

# 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) aimed to strengthen the resilience of refugee and Ugandan women, girls and youth by reducing gender-based violence (GBV) in Northern Uganda. The project focused on addressing gender inequality and poverty among women and girls, which are significant factors contributing to GBV.

To promote gender equal relations within household, WAYREP implemented CARE's Role Model Men and Boys (RMMB) approach. The WAYREP team adapted this approach to better suit urban, youth and refugee contexts, as they encountered challenges in engaging the urban youth effectively.

This learning brief outlines WAYREP's various engagement strategies, which include

household dialogues, couple seminars, male spaces, and male action groups. It demonstrates the importance of using both public and private spaces to reach and involve men and boys in discussions about gender-based violence and gender equality. The use of safe male spaces 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, contributes to ending GBV and transforms men into agents of change for gender equality. Selected men and boys are participate in a series of training sessions and receive ongoing support 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>



<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)

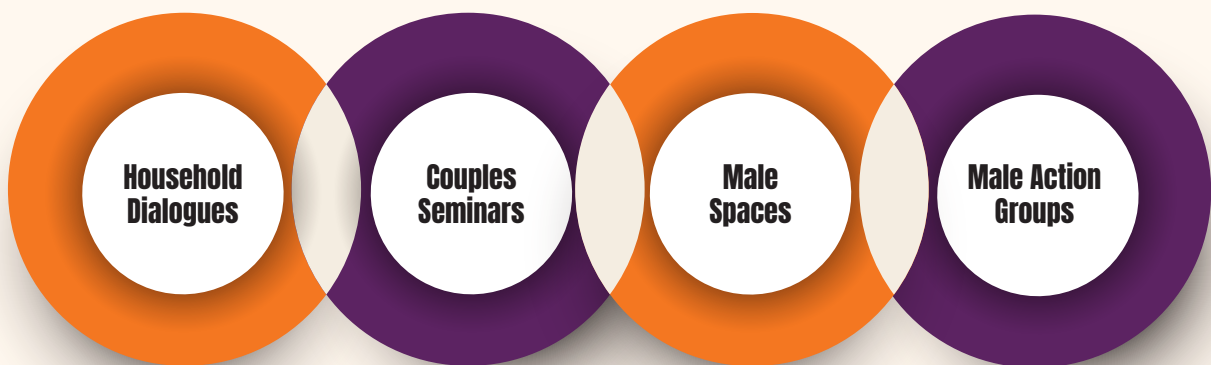
## Challenges in urban and refugee contexts

Male household members were often not at home due to the higher mobility of urban and youth populations, and their demands of earning a daily living, with some even working in other districts. Similar situations were observed in the refugee communities, where many men frequently traveled to South Sudan, families moved within the camp, and numerous women assumed the role of primary heads of households. Consequently, regular awareness raising activities on GBV reached fewer men in these settings.

Additionally, many men were hesitant to address what they considered as “women’s issues” or view activities related to these as a “waste of time. They often feared that engaging in such discussions would lead to missed economic or social opportunities. Poverty was

frequently cited as a major driver of violence, and most men prioritized their livelihoods above everything. Generally, men and boys were less likely to discuss issues related to violence, compared to women. They often felt uncomfortable showing vulnerability or admitting a lack of knowledge to their partners, communities, or society at larger. As a result, 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 different methods within the RMMB approach to 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 cases involving an abusive father). The project evaluation and feedback from project participants clearly indicated a shift towards more gender-equitable behaviors as a result of the intervention. Men began take on tasks previously considered “feminine,” such as household chores and childcare responsibilities. Violence decreased in the targeted households and participants reported improved communication, collaboration and overall 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*

## Role Model Men and Boys Methodology

Multilevel recruitment strategies allowed RMMB to effectively reach young and urban men. WAYREP used both private spaces, which offered safe environments for open dialogue, and public spaces, where men typically gather. Household dialogues remained the core of the RMMB's work, supplemented by other strategies, tailored to specific situation. These four key methods were essential to the approach.

### Household Dialogues

In household dialogues, facilitated by RMMB, members from three nearby households come together to discuss power dynamics within their homes. These discussions not only include couples, but also family members who may have a significant influence such as children and other relatives.

RMMB emphasizes that these household dialogues are particularly effective because they can convey messages about GVB to all household members. With this understanding, members are empowered to remind the couples of the lessons learned and can hold them accountable in case of future conflicts. Since children are often affected by their parents' 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 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 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, the 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 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 Man

## 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.

Male-only and voluntary MAGs were a relatively easy audience for the RMMB to pass the message. These offered a cascading effect where they amplified 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 in joining them. Local leaders recognized MAGs for their exemplary behavior and their support

*“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

01 **Public and private spaces key for effective men and boys’ engagement:** Public spaces, such as community centers or marketplaces, are ideal for initial outreach and awareness-building, while private spaces, like workplaces or social gatherings, facilitate more in-depth and meaningful conversations. A comprehensive approach, as demonstrated by RMMB, combines targeted outreach strategies, including meeting men and boys in their

workplaces or social areas, leveraging family and friend networks, and engaging local leaders, to ensure sustained involvement and impactful discussions that drive transformative change.

02 **Leveraging local knowledge and networks key for an impactful man and boys’ engagement:** WAYREP’s successful approach involved identifying and partnering with respected Role Model Men and

Boys from the community, who worked collaboratively with local leaders and community-based structures like change agents. By tapping into existing social capital and trust, these local champions helped tailor interventions to community needs, ensuring culturally sensitive and impactful engagement that drives meaningful change.

- 05 **Creating safe, confidential male-only spaces is vital for challenging harmful gender norms and fostering emotional expression.** Traditional masculinity norms often suppress vulnerability, but all-male spaces enable men and boys to share experiences, emotions, and struggles without judgment. Our experience with RMMB shows that these spaces facilitate sensitive discussions, anonymous questioning, and collective problem-solving, empowering men to redefine masculinity, address family challenges, and develop emotional intelligence.
- 06 **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.
- 07 **Role Model Men and Boys (RMMB) are most effective when integrated into existing support**

**networks, leveraging personal crises or life events as catalysts for change.** We learned that men and boys often require a catalyst, such as a personal crisis or significant life event, to prompt reflection and readiness for change. RMMB successfully leveraged these moments to facilitate transformative journeys, providing sustained guidance and challenge to entrenched attitudes and behaviors. This collaborative, community-based approach acknowledges the interplay between individual circumstances and broader social influences, highlighting the importance of tailored, supportive interventions for lasting impact.

- 08 **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 people remains a challenge for many RMMBs. Regular reflection meetings and contextualized IEC materials, tailored to the local language and culture, facilitated their engagement.
- 09 **Investing in RMMB support and protection ensures their continued advocacy for transformative change, ultimately strengthening gender equality efforts.** We learned that Role Model Men and Boys (RMMB) who challenge harmful gender norms may face backlash, despite their community respect and successes. To mitigate risks and sustain effectiveness, supportive measures are crucial.

## Moses and Milly's Journey of Transformation

Moses and Milly have been together for 11 years and have three children. In their community, Moses was known as a heavy drinker. Their home was often filled with quarrels and incidents of physical abuse. These disputes frequently escalated after he lost his job, with arguments about money often triggering the violence. While Moses drowned his frustrations in alcohol, Milly struggled to provide for the family. Despite attempts by



local community authorities and family members to intervene, no lasting change occurred. Moses refused to acknowledge that he was doing anything wrong. Therefore, the transformation of their relationship came as a surprise to the community.

The change began 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 not only provided support during violent incidents but also recommended her for skills training, which enabled her to open a hair salon.

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

The Role Model Man became a valuable friend, and despite cultural norms discouraging the sharing of painful stories, Moses felt comfortable opening up to him. He said, "The most I responded to was the Role Model Man because when a new person really advises you,

you feel like what you're doing is out of hand." Throughout their journey of transformation, the Role Model Man continued to visit them. The couple learned to communicate better, respect one another, and work together.

Neighbors noticed dramatic changes. Moses began helping with household chores, and the couple started spending quality time together. Their improved relationship had a positive impact on their children, who became more relaxed and open with their parents. The couple made joint plans, including building a semi-permanent home and enhancing their individual businesses.

Moses joined a Male Action Group where men share their challenges. This group has been instrumental in his ongoing personal growth and in helping him avoid old habits, such as alcohol use and fighting. Furthermore, Moses plans to get traditionally and officially married to Milly. Their VSLA group intends to support the wedding, which will provide additional accountability and 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 while living exemplary lives. Their transformation has caught the attention of the entire community, including the local council leader, who has praised their progress.



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