

## Why Gender Equality Is Good for Men's Health and Why This Matters Now



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As governments and organizations worldwide implement sweeping measures to address and stymie the health, economic, and social costs of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), societies must consider the type of world that can and should be rebuilt after the pandemic. This is the opportune moment to set in place changes that reform the structures and mechanisms that embed and reinforce gender inequalities and rebuild a society that maximizes the health and well-being of all.

Gender equality is typically positioned as an issue for women and girls: women have led the movement for gender equality, and it is women who have historically been (and remain) most disadvantaged by gender inequality.<sup>1</sup> However, what is commonly missed is that gender equality benefits men and boys, too.<sup>1–3</sup> In relation to health specifically, among men, gender equality is associated with better mental health,<sup>2,4</sup> reduced overall mortality,<sup>5</sup> better overall self-rated well-being,<sup>2</sup> and health-promoting behaviors such as increased physical activity<sup>6</sup> and reduced alcohol consumption.<sup>7</sup>

The precise mechanisms underpinning these associations between gender equality and health outcomes are unclear; however, gender norms are considered a fundamental contributor.<sup>8</sup> Gender norms are socially constructed and are fundamental to the perpetuation of gender inequalities, setting the tacit and overt rules that govern acceptable behaviors, roles, and responsibilities for men and women. Restrictive and prescriptive gender norms can be problematic for all genders, and there are clear costs of some masculine norms to the health of men and boys. Some masculine norms support a cavalier attitude to health and can lead to more risky health behaviors.<sup>9</sup> Norms such as autonomy and endurance, while clearly advantageous in some contexts, are central to men's drinking practices and can lead to risky alcohol consumption.<sup>9</sup> Other masculine norms, such as self-reliance, are associated with poorer mental health<sup>10</sup> and greater risk of suicidal behaviors for men.<sup>11</sup> Self-reliance, the belief that you should solve your own problems and be independent, is central to normative masculinity in

Western countries and is associated with reduced help seeking.<sup>12</sup> Such masculine norms also promote a stoic, tough-it-out approach to adversity, pain, and distress. The net effect is that men are less likely to seek help for poor health and are less likely to engage in routine, preventive, or screening health services. When they do engage with health services, it is often late, when treatment options may be limited or more invasive and intensive.<sup>13</sup> Men are also less likely than women to seek help for mental distress, and conforming to certain masculine norms appears to increase the likelihood of experiencing distress while simultaneously reducing men's propensity to seek help.<sup>14</sup> In addition to engaging less with health services, men have poorer health literacy than women, and this also appears to be related to masculine norms.<sup>15</sup>

Gender equality cannot be achieved without the support and participation of men. But what is important to note is that gender equality does not sit at counterpoint to the interests of men, nor does it place the interests of men and women at odds with one another.<sup>2,16</sup> Although there is no evidence that men are disadvantaged or devalued by gender equality,<sup>2</sup> there is increasing evidence that they are beneficiaries of gender equality.<sup>2,3,17</sup> Recognizing that gender equality serves the wider population and advances equality in opportunities and experiences for all genders opens avenues to spearhead action.

Around the world, male-breadwinner arrangements are the norm, with men as the primary household breadwinner and women taking primary responsibility for domestic tasks (even when in paid employment),

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particularly caring for children.<sup>16</sup> Traditionally, masculine norms regarding the primacy of work have also been reproduced in workplaces, particularly in terms of lack of flexibility and parental leave arrangements for men, and career and working time models that position the breadwinner (with no caring responsibilities) as the default. Such arrangements are underpinned by a gender system that reinforces and reproduces this divide across the life course and across all levels of the society, in community and institutions, within households and relationships, and through policies.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary economic and social policies and strategies remain largely predicated on this male-breadwinner arrangement.

Many recent initiatives at the workplace level have implemented what are intended to be family-friendly approaches; however, these have mainly targeted women and have generally not been complemented by initiatives supporting male caring. The misalignment between the recent initiatives at the workplace level supporting female labor force participation (e.g., through flexible work arrangements) and the economic and social policies promoting a male-breadwinner arrangement creates a gender equality stalemate, hindering the ability to both drive gender equality and to obviate the harms of gender inequality—for both men and women.

Transformative approaches that catalyze normative and structural change have been identified as key to successful gender equality interventions.<sup>18</sup> Although normative social change typically occurs slowly and generally apace with intergenerational population replacement, there is evidence that many countries have reached a tipping point, whereby there is an acceleration toward egalitarian gender attitudes.<sup>19</sup> Capitalizing on the cultural momentum toward gender equality<sup>19</sup> should be a focus of COVID-19 recovery, and a fundamental focus of policy reform should be redistributing the division of paid and unpaid labor, particularly in relation to caring.<sup>20</sup>

Supporting a dual-earner/dual-carer model, where both men and women are supported to combine paid labor force participation and caring, is one way of supporting gender equality and ameliorating the harms of gender inequality for both men and women.<sup>16</sup> Women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work is fundamental to gender inequalities around the world, and increasing men's caring opportunities offers an important way to redistribute this inequitable load. This is one part of a multidimensional puzzle that is needed to achieve gender equality; other important aspects of engaging men in tackling gender inequality include addressing violence against women and girls, encouraging men to share responsibility for reproductive and sexual health, and increasing women's economic and political participation.<sup>21</sup> The principal focus of this

paper is on the redistribution of paid work and unpaid care work because first, it is considered a cornerstone of gender equality, and second, this represents a pathway for transformative change in which masculine norms are reformulated to encompass a broader set of behaviors and attributes.

Caring is almost universally regarded as women's work.<sup>22</sup> It is conceived as involving nurturance, sensitivity, and intimacy—attributes that are regarded as feminine and dissonant to dominant masculinities.<sup>22,23</sup> The sidelining or exclusion of caring from dominant masculinities can impact men's emotional needs, mental health, and relationships with others.<sup>24</sup> Caring masculinities offers a transformative framework by which men can be engaged in gender equality and masculine norms can be reconfigured.<sup>17,23</sup> This presents a means of defining a more equitable division of labor for men and women where caring and paid labor force participation can be combined. Many men want this; for example, an increasing number of men are choosing to play a significant role in caring for their children.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, caring, particularly caring for their own children, is good for men's health. Among a sample of Swedish men working long hours (>50 hours), caring for children appeared to buffer them from symptoms of poor health, leading the authors to suggest that having multiple roles, including caring, may be of benefit to men.<sup>26</sup> Having multiple roles in the society is theorized to impart beneficial effects through several processes,<sup>27</sup> but most salient here is the buffering effect that multiple roles have on stress. Stress or adverse experiences in the workplace, for example, can be buffered by reward, satisfaction, and positive experiences in other roles such as caring and parenting.<sup>27</sup> It is also theorized that having multiple roles expands the frame of reference for adversities and successes and in this way provides the multiple role holder with a greater perspective on the vicissitudes of life than a single role does.<sup>27</sup>

Transformative approaches that operate across multiple levels and domains are needed to recognize and attend to the structural and social drivers of gender norms within individuals, within households and other interpersonal settings, and across institutions and society more broadly.<sup>28</sup> Evidence across multiple countries indicates that transformative policy design can shape normative change in relation to gender equality.<sup>28,29</sup> For example, nontransferable parental leave for fathers has accelerated behavioral change in Norway and Sweden, with a large increase in the proportion of fathers taking this use-it-or-lose-it leave. This in turn has led to wide public acceptance of fathers caring for children.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, however, policies should cohere with, and complement each other. Nontransferable parental leave

for fathers should be accompanied by affordable child care and flexible work arrangements for both men and women.<sup>31</sup>

Shifting and broadening acceptable expressions of masculinities (e.g., by driving normative acceptance of caring) is likely to have positive effects on health and well-being across the society, including among many men who do not align themselves with or do not perceive that they meet idealized standards of masculinity. As part of transformative and ecologic approaches, economic and social levers supporting male caring must be complemented by supportive policy in other domains. Health policy and programs, for example, must recognize the way that masculine norms and gender inequalities can impact men's health and their interactions with health systems. Here, transformative approaches are needed to shift the often singular focus on men's behavior to ensure the availability of health systems that meet men's needs.

Common conceptualizations of gender equality often ascribe a very privileged Western cultural form. An intersectional perspective is therefore vital in recognizing the diversity of men's and women's experiences and identities when shaping programs and strategies.<sup>17</sup> There is, for example, evidence that some gender equality initiatives are not as affordable or accessible to disadvantaged populations relative to the middle class or highly educated groups.<sup>32</sup> Recognition and understanding of this must also be factored into initiatives and strategies.

As they reckon with the societal tumult caused by COVID-19, governments are implementing policies and initiatives that only months ago appeared radical. Initiatives to support male caring and build gender equality are not radical, but rather prudent investments in health and well-being. The benefits of driving gender equality are not limited to men and women but extend to children and adolescents who should also be engaged in programs driving normative change. Experiences of gender equality or inequality in childhood impact attitudes and behaviors as adults.<sup>33</sup> This raises the stakes: driving gender equality now sets the foundation for the health and well-being of future generations. Advancing gender equality and disassembling damaging gender norms is an investment in future health, an investment that should be prioritized.

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