TRANSFORMING MASCULINITIES

A qualitative research summary

📷 Gender Champions training in Bangui, Central African Republic, 2016. Photo: Prabu Deepan/Tearfund

'Transforming Masculinities' is a faith-based approach to preventing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and promoting gender equality through addressing harmful concepts of gender. Tearfund's Transforming Masculinities work started in 2013. Between 2013 and 2017, Tearfund commissioned a series of research projects in Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, Nigeria and Rwanda, as interventions were being rolled out in these countries. The research investigated current social norms around gender, particularly concepts of masculinities, as well as attitudes towards and understandings of SGBV, to help Tearfund shape the Transforming Masculinities process.

This brief highlights the key themes and issues that arose from the research. It emphasises how religious scriptures, the Bible and the Qur'an, can be used to justify and perpetuate harmful forms of masculinity and reinforce gender inequality.

Harmful gender norms

Prevailing social norms that maintain men's superiority over women, and which are accepted and embraced by both men and women, were highlighted as a cause of concern in all regions. In daily and domestic life, most participants held the view that men and women are not equal in society: the man is regarded as the head of the household culturally and religiously.

'In any partnership or relationship there must be someone who has the final say, even in a democratic system. This is the role for men. The man must negotiate with the wife first, but if they don't agree the man must make the decision and the wife must accept it.' (Liberia)

Men typically had the ascribed status of provider and protector while women's ascribed status was that of caregiver who looks after the family and all the household chores. In Burundi, 94 per cent of women agreed that their primary role is to look after their families and take

tearfund

care of their households. In Nigeria, however, norms are evolving as women are beginning to earn and provide for their families.

Gendered practices

Another underlying theme in the research was SGBV. Participants described marriage as becoming 'one flesh' in which 'one flesh cannot harm its body'. However, some participants felt that a man should be able to use physical violence as a form of punishment when a woman is disobedient. Both men and women agreed that a woman should tolerate violence for the sake of her family.

'…the man must then slap her to show her the way.' (Liberia)

Structural factors

Role of church and faith communities

These harmful gender norms and practices are predominantly informed by religion and culture and are accepted with little consideration of the possibility of any change to the status quo.

The role of faith communities in all contexts was limited to promoting healthy traditional relationships. This largely meant asking men not to abuse their partners, urging men to act responsibly and provide for their families, and asking women to respect and submit to their husbands. Some participants felt that faith leaders should counsel perpetrators and pray for survivors of SGBV in addition to teaching based on scriptures, because their duty is to keep families together.

The following are quotes from research participants, expressing their understanding of their faiths' teaching of gender equality.

'Women were created from the man's ribs and as a result the man is the head of the family. Man and wife must be taught how to respect this order of things. Anything else brings confusion.' (Liberia)

'In Islam, the Qur'an tells women that they should be submissive to their husbands so they can go to Paradise.' (CAR)

In all contexts, the role of faith communities in responding to gender norms, SGBV and the promotion of gender equality was noted as very limited. This limitation includes the lack of adequate and up-to-date theological and theoretical knowledge beyond their religious practices and doctrines, as well as the requisite knowledge of practices and strategies in the gender equality/women's rights sector.

Faith Leaders training in Ngiri, Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo, 2015. Photo: Uwezo Lele Baghuma/Tearfund

📷 A couple from our work in Liberia who model love and equality in their relationship. Photo: Elisabeth van den Dool

'But one reason why the church is often slow in responding to these situations is its acute lack of sufficient information and knowledge for meaningful action. This, too, is partly because we are not undertaking the necessary research that will bring such issues to the forefront. As a result, we do not know the depth of this problem, nor are we prepared to act on behalf of those it hurts.' (Rev Nuwoe James Kiamu, PHD President of the United Liberia Inland Church)

Lack of safe spaces

Participants stressed that, in theory, the task of the faith communities is to care for survivors of SGBV who suffer its consequences. However, they acknowledged significant barriers, including the fact that conservative faith leaders demonise survivors of SGBV. These barriers also include stigma, shame, a desire to keep confidentiality, guilt, distrust, poor implementation of the law and, in the case of married women, fear of losing their marriages. An older man described the situation facing women who had been raped:

'Women who are raped by militiamen are abandoned by their husbands. Because of the stigma, these women have to leave their neighbourhoods to seek shelter elsewhere. Their husbands are afraid that raped women will be HIV-positive and so they abandon them.' (CAR)

Role of government

Most participants were not aware of the government's role in responding to SGBV, and consequently had no expectations of the government to take action and respond to their needs. Their call was for NGOs, especially international ones, to support them in their areas of need, such as water and sanitation, schooling and vocational training. Some participants did identify a limited role for the government, in the form of raising awareness of the prevalence of SGBV.

Poverty and the additional burden on women

Poverty also stood out as a theme in these countries. Poverty was identified as a source of most other social ills, such as rape, transactional sex, and child abandonment. Women are the ones who bear the burden of care.

'As women we are the ones left alone to find food for our children because the men run away when they are not employed and do not have small businesses. We must then find ways to do this.' (Liberia)

Faith Leaders training in Ngiri, Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo, 2015. Photo: Uwezo Lele Baghuma/Tearfund

Conclusion and recommendations

Harmful gender roles, practices and concepts of manhood cannot be addressed without addressing the cultural and religious norms that influence them.

Promoting positive masculinities must therefore be seen as imperative within the developmental context of empowering women and girls. From the research, it is evident that people hold conversations, views and interpretations of scriptures that need to be addressed as a starting point for building equality.

Church and faith communities

There are many opportunities for faith communities, and both faith-based and secular organisations to intervene and impact on behaviour and practices. For instance:

- **Enabling safe spaces**
  Faith communities need to become safe spaces for survivors in which their voices can be heard.

Interventions can support faith communities to fulfil this role. Safe spaces for men also need to be created where men can discuss the concept of positive masculinities, and where discussions can be facilitated to enable them to share – with peers and church leaders – their frustrations, challenges and traumatic experiences. This is crucial to help men adapt to the changes around them and find healing from past experiences.

- **Male-focused transformation interventions**
  Interventions need to target the cause of violence in order to break its cycle. Shifting the dominant negative gender norms that frame men as leaders of subservient women, and promoting gender equality, requires an intervention that includes men. Without engaging men, any intervention at best only addresses symptoms. Engaging men will create a space and process to address the cause of negative gender norms and inequalities.

REFERENCES

- Deepan P (2014) *Men, faith and masculinities: Burundi*, Tearfund

- Deepan P (2014) *Men, faith and masculinities: Rwanda*, Tearfund

- Deepan P (2014) *Men, faith and masculinities: DRC*, Tearfund

- Loots L (2014) *Transforming masculinities: Great Lakes Region summary report*, Tearfund

- Lesejane D (2017) *Exploring the linkages of gender, masculinities and faith – Liberia*, Tearfund

- Lesejane D (2018) *Gender, masculinities and social cohesion – Nigeria*, Tearfund

Full reports and the Transforming Masculinities toolkit can be accessed at: tearfund.org/transformingmasculinities