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Author/s:

Burrell, SR;Kamiyama, S;Belbase, L;Khurram, M

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'Care is not only the goal, it's the way': working with men and boys for climate and gender justice

Stephen R. Burrell ^{a,b}, Sari Kamiyama^c, Laxman Belbase ^d, Muhammad Khurram^d
and MenEngage Alliance Climate Justice Working Group^d

^aSchool of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia; ^bDepartment of Sociology, Durham University, Durham, UK; ^cGraduate School of Letters, Arts and Science, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan; ^dGlobal Secretariat, MenEngage Global Alliance, Washington, DC, USA

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the MenEngage Alliance, active in 92 countries, has played a key role in advancing gender-transformative work with men and boys. The Alliance has mobilised diverse individuals across sectors and regions to build a community of practice dedicated to engaging men and boys for gender justice across intersecting issues, including climate change. This is the focus of the MenEngage Climate Justice Working Group, amidst growing recognition that environmental crises are gendered – not only in their disproportionate impacts on women and other marginalised groups, but in men's contributions and responses to them. This paper is founded upon reflections from the Working Group, who conducted 15 interviews with MenEngage members working for environmental and gender justice worldwide. These interviews provided insights into how practitioners became involved in this field, engage boys and men in change, hold men in positions of power to account, and face challenges in their work, including patriarchal backlash and gaps between policy and practice. The paper highlights the tensions of male allyship for gender and climate justice, arguing that men need to simultaneously recognise their roles and responsibilities as allies, beneficiaries, and agents of change, who work towards systemic as well as personal transformations.

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Introduction

We have enough data, enough warnings not to exceed global temperature increases by 1.5 degrees Celsius. For decades, we have known enough not to breach the nine planetary boundaries: interdependent processes that shape the stability and resilience of the Earth's ability to support life (Richardson et al., 2023). Yet we did. Yet we continue to do so, even as six of these boundaries have been excessively crossed. If humanity is to survive as a

CONTACT Stephen R. Burrell  stephen.burrell@unimelb.edu.au  <https://www.linkedin.com/in/srburrell/>  https://x.com/the_daily_panda

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species, we must move beyond superficial changes and nurture deep social shifts that centre care and kinship.

While the climate crisis is global in scale, it is not gender-neutral. It disproportionately impacts women, girls, and gender diverse people, particularly those in the Majority World, or at the intersections of multiple forms of marginalisation (Djouidi et al., 2016; MacGregor, 2010). Long-standing ecofeminist and decolonial analysis demonstrates that climate change is deeply rooted in patriarchal, colonial resource extraction and capitalist modes of industrial production. These modes of organising maintain structures of power that exclude women and gender diverse people and exploit natural ‘resources’ with disregard for people and planet. Therefore, the climate crisis is a crisis of human relationships (Morales, 2019). To effectively address it, we must end these patriarchal patterns of exploitation and their many forms of control over bodies, land, and livelihoods, entrenched within systems of privilege and power.

How, then, to foster the will to change? Why is it that despite overwhelming evidence, despite the escalating frequency of climate disasters, we still structure our societies, economies, and political systems in ways that perpetuate harm and deepen inequality? And how do we, as a global community, disentangle ourselves from these destructive patterns, these deep violences that sustain the crisis? In this paper, shaped by feminist, decolonial, and intersectional perspectives, we argue that transformative climate action requires confronting the patriarchal systems that normalise domination. After all, ‘every struggle is an ecological struggle’ (Morales, 2019, p. 4).

We look at possible answers to the urgent need for climate mobilisation through the work of members of the MenEngage Alliance: a global network of 1100+ civil society organisations and individuals dedicated to transforming patriarchal masculinities and promoting gender, climate, and social justice (<https://menengage.org>). We, the authors, are members of the Alliance’s Climate and Environmental Justice Working Group (<https://menengage.org/our-work/climate-justice/>). This member-led group of grassroots activists, scholars, and practitioners was formalised in 2021 with regional representatives from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, South Asia, North America, the Middle East, and Oceania. It is the body within MenEngage that advances research, advocacy, communications, and programme implementation to engage men and boys in gender and climate justice. Drawing on interviews with MenEngage members and our own critical reflections, supported by the collective analysis developed by the Alliance over the past 20 years, this paper highlights how patriarchal notions of control and extraction shape climate inaction – and how they can be disrupted. We argue that the accountable engagement of men and boys towards this end must recognise the continuum of roles they can simultaneously play as allies, beneficiaries, *and* agents of change.

Literature review

Climate change is one of the most urgent global challenges facing the world today. Feminists have documented the ways in which the dominance of masculine perspectives in climate politics, science, and business has led to a narrow focus on technological solutions, endless economic ‘growth’, and neglect of social and cultural dimensions (Garlick, 2016; MacGregor, 2010; Nagel & Lies, 2022). While research has illuminated

its disproportionate impacts on women and marginalised communities, the role of men and masculinities in both perpetuating and potentially mitigating climate change remains underexplored.

The intersection of gender and global heating thus warrants deeper scrutiny in both research and practice, such as how dominant and emerging forms of masculinity influence mitigation and adaptation efforts. There is a growing body of scholarship seeking to address this gap, influenced by ecofeminist analyses (Burrell & Pedersen, 2025; Hedenqvist et al., 2021; Hultman & Pulé, 2018; Pease, 2021). This highlights that one of the key drivers of environmental crises is patriarchal logics of detachment, domination, and exploitation, reinforcing structures of power that demarcate ‘man’ as entitled to control other people and the more-than-human world alike (Greig, 2021). This overlaps with Eurocentric thinking tied to capitalism and colonialism, in which (white, Western) ‘man’ is defined as superior to nature and all beings (including animalised humans) associated with it (Chemhuru, 2018; Mies & Shiva, 2014; Plumwood, 1993). Patriarchies can be understood as socioeconomic and political systems that privilege male dominance and masculine identities, traits, expressions, and modes of power over women and other marginalised genders in public and private spheres. However, patriarchy does not exist in isolation; it is co-constituted with other oppressive relations of power including capitalism and white supremacy, requiring us to understand its complex amoebic capacity to sustain gendered hierarchies (hooks, 2004).

Understanding how constructions of masculinity intersect with environmental degradation and disaster response is essential for developing equitable and effective climate action (Gaard, 2015; Hultman & Pulé, 2018). Hultman and Pulé (2018) critically examine the entanglement of masculinities with fossil-fuel-based economies, showing how masculine norms tied to economic production and control over nature foster resistance to climate knowledge. Climate denial, they argue, is not simply a rejection of scientific consensus but a defence of gendered power and privilege. By connecting industrial/breadwinner masculinities to resource exploitation, they underscore the need to dismantle these entrenched norms in order to achieve meaningful climate action. This also means that the ‘green transition’ must involve transformations in gendered narratives about the future of work. Such a transition must also contend with male-dominated corporate and state elites who benefit from the neoliberal economic order (Greig, 2021).

Patriarchal masculinities (hooks, 2004) emphasising control and domination often mirror the exploitative relationships humans have with the environment and non-human animals. Engaging men and boys in climate justice therefore requires a critical examination of how gendered expectations influence their conduct towards nature and their role in perpetuating or challenging environmental harms (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Garlick, 2016). From an early age, boys are often taught to value traits such as stoicism, rugged individualism, and solitary problem-solving, contributing to disconnection from nature and reluctance to engage in care, including for the environment, with both constructed as ‘feminine’ (Swim et al., 2018). This process not only limits the emotional and social development of boys but perpetuates gender inequalities by valorising masculine traits over others (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; hooks, 2004).

Norms such as showing ‘manly’ disregard towards environmental concerns are not only expressed in individual attitudes and behaviours, but also in institutional policies and practices, and societal traditions and belief-systems (Connell & Messerschmidt,

2005; Greig, 2021). Efforts to transform patriarchal masculinities should therefore not only focus on changing interpersonal power dynamics, but on the systems of power that grant men disproportionate levels of sociopolitical advantage at both relational and structural levels. Peers and sociocultural institutions alike contribute to the reinforcement of such expectations among young people, and studies have found that parental influence is a significant factor in shaping environmental attitudes and behaviours (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). However, it is crucial to avoid essentialist assumptions about boys' and men's environmental attitudes. A nuanced approach is needed to understand how different constructions of masculinity interact with environmental concerns across various cultural contexts.

It is also important to understand the social dimensions of climate-related 'natural' disasters, which expose and exacerbate existing gender inequalities rather than creating them anew (Enarson & Pease, 2016; Lau, 2020; Rushton et al., 2020). Studies have critiqued disaster risk reduction efforts for failing to incorporate an analysis of masculinities, overlooking how male-dominated decision-making structures shape responses (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Even when gender is considered, it is frequently simply equated with women and girls. These studies call for more critical engagement with patriarchal masculinities in climate policy, asserting that without addressing gendered power relations, climate adaptation strategies will remain insufficient and inequitable (Burrell & Pedersen, 2025; Pease, 2021). For instance, in regions prone to extreme weather events, masculine ideals such as risk-taking and self-sufficiency may hinder effective disaster preparedness, as men are less likely to evacuate or seek assistance (Dunn, 2016; Enarson & Pease, 2016; McKinnon, 2022; Rushton et al., 2020).

Analysis by Khan et al. (2023) attempts to provide a Global South perspective where the climate crisis is actively reshaping masculinities, as found in their studies from Bangladesh and South Africa, where events such as cyclones and droughts have disrupted gender norms. In these contexts, expectations of manhood were once based upon being providers and protectors, which men are now struggling to maintain against the economic and environmental pressures wrought by climate catastrophe (Djoudi et al., 2016). This situation has generated feelings of powerlessness and an inability for men to keep their identities intact, leading to increased stress, social dislocation, and in some cases, violence to reclaim lost authority. However, Khan et al. (2023) argue these shifts also bring opportunities to reconfigure inequitable norms in ways that could foster resilience and sustainability (Lau, 2020).

Challenging masculine expectations requires moving beyond deficit models that portray men solely as obstacles to sustainability. Emerging research suggests that alternatives to patriarchal masculinities, such as identities centred around care, cooperation, and ecological stewardship, offer pathways for pro-environmental behaviour (Hultman & Pulé, 2018). Participatory climate adaptation strategies that engage boys and men in questioning dominant norms and forging equitable solutions can help dismantle gendered hierarchies perpetuating environmental harm (Rosen & Supran, 2020). Some scholars have questioned whether aspiring to more 'positive' forms of masculinity should be the focus of this work, or if seeking to deconstruct gender dualisms and men's investments in them would be more productive (Burrell, 2023; Pease, 2021). A common theme across these perspectives, built upon ecofeminist thinking, is encouraging boys and men to embrace an ethic of care in the ways they see and engage with the world

(Burrell & Pedersen, 2025; Pease, 2021). This requires learning from First Nations ontologies which emphasise relationality and interdependence with nature and one another (Doucet et al., 2024). However, it is also important to be cognisant that ways in which men are traditionally seen to practice care, such as breadwinning or being a ‘protector’ of women and children, may not challenge gendered power inequalities (Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025).

In this article, we argue that critically engaging with patriarchal masculinities and exploring the potential for alternative ways of being can facilitate the dismantling of norms that perpetuate environmental harm while fostering more inclusive solutions to the climate crisis. However, there is little research to date with organisations and activists who are putting work towards these ends into practice. This paper seeks to help address this gap, to help inform the further development of such efforts.

Author positionality

All four authors are ourselves members of the MenEngage Alliance (and in the case of Ixman and Muhammad, its Global Secretariat) and its Climate Justice Working Group. We are therefore simultaneously involved in practice, research, advocacy, and activism around gender and climate justice at the same time as seeking to critically investigate it. This positionality has informed every aspect of the paper, from our choice of interviewees – many of whom are colleagues or collaborators – to our analysis, which draws on auto-critical reflections as well as the Alliance’s collective learning. The paper can therefore be seen as part of the long tradition of collective reflective writing on political action, in which the authors and research participants are simultaneously both subjects and objects of analysis (Hearn, 2025).

Our insider perspective provided both opportunities and limitations. It gave us unique levels of access and insight into work in this area. We were not approaching interviewees or as detached observers, but as active participants, which may have enabled them to be more open with us. However, it is also likely to have constrained our ability to critically probe the practices of fellow MenEngage members, not least because it is work which we are generally very supportive of. Both personally and politically, as individuals working on masculinities, we are likely to have blind spots regarding the dynamics of gendered power relations, including in our own practices (Hearn, 2025; Thym, 2018). This is why reflexivity and accountability are central to the pro-feminist principles developed by MenEngage, and which we have sought to enact within the Climate Justice Working Group. To ‘practice what we preach’, it is crucial that work with and by men as a privileged group endeavours to ensure it is challenging, and not reinforcing, patriarchal power relations. This necessitates what Thym (2018, p. 71) describes as hegemony self-critique; ‘critical reflection – from a hegemonic position – on one’s entanglement in relations of power and domination’.

The authors thus met regularly to engage in critical reflections about the paper. We also discussed the research with the wider Working Group, sharing the paper with them in draft form to garner feedback and ensure it chimed with their experiences. The article therefore reflects the work of the group as a whole, whilst representing the views of the authors specifically. We are motivated to break down distinctions between academia and practice, in which knowledge from the former is treated as

more valuable. In reality, knowledge from these two sectors is often produced in tandem, and it is vital to acknowledge this, rather than reproducing extractivist relationships with experiential forms of knowledge (Hearn, 2025). This is doubly important when we consider that much innovative climate and gender justice work is being developed in the Majority World at the forefront of the climate crisis, whilst the colonial hegemony of Global North scholarship persists. We have found that transnational co-authorship can break down some of these divides, however this is not inevitable, when confidence in academic English is often required for instance.

Research method

Between December 2022 and January 2023, MenEngage's Climate Justice Working Group conducted a global mapping survey to find out who within the Alliance was working at the intersections of climate justice and masculinities, with 38 responses. To learn more about their experiences, semi-structured interviews were carried out with some of these respondents. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on whether the respondent agreed to be contacted again; the extent to which they were actively addressing climate justice; and their location, to ensure a geographical spread of interviewees, with emphasis on regions most affected by global heating. Eight participants were also members of the Working Group, of whom three belong to MenEngage's Global Secretariat (one of whom is laxman) and were felt to have important experiences to include. This resulted in interviews with fifteen participants, each lasting approximately one hour. These were conducted by Stephen through virtual video calls between May 2024 and January 2025.

Four of the participants identified as women and eleven as men, and they were based in eleven different countries, listed in the appendix. As the interviewees were all publicly carrying out work on the research topic, they were given the option of being anonymised in the research or named, and all chose the latter. This may have constrained the extent to which they felt able to be honest and self-critical in the interviews. Equally, the research provided an opportunity for them to share the work they were doing with wider audiences. However, whilst they were interviewed as representatives of their organisations (also listed in the appendix), their views should ultimately be seen as personal to them. Each participant was given an information sheet and the opportunity to ask questions before completing a consent form and commencing the interview. Ethical approval for the research was granted by Durham University Department of Sociology's Ethics Committee. After being transcribed, the interviews were analysed by Stephen via NVivo 14, using the reflexive thematic analysis approach articulated by Braun and Clarke (2022). This involved familiarisation with the transcripts through repeated readings; coding notable features of the data; developing initial themes from patterns across these codes; reviewing and refining themes based on their applicability to the dataset as a whole, in discussion with co-authors based on our knowledge of the literature and field; and writing them up.

Interview findings

This section presents the themes generated from the analysis of the interviews. Eight key themes are discussed: promising practices being developed at the intersections of climate

justice and transforming patriarchal masculinities; men's community leadership; caring approaches to boys and men; having an impact; pathways through which practitioners entered the field; navigating the tensions of men as allies, beneficiaries, and agents of change; confronting backlash; and the gap between policy promises and implementation. We emphasise both the transformative potential and the limitations of working with men and boys to dismantle patriarchal structures and build more caring, sustainable futures.

Promising practices

The interviews highlighted a range of innovative gender-transformative work being done with boys and men in diverse contexts to cultivate environmental and gender justice. This tended to revolve around group work, creating the conditions for boys and men to reflect on how they've been affected by expectations of manhood, and how they can resist and change them. Uniquely, they would also explore how these norms shape their relationships with nature and environmental crises in their communities and across the globe. A common theme was moving beyond rational arguments about the climate crisis, to examining the feelings it evokes, and how these can mobilise action. Vidar runs reflective groups for men, involving eight sessions in which participants are asked to engage in radical listening together:

People shared that they had moved from the head into their body, into their heart, and had embodied knowledge and motivation. That, I think, is the deep kind of motivation that is needed for us to make the changes that are needed.

Initiatives encouraged boys and men to consider the ecological ramifications of their everyday practices, as part of their livelihoods for example, and pro-environmental behaviours they could take up, such as disposing of waste responsibly. In some cases, programmes involved outdoor activities such as reforestation and cleaning up the local environment. And at the same time, helping men to think critically about gendered norms which might underpin destructive behaviour towards both the environment and other people:

Most of the deforestation is done by men, when the forest is burned down. It's burned by men, and sometimes the men are just angry at something, you know, they pass by, and they burn it. (Riana)

This also involved awareness-raising and capacity-building in communities. For example, Center ANNA in Russia (an organisation which eventually had to close) organised a photo exhibition tour about fathers and their children caring for the environment, which ended in one of the most popular parks in Moscow, and was used in training for groups working with fathers:

So it's not only being a father, but also a father who is environmentally aware and brings it to his family ... The exhibition is not imposing, it's sharing, but sharing by example ... You see a person who is doing it and it's a real person, a real story, so it's really teaching by example. (Marina)

The interviewees were also involved in advocating for political and social change. Youth-Net Global are a Bangladeshi organisation playing a leading role in engaging with policy-makers locally, nationally, and internationally about the need for climate action which

simultaneously addresses gender inequalities – including those manifested within policy-making itself, because ‘*men are fully, you know, in the driving seat, as is petro-masculinity*’ (Sohanur).

As a youth-led organisation, YouthNet addresses the interconnecting issues of climate change, child marriage, and sexual and reproductive health, primarily in regions vulnerable to environmental disasters. In Bangladesh, flooding, salinisation, cyclones, and drought exacerbate the economic hardships many families face, leading to an increase in child and forced marriages:

It’s creating more poverty for the affected people, and affected people are taking negative coping mechanisms, that is child marriage. Because the climate crisis makes them more poor, and they are migrating. They are displaced from their own land. (Sohan)

YouthNet have initiated a ‘Father’s Dialogue’ to engage fathers in conversations about child marriage, girls’ rights, and the role they can play in dismantling gender stereotypes in the family. They also have ‘Couples’ Dialogue’ to encourage equitable relationships, enabling women to voice their concerns and mobilising men to take on household responsibilities.

Another organisation developing leading work on the links between masculinity and the climate crisis is the Community Transformation Foundation Network (COTFONE) in Uganda:

The initiatives we have been doing are geared towards transforming our communities from a high level of toxicity that comes with patriarchy and masculinities, and trying to ensure that we have equality within our communities. (Bukenya)

This includes engaging with boys from age nine about what the climate crisis is, its local impacts, what sustainable practices look like, and how they can become agents of change. Most of COTFONE’s work occurs in rural settings, where the primary livelihoods are cultivation and farming. They discuss increasing droughts in Uganda, the impacts of pollution, and how poor waste disposal is damaging water systems and soil fertility. For young men, they also encourage taking a stance for nature, against the degradation of local ecosystems. With adult men, they explore how they can act as stewards in their communities and families. This includes shedding light on transforming the damaging impacts of some livelihoods. They have trained a cohort of community facilitators and organise an annual gender and climate justice dialogue about women and men working in partnership.

COTFONE also advocates for the communities they serve. They have been campaigning against the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), planned by French oil company Total and the Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation to be the world’s longest heated oil pipeline, with catastrophic consequences for local ecosystems and communities. COTFONE’s offices have subsequently been raided and they have faced threats and intimidation to stop campaigning, demonstrating the risks that environmental advocacy can involve (Global Witness, 2023).

Accountable leadership in communities

Interviewees emphasised that men are not a homogenous group, with some having more responsibility for the climate catastrophe than others. In this regard, there was a strong feeling that male politicians, corporate leaders, and others in positions of power have

failed to respond with the gravity that global heating warrants: *'I think it's a general leadership crisis that I feel we have really ... I think there is a general mismatch between things that concern communities and the leaders we have right now'* (Bukonya). This disregard can be influenced by a desire to appear a 'strong', 'invulnerable' leader. Several participants were thus seeking to engage with men in positions of power, hold them to account individually and collectively for climate inaction – and embolden those taking it seriously. Many men are in influential gatekeeping positions in their communities (e.g. in religion, business, sport), and recruiting them as agents of change was seen as a vital strategy:

The gentleman recommended us to apply to the local green fund and he was really enabling ... he became an enabling force because he was like, 'I feel like I could do something now'. That was his phrase. So I was like, 'Okay. We've made an impact at that level'. (Sue Ann)

This requires finding a delicate balance. On the one hand, organisations wanted to help men who support gender equality and environmental stewardship to build the confidence to take on community leadership roles in transformative ways. However, they also wanted men to learn when to step back, and support *women's* leadership. One participant noted that higher levels of gender equality and women in leadership can lead to more pro-environmental decision-making, for example (McKinney & Fulkerson, 2015).

Cultivating relationships

The participants described genuine dialogue as central to having generative impacts on boys and men's lives: building meaningful relationships, listening to their perspectives, and empathising with their experiences of masculinity and the environment:

First is to build up a relation. To build a relation is to listen. Because every one of these boys, and every one of these men, and also women, has their own story ... so by listening and showing them, I have an interest in you, I think is the first important thing. (Michael)

In other words, showing the same care to boys and men that we wish them to nurture: *'care is not only the goal, it's the way'* (Vidar). Participants discussed helping boys and men make the connections between their own lives and social issues like climate change and gender-based violence; moving beyond individual responsabilisation towards a consciousness of social norms and how to shift them. For instance, several interviewees discussed men's concerns about the consequences of climate change for their livelihoods and identities as 'providers' (Hultman & Pulé, 2018). They thus helped men explore alternative forms of income, at the same time as questioning the notion that their worth is tied to being a successful 'breadwinner':

We are trying to divert the men and women involved in these activities ... we are trying to give seed money to women and some men to start, let's say, their own income-generating activity outside the logging and the charcoal making. (José)

However, this highlights the limits of working with individual men and boys, if it does not coincide with structural change in which more sustainable forms of employment are developed.

If they were able to get them 'through the door' and create a safe, trusting space, interviewees often found men eager to discuss issues which might be perceived as 'unmanly': *'It looks like when you are born as a boy you already have everything in your head and it's*

just going to unlock, but men are really yearning for learning' (Bukenya). Some participants expressed being most likely to find this openness among boys, but also at transitional times in men's lives, such as when becoming a parent: *'that is a window of opportunity. When men are about to become fathers, they are more open to change'* (Vidar). Several participants agreed that concern for one's family can be an impactful way of reaching out to men about climate change: *'We had a question like, what do you want to leave for your children, what future? What do you think your kids will need? ... so bringing it home, basically'* (Marina).

This also meant helping men and boys to process uncomfortable feelings such as guilt, fear, anger, and hopelessness – for themselves, loved ones, and the planet. Resistance to climate action can stem from a desire to avoid these painful emotions. However, supporting men to confront them, and accept our vulnerability as humans, was seen as an important step in mobilising a sense of responsibility for the climate (Pease, 2021). Some interviewees also felt it valuable to underline the positives of climate action – that showing care for the things we love, such as the environment, non-human animals, our communities, will *improve* men's lives.

Some participants felt that disconnect from nature was contributing to feelings of alienation among boys and men. Popular discourses about the climate crisis can contribute to this, making it feel like an insurmountable, far-away problem, which each person has little influence over: *'capitalism and profit over planet is so entrenched and embedded in the world view that it feels, kind of, paralysing'* (Wessel). This sense of powerlessness can feel uncomfortable for men raised to have mastery over the world around them (Singh, 2017). By encouraging them to actively promote gender and climate justice in their communities and care for their local environment, participants appeared to be showing boys and men that they could have a positive, agentic influence on the world around them, without needing to *control* it:

That in itself becomes some kind of change in masculinity norms, to go into difficult emotions and feel them, instead of avoiding them. There are many beautiful examples of how that has worked, from 'I don't want to talk about that, it's too big. I can't do anything', moving into 'yes, I do really care for this, and I want to do this'. (Vidar)

This also meant coming to terms with change and the feelings that evokes, both as something which is part of life, and something which men are capable of: *'Before doing these kinds of exercises, they were thinking that things are written in stone'* (Riana).

Seeing an impact

The interviewees felt that they had observed their work making a real difference to the lives of boys and men they were engaging with, and in some cases, to their wider communities:

Now we can say, through our interventions, we have the reduction of diseases within our areas where we operate. We also have people growing their own food, fresh food, organic food. We also have, now people who are working, as they clean the environment and also earn some living, through the lobbying we did. (Joseph)

There was also realism about the limits of what could be achieved when working with meagre resources and relatively small numbers of people. However, several interviewees

observed boys and men gradually seeing the world in new ways through self-reflecting on masculine norms:

I think the moment they realise that their actions have caused harm it's like a snap, it's like waking up ... when you deepen the conversation, they think 'oh shoot. I think we were blind in some sort of way', because the narrative is, go into wetland and cultivate, make money, be the great man. (Bukonya)

In some cases, this connected to men's empirical experiences, where witnessing the impacts of climate breakdown on their own surroundings was 'eye-opening' (José). Shifts in men's perspectives were also sometimes propelled by the positive impacts they identified in themselves from engaging in caring practices: *'They are starting to feel better about themselves. They changed, or they feel the environment, or they feel the importance of caring, for natural resources, for the forest'* (Riana).

Some interviewees also witnessed policymakers gradually starting to acknowledge the need to address men's role in gender inequality and the climate crisis as a result of their work. However, Wessel noted that these complex messages can be difficult to convey to decision-makers such as business leaders in concise and accessible ways, given the lack of time and attention they typically make available: *'He was like ... "this is really important." But he had to sit with us in the room for three hours and listen to what we were talking about, you know?'*

Interviewees opened up about the impacts their practice had had on themselves, too: *'The work on climate justice supports you to live in moderation, to be mindful: what effect does this have on what I am doing? ... for me personally, this work keeps deepening my belief in nature and in Africa'* (Bukonya). This illustrates the importance of advocates not seeing ourselves as already having all the answers, but constantly learning alongside men and boys, in a reciprocal way.

Pathways into the work

The interviewees came to climate justice work from varied paths, often having already been involved in practice with men and boys on issues such as gender-based violence, fatherhood, and sexual and reproductive health. Several had a pre-existing preoccupation with nature, often from a young age, which laid the groundwork for drawing connections between gender equality and environmental issues:

I was also at that time in the scouts, and with my family there was a lot of camping, so I was in nature, I was hunting for butterflies. So I was always interested in animals and plants and nature. (Michael)

For some this affinity stemmed from educational or vocational experiences, such as being involved in agriculture, or studying biology or forestry – including critical observations whilst doing so:

I was inspired by a connection to nature and feeling, just living in such a beautiful place, as I am, about conserving that, and learning quite quickly that forestry is not about conservation. At least, not at that point. It's about farming trees. (Wessel)

This underscores the value of helping boys to forge a close relationship with nature from a young age, and teaching them that it is acceptable to show love and care for it, and to see

themselves as part of rather than separate from their ecology. It raises the possibility that those brought up closely connected to nature may be more predisposed to gender non-conformity – a link which has been highlighted in research with anti-sexist men (Westmarland et al., 2021).

Other participants were mobilised by global heating after observing its effects on their own communities – including within gender equality work. For instance, Sohanur was already a youth activist working to end child marriage, who started to learn more about how the climate crisis was exacerbating this problem: *‘that engagement inspired me to create a movement, especially for girls, and men and masculinity, and climate action’*. Drawing on lived experience in this way can be more challenging in Global North countries, where climate change may feel less ‘close to home’ – and thus easier to dismiss.

The complexities of allyship

Participants spoke about the unique personal and organisational tensions of male allyship in the context of climate justice. Jennifer felt it crucial to find a balance between showing solidarity and not taking over. This was typically seen by participants as men taking a primarily supportive role, and bolstering the voices of women, youth, LGBTQI+, Indigenous and other marginalised people leading the climate justice movement. At the same time, they were encouraging men and boys to speak up and utilise their privilege – especially to influence other men and patriarchal institutions. There can be a tension between these two positions which is not always easily resolved. It necessitates a careful assessment of when to stand behind, beside, and in front within the allyship spectrum. Several interviewees described efforts to reflect continually on their work, and organise possibilities for feminist accountability, in attempting to ensure it was truly transformative and not tokenistic: *‘You have to speak a language that does not reproduce the thing that you are trying to combat, as well as I think you want buy-in from men’* (Sue Ann). One risk is focusing solely on men looking inwards, and losing sight of wider feminist social change:

A very cynical perspective is it lands up being middle-class men navel-gazing in the woods. Not to be too disparaging on that, but it’s very self-centred. Men dealing with our own vulnerabilities is a really important part of the broader picture. I think I just get a little bit impatient if it stops at men’s own vulnerabilities and doesn’t get connected to the broader work on social justice. (Wessel)

Another tension of allyship relates to intersecting inequalities. Participants discussed how Global Majority countries and local NGOs often face challenges in accessing international climate discussions due to limited resources and platforms. Yet these are the voices needed most, as they are dealing firsthand with climate catastrophe, whilst having done the least to cause it. Some participants expressed a need to ensure these power dynamics are not replicated within environmental and gender equality work. For instance, it was highlighted that MenEngage members are working with very varied levels of resources:

I would love folks to understand that we work in very different contexts and sometimes some of us folks that are in the Global South, we are right now dealing with some crises. (Bukonya)

This highlights the need for advocates in the Global North to listen and learn from their counterparts at the forefront of the climate crisis, who are already forging solutions, and helping to elevate their voices to ensure that those countries most responsible for the problem do not continue to dominate the conversation. Some participants pointed to moving beyond the hegemony of the English language where possible, and producing more translated materials to better engage local communities, especially in rural areas where limited internet access can hinder programme reach.

Interviewees talked about the need for attentiveness to these inequities within work with men and boys, too. For instance, whilst many men's livelihoods are intertwined with unsustainable industries, they still hold far less responsibility than their employers – those at the top of corporations that have been the chief drivers of global heating. Some suggested that unless we address these disparities in power, men lower down social hierarchies may feel particularly defensive, and reluctant to grapple with issues of accountability. Bukenya felt that the conversation should transcend just climate change or gender equality, bringing together the broader human rights issues and intersecting inequalities impacting people's lives. There is thus a need to simultaneously emphasise the multidimensional nature of the problem, whilst drawing attention to its under-recognised gendered dimensions.

Gender and climate backlash

Defensiveness was described by participants as one of the biggest challenges in their work, including through organised backlash. Some men may view these topics as foreign to their cultural norms or threatening to their masculine identities – especially when the focus moves beyond gender equality and climate in general, to men's role specifically:

He really was affronted by the idea that this was more than just 'save a few weak women'; that this was about men and masculinity and how they are implicated in the issues and how they contribute to climate impact. (Sue Ann)

It was pointed out, for example by Riana, that this defensiveness not only comes from men; women can also resist gender equality and environmental concerns, for example because of anxieties about tradition and cultural preservation. Even within environmental or gender equality groups, there can sometimes be a feeling that connecting these issues can be a distraction, with responses such as '*Aren't you moving us away from the core, here?*' (Vidar).

Backlash is not just expressed by individuals – it is being advanced by states and well-funded political, business, and religious groups. Participants discussed how backlash against gender equality and climate action often overlaps, with powerful masculinist forces pushing back against both movements and seeking to reinforce patriarchal norms: '*This right populism is ignoring climate change and is ignoring the green deal and is fostering an old stereotype masculinity, and it's getting stronger all over the world*' (Michael). This was creating significant obstacles for their work, with tactics like homophobia and transphobia discouraging engagement with gender equality among men. This organised resistance is evident in the rise of mis- and disinformation campaigns, especially online, where climate denial and misogynistic attitudes are fuelled

by conspiracy theories, and disasters are attributed to forces such as witchcraft or blamed on minority groups. Technology, while facilitating global communication, becomes a tool to undermine trust in scientific facts and direct harassment towards those advocating for change. Allyship can thus mean men vocally supporting the women and other activists from marginalised groups being disproportionately targeted with such abuse. The growth of backlash underlines the importance of coalition-building among those engaging with men and boys (as we have sought to do with the Climate Justice Working Group), who also have expertise of relevance to the environmental movement in how to overcome masculine defensiveness.

Gaps between policy and practice

Perhaps the biggest challenge raised by participants was the lack of funding, commitment, and policies to support their work. It was felt that many political leaders use the right language around gender equality and climate, but fail to translate this into concrete action. This is evident in global forums like COP, where ambitious agreements are reached but implemented insufficiently at the national and local levels due to corporate influence, political inertia, and systemic corruption:

It's a 'top, top, top down' approach. So, most of the priorities, they're blurred by the donors, they're blurred by the Global North, they're blurred by the consultants in Dhaka. But local-led solutions, local ownership, local leadership, localisation, is still missing. Our development approach makes people as a beneficiary, but it should make people as active agents, as active partners, especially those who are facing systematic barriers. (Sohanur)

Participants described widespread gender blindness persisting among policymakers regarding environmental crises. They were therefore keen to devise more accessible ways of explaining the links between these issues – even within social justice spaces, where anthropocentric perspectives can still dominate: *'We're very much stuck within the social circle ... at best, we might start to think about intersections between people and money, but very rarely about people and planet'* (Wessel). It was notable even within the interviews that the emphasis tended to be on the impacts of environmental destruction on people; the wellbeing of non-human animals and ecosystems was rarely discussed as valuable in its own right. Yet ecofeminist and decolonial theories have shown that this human-centred approach is part of what has created such unsustainable societies in the first place (Gaard, 2015; Plumwood, 1993; Singh, 2017).

Deepening research-practice collaborations was seen as vital to advance policies and programmes at the intersections of gender and climate change. However, political turbulence was often hampering such developments, exacerbated by corporate capture in spaces like COP, where fossil fuel interests co-opt climate negotiations. In several countries, corruption within male-dominated power structures posed a significant barrier, and political suppression was stifling efforts to bring attention to these challenges: *'We need to make sure that we fight corruption more effectively, because we can't have all the policy, all the tools, as long as there is corruption'* (Riana).

Interviewees thus underscored the need for strategic advocacy work (which they themselves did not always have the capacity to undertake) to advance systemic change as well as education and engagement. In the words of Sue Ann: *'I would say campaign,*

campaign, campaign'. To help shift the public discourse in this regard, some participants were keen to find ways to intervene more in media and public platforms: '*It would be good to be more visible and start claiming back a bit of the space in terms of shaping the narrative around men and masculinity, in the climate discussion*' (Tom). This highlights the tension of how to draw attention to the role of patriarchal masculinities in global heating, without recentring men and marginalising women within discussions about its solutions.

Conclusion

Our interviews highlight innovative examples of work being done across the globe to engage boys and men in shifting patriarchal masculinities and embracing climate justice. They also illustrate the tensions involved in this work. In seeking to reach out to men, there can be hesitancy in encouraging them to take on their share of responsibility for systems transformation; to dismantle the systems that privilege them. We argue that this calls for a conceptualisation elucidating the multiple roles and responsibilities for men and boys in relation to climate justice. This can be conceived as a continuum consisting of three pillars: allies, beneficiaries, and agents of change. Allyship includes boys and men recognising gender-based and other inequalities, their own positionality in relation to them, and beginning to stand in solidarity with women and marginalised groups on specific issues. In practice, in attempting to make it as accessible to men as possible, allyship has often become discussed as a matter of 'convenience' rather than one of accountability, creating a disconnect with the transformatory vision that is widely agreed as being necessary for gender and climate justice.

We argue that allyship should be seen as the entry point. If we recognise men and boys as gendered beings for whom patriarchy has numerous negative implications (not least planetary breakdown), then it's vital that men and boys begin to see that they too benefit from dismantling harmful gender norms. They're not just 'helping others' – they are also healing and liberating themselves, and are thus beneficiaries of gender and climate justice. However, if dismantling patriarchy is in men and boys' own interests, then it further requires them to take on appropriate responsibility to join hands in working for a more equitable, caring, and sustainable society, rather than simply being passive beneficiaries. Hence, we believe men and boys must step into active, accountable leadership roles in transforming systems and cultures, as *agents of change* – in accountable ways that do not undermine feminist leadership – to achieve the socially just climate action that is desperately needed.

This also necessitates moving beyond framing boys and men simply as a monolithic group, disproportionately responsible for the negative effects of climate change due to their dominance of positions of power, patterns of consumption, and investments in modern industrial livelihoods. It has become increasingly urgent to address how men's diversity – according to geography, social class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other factors – affects not only how they live their lives, but the complexities of how they contribute and respond to climate change, and the positive opportunities this presents.

Our interviews also highlighted the ongoing challenge that work to transform patriarchal masculinities frequently becomes focused on individual men and boys (and especially those in less powerful groups), rather than on the structures and institutions

that shape their lives (Greig, 2021). There remains a lack of understanding of the tools and methodologies that are capable of realising and measuring multi-level systems change. This has led MenEngage to start developing a Programme, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning framework as one way to help fill this gap. Shining a light on the need for fundamental shifts in our unjust and oppressive social structures, as much as in relationships among individuals, is also a powerful way of navigating defensiveness. At the same time, the societal nature of the problem cannot be an excuse for inaction. Each of us must play our part in collectively creating gender-equitable and ecologically sustainable societies built upon ethics of care. This especially applies to men – as allies, beneficiaries, and agents of change.

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Notes on contributors

Dr Stephen R Burrell is a Lecturer in Criminology in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He is a co-chair of the Melbourne Research Alliance to End Violence against women and their children (MAEVe). He is also an Honorary Fellow in the Department of Sociology at Durham University, UK. Stephen is a member of the MenEngage Climate Justice Working Group, and co-hosts a podcast called Now and Men: Current conversations on men's lives.

Sari Kamiyama is a researcher and activist focused on men and masculinities studies. She is the founder and president of the International Men and Masculinities Studies Society (IMSS), a student organisation in Tokyo, and a current MA student at Waseda University in Japan. Sari interned with the North America MenEngage and is an individual member of the global MenEngage Alliance, where she also participates in the Climate Justice Working Group and Youth Reference Group.

laxman belbase is the Global Co-director of MenEngage Global Alliance. laxman is a gender justice activist with over two decades of expertise in organisational management, strategic and programme development, and advocacy for gender justice and child rights. laxman's expertise includes engaging men and boys in gender equality, advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights, climate justice and social justice, and promoting child rights. laxman also serves as a part-time faculty member at the Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University.

Muhammad Khurram is a poet. As an artist-academic he enjoys working as part of the MenEngage Global Secretariat team on community-focused projects. Khurram also serves as a part-time

faculty at the School of Economics and Social Science, Institute of Business Administration, Karachi, Pakistan.

MenEngage Alliance Climate Justice Working Group was formalised in 2021 through collective dialogue among grassroots activists, scholars, and practitioners committed to addressing the gendered dimensions of environmental destruction and climate breakdown. This member-led group has regional representatives from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, South Asia, North America, the Middle East and Oceania. They are part of the MenEngage Alliance, which is a global social change network of over 1100 member organisations dedicated to transforming patriarchal masculinities and promoting gender, climate and social justice.

ORCID

Stephen R. Burrell  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2447-0272>

Laxman Belbase  <http://orcid.org/0009-0000-4403-469X>

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Appendix. Interview participants

Name	Organisation	Country
Bukenya Denis Lewis	COTFONE	Uganda
Jane Nampijja	Men's Forum Uganda	Uganda
Jennifer Rodríguez Bruno	MenEngage Global Secretariat	USA
Joseph Kilonzo Mutisya	Beyond Initiative for Social Concern	Kenya
José Ivo Correia	MenEngage Mozambique	Mozambique
Kayinga Muddu Yisito	COTFONE	Uganda
Iaxman belbase	MenEngage Global Secretariat	USA/Nepal
Marina Pisklakova-Parker	Vital Voices	USA/Russia
Michael Bockhorni	Independent consultant	Austria/Italy
Riana Ndrialisoa	MenEngage Madagascar	Madagascar
Sohanur Rahman	YouthNet Global	Bangladesh
Sue Ann Barratt	Higher education	Trinidad and Tobago
Tom Hornbrook	MenEngage Global Secretariat	UK
Vidar Vetterfalk	MÄN	Sweden
Wessel van den Berg	Equimundo	South Africa