

# Creating spaces for men's involvement in sexual and reproductive health



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## overview

Change in men's behaviour with respect to gender-based violence, sex and reproductive health is occurring on the ground in various ways. This *perspective* highlights the challenges this involves at a group and personal level.

## keywords

men, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS

This *perspective* looks at the gender-based violence (GBV), health and HIV/AIDS prevention work done by the Hope Worldwide project, which falls within the larger Men as Partners (MAP) network.

Hope Worldwide started three years ago and utilises the training we received from EngenderHealth in the Men as Partners methodology.

Let me explain the reason we are involved in this specific work and why we think we need to be working with men. A link has already been established between GBV and the vulnerability of women, especially with regard to HIV infection. The reality is that acts of sexual and gender-based violence are committed by men and young boys – and we really need to face up to this reality.

Men have a stake in changing the status quo, because contemporary gender roles compromise both men's and women's health. For example, an issue such as multiple sexual partners affects both men and women as it is men who are 'forced' to prove their manhood by initiating sex, thus directly compromising their health. What we need to be talking about is the socialisation that teaches men these unsafe practices.

As a young man, I thought men who played it safe were weak, so for me to be strong, I

needed to pretend that I wasn't scared. I remember many risks I took to prove that I was a man, which involved risky sexual behavior.

One way for a man to prove his manhood is by initiating sexual encounters. I have a friend who, at the age of 18, had facial hair but still had not had sex. He was bullied and teased about this and the peer pressure eventually became too much for him and resulted in him feeling forced to initiate sex.

We need to act from within a human rights framework. MAP's work falls within this framework, because GBV is seen to be a violation of basic human rights, not only women's rights. We must acknowledge that GBV and gender power dynamics are not only health issues: they transcend health. It is because of this that we need to start discussing the causes of GBV and sexual assault and the social implications of these.

As Hope Worldwide, we started off working in four Gauteng-based sites, but have recently expanded (in collaboration with Population Council and EngenderHealth) to 16 other sites nationally. In these areas, our coordinators and peer facilitators run workshops on a variety of sexual and reproductive health issues. Specifically, we deal with the question of rape and what rape means legally, culturally and morally. We speak about the implications of GBV for our lives and our partners' lives while also

dealing with a range of health-related issues.

We recruit workshop participants mostly from community-based organisations. Even though the workshops are focused on men and male participation, they are not necessarily exclusive. In some workshops there is a fifty-fifty male/female split. Importantly, we try to mobilise religious groups, which then creates a forum for men within the church to discuss the issue of GBV and the implications of HIV/AIDS. We mobilise soccer clubs, as well as institutions like schools and universities. We also recruit through street interventions, street by street, house to house. We go in and meet the men and try to educate them on the basics of HIV/AIDS and we then invite them to a MAP workshop.

To change the status quo, men must be provided with the space and opportunity to express themselves on issues they are not used to discussing. During my first radio appearance, I asked, 'What does a man have to do, or what does a woman have to do to avoid being sexually assaulted?' Male guests immediately came up with about 25 things that a woman could do: When you go to your car always check the back seat; check underneath; just make sure that there's nobody there; don't walk alone at night; don't wear this... When I asked the next question, 'What does a man have to do to avoid being sexually assaulted?', there was silence. The only response I could give was, 'avoid going to jail' because that's where a man could get sexually assaulted. This is not always true though – men are abused in other spaces too and this needs to be talked about more openly.

Our workshops create the opportunity for us to explore, challenge and discuss the attitudes and behaviours that compromise both men's and women's health. Beyond the workshops, we encourage men to take action to end violence and to promote gender equity in their private and public lives.

There is a culture of avoidance in our society. If the loud noise coming from next door is

caused by a radio you go and tell the neighbour to turn it down, but if the noise is from a woman being beaten, people are quick to say, 'It's none of my business, it's between the two of them'. In line with this, we try to challenge men. We ask them about courage: How much courage would it take to challenge your friend who is speaking badly about women? How much courage would it take, when you hear something going on next door, to pick up the phone and dial 10111 and report it? How much courage would it take for you to walk away from a situation of violence? How much courage does it take? We are under no illusion that a four-day workshop is going to totally change a man, but it's a start. It is very important that we continue, after the workshops, to encourage men to take action through the formation, management and monitoring of 'community action teams'. We encourage these teams to take action on a local level. For example, a team can look at practical ways of securing the neighbourhood. If there are high reeds around the neighbourhood, violence can easily be hidden away without the community noticing. To correct this, the community action team can find ways to cut these down so that the area is more visible. If there are no street lights, the teams can mobilise towards installing these to help reduce sexual assault and GBV.

The need to mobilise beyond workshops and into community, government and workplace settings is very important. Consistent restructuring is necessary for the further education of men in relation to GBV. Some men will blatantly tell you things like, 'What you're coming up with is the strategy that Mandela has come up with and it's just not going to work here.' Others are beginning to realise that we need to get out of the box society has put us in as it is compromising our own health.

Changing men's behaviour is a work in progress. Our work and programme is designed to complement the work that has been done in the women's movement.

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