

Commission on the Status of Women
Forty-eighth session
New York, 1-12 March 2004

PANEL II

The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality

Written statement submitted by

Njoki Wainaina

The role of men and boys in the prevention of HIV/AIDS and in Combating Gender-based violence

Njoki Wainaina, Gender Consultant

Introduction

When I was asked by an officer of the Kenya Government whether they could nominate me as a panelist for this session, I answered in the affirmative without the slightest hesitation. The reason was that in the last twenty years and more, I would have been the last person to be so considered, because I was in the groups stereotyped as the opposition, just because I belong to a certain geographic area and ethnic group. It has been a long struggle to get out of bad governance. What this reminded me is that no matter how long and daunting our struggles are, as long as we do not give up, victory will come.

When I received the invitation to participate in this panel, I also received a number of documents, including the report of the Secretary General on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality, which many of you have already received and read. Although I had enthusiastically agreed to the invitation, I doubted that there is anything I could add to the issues discussed in this and other excellent reports provided. After some reflection, I decided that the best way to tackle this presentation is to imagine I am speaking to you (as I often do), about our work with men, and to share with you a few answers to the questions often asked about why we chose to work with men, and their role in combating the spread of HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence in Africa.

The current work with men and boys for gender equality has evolved out of our continued struggle to look for answers, and for more effective strategies to achieve the goals of gender equality, development and peace, which we have pursued the last three decades. For those who have been deeply involved in this process since Mexico in 1975 (I am most privileged to be one), we have gone from one global Conference to another, with renewed hope and vigour. But at each point, whether in Copenhagen (1980) or in Beijing (1995), we came together as women of the world to agree that while some progress had been made, there were still major obstacles. We also kept agreeing that overall, the situation of the majority of women was getting worse. So, the question has always been, what are we not doing right, what else could we do and/or what could we do differently?

When the shift from the women in development approach to the gender and development approach was proposed after the Nairobi Conference (1985), many of us embraced it with enthusiasm because it seemed to offer yet another hope for the achievement of our deeply valued and yet ever elusive goals. The initial stage of embracing and understanding the approach was controversial within the women's movement, at least in Africa, where my experience is based. Many felt we were diluting or selling out on the women's struggle, while others felt that the new approach was a sound strategy for advancing our course. The gender approach entailed the involvement of and a focus on women, men, girls and boys. Men did not always participate in gender and development programmes voluntarily or willingly, and most of them still do not. However, one of the rewarding experiences of working

with the gender programme has been to witness the change that comes with the understanding of the gender concept. Running through the evaluations from hundreds of gender sensitisation workshop evaluations, it is clear that women and men alike perceive these workshops as real “eye-openers”.

There are many women today who feel strongly that working with men and boys is diluting, diverting and even trivialising our struggle. Many hold the view that because men and boys are the beneficiaries of male privilege and the discrimination against women and girls, they can never fully understand our struggle. Many doubt that men and boys can be fully committed to a change that would mean men losing a lot of the privileges they now enjoy. As the understanding of gender dynamics, their social construction, masculinities, femininity and their impact on all groups in society deepens, it becomes clearer that males have many reasons to want to change, and that gender equality would have benefits for them, and for all the groups in society.

The work with men and boys for gender equality is only one of the many strategies and approaches that must be combined to tackle the ever growing problem of inequality, injustice and oppression. The problem is so large, threatening and daunting, that we need every strategy to tackle it. We need the women’s empowerment, gender and development, gender mainstreaming, men and boys empowerment, integrated, people oriented, sustainable livelihoods and every other one of the approaches we have tried in decades of struggle towards a more equal and just society. It is not one or the other, but often the combination of what is most appropriate, relevant or effective in given circumstances. For example, in the struggle to combat gender-based violence and the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa, working with men and boys presents one possible approach, especially given the dominance of patriarchal ideologies and systems and the relationship between the low status of women, the spread of HIV/AIDS and the escalation of gender-based violence. It is a new approach and experiences with it are recent, sketchy and much less tested. But the need for finding solutions is urgent and therefore all possible solutions must be employed to combat this life threatening situation. This is not the only way to go, but it is a definite way of getting some solutions.

Why are we involving men and boys in the fight for gender equality?

There are many compelling reasons for involving men and boys in the struggle for gender equality. For a start, (whether or not, justly, legally legitimately, fairly or appropriately) most men hold the power, authority, control and privileges that are the contention for our struggle. They must be engaged as they will have to give (up, in, to, away, etc) something for the struggle to be won. Whether this is to be achieved through persuasion, coercion, political struggle, divine intervention, legislation, socialisation, policy, social revolution or whatever means, they have to be involved.

During the Decade for Women (1976-1985) I was privileged to work with women in development programmes in several countries in Africa. I had a chance to see what difference men who supported women’s empowerment could make. In one country where women were not allowed to borrow money except with the consent or support of their husbands, fathers, sons or uncles, one bank manager decided that women borrowers were credit-worthy, conscientious and worth taking a risk with. He facilitated women’s access to credit, broke a key barrier to their empowerment and

created a precedence that could be used by thousands of women borrowers, besides proving the point that women borrowers were worth taking a risk with. Similar examples can be given of men judges, magistrates, police officers, permanent secretaries, ministers and heads of state who have made significant difference because they believed in women's empowerment. The men for gender equality approach is a way of recognising and deliberately mobilising such men to be part of the solution. They are there in their thousands, and will actively participate in the struggle once the strategy to involve them is explicit and deliberate.

I grew up in a patriarchal society, but in a family where my father was a strong believer in equal opportunities for girls and boys. I am therefore a product of a man's determination to achieve social justice because he believed that as a Christian to do so was divine command. My late father fought female circumcision with every weapon including physical confrontation, gave us girls every opportunity he gave our brothers including inheritance, refused dowry, defied society and patriarchy in all ways and left a legacy that laid a foundation for the women and girls in our family to claim equality. He also became a model which society could ridicule, envy, question, emulate or oppose, but which could not be ignored. My work with men is a desire to multiply the number of men who would be like my father, for I believe if every girl child gets from their fathers what I got from mine, then our struggle would move a major step forward. Sadly my father did not give the same things to my mother, and I know many men who like him do the right things with their daughters and not their wives, but every woman is some man's daughter, so I am still persuaded that fathers of daughters are a great constituency to work with in our struggle towards gender equality. Many prominent women in Africa testify that they are who they are because they are daughters of men who supported girl's and women's empowerment.

In the struggle against gender-based violence and the spread of HIV/AIDS, which now pose a threat of a magnitude that is unprecedented in the history of our continent, women have been and continue to be the greater victims relative to men. For the past two decades when these two problems have clearly surfaced, we have targeted women with messages, advocacy, and counsel and support services. Still the problems have continued to escalate unabated, causing us to continue the search for answers. Gender analysis has been a key tool that has pointed to the answers, at least regarding the root causes of the persistent women's oppression, in spite of all the global, regional and national efforts to free women. The unearthing of the unequal gender and power relations as the root cause of gender-based violence and the unequal impact of the HIV/AIDS on females relative to males has been a result of the search for answers.

With this knowledge, attention is gradually being turned to men and boys as partners to women and girls, as part of the solution to combating the scourge. Although this approach is still in its infancy, compared to other approaches, indications are that it holds a promise. While research in the area of gender-based violence is still scattered, the relationship between gender-based violence and the spread of HIV/AIDS has been established. The powerlessness of women in the social, economic, religious, political and decision-making arenas, make them victims of such forms of violence as rape, physical, psychological, economic, emotional and sexual abuse, all of which have direct or indirect co-relations with the threats of infection of HIV/AIDS.

It is now proven that in Africa more females are affected and infected by HIV/AIDS, and are the large majority of victims of gender-based violence. It is therefore logical that they should be our key targets for any preventive, protective, care giving, support and empowerment interventions. The bulk of the programmes on HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence are correctly targeting women. The only problem with this approach is that most of these interventions have not addressed critical gender issues, for example, gendered and unfair division of labour, unequal access to resources including health care and services, women's powerlessness, low social worth and inability to make decisions even about their bodies. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has added burdens to an already over-burdened, powerless, victimised, oppressed and under-valued group. African villages are now overflowing with women victims of gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS who contracted the virus in their bedrooms or because they were victims of rape, marital rape, polygamous relationships, incest, economic hardship and despair that drove them to commercial sex work, exploitation by relatives and a myriad of other factors whose root cause is gender inequality.

Women can and are already doing a lot to cope with the pandemic, but men hold the remaining part of the solution. Suppose our dream came true and every man in Africa said "no" to violence and irresponsible sexual behaviour and "yes" to the popular message of "Stick to One Faithful Partner?" Would it not be a wonderful gift to humanity? While this may not be achievable immediately, our conviction is that we can mobilise large numbers of men to do so, and that they will make a difference in combating the spread of these pandemics.

Home based care and support has traditionally been the responsibility of women. Many men have found it convenient to stick to this division of labour, especially when it comes to the difficult and heart breaking responsibility of caring for HIV/AIDS sufferers. Women and girls nurse the males in their families, but when women and girls need similar care, this is sought from the extended family, community or friends. While the pandemic is wreaking havoc on the lives of women, families and communities, few men have changed their behaviour or taken on new responsibilities. Even in situations that are culturally taboo, for example a mother nursing her adult son, women are taking on such responsibilities because men are not willing to be involved. The traditional roles played by men of providing leadership and material support for families have also shifted to women and girls, since they are conditioned to think of the needs of others, even when they are the more needy. Most women will struggle to the very end of their energies to cater for their families, and especially children. When mothers are too ill to care for themselves and others, it is girls who have to drop out of school to take over. Surely this situation has to change, and men are the missing part of the action.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic and the campaign to stop gender-based violence have brought a new focus on the socialisation of men and boys. Gender analysis is central to understanding male attitudes and behaviour. Men who have gone through sensitisation training on gender issues related to the pandemics of HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence quickly understand the need for men to re-think their masculinity values and perceptions as a way of bringing about the urgent behavioural change required. The demand for male training and sensitisation on issues of HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence and related issues has grown and men's support, counselling and spiritual guidance groups are quickly emerging, especially at

community level. Youth groups bringing together women and men to take action in preventing HIV/AIDS are particularly gaining popularity as more young people recognise the dangers ahead of them.

There is a popular saying that from the bedroom to State House, men hold the power to end gender-based violence and the spread of HIV/AIDS. This is the key to our work with men. The report of the Secretary General outlines different ways in which men in families, communities, faith institutions, work places, parliaments, universities and all places of learning and in society in general can make a difference in ensuring greater progress towards gender equality. The experience working with men in Africa has shown that there are many men in all these institutions who are committed to the principles of gender equality.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has created a threat that has touched or will soon touch every woman, man, girl or boy in our continent in one-way or another. What many of the people with the power and authority to stop this pandemic do not know or realise is that they hold this power, authority and responsibility. Without sensitisation, awareness creation and mobilisation many men will not have the consciousness, awareness, knowledge, analytical skills, willingness and the commitment to act in timely and appropriate ways. With the sensitisation a lot of men are willing to be part of the solution, and to use their influence in their families, communities and institutions. The need for getting men and boys to become key players in the fight against gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS is therefore overwhelming, but it comes with the promise of a break-through in the fight for gender equality.

Who are the men involved?

In three decades of activism for gender equality and the rights of women, I have worked with many men who support the struggle for gender equality. Many of them are to be found in the most unlikely places, such as in communities that are considered backward, patriarchal and conservative. Community leaders are among those who are quick to observe and acknowledge the need for change. Many of them have witnessed the transition in their communities and bearing the social responsibility for their communities, many of them will support initiatives that would address the identified problems of their society. The support of community or traditional leaders and authorities has been forthcoming in dealing with issues relating to land and property ownership, protection of victims of violence, support for orphans and the fight against traditional harmful practices, especially early marriage and female circumcision. On the other hand these leaders could be the best gatekeepers of negative cultural and traditional practices, so they have to be educated, sensitised and involved. Recently, I was on assignment in Somaliland, and I was amazed at how much community level support there is in tackling issues of gender equality. Africa's economic crisis has deeply impacted the role of men as key providers for their families and in many cases shifted the responsibilities to women. This has caused an up-heaval that has opened the opportunity for discussing gender and power relations with leaders and men at the community level.

In several African countries faith based organisations have taken a lead in the men for gender equality initiatives, particularly responding to the growing threat of HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, drug and substance abuse and indiscipline in

learning institutions at all levels. The reality of the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has grown to such proportions that leaders in every sector of society can no longer ignore the problem. Issues of HIV/AIDS are now discussed from pulpits and many men's and boys forums have been created. Counselling programmes for men infected by HIV/AIDS are increasing in many countries and faith based organisations are emerging as leaders in the mobilisation and involvement of men. In recent months our network has done some sensitisation in communities around Nairobi in Kenya and the demand for speakers at seminars, materials and other forms of support to faith based and community groups is more than could have ever been anticipated.

Men working in the media are among those who are active and committed to action for gender equality. Their profession puts them in the frontline of exposure to the realities of the evils of gender-based violence and the suffering of the victims of HIV/AIDS. In all the countries where men's initiatives have been established, the support of men in the media has been the key factor in reaching out to men and persuading them to join. The involvement of men in the Campaign on "Sixteen Days Activism Against Gender Violence" has been a flagship in enlisting and mobilising male support in combating gender-based violence. In the last two years, the linking of the theme of the role of men in combating gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS by the United Nations entities and civil society has created an even deeper understanding of the urgency for male participation in the struggle. At the community level, male artistes, musicians, theatre groups and puppeteers have contributed greatly to the campaigns.

The fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic and gender-based violence has touched the hearts of men who hold influence, authority, power of decision-making, policy, political and religious clout. In several countries, heads of State and Government have come out to explicitly state their positions and declare support or campaign on these issues. In Africa, the most explicit support for the elimination of gender-based violence came from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in a declaration that committed their countries to a programme of action, in which countries are mandated to report progress yearly. As the threat of the HIV/AIDS pandemic surfaces, a number of Heads of State have taken frontline positions as men to influence male behaviour. In Kenya, HE the President Mwai Kibaki has taken such a position. Bishops, Kadhis and other religious leaders are also increasingly reaching out to men to challenge them to change. Uganda has made remarkable strides in halting the spread of the pandemic and offers useful lessons, especially on how to mobilise and involve critical male players, including children both boys and girls in schools, young women and men in their peer groups, men in faith based groups, trade union groups, work places and communities.

The fact that the achievement of gender equality cannot be stopped or avoided forever has been accepted by many men and boys, we can confidently affirm. Most men know that it is only a matter of time before gender equality becomes a social norm, even in the patriarchal societies of Africa, most of which have already embraced gender equality as a principle in their constitutions. In the popular development theory of how new ideas are adopted, men who support gender equality and those mobilising other men to fight HIV/AIDS are the innovators and early adopters. They are the leaders who know when it is time to change and will take the risk to do so, regardless of what the majority think or do. These men come in many profiles and understanding

their motivation to change gives us insight into what needs to be done to maintain their support and to bring more of their kind into the movement.

There are also many visionary men who have recognised that gender equality is the one answer to many of the evils that have bedevilled society. While many of them may not necessarily come out on their own to innovate strategies for achieving gender equality, they will positively respond when they are involved. This group of men are to be found in all societies. They include village elders who have seen generations of women and men play different roles in society and recognised the equal value of contributions of women and men; also recognising the complementary nature of such roles. These men of vision also see the dangers of oppressing and subordinating one group of people in society and are the voice of reason in discussions with peers, in counselling younger people, in fighting for the rights of the oppressed and marginalised and in calling society to order. In the fight against HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence these men have included prominent men in society, youth, professionals as well as men living with HIV/AIDS. Many people who have worked closely with communities can immediately think of many such men, and there are many more with the same potential, if only they could be reached.

Increasing numbers of men support gender equality and such campaigns as those for combating gender-based violence and the spread of HIV/AIDS because they have witnessed or perceived the impact of such threats to the whole society. They are also in the forefront in fighting against other threats such as food insecurity, environmental degradation, ethnic conflicts, war and political insecurity. These men see where others do not necessarily see, the connections between gender inequality and these threats to the future of their societies. They therefore fight for issues like female education, elimination of gender-based violence, female inheritance and the involvement of women in decision-making because what is good for women is also good for the whole society.

Human rights activists are among the most common campaigners for gender rights because of their belief in the principles of equality, justice and fairness as fundamental to the enjoyment of human rights. The women's rights campaign has benefited from the increased consciousness and awareness of human rights. Human rights organisations have now mushroomed in many countries, dealing with a diversity of issues including issues of governance, democracy, transparency, economic rights, land rights, children's rights, reproductive health rights etc. The fight against HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence is increasingly taking the human rights approach, especially for the prevention and protection of victims of gender-based violence and those living with HIV/AIDS.

Many young men are now joining campaigns on human rights, democracy and against HIV/AIDS, and gender-based violence. Those who have been brought up in environments where equality is a norm are less likely to be threatened by gender equality. Others say they have learned through exposure in schools, learning institutions and their relationships with girls and women that there is no room for patriarchal ideologies in their time and generation. While many of them see the privileges that patriarchy confers on them, they are also aware of the threats, the disadvantages and especially the cost to them and the entire society.

Sadly, there are also many men who have joined the campaign for gender equality because they are victims. As the debate on gender-based violence and the threat of HIV/AIDS goes more and more public, there is remarkable increase in the reported cases of violence against men. Many women feel that paying attention on violence against men is likely to trivialise the issue of violence on women and girls. However, it is my conviction that addressing violence against men is an opportunity to make the point that tolerance of any violence against any group of people in society breeds violent societies; and that violence of any kind, perpetrated on any person by another is totally unacceptable.

Men living with HIV/AIDS are among the men who have learned the hard way, and some of them have resolved to join the campaign to help other men avoid the pitfalls. Others who have been drawn to the movement include men who have reformed from drugs, crime and other risky behaviour. These also include ex-prisoners who served terms in prison for femicide, rape or other forms of violence for which they regretted, repented and have been socially rehabilitated. A founder of one of the men for change groups in Africa, was motivated to start a programme for the rehabilitation of men after he served a sentence for violence against a woman who was very close to him. He uses his experience to counsel other men and his programme now reaches boys in schools to teach them new masculinities and gender equality principles.

Fathers who love and honour their daughters constitute a large group of men who support gender equality. These men are found in every society and can become key advocates for gender equality, given the skills and knowledge of the issues, and the platform from which to speak out. Many of the men in the women's rights movement are there because of the love and concern for their daughters, mothers and occasionally wives. The impact of fathers who support gender equality on influencing other men in such matters as female education, eradication of negative and harmful practices such as dowry, female genital cutting, early marriages and inheritance is enormous. Many of these men also gradually entering the campaign of men against the spread of HIV/AIDS including the protection of women and girls.

Why are the men involved?

Most men's groups, like women groups, are created out of felt needs. Such groups though formed for one purpose are involved in different activities. Gender equality, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence may be only part of the list of issues these groups are interested in. Just as the women's movement evolved out of identified needs, the men's movement is also emerging from identified needs of men, most of them gender related, as discussed earlier. The gains women and girls have made in such areas as education, policy and legal reforms and the advocacy that has gone into it have had an impact on some categories of men, and especially those who are aware of the human rights principles. This in turn has informed the way such men perceive gender relations and many such men have seen the need for men to understand gender issues and to be part of social transformation. Such men support gender equality principles at personal and institutional levels, especially where gender equality policies and strategies are explicit.

Many men are involved in gender equality initiatives because they are weary of living the lies that are propagated through patriarchal ideologies. Many especially among

young people recognise the dangers of believing the stereotypes of men as stronger, wiser, superior, better, cleverer, braver and all the other things they are socialised to believe. Such lies frustrate men as society expects them to live the lies and often are ostracised if they do not conform. In gender seminars with men, many of them disclose the agony and pain they have endured trying to conform to social norms that force them to pretend to be super-human, to suppress all human feelings and emotions and to pretend they are “being men”. Many men have therefore recognised that they too are victims of socialisation processes that oppress them even as they become the beneficiaries of the patriarchy. For example, in many African societies boys are treated harshly and denied the love, comfort and warmth of their mothers and female relatives. Consequently they grow up without developing the necessary human feelings and communication skills.

Beijing has become a symbol of fear, threat and apprehension as many men have heard all types of misinformation on what went on at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Many men have joined the movement to find out what gender equality is about. The focus on the girl child since the Beijing Conference has particularly challenged men to look at the boy child. In several countries in Africa, gender programmes are targeting boys because of the recognition that boys too suffer certain gender specific problems, especially arising from their socialisation. There is for example growing concern that while girls have been over-burdened with family responsibilities as helpers to their mothers, boys are growing up without learning and taking their responsibilities at their personal, family and community levels. The cost to society of some of the male population not taking their share of responsibility is particularly evident in many communities where many out-of-school young men are increasingly turning into drug and substance abuse, violence, crime and other social problems.

The economic crisis in Africa has jolted many men to the reality that gender and power relations are a critical factor in the day to day social dynamics of every society. This reality has prompted male support for gender and development programmes, especially on gender-based violence. As mentioned earlier, the economic crisis has reversed roles of women and men and some men’s groups have come up as support to men who are experiencing the economic and gender role crisis. In the changed gender roles many men have now found themselves in the scary situation of dependents, while women have been forced to take on even heavier burdens of eking out livelihoods for their families, especially in the over-crowded informal sectors. This increased burden for women who have to shoulder their traditional care-giving roles and the additional provider responsibilities has not been matched with any change of roles for men. Further it has increased the threat of gender-based violence as many men take out their frustrations on women, and many have turned to substance abuse, idleness and other socially threatening behaviour.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has jolted many societies into action, particularly challenging them to examine how boys have in the past been socialised into manhood and the masculinity values that have been passed or not passed on to them. In this connection targetting boys is fast gaining prominence as a medium-term strategy for changing male behaviour and developing new masculinities. Activities include developing new rites of passage, which take into consideration the changing roles of

men in society, and particularly recognising the principles of gender equality that are gradually being accepted as a social norm.

Conclusion

There is a budding movement of men that could be harnessed to sensitise, educate, inform and mobilise men as partners, peers, fathers, leaders and trend setters to support actions towards gender equality. Efforts to work with such groups should include capacity building since most of the men's groups are new, small and inexperienced in group organisation and management.

The need for education, sensitisation, education and support to men especially on the subject of HIV/AIDS, including counselling, home-based care, voluntary testing and other related issues is overwhelming. The level of ignorance even of the most basic information about HIV/AIDS and what constitutes gender-based violence is very high even among men who would otherwise be considered educated and influential. The commitment to learn and find solutions is now driven by the needs as families and communities grapple with the threats of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the resultant poverty, social stigma, rejection and other evils perpetrated on victims.

In 1985 at the Nairobi Conference, there was a slogan that women hold half the sky. The holders of the other half need to know that they are only entitled to half of the benefits from the sky. In Nairobi the women of the world were affirming our claim to recognition. Now our goal is to get our rightful share in the partnership and therefore we need to call the other partner to the negotiating table at home, in the community and at all points of action. In the fight against gender-based violence and the spread of HIV/AIDS women and men partnership is critical and the need to get the men to take their share of the responsibility is very urgent.