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Gender equality: Where do we stand 25 years after the historic UN World Conference on Women in Beijing?

What role for partners in the global North?

Gender transformative approaches for sustainable change in gender relations

By Alexandra Nicola

The body of research on the quality of projects applying gender-transformative approaches and their effectiveness is growing. However, a key prerequisite for the successful initiation and sustainability of gender-transformative processes receives little attention so far: the importance of a full buy-in – or “transformation” - of those that directly engage with populations. For IAMANEH Switzerland, this guides the way for the engagement of ‘Northern partners’, from a role as ‘drivers’ and supporters of gender-transformative interventions, to a role as facilitators and coaches of local civil society partners as important agents of change towards a sustainable transformation in gender relations.



While some years ago it was not rare for the use and mention of the term “gender transformation” to prompt reactions of incomprehension or even rejection, there is today a growing commitment to promote gender-transformative approaches and programming in the field of international cooperation. The term which has its origins in HIV prevention refers to the “promotion of gender equality by addressing the root causes of gender-based health inequalities” (Gupta, 2000). Unlike gender sensitivity, gender transformation entails a structural dimension with the final aim being a change in power relations.

Since its first mention in 2000, the concept has found attention way beyond the health sector, and a multitude of guidance notes, manuals and toolboxes have been developed that orient the application and implementation of gender-transformative tools and approaches also in other fields of international cooperation. However, the questions of «how and where to start” – and hence, “what can and should be the role of “Northern” partners in supporting gender-transformative change?” remain omnipresent.

Experiences and learnings from gender-transformative work with men and the introduction of professional perpetrator counselling

IAMANEH Switzerland has been introducing gender-transformative approaches in its programme in the West Balkans from 2008 onwards with the introduction and development of professional counselling services for male perpetrators in Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina. While the development of a country-specific, context-adapted working approach that is considerate of the cultural dynamics was at the core of the intervention, it became clearer and clearer during the implementation that the counsellors’ personal confrontation with their own gender socialisation and attitudes towards gender equality was a key element for their successful and effective counselling work.

During their training and first implementation of counselling services, they not only underwent a technical learning process, but also went on a journey of discovery of their own perceptions and attitudes towards gender, masculinity and violence. This self-reflective process constitutes the basis for an empathic counselling and their capacity to build authentic relationships with their clients. As one of the counsellors explained it: *“I went through a process of personal gender transformation. I am not the same person as before – my views on gender norms have completely changed. Without this personal process, I would not be the counsellor I am today”* (Loncarevic/Reisewitz, 2016). Today, the counsellors apply these personal capacities and learnings also in their gender-transformative work with institutions within local referral systems for gender-based violence, which include, among others, Police and Justice.

Applying the learnings to the Western Africa programme

Having learned that successful gender-transformative work depends to an important extent on the people interacting with target groups and their personal convictions, values and attitudes, IAMANEH decided to introduce gender-transformation as a key implementing approach also in the West Africa programme. While the active engagement of men had already been increasingly integrated in the projects in the region, the concept of gender transformation itself was formally introduced during a workshop with partners in 2015.

More important than a theoretical treatise of the concept was the active engagement of the participants - representatives from all partner organisations - to promote reflection on their own gendered lives: how does gender impact on my life as a man / as a woman? What areas of my life are affected by the prevalent gender norms and thinking in my environment? Are there differences for women, men? Participants then reflected on the vulnerabilities lived by men as a result of rigid ideas of masculinity. How do men live and experience the expectations related to 'real' manhood? What do these trigger in men? Eventually, through the visualisation and analysis of their own lived experience as to changes in gender relations over time, participants realized: Gender norms are not static, they evolve. And they can be influenced by us.



Visualization exercise during a workshop with local partners on the change in gender norms and relations: past, presence and future. Foto: © Maja Hürlimann

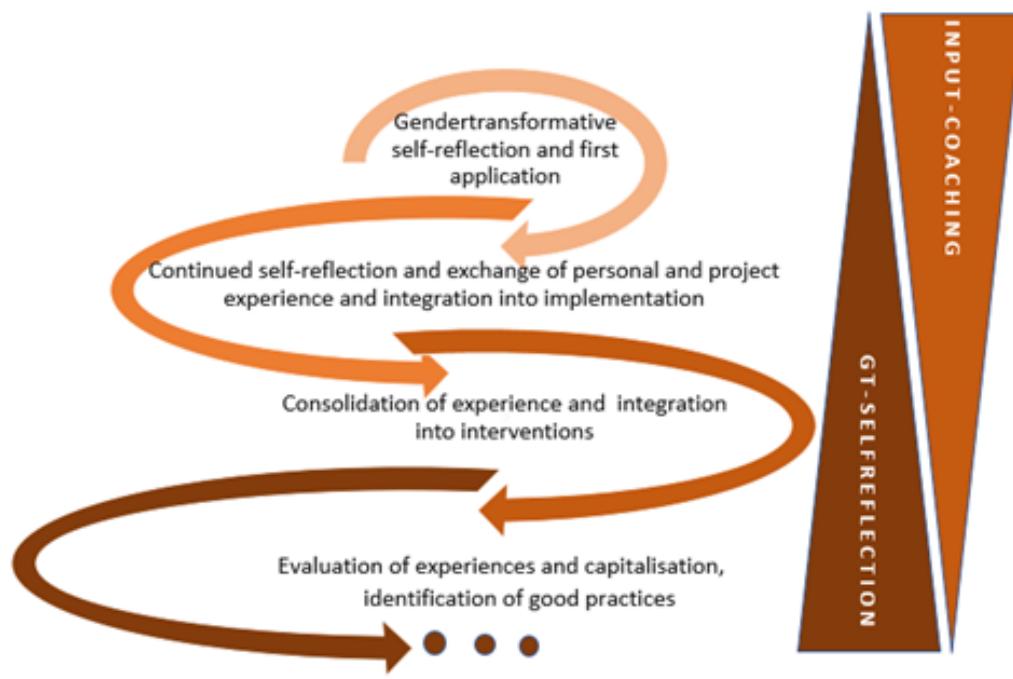
A participant of this and following workshops describes them as an eye-opener: "I was aware of the approach of engaging men in sexual and reproductive health, but I had not heard about gender transformation as such prior to the workshop. The reflections during the workshop on our own gender socialisation triggered a sort of Eureka moment in me. It made me look differently at my environment, the society I am living in, the work I am doing and how I am doing it.

This reflection of my own gendered being, the predominant norms that surround me in my society and in whose context I have grown up in, helped me to have another view on gender norms and gender-based violence, as well as on approaching the work we were doing in the field of community-based maternal and child health. It made me realise how big of an impact our own gender norms have on our way of seeing and doing things.

Since we engage in contexts with strongly patriarchal thinking and values, working towards the goal of gender transformation inevitably leads to resistance – in our professional but also in our personal environments - family, neighbours, friends. By challenging the status quo, gender transformation creates fears in men of losing power and control.

Our work is to take away those fears and to create understanding and consciousness that shared power is to the benefit of all, including men; that sharing power and privilege can alleviate the harmful effects of power imbalances, the responsibilities and restrictions that come with them, and open new spheres, also to men.

What has become clear to me since the first workshop on gender transformation and consecutive workshops is that gender transformation is not done with following a policy or a strategy, to apply a standardized approach or tools – it is first and foremost the conviction and the result of my personal engagement with my own gender socialisation, thinking and behaviour, which allows me to be authentic and engage with and win over others. Anybody working on transforming gender relations can only be effective and successful in accompanying others when they have accepted to confront and question their own personal stereotypes and attitudes towards gender equality, and are therefore transformed themselves.”



Visualisation of gender-transformative personal development and learning process. Graphic: © M. Hürlimann

The role of Northern NGOs in supporting gender transformative processes and domains of action

While methods and tools are undoubtedly important for implementing gender-transformative interventions, experience shows that process and techniques are not sufficient for successful and sustainable gender-transformative work. At IAMANEH Switzerland, our learning is that it is only when there is a merger between methodological skills and personal consciousness that authentic gender-transformative persuasiveness can develop. For us, this means that we not only need to invest in standardized training but in engaging with our local partners, accompanying them and engaging in a process of exchange, self-reflection and personal learning.

In other words, essential steps to facilitate gender-transformative processes as Northern partners are:

- To accompany local development partners as the actual drivers of gender-transformative change: Alongside strengthening of their technical capacity with regard to strategies, methods and tools for gender-transformative work, support and accompany self-reflexive processes among project staff and partners.
- To be able to do so and provide meaningful support to partners, we, as development partners in the global North, need to reflect ourselves on our attitudes, biases, thinking and gendered behaviours in our personal lives and in our own organisations. It may seem obvious, but when have you last really questioned your own gendered thinking and everyday behaviour?

For funders, on the other hand, supporting gender transformation requires being open to investments in local partner development and in building local resource pools that can closely accompany and support ongoing learning processes.

Lastly, we need to recognize that gender transformation is a process rather than a programming method. We believe that this process needs a stepwise approach that we can accompany but which, in order to lead to sustainable transformation of gender relations, must be driven by local actors.

References

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