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Gender-Based Violence: Organisations for International Cooperation must take Responsibility

Addressing sexual and gender based violence from the men's side

The call for engaging men and boys

By Maja Loncarevic

Despite the fact that engaging men and boys has been promoted in international treaties and agreements, gender programmes have frequently been regarded as purely programmes for the advancement of women. Following the call coming from the field IAMANEH Switzerland has invested in conceptual as well as implementation oriented development work for engaging men and boys for gender equality. In order to bring about lasting change to gender inequality, a critical self-examination of gender roles must be conducted. Men and boys are called upon to reflect on their own social positions and experiences with regard to gender inequality and are encouraged to develop critical positions that oppose dominant male behaviour patterns.



Future counsellors for perpetrators discussing violence circle during their training module in Albania. Photo: © IAMANEH

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, during and after the war, the local NGO Vive Zene has been offering professional support and care to raped and heavily traumatized refugee women and their children from Srebrenica. A few years later their therapy centre more and more turned to a shelter for survivors of domestic violence. Through therapeutic work with these women, the interconnectedness of war violence and domestic violence became evident. There were women, who had been raped during war and who now again were experiencing sexual violence in their partnership. At the same time, highly vulnerable men, who claimed not being real men anymore, were drowning their emotional speechlessness in alcohol and became perpetrators themselves at their homes. Both, women and men, never talked about what they had experienced during war. At school, their children and especially the boys were presenting alarming violent attitudes. Almost ten years ago, these and similar experiences in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania have led IAMANEH Switzerland and its local partner women's organisations to reflect about the need to start working with the men in these post-conflict and transition societies.

Why working with men and boys?

Theoretical reflexions as well as evidence show that the empowerment of women has significant impact on men and their social positions and livelihoods. Women who actively defend their needs and rights with regard to decision making, voice, room for manoeuvre and access to economic and societal resources threaten male self-conceptions and can produce counter-reactions in terms of opposition as well as attempts for greater control and domination over women (Chant, Sylvia; Gutmann, Matthew 2000: *Mainstreaming Men into Gender and Development*, Oxfam Working Papers, Oxford, p. 1 ff.).

On the other hand, in a globalized and conflict-torn world, men and women are both exposed to various forms of exclusion, subordination and disempowerment. Gender inequalities themselves negatively impact not only on women, but also on men. Men have been identified as gatekeepers for women's empowerment, but at the same time a differentiated analysis of changes in male roles and positions in society has shown their own manifold marginalization and vulnerabilities. A high percentage of violent men have been exposed to different forms of violence experiences during their own childhood or have grown up in dysfunctional families. Being exposed to violence during childhood bears a high risk developing violent behaviours in adulthood.

Therefore, men and boys are equally key addressors and actors in interventions addressing sexual and gender based violence and for gender equality work in general (Calkin, Sidney 2013: *From Absent Obstacles to Allies: Creating space for men in theories of women's empowerment*, draft paper, University of York, p. 13 / Unpublished conference paper, presented at the European Conference on Politics and Gender in Barcelona, March 2013). Strategies addressing men and boys seek to strengthen men with regard to their own vulnerabilities and to empower them to develop gender conscious thinking and independence from stereotype norms and values that oppress women, but partially also disempower and marginalize men as well in society. The identification of mutual interests of women and men with regard to needed changes in power relations and power distribution can form a positive basis for developing violence free relationships and for joint action towards gender equality. Identification of existing formal and informal power structures that disadvantage men as well as women and of those who control them and influence decision-making and behaviours is an indispensable element in this process.



Male footballers stepping out publicly against violence against women during a football game in Shkoder, Albania. Photo: © IAMANEH

Gender-transformative processes as a goal

As the experiences of IAMANEH and its partner organisations show as well as widely spread expertise confirms, developing a men-focused working approach in combating SGBV and engaging for gender equality needs to go beyond gender sensitisation. Such approaches call for gender-transformative action where a re-definition of gender roles and values needs to take place and that can't be addressed without a conscious re-distribution of power between the sexes and in a broader societal context (UNFPA 2013: Engaging Men and Boys: A Brief Summary of UNFPA Experience and Lessons Learned, p.5). Gender-transformative approaches put gender-relations at the centre of their attention and by questioning social norms and values that define gender-relations and are in various ways harmful to men and women both they address the root causes of gender inequality.

While the overall goals remain the improvement of rights and room for manoeuvre of women, an improved victims' protection or a reduction of violence against women and children, men and boys need to be engaged as change agents or as partners in the pursue of these goals. Men and boys have to take an active stand for changing gender roles and against violence. This needs to be pursued through prevention as well as intervention.

Multi-level gender-transformative work in practice

In the Western Balkan region, violence counselling with men and youngsters who use violence is one of the main pillars of the programme implemented by IAMANEH Switzerland and its local partner organisations. In collaboration with Croatian and Swiss experts male

professionals have been trained as counsellors for perpetrators. As a consequence, in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as in Albania, trained male professionals have established counselling centres for men and boys and engage in pioneer work with men against SGBV. Apart from perpetrator treatment as main focus, they all have developed low entry points or outreach strategies in order to reach the men and to make their new service offer known and accepted in their target communities. All these services are engaged in an active negotiation process with governmental structures and especially the justice system, pushing for formalized collaboration and referral of perpetrators to mandatory treatment as it is foreseen in the laws.

In parallel, partner organisations proactively work with pupils and especially boys at schools, but also with teachers and parents, since they have recognized that these young men find themselves in a personal transformation process regarding gender roles between tradition and modernism and therefore carry a high level of interest and readiness for change. In the north of Albania, boys are trained as «negotiators» to mediate in peer conflicts and to promote violence free conflict resolution at schools and in adolescent relationships.

In public, young men carry out important and highly visible campaigns, by going out in the streets as men, be it in cities, but also in small villages, where they speak out publicly against violence against women and engage in dialogue with representatives of administration and public institutions on these issues.



Men at a perpetrator counselling session at the Men's Centre in Modrica, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Photo: © IAMANEH

Main learnings from engaging men and boys in SGBV prevention and intervention

One of the most important experiences and lessons learned is that the development of a gender-transformative attitude in men and boys is only possible if they engage in a process of personal self-reflexion, dealing with their own emotions and experiences as men in their societies. This is true not only when reaching out to violent men or boys. This capacity also needs to be developed when training male professionals to do this work. And it is a difficult task, since men aren't used to talk about emotions or to admit feeling weak. They need careful support on this challenging path. The reflexion of one's own positions and dominance, but also one's vulnerabilities and concerns as men in a patriarchal system initiates a process of critical questioning of values and norms and the need for transformation. Dealing with the consequences of male dominance over women and children in society triggers an important change of perspectives that induces a critical reflexion of one's own behavioural patterns.

It is equally important to create space where new attitudes and behaviours can be tested and learning shared with likeminded. Furthermore, it is crucial to empower men as role models, i.e. to search for those men who can take a pioneering role and to work with them.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as in Albania, today it's the trained male professionals who develop this work further and they do it in close collaboration with women's organisations running victim's protection services, shelters and therapy centres. And they claim having become «gender-transformed» men in their society.

Another important experience is that it is indispensable to bring the issue also on the political agenda. It's not sufficient to concentrate only on punctual small scale pioneer projects that might produce good results, but only have little reach. Therefore in Bosnia as well as in Albania, efforts have been deployed to push for governmental responsibility with regard to perpetrator treatment as well as boys centred prevention programmes at schools. At the beginning dialogue with ministries and relevant multilateral actors was little promising. Besides lacking professional as well financial capacities they raised concerns that a new focus on men/boys and perpetrators would deter attention and funds from gender work for women and the anchoring of victim's protection in the state social protection systems. But today, in Albania there is a national action plan for engaging men and boys for gender equality and against SGBV and in both countries perpetrator treatment is fully integrated in the laws and measures for victim's protection. This forms an important backbone for further development of the work of the still young men's initiatives in these countries and the broader anchoring of the topic in public awareness.

A joint agenda for equality for all genders

Finally we can conclude from our experiences, that the collaboration of women's and men's organisations produces far more mobilisation power. Acting together for joint goals leads to a targeted corporate action and prevents women's and men's interests being played off against

each other. «Gender synchronisation» is the key term trying to describe the need for complementary and coordinated work of women and men activists in this field.

While individual changes in conceptualizing gender related identities and attitudes are indispensable for a transformation of interpersonal gender relations, a social justice framework that highlights the links between gender inequalities and other kinds of inequality and that values diversity and opposes discrimination against specific groups of men and women is indispensable to protect progressive men and women from marginalization and further discrimination and that creates a basis for broad societal changes with regards to gender.

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Project Example

ZDB - First Counselling Office for Men and Boys in the strongly patriarchal North of Albania

Two male psychologists, trained as counsellors for perpetrators, have developed the first Counselling Office for Men and Boys in the rural North of Albania. As a sub-branch of the women's organization «Woman to Woman» they primarily offer professional counselling to violent men. In the very traditional patriarchal rural communities, intense sensitization work has created a basis of understanding and trust in the society that allows to reach out to men and to make people accept the new idea and the service. In close collaboration with the women's main office of the organization, they are establishing partnerships and collaborations with relevant institutional actors and creating a formalized referral mechanism for interventions in cases of domestic violence. Pro-active information work at high schools and university has mobilized young men to become volunteers and to support the Men's Office in public campaigns and street work. University fora on the topic of work with perpetrators are an additional instrument to create interest among future professionals for this completely new intervention field. Within a short time, ZDB has become a highly professional counselling service that is well anchored in the community and that successfully spreads gender-transformative convictions and binds in a growing number of young men in the fight against SGBV.

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supported the therapy centre of Vive Zene since 1997. The author is programme responsible at IAMANEH Switzerland for the Western Balkan region since 2004.

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