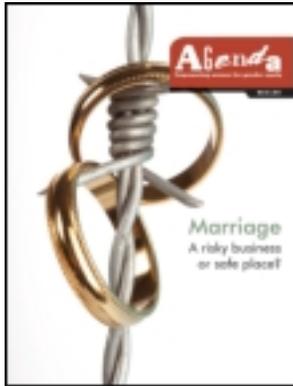


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## Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity

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# Gender and development: Working with men for gender equality in Rwanda

Katie Carlson and Shirley Randell

## abstract

This *Briefing* examines the recent approach of the Government of Rwanda and Rwandan civil society to involve men in gender equality initiatives. Specifically, it will review the progress being made and highlight the barriers encountered through two concise case studies. The first case study analyses the drafting and passing of the *Law on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence* (Republic of Rwanda, 2009), which involved significant male participation both at the community level and via male parliamentarians. The second case study looks at the work of the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC), which takes a grassroots approach to the sensitisation of men and women in civil society, in both rural and urban communities. These case studies highlight the progress made using targeted methods of engagement with male leaders both at the national and the village level, as well as persistent barriers to gender equality found in the attitudes of both women and men towards gender-based violence (GBV).

## keywords

Gender-based violence, gender equality, engaging men, Rwanda, East Africa

## Introduction

The advancement of women is critical to good governance, social and economic development and an active civil society, and thus benefits men as well as women. Ending gender-based violence (GBV) is essential for women to take their rightful place in societies around the world. Engaging men in this process and challenging traditional masculinities is of the utmost importance for sustaining lasting behavioural change that will break the generational cycle of GBV and contribute to the overall advancement of gender equality. In the context of Rwanda, the case studies examined in this *Briefing* address both the theory behind ending GBV by involving men directly at the national and the village level, as well as the practical tactics used in

the process of engagement and dialogue at the grassroots level.

In this *Briefing*, we argue that engaging men, in particular male leaders who are in positions of authority and respected in the community, is critical for changing the gender-based power dynamics that lead to GBV. Sensitising women is not enough, as many of these women continue to function in public and private environments that are not receptive to these changes, and therefore can even result in an increase in GBV. Nor is it sufficient to attempt to institutionalise gender equality by passing laws against GBV and other gender-related offenses, for the actual implementation of such measures requires attitudinal change at the level of civil society, which will not happen without sensitisation at the

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grassroots level and upward. Thus, male leaders must be engaged and continue to champion gender equality in their communities to sustain a lasting impact, and men in civil society must work alongside their female counterparts to end GBV and dismantle the perpetual cycle of abuse that is rooted in the social constructions of masculine identities.

### **Gender equality and development: A vital relationship**

Gender equality is indispensable for long-term social and economic sustainable development, yet it cannot be achieved without the elimination of GBV (Dollar and Gatti, 1999; Kevane, 2004; Rai, 2008; King & Mason, 2001; World Bank, 2011). In recent years, the international community has witnessed a reinvigorated recognition of the importance of gender equality and development reflected in the creation of institutions such as United Nations (UN) Women (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, a more robust international body that brings together all the gender work of the UN under one agency) and in major international publications like the 2012 World Development Report produced by the World Bank, which focuses exclusively on the vital relationship between gender equality and development (World Bank, 2011).

involving men and boys directly in dialogues and activities that promote gender equality and question traditional masculinities is an indispensable part of the process of changing the power dynamics of existing gender roles that subordinate women to their male counterparts

The World Bank highlights gender equality as an issue of crucial importance for development for two key reasons (*ibid*). First, gender equality is valuable in its own right, regardless of any economic benefits that may result from a more equitable relationship between men and women in developing countries; it is understood as a fundamental human right that must be recognised and secured for women around the world. Second, gender equality is

hugely important for economic growth and development. Gender equality leads to greater participation of women in the labour force, boosting economic activity and contributing to improved childhood development at the home level (Buvinic *et al*, 2010). In fact, gender inequality is cited as a major contributing factor to the increased vulnerability of many developing countries to economic shocks and financial crises, perpetuating and even worsening current levels of poverty, instability and insecurity (*ibid*).

In order to tap into the numerous social and economic benefits of gender equality and to affirm the inalienable human rights to personal security and wellbeing that belong to all women and girls, we must first begin at the level of the home and the community. If social and cultural perceptions of women's traditional roles are not adjusted accordingly, the social and economic advantages of greater gender equality will never be attained. Part of this process of attitudinal change is to openly and actively engage men in discussion and self-reflection about their own masculinities and their perceptions of a woman's place in the family and in society. There is a growing body of research and activism that specifically addresses the importance of engaging men in gender equality dialogues and to be role models for others, particularly within developing countries, to live without violence and to understand how gender roles can serve not only to severely compromise the quality of women's lives, but also the lives of men the world over (Peacock and Levack, 2004; Barker and Lang, 2011; UNFPA, 2012; Minerson *et al*, 2011).

Within the international community, there appears to be a growing consensus that involving men and boys directly in dialogues and activities that promote gender equality and question traditional masculinities is an indispensable part of the process of changing the power dynamics of existing gender roles that subordinate women to their male counterparts, and thus dismantling the cycle of violence which those gender roles serve to justify in the minds of many (*ibid*). Thus, the question of engaging men in strategies to attain gender equality is not one of whether or not, but *how*.

## Gender-based violence and the social construction of masculinity in Rwanda

GBV and gender inequality overall is a global problem, and sub-Saharan Africa is no exception (Jacobs *et al*, 2000; Kevane, 2004). Theoretically, violence can generally be divided into two distinct categories – indirect structural violence and direct personal violence (Galtung, 1969). In the context of GBV, physical violence such as rape, abuse or murder, as well as psychological violence, such as emotional or psychological abuse, are examples of direct personal violence. Conversely, structural violence is a form of violence that occurs as a result of structures that discriminate against certain groups or individuals. It should be noted that there remains significant social stigma attached to the reality of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people (LGBT) in Rwanda and LGBT rights are not openly discussed within the context of gender dialogues; thus for the purposes of this *Briefing*, our analysis necessarily focuses on hetero-normative relationships and the gender dynamics between heterosexual men and women.

In many African countries, culture and religion often dictate that a woman should be subordinate to her husband or other male relatives; male relatives and male spouses are often in control of the family finances and responsible for all major decisions affecting the home (Kevane, 2004; Adekunle, 2007). These power imbalances inherent in traditional gender roles leave women particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence (Winter and Leighton, 2001).

GBV in Rwanda has been a reality for many decades, both structural and personal. Before the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 and the subsequent political reorientation within the country, women in Rwandan society were legally designated as minors, and were not permitted to engage in economic transactions, to control financial resources in the home, or to own or inherit land (Wallace *et al*, 2009). In a country where the vast majority of the population lives in rural areas and relies on subsistence agriculture for survival, the right to inherit and own land is a crucial one, and denial of this right was a distinct form of structural violence faced by women in Rwanda prior to 1994. Colonialism further entrenched patriarchal norms within

Rwandan society, and in fact even exacerbated them in some situations, stripping Rwandan women of what little power they held under traditional arrangements, particularly during the time of the monarchy in Rwanda. As the 'Queen Mother', a Rwandan woman held significant power and influence as adviser to the King and was revered within her community, but with colonisation, Rwandan women were conditioned by colonising powers to reflect a more docile and domestic woman, strikingly reminiscent of the Victorian-era female in western European countries (Hogg, 2010; Randell and Buscaglia, 2011).

The Family Code of 1992 established men (husbands, fathers, older sons) as the head of the household (Sharlach, 1999). Due to the patriarchal structure of Rwandan society, the man was considered the primary decision-maker, while women and girls were the sole caretakers within the home, responsible for all aspects of childcare, domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning, fetching firewood and water, and caring for sick or elderly relatives (Adekunle, 2007).

women would often avoid reporting incidents of abuse altogether for fear that they would lose their children in the process

The practice of 'bridewealth' or *inkwano* further subordinated women within the gendered social hierarchy of Rwandan society; when a couple wed, the man would pay the woman's family in either cows or money to take her hand in marriage (Adekunle, 2007; Uwineza and Pearson, 2009). Though traditionally *inkwano* was intended as a sign of respect paid to the woman's family, it nevertheless functioned within the existing gendered power dynamics of Rwandan culture; thus the practice also served to establish the woman as the property of her husband and further solidified her status as a minor. If a woman wanted to divorce her husband, she was only able to do so if it was publicly known that he had physically abused her on more than one occasion; however, as cultural tradition held that any children of the marriage automatically became custody of the father upon separation, women would often avoid reporting incidents of abuse altogether for fear that they would lose their children in the process (Uwineza and Pearson, 2009).

In addition to the denial of land rights and access to economic resources, domestic violence and sexual abuse were widespread in Rwanda (Hendricks and Oder, 2010). As women held the status of minors, a woman was seen as the property of her husband and was not afforded legal protection from such violence and abuse. As Nicole Hogg (2010) states:

“the inferior status of the woman [and] her ignorance encourage[d] her into submission and expose[d] her to rape and sexual services . . . Girls and women experiencing sexual or domestic violence were expected not to report it or discuss it with anyone.”

Though many promising changes have occurred since the genocide, at both the legal and societal levels, women and girls in Rwanda continue to suffer from GBV and, tragically, their experience is not unique. Women in the developing world often experience not only physical violence but also severe forms of structural violence, easily observable in their lack of access to significant rights and opportunities, including political participation, access to education, safe and effective health care, legal rights and access to resources (Winter and Leighton, 2001; Mazurana and McKay, 2001; Rai, 2008; Irish Joint Consortium on Gender-Based Violence, 2009; World Bank, 2011). Patriarchal gender roles effectively normalise both structural and personal violence against women and girls, and serve to perpetuate these inequalities over time as each new generation is socialised into their respective gender role, complete with the power imbalances that continue to oppress women.

the Rwandan penal code was critically flawed with respect to sexual violence: it did not define rape and as a result failed to fully protect adult rape victims

So how do we end this cycle of violence and discrimination? In part, it is by engaging men in dialogues about gender inequality and in active self-reflection about the construction of masculine identities in their own communities and countries. In the same way that we seek to empower women to assert their independence and self-worth, we must also encourage and empower men

to become part of a positive movement to end GBV. We believe that men must feel empowered to make changes in their lives, to be role models for others, and to understand that gender is not synonymous with women, but rather is the social construction of both male and female roles. There is encouraging evidence in both the African context and beyond that engaging men in gender issues can result in significant attitudinal and behavioural change that contributes to improvements in the physical, mental and emotional health and overall well-being of men, women and children in a given community (Peacock and Levack, 2004; Barker and Lang, 2012). A good example of such a case is South Africa, where rates of GBV, HIV and AIDS are alarmingly high; engaging men in this context has so far yielded significant positive results, revealing sustained changes in knowledge, attitudes and practice with regard to male and female gender roles and sexual and reproductive health (Peacock and Levack, 2004). Similarly, the groundbreaking gender-awareness programmes and training for the prevention of and response to GBV for the Rwanda National Police (RNP) and the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) have had a substantial impact on strategies to reduce GBV in Rwanda (Randell and Zakirova, 2010).

The following case studies analyse the process and outcomes of two further examples of engaging men in the fight to end GBV in a Rwandan context. While some elements of these case studies indicate progress in the fight to end GBV in Rwanda, still other pieces of the overall picture require a more critical feminist analysis.

### **Engaging men in the institutionalisation of gender equality: The role of male parliamentarians in drafting and passing the gender-based violence bill**

Seven years after the genocide against the Tutsi, the Rwandan government adopted a child protection law and launched a nationwide campaign against sexual violence. While this law improved protection for child victims of sexual violence, the Rwandan penal code was critically flawed with

respect to sexual violence: it did not define rape and as a result failed to fully protect adult rape victims (Human Rights Watch, 2004: 2). An important reform championed by the cross-party women's caucus, the Rwanda Women Parliamentarians Forum (FFRP), was the law on the *Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence* (Republic of Rwanda, 2009). Notably, this law was the first piece of legislation introduced from the floor of the national parliament since the elections in 2003, as opposed to the executive branch of Rwanda's government, which traditionally has introduced all legislation and holds significantly more power. It reflected a widespread concern about the prevalence of GBV and the ineffectiveness of the criminal law on issues like rape and domestic violence.

FFRP conducted extensive participatory research, involving consultations with numerous civil society groups and direct communication with rural villages, communities and individuals, regarding their perceptions of GBV and soliciting their recommendations for appropriate punishments for various GBV crimes. FFRP strategically angled for the support and endorsement of both male parliamentarians and men within civil society. The purpose was not only to gain potential allies in the parliament and increase the number of votes for the bill, but also to ensure that implementation of the law would be effective. Powley and Pearson (2007) have documented a detailed report of this process. This approach not only resulted in the effective sensitisation of participants to the reality of GBV, but it also assisted with the drafting of the bill and the credibility of its content, as it relied so distinctly on the views and recommendations of many men and women in Rwandan civil society.

The draft bill was brought to the parliament by four men and four women. The bill's clear definition of GBV was approved in the legislation:

"any act that results in a bodily, psychological, sexual and economic harm to somebody just because they are female or male. Such act results in the deprivation of freedom and negative consequences. This violence may be exercised within or outside households" (Republic of Rwanda, 2009, Article 2: 89).

Significantly, the bill was designed to include the male population in its considerations, in that the protection of children, both boys and girls, was also explicitly addressed. In order to win the support of male parliamentarians more easily, FFRP made a conscious effort to highlight the bill as one pertaining to inalienable human rights, rather than one concerning women only. The bill received unanimous approval from parliament in 2006, and was passed into law by both chambers in 2008, the slight delay in its publication due to a slow process of review and translation (Goitom, 2009).

The law defines terms related to GBV, and specifies the penalties for committing certain crimes. The minimum penalty is a prison sentence of six months. Certain crimes listed in the law, including sexual torture, rape that results in death or terminal illness, and killing of one's spouse receive a sentence of life imprisonment.

The following are prohibited under Rwanda's GBV law (Arnold, 2011: 8)

- "threatening to deprive someone of his or her rights;
- polygamy, concubinage and adultery;
- harassing one's spouse due to dowry, reproductive health or natural physiology;
- rape, including marital rape;
- neglecting a child because of his or her sex;
- using drugs, films, signs, language, etc with the intention of committing GBV;
- indecent behavior;
- firing a woman or denying her education because she is pregnant or on maternity leave;
- abduction, sexual slavery, sexual torture and human trafficking;
- killing one's spouse;
- intentionally transmitting a terminal disease;
- violence against an elderly person or a disabled person;
- refusing to assist a GBV victim or refusing to provide testimony."

The political power and representation of women in decision-making positions in Rwanda (the only country in the world with a majority of women in Parliament since

2011) and the fact that His Excellency, President Paul Kagame, is a known champion for women and gender equality were significant factors in the passage of comprehensive GBV legislation. Additionally, there were several significant features of the law's preparation leading to its success, highlighted below.

- Men were involved at every stage of the policy-making process, including as leaders of working groups;
- One man and one woman were selected as consultants in assisting with drafting the bill;
- Gender-inclusive language was used and issues of direct concern to men were highlighted, for example, violence against young boys. The law was seen to be for the protection of everyone in the community so avoided considering only men as perpetrators and only women as victims;
- Men were not portrayed as targets of the legislation but rather seen as defenders of human rights;
- In the public discussions, men were considered as fathers, brothers and sons rather than only husbands, so the debate was about protecting mothers, sisters and daughters as well as wives;
- Men were constantly reminded of their role as legislators and defenders of their constituents, addressing problems affecting all Rwandans. All drafts of the bill were circulated to male parliamentarians so they saw themselves included at every stage (Powley and Pearson, 2007).

In the parliamentary debate on the bill, there were finally very few issues of concern. As expected, listing conjugal rape as a crime, even though with less punishment than non-marital rape, was resisted by some, but passed into law. Discussions about punishments for GBV focused on how offenders should be defined (especially within the family context), what the nature of punishments should be, what consequences affected families would face, and what alternatives to the formal court system could be used (UNIFEM, 2008). The clause allowing for imprisonment of women for 'sex starvation' – denying their spouses sex for an indeterminate amount of time, based

on witness testimony, included punishment of six months to two years imprisonment and was reduced to two to six months during the parliamentary debates. (During parliamentary committee discussions this discriminatory punishment for 'disturbing the tranquility of one's spouse on sexual grounds' was revised to six months to two years imprisonment and to apply to all persons, both men and women (Republic of Rwanda, 2009, Article 28: 100.) As male parliamentarians were targeted for direct involvement in this process, they were able to answer the concerns of their male colleagues, rather than leaving the responses to female parliamentarians.

A feminist analysis of the law must be critical of the difference in the punishments for rape (10-15 years) as against conjugal rape (six months to two years), and the omission of any reference to LGBT rights, still ignored in Rwanda. Such analysis might also be critical of the equal way that men and women are treated in the prevention and punishment of GBV, rather than recognising that it is primarily men who are the perpetrators of violence against women. However, this is based on the understanding in Rwanda that gender involves both men and women and the importance given to including both sexes in all Rwandan laws, policies and activities when seeking to transform social attitudes and behaviours. It is the result of the recognition by Rwandans of the fact that women cannot achieve gender equality in this society on their own.

As with all laws, a major challenge is the GBV law's effective implementation. A 2010 review by Rwanda's Gender Monitoring Office (GMO) reported that gender equality has not fully trickled down to the grassroots level despite the gender-related laws (GMO, 2010). However, the GMO has claimed that the rate at which gender related crimes are reported has increased and it attributes this to sensitising and the greater awareness among the public (Bangirwe, 2012). The Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) made the eradication of GBV its major theme for 2011 activities over the UN's 16 Days Activism for No Violence Against Women (MIGEPROF, 2012; Republic of Rwanda, 2011). In July 2011, the Cabinet passed a policy and strategic plan against GBV. Standard training modules on

gender and GBV to build the capacity of practitioners and the general public were also developed in 2011. The Cabinet meeting of 18 November 2011, passed a Prime Minister's Order determining modalities in which government institutions prevent and respond to GBV. The challenges in addressing GBV in Rwanda require a holistic and multi-dimensional approach focusing mainly on behaviour change, economic empowerment of women and a stronger co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation of interventions of all stakeholders' work (*ibid*).

Since the passing of the law on GBV, policy advocacy has been continued. One stakeholder, CARE Rwanda produced an advocacy guide on GBV for activists that has been widely used (Arnold, 2011). The men's organisation, the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC), our second case study, has had a significant influence on the strategy for implementation of the law, and in turn has influenced the development of the national gender policy, which has involved the role of men. In addition, male engagement in HIV prevention and reproductive health has particularly been sought and RWAMREC is part of the committee that is developing the national strategic plan for mainstreaming and implementing male engagement in HIV prevention. For the first time, the issue of men who have sex with men is being addressed (Republic of Rwanda, 2011).

The case of the GBV law in Rwanda highlights the fact that the legal institutionalisation of measures aimed at eliminating GBV is a crucial step, though we believe it is not enough on its own to affect change; such laws require widespread social acceptance and support for their effective implementation at the community level. To this end, RWAMREC focuses extensively on the engagement of civil society with a particular emphasis on men and masculinities, in order to foster the attitudinal and behavioural change necessary for ending GBV in Rwanda.

### **From theory to practice: The work of the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre**

RWAMREC was founded in 2006 by Rwandan men in response to increasing

rates of GBV in post-conflict Rwanda (Carlson, 2012). As in most post-conflict settings, GBV was a significant issue, both during and after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. The organisation was initially created specifically to help men end male violence against women and against themselves. In light of the high levels of gender inequality historically experienced by women in Rwanda, the creation of a truly grassroots organisation like RWAMREC, established by Rwandan men of their own volition, can certainly be viewed as significant progress made in the fight to end GBV.

The theoretical basis of RWAMREC's work is broad and robust. The founders of RWAMREC believe that men cannot prevent violence against others if they do not have a non-violent attitude towards themselves. In particular, men need to understand *why* violence against women should end, and to see that gender is not just an issue for women. According to RWAMREC's Executive Secretary, Edouard Munyamaliza, there are significant implications for development that come from ending GBV. In an interview, he stated that men in Rwanda often feel excluded from the dialogue on gender in a development context (*ibid*). RWAMREC seeks to help men to understand that women can and should be empowered, and that if women have more power, it does not mean that men will then be subordinated to their female counterparts. Participants of RWAMREC's gender workshops have sometimes declared that the Rwandan President attributes more value to women than men, in the same way as he values the environment above plastic bags and grass-thatched houses. Not surprisingly, some men resist the concept of 'gender' when they perceive it in this context, as they often feel neglected and of little value in their communities.

The founders of RWAMREC believe that men cannot prevent violence against others if they do not have a non-violent attitude towards themselves.

RWAMREC strongly believes in the importance of creating male role models in the community, who will exemplify for other men how to behave, who demonstrate that behavioural change is possible and who will reach out to other men (*ibid*). Experiences

## briefing

from the dialogue sessions facilitated by RWAMREC reveal that men often find it easier to talk to other men, rather than women, and to understand concepts based on the experiences of another man, especially if this man is a respected member of the community or a local leader. In a context where women are not given the same value as men, this is not surprising. Thus, RWAMREC utilises men's existing social perceptions of other men in order to begin the process of reversing their attitudes about exactly what men, and women, are expected to do and be in Rwandan society. As part of their work, the male role models openly discuss why and how GBV has affected their lives, and why and how they have changed for the better.

The practical basis of RWAMREC's work is broad. The organisation has four primary areas of intervention: community mobilisation (CM), promotion of non-violent behaviours and positive masculinities in secondary schools, policy advocacy, and the promotion of healthy families in coffee cooperatives. While all of these interventions are important, for the purposes of this *Briefing* we will concentrate primarily on CM in the form of dialogue sessions and gender workshops. These activities involve men and women from all socio-economic backgrounds, in both rural and urban communities.

participants begin to understand that culture itself is not inalienable and cannot be used as a justification for the oppression of women

In years past, the CM focused only on men, but RWAMREC soon recognised that the involvement of women was crucial to the effectiveness of dialogue sessions surrounding GBV in the family and the community. They now conduct workshops that first deal with men and women in separate groups, and then bring them together for discussion and reflection. This helps for both sides to hold the other accountable to what was learned and discussed in the workshop once they return to their homes (*ibid*). The initial focus is on training local leaders and what RWAMREC calls 'opinion leaders'. Local leaders are those in positions of formal authority (teachers, lawyers, government officials, members of the National Women's Council and the National Youth

Council, etc), while opinion leaders are those who are particularly admired and respected in the community. Opinion leaders generally have higher status in rural areas, and are vetted beforehand to make sure they have the capacity to receive and distribute the message of RWAMREC's values and goals for gender equality; they must have certain skills necessary for ongoing community outreach. Those community leaders who are selected must be role models who lead by example themselves, to teach others about gender equality and to sensitise the community to the GBV laws in Rwanda. The training of these leaders involves open dialogue sessions that sensitise them to RWAMREC's values and to GBV in general, including reflection upon their own experiences with GBV and the concept of 'correct' masculinity in Rwanda, ensuring they are fully committed to the task and to RWAMREC's vision of a country free from GBV.

Once vetted, these leaders identify groups for community outreach. Training sessions are normally held over three days for leaders, and one to two days for participants. Leaders will often approach communities during *umuganda* (the national day of voluntary public service conducted monthly in Rwanda for all citizens), village security meetings or other public gatherings, such as during the sensitisation of the community to new laws in the country. Leaders live in and monitor the community, and this approach has so far been very effective (*ibid*).

Born out of these activities are dialogue sessions between couples, or *umugoroba w'abashakanye*, where five to ten couples come together in the evenings after the day's work is done to discuss and remedy their problems; these couples have been sensitised to the concept of GBV already. Munyamaliza reports that if a local family is experiencing violence and others in the community know about it, they can approach them at one of these sessions in an open and friendly manner. RWAMREC's overall approach is not exclusive to married couples, however; it also involves GBV discussions with single men about female relatives in the home as well as personal relationships between unmarried men and women.

Munyamaliza emphasises that successful CM relies on creating an influential first impression when meeting with a group of men in a community for the first time; men are engaged separately from women in the first session. The workshop begins by opening up a dialogue that encourages men to think about their existing relationships with women and the problems that arise in these relationships, as well as the perceived causes of these problems and their consequences. The discussion begins informally, and the leader asks participants to think about how the socialisation of men and women is different and how it has affected their lives and their families. Munyamaliza reports that the men in these groups are often very open and keen to talk about these problems. Gradually, participants begin to understand that culture itself is not inalienable and cannot be used as a justification for the oppression of women; cultural aspects can be negative when they harm others, even if they are accepted and have been perpetuated for many years, as is often the case with gender inequality and GBV. *How* this dialogue is framed is also very important – using the term ‘gender’ often makes men feel displaced and undervalued, as they see gender as synonymous with women. Thus, RWAMREC utilises a human rights framework to initially approach the idea that violence against women is fundamentally wrong, in the same way that violence against men or children is also wrong. It is from these discussions and activities that many members of the communities RWAMREC works in have come to see themselves as gender champions who can speak openly with other men about their harmful behaviours in the past and why they have changed. In addition, RWAMREC also conducts follow up ‘refresher’ courses to check in with these communities and to help keep them on track with their goals and ideals.

RWAMREC’s ultimate goal is to change the minds of men and women permanently, and to turn men into role models for the community so that they will live by example and break the cycle of violence for the next generation (*ibid*). The workshops seek to find techniques to touch the participants personally in a way that will make them realise how their behaviour is harming others and encourage them to take action

and live differently. Though RWAMREC has not yet conducted a complete quantitative study to assess the impact of these workshops, feedback from communities thus far has been overwhelmingly positive, for both men and women. In a few communities, some men have reported that they experience a greater feeling of self-worth, peace and contentment in their lives, living free from violence and redefining in their own lives what it means to be a man in Rwanda (*ibid*).

RWAMREC’s ultimate goal is to change the minds of men and women permanently, and to turn men into role models for the community so that they will live by example and break the cycle of violence for the next generation

### **GBV in Rwanda: Encouraging progress and persistent challenges**

The feminist conceptualisation of gender as a social construction that has served to oppress women has helped to alter how different societies understand violence against women and led to a deeper analysis of the systemic root causes of such violence. Carrie Yodanis (2004) tested this feminist theory of violence in a study across several nations where she examined the levels of violence against women in relation to their status within wider society (Yodanis, 2004). Yodanis (*ibid*) found that the higher the social status of women within a given society, the lower the levels of violence against them; where women are more highly educated, have greater social equality with men, and are represented within political structures, they experience significantly fewer incidences of GBV. It is argued that, engaging men in gender equality dialogues and community mobilisation from the grassroots up to the level of national government has the potential to raise the social status of women in any given society and to ultimately contribute to the elimination of GBV. Certainly, some of the progress made in Rwanda thus far can be attributed to greater political representation for women, as the country has the only female majority in parliament in the world, currently 56% women for the lower house and 38% for the upper house (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011). Rwanda’s progress has also been

driven by the idea that in order for women at the community level to benefit from greater gender equality in their daily lives, men at the level of civil society must also be engaged.

Although the passing of a law to prevent GBV in Rwanda is a milestone to be acknowledged and celebrated, as are the men's gender programmes by organisations like RWAMREC, and the introduction of gender programmes in state security structures, like the RNP and RDF, the fact remains that behavioural change takes time and commitment, for both women and men. A 2010 national study by RWAMREC reveals that many women as well as men continue to hold attitudes that support gender discrimination and justify violence against women (RWAMREC, 2010). Further, data from the Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) revealed that roughly 50% of all women and girls in Rwanda had experienced or continue to experience physical violence, sexual violence, or both (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda [NISR], 2010). In the vast majority of these cases, the male spouse or partner was the perpetrator of such violence. The report also finds that there is little difference between urban and rural areas with regard to the number of cases of violence (*ibid*). Thus, the need for the work of organisations like RWAMREC, and for the engagement of men overall in working to secure meaningful wider social as well as gender equality, remains significant.

while violence by men is now openly contested, there is resistance by both men and women to the changes that give women more freedom

The study by RWAMREC (2010) sought to question the conceptualisation of masculinity in Rwanda, particularly in relation to the changing dynamics of male and female gender roles in the country that were thought to be the primary cause of GBV. As gender roles have transformed significantly in the wake of the genocide, with women taking on greater responsibility in many aspects of life traditionally viewed as male territory, tensions have arisen that in many cases are reported to lead to GBV. This nationwide survey inquiring about participants' views of the prevalence of

GBV indicated that many Rwandan women, in some cases more so than men, believe that different forms of violence against women have their place in Rwandan society and are justifiable and even necessary in some circumstances; this attitude is also reflected in the recent DHS survey noted above (RWAMREC, 2010; NISR, 2010). The data suggests while violence by men is now openly contested, there is resistance by both men and women to the changes that give women more freedom. There is an immense need for the work of RWAMREC across the country, and for ever greater collaboration between civil society actors and policy makers at the national level to ensure legislation is implemented to help prevent and respond to GBV in Rwanda so that the emancipatory momentum and greater economic freedom and autonomy for women that has been achieved thus far is not subverted. Encouragingly, RWAMREC is expanding considerably and will continue to benefit many more communities throughout the country as the organisation grows.

## Conclusion

Men are at the centre of GBV and are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of violence; engaging men directly thus seems like an obvious and much-needed strategy in the fight to end GBV. Though strong legislation to protect women and girls from violence and discrimination is of course a necessary step, engaging men at the grassroots level is indispensable in the process of addressing those gender dynamics in the home and community that continue to subordinate women. Despite the fact that the passing of the GBV law is a promising step in the fight to end GBV in Rwanda, a feminist analysis of the law indicates the need for a more critical examination of the concept of gender itself, and reveals a lingering attachment to the power imbalances inherent in traditional gender roles in Rwanda, particularly regarding issues surrounding marital rape. The law could also be criticised for its narrow definition of GBV, as discrimination against LGBT people is entirely overlooked.

On the other hand, RWAMREC's work appears to delve a little deeper into the heart of the matter, directly investigating the causes of GBV in the context of the gendered socialisation of men and women in Rwandan

society, and targeting men for discussion and reflection about their own understanding of men's role in the home and community. In this context, it can be taken as a positive sign that RWAMREC is heavily involved at the national level with regard to gender-focused legislation, informing policy, and advocating for even greater attention to GBV in Rwanda. Perhaps this will allow for a more critical approach to the perplexing issues surrounding GBV, and the definition of gender itself, drawing on the experiences of women and men within communities, at the legislative level in the future.

Rwanda is setting the pace within the continent and perhaps worldwide as the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) builds a programme that seeks to involve men and women to reduce GBV. The messages on MIGEPROF's website focus on both sexes and its current training of trainers' programmes concentrate on improving relations between spouses (MIGEPROF, 2012). There is a keen will to involve families in gender equality and women's empowerment strategies as it is increasingly recognised that the family is the basic unit in society and the solid foundation for national development and stability; if attitudes and values can be changed at the family level to be gender inclusive, Rwanda will continue to make exceptional progress towards the achievement of its Millennium Development Goals and the President's target of Zero GBV. The need to engage men in gender issues, however, is a universal concern, and the Rwandan experience can both provide insight and initiate important debates in other communities around the world.

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