathways for Healthy Connection (Equimundo)

Digital Violence: A study of the profiles of perpetrators and survivors of digital sexual violence (Ley Olimpia, Defensoras Digitales)

Troubling Masculinities in Patriarchal Backlash: Tools, Stories, Insights (Countering Backlash, Institute of Development Studies)

Webinar: Uprooting patriarchal masculinities from the digital spheres for gender justice (MenEngage Alliance)

Research of interest

Addressing 'wicked complex problems'
Qualitative understandings of sexual violence prevention in male-dominated industries (2025): https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40148773/

Are sexist beliefs related to mental health problems? (2020)
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03623319.2020.1809902
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559709/

The Missing Ingredient
How Misogyny and the Patriarchy Sabotage our Clinical Practice and Research (2023):
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10544243/

Understanding Gender Backlash
Southern Perspectives (2024): https://bulletin.ids.ac.uk/index.php/idsbo/issue/view/254

Key reading on masculinities (References)

- Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- hooks, bell (2005). *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2005.

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