Promoting Male Responsibility
Towards Greater Gender Equality
Lessons Learned

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INTRODUCTION

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Between November 2004 and April 2008, HealthBridge implemented the program *Promoting Male Responsibility towards Greater Gender Equality*. Within the context of this program, the term “gender equality” was used to indicate a more equitable division of responsibilities between men and women, to the benefit of both.

This program, partially funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), sought to identify ways to encourage positive male involvement in and responsibility for family matters, specifically related to reproductive and sexual health, but also to parenting, economic decision-making, and household work. A parallel goal was to increase men’s involvement in efforts to reduce violence against women. The work focused on the use of positive messages in both its activities and in media, to depict what is expected or desired from men, rather than negative images which may in fact normalize or even promote undesirable behaviour.

HealthBridge began the program in three countries: Bangladesh, India, and Vietnam. In Bangladesh, HealthBridge worked with Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB Trust), in India with the Mission for Population Control (MPC) and with Evangelical Social Action Forum (ESAF), and in Vietnam with the local HealthBridge office. In late 2006, new components were added in Nepal and Pakistan. The different contexts and foci in each country led to different sets of activities and lessons learned; however, each component contributed to a comprehensive larger program that addresses HealthBridge’s niche in gender: engaging men and valuing women.

In sharing key lessons that HealthBridge and partners learned during the implementation of the work, this report is meant to provide a fresh perspective on gender issues and to encourage people to consider new approaches to increasing gender equality.
Gender and gender equality are terms which are often—perhaps sometimes even deliberately—misunderstood. The term “gender” is often assumed to mean “women”, such that gender-based programming is expected to exclusively address women’s issues. Likewise, the term “gender equality” has sometimes been viewed as meaning the elimination of all distinctions between the sexes, whereby both men and women will have exactly the same rights and obligations and face the same expectations. In the words of a Vietnamese man who participated in a research study conducted through the program, gender equality means that “women will become as obsessed about work [as men] and will neglect their husbands and children in their single-minded career drives.”

These misunderstandings are contrary to the nature and intent of gender-focused work. In reality, “gender” refers to the socially-construed, as opposed to biological, differences between men and women. While it is important to address women’s issues where such issues have long been ignored and where women are frequently oppressed, gender programming should address stereotypes and cultural perceptions about both sexes—thus affecting men as well as women. For example, “gender in media” could address negative portrayals of both sexes, not just women; “gender in agriculture” could look at more rational divisions of labour, not simply the inclusion of women.

Similarly, “gender equality” refers not to the elimination of all differences between the sexes, but rather to the attempt to ensure that people of both sexes experience equal opportunities. Thus, gender equality programming should look at access to education, jobs, and health care, as well as inheritance of land, safety from violence, representation in court, and so on. After all, diversity makes the world
a richer place—but not when only one or a few groups in society control all the opportunities and relegate others to positions of subordination. While any specific society may never realize full gender equality, the closer a society moves to that ideal, the better the chance that all its members will benefit from the multiple advantages that accrue from women’s greater participation in, and thus contribution to, family, society, and the nation.

Worldwide, men face inordinate burdens in terms of earning income and of being the key or sole decision-maker in the home and in politics, often with little support from women. Where women are given the opportunity to assume more of these burdens, the burden on men declines proportionally. Similarly, children of educated and “empowered” mothers are more likely to thrive in terms of education, health, and personal development.

Like so much of what is valuable in life, gender equality—or any significant strides towards it—is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Fortunately, it is not necessary to wait until gender equality is achieved—if it ever is—to benefit from the attempt to achieve it. Working towards a more gender-equal world will bring many benefits along the way, frustrating though the work may sometimes seem. This report notes the achievements that HealthBridge and its partners realized through the implementation of this program and highlights the lessons that were learned in making a small contribution to the achievement of gender equality.

**Organization of this report and issues covered**

This report is divided into two sections: “Issues” and “Methods”. The section on issues focuses on specific areas of work (gender stereotypes, reproductive and sexual health, violence and economics, transport, ecosanitation, recreation, and the economy). A few of these issues have rarely been addressed as gender issues *per se*. Lessons learned under “Issues” address what HealthBridge and its partners learned in attempting to address these specific issues—and why we chose to do so. The section on methods describes what was learned, across issues, through methods such as advocacy (direct and via media), networking, capacity building, and research.
PART ONE: ISSUES

A number of themes and issues emerged in our gender-related work, some of which are touched on in this section. By no means a comprehensive description of all major gender issues, this section sets out to illustrate the various gender issues with which HealthBridge and its partners have worked, and some of the lessons learned over the course of that work. Many of the issues are inter-related, and addressing several issues simultaneously led to an interesting cross-fertilization of ideas. In any case, a broad definition of gender issues beyond those traditionally defined as such, helps to address more of the issues of inequality faced by women and men as they struggle to achieve a decent quality of life and reasonably harmonious relationships.

Because gender affects virtually every arena of life, it may seem random as to what is and is not included under gender issues. The report is not meant to be an extensive review of all important gender issues, but rather to share lessons from the existing work of HealthBridge and key partners in addressing gender across a range of fields. Other areas in which HealthBridge is addressing gender—such as in HIV/AIDS and tobacco control—are not included, as the gender aspect of those issues have been addressed elsewhere.
Gender stereotypes

From infancy through old age, people are subjected to continual reinforcement of gender stereotypes—what it means to be a boy or girl, man or woman—based not on biological but rather on cultural differences between the sexes. These stereotypes affect all areas of our lives, are often accepted without question, and may cause tremendous, albeit unintentional, harm.

One key example of such a norm starts with the assumption that girls are of little value to their families; this is reinforced by the common practice of men marrying “in” and women “out” (that is, men living with their families after marriage, while women leave theirs to move in with their in-laws). As a result, parents may consider investments in a daughter’s health or education “wasteful”, as she will simply move out after marriage.

Similarly, building upon the same stereotype that women are of little value, or that women are “incapable” of understanding economic issues, men may control their wives’ earnings. That practice reduces women’s economic power and freedom and increases women’s dependence on men. When women work without pay for their husband’s income-earning enterprise (be it a farm, a shop, or a laundry), their unpaid contributions are often considered to have no value, while the man’s entire earnings are considered his property. Such practices both stem from a belief that women’s work is of little or no value, and contribute to that belief.

In Bangladesh and India, the practice of the bride’s family paying a hefty dowry to the husband (to “take her off her family’s hands”, because she is seen as contributing little or nothing of importance to her natal family) contributes to violence and even murder. Men can use violence against their wives to extort more money from her family, often wrongly believing that the family is able but reluctant to pay. By
murdering their wives and remarrying, men can collect another dowry. Where police and governments turn a blind eye to the practice, devastating levels of violence can become commonplace. Men as well as women, boys as well as girls, are negatively affected by these norms and cultural beliefs. Examples of harm to men caused in part by beliefs that men should be “macho”, strong, and brave include:

- male violence (from school bullying on up through gangs and warfare);
- high rates of drug use and alcoholism in some cultures;
- unequal burdens in terms of income earning;
- responsibility for the family’s economic well-being; and
- responsibility for major decision-making.

Economic and other stresses lead to higher rates of depression and suicide among men in times of economic downfall, as well as greater stress-related disorders such as hypertension, heart attack, and stroke even in “normal” times. Psychological harm to men and boys from gender stereotypes takes many forms. Many men are unable to show their true selves because of fear or ridicule. In some cultures, display of affection among men is considered a sign of homosexuality, while such physical displays are widely accepted for women.

Gentle, caring men or men who help their wives with housework (as revealed in the Vietnam research on this topic) may be labelled effeminate. Those with little desire to do so may drink, smoke, and even go to brothels in order to “fit in”, while all that may be demanded of women is a soft voice and feminine appearance—demeaning, to be sure, but not typically as harmful as traditional male behaviours.

In a more gender-equitable world, the fact of being born male or female would carry far less significance than it does currently. The issue of sex-selective abortions would not arise, nor that of discriminatory feeding and other practices that make it more likely for female than male infants and children to die. Girls would have the same opportunity to attend school as boys and would be treated by their parents, teachers, and peers in the same way as their male counterparts. From youth onwards, men and women would find similar job opportunities with the same pay; both would benefit from a range of policies (medical, leave, child care) that support the dual role of both sexes as income earners and carers of families. While differences between the sexes are inevitable, natural, and desirable, many of the negative consequences of those differences, resulting from cultural perceptions of gender, would disappear.

Changing perceptions of the sexes from current (often negative) gender stereotypes to more accepting, less rigid, and more positive concepts is no easy task. HealthBridge’s gender program attempted to bring these issues to the attention of the public, the media, other NGOs, and policymakers in order to raise awareness of the problems and generate the will to change.
Lessons learned related to gender stereotypes:

It is helpful to remember that gender equality involves men as well as women and that antagonizing men is unlikely to lead to significant progress towards gender equality. In order to attain positive involvement of men, we need to encourage, not attack, them. That is, rather than portraying women as victims and men as perpetrators of negative acts, it is important to remember the positive contributions that many men make and the positive role they often play within the family, and to model positive, rather than criticizing negative, behaviour.

Some of the people and organizations working on gender issues accept gender stereotypes as cultural absolutes that cannot be changed. Yet culture obviously is very fluid and does change frequently; witness the rapid influx and acceptance of television, cars, computers, mobile phones, and so on into otherwise “traditional” cultures, and the significant changes those inventions have brought. Rather than accept gender stereotypes as inevitable or feel that it is culturally insensitive to change them, we should all be aware of the harms caused by many of those stereotypes and work together to achieve positive change. We have discovered through our work that many of those working on gender issues are open to change as long as they are approached in a friendly, cooperative (non-aggressive) way.

Gender and reproductive and sexual health
Reproductive and sexual health (RSH) programs typically target women. This occurs for a number of reasons, including the fact that it is women who get pregnant and are thus more motivated to use contraception. Whether as a result of this fact or due to biology, most contraceptives currently available are only for use by women. In addition, women are generally “easier to reach” than men; that is, more likely to come to meetings or clinics. But women also tend to have far less decision-making power in the family, even with regards to their own health. Therefore, women’s desire to practice family planning may not actually result in their safety from unwanted pregnancy or disease.

The emphasis placed on reaching women through RSH services is apparent in many countries, as seen from contraceptive usage rates among women versus men. More women typically are sterilized than men, even though vasectomies are safer and less intrusive than tubal ligation. Meanwhile condoms, despite their effectiveness in preventing HIV, and the fact that they are safer, more affordable, and less likely to cause side effects than contraceptive methods designed for women, are generally less commonly used for contraception than the Pill or IUD.1

The extent to which most women are able to enjoy reproductive and sexual health and a satisfying sexuality depends in large part on men. Further, men too are subject to reproductive and sexual problems, few of which are regularly addressed. It thus makes sense to address and include men as well as women in RSH programs and service delivery.

RSH is of course about more than contraception. Sexual health involves hygiene and, more broadly defined, can include enjoyment of a healthy sexuality. Sexuality is itself a complex topic and often difficult to address given conservative views which consider open discussions of sexuality “obscene”. This is unfortunate, as sexuality plays such an important role in people’s lives and more open discussions of it could contribute to greater closeness, intimacy, and mutual enjoyment between spouses. This particular issue was addressed only in the Vietnam component of the project.

Given the significant benefit that would accrue to both sexes if men increased their responsibility for avoiding disease and unwanted pregnancy, HealthBridge’s work in India and Vietnam focused on outreach to men. The key goal of the India program was to address the unmet demand for male contraception by improving access to and quality of male-focused reproductive health care education and services through advocacy and networking. The main success was the increased availability and use of condoms within a conservative slum. The India program also looked at motivating men to get vasectomies, but weaknesses in government services meant that motivation alone was insufficient to ensure quality service. As a result, the project team also worked with local government officials to encourage improvements in service delivery for men; as a result, the government was convinced them to hire male extension workers and to revamp vasectomy services.

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1 While it is true that the failure rate for condoms is much higher than for most female methods, most of the failure is among a minority of users, while most users of condoms are able to use them safely. Meanwhile, asking couples to use two methods (condoms to prevent disease and another method to prevent pregnancy) seems impractical, unlikely to occur (most couples have enough trouble using one method), and to be a waste of resources, given that many of those at risk of HIV do not have access to condoms.
Specifically, approaches in India included the following:

- Working with a local community to increase awareness of the need for and means of male contraception and the challenges faced by women related to reproductive and sexual health and child health.

- Raising community awareness by publishing pamphlets, making banners, and giving presentations about reproductive health and contraception and distributing/displaying them at large gatherings of people.

- Engaging local government officials to get their commitment to increase the availability of contraceptives through Primary Health Centres; ESAF also worked to develop relationships with local NGOs and professional associations involved in gender and reproductive health work and produced a video to increase public awareness about the role of men in reproductive health.

- Forming men’s and women’s core groups for increasing awareness of “positive male involvement” in families through group discussion, counselling, and video and poster shows, etc. The core groups also created and managed a community-based condom bank.

- Engaging NGOs and quasi-government organisations, doctors, and youth by organizing a number of programs on gender issues.

Key results of the work in India included core group meetings, leading some men to start to help with household chores, some to consider vasectomies and condoms as family planning options, and more men to become involved in reproductive health discussions and services. The program also succeeded in convincing local government to assign some men as outreach health workers in order to more easily reach and motivate men to take responsibility in RSH.

In Vietnam as well as India, an effort was made to motivate men to use condoms and get vasectomies, mainly through the development and use of IEC materials about men’s roles in reproductive and sexual health and the family. The messages were developed based on the results of research that identified what men (and women) thought about what men’s roles were and should be. The messages were disseminated via television, radio, and newspaper, as well as through leaflets, drama and loudspeakers (see section on media).
In addition, the Vietnam program worked to build the capacity of local partners to design and host training sessions on gender issues, including male involvement in reproductive and sexual health. In developing training curricula, HealthBridge Vietnam staff also sought to incorporate RSH messages into other trainings, such as on agriculture technology, and to integrate RSH issues into larger themes of gender, sexuality, communication skills in the family, women’s rights, gender equality law, and the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

**Lessons learned related to gender and reproductive and sexual health:**

- Low condoms usage rates in some countries or communities may have less to do with culture than expected, and may thus be relatively easy to address. For instance, the usual source of condoms may be inappropriate (e.g. wrong hours, location, or unfriendly attitude of staff).\(^2\) Simply by establishing a “condom bank” in a slum community in India, condoms became locally available at convenient times and locations, making their use far more likely despite existing conservative attitudes.

- While addressing sexuality is a sensitive and difficult matter, it may not be as difficult as many believe. Research in Vietnam confirmed that many people are eager to discuss the intimate details of their relations and that greater communication could lead to happier marriages. Following that research, the Vietnam program created a manual for use by those working at the community level to address RSH which includes activities to encourage open discussion of sexual issues between husbands and wives.

- Despite cultural norms for men’s sexual behaviour, many men are in fact willing and able to participate more fully in RSH issues such as family planning. What has been lacking for these men is a “comfort zone” within which they are given the opportunity to do so. That is, the main issue preventing men from assuming more responsibility for their and their partner’s RSH may not be mainly cultural or personal, but simply the lack of encouraging and enabling environments.

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\(^2\) Research in the United States by young people indicated that in many pharmacies, condoms are so placed that it is necessary to ask for them, rather than simply taking them to the counter. While the reason is obviously to avoid theft, the result is that many shy young people avoid purchasing condoms.
While men are more often the victims of some forms of violence than women (for instance, homicide and “arbitrary” imprisonment, such as for politics or drug possession), men are often the greatest perpetrators of violence in the family. WBB’s program in Bangladesh looked specifically at the issue of male violence against their wives. In addition to the emotional harm caused, violence is also a serious health issue and can represent major costs to governments in terms of health care, reduced productivity, and psychological problems.

When attempting to understand violence, the key issue is not what causes a man, at any given moment, to be violent towards his wife, but rather why men (and women) find it acceptable for men to beat their wives. It is no surprise that men get angry with their wives, and vice versa. Anger itself is probably unavoidable; the issue is how people respond to that anger or how they act on it. Some men are able to control their anger, or at least avoid letting anger result in violent actions against others.

Studying such positive deviance (those who differ from the norm in a positive way) could be enormously valuable here. Unfortunately, given the complexity of the issues—identifying men who are not violent and trying to understand how they differ from men who are—it was not possible to utilize this approach. Nevertheless, it would be enormously useful to investigate how men who don’t beat their wives

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3 Violence takes many forms, including physical, emotional, and sexual. While all forms of violence are harmful, the program in Bangladesh only explicitly addressed physical violence; however, the assumption was that in addressing a root cause of violence, all forms would eventually decline.

4 The term “beat” is used throughout to refer to various forms of physical violence against women.

5 Research indicates that about 50% of women in Bangladesh are beaten by their husbands.
deal with their anger and the other negative feelings that can lead to abuse. What WBB’s research did touch upon was the respectful way some men talked about their wives, treating the possibility of violence with horror and contempt, because they so highly valued their wives. The key issue that emerged through the research (of men failing to value their wives and therefore believing it to be acceptable to be violent towards them), thus became the key theme for intervention. The issue then arises—how do you demonstrate the value of a person?

Some effort has been made by others to draw attention to women’s worth. In Bangladesh, for example, posters show a many-armed woman engaged in several tasks or depict women cooking, cleaning, working in the fields, caring for children and the elderly— with slogans to the effect of, “Who says women don’t work?” As valuable as such posters are, they fail to draw significant attention to the core issue. Further, these slogans can be answered with a simple “so what?” Sure, women keep themselves busy—what of it?

The work commonly performed by women is typically considered unskilled in the same sense that many people may consider farm work as “unskilled”, and performed by the “uneducated”; the accumulation of knowledge and experience necessary for success are often “invisible” and thus discounted. Like farm work, household work involves no formal education and thus may be considered unskilled and thus of little or no value or significance.

By placing a monetary value on the work, such perceptions can be overcome.

In one sense, as discussed in the section on women and the economy below, any effort to demonstrate the value of a person in economic terms is an insult, as the very nature of humanity supersedes and overshadows the value of money. Yet by failing to do so, people may be viewed as worthless, interchangeable, and eminently replaceable. The safest compromise may be to establish a “reasonable”, context-specific value for the work done by women without pay, with the understanding that much of the value of any woman—any individual—lies outside the sphere of economics. But monetary terms do gain attention and do give shape and significance to the issue of women’s work, and hence to women themselves being undervalued; thus monetary calculations cannot be dismissed altogether. This is particularly true given that men’s contributions typically are phrased in fiscal terms.

Will highlighting the value of women’s unpaid work—the work typically taken for granted—lead men to value their wives more and to behave less violently towards them? It is far too early to say for certain, but there is logic to the theory, which also has the advantage of being a positive rather than a punitive approach. (People should of course be punished for their misdeeds, but the extent to which punishment succeeds at reducing violence of any kind seems questionable at best.) Further, this approach has the advantage of

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6 While farm work conducted by men is counted towards national income, it is difficult to imagine farmers receiving the same respect in society as “educated and skilled professionals” such as lawyers, doctors, or even successful businessmen. As with housewives, they perform the most necessary work for survival, and receive very little respect or other reward for it.

7 This problem takes a singular form when looking at the human toll of various diseases or disasters. One system is to calculate loss of earnings, based on what each person may reasonably have been expected to earn in her or his lifetime. Thus an American is valued at an exorbitantly higher rate than an African, and problems in America are considered more damaging than those in Africa.
potentially increasing women’s self-confidence and sense of self-worth, which may itself contribute to reductions in violence. This subject is addressed in more detail in the section below on women and the economy.

The related issue of women’s economic rights, including inheritance rights, was addressed in Bangladesh. WBB’s research confirmed the obvious: that women earn less money than men and are far less likely than men to hold a wage-paying job. Study by WBB staff on the legal situation surrounding inheritance by women and girls revealed a complex mix of religious and national laws, with most religious laws rewarding females a far smaller inheritance than males. Meanwhile, the national law was generally overlooked in favour of religious laws. When attempting to escape an abusive situation, a women’s economic dependence on her husband is clearly a major factor that prevents success. WBB thus sought to highlight the importance of women’s inheritance rights.

8 Of course it could also go the other way, with men being more intimidated/threatened by self-confident women, and thus more likely to beat them. This does seem a potential problem when women are taught to demand their rights, without simultaneously engaging men to accept these rights.
that need to be addressed when designing awareness campaigns about violence.

Discussions about violence in Bangladesh invariably lead to the role played by women themselves, particularly in the case of violence against women where the violence may be instigated by mothers-in-law. That is, the mother-in-law may herself be violent to her son's wife or may encourage her son to behave violently towards his wife. Such behaviour needs to be understood in context and addressed appropriately. It is important to remember that women's opinions are shaped as much by cultural stereotypes as are men's, and that women's violence against other women should also be susceptible to change when appropriate programs are implemented.

**Lessons learned related to gender, violence and economics:**

- Women’s economic dependence on men, due to lower earning opportunities and lack of full inheritance rights, makes it difficult for them to escape violent situations or to stand up for themselves in violent conflicts. Therefore, two of the many approaches needed to reduce violence against women may be a) to demonstrate the socio-economic value of women and b) to lessen women’s economic dependence on men by increasing women’s rights to inheritance, property, and a decent wage. While such areas may seem more difficult to approach than promoting messages about the unacceptability of violence, they may reach closer to the core reasons behind the violence.

- In terms of messages about violence, it is important to understand how men and women view violence against women. That is, they may differentiate needless, senseless violence (such as the husband being in a drunken rage and beating his wife for no reason) from “discipline”, where the violence is used “appropriately” to teach the wife a lesson. Vague messages may be of little good if they do not take into account the way people view violence.

- Women, particularly mothers-in-law, can play a role in perpetuating violence. (For many women, the first time they assume a position of power is when their sons marry, and power is itself a necessary precondition for committing violent acts). It is important to remember that women are being socialized in the same system as men and are learning the same lessons about the low value of women and the acceptability of violence in certain situations. That is, in some sense, women and men are both victims of the socialization which teaches both sexes to accept and act on negative ideas about gender roles. Liberation of both sexes from the most oppressive gender stereotypes may be needed to escape negative views which encourage violence rather than family harmony.

- Not all men are violent; we have much to learn from those men who stand up against violence and we should recruit them to work with us. Further, violence may fruitfully be viewed as a community rather than an individual issue; communities that resist violence are more likely to harbour non-violent families. Recognizing that the positive exists, at the individual and community level, allows us to seek it out and to promote those attitudes and values that encourage non-violence.
Women and transport

A major issue facing women in South Asia is mobility. For various social and cultural reasons, women’s mobility is often quite limited. This has direct effects on the lives of women themselves and on those dependent on women, particularly children and the elderly. Women and dependents’ access to education, health care, healthy foods, recreation, and other opportunities are all limited or even non-existent when women’s mobility is hampered. We know that women’s own education improves children’s welfare and family planning; yet we may forget that children’s access to health care and education often depends on women’s mobility.

Beyond the social and cultural reasons limiting women’s mobility—and perhaps easier to address—are the physical infrastructure and policy environment that affect women’s ability to navigate their surroundings safely and comfortably. These can include whether it is safe and pleasant to walk or cycle, whether public transit options are available and perceived as safe and convenient, and whether public transit options take into account schedules other than the standard working day.

In some settings, women often face problems accessing transport due to the nature of the transport or their inability to pay the fare; these women typically walk to most destinations. For example, buses are often not women-friendly in that women may face sexual harassment on the bus and buses may not come to a complete halt at bus stops, making it difficult, especially given some cultural norms for clothing, for women to jump on or off. In some parts of the world, cycling is not considered acceptable or modest for women.
Bangladesh sticker: Rickshaws are the favourite transport of women and children

In Bangladesh, women often lack money for cycle rickshaw fares; however, even when they can afford rickshaws, which offer them convenient, safe, dependable door-to-door transport, women are affected by bans of rickshaws from many major streets. Similarly, transport options for women in Pakistan are very limited, and options that are safe and convenient are unaffordable for much of the population. Between the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the main public transport is vans, which reserve only two front seats for women while the remaining 16-18 seats are for men.

In countries where many women hold paying jobs, women often are engaged in triple roles as income earner, homemaker, and community worker. As a result, they tend to take shorter and more frequent trips. They may take their children to school, go to a shop for food, take an elderly parent to the doctor, and pick up their children. Such frequent trips are not affordable by bus, which typically requires separate fares for each segment of the trip. In addition, women often carry bulky loads and travel with children or elderly relatives, further hampering their mobility and making buses as well as pedestrian bridges difficult or impossible to use.

Despite the importance of women’s mobility, it is clear that transport planning often ignores women’s needs. Transport planning is usually oriented towards men, focused on getting men to and from formal workplaces. Women’s differing and special needs are not known and thus not included in plans, and trips made by women may, even if sub-consciously, be considered as less important than trips made by men.

Since women often travel by foot, women will be particularly affected by improvements in the pedestrian environment. Of particular concern for women is safety, the lack of which can curtail women’s
travel, particularly in the evening. To improve safety for all, planners could encourage the presence of hawkers, ensure that there is good lighting on streets, and—to prevent injuries—regularly maintain footpaths. Because it is cumbersome to climb stairs, particularly when wearing a sari or when carrying a load or an infant, it is important to provide safe street-level crossings rather than expecting that women will climb up over, or descend under, the street to cross.

Lessons learned related to women and transport:

- Women have different needs and face different problems than men in terms of mobility. The concerns and needs of women must be integrated into transport policy for the benefit of all. Women have more to gain or lose from changes in the transport system as they are more affected by bad options. Finally, women’s transport needs can and must be taken into account in transport and urban planning.

- Transport and urban planners often unconsciously plan for healthy, young, active men, and tend to forget that others exist—women, children, the elderly, the disabled, and so on. It is important to share information and ideas, reminding planners that different people have different needs.

When presenting women’s unique transport needs at a workshop in Bangladesh on transport issues, planners said that they had never considered that women had needs different from those of men where transport is concerned. It wasn’t that the planners wished to ignore those needs or felt that those of men were more important—they had simply never thought about them.

This theme of not having considered an issue but being receptive to it came up frequently in the work of HealthBridge and its partners. It seems that there is much room for innovation in gender-related work, as long as someone identifies an issue and takes the lead.

- Those who suffer from being excluded from transport planning are often not in the position to complain about their exclusion, nor do they necessarily realize how they would benefit from different planning. More outspoken women may also be
reluctant to speak about the specific problems faced by women, as they wish to show that women are not weak and that women can adapt to a system designed for men. This can mean that those most in the position to speak out on behalf of women may not do so.

The problems faced by women in transport are not simply based on physical differences or different abilities, but on the different schedules and thus travel needs of women—more frequent, shorter trips, often accompanying children or the elderly.

9 Thus a gender activist once told the author that women, rather than using cycle rickshaws, should accept harassment and ride buses in order to make buses eventually safer for women because it is wrong to say that women are somehow weak or unable to accept what men endure. The activist in question had her own car and driver.
Sanitation is, of course, not exclusively a women’s issue—but like many other gender issues, it is an area in which women are affected differently than men and for which their specific needs are often neglected. For instance, women tend to be those responsible for keeping toilets clean, for carrying water, and for looking after family members who have fallen ill. Because women and children often have less access to food than men, they are weaker and more likely to become ill as a result of poor sanitation. Women can also become victims of violence when travelling alone to an outdoor latrine at night; the fear of such attacks can hamper their quality of life and cause them to drink too little water, which in itself causes health problems. Further, women working outdoors in cities are affected by the shortage and poor condition of public toilets, which again can prevent them from drinking during the day and lead to kidney infections and other ailments.

In Bangladesh, WBB is promoting sanitation solutions\(^\text{10}\) that are sustainable, have less impact on the environment than traditional sanitation, and that while benefiting everyone, will particularly benefit women. Possibilities being promoted include:

- Composting toilets that separate waste and require no water for flushing. Such toilets have several benefits: they are easy to keep clean and free of smell and flies, they reduce household water use which in turn reduces the burden on women where they must carry water, they benefit the environment (human waste can be returned to the environment in a natural and non-polluting way, rather than being dumped often as untreated sewage into water bodies), and in urban settings reduce electricity and water bills (thereby freeing up more funds for other needs).

- Rainwater catchment systems and greywater reuse. This involves using water from drains, rather than fresh water, for flushing toilets and potentially for other uses such as watering plants. Again, such systems reduce spending on water and the burden on women for carrying water.

WBB is working with an environmental NGO to promote improved public toilets in terms of both quantity and quality. At present, there are no public toilets designated exclusively for women’s use and women often cannot use those that are frequented by men due to concerns about safety and modesty. In rural areas, WBB is partnering with SPACE, a local NGO promoting the use of separating composting toilets. Being hygienic, such toilets have the potential to reduce

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\(^{10}\) Please see [www.gtz/ecosan.de](http://www.gtz/ecosan.de). The UN has established the World Toilet Organization (WTO) and the affiliated World Toilet College: [http://www.worldtoilet.org/](http://www.worldtoilet.org/)
diarrheal disease and thus save money on medications and increase school attendance and work productivity. Because composting toilets can be built in or immediately adjacent to the home, they are also convenient and safe for women. The toilets have proven to be very popular where built but no large-scale ecosanitation program has yet been implemented in Bangladesh.

Lessons learned related to gender and ecosanitation:

- Traditional gender programs tend to focus on a certain limited set of issues, thereby neglecting many other important areas that greatly affect women’s lives or that further contribute to inequity in health and other markers between women and men. Conventional sanitation solutions have serious limitations and thus may contribute to the unequal burden on women in terms of disease and water collection.

- Ecosanitation offers an exciting opportunity to reduce burdens on women, improve sanitation, reduce disease, increase productivity, and improve environmental conditions.

Women and the economy
A visit to an academic bookstore in the United States proved instructive: in the section on gender and women’s issues, most of the books were about sexuality and reproductive issues. Virtually none touched on economics. Yet economic issues are some of the most pressing in women’s lives. Women are more likely than men to be poor and to become poor after a divorce or separation. Women earn lower wages than men for equal work and women are more likely than men to be employed in jobs that pay little, that offer few opportunities for advancement, or that fail to provide decent benefits packages. When women do obtain high-paying positions, they are more likely than men to face excessive demands in balancing work and family.

The wide range of issues involving women and economics is well beyond the scope of the HealthBridge gender program. HealthBridge and its partners did, however, examine in some depth the issue of women’s perceived worth. Our key interest was in the deliberate exclusion of most activities performed by women without pay from calculations of national wealth under the UN system of national accounts (UNSNA). The omission of women’s unpaid work from measures of GNP are reflected throughout society in the belief that women contribute little or nothing to the family, society, or the nation—certainly in economic terms, and often in other terms as well.

According to UN rules, traditionally female activities such as weeding, storing crops, carrying water and firewood, and performing housework are considered “unproductive”, while traditionally male activities, such as planting and harvesting, are considered productive. Yet little protest seems to have been generated over the issue, and in country after country, women’s unpaid work continues to be uncounted. This failure to assign monetary worth to women’s work is associated with an undervaluation of women overall and a failure to recognize their contributions.

In attempting to place an economic value on women’s work through research conducted first in Bangladesh, then replicated in Nepal, Pakistan, Vietnam and India, HealthBridge and its partners faced a number of challenges. From the very point of agreeing to conduct the research, to refining the methodology and methods of placing value on different tasks, the process was beset with difficulties. Some colleagues feared that the research would be perceived as a subtle attack on men or a questioning of the value of men’s work; others were concerned that HealthBridge would be seen to be demanding that women be paid a salary for their domestic work. Such issues, rather than discouraging us, suggested instead the very importance of the research and the necessity of ensuring widespread dissemination of the results and discussion of the significance of the findings.
Despite the obstacles, there was tremendous receptivity to the research in Bangladesh (the only country where the results were available at the time of writing this report), even within government circles. A common response was that “such research has long been needed”. It is interesting to note the very high figures that were calculated for the value of women’s unpaid work across all women of “productive” age in rural and urban Bangladesh: the figures were even higher than existing calculations of GDP. While no accurate figure exists for the value of women’s unpaid work—any more than one could give an appropriate dollar value to any human being or her or his contributions to family or society—the range of the estimates indicates the significance of the work performed by women on a daily basis.

WBB released its research on the economic contribution of women through their unpaid work at a roundtable discussion organized jointly with Unnayan Shamay, a well-known NGO long involved in gender issues, headed by a famous economist, Atiur Rahman. Although Unnayan Shamay was not part of the research team, WBB staff felt it was important to include an economist and someone who had been working on issues regarding the national budget and its impact on women. The decision increased the positive attention to the research and strengthened WBB’s credibility. As HealthBridge had previously learned working on tobacco control, economic issues are of particular interest to journalists; this also helped explain why four TV channels and over twenty newspapers covered the event, including some front page coverage and an editorial.

It is also important to note the eagerness of women to be interviewed for the research—that is, to be listened to and validated. When asked, “Do you have any leisure time?” a few women actually burst into laughter. Women expressed their appreciation at being taken seriously, at being asked about the work they do, and at seeing that the researchers considered their work significant and valuable.

In the end, the research may lead us to question the relative value or worth assigned to different segments of the economy and to different activities within a nation. While at first glance it may make sense that an advertising executive earns many times more than a child care worker, on further reflection such discrepancies in income and perceived value may appear more and more inappropriate. At the national level, we may be guilty of emphasizing the least significant parts of the economy: as Marilyn Waring points out in her book If Women Counted—the inspiration for this research—the market economy is small in terms of money and time when compared to government economies and unpaid work.

As the book Unfinished Work raises so eloquently in a series of essays, what sort of society do we create when we value only work for pay and fail to give importance to such tasks as caring for the home, children, the unwell, and the elderly? Unless we learn to value caring and nurturing as well as income earning, we are likely to create a society that values money more than people, that neglects the elderly and the infirm, and that lacks the basic social values which are so important to civilization.

**Lessons learned related to women and the economy:**

- Where women are not valued, a major reason may be that much of what they do is given no monetary value. Therefore, to change the perceived value of women, it may be necessary to count the uncountable, or assign economic value to the work women do without pay.
While many gender-based NGOs address various issues of economic rights, most do not appear to address the fundamental basis of some forms of economic justice in terms of the systematic devaluing of women in measures of national wealth. Yet for those willing to take the lead, the information uncovered is likely to be of great interest and use to others.

The struggle for greater gender equality may assume more relevance to people when placed within a larger struggle for a society which values caring for others in addition to earning an income. While it may seem ironic to use economic terms in order to question the value of placing a monetary value on everything, it is sometimes necessary to fight within existing systems. In any case, the key issue may be one of raising questions about what is valued and what is not—and the effects of such value judgments.

Gender and recreation
Recreation and play are vital to physical and mental health. People need opportunities to be physically active, to interact with others in safe environments, and to relax and enjoy themselves. Research on youth in cities\(^\text{11}\) has illustrated the need for better recreational opportunities for both sexes, where children can play and youth interact in a safe environment. In the past, cities were designed with the recreational needs of the inhabitants in mind, with each section of the city having its own open spaces and parks for people of all ages to enjoy. Unfortunately, with population pressures, rising real estate prices, and a focus on commercial opportunities over public interest, such places are rapidly disappearing and are not being planned in new city areas.

While everyone needs recreation, women and girls are particularly affected when such opportunities are lacking. Men and boys often can adapt to poor circumstances, gathering in less safe and attractive places. Open fields may still have boys and young men playing football, and men will drink tea at simple stalls even along busy roads. But where no safe and attractive places exist, few women and girls will be able to recreate outdoors. Furthermore, social restrictions on girls’ activities mean that girls may need far more encouragement and inducement to be involved in sports and other active play than will boys. Similarly, restrictions on women’s movement requires a safe and inviting environment to attract women.

That women and girls do desire and will make use of recreational opportunities, even in conservative societies, is illustrated by the presence of women in Islamabad’s biggest park, Fatimah Jinnah Park, and of girls participating in WBB’s cycle training program in Dhaka, wherein the street in front of WBB’s office is partly closed a few hours a week. Unfortunately, threats to such opportunities are also evident: a portion of Fatimah Jinnah Park has been given over to build a McDonald’s, and an extensive struggle was needed to rescue a major park in Hanoi from the hands of developers.

Recreation has not been a main focus of HealthBridge’s gender program to date. But the recreational and social needs of women and girls—including the need for physical activity—have been an important element in partners’ efforts to preserve existing parks and advocate for new parks and playing fields in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Vietnam; to create cycle parks for children in the Philippines; and to reduce car use and thus improve the environment for walking and leisure in the Thamel district of Kathmandu.

\(^{11}\) See, for example, UNESCO’s Growing Up in Cities research (Canadian site available at \(\text{http://www.growingupincities.ca/english/unesco.php}\)).
Lessons learned related to gender and recreation:

- It is easy to underestimate—and even to forget—the recreational needs of urban populations. When few people, especially women and girls, engage in outdoor recreation, we may believe that they consider such activities inappropriate or that society frowns on them. Yet when such opportunities are created, we may be surprised at the number of women and girls enjoying them. While addressing more apparently serious gender issues, it is important not to neglect recreation, with the understanding that another benefit of outdoor social opportunities for women is that they provide a place where women can discuss their issues and begin to work together on solutions.

- Movement towards gender equality requires more understanding between the sexes. Public social interactions allow the sexes to learn more about each other and for youth of different sexes to interact in a safe environment. Research in Vietnam on gender stereotyping revealed the extent to which women and men fail to understand each other. While providing places for both sexes to interact is rarely on the gender agenda, it could contribute to harmony and mutual understanding.

- Women tend to have very little leisure time. Girls are often kept in and close to the home, even when boys are allowed much freer range. Women and girls thus would benefit from a proliferation of recreational possibilities close to home and available at all hours, involving no expenses and little travel. This is an issue rarely if ever addressed by gender programs but one that could have an enormous impact on improving women’s lives—and expanding women’s opportunities to seek social support for the problems they face.
PART TWO: METHODS

For many years, HealthBridge and its partners have worked on tobacco control. Efforts have been focused on obtaining changes in policy that will eventually lead to substantial reductions in tobacco use and thus in the problems caused by tobacco. In seeking to bring about policy change—and through many successes along the way—Health Bridge and its partners have learned much about advocacy. Fortunately, much of what was learned is also relevant to the work of creating enabling environments for positive change in a range of gender issues. Just as tobacco use is a societal as well as an individual issue—but one where making change at the societal level is likely to have far greater effect than addressing individuals alone—so with gender.

People are greatly influenced by their environment, and changes in that environment are likely to bring about significant change in how men and women relate to each other and the degree to which we can make significant strides towards gender equality.

It is clearly not enough to grasp the issues and have ideas about how to beget positive change; one must also know how to “work the system” and obtain results. This section covers lessons learned in the realms of working with government and media, networking, capacity building, and research, and on the importance of flexibility in these approaches. It also discusses, as a further extension of the issue of media, the importance of promoting positive images of men.
The extent to which gender equality exists in any country depends in great part on national laws—which in turn may depend in great part on the existing gender situation and cultural norms. While it may seem difficult to determine where to begin, it is often easier to change laws and policies than cultural norms—and cultural changes may flow naturally from policy changes, while waiting for culture to change may be a slow, difficult, and often seemingly impossible process.

In addition to legal and policy issues, government practices on a range of fronts have significant effects on women’s and men’s lives and on relations between the sexes. For instance, agriculture extension or loan programs that target only or mostly men, despite women being heavily involved in agriculture, will further gender inequities. Likewise, loan programs that target only women often fail to take into consideration cultural norms about who within a household makes decisions about how money is spent. Reproductive health programs that target only women provide much-needed services to women, but if they exclude men, who have more power than women, then their utility will be limited.

However, legal and policy responses to gender issues can have their negative sides, so caution is needed. For example, laws in China many years ago to protect women workers by ensuring such benefits as pregnancy leave and menstruation breaks were not accompanied by laws forcing people to hire women. As a result, employers fearing the heavy burdens of the new policies simply stopped hiring women. In Bangladesh, a law meant to punish violent offenders for crimes against women and children includes such harsh penalties that judges have, to date, been extremely reluctant to punish offenders, and even the slightest shadow of a doubt seems sufficient reason to avoid sentencing.
HealthBridge partners addressed the issue of working with governments in different ways, in response to specific local contexts. In one district in India, ESAF sought to work closely with existing government efforts, rather than establishing separate and possibly competing programs. In partnership with governmental sectors at provincial and national levels, ESAF conducted a series of awareness raising and capacity building activities for governmental staff and media workers. ESAF also successfully lobbied various officials to recruit male health workers or animators to improve the ability of reproductive health programming to reach men.

Thanks to ESAF’s efforts, Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) officials took the initiative to influence fathers about gender issues through child care centres. As a result of these activities, the local government now plans to involve male community workers in rural areas in reproductive and child health, the district TB department has promoted schemes to involve male volunteers, the District IEC department has increased its promotion of non-surgical vasectomy through NGOs, the District Hospital has regularized health check-up camps in urban areas with the support of ICDS, the government started taking the initiative to stop sex determination (sex-selective abortions to ensure giving birth to a boy), and ICDS workers are reaching more people with gender messages.

The complications of gender policy issues in Bangladesh are such that WBB was reluctant to try to assume a major role, given that it was new to the issues. For instance, as mentioned, policy measures to address violence have to some degree backfired due to the overly-strong punishment, and the issue of inheritance rights is highly controversial due to the dominance of religious law. Most of the work in Bangladesh was therefore with media and other NGOs, with this program serving as a foundation for further work which will ultimately have a stronger focus on policy. However, where WBB did approach government officials on specific issues, it received a very positive response, specifically when discussing with officials in the GDP and labour/industry branches of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

In Vietnam, HealthBridge partnered with mass government organizations which play key roles in promoting gender equality, such as the Vietnam Women’s Union (with branches throughout the country, from top-level down to grassroots, and millions of members), the National Committee for the Advancement of Women (NCFAW), and the Farmers’ Union. Activities included training workshops, whose main objectives were to share with the participants different approaches for promoting gender equality and experiences in
integrating gender equality in specific working areas, and to provide updates on newly-approved legislation related to gender equality. The workshops also sought to encourage partners to promote positive social norms regarding gender roles, masculinity, gender stereotypes, and gender equality.

In Bac Ninh province, HealthBridge cooperated with the provincial Women’s Union and Farmers’ Union to conduct trainings for key communicators at provincial, district, and commune levels on gender equality issues. In addition, the training promoted improved communication between spouses as a way to increase the involvement of men in sharing domestic work and reproductive health. The Women’s Union then conducted similar trainings for members at lower levels and incorporated the training plan into its annual action plan.

At the national level, the program supported the National Committee for the Advancement of Women (NCFAW) to strengthen its capacity to integrate gender issues into planning processes and the implementation of its existing action plan. The project also supported policy formulation and implementation at different ministries and in different cities and provinces through training workshops.

The training workshops came about in response to an observation by NCFAW that some secretaries in CFAW had retired and others had just recently been assigned to the post, so that new people did not have the opportunity to update their knowledge about gender, how to mainstream gender into an action plan, how to formulate and implement policy, and techniques for working towards the advancement of women. Many participants reported that following the trainings, they understood more clearly the meaning of gender mainstreaming and felt more confident to discuss gender mainstreaming with the agencies in charge of developing plans.

During the trainings, an important opportunity occurred for legislators and advocates of gender laws to meet and talk. During the explanation on the law-making process, the advocates learned that sometimes a law failed to be passed because the parliament did not receive enough evidence to support the law. This suggests that people should be clear when presenting their arguments and anticipated benefits if proposing new policies, legislation, or programming to government.

After the training courses, some of the participants called the HealthBridge officers to request information on the research previously carried out and shared during the training. Some participants also arranged meetings with HealthBridge staff to discuss opportunities for collaboration. Finally, the training resulted in a useful list of contacts of those working as a focal point on gender at all levels of government.
Lessons learned related to working with governments:

- Involving government officials in a training workshop can be an excellent way of broadening a network to include new people to engage government partners on key policy issues, and to promote the work of one’s own organization. This is also true for NGO and media representatives.

- Although it is easy to criticize government for being inefficient or ineffective, it is far more difficult to work cooperatively with government officials to improve their approach. Yet it is obviously far more constructive to work on improvements rather than limit oneself to criticisms. Although partners in all countries faced challenges in developing constructive relationships with government officials, in each country positive developments did occur. This underscores the importance of treating government as an important potential partner, even while continuing advocacy efforts aimed at changing policies and practices.

- One of the many benefits of partnering with governmental agencies is that they can help facilitate and reduce the cost of implementation. With only one state television agency in Vietnam, accessing it to launching a TV spot is difficult as well as important for reaching large audiences. After working with Vietnam TV on a TV spot promoting male involvement in housework, HealthBridge learned that if it involved a governmental organization such as NCFAW from the beginning and demonstrated to the TV station that the work being broadcast was that of the government agency and not of an international NGO, then complicated procedures for launching the TV spot would become far easier. Further, in some cases a spot made by a governmental agency may be subjected to less censorship than one made by an NGO.


Working with the media

The media can play a vital role in raising awareness of gender issues among both policymakers and the general public. At the same time, media itself is often responsible for propagating many of the negative stereotypes about gender. This is of course a two-way street: media is both influenced by, and itself influences, gender stereotypes, but often images of the sexes in media are more exaggerated than those in the popular imagination. For instance, media portrayals of violence (including fights, beating, rape, and murder), promiscuous sexual behaviour, drinking and smoking, and extreme female (and male) body types are all far out of proportion with rates of such events in the general population.

Furthermore, research has shown that at least in the United States, men on TV are generally shown as rational, ambitious, smart, powerful, and violent, while women are portrayed as sensitive, romantic, attractive, submissive, and timid. Children’s shows more often feature male characters and (in the case of cartoons) voices than female; roles for women in TV are often as housewives or in low-skilled employment.

Advertising perhaps presents even more gender stereotyped images than TV shows. In country after country, women in ads are generally shown either as sex objects or housewives. Ads for household cleaning products, cooking oils and spices tend only to show a man engaged in their use if he is patiently instructing a woman on the basics of toilet cleaning or cake baking.

While women are under-represented in many TV shows, they may likewise be over-represented in ads, but typically in highly stereotyped images that bear little connection to women’s actual lives and serve as poor role models for women and girls. (For instance, a series of ads for a skin whitening cream in Bangladesh shows how
women obtain success—and thus happiness—not through hard work and study, but rather through “improvements” in their physical appearance. Success is carefully portrayed in socially acceptable ways for women: by gaining a male admirer or by obtaining a stereotypically female job such as, for example, a flight attendant.)

It is not only TV that portrays and glamorizes negative images of women and men. Newspapers can play a similar role. In some countries (including the otherwise apparently conservative Bangladesh), newspapers regularly carry photographs of scantily-clad women. Articles about politics and important current events typically feature men, while women may be mainly relegated to the entertainment and culture pages. Even when covering gender issues, newspapers can serve to promote rather than reduce gender problems by portraying women as victims, normalizing offensive male behaviour, and downplaying the possibility of remedies to the manifold problems caused by gender inequality.

Given that media can both resolve and exacerbate gender problems, it is important to consider two approaches to media: utilizing their advantages, and countering the problems that they create. That is, a media-focused gender program could seek both to utilize media to disseminate positive messages about gender issues and to engage them in a campaign to convince those in charge to become more sensitive in their portrayals of different issues, to lessen the negative portrayals of both sexes, and to stop undermining the value of women in direct and indirect ways.

Traditionally, gender-related messages may focus on the negative rather than emphasizing the positive. As mentioned above, negative messages may serve to normalize undesired behaviour and may leave unclear what behaviour is actually expected and desired of men. Thus rather than showing images of a man beating his wife and the negative consequences, HealthBridge feels that it is more valuable to show how a man can behave more positively in his family—and the benefits that will result. In addition to using such methods ourselves, all of our partners also encouraged others to change to positive images, often finding great receptivity to the idea.
WBB decided to organize a special event for International Family Day, which falls on 15 May. WBB felt that it would be interesting to invite journalists to a discussion in which women talked about the help they received from their husbands. WBB hand-picked two couples to discuss the role of men in their families: one family in which the wife is often busy operating her own NGO, and one which has a young daughter and twin sons, where the father is often responsible for their care to lessen the burden on the mother.

To WBB’s surprise and the journalists’ amusement and illumination, the discussion became contentious, as the women in both couples claimed that their husbands do little or nothing to help and that the lion(ess)’s share of the family burden is on them. The men reacted defensively, and heated discussion ensued, with female journalists in particular asking pointed questions.

Rather than considering the event a failure, WBB staff were delighted with the openness of the discussion that took place and the level of interest among the journalists. It was clear that such an event could be dangerous if abusive men were invited who punished their wives for their openness. As it is, all four participants from the two couples expressed their gratitude for the chance to discuss family issues so openly—issues that they had, for the most part, been unable to raise previously. In addition to suggesting an urgent need for family therapy (!), the discussions also revealed how much room there is to question our own assumptions and beliefs, and the need to invite our target audiences to participate actively in our work.

In India, HealthBridge’s partners developed pictorial mass media materials related to men’s responsibility in reproductive health. They also worked with newspapers with broad population coverage to improve and increase coverage of sensitive gender issues, including contraception and family planning. They soon discovered that the local media was eager for information and happy to print as much as the partners could supply. For example, HealthBridge’s partner organization ESAF wrote articles about gender issues such as dowry, child marriage, and “missing girls”, which the newspaper published. The research performed by ESAF was also published in a local newspaper, with special focus on the lack of doctors who could perform vasectomies.

ESAF also explored the possibility of making linkages with women journalists who had participated in a five-day tour of various European cities as part of an exchange program between India and the EU (to show the participants how media outlets and unions in Europe dealt with gender issues). The tour was organized by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the EU in cooperation with the All-India Newspaper Employees Federation and the Bangalore Newspaper Employees Union (BNEU). Thanks to ESAF’s efforts, All India Radio broadcast a special episode on gender issues, with a script supplied by ESAF.

ESAF also produced a message which was telecast on a local TV channel to nearly 35,000 houses. (While local TV may often be dismissed as unimportant, it can be extremely inexpensive and easy for an NGO to access, and when compared to the reach of a pamphlet, its impact can be considerable.) As a result of these activities, public enquiries about gender issues increased, the Urban Family Welfare Department requested gender articles and messages to develop its own IEC materials, Bhuj Municipality took immediate action to provide basic facilities to the Sanjay Nagar community where the program took place and to provide birth certificates for children, and
the print media took the initiative to focus on gender-related news and articles.

In Vietnam, the Department of Culture and Ideology periodically organizes workshops to orient members of the press on upcoming government priorities in media. These workshops represent an excellent opportunity to spread gender-related messages among the public, by partnering with the Department of Culture and Ideology and including these messages in the orientation agenda.

HealthBridge Vietnam, in collaboration with the Central Department of Ideology and Culture, therefore organized a two-day training workshop for journalists and editors. Of particular relevance were sessions that addressed the coverage of gender issues in news magazines, TV and radio advertisements/shows, including the strength and weakness of this coverage, and what issues need to be covered in the future. After the trainings, some of the participants called the HealthBridge office to request information to publish in their newspapers. In turn, HealthBridge now has a list of journalists and editors of national newspapers in charge of gender and family issues with whom news and important information can be shared.

Messages on gender equality and on the gender program itself gained more coverage after such media orientations, and some journalists maintain regular contact with HealthBridge staff to ask for new information or to seek technical support for gender issues such as gender-based violence in the family and sex-selective abortion.

In addition to its collaboration with the Department of Culture and Ideology to reach journalists to influence reporting, HealthBridge Vietnam itself produced media messages. Different means of communication were utilized to target different audiences, taking into account reach, cost, and the type of message possible (for example, a 3-minute loudspeaker message, 30-second TV spots, one-hour drama performance, and 2-column newspaper article all have different potential in terms of the amount of information they can convey and the audiences they will reach). Methods used included loudspeakers, radio, drama performances (of great interest due to lack of available entertainment in rural areas), billboards (brief slogans and careful design led to high retention of the messages), and TV spots. Messages, reinforced across different media, included “when sharing housework amongst the couple, the family will be happier” and the importance of male responsibility in housework and reproductive and sexual health.
The TV spots were telecasted repeatedly for four weeks on two channels of Vietnam Television, VTV1 and VTV2. The use of famous actors and actresses in the spots was appealing to audiences. After only a few days of showing the spots, colleagues from other NGOs and government agencies phoned HealthBridge staff to say that they saw the TV spot, commenting that it was impressive and humorous. Some other organizations asked for copies to show at their events, including a violence prevention program in Nghe An province.

In Bangladesh, media work focused on radio and newspapers, although TV coverage also ensued. WBB regularly creates scripts for radio talk shows and organizes speakers; the shows are taped in the WBB office, and later aired by the national radio station, Betar Bangladesh. Although WBB has not yet succeeded in trying different formats for its radio work (e.g. brief messages or slogans repeated throughout the day, or drama using traditional formats such as grandfather-grandson conversations), the talk shows are important. Their length (about 15-18 minutes) allows for the treatment of serious subjects in-depth; different speakers bring different perspectives, and “on-the-street” interviews (recruiting local college students or other “non-experts” to express their opinions) make the talk shows more informal, interesting, and lively. Topics included the role of youth in dowry prevention (as dowry payments are often the cause of violence and even murder), increasing the role of women in family decision-making, the right to education of the girl child, women’s inheritance rights, and the importance of valuing women’s economic contributions through their unpaid work.

In terms of print media, WBB regularly provides information to journalists, as well as writing newspaper articles or letters to the editor. Work with the print media is facilitated in both Vietnam and Bangladesh by the fact that local staff include former and current journalists, who both understand journalistic writing and have good connections with other journalists and editors. WBB was pleased to see the shift in coverage from a focus on negative gender issues (prevalence of violence, women’s lack of power) to positive messages in the local media about the way things should (and could) be, following its media sensitization work.
Lessons learned related to working with media:

1. Lack of positive reporting in the media may be due more to ignorance or lack of quality information and articles than to any active resistance. For instance, WBB had excellent experience in getting its articles published. Similarly, ESAF in India found it harder to keep up with the demand for information than to get its articles published. This indicates a great interest by media in gender-related topics, particularly if a fresh approach is taken (in this case, including positive messages rather than only focusing on problems). That is, by providing something “new” and addressing positive approaches, one can often achieve significant coverage.

2. As with journalists, so with public figures. While civil society leaders may be in the habit of complaining about the problems women face and of talking about the evil men do, they may be convinced by logic to take a more positive approach. In the regular radio talk shows that WBB organizes, the staff discovered that it was possible to attract well-known, high-level people (such as lawyers and NGO leaders) to be speakers and to convince them to focus on the need to show positive images of men and to highlight the value of women’s work. So rather than lament that people often take a negative approach, it may be effective to convince them of the importance of a positive one.

3. Even TV may be more accessible than we think. While commercial rates for airing TV spots can be extremely high, there are other, low- and no-cost ways to gain airtime. For instance, WBB sent out a letter to TV reporters and followed up with phone calls, explaining the importance of the issues and the potential for interesting programming. With a little effort, and essentially no expense, it was possible to generate two lengthy TV interviews (one of 7 minutes!) on air, with WBB choosing the speakers. Rather than dismissing TV as too expensive, it may be worth the effort of seeking ways to access it for free.

4. As the Vietnam team found, billboard messages can resonate in people’s minds; a combination of different media and messages are more likely to have an effect than one single media or repeating the same message.

5. Exposure can have a multiplier effect: one of Bangladesh’s largest NGOs, upon reading an article in the newspaper about WBB employees being allowed to take their babies to the office, contacted WBB to learn more about the policy; an NGO participating in a WBB-organized press conference on its research later asked the WBB gender project officer to be a speaker at the opening of a very large workshop.
Among the main forms of influence on people’s behaviour are family, peers, and media. People learn to behave in part by what they observe around them, in person or via television. Gender-stereotyped behaviour thus takes very different forms in different societies, depending on what people accept as normative and learn from others or from media. It would then seem to make sense that, in trying to make changes for the better, we should examine the role models to which people are exposed.

Unfortunately, the way men are portrayed in media, and even in messages designed to deter violence or other harmful behaviour, is often negative. Films and TV serials often depict men as heavy drinkers and smokers, who are physically abusive to other men and to women, and who engage in sexual relationships casually with a number of women. “Positive” male traits in media may include strength, independence, and initiative, while caring or gentleness in men may be portrayed as unmanly.

While it is not surprising that popular media would not portray men in their best light, it is a matter of great concern that those seeking to address problems caused by men often use negative images. For instance, messages against violence tend to show a man beating a
woman; messages against smoking or drinking may show a man engaged in precisely those behaviours.

Rarely do such messages indicate what behaviour is expected or desired of men. Nor do these message-makers appear to question the wisdom of portraying precisely what is not wanted. Yet it is possible that such messages serve to normalize male violence, leading to the question: if everyone does it, why not me? Many people—those passing quickly by a poster or billboard, or the illiterate—will only see the images, not the text, which may resemble an advertisement for wife-beating. In commercial advertisements, one would rarely or never portray the behaviour one does not wish to elicit. If an image is successful, it will stay in people’s heads—and is that the image we want people to retain, of violent men and terrified women?

When WBB produced the first report of its new gender program, The role of men in improving husband-wife relations, people were captivated by the title. Even if they did not face serious problems such as violence, couples perceived that there was always room for improvement in their relationships, and were eager for information on how to do so. This was a positive approach to an important topic that could do much to encourage people to think differently about gender roles and how men and women relate to each other. Similarly, those participating in HealthBridge’s research in Vietnam were eager to discuss issues of marital harmony, and would likewise appreciate positively-worded messages on the matter.

HealthBridge strongly believes in the importance of using positive images to show desired behaviours, rather than showing what we don’t want from people. In the absence of positive role models, it may be difficult for men to understand what exactly it means to be a “good” man, and vague encouragement to be good without making explicit what is expected may thus fail to result in any positive behaviour change. Media campaigns should make such behaviours explicit, rather than leaving them to men’s imagination. Such messages can appeal to self-interest by showing what men themselves, as well as their family members, can gain from men assuming a more positive role in the family by helping with housework, spending time with the children, and treating their wives with love and respect.

HealthBridge’s gender program emphasizes positive images of men—on stickers, in TV spots, etc., and encourages other organizations and government agencies to create positive messages. Such images, for instance, show men happily cooking or cleaning or taking care of children. While in a sense these activities are a drop in the sea of negative media portrayals of men, HealthBridge hopes that they will provide some reassurance to those who want to share responsibility, and some encouragement and guidance to those who aren’t so sure or who never considered the possibilities suggested in these messages.

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Lessons learned related to promoting positive images of men:

When faced with the alternative of using positive rather than negative images of men in their media campaigns and other messages, most NGOs respond positively. “We never thought of that” sums up their response, as they switch from attacking to encouraging men.

Those working on gender issues are by no means free of gender stereotypes and sometimes may think of and portray women as victims and men as perpetrators. This can lead them to be reluctant to portray men in a positive light. But people can be receptive to reasoning, and just as with the general population, so those working on gender can be convinced to change their way of thinking, and to promote positive rather than negative images of masculinity (and more empowered images of femininity). It is important not to assume that those working on gender issues are themselves free from such stereotypes or that those stereotypes will not affect our work. An important first step in gender programming can thus be to challenge our own beliefs and views before reaching out to a wider audience. This could help to reduce the negative portrayal of men in many messages.
Working alone can sometimes be the easiest approach, as it saves the time and hassle involved in trying to coordinate with others who may have different ideas and approaches. However, working in isolation is also likely to prove less effective than working with others. Previous experience, as well as through this program, has shown HealthBridge and partners the great value of network building, and thus the value of making the effort to work together. An organization standing alone gains far less credibility than a group of organizations speaking together. Creativity, access to resources, scope and likely success of work are all enhanced when different people from varying backgrounds come together. Work that is difficult, lonely, and exhausting when done alone can become easy, fulfilling, and enjoyable when done with others, and the fruits of success usually compensate for any difficulties in the coordinating of different egos and personalities.

An important lesson in coalition building is the difference between collaboration and cooperation, or more simply, between sharing ideas (cooperating) and trying to work jointly on programs (collaborating). Simply sharing ideas is often far easier to manage than trying to conduct any joint activities and may be the most sensible goal. Meanwhile, some joint activities can be conducted, when kept simple, such as a letter or signature campaign where a sub-committee (or individual) drafts a letter on a certain topic, and others send similar letters to key policymakers, or everyone signs and jointly submits the letter.

In Vietnam, the focus of networking was on involving government partners more closely in the work; however, sharing with other NGOs also occurred, mainly through existing interest group meetings coordinated by the NGO Resource Center in Hanoi.

Project staff also participated in quarterly meetings of the Gender Action Partnership Network and worked with other NGOs to strengthen the Reproductive Health Network.

In Bangladesh, building a network proved challenging and the process was not free of mistakes, but progress was made. Perhaps the biggest mistake was to begin by funding other groups who then were less interested in continuing the work when further funding was not available. A decision was made to conduct the initial research on gender issues (particularly violence) with local NGOs, but the amount of training they required was under-estimated and the quality of the research (particularly the analysis and write-up that occurred locally) suffered somewhat as a result.

Efforts to bring the team together were often unsuccessful, but some individual members of the network maintained close contact with WBB. (A plus and minus of the network was that many members were already part of WBB’s tobacco control network; the advantages included an existing close relationship and opportunistic meetings when partners attended tobacco control-related events or dropped into the WBB office for other reasons; the disadvantage was over-commitment to various tasks resulting in insufficient concentration on any single one.)

Networking can include outreach to communities as well as organizations. In India for instance, linkages were successfully made with nearby communities that had, through local community empowerment, made a commitment to change their own long-accepted norms of female harassment and killings for monetary gain (i.e. dowry deaths).
heavy workloads, geographic distance, and competing interests, active involvement in the network may be minimal, but such involvement can be fruitful when focused on specific campaigns, such as encouraging everyone to write letters to policymakers or the local media on a certain issue. Rather than focusing on attracting the biggest NGOs and expecting a large amount of work from them, it can help to think small—but in a targeted and effective way.

When establishing a network, certain “social” or “psychological” issues may be more important than the work itself and may determine whether or not the network thrives or rapidly dissolves into infighting. Treating all members as equally important and valuable, ensuring that members feel a sense of ownership in the work (by organizing workshops themselves, as in the case of Vietnam, or conducting research, as in Bangladesh), giving everyone the opportunity to share their ideas and experiences through meetings and via newsletters, and maintaining friendly communication can all be vital to the sustainability of a network.

In the case of the international network created through the HealthBridge gender program, HealthBridge realized that communication across countries—particularly where no personal relationship pre-exists—can be difficult to sustain. However, it can lead to interesting and important lessons and experience exchanged. E-mail enabled some communication among partners while the chance to meet face-to-face at annual workshops was particularly helpful for sharing information and ideas and for providing moral support.
Capacity building activities are essential for ensuring that local partners have the required skills to implement the project’s activities and to apply these skills to other work, as well as to ensure an active and positive attitude towards the work. The issues of capacity building, local ownership, and networking are all inter-connected. The basis is a development approach which focuses on strengthening the capacity of local agencies and reducing reliance on outside experts or external agents.

Capacity building in Vietnam

This project represented the first time that the Bac Ninh Center for Health Education and Communication, the local partner of the project in Vietnam, was involved in the management and implementation of a project. By participating in the training courses organized by HealthBridge and being actively involved in the project’s activities, staff of the Center not only gained knowledge on gender and reproductive health, but also on working methods.

The Center staff have assessed the province’s situation, pointed out the priority programming needs for their province, and assumed the key role in project implementation.

After producing a series of IEC materials for the project and publishing them for the local people, the Bac Ninh Center for Health Education and Communication has become well-known for its ability to design and produce high-quality IEC materials. They have since been given the responsibility by other government departments and agencies to produce IEC materials, including for the national targeted program on protecting the environment and the program on preventing lung disease and tuberculosis.
In India, training workshops were organized on the subjects of family planning, sterilization, awareness of gender bias in the family life, immunization, TB, and HIV/AIDS. Initial training/information sessions were held during the daytime, which resulted in only female participation. Future sessions were organized during other community events to ensure broader participation.

Community events in India included discussions held with core group members about gender stereotypes in the way children are raised and household chores divided. (While the work in general focused on men, it is important to note that women, as the main rearers of children, play an important role in implanting and reinforcing gender stereotypes in the young.) Acknowledgement of the unfairness of raising male and female children differently was achieved, with some women pledging to make changes. The importance of the value and contribution of women’s household work was also stressed and awareness of the practice of female infanticide increased. As one participant commented, “If this practice [female infanticide] continues, there will be no wives for our sons to marry.” Training programs were also developed for community health workers, particularly on the subject of gender, sex, and social inequalities. In addition, internal staff training on gender issues was conducted to enhance the capacity of ESAF staff to lead the project and to identify and design appropriate activities.
The main capacity building in Bangladesh was in building the research and reporting skills of local NGOs who worked together on two research projects. In addition, much work was done to encourage NGOs from a wide spectrum of interests to frame their messages to men in a more positive light. Capacity building of WBB staff themselves occurred mainly through a series of in-house presentations on different gender issues often gathered from books on different subjects.

Vietnam staff benefited from local and regional workshops and trainings on reproductive and sexual health, which allowed staff to further develop their skills and strengthen their networks. Many training opportunities are available for those maintaining a strong network, which otherwise might be missed; here is where capacity building and networking can directly coincide!

**Lessons learned related to capacity building:**

- Building the capacity of an organization in one field of work can often have multiplier effects in other areas, as was the case in Bac Ninh. This fact increases the efficiency of capacity building, as support to any single program can lead to benefits across other areas.

- In India, capacity building of government relied on first building positive, mutually-respectful relationships. Without such relationships, ESAF as an NGO new to the area would not have been trusted and would have had little or no impact on government activities.

- The importance of capacity building of local staff should not be understated. Gender issues are sensitive, and those working on them are often themselves susceptible to strong beliefs and prejudices about gender roles, including the division of labour. Those working on gender should be invited and challenged to question their own views, and understand how their personal perceptions affect their work. Only if we are honest with ourselves and begin to question our own beliefs are we likely to be effective in changing attitudes and practices.
Research

The Economic Contribution of Women in Bangladesh Through their Unpaid Labor

In order to design a program that would be relevant in addressing the gender issues in each country, HealthBridge and its partners began their work with research focused on reproductive and sexual health in India and Vietnam, and on male violence towards their spouses in Bangladesh. The research was designed to gain understanding of the key issues people face and the way people feel or talk about them, both negative and positive, in order to feed into programming and messages.

As all research contains a researcher bias, and all of us experience to greater or less degrees the effects of gender stereotyping in our cultures, it can be very difficult to design an open-minded survey that doesn’t simply repeat what others have found. For instance, much research has been conducted in Vietnam on why men don’t like to use condoms, but little research addresses all those men who do use them. There is an overlying assumption that men don’t like to use condoms, and research thus tends to elicit the reasons for not using them. A similar issue arises with vasectomies, where it may be easier to plan research to reveal men’s objections to them than research to discover ways to promote them that will make them more acceptable to men.

Similarly, in Bangladesh the research was meant to show why men (and women) find it acceptable for men to be violent towards women. Previous research had shown the reasons why men beat their wives at any particular moment but not the underlying reasons. It involved much thought and creativity to decide how to phrase the questions such that the reasons for considering violence acceptable, and statements from men who take a firm stance against violence, would be captured.

While it required a lot of time, patience, thought and discussion, the research did finally reveal a finding of importance: that violence is
associated with undervaluing of women. This led to a second study, on the value of women’s unpaid work, which met with considerable interest from NGOs, especially those working for many years on issues of government spending on women’s issues.

As in Bangladesh, research in India and Vietnam raised issues beyond what was anticipated in the research design. This is a benefit of qualitative research: surprising and useful discussions can occur during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions that shed new light on an important subject. Greater understanding of the context in which gender issues are faced in India gave rise to community programs to deal with some of those other important issues, such as lack of access of slum children to government schools.

In Vietnam, discussions during the research revealed the difficulties faced by spouses in talking openly about sex, and the belief by both men and women that comfort in sex implies premarital experience. These problems emerged as major issues for both sexes, and led to the decision to write a manual for NGOs to use in training couples on improved communication and sharing in general, but also on sexual issues.

**Lessons learned related to research:**

- For those prepared to engage in a novel approach, it is vital to allocate sufficient time for research—and to extend deadlines if necessary as preliminary results indicate a change is needed to the research questions. On the other hand, balance is needed between the resources going into the research, the usefulness of the findings, and the ability to put the findings into action. While it can be difficult to identify this “happy medium”, it is important to attempt to ensure that the research is appropriate, answers key questions, but does not unduly delay the program, especially in trying to quantify the unquantifiable (as with the value of women’s work).

- Combining research with capacity building by involving local NGOs with little or no previous research experience may somewhat reduce the quality of the research, but it will strengthen the engagement of local organizations and increase the chances of the research results being used, and it will broaden the scope and understanding of the issues being researched by those local groups.

- Carefully designed research can provide key insights to understanding the local context, coming up with appropriate messages, and influencing policy change. When trying to bring other NGOs, media, and government officials on board, it can be important to have evidence; research results indicate that there is indeed a basis for the assumptions underlying the work.
Taking a flexible approach

Flexibility, although not specifically a method, is addressed here due to its great importance. Flexibility is critical to success in all aspects of development. A startling new piece of information, or a revealing research finding, lead to a different track—but that new information can actually lead to something far more useful than the original plans. In seeking to solve a problem, it is more important to focus on the problem and respond to what is learned, rather than to follow the original program design.

In India the project implementers were highly innovative in seeking ways to gain community support, in large part by responding to the expressed needs of that community even when they lay outside the scope of the project. For example, project staff discovered that some parents were unable to send their children to school because they lacked a birth certificate—which was in turn unavailable in the slum in which the families lived. The project staff temporarily turned their attention from their main focus, gender issues, in order to address the expressed need of the community, and applied pressure to local government officials to supply birth certificates to the children in need. The officials complied and children were able to attend school. As a result, ESAF gained great popularity in the community and its ideas were received with more openness than if it had stuck with its own agenda rather than that of the community.

In attempting to address local priorities, project staff in India also established coordinated programming between government and NGOs, particularly related to the organization of training on STD/HIV, improvement of TB programs, and arrangements for or following up of sterilizations. ESAF also complemented government activities by distributing condoms, and responded to community needs for expanded income-earning opportunities by establishing trainings on
small-scale entrepreneurship. While such a broad approach runs the risk of overwhelming an NGO or of losing focus, it may sometimes be the only way to operate in a difficult environment such as the conservative slum of Sanjay Nagar.

In Bangladesh, the political situation changed drastically between project design and implementation. A quiet takeover by the military following the cancelling of elections due to political fallout in the fall of 2006 led to a state of emergency which continued for more than a year. Suddenly politics and protests were banned. This naturally led to some complications in working on such a political issue as gender and required a rethink of approaches and a revised style of working. In Pakistan, the onset of research was delayed by flooding, bombing, and other disasters natural and man-made. Such extreme occurrences are by no means unusual in some parts of the world, and while it is impossible to anticipate them, it is vital to maintain the freedom and flexibility to respond as needed.

**Lessons learned related to flexibility:**

- While targeted interventions are necessary to have an impact, ignoring people’s felt needs is unlikely to lead to success. The flexibility to help people solve their *perceived* pressing problems can gain support for a program that would otherwise be very difficult or impossible to implement.

- Unanticipated disasters, major changes in the political system, and other such changes in the working environment do happen, and flexibility may prove to be the saving grace of one’s program.
In one sense, any area of work could be described as gender-based. This is reflected in the work of organizations that address gender mainstreaming to show how gender influences all aspects of life and to ensure that work in all areas takes that influence into account.

In attempting to address gender inequality across several countries in South and Southeast Asia, a number of issues become clear and a number of lessons were learned. The key realization was that many or most of those working on gender tend not to take a positive approach to male involvement—complaining about the problems men cause rather than encouraging men to do better—and tend, themselves, not to realize the great value of the work most women do daily without pay.

But in order to increase gender equality, valuing both men and women is essential. Focusing on those two issues—positive involvement of men and valuing of women—HealthBridge and its partners have made significant progress towards achieving greater awareness of the importance of gender equality for all, and have learned many lessons that may prove useful for others. Perhaps the greatest lesson of all, which we hope is made clear in this report, is the importance of thought and logic, and of identifying new approaches, in order to improve the lives of those we hope to reach in our programs.

Important as gender mainstreaming is, there is still an important role for work aimed specifically at addressing gender issues rather than at incorporating a gender perspective into existing programs—if for no other reason than that much programming still fails to mainstream gender appropriately. Meanwhile, within gender-based work, it is important to recognize that there is a wide variety of potential issues where gender is a key factor.
 SOURCES


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