

The Role of Boys, Men and Fathers in Gender Equality – Conceptual Frameworks and Political Practice

Introduction to the panel «Contributions of boys, men and fathers to gender equality: Where do we draw the line of a progressive alliance?». International Conference on Masculinities: Engaging Men & Boys for Gender Equality, 7th of march 2015, New York

Author: Markus Theunert, president of masculinities.ch, the umbrella association of progressive men's and father's organisations in Switzerland. theunert@maenner.ch

After a decade advocating as a progressive men's organisation, we pursue the policies and coalition building for Gender Equality with some worries, because we believe that

- the progressive alliance is not as large and powerful as it could be and
- the progressive policies are not as progressive and courageous as they should be.

Therefore we would like to share some lessons learned in 10 years of advocacy work for gender transformation in Switzerland, introducing the concept of triple advocacy.

We believe this concept is precious

- to clarify the identity of a progressive alliance as well as its borders,
- to make visible which contributions of boys, men and fathers really do contribute to gender equality,
- to show why Gender Equality movement needs tensions to be effective – and why these tensions should rather be encouraged than suppressed.

What does triple advocacy mean?

1. In a historic perspective there is no doubt that men in movement share a feminist heritage. So, as men in movement we have to be supporters of women's rights and movements.

2. As feminist research and practice show: Gender is a construction, and this construction of a polarity of «men» vs «women» is a question of power. So, we can't stop here. We have to overcome the idea of gender binarity and fight for a colourful variety of equivalent gender options. We have to fight for the equality of and for all gender.

That's where we are today. There is a huge work done by feminist activists and LGBTQ-activists in societal and academic world. But where are the men? Sure, quite a

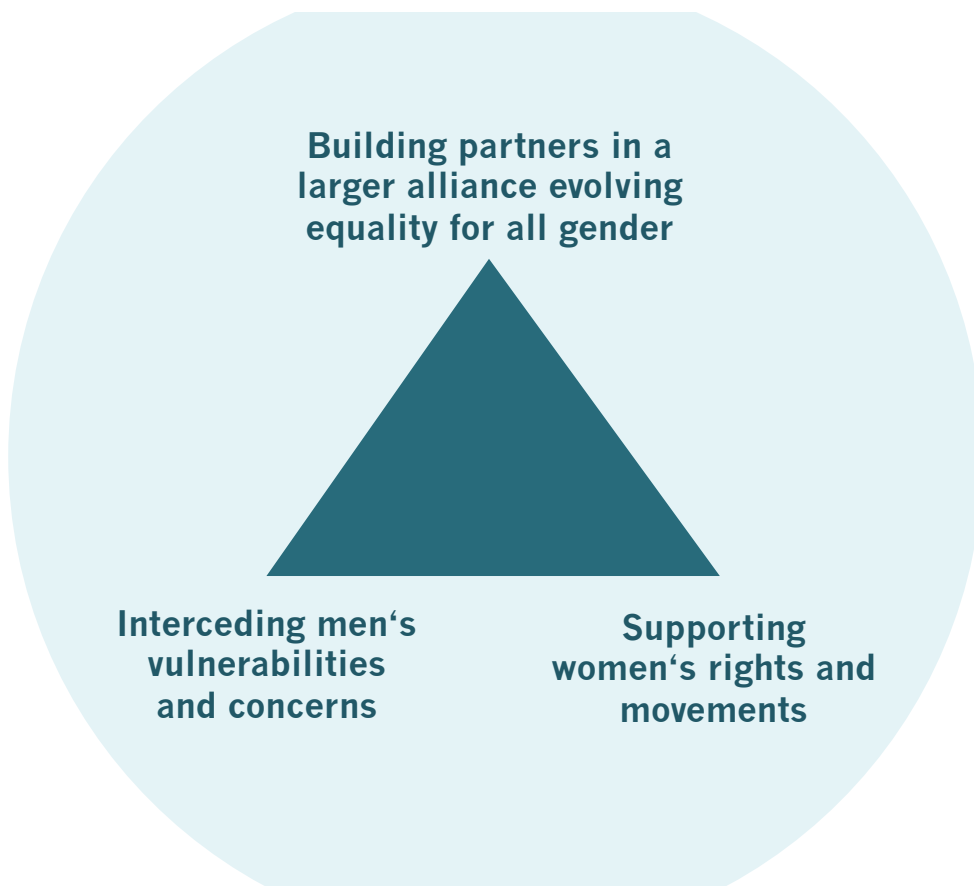
few of them join the movement.

But honestly:

- Do we really succeed to wake up the average guy's compassion for gender justice?
- Do we really talk to him as part of the solution and not as part of the problem, as we like to pretend?
- Do we succeed to make him feel his own benefit of more justice and variety?
- Do we encourage him to develop his own perspective of how to be an emancipated man?
- Do we want him as an activist and critical friend – and not only as a follower?
- Do we trust him? Do we really believe in his deep desire for equality?
- Do we show him how to deal with his privileges without denying them but also without forcing him in an altruistic, knightly – and therefore still patriarchal – battle for «the weak ones»?
- Last but not least: Do we use his intimate knowledge about patriarchy to fight against patriarchy?

Our conclusion after 10 years of advocacy work for gender transformation in Switzerland is: Progressive men have to go way beyond defending women's and LGBTQ's rights. They have to reconcile a third role and responsibility for gender equality.

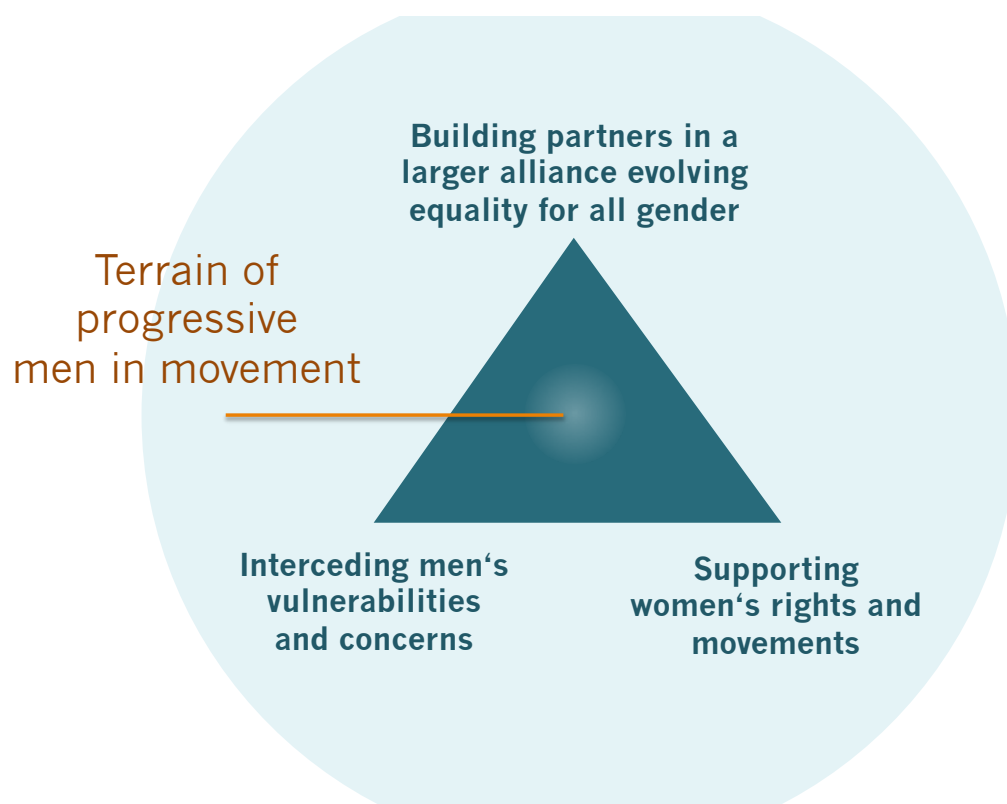
3. Men in movement have to be interceders of men's vulnerabilities and concerns, too. Simultaneously and equivalently.



If you look at the triangle of these three advocacies and responsibilities you may find yourself remembered at another triangle: Mike Messner's important triangle of politics of masculinities, presented 1997. Mike shows three elements which have to be reflected in a politics of masculinity: institutionalized privileges, costs of traditional masculinity and inequalities among men.

In the center of the triangle he is locating the «terrain of progressive coalition building»: «The closer a group's worldview is to the center of the triad, the more complex – even contradictory – its internal debates about the social structure of power, inequality, and oppression are likely to be» (Messner, 1997, 100.).

These tensions bundle a lot of energy that may be used to create force if they are valued and not feared. This is the same with triple advocacy.



We believe and our experience shows: Bringing men – not only a selected elite but the mainstream – into a progressive alliance against patriarchy and for gender justice means building a bridge. Triple advocacy may be this bridge.

The concept allows to develop perspectives of men's emancipation which are protected from re-empowering hegemonic masculinities as long as they are part of the triangle. It allows to compose men's contributions to Gender Equality in a mature synchronicity of loyalty and dispute with women's and LGBTQ's movements. It allows men to join a progressive battle against patriarchy by naming their today's responsibilities while releasing them from the guilt of their fathers and grandfathers.

If we open our comprehension of Gender Equality movement towards triple advocacy, it is true what Mike Messner wrote about the center of his triangle as well. There may be tensions and contradictions. But there is force within these tensions. Let's use it.

Progressive men's organisations shouldn't therefore be forced to label themselves as «feminist» or «profeminist». If they do, great. If they do not, ok. It's not about the label. It's about values and about proof of action, it's about accountability. Let's apply refined criteria to decide whether they are part of a progressive alliance or not.

Michael Messner's triangle poses the first crucial question: Do men in movement acknowledge that there are privileges and costs related to gender as well as inequalities among gender categories – and are they committed to reflect all the three of them at the same time?

Derived from political practice in Switzerland, we suggest Triple Advocacy as second criterion: Do men in movement acknowledge that there are equally legitimate and important women's rights, LGBTQs rights and men's vulnerabilities/concerns to take into account – and are they committed to reflect and advocate for all the three of them at the same time?

Affirmation to these two questions is marking the border of the progressive alliance.

Let's resume: In a political perspective, triple advocacy concept demands, that men in movement reconcile all three responsibilities if we want to support them gender equality movement with full force. Let's use this potential. Gender justice can't become reality if we miss waking up men's compassion for equality – and if we don't trust in their deep desire for equality.