Rutgers
For sexual and reproductive health and rights

Men and boys challenging gender inequality in Kenya

Gender equality as a catalyst for lasting impact

Power to You(th) Kenya

In Kenya, many people still believe men should have power over women. Power imbalances between men and women – and the older and younger generations – are common, while traditional and religious beliefs underpin strict norms and practices.

A lack of meaningful involvement from men in addressing – or even talking about – harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and sexual and gender-based violence has long undermined the effectiveness of work on these issues.

In Kenya, men are typically the leaders in politics, religion, culture and the household. Decision-making processes are unequal, even on matters directly affecting women. Women have been expected to accept their position and often feel helpless to challenge the status quo.

"These are perceptions ingrained in our spirits"

"We have perceptions of exactly what men and women should do. No one is taught in class that these are the roles of men or women. These are perceptions ingrained in our spirits, in our brains, and move from one generation to another in tales from our fathers and grandfathers," explains Dominic Kimitta, gender focal person for Power To You(th) programme partner Network for Adolescent and Youth of Africa in Kenya.

Grace Shirim from Amref Health Africa in Kenya, the GTA focal point for the Kenyan Power to You(th) consortium, says "The effects of patriarchy and masculinity are in many cases negative and toxic. "We have the issue of young girls being married early – but men are the ones marrying them. But at a community level, on a project tackling gender issues it is really hard to have men involved. They think these are just 'women's issues' that have nothing to do with them."

Bringing men on board

Power to You(th) Kenya's work holds true to a key principle in the gender-transformative approach: 'engaging boys and men in creating healthy relationships and promoting gender equality and engaging them as gendered beings, part of the solution with their own sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) needs'.

Power to You(th) supports adolescent girls and young women, especially those from remote or marginalised communities, to speak up on the issues affecting them, make informed choices and take control of their futures. The programme promotes gender equality by helping young people to understand their rights and challenge harmful traditions and barriers that limit their opportunities.

Issues like child marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence, and unintended pregnancy continue to affect millions of young people around the world. Power to You(th) works to prevent these practices by addressing the gender expectations behind them and enabling girls and young women to be meaningfully included in making the decisions that shape their lives.

POWER TO YOUTH
CHANGE STARTS WITH YOU(TH)

About Rutgers' gender-transformative approach

Gender-transformative approaches aim to address root causes of gender inequality and power imbalances by challenging harmful, rigid and unequal social norms. They work to replace these with more inclusive and respectful ones, leading to better SRHR outcomes and helping to prevent violence and discrimination.

Rutgers' GTA key strategies include promoting and protecting human rights, encouraging people to critically reflect on traditional gender roles and expectations, highlighting the negative impacts of harmful norms on SRHR and the benefits of change, supporting the empowerment of women and girls, including those often excluded or disadvantaged, and involving boys and men in efforts to improve SRHR and promote equality for all members of society.

The programme has brought men on board to discuss SRHR issues – often for the first time. This is changing their perspectives about women and girls, and it is helping to combat sexual and gender-based violence. There is increased engagement and ownership within communities, and a growing number of trained male champions who are advocating against negative masculinity.

"The programme is part of the change we want to see," says Dominic. "It is creating platforms for more men to be community influencers to change perceptions on female genital mutilation, child marriage and teenage pregnancy."

Grace adds: "One of the key things for us was localising gender-transformative approaches so the community can identify with them, and using existing structures or groups in the community so they have that ownership. (We have been) identifying common platforms – it's easier to find an organised group than taking individuals from different places and bringing them together.

Our approaches have been custom-made to fit the needs and priorities of each community."

Since the inception of Power to You(th), Kenya has trained approximately 300 male champions to raise awareness of issues such as sexual and gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, teenage pregnancies and child marriage. These men have been at the forefront of advocacy to end these harmful practices. They have also been mobilizing other men to join the course and cascade the trainings to the grassroot level.

The male champions are drawn from different parts of each community and include Boda Boda (motor-cycles taxi) riders, sand harvesters, beach management units, male teachers, cultural elders, youth leaders, clan elders, religious leaders and chiefs.

Nyumba Kumi elders become champions

Nyumba Kumi is a Swahili phrase meaning 'ten households'. It describes a type of village policing in which ten houses are represented by one individual, usually an elder, who is responsible for managing household-on-household or neighbour on neighbour conflicts. The vast majority of those appointees are men.

Kenya's Ministry of Interior officially recognises the Nyumba Kumi system, and elders are mostly appointed by the local administration to represent the ten households.

The system has provided a way to engage community members on harmful practices. As the structure is recognised by the community, it provides a way to report, monitor and address female genital mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence and teenage pregnancies in rural areas.

Through Power to You(th), over 30 members of the Nyumba Kumi have been trained on sexual and gender-based violence referral mechanisms and how to better report and refer cases related to female genital mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence and teenage pregnancies to the relevant services.

Nyumba Kumi created a platform that links civil society organisations, government and communities. They have also provided County departments, including the Gender Department, with statistical information on cases of teenage pregnancies, female genital mutilation and sexual and gender-based violence.

A challenge with the Nyumba Kumi Initiative is that some of the elders involved are political appointees. In many cases, these appointees have mostly focused on the sitting leadership's political priorities and gaining political support from the community, rather than influencing gender issues and harmful cultural practices.

And with each new administration, appointees in community structures often change, as leaders prefer individuals who align with their agendas. This lack of continuity can undermine efforts to address harmful cultural practices and sexual and gender-based violence.

Power to You(th) has worked hand-in-hand with the Nyumba Kumi initiative (NKI), training the elders on reporting and referral pathways, bringing an increase in vigilance and surveillance of sexual and gender-based violence and preventing incidents.

Champions have emerged and intergenerational forums have been held to talk about gender issues and key challenges facing girls and women.

"The men have been pivotal in making sure issues to do with sexual and gender-based violence and female genital mutilation are addressed, and making sure cases are reported at the police stations, worked upon and followed up," says Dominic Kimitta.

Previously there were many challenges with how the local police unit handled cases relating to girls and women. But intensive capacity strengthening and trainings, coupled with lobbying and advocacy for reforms within the unit, has made the police more effective at dealing with these cases. Efforts by various civil society organisations resulted in gender desks being established within police stations, which are specifically trained to deal with these issues. This has also resulted in a collaboration with the Court Users Committees in which civil society organisations, the police, Children Services and the Public Prosecution department, among others, meet frequently to address the gaps and challenges in accessing justice while advocating for the prioritisation and fast tracking of gender-related cases.

"We have a very passionate, motivated champion in Mr Karokia, the NKI chair for the entire county. We have seen him take centre stage in talking about gender issues. Most people now believe he talks more about gender than security.

He has been inspired by his daughters. With age comes a lot of respect and responsibility. With the responsibility entrusted in him as chair and as a father, he believes he has an opportunity to influence the community on issues to do with gender and women", Dominic adds.

Walking with the Moran

The Moran Walks initiative was custom-built to create safer, more equitable communities in remote Kajiado County by encouraging young Maasai men (Moran) to become advocates for gender equality and SRHR champions.

Morans are aged between 17 and 25. They are deeply embedded in Maasai norms, values and culture, and they are groomed by cultural elders to become the next custodians of the culture.

"Not many organisations engage them as they are mostly in areas that are hard to access. Holding our discussions in their villages gives them a sense of security and trust,' says Grace. "Knowing Power to You(th) is a project that directly targets them makes them feel included and that their needs are finally being recognised."

Power to Youth has engaged and trained 200 Morans, not only during the Moran Walks but also through cross-border engagements, as Kajiado County Borders the United Republic of Tanzania.

It is because these young men are rooted in the Maasai culture that they support the continuation of traditional practices. Most believe they cannot marry uncut girls, which pressurises girls to undergo female genital mutilation for fear of being deemed unfit for marriage.

Grace Shirim, who is Maasai herself, explains: "These people have never talked about female genital mutilation. Nobody has ever told them it is not a good thing. For them, they know they have to marry a woman who is cut.

They were so shy to even talk about sex. Issues to do with intimacy and sexuality is none of their business. We told them the effects of female genital mutilation, what happens to the vagina of a girl once she has been circumcised. They were closing their eyes and shying away. Explaining this enabled them to realise young girls are truly suffering. By deconstructing myths and misconceptions, we were able to convince them it's okay to marry an uncut girl.

For those already with children, we could see how their emotions were invoked. They swore not to allow their daughters to go through such a horrific experience. Some of them confessed how their wives had suffered during childbirth."

These sessions incorporate a lot of dancing and swinging of heads, which is part of Moran culture. The group walks through the community holding banners in the Maasai language so everyone in the community can understand the messages about harmful cultural practices.

After identifying Morans as a key group to target, Power to You(th) organised Moran forums.

These forums focused on the medical, social, physical and psychological impact of female genital mutilation, and provide information about key national and county policies that criminalise the practice. Awareness of the legal implications of female genital mutilation and marrying young girls has greatly discouraged the Morans from continuing with these practices.

But most Morans cannot read and they are deeply rooted in their culture which means changing their attitudes and perceptions takes time and intensive, face-to-face engagement.

> "Engaging with men for the first time – of course, it's not easy. It's not a sure bet when we engage a male group that it will work. There is pushback, because this is not what they normally do."
>
> Denis Ochiel, communications officer for Amref Health Africa in Kenya

Working in 'the shadows' to challenge norms and attitudes

Denis Ochiel, communications officer for Amref Health Africa in Kenya adds: "Not everyone agrees to come with us. In the Maasai community, not all Morans will come. Working with boda-boda (motorcycle taxi) riders hasn't worked in all counties. Some are very shy, not ready yet to be the 'face of a campaign'."

The Power to You(th) Kenya team carefully picks champions from male groups who engage with the issues and show an understanding of the harms traditional practices can bring to serve as an example for others to follow.

"Initially, they think speaking out about these kinds of things will make them unpopular in their community. But then they see their colleague on the TV or the radio", Denis explains. "Speaking about harmful practices can make you very popular and give you respect. When you use one person as an example of what is possible, others follow suit.

> "In Kajiado, we had a man who married an uncut woman. It's not something you would ordinarily be proud of in such a culture. But when you package his messaging and that person is appreciated by the government, by the media, by the elders, others want to follow."
>
> Denis Ochiel, communications officer for Amref Health Africa in Kenya

This is a continuous process of capacity strengthening. Even those who refuse to join the bandwagon, it doesn't mean we won't work with them. We do not leave them behind. When facing backlash, when we hear a 'no', we have a challenge to work on. So let's re-strategize and approach this differently."

A big barrier for Power to You(th) has been communities feeling like NGOs are trying to erode their culture and identity with a 'foreign agenda'. The team has sought to overcome this by working closely with influential cultural elders who are well conversant with community dynamics.

Progressive religious leaders and reformed female cutters have been helpful in steering communities away from harmful cultural practices. One Homa Bay pastor was vehemently opposed to Power to You(th)'s agenda. But after working with the pastor through a capacity strengthening initiative he is now speaking in his own church about sexual and gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy, and has recruited more pastors to join the groups.

"We reach out to the leader and talk to them about what we are doing or call them into one of our sensitisation sessions", says Grace Shirim. "We identify an individual who is very influential – in every group there is one person able to pull the masses, someone they will be able to hear.

In most cases, when we want the community to be part of our activities, we use the chief to mobilise the people. We will also use community-led organisations already working in that area to mobilise people we want to come to our trainings.

It has been a long journey to reach a place where they will even listen to us. We have been very intentional to leverage on existing structures, to work in shadows."

"For a woman it is not easy": how Maasai Grace found ways to change elders' attitudes

For Grace, as a young Maasai woman, having conversations about sensitive topics like gender with highly influential, older men in a very patriarchal society, has been personally challenging.

"I will say for a woman, it has not been easy. You can't go to another man's house and start doing whatever you want. But now the community is opening up and they are very welcoming. Being a Maasai girl who is educated, they find it so interesting. They say: she's dedicated, she has gone to university, she's one of our own. It's a good thing."

Grace also describes the need to find ways to deal with the challenge of local groups or individuals making financial requests or having other expectations.

Grace says: "Sometimes when you want to engage, they will ask: what do you have for us? It's not very effective to engage with people who have very high expectations you cannot meet. It can really disengage how we work with them."

But the Power to You(th) team has discovered that recognition or opening doors to the corridors of power can often be a greater reward than money.

Denis adds: “A group of pastors wanted something we couldn’t provide. We connected them with the county government. We couldn’t give them access to financial instruments, but the government can.

That changes everything. Once they meet the governor and they are recognised as a group working to fight sexual and gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy, it motivates them a notch higher. They are recognised. That’s the biggest thing. It can jumpstart the whole process.”

Building political support

Politicians believe gender issues are not a vote winner, so few will openly support the fight against sexual and gender-based violence and female genital mutilation.

“We’ve seen our politicians shying away from speaking about these issues”, says Grace. “We manage this by identifying different policymakers who are very vocal and passionate about the issues of women at the county level, make them our champions, bring them together and amplify their voices to influence others to follow the trend.”

Dominic Kimitta adds: “I want to see members of the county assembly on the forefront. They play a very important role in legislation but are very limited in getting time to talk about these things. I must commend the members of county assembly who passed a county-specific female genital mutilation policy – the first of its kind in the country. A lot of CSO support came together to influence the action. We really look forward to seeing more politicians in this space.”

Massive shift for men

Many Power to You(th) activities now involve older men who never thought they would openly talk about female genital mutilation or sit down in groups to discuss sexual and gender-based violence, let alone seek to address these issues and take action.

But these men now see that these issues are not only about women, they are about everyone. This is a massive cultural shift.

The gender-transformative approach intentionally avoids causing harm to any group when bringing change to a community. It is designed to involve and benefit everyone. This means empowering teenage girls and women, but also adolescent boys and men, and working with young people like the Morans and the sand harvesters, and cultural elders like the Nyumba Kumi. Everyone is included. ■

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