

Policy Brief

ENGAGING WITH MEN AND BOYS IN ADVANCING THE GENDER EQUALITY AGENDA IN INDIA



“It is time that we all see gender as a spectrum instead of two sets of opposing ideals”

Emma Watson, Actress

- Focus on engaging with men and boys in different gender oriented programs
- Launch a national campaign to influence and inspire men to challenge and resist toxic and hegemonic forms of masculinities
- Introduce and implement a paternity leave for men (as expectant fathers) in India
- Focus on male involvement in reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health programs

ROLE OF MEN AND BOYS IN ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY

The idea of women's empowerment has undergone multiple shifts over the years in international development. Right from the Women in Development approach to a Gender & Development approach, there have been multiple paradigms to analyse and solve issues which affect women. Currently, a widely popular and emerging agenda is that of engaging with men and boys to address gender equality issues. While it is a no-brainer that men and boys are in a privileged and advantageous position than women and girls, increasingly there is a consensus among researchers and practitioners that engaging positively with men and boys is a key strategy for transforming gender relations. In this policy brief, we will explore and review the current debates and evidence around engaging with men and boys to advance gender equality. We start by giving an overview of the global debates and paradigms on the role of men during the COVID 19 pandemic, which has emerged as an important topic of discussion. Then we further explore this issue using the role of men in reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health as well as in parental leave policies. Finally, we give some policy suggestions.

SHIFTING ROLES OF MEN IN THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

Traditional gender roles and ideologies perpetuate a disproportionate division of la-

bour in the domestic sphere. Socio-cultural norms and traditions often deem women as the primary caregivers, and sole heads of household chores. However, the pandemic - in a manner, acted as a catalyst for the cause of gender equality by helping challenge these preexisting, dominant beliefs. Men's participation in the domestic sphere, and childrearing practices, it has been studied - has increased during the lockdown. Studies reveal that while women still spend more time on household chores, men, too, share the burden of housework unlike before. The pandemic has been instrumental in eliminating structural barriers for men - no longer having to physically report to the office, they get to spend time with their families. This increased flexibility and work-from-home policies have led to the greater contribution of men at home.

Analysing the data released by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), Ashwini Deshpande notes that the 'gender gap in average hours spent on domestic work decreased,' 'men devoted an extra hour to housework (2.5 hours) in April 2020 as compared to 1.5 hours in December 2019.' With the complete banning of domestic workers in residential complexes, the burden of all housework fell on families. Several news pieces have reported men realising the need to shoulder the responsibility. The pandemic - in this manner, has led to a change in family dynamics. No longer inundated solely with the drudgery of house-

hold work, women could now participate efficiently in their paid activities as well. The contribution of men's presence in the domestic sphere is a great blowback to the growing patriarchal and capitalist culture.

Their involvement at home has led to a newfound respect for unpaid work - which would otherwise be deemed 'unproductive,' in merely economic terms. The increased participation of men is essential for dispelling previously believed notions of masculinities and femininities. It has helped uncover the gendering of occupations and expected roles. This situation has often been compared to the times after the second world war, whereby the female labour participation rate potentially increased. Significant historical occurrences such as these, therefore - have sparked greater social changes. Gender equality cannot happen in a vacuum - the presence and willing participation of men and young boys working towards the cause will lead to a sense of equity and equality.

ROLE OF MEN IN REPRODUCTIVE, MATERNAL, NEWBORN AND CHILD HEALTH (RMNCH)

While we all know that in India as well as most countries globally, given the biological realities, reproduction has historically been considered a woman's issue, which has led to using it as a tool to systematically

oppress them. This has led to a distance between men and reproduction processes to the extent that they are termed as the 'Second Sex in Reproduction' by some scholars. However, in 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) at Cairo, Egypt recognized the need for men to be more involved as partners in reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health. It said:

"Special efforts should be made to emphasize men's shared responsibility and promote their active involvement in responsible parenthood, sexual and reproductive behaviour, including family planning; prenatal, maternal and child health; prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV; prevention of unwanted and high-risk pregnancies; shared control and contribution to family income, children's education, health and nutrition; and recognition and promotion of the equal value of children of both sexes. Male responsibilities in family life must be included in the education of children from the earliest ages. Special emphasis should be placed on the prevention of violence against women and children."

While India was a signatory to ICPD 1994, our review of the evidence and policies suggest that till date, there has been no major intervention or effort by the Indian government to focus on the role of men in this regard. Most policies and programs on RMNCH in India do not have any focus

on engaging with men as fathers. The only exception is that of family planning where government policies and programs focus on men getting sterilised to reduce fertility rates. However, despite this, the burden of sterilisation remains on women which is evidenced by the fact that 35.7% of all family planning procedures in India are female sterilisations while only 0.3% account for male sterilisations, according to National Family Health Survey 4 data. Furthermore, in other areas of RMNCH, there is no policy or intervention which encourages or promotes male involvement. This is hugely problematic as extensive research across the world has shown that men's increased involvement in RMNCH has not only benefits for the woman and the child, but even for men themselves. Men's increased involvement has been linked to improved outcomes in physical, mental, and emotional health for families (including men themselves).

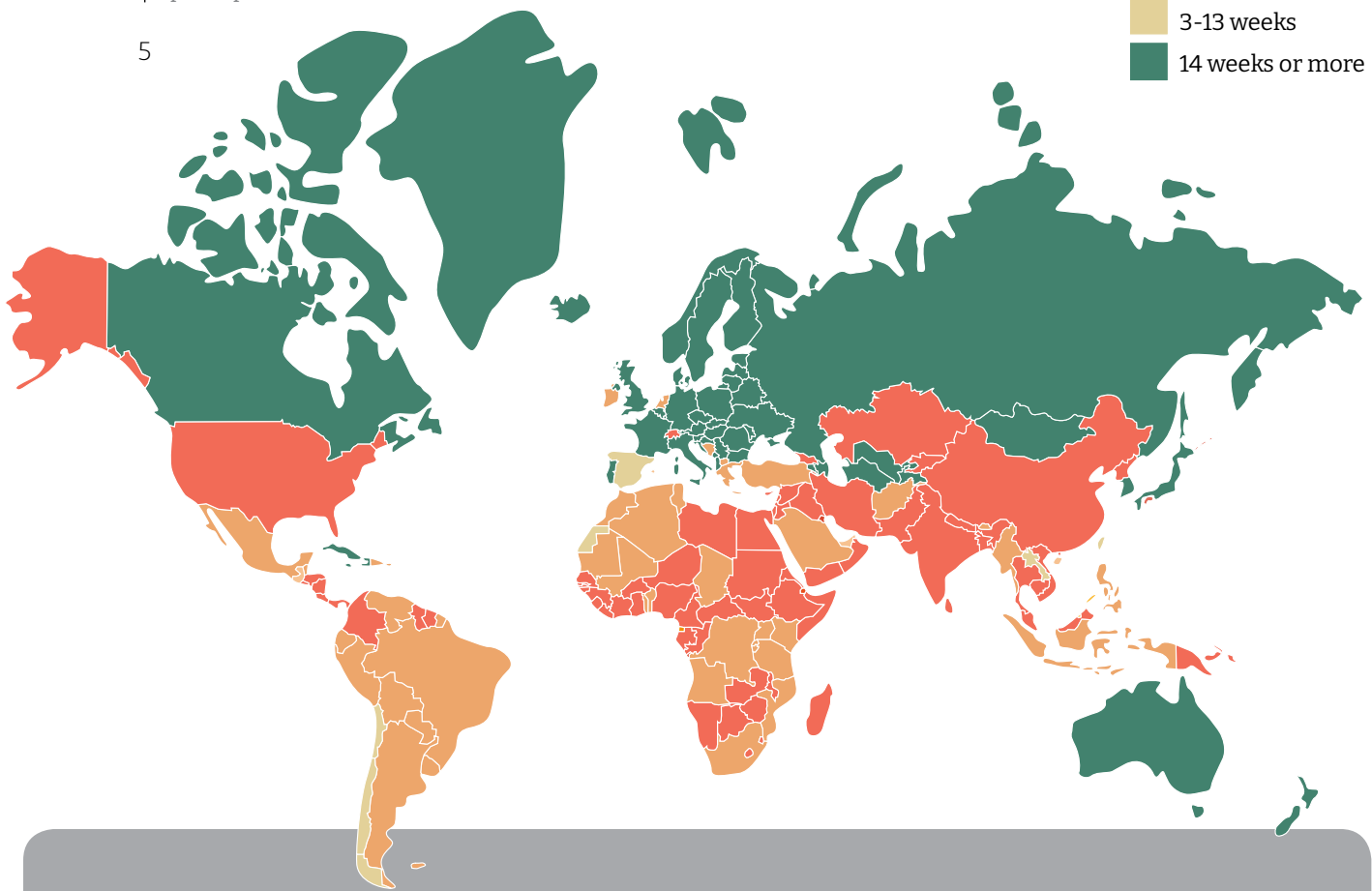
HOW PATERNITY LEAVE FOR MEN CAN TRANSFORM GENDER RELATIONS

In 2017, the Maternity Benefit Act (MBA) of 1961 was revamped and mandated six months of full paid leave so that the impact of the pregnancy and motherhood on women is mitigated as much as possi-

ble. While this was a widely praised move that heralded India's progress, our research and review suggests that this leave needs to be complemented by providing paternity leave to men who become fathers. There are some organisations and institutions, which provide two weeks of paternity leave to men, but those are mostly one-off and ad hoc. Research suggests that pregnancy & childbirth is a crucial entry point where the agenda of gender equality in care work and parenting can be addressed. Providing six months of maternal leave to women is no doubt a commendable move, but this is the point where lack of engagement from the further can manifest further in distancing men from care work and transforming gender norms. Many countries in the West provide significant leave for both parents. The overall gap can be fathomed from the fact that 103 countries provide paternity leave as compared to 185 countries that offer maternity leave. For instance, Sweden provides 240 days of leave for both parents and Finland also provides the same parental leave to both parents. Thus, while significant efforts have been put into providing maternity leave for women, it is time now to start planning and implementing parental leave for fathers, who can be more active with their wives and children and thus, contribute towards gender equality.

India's big gender challenge:
COVID-19's devastating impact
on rural female labour force
participation

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Policy Recommendations

Focus on engaging with men & masculinities as a theoretical foundation for programs:

Most women oriented policies and programs in India are well intentioned, but they assume that only targeting and engaging with women will lead to change. Thus, it is important that gender oriented policies and programs should start focusing on men & masculinities as a theoretical foundation, which can (and does) influence the lives of women. Rather than assuming gender = women, it should approach gender as a relational concept and also focus on the influence of men and masculinities on gender issues.

Launch a national campaign to influence and inspire men to challenge toxic masculinities:

Nationwide behavioural campaigns have always had some impact on the country's social indicators depending upon the context. Campaigns such as anti-smoking, importance of eggs to more recent endeavours such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, etc. led by the Prime Minister do have some influence on everyday norms and practices. Thus, a similar such campaign should be led by governments which could positively influence men to take up more household work and challenge gender norms. Such campaigns could also focus on resisting and challenging gender based violence against women.

Focus on male involvement in RMNCH programs: The national and state government should focus more strongly on engaging with expectant fathers in RMNCH programs and initiatives. For e.g: They should be actively welcomed in maternity wards, antenatal care check-ups, immunizations for their children as well as gynaecological discussions. In addition to educating them regarding pregnancy & childbirth matters, their concerns as expectant and new fathers should also find a place in the health system. It is only when a man feels fully welcomed and involved as he transitions to fatherhood, the positive impact of his well being will also reflect on the mother as well as the child

Introduce and implement a paternity leave for men in India: It is high time now that the government should start deliberations and discussions around paternity leave policies in India. Already, some private organisations and companies have implemented such policies, and therefore, their experiences could be leveraged to frame and design a nationwide paternity leave in India.

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