

Addressing Gender Based Violence: Changing Attitudes and Practice – Experiences from Civil Society



UNDP CONFERENCE ON GENDER BASED VIOLENCE and the GLOBAL GENDER RETREAT

April 21-24, 2009

By Hope Chigudu, HopeAfrica, Zimbabwe

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The paper

This paper is written from the perspective of someone who has worked in many African countries. It is not academic, it is anecdotal and reader friendly. It is based on real field experiences.

Objective

Convey the potential power and transformative energy of some of the strategies that NGOs have used to combat GBV horrors and to prevent such evil from continuing and recurring. The paper is also meant for all of us to share a sense of excitement and possibility for change created by the work of a few selected NGOs.

Lay out

The paper narrates some GBV stories, and the strategies used to organise resistance against the tyranny of GBV. The key shifts in attitude that have been made as well as some of the current and ongoing challenges NGOs continue to face as they struggle to create a non-GBV society are also highlighted.

1. GBV STORIES: STRATEGIES AND SHIFTS

1.1 Defilement and its consequences - Uganda

Angelina Kyomugisha is from Mbarara District, in Uganda. She was working in her garden when her children, in a state of alarm and panic, called and urged her to go behind the family house, which is right in the middle of a banana plantation. What Kyomugisha saw was chilling and unbelievable. Geoffrey Mugarura, a forty-year-old man who had 'mainstreamed' himself as a frequent visitor to the family, had discarded his trousers and was defiling her ten-year-old daughter, at her own home. A home is supposed to be the natural site of love, comfort and kindness; a place which received this little girl when she entered this world and where she is supposed to be guaranteed safety, security and survival but here was Mugarura turning it into a bloody mess for this little girl.

Kyomugisha took in this brutal, callous, stomach-churning and shockingly senseless scene, and contemplated her next move. "My nails are very soft; they break easily, so I always carry a razor blade in the pocket of my dress. Without hesitation, I got out my razor blade, and cut off Mugarura's penis¹. As I looked at the blood, I knew the bullet had left the gun and could not be recalled. The penis was gone", said Kyomugisha.

Kyomugisha was arrested. The Federation of Women lawyers in Uganda (FIDA-U) heard the story. They knew they had to rescue Kyomugisha. They feared that on being discharged, she could be castigated by the entire village for cutting a man's penis. They paid for the stitching back of the remains of Mugarura's penis; they also paid for his medical treatment. They paid because they wanted Kyomugisha's sentence to be lighter. FIDA-U provided legal support to Kyomugisha ; she won the case and was proudly escorted back to her home by FIDA-U. In the meantime, FIDA-U carried out an extensive awareness raising campaign on the dangers of defilement and rape. They also helped Kyomugisha to send her little girl to a boarding school since the people in the village had already started calling her 'Mugarura's wife'. FIDA remained close to Mugarura and in the process, Mugarura confessed to having defiled the girl. Today Mugarura is in prison.

FIDA-U has used the Mugarura case to enlist the village he comes from to fight defilement and rape. They have trained children to recognise rapists, defend themselves and report any suspicious characters to their parents or police. The community now respects Kyomugisha because her case has made other mothers speak out against Mugarura who apparently has always terrorised little girls in the village.

Strategies used in this case

Using street wisdom (paying for the stitching back of Mugarura penis), legal education and awareness raising, litigation, and financial support and ensuring that many people in the community are engaged in the fight against violence.

Shift in attitude made by this case

As a result of Kyomugisha's actions, many more people in the village are talking about defilement; the private is being made public. This is a shift which won't be reversed.

1. Women and girls are so often the subjects of violence that women's movements have sought to make non-violence and peaceful strategies are high priority in all aspects of their work. However, in this case, Kyomugisha needed to stop Mugarura from violating the bodies of other young girls.

These days little boys in the village are heard saying, 'don't rape, your penis might be cut'. At least the cutting served as a deterrent.

FIDA used the opportunity presented by the case to educate the police and the general public about defilement and how the people close to the child can prove to be the real 'enemies'.

In schools, issues of rape are being discussed openly. Children are being encouraged to speak out.

1.2 Rape and incest - Zimbabwe

Shamiso was born in Rusape, Zimbabwe. The mother, a Mozambican, returned to her country leaving Shamiso with her father; then, Shamiso was only 2 years old. This year, Shamiso is 9 years old. She lived with her father and two brothers, one a 14-year-old boy and other 12 years of age.

Both her 14-year-old brother and her father raped her since the age of 5. The father ordered her brothers to call her 'mother'; indeed, she was like a grown woman: cooking, washing and generally taking care of the whole family. It was only when the village chief and other villagers became suspicious that she was rescued and taken to a women's NGO called Batanai. Batanai took her to the police, the father was arrested but he denied ever raping his own daughter. Both the father and his son were not charged but Shamiso was put in a children's home. She is happier there than she was at home. She is going to school and being treated the way a nine year old should. In the meantime, Baranai, the organisation which took care of Shamiso went back to the chief and asked him to mobilise other chiefs and launch a campaign for a rape free society. Batanai has started an action research programme in Rusape, to identify issues and concerns of young girls who are brought up with fathers or just male relatives. The research process is also raising awareness on defilement and incest. The organisation is working closely with the women of the village to identify children who are likely to be victimised or who have already been abused.

Strategies used

Capitalising on the role of traditional leaders and collaborating with them.

Using the case to launch a research project on what happens to young girls brought up in homes with no mothers.

Shifts in attitude

The chiefs have been empowered by realising that they can actually report a case and action will be taken.

Communities are now more vigilant, they are checking on little girls who stay with male relatives.

1.3 Sexual Harassment: Targeting the taxi industry – South Africa

Africa-wide, the taxi industry remains one of the least gender aware. Men constitute the overwhelming majority in the taxi industry, from drivers to owners, and heads of associations. Women experience harassment on a daily basis, yet there are no clear mechanisms for reporting.

A women's organisation called Gender Links, based in South African has found a way of addressing the harassment. Nowadays, in Ekurhuleni Municipality, if you jump into a minibus you may be greeted by something a bit different from the usual fare of thumping kwaito and house beats. Tjoo'nin is an audio CD designed specifically for playing in public transport to raise awareness among taxi drivers and passengers about gender violence.

The CD is an entertaining mix of music, feature reports, interviews, testimonials from survivors of violence, and radio spots highlighting various 16 Days of Activism themes, particularly domestic violence, xenophobia, human trafficking, and men as partners. Produced partially during a series of workshops with transport stakeholders, Ekurhuleni Councilors and survivors of violence, the CD features the energetic voices of various people talking about everything from gun free zones to music and soccer, and how these all fit in with 16 Days of Peace.

An innovative project by Gender Links (GL) in partnership with Ekurhuleni Municipality and the Gauteng Women in Transport, the CD is distributed free of charge to taxis and radio stations. As part of the launch, Ekurhuleni Municipality hosted a panel discussion around gender violence in public transport.

Strategies used

Targeting taxi drivers is an innovative way of reaching out to key people who are not likely to attend workshops on awareness raising.

Gender links has forged a working relationship with the Municipality and the transport industry.

Shifts in attitude

As a result of the CD, the taxi drivers are behaving differently; from harassing women commuters, they now denounce sexual harassment.

Gender Links has succeeded in putting women's issues on the agenda of the Municipality of Ekurhuleni

1.4 Female Genital Cutting - Gambia

Jane and her ten-year-old daughter went to their rural home to attend a wedding. While, there, her daughter was kidnapped, circumcised and left at her mother's doorstep bleeding. In that part of the country, there is a strong belief that a girl who is not circumcised (traditional rite of passage) is a curse to the whole community hence the use of force.

Jane was hurt, and wounded by what had happened to the daughter. She decided to do something to save other little girls likely to face the same fate as her daughter. She mobilised a group of women whom she knew to be ant-circumcision and they engaged in an aggressive campaign to stop this brutal practices. Because of the campaign, the district passed a bylaw on genital cutting. They have also started what they call a vigil group composed of women, men and girls who are anti-genital cutting. The members of the group keep their ears on the ground and report people whom they know are intending to circumcise girls. Even young girls have been known to go to the police to report cases of intended mutilation. With assistance from a larger NGO BAFROW (Foundation for Research on Women's Health, Productivity & Development), the group is also engaged in mass campaigns to promote alternative rights of passage.

The campaign is ongoing and there have been some achievements. At the projects' inception in 1996 and 1997, an amazing reduction took place in various districts. In Fulladu District, 412 girls were circumcised in initiation ceremonies in 1996 which fell to 190 girls in 1997. In Niamina District, 92 girls were cut as part of their initiation ceremonies in 1996 which fell to 12 girls in 1997. The trend has since spread to other districts, thus empowering Jane and her friends to also campaign aggressively.

Strategies used

Demonstrations, petitions.

Engagement and increased dialogue with the community.

Shifts in attitude

People in the community or larger society are more engaged in female genital cutting campaigns, they are speaking out. There are now people out there who can challenge the culturally justified and systematic damage of women, through ritual and physical mutilation.

1.5 Denial and deprivation of resources - Namibia

An organisation called Pamberi based in Namibia has a shelter for the survivors of violence. Women are supposed to stay in the shelter for a maximum of two months while recovering and thinking of the next move. However, after two months some have nowhere to go. Both their husband's family and their own families reject them; since there is a scarcity of resources and people don't want to share the little that there is.

Pamberi has been raising awareness about the connection between violence against women, deprivation and denial of resources. The organisation has been lobbying for land for women. Recently they got 100 acres of land for women survivors of domestic violence to restart their lives.

Strategies used

Awareness raising, campaigns and resource allocation to make women get out of violent situations.

Shifts in attitude

The patriarchal attitude is that women should never own land since men own them (women). This attitude is shifting. The few women who now own land are showing others that its possible

1.6 Killing old women accused of witchcraft

Five old women were reported killed in one province of Tanzania. They were accused of witchcraft. The Tanzania Media Women's Association TAMWA investigated the story. With all the facts, TAMWA organised for all the media houses to publish the story on the same day. All the radio and (there are 49 community radios in Tanzania), TV stations and newspapers prioritised the story. On the same that the story was published, TAMWA organised women to demonstrate against the killing of old women as witches. All the women's organisations were mobilised to support TAMWA. Individuals were asked to write letters condemning the practice. This is known as 'bang style'.

Strategies used

Creativity in making visible important issues related to the violation of women's rights.

Using the mass media and hence making women's agenda part of ongoing national debates.

Shifts in attitude

As a result of the bang style, the murder of old women as witches has stopped. TAMWA has also used the bang style to fight different types of violence against women.

1.7 Girls Empowerment Village - Zimbabwe

Thandi was sexually abused when she was three months old. Her mother was so disturbed that she committed suicide. Thandi's father took her to Girl Child Network (GCN), an organisation which fights violence against girls. However, GCN has no orphanage. It took Thandi to its Girls Empowerment Village. This is a village built on land donated by one of the chiefs. GCN lobbied the chief by reminding him of the privileged position women in his community used to enjoy. He agreed to give land to GCN to build what it called 'The Empowerment Village for Girls'. The organisation built low cost houses, dormitories, meeting halls and offices. In the province where this empowerment village is situated, most of the activities related to GCN are organised at the village. Some of the survivors of violence with nowhere else to go, continue to live at the village, while continuing with their education. A matron takes care of the small children. The whole Province has been sensitised to the importance of the Empowerment Village as a symbol of girls' empowerment and bodily integrity. There is a strong sense of ownership in the community. Hospitals, the police, communities, etc., send the survivors of violence to this village. And they all see themselves as key stakeholders. The concept of the empowerment village has enabled GCN to scale up its work and to amplify the voice of the girls.

Strategies used

Lobbying, invoking and capitalising on the inspirational and positive aspects of our culture, working with traditional leaders, police and hospitals.

Shifts in attitude

Violence is now defined differently in the community, it is definitely a crime.

The Empowerment Village has shifted the position of the girls from that of disempowerment to that of empowerment. Many of the girls are so confident that they will not hesitate to report cases of violence to the police. Some even help their parents to report cases of violence.

People in the community and larger society are more engaged than was previously the case.

1.8 Horrors that war unleashes on women

Isis-WICCE, a women's organisation, collects, documents and packages, and disseminates information on issues of women's human rights in situations of armed conflict in Africa and globally.

A visitor from Medica Mondiale in Germany, who had worked with women survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, accompanied the Isis-WICCE team to one of its research areas in Uganda and recognised the deep trauma that many survivors were experiencing. She advised the Isis-WICCE research team to link with medical practitioners, who would assist with the analysis of the trauma and provide treatment. This marked the beginning of Isis-WICCE's action – oriented research, and the researchers teamed up with a group of physicians, surgeons, psychologists, gynaecologists and psychiatrists through their different organisations. The medical team interviewed the survivors, organised treatment and surgery where necessary,

and gave medical and psychological advice to the women. One interesting outcome is that this process has been repeated in all the areas of Uganda where Isis-WICCE has done research, and it has had an impact on the doctors themselves. It has also been replicated in Liberia. Some have testified that the experience has gotten them to focus on women's issues, and they now practise medicine with a human face, whereby they are willing to investigate more than the ailment that the patient presents. These doctors still visit the areas of research, even without Isis-WICCE. Isis-WICCE has also realised the importance of confidence building, feminist counselling and sensitivity in working with traumatised people.

The Doctors recognised that medicine, as a discipline, is political and gendered.

Strategies used

Collaborative initiatives, healing and feminist counselling

Shifts in attitude

The process started a debate on the way in which mental health is viewed in Africa. As a result of the work done by Isis-WICCE, the Uganda Ministry of Health committed itself to including mental health in the national five-year health strategic plan. This is a major shift

Isis-WICCE also packaged the information gathered from the research in videos, and encouraged theatre groups to use the information in theatre for development. Some of the materials were used for training, community dialogue and advocacy for awareness raising, and fundraising. Those who were detached from the situation were able to see it visually.

The doctors who were involved in the case study learnt to appreciate the importance of narratives and storytelling in their profession. They listened to the women's stories, stories of the time the women were whole to the time they were maimed. One doctor was heard to say: 'The way I do things has changed and will never be the same again.'

1.9 Flogging in the name of culture - Nigeria

A Nigerian teenager named Bariya Ibrahim Magazu was accused of having unlawful sex. She was flogged publicly on the orders of the rulers of her state, on the first anniversary of their having declared that it be governed by Sharia law. The evidence that she was raped, her own father having prostituted her to three men in settlement of his debts, was conveniently ignored, as were the appeals of local women's groups and progressive Muslims and the advice of leading experts on Islamic jurisprudence. The manifestation of culture (a perversion of religious law) was a demonstration of political prowess. Appeals for clemency and justice were ignored on the basis that this child represented a threat to Islam.

Strategies used

Globally, concerned women and men raised their protesting voices and highlighted this case. Petition letters were sent to the rulers of the province.

Shifts in attitude

Probably not much but hopefully the noise made in connection to this case changed a few people

2. FACILITATING FACTORS

2.1 Women's Funds on the Continent

There are two major women's funds on the continent: African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) and Urgent Action Fund-Africa (UAF-A). These two funds help in providing resources to organisations fighting violence against women. UAF's grant making is based on urgent and strategic responses to women in situations of crisis. UAF-A grants have contributed to successful enactment of domestic violence and sexual offences legislation in Ghana, Zimbabwe and Kenya.

The Ghana Case

After extensive research and lobbying by women's organisations, the Domestic Violence Bill was introduced to the Parliament of Ghana in 2003. To advocate for its speedy passage into law, human rights and women's organisation formed a coalition aimed at pressuring the legislators and creating public awareness on the proposed law. However, three years into this initiative, the Bill had not been passed despite nationwide consultations on it by both the coalition and the government. The Bill is on record as being the only bill to have undergone the most extensive consultation with the public in Ghana. The Bill was to be tabled in Parliament in July 2006 but the Parliament went on recess without discussing it. The coalition sought support to take advantage of this three month Parliamentary break to strongly shape public opinion on the Bill and create pressure on the legislators to expedite action on the passage of the Bill into law. They sought to have consistent messages in the public domain on the issue through airing a 10-minute video documentary on domestic violence during this period. The aim of this documentary was to demonstrate the importance of the Bill as well as garner public support for the passage of the law. This is when the UAF-A came in and gave its support. A lot of public interest on the issue was raised when the documentary was aired. .

2.2 SADC governments and their response to the issues of GBV

Leaders of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) signed the Protocol on Gender and Development, which, among other obligations, commits governments to halving levels of gender based violence by 2015.

3. CHALLENGES

- There are many interesting and educative cases but amplifying and scaling up is still limited.
- There is limited dissemination of successful strategies.
- Women's organisations are still afraid to bring in men to assist in fighting violence against women. This is mostly because violence against women has been equated with masculinity and GBV. They see GBV as a war perpetuated by a male-dominated system – a patriarchal system that has the power to direct the definition of culture and values. (Some women actually perpetrate these harmful practices).
- Fundamentalism of all sorts, especially religious fundamentalism.
 - For example, a few years ago, a number of women's NGOs in Uganda were involved in attempts to produce the Vagina Monologues², which was supposed to expose issues related to violence against women. The play was banned and necessitated those involved to appear before the Media Council (an equally conservative body).
 - Religious institutions are also strongly against gays and lesbians, and as result there has been a lot of violence inflicted on individuals within this movement.
- GBV tends to remain in the private sphere; it is still hard to bring the private into the public.
- GBV is very much connected with many other issues such as HIV and AIDS.
- Globalisation has produced many neurotic responses at the local and global levels through economic policies and global capitalism, conflict and poverty, that even when progress has been made, there are always reversals.

^{2 2} See www.vday.org for more on the Vagina Monologues

4. WHAT CAN UNDP DO?

UNDP can do many things but I will focus on three:

- a) These stories must not be shared in vain. They must be publicised, used to inspire more organised resistance to the tyranny of GBV. They must be used to educate ourselves, other women, the men and all the children. These atrocities must be stopped for all time and UNDP is well positioned to find ways of doing this.
- b) Commission a study to compile, understand and devise ways of disseminating successful strategies which have been used globally to combat GBV. Do this with a degree of humility and openness as you (UNDP) listen and learn from and with the NGOs, allowing them to be their own articulate selves through an alternative vision of a future that is just, peaceful and sustainable.
- c) Help organisations to scale up their strategies and the geographical areas they cover.

5. CONCLUSION

The diversity of the above strategies indicates that anti-violence against the women's movement has grown, flourished, broken new ground and gathered strengths and diversity over the years. It is a movement that has learnt to replenish its ranks by recruiting young people. Some of these young women have formed their own organisations to fight for their own bodily integrity. Issues such as those related to violence, sex and sexuality, which could not be discussed in public, are discussed these days, even if they remain contentious. Clearly, NGOs in Africa and women's rights groups in general are shifting and changing attitudes within their own communities. This does not mean they have all the answers and it does not mean that they do not make mistakes. It does mean, however, that something is happening and shifting: women are not sitting still.

New technologies³ and new ways of organising are opening up exciting possibilities on how the movement can increase its impact by re-thinking its organising and mobilisation strategies. Some organisations have already adapted new strategies to fit changing realities whereas others are still struggling mostly due to lack of resources.

Finally, eliminating violence against women will depend on how well and how courageously the activists mobilise the masses and the choice of the sharpness of the strategies chosen.

³ New technologies have also deepened the challenge of cultural and intellectual domination of Eurocentricism.