

# FOSTERING GENDER EQUALITY AND INCLUSIVITY AMONG LESOTHO'S YOUTH AND MEN: LESSONS LEARNT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM UNICEF EVALUATIONS (2018-2023)

**Sonia Mairos Ferreira, & Kimanzi Muthengi**  
*UNICEF Lesotho Country Office (Lesotho)*

## Abstract

In the pursuit of gender equality and inclusivity, this study undertakes a meta-analysis of the five UNICEF Lesotho CO Office Evaluations conducted between 2018 and 2023 in Lesotho. This analysis centralizes on the incorporation of gender-focused educational strategies aimed at engaging men and male youth and evaluates the effectiveness of these interventions in shifting gender norms. The research methodology entails a comprehensive review of the Evaluations, scrutinizing the integration of gender and inclusivity principles within the program's frameworks and the extent of adherence to UNICEF's gender equality and inclusivity mandates. The aim is to understand how educational content and methods have resonated with and influenced male demographics. The analysis importantly illuminates the complex interplay between gender-focused education and the cultural dynamics of Lesotho, spotlighting the pivotal role of inclusivity. It scrutinizes how inclusivity is either fostered or hindered within the context of Lesotho's traditional gender norms. The study considers how these norms may affect the acceptance and integration of gender equality concepts, especially among male participants. It reflects on the effectiveness of strategies aimed at inclusive education, which not only challenge but also aim to broaden and transform the understanding of gender roles in a culturally sensitive manner. This component of the analysis is critical in developing comprehensive educational programs that are not just gender-sensitive but also truly inclusive, considering the full spectrum of gender identities and expressions, and ensuring that every individual has the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from gender equality initiatives. Key findings from the study indicate that while there is progress, important challenges persist, particularly in fully engaging men and male youth in gender equality, and inclusivity promotion initiatives. The study identifies successful strategies that have led to positive changes in gender ad inclusion perceptions, as well as gaps and biases that need to be addressed. The implications of this research are significant, providing actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and development practitioners seeking to develop gender-inclusive educational programs. By distilling lessons learned and offering evidence-based strategies, the paper contributes to a broader dialogue on effective approaches to gender equality education. It underscores the importance of proactive, reflective practices and the transformative potential of education as a tool for social change, setting the stage for a legacy of gender equality and inclusivity. These findings form the basis for a set of robust recommendations aimed at enhancing the gender sensitivity and inclusivity of UNICEF's future educational programs.

**Keywords:** *Gender equality, male engagement, inclusivity, program effectiveness, UNICEF, Lesotho.*

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## 1. Introduction

Amidst the grandeur of Lesotho's mountains lies a complex socio-economic reality. Governance gaps borne from episodic political instability have hampered access to vital services and goods, directly impacting the socio-economic stability of the nation (UNICEF, 2023a; UNICEF & Lesotho Red Cross Society, 2023; IMF, 2022). The struggle against poverty, ecological fragility, and limited employment opportunities exacerbates the nation's reliance on international aid, highlighting a critical need for interventions designed with precision to bolster domestic resilience, especially among the most vulnerable groups (The World Bank, 2023a, 2023b; Hemat *et al.*, 2022). Compounding these challenges, the pervasive HIV/AIDS epidemic places additional strain on an already overburdened health system, demanding a cross-sectoral response that integrates nutrition, WASH, healthcare, and education to effectively address the root causes of health disparities (Mairos Ferreira *et al.*, 2023; Schwitters *et al.*, 2022).

Gender inequality in Lesotho is a multifaceted issue that transcends the simple dichotomy of male and female disparities (The World Bank, 2023a). Historical context and socio-economic structures have colluded to entrench a patriarchal system that systemically disadvantages women and girls (Mairós Ferreira & Muthengi, 2023a, 2023b; Paramaiah *et al.*, 2020). Nonetheless, a holistic perspective on gender inequality recognizes that the patriarchal dividend for men is also a patriarchal burden, whereby traditional roles inadvertently limit male expression and contribute to harmful masculinities. Addressing this requires an inclusive approach that also analyzes how men and boys, particularly those with disabilities, are affected by and can contribute to gendered power dynamics. Societal norms that dictate the archetype of the able-bodied male as the provider exacerbate the marginalization of disabled men, who are often excluded from both the discourse on gender equity and from opportunities for economic and social participation. Gender equity as a concept must transcend the distribution of resources and opportunities, advancing towards a transformative change in the institutional structures and belief systems that underlie gender relations.

In alignment with the overarching goal of gender equality and inclusivity, this paper presents a brief exploration of five UNICEF Lesotho Country Office Evaluations conducted from 2019 to 2023. The research critically examines the male role within these frameworks, seeking to redefine entrenched gender norms and highlighting the significant potential of men as catalysts for familial and societal change. This inquiry promotes a robust initiative towards capacity building and consciousness-raising among family members, particularly focusing on the transformative influence of men. It endeavors to pioneer a new era of child development in Lesotho characterized by equity and inclusivity.

## 2. Methodology

The meta-analysis presented here draws from a series of Evaluations by the UNICEF Lesotho Country Office, spanning 2019 to 2023. It examines the integration of gender and inclusivity principles within UNICEF Lesotho's program frameworks, assessing compliance with UNICEF's mandates for gender equality and inclusivity. The objective is to discern the impact of educational content and methodologies on male audiences, gauging how effectively these interventions have engaged and influenced male perspectives and behaviors toward gender norms and inclusivity. An iterative coding process was central to this effort, dynamically shaping the data collection and ensuring that findings resonated authentically with participants' experiences, thereby cementing the research's conclusions in the reality of Lesotho's societal context. Methodological rigor was fortified through a comprehensive triangulation strategy, which served to validate the research findings. This approach involved the corroboration of data points across various Evaluations, irrespective of their specific focus areas, to form a coherent narrative. The combination of different methodological strengths from each Evaluation through both methodological and data triangulation bolstered the internal validity of the study. This meticulous approach ensured a balanced and thorough representation of gender dynamics as portrayed in the Evaluations, providing a credible and trustworthy analysis that contributes substantively to our understanding of gender integration in programmatic initiatives.

## 3. Findings and discussion

In the pursuit of gender equality, equity, and inclusivity, the Evaluations conducted by the UNICEF Lesotho Country Office from 2019 to 2023 highlight a critical opportunity: the active role of men and male youth can be significantly enhanced to drive these efforts forward. The comprehensive evaluation of the UNICEF Lesotho Country Programme (2019-2023) demonstrates commitment to integrating gender equality, equity, and inclusivity within various developmental frameworks [*e.g.*, "The Country Programme (...) includes inclusion- and equity-integrated support for improving the access and quality of early childhood care and development, as well as primary/secondary education, out-of-school children, and adolescents" (Bester, 2022, p. 32)]. Notably, it underscores the decade approach (division in decade 1 and decade 2) as pivotal, recognizing the formative years of children and youth as critical junctures for intervention. The Evaluation Report points out that, while achievements have been validated, there remains considerable scope to bolster the gender, equity, and inclusion dimensions, especially within the strategic development plans.

"The evaluation found that the Country Programme is aligned with UNICEF's Gender Action Plan (2018–2021) and NSDP II priorities to address gender inequality. Examples of UNICEF interventions addressing gender inequality include support to the Ministry of Education and Training to strengthen the gender-responsiveness of national education sector plans and policies; capacity strengthening of law enforcement officials to identify and respond to cases of gender-based violence; and the Joint UN programme 2gether 4 SRHR (sexual and reproductive health rights) empowering adolescent girls and

young women. The Country Office, however, lacks an overarching gender strategy, and so interventions addressing gender inequality lack coherence. The evaluation identified the need for gender technical capacity in the Country Office" (Bester, 2022, p. x).

Although men are undoubtedly involved across various programmatic areas, the other The evaluative discourse suggests that efforts must pivot toward a more deeply integrated approach that amplifies the potential of gender, equity, and inclusion strategies to permeate and influence the decade framework's entire spectrum. This need for a deeper, more integrative approach that fully mobilizes their potential as catalysts for change is also corroborated in the other Evaluations (iQvia, 2023; Binci *et al.*, 2022; Cream Wright, 2019). This is not just a matter of participation; it is a transformative process where men and boys evolve into ambassadors of gender equity, embodying the values of inclusivity in their communities. The transformative role of males is consistently observed as a common element in the Evaluations, particularly regarding their participation in discussions and training on gender issues. From the teachers in the classroom to the young leaders in the community, the presence of male figures engaging in gender discourse is essential.

"We as Basotho we still have a cultural belief where we believe ladies or mothers are the only ones to take care of their babies. But we broke that cultural barrier through forming forums. Some men still want to do that. It's also their responsibility to take care of their families (...) Immediately when these ladies heard that we were discussing about how men should take care of their families, the women were happy about that. They said, 'at least now bo ntate (males) will go to facilities and test; we will not go alone there'" (iQvia, 2023, p. 57)

Yet, despite this acknowledgment, the Evaluations concurrently underscore the necessity of addressing the barriers that prevent men and male youth from fully contributing to gender equality efforts (iQvia, 2023; Bester, 2022; Binci *et al.*, 2022; Cream Wright, 2019). Cultural expectations, traditional roles, and the lack of clear avenues for involvement are consistently mentioned as impediments to achieving true inclusivity. The challenge, therefore, lies in dismantling these barriers to forge a more equitable path forward. Specific strategies, as reported in the Evaluations, have led to positive changes, suggesting a more significant investment in these approaches could be beneficial. For instance, in the Evaluation of the Lesotho Child Grants Programme (Binci *et al.*, 2022), male engagement was particularly effective when programs were closely aligned with local customs, showing that gender initiatives resonate best when they are culturally attuned. Moreover, navigating the complex dynamics of family participation in Lesotho's public health sphere, the Endline Evaluation of the Integrated HIV & AIDS-Nutrition Programme in Lesotho (iQvia, 2023) reflects on how men's involvement in maternal and child health initiatives has yielded positive changes. Nevertheless, it is evident that there remains untapped potential in the male youth demographic. The data suggests that adolescent boys, in particular, are at a pivotal developmental stage where interventions could significantly influence their perception of gender roles. However, these interventions must be designed with an acute awareness of the socio-cultural landscape they aim to change [*e.g.*, Lesotho Evaluation of Lesotho Country Programme 2019–2023 (Bester, 2022)].

Across all Evaluations, another critical element is abundantly clear: the active participation of men and male youth in gender initiatives is not merely beneficial but essential for the holistic development of gender equality, equity, and inclusivity. The Final Report of the Lesotho CFS Evaluation (Cream Wright, 2019), for instance, illustrates that when men are provided with the opportunity and the tools to engage with gender initiatives, they can become influential allies in promoting gender equality. The report's qualitative data speak to a shift in attitude among male participants, showcasing a growing awareness and willingness to challenge and change deeply rooted gender norms. Furthermore, the Endline Evaluation of the Integrated HIV & AIDS-Nutrition Programme in Lesotho (iQvia, 2023) brings to light the delicate interplay between existing cultural norms and the acceptance of new gender paradigms. The journey toward full gender equality and inclusivity is complex and multifaceted. Male and male youth engagement vary across the board, with certain Evaluations pointing to more effective methods of inclusion than others.

"The evaluation found that the Country Programme is aligned with UNICEF's GAP (2018–2021) and interventions under the Country Programme are among the priority interventions of NSDP II to address gender inequality. [...] However, UNICEF's work in addressing gender inequality tends to be projectized and lacks coherence" (Bester, 2022, p. 38).

In sum, the Evaluations collectively emphasize that to move the needle on gender equality, equity, and inclusivity, we must actively cultivate the roles of men and male youth as advocates and practitioners of these values. This requires a concerted effort across all sectors, to build programs that are, entirely, gender-sensitive and inclusive.

#### 4. Conclusion and recommendations

In concluding the meta-analysis of the Evaluations conducted by the UNICEF Lesotho Country Office from 2019 to 2023, a unifying thread emerges: the empowerment of men and male youth is crucial and holds substantial untapped potential to bolster gender equality, equity, and inclusivity. The Evaluations illuminate a compelling narrative; they highlight the necessity for a strategic realignment of existing initiatives to better incorporate and amplify the roles of men and boys in gender-based programs. The transformative influence they can wield, as documented in the Evaluations, is manifest in their growing willingness to redefine traditional gender norms and partake actively in the cultivation of an inclusive society. Yet, the journey remains intricate, interlaced with cultural nuances and systemic barriers that demand thoughtful, context-sensitive approaches. The Evaluations underscore a collective call to action: to harness the insights gleaned, to translate them into decisive, culturally resonant strategies that will indelibly mark Lesotho's commitment to fostering a community where inclusivity is not an aspiration but a lived reality. Moving forward, the recommendations drawn from these comprehensive Evaluations are clear. There is an imperative to develop robust, evidence-based strategies that integrate men and male youth as central figures in gender initiatives. These strategies should encompass educational, health, and community sectors, creating inclusive platforms that not only educate but engage males in gender discourse and action. Building upon successful programmatic interventions, such as those highlighted in the Lesotho Child Grants Programme, future initiatives must ensure the sustainability of engagement practices that encourage male agency and leadership in promoting gender equality. Consistency in approach and methodology across all programs will be vital to this endeavor. By fostering a culture where men and boys are empowered as equal stakeholders in gender justice, Lesotho can carve a path toward a future defined by equity and inclusivity for all its citizens.

#### Acknowledgments

We express our profound gratitude to all professionals and teams who have been engaged in the Programs and their Evaluations (2019-2023). Our special thanks are extended to the communities in Lesotho, most notably, the children and their families. Their engagement and the valuable insights they provided have been central in enriching our understanding of their distinct perspectives and needs. Furthermore, we extend our heartfelt thanks to the UNICEF Country Office Lesotho team. Their unwavering support has been instrumental to the successful completion of this research.

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