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The Role of Men in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS

Prepared by
Njoki Wainaina*

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

Gender equality has for a long time been seen as a women's issue, and it is women who have primarily been in the forefront in advancing the gender agenda. Equality is however not a women's issue, but a human rights issue. The persistence of the women's rights campaigners since the foundation of the United Nations has resulted in the recognition of gender relations as key to the transformation of humanity. The threat posed by the HIV/AIDS pandemic has added to the urgency of addressing gender relations from a perspective that had not in the past been given as much attention. Building partnerships between women and men and transforming socialisation processes is a strategy for addressing one of the root causes of the spread of the pandemic, the unequal gender power relations.

The urgent need for solutions to the problem of gender inequality has engaged feminists, scholars, thinkers, researchers, writers and development practitioners on a continuous search for answers. The unequal power relationship between females and males in most societies has been recognised as the root cause of most development woes, and especially the spread of HIV/AIDS. While culture is a key determinant of the gender power relationships, patriarchal structures and systems are the vehicles through which gender inequalities, discrimination and the subordination of women are perpetuated and justified; and from which men reap unfair benefits and dominate women. The predominant patriarchal society insists on control, subordination and the under valuing females, stereotyping males as stronger, better, higher value and leaders of women and society. It creates major problems for females and males of all ages, and nowhere has this been as evident as in the current situation where HIV/AIDS has ravaged humanity, especially in countries of Africa.

What Has Motivated Men to Action?

Increasingly, men have become aware that they are beneficiaries of an unfair and untenable system in which everybody eventually becomes a loser. The advancement of the movement for gender equality has changed men's lives and their environment. The Beijing Conference had such a profound impact on the lives of women and men that even in remote villages and communities, it is not uncommon to hear the name Beijing, correctly associated with the empowerment of women. The world will never be the same again after Beijing, and more and more men are beginning to realise that the acceptance of equality as a reality is a pre-requisite for the inevitable social transformation. The criticism that has been levied at the patriarchal society as the root of all the evils against women has given many men a sense of guilt because they realise that they are the beneficiaries of the oppression of women and the other fruits of the patriarchy. On the other hand some men are beginning to rebel against what they see as the feminists' effective appropriation of the power to make decisions especially in the area of reproduction and sexual rights where increasingly women have gained control because of the availability of family planning.

The budding movement for men for gender equality has been motivated by the women's advancement towards gender equality. In Africa, the most active groups of men for gender equality have been

formed by men who have felt left behind by women in organising for change. In the programme for gender equality, particularly mobilising men for the fight against violence on women and the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS, the majority of the groups are faith based. They have been formed to fill the gap that men felt as they witnessed women gaining empowerment and providing support to other women in ways that men could never match. The post-Beijing period witnessed a focus on the girl child compared to the boy child that has rang a wake-up call to men that things are not right in the masculinity arena. The debate on the boy child is gradually emerging as an issue and agenda for male action. Male visionaries who have in the past pointed to the need for creating new masculinities are beginning to get a hearing from other men, as they recognise the need for men to wake up from their slumber and pay attention to the inevitable changes that have come with the human rights and gender equality movement.

While patriarchy confers all the power to the male in society, men are also heavily represented on the losing side. Men are learning that there is a cost to pay for the things patriarchy has taught and allowed them. Male domination over women in matters of sexuality and the abuse of such power is a primary factor behind the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is not a coincidence that the most patriarchal societies are the same societies where the pandemic is ravaging humanity with the greatest impact. The cost of patriarchal excesses is felt in other facets of life. For example there are more men in prisons, mental hospitals, victims of drug and alcohol abuse, and in gangs; and these conditions are also in turn impacting the spread of the HIV/AIDS and the inevitable end in graves.

This fact has not escaped the notice of the visionary men in societies, in developing and developed countries. Attitudes are gradually changing as more men recognise the value and benefits of societies built on principles of gender equality, justice and freedom. Men who are concerned about the future generation of men are beginning to appreciate the need for constructing new and alternative masculinities, which will among other things inculcate gender equality as a social norm. More men are joining in activities to sensitise men on issues of gender and the dangers posed by such evils as gender based violence and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Through these interventions men have started rethinking their roles and status regarding other issues such as reproductive health, family responsibility, including the nurturing and care of children. The role of men in socialising boys to develop new masculinities is one of the areas where programmes for the empowerment of the girl child have motivated men to act to empower the boy child.

Masculinity and HIV/AIDS

The concept of masculinity differs from one society to the other, depending on the socio-cultural situation. It is defined as a set of attributes, values, functions and behaviours that are considered normal conditions of men in a given culture. In most societies masculinity is culturally constructed as essentially a dominant person who discriminates against and subordinates women and other men, especially those who do not conform to similar behaviour. Boys are socialised and modelled along this pattern from birth and through the life cycle. Social systems ensure compliance to this behaviour. Men who deviate from the defined behaviour are ostracised and assumed to take the side of women. The fear to be labeled as

women keeps many men and boys from supporting gender equality and defending the rights of women. The socialisation of boys and men regarding sexuality is one of the areas of masculinities that are of major concern today, in face of the HIV/AIDS, especially in Africa. Most men and boys are socialised to believe that they are entitled to have sex and that it is natural to have many partners. Boys and men are socialised to believe that sex is their right and that they are entitled to it whenever they want it. Girls are socialised to be submissive, service oriented and self-sacrificial. They grow up believing it is their duty to serve and satisfy men. Some women believe the lie that it is natural for men to have many partners or to exercise power over them. Even when they know their partners are involved in risky behaviour, they lack the power to negotiate safe sex and to say no to irresponsible men. Polygamy is an accepted norm by both women and men in many societies; and multiple partners are justified as a form of informal polygamy. The informal polygamy is seen as a right to have sex with many women without obligations of fidelity or responsibility to the women or the children conceived in these relations. Widow inheritance, female genital cutting and other cultural practices where men are the beneficiaries have increased the threat of HIV/AIDS for themselves and the women.

Men and HIV/AIDS

Men, women and children are at risk of HIV/AIDS. Men's vulnerability is made higher by their patterns of behaviour, modes of socialisation, peer pressure, prevailing concepts of masculinity, alcohol and drug abuse, violence, hostile environments, cultural practices and norms. Men have significant control over women's sexual lives. Many use violence, psychological, economic or social pressure to insist on sex with their partners. Further they use the same advantages to have many sex partners. Even when aware of their own vulnerability, most women have little opportunity or power to protect themselves from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Men are placed at risk by masculine values, which discourage them from protecting themselves. In a recent consultation with some men in Nairobi, they traced the risky behaviour many of them indulge in to the way they were socialised and brought up to show masculine prowess and power over women and girls.

Culture plays an important role in the spread of HIV/AIDS. Practices such as widow inheritance, polygamy, female genital cutting, early sexuality and dry sex affect the individual's risk of contracting or transmitting HIV. Some men use violence to make their partners have sex with them. Sex coercion happens in and outside the home. Children may encounter violence from parents, older members, close relatives, older friends, youth gangs, domestic workers or teachers. Younger girls are forced or enticed into sex relations with older men because these men believe that young girls are free of the virus. In the recent past cases of violation of baby girls by adults have greatly increased, and as the pandemic ravages communities there is no end to the atrocities being committed by many in situations of despair, and who are looking for cure even in the most unlikely places.

Rape among men in prisons is a common occurrence, which may be through consent, rape or other forms of exploitation. Wars and political instability create refugees persons who are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS because of a multiplicity of factors including inadequate protection, poverty, poor nutrition, inaccessibility to health services, the use of rape as a war weapon and forced

transactional sex. Drug and alcohol abuse have a direct relationship with HIV transmission because of contaminated syringes. Drug and alcohol use impairs the judgement of users and could lead to risky behaviour such as sharing of partners and sex rituals.

Men's Involvement in Care and Support

The gender division of labour in most societies puts the burden of looking after the sick on women. Often women will care for the men in their families, but if women get infected, they depend on their children or relatives to look after them. Involving men in the prevention, care and support of those living with the epidemic is one of the ways of bringing change. Men are the key decision-makers in all aspects of the transmission and the power to protect themselves and their partners. Engaging men in giving care brings them face to face with the realities of HIV/AIDS, and the need for change. Men's participation in dialogue, giving personal testimonies and analysis of things that are happening to men and boys in families and in society is one of the effective strategies that has been used to help those men living with HIV/AIDS and for helping others to change their behaviour. In most societies, women have support groups and more openly share information and concerns than men. Men and boys have been socialised to believe they know more than women, and therefore feel threatened when women know more. Creating forums for men to share, discuss and agree on action is an effective way of mobilising their support and changing their attitudes and 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. Boys' camps are another common activity where they learn under the guidance of men and older youth new values.

In several African countries faith based organisations have taken a lead in these 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. Media programmes, production of educational materials, drama and theatre groups are some of the other activities that are gaining popularity. In Kenya, an annual event known as the national drama and music festival is playing a crucial role in mobilising the creativity of young people in schools through-out the nation in composing songs and drama on the theme of HIV/AIDS. Both boys and girls' schools have been involved and this has greatly contributed to the awareness creation among youth of the dangers posed by the pandemic.

The Men for Gender Equality Initiative in Africa

The Men for Gender Equality Initiative is one of the budding initiatives to mobilise men to support gender equality in Africa. The long term goal is to create a movement of men in Africa who support gender equality. It builds on existing efforts to mobilise men to support gender based programmes such as the elimination of gender based violence, men in reproductive health, men in the churches and men in the fight against HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is a collaborative initiative between the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) and national organizations working with men for gender equality in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia and South Africa, initially. The Malawi Council of Churches is the lead partner organisation and Network contact for Malawi. The combination of the agenda to fight gender based violence with the campaign to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS is one of the strategies of mobilising male support to programmes for gender equality.

The initiative is based on the recognition of the vital role men play in leadership in private- and public spheres; and the impact they could have in transforming gender relations, if they had the knowledge and commitment to do so. Further, the initiative is based on the knowledge that in many countries there are some already existing efforts by individual men or small groups of men, who are willing to take action in support of women's empowerment and gender equality. The initiative aims at mobilising such men, bringing them together; and involving them in programmes to reach, mobilise and influence other men to join the movement of men in support of gender equality and in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Strategies for the future

The fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic requires the efforts of everybody in society, especially men who hold the power of decision-making at every level of, from the bedroom to the Statehouses and other power bases of policy, politics and resources. Innovative, bold and rigorous approaches to HIV/AIDS prevention and care of those affected are urgently required and men are critical players at all these levels. Countries like Uganda that have made remarkable strides in halting the spread of the pandemic offer 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. Male political leaders, have a particularly important role to play in spreading the message, and as the President of Kenya Hon. Mwai Kibaki recently told his fellow men in an international forum, the choice is between life and death and they must choose life.

The private sector approach to reaching men has been successfully tried in many countries to support HIV/AIDS prevention and care programmes at the workplace. Integrating these services with family planning/reproductive health training and service delivery, contraceptive social marketing, and strengthening health finance systems has been an important strategy of mobilising men in programmes

that in the past were considered women's services. The private sector has suffered heavy losses from the HIV/AIDS pandemic and many companies are now investing in education, awareness creation, support and counselling programmes. Important lessons have been learned from private sector approaches to reproductive health and these continue to offer models for involving men in the campaign against HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The fight against HIV/AIDS pandemic must adopt an approach that emphasizes the collective responsibility of individuals, community groups, different levels of government and other agencies; particularly emphasising the role of men in combating the pandemic. Men must be in the forefront of the prevention of HIV infection, mitigation of the impact of the epidemic on individuals and communities and provision of health care and compassion, just like they have taken leadership in other sectors. Orphan support programmes have placed a heavy burden on women and men must be mobilised to support and contribute to these programmes at family and community levels.

Programs should be implemented at the grassroots level, communicating with people in familiar ways that are consistent with the local culture, and include all members of society, as opposed to targeting certain high-risk groups. This will mean that everyone in a community is exposed to the consequences of HIV/AIDS. Openness in discussing HIV/AIDS and its effect, thereby reducing the stigma associated with the infection has contributed greatly to the decline in the disease in such countries as Uganda, where men, including those living with HIV/AIDS, political leaders, community and faith leaders, musicians and football stars have led the way in speaking out about the pandemic. There is new debate in several countries on whether political leaders should go for voluntary testing and also whether in view of the important roles they play they should publicly disclose their status. Men should be encouraged to open such issues for discussion among themselves and influence others to test.

Men should be specifically targeted as members of communities, leaders, workers, parents and spouses and be involved in learning through educational programmes, and in designing interventions to reach other men. This strategy ensures that interventions are designed by those who are most knowledgeable about how HIV/AIDS affects them as individuals, their families, and the community at large, and also about what issues need to be addressed. For example, the involvement of people living with AIDS will enable them to influence policy debate, reduce discrimination and stigma, and enhance advocacy for review of the policy framework and legal system in order to eliminate practices that discriminate against those people living with AIDS. Peer education in schools and work places is an effective strategy in maintaining and encouraging behavioral change. Sex education in school, out of school, peer clubs, community groups, games club, universities, colleges and work places can attract large audiences of men and boys.

More men must be involved in programs that are geared towards prevention, which is important in curbing the spread of the disease. In addition there should be more programmes for helping people who already have HIV/AIDS and their families to cope with it. Provision of medication, access to cheaper drugs, and social support to such families is vital. Reaching men is one of the innovative ways of dealing with the HIV/AIDS pandemic particularly aiming at capacity building in technical and management skills, information gathering and sharing, monitoring the pandemic and adapting programs to meet the

most critical needs, especially researching and establishing how men's behavior, attitudes and practices change.

The men's initiative should particularly target male political, private sector, faith based organisations and policy level male leadership. Political commitment and local ownership of the initiative are important, and so is the involvement from the top, recognizing that men at every level are instrumental to the success of prevention and support programs. Experiences with the HIV/AIDS have shown more than any other crisis in human history that while it is relatively easy to provide health services and train people in how to cope with epidemics, as was done in the elimination of smallpox and polio, the more serious and challenging issue regarding HIV/AIDS is how to change male attitudes and sexual behaviour. This requires the mobilisation and involvement of men and boys from the cradle to the grave in order to comprehensively deal with the pandemic now and into the future.

Partners with Women in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS

The involvement of men in the campaign for gender equality is a social innovation. Like all innovations, it has the different characters who cause change, and those who will resist it to the very end. Men who support gender equality and those mobilising other men to fight HIV/AIDS are the innovators and early adopters, 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, to bring more of their kind into the movement. For those who come into the gender equality movement because they feel oppressed by the empowerment of women and therefore the need to oppose it from inside, we have to prepare to dialogue and eventually win. In more than two decades of work in gender programming, the following categories of men who support gender equality have been identified or observed.

Visionary men who have recognised that gender equality is the answer to many of the ills that have bedevilled society are to be found even in the most patriarchal societies. These 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 as well as men living with HIV/AIDS.

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, 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 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 attracted the participation of many men and as the human rights agenda has evolved to encompass more and more areas of human relations, more men have been moved to join in action. 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 now includes the human rights dimension and calls for the use of the human rights approach to prevention and protection of those living with HIV/AIDS. Young men who have been brought up in environments where equality is a norm are less likely to be threatened by gender equality. Many young men are now joining campaigns on human rights, HIV/AIDS, against gender based violence and democracy. Gender sensitisation courses with university groups, public debates, media programmes and community peer groups are some of the activities that have attracted young men who support gender equality.

Men who consider themselves the advocates for the oppressed men and especially those who feel that men are endangered by the gender equality movement have joined programmes for gender equality to represent the views of the perceived "oppressed men". The reproductive rights of women have particularly caused bitterness among some sections of men who feel that the whole approach empowers women at the expense of men, especially regarding their rights as fathers. Male grievances include some provisions in the legislation on domestic violence, father's rights, the rights of the abused man, the marginalisation of the boy child, the welfare of the aging males and the increasing plight of the unemployed men. Men's support groups with the objectives of shielding men from oppression are some of the structures that have come up in response to the needs of men who are threatened by gender equality and the empowerment of women. These groups are useful forums for addressing issues of HIV/AIDS and of changing men's attitudes.

Men living with HIV/AIDS are among the men who have learned the hard way, and have resolved to join the campaign to help other men avoid the pitfalls. Others 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. 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. The 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 are found in every society and can become key advocates for gender equality, given the skills and knowledge of the issues, and the platform. Many of the men in the women's rights movement are there because of the love of 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. These groups of men can also be mobilised to support the campaign of men against the spread of HIV/AIDS including the protection of women and girls.

Conclusion

The hope for the future lies in changing the attitudes and behaviour of the boys of today, the men of tomorrow, who will not be afraid of equality with women. This should include developing new masculine and feminine ideologies especially among the youth. The involvement of men in programmes for gender equality and especially the fight against the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic borrows a leaf from the struggle to end apartheid. The struggle made great gains when some white campaigners joined the struggle and campaigned against the evil. The perpetrators of the evil listened to their own; and created a new voice. Men who support equality with women are powerful and effective advocates for change. Men must take the lead in dismantling the patriarchal systems and must refuse to continue to be beneficiaries of the evil system that dehumanises and subordinates more than half of every patriarchal society. Our task is to show that the gains for them to do so far outweigh the losses. The threat of HIV/AIDS is one of the major losses to society that must motivate men to change. The gender equality movement has built a strong base on which the threat posed by the pandemic in eroding the gains made in the last three decades can be tackled in an equal partnership between women and men.