



ENLISTING MEN FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY

South African initiatives against sexual violence, gender inequities
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**Sonke Gender
Justice Network**
HIV/AIDS, Gender Equality, Human Rights

JOHANNESBURG



Bafana Khumalo



Dean Peacock

When an older man raised his hand to speak on the third day of a gender workshop in Hoedspruit, a rural community in northern South Africa, Bafana Khumalo's heart sank. As the facilitator of the workshop, which specifically targeted men, he had already touched on concepts of manhood and how gender inequality contributed to the sky-rocketing HIV rates in South Africa.

Mr. Khumalo worried that the elderly participant would deliver a lecture on how equality between men and women is contrary to African culture or how women's empowerment is dividing families. Older men are deeply respected in rural communities, and he knew this man had the ability to derail the workshop.

"Yesterday, after I got home," the participant began, "I called my sons, I called my wife, and I explained to them what we are doing in this workshop." He told his children that things had to change in their home. No longer could their mother arrive home tired from a day of work and be expected to cook, clean, wash the dishes and clear up all on her own. It was simply unfair.

From now on, he told his children, they would have to contribute to household chores. "You have to start cleaning and tidying the house. You have to begin preparing dinner, so when your mother comes home she can see that we have all contributed. I can't learn to cook — I am too old. But I am prepared to wash the dishes."

For Mr. Khumalo, it was a significant moment. This participant had accepted one of the main messages of the workshop: that the idea of what it means to be a man is not innate, but shaped by society, and can therefore be changed. As Mr. Khumalo points out, social conventions equate manhood "with dominance and aggression, with sexual conquest and fearlessness." Social norms also determine the roles that men and women play. To change those relations, all aspects of gender inequality must be addressed.

"I look back at this moment," he told Africa Renewal, "and I realize we are getting somewhere. This story is repeated again and again in every area that we have established our programme."

Across South Africa, such workshops are beginning to change attitudes. Research by the South African Men as Partners (MAP) network shows that 71 per cent of men participating in such workshops believe that women should have the same rights as men, compared with only 25 per cent more generally. Asked whether they thought it was normal to sometimes beat their wives, 82 per cent of workshop participants said it was not, while 38 per cent of non-participants thought wife-beating was normal.

‘NEED TO BE DIFFERENT MEN’

Mr. Khumalo is co-director of Sonke Gender Justice, a non-governmental organization formed in 2006. It tackles two major issues in South Africa: violence against women and very high HIV-transmission rates. He was an activist in the anti-apartheid struggle, and after apartheid ended he began working with the Lutheran Church in various capacities, including as a pastor. His true calling, he realized, was to work with men to help end violence against women. He developed workshops and often ran them with Sonke co-director and co-founder Dean Peacock, who returned to South Africa after more than a decade’s work in the men’s movement in the US.

Mr. Khumalo was struck, he says, by how “hungry” men in his workshops were to discuss violence against women and their role in that violence. “They expressed a heartfelt need to be different men, different fathers from the older generation of men.”

Mr. Khumalo and Mr. Peacock strongly believe that gender equality cannot be achieved through focusing on women’s empowerment alone. They also believe that men’s behaviour and attitudes are driving both the HIV epidemic and violence against women.

“Men’s violence against women is not simply a result of men losing their tempers or because they lack control,” Mr. Peacock told Africa Renewal. “They have been brought up to believe and internalize a view of manhood that is equated with aggression, dominance over women and sexual conquest. Men often fear that they will be dismissed by their friends and their community as not ‘real’ men. They will be regarded as ‘weak’ if they apologize, compromise or share power. Rather than seeking ways to resolve conflict, they resort to violence — not only against women, but against each other.”

RAPE, VIOLENCE AND HIV

According to numerous studies, South Africa has the highest incidence of reported rape in any country. In 2006 the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) surveyed 1,370 male volunteers from 70 rural villages. It found that close to one in four of the men surveyed had participated in sexual violence. Of the total, 16.3 per cent had raped a non-partner or had participated in gang rape, while 8.4 per cent had been sexually violent towards an intimate partner.

Other studies have shown that the first sexual experience for many adolescents and young women is unwanted. According to research by the Witwatersrand University published in 2004, almost one-third of sexually experienced women report that their first sexual encounter was not consensual. That same year, the MRC reported that one woman is killed every six hours by an intimate partner in South Africa — the highest substantiated rate anywhere in the world.

“THERE’S A REALIZATION THAT IF WE DON’T BRING MEN IN AS PARTNERS, WE WON’T WIN THE BATTLE.”

Also in 2004, South African researchers reported in the respected Lancet medical journal that women with violent or controlling male partners are more vulnerable to HIV infection. The study postulated that abusive men are more likely to have HIV and to impose risky sexual practices on their partners.

Violence against women is not unique to South Africa, of course. Worldwide, one woman in three experiences domestic violence.

BEYOND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

With the end of apartheid in 1994, the new government made achieving gender equality a central goal. The 1996 constitution broke ground internationally with its attention to the protection and promotion of women’s rights and gender equality. Besides affirming the right of everyone to be equal before the law and to have the equal protection and benefit of the law, it established a Commission on Gender Equality to promote democracy and human rights for both men and women.

Some six years later, one of the commission members, Sheila Meintjes, observed: “There’s a realization that if we don’t bring men in as partners, we won’t win the battle.” That view guides activists’ current work with men.

Mr. Khumalo and his colleagues at Sonke believe that existing progress towards gender equality will be derailed unless men also begin to change. “The attitudes of men and the concept of masculinity are linked to our patriarchal heritage,” Mr. Khumalo says. “In the course of our work during the 13 years of our democracy, we learned a lesson. While a lot of emphasis was placed on the need to transform gender relations between men and women, the major focus was on women’s empowerment.” That focus on the oppression of women made some men feel left out.

While work on women’s empowerment remains necessary, Mr. Khumalo adds, he also points to an unfortunate trend. “If a woman is living in an abusive relationship,” he explains, “then to empower her with awareness of her rights . . . is not always a wise thing. Women return from workshops with new clarity, wanting to assert their rights. The result? The men begin to regard themselves as the victims. Fearing the unknown, they become even more violent towards their partners.”

RISKS OF VIOLENCE FOR MEN

It therefore is important, he continues, to show men that reducing the power men exert over women has benefits for men as well. “It makes us much less susceptible to using power in the negative sense.”

Violence is not only dangerous for women. It has a damaging impact on men themselves. The South African National Injury Mortality Surveillance System reported in 2003 that roughly seven times as many men as women died as a result of homicide in South Africa (7,359 men and 1,197 women).



Mr. Peacock argues that this too is a form of gender-based violence. “It is not just about men being violent towards women. It is also about man-on-man violence, another way of asserting male dominance. If men can understand that they themselves are dying in large numbers because of this violence, then it provides them with an imperative to explore alternative, more peaceful ways of expressing their masculinity.”

There are other ways in which men’s perceptions of masculinity adversely affect their lives. Mike Matyeni, an organizer for Sonke Gender Justice who is open about his HIV-positive status and was previously active in both the Treatment Action Campaign and Men as Partners, cites the links between cultural attitudes and HIV transmission. Many men’s perceptions of manhood, he told Africa Renewal, often lead them to refuse to use condoms. Condom use, they feel, diminishes their sexuality and their view of themselves as men.

Also, some argue that because they have paid a bride price when they married, their wives have no right to tell them what to do. Men also resist going to clinics to be tested or for treatment, believing that would indicate “weakness” and leave them open to taunts from their friends. Many therefore seek out the services of traditional healers instead. Moreover, many medical practitioners in the clinics are women, and men may feel it demeaning or embarrassing to be treated by women. So they do not go even if they suspect they are HIV-positive or are sick.

‘ONE MAN CAN’

The first work focusing on men began in collaboration with women in women’s organizations. Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT), for instance, developed a men’s programme to educate men about domestic violence. This included improvisational skits in township taverns and men’s marches, one of which was attended by then President Nelson Mandela. Over the years, men’s groups began forming to specifically address men’s roles, responsibilities, attitudes and behaviour.

This spurred a wider response. Government departments began different campaigns. Civil society organizations arose, including Fathers Speak Out, the Men as Partners network and the South African Men’s Forum. Trade union federations and faith-based groups also developed programmes on gender equality and HIV. Their activities include holding training workshops, staging drama, promoting discussions in informal taverns, painting murals that highlight the issues and undertaking other initiatives that involve community members.

Sonke Gender Justice is trying to move beyond workshops and small events to engage men — and women — in broader activism and campaigns. The goal is to enlist many more organizations and communities and to develop a national response. Sonke’s One Man Can campaign is one reflection of the broadened approach.



“IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT MEN BEING VIOLENT TOWARDS WOMEN. IT IS ALSO ABOUT MAN-ON-MAN VIOLENCE, ANOTHER WAY OF ASSERTING MALE DOMINANCE”

Funded by diverse donors such as UNICEF, the International Organization for Immigration, private foundations and South African government departments, the One Man Can campaign is being implemented in all nine of South Africa's provinces, and is gradually being taken up in neighbouring countries. Its goal is to encourage men and boys to take action to end domestic and sexual violence and to promote healthy, equitable and mutually respectful relationships. By mobilizing civil society, the campaign promotes change within families and communities and advocates a stronger governmental response.

GETTING OFF THE SIDELINES

“We want men to be able to speak out and take a stand, not watch from the sidelines and do nothing,” explains Mr. Khumalo. If a man sees a woman who has been beaten by a boyfriend or husband or hears screams from the other side of a closed door, he needs to act responsibly. “Women are afraid of us. They are afraid to hear footsteps behind them in the night. We have to show them that we care and that we will no longer accept the negative behaviour of men towards them.”

An underlying message of the campaign is that men can love passionately, respectfully and sensitively. The complex and diverse messages of the campaign go beyond statements of intention to suggestions about how to build trust between partners and with women in general. They promote awareness of how violence undermines women's ability to fully and safely function. Developing clear communication between men and women, whatever their relationship, is key to building respect. Only then can men appreciate that “no means no,” that using condoms is important, that justice and rights are necessary at both the personal and national levels and that the government needs to do more to meet its constitutional obligations.

In appealing to men to get directly involved in ending violence against women, the campaign also urges them to stand up for their principles — and to not let friends pressure them into disrespecting and degrading women. It is up to men to break the cycle of violence.



EDUCATING FRIENDS — AND WOMEN

Men who have changed their attitudes and become active often speak about the constraints of their upbringing. Zithulele Dlakavu, an organizer for One Man Can and an actor, writer and director of educational plays, recalls that his best friend was hostile to his work with men. They had been close since adolescence, but his friend could not understand why Mr. Dlakavu had changed so radically. “You are not a man!” his friend told him.

Meanwhile, Mr. Dlakavu was disturbed that his friend beat his girlfriend. Mr. Dlakavu intervened to educate his friend. His persistence paid off. His friend no longer beats his girlfriend.

Male activists have found that it is not only other men who need to change. Wives and girlfriends often deride men who offer to share household responsibilities or make decisions together. In a discussion three years ago in Soweto, a township outside Johannesburg, a group of organizers spoke of the reactions of women to their work. One had come home from a workshop, cleaned the house and prepared the dinner. His girlfriend thought he was silently chastising her for not looking after him or the house well enough. Another was castigated by his wife when he asked her to make a particular decision: “Aren’t you man enough to make decisions anymore?”

Another overheard a young woman in a mini-bus say to her friend, “I do things wrong. Of course he must beat me. How would I know if he loves me if he doesn’t beat me?” When the organizer tried to explain to the young woman that no one has a right to beat her, the women and other men in the bus shouted him down.

For Mr. Khumalo, like other activists, the passion for his work lies in his hopes for a safer society, not only for his wife and sisters, but also for his daughters. “I want to contribute to a society in which I do not have to be my wife’s protector,” he says. “I want to contribute so that my daughter can walk without fear of being violated by men. I want her to be able to grow up and respect herself for who she is and live accordingly. I want a society in which my wife and daughter are able to live without such fears.”



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