
Transforming Masculinities: A Personal Narrative of a Continuing Journey

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This article presents the personal narrative of Prabu Deepan, a pioneer of the "Transforming Masculinities" initiative by Tearfund UK. The initiative aims to address and reduce sexual and gender-based violence by challenging harmful gender norms and fostering equitable relationships. Through workshops and community dialogues, the program involves men and women as "gender champions" who, alongside faith leaders, promote positive social norms within communities. Prabu reflects on his transformative journey from a childhood impacted by violence and displacement to a leadership role that encourages compassion, accountability, and gender justice. His story highlights faith's role in shaping healthier masculinities, drawing inspiration from Jesus Christ as a model of compassionate leadership. Additionally, Prabu's journey emphasizes the importance of supportive relationships, personal accountability, and community engagement in promoting gender equality and breaking cycles of violence.

Introduction

Prabu Deepan is the architect of Tearfund's evidence-based [Transforming Masculinities](#) intervention (Tearfund n.d.b). Launched in 2013, Transforming Masculinities is an initiative of Tearfund UK, developed together with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. It is designed to train and equip men and women as "gender champions" in their home communities, in close partnership with local faith leaders, through training workshops and regular community dialogues (Tearfund n.d.a).

Transforming Masculinities is a community level, participatory, inclusive, reflective process which engages men and boys alongside women and girls. Its goal is to end sexual and gender-based violence by shifting the harmful social and gender norms which uphold violence against women and girls. It aims to create new positive norms that encourage equality. Social norms, as used here, are the unwritten rules of what people expect others to do in their communities, what people think others are doing, whether or not they actually are, and/or what people think others expect them to do.

Transforming Masculinities works with faith communities as the primary agents of positive change. These communities can play a big part in addressing sexual and gender-based violence but are often overlooked or sidelined. All of us may have played a role in perpetuating and observing violence. We all need to be transformed, and in faith communities this

starts with faith leaders: those with considerable influence who shape existing social norms.

Faith leaders are fully trained in the approach, and are supported through their own journey of transformation. In turn, they speak out in their communities, sharing positive messages in sermons and modelling positive ways of being a man or a woman which value men and women equally. These faith leaders also select one man and one woman in their community to become "gender champions" who are trained the same way. They then facilitate small, participatory discussion groups in their communities, called ["Community Dialogues"](#) (Tearfund 2016).

Community Dialogues are transformative spaces where men and women can reflect on their communities, families and, most importantly, their own beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Each dialogue runs for six weeks, with one session for two hours each week. The first five weeks are single sex, and the final week brings women and men together to envision their community free from violence and abuse. Community Dialogue participants often want to share their stories of change, telling others about how their families are stronger, how violence is stopping, and how women and men are thriving together. These members are supported by the gender champions and faith leaders to share their stories and messages in the wider communities. They share testimonies at church, over meals, even at sports events. Through sharing, more

people can choose to adopt behaviours and attitudes which support equality—leading to a community level change in norms and behaviours.

Some contexts have specific issues or forms of sexual and gender-based violence that need more in-depth discussion. When communities identify specific needs, the approach can be adapted to address the issue raised by the community. For example, in Mali and Chad there are very high rates of female genital mutilation or cutting. To help end this, Tearfund, its partners and survivors adapted the content to include a focus on this issue in the training, as well as in the Community Dialogues.

In other contexts, family planning decision making has been the focus, as well as women's economic empowerment and girls' education. Tearfund recognises that although everyone is affected by sexual and gender-based violence, it is women and girls who are affected the most. Overwhelmingly it is men who are perpetrating violence against women and girls, and it is essential for men to be transformed in order to be a part of the solution.

The Transforming Masculinities programme has been proven to reduce rates of violence and enable communities of women and men to flourish equally and together. There is a solution, and each one of us must be part of it. The programme has been adapted and implemented in fifteen countries, with the tools available in more than ten languages. Over 2000 gender champions and faith leaders have been trained and journeyed with, and over 100,000 men and women have participated in the Community Dialogues over the last nine years.

This article outlines such a "journey of transformation" in Prabu's own life, where he reflects on his journey from childhood as an ethnic minority in conflict-ridden Sri Lanka to his present-day roles as a husband, a father, and a leader in the global development sector, especially in the Transforming Masculinities program. He offers a vulnerable reflection on the people, experiences, and social realities that have shaped and changed his way of being a man in this world, seeking to embody masculinity and personhood according to the example of Jesus Christ.

Prabu's story is incomplete without the voices of those who are walking this journey with him. Here, Prabu's reflections are interspersed with excerpted testimonies from interviews with several others who know Prabu and his journey well and who are walking their own journeys of identifying and transforming practices of gender injustice. It is our hope that, taken together, these reflections will offer insights and resonance for Christian development practitioners and beyond who are walking their own journeys towards understanding, transformation, and Christlikeness.

Formative Childhood Experiences

During most of my childhood, my father was absent in one way or another, struggling with his own demons and the troubles that came with his identity. As a child, I cannot remember any involvement from him in my life, even a conversation. I knew he was proud of my educational achievements: that was it. He was also abusive and violent towards my mother, and there were many times I remember intervening, even though I was still a child. Of course, this resulted in getting me into trouble with him and also affected my perception of who he was.

I decided at a young age that I didn't want to be a man like my father, a father like my father, or a husband like my father. Now that I'm older and a bit more aware, I realise that that decision in itself didn't make me a good person, but it was my starting point. I simply knew that I did not want to be violent. At that time, my understanding of violence was specifically physical, because that was what I saw everywhere around me. And I think that indicates the problem I saw around me: an accepted norm of men being violent.

Uwezo: His father was violating his mother. Prabu decided he couldn't be like his father, treating other people differently, especially women. And I think this motivated him to think about how to help other men who were treating women the way his father was treating his mother. He was motivated to do this work, and he was passionate about it. And it is easy to see that he values everyone, despite their status. I think this is his strength: he's treating people the same way he wants to be treated. (Uwezo is Tearfund's Global Transforming Masculinities Advisor, based in Goma, DR Congo. He has worked closely with Prabu since 2015 in various capacities, including as staff of the partner organisation implementing the "What Works" project in Eastern DRC).

We were, at that point, displaced because of the war, and by then I had already been sexually abused. We lived with a host family in the city, and I was sexually abused again. My childhood and teenage years were marked by lots of pain, and I didn't know how to navigate it. There was no one who could talk to me about it. I didn't know any other displaced kids, and I struggled to understand my identity as a displaced person. On top of all that, I was struggling with my relationship with my father. It was a very difficult time.

During that season, however, I met my pastor for the first time, and that relationship was transformational: meeting a person who constantly told me he believed in and saw me. I was not invisible. Now that I look back to my formative years, I think about my pastor and other men who came into my life, whose characteristics and attributes were positive models for me. I think, too, about my mom. She was courageous

and vulnerable, and I am the man I am because of the woman that my mother was.

Drawing from the examples of these people, I chose the characteristics that I wanted to build myself around: compassion, courage, seeing people as they are, investing in people like my pastor did, and a deep sense of commitment to social justice. Because I did not have any one constant figure in my life shaping who I was as a man, I chose whom I wanted to emulate and made my own identity. In a way, this worked out well, but it only formed me on the interpersonal, individual level, not on the level of the society and systems I was a part of, because I had no framework for that. No one had taught me.

Over time, this focus on cultivating an identity of righteousness transformed into self-righteousness. Mistakenly, I believed that abstaining from physical violence alone made me a good person. It took me a long time to realise that the matter was far more complex. The benchmark was so low that people with whom I was in a relationship would consider me a good person simply because I wasn't physically violent or didn't cheat on them. I could be emotionally manipulative, I could be narcissistic and passive-aggressive, and this was accepted as "typical male behaviour." It was justified because I was still a "good guy," meaning I wasn't physically violent or cheating on them. They would go away thinking they did something wrong, and I would let them believe that. There was no accountability, just impunity and justification. Only when I was approaching my thirties did I begin to bring that all together, to figure out the core of who I was and to try to call that out.

This internal processing that I went through is so critical for deep transformation, and it is reflected in the design of Transforming Masculinities. In the training sessions of that program, men and women are invited to reflect on their actions and childhood experiences and through trainings and workshops, the "fishbowl" activity, and community dialogues, there is space created for men to reflect and share and reimagine alternative practices. Part of this involves reimagining alternative characteristics to those that are harmful and devaluing ones that our society reinforces. They explore characteristics of equitable relationships and ways in which we can resolve conflict through effective communication. Men and women are also invited to work towards shaping a culture that promotes accountability to one another.

Marriage and Fatherhood

My wife is phenomenal: very strong-minded and strong-willed. Our relationship was mostly healthy and there was a lot to unlearn and learn. Over the years, our journey as partners has been one of much growth and maturing, providing me with a sense of accountability as

I unlearned and learned over and over again what it was to be a man. When we married, I had only just begun to reflect on myself, who I was as a man, and a relationship partner. This was new; I hadn't been exposed to this kind of self-reflection because I just generally wanted to be good. I wanted to be good for myself and be good, kind, and encouraging to my wife because of her difficult journey. I was still, in many ways, a broken person at that time.

S: I think he had a transformation just before we got married, because before that he was always kind of insecure, trying to get his way. I'm also very strong-willed, so I didn't give in, but neither did he. He had this way of making his idea feel more important than what I wanted to do. I didn't even think about it, because his idea sounded better than mine, and I thought, "Okay, yes." Gradually I became dependent on him, because he was making all the decisions. But when he started working [in Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SBGV)], he realized that it [Prabu's verbal behaviour] was toxic. Even though it was not technically verbal abuse, it was toxic because I was losing myself. (S is a software engineer and is Prabu's wife. Name is anonymised for safety reasons).

To make our relationship work, we never had to sacrifice each other's journeys, ambitions, and aspirations because we came in as equals. She was doing amazing things, completely different from what I was doing, and the mutual support was enriching.

S: We had a massive launch last November in my company, so I was working ten to sixteen hours a day some days. At that time, to be honest, I didn't know what our son took in his school lunchbox, whether it was washed, what happened with his uniform, what he took to school. Prabu took over: "You do your work. Everything else, I got it covered."

My work requires me to travel at least twice a year, so he will check my schedule first and manage his schedule accordingly. I could easily tell my boss, "I can't go because my husband is traveling," but Prabu ensures that I can't use that excuse. I'm a homebody; I prefer to stay home, but he tells me: "You can use any other excuse you want, but you can't say that it's because of my schedule."

When we were expecting our son, I was experiencing a period of unemployment. My wife was working and pregnant, and we didn't have enough money to meet our expenses. No matter how much I believed that it was not my sole responsibility to provide, I felt broken. My father would say things like, "How can you help people if you can't help yourself?" Hearing this made it challenging to accept myself in that situation.

It was a deeply painful time for me, but it was a formative time for us and our relationship because it caused us to start unpacking some things about

ourselves. I realised that I wasn't feeling small or diminished as a person because I depended on her; I simply felt sad that I couldn't care for her enough even though she was pregnant and working. I learned that companionship and support were fundamental in relationships, and embracing support became a transformative experience for me.

S: In this journey with Prabu, I would say the most important thing is I've learned to prioritise myself and also look after myself. I think maybe because of how I grew up, I do not like spending time improving or looking after myself. Prabu also points out that women are always going from one task to another. So he has pushed me, throughout the years, to give some priority to myself. This was also because of his journey and what he was learning.

People say to me, "It's great you're helping your wife." To that, I respond, "Why do you consider it 'helping'? It's not her job. It's our thing. It's our house." I cook because I love my family. I love the fact that they enjoy the food I make, and therefore I cook. It's an expression of love. I clean because we all live in this house, and we all want to live in a clean house. People praise me for "doing good things for your wife, for looking after your son, for helping with your son." I'm always like, "He's *our* son, lol."

S: Prabu has always been a good father. He travels a lot, but it doesn't matter whether he's been travelling for like 18 hours or 24 hours at a stretch: as soon as he opens the door, he's back to being the father. He will start washing our son and feeding him, no matter how tired he is. Immediately, I know I'm on a break. And there was never a sense of me feeling guilty. He didn't make me feel like that, because I think he really, really enjoys being the father.

When our son was born, I thought, "I want him to know my heartbeat like he knows his mother's, from his time in her womb!" I wanted to always hold him, carry him, and care for him because he was a precious human being, a formation of God's goodness in life. But I also wanted to have a real relationship with him—a real bond.

At that time, I was going through a crisis of not knowing who I was or what I wanted to do. Suddenly, my son's birth catalysed me to try to understand my own experiences and to explore how I could create a space for him that was different from the one I grew up in. I began to realise that I could not only be nonviolent; I could be actively positive in that sense, exploring ways that my actions in my relationship, decision-making, household chores and care, and how I communicate could be affirming, equitable, accountable and more Christ-like. I think that was when my wife and I started having the conversation in our relationship about gender norms, gender equality, and the type of man I could be and wanted to be.

Since then, it's been an interesting journey for us to be able to talk about gender roles—and to be held accountable as well. She knows what I do and what I talk about; I am accountable to her to practise in real life what I am "preaching" in my work. And with our son, we have been very intentional about talking with him about household work, consent, and respect for women and their bodies. We knew we needed to raise him from a young age in a way that allows him to be all of himself while also being accountable and conscious of his actions—not just intentions.

This intentionality, creativity, and accountability became and continues to be fundamental to the Transforming Masculinities (TM) approach. TM creates a space for men and women to reimagine and work towards an alternative ideal world. While we don't prescribe behaviours, we invite men and women to co-create practices and behaviours at home (in childcare, chores, and so on) to reflect their commitment to and equal valuing of each other. We also encourage them to create a culture of accountability with one another, between the peers from the Community Dialogues group, and with the "gender champions" so that they can continue to grow in their journeys.

Christ As the Model for Inspiration

Right after my son was born, I was exposed for the first time to conversations about engaging men in the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In early training and conversations, people talked to me about fatherhood, gender roles in childcare, and similar topics. Yet I was still stuck in this narrative that men should be the good guys who stand up and save the day.

As I progressed in my own journey and gained exposure to various programs on male engagement and accountability, I came to realise that any intervention or approach aimed at promoting transformative masculinities and gender equality must extend beyond mere training and workshops. It must permeate our everyday conversations, the messages conveyed in sermons, and the fabric of our societies. A profound shift in norms related to gender roles and attitudes is necessary, and both men and women must exemplify these positive behaviours. I remember when for the first time, I thought, "Oh, aha! Why are we always talking to women about gender-based violence if it's an issue that we have actually done to them? You can't be expected to fix something of which you're a victim." At that moment, it clicked for me.

One of the most significant turning points in the development of Transforming Masculinities occurred when I heard male participants in a focus group express, "I've never seen a man like this. How can I become something I've never seen?" This prompted me to reflect, "What about Jesus Christ?" The more I

delved into studying Jesus and his teachings, the more I found resonance with his character and the transformative potential of faith in Him.

This experience revitalised my belief in the power of faith. I realised that I couldn't align myself with the Christian faith that was often labelled as misogynistic, sexist, and patriarchal. As my understanding of Jesus deepened through Scripture study and engaging in discussions with pastors and others, my appreciation for Christ's essence grew. He became an aspirational figure for me and the ultimate role model for us in our work on Transforming Masculinities. Throughout the training sessions and community dialogues, we reference examples of Jesus. For example, in the "Jesus as the role model" session, we look at the life, teachings and ministry of Jesus, especially as a man, as a leader, and also someone who served those who were vulnerable, discriminated, and marginalized by society.

In a time where faith can be so divisive, so alienating, so discriminating towards women, girls, and people of different identities or nationalities or races, I finally began to see how our faith could also bring people together. Our faith could be transformative. Our faith could be a source of power for good in a world that is so broken. Seeing the humblest forms of faith in the communities that I work in and seeing Christlikeness in people has been really transformative for me.

Power, Leadership, and Intentionality

This whole conversation is about power. When you're talking about gender inequalities, you're talking about power, status, access, and opportunities: the things our society awards men. (This is all, of course, complicated further as it intersects with race, ethnicity, and so on.) My journey had to start with unlearning old habits and becoming attentive to how I engage with people and negotiate power. Whether I like it or not, my presence carries power. How I speak, how I enter a room, how I enter a conversation: I need to be conscious of the impact I make on others. These dynamics are really complex when I'm holding some sort of an organisational responsibility or authority, particularly if I'm leading women or co-facilitating with women or when I am the only male in a female-dominated group or team.

Francesca: Prabu is often given quite a platform as an engaged male ally [Editor's note: "Male ally" is a term generally used to refer to any man that is willing to advocate and speak up in support of gender equality.] He tries to balance that with not taking up too much space, in discussions or panels and so on. It's a tension, in that his personality is very talkative with lots of ideas, so he has lots of things to share. But he's also aware that he doesn't want to take up that space and wants to make sure that he's creating space for others. (Francesca is

Tearfund's Consortium and Networks Manager. She has worked with Prabu closely since 2015 in adapting, developing, and managing Transforming Masculinities intervention and research projects. She is based in the United Kingdom).

Out of my enthusiasm, there has often been a lot of "me" in whatever I was talking about. I felt like I needed to assert myself, like all "good" allies who feel the need to reinsert themselves into the conversation as if the whole thing revolves around them. I didn't notice this until someone called me out, and then I was like, "What do I do with this? I'm a good guy!" Your ego gets affected when someone says something like that, and you get defensive: "Do you know what I'm doing, you random person on the internet? If you only knew how many countries I'm doing this work in..." And then you check yourself: "You've got a problem, bro! You're stuck on yourself." It's a really humbling thing when you have to tell yourself, "Hey, sit this one down."

In the role of ally, I realised, I had co-opted the space and struggle of women in many ways. It shocked me that I, this good guy, could be this insensitive in many ways. From there, I started to see my journey, my relationships, everything kind of converging. I have found that it's really important to keep telling myself that I'm not doing this for anybody else. I'm grateful for other people in my life who hold me accountable, who say things to me like: "You're not doing this for me as a favour. You're doing this because it's right." This comes from the experience of being called out and in, learning when to be silent and intentional about allowing the space to exist where others can be heard more clearly, whether this is at home in a discussion, at work in meetings/trainings or even in casual conversations, or at conferences and panels, where I have learned sometimes it's the best outcome if I can step out of the way and suggest someone else whose voice needs to be amplified. Whenever I'm invited to speak, I always reflect on what I can contribute meaningfully, and if there's someone else who I can recommend whose voice needs a platform. In my work on gender equality, I try to connect these invitations with the amazing women who lead and work on our programmes.

All of these elements are central parts of Transforming Masculinities, in that we promote practices of accountability to God, self, and others through the "Accountable Practices" session during the training and the Community Dialogues. This also reinforces the idea on why this conversation is important—to live the way God called us to live by embodying the teachings of Jesus Christ. We also discuss how to be better allies, and in an accountable way without co-opting.

Uwezo: I had the chance to spend two weeks with Prabu facilitating Transforming Masculinities training in villages. In terms of practising what he's teaching, I

can remember during a lunch break in the villages, he was there to help people get water, serving other people, and they were saying, "Wow. This is strange. How can a man serve others?" Seeing a man do this was strange according to the custom of the area. I've seen many times that he's ready to help other people.

I have started to learn by asking colleagues, "What is a helpful way to come into this conversation? What would be an empowering way to come into this conversation? When do you want me to come in? Do you need me to come into this conversation?" These are things that I had to start rebuilding in my practice, recognising that my intention doesn't always translate into people's experiences of me. I am learning to emphasise, "What do you want in this space, and what is my role in this space?" I am also learning to recognise that it doesn't have to revolve around me.

Francesca: I felt like he gave me space to step into things, but he also backed me up. If there were questions or if things didn't go well, I knew that he had my back. He's very encouraging, always feeding back things that he noticed or things that I was doing well, helping me to think bigger, longer-term, about where I was going and what I was doing.

As a line manager, I encountered a situation where I unintentionally made a female colleague feel disempowered when discussing her performance. This was a new experience for me, and initially, I didn't know how to respond. I chose to acknowledge her feelings and requested time to reflect before continuing the conversation. It was crucial for me to validate her experience, regardless of my intentions. This learning process prompted me to explore preventive measures, such as regularly checking in on her well-being and seeking her accountability. Additionally, I recognized the importance of discussing her performance in a way that would empower rather than disempower her. This open and honest dialogue was necessary to address the issue at hand. This has led to significant improvement in how we work together through me becoming a better line manager and creating a comfortability around accountability.

Today, I'm a regional director with a role that comes with a lot of authority and responsibility. In this role, it's been really important to me to intentionally think about how I create space in which we engage with people as equals of value, irrespective of their role or what they do. I try to constantly think, "How do I use the space that I'm in to create more space for people? How do I spotlight somebody else? How do I actively stand out of the way and create space for other people so that they can shine?" I strive for active demonstration and modelling so that other people in my team can pick it up.

Madhu: He openly shares his stories and vulnerabilities, inspiring others to join him on his

transformative journey. He fearlessly challenges stereotypes and encourages dialogue in training sessions, creating space for women's leadership and promoting intergenerational equity. Moreover, he has extended the Transforming Masculinities program to all staff members, raising awareness and fostering understanding of positive and harmful behaviours. This inclusive initiative within the organisation empowers individuals to embark on this important journey, as awareness and comprehension are crucial for progress. (Madhu is Tearfund Asia's regional Design, Monitoring and Evaluation Advisor, based in Nepal. He is also a Master Trainer for the Transforming Masculinities model.)

This consciousness of power and intentionality about equality comes into play on the organisational level of Tearfund and the personal and home levels. It doesn't matter whether you're a driver or a line manager, a housekeeper or a country director. We are all created in the image of the Triune God, different in the ways that we express God's characteristics. We are not the same, but we have equal value. And if I see you fundamentally as someone created in God's image, how does that shape my interaction with you? How does that shape the way I relate to you? How does it shape the way I give feedback to you and work with you?

Uwezo: I think dominance is not part of him. I think we were in Nairobi one day, and we had to take lunch together. We were just two men, Prabu and I, and all the other colleagues were women, about six. We were discussing, sharing, laughing, you know, this kind of collaboration, friendship. There was no complex about who you were or not. He is someone you can come close to, and he will be open to you.

But the power dynamics don't disappear because I'm actively working to unlearn and learn. Their impact doesn't go away when I walk through the door now as if somehow there's a magical vacuum that sucks up all the power, and I'm this powerless person. It is an active, intentional effort on a day-to-day basis, the way that I sit, talk, and do things to deconstruct power.

I think that's the only way until we live in a world where these inequalities don't exist. Our actions, words, and behaviour must be consciously oriented towards dismantling unequal systems. Our leadership has to promote alternatives like Jesus, using our power to flip harmful systems and social norms, oppressiveness, stigma, and shame. We must be intentional about it because the norm is that we fall into the pattern of doing what everyone else is doing: reinforcing inequality and disparity in our world.

This is the essence of the Transforming Masculinities approach, now part of hundreds of communities across more than fifteen countries, available in multiple languages and adaptations. We explore the life and leadership of Jesus, creating a

learning reflection on how we can embody his example in our leadership. We seek to embrace a form of leadership that is purposeful, caring, loving, affirming, nurturing, committed, without ego and arrogance, not demanding but serving, and ultimately, sacrificial. It's a journey, and my journey continues. I unlearn and learn every day, I get called out, and I spend time reflecting on my thoughts and actions, because I believe I can be better and must be better.

I invite all who read this article to embark on this transformative journey—a journey of questioning and grappling with the narratives we have been taught about masculinities, leadership, power, and gender inequality. Let us explore alternatives, seek connection with fellow travellers on similar paths, and willingly accept accountability for our actions. Only by doing so can we actively contribute to building a more equitable world, a world free from violence, where individuals of all genders, boys and girls, men and women, can thrive and fulfil their inherent potential bestowed upon them.

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