



International commitments to involving men and boys in achieving gender equality:

Equality between women and men is a fundamental principle of international law established in the United Nations Charter. Achieving gender equality is a societal responsibility that must fully engage both men and women. The role of men and boys in promoting and realizing gender equality has, however, only been given significant attention during the past decade. Since the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, many countries have signed onto international declarations calling for greater attention to men's roles and responsibilities in achieving gender equality.

Policy makers now have a compelling mandate to begin developing and evaluating policy approaches to working with men. Many countries have affirmed their support for work with men in a number of international commitments. These commitments both require policy makers in signatory countries to develop policies and programmes and also provide civil society activists with leverage to demand rapid implementation.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development affirms the need to “promote gender equality in all spheres of life, including family and community life, and to encourage and enable men to take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behavior and their social and family roles.”¹

The Programme of Action of the World Summit on Social Development (1995) and its 2000 review also addressed the role of men, in particular with regard to sharing family, household and employment responsibilities with women.²

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) restated the principle of shared responsibility; and argued that women's concerns could only be addressed “in partnership with men”.³

The twenty-sixth special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS (2001) recognized the need to challenge gender stereotypes and attitudes and gender inequalities in relation to HIV/AIDS through the active involvement of men and boys.⁴

An expert group meeting on the role of men and boys was convened in 2003 in Brasilia by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW/DESA), in cooperation with ILO and UNAIDS to inform the CSW at its forty-eight session.⁵

At the 48th session, the UN CSW adopted agreed conclusions calling on Governments, entities of the United Nations system and other stakeholders to, inter alia:

- promote reconciliation of work and family responsibilities;
- encourage the active involvement of men and boys in eliminating gender stereotypes;
- encourage men to participate in preventing and treating HIV/AIDS;
- implement programmes to enable men to adopt safe and responsible sexual behaviour;
- support men and boys to prevent gender-based violence;
- implement programmes in schools to accelerate socio-cultural change towards gender equality.

In the ten-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action, Member States emphasized that changing men’s attitudes and behaviours required a range of strategies including: legislative and policy reform, the implementation of programmes, the involvement of educational systems and the media, and partnerships with NGOs, the private sector and leaders from all segments of society, including religious leaders.

The review also encouraged Member States to create opportunities for sharing experiences and good practices across regions and stressed that this offered important opportunities for cross fertilization.⁶

As a signatory to these international commitments, South Africa has made significant efforts to reach and engage men and boys. Sonke Gender Justice was commissioned by the national Office on the Status of Women to develop the South Africa country report submitted to the 51st session of the UN CSW. This report, available at <http://www.genderjustice.org.za/sa-country-report-2007.html>, chronicles the efforts of many government and civil society organisations. One such initiative described is the One Man Can Campaign developed and coordinated by Sonke Gender Justice.

¹ See paragraphs 4.11, 4.24, 4.25, 4.26, 4.27, 4.28, 4.29, 5.4, 7.8, 7.37, 7.41, 8.22, 11.16, 12.10, 12.13 and 12.14 of the Cairo Programme of Action, and paragraphs 47, 50, 52, and 62 of the outcome of the twenty-first special session of the General Assembly on Population and Development.

² See paragraphs 7, 47 and 56 of the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development, and paragraphs 15, 49, 56 and 80 of the outcome of the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly on Further Initiatives for Social Development.

³ See paragraphs 1, 3, 40, 72, 83b, 107c, 108e, 120 and 179 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

⁴ See paragraph 47 of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS: “Global Crisis – Global Action”.

⁵ Report of the Expert Group Meeting on “The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality”, Brasilia, Brazil, 21-24 October 2003, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/men-boys2003/reports/Finalreport.PDF>

⁶ Ibid., paragraph 669.