Exercise: Rethinking Gender Norms

Rationale: In order to change how people think about and participate in violence it is necessary to address existing social norms around gender and to create different gender norms. This exercise invites participants to think about the existing male and female gender norms that they would like to re-envision.

Materials: Chart paper or boards for writing and paper for participants to write on (or their note pads)

Directions:
1. Write on one piece of paper “In times of violent conflict, a ‘real’ man...” and on a second chart paper write, “In times of violent conflict, a woman...”

2. Ask the group to give you social norms/behavioral expectations that fall under each heading and write their ideas on chart paper. If necessary, remind the group that you are not asking for realities in conflict; rather, you are asking for what society expects of men and women.

3. Now ask the group to identify the items for which there is crossover. Which items on the list for men also apply to women? As they identify them, put a dot next to these items. Which items on the list for women also apply to men? As they identify them, put a dot next to these items, as well.

Ask the following:
- What do you notice about the crossover?
- What does this mean for gender and the creation of gender norms?

4. Hang the two lists on the wall. Give participants small pieces of paper or sticky notes and ask them to identify the negative consequences of the norms for men and women that they listed earlier. Have them write one consequence on each small piece of paper and tape that paper on wall next to the corresponding gender norm.

5. Tell the group that in order to see change, they have to think about what they want to change and how they can reconstruct particular gender norms.

6. Divide the group into gender-mixed groups of four (two men, two women). Ask each group to write two letters that begin as follows:
   a. Dear Sons of my community, you may have been taught X, but I want you to know that it is ok to Y. (For example, you may have been taught that marrying an educated woman is to be emasculated but you should know that an educated woman has added values.)
   b. Dear Daughters of my community, you may have been taught X, but I want you to know that it is ok to Y. (For example, you may have been taught that as a girl, you should be submissive and more caring for your family, but it is ok to do so without thinking that you are less important.)

Have the group come up with as many reconstructed norms as they can for each gender group. Allow 20 minutes for them to work in groups.

7. Have each group share at least one reconstructed norm from each letter they wrote (the number shared
depends on the time you have available.

Discussion:
- What was it like to write these letters?
- What other ways can you communicate these messages?