




# Transforming Masculinity

*A Guide for Expanding the Conversation about Gender Equality*



**Together**, we will  
realize a future where  
everyone is safe,  
connected, and valued.

We invite you to use this MERGE Conversation Guide© to reflect on your own attitudes and behaviors, to offer ideas and raise questions with others, and to inspire actions that promote gender equality. This guide is intended to be used as a tool to promote conversations about masculinity and the socialization of boys and men, and to encourage people of all genders to work together for gender equality. A glossary is included, to provide definitions for terms used within this guide and assist in creating common understanding as you engage in these discussions.

The five core beliefs described in this guide have been used to stimulate dialogue, raise consciousness and inspire action by individuals and communities around the world. Developed over three decades of work with men's groups, organizations, and networks, these beliefs have been a vital tool for communities working to advance gender equality in the United States, as well as other countries such as Albania, Liberia, Myanmar, and Rwanda.

Opportunities for conversations are all around us — within relationships, families, workplaces, schools and communities. Please join us in this movement by planting the seeds of conversation in your life.

**YOU ARE NOT ALONE!**

## The **MERGE** Approach©

The mission of **MERGE** for Equality is to engage people and communities in transforming masculinity to advance gender equality.

**MERGE** for Equality, Inc. works to advance the beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors that allow men and boys to be their authentic selves and embrace their role in ensuring gender equality. We do this with individuals, groups, and communities across the globe, in alliance with girls, women and all marginalized people.

There are three pillars of our work that are proven and remain constant. These are core elements, which **MERGE** embodies as we work to achieve our mission.

### **COMPASSION**

We recognize that boys and men both benefit from, and are harmed by, gender inequality.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

We believe boys and men have an important role in advancing gender equality.

### **PARTNERSHIP**

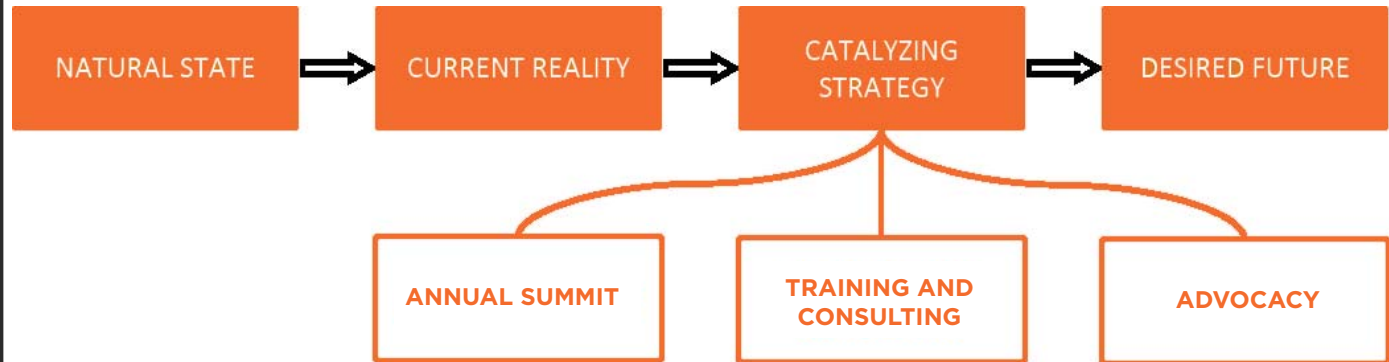
We work to empower individuals and strengthen communities by emphasizing collaboration and inclusiveness.

Building on these pillars, **MERGE** provides three core services: **Annual Summit**, **Training and Consulting**, and **Advocacy**, aimed at:

- Promoting a deeper understanding of masculinity and expanding the conversation around men and boys.
- Convening strategic partnerships that promote best practices, networking, and collective action in order to forge deep connections across social divides.
- Building capacity by training, coaching, mentoring, and providing resources to individuals and groups involved in community building.
- Galvanizing, developing, and supporting the next generation of change agents.

## The **MERGE** Theory of Change

The **MERGE** Theory of Change affirms our shared humanity, takes stock of current conditions, envisions a desired future, and prescribes a catalyzing strategy to achieve this future.



## The **MERGE** Theory of Change

### **Natural State**

Boys and men are naturally life-affirming, loving, and sustained by connection.

### **Current Reality**

Far too often, boys and men are socialized in ways that promote emotional disconnection, social isolation, dominance, and violence. Reinforcement of these social expectations are harmful to all people, relationships, families and communities. Boys and men also have access to opportunity, security, and a variety of social benefits not afforded to people of all genders. These privileges often lead to the oppression of women, children, and marginalized groups in ways that range from subtle to extreme.

### **Catalyzing Strategy**

MERGE seeks to transform how boys and men are socialized and engaged throughout their lifetime. This shift is essential to achieving gender equality. Core strategies for accomplishing this mission include: annual summits, training and consulting services, and advocacy initiatives.

### **Desired Future**

We envision a world that promotes the natural life-affirming and loving qualities of boys and men. This empowers boys and men to experience and help create healthy, compassionate, non-violent relationships. As a result, boys and men can partner with people of all genders to serve as effective agents of change - to promote equality at home and in the community.



# **MERGE** Core Beliefs



# 1



**All boys are born loving, caring and sensitive.**

1. Boys are not born dominating and violent.
2. Boys are born with a capacity for compassion and a desire for connection.
3. These qualities must be nurtured and cultivated to be sustained into adulthood.

Core Belief 1

Natural State



**Notes:**

# 2



**Boys are trained to be masculine in ways that are both beneficial and harmful.**

1. Boys and men are trained to deny the need for connection, suppress emotions, and use domination over others to feel powerful.
2. This training leads to isolation, mental and physical health problems, and violence within families and communities.
3. By conforming to these dominant forms of masculinity, men gain privileges in relationships, families, workplaces and the wider culture.

Core Belief 2

Current Reality



**Notes:**

# 3



**Boys and men are taught that violence and domination are socially acceptable ways to control feelings of powerlessness and protect privileges.**

1. Boys and men are profoundly impacted by the traumas of violence — as survivors, witness and perpetrators — which leads to feelings of powerlessness.
2. There is a cyclical link between violence, trauma, and dominant masculinity.
3. The privileges of masculinity are gained in exchange for denying trauma in oneself and in others.

**Notes:**

# 4



**Boys and men are eager to reclaim the capacity for caring and connection with self, others, and community.**

1. The desire for connection remains alive in all boys and men.
2. Healing from traumatic experiences as individuals and with others enables men to reconnect with their authentic selves.
3. Men can be role models, advocates for gender equality, and allies to women, transgender people, and other men.



**Notes:**



# 5



**Together, people of all genders can transform masculinity.**

1. Masculinity can be changed.
2. Building on the accomplishments of the women's movement, and the movement for LGBTQ rights, men have a unique opportunity to join the work for gender equality.
3. Cross-gender partnerships are essential to the transformation of masculinity and achieving gender equality for the benefit of all.

## Core Definitions



### Gender

refers to the expectations, roles and responsibilities, which families, cultures and societies use to characterize individuals based on assigned biological sex. Gender roles and expectations are learned starting at a young age, vary across culture and class, and can change over time. While often limited to either masculine (for males) or feminine (for females), gender categories are more diverse and include transgender (including those assigned male sex who identify as gender female and those assigned female sex who identify gender male), gender fluid, and/or gender neutral.

### Transforming Masculinity

is essential to advancing gender equality. It starts with socializing boys to be their naturally life-affirming and loving selves, capable of expressing a full range of emotions and treating everyone with respect. It also includes the expectation that people of all genders will be equally empowered to live fulfilling lives – that boys and men will not be afforded privilege and power because of their gender. It leads to equal partnership in the home, community, and society, helping ensure fair life outcomes for all.



## Core Definitions

### Gender Equality

refers to the equal treatment of individuals based on gender, (a woman earning the same income as a man for performing the same work, a man accepted for expressing emotions or crying, a transgender person free to choose pronouns or restrooms). Currently, women and transgendered individuals are more likely to be disadvantaged and marginalized, whereas men are more likely to benefit from gender imbalances. Gender equality is beneficial for people of all genders.

**Together we are - Transforming Masculinity to Advance Gender Equality.**



**Notes:**



**Notes:**



**Notes:**



# MERGE

for Equality

Transforming masculinity to advance gender **equality.**

**MERGE** for Equality is a unification of the Men's Resource Center, Men's Resources International, and the Healthy Men and Boys Network. The ideas presented in this Conversation Guide© evolved from many sources. Drawing from feminism, the men's movement, community organizing, and social justice education, the Men's Resource Center for Change began pioneering community based men's programs in the 1980s in Western Massachusetts. Beginning in 2004, Men's Resources International further developed this theory and practice in diverse global contexts.

**MERGE** is grateful for the Summit Advisory Team and Conversation Guide Working Group members for their diligent work and on-going support.



**And then  
all that has  
divided us  
will merge**

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