

SWISSCONTACT'S APPROACH TO POSITIVE MASCULINITIES

Engaging men as allies for gender equality and women's economic empowerment



Our understanding of an approach to positive masculinities

Work on masculinities recognises that gender norms affect everyone in society, although in different ways. Swisscontact's approach goes beyond classic gender sensitization, as it encourages men to reflect deeply on their own attitudes, fears, and vulnerabilities. These reflections support behaviour changes by enabling men to see themselves allies of gender equality and women's empowerment.

Positive masculinities are defined as values and norms that society places on men's behaviour, and which promote constructing, non-violent, and fair forms of masculinity that advance gender equality.¹

Swisscontact views work on positive masculinities as one form of gender sensitization, but with important differences. The focus lies on the pressures and vulnerabilities men experience, and which hinder them in supporting women's empowerment, recognising that this improves the situation of all genders. For example, in eastern DRC, husbands of women enrolled in vocational training reported feeling strong social pressure to discourage their wives from working. Masculinity group discussions helped them recognise how these norms were also limiting their own family's development.

¹ See [UNDP](#) and [EIGE](#)



Difference between masculinity groups and common gender sensitization approaches

MASCULINITY GROUPS

Focus on men's own barriers to become enablers of women's empowerment (their own fears, pressures, needs)

Address vulnerabilities of men regarding gender inequality, dominant norms of masculinity

Make men aware of the oppressive and disempowering effects of masculinity norms on women and on themselves

Engage men as allies in women's economic empowerment (including regarding the choice of non-traditional careers)

Explore advantages of gender equality for men

Develop their own positions against dominant forms of masculinity

COMMON GENDER SENSITIZATIONS

Focus on women's barriers to empowerment

Address women's vulnerabilities

Make men aware of the oppressive masculinity norms

Men as barriers to women's empowerment

Importance of gender equality for women

Empower women to overcome power inequalities

Swisscontact has successfully worked with this approach in several projects. Implementation varies in the different countries, depending on the focus of the project and the partners in the local context. Swisscontact implements **masculinity groups not as stand-alone sensitizations** – but linked to skills development, VET training, employment and thus increase of income. This combination makes these interventions particularly effective. For example, in Benin, masculinity groups were integrated in agricultural organisations and combined with savings and credit activities, strengthening both women's leadership and household economic stability. In Niger, community networks involving traditional and religious leaders publicly promoted girls' participation in technical training, contributing to young women enrolling in trades such as electricity and plumbing.

Swisscontact's interventions regarding masculinity groups have shown measurable impact in various areas regarding:

Increased women's participation in leadership roles

Enhanced economic opportunities for women

Positive shifts in community attitudes towards gender equality

Increased engagement and integration of women in professional occupations

Transforming persistent gaps

In many contexts, women have less access to and control over resources and assets such as land, which restricts their possibilities to generate income. Further, even where they do generate their own income, decision-making power over household resources, as well as representation and leadership in communal, regional or national institution is often unequally distributed between women and men.

In the area of sustainable agriculture, this means that women often have less access to inputs, financial services, extension services, skills development, and sustainable practices. They are less equipped to cope with climate change as they have fewer resources to absorb and recover from climate shocks.

In the area of (vocational) skills development, women and girls face lower enrolment in VET due to social norms, limited school participation, and prioritization of boys' education. Women do usually not have access to the full range of training and career choices, which is an obstacle for their career aspirations. As a consequence, they remain in professions that are less valued, less remunerated and with less scope for economic advancement than those dominated by men. In particular, they are underrepresented in STEM and future-oriented fields, with limited access to upskilling and labour market services. Social norms also restrict women's mobility and give them less access to services, networks, markets and information. Unpaid care responsibilities, gender stereotypes, and exclusionary practices hinder women's and other vulnerable groups' full participation in the labour market.

These persistent inequalities can only be overcome through joint efforts, with men supporting the empowerment of women. Past approaches have shown that to achieve this, top-down approaches that impose gender equality measures based on women's needs only, are not necessarily leading to sustained change.

Positive masculinities – innovations and success factors

Swisscontact does not use a blueprint model to approach positive masculinities in its projects in different countries and contexts. Rather, the approach is adapted to the local context, embedded into the project's objective and structure, and is based on initiatives of local partners. Together with them, the concrete model to be implemented is designed. The approach is flexible and the range of variation is what makes it valuable.

In Benin, the focus lies on the couple as a whole. These “husband schools” aim at increasing decision-making and leadership of women within the local agricultural organisations. In addition, to gradually remove certain socio-cultural barriers in northern Benin, a vast awareness-raising network has encouraged some husbands to donate land to their wives, with the possibility of establishing Certificates of Customary Ownership to secure their rights.

In the DRC, the main target group of the masculinity groups were the husbands and male family members of the female trainees of vocational training, aiming at preparing the ground for those female graduates to enter the world of work after their training without encountering social resistance from their male family members.

In Niger, the masculinity groups are to be understood rather as networks of influential male and female community leaders, including religious leaders, traditional chiefs, and communal government, as well as from women's associations, community radio stations and technical services. The networks are created by municipal decrees and comprise around ten members, at least one third of whom are women. The aim here was to institutionalise them within the framework of public meetings where these leaders defend the importance of vocational training for women and girls.



Across all these contexts, Swisscontact worked with the following innovative modalities:

- **Linking masculinity groups to vocational education.** We directly connect them to enrolment, participation, and transition to the world of work of female trainees that were trained in the project to enter the world of work. Further, they advocate for the importance of technical vocational training as an income activity of women and girls, by influencing parent's attitude on this topic.
- **Creating a direct link between masculinity groups and the female target groups in the project:** We use a targeted approach, which ensures the relevance of the topic for the members of the masculinity groups and builds on their intrinsic motivation. The project's target group on vocational training, or local agricultural organisations and partners, are our entry point.
- **Creating men-only spaces:** Our projects work with men-only spaces which give men the possibility to reflect among themselves on pressures and vulnerabilities connected to gender relations. Women are included in specific formats throughout the process in selective moments.
- **Forming male leaders and role models:** While in some projects we work with leaders and persons that already are considered role models, in others, the projects supported the development of family members of the female trainees to become leaders and role models. This low-level entry point proves to be highly impactful at the level of the female trainees.
- **Combining masculinity groups with savings groups or social funds:** This combination boosts the sense of belonging, motivation, and sustainability of masculinity groups.

In all different models, the following factors are pre-conditions for success:

- Use close family members (e.g. wives) who benefit from other project interventions (e.g. vocational training) for the identification of the members of the masculinity groups.
- Introduce basic knowledge on gender equality, gender-based violence, and leadership before the reflection sessions among the masculinity group members start.
- Include trainings on participatory tools for sensitization and negotiation.
- Set-up the masculinity groups with men only.
- Engage traditional authorities, including religious authorities, and – depending on the context – public authorities.
- Adapt the concept of positive masculinity linguistically and culturally, using local terms and letting the local communities decide on them.
- Draw on existing local structures and strong community mobilisation where these exist.
- Use local facilitators from the same communities and leave autonomy to them.
- Organise exchanges between masculinity groups from different localities.
- Give local visibility and accessibility to masculinity groups.
- Motivate masculinity groups to install a social fund or a saving and credit group.
- Anchor the approach systemically in local institutions.

Swisscontact's offer for partners in the area of positive masculinities

Swisscontact supports public, private and civil society partners in integrating positive masculinity approaches into skills development, employment, agricultural and economic inclusion programmes. Swisscontact supports its local partners in implementing their modality to implement such an approach. By integrating gender transformative practices within existing systems and linking reflection on norms to concrete economic outcomes, partners can reduce resistance, strengthen local ownership and achieve more durable results in women's economic participation and leadership.



Preparing the ground for female graduates to enter the world of work

In a fragile and highly conflict-affected context like Sud-Kivu in the DRC, high levels of gender-based violence and patriarchal norms constrain women and girls' opportunities to study and work. The UPEG Project – United for Gender Equality – implemented by Swisscontact supported the creation of so called “husband schools” (masculinity groups) to ensure that female beneficiaries in the vocational training component of the project are supported by their main male members (husband, father, or big brother), so that they finalise their training and work in employment or self-employment after the training ends. With this, the approach allowed to decrease the abandonment rate and to increase the integration and transition of opportunities for female graduates transitioning into the world of work. The members of the masculinity groups were mainly motivated through their partners and their own wish to better support them. Many of the members of the groups struggled with the fact that their wives tended to abandon vocational training or employment before. They were motivated to participate in the “husband school” because this helped them to know how to support their wives to avoid their career abandonment.

The masculinity groups did the following activities:

- **Reflection sessions** twice a month's regarding barriers that inhibit them to support their wives, daughters, or younger sisters in their professional development and work.
- **Home visits** to encourage training participants who were about to drop out to continue with the support of their families.
- **Community forum**, once per cycle
- **Other activities** related to the work and employment situation of their wives, depending on the specific situations (e.g. visiting their wives at their vocational training centre; advocacy at employers when they wanted to discontinue employment; collaboration with churches; etc.)

Further, the “husband schools” self-initiated a social solidarity fund, to which every member contributes once a month. This fund is used both for to support members of the group in need, but also for the activities of the group that go beyond what is covered by the project.

The project's main learning are:

- The focus on masculinity and the combination of different formats led to a positive attitude of the masculinity group members towards gender equality, women's empowerment, inclusive leadership and a commitment against GBV.
- Positive masculinities need to be understood also by women, not only by men.

Serious challenges remain: the absence of male role models in certain localities, strong social norms and resistance towards change, and the inability to anchor these groups in state services due to the conflict context and the parallel administration in provinces.

The masculinity group approach had lasting **impacts**: It helped to transform family dynamics by actively involving men in promoting gender equality. There has been reported an improved family cohesion, reduced tensions, and fostered an atmosphere of respect and dialogue within households. Masculinity group members changed towards a largely positive and encouraging attitude toward women's professional choices, and women whose husbands were members of the masculinity groups have successfully integrated into male-dominated professions and contribute to household income. Further, local leaders have adopted and expanded the programme, supporting the masculinity groups in their activities and encouraging other community members to become members in some case.

"My husband has changed. We have become true partners. I am deeply grateful to Swisscontact for this transformation,"

says Pascaline Nsimire, wife of a member of the Birava Husbands' School. Before joining the UPEG training programme, Pascaline's married life was marked by profound inequalities. Her husband behaved like a supreme leader and refused to let her take the training. Despite his opposition, she enrolled in hairdressing classes and persevered. Thanks to the Husband School initiative, her husband gradually changed, moving from authority to understanding. Today, he accompanies her, shares household chores, supports her business and participates in family decisions. This change has transformed their relationship and made him a role model in the community.



"At first, I didn't know that I could sit with my wife and discuss her professional life. She completed training in electricity, but I wouldn't encourage her to look for clients; instead, I tried to block every opportunity where she might find work. Now I understand that I was blocking my family's development and my wife's fulfillment. She didn't even respect me because of this bad behavior. But thanks to this school, I have become the first to get involved and to encourage her to progress in her field. At my workplace, I always ask whether someone is looking for an electrician so I can recommend my wife. And I can already see the results: in our home we now live in an atmosphere of peace, mutual understanding, and respect. I have learned to appreciate her value and skills. I managed to overcome all those social norms that held me back, and now I can serve as a role model for others who are still hesitant."

– Biragi Balolebwami

PROJECT EXPERIENCE

Niger's community networks to defend the importance of vocational training for women and girls

In Niger, women demonstrate significantly lower enrolment rates for vocational training than men. This is the GWANI project's starting point: it promotes a more inclusive and coordinated vocational training system by actively involving both public institutions and private sector actors. The project implemented the masculinity approach in the form of community networks (so-called cadres "cadres communaux") to demonstrate the social and economic benefits of greater equity, to promote and monitor the participation of girls and women in technical training, and to the inclusion of women in technical sectors. These networks are composed of members from all different social groups (traditional chiefs, religious leaders, representatives of persons with disabilities, representatives of community radio stations, technical services, women's groups, as well as the Mayor's Office, which chairs the network).

The communal networks have the aim to promote positive masculinity among leaders, as well as to advocate for gender equality in the mostly rural areas where they are built. They carried out the following activities:

- Organising awareness-raising sessions in communities and neighbourhoods through various channels (community radio stations, markets, families)
- Identifying and monitoring girls and women who have chosen technical courses, often through home visits and in partnership with the training platform, with the aim to avoid dropouts.
- Organising a capitalisation meeting with the support of the project once a year.

The project partnered with local authorities (town halls, mayor), technical services for vocational training (agriculture, livestock farming, vocational training centres), and training centres.

The project's main learnings are:

- Having engaged traditional authorities like chiefs, canton leaders, or imams in awareness efforts has strengthened the legitimacy of positive masculinity.
- The inclusive approach aimed at engaging community and religious leaders, community radio stations, technical partners, women's groups, persons with disabilities, and young people has fostered local ownership.

Serious challenges remain: The absence of female role models who support this change in local communities, as well as religion, which places women in a negative position, makes the work of municipal officials more difficult, and limited financial and logistical resources make it difficult for local officials to carry out their activities (implement their action plans), even if they are motivated to do so.

The project's **impact** is multi-layered, as these communal networks laid the basis for social transformation: The positive masculinity approach has fostered intergenerational dialogue and discussions on gender-based violence and enhanced participants' capacity to engage in conversations and address gender-related issues. The institutionalisation of the committees through town hall decrees has officially created positive masculinity frameworks responsible for organising and raising community awareness of positive masculinity in relation to manual occupations at town halls. Further, the approach led to a gradual normalisation of discourse on gender equality in community spaces, and to a reduction in social resistance thanks to the involvement of recognised male and traditional leaders.

According to Mariama Hamza, 22, from the Urban Commune of Aguié:

"thanks to the community committee's awareness campaign on positive masculinity, I decided to choose the scrap metal industry to get training that would enable me to find a job and serve as an example to other women. With goodwill, jobs traditionally done by men can be accessible and done by women; there are no barriers."

I found the training very interesting. We learned, we were busy, and we were happy to have a job. We disregarded old perceptions about male and female occupations. By embracing this field, we showed others that you have to move forward with determination and commitment. We are convinced that we must break down barriers and move forward.

We were informed about the possibility of employment in these 'male-dominated' sectors such as carpentry, plumbing



and electrical work. So the three of us decided to give it a try. I come from a family where we don't have enough income, so I am confident that even after I get married, I want to continue this activity, perhaps with my husband. I would like to show other women that all you need is determination and not to believe the rumours."



PROJECT EXPERIENCE

Working with couples to increase women's decision-making in agricultural organisations

In rural areas of Benin, women are often excluded from decision-making bodies within agricultural socio-professional organisations, due to socio-cultural constraints and a lack of support from their husbands. This hinders their empowerment and limits family farm performance. "A l'école de mon mari (EDM)" is an initiative to strengthen women's leadership within socio-professional organisations and promote their active role on the farms. The initiative was launched by the Unions Départementales des Producteurs du Borgou et de l'Alibori (UDP-BA), one of the PASDeR project's implementation partners. The masculinity groups approach was implemented as a two-folded approach: on the one hand, it targeted the couples (women and men) who are part of a local agricultural organisation the project works with; on the other hand, there were men-only sessions among these husbands. My Husband's School's approach was gradually rolled out in the communities targeted by PASDeR, drawing on existing local structures and strong community mobilisation. Facilitators, often from the villages themselves, were trained in participatory facilitation, gender issues, positive masculinity and non-violent communication.

The activities of the "École de mon Mari" (My Husband's School) were structured around:

- Awareness-raising and participatory learning sessions led by facilitators trained in gender issues, positive masculinity, and family cohesion;
- Community discussions on social roles, task sharing, parenting, family planning and joint resource management;
- Awareness-raising and financial education sessions led by the same facilitators trained to lead Savings and Credit Groups (SCGs);
- Financing of members' income-generating activities and monitoring of repayments;
- Behavioral monitoring to assess changes in participants' perceptions and practices.

These "husband schools" also function as Savings and Credit Groups. As such, they also benefit from financial education sessions to facilitate women's access to the financial resources necessary for the development of their Income-Generating Activities.

The project's main learnings are:

- Men's involvement is a key lever for women's empowerment and leadership, as progress in female representation is only sustainable when husbands and male leaders are actively involved in the process of social change.
- Structured marital dialogue is more effective than general awareness-raising: The approach based on small groups of model couples, with regular discussions, is more effective than broad but diffuse awareness campaigns.
- Institutionalisation (statutes, rules, quotas) is necessary to consolidate achievements: Awareness-raising alone is not enough: progress is sustainable when it is incorporated into the texts and rules of organisations.

The project had measurable **impacts**: 85% of women report improved marital dialogue, and 70% of participants began sharing decisions about agricultural production and household expenditure, which demonstrates improved relationships within families. 5 local agricultural organisations have enabled women from husbands' schools to access strategic positions in governance bodies, where they now account for 30% of these bodies. With the operation of certain "husband schools" as Saving and Credit Groups, 14,100,000 CFA francs were mobilised as internal savings, of which 9,300,000 francs were used to finance women's income generating activities. Having reached a certain level of financial stability, these "husband schools" were put in touch with decentralised financing systems to open accounts and systematically deposit their assets in these accounts. Over time, they obtained solidarity loans and individual loans for the development of their income generating activities for a total amount of 65,000,000 CFA francs.

Fatouma, 23, a cassava processor and active member of a women's cooperative in the village of Soubado, has seen her life change thanks to her husband's involvement in the initiative. Once opposed to her participation in the



cooperative's activities, Jonas has become her biggest supporter, encouraging her to take on responsibilities. As a result, Fatouma is now the Secretary General of her cooperative. Jonas, 27, says:

"Today, I see this initiative in a positive light and feel committed to promoting behavioural change within my household and community."

Their relationship has improved, as have their communication and family management skills, with positive effects for their children.



We create opportunities

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