HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
EAST & HORN OF AFRICA

The masculine side of gender programming.

A reflective study on male centric gender programming in Kenya

Executive Summary

Gender programming in Kenya has been historically feminised in response to priorities set in the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies of 1985 and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995. In the last decade, however, there has been increasing impetus among gender equality actors and women's rights advocates to challenge patriarchal masculinities that continually erode the gains achieved toward gender equality.

The rationale for engaging with men in gender discourse could be summed in three ways: Firstly, women and girls continue to face sexual and gender based violence and discrimination in greater proportions to men. Such physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse is primarily attributed to negative and violent masculinities. Toxic masculinity which includes the unrelenting quest for male power also endangers the lives of men and boys who are perceived to be 'weaker' or 'different' in terms of economic and social status or sexual orientation norms. Human rights practitioners are increasingly studying male psychology in order to understand the drivers of violence in societies.

Secondly, is the realisation by feminist and human rights practitioners in Kenya that there is an emerging roll back on gains made through affirmative action initiatives targeting women and girls and democratization processes. The expedient assertion by male wielders of power that equality and democracy are alien concepts is an indicator of the re-assertion of patriarchal power in the face of increased civic and feminist agency. Therefore, gender equality actors are increasingly strategizing on building male alliances and propping up male champions for equality.

Thirdly, male centric gender programming is informed by the urgency to counter sexist narratives driven by the free media. Popular culture and populist campaigns that seek to re-affirm male dominance in terms of sexual prowess and political power have eroded progressive outcomes toward equality and protection of human rights. Gender actors are apprehensive that efforts toward the empowerment of women and girls are hampered by misogynistic public opinion shaped by sexist narratives and visuals proffered through the media that are designed to maintain the patriarchal status quo in the social, political, economic, and private spheres.

From 2006 to 2011 the Hbs Nairobi Office supported the Men to Men Programme of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), a pan African feminist institution, and in 2012, the offshoot men's network in Kenya under the banner Men for Gender Equality Now (MEGEN). The men to men strategy rationalises that patriarchal and violent masculinities lead to sexual and gender based violence. The strategy therefore seeks to facilitate conversations between and among men to understand the debilitating effects of violent masculinities and to grow a network of men campaigning against sexual and gender based violence.

The rich experience gained from these partnerships inspired the Hbs, Nairobi Office to seek deeper understanding about the theory and practice of masculinities in relation to gender. In 2013, the office took a step back to engage within the masculinities and wider gender sector to reflect on the process and outcomes of male centric gender work in Kenya. This study report is the culmination of a 7 month long reflective process that began in September 2014 led by Anzetse Were, a gender and economics consultant.

In 2005 Anzetse Were sought to gain deeper insight into masculinity, aiming to unearth the cause, expression and effects of problematic masculinities. In her book *Drivers of Violence: Male Disempowerment in the African Context*, she asserted that the underlying reason for misogynistic and violent male behaviour targeted at females is male disempowerment and emasculation. This sense of powerlessness catalyses a reassertion of domination oftentimes expressed in violent or cruel means against an intimate partner or against any person perceived to be 'weaker'. This sense of impotence conveyed through violence reveals striking realities as explained below.

First is the realisation that patriarchal attitudes, norms, values and systems affect females and males in equal measure, but nuanced differently. Men are disempowered by patriarchal norms and narratives that prescribe unattainable standards of 'manhood' such as being impenetrable, invulnerable, unemotional and autocratic. This dissonance between expectations of manhood and the reality that men do experience human emotion breeds insecurity about their male credentials. Some men will therefore seek an escape in negative and self destructive behaviour, oftentimes engaging in violence and crime.

In addition, patriarchal masculinity is anchored on a very fragile concept of prescribed gender roles and gendered conduct. For example, patriarchal scripts state that men should be the bosses, earn higher salaries, own property, and wield positions of authority; while women should be home-makers, care givers and subservient to men's decisions and actions. Thus, a reverse of this given gendered order is seen as a

contestation of manhood. Decades of work toward female empowerment therefore is perceived by a patriarchal society as a direct affront to their value system and invites resistance and a 'fight back'. And because patriarchy already makes men question their male credentials if they fail to attain the manhood 'bar', for some, women's equality is therefore simply unfathomable.

Gender programming acknowledges and is in fact informed by the critical role masculinity plays in shaping gender relations. Interventions have traditionally sought to uplift the status of women and girls and to challenge gender power relations toward a more equitable and diversified outlook toward gender. Increasingly, the need for direct engagement with men and on masculinities has re-engineered gender programming and invigorated gender discourse.

This reflective study has exposed critical conceptual and pragmatic questions that gender programming (in particular male centric work) must consider.

Male centric gender programming refers to activities and interventions that target boys and men toward re-constructing masculinities toward human rights and gender equality and facilitating men's contribution to gender discourse. The focus of this study is therefore to be distinguished from other thematic foci of male centric work such as men's health, men's welfare programmes, professional men's organising, private networking and criminal justice programmes, insofar as these do not relate to the transformation of gender relations.

Reflections from the field on male centric gender programming reveal various lessons. At the outset, there is no collective articulation of positive masculinity. Masculinity is understood, defined and communicated in different ways by different actors. Some assert that male centric programming must only serve feminist interests, while others conceptualise male centric work for the maintenance of male dominance and benevolent autocracy. Yet others theorise masculinity as a psyche that can be shaped to curb self-destructive male behaviour while other men's advocacy streams intend to challenge discrimination against certain groups of marginalised males (that it the men's rights theorem). While tactics and theories of male centric gender work vary widely with a vaguely-defined goal for human rights, unfortunately it inevitably leads to incoherence and mixed signals to the target audiences.

The study established that the most transformative space for positive role modelling and masculinity advocacy is in the private sphere and through informal engagements. Male influencers in the communities who believe in social justice, fairness and equality are making a tremendous contribution, albeit informally, to engender a conscientious and egalitarian generation of young males.

Formal male centric gender work is also picking up pace in the non-state sectors such as the business, religious and non-governmental instututions. Actors from within and outside the feminist or women's rights movement run male centric gender programmes. However, there has not been sufficient opportunity for actors to cross reference or deliberate interpretations of masculinity and theories of change that inform their programmes. This inevitably leads to incoherence and in some cases contradictions in gender work. Furthermore, opportunities to create synergies between male centric and feminist gender programmes within the formal sphere are virtually non-existent. As a bridge measure, various female oriented (feminist) organisations run independent male centric programmes alongside their core feminist work, while others integrate strategies to reach out to male influencers to support their work, such as alliance and network building. In most cases however, formal gender work is either purely feminist or women centric in its approach or purely male focused.

The study observed the complexity in financing gender work. Traditional programme grants and partnerships on gender have laid focus on women/girls with universal support for movement building, girls'/women's empowerment and direct responses to issues affecting them. This has been as a result of long drawn processes and intellectual validation of women and girls' outlook within the wider human rights context. In the converse, the theory of change in male centric programming is not universally understood or theorised by the change agents. In addition, the mobilisation, organisation, leadership and movement building for male centric gender advocacy is only now emerging and leadership within the gender sector still remains anchored in the women's movement. Funding partners are therefore inclined to be strategically minimalistic in their support for direct male centric programming, and in essence, desire the comfort of established women's organising to direct gender funding, whether for male centric or female centric activities.

The study sought to understand how masculinity work and male focused gender programming impacts communities and discovered factors that enhance and those that hinder effectiveness. The interpretation of norms in patriarchal terms greatly underpins social norms and narratives. In turn, women and men alike have internalised the patriarchal social order, and will often respond to shifting masculinities with consternation. Masculinity programming, not unlike feminist programming, must therefore target all members of society.

The study observed the spaces and conditions under which male centric programmes are taking place. Formal spaces are within private corporations, religious institutions, education institutions, cultural institutions, non-state organisations or networks and community organisations. Informal spaces are within

the private sphere such as in the home or extended family network and in social spaces such as bars and markets.

The tactics and interventions in male centric gender advocacy are as diverse as the actors engaging in them. Media messaging including profiling role models is the most common means used to inspire attitude change toward positive masculinity. Media platforms in the last decade have broadened with the increasing use of the social media and internet in the region. Male only conversation spaces (men engaging with men are also popular within the formal and the informal spaces. Other interventions include legislative reforms and policy advocacy on male focused issues, rehabilitative programmes for men within and out of the criminal justice system, as well as the use of art, sport and culture to mobilise and convene around masculinity issues. Public debates on the status and outlook of boys are rife in the last couple of years in Kenya, following obvious debilitating effects on the ignorance by society about the role of masculinities.

The study reflected on the influencing agents that shape male centric gender programming and masculinity discourse. Influencers that make a positive mark include role models, peer mentors, leaders in professional institutions, allies in other human rights movements and the progressive policy framework that supports human rights programming. Conversely, negative influencers include leaders and agents who are proponents of regressive cultural and traditional practices yoked on patriarchy, unregulated media and misogynistic populist narratives, outdated and regressive laws, the uninformed political class, and religious/cultural doctrines that preserve male domination.

From this intense reflective process Hbs, Nairobi Office, partners and actors in the gender sector will be better informed about the outlook of male centric gender programming in Kenya, its correlation with women centric gender programmes, challenges and threats that hinder effective gender programming focusing on men/boys and the opportunities for congruence in gender programming. Gender equality programmers will also be alerted about what to think about and look out for in conceptualising gender programmes that target men and boys to achieve a common human rights and equality agenda.

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