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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: WHY YOUNG MEN SHOULD BE INVOLVED



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This brief highlights the roles men play in opening up spaces for women, why men's involvement in women empowerment initiatives is vital in combating harmful gender stereotypes, why attention should be given to adolescent boys while, looking into pilot trials from organizations that have successfully managed to interest men in the Women Empowerment Agenda.

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Understanding the importance for deeper and more meaningful engagement of men at the household, community and policy levels in regards to interventions on women's empowerment and women's development has been gaining increasing recognition amongst development practitioners not just in Uganda but globally.

Existing interventions seeking to engage men in women's Social, Economic and Political interventions have either targeted men as "gatekeepers" to gender equality or as potential agents of change in the ever challenging established gender norms. Some interventions have set out to involve men as direct support in their wives or female relative's empowerment (ILO, 2014).

These kinds of interventions aim to take advantage of the skills, knowledge and network that male family members have to support their female relative's social, economic and political empowerment. Male family members have acted as social/economic and political empowerment "gatekeepers" for women, by giving them more freedom to make decisions, access to capital, information, and networks that would otherwise remain out of their reach because of context-specific gender barriers.

A World Bank "Gender and Youth Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa Research Working paper of 2017, stated that "Women in Sub-Saharan Africa have the highest labor force participation rate of any developing country region in the world. Women in Sub-Saharan Africa are also more likely than women of any other region to work as entrepreneurs and are more likely than men to be engaged in entrepreneurship. Among the non-agricultural workforce, almost 50 percent of women in the region (compared to less than 40 percent of men) are entrepreneurs, with the vast majority of these women being self-employed, rather than employers.

A recent study conducted by Gender Innovation Lab in 2014 showed the crucial role Ugandan fathers and husbands play in the likeliness of women crossing over to male-dominated sectors. In the entrepreneurial context, the study showed that crossover firms outperformed others in traditional female sectors, both in terms of profits and size of firms by the number of employees (Alibhai et al., 2015). Crossover firms are indeed more likely to report having started their business due to an opportunity provided by their husband or brother.

While a father's/ brother's occupation seems to have a strong influence on a woman's likelihood of crossing over, thanks to them providing start-up funds for a business or initiating introductions to contacts in male-dominated industries. It's vital for us as a country to involve young men in the women empowerment Agenda in all sectors and spheres of life.

We clearly know that while the women's movement and the young women's movement must continue to lead the movement for gender equality and women empowerment in general, we need to also engage boys and young men to be able to empower women and girls.

During adolescence and young adulthood, there is a critical period of opportunity to engage boys and young men in understanding why women empowerment is good for everyone and recognizing their role in promoting the empowerment of girls and young women. By using and sharing their power and privilege, boys and young men have the ability to shift the dominant norms and ideas about gender and masculinity, and challenge the patriarchal beliefs, practices, institutions and structures that drive inequality between men and women.

Training young male volunteers to give interactive presentations in secondary schools on ending violence against women and girls, and having them participate in radio programmes to discuss the role of men in ending violence against women and girls, and organizing youth events to start a public discourse on the issue could help accelerate the women empowerment agenda. This has previously been successfully demonstrated by UN Women in Cambodia (<https://www.unwomen.org/>)

Involving young men for instance in social, political and entrepreneurial related trainings targeting women are starting to bare "fruits" in countries like Nicaragua where Wangki Tangni (An Indigenous Women's Organization) is educating Men and boys about women's rights and their role in ending violence. As Iteso Welfare Association Uganda, we do believe that the adoption of this approach in our own country (Uganda) would help men and boys understand what their household has to gain from women empowerment and how they can support women/girls.

Considering that 78% of Uganda's population is below 35 years of age (Ubos, 2014), We do believe that, the future of this country lies with the young people and putting more focus on activities that foster the women empowerment agenda will be crucial in achieving enormous progress in regards to respect for women rights, and empowerment.

From our experience conducting gender and career seminars in rural schools in Teso sub region in collaboration with Teso Students' Development Association- Makerere University (TESDA) over the course of three (3) years (2015-2017), we realized that the majority of adolescent boys seemed to show greater will to the issue of women rights and empowerment and, ending gender-based violence despite their limited knowledge on the issue.

In one of the seminars we conducted in Usuk Secondary School (Katakwi district) in July 2017, school boys stated that;

“Much of the violence and horror they had witnessed against women and girls in their families and local communities had much been orchestrated by their fathers and community elders who think it’s their right to “decide” on issues concerning women and girls. “

Due to their (elders) limited knowledge and commitment to women’s renewed plight for empowerment, much of the decisions from these elders have always gone against women.

Having had the unfortunate experience of attending a burial of a female victim of domestic violence in my local community as a teenager and having witnessed the shocking and painful acquittal of all murder charges that had been brought forward against the perpetrator in under two months, coupled with government’s limited avenues for concrete discussion with elderly men on issues concerning women and girls in rural communities, it’s only fair as a country that we focus our energies and resources on the dissemination of women rights and empowerment information to young men and boys since they hold the delicate path to determining how free women and girls will be in the near future.

Policy implementers need to take advantage of their (adolescent boys) willingness to learn and cope with changes in regards to women rights and empowerment and, transform them in to responsible young men who will advocate for women and change in their own localities and carry on the message of women empowerment in to their families once they are ready and capable of establishing their own.

It’s our hope that government, NGO’s and other stakeholders will make policy adjustments on their pursuit and advocacy for women rights and empowerment interventions to focus on rural schools with keen interest on adolescents through combining single sex and mixed activity sessions while instituting intensive career and gender seminars.

Single sex sessions will give young boys and girls the necessary spaces to speak openly about the issues that they are afraid of sharing with the other sex. Mixed sessions will enable boys hear and understand the plight of girls and the horrifying experiences of what they undergo daily as a result of the existing toxic gender stereotypes. This would enable boys change their attitudes and behaviors on women and girls, and bring about deeper understanding of both sexes.

Identifying and supporting male adolescent gender champions is equally crucial in promoting women empowerment by engaging men as allies in transforming toxic masculinity traits. This can be done at three levels –household, community (school) and policy - along with building gender champions’

capacity to advocate for women interventions and male support. As we have previously highlighted (<https://uganda.unfpa.org/en/news/i-am-determined-keep-championing-womens-rights>), the involvement of young people in these interventions is crucial for sustained women empowerment advocacy in rural areas.

Inviting men to trainings targeting women is crucial in getting them involved in the gender empowerment agenda. In my local community, men have veered to nickname women empowerment advocacy sessions as “Meetings for opposing husbands”. This is simply because men are never invited to these meetings and as such it leaves them guessing on the kind of discussions that take place there. Getting young men involved in these kinds of meetings would help mitigate the jealousy that interventions solely targeting women and girls may sometimes trigger for male family and community members. It can lead to a better long-term understanding and recognition of their female family members’ social and economic activities. Additionally, linking women empowerment activities with typical moments of male socialization can come in handy when calling for men’s involvement in women rights and empowerment interventions. This strategy has been piloted by Promundo (<https://promundoglobal.org/>) in Brazil. They linked men’s workshops with weekly football matches. Men only received equipment for matches/tournaments and were allowed to join teams playing after having participated in a gender education session. Football being a sport cherished by most youth in Uganda, it wouldn’t be that difficult to mobilize young men for gender education sessions while inextricably linking them to community and school football tournaments. This mechanism promotes accountability for individual young men, as well as between teammates and teams.

In spite of all the tangible avenues available to call on men’s attention to the women empowerment issues, better monitoring and evaluation of these interventions will be crucial to informing future programming. This ultimately would create an environment where men are at the forefront of the women empowerment agenda and women are able to make independent decisions and have access to social, political and economic opportunities while ultimately free from violence.

As Kofi Annan pointed out, *“No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth in all aspects. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death.”* We therefore as a country ought to honor our obligation in regards to respect to the rights of all humanity, and involvement of young men in women empowerment issues can be one of the means to achieve that much desired milestone.