

# Critical Half

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## Engaging Men in “Women’s Issues”: Inclusive Approaches to Gender and Development

Involving Men in Gender Policy and Practice

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“Gender Is Society”:

Inclusive Lawmaking in Rwanda’s Parliament

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Combating Gender-Based Violence in Kenya:  
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Gender Dynamics and HIV/AIDS:  
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SHUKRIA DINI

IN THE FIELD: Women Are Not Islands: Engaging Men to Empower Women

PATRICIA T. MORRIS



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*Critical Half* is a bi-annual journal of Women for Women International devoted to the exchange of ideas and insight encountered by practitioners in the fields of gender, development, conflict, and post-conflict reconstruction.

Each issue of *Critical Half* focuses on a particular topic within the field of gender and development. Past issues of the journal and calls for papers for upcoming issues can be found on our website at [www.womenforwomen.org](http://www.womenforwomen.org).

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# Critical Half

## ENGAGING MEN IN “WOMEN’S ISSUES”: INCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

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## Reflections from the Board of Editors

Over the last decade, there has been a shift in development institutions' focus from "women" to "gender" that has sparked an explosion of interest in working with men to establish gender equitable societies. Whereas the "women in development" (WID) framework paid scant attention to men, the "gender and development" (GAD) paradigm centers on gender relations, the transformation of which cannot be accomplished without the participation of men because it is the relations *between* men and women that are the object of change. Conceptually, the GAD paradigm rejects the "boys will be boys" fatalism often implicit in the WID framework in favor of a belief in men's capacity to change.

The benefits of this paradigmatic shift are clear. GAD work has revealed that many men are capable of reflecting on their gender experience and are interested in making changes in their lives for the benefit of women as well as themselves. It has also drawn attention to the different ways that men are harmed by gender roles; for example, through the violence used to maintain hierarchies among men. Above all, GAD work has revealed the heterogeneity of "men" as a category. Men may share gender privilege, but such privilege is altered by differing levels of access to power and resources based on class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and faith. In response, some programs have mobilized men's support for gender justice by helping them to relate their own experiences of disempowerment to women's experience of gender inequality.

This analysis of men and gender in terms of power relations is necessary for countering the tendency to create a false parallel that argues the need for work with men because, like women, they too are harmed by gender. While gender socialization undoubtedly comes at a psychological cost for many men, it tends not to materially disadvantage them as it does women. Therefore, holding men accountable for the ways that they maintain gender privilege is critical. This approach does not blame men for the patriarchal systems in which they were raised; rather, it asks them to make a commitment to doing what they can to transform structures of male privilege and authority.

One test of this commitment is men's response to male violence. Some of the implications of the test were

highlighted last year during the trial and acquittal of South African Deputy President Jacob Zuma on charges of rape. While women protested the abusive treatment of the case's complainant and struggled to be heard above the din of politicking surrounding the trial, many men's organizations remained silent—in a country where thousands of men have heard messages of gender equality. The gap between South Africa's extraordinary educational effort and men's reactions when confronted with the chance to take a public stand against male violence, and the patriarchal ideology that underpins it, is instructive.

Compare the South African men's response with the courageous actions of Grupo de Hombres Contra la Violencia (GHCV) in Nicaragua, which publicly supported the stepdaughter of Daniel Ortega, Zoilamerica Narvaez Murillo, in her claims of sexual abuse by the Sandinista leader and former Nicaraguan President. An important difference may be that, while much of the gender equality work with South African men originated in the sexual and reproductive health field, the men of GHCV came together because of a shared political commitment to ensuring that liberation from gender inequality is central to the Sandinista struggle for political liberation and social justice.

Arguably, it is this emphasis on political mobilization that is frequently lacking in the burgeoning field of gender equality work with men. In general, programs working with men shy away from talking about men in terms of power structures—about men as both agents of gender power and as targets of other forms of oppression, be it economic exploitation, racial oppression, age discrimination, sexual subjugation, or religious persecution. If anything has been learned from the last 30 years of feminist struggle, it is the need to be clear-sighted about power relations. Talking to men about power, gender justice as a necessary part of social justice, and the shared interests and common struggles that join women and men together is an important way to mobilize men for gender equality. If the first step is to get men engaged, the next is to get men organized.

### Alan Greig

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## In this issue of *Critical Half*

For individuals and organizations that work with conflict-affected women, as Women for Women International does, men are inevitably part of programming considerations. More often than not, however, men in conflict and post-conflict societies are cast simply as violent aggressors—leaders who encourage bloodshed, soldiers who use rape as a means of humiliating their enemies, and husbands who beat their wives to assert their authority at home as their community descends into chaos. Given these images, one does not typically think of creating partnerships with men to better women’s lives.

Yet, while visiting our chapter offices in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) several years ago, I began thinking about the positive roles men can play in our work for gender equality. A couple of experiences triggered these thoughts. The first occurred in a camp for internally displaced people outside of Kabul. I was talking with a group of women when I noticed two men approaching me. Upon seeing these turbaned, bearded strangers, my mind was flooded with stereotypes of the Taliban—the former leaders of Afghanistan, whose misogynist interpretations of Islam resulted in the brutal oppression of Afghan women—and I braced myself for the ways they could express their disapproval of the gathering of women. But to my surprise, the men had come to thank me for the opportunities that Women for Women International had brought to the women, their families, and their community.

During that same trip, I met a woman who told me a story about her father-in-law, an older man with weak hearing who worked as a hospital guard. One day, Taliban men slapped his face when he did not open the hospital door for them, not having heard their knocks. When he returned home, he complained of being sick and remained in bed for three days. On the fourth day, the man left his bed, knelt in front of the women in his family, and apologized for the times he had slapped them in the past, saying that, until his encounter with the Taliban, he had never thought of the humiliation it caused. From then on in that household, women were safe from physical abuse.

Shortly afterward, I traveled to the DRC, where rape and other forms of sexual violence have shredded the country’s social fabric. I had the opportunity to speak with Congolese men who had abandoned their wives after witnessing their rapes. As the men spoke, I was

struck by the inner turmoil that characterized their explanations. While I expected to hear accusations of the women’s “adultery,” many of the men’s stories focused instead on their own feelings of failure and inadequacy for having been unable to protect their wives from such brutality.

Following these experiences, I was forced to confront my simplistic stereotypes of men as aggressors, and reflected on how similar they were to the frustrating stereotypes many hold about “passive” and “helpless” women. I also realized how little we know about the complex social pressures and circumstances that men face, and how their attitudes and behaviors affect our ability to empower the women in their societies.

To help women become active citizens, we must engage the men in their lives. We can benefit from the involvement of those men—like the two from the camp and the hospital guard in Afghanistan and the Congolese husbands—who are sympathetic to the struggles of their mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives and support efforts to improve women’s lives. We must also approach men who discriminate and abuse to understand the reasons behind their actions and discover how we can reach out to them in constructive ways.

Deciding to involve men in our work does not mean that we must turn our attention away from the specific needs and realities of women—who, in many societies around the world, continue to face abuse, injustice, and marginalization at greater levels than their male counterparts. Rather, our decision to involve men acknowledges that building a gender equitable world requires social transformation, and social transformation requires all members of society—women *and* men—to work toward that goal. An inclusive approach that fosters cooperation among all community members will increase the likelihood of sustainable change.

Thus, this issue of *Critical Half* explores how men can be engaged to support and promote women’s rights and thus help to establish gender equitable societies. The topics covered include men’s perceptions of gender roles; men’s opinions of “women’s empowerment”; factors and incentives that influence men’s receptiveness to social, political, and economic programs for women; obstacles faced by men who wish to implement change in their communities; and proven strategies to create partnerships with men to positively transform gender relations.

Readers will doubtlessly notice that most of the articles present examples from sub-Saharan Africa. Inter-



estingly, and unlike our previous issues, many of the papers we received focused on this region of the world. The need to engage men in gender issues, however, is a universal concern, and we hope that by showcasing the challenges and lessons learned in several African nations we can provide insight and spark debate in other communities around the world.

The journal begins with “Involving Men in Gender Policy and Practice,” an overview by Michael Flood, which argues that the creation of a gender-just world requires the involvement of both women and men. He outlines reasons for men’s inclusion in gender-based work as well as benefits men stand to gain by advancing gender equality, while providing key considerations for male engagement to ensure that programs remain profeminist and committed to enhancing the lives of all involved.

Next, in “‘Gender Is Society’: Inclusive Lawmaking in Rwanda’s Parliament,” Elizabeth Powley and Elizabeth Pearson describe how Rwandan female parliamentarians recently engaged some of their male colleagues in drafting an anti-gender-based violence (GBV) bill to ensure its passage and effective implementation. By using inclusive and non-threatening language, and welcoming input from men across all levels of society during the drafting process, the female parliamentarians successfully transformed notions of GBV from a “women’s issue” to a “gender issue” of concern to all.

Similarly, “Combating Gender-Based Violence in Kenya: The Experience of ‘Men for Gender Equality Now’” provides an important model for men’s participation in anti-GBV initiatives at the grassroots level. Author Okumba Miruka highlights the work of a Kenyan organization whose mostly male members confront negative behavior and attitudes toward women to eliminate acts of GBV. The organization’s activities, such as community forums where men and women participate in frank discussions about GBV and an emergency response team that confronts abusers and provides assistance to the abused, demonstrate the positive potential of engaging men as allies in violence prevention rather than characterizing them collectively as perpetrators.

The following article, “Gender Dynamics and HIV/AIDS: Engaging Ugandan Men in Disease Prevention,” highlights the benefits of working with men to combat a disease that is an increasing threat to women. Using examples from two innovative HIV prevention initiatives in northern Uganda, Alicia Simoni shows how men’s attitudes and behaviors can be transformed, and women’s exposure to HIV/AIDS subsequently diminished, through programs that acknowledge men’s responsibili-

ties and concerns while encouraging them to forgo the risky sexual behaviors that underline traditional notions of masculinity.

The need to engage men in gender work is especially pronounced in conflict environments, where women’s assumption of traditionally male roles may spark a backlash from men who feel emasculated by their own loss of control and authority. In “Negotiating with Men to Help Women: The Success of Somali Women Activists,” Shukria Dini presents examples of ways Somali women’s organizations have successfully worked with male community leaders to defuse men’s resistance and secure their support for initiatives that empower women.

Traditionally, each issue of *Critical Half* closes with a contribution from one of our chapter offices. However, given the universal importance of this issue’s topic, we asked all of our senior field staff—women living in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the DRC, Iraq, Kosovo, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Sudan—to discuss the current and potential role of men in Women for Women International’s work. Our Director of Programs, Patricia T. Morris, presents this discussion in our closing article, “Women Are Not Islands: Engaging Men to Empower Women,” in the hope that our internal observations and experiences might help to encourage or advance discussions in other organizations that are also searching for innovative ways to transform gender relations worldwide.

I would like to thank our Board of Editors—Alan Greig, Magda Mohammed El Sanousi Omer, and Wilbert Tengey—for their thoughtful contributions. I am also grateful for the dedication and talent of our Managing Editor, Taea Calcut, the guidance offered by Tobey Goldfarb, and the skillful work of our copyeditor Barbara Bares and designer Kristin Hager. Finally, I express my deepest appreciation to Women for Women International’s supporters, whose interest in establishing gender equitable societies around the world makes this publication possible.



**Zainab Salbi**  
*President and CEO*  
*Women for Women International*

**THERE ARE MANY GOOD REASONS TO ENGAGE MEN IN BUILDING GENDER EQUALITY**, especially given that some men's practices, identities, and relations can sustain inequalities. The need to engage men can be particularly true in conflict and post-conflict societies, which often reinforce narrow views of masculinity and gender hierarchies. At the same time, involving men in gender-related policy and programming carries the risk of compromising resources and services directed exclusively to women or diluting the feminist orientation of such efforts. To minimize this risk, men's involvement must be framed in ways that are pro-feminist, while interventions must be sensitive to the diversities among men and supportive of men's positive contributions.



# Involving Men in Gender Policy and Practice

MICHAEL FLOOD

## Introduction

Across the globe, there is growing interest in the question of men's roles in fostering gender equality. The perception that it is desirable to involve men in efforts toward gender equality is rapidly becoming institutionalized in the philosophies and programs of international organizations. Local programs that engage men have proliferated in fields such as sexual and reproductive health, violence prevention, parenting, and education. At the same time, policies and programs addressing men in gender-conscious ways are scattered and underdeveloped. There are few examples of the systematic integration of gender-related work with men in either government policies or the programming of large-scale institutions. In addition, there are key areas in which men's gendered lives and relations have received little attention, including civil conflicts and wars.

Given the persistence of widespread gender inequalities that disadvantage women, and the limited availability of resources for gender-related work, the desire to continue focusing on women alone, rather than incorporating men, in gender policies and programming is understandable. Programs that address women's strategic and practical gender needs are often marginalized and under-funded, and have had little impact on mainstreaming gender concerns in policies and processes. Thus far, gender mainstreaming has generally fallen short of any radical transformation of the patriarchal gender order.<sup>1</sup> Some women also fear what may happen if men are invited to participate in gender-related work because they have sometimes seen men take over and erode women-oriented projects.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, including men will be critical to the successful creation of gender equality. There is a compelling rationale for engaging men to positively transform gender relations. This paper outlines the rationale for this engagement and identifies the principles that should guide men's involvement.

## Reasons for Engaging Men in Gender Issues

There are four essential reasons for engaging men in building gender equality.

### *Men Are Gendered, not Generic, Citizens*

The impetus for male inclusion in gender-related work is associated with an important shift in how gender issues are conceived and addressed. Men have always been part of the policies and practices of development work, for example, but they have traditionally been treated as generic and ungendered representatives of all humanity. When we assume that men speak for all members of their communities, we perpetuate masculine norms and gender inequalities. The agenda of engaging men is not novel then because of whom it addresses, but how. It addresses men *as men*—as gendered beings who participate in gender relations.

A “women in development” approach—characterized by a focus on women in both analysis and practice, the creation of separate organizational structures for dealing with women, and the development of women-specific policies and projects—dominated development work in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>3</sup> The subsequent shift to a “gender and development” approach over the last two decades embodies a move toward a more overt focus on gender relations and an aim of creating structural changes in male-female power relations. While this approach continues (ideally) to address women's experiences and social situations, it also situates these in the context of social and power relations between men and women.<sup>4</sup>

Men are *unavoidably* involved in gender issues.<sup>5</sup> Most immediately, men (or more accurately, specific groups of men) control the resources required to implement women's claims for justice. But, more broadly, gender inequalities are based in gender relations, in the complex webs of relationships that exist at every level of human experience. Men are as implicated in gender is-

sues as women, and addressing men's attitudes and roles is a crucial element in reconstructing gender relations and equality.

This point is particularly pronounced in conflict and post-conflict societies. To understand and respond to civil unrest, militarism, and war, we must address the men and masculinities that dominate them.<sup>6</sup> Constructions of male warrior heroes are central to the histories and meaning of war, and gendered social norms shape young men's participation in collective violence.<sup>7</sup> Conflict situations often reinforce narrow views of masculinity and gender hierarchies.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, periods of post-conflict reconstruction offer new opportunities for addressing gender inequalities and institutionalizing reforms.

### ***Many Men Maintain Gender Inequality***

Engaging men is necessary though for a more direct reason: to achieve gender equality, many men's attitudes and behaviors must change. Men often play a crucial role as "gatekeepers" of the current gender order through their responsibilities as decision-makers and leaders within their families and communities. They may participate in sexist practices and maintain unjust gender relations by perpetrating violence against women, controlling women's reproductive and familial decision-making, limiting women's access to community resources and political power, or espousing patriarchal beliefs and norms that allow other men to engage in such actions. More broadly, patterns of gender injustice are tied to social constructions of masculinity and male identity. In northern Uganda, for example, where notions of male strength and authority and female weakness and untrustworthiness are prevalent, "real" men are expected to exercise control over their wives.<sup>9</sup>

Conflict and post-conflict societies provide a blunt example of the need to challenge men's perpetuation of gender inequalities. Perhaps the most brutal instance of this is some men's use of violence against women. Incidents of rape and sexual exploitation by men in war and conflict are widespread and well documented. Armed conflicts and political upheavals often entrench gender inequalities and create new ones. Indeed, policies adopted as part of post-conflict reconstruction may exacerbate these.<sup>10</sup> Post-conflict policies and programs must therefore encourage men's adoption of gender-equitable identities, behaviors, and relations. For example, effective strategies for gun control and disarmament must "demobilize" the militarized and violent conceptions of masculinity that sustain arms violence and undermine weapons collection processes.<sup>11</sup> They must engage with

and build on the nonviolent identities and social relations evident among many men to encourage unarmed and peaceful ways of living.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Men Have a Stake in Fostering Gender Equality***

Gender work with men has also been fueled by the more hopeful insight that men have a positive role to play in fostering gender equality. There is growing recognition that gender inequality is an issue of concern to women and men alike and that men have a stake in fostering gender equality.

Some men are already living in gender-just ways: they respect and care for the women and girls in their lives, and they reject traditional, sexist norms of manhood. And some men are already playing a role in fostering gender equality. Individual men in trade unions and government organizations have been important advocates for women's rights. Small numbers of men are engaged in public efforts in support of gender equality, in such fields as violence prevention, HIV/AIDS prevention, and education.<sup>13</sup>

Experiences in conflict and post-conflict societies also provide powerful examples of how gender disparities harm men and progress toward gender equality benefits them. Again, the strongest example of this concerns violence. In areas of political conflict, young men often have a greater exposure to and participation in violence than young women.<sup>14</sup> Men are most at risk of violence from other men, and sex-selective mass killings of males are a gendered component of many political and military conflicts.<sup>15</sup> While male combatants are perpetrators of abuse against women and other men, both they and non-combatants pay a hefty emotional, social, and physical price for their complicity in patriarchal systems of violence. Conflict and post-conflict conditions provoke further challenges for men, including the loss of traditional livelihoods and displacement from family and community roles. For example, Namibia's post-apartheid legacies of systematic societal discrimination have removed men's access to some traditional forms of affirmation and status and have subsequently encouraged violent and controlling masculinities.<sup>16</sup>

Some men are capable of recognizing that they and their communities will benefit from reducing the civil and international violence associated with aggressive constructions of masculinity and patriarchal nation-states.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, there is evidence that gender inequality does more than merely harm women's status and livelihoods; it increases the likelihood that a nation-state will experience internal conflict in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Excluding Men Is Detrimental to Positive Change***

Finally, excluding men from work on gender relations can provoke male hostility and retaliation. It can intensify gender inequalities and thus leave women with yet more work to do among unsympathetic men and patriarchal power relations.<sup>19</sup>

Given that women already interact with men on a daily basis in their households and public lives, involving men in the renegotiation of gender relations can make interventions more relevant and workable and create lasting change. Male inclusion increases men's responsibility for change and their belief that they too will gain from gender equality, and can address many men's sense of anxiety and fear as traditional masculinities are undermined.<sup>20</sup>

### **Why Should Men Change?**

There are two broad answers, one practical and the other moral, to the question, "Why should men change?" First, it is in men's best interest to change. By advancing toward gender equality, men will see improvements in their own lives, relationships, and communities. Second, given the fact of men's unjust privilege, many would argue that there is an ethical obligation for men to act in support of the elimination of that privilege.

Many men receive formal and informal benefits from gender inequalities, including material rewards and interpersonal power. At the same time, men also pay significant costs, particularly to their emotional and physical health. More widely, men can be and are motivated by interests other than those associated with maintaining gender privilege. Overall, there are four reasons why men may support change toward gender equality and will benefit from it.

### ***Personal Well-Being***

Men suffer heavy personal costs for conforming to dominant definitions of masculinity. For example, current gender roles in South Africa compromise men's health by encouraging them to engage in risky sexual behaviors as part of being "manly" and to see health-seeking behavior as a sign of weakness.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Better Relationships with Women***

Men live in social relationships with women and girls—their wives and girlfriends, sisters, daughters, mothers, aunts, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and so on—and "the quality of every man's life depends to a large extent on the quality of those relationships."<sup>22</sup> Many men hold high hopes for their daughters' futures, care for their sisters, value their mothers, and disapprove—

at least privately—of male peers' abusive treatment of their wives and girlfriends.

### ***Community Well-Being***

Gender reform benefits the well-being of the communities in which men live. For example, both men and their communities profit from flexible divisions of labor that maximize labor resources, improvements in women's health and well-being, and diminishing interpersonal and collective violence.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Principle***

Men may support gender equality because of their ethical, political, or spiritual commitments. Male human rights activists have advocated for gender equality because of their commitment to ideals of liberation and social justice, while male religious leaders have promoted faith-based beliefs in ideals of compassion and justice for women. Thus, some men have embraced a moral imperative that men share their rights and responsibilities with women.

### ***Risks of Male Inclusion***

Nevertheless, male inclusion in gender-related work also involves risks. Involving men in gender policies and programming can threaten funding and resources for programs and services directed at women and may dilute such services' feminist content and orientation. There is also a danger that in speaking to men's concerns, interests, and problems, the impetus for justice for women will be weakened.<sup>24</sup> Emphasizing men's roles can also communicate a false sense of symmetry between women's and men's social positions. Indeed, growing policy interest in men and gender issues has been fueled in part by non-feminist and even anti-feminist motivations, including the misguided beliefs that "the balance has swung too far and men are now the victims" or that "men must take back their rightful places at the head of the family and society." Anti-feminist men's and fathers' rights groups are vocal advocates of such positions, and they have had some influence in swaying the policy agendas of governments.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Key Principles for Male Involvement***

What principles then should inform efforts to engage men in gender-related policies and practices? Three interrelated principles guide the positive involvement of men in gender issues: men's involvement must have a pro-feminist purpose, interventions must be sensitive to diversities among men, and we must acknowledge and support men's positive contributions. In addition, to be

effective, the interventions chosen must be culturally appropriate and theoretically informed.

To be pro-feminist is to be guided by principles of gender equality and social justice. It is to be critical of those aspects of men's behavior, constructions of masculinity, and gender relations that harm women. To be pro-feminist or gender-just is to also encourage men to develop respectful, trusting, and egalitarian relations with women, and to promote positive, open-minded constructions of gender or selfhood. Any engagement of men in gender-related work should further feminist goals and draw on feminist frameworks. In other words, we must frame male involvement within a clear feminist political agenda. This work must be done in partnership with, and even be accountable to, women and women's groups. In addition, we must protect women-only spaces and women-focused programs.<sup>26</sup>

Any approach to men's issues must also acknowledge both commonalities and diversities in the lives of men. Factors such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age shape expressions of manhood and gender. Men share the fruits of male privilege unequally, and some forms of manhood are dominant while others are marginalized.

Furthermore, any work must be grounded in both a belief that men can change and a support for every man's efforts at positive change. This commitment involves resisting feeling hopeless about men and dismissing their participation, and instead building on the many positives already in place in current notions of manhood.

While it is important to understand these three principles for male involvement in gender-related work, it is equally important to be able to translate them into effective interventions. It is clear, for example, that effective interventions must be culturally appropriate—they must be grounded in the realities of men's lives and relations and local gender cultures. Evidence from the field of violence prevention shows that effective educational strategies are comprehensive, intensive, and address cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains: what people know, how they feel, and how they behave.<sup>27</sup> Ideally, gender-sensitive education for men uses male facilitators and peer educators, working in partnership with and at times led by women, and creates safe spaces for men to reflect and learn. Our interventions must pay attention not only to men's perpetration of and complicity in gender injustice but also to their involvement in gender-just behaviors and relations.

Interventions should also be theoretically informed by contemporary scholarship on men and masculinities. This recognizes that constructions of masculinity in any

context are likely to be diverse, organized into hierarchies that are actively contested and negotiated, sustained in the gender regimes of institutions and by collective processes of reward and sanction, shaped by both local and global forces, and intertwined with other forms of social organization associated with ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, and nationality.

## Conclusion

There is now a sizeable range of resources with which to encourage men's roles in promoting gender equality. The rationale for involving men in work toward gender equality has been well articulated in academic writing and at international conferences.<sup>28</sup> Online, pro-feminist men's websites explore anti-sexist politics.<sup>29</sup> More practically, key educational and organizational strategies for engaging men are increasingly well documented.<sup>30</sup> What is needed now is the widespread adoption of this work, which requires funding, institutionalization, and policy and professional development.

The impetus for men's involvement in gender-related work is likely to increase in the next few years. It is fueled by ongoing shifts in gender relations, feminist and pro-feminist recognition of the need to transform and reconstruct masculinities, and trends in fields such as international development. There is no doubt that involving men in efforts toward gender equality has the potential to greatly enhance the impact and reach of this work, but whether it does so or not will depend on the play of political and cultural forces. Still, building a gender-just world will bring benefits to both women and men, and the reconstruction of gender relations will require their shared commitment and involvement.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Ertürk, 2004.
- 2 Chant and Guttman, 2000.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Connell, 2003.
- 6 Nagel, 1998.
- 7 Enloe, 2000; Buchanan et al., 2005; Barker and Ricardo, 2005.
- 8 Myrntinen, 2003.
- 9 Dolan, 2002.
- 10 Greenberg and Zuckerman, 2006.
- 11 Myrntinen, 2003.
- 12 Barker and Ricardo, 2005.
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- 14 Reilly et al., 2004.
- 15 Carpenter, 2002.
- 16 Kandirikirira, 2002.
- 17 Nagel, 1998.
- 18 Greenberg and Zuckerman, 2006.
- 19 Chant and Guttman, 2000.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Mehta et al., 2004.
- 22 Connell, 2003.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Flood, 2004.
- 26 Flood, 2005.
- 27 Flood, 2005-2006.
- 28 UNDAW, 2003; Kaufman, 2003. Also see <http://mensbiblioxonline.net/>.
- 29 See the articles, lists of websites, and other resources collected at XYonline: <http://www.xyonline.net>.
- 30 Family Violence Prevention Fund, both entries; Flood, 2005-2006; Instituto Promundo, 2002; Greig and Peacock, 2005; Ruxton, 2004.

**WHILE THE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY HAS SHIFTED TOWARD A GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT (GAD) PARADIGM** that emphasizes relations between women and men, rather than focusing on women alone, GAD programs often fall short of truly including men. However, a 2006 legislative campaign by Rwandan women parliamentarians, in which they engaged their male colleagues to fight gender-based violence (GBV), demonstrates how such inclusion might be conducted successfully. Though challenges remain in involving men in addressing gender disparities, the recent development and drafting of anti-GBV legislation in Rwanda provides a noteworthy model for engaging men on traditionally women's issues.

# “Gender Is Society”: Inclusive Lawmaking in Rwanda’s Parliament

ELIZABETH POWLEY AND ELIZABETH PEARSON

## Introduction

In August 2006, eight members of the Rwandan Parliament introduced a wide-ranging bill to combat gender-based violence (GBV).<sup>1</sup> Because Rwanda leads the world in women’s political representation—48.8 percent of its lower house of Parliament is female—it is perhaps unsurprising that criminalizing GBV is a legislative priority. What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which women and men worked together on this issue; the bill, known as “Draft Law on the Prevention, Protection, and Punishment of Any Gender-Based Violence,” was co-sponsored by four women and four men.

While the legacy of the 1994 genocide permeates all aspects of life in Rwanda, including contemporary politics and gender relations, this article does not attempt to comprehensively address the relationship between the genocide or its attendant trauma and current gender relations. Instead, it explores one case of post-conflict policymaking and posits that it is emblematic of the state of gender relations in Rwanda today. Based on field research during the summer of 2006,<sup>2</sup> this article examines the ways in which women parliamentarians engaged male colleagues in the fight against GBV. Motivated by principle and strategic concerns, Rwandan women parliamentarians created a cooperative, rather than adversarial, legislative campaign. The development and drafting of the GBV bill, which passed through to committee without objection but awaits a final vote in Parliament, provides a successful model for engaging men in traditionally women’s issues.

## The New “Gender” Approach to Social Problems

The 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which Hutu extremists targeted the Tutsi minority and politically moderate Hutus, decimated the population and destroyed the country. The violence was extremely gendered; the vast majority of perpetrators were male and the major-

ity of survivors were female. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Rwanda noted that genocide crimes “took on special connotations when women were the victims” and that, during the genocide, “rape was the rule and its absence the exception.”<sup>3</sup> In the immediate aftermath, Rwanda’s population was 70 percent female. Large numbers of men had been killed or fled the country, while many of those who remained were subsequently imprisoned.<sup>4</sup>

Several non-governmental organizations have documented the extent of GBV during the genocide.<sup>5</sup> There have been some—albeit insufficient—efforts to address the trauma suffered by women, particularly survivors who contracted HIV/AIDS as a result of rape during the genocide, but less is understood about the impact of trauma on men or gender relations. And GBV, though not genocidal in nature, continues to be a problem in Rwanda today. A 2004 study conducted by the Rwandan Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROFE) estimated that, in the previous five years, one in three women in Rwanda had been physically or verbally abused in their communities, and, in the past year, one out of every two women had experienced an act of domestic violence.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing that there could not be a sustainable improvement in the lives of women without a change in the relations between women and men, Rwanda shifted from a “women” approach to a “gender” approach to development in the post-conflict environment of the mid-1990s. Before and immediately after the genocide, for example, these issues were managed by a Ministry of Women’s Affairs, but by 1997, the ministry was renamed the Ministry of Gender and Social Affairs.<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis on gender relations rather than on just women in Rwanda mirrored a shift in the wider development community, beginning in the 1980s, from “women in development” (WID) to “gender and development” (GAD). The shift was based on the acknowledgement that WID programs, helpful as they might have been to



their beneficiaries, did not fundamentally challenge the social structures that privilege the majority of men. GAD programs promised to promote sustainable development by addressing the inequalities that are the result of social constructions of gender. Yet, despite this ideal, development programs have struggled to include men in GAD initiatives or account for the diversity of male concerns.<sup>8</sup> Men are “largely missing from GAD discourse,” and when they do appear, they are cast in stereotypical roles as oppressors or obstacles.<sup>9</sup>

Though the shift from WID to GAD remains uneven worldwide, and well-intentioned but uninformed practitioners often conflate the terms “women” and “gender,” advocates in Rwanda have created interesting models that include men. Male and female staff from MIGEPROFE, for example, conduct gender trainings throughout the country that describe development as a shared challenge and emphasize the roles that both men and women play in advancing it. In the local language, Kinyarwanda, trainers use two translations of the English word “gender”: *ubulinganire* (equality) and *ubwuzuzanywe* (complementarity), or the idea that women and men, while different, complement one another.

### Forum of Women Parliamentarians

The development of the GBV bill was coordinated by the Forum of Women Parliamentarians (FFRP). The FFRP is a cross-party, multi-ethnic political caucus to which all women parliamentarians belong. It seeks to develop “policies, laws, programs, and practices [that ensure] equality between men and women.”<sup>10</sup>

From the outset, the FFRP saw men as crucial partners in the development of the GBV bill and deliberately sought to include them. As Member of Parliament (MP) and FFRP President Judith Kanakuze explained, “If it is a gender issue, men and women, everybody, must advocate.”<sup>11</sup> Her colleague Aimable Nibishaka, one of the male co-sponsors of the proposed legislation, concurred: “Most of the time, when we talk about gender, ‘gender’ equals ‘women,’ yet it is important that men talk about gender too, since gender is society—men, women, all.”<sup>12</sup> The FFRP’s commitment to collaboration was based in part on principle; it believed its efforts would be incomplete if it failed to include men.

Additionally, the FFRP had strategic reasons for involving men in the policymaking process. They wanted to gain potential legislative allies, attract votes for the bill, and increase the effectiveness of the law’s eventual implementation. Because of the sensitive nature of GBV, which is still considered by many in Rwandan society to be a private matter, and because the issue can play into

unfortunate stereotypes of all men as violent perpetrators and all women as passive victims, the FFRP was aware that enlisting men as allies would require a deliberate effort.

### Non-Alienating Language

Women parliamentarians and their counterparts in civil society developed ways of discussing GBV that would attract male support. The draft bill used inclusive language and highlighted issues of direct concern to men, such as crimes against young boys, in addition to those of concern to women. During the debate about the bill in the lower house, one female MP explained it this way:

I would like to ask my fellow MPs not to take this law as if it is a women’s thing, even though in many cases women are the ones suffering from gender-based violence. [This] law will protect the whole Rwandan society.<sup>13</sup>

The genuine commitment to protecting men and boys as well as women and girls, and the strategic use of non-threatening language worked in the bill’s favor; a male MP also spoke out during debate to note that “when you read this law, at first sight you will think that it is favoring one side [women], but...it is a law for the whole society.”<sup>14</sup> By emphasizing that the bill addressed a social problem that could affect anyone, the women avoided creating a dynamic where all men are cast as potential perpetrators and women as the only victims.

In public discourse about GBV, and in the national media campaign they sponsored, women parliamentarians were also careful to engage men as fathers and sons, not as husbands. As one of the consultants who helped to draft the bill explained:

Anyone would love to see their mother happy...and they would love to see their daughter grow and prosper.... But a wife is always something, you know, something else. So [when] presenting gender-based violence as a women’s rights violation, you always have to use examples of daughters and mothers.<sup>15</sup>

Men were encouraged to think about the protection of their daughters and mothers, but not feel as if they were being accused of mistreating their own wives. This tactic also provided a form of political cover for male lawmakers, some of whom may even have committed abuses themselves, and demonstrates the kind of compromise that attends all policymaking efforts.

Thus, men were invited into the discussion as champions of victims' rights, not as the target of the legislation. As the chair of the National Women's Council, which worked in collaboration with the FFRP on the GBV campaign, stated:

If you don't involve [men], they become enemies. They think that you are planning bad things [for] them. But if you involve them and try to show them that this is the community's problem, this is the society's problem, [they see that] it has to be solved by [all] members of the society.<sup>16</sup>

In a society familiar with issues of accountability and impunity, the women parliamentarians chose to make their male peers accountable on the issue of GBV not by accusing them as potential perpetrators but by reminding them of their role as legislators and their responsibility to protect constituents and address issues of importance to all Rwandans. In a recent guide to engaging men in gender equality work, researcher Emily Espen suggests avoiding "language that leaves men feeling blamed...or feeling guilty" and recommends drawing on "men's sense of responsibility and positive engagement as fathers."<sup>17</sup> The success of the FFRP in recruiting men as allies reinforces her conclusions.

### Development of the GBV Bill

The primary method by which the FFRP enlisted men's support was by inviting the involvement of male colleagues at every stage of the policymaking process, including asking key male allies to play leadership roles. The FFRP process was markedly participatory, involving extensive public consultation and collaboration with civil society over nearly two years. The centerpiece of this process was a series of *descentes en terrain* (trips to the field) during which parliamentarians held public meetings with their constituents to discuss the causes of and solutions to GBV.

In addition to participating in the *descentes en terrain*, male parliamentarians were invited to join the FFRP in opening a national conference on GBV held in Kigali in 2005. Furthermore, when the FFRP hired two consultants to help with the actual drafting of the legislation, one was female and one was male. Involving men throughout the process of developing the GBV bill meant that men at all levels of society were made aware of the issue and of the Parliament's intention to address it. One male parliamentarian reflected on the importance of men's participation:

I was in charge of delivering this particular message [on gender-sensitivity]. At the end of the meetings, local leaders, local *male* leaders, were shaken up. Hearing the message from a man was an added value, [they were] more convinced, more able to take the message seriously. But if the message had come from a woman you [would have] found them saying, "Oh, yes we know the story," but they [wouldn't have] given it much weight. They tend to be more concerned with gender issues when a man delivers the message.<sup>18</sup>

Including male parliamentarians in this manner meant that the dialogue with the population was not limited to women constituents. Because GBV touches deeply on sensitive aspects of Rwandan culture and traditional power structures, and because it affects a large portion of the population, public consultation was seen as an effective methodology for both developing the bill and improving the effectiveness of its implementation, if passed into law.

In the summer of 2006, when the FFRP was preparing to introduce the bill, it made the strategic decisions to share its early drafts with male colleagues, to work to ensure that men felt included rather than alienated by the introduction of the bill, and ultimately to enlist equal numbers of women and men sponsors. "Everyone recognized [that] women pushed the process," FFRP President Kanakuze said. She stressed, however, that working to ensure that men also felt "ownership" of the bill was more important than demonstrating women's leadership.<sup>19</sup>

Members of the FFRP did not indicate that they felt disempowered by the enlistment of men as advocates for the bill; rather, they spoke with pride about having conceived, directed, and executed a process in which they *chose* to involve men. Furthermore, men's involvement meant that GBV was less likely to be sidelined as a "women's issue." Having participated as visible members of the consultation process as a result of the FFRP's strategy of inclusion, men were then accountable for their own involvement in the legislation.

The FFRP's campaign against GBV has not been without obstacles. Some men who were approached by the FFRP were unwilling to co-sponsor the bill. Others raised objections to specific provisions of the bill—most notably to the length of prison terms for GBV crimes and to the criminalization of marital rape—when the bill was debated in August 2006.<sup>20</sup> Still others argued that despite the FFRP's attempts to be gender-sensitive,

men’s experiences as victims of domestic violence had been overlooked.

The resistance of some men to shifts in gender relations or the empowerment of women can sometimes invite compromises that undermine feminist aims. Members of the FFRP and their male allies responded to this potential threat by emphasizing the consultative process they had engaged in and citing data to justify their proposals. During the debate, they referenced their public consultations to defuse objections, claiming that the bill reflected opinions of citizens at the grassroots level.<sup>21</sup> A 2004 MIGEPROFE study which demonstrated that, though men are also affected, women are disproportionately the victims of GBV also bolstered proponents of the bill. With this backing, the FFRP was able to defend itself against opponents who claimed that the bill ran contrary to Rwandan culture, denied the severity of the problem, or asserted that the bill victimized men. The experience of the FFRP demonstrates how public consultation and survey data can be crucial tools in advancing women’s legislative interests when some male political elites may be resistant to change. Ultimately, in August 2006, after two days of debate, the bill passed through to committee without objection.

## Conclusion

Although the GBV bill passed its initial test when it was sent to committee, there are ongoing negotiations that will determine the final shape of the legislation, and the bill then faces a full vote on the floor of the Parliament. Regardless of the final legislative outcome, however, Rwandan women parliamentarians have already succeeded in creating an anti-violence movement that includes men. They have garnered significant support for what could have been an alienating issue. Two months after the introduction of the bill, for example, in a ceremony to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the FFRP, the President of the Senate applauded his female colleagues for their legislative contributions and thanked them specifically for the introduction of the GBV bill.<sup>22</sup>

Involving men in gender issues is not without challenges. It requires deliberate attention to frame the issues in ways that are not exclusively about women but rather about social relationships. This effort must include both women and men since the conflation of “women” and “gender” is a conceptual, not solely a linguistic, problem. In Rwanda today, women parliamentarians and activists must work to sustain the level of support that they have thus far garnered, continue to educate and inform the population about culturally sensitive or controversial provisions in the bill, and work to create the means for

implementation so that the bill, if passed into law, will be enforceable. Rwanda’s current government is receptive to gender issues—there is a commitment from the executive as well as the legislative branch that has emboldened activists on the GBV issue—but institutions need to be put in place to guarantee the upholding of these rights and protections regardless of the political climate. And while the public face of gender relations has improved dramatically in the 13 years since the genocide, in part because of the ruling party’s promotion of quotas for women’s membership in Parliament, the pace of change is much slower at the local level.<sup>23</sup>

The women parliamentarians’ principled commitment to the inclusion of men exemplified the GAD approach that “gender” must mean more than “women” in order to effectively address the unequal relationships at the heart of many social issues. Their efforts provide a powerful example of the strategic benefits of including men in addressing “women’s issues.” Ultimately, the GBV bill was not only a chance for women MPs to represent their female constituents’ interests but also an opportunity for them to influence their male colleagues and demonstrate that women’s concerns are society’s concerns.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 The bill defines and criminalizes GBV as the physical, sexual, or mental abuse of a person based on his or her gender. In addition to addressing rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and domestic violence, the bill also includes articles dealing with divorce, property rights, dowry, maternity leave, access to family planning services, and polygamy.
- 2 This research was funded by The Initiative for Inclusive Security, a program of Hunt Alternatives Fund. It is part of a larger body of research being conducted under the auspices of The Initiative for Inclusive Security's Rwanda Project. For more information, see [www.inclusivesecurity.org](http://www.inclusivesecurity.org).
- 3 Degni-Ségu, 1996. Gathering statistics on gender-based violence during conflict is difficult; even so, estimates of the number of rapes committed in Rwanda during the genocide range from 250,000 to 500,000. Human Rights Watch, 1996.
- 4 Various sources estimate that approximately 120,000 people, most of whom were men, were imprisoned after the genocide, while approximately 1 million people, or one-eighth of the population, fled the country as refugees.
- 5 For examples, see Amnesty International, 2004 and Human Rights Watch, 1996.
- 6 MIGEPROFE, 2004. Though this study is an important contribution to the understanding of the problem of GBV in Rwanda, it is unclear whether the high levels of GBV reported reflect increased reporting or an actual increase in violence. There has not been a systematic comparison of GBV before and after the genocide, but some illuminating studies exist. Taylor, 1999 reports an increase in rape just prior to the genocide; Amnesty International, 2004 claims that the increase in small arms in the country following the 1994 conflict contributed to greater amounts of GBV.
- 7 The name of the ministry has undergone several variations since 1994; it is currently the Ministry for Gender and Family Promotion in the Office of the Prime Minister.
- 8 Men's concerns, like those of women, often differ based on variables such as economic and social class, level of education, cultural background, and sexual orientation.
- 9 Cornwall, 2000.
- 10 Forum of Women Parliamentarians, unpublished: cover page.
- 11 Judith Kanakuze, personal interview by Elizabeth Powley and Elizabeth Pearson, Kigali, August 30, 2006.
- 12 Aimable Nibishaka, personal interview by Elizabeth Pearson, Kigali, August 24, 2006.
- 13 S. Henriette Mukamurangwa, Chamber of Deputies debate observation by Elizabeth Powley and Elizabeth Pearson, Kigali, August 2, 2006. Translated by Elvis Gakuba.
- 14 Elysée Bisengimana, Chamber of Deputies debate observation by Elizabeth Powley and Elizabeth Pearson, Kigali, August 2, 2006. Translated by Elvis Gakuba.
- 15 Justine Mbabazi, personal interview by Elizabeth Pearson, Kigali, July 11, 2006.
- 16 Oda Gasinzigwa, personal interview by Elizabeth Pearson, Kigali, August 17, 2006.
- 17 Esplen, 2006: 15-16.
- 18 Wellars Gasamagera, personal interview by Elizabeth Powley, Kigali, Spring 2006.
- 19 Judith Kanakuze, personal interview by Elizabeth Powley and Elizabeth Pearson, Kigali, August 30, 2006.
- 20 During several hours of debate, six men raised objections to the severity of the proposed punishments; one suggested that perpetrators of GBV should perform community service instead of serving jail time. Five men raised concerns over the criminalization of marital rape, referring to it as an oxymoron or something that simply couldn't exist. Three men commented on the provision that would require men with multiple wives to legally marry only the first wife. No women parliamentarians raised concerns regarding these issues.
- 21 During the debate, a woman parliamentarian responded to concerns about the severity of the proposed punishments by pointing out that most of the penalties in the bill were less severe than those suggested during the public consultations. If anything, the drafters of the bill had been more lenient than the public.
- 22 Vincent Biruta quoted in "Women MPs Forum Marks Ten Years," *The New Times*, Kigali, October 10, 2006.
- 23 For example, male participants in a focus group in rural, northern Rwanda indicated that women's empowerment meant that women now perceived themselves as "better" than men and had lost respect for men. According to these men, they now had to fight for *their* rights. These comments suggest that some men are struggling to deal with post-genocide changes in gender relations.

**IN RECENT YEARS, THE IDEA OF INVOLVING MEN IN ANTI-GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) INITIATIVES** has received increasing support. In Kenya, an organization known as Men for Gender Equality Now (MEGEN) provides a successful example of male involvement. Through constituency building, by way of community forums and media engagements; capacity building, with in-house training to increase members' ability to articulate gender issues with confidence and conviction; and practical interventions, including monitoring cases of GBV and connecting survivors to sources of assistance, MEGEN aims to re-socialize men and redefine masculinity as a construct that does not inhere in domination, aggression, and violence.



# Combating Gender-Based Violence in Kenya: The Experience of “Men for Gender Equality Now”

OKUMBA MIRUKA

## Introduction

According to a book published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 2003, most victims of gender-based violence (GBV) are female while the perpetrators are predominately male.<sup>1</sup> Yet only recently has thinking shifted toward a greater involvement of men in combating GBV. This shift stems from the growing recognition that GBV is a societal problem and men should be part of its solution.

Following a 2001 consultation for eastern and southern African men to discuss ways that men could combat GBV,<sup>2</sup> a regional movement of men against GBV crystallized and led to the creation of Men for Gender Equality Now (MEGEN) in Kenya. MEGEN argues that not all men are perpetrators of violence; rather, many men recognize the problem of GBV and can be effective allies in tackling it, particularly by bringing their peers together to confront negative behavior and attitudes toward women and collectively redefine masculinity as a construct that does not inhere in domination, aggression, and violence. In the words of MEGEN’s Coordinator, Ken Otina, “I talk to my brothers and friends about the futility of violence. [I] advise them not to raise their hand even when provoked but instead address the root cause of the problem. And I have seen a positive change in their lives.”

This article describes the strategies developed, challenges faced, and lessons learned by MEGEN as it works to combat incidences of GBV across Kenyan society and, in the process, create greater equality between the nation’s men and women.

## About MEGEN

In Kenya, GBV takes many forms. In 2003, Kenya’s Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) stated that acts of violence reported by women included verbal assault, intimidation, physical battery, and marital desertion. Over

half of the perpetrators in these reports were relatives, most of whom were women’s husbands, and nearly a third of the violations occurred at home.<sup>3</sup> In response to these and other acts of GBV—including female genital mutilation, rape, and forced marriage—across urban and rural Kenya, MEGEN works to:

- Improve services for the protection and support of GBV survivors;
- Access justice for GBV survivors and victims;
- Campaign for the review, repeal, and revision of outdated laws, regulations, policies, and practices;
- Transform male attitudes and behavior toward women; and
- Create and promote new concepts of African masculinity and values of manhood.

MEGEN’s 140 members are representatives of existing men’s faith-based and community organizations as well as individual volunteers who include professionals from the medical, legal, media, education, and art sectors. Those interested in joining the organization must sign a code of conduct to eschew violence and unbecoming behavior, and are required to assist targets of GBV when they personally witness or are notified by informants of acts of abuse.

While the majority of MEGEN’s members are men, the organization also benefits from women’s membership. Two women, in fact, are founding members of MEGEN who have extensive experience in working on gender issues and serve as trainers and mentors. Women provide personal experiences and insights that help inform activities and advocacy messages, facilitate rapport with the predominately female survivors of GBV, especially sexual violence, and sensitize other females to MEGEN’s belief that violence should not be tolerated

regardless of its origin or target. Moreover, including women in MEGEN's work conforms to the organization's conviction that tackling GBV should involve both sexes and alleviates the possible misconception that male members intend to hijack a "women's issue." This unity in purpose was captured by Nyaradzai Gumbonzvanda, the East and Horn of Africa Regional Director for the United Nations Development Fund for Women, who, when opening the 2001 consultation, quoted the Bahá'í teaching that "a bird flies better with two wings."

### Strategies

In early 2002, the national men's movements against GBV from across eastern and southern Africa met once again to develop strategies around which to build their activities.<sup>4</sup> Three strategies were subsequently identified: constituency building, capacity building, and practical interventions. How MEGEN applies the strategies is described below.

#### Constituency Building

Constituency building is the process through which MEGEN widens its outreach to gain more members (especially male members), inform the public about its activities, campaign against GBV, and form alliances with like-minded civil society organizations. The organization's primary forms of outreach are public forums convened by individual MEGEN members in the target community that discuss GBV and stimulate the development of community-based vigilance against its occurrence.<sup>5</sup> And, rather than focus exclusively on women—GBV's primary targets—the forums also address the community's men, exploring their identities, roles, and responsibilities; discussing the costs they face by perpetuating gender inequality through acts of GBV and the benefits they stand to gain in promoting gender equality; and helping them to create plans for individual and collective action against GBV.

Two dialogues are central to the forum experience. The first brings men together to talk about how they have experienced and perpetrated GBV. (Simultaneous to the men's dialogue is a women-only dialogue in which women share their experiences of GBV and prepare issues to discuss with men.) Common points that arise out of these dialogues are that violence is an expression of patriarchy and masculinity and that socialization is responsible for the acceptance of GBV as a norm. In one such dialogue, men attributed their explosive behavior to the fact that they are not allowed space to vent their emotions through non-violent means, such as weeping. In another dialogue, it emerged that because men

are socialized to provide for and defend their families, it is more disastrous for a husband to fail than for a wife to do so. When men cannot meet these social ideals, they may resort to violence to re-assert their authority. Similarly, in discussions of sexual violence, participants point to their society's value of male virility, where sexual conquest is applauded while sexual weakness is considered the ultimate failure. The result is a psyche in which the phallus becomes a symbol of power; in Dholuo, a Kenyan language, this construct is embedded in *dichuo*, meaning "husband" or "the one who pierces."

The second dialogue brings men face-to-face with women to talk about GBV. The dialogue's ground rule is that questions and answers must be genuine even if they put the interlocutor in an awkward position. Typical themes that arise from these open conversations include the concept of love in marriage, nagging behavior, use and control of family resources, promiscuity, subordination, verbal insults, and denial of conjugal rights. At the end of the dialogue, the women propose ways that men can end GBV, which men later consider when developing their action plans. The dialogues create a sense of catharsis in the women because of their ability to speak frankly with men and invoke men's personal commitment to combat GBV.

In addition to hosting forums for individual communities, MEGEN works to reach out to the wider Kenyan public, particularly beyond the country's capital, Nairobi, and the five rural districts where it predominately works.<sup>6</sup> Having developed relationships with media houses, MEGEN relays its messages about GBV to the public through radio and television talk shows as well as newspaper articles. Moreover, during the Sixteen Days of Activism Against Gender Violence each year,<sup>7</sup> MEGEN conducts a Men's Traveling Conference (MTC), where members travel throughout Kenya and stop at community gathering places such as markets, schools, and churches to sensitize the public and appeal for male involvement in combating GBV through song, theatrical performance, visual arts, and seminars.<sup>8</sup> The public response to these events is receptive—even ecstatic—given their entertainment value. Also included in the MTC's entourage are journalists who file reports with media outlets and thus focus national attention on the activities.

#### Capacity Building

Although many enthusiasts join MEGEN, their emotional enthusiasm is not necessarily matched with an ability to articulate gender issues and campaign



against GBV from a point of knowledge. It was therefore deemed necessary to organize in-house trainings at which more knowledgeable and experienced members train their less experienced counterparts.

Using a manual designed by four of its members,<sup>9</sup> MEGEN conducts an annual six-day training that incorporates participatory methods such as role play, videos, personal testimonies, group work, case studies, court cases, and peer training. The first day's session defines key concepts such as gender, sex, masculinity, patriarchy, feminism, culture, equality, and empowerment. On the second day, participants explore social constructions of femininity and masculinity and learn how these constructions relate to violence. The third day's session analyzes how GBV is perpetrated from infancy to old age. The fourth day focuses on strategies to transform male behavior. On the fifth day, participants examine adult learning principles and training skills. Finally, on the sixth day, participants develop a plan of action and identify possible obstacles and counter-strategies. Shorter day-long sensitization workshops are also held regularly as new members join the organization.

Over time, it has become evident that trained individuals have greater confidence in their ability to lead community forums, are more committed to MEGEN's vision, and are better able to direct those in need to useful resources. Most importantly, as a result of the training, MEGEN has a wide pool of trainers who can be deployed to different locations to conduct simultaneous forums when needed.

### ***Practical Interventions***

MEGEN has also recognized the need for visible results in response to GBV beyond advocacy, community activities, and media engagements. To this end, MEGEN created a Rapid Response Committee (RRC) of 20 members who rush to the aid of GBV survivors and connect them with medical, legal, and psychosocial service providers as well as temporary shelter. The RRC also provides moral support and shows solidarity with survivors by donating food and clothes to survivors and their families, attending court hearings for GBV-related incidents, and attending victims' funerals. During all of these activities, the RRC team wears trademark T-shirts and white scarves to create visible social pressure for action. The following real-life example illustrates how a RRC intervention works:

Rose Chege, an MEGEN co-founder, was driving in the outskirts of Nairobi when she

chanced upon a man beating a pregnant woman by the roadside. The woman, who was bleeding heavily, had a baby wrapped against her back. Chege asked the man to stop beating the woman but he replied that it was none of her business. She then ordered him to stop or be arrested. Sensing the seriousness of Chege's threat, the man fled. Chege then drove the woman to a nearby hospital, where the woman received treatment while Chege helped file a police report on the attack. Chege also contacted male members of MEGEN who, along with local police officers, went to the man's home and waited throughout the night to arrest him upon his return. Meanwhile, other MEGEN members contacted the Women's Rights Awareness Programme [a partner organization], which identified a temporary, safe shelter for the woman and her baby, and made arrangements for them to return to the woman's family.

In addition to rescuing survivors, the RRC hopes to inspire survivors' families and communities to join the fight against GBV. Since its inception, MEGEN has carried out over 100 rescue missions, and some of its members have in fact joined the organization after a member of their family or community benefited from a mission. According to Chege, "People identify with the issue [of GBV] once they are assisted since the sense of justice appeals to them more. They realize that it could have been their mother or daughter, the ones they value most."

### **Challenges**

MEGEN is still a young organization that faces various challenges. One challenge is an initial distrust of MEGEN's motives. Some women's organizations regard gender issues as their exclusive turf and treat any new entrant with hostility and suspicion—especially male newcomers. In some quarters, MEGEN was even thought to be an organization of "hen-pecked men" seeking solace in numbers. This author, who is a co-founder of MEGEN, has personally been asked several times whether he is "in the business" out of genuine concern or for financial gain. To overcome this challenge, MEGEN has made it clear that it wants to collaborate with and support, not compete against, women to overcome a societal problem by creating partnerships with leading Kenyan women's organizations and service providers such as FIDA, the Women's Rights Awareness Programme, the Coalition on Violence Against Women, and the Nairobi Women's Hospital.

A second challenge is cultural pressure to perpetuate, support, or submit to traditional customs that contribute to GBV. Widow inheritance is a deeply-rooted practice in some regions of Kenya, for instance, as is the belief that a husband demonstrates his love by beating his wife. Thus, some women deliberately provoke their families and husbands to facilitate these acts. Similarly, some of the victims rescued by the RRC do not pursue legal redress against their abusers and even return to violent environments. Pressure to accept such practices can be so strong and pervasive that one risks being branded a cultural traitor for opposing them. In response, MEGEN attempts to facilitate a middle ground in which men and women can offer honest opinions about and diplomatically dissociate themselves from those practices.

A third challenge is maintaining members' motivation and high spirits in the face of the difficult and slow process that characterizes social transformation. RRC missions are generally so hazardous and depressing that "if you do not have the passion," according to MEGEN Coordinator Otina, "you can easily break down or leave." Members must occasionally endure long nights keeping vigil in unfamiliar neighborhoods while in search of perpetrators, and face the threat of backlash by those who remain at large. Members may also experience hostility from some insensitive local policemen, who—despite MEGEN's established partnership with their force—think that the organization is trying to teach them how to do their jobs, while other officers believe that domestic violence is a private affair that should be dealt with by families alone. Finally, male members may at times face ridicule for their participation in what has been considered a "women's issue." This author, for example, has been lampooned as an emasculated man and was once pejoratively referred to as "Miss Miruka." However, members learn to dismiss ridicule, as well as the occasional danger and frustration of their work, when they see the positive impact that their participation has in the fight against GBV.

## Conclusion

As MEGEN becomes a rallying point for those keen on involving men in the forefront of fighting GBV, it continues to evolve in response to its work on the ground. During the course of its work with men and women over the last five years, MEGEN has learned the following key lessons:

- *Persistence is the surest means of gaining acceptance and allies.* For instance, MEGEN's strong collaboration

with women's organizations, local administrators, and the police is a result of its tenacity and demonstrates that these allies value its contributions to anti-GBV efforts.

- *Public confidence develops from tangible results.* This is particularly exemplified by the number of people who have joined MEGEN after benefiting from its rescue missions or public outreach activities.
- *Passion alone is not enough to combat GBV.* MEGEN members must be well versed in gender issues in order to articulate them in public forums. Thus, MEGEN trains all of its new members. Likewise, RRC members must be continuously trained in assisting survivors of GBV, interacting with the police and local administrators, and managing stress.
- *Education efforts must take community diversities into consideration.* Because GBV issues differ from community to community, it is imperative to train members from diverse backgrounds who can then contextualize the issues in their own communities.
- *Forging sustained relationships with male-dominated security institutions will help ensure GBV prevention.* While the police force and military are key law enforcement agencies that should assist in GBV prevention, individual police officers and soldiers are not necessarily gender-sensitive. Furthermore, some, by virtue of their training, equipment, and status, can and do perpetrate GBV. Police officers and soldiers are therefore prime targets for sensitization and assistance in developing effective GBV response strategies. Thus, MEGEN needs to solidify its existing relationship with the police force and begin a relationship with the military.
- *Attitude transformation is a slow process.* Because cultural norms change only gradually, there is a need for MEGEN to revisit sensitized communities to monitor the implementation of action plans and to provide continuing technical back-up and moral support.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 UNHCR, 2003: 6.
- 2 The African Women's Communication and Development Network convened the conference, which was held at Nairobi's Stanley Hotel in December 2001.
- 3 FIDA, 2003: 64-73.
- 4 The African Women's Communication and Development Network convened the conference, which was held at Nairobi's Landmark Hotel in April 2004.
- 5 The fact that MEGEN members from the targeted communities convene the forums results in communities' greater acceptance and participation.
- 6 These districts include Kiambu, Teso, Tana River, Machakos, and Nakuru.
- 7 To learn more about the annual international campaign, see <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/16days/about.html>.
- 8 The first-ever MTC in 2002 was a regional conference in which MEGEN members traveled by bus through Tanzania and Malawi to Zambia. There, they were joined by a similar organization from Namibia. In subsequent years, MEGEN has remained in Kenya for its MTC because of its lack of resources to carry out the regional tour.
- 9 Miruka et al., 2003.

**TRADITIONAL UGANDAN GENDER CONSTRUCTS ENCOURAGE MEN'S PARTICIPATION IN HIGH-RISK SEX** and limit women's ability to negotiate sexual relationships, thus rendering both sexes vulnerable to HIV infection. Despite evidence that gender dynamics fuel the spread of HIV, Uganda's response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been largely characterized by gender-neutral interventions. There are, however, a few promising initiatives that engage men to help reduce the exposure of women and men to the disease. These initiatives succeed by confronting masculinity as a source of power and vulnerability, simultaneously acknowledging men's responsibilities and concerns while encouraging them to forgo risky sexual behavior.

# Gender Dynamics and HIV/AIDS: Engaging Ugandan Men in Disease Prevention

ALICIA SIMONI

## Introduction

Over the past decade, institutions worldwide have increasingly promoted male involvement in gender issues, particularly in regard to HIV/AIDS. The 2000 World AIDS Campaign, “Men and AIDS: A Gendered Approach,” declared that gender inequity is a fundamental factor driving the spread of HIV/AIDS and gender equity is possible only if men support and promote it. The same year, at the 13<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference, International Center for Research on Women President Geeta Rao Gupta identified several types of responses to HIV/AIDS, including gender-neutral responses, gender-sensitive responses, and transformative responses.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to gender-neutral approaches that do not distinguish between the needs of women and men, gender-sensitive initiatives recognize those differences and attempt to meet short-term practical goals. Transformative approaches, on the other hand, address women’s and men’s status, relations, behaviors, and interests to achieve long-term strategic change.

In the context of the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda’s approach to the epidemic has been touted as exemplary. The country’s ABC (Abstain, Be faithful, Condom use) strategy for confronting risky sexual behavior is cited as key to the country’s dramatic decline in HIV prevalence. Yet, in spite of this perceived success, increasing evidence indicates that the gender-neutral ABC approach, combined with only a limited number of gender-sensitive interventions, fails to adequately address women’s needs, men’s realities, and the relation between the two, and therefore overlooks the fundamental factors driving the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Despite Uganda’s shortcomings in addressing the interaction between gender inequalities and HIV/AIDS at the national level, several smaller local initiatives offer the potential for transformative change. With particular focus on northern Uganda, where social, economic, and

physical conditions created by 20 years of violent conflict exacerbate the prevalence of the disease,<sup>2</sup> this paper outlines the current state of HIV/AIDS and shortcomings in prevention approaches, and highlights two initiatives that attempt to transform gender relations and thus reduce both women’s and men’s vulnerability to infection.

## HIV/AIDS in Uganda

In August 2006, the Uganda AIDS Commission (UAC) and the Ministry of Health (MoH) announced that “the country is experiencing a mature and generalized epidemic, an indication that all Ugandans are at risk of contracting HIV.”<sup>3</sup> Heterosexual sex is the primary mode of transmission; the current drivers of the epidemic include social, cultural, economic, and structural factors that render individuals unable or uninclined to adopt preventive behaviors, even when they have access to appropriate information. Assessments by the UAC in 2006 also revealed that the majority of Ugandans are “having higher risk sex as normal sex,” with high-risk sex defined as sex with multiple, non-marital, and non-consensual partners; inconsistent or no condom use; commercial, transactional, and intergenerational sex; alcohol or drug use before sex; sex without testing or disclosure; and early sexual debut.<sup>4</sup>

In northern Uganda, factors contributing to the frequency of high-risk sex are intensified due to the displacement, poverty, and social disruption caused by ongoing violence. MoH surveys show that HIV prevalence rates in northern regions are more than twice as high as those in neighboring regions.<sup>5</sup> Cutting across all other demographics is the fact that HIV prevalence is higher among women than men. North central Uganda reports prevalence rates of 9 percent among women aged 15 to 49 years old as compared to 7.1 percent for men in the same age range; in Gulu District, prevalence rates are as high as 21.1 percent for women aged 30 to 34 years old.<sup>6</sup>

### Feminization of the Epidemic

While women's biological make-up increases their susceptibility to HIV, it is not the main factor in their significantly higher infection rates.<sup>7</sup> Rather, social, cultural, and economic factors limit women's ability to negotiate sexual relations and safeguard themselves against HIV infection. Women express that "as a woman you can never force your husband to use a condom. He may even force you into having sex when you are so weak with AIDS. Yet you cannot refuse because he is your husband."<sup>8</sup> Fear of violence prevents many women from accessing information about HIV/AIDS, being tested, and receiving treatment and counseling. Women's economic dependence also makes it difficult for many to refuse unsafe sex and necessitates that some women engage in commercial or survival sex. Additionally, traditional practices such as polygamy, early and forced marriage, and widow inheritance—which can bind women to one or more sexual partners without their consent—expose many women to infection.<sup>9</sup>

### Gendered Approaches to Combating HIV/AIDS

Uganda's ABC response to its HIV/AIDS epidemic largely marginalizes women's issues, and HIV/AIDS coordinating bodies have failed to adequately address gender concerns.<sup>10</sup> Abstinence until marriage is continuously promoted as a core prevention strategy despite the fact that most Ugandan women are unable to control sexual interactions due to their unequal relationships with men. It also ignores reports stating that approximately 60 percent of new HIV infections occur within marriage.<sup>11</sup> The gender-neutral promotion of faithfulness dismisses the reality that 29.8 percent of married men had two or more sexual partners in 2005 as compared to only 2.6 percent of married women.<sup>12</sup> Prevention programs that emphasize condoms fail to account for many women's inability to negotiate their partners' condom use. Moreover, while the government has established a National Committee on HIV/AIDS in Emergency Settings, there have been no systematic attempts to address gender-related factors contributing to the spread of HIV in conditions of conflict and displacement like those in northern Uganda.<sup>13</sup>

However, in the face of an evolving epidemic, there is recent evidence that Uganda is gradually recognizing its need for more gender-sensitive and transformative approaches. In July 2006, the UAC and the MoH acknowledged: "Other factors which may be driving the epidemic include the following: inadequate focus on gender in designing interventions...lack of prevention programs targeting men, lack of focus on programs for married and cohabiting couples, lack of programs for the pro-

tection [against] rape and domestic violence."<sup>14</sup> Likewise, a November 2006 paper informing Uganda's National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS 2008–2012 highlights the fact that "interventions over the past 25 years have not effectively addressed gender inequalities and low status of women and girls which remain major drivers of the HIV/AIDS epidemic."<sup>15</sup> Yet, it remains unclear whether this increased awareness of gender dynamics will translate into strategic action or if fundamental gender factors, such as the complex relationship between men's power and vulnerability, will be adequately addressed.

### Masculinity and HIV/AIDS

Norms that emphasize rigid models of masculinity largely govern boys' and men's socialization in Uganda.<sup>16</sup> At its simplest, manhood is defined as superior to womanhood.<sup>17</sup> The resulting power imbalance in gender relations not only curtails women's sexual, economic, and social autonomy but also buttresses men's freedoms. As a result, both women's and men's vulnerability to HIV infection is increased.

High-risk sex, or precisely the kind of sex that characterizes ideal masculinity, primarily drives the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As a young Ugandan man explained: "Society rewards aggressive, sexually promiscuous men just as it rewards submissive women. This has greatly contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS."<sup>18</sup> What is deemed "risky" behavior, then, is not only normal but also directly links to a socially-encouraged version of manhood. As development, sexual and reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS experts increasingly recognize: "Traditional men's gender roles limit men's options regarding how they can behave, put stress and strain on men, encourage more sexual partners and sexual activity, promote beliefs that sexual relationships are adversarial and lead to more negative condom attitudes and less condom use."<sup>19</sup> As such, men's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS is enhanced in spite and often because of their greater power in gender relations.

In northern Uganda, the coupling of masculinity and vulnerability is brought into sharp relief amid the complex conditions of conflict and displacement. As in most regions of the country, men in northern Uganda are expected to have many female sexual partners and to shun the use of condoms on the basis that they are foreign, unnatural, and evidence of a woman's infidelity. As a male focus group discussant in Gulu emphasized: "The freedom of being a man brings the disease."<sup>20</sup> The idleness and unemployment characterizing life in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) further exacerbate men's sexual promiscuity. As one man described it: "We now eat, drink, and resort to sex because [we have] no other



things to do.”<sup>21</sup> Militarization of the region compounds these factors. Soldiers with poor information about HIV/AIDS and considerably more disposable income than civilians engage in exploitative exchanges of food for sex, sex trafficking, and “marriages for protection” that heighten HIV prevalence rates among themselves and the civilian population.<sup>22</sup> Many male civilians also express a sense of alienation and emasculation due to the plethora of agencies targeting women for basic needs and HIV services—an attitude that is often summarized as “she does not need me now, she is married to X NGO.”<sup>23</sup>

HIV-positive men in northern Uganda say that the widespread absence of men accessing HIV services is due to the lack of messaging that targets men as well as extensive fear of “losing their sexual market.”<sup>24</sup> Men fear the stigma associated with being HIV-positive, expressing anxiety that women will no longer have sex with them and often claiming that they would prefer to die than reveal an HIV-positive test result.<sup>25</sup> In Uganda, men are socialized to be strong, avoid displays of emotions, and ignore assistance in times of need or stress—all of which are characteristics that run counter to accessing HIV/AIDS services. Furthermore, conflict and acute poverty have led to fatalist attitudes. While women cope with daily concerns, men reportedly “look at life as if it’s something ending today.... AIDS is something for the future so how can you think about it. That is why they will never think about the condom.”<sup>26</sup>

Men’s refusal to access HIV services not only increases women’s vulnerability to infection but also their exposure to gender-based violence.<sup>27</sup> Although a relatively high number of women access HIV services in northern Uganda, they are subjected to pervasive violence and accusations of bringing AIDS into their homes.<sup>28</sup> Rather than test themselves, men often send their wives for HIV testing only to chase them from their homes if they return with a positive result. Male focus group participants acknowledge that men’s shame often leads to violence; it is common for a man to “turn the blame on a woman and yet it is him who caused all these problems.”<sup>29</sup>

### Engaging Ugandan Men

According to a recent report by the United Nations Population Fund, “There is need to focus on providing attention to [the] motivation of men, particularly men who rarely practice safe sex.” Men must “understand the use of condoms for dual protection, and the need for sexual communication and negotiation with their partners as well as the need to support their spouses as they seek and receive [sexual and reproductive health] and HIV/AIDS services.”<sup>30</sup> This growing emphasis on

men is characterized by questions of how and to what ends to promote male involvement.

The potential for lasting change lies in addressing men’s needs and concerns as well as working with men to change some of their attitudes and behaviors. Such approaches recognize men as both agents of patriarchy and victims of masculinity and attempt to link masculine privilege with responsibility and accountability. The emphasis is on working with men to acknowledge and understand the effects of gender norms in their lives while simultaneously holding men accountable for the choices that they make in relation to these gender norms. There are currently a handful of innovative initiatives in northern Uganda seeking to implement such transformative approaches.

The Positive Men’s Union (POMU), created by a small group of Ugandan men in response to the isolation, poor health management, and family challenges they faced, provides a strong example of a grassroots effort to engage men on the basis of their own needs and personal obstacles. In April 2006, a POMU–Gulu chapter was formed in northern Uganda. The organization asserts: “We don’t want to take blame any longer; it is painful!”<sup>31</sup> POMU’s mission is “to scale up the involvement of men in prevention, care and support activities so as to mitigate the health, social and economical impact of HIV/AIDS at all levels.”<sup>32</sup> To do so, POMU promotes positive male attitudes and beliefs, encourages men to share experiences and support each other, and develops strategies to improve the socio-economic status of men and their families.

Most men who belong to POMU cite poverty and unemployment as the primary concerns that they share with fellow members. However, some POMU members report that participation has also led to an attitude change and improved communication with their partners. One POMU member described: “All those problems I brought [to my wife] because I was misbehaving, ever moving, mobile...when I think about my story and what I brought I feel pain.”<sup>33</sup> Interviews with HIV-positive women and men reveal that POMU members serve as much needed role models for other men in the community, showing that it is possible for HIV-positive men to lead meaningful lives.

Unlike POMU, which targets men specifically, *Stepping Stones* is one of the first HIV interventions in Uganda to bring together women and men to explore their social, sexual, and psychological needs, analyze the communication barriers they face, and make changes in their relationships.<sup>34</sup> Its curriculum includes explicit discussions about manhood and masculinities. For example, men are asked to role-play being women or young people;



in doing so they learn to see how life feels from different perspectives of greater or lesser power.<sup>35</sup>

Approximately 12 to 18 months after implementation, an evaluation of Stepping Stones' program in northern Uganda revealed three main behavioral changes among participants: improved gender relations, decreased HIV stigma, and increased condom use.<sup>36</sup> A report on the implementation process highlights personal changes: "One woman said that it has given her the courage to talk to her husband; a man said he learned how to respect his wife; another said he had left his bad ways and changed his lifestyle, yet another that he had learnt [sic] about condoms and how to use them and how to advise others."<sup>37</sup> Communication between sex partners was an area where Stepping Stones showed the most marked impact: 89 percent of participants had discussed sex with their partner in the last three months as compared to 40 percent of non-participants. One male participant explained: "Before I was trained, I forced my wife into sex. Now I ask her when I want to and, if she has a problem, I wait."<sup>38</sup>

The main challenges Stepping Stones faces are conflict and acute poverty, which exacerbate risky sexual behavior and create a state of dependency that results in a desire for tangible benefits. For instance, Stepping Stones reports that young women in IDP camps have been known to get pregnant to receive "their own huts and additional food."<sup>39</sup> To have a lasting impact, then, Stepping Stones must be implemented in coordination with other services such as income-generating opportunities.

Both POMU and Stepping Stones show promising signs of having a positive impact on the lives of men and on the power relations between men and women. By acknowledging men's needs and economic concerns, examining the complex ways behavior is linked to identity, and addressing the relations between men and women, these programs are taking the first steps to tackle masculinity as a source of both power and vulnerability, offering men understanding and healing while holding them accountable for their power and privilege.

## Conclusion

The higher prevalence of HIV in the Ugandan female population and the greater vulnerability of women to HIV infection combine to reveal an epidemic that has been described as having a "female face."<sup>40</sup> Yet most HIV-positive women contract the disease through sex with men. Therefore, behind every woman who is HIV-positive or at risk of becoming HIV-positive is a man who is HIV-positive or at risk of becoming HIV-posi-

tive. Together, women and men are the face of the epidemic, and both must be involved in transforming the gender dynamics that drive it.

Making men more aware of the costs of traditional masculine behaviors and attitudes, both for themselves and for women, is a critical step in thwarting the spread of HIV/AIDS. Initiatives like POMU and Stepping Stones reveal that there are men who recognize the devastating impact of gender disparities and are willing to examine their own attitudes, behaviors, and relationships. The potential in these initiatives must be tapped; more men must be encouraged to see the benefits in forgoing the risky behaviors that reflect traditional notions of manhood. Existing gender norms are disempowering women and obscuring men's vulnerabilities, resulting in the increasing risk of death by a fearsome disease. There is no more powerful reason for change.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Gupta, 2000.
- 2 Violent conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), government forces, and the civilian population raged in northern regions of Uganda over the last two decades. It is estimated that between 1.4 and 1.6 million people live in approximately 200 IDP camps as a result of the conflict, including approximately 93 percent of the population of the Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader districts. The camps are extremely overcrowded and housing, health, and sanitation conditions are deplorable. In August 2006, the Ugandan government and LRA signed a cessation of hostilities, resulting in a precarious state of peace. Prior to this agreement, people throughout northern Uganda lived in constant fear of ambush, abduction, and assault by LRA rebels and government soldiers.
- 3 UAC, August 2006: 1.
- 4 UAC, July 2006: 2.
- 5 UAC, December 2005: 3.
- 6 Ibid: 3.
- 7 Royce et al., 1997. Biologically, the risk of infection during unprotected sex is two to four times higher for women than men. Young women are even more vulnerable to HIV because their reproductive tracts are still maturing and tears in the tissue allow easy access to infection.
- 8 ActionAid, 2005(a): 15.
- 9 Widow inheritance is a traditional practice where the brother of a deceased man marries his widow with or without her consent.
- 10 Since the early 1990s, Uganda has had a multi-sector response to HIV/AIDS, guided by a national HIV/AIDS operational plan. The UAC is the government body charged with coordinating this response. All regions of the country, including conflict-affected northern regions, follow the same government mandates and guidelines.
- 11 UAC, August 2006: 3.
- 12 Uganda Ministry of Health, 2006: 75.
- 13 UNAIDS Inter-Agency Task Team on Gender and HIV/AIDS, 2003.
- 14 UAC, August 2006: 7.
- 15 UNFPA Uganda Country Office, November 2006: 2.
- 16 It is important to note, however, that multiple masculinities, as reviewed by Connell, 1995, exist across class and ethnic groups throughout Uganda.
- 17 The following quote—submitted to a national essay competition coordinated by the UAC in order to explore the knowledge and opinions of different age groups regarding gender socialization, rights, and empowerment—encapsulates the common attitude about men and women in Ugandan cultures: "Women are expected to be submissive and inferior. This means that men are superior, which gives them (men) liberty to be aggressive and sexually promiscuous. Our society accords one gender (males) more value and privileges than the other (females)." UAC, June 2005: 32.
- 18 Ibid: 2.
- 19 Noar and Morokoff, 2001: 48.
- 20 Charles Wanyama, focus group conducted by Alicia Simoni, Gulu, November 16, 2006. (The names of all individuals interviewed and quoted have been changed for purposes of confidentiality and security.)
- 21 Leonard Ssekenya, personal interview by Alicia Simoni, Gulu, November 15, 2006.
- 22 UNAIDS Inter-Agency Task Team on Gender and HIV/AIDS, 2003: 1; Akumu et al., 2005: 9.
- 23 Felix Oloba, personal interview by Alicia Simoni, Gulu, December 4, 2006.
- 24 James Olweny, focus group conducted by Alicia Simoni, Pabbo IDP camp, November 16, 2006.
- 25 Pervasive insecurity throughout northern Uganda for the past 20 years has rendered HIV/AIDS sensitization nearly impossible, resulting in much higher levels of stigma in comparison to other regions of the country.
- 26 ActionAid, 2005(b): 14.
- 27 Human Rights Watch, 2003: 22.
- 28 The AIDS Support Organization (TASO) is one of the primary HIV service providers in northern Uganda. TASO management information systems indicate that, as of November 2006, 85 percent of clients in Gulu are female.
- 29 Leonard Ssekenya, personal interview by Alicia Simoni, Gulu, November 15, 2006.
- 30 UNFPA, 2006: 14.
- 31 POMU, 2006.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Godfrey Kisente, personal interview by Alicia Simoni, Gulu, November 17, 2006.
- 34 Stepping Stones is a participatory, community-centered approach developed by Dr. Alice Welborn, a British social scientist. The process was first implemented in 1994 in a rural Ugandan village, and the Stepping Stones package has since been distributed to over 103 countries worldwide. ACORD, an Africa-led alliance working for social justice and equality, in partnership with several community-based organizations, is responsible for the recent implementation of Stepping Stones in northern Uganda.
- 35 Stepping Stones, "Stepping Stones Training Package—How Does It Work?"
- 36 Hadjipateras et al., 2006: 9.
- 37 ACORD, 2006: 6.
- 38 Ibid: 10.
- 39 Ibid: 12.
- 40 The theme for the 2004 international HIV/AIDS campaign was "Women, Girls, HIV/AIDS." In Uganda, this global theme was domesticated into the slogan, "Revealing the Female Face of the Epidemic." UAC, June 2005: ix.

**WHILE SOMALIA'S CIVIL WAR HAS PROVIDED SOMALI WOMEN WITH AN OPPORTUNITY TO MOBILIZE** and respond to their social and economic marginalization, the programs they have designed to empower women in their communities have encountered resistance from men who feel emasculated by the war and threatened by women's increasing agency and activism. In Puntland and Somaliland, women activists have come to understand that programs targeting women alone inevitably lead to suspicion and hostility among some men. They have therefore partnered with influential male leaders to address men's misconceptions and concerns, win their support, and thus ensure the programs' success.

# Negotiating with Men to Help Women: The Success of Somali Women Activists

SHUKRIA DINI

## Introduction

In 1991, Somalia's government collapsed and the nation became engulfed in a deadly civil war that continues to cause enormous suffering, destruction, and displacement today.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent anarchy has made it impossible for Somalis to form lasting state institutions that provide essential services such as healthcare, employment, and education to the population. In response, some Somali women have emerged as grassroots activists seeking to provide services to those who bear the brunt of the war, particularly vulnerable women. However, these activists have encountered numerous obstacles from male leaders who are suspicious of their women-specific activities.

This paper will briefly examine the status of women within Somalia and the rise in Somali women's activism. Then, drawing upon interviews conducted by the author in Puntland and Somaliland in 2005 and 2006,<sup>2</sup> it will discuss how women activists have come to understand the importance of working with male leaders to deliver services to women in need, and the methods that they have used to overcome men's suspicions and increase their support for anti-female genital mutilation (FGM) and literacy initiatives designed to assist and empower women.

## The Status of Somali Women

To make sense of the challenges women activists face in war-torn Somalia, it is first important to understand women's status in Somali society. Despite their important contributions to their families and communities, Somali women—especially nomadic women in rural areas—are often economically, socially, and politically marginalized. Traditionally, men are believed to be superior to women, who are viewed as unintelligent and child-like. A famous nomadic proverb, for instance, says "*Kal caano galeen iyo kas kala dheer*," meaning "A breast that contains milk has no wisdom." Another common proverb, "*Dumar waa caruur cago weyn*," declares "Women are chil-

dren with big feet." While some Somali men believe that women can be as intelligent and capable as men, many others support the traditional notions of womanhood and expect women to be *raaliya*, or obedient wives who are single-mindedly dedicated to pleasing their husbands.

The ongoing civil war presents further challenges for Somali women. Violence has forcibly uprooted many women from their homes and communities. As in other conflicts around the world, women's bodies have become a battlefield where militias use rape to humiliate and destroy enemy communities. The war also negatively affects women's economic status. For example, women who worked in the formal employment sector before the war are now largely unemployed. Other women who depend on their husbands' income may become financially insecure following their spouses' deaths. Under these conditions, many women find themselves burdened by new responsibilities without the possibility of assistance from the state or other official support systems.

## A Cause for Activism

As men leave their families to fight or are killed in the war, women often assume traditionally male responsibilities in addition to their own female roles. In many households across Somalia, for instance, "women are increasingly replacing men as the primary breadwinners of the family" out of economic necessity.<sup>3</sup> The shift in gender roles that often occurs during conflicts has inevitably led Somali women to become conscious of their own identity and resilience and to recognize their capacity for autonomous and collective action.<sup>4</sup> Ayan, a widow with six children who had been supported by her husband prior to his death, explained: "I couldn't sit and do nothing. I had to learn how to do things without my late husband. I have children to feed."<sup>5</sup> Significantly, Somali women's entry into these new roles has made them increasingly aware of how traditional socio-cul-

tural practices that disadvantage and marginalize them have also exacerbated their vulnerability in conflict. As a result, women have taken steps to organize themselves, pool their resources, and address not only the immediate needs of vulnerable groups but also the root causes of their marginalization.

### Male Resistance

At first, male community leaders welcomed the women activists' programs. Zahra, a community outreach worker, recalls: "At the beginning, when we had our feeding centers, the community, including male leaders, was supportive and no one complained...because [the] programs did not question and challenge patriarchal values, practices, and structures."<sup>6</sup> However, in addition to their initial emergency relief programs, activists increasingly implemented long-term development programs to address women's social, physical, and economic vulnerabilities. For example, women's organizations in Puntland and Somaliland currently offer programs that promote women's literacy, provide women with income-generation opportunities, and advocate for the elimination of gender-based violence, including FGM, rape, and early and forced marriage.

As their programs became more prevalent within communities, activists experienced suspicion and hostility from men. Men's disapproval manifested itself in a variety of confrontational ways. Activists reported being harassed at their organizations' offices and in public by men who shouted at them and accused them of "corrupting the minds of women" and doing "foreign work" that contradicts Somali cultural values. According to Habiba, whose organization provides free education to women: "We were accused of converting people from their faith and culture to new ones."<sup>7</sup> Some activists were physically attacked, while others' offices were vandalized and looted. The doors and windows of a number of women's literacy schools were smashed.

When asked why some men reacted negatively toward their programs, activists cited the shift in power between men and women. While men are occupied by the war, women have steadily gained control within families and civil society. Activist-led initiatives provide women with further knowledge and resources to assume leadership positions. Women's gains, then, may remind men of their own loss of power and privileges. Comments made by Farah, an unemployed father of seven children, support the activists' claims:

The war has emasculated Somali men. Men can no longer provide for their families. It is our

women who have taken those responsibilities now.... We men have taken so hard about the situation, [while] our women are coping very well. In fact, it is women who are running the country.<sup>8</sup>

According to activists, men were frustrated and resentful of the fact they lack the opportunities available to women, whose programs receive financial support from women in the Somali diaspora and from international organizations while men's needs are neglected.

More significantly, men's negative behavior toward activists' programs may also be linked to the inherent "threat" that women's mobilization and empowerment pose to the core structure of Somali society. All Somalis are divided into groups of clans and sub-clans. The system is patrilineal, meaning that only boys and men are entitled to full membership within a clan while girls and women remain outsiders who are not accepted by the clan of their birth and are also marginalized within their husbands' clans. Women's marginalization within the clan system has given them an opportunity to "move with relative ease between clans and see beyond clan interests" and reach out to women who belong to other clans.<sup>9</sup>

Such mobility across clan lines characterizes women activists' work, as they view themselves united by gender-specific struggles.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, "men," according to Halima, who coordinates a women's literacy program:

...have been after each other, fighting against each other. They have neglected their families, communities, and their country. All they want is power and they are willing to die for it. We women studied the situation and the outcomes of the conflict and we decided to enter the public space which men have abandoned to do meaningful things.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, given the strength of men's resistance to their programs, some activists began to believe that they had made a mistake by not engaging men in their work. According to Saida, a teacher:

In the beginning, we had no clue that our women-only programs would get us into trouble and men would react to these programs negatively. When we investigated the reasons why men, including male leaders, were negative about our programs and understood their positions, we became very aware that in order for



our programs to make positive changes in the lives of [women] we also need to target men.<sup>12</sup>

Noting that “it becomes very dangerous when...organizations are accused [of] contaminating the culture and religion,”<sup>13</sup> and understanding that targeting women alone can lead to male confrontation, many women activists adopted an inclusive approach toward men and began seeking the help of male traditional and religious leaders in their communities to generate support for their programs. A social worker named Fatima observed: “They are our men. They can be both our enemies and allies. We decided to have them as allies.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Engaging Men in Women-Specific Initiatives**

To fight negative rumors and win communities’ trust, women activists turned to male leaders for help. The following examples show how, with men’s engagement, anti-FGM campaigns and female literacy programs have experienced success in some Somali communities.

### ***Female Genital Mutilation***

In Somalia, many young girls are subjected to FGM to control their sexual activity. International organizations report that 90 percent or more of all Somali women have undergone FGM, sometimes as early as six or seven years of age. The procedure commonly involves the removal of part or all of a girl’s genitalia and the stitching of her vaginal opening, leaving only a small hole for urine and menstrual blood, and is often performed under unsanitary conditions.<sup>15</sup>

While FGM always posed a threat to Somali women’s health, both from the surgery and later when women become expectant mothers,<sup>16</sup> the ongoing conflict and subsequent lack of functioning health facilities have exacerbated its potential dangers. According to Haredo, a traditional birth attendant: “Being circumcised and pregnant in war-torn Somalia is indeed a death sentence for women.”<sup>17</sup> In response to this deadly practice, many Somali women’s organizations have established anti-FGM projects. Early campaigns against FGM, however, encountered strong resistance and hostility from communities, particularly among men who viewed FGM as an important and necessary tool to ensure their daughters’ sexual “purity” before marriage and preserve their family’s honor.

To alleviate men’s resistance to the anti-FGM programs and secure their support, activists turned to traditional male leaders, appealing for their involvement to ensure the well-being of their communities’ wives and daughters. Many leaders were pleased with this approach,

viewing the activists’ request as both an acknowledgement of the men’s authority within their respective communities and a sign that their participation would be valued, and they accepted the activists’ invitation to help combat FGM. Muse, a traditional leader in Bosaso, said:

When women activists came [for] our help and requested our support in their anti-FGM program, we were happy about such development and agreed to be a partner in their initiatives. At the beginning, the women thought that they could do their things without our approval and support. We were disappointed about how they isolated us from their initiatives. They were wrong to ignore us as individuals without power in the community. The fact that they have acknowledged our leadership and influence in the community has encouraged us to help their programs. After all, they are empowering members of our community, including our daughters and wives.<sup>18</sup>

Next, activists provided leaders with specific evidence of the negative impacts of FGM on women’s health, using examples from women in the leaders’ own communities. Safia, a community health worker, explained: “We told them that so and so’s wife died in labor, and so and so’s daughter died because of an FGM operation, and that such deaths can be avoided by simply ending the practice of FGM.”<sup>19</sup> Daud, a traditional leader in Galkacyo, pointed to the effectiveness of this approach as he commented that “such evidence on the deadly impact of FGM...has informed us of [its] serious nature.”<sup>20</sup>

Once male leaders understood FGM’s devastating impact on women’s health, especially in war-torn environments like their own, they encouraged local male religious leaders to debate whether Islam mandates FGM or whether it is purely a cultural practice, as many men within the community thought that the anti-FGM campaigns ran contrary to their faith. Through these debates, a number of religious leaders concluded that Islam does not require women to be subjected to FGM.

Women activists then requested that traditional and religious leaders directly educate the public about FGM. On the radio and television and at local mosques, the leaders appealed to men from their communities, and to the fathers in particular, to reject the practice of FGM. Men, in turn, have relayed these messages to their spouses and neighbors.

With the support of male community leaders, who have fostered greater understanding of the importance of women's programs and instilled trust within the communities, activists are now better able to carry out their anti-FGM campaigns. And, because of the partnership that women activists formed with male leaders, many parents in both Puntland and Somaliland are now in favor of a far milder version of the procedure in which the clitoris is pricked with small needles and, unlike past practices, no cutting or sewing is involved. Encouraged by these incremental yet significant gains against FGM, women's organizations are now advocating for a zero-tolerance approach to the practice.

### *Female Literacy*

The protracted war has denied the people of Somalia the opportunity to increase their literacy, especially among Somali women. Women activists view education as a powerful tool that can improve women's socio-economic status and encourage their active participation in conflict resolution and reconstruction processes. As a result, they have built schools and created free literacy programs for women and girls in their communities.

Many communities' initial response to these literacy programs, as to other programs that promote women's empowerment, was negative. At the family level, some men disapproved of their wives and daughters leaving home for long periods of time to attend classes, with several even going to the schools to demand that their wives and daughters come home.<sup>21</sup> Within the wider community, said Amina, a teacher for a girls' literacy program, "male leaders became suspicious of our literacy work and often confronted us, asking us why it is that we are only educating girls and not boys."<sup>22</sup> Some leaders, viewing women's education as both unnecessary and morally dangerous, encouraged the men in their communities to forbid their wives and daughters to attend the literacy programs. Exasperated, an educator named Khadija, who established a literacy organization for women and girls, remarked:

We never complain against boys-only schools, which are many in this town. We have created similar schools for girls, but we are accused for favoring girls over boys and brainwashing them without evidence. What the community does not understand is that there are so many things working against girls and that specific programs are needed that will tackle some of the obstacles facing girls in order to help them finish school.<sup>23</sup>

As with their anti-FGM campaigns, women activists looked to build partnerships with influential men in their communities to ensure the literacy programs' success. Given that some male leaders were suspicious of the program, women activists decided to engage those leaders who believed in the importance of women's education.

To overcome perceptions that the literacy programs were culturally inappropriate, women activists invited these leaders to visit their schools and review their curriculums. The men then shared their findings with other leaders and the larger community, once again through announcements on radio and television as well as in mosques, and stressed the importance of educating the communities' women and girls. Fathers were especially encouraged to support their wives' and daughters' education. Particularly persuasive arguments focused on how programs that target women nonetheless benefit many others—that women who are able to read and write can pass these skills on to their children, for instance, which will lead to prosperous families and communities. Encouraged by leaders' endorsement of female education and the benefits educated women bring to their families, many men in these communities have now begun to support their wives' and daughters' participation in the literacy programs.

### **Conclusion**

While the war in Somalia has presented women with an opportunity to exercise their activism and address their vulnerabilities, it has also taught them that the success of programs designed to empower women depends in part on negotiations with their countrymen, particularly those who may feel emasculated by the war and threatened by the heightened visibility of women in their communities. Explaining the importance of such collaborative work between men and women, activist Anab stated: "Our interactions with [male] leaders have clarified misconception and misunderstanding held by... members of the community."<sup>24</sup> The successful outcomes from women activists' negotiation with men signify that cooperation between men and women is an essential factor in the women's ability to provide needed services to their communities and, in the future, rebuild their nation.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 For a detailed conflict history and updates on current events in Somalia, see International Crisis Group, “Somalia.”
- 2 Puntland is a region in northeastern Somalia. Somaliland, formerly a region in the northwestern part of Somalia, declared itself an independent republic in 1991 but is not recognized by other countries or international organizations.
- 3 Gardner and El Bushra, 2004: 10.
- 4 Jacobs et al., 2000.
- 5 “Ayan,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Garowe, Puntland, November 10, 2005. (The names of all individuals interviewed and quoted have been changed for purposes of confidentiality and security.)
- 6 “Zahra,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Galkacyo, Puntland, December 9, 2005.
- 7 “Habiba,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Badhan, Puntland, October 20, 2005.
- 8 “Farah,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Galkacyo, Puntland, December 11, 2005.
- 9 Gardner and El Bushra, 2004: 16.
- 10 Notably, at the 2000 Somalia National Peace Conference in Arta, Djibouti, Somali women established a separate “sixth clan” composed of women across Somali society in response to their lack of representation among the five major patrilineal clans present. By forming such a clan, women sent a strong message that they do not want to be part of a male-dominated system that continues to spark violence and create divisions among Somalis today.
- 11 “Halima,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Bosaso, Puntland, September 3, 2005.
- 12 “Saida,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Bosaso, Puntland, October 12, 2005.
- 13 Personal interview with an activist by Shukria Dini, Galkacyo, Puntland, December 12, 2005.
- 14 “Fatima,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Garowe, Puntland, November 2, 2005.
- 15 Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women’s Issues, 2001.
- 16 UNFPA, “Frequently Asked Questions on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting.”
- 17 “Haredo,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Bosaso, Puntland, October 17, 2005.
- 18 “Muse,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Bosaso, Puntland, October 18, 2005.
- 19 “Safia,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Hargeisa, Somaliland, January 4, 2006.
- 20 “Daud,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Galkacyo, Puntland, December 13, 2005.
- 21 Personal interview with a teacher by Shukria Dini, Garowe, Puntland, November 6, 2005.
- 22 “Amina,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Garowe, Puntland, November 7, 2005.
- 23 “Khadija,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Galkacyo, Puntland, December 14, 2005.
- 24 “Anab,” personal interview by Shukria Dini, Bosaso, Puntland, April 3, 2006.

## IN THE FIELD

*Traditionally, this section highlights a perspective from one of Women for Women International's chapter offices. In this issue, we feature an article written by Patricia T. Morris, Director of Programs, in collaboration with senior staff from each chapter office on the role of men in women's empowerment and the creation of gender equitable societies.*

# Women Are Not Islands: Engaging Men to Empower Women

**PATRICIA T. MORRIS**

## Introduction

For the past year, Women for Women International has been engaged in a strategic planning process to determine the shape of our future programs to empower women. The role of men in the promotion of women's rights and active citizenry has been a central part of our deliberations. While it may be possible to enhance women's opportunities for economic, social, and political participation without engaging men, we have come to understand that it is unlikely that gender equality—the ultimate goal of women's empowerment—can be achieved without partnership between women and men.

Currently, Women for Women International uses both bottom-up and top-down approaches to facilitating partnerships and shared decision-making between women and men. The bottom-up approach begins with our community assessment process, a protocol that includes introduction, dialogue, and consensus-building within communities. The top-down approach is reflected in our Men's Leadership Program, an initiative designed to raise male community leaders' awareness and activism in support of women's rights. And, as the international development community increasingly stresses the importance of men's role in gender equality, and our own program participant surveys reveal women's desire that we further engage the men in their lives, we continue to think about our relationship with men in the communities where we work. The central question is how we can best secure men's support for women's empowerment, thus establishing viable civil societies where women and men work together as partners for peace and prosperity.

To enhance our internal discussion on this topic, we recently asked senior staff from each chapter office to talk about Women for Women International's current engagement with men and lessons learned for future work. We present their replies below—which include descriptions of how war has affected gender relations in their

countries, men's responses to Women for Women International's work with women in their communities, strategies that staff employ to alleviate men's resistance to and concerns about Women for Women International's programs, and ways men can support women's transition from victims to survivors to active citizens—with the hope that their experiences and insight might help encourage similar discussions in other organizations that, like ourselves, are exploring innovative strategies to establish gender equitable societies.

## War and Gender Relations

In the war-torn countries where Women for Women International works, conflict has exacerbated unequal relations between women and men. Sweeta Noori, Country Director for Afghanistan, noted:

During the conflict and war in Afghanistan, relationships between men and women became worse. Men do not respect women as human beings, and incidents of violence and abuse against women have increased. Women are used to resolve debts or conflicts between families—men who cannot pay back their loans will give their daughters or sisters to the lender instead, while the women involved have no say in the matter.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a surge in abuse and employment discrimination against women occurred in the war's aftermath. "Generally, the war destroyed families and the whole society," remarked Seida Saric, Country Director for Bosnia and Herzegovina:

Amid all of the devastation, men became violent toward their families. They started to use alcohol and gamble, leaving women in a state of

constant fear and insecurity. Also, many women lost their jobs after the war just because they were women.

There are similar patterns of violence and discrimination as well as impunity for perpetrators who are also war heroes in Sudanese communities. Sudan Country Director Judith Registre explained:

Women have been left to carry the burden of providing for their families and communities without any skills to rely upon. They are now struggling to receive basic education, but are being denied that right. Men, many of whom were soldiers, are coming back to their villages and towns jobless and frustrated. In Rumbek and surrounding communities, we have witnessed an increase in alcohol consumption, which has led to increased violence against women and girls. We talk to women who tell stories of drunken uncles molesting young girls. We hear how husbands who beat their wives are pardoned because they were drunk, or because they fought for their country in the war. But those pardons do not take away the scars left on young girls and women.

The war in Iraq has reversed progressive relations between the nation's women and men. According to Nawal Ali,<sup>1</sup> Communications and Outreach Manager for the Iraq chapter office:

In Iraq, women were never 100 percent free, but they once had stronger rights and could work in positions that other women in the world may dream about, and they could travel and participate in political processes. Since the current conflict, however, women have submitted to their families' fears about dangerous people and insecure situations.... Now women, especially those who live in cities, are unable to leave their homes and go to work.

Patterns of distrust between the sexes and social exclusion were evident in Rwanda in the aftermath of conflict. Rwanda Country Director Berra Kabarungi reflected:

Many women refused to participate in conflicts, so men considered them weak, unsupportive, and lacking sensible ideas.... The conflicts intensified the social exclusion of women and girls, who lacked access to property, education, credit, and business opportunities. Their lack of skills and resources turned them into dependents, and made them very submissive and voiceless.

Senior field staff also highlight the use of rape as a tool of war in their countries and the impact that remains long after the attacks occur. Saric noted the scale and infamy of Bosnian rape camps, where "twenty thousand women were raped during the war... [and] following the war, the international community recognized rape as a war strategy for the first time in history." In Kosovo, according to Country Director Hamide Latifi, rape in war has ostracized women and emasculated men: "Both women and men were humiliated by acts of rape, and husbands and other male family members find it difficult to accept raped women back into their lives." In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Country Director Christine Karumba pointed to a similar breakdown of relationships between men and women:

Some men deserted their wives, who had been raped in the conflict; others who kept their wives are now having extramarital affairs. Trust has been broken between couples.... Some men think that all women were raped in the war and are therefore cursed, that they are burdens for the community who should be expelled.... To restart her life and feel at home, a rape survivor has to go far away from her community, where nobody knows her story.

Likewise, Nigeria Country Director Ngozi Eze pointed out that rape has been used as a political tool:

During the civil war, Nigerian army soldiers abducted women in southeastern Nigeria. In 1999, during civil unrest in Odi [a town in Bayelsa State], Nigerian soldiers raped many women. Sometimes pictures of these rapes were published in the newspapers, which the government said were staged. The trauma and psychological harm suffered by women cannot be overemphasized.

### **Calls for an Inclusive Approach**

Given war's negative effect on gender relations, it may initially seem contradictory to consider engaging men in the promotion of women's rights and participation in the socio-economic and political development of post-conflict societies. Yet, as Registre pointed out: "Women are not islands; they do not exist independently of their families and communities and do not want to exist apart from them." In Iraq, her colleague Ali agreed:

Communities consist of both men and women, each of whom completes the other. We can ignore this fact, or we can involve men in our

process to ensure their strong and complete support for women's active participation in the community.

Recent surveys from Women for Women International's program participants reveal that women survivors of war want to repair the broken relationships in their communities. While participants do not want to be relegated to secondary positions or become hostages of systems of male dominance that perpetuate cycles of conflict, they also do not believe that empowerment in a vacuum is sufficient for peace and security. The women live in societies where men are an integral part of their lives and where men's attitudes and behavior toward women affect women's abilities to meet their economic, social, and political potential; progress for women without men's support and involvement therefore misses the mark.

### **Men and Women for Women International**

In the course of our discussion, we asked senior field staff to describe the opinions of men in the communities where they work and the factors that determine men's support of or resistance to Women for Women International's programs. According to many of the women, men's initial response to Women for Women International is resistance borne of fear; they are afraid they will lose the power and privilege they have in their relations with women. "Opposition is the first reaction," Karumba noted:

Men are used to seeing women's organizations dispense ideologies that, according to them, come from strange contexts and do not consider their own culture.... Most of the time, men think that when women receive trainings and become aware of many things, women will reject men's authority, which will in turn threaten men's position as chief of their families.

Likewise, in Sudan:

Men's initial reaction is concern that we have come to change their culture.... Their concern is based on the following: first, previous programs targeting women seem to have been designed and implemented by outsiders with limited or no understanding of the local culture; second, some men do not see the value in women having any sort of education—they believe men are the ones in charge, and wonder

why a woman needs an education if the man is the decision-maker; and third, men also fear that educated women will not respect them. When meeting with men to discuss our program, we are repeatedly told that educated women will not do what their husbands ask them to do and will neglect their wifely duties, which will cause the men to look bad in the eyes of their community.

In Nigeria, men similarly harbor suspicions about Women for Women International's work. Eze observed:

Some beliefs are based on ignorance, rumors, or fear.... Some men felt that we would teach women foreign values, and would cause their wives to lose respect for them.... Our culture is embedded with patriarchal traditions as well as interpretations of religious beliefs which claim that women are unequal to men. Some men...may therefore treat women as second-class citizens.

Importantly, however, men's reactions are not uniformly negative. In Afghanistan, for example, men's responses are mixed. In some cases, they make it clear that Women for Women International is not welcome in the community. "In areas dominated by warlords," Noori acknowledged, "it will take time to change the thoughts and attitudes of men, and our activities with women are too small to bring change to these communities for now." In other areas around the country, however:

About half of the population greets our programs with relatively open minds. As time goes by, they appreciate our programs and are willing to volunteer with the organization, providing security.... And in some areas, men really want NGOs to help their women and, at times, they come by themselves to our office to ask for help.

What accounts for mixed reactions? Senior field staff pointed to a variety of factors, including men's own life experiences as well as their calculations of the costs or benefits that women's participation in Women for Women International's programs may bring to their families and communities. For instance, many commented on men's education level and exposure to alternate ways of life beyond that practiced within their own communities as a factor in whether or not they accepted women's participation in the programs. According to Saric in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Eze in Nigeria, educated men were more likely to support and promote Women for Women

International's programs for women's advancement, while less educated men were not. In the DRC, Karumba noted that men who hold conservative religious beliefs are less likely to support Women for Women International's work but others who have traveled widely—such as businessmen, government officials, and some soldiers—and have seen “how women in other locations are treated with dignity” are often strong supporters.

On the other hand, Registre noted that in Sudan education may be less a factor for supporting Women for Women International's work with women than the promise that economic opportunities from women's participation in the programs may bring to their families: “Educated men are more inclined to say ‘this is how our culture is,’ while less educated men tend to be more open because, for them, the issues are not intellectual but rather more about bread and butter.” This focus on the economic benefits that accrue to the family is echoed in most chapter offices. In Rwanda, Kabarungi remarked:

For the majority of men who survived the genocide or who may have just returned from exile, our program helps relieve the big burden they have of taking care of their families and relatives (some of whom are now orphaned, widowed, or rape survivors). This responsibility has been too much for them due to the poverty following the war. Some men have even approached us to ask for support for their wives, sisters, or mothers.

Latifi observed that businessmen are among Women for Women International's strongest supporters in Kosovo, primarily because they recognize the enormous potential return from investments in women. Over time, many men within Kosovar communities also come to the same realization:

In the beginning, men are reluctant to cooperate with Women for Women International, and express pessimism about our promises of achievements and positive outcomes. But as the program develops and men see measurable economic results, they become very open and supportive of the organization.

In Iraq, as in Rwanda and Kosovo, Women for Women International's promise of financial support and economic development are also primary factors for men's acceptance of women's participation. According to Ali: “A community does not always object to a woman's wish

to join the program.... Some men like their wives to be educated and to contribute to the family's income.”

Financial considerations aside, men's love and care for the women in their lives—their mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives—cannot be underestimated as a factor in determining their support for women's participation in Women for Women International's programs. Eze noted that, in Nigeria, “Some men are also likely to support women's participation if they have experienced injustice in their lives, through incidents such as their mother or sister or another female relative becoming a widow or being marginalized in some other form.” Similarly, in Sudan, Registre remarked that “husbands who see the changes in their wives and the positive impact on their families are often the biggest advocates of our program,” while Ali in Iraq said that “the fact we offer...psychological comfort and education to women helps minimize men's objections.”

Finally, political will is also key to men's support of Women for Women International's programs. According to Kabarungi: “The [Rwandan] government advocates for supporting women's rights. The Constitution also promotes women's rights, thus empowering them and making men accept or welcome their roles in rebuilding their community.”

### Securing Men's Support

Women for Women International's community assessment process incorporates a number of strategies to address and reduce male resistance to women's participation in our programs. When appropriate, chapter office staff consult government officials and representatives—most of whom are men—in the communities where Women for Women International plans to work. The chapter office staff also host community meetings to explain the programs, which help to eliminate any misunderstandings or fears men may have about women's participation or Women for Women International's motives, and to measure community interest and support. When explaining the programs, staff use inclusive language to encourage men's support. Eze noted: “We paint a picture of how the *community* will benefit and develop when the women are meaningfully engaged.”

Another strategy used to secure men's support is the employment and capacity strengthening of community members who serve as trainers and role models for female program participants. According to Registre:

Some communities have had previous programs that targeted women...that created confusion as to the intention of the outsiders who imple-



mented them. That we have trainers who are from the community where the program takes place helps enormously in pre-empting and counteracting negative attitudes.

As mentioned previously, Women for Women International's vocational skills training and income-generation opportunities also frequently encourage men's support of women's participation. Importantly, those financial incentives provide a gateway to women's rights education—a component of Women for Women International's programs that, alone, might alienate men. In Kosovo, Latifi noted:

We don't introduce men to our program through a human rights and leadership angle; instead, we point out the economic benefits. Whenever we speak about human rights, men are keen to close the meeting as soon as possible and run away.... When we establish a good base with skills, sponsorship, and other economic activities, we can begin talking about human rights issues with men.

Moreover, "when a woman is able to help carry the family's financial burden," Registre observed, "she gains recognition and value. More importantly, she begins to change the dynamic of negotiation in her family."

Women for Women International also calls on supportive male leaders to promote our work and serve as "positive deviants"—or role models that counter the norm in progressive ways. As Latifi explained:

During our community assessments, we identify allies and those who oppose or have negative opinions about the program or women's participation. We show men who oppose the program results from nearby communities, or ask reputable community leaders, military men, or family members who support us to speak with the men about the benefits of the program.

Women for Women International's work with supportive male leaders was recently formalized through our Men's Leadership Program, which was developed in Nigeria in 2002 and has subsequently been piloted in Iraq and the DRC. Over the course of several sessions, the program educates male community leaders from the government, religious, traditional, security, and civil society sectors on their respective roles in promoting gender equality. The influence and status that these men

hold in their communities allows them to reach out to other men and raise awareness about the negative impact that gender-based violence and other forms of injustice against women has on families and the community as a whole. In the DRC, for example, there is a former Men's Leadership Program participant who now travels from home to home with his wife and children to encourage other families to support, rather than restrict, women's economic, social, and political potential.<sup>2</sup> In Nigeria, Eze described some of the training sessions as follows:

In some communities, we hold men's training programs and ask them to create action plans on things they intend to change in their community. Of late, we have started asking men in the community to promise to buy or provide land to groups of women that they can use for income-generating projects. In some men's training programs, we have invited a person living with HIV, an engineer, a doctor, and a psychologist to address men. We have also invited some women participants as well as women leaders to speak at the men's training program and share their experiences.

### **How Can Men Assist Women for Women International in Its Work?**

Throughout our discussion, senior field staff made it clear that men have a role to play in the struggle for gender equality. Commenting on the absence of men among Kosovar municipality officials working on gender issues, Latifi remarked: "There is a lack of education and understanding about gender—gender is seen as something that is applied to women alone." Yet, as Registre noted, "In reality [gender issues] are a community problem."

Thus, when asked how men could assist Women for Women International in its work, senior field staff had numerous suggestions. Saric, for example, said, "Men can absolutely assist our work. They can be ambassadors for Women for Women International and talk about how our work can benefit the lives of participants and their families. With their assistance, we can have a greater impact on communities." Noori agreed, noting that in Afghanistan men have greater access than women to meeting spaces where community decisions are made and that voicing their support for women at these meetings could lead to better gender relations. Similarly, Karumba, Kabarungi, and Eze felt that men could serve as gender-sensitive role models and teachers who raise men's aware-

ness of gender issues and show through their own gender-just actions that supporting women's rights is manly.

Both Eze and Ali believed it is important for men to play a role in women's access to key resources such as land, education, credit, and jobs. Latifi thought that men should develop partnerships with women, particularly in regards to the development of family businesses. Registre mirrored Latifi's response by putting it in a larger context: "We do not want to empower women who then return to disempowering communities and disempowering households." In sum, senior field staff believe that there is a crucial role for men to play in women's empowerment. Men should be equal partners with women, valuing women's contributions as they value their own, and sharing and promoting women's hopes and dreams for their families, communities, and nations.

## Conclusion

Women for Women International's present engagement and exploration of future work with men has made one thing clear: women are not islands and they want to find ways to advance themselves and their loved ones—female *and* male. They believe that it is important to engage men even as they struggle for their rights and recognition. Engaging men in the promotion of women's empowerment is more than a strategy to convince men to allow women to participate in an assistance program—

it is an important step in rebuilding relationships critical to the realization of peace and inclusive security, and it is the key to establishing strong nations.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Iraq Communication and Outreach Manager's name has been changed for security reasons.
- 2 For an in-depth account of Women for Women International's Men's Leadership Program in the DRC, see *Ending Violence Against Women in Eastern Congo: Preparing Men to Advocate for Women's Rights* online at <http://www.womenforwomen.org/mltdrc.htm>.











## ABOUT WOMEN FOR WOMEN INTERNATIONAL

Since 1993, Women for Women International has provided women survivors of war, civil strife, and other conflicts with tools and resources to move from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency, thereby promoting viable civil societies. The organization provides services that aim to address participants' short-term economic needs while enhancing and building their capacity to create long-term economic solutions. In the process, participants also receive intensive training in women's economic, social, and political roles and value in society. This strategy stems from Women for Women International's conviction that economic solutions are not sustainable unless they are paired with active participation in social and political discourse.



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