Redefining masculinity in the era of HIV/AIDS: *Padare's* work on masculinity in Zimbabwe

Regis Munyaradzi Mtutu

overview

When masculinity as a source of male destructive behaviour is challenged and dismantled with the involvement of men themselves, it gives way to a new image of manhood, which *Padare* is seeking to construct. This *profile* explores the context in which *Padare* operates in Zimbabwe as it strives to create new definitions of manhood, leading to the establishment of new partnerships between men and women on an equal basis.

keywords

Padare, masculinity, HIV/AIDS, power, sexuality

Men's involvement in gender work is relatively new. In Zimbabwe, perhaps only *Padare* is seeking to build a more just relationship between men and women and to contribute to the transformation of patriarchal society's paradigm of what it means to be a man. Similarly, few organisations have accepted the challenge of getting men to question and transform, from their own experiences, the behaviours, values and concepts with which the dominant culture defines and determines masculine identities.

Padare/Enkudleni/Men's Forum on Gender is a pioneering organisation which, through an educational process, reflects on the meaning of being a man and the factors determining the formation of masculine identity. *Padare*'s work on masculinity stems from the hypothesis that behaviour is learnt, and can, therefore, be unlearnt through the conscious process of reflection on daily practice.

Masculinity in modern-day Zimbabwe is used to describe a socio-cultural model that is passed from generation to generation. It dictates attitudes, values and behaviour that men should adopt both to be considered 'men' by others, and to personally feel that they are 'men'. It encompasses not only the way that men relate to women, but also to other men and children in both the domestic and public spheres of life. It is, in effect, an ideology built upon the overwhelming supposition that men are naturally superior to women – physically, intellectually and sexually – a concept that is instilled in both men and women from an early age. Consequently, men enjoy rights and privileges and have access to opportunities in society that are denied to women, thus promoting and perpetuating a system of gender inequality.

Power

The concept of power is of particular importance in perpetuating gender inequities and this extends to how we face the reality of HIV/AIDS as men and women. In a social system based on gender differences, power is a male prerogative. Men quickly learn that they not only have to possess power, but that they must use it. Power includes the ability to conquer and dominate. It leads to control and manipulation of those who are considered inferior, and promises rewards. Men are expected to manifest this type of power in their sexual relationships with women and in all

spheres of life. The successful use of power guarantees rights and privileges within the family unit and in society. Power ensures men's sexual supremacy over women, freedom of movement, and individual and professional development at the expense of women. This type of power can lead to the use of violence, especially in conjugal relationships. Its private application as physical violence and as a means to control women, is a common practice in Zimbabwe, that many men internalise as their right and duty. Both men and women have been taught to regard the woman in marriage or common-law unions as the man's property, buttressed by the *lobola* or bride price paid. This confers on the man conjugal rights (whether the man is infected or not), the right to do as he pleases with her, and the duty to keep her under control.

Violence by men against women is not confined to couples. Even within the family, other violent dynamics are common. For example, fathers may use psychological and physical violence against their sisters or sons, or men may inflict violence on younger or older men under their control. This is still an expression of masculinity. It is only now that men appreciate that men can be raped by other men and thus be exposed to the risk of HIV infection, although many men believe that such rape occurs only in prisons.

Power and sexuality

The maintenance of male power and privilege in society is directly related to the control of women's sexuality and the allocation of reproductive tasks to women. The use and threat of sexual violence is a mechanism for the control of women. Although sex and sexuality are shrouded in myths and taboos (even for men), the expectations of men's sexuality are remarkably clear. From an early age, young men are taught that sexual prowess is the measure of masculinity. The concept of women as sexual objects is constantly reinforced by male relatives and friends and mass media representations of women.

Male attitudes towards sex and the constant pressure to prove their virility poses a risk of spreading HIV/AIDS. 'Real men' must demonstrate their sexual power by having numerous sexual partners. In Zimbabwe, the woman on the side is called a 'small house'.

Combined with poor sex education and the propagation of myths about condom use – 'they reduce sensitivity and pleasure' – the way that men in general exercise their sexuality is a cause for major concern. Many men, who are in established, heterosexual conjugal relationships frequently have unprotected sex with other women and men (bisexual practices). The HIV infection rate among heterosexual women is increasing rapidly. Half of the adolescents living with HIV at present, are women.

The maintenance of male power and privilege in society is directly related to the control of women's sexuality

The reluctance of Zimbabwean men to use condoms or to develop a more responsible approach to sex and sexuality is symptomatic of the androcentric nature of traditional masculinity. Sexual pleasure is a male right and privilege that is negated by the use of condoms or self-imposed restrictions. Women's sexual and emotional needs are barely recognised, and knowledge about women's bodies and sexuality is limited.

Indeed, the almost exclusively genital understanding of sex also means that most men never discover the erotic potential of their own bodies and the diversity of human sexuality. Even if love is present in relationships, the expression of feelings, emotions and affection is taboo to male sexuality. As has been said many times in Zimbabwe: women give sex to receive love and men give love to receive sex. In everyday life, this maxim is borne out in the

way many men, of all ages, try to guarantee sex by sweet-talking women or even through emotional blackmail, using the 'if you really loved me' approach. For adolescent and young women, this pressure often leads to premature and unwanted pregnancies. For them, sexual relations become acts of love by which they aspire to preserve the attention and love of their suitors. For many young men, the pregnancy represents another feather in their cap, a new conquest about which to boast. This is indicative of men's attitudes to sex and women, to their own sense of responsibility and to their own children.

Men are granted privileges denied to women and are freed from any sense of responsibility

As in other areas of life, in the exercise of their sexuality, men are granted privileges denied to women and are freed from any sense of responsibility. Birth control, child-bearing and child-rearing are women's tasks while men are expected to contribute, at most, economically to the children's welfare. Many fail to fulfil even this task. Men's sexual adventures are praised by others, which then boosts the male ego and social standing. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be pure, chaste before marriage, and faithful within it.

Learning male identity

It would be ridiculous to assume that every Zimbabwean man colludes unconditionally with the hegemonic model of masculinity described above. The socialisation of each individual determines the degree to which he assimilates the attitudes and values of traditional masculinity and the expected behaviour. Although society undoubtedly attempts to assign a homogeneous identity to all men, the particular family context, social context and individual life experiences of men, lead to the existence of different identities in the same society. Categories such as class, race, religion, geographical location and family unit type influence the attitudes, values and behaviour that any one man takes on. These varying manifestations of masculinity depend greatly on how individuals and groups of men interpret the standards prescribed by society as typically male, and how they internalise them.

However, although different expressions of masculinity may coexist and no two men are ever the same, few manage substantially to escape the framework of traditional masculinity that emphasises the position and use of power as a prerequisite for all men. More critically, responses that adopt male stereotypes of strength, virility and by implication, promiscuity, may therefore promote behaviour that runs counter to HIV/AIDS prevention and transmission.

Redefining masculinity

Padare began by establishing monthly discussion fora in Harare, Chitungwiza and Bulawayo in 1996. We have since encouraged similar developments in other centres throughout Zimbabwe and now have 14 chapters. Meetings bring together men who are seeking to alter the reasoning on which a false image and role of 'men' has been promoted at the expense of women. We are now practically involved in dismantling some of the definitions of masculinity that are often rigidly stereotypical. Thus we have men who are active in settings that would be seen as traditionally women's spheres. We have men as caregivers, men who mobilise and advocate in communities on the prevention of parent-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS. We have men who confront their sexuality which is based on male power and patriarchy, and explore what this implies in addressing HIV/AIDS.

We unanimously agree at *Padare* that the solutions to gender inequality and the imbalances in power relations between men

and women in our society can only be effective if men begin to take responsibility for their destructive actions.

There is a need in Zimbabwean society to open debate, especially around men's sexuality, for us to undergo deep-rooted change if enough men are to be persuaded to change their behaviour. However, this is a discussion which is challenging, difficult, and likely to take many years to resolve. In fact, men generally appear reluctant to debate these deeper issues of gender inequality, masculinity, patriarchy and male sexuality.

The challenges of working with men on gender

Working with gender questions is a huge challenge for men. It cannot be underestimated how difficult it is for us as men to open our minds to rethink beliefs that in our hearts and imagination we embody in all kinds of fixed, traditional ways. Most men experience strong unwillingness to disturb some aspect of traditional gender notions in conscious dialogue with others. Further, we also have our own particular inner resistances to – or anxieties about – dislocating our ideas about what men and women 'are' or 'should be' when it comes to family life or sex. For example, we have sex, we do it, but we never really want to talk about it.

The challenge in our gender discourse at *Padare* is to find what kinds of activities and discussions encourage flexibility and open-minded reflection, in contrast to approaches that confirm inflexibility and rigidity in men's thinking. Gender discussion processes that encourage movement in critical thinking are the ones that can best inform personal agency and new consensus for social changes that this era of HIV/AIDS so urgently needs.

What also makes our work very difficult, are the stereotypes of heterosexual male youths and men who we meet in the course of our work. Just as women can be affected by expectations that they must not be sexually active outside marriage, so men are often expected to meet stereotypes of 'masculinity'. This moves us to address the second challenge: the challenge to men to listen to, understand and accept women as fellow human beings. But most men do not effectively listen to their inner selves in order to confront the reality of their sexist injustices, fear, misconceptions and illusions.

Padare offers practical examples of what could be: the means to not only challenge masculinity, but also to begin to dismantle it by engaging in behaviour and practices that were once the preserve of women. In doing so, we show that it is 'manly' to take risks in a positive way, and to redefine masculinity in ways that shape a better life for men.

A new way of perceiving manhood would empower men and boys to live differently

In 2003, I was fortunate to attend a regional conference in Pretoria, that looked at Men and HIV/AIDS and explored the role of men in the pandemic. We asked many questions of ourselves. What does it mean to be a man in Southern Africa today? How do young men perceive themselves as single men, husbands, fathers and breadwinners? How do these perceptions interact within the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the context of unemployment and poverty?

As researchers, academics and activists, we reached consensus that the concept and practice of masculinity needs to be reconstructed in ways that fit the new socio-economic and political realities, from rural-urban migration to women's advancement, HIV/AIDS and unemployment. A new way of perceiving manhood would empower men and boys to live differently.

There is a stereotypical predominant discourse of 'men as the drivers of the

epidemic', high male sex drive, men as risk-takers, that the only enjoyable sex is one of penetration, and lastly, masculinity as conquest and domination. This is often coupled with negative images channelled by the media and society and is internalised by most young men, which creates a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The last decade has seen an explosion of interventions around HIV/AIDS centred on women and girls. Today there is greater understanding of the gender dimension of the epidemic. However, many interventions fail because they do not take into account the identity constructions of the men who interact with women and girls as partners, fathers, husbands and in-laws. Lindegger (2003) argued: 'Changing the relationship in masculinity and HIV risk is far more than just changes in behaviour and technology, but rather about transformation in the very identity of men.'

Change will come from the bottom up as we get a 'critical mass' of men

We could argue that it is still too early to talk about basic changes in men's attitudes, values and behaviours and that the impact of *Padare's* work on gender and masculinity should be viewed with caution. But to do so would be to ignore the individual and collective response of hundreds of men in Zimbabwe who have accepted the challenge to reflect on their masculinity and who have embarked on a journey of self-discovery and change.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the change process initiated by men may not go beyond men's own individual identities, immediate family relations, workplaces and sometimes, friendship with women. At best, *Padare's* work will encourage men to question male stereotypes and how the socialisation process will contribute in the future to significantly change men's concept of power, sexuality and its exercise both in the public and political spaces. Change will come from the bottom up as we get a 'critical mass' of men.

To minimise the risks and benefits to both men and women, work on gender and masculinity must continue in a pro-feminist framework that defines gender equity as its ultimate goal. It is men, however, who must take the ultimate responsibility for promoting and consolidating change within themselves and in other men.

Our involvement in *Padare* has made us realise that it is possible to create new definitions of manhood, leading to the establishment of new partnerships between men and women on an equal basis. This is why we can confidently shout slogans like 'Men of quality are not afraid of equality'. We strongly believe that strategies that focus on boys and young men can assist men to understand their obligations in tackling masculinity and gender inequalities, gender-based violence and linkages to the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

This is why we are increasing our efforts to involve men in seeking solutions to the problems associated with masculinity. One clear development about which we are confident, is that men can change. When masculinity as a source of male destructive behaviour is challenged and dismantled with the involvement of men themselves, it gives way to a new image of manhood, which *Padare* is seeking to construct.

Our increasing strength is in the already visible role models in our society, of both boys and men who are refusing to be identified with the oppressive and destructive definition of men in our society. When HIV-positive men come out and speak out, when men provide care and love to the infected, when men accompany their pregnant spouses to pre- and antenatal clinics, a new image of manhood emerges. This is an indication that the work that

Padare is doing may be difficult but not completely impossible. The challenge for all men today is to be man enough to identify with organisations like *Padare*. I end with a challenge to all men: if you are a real man, stand up and be counted!

References

Lindegger G (2003) 'Masculinity, Boys and HIV Risk Behaviour', paper presented at Men, HIV and Aids Conference, VSO RAISA, Pretoria.

Regis Munyaradzi Mtutu is a social worker by profession. He is a founder member of Padare/Enkudleni/ Men's Forum on Gender and is the current Executive Director.
Email: padare@mweb.co.zw