**Submission to OHCHR report on**

**Engaging men and boys in preventing and responding to violence against all women and girls**

**Plan International Inc.**

Plan International, Inc. is an independent non-governmental organisation with no religious, political, or governmental affiliations and isin Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC. Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the oldest and largest child rights organisations in the world. We strive to advance children’s rights and equality for girls in both development and humanitarian contexts. Working with children and young people in more than 70 countries around the world, we tackle the root causes of inequality faced by children, especially girls.

Plan International welcomes the forthcoming report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on Engaging men and boys in preventing and responding to violence against all women and girls, and hope that the below information will be useful. Given space limitations, the submission focuses specifically on the **importance of adopting a life cycle approach to engaging men and boys in preventing and responding to violence against women and girls, starting from the earliest age and continuing throughout adolescence and into adulthood.**

# Importance of a life cycle approach

As an organisation committed to realizing the rights of children, and especially working towards equality for girls, Plan International has a unique perspective on the issue of engaging boys and young men in the promotion of gender equality. Plan International firmly believes that breaking the intergenerational cycle of violence and discrimination against girls and women and putting an end to the patriarchal systems that perpetuate inequality require the transformation of social norms from the earliest age.

Attitudes and behaviours about gender roles and expectations are formed at an early age, internalized throughout childhood and adolescence, and made concrete in the transition to adulthood and the world of work. They are then passed on from generation to generation. This is why Plan international is working from early childhood all the way through adolescence and into young adulthood with both boys and girls to combat gender stereotypes, promote positive masculinities, and empower girls.

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| **Overarching recommendations**: Make curricula, starting in early childhood, gender-transformative, eliminating gender stereotypes in curricula; integrate human rights and gender equality into educational curricula and teacher training;  * Incorporate comprehensive sexuality education into school curricula for both children and adolescents, including information on gender equality, violence and sexual abuse;  Support adolescent boys and girls to learn about gender equality, creating safe spaces for them to discuss violence and discrimination, including by integrating comprehensive gender equality modules into school curricula; support youth-led civil society organisations aiming to promote gender equality and women’s rights.Create policies and implement programmes that encourage engagement of fathers in parenting and caretaking, including through parental leave policies. |

# Plan International’s experience in engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality throughout the life cycle

# Early Childhood Development (ECD)

Initiatives to promote girls’ rights and gender equality often pay little attention to early childhood, instead focusing on older girls and adolescents. There is no question that the most significant gender-specific rights violations and gaps usually affect older girls, adolescents and young women. However, there is overwhelming scientific evidence that the first years are the most important years of a child’s life. This is the period in which children learn and are socialized into gendered norms, roles and attitudes. By the time they reach primary school, girls and boys already have a clear idea of how they are expected to behave, how they are valued and what their future role will be. Furthermore, it is increasingly recognized that children form ideas, prejudices and stereotypes from the earliest age, and that discriminatory attitudes and practices are often sown in early childhood.[[1]](#footnote-1)

# Key Learnings and good practices

Plan International’s gender-transformative early childhood development (ECD) programming and policy advocacy aims not only to ensure that girls and boys access the care, support and services they need to survive, grow healthily and develop to their full potential – it also pays specific attention to transforming unequal gendered power relations. When ECD programmes are gender transformative, they engage parents, caregivers, community leaders and educators to change the way that children are taught so that unjust gendered norms and attitudes are challenged from an early age; they work to ensure that girls and boys are provided with equal care and opportunities; they successfully promote men’s support for care work and emotional engagement in the upbringing of their children; and they support women’s rights to health, freedom from violence and empowerment.

Research conducted by Plan International indicates that many ECD programmes are gender-unaware, meaning that they do not take into account gender-based inequalities and discrimination present in early childhood. Without very specific attention to ensure that ECD programmes explicitly address gender inequality and discrimination, such programmes in fact tend to reinforce existing inequality and injustice. For example, educators often reinforce stereotypical gender roles, particularly in interactions with children. Most educators believe their job entails training girls to be women and boys to be men within narrow, culturally prescribed gender roles. Many reinforce feminine and masculine ideals in their interactions with the children. For instance, in Ethiopia, girls were asked to sit near “restless” boys, acting as de facto assistants to educators (thereby detracting from the girls’ own learning). In Uganda, rather than encouraging and supporting girls and boys to play together, boys’ disruptive behaviour was used as an excuse to separate the sexes. Girls were encouraged to use materials and equipment related with traditional gender norms, such as dolls and cooking equipment. Boys dominated the outside play areas, leaving the girls little space to play.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Therefore, Plan International’s approach to promoting gender equality and combating violence against women and girls starts in early childhood. Early childhood development (ECD) programming offers major potential to transform gendered roles and relationships for the promotion of gender equality. This occurs in several ways:

* By ensuring that children do not learn stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes in their first years, but rather learn ways of relating to each other that are not gender-normative and unjust;
* By ensuring that young girls receive equal care and support, and preventing gendered gaps that will have lifelong implications;
* By offering a “safe” entry point to engage and reflect with family members on gendered attitudes, roles and responsibilities;
* Because ECD programmes have secondary positive benefits for older sisters, mothers and the next generation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

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| **Example from Uganda:**  One of the key approaches that Plan International uses to transform unequal gender relations from an early age is engagement of fathers in parenting and caretaking. In Uganda, Plan International is implementing the Community Led Action for Children (CLAC) programme, an Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme that focuses not only on critical practices such as provision of a diverse diet, but includes discussion around maternal well-being and the importance of men’s engagement. The programme is family focused – all mothers and fathers with young children in the community are encouraged to attend a 12 session programme, delivered by trained community facilitators (both male and female) over 6 to 8 months. All sessions emphasise the importance of love and respect – for themselves, their spouses and children. Through interactive activities, including role play, games, parent-child interactions and group problem-solving, parents learn new skills and are assigned ‘homework’ to put these practices into action. Male participants in the programme have shared that through this programme, and by learning the importance of raising children in a stable and peaceful home, they have sought to improve their relationship with their partners, and even stopped beating them. Plan International’s experience is that engagement of fathers in parenting and caretaking has a positive impact at multiple levels: a) fathers themselves begin to transform negative or violent patterns of behaviour towards their female partners; b) children’s wellbeing improves due to increased positive input from fathers and the improved wellbeing of mothers; c) boys are socialised into nonviolent forms of masculinity, and are encouraged to adopt respectful behaviours towards girls and women.[[4]](#footnote-4) |

# The Champions of Change Programme

Plan International’s approach to fostering more positive forms of masculinity amongst boys also targets adolescents. At the global level, Plan International has developed an innovative and comprehensive curriculum to engage boys and empower girls, called ‘Champions of Change’, being implemented in every region in which Plan International works. This programme seeks to engage adolescent boys and girls in critical reflections on gender dynamics. The programme recognizes the importance of working with girls and boys as a key strategy and entry point to changing gender norms and behaviours for the promotion of gender equality and for ending all forms of violence and discrimination against girls and women.

The Champions of Change programme is innovative in its holistic approach. It emphasizes that in order to be sustainable, change must occur in knowledge, attitudes and practices at three levels of society: the individual level, the family/community level, and the institutional level. Through the programme, Plan International also seeks to catalyse a youth-led social movement that challenges existing social norms and gains society-wide support for gender equality and girls' rights. As a first step, girls and boys build their own safe spaces where they can unpack gender inequality and visualise change through a comprehensive set of curricula. As a second step, young people work together to involve their peers and communities, and ultimately to engage duty bearers with their demands. This model presents consistent strategies to bring about change at the individual, collective and society levels, and to build momentum at all levels on gender equality and girls' rights.

# Key learnings and good practices

Through the Champions of Change programme, Plan International has identified a number of key learnings and good practices for the engagement of men and boys in the promotion of gender equality:

**Individual level: Work with boys *as well as* girls**

Plan International believes that girls and boys must work together as allies in the promotion of gender equality. This is why the Champions of Change programme has developed a comprehensive set of curricula for both girls and boys. Taken together, these curricula complement each other. However, girls and boys go through tailored curricula separately and come together for one joint module. Plan International has found that separating girls and boys allows each a safe space to speak transparently about their challenges, experiences of social pressure and gender stereotyping, and to question power and privilege. The curricula prompt a process of reflection amongst participants for shifting rigid gender norms, highlighting their costs and privileges, so as to create more equitable and just personal and social relations to end discrimination.

The girls’ curriculum focuses on empowerment of girls and cultivating sense of self-worth, and is designed to raise awareness of opportunities and barriers for girls' empowerment at the individual, family/community, and institutional levels. It seeks to support the girls in developing the skills they need to embrace and promote change. It is essential to strengthen a girl’s agency and assets, as well as her decision-making ability so that she is empowered to identify patterns of violence and discrimination in her life and speak out against them.

The boys’ curriculum focuses on self-reflection and fostering a true and deep commitment of boys and male youth to gender equality. It is a process of helping them recognise themselves as a part of gender inequality, and to recognise their own privileges and advantages. The curriculum supports young men in promoting gender through individual and collective reflection, helping boys and young men recognise, take ownership of, and multiply inclusive, respectful, egalitarian and non-violent masculinities.

**Family/Community level: Inter-generational dialogue and community engagement:**

Plan International recognises that unequal social structures cannot be changed by changing individual knowledge, attitudes and practices alone. Transformation must also occur at the family and community level. The main objective of Plan International’s programme interventions at the family and community level is to facilitate the building of a social movement that will transform the environment in which boys and girls live, including by changing existing gender norms and practices that drive gender-based violence. For this reason, the Champions of Change programme also supports peer-to-peer actions organized by girls, boys, and youth, promoting intergenerational dialogue and community-level advocacy on gender equality.

**Institutional level: Engagement with state institutions**

It must be emphasized that combating violence against women and girls is first and foremost a State responsibility, and engaging men and boys must not be seen as solely an individual responsibility. Both male and female participants in the Champions of Change programme, are encouraged to engage with civil society organisations, especially with women’s rights organisations, to advocate for legal and policy change. Furthermore, the programme supports capacity development in state institutions to improve their ability to promote gender equality and combat all forms of violence against women and girls.

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| **Testimony from programme participant in Colombia:**  Cristobal[[5]](#footnote-5) is 14 years old and participated in Plan International’s Champions of Change programme in Colombia. In a recent field research project, he shared his reflections around the harmful gender and social norms that exist in his community and how these discriminatory norms have been challenged through the Champions of Change programme.  *“Boys have stereotypes they have learned from their parents because as a boy they cannot play with girls, boys are called gay if they do, and if a girl plays with you she becomes a* machorra *[butch]…Both girls and boys have challenges, but they are harder for girls because people think that since they are girls they are less than men, so men can do anything and girls cannot. They think that girls are weak and that they cannot do anything except house chores.*  *I think these problems exist because of the teachings that our parents give us, sometimes they teach us to be violent with a woman. For example, my mom divorced my dad because he used to beat her a lot – he came drunk, he became aggressive and beat her. I felt bad for my mom because I saw her suffering with bruises on her face, and as I could not do anything for her at that time, I felt a lot of anger and pain….*  *There are always some cases like this in my community but there are always ways to solve things through dialogue…we know now that violence does not take you anywhere because if you use violence for something then it becomes a violent circle.*  *The [Champions of Change] project was very successful because we learned a lot of things. Before we did not know about the roles that men and women play, the stereotypes… We learned values such as respect, tolerance, solidarity and honesty. They taught us the meaning of things and taught us how to challenge and contradict the things that happen in the community.*  *…It is nice to teach others what they do not know and explain what you know so they understand…It reinforced my way of expressing myself to people, knowing what to say and conveying what I learned.*  *…We must break the stereotypes as Champions.”* |

# Comprehensive Sexuality Education throughout the life cycle

Programmes that work to break down stereotypes and violent patterns of masculinities are even more effective when paired with comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) throughout the life cycle. UNESCO has defined CSE as “age-appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sexuality and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgmental information.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The term “comprehensive” emphasises a holistic approach to sex and sexuality, encompassing the full range of information, skills and values to enable children, adolescents and youth to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights, and to make positive decisions about their health and sexuality.

CSE contributes to a range of gender equality outcomes, including transforming harmful gender norms and promoting gender-equitable attitudes – with students more likely to openly express opposition to gender-based violence (GBV).[[7]](#footnote-7) There is increasing evidence to support making CSE part of a holistic approach to preventing and responding to violence against women and girls (VAWG).[[8]](#footnote-8) Studies indicate that CSE can shift harmful notions of masculinity and rigid gender roles and stereotypes.[[9]](#footnote-9) Moreover, CSE can help break the silence about sexual violence and inspire young people who survive violence to seek help.

1. Plan International. *Gender Equality and Early Childhood Development: A review of the linkages*. https://plan-international.org/research-gender-equality-and-ecd-initiatives [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Plan International. *Synthesis Report: Research into gender equality and early childhood development in Eleven Countries in Asia* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plan International. *Gender Equality and Early Childhood Development: A review of the linkages*. 2017. https://plan-international.org/research-gender-equality-and-ecd-initiatives [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Plan International. “Better relationships in Uganda when fathers engage in parenting”. 2017. https://plan-international.org/fathers-support-benefits-maternal-wellbeing-and-child-development [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. UNESCO. *Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Global Review*. 2015. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002357/235707e.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Holden J., Bell E. and Schauerhammer V. *We Want to Learn About Good Love: Findings from a Qualitative Study Assessing the Links Between Comprehensive Sexuality Education and Violence Against Women and Girls.* 2015. Plan International UK and Social Development Direct. www.plan-uk.org/assets/Documents/pdf/We-want-to-learn-about-good-love [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. UNESCO. *Emerging Evidence, Lessons and Practice in Comprehensive Sexuality Education, a global review.* 2015. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002431/243106e.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. World Health Organization (WHO). *Sexual Health, Human Rights and the Law.* 2015. www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual\_health/sexual-health-human-rights-law/en/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)