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## Engaging Men and Boys in Urban Areas

### A learning brief from the Women and Youth Resilience Project (WAYREP)

The Women and Youth Resilience Project (WAYREP) aims to strengthen the resilience of refugee and Ugandan women, girls and youth and reduce gender-based violence (GBV) in Northern Uganda. The project focuses on women and youth at risk of GBV. WAYREP is based on the hypothesis that GBV has two main drivers: gender inequality and poverty.

To enhance gender equal relations at household levels, WAYREP implemented CARE's Role Model Men and Boys (RMMB) approach. The WAYREP team adapted the approach to better fit urban, youth and refugee settings, as it was facing challenges in reaching particularly urban youth.

This learning brief documents WAYREP's multiple engagement strategies including household dialogues, couple seminars, male spaces, and male action groups. It demonstrates the relevance of using both public and private spaces to effectively reach and involve men and boys in discussions on gender-based violence and gender equality. The use of safe male spaces, for example, allows men to openly discuss sensitive topics and challenge harmful gender norms.



### Role Model Men and Boys Methodology

CARE International in Uganda pioneered its Role Model Men and Boys (RMMB) model in 2019. The approach promotes women's empowerment and contributes to ending GBV and to transforming men into agents of change for gender equality. Selected men and boys are supported through a series of training and ongoing accompaniment to strengthen positive forms of masculinity through a personal "journey of transformation". The participants can then become Role Model Men themselves, creating a positive snowball effect. Originally designed for the rural context, the RMMB approach is being increasingly adapted for use in the refugee and other contexts.<sup>1</sup>

### Challenges in urban and refugee contexts

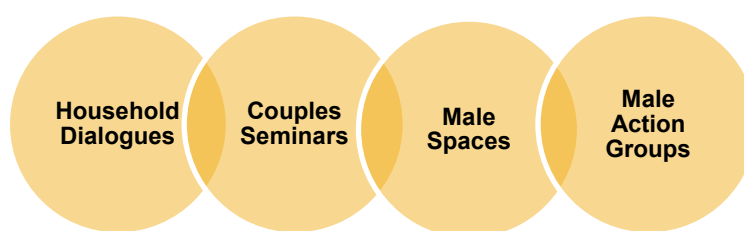
When applying the RMMB approach in the urban context and reaching out to younger men, WAYREP's role model men and boys faced challenges. They realized that it was not sufficient to use household dialogues as their main approach.

<sup>1</sup> [https://careuganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Role-Men-Model-Brief\\_FINAL-Version.pdf](https://careuganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Role-Men-Model-Brief_FINAL-Version.pdf)

Male household members were rarely at home, due to a higher mobility of urban and youth populations and their need to earn a daily living, with some even working in other districts. Similar issues were observed in the refugee communities, where many men frequently traveled to South Sudan, families moved within the camp, and many women were the de facto heads of households. As a result, regular awareness raising activities on GBV reached fewer men in these settings.

Furthermore, many men were reluctant to miss economic or social opportunities for what they considered “women’s issues” or a “waste of time”. Poverty was often cited as a major driver of violence and livelihoods was the first priority for most men. Generally, men and boys were less likely to open up on issues related to violence, compared to women. They were hesitant to show vulnerability or admit knowledge gaps to their partners, communities, or the larger society. Therefore, when RMMB worked with households experiencing GBV, they often interacted mostly with the wives. This, in turn, led to suspicion and mistrust among husbands.

To address this challenge, WAYREP encouraged the RMMB to deliberately adapt and strategically combine the interconnected methods within the RMMB approach to identify and engage men and boys more effectively:



## Impact

WAYREP’s 75 role model men and boys reached a total of 9,091 people, with 70% being men. They mainly supported couples in violent relationships but were also called in other situations, such as intergenerational violence (e.g. in case of an abusive father). The project evaluation and feedback from project participants clearly pointed a to shift towards more gender-equitable behaviors due to the intervention. Men began taking on tasks that were previously considered “feminine,” such as household chores and childcare responsibilities. Violence decreased in the targeted households and participants reported improved communication, collaboration and wellbeing in their families.

**“We walk together, talk and laugh in public which used not to happen. My husband baths the children and cares for them when I am at work. He stopped drinking even when he goes to interact with men in the trading center.”**

Participant from Gulu

## Main Pathways to Engagement

Multilevel recruitment strategies allowed RMMB to reach out to young and urban men more effectively. WAYREP used both private spaces, which offered a safe space for open dialogue, and public spaces, where men typically gather. Household dialogues remained the core of the RMMB’s work, but were complemented by other strategies, depending on the specific situation. These were the four key methods:



### Household Dialogues

In household dialogues, the RMMB invites the members of three households who are in close proximity. They come together to reflect on power dynamics within their homes. These dialogues include not only the couples, but also family members who may have a strong influence in the household, such as the children or other relatives.

RMMB underlined that household dialogues are particularly powerful as they could reach all household members with messages about GVB. With this knowledge, household members were able to remind the couples of these learnings and to hold them accountable in case of future conflicts. Since children are often affected by their parent’s violent behaviors, couples appreciated that the RMMB’s intervention positively impacted not only their relationship as a couple but also the relationships with their children.

**“We learned to create space for dialogue and address issues amicably without violence. There is happiness in the home because we can communicate peacefully and joke and play with the children.”**

Participant from Gulu



## Couples Seminars

Couple Seminars offer a safe and confidential space for dialogue between and among couples living in violent relationships. RMMB invite several couples from a community to share their experiences, bringing together those who have begun their journey of transformation and those who are still struggling with GBV. The couple seminars provide an opportunity for open communication, mutual support and shared learning.

Participants appreciated the opportunity to exchange on intimate issues and relationship challenges with other couples and to explore topics they usually would not discuss. Unlike other spaces, no family nor community members were present, allowing couples to open up more easily. They realized that other couples were facing similar challenges – and that some had found ways to manage them. Since both spouses were supposed to attend together, men felt more compelled to participate compared to other types of meetings like household dialogues. Though some remained initially hesitant, most of the couples acknowledged the positive impact after attending. Generally, couple seminars were very well perceived and often attracted more participants than originally invited. From these seminars, couples who had undergone transformation were identified and prepared to support peers seeking help in their own processes of change.

**“Culturally, we don’t talk about our problems because we believe it gives an opportunity for one to abuse you. From the couple seminar, I learned sharing a problem is partly to solve it because you share the anger, and pain reduces.”**

Participant from Gulu



## Male Spaces

RMMB engaged with men and boys in their usual gathering places, such as boda boda stations (motorcycle taxi stands), bars, trading centers, video halls or football games. In these settings, they initiated discussions on GBV and gender issues, offering support and identifying individuals with violent behavior. If they had been unable to meet a husband at home, RMMB would sometimes follow up with men in these spaces.

Even though it was difficult to approach people individually in these spaces, they provided crucial opportunities to raise awareness about GBV and to offer the RMMB’s services. In male-only spaces, RMMB could tailor their messages to this particular target group, making it easier to talk about masculinities and GBV. In some cases, men requested the RMMB to return and address specific topics, often those they felt were not explored elsewhere. Moved by the messages, some men and boys shared their telephone numbers with RMMB, reached out to them later, or even invited them to their homes. Once the interest was sparked, RMMB would schedule a meeting in the household or a one-on-one conversation. One RMMB even shared the examples of a visitor from another parish, who was so eager to hear more that he stayed for 2 weeks to be able to learn more.

Generally, male spaces provided opportunities to reach large and diverse groups of men and boys. Enjoying their spare time, they were more willing to listen and share with peers. Organized spaces like boda boda stations or marketplaces were particularly accessible. In these locations, the RMMB could establish contacts through the chairpersons and engage more systematically. They could agree on suitable timings, identify topics of interest and provide customized inputs. Football matches were good occasions to disseminate messages to a broader audience. Bars, however, were more challenging spaces, as some men were drunk and aggressive. Yet, a few men from these spaces later approached RMMB for their advice.

**“When you start the conversations, many will argue with you. Keep calm and handle them with care. Respond to all their questions because some will take the message and approach you later for support on their situation. Men do not easily share personal issues in public.”**

Role Model Men



## Male Action Groups

Male Action Groups (MAG) consist of about 10 men and boys who meet regularly as part of their journey of transformation. Together, they explore issues related to healthy relationships, family well-being, gender equality, and livelihoods. MAG members are identified by Role Model Men and Boys and are invited to engage in ongoing conversations. They are men and boys with whom the RMMB has previously worked and who started to change. As peers, they share challenges they face in their households. As role model couples, they reach out to violent men, boys and households that experience conflicts, offering support and guidance.

MAGs were a relatively easy audience for the RMMB, being male-only and voluntary. They helped to amplify the RMMB's work by reaching out to other men or couples in their communities. MAG members shared their learnings and addressed cases of violence. Occasionally, they also welcomed new members in their group who were interested to join. Local leaders recognized MAGs for their exemplary behavior and their support to other men in the community.

**“We plan to continue with the way we are living, happily supporting each other, planning together. And also we want to continue being models to other community members. We want to live an exemplary life so that people learn from us. Whenever we are with other couples, we go and support them. That is our plan.”**

Role Model Couple from Gulu

## Lessons Learned

**It is good practice to utilize both public and private spaces to engage men and boys and to ensure their ongoing involvement.** Public spaces are effective for initial engagements, while private spaces facilitate deeper, more impactful discussions. RMMB successfully used a comprehensive set of approaches - ranging from following men and boys to their workplace or hang-out areas, to working through family, friends and local leaders, to combining the various outreach methods outlined in the RMMB approach.

**Local knowledge and networks are essential in identifying the most effective and suitable approach to engage men and boys.** In WAYREP, this was achieved by selecting Role Model Men and Boys from the communities, who were respected for their ability to handle even the most challenging cases. They worked closely with local leaders, including Local Councils 1, community and religious leaders, and other community-based structures, such as community change agents who supported their work.

**It is important to create safe and confidential male-only spaces.** Harmful gender norms can also be perpetuated by representations of masculinity that discourage expressing weakness, sadness, or pain. Men and boys benefited from sharing experiences and emotions in all-male spaces. These spaces provided a comfortable setting for men to ask sensitive questions, share their struggles and seek solutions. RMMB worked with men to voice their concerns and offered possible solutions for difficult family situations. This environment allowed men and boys to learn how to talk about their experiences and emotions openly.

**Introducing relevant, often sensitive topics that are not commonly addressed elsewhere helps to raise the interest of men and boys to engage with the RMMB and to talk about masculinities and GBV.** In their outreach activities, RMMB covered issues including intimacy, sex, personal hygiene, communication, (un)healthy relationships, drug abuse or even finances. These subjects are rarely explored in the communities, creating a unique opportunity for men and boys to engage in meaningful discussions.

**RMMB do not work in isolation.** Often, before RMMB are called to a case, others, such as friends, family members, or local leaders have already tried to assist the couple. Individual circumstances encouraged men and boys to open up and accept the need for change. Participants noted that personal events, such as the death of a father, the birth of a child or illness, often triggered reflections and readiness for change. In these instances, RMMB acted as important enablers, supporting men in initiating and sustaining change, and accompanying them throughout their journey of transformation. The continuous presence of an external person like the RMMB, who consistently challenged their attitudes and behaviors, was an important aspect of this process.

**Continuous training, exchange meetings and mentorship was essential for the RMMB's work.** They developed relevant communication and negotiations skills, allowing them to engage effectively with individuals who were older, more educated, or even violent. Yet, targeting such persons remained a challenge for many RMMBs. Regular reflection meetings and contextualized IEC materials, tailored to the local language and culture, facilitated their engagement.

**Despite their successes and the respect they have earned in the communities, RMMB face backlash for continuously challenging rigid and discriminatory gender norms.** Peer and learning exchanges, as well as safety and security sessions are important for supporting the RMMB's work. These activities help address challenges, foster their wellbeing and maintain their effectiveness.

## Moses and Milly's Journey of Transformation

Moses and Milly have been together for 11 years. They have 3 children. In the community, Moses was always known as a heavy drinker. Their home was filled with frequent quarrels and physical abuse. Especially after he had lost his job, disputes about money were a frequent trigger for violence. While he drowned his frustration in alcohol, Milly struggled to provide for the family. Even interventions from local authorities and family members failed to bring about change. Moses did not accept that he was doing something wrong. Thus, the transformation of Moses and Milly's relationship came as a surprise to the community,

All started when Milly joined a Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) in 2021. Through the VSLA, she learned about Gender-Based Violence and effective communication skills. The group also provided support during violent incidents and recommended her for skills training, leading to Milly opening a hair salon.

A significant breakthrough occurred when Milly attended a couple seminar organized by a Role Model Man (RMM). With a little trick, she convinced Moses to attend subsequent seminars, which proved transformative for their relationship. The seminars taught them about forgiveness, appreciation, and the importance of sharing problems. Moses understood that "if you have problem, at least you have to share with your friend. You don't have to remain inside your home, quarrelling all the time. I realized that it is good to share a problem with a friend."

The Role Model Man became such a friend. Even though, culturally, you do not expose painful stories to others, Moses opened up to him. After all the different persons that had already approached them, "the most I responded to was the role model man because, you know, when a new person really advises you, you feel like, really what you're doing is out of hand." Throughout the journey of transformation, the Role Model Man kept visiting them. The couple learned to communicate better, respect each other, and work together.

Neighbors noticed dramatic changes. Moses helped with household chores and the couple spent quality time together. Their improved relationship positively impacted their children, who became more relaxed and opened up to their parents. The couple has joint plans for the future, including building a semi-permanent home and improving their individual businesses.

Moses has joined a Male Action Group where men exchange about challenges that they are facing. This helps him to continue his personal growth and to avoid falling back into old habits, such as alcohol and fighting. Moreover, Moses is planning to get traditionally and officially married to Milly. Their VSLA group plans to support the wedding, as it can provide additional accountability and will reinforce the positive changes in their relationship.

Milly and Moses are now seen as role models in their community. They encourage other couples to attend seminars and seek help when needed. In the future, they plan to continue supporting other couples and living an exemplary life. The community, including the local council leader, has noticed and praised their transformation.



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