

Insights on Engaging Men and Boys in Creating a More Gender Equal Future in Canada

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a national qualitative research study of 33 diverse and profeminist leaders who identify as men and are engaged in gender equality work with men and boys across Canada. Key findings include the need to meet men where they are at, moving away from the ineffective “all men are perpetrators” frame, and to evolve to new and more relatable narratives and approaches that get men committed to this work for their own liberation. Taking an intersectional approach and working in partnership with feminist and intersectional organizations are essential to advancing gender equality in the Canadian context.

Keywords

profeminist men, gender equality, engaging men and boys, allies

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the critical role that men and boys play in advancing gender equality has gained worldwide recognition (Flood & Greig, 2021) leading to more and more countries exploring how to facilitate men and boys’ participation in this domain (Edström & Shahrokh, 2016; Levtov et al., 2014; Peacock & Barker, 2014). Undeniably, many men and boys directly benefit from both heteronormative patriarchy and gender inequality. Yet, there is growing acceptance that all men do not benefit equally and that, despite the privileges, most men pay significant emotional, relational, and physical health costs by ascribing to harmful masculine norms and our

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broader patriarchy-driven society (Edström & Shahrokh, 2016; Flood, 2019; Flood & Howson, 2015).

Most efforts to date and the requisite funding to engage and mobilize men and boys have historically focused on violence prevention programs within a gender transformative framework. Such frameworks aim to positively transform individual gender norms, attitudes, behaviors, relations, and practices through critical reflection and reconceptualization of gender and its manifestations (Casey et al., 2016) with the goal of preventing gender-based violence. It is only recently that strategies to engage and mobilize men and boys have targeted gender equality explicitly, with violence prevention as one aspect.

In 2018, the Government of Canada established its first Gender Results Framework, a whole-of-government tool to guide policy decisions and track developments in gender equality and diversity across several identified policy priorities. This led parliament to pass the Canadian Gender Budgeting Act and create the Department of Women and Gender Equality (Government of Canada, 2018). One of the first priorities of the department was to develop a federal strategy to engage men and boys as partners to advance gender equality across the country. As Canada lacks national representative or qualitative data on men and gender equality work, the Department of Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) put out a call for a study involving Canadian gender equality advocates who identify as men. The goal of the study sought to better understand men's motivations and experiences and to inform government on how to attract, invite, encourage, and support other men and boys to get motivated and mobilized in this work. The first author applied and was awarded funding to complete the study. Here, we present key findings from Canada's first qualitative national study on engaging men and boys in gender equality.

Why Engage Men in Gender Equality?

A growing chorus of gender equality and violence prevention scholars and advocates have emphasized the important role men and boys can and should play as cobeneficiaries, advocates, and allies in advancing gender equality worldwide (Crooks et al., 2007; Edström & Shahrokh, 2016; Flood & Greig, 2021; Levtov et al., 2014; Peacock & Barker, 2014). Viewing gender equality work with men and boys as part of the wider solution to ending gender-based violence includes understanding the ways that restrictive or traditional gender norms also harm men and boys (Edström & Shahrokh, 2016; Flood & Howson, 2015). Evidence increasingly demonstrates that gender equality also benefits men and boys. For example, men and boys who live in more gender equitable societies are more satisfied with life, have better mental and physical health, spend more time with their families, contribute more to care work in the home, have more mutually satisfying sexual relationships, are more likely to actively contribute to the reduction of unintended pregnancies through contraceptive use, and sleep better (Audette et al., 2019; Karpf, 2022; King et al., 2020; WHO, 2018). Gender equitable societies create the conditions for men to more easily ask and receive help, take advantage of work–life balance policies that reduce

burnout and promote well-being, and have more flexibility in career choices (WHO, 2018).

Preventing men's violence against women and advancing gender equality requires men and boys to be part of the solution. Engaging men and boys with evidence-based strategies will help stop violence before it starts while embedding and cultivating a long-term vested interest in gender and social justice. To do this, men and boys need to be able to develop healthy and positive identities and emotionally self-regulate (through social-emotional learning [SEL]); embody gender equitable norms and behaviors; have the skills to disrupt sexism and violence within themselves and their peers; embrace nonviolence; have the skills to heal, repair, and manage conflict; are accountable; and actively inspire their peers, colleagues, and children to do the same (Heilman & Barker, 2018). Critically, this includes creating the conditions that support and reinforce gender equitable behaviors, such as through gender equitable organizational policies, institutional reform, movement-building, and systems change (Flood & Greig, 2021).

What Do We Know About How to Engage Men and Boys in Gender Equality?

How to engage men and boys involves understanding what gets men to “come to the table” in the first place—and how to keep them there. Ally research has established that men get involved in this work when they connect their own personal experience with violence/oppression (Alcalde, 2014; Peretz, 2017) or when they receive a disclosure about violence or have knowledge/experience of gender-based violence involving friends and family (Casey & Smith, 2010; Peretz, 2017). Other men get engaged when they receive encouragement from a key relationship (i.e., a peer, mentor, wife, or mother encouraged them) (Flood & Howson, 2015) or become a parent/father (Barker et al., 2021; Flood, 2019). The research shows that exposure to modeling of nontraditional gender roles is also a motivator for some men and boys (Flood & Howson, 2015) while others get engaged because of their prior/current involvement with other social justice activities (Flood & Howson, 2015; MenEngage, 2016). A prosocial-supportive public policy, like parental leave, creates the conditions for behavior change and can be a motivator for men to get engaged in gender equality activities (Barker et al., 2021; MenEngage, 2016). With these motivators identified to get men engaged, what do we know about how to support them to stay engaged and mobilized to advance gender equality work?

Research has helped to illuminate the importance of “meeting men where they are at.” This is understood in terms of who they will listen to and how messages are framed and made to resonate with their own experiences, realities, and contexts, as well as the physical locations’ men gather (Dozois & Wells, 2020). The findings from the present study are all variations of this core concept of meeting men and boys where they are at, taking up different strands of this concept to add clarity and nuance to effectively engage men and boys. For example, the first theme refers to meeting men where they are at in terms

focused more on building new narratives and approaches that invite men in continuously and recognize where they are along the change continuum, while another theme speaks to the need to work with men in the places they already gather.

The concept of meeting men where they are at is not limited to initial engagement but is rather an ongoing approach that invites, retains, and mobilizes men through creating resonance, connection, and a personal stake in preventing violence and advancing gender equality. Meeting men where they are at is about creating ongoing opportunities for men to see themselves as belonging to—and benefiting from—the work to advance gender equality and prevent violence. Research has confirmed that one's social environment and personal networks are prime influencing factors on men's behaviors (Dolan et al., 2011; Dozois & Wells, 2020). As such, prosocial change strategies are more effective when they target individuals alongside the social norms, systems, and structures in which they are already embedded (e.g., the workplace) rather than engaging individuals detached from their daily social contexts and ties (e.g., a violence prevention program with strangers) (Cooper et al., 2014; Flood, 2019; Paluck & Ball, 2010).

In terms of physical spaces, Dozois and Wells (2020) have identified the importance of taking the work to places where men work, play, socialize, worship, and live including school settings, sports and recreational settings, and local neighborhoods. This approach involves physically working in these settings (as opposed to recruiting men to an external program site) and building relationships of trust and connection while supporting men to see how they can leverage their relationships within their networks and spheres of influence. Their influence within these networks is an important leverage point for changing norms and behaviors among peers (Dozois & Wells, 2020).

Research also shows that *who* delivers the message or content to men and boys matters, and as always, context is everything. For example, men have been shown to be more receptive to messages regarding gender equality when the message is delivered by a man (as opposed to a woman) (Subašić et al., 2018). The value of leveraging ingroup membership can also be seen in studies on confronting racism. One study, for instance, showed White participants more likely persuaded by a White person confronting them about a biased response than a Black person, who is more likely to be perceived as a “complainer” (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). Another study found that non-Black participants overall were more likely to accept confrontations on racism as “convincing and suggestive of their need to work on bias reduction” (Gulker et al., 2013, p. 289) when carried out by a White as opposed to a Black individual. In Gulker et al.'s study, which also compared confrontations around sexism, results demonstrated an overall trivialization of sexism regardless of who confronted whom (2013). However, other research has shown instances where men are particularly well-situated to act as allies *because* they are able to provide support as an outgroup member (to women), such as in cases of more favorable responses (i.e., higher self-confidence and less self-stereotyping) from women who are told they might be subject to sexism from a male versus female source (Cihangir et al., 2014). These examples help to illuminate the importance of the messenger in efforts to engage men and boys.

Lastly, how messages are framed also matters. Given the immense diversity and heterogeneity of male-identified populations and their experiences, the literature has demonstrated that men vary in their receptivity and relatability to messages around gender equality and that the packaging and framing of these messages are critically important (Dozois & Wells, 2020). For example (and not surprisingly), research has found that focusing on men as the “problem” or “vectors of disease” will evoke defensiveness among many men and limit their receptivity to information and capacity to learn (Makusha et al., 2020, p. 70). Messaging that goes beyond being diagnostic and is, instead, strength-based and solution-focused, helps to build a positive counternarrative and relationship. This strength-based messaging focuses on the roles men *can* play—from a gender transformative perspective—and, as such, is more likely to be well-received (VicHealth, 2020). This approach also aligns with “common cause framing,” which seeks to locate customary values and underlying commonalities across a target audience that can be built upon for one’s cause. In the case of gender equality, common cause framing presents gender inequality as something that negatively impacts all genders and has been shown to increase men’s collective action intentions and sense of feminist solidarity (Subašić et al., 2018).

Canadian Context

The current government of Canada is committed to advancing gender equality through the promotion and protection of human rights for girls and women both internationally and domestically (Government of Canada, 2018). Yet, Canada still faces many of the same struggles as other countries in the global north, including gender pay gaps that put women at an economic disadvantage, high rates of gender-based violence (Dawson et al., 2019), systemic racism, and subsequent inequities that continue to wreak havoc on Indigenous populations, racialized communities, and persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls in these groups (Arriagada, 2016; Hudon, 2016; Hudon & Milan, 2016). The presence and ferocity of right-wing and White nationalist movements in Canada have also been on the rise, a phenomenon that disproportionately attracts White men and which foments fears that “traditional” masculinity is under threat (Jokic, 2020; Sethi, 2022). Given the growing interest and importance of the role of men in preventing gender-based violence and advancing gender equality, research encompassing work with men in the Canadian context is needed.

Aims of the Study

In 2018, we conducted a national qualitative study with two goals. The first was to reveal the motivations and experiences of profeminist men engaged in gender equality in all sectors across Canada. The second was to identify how government can help mobilize more men and boys to become engaged in advancing gender equality (Fotheringham & Wells, 2019). Results from the full study informed a set of key recommendations submitted to the Government of Canada on how they can support the mobilization of more men and boys to champion gender equality engagement within

their spheres of influence (Wells & Claussen, 2021). Here, we present participants' insights on how governments can help engage and mobilize more men in gender equality work in the Canadian context.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this qualitative study were as follows. First, we used a positive deviance approach, which shifts the focus of research onto those who are resisting typical norms and engaging in atypical behavior (Tucker & Harris, 2016). This oriented the research study toward men who are focused on solutions. In the context of this study, we sought to identify those who have defied typical gender norms and social constructions of masculinity, have committed to public and observable gender equality work, and are actively supporting women's rights.

Choo and Ferree (2010) have identified two primary research dimensions of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), which served to inform the second aspect of our theoretical framework. First is the importance of including those who are situated at the intersection of multiple oppressions and who have been traditionally excluded from mainstream knowledge creation. They stress the need to consider the intersection of categories (e.g., how does race intersect with gender or class) as they are dynamic and coconstituted. The second dimension is a macro-level intersectional analysis involving systems, structures, and policy and how inequality is institutionalized.

Finally, this study was situated with the pragmatic paradigm (Patton, 2002), which, in a research context, is an applied approach that replaces traditional concepts of epistemology and methodology (Morgan, 2014). Fundamentally, pragmatism is concerned with the usefulness of research and how it can engender social or political change (Wicks & Freeman, 1998). Because our study had practical objectives, such as informing a national engagement strategy for men, pragmatism was determined to be the best fit.

Recruitment and Data Collection

We incorporated two sampling strategies: deviant case and snowball (Patton, 2002). Deviant case aligns with the positive deviance approach as it allowed us to select men who were "positive outliers" in a gender unequal society. Snowball sampling helped us locate more positive deviant cases by asking key feminist informants across Canada to identify men engaged in gender equality work.

While establishing the recruitment strategy for this study, we were faced with pivotal questions. For example, what does advancing gender equality look like in practice? What actions, behaviors, and activities does this involve? We wanted to be sure to involve men who demonstrated public and observable *actions* to advancing gender equality as well as respect and recognition of women's rights. To help us in this regard, we created a Gender Equality Indicators and Practices Index (Wells, Fotheringham, Goulet, 2019, p. 56), which articulated specific outcomes and behaviors

that described the profeminist men we were hoping to recruit for the study. The index included eight indicators and 42 explicit practices (i.e., behaviors) to help people determine which men would be an appropriate fit for this study. We then asked feminists working in the area of violence prevention and gender equality from across Canada (known to the authors through their networks) to testify in writing about the character or ability of a potential participant for the study that matched one or more of the indicator/practice examples provided.

Wells, Fotheringham and Goulet (2019, p. 56) developed the index using indicators outlined by the government of Canada and by international and academic literature to fit within the study objectives and to help identify concrete and observable gender equality actions and behaviors. (Table 1) illustrates two examples of indicators and practices.

We compiled a list of women's rights and feminist organizations across Canada to identify men engaged in gender equality and violence prevention activities. This list was developed via our robust feminist network that included grassroots initiatives, nonprofit organizations, ethnocultural groups, and the private and government sectors. We also conducted an online search to identify organizations outside our network and targeted each province and territory. This process led to identifying over 400 Canadian organizations.

Through email, we contacted these organizations, inviting them to identify men who were engaged in gender equality practices in public, observable, and confirmable ways. We shared our Gender Equality Indicators and Practices Index with these organizations and asked that they submit a testimonial or example of how the recommended men

Table 1. Examples of Gender Equality Indicators and Practices.

| Gender equality indicator | Practice examples |
|---|--|
| 1. Profeminist men who advocate to end violence against women through activism, policy, programs, and campaigns within diverse settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has spoken out on violence against women publicly (blogs, news articles, community events, and within ethnocultural and religious communities) • Has embedded and enforced sexual harassment policies at work • Has led and/or implemented domestic violence policies within government, community organizations, or the workplace |
| 2. Profeminist men who advocate for increased participation of women in leadership and decision making in public or private sector, organizations, institutions, committees, or neighborhoods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has instituted a gender balanced Board of Directors, committee, or workforce • Has hired and mentored women to be successful in senior-level positions • Has supported women political candidates • Has established/increased on-site childcare at work • Has increased representation of women in traditionally male-dominated settings through the creation of programs/policies/initiatives |

were involved in at least one indicator and practice area. This strategy allowed us to use our network as a prescreening mechanism. From this, we received 122 names of men in Canada.

Using public domains, we conducted a search on each of the 122 nominees to develop a description, including area of work, and if this work fell within our Gender Equality Indicators and Practices Index, and the following diversity characteristics, if known: geographical location, gender and sexual orientation, religious and cultural affiliation, English and French speaking, Indigenous/Métis, age, and sector of work (public, private, and nonprofit). Based on this information, we classified men into one of four categories: (1) men who were known experts in gender equality and violence prevention work and, therefore, easily met at least one indicator because their work is well known, (2) men who were not well known, yet met more than one indicator based on the description provided and met the diversity characteristics outlined above, (3) men who met one indicator based on the description provided, and (4) men who did not meet any of the indicators. As the study funding and timing was limited, we were only able to interview up to 33 participants. As a result, we began by inviting men through email from category one and two, targeting representation in every province and territory. In total, 52 men encompassed either the first or second category and were invited into the study. Of the 52 invited to participate, 33 agreed to be interviewed. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board approved all methods in this study, and all participants provided written, informed consent.

Using a semistructured interview guide, the first two authors conducted interviews by phone, which took approximately one hour. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were then sent back to participants for verification as a form of triangulation called member checking (Patton, 2002). This gave participants the opportunity to make any revisions to their statements.

Transcripts were read by first two authors, and the second author analyzed the qualitative data using NVivo software. Following the general qualitative analysis process of Patton (2002), the first two authors conducted content analysis, coding, and categorizing of themes. The research team developed a preliminary coding scheme incorporating an intersectional lens by previewing the first five transcripts in consideration with the research questions and objectives as well as the known literature base on men's engagement. The preliminary coding scheme included four high-level themes: (1) gender equality work, (2) motivations and influences to getting involved in gender equality work, (3) challenges and barriers to men's successful involvement in gender equality work, and (4) how to engage men and boys in gender equality work.

Numerous subthemes and categories followed these overarching themes. An intersectional lens permeated the preliminary coding scheme through inclusion of subthemes and categories reflecting intersectional experiences. For example, under the high-level theme "challenges and barriers to men's successful involvement in gender equality," a subtheme titled "structural challenges" included categories of "colonization," "racism," "heterosexism," "class inequality," "White supremacy," and "religion/cultural beliefs," which allowed for analysis between masculinity and systems

of oppression. Another subtheme was “male/White social privilege,” with categories capturing the various ways this subtheme creates challenges and barriers to men’s active engagement. Following the development of the preliminary coding scheme, one analyst reviewed the transcripts and coded them accordingly, adding to the coding scheme as new themes emerged, which is consistent with qualitative analysis (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Codes and themes were regularly discussed with the research lead, a known expert on men’s engagement, thereby enhancing confirmability and credibility of findings known as analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002).

After analysis was complete, we presented the findings to an expert panel as another form of data analyst triangulation. This panel comprised of seven diverse male experts that are well-known from across Canada. They were selected because of their historical work in this area. We chose to only target men as the study focused on hearing from men who are profeminist gender equality leaders, and we wanted to test our findings within this group. We presented the results of the study to the panel of experts, and they shared general reflections on the data.

The final form of triangulation used in this study was thick description. Thick description involves the collection of rich data, provision of detailed descriptions, and direct quotations so that others may evaluate one’s conclusions (Patton, 2002). In this study, thick description was accomplished by audio recording and verbatim transcription of interviews and the use of direct quotations in the results. We selected quotations that best illustrated the themes and reflected intersectional experiences.

Findings

Description of Sample

Of the 33 men interviewed, 20 identified as White/Caucasian, five as Indigenous/Métis, four as African or Caribbean-Canadian, three as Indo-Canadian, and one as European Canadian. Four men identified as gay and one as transgender. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 72 years old. Length of time engaged in gender equality work ranged from under 2 years to over 21 years, with the majority having worked in this field for 5–10 years.

We asked participants to identify in which sector their work took place: public (government, health, and education), private (business and finance), or nonprofit/community. Almost half of the respondents ($n = 15$) stated their gender equality work crossed all sectors. For those who predominately worked in one sector, eight identified the nonprofit/community context, such as with a grassroots initiative. Seven men indicated they worked in the public sector, such as in the local school system or large public systems, such as policing and military or municipal government. Finally, three participants focused their work in the private sector such as in finance, engineering, and technology. The sample included men from all regions of Canada: West Coast, Prairie Provinces, Central Canada, Quebec, Atlantic Provinces, and Northern Territories.

Focus of their work occurred across three themes: preventing and stopping violence against women (sexual assault or gender-based violence) and examining gender

socialization, stereotypes, and healthy masculinity; and gender equality work generally, such as advancing gender equality via leadership within a company or large system. Participants also identified approaches used in their work. The most described approach was educational/skill-based training and workshops. This was followed by group facilitation with young and adult men in schools, universities, and social services. Seven participants described they led mentorship efforts that focused on empowerment and leadership skill development with young men, and seven men used media and public awareness campaigns as their strategy. Another six men emphasized their approach was through partnerships with feminist or civil society organizations to advance gender equality work. Examples included international partnerships with like-minded feminist organizations and with local women's organizations during key activities such as 16 Days to End Gender-Based Violence where they would facilitate discussions, provide keynotes, or sit on panels to advance the conversation. A few men described how they leverage their grassroots network by bringing together different communities (e.g., through their mosque) to discuss gender equality issues within a culturally appropriate framework. Indigenous ceremonies, rites of passage, and connection to reconciliation were identified by a few respondents as times and places they engage in gender equality work. Finally, for a few participants, their gender equality work involved leading culture change initiatives in an organization, company, or large system.

How to Engage Men in the Canadian Context

Five broad themes emerged from our interviews: (1) meet men where they are at; (2) create more safe spaces; (3) support more men to get engaged as leaders and mentors; (4) leverage settings where men already congregate and target boys' and men's life transition periods; and (5) embed a feminist and intersectional approach to gender equality work that respects multiple worldviews and experiences. In presenting these, we mirror the language and terms employed by participants to accurately represent their descriptions of their own experiences and challenges, which are put in quotations for clarification. However, some of the language chosen (e.g., "safe spaces") is embedded with tensions, particularly as it relates to hearing men's perspectives on engaging in profeminist work. We explore these tensions and offer alternative terms and phrasing where possible.

Theme 1: Meet Men Where They Are at. The strongest theme that emerged from the analysis was the need to meet men where they are at. Other themes expand on other strands of what it means to meet men where they are at; this one focuses on the need to build new narratives and approaches that invite men in continuously and recognize where they are along the change continuum. Including "positive aspects of masculinity" in gender equality work was one of the most common subthemes identified by the men interviewed, as was the need to change the language used to be more inclusive and respond with empathy and compassion. Several men reported that most engagement strategies they had experienced tended to talk to men "as potential rapists" and

often in a “punitive and demeaning” manner. When this occurred, men often felt “embarrassed, angry, and confused,” leading them to shut down and resist the call to action. Participants discussed that, rather than maintaining a singular focus on the harm and danger of men, engagement should evolve to encompass “all aspects of male experiences, including the positives that men bring.” A few emphasized this is not to negate or ignore men’s violence and the need for accountability but to expand the discussion to include positive concepts of masculinity in men’s engagement strategies and to improve the relatability of messages around gender equality aimed at men.

Furthermore, participants explained that the type of language used in gender equality approaches can either invite men in or alienate them. Several explained that words such as “patriarchy,” “feminism,” “masculinity,” or “gender equality,” when used too early in the engagement process, tend to shut men down due to preconceived notions about the meaning of these words and their association with “male-bashing,” which puts men on the defensive. In place of this, participants recommended using more creative approaches to get at these critical topics. For example, one participant stated:

I feel, with this work, you have to be a little sneaky. It is a group [that] talk[s] about masculinity, but we don’t mention the word masculinity anywhere in the signs, and we don’t really talk about that in the group either. We are talking about masculinity... but we don’t say the word feminism and we don’t say the word masculinity.

Similar comments were made about effective engagement with men from Indigenous, ethnocultural, or religious communities. Participants explained these words are not the most successful way to draw diverse men in. One participant from an ethnocultural community explained:

Not leading with, “I am a feminist” [has] helped me access people in religious communities where it was taboo, or it was not the [way] to identify oneself, but where the values and principles were there to call upon, to activate, or to catalyze in a sense. This has given me a kind of access to people that are maybe the people who are least reached by... this theory of feminism, but who, when they are approached in different ways, through their religious traditions, their cultural traditions... there are things in there, embedded within their own traditions that could be marshalled to get the same results, but just by taking a different route.

Along with improving the framing of messaging and pulling on positive aspects of masculinity, participants emphasized that efforts to engage men need to respond to men with empathy and support. They explained that traditional feminist approaches tend to call men out in ways that are confrontational, blaming, and perpetuate shame and that these approaches tend to result in resistance and even backlash. Alternatively, participants explained, a more effective response would be to offer safety and empathy and to recognize that men, just as anyone challenging the status quo, need support as they delve into their own personal growth and navigate concepts and ideas that challenge much of what they have been told about the world. For participants, this involved “acknowledge[ing] men’s anxieties and fears” and “coming from a standpoint of

listening and understanding.” Some noted the need for space for men to talk about their own experiences of trauma, victimization, and/or oppression, expressing that this is an important part of supporting men through change, and doing so through a trauma-informed approach. This is especially important for men who have experienced oppression and violence such as men from ethnocultural communities, Indigenous, and gender/sexually diverse men. Participants talked about the impact of colonialism and intergenerational trauma on Indigenous men, ongoing violence, and oppression of gay, trans, and racialized men and how engagement work needs to be trauma informed by including space for healing. Several participants also shared how they connected these experiences of oppression in their own lives with gender equality for women, offering a way to work with diverse men. One participant explained: “I came out in my teens as a young gay man. I have been able to draw the links between experiences between violence against women and domestic violence, with my experiences of homophobia and discrimination.”

Participants also discussed the need for a relational-based approach to working with men. According to several of those interviewed, meaningful and trusting social connections are so foundational to engaging men that, without them, change cannot happen:

I think what men are lacking in general, is really strong, trusting relationships. We try and make corrections to masculinity outside of relationship, and without the relationship it just is not going to happen. Without the relationship, there is not going to be trust, and without trust, you can't expect any kind of change.

Participants also explained that for many men, there is an absence of healthy, intimate, trusting male relationships in their lives. By creating engagement strategies that revolve around building healthy peer relationships among men, we are “fulfill[ing] a core need that was there to begin with.”

This is congruent with Indigenous and ethnocultural communities who share values of relationship, community, and collectivism, and, according to many interviewed, these values should be leveraged as part of the work to engage men. One participant stated:

There is an impulse we can work with to contribute, to be a strong member of our communities. I work a lot with collectivist men for whom their role is... their sense of masculinity comes from being part of the community rather than standing up as an individual.

Participants made clear that they believed, based on their personal experiences as profeminist men and their professional experiences working to engage and mobilize other men, that strategies that take a strength-based approach and incorporate human connection—including healthy, intimate, and trusting relationships with other men—are more effective in working with men to advance gender equality.

Theme 2: Create “Safe Spaces”. The second theme that emerged was the need to create more “safe spaces” for men. Safe spaces were described as those where men can gather and participate in dialogue without fear of judgement or shaming. In these safe spaces, men can build relationships, receive, and provide empathy and support as part of their learning process and explore masculinity and ideas about equity and inclusion in ways that spark curiosity instead of triggering a threat response. One participant explained:

I think there [are] a lot of millennial men, like myself and our peers, who might have questions but... no space to go and unpack those kinds of things... we are trying to create those spaces and really have those conversations around what it means to quote/unquote “be a man” in a really complicated and nuanced way, versus being a man equals perpetrating sexual violence.

The need for safe spaces was also highlighted for adolescent boys and young men. Many participants who work with these populations believed they are “hungry” for such spaces and want to talk about their emotional lives and issues related to gender and relationships. One participant stated:

Teen boys are not necessarily thinking about gender equality, and yet when we start those conversations, they are very hungry to have the conversations. They want to be having different kinds of relationships with each other, with other men and boys, and they want to talk about these topics.

This theme is consistent with notions of collectivism and relationship among several diverse participants. One Indigenous participant elaborated:

In the Indigenous community, there is an instinct to group together, an instinct for family, for community, for companionship, for, you know, a communal experience... it feels good to know you are not alone, it feels good to make connections and bond with the other men.

A number of those interviewed commented on how there are so few constructive spaces for men to gather that do not reinforce gender norms and toxic masculinity, like that of sports clubs and fraternities. These safe spaces, in contrast, would help men foster healthy, positive relationships with other men while exploring masculinity, gender, and ways to prevent violence and advance gender equality.

Theme 3: Support More Male Gender Equality Leaders to Mentor Other Men and Boys. The third theme on engaging men centered on men’s gender equality leadership and mentorship. Many participants discussed the need for more diverse and visible male leadership in the movement toward gender equality. Several reasoned that men and adolescent boys need to see other men working to advance gender equality and anti-violence work so that others may follow. This, too, is another aspect of meeting men where they are at. Some spoke about the work of public figures, such as athletes using their platform to advance gender equality in public ways. Others emphasized leadership at the organizational or

community levels, such as with business leaders, local politicians, and other community leaders. Indigenous participants underscored the importance of leadership from Chiefs and Elders of Indigenous communities stating, “More and more Elders are coming around. Again, a lot of it is led by female Elders, but there are a number of male Elders [coming forward].” Respondents recognized some of the challenges this entails due to intergenerational trauma from colonization yet stressed how vital it is for Elders to share stories and teachings with the younger generation. One participant explained:

I am [name of Indigenous Nation removed for confidentiality] and we have many teachings on equality and respect for women... and there are many other teachings in our culture that promote equality, and the value and respect that is required of boys and men to treat women and girls with respect, and that they are our equal; they are not less than us, and they are not greater than us.

Leadership in the workplace was another related subtheme. For participants who worked in large government or paramilitary systems, gender equality championing by high-ranking or senior officials was seen as essential for system change. In a similar vein, participants stated that leaders and directors of other types of workplaces have an important role to play in role-modeling gender-responsive workplace change. One participant said: “Providing gender [equality] training for people in positions of power is a no-brainer investment, and it should almost be mandatory... it should be expected that anyone at a director level would have this.” Others added that leaders need to develop systems and processes that are informed by a gender-based, equity, and inclusion analysis and set expectations, promotions, and incentives for staff to uphold these practices.

About half of the participants talked about the value of adult male mentorship for boys and young men. Having male adults role model gender equality and demonstrate healthy and caring versions of masculinity that actively oppose violence “would just change the perception, especially for boys, seeing a bunch of men operating in a good, kind, loving way.” One participant noted that adolescence is a difficult time for young boys with relationships, social norms, and changing hormones and, as such, is a critical time for mentorship from men.

Mentorship was reinforced by men from ethnocultural communities. One participant talked about the value of mentorship within his community:

The Muslim men, so many men from my own community whom I could relate to, who looked a lot like me, who were family men, who were men that had complex, mature relationships with women, like in their professional life and their personal life who could then talk to us [as young people].

Having male mentors from one’s own community (geographic, religious, etc.) was viewed as an important strategy for working with diverse boys and young men.

Theme 4: Leverage Settings and Life Transition Periods Specific to Men and Boys. The fourth theme identified was targeting or leveraging settings where men are already

congregating and have relationships, as well as during key periods of life transition. Settings identified included sports teams, fraternities, workplaces, and religious or cultural gatherings for men. About half of the participants also identified the school setting as the best place for gender equality work with adolescent boys and young men. Participants explained that school environments provide access to a diverse group of boys and young men; something that may be difficult in other environments. Several felt that adolescent boys and young men are likely “more open to this stuff” in school settings because they are already having “more conversations about consent and respect that are really critical [and are] part of curriculum.” Furthermore, several healthy masculinity and relationship programs have been developed for boys and young men in Canadian educational settings; therefore, some felt there is a lot of practice to draw from.

Puberty and adolescence were identified by participants as one of the key life transitions where gender equality efforts should target. A few participants noted that this is a time when bodies are changing, and youth are navigating dating relationships and facing increasingly cemented gender role expectations. It is also when ideas about harmful notions of masculinity, misogyny, and sexism are increasingly acted upon. Engagement strategies that target this critical period of development were seen by many as an opportunity to unpack and change harmful social norms.

The next most common transition period named in the interviews was fatherhood. Several participants elaborated on the importance of fatherhood as an entry point to working with men on gender equality, with one quote reflecting the intersection between fatherhood and violence against Indigenous women:

As fathers, we have an interest in raising new generations of healthy kids, and we have an interest in ensuring our sons don't end up using violence or engaging in inequitable ways towards their partners, and that our daughters grow up to live in healthy equal relationships. I have visibly Indigenous daughters and the propensity of the current society is to harm them and marginalize them just because they are visibly Indigenous women, so I am deeply motivated to try and create as much of a seismic shift as possible.

Theme 5: Embed a Feminist and Intersectional Approach That Respects Multiple Worldviews. Embedding a feminist and intersectional approach while respecting multiple worldviews and experiences was the final theme identified through analysis. Most participants referenced the importance of grounding the work in feminism and intersectionality: “I think in engaging men... really do it from an intersectional, feminist approach, and make sure that we are doing the feminist work.”

Indigenous participants talked about the importance of an intersectional lens in gender equality and how concepts of male privilege, which are often based on the realities of White, settler men, are not as relatable due to their own experiences of racism, oppression, and colonization: “It is challenging for them... in one way, they are very much oppressors, but in other ways they are very much oppressed. And this is kind of a difficult thing, I think, for a lot of Indigenous men to wrap their head around.” Intersectionality offers a lens for men to examine their own experiences with privilege

and oppression and, in doing so, opens avenues for men to cultivate empathy and find solidarity with women and marginalized populations whose experiences they can relate to.

Along similar lines, participants noted that gender equality work needs to recognize that men are widely diverse, with multiple experiences, worldviews, and experiences. Many participants observed dominant leadership approaches within the field of engaging men currently reflect a more White-dominated and Westernized set of perspectives. Diverse male populations and worldviews need to be better integrated into engagement practice. This was poignantly stated by one participant: "If you just come at it with a Western epistemology, it is not going to reach everyone. I think you need to present multiple worldviews, and you need to create space for multiple worldviews." For ethnocultural participants, this was an important point as much of the current practice in Canada is White dominated.

Discussion

Findings from this Canadian study support much of what is known internationally on engaging men and boys in gender equality work and suggest that Canadian men have similar perspectives to those in other geographical contexts (Alcalde, 2014; Casey, 2010; Coulter, 2003; Messner et al., 2015; Peretz, 2017; Piccigallo et al., 2012). The strongest finding, the need to meet men where they are at, reinforces the priority for work in Canada to evolve to include new and more relatable narratives and approaches that invite men in and keep them engaged and mobilized to contribute actively to this work. This is done through a relationship, strength-based and solution-focused approach that includes caring and positive narratives during engagement and thoughtfully framed messaging focusing on relatability with the men being targeted. Empathetic and supportive responses along with building trusting and caring relationships while fostering connections between men are important aspects needed to advance the work.

Findings from this study support existing literature in terms of practice theory and evidence. For example, research has shown the importance of recognizing and working with men where they are at along the change continuum (Funk, 2005/2006). Crooks et al. (2007) have cautioned that sometimes "there is a sense that unless [men] have a sophisticated understanding of power and control dynamics and gender inequality, they will not be able to make a meaningful contribution" (p. 223). Casey (2010) has stated that strategies should acknowledge the need for men "to personally relate to anti-violence efforts or conversations and to build on the knowledge and attitudes they hold at the moment they are engaged" (p. 274). This involves tailoring conversations to where men are at by asking questions, assessing attitudes and beliefs, and exploring topics that resonate with men from a place of curiosity instead of judgement, and doing so alongside skills-building efforts geared toward developing communication skills and emotional intelligence (Dozois & Wells, 2020).

Research has also found approaches that engage men as potential or inevitable perpetrators foment shame, blame, and judgement and do little to actually positively transform men. For one, placing blame for violence at the feet of men alone obscures the

urgent need to address the broader structural drivers that drive violence. Poverty, food insecurity, childhood experiences of abuse (including witnessing violence), and household dysfunction (including substance and/or alcohol abuse or incarceration of a family member) are key drivers of men's perpetration of violence (Gibbs et al., 2020; Heilman & Barker, 2018; Pulerwitz et al., 2022). Men who have experienced adverse events (i.e., traumatic experiences) are much more likely to perpetuate violence as well as experience negative health outcomes, with more events associated with more violence and worse outcomes (Pulerwitz et al., 2022).

Centering one's approach on individual blame and shame is likely to be met with backlash and is often ineffective in sustainably and positively changing behavior (Casey, 2010; Crooks et al., 2007; Leach & Cidam, 2015; Loschiavo et al., 2007; Nielson & Kepinski, 2020). Like the findings in our study, researchers have instead advocated strategies that invite men in, using a strength-based, solution-focused, positive approach that take as its point of departure that men are cobeneficiaries in gender equality (Casey et al., 2016; Casey & Smith, 2010; Flood & Greig, 2021). Strength-based responses assume men want to be part of the solution, have important strengths and skills to contribute, and have a vested stake in working to advance gender equality (Carlson et al., 2015; Casey & Smith, 2010). They are also much better aligned with the recognition that trauma is almost always behind the perpetuation of violence and that efforts must center on creating the conditions for men to meaningfully contribute, instead of assuming they are incapable of change. Positive and affirming messaging has also been found to be a key feature of effective programing (Barker et al., 2007).

Despite what is known in the literature about successfully engaging men, there are many women-identified feminist individuals and organizations in the anti-violence movement in Canada who are hesitant—and at times actively resistant—to working with men. For those with past experiences of being harmed, brutalized, betrayed by men, and/or who have understandable frustration with persistent misogyny and gender inequality, the work of meeting men where they are at and helping them develop their own vested interest is a heavy burden and one that comes with a great deal of emotional labor (Giridharadas, 2022). For some, this is too big an ask and understandably so. There certainly are tensions and inherent issues with engaging men toward violence prevention and gender equality, including that some men may perpetuate harm and inequalities through intentional or unintentional actions while engaged in this work. These issues are real and important. And, they also risk enclosing this work in ways that do its own harm, including creating dangerous opportunities for more nefarious groups and perspectives to make meaning out of the real and perceived grievances of many men and boys. Our research has highlighted the ways in which men from diverse backgrounds are often among those excluded and the compounding harm done when there are few positive male role models supported and visible in these communities. While recognizing this is not the work for everyone, there is great need for those who are willing and able to hold and create space for the inevitable mistakes that come with getting people (including men) onboard for transformational positive change. For example, there is a growing body of voices, led primarily by Black and

Brown community activists, who are voicing concern over the increasingly divisive way that social change is engaged with (Brown, 2020; Giridharadas, 2022).

Importantly, the tendency to blame, punish, and dismiss men also flows from the broader conceptual framework of carceral feminism, which relies on punitive measures, surveillance, and prosecution to address male-perpetrated violence (Bernstein, 2012). The approaches promoted through carceral feminism have been shown to be ineffective both in reducing violence and addressing the needs of survivors (Peacock, 2022). Furthermore, the overly narrow focus on criminalizing gender violence, as opposed to seeing it as a symptom of broader social and political ills, has proven devastating to racialized and Indigenous communities who are more likely to be targeted and disproportionately punished within the criminal legal system (Goodmark, 2012; Kim, 2018).

Indeed, there is growing recognition that the anti-violence feminist movement is “in the midst of a painful reckoning with the collateral damage” (Carpenter, 2020, para. 6) because of the combined legacy of carceral feminism and an overreliance on “cancel culture” and calling out. There is hope that a shift is happening, led primarily by women, Indigenous, nonbinary, and trans people of color who are calling for practices that invite people in (Brown, 2020) and alternative forms of addressing and preventing harm, including restorative and transformative justice approaches, which have their roots in Black and Indigenous traditions existing outside the legal system (Kim, 2018; Whynacht, 2021). Participants of our study reflect this sentiment in their extensive discussions about the ongoing need to shift from the “men-as-perpetrator who must be punished” frame in violence prevention and broader gender equality work. They highlight the need to move from shame- and blame-focused language to an approach that invites men in and is grounded in relationship and compassion and the belief that change is possible. This work underscores a call to the Canadian feminist anti-violence movement to shift our approach in order to attract, motivate, mobilize, and retain more men in our gender equality efforts.

Another critique seen in the literature and is reflected in our findings involves intersectionality. As previously stated, the experience of masculinity and related behaviors are influenced by intersecting social locations such as race, class, and sexuality (Casey et al., 2016; Peretz, 2017). The gender transformative approach, the current known best practice in engaging men, is largely influenced by second-wave feminism and tends to overemphasize gender at the expense of intersectional masculine identities (Dworkin et al., 2015). In our study, Indigenous and racialized participants discuss how difficult it is for men in their communities to examine men’s power and privilege when they, themselves, face oppression and racialized violence. Scholars have problematized generalizing men’s privilege in engagement approaches since diverse men experience oppression and disempowerment along other intersecting social locations (Alcalde, 2014). Further, research suggests that connecting gender inequality to racial or other types of inequality is an important pathway to engagement and a meaningful way to build empathy among men toward women and other marginalized groups (Alcalde, 2014; Dworkin & Barker, 2019; Peretz, 2017).

Concern with the heteronormativity of gender transformative approaches has also been noted in the literature (Brush & Miller, 2019; Dworkin et al., 2015). Bullying, particularly in the form of homophobia and transphobia, are common “gender policing” tools used to intimidate men and boys and demonstrate the consequences and social costs of stepping out of the restrictive “man box” (Barker et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2020). More efforts to address and prevent gender policing by all genders are needed in current gender transformative programming (Brush & Miller, 2019). This underpins the need to include intersectional approaches that examine inequalities and diverse experiences among men (Dworkin & Barker, 2019; Peacock & Barker, 2014).

In our study, intersectionality and attention to diversity are important themes advanced by participants. Creating space to examine intersectional perspectives that influence men’s experiences with power, privilege, and oppression is needed in what has traditionally been a White, heteronormative, and Western-centric approach in Canada. In the scholarship, many articles have discussed the importance of working with diverse men (Casey et al., 2016; Peacock & Barker, 2014), yet it remains an understudied area (Alcalde, 2014; Casey et al., 2016; Hurtado & Sinha, 2008; Jewkes et al., 2015; Peretz, 2017). Applying intersectionality to engagement approaches is strongly supported in the literature as a way to increase diverse men’s engagement and enhance program effectiveness (Casey et al., 2016; Dworkin et al., 2015; Flood, 2019; Messner et al., 2015; Peacock & Barker, 2014; Peretz, 2017).

Conclusion

Preventing gender-based violence and advancing gender equality and positive social change across sectors are inextricably linked, but much of this work is siloed in funding and action. This is a call to integrate them. In spite of this fragmentation, Canada is fortunate to have some thoughtful, strategic, and caring profeminist male leaders who are committed to advancing local and national gender equality efforts. Still, and as evidenced in our study, the field remains small and is led predominantly by White, cisgender men—realities that need to shift if we want catalytic, long-term change to occur.

There are methodological limitations to our study that must be considered alongside our findings. Although we made a concerted effort to have a diverse sample of Canadian men, just over half of the sample identified as White. One of the likely reasons for this is the disproportionately privileged positions, status, and access to leadership opportunities White men have in comparison to Indigenous and equity-deserving men. We were also reminded by one of our Indigenous participants that our recruitment strategy itself had limitations, as it relied primarily on email to connect with potential participants, inadvertently excluding those who may prefer making connections and building trust through more relational-based approaches. Moreover, the use of the term “profeminism” in the recruitment email may have screened out some men doing great work who do not identify as such and/or who are uncomfortable with this term. Lastly, we relied heavily on our large national

network of feminist advocates and organizations to help us recruit. If men were not directly connected with such organizations, they may not have been identified.

Despite these, our study reveals important learning that can inform future gender equality work in Canada. The feminist sector must contend with our colonial history and harms against Indigenous people, while integrating intersectionality and racial justice work and perspectives into gender transformative work with men. Decolonizing ourselves, along with cultivating a clear intersectional approach at every level of work with and alongside men, will be critical to advancing gender equality in the Canadian context.

There are other undeniable challenges in moving this work forward. In our experience, mobilizing groups of socially privileged individuals in ways that keep them invested in dismantling systems from which they benefit is rife with tensions. We have found that focusing on ways that men are also harmed by patriarchy and how they are co-beneficiaries in dismantling systems of oppression and advancing equality resonates. Seeing privileged members of society as vulnerable and flawed is challenging for many. This is not made easier by the fact that men who do gender equality work are often more consistently recognized and even compensated more than comparable work done by their female counterparts (Macomber, 2018). This must change. Additionally, many men have perpetrated harm, either intentionally or unintentionally, and important questions remain in how best to navigate this. What is the tolerance for working with men that have harmed, grown, and changed? When has someone been held accountable, and what does it mean to be held accountable? And by whom?

As work continues alongside these important and ongoing conversations, this research highlights the need to shift our approach in engaging men and boys in gender equality work in Canada. As the first Canadian national qualitative study, our work contributes to the small but growing evidence base that moves beyond the “why” for engaging men and boys in gender equality and provides key elements of the “how.” To catalyze these findings, investment in more research and evidence-based practice is needed to better understand what actually works to engage and sustain men in gender equality efforts such that positive and lasting change in behaviors, norms, and systems is achieved. We call on the feminist movement in Canada to join us in working through the tensions in this work. It is only through dialogue, relationship, engagement, and compassionate accountability that we will be able to make true social change in achieving gender equality.

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