# From ‘women’s issues’ to everyone’s issues

Rutgers

Power to You(th) Kenya

**In Kenya, men and boys are socialised to express a certain kind of masculinity and communities often believe in the power of men over women. Imbalances between men and women – and the older and younger generations – are common, while traditional and religious beliefs underpin strict norms and practices.**

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,” explains Dominic Kimitta, gender focal person for Power To You(th) partner, Network for Adolescent and Youth of Africa in Kenya. “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, that move from one generation to another in tales from our fathers and grandfathers.”

“Men play a key contributing factor to the issues women are going through. We have the issue of young girls being married early – but men are the ones marrying them”, says Grace Shirim, gender focal person for Amref Health Africa in Kenya. “At 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.”

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> Grace Shirim, gender focal person for Amref Health Africa in Kenya

## Bringing men on board

Power to You(th) Kenya is changing this by working with boys and men. The aim is to involve boys and men in creating healthy relationships and promoting gender equality, making them part of the solution with their own sexual and reproductive

health and rights (SRHR). “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.”

Men are brought 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 harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and child marriage, and sexual and gender-based violence. There is increased interest in these issues within communities, and a growing number of trained male champions who are advocating against negative masculinity, promoting gender equality and leading and participating in grassroots efforts to bring about change.

“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,” Grace adds.

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

## “Speaking about harmful practices can give you respect”

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

“Not everyone agrees to work with us. Working with boda-boda (motorcycle taxi) riders for example hasn’t worked in all counties. Some are very shy, not ready yet to be the ‘face of a campaign’. Initially, they think speaking out about gender issues will make them unpopular in their community. But then they see their colleague on the TV or the radio. 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”, Denis Ochiel, communications officer Amref Health Africa in Kenya, explains.

It's a continuous process of capacity building. Even with people initially refusing to join the bandwagon, doesn’t mean we won’t work with them. When we hear a ‘no’, we have a challenge to work on.”

“We reach out to community leaders and talk to them about what we are doing or call them into one of our sensitisation sessions”, adds Grace .

“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 will work with the chief to mobilise the people. We will also use community-led organisations already working in that area to reach people we want to come to our trainings.”

As a young Maasai woman, Grace says that speaking with highly influential, older men 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.”

## A 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 these issues are not only about women, they are about everyone. In many communities, intentionally involving men and boys has brought a massive cultural shift.