

# SGBV- Thinking outside the Box

By Wanjala Wafula-Founder Coexist Initiative



## *A discussion with Men about SGBV*

Violence against women and girls in Africa as it is in other parts of the world is an aftermath of profound social systems that advance and proliferate it. Attitudes that generate traditions of terror and encourage the use of violence as enshrined in patriarchy, negative masculinity and the entire negative socialization process remain ever present.

Brutal expressions of masculinity by men and boys remain widespread with a 2015 Coexist report revealing that violence against women affects one in three women in Kenya. The Coexist Initiative is therefore premised on the fact that Gender based violence is a manifestation of unequal relations between women and men with roots in deeply entrenched social, economic and political informal conventions based on perceived men and boys “privilege” at the expense of girls and women’s vulnerability. Our work at Coexist is anchored on the fact that men and boys remain the main perpetrators of violence against women; therefore the fundamental role of men and boys in fostering gender parity cannot be over emphasized yet largely ignored.

## **Existing gaps in gender based violence programming in many parts of Eastern Africa**

Many countries in Eastern Africa have developed adequate legislation for addressing gender based violence, including specific legislation on protection, prosecution and reintegration. However, the full enforcement of the legislation is hindered by the lack of specific policies addressing gender based violence, and insufficient institutional development in the field of combating gender based violence at the grassroots.

The national pattern for providing services to survivors, specifically wife battering, post rape care, shelter, free legal assistance and social support is defined by a combination of actions taken by key women's civil society organizations and slowly increasing involvement of the governmental social services. The involvement of men and boys in the process is literally absent

The most significant challenge for ending gender based violence in Eastern Africa remains the gap between legal provisions and governmental commitments, national strategies to promote gender equality and/ or combat sexual violence and their translation into concrete action and particularly into financial support and budgets to address sexual violence. Currently, there is no separate budget line in the state budget allocated for implementing strategies to combat gender based violence and specifically and comprehensively address the needs of survivors.

Collaboration and harmonization between various gender based violence stakeholders is not common practice in the region. Thus, an important prerequisite for the development of holistic and multidisciplinary models and guidelines for responding to gender based violence at the community level is lacking.

There are no institutionalized programs for perpetrators/offenders, although the current legislation on gender based violence includes requirements to establish rehabilitation programs for offenders.

Lack of data and reliable records about gender based violence at the community level related cases significantly hinders advancements in work to combat the vice. While progress can be noted in respect of collecting data at the level of various institutions, the country has not established an integrated or disaggregated data collection on gender based violence. Furthermore, many institutions do not have a practice of collecting and publicizing data.

Organizations working to end gender based violence largely evaluate the provision of services to survivors of the vice in region as unable to meet the needs of communities, inadequately funded and often scarce predominantly at the grassroots. National and grassroots networking of women and men groups towards domestic violence prevention and mitigation is still not a wide spread practice in the country.

### **Here is our take**

Masculine construction which is the main driving force behind women and girls disempowerment and vulnerability requires manhood to be equated with the ability to exert power over others, especially through the use of force. Masculinity, as it is espoused, gives man power to control the lives of those around him, especially women. For us at Coexist, the solution to the insidious gender based violence in society is working with men and boys as key partners against the vice at the local and national levels.

We develop and share new and effective strategies of engaging men and boys as principle partners in the holistic respect of the rights of girls and women. We build the capacities and competencies of men and boys empower men and boys to break out of the portrayal of the notion that work around gender justice is a women's struggle only, where almost the only role available to (all) men and boys is that of perpetrator or policeman. We work to enable men and boys

embrace their role as advocates against girl's and women's vulnerability. Our work is anchored on transforming possible abusers to steadfast partners.

We firmly believe that the way forward is to engage men and boys as well as the community as a whole. Social transformation does not happen without community engagement. Community engagement is a necessary part of working to prevent and respond to all forms of gender based violence. Gender norms—especially gendered beliefs and practices—at the community level are among the root causes of gender based violence. Our approach and strategies have had the efficacy for escalating community receptivity to anti-GBV messages, by lessening resistance to them, and for increasing the likelihood of community members taking an active role in GBV prevention and other related interventions.



### ***A forum with young men on GBV***

That's why much of our work at Coexist is focused on raising awareness of the dangers associated with gender based violence. We do this through a multiplicity of strategies including capacity building, advocacy, peer education, media programming, tools development, edu-entertainment and community forums. We target, empower and raise the capacities of men and boys across the country because we have over the years realized that the deliberate isolation of men and boys in gender programming is a major gap and cause of women and girls vulnerability in the country. Our work has successfully been able to bring the dialogue about gender based violence into public consciousness and spaces hence shattering the secrecy that has characterized the vice for generations.

## **Why men**

Men and boys still remain the custodians of culture which is a key deterrent to women and girls empowerment. We work with men, boys and community elders because we have proven over the years that they dramatically enhance the reach and effectiveness of our programming.

Men can substantially impart their traditions and beliefs onto younger generations yet most the information disseminated over the years enhances disparity and vulnerability. Traditional leaders have the authority needed to decrease the acceptance of gender based violence, and their voices are particularly important when it comes to reaching out to boys and men

A key moment in a boy's life is the time when he learns the "rules of manhood". This traditionally happens during the male circumcision ceremony, when boys are exposed to highly gendered messages about what it means to be a man. Working with spiritual leaders has proven paramount in opening a new space for dialogue, in teaching boys different lessons about manhood: boys become men by seeing and supporting women as human-beings.

Our choice to work with men and boys is informed by the fact that masculine perceptions show traditional stereotyped mindsets, which shape the identity and behavior of men and young boys, thereby perpetuating gender inequalities rather than breaking patriarchal norms.

The traditional stereotypes, largely inculcated through socialization processes greatly influence women and girls in the context of their engagement with the economic, political and social development.

## **Our success stories**

On an optimistic note, there is some delight in seeing the walls of negative masculinity and patriarchy slowly start to grind. Our shattering shackles movement has rapidly expanded with more than one hundred thousand men and boys becoming active members of the changed men initiative.

Our 2014-15 Impact project has realized a 30% increase in the number of men boys now openly coming out to support gender parity and girl's empowerment. More families are investing in their daughters' education and healthcare.

Scores of men are supporting their wife's pursuit of education and economic advancement. A larger portion of men are now comfortable with women taking top positions of leadership.

After four years working alongside Kaya elders, for their strict adherence to tradition as well as the Muslim faith, not one underage girl was married off in their community this year and cases of wife battering gone down by 65%. Girls school enrollment has sky rocketed by 30% and several archaic traditions including the ghastly Mdundiko festival were not celebrated this year.

We produce and distribute several gender based violence documentaries and programs with the most popular production being the "their bodies our battlefield"

tools including the recently launched guideline on how to engage communities in gender violence prevention and survivor support.

### **The key challenges we face**

While the struggle to eliminate gender based violence and foster the culture of respecting the rights principally of vulnerable groups who include women and girls in the region remain largely disjointed, several advantages will be realized by breaking the walls of suspicion and forging a common front.

We have been in operation for over a decade and have never received substantial funding for our work. We still survive on donations and very meager grants that continue to curtail our work. We affirm that our work is not in competition with women's organizations but rather compliments the same. Ours is a call to redeem millions of men from the shackles of negative socialization processes, cultures, traditions, religions and stereotypes that continue to inhibit men and boys.

### **Way forward**

GBV work in the East Africa region is curtailed by the deliberate alienation of men and boys in GBV programming with no specific resource pool set- aside for the same. In 2015 alone, five men and boys organizations have closed shop due to lack of funding. There need to emerge more synergies comprising of and women's organizations. The suspicion and outright rivalry undermining efforts.

More effort needs to be invested in the implementation of existing legislation on GBV. An exclusive item in the budget to go towards GBV will be a welcome gesture.

I insist that synergies have greater credibility individual organizations. This is especially true in terms of lobbying and advocacy. The broader purpose and breadth of synergies give them more credibility than individual organizations yet most of GBV networks in the region are simply formed to meet donor demands.

In numerous religions, certain man-made practices performed in the name of religion malign accepted norms of women's human rights. The customary practices and some aspects of tradition are often cause of violence against women. These include female genital mutilation, binding, male preference, early marriages, virginity tests, dowry deaths, and female infanticide among others

### **Conclusion**

On an optimistic note, GBV prevention programs are beginning to emerge throughout the region. They represent a growing body of experience and show that through prevention efforts aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviors perpetuating GBV, homes and communities can become safer places for everyone. Many of the prevention efforts within the country are relatively new and are challenged to develop solid and effective prevention programs. Currently, there is diminutive sharing of information and experiences among stakeholders.

There are drearily few opportunities to learn from others and only a handful of programmatic tools published to help guide efforts. As such, innovative ideas, effective responses and valuable experiences tend to remain in the hearts and minds of those who have been the driving force behind them, while in the next community or the neighboring vicinity, colleagues struggle with similar problems and face similar challenges.

Therefore, it is important to share experiences, skills and promising practices so as to address commonly encountered challenges. It is also important to discuss responses developed in different parts of the country and compare notes on how relevant and replicable these responses could be. However, few such linkages exist that build on the strengths of each other. It's our affirmation that a shared approach on matters relating to GBV is handy for accomplishing an extensive range of goals that reach beyond the capacity of any individual organization or person.