

# The role of men in the struggle for gender equality: possibilities for positive engagement



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## abstract

This *briefing* argues that another world is possible – one in which men and women work in partnership against gender injustice, and it calls for commitment to this partnership to establish a firm foundation for South Africa's democracy so that future generations can be proud of the role we have played.

## keywords

men, violence, gender equality, democracy

*'Is it possible to live calmly and happily when you know that two-thirds of human beings are suffering, hungry and poor?'*  
(Boff, 2005)

## Introduction

Boff's statement above is just as relevant for his audience in Porto Alegre, Brazil, as it is for us down South, as his penetrating question can be translated into our context. Is it indeed possible for us to live calmly and happily when we know that more than half of our citizens – women and children – are violated physically, emotionally, economically and psychologically?

Boff's statement is part of an interview he gave shortly after a World Council of Churches Conference in Porto Alegre, the overarching theme of which was 'Another world is possible'. It is my contention that another world should be possible for women and children: a world without the sordid scourge of violence and all kinds of violations. For that world to be a possibility, all of us, both men and women, need to work in partnership against gender injustice. This *briefing* argues for this possibility from the perspective of men's involvement in

the struggle for gender equality.

It is worth noting that the amount of interest in this subject by a broad section of our community is unprecedented. It is our hope that through this engagement, we will contribute to the national debate that will shape policy formulation and, where necessary, inform law reform that will benefit the gender equality agenda.

## Context

South Africa's sordid past with its legacy of institutionalised and systemic inhumane practices of racism and sexism, still rings fresh today. Incidences of gender-related violence remain a huge blot on our otherwise positive report card as a young democracy. We recently heard the story of a 79-year-old, well-respected Bishop in the Vhembe District in Limpopo, who allegedly, repeatedly raped a 9-year-old girl. What added insult to injury, was that the community broke the silence when the little girl died as a result of his brutality – it turned out that the perpetrator had a record of abuse against his wife. This raises very serious moral and ethical issues for us as a country. How our society continues to give a man with a history of spousal violence the label of 'respected

community leader' is right at the core of the challenge that confronts us. Why is it that our society ignores the plight of women and children in such circumstances and continues to show respect for persons of such invidious character?

The rise of violence, including rape by young boys in schools, points to the depth of the challenge that confronts us as we seek to unmask the roots of patriarchy. This kind of behaviour points to what Leach (1994:36) refers to as the politics of masculinities:

*Like femininity, masculinity operates politically at different levels. At one level, it is a form of identity, a means of self-understanding that structures personal attitudes and behaviours. At another distinct but related level, masculinity can be seen as a form of ideology, in that it presents a set of cultural ideals that define appropriate roles, values and expectations for and of men.*

The manner in which we socialise our children needs serious review. A week ago we were alerted to a trend of unfair labour practice within the private sector, relating to threats to career and job security of pregnant women. That employers can discriminate in this way, even though they know it does not conform with the law, points once more to the arrogance of a patriarchal system that sees women as expendable in the production process that is hell-bent on making profits at all costs.

This is all part of a bigger malaise confronting us as a country, and points to the persistent and disturbing ideology of male superiority and female inferiority which continues to pervade South Africa at all social formative levels, entrenching false myths about women's and men's roles. Coupled with the multiplying negative effect of discrimination through racism, black women in South Africa have suffered even more than their white female counterparts. The violent nature of

abuse towards women and children is testimony itself to an urgent need for more men to be involved in South Africa in the progression of gender equality.

Men can and should play a role in the quest for gender equality. I submit that the struggle for gender equality is key to the success of our vision for a vibrant democratic society. In the last decade, much of the work in which we have all been engaged, focused on women's empowerment. While this was vital, it is my humble submission that perhaps the time has now come that we, as gender activists, need to broaden the base by targeting men to be part of the struggle for gender equality. There are many others who also assert that the scourge of gender violence cannot be dealt with adequately if the perpetrators of such heinous crimes are not part of the processes that seek to eliminate this crime from our society.

### Premise

I must hasten to state that our call for an increased focus on men as a sector is not by any means intended to undermine the gains that have been made by women over the years in the quest for gender equality. On the contrary, this process is intended to support these initiatives and ensure that men play a proactive role in gender transformation. The issue of leadership of this struggle for gender equality is not in dispute: this role should continue to be played by women. It is pivotal for us, as we embark on this process, that we do not compromise this fundamental premise.

In contemporary South Africa, economic, agricultural, social and religious policies are generally presented as if they are neutral, by those who draft them, yet they often have a differential impact on various categories of people, including women and men. When analysed from a gendered perspective, it is often clear that such policies are not neutral, but benefit men more than women. This results



from sexism, patriarchy, kyriarchy and misogyny, exacerbated by aggressive neo-colonial free market economies which purport to be neutral.

The analysis, therefore, of the role of men in promoting gender equality in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, and globalisation, is an urgent and important task for gender equality, justice and just relations between humanity and the earth. Gender equality is understood in this *briefing* as a state or situation where women and men have conditions for realising their full human potential and rights to contribute to earth/ biodiversity, knowledge, national, political, economic, social and cultural life, and to benefit equally from these.

### The broader global environment

Human societies, according to Hopkins (2003), create meaning of gender in various ways. These meanings are often influenced by mediums such as schools, sports, visual and audio entertainment, sex roles, jobs, professions, church and other faith institutions, news media, languages, myths, rituals, laws and race, to shape gender relations between women and men. The contemporary context of economic globalisation and capitalist democracy, according to Hopkins, also influences people's or community's perceptions of gender and the roles that gender plays in society. He comments (2003:27):

*The capitalist system sets the broader context of all definitions and formations of gender. This political economic structure maintains a bottom line culture of profit making at the expense of the majority of the people. The root of the profit culture is private ownership of capital and wealth by a small elite group of families headed by men.*

Hopkins (2003:27) says, even more specifically, capitalist democracy in the United States (and its hegemonic influence in other contexts) influences women's and men's relationships by situating 'males of a certain race as the primary occupants of power positions and owners of wealth and capital'. It results in the creation of a hierarchy of gender, class and race. Accordingly, the gender hierarchy produced by capitalist democracy results in the supremacy of the minority over the majority as it 'thrives on seeing another human being as someone to be used and dominated for profit and the accumulation of more wealth' (Hopkins, 2003:27).

The entrenchment of economic globalisation, particularly privatisation of public resources and the transformation of agriculture to meet the needs of a globalised market economy, is contributing to the gradual erosion of women's biological resources and knowledge systems. According to Women's Action Agenda for a Healthy Planet report (2002):

*The opening up of trade in agriculture has resulted in hardships for small farmers to compete in the world market, and increased dependence on monoculture production, fertilizers and genetically engineered seeds.*

Consequentially, this leads to the disruption of the cycle of local economies and the devaluation of women's indigenous or local knowledge. The privatisation of public utilities, infrastructures and basic public services, creates new social disparities in access to resources and leads to marginalisation of women in biodiversity and the care of the earth. According to Howard (2001:2-3):

*Gender research has clearly demonstrated the presence of gender bias in social and natural sciences. This means that scientists take prevailing gender norms in a society to be 'natural' and often incorporate these norms*

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*into their theories as unquestioned assumptions. [they] assume male predominance and take men's behaviour and knowledge to be standard whereas women are given little importance, or their behaviour is seen to be 'deviant' in comparison with men. Gender bias affects theories, the questions formulated, the methods used and the research outcomes.*

It is in part due to these challenges (exclusion of women and communities in Africa, devaluation of indigenous knowledge and the expropriation of African indigenous knowledge) that African scholars and activists have questioned the very definitions and parameters of knowledge.

Feminist, womanist and African scholars have written about the extent to which Eurocentric epistemologies have worked to systematically exclude the possibility of those outside the western paradigm, and of women and their agency in knowledge production. These scholars and critics have focused on how the epistemological construction of Europe, implicit in the international laws on knowledge, intellectual property rights, trade etc, has been constitutive of racism and of benefiting Europe and not other continents.

African scholars such as Samir Amin, Mahmood Mamdani, and women in the eco-movement, have contested the ideological underpinning of dominant models of economic development and scientific progress. On the Diverse Women website, it is pointed out that development has been used to under-develop Africa and have highlighted that mainstream or Eurocentric construction of economic development and scientific progress were based:

*... on a particular construction of production and knowledge which excluded women and the third world communities as producers of*

*economic value and as generators of intellectual value. Economic globalisation deepens this exclusion and becomes a threat to the survival and integrity of local communities.*

Economic globalisation puts the rights of the poor and the vulnerable groups to meet their basic needs at the mercy of financial intermediaries. It also stimulates the growth of financial corporations at the expense of the rights of Africans, especially women. According to a Commonwealth Secretariat and International Labour Organization brief, it further exacerbates African women's burden as they generally have:

*... a triple burden in undertaking the traditionally prescribed role of caring for children and the elderly, engaging in food production as well as household duties and carrying out the tasks of enhancing, developing and transmitting agricultural knowledge and know-how in the community.*

Gender analysis in this case clearly shows that the decisions at international level on who ought to own and control the processes of development discourses, theory and practice are decided by people of the North. As indicated by Hopkins above, such decisions result in a hierarchical relationship where a few companies – and the white males who run these institutions – become the major beneficiaries of these activities while women and men from the countries of the South (Africa in particular) are generally marginalised from the benefits of their knowledge and resources. A gender-sensitive approach requires a *priori* recognition and actions to address the structural disadvantages that African men and women face, which are worsened by the

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capitalist implementation processes. According to Randriamaro (2000:3), it is essential that gender analyses:

*... identify who is part of the 'private sector' that is targeted by the neo-liberal state. In this regard, it should be noted that the prevailing definition of the private sector excludes the informal sectors where the major part of women's economic activity is located. In addition, measures to promote the development of private sector in Africa include mainly policies directed at large scale industries and ignore the small scale production in which the majority of women are engaged.*

**Globalisation is further rendering invisible and destroying women's work and intelligence**

Privatisation, which is one of the characteristics of economic globalisation, 'has intensified some of the existing gender, class and race-based inequalities that poor women farmers are subjected to' (Women's Environment and Development Organization, 2002). Barwa et al (2003) argue that privatisation is a gendered process in a number of ways. They point out that privatisation and patenting

have historically been processes of exclusion of women as well as some racial and ethnic groups. They argue that privatisation and patenting of knowledge has, in places like the European agriculture and health sector, become 'the domain of male scientists and researchers who denied the relevance of social knowledge's to their work'.

Ling (in Barwa et al, 2003:20) states that it has become obvious that:

*... in the global market systems dominated by hyper-masculinised values that recognize only certain forms of knowledges, work and competition, even the male populations of*

*third world countries get feminised through emasculation in the market place.*

According to Miles (2001:867):

*The impact of these business practices on the growing number of economic losers is heightened by the simultaneous shredding of social safety nets as the neo-liberal ideology plunders the protected spheres. This appropriation of public wealth by corporate capital is legitimized in an ideological climate that denies all communal life and redefines all public wealth as personal impoverishment.*

Miles observes that corporate globalisation today is commercialising and colonising not only the means of life, but life itself. Women's work and responsibility for the bearing and sustaining of individual and communal life has become the central ground of both patriarchal capitalist development and the construction of alternatives. She suggests (2001:870) that:

*Women in both economic south and north are especially vulnerable to the harms of corporate globalisation, but particularly active in resisting and in articulating alternatives.*

Globalisation is further rendering invisible and destroying women's work and intelligence and nature's work and the integrity of ecological processes. The impact of globalisation is therefore to take resources and knowledge that have hitherto been under women's control, and that of the third world communities, to generate sustenance and survival, and to put them at the service of corporations engaged in global trade and commerce to generate profits. In this sense, the association between profit and masculinity is visible in economic globalisation.

People committed to social and gender justice are seeking to transform the dominant system through their participation in the search



for gender and socio-economic justice. Miles (2001:873) writes: 'They reject the hierarchical, competitive, market ruled, patriarchal capitalism as less than human, even anti-human.' African cultures and practices of justice and feminist perspectives are essential in seeking alternatives to gender injustice and 'have yet to be properly heard, understood and acknowledged by other movements' (Miles, 2001:873).

### Men's engagement towards gender equality

- Men need to take responsibility for creating societies that have gender equity and equality. It is crucial, though, to acknowledge that there is a pervasive and globally entrenched false ideology of the superiority of men over women. So much so that the system of discrimination is self-perpetuating and self-inflicting, like in some of the rural communities where women are bound through tradition to wait for their men's permission. It is important to acknowledge that this has been a carefully constructed social engineering process of power relationships, built over hundreds of years that involved systematic economic, social, political and cultural exploitation.
- Extremely similar to racism, sexism is arguably the single most important obstacle to overcoming rampant oppression in the world. The ideology of the superiority of men over women is entrenched: in educational systems where scholars learn and teach that men are better than women because of either physical attributes or endurance; through the media where consistent framing of images of men are positive and framing of women is negative; via language where usage reveals bias towards the man: 'it's a man's world', 'humankind', 'history'; and through legislation where only in the last century

have women been legally viewed as equal to men in most countries across the globe. Sexism is both subtle and direct and communities can experience it without even acknowledging that they are being consistently discriminated against.

- The first step in positively engaging in the creation of gender equity, equality and justice is for men to acknowledge that, in essence and reality over hundreds of years, men have been advantaged to the negative cost of women. Acknowledging that culture has created and supported a false ideology of superiority of men over women, is important in developing room for greater positive participation of men in the creation of gender equality.
- In the last year, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) in partnership with the South African Council of Churches, The SA Men's Forum and the Moral Regeneration Movement embarked on an ambitious programme targeting men as a sector, through provincial workshops to engage them on the challenge of gender equality. We have learnt many lessons from these encounters. What has been encouraging is men's enthusiasm at these functions, and the majority of men who participated were very supportive of gender equality. In many instances, they raised very innovative suggestions on how gender equality should be consolidated, particularly within the public sector, where much work has been hitherto undertaken. Men proposed that it is vital that more men be targeted so that they are exposed to these issues. They suggested a focus on shebeens/bars, sports centres, the entertainment industry, the media etc.

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- We participated in many functions where several government departments were setting up what they referred to as Men's Forum's with the express agenda of mobilising men to play a meaningful role as partners in the quest for gender equality.
- The Department of Education has established the Boy Education Movement (BEM), modelled after the Girl Education Movement (GEM).
- The Chapter 9 institutions are exploring the possibility of setting up an annual summer camp targeting the youth for training in democracy education which will include a focus on human rights, gender rights, democracy education etc.

These strategies, combined with efforts of other civil society organisations, will go a long way towards creating a new culture that embraces gender equality as a value.

***We will transform South African society so that it lives up to the values enshrined in our Constitution***

### **Conclusion**

South Africa has an insidious history of institutionalised and systemic inhumane practices of racism and sexism that affects our daily lives today. The persistence and disturbing ideology of male superiority and female inferiority pervades all social formative levels, entrenching false myths about women's and men's roles. Coupled with the multiplying negative effect of discrimination through racism, black women in South Africa have suffered more than black men. However, this does not mean that gender equity, equality and justice cannot be achieved.

Gender equality cannot be achieved without the empowerment of women, in particular their participation in planning and decision-making (NGO Women's Forum, Germany & Working Group 'Women' in the Forum Environment & Development, 2002).

The attainment of gender equality, therefore, requires equal recognition and enjoyment by both men and women of all socially valued opportunities, resources and rewards.

We are certain that through our concerted efforts as stakeholders, we will transform South African society so that it lives up to the values enshrined in our Constitution. We all need to commit ourselves to ensuring that we build a strong partnership between men and women, that we establish a firm foundation for our democracy so that future generations can be proud of the role we have played.

I concur with Boff's assertion: another world is possible! It must, of necessity, be possible. A world where gender relations will be properly understood as a relationship of equals and where differences will be celebrated. A world where the boy child will view himself as a mere mortal, equal in all respects to the 'other'. A world where the girl child will enjoy all the freedoms and all the rights as a full citizen in her own right.

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