Men, Masculinities and the Pandemic
A New Roadmap to Programming

This consultation report has been produced in collaboration with 15 organisations working with young men and boys in Uttar Pradesh.

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INTRODUCTION

As an immediate response to the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis in India, the central government declared a nationwide lockdown on 22nd March 2020 that extended until 18th May, 2020. Survey-based research studies conducted in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of the lockdown documented the impact of these policy decisions and response measures on development programmes across the country.[12] As reported by development professionals in these studies, social distancing protocols, travel restrictions, school and university closures, and work from home measures impacted programme design and delivery in myriad ways. COVID-19 crisis necessitated significant shifts in the thematic focus and priorities within ongoing work. Along with timelines, strategies and models for outreach, engagement, feedback and monitoring and evaluation, all required re-planning and change. TYPF's participants, and their communities and programmes that engaged them were impacted in similar ways. On-ground implementation had to be halted, and interventions in Delhi with migrant communities were scaled down as many families including adolescents had to leave Delhi. From May 2020 onwards, curricula and implementation modalities were modified to take up online engagement based on phones, WhatsApp and Zoom calls. We also re-designed curricula to include AV resources.

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1 Deloitte. (2020, October). Social response to COVID-19 : Roadmap to recovery through development and CSR initiatives.https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/in/Documents/about-deloitte/in-about-deloitte-covid-19-response-document-indias-development-sector-noexp.pdf

2 Development sector : Adapting to the new ecosystem in the COVID-19 era. (2021, March). WE Communication. https://we-worldwide-arhxo0vh6d1oh9i0c.stackpathdns.com/media/450023/avian-we-social-impact-whitepaper_digital_03152021.pdf

Outreach and field staff reported an increase in many other concerns during the lockdown period. There were multiple cases of domestic violence and harassment reported by programme participants, seeking legal, financial, and psychosocial support for themselves. Cases of adolescents and young people facing violence from community members while attempting to meet their partners also increased. Many adolescents and young people reached out for support in accessing SRHR products and services especially sanitary napkins, Emergency Contraceptive Pills (ECPs), and abortion services. Field workers shared the need for mental health support to deal with burnout and stress resulting from dealing with community issues on a daily basis. During the enforcement of lockdown, incidences of caste based discrimination in communities were highlighted by field facilitators while discussing the impact of COVID on communities. Across April-June, 2020 we took up specific COVID related scoping of community needs, and were able to allocate resources to support relief activities for communities in crisis during the lockdown period.[3]

On ground situations and programme implementation challenges particularly around violence, and access to SRH services indicated a need for redesigning existing programming and interventions with young men and boys in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

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[3]The YP Foundation. (2020). Youth Insight : Informing COVID-19 relief and response with young people's experiences.

TYPF's earlier research and engagement with young men and boys in Uttar Pradesh had shown a need for programme designs that address the intersecting realities of gender, sexuality, caste, class, religion and ability. This background also emphasised the need for us to understand the impact of the pandemic on programming with young men and boys more comprehensively, which would take into account the diverse realities of their lives.

This research study to document and analyse the impact of COVID-19 on 17 development organizations engaging young men and boys on issues of gender, livelihoods, health, education and WASH in Uttar Pradesh emerged from this experience. It presents a mapping of the situation and puts forward recommendations for moving forward more concretely and collaboratively. While the findings emerging from the research have been recorded in a detailed report separately, this document consists of a brief summary of the same as well as a set of collaboratively created recommendations by 15 organizations who participated in the research consultation organized on 31st August, 2021.

MEN, MASCULINITIES AND THE PANDEMIC: A RESEARCH STUDY

Background

TYPF's study on the impact of COVID-19 on development programmes engaging young men and boys employed a qualitative research design. We reached out to 17 organisations in Uttar Pradesh to conduct online in-depth interviews to understand the impact of COVID-19 from multiple perspectives based on the experiences of managerial staff as well as fieldworkers. These different perspectives were important to us, as on one hand, fieldworkers were able to observe and report the emerging issues in the communities more acutely, given that they were in touch with the participants in their programmes throughout the lockdown period and beyond. On the other hand, managerial staff were more in touch with programmatic decisions and adaptations being made at the time.

The study included organizations working on a wide variety of issues across U.P. in both urban and rural areas. While the findings are not completely generalizable, broad patterns emerging in this analysis might be able to inform programmes about the approaches that would help in building effective future interventions. The table below elaborates on the thematic diversity of the organisations interviewed for the research.

Organizations (working on themes of gender, masculinities, livelihoods, education, health, nutrition and sanitation)	Location(s)
Aanchal	Saharanpur
Asian Bridge India (Ek Saath)	Banaras
Astitva Samajik Sanstha	Muzaffarnagar
Awadh Peoples Forum (Ek Saath)	Ayodhya
Badlav	Lucknow
Breakthrough	Pan UP
Disha Foundation	Jaunpur
GPS Azamgarh (Ek Saath)	Azamgarh
Gramaya Santha	Banaras
HCL Foundation	Noida, Lucknow
Majdur Khadan Union	Mirzapur
Project Khel	Lucknow
PSI	Pan UP
Sahyog India (Ek Saath) in partnership with Samarth Foundation	Hamirpur
Tarun Chetna Samiti (Ek Saath)	Pratapgarh
Vigyan Foundation	Pan UP
WAYVE Foundation	Pan UP

Summary of the Research Findings

Most organisations responded to the immediate effects of the COVID-19 crisis and subsequent nationwide lockdown by distributing ration, spreading COVID-19 related awareness, setting up health desks, and responding to **increasing GBV in the communities by setting up helplines, assisting community members in filing FIRs, and engaging in conflict resolution.**

They were careful and sensitive to the mental health needs of their participants by remaining in touch with the communities throughout the lockdown and organising fun activities on virtual platforms to serve as a medium for stress relief and distraction.

In many cases, relief work performed by the organisations during COVID-19 strengthened their relationship with the communities.

"During the first wave of COVID-19, we started to distribute [ration]. It is a poor area, and a lot of people had difficulty with food. The situation was so bad, that till now people are coming to ask our organisation for food. This became a way for people to begin recognizing our work in the area." – Field Worker

Challenges and Emerging Needs

Based on our interviews with participants, challenges in continuation of work during the COVID-19 crisis, can be categorised into 5 areas as below.

1. Adapting to Online Engagements

Lack of access to smartphones or laptops, along with unstable mobile network in the villages, made it difficult for organisations to conduct online meetings. Mapping the interest of participants who joined online meetings and sessions also proved difficult for similar reasons. Some organisations also reported that enforcement of strict timelines by funders necessitated conducting monitoring and evaluation processes of some of the programmes online or via phone calls.

In contrast, organisations working in urban Uttar Pradesh reported better access to technology and gadgets in their communities. For these organisations, their programme participants seemed to be at the forefront of leading the shift of programmatic engagement to online platforms. For example, two organizations reported shifting to TikTok during the lockdown through the help of their participants, who were already well-versed with the application. These organizations with adequate funds, operating in multiple locations in U.P, reported their plan to invest in the creation of websites or phone applications to build more sustainable online engagements which are accessible to a more diverse population in the future.

2. Ensuring Participant Engagement and Combating Drop-Outs

Participant dropouts were a common phenomenon for organisations prior to the COVID-19 crisis as well, owing to the migration patterns of men in their communities induced by the need to find jobs. The lockdown exacerbated this phenomenon because of the enormous losses of income and employment experienced by young men and boys during this time. Initially, reverse migration from cities during the lockdown created pools of participants for programmes being implemented in rural areas. However, the presence of these populations was only perceived as short-lived and shifting. Migrant workers, too, were unwilling to engage with the organisations as they believed that this engagement would always only be in the short-term, till the economy would start functioning again and they could resume their jobs in the cities.

"After the lockdown, when participants started going out, they were constantly working or trying to find work. Basically they were putting in efforts to reimburse the loss they incurred during the lockdown. That is why participants do not accommodate their time for meetings now. For example, we asked rickshaw pullers for a meeting but they are unable to devote much time as they are constantly working." - Coordinator

It must be noted that while all organisations reported high rates of drop-outs in their programmes, the rate of drop-outs in the masculinities and gender related programmes were higher as compared to drop-outs in programmes working on other issues. Organisations reported three main reasons for this pattern. Gender and masculinities programmes shifted to online engagement, which was beset with technical issues. Secondly, the break in between the implementation of the programme necessitated refresher sessions which the participants often found repetitive and boring, leading to lower rates of attendance. Lastly, the need to find and sustain livelihood was priority leading to disengagement of the participants from the programmes.

3. Addressing Emerging Issues Through Thematic Expansion

Organisations working on water, sanitation and education in particular reported an interest in diversifying their thematic focus and engagement groups, as the multitudinous impact of COVID-19 necessitated a more holistic response. Similarly, organisations working on issues of livelihood, education and health emphasised the need to work on issues of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) including menstrual health, family planning and abortion with adolescent boys and girls in their communities. Organizations implementing gender-focused programmes acknowledged the need to work on mental health issues, given the adverse impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of their participants and communities during lockdown. However, lack of knowledge, perspective, and technical skills on mental health made it difficult for them to work or engage on this issue.

4. Reversing Differential Impact of COVID-19 on Marginalised Communities

Along with the recognition of the need to diversify thematic focuses, organisations also recognised that the impact of COVID-19 on their participants was differential, owing to the different identity positions of the participants. This was particularly observed in the engagement with groups of migrant workers, Dalit, and Muslim participants. The reluctance on the part of migrant workers to engage in labour in the villages, the loss of livelihood opportunities for Dalit workers, and the strengthening of islamophobia in the communities during the first wave of COVID-19 crisis were some instances of the specific social impact of the COVID 19 crisis.

"During ration distribution, we saw that two queues were formed where people of the marginalised caste were standing separately from the people of the upper caste. When we confronted this issue, we were told that this discrimination is necessary because of different living conditions. Such encouragement of caste-based discrimination was questioned by us throughout the lockdown." - Coordinator

Organizations reported that attempts to address caste and religion in the sessions before and during the COVID-19 crisis were often fraught with tension. According to the research participants, the physical or virtual space of session facilitation brings many participants from different identities from the same communities in a common space. In the experience of the organisations in the past, this space can become violent as participants from dominant communities often engage in verbal abuse or bullying against participants from marginalised communities. If the session facilitators intervene, they are labelled as 'outsiders', not in touch with the realities of the field. During COVID-19, organisations had observed the strengthening of stigma against marginalized groups in their communities in tandem with the vilification of marginalised groups in mainstream media.[5] This highlighted the need for organisations to address this issue in sessions with the participants. However, adverse experiences of attempting to talk about caste or religion related stigma in the past as mentioned above, discouraged organisations from engaging with this issue.

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5 Veeraraghav, S. (2020). No Lockdown on Caste Atrocities. Dalits Human Right Defenders Network (DHRDNet).

6 Vetticad, A. M. (2020, May 15). Indian media accused of Islamophobia for its coronavirus coverage. Breaking News, World News and Video from Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/15/indian-media-accused-of-islamophobia-for-its-coronavirus-coverage

5. Finding and Sustaining Channels of Funding

Organizations that worked in only one or two districts felt that the new amendments to FCRA worked against them. While they believed that FCRA would allow them to open and maintain a bank account, they also felt that they would be getting lesser funds in the future as subgranting was outlawed, and their older channels of funding through organisations receiving foreign funds were in peril. Organizations also shared the need to divert programmatic funds in order to meet the immediate ration and medical needs of communities. Overall, the pressure of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, the changes in the FCRA rules, and the concomitant shifts in funding landscapes occuring at the same time presented as a significant challenge for the organisations.

These reflections from the research study presented various questions on future programming with men and boys that needed more in-depth discussions:

How can programmes engaging young men and boys be made more intersectional? What kind of networks and collaborations are needed for more resilient programme designs? Can online implementation strategies work in the longer term? Is direct research with young men and boys needed to further understand the impact of COVID-19 on their lives?

These questions formed the basis for the consultation that was organized with the same set of organizations to co-create a general roadmap for future programming with men and boys across various themes.

Improving funding models for more resilient and sustainable programming

Exploring new and collaborative models of fundraising

Improving collaboration between organisations to support learning and growth

Developing consultative policy frameworks to upscale work with men and boys

Enhancing organisational ability to address multiple needs and expertise on diverse issues

Building deeper relationships between organisations, men and communities

NAYI SOCH NAYA KAAM:
A ROADMAP

Findings from the research demonstrated an urgent need to strengthen linkages between development work on various thematics of livelihoods, education, health, gender, and WASH. They also highlighted the need to create and sustain collaborative spaces to facilitate regular exchange of information, knowledge, successful strategies and best practices from the field. With conversation and connection making emerging as a dominant need, we felt that analysing the findings to develop a set of recommendations should be the first platform to initiate this process. With that in mind, a convening of 24 representatives from 15 organisations[7] was held on 31st August, 2021 with the aim of developing a roadmap for the future collaboratively. The event was a half-day online convening, with participation from representatives of the organisations interviewed for the research. The consultation had multiple sessions designed to facilitate conversations on the need for intersectional programming with young men and boys, the emergence of new issues during COVID-19 crisis which need to be addressed in programming, and conversations on the work of government, funding and network related stakeholders. The next section details the deliberations based on the findings as the way forward.

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[7] Asian Bridge India, GPS Azamgarh, Sahyog India (in partnership with Samarth Foundation), Awadh Peoples Forum, Tarun Chetna Samiti, WAYVE Foundation, Project Khel, Breakthrough, Astitva Samajik Sanstha, Gramaya Santha, HCL Foundation, Majdur Khadan Union, Vigyan Foundation, Disha Foundation, Aanchal.

Towards More Resilient Programming

At the end of this process, the following roadmap emerged that can potentially inform any programming with young men and boys across various issues:

I. DEEPER COMMUNITY RELATIONS TO ENSURE ENGAGEMENT DURING CRISIS

The pandemic exacerbated many related issues such as caste and communal tensions, as well as livelihood and sustenance, testing the ability of existing engagements to tide over the same to provide support. The participants discussed how a stronger connection with communities can help in taking up contentious and difficult issues, address intersections of a disaster identity and context based vulnerabilities and help navigate backlash by building trust.

What we can do:

- Undertaking **further primary research to study** the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of young men and boys by directly engaging in conversations with them. This can also be done collaboratively by organizations working on various issues of GBV, SRHR, livelihoods, education, sanitation etc. to gather more holistic information and insights about men's lives along multiple identities which could in turn inform specific intervention designs more comprehensively.

- Building **long term relationships with the communities** to enable addressing caste and religious tension directly without the tension that emerged during the COVID-19 crisis when facilitators and field workers were perceived as 'outsiders'. As one organisation suggested, events that are hosted with community stakeholders to facilitate dialogue on gender-related issues could be expanded to include conversations on issues related to caste and religion.

- Possibilities of building **cross-organisational fellowship models** for young men and boys could be explored to build deeper engagements on intersecting issues of gender, sexuality, livelihoods, education etc. This would also financially support cohorts of young men who find it difficult to sustain their engagement as volunteers due to the pressure of earning early.

- Strengthening **youth networks within communities** to ensure active and long-term participation by men and boys, even in times of crisis. This can also be achieved by combining learning and recreational activities such as games, food fests, nature walks etc. Participation in activities beyond immediate programme efforts such as organizing disaster relief collectively, also helps in building a sense of collaboration and responsibility among young men.

II. FACILITATING LEARNING EXCHANGES TO ADDRESS PARTICIPANT NEEDS BETTER

"Firstly, we need to recognise the identities we want to work with and we should build the understanding, knowledge and perspective of our organisational staff on these identities. It is only when we work collaboratively that we will be able to address these issues!"

All organisations interviewed had expressed interest in working on and increasing their capacities on one or more thematics beyond their organisational focus, given the emerging issues in the communities. These thematics were related to SRHR, mental health, livelihoods, education, health and caste and religion based discrimination.

What we can do:

- **Cross-sharing of resource materials** and stories of change and role models emerging in different areas of Uttar Pradesh in order to support network members in carrying forth work with young men and boys on a diverse range of issues.

- **Organising cross-learning visits** to be able to observe the work of different organisations in order to gain insights into this work being implemented across different contexts and geographies, and sharing **technical expertise** by organising sessions with resource persons from different organisations could be helpful in building staff capacities to engage on issues beyond their own thematic areas.
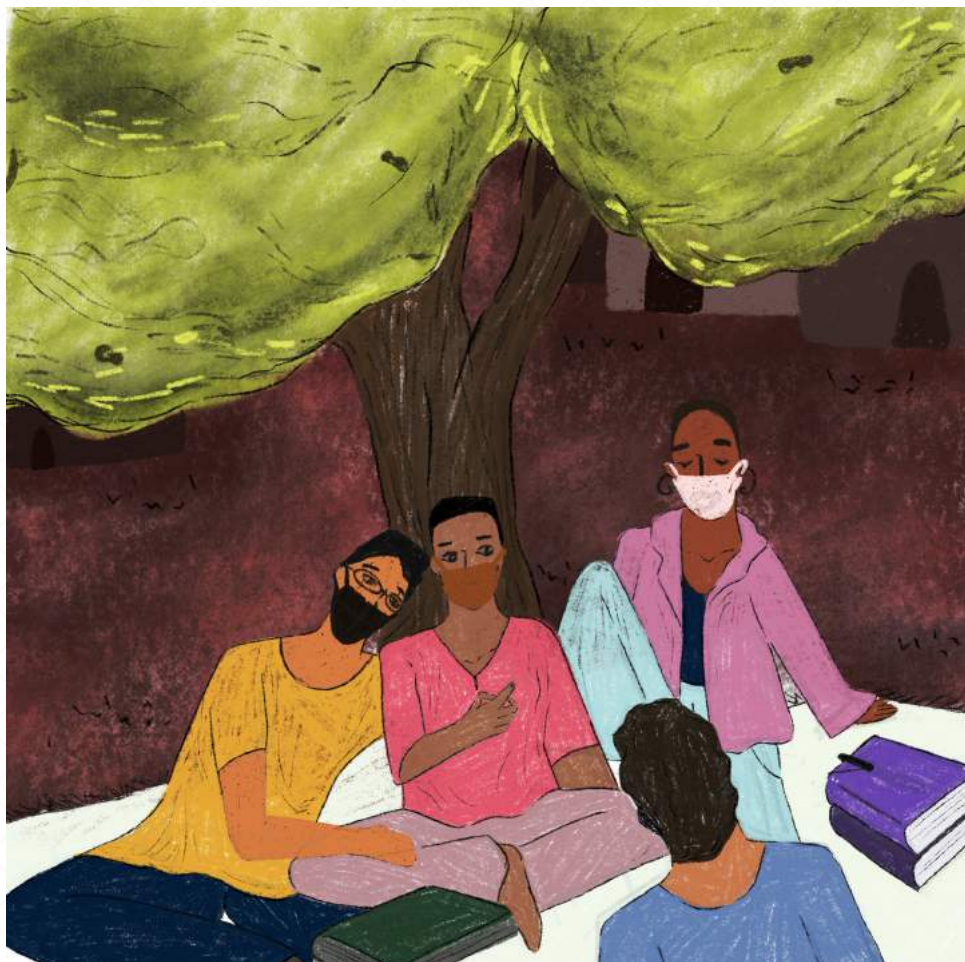
III. EXPANDING NETWORKS FOR WIDER DIALOGUES AND SHARING

"There are a lot of organisations with connections to much bigger networks and platforms in this forum. These types of forums can help in strengthening connections between organisations to help in addressing and amplifying awareness on issues of discrimination, stereotype, gender, caste or religion."

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There is a need for existing organisational networks to broaden their current compositions to reach out to multiple stakeholders and influencers in their communities and areas of work, especially youth organisations and networks. This would address the challenge organisations experienced in retaining participant engagement during COVID-19, by centering youth issues emerging from the pandemic, especially in the context of extensive job losses and reprioritisation of needs within communities.

What we can do:

- Reaching out to **print media and local media** could be helpful in showcasing existing work of network members during the COVID-19 crisis, which could help organisations across U.P in adapting similar approaches and mitigation strategies in the crises to come. This could also serve as a useful trigger in inviting membership of diverse organisations and stakeholders in the existing networks.
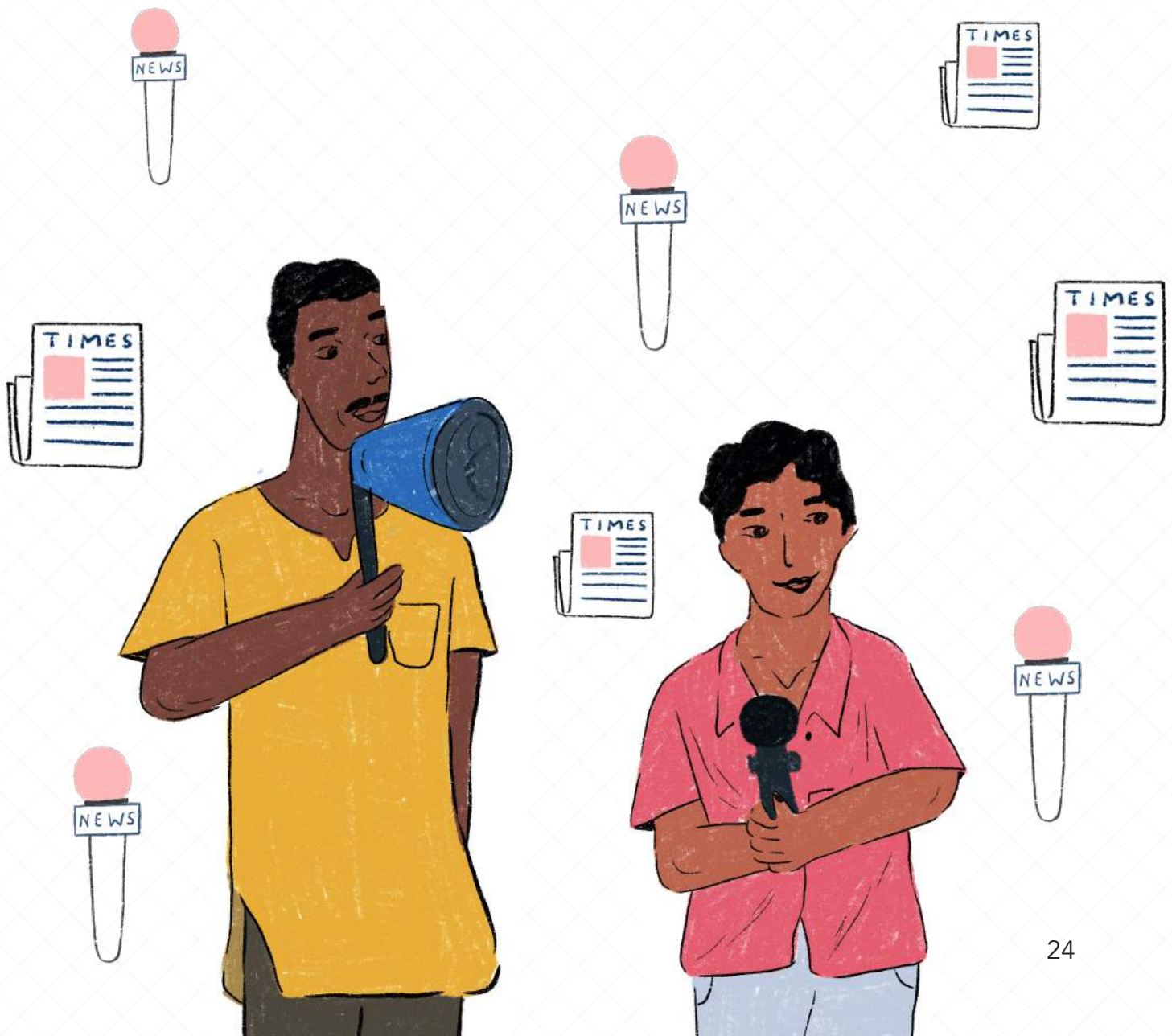
- **Recognising influences** that shaped understandings of masculinity amongst young men and boys particularly during the COVID-19 crisis - such as social media, films and cinema, interactions in virtual spaces with people of different genders - and focusing on these spaces by incorporating them within programme content and implementation could be helpful in the longer term.

- **Identifying youth organisations and collectives** to learn more about their work and ensuring their representation and participation in network activities and meetings could address the current lack of youth voices in existing networks.

- Forging **district level alliances** by reaching out to student networks and sports networks, with sufficient representation of young men and boys from marginalised communities. One of the ways through which such networks could be engaged is by creating platforms in conjunction with district-level events that already witness an overwhelming presence and participation of young people.

IV. EXPLORING NEW AND COLLABORATIVE MODELS OF FUNDRAISING

One of the biggest challenges in undertaking all of the work recounted above is finding and sustaining channels of funding, and working in tandem with existing policy structures and government programmes. With much of the developmental funding redirected towards immediate COVID-related relief, and the recent FCRA amendments limiting access of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to foreign funding, programmes have struggled to find the means and support needed to engage with the communities effectively. Organisations also identified the means through which existing issues with government policies and programmes could be addressed.

- After the recent FCRA amendments, CBOs funded by organisations in India with FCRA clearance are now facing extreme difficulties in securing the same funding as before. It is thereby important for these CBOs to focus on advocating with Indian funding agencies to provide more sustained support to programming with men and boys.

- Moreover, there is also the need to **scope for more funding opportunities,** rather than relying on funding agencies for grants. There is a need to collaboratively research possibilities for crowdfunding and CSR funding, and invest more in possibilities of coalition fundraising.

- **Extending support in proposal writing and resource mobilisation** to organisations in need in order to ensure financial feasibility and sustainability, and to increase access to funding opportunities, especially in the context of the challenges in securing funding propelled by the COVID-19 crisis.

Towards More Resilient Funding and Policy Frameworks

Apart from these recommendations on making programmatic shifts to adapt to the pandemic, programmers also expressed a need for changes in the ecosystem in which they operate. Funding strategies and policy frameworks heavily impact the ability of programmes to act on the above-listed steps. Hence, some recommendations for funding and policy ecosystems are listed below:

WHAT FUNDING AGENCIES CAN DO :

- Organisations reported that project based funding restricts possibilities of long term engagement in the communities. Most projects on ground are based on the scale of community outreach, and are funded only for the short-term. This focus on horizontal rigour, rather than vertical one, limits the potential of the organisations to create long-lasting change. Funding agencies need to focus on **building longer grant cycles,** in order to support sustained community engagements in the longer term.

- During crisis situations, it is important for funding agencies to understand the on-ground hindrances in the implementation of the project, and thereby ensure flexibility of project timelines. For instance, during COVID, there was severe restriction in movement on ground making it difficult to carry forth implementation activities. If the funding agencies account for these hindrances, it will ensure that there is no pressure on the organisations to meet targets during times of future crises.

- According to participant organisations, satisfaction of organisational staff with their salary scales is an important prerequisite for ensuring that the implementation of the programme is being carried out with utmost commitment and rigour. But there is often pressure to channel more money into operations than staff salaries. Funding agencies should trust the implementation team for the efficient utilization of the funds, and a **balanced approach to funding** should be adopted which takes into account the needs and expectations of both funders as well as implementing partners.

WHAT GOVERNMENTS CAN DO:

- Participant organisations believe that the inclusion of men and boys in the discourses of gender-based violence, inequality, family planning etc. is crucial. It has been suggested that while government stakeholders are designing new policies or programs on these issues, they should invite recommendations/inputs from both men and women in the communities through multi-stakeholder consultations.

- Engaging young men and boys on issues of gender-based violence (GBV), mental health, and gender inequality in the role of additional fieldworkers and community workers is crucial to ensure engagement of male participants in the government programmes.

CONCLUSION

As we grapple with the current crisis, and with the possibility of new crises emerging in the near future, the issues highlighted in this project will continue to get deeper and more challenging to mitigate. While it is true that many of the challenges highlighted in this document have existed well before the pandemic, the unfolding crisis has exacerbated all these issues to appalling degrees. Many of the pre-existing gaps in programming with men and boys have also widened during this period. We set out to identify those gaps and the root causes behind them, so that we can discover ways to build back with resilience to match up to these challenges. This was an opportunity to not only take a look at the immediate issues and mitigation strategies that we tried to implement during the COVID-19 crisis, but also to start thinking of ways in which our existing systems, practices and networks can be reimagined. While programmes with men and boys operate within their local and regional contexts, there are many shared experiences among practitioners that can potentially inform newer approaches. This consultation was our first step towards that goal of building deeper synergies. It is evident that working in silos is not adequate to address many larger systemic issues that enable inequalities around gender, sexuality, livelihood, education, sanitation, nutrition etc. Amidst a dearth of such cross-thematic dialogues and networking within the domain of work with men and boys, we hope that this process would spark more interest in collaborations that address these multiple realities of privileges and vulnerabilities that young men and boys experience in their daily lives. The way forward, while being uncertain and rocky, lies in creating cohesive communities of practitioners prepared to adapt with ever-changing ecosystems.

The YP Foundation (TYPF) is a youth development organisation that facilitates young people's feminist and rights-based leadership on issues of health equity, gender justice, sexuality rights, and social justice. TYPF ensures that young people have the information, capacity, and opportunities to inform and lead the development and implementation of programmes and policies that impact their lives and are recognised as skilled and aware leaders of social change.

The Mardon Wali Baat programme works with young men and boys to facilitate a deeper reflection on masculinities in order to challenge patriarchal gender norms and prevent gender based violence. Through research and intervention designs, the programme seeks to create interactive spaces for young men and boys to hold dialogues on the intersectional nature of their privileges and vulnerabilities.

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Website - theypfoundation.org

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