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INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

EN

Rufino Blanco, 8 · 3B - 28028 Madrid (Spain)

www.iffd.org

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Towards 2014: The empowerment of women and men through the promotion of families

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The United Nations Secretary-General's campaign to end violence against women outlines how up to seventy percent of women suffer some sort of physical, sexual, psychological and/or economic violence. These findings call for an urgent commitment by international bodies to act in defense of abused women and girls around the world.

Power and control issues are at the core of violent and abusive behaviors. Its signs are usually present over time. For example, a strong predictor of violent tendencies in adulthood is the amount of violence a child experiences "in the household in which the person was reared,"¹ The effect, is often as insidious as it is subtle as many children exposed to an environment of ongoing violence and abuse internalize and come to accept this otherwise abusive behavior as normal.' Thus, the infamous "cycle of violence" is facilitated and reinforced through intergenerational propagation. For this reason, all institutions addressing violence against women and girls emphasize 'quality parenting' as the cornerstone for a loving, nurturing, and safe environment.

Prevention and education

Men play a very important role, as they are key subjects to act towards the respect of women for who they are and for appreciating the good that they bring to society. Indeed, there is a growing awareness that men, in partnership with women, must play a significant role in ending violence against women. Thus, there has been an increase in programs and activities focusing on men's roles in preventing violence against women.

Successful prevention programs are comprehensive, relevant, intensive, incorporate positive messages, and may employ one or more of the following strategies: fostering empathy towards victims, changing individual men's attitudes and behaviors, teaching men to intervene against other men's behavior, and using social marketing strategies to foster positive norms.

In the field of education, both adults and children can develop learning skills that are self-reflective, critical, and process oriented. For example, the International Center for Research on Women in Asia-Pacific has worked diligently to prevent violence against women and girls by educating children in schools as they rightly acknowledge positive change.² They

¹ Tina de Benedictis, Ph.D., Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D., and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., 'Domestic Violence and Abuse: Types, Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Effects' (American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, 2012).

Available at www.helpguide.org.

² The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is a global research institute with headquarters in Washington, D.C. ICRW is comprised of social scientists, economists, public health specialists and demographers, all of whom are experts in gender relations. ICRW's mission is to empower women, advance gender equality and fight poverty in the developing world. To accomplish this, ICRW works with partners to conduct empirical research, build capacity and advocate for evidence-based, practical ways to change policies and programs.

mentioned how “notions of gender roles, appropriate behaviors, and the resolution of conflict through the use of violence are all learned, and hence can be influenced. Primary prevention efforts are necessary as they offer the possibility of preventing the use of violence before it begins. They also provide alternatives of behaviors to children who have witnessed violence in their homes and other intimate surroundings.”³

Similarly, the International Federation for Family Development (IFFD) dedicates significant efforts to helping both women and men by stressing a critical-thinking methodology. The organization works in more than sixty countries around the world helping families achieve healthy relationships, providing parents with enough tools to team-up to make important family decisions, respect each other, become good models for their children, share responsibilities, determine how to balance work and family, etc. In the same path, the Nigerian Women’s Board Educational Cooperation Society, in special consultative status at the UN, is working for a Nigeria where all persons can have access to education of good quality and personal development.⁴ Our modern society underestimates the challenges arising from parenthood and familial relationships in general. We see a clear need to facilitate education for parents as they endeavor to raise healthy, well-adjusted children and our leaders of tomorrow.

IFFD teaches communication skills through its courses, which lead to a better understanding of the important differences between women and men with the goal of fostering the mutual respect and cooperation necessary to reach their common goals together, through measures tailored to parents expectations and children needs without wanting to ideologically influence them. Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept that there are many countries around the world that still keep women from being fully integrated into social, political and economic life. Unfortunately, “prevention programming remains weak in virtually every humanitarian setting around the world”.⁵ Efficient-effective prevention programs are required now more than ever, and initiatives such as the ‘Violence Prevention Initiative’ of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, reflecting “government’s commitment to addressing the problem of violence in this province” could be a good example. The people who work with victims of violence use a specific name to focus on “the concepts in relationships that promote respect, equality and demonstrate appropriate ways of interacting in healthy relationships and ways that people who abuse can now choose to act non-violently”.⁶

Empowering women

The UN women annual report of 2010-2011 records Secretary Generals’ statement saying, “When we empower women, we empower communities, nations and the entire human family.”⁷

Empowering woman can take many forms. For example, empowering women who are mothers is particularly important because they have a strong influence in their families and in their communities as agents of peace. A study by OECD called ‘Doing Better for Families’ shows that mothers who have access to flexible work are most likely to have the children they want. In this sense, policies that empower the woman as mother will directly empower families and their wellbeing.⁸

Empowering women who work is important because a greater presence of women in society will help to manifest the contradictions present when society is organized solely according to the criteria of efficiency and productivity. Women should also receive equal pay for equal work and protection for working mothers should be provided. Policies should focus on conciliation and balance between family and work life, through the recognition of the family and highlighting the role of the family and the value of having a successful family life.

³ Nandita Bhatia, ‘Shaping norms when they form: investing in Primary prevention of gender-based violence through working with children in schools’ (UN Women in cooperation with ESCAP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO, 2012).

Available at <http://www.unwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Report-of-the-EGM-on-Prevention-of-Violence-against-Women-and-Girls.pdf>.

⁴ Women’s Board - Educational Cooperation Society is a Nigerian not-for-profit, non-governmental organization working since 1972 for the development of women of any background, ethnic group or religion. The organization was formally registered in 1974 with the Nigerian Companies Decree under the name of Educational Cooperation Society, the Women’s Board being an autonomous division committed to the promotion of women. It is registered in the Ministry of Women Affairs and Poverty Alleviation in Lagos. The mission statement is “to foster the development of the individual Nigerian woman, empowering her with education and high standards of work and inculcating in her a commitment of service to the community so as to make her a citizen better equipped to participate in the social progress of the country”.

⁵ UN Women in cooperation with ESCAP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO, ‘Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls’ (Bangkok, Thailand, 2012).

⁶ Women’s Policy Office, ‘Developing a Phase II Action Plan to Prevent Violence in Newfoundland and Labrador - Discussion Guide for Partners and Stakeholders’ (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2012).

⁷ UN Women, Annual Report 2010-2011.

Available at: http://www.unwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/UNwomen_AnnualReport_2010-2011_en.pdf.

⁸ Cfr. <http://www.oecd.org/social/socialpoliciesanddata/doingbetterforfamilies.htm>.

Empowering women who are in political positions is important because they will increasingly play a part in the solution of the serious problems of the future. They will also remind governments of the need to condemn those who abuse women sexually and pass laws that defend them from such violence. The United Nations Development Program works to ensure that “women have a real voice in all governance institutions, from the judiciary to the civil service, as well as in the private sector and civil society, so they can participate equally with men in public dialogue and decision-making and influence the decisions that will determine the future of their families and countries”.⁹

Rural women

In my opinion, the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges, coincides with the vision and core objective of all IFFD projects, which is to drive capacity building programmes that directly provide all women, and rural women in particular, with technical skills, literacy, leadership training, health and maternal services, etc., that favorably position and empower them to play a positive role in their own personal and community well being and development.

Nigeria provides an example of it, with a population of 150 million with women constituting approximately 50 per cent. 53 per cent of Nigerians live in the rural areas. Evidence shows that agriculture contributes 45 per cent of the GDP and provides a livelihood for 90 per cent of the rural population. Statistics proves too that over 70 per cent of Nigerians are classified as poor and that over 35 per cent of those in abject poverty live in the rural areas.

Rural women play a major role in agriculture but cultivate less than one hectare of land per household. The consequence of this inequity, which directly impacts food production and hunger, is that women and households headed by women are the most chronically poor.

A number of factors are responsible for this abysmal status of women in this regard.

The most fundamental of these factors is gender inequality in education. The fact that most women in rural Nigeria do not have the benefit of formal education has excluded them from participation in the formal sector of the economy and from accessing credit to increase their agricultural yields. The economic imperatives of globalization and the introduction of certain monetarist policies by the Nigerian State to cope with these, have also further eroded the capacity of rural women to function competitively economically and in a wide spectrum of other activities. This has led to palpable poverty and an increase in rural ailments such as malaria and malnutrition.

Another factor is the rural woman’s lack of political leverage. At present, women in rural areas do not actively participate in the political space, despite the fact that women in pre-colonial Nigeria played complementary roles to the men in making political decisions. This exclusion is not unconnected with the practice of liberal democracy, which is dependent on literacy. This political disempowerment can be corrected through a conscious policy of educating the girl child. Development for rural women cannot be equated strictly with welfare and poverty alleviation alone. Rural women need fundamental changes in power relations and a re-engineering of social structures that perpetuate their disempowerment, such as changes in law, property rights and inheritance.

Rural women are repositories of culture, and despite the onslaught of globalization on indigenous cultural values, they continue to pass these to the next generations through socialization. Through this process the family institution is preserved and children are inculcated with the norms and values of the society.

In view of the foregoing, we suggest the following:

- The liberalization of financial services to encourage domestic savings with a view to allowing rural women access to credit.
- Revamping policies that exclude women from ownership of land so that rural women can have more access to land to increase their agricultural yields.
- Bridging the gender gap in education so that more women would play prominent roles in decision making in order to address systemic discriminations against women.
- Strengthening the institution of the family by encouraging young people to get married and live together to raise a family. This can be done through incentives to those who get married and live together without getting a divorce.

⁹ Cfr. <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/womenempowerment/overview.html>.

The role of men

The men play a very important role in our society and in our families. They are the ones who can protect and honor women, even when they don't fully understand women's way of thinking and doing.

We don't want to go back to ancient civilizations where women didn't have any rights at all, nor do we want to promote the idea of women wanting to exclude the men. To many, it might seem mistaken to seek equality between women and men, providing the idea that women and men are essentially different. However, if we look for synonyms of the word 'equal' we will find terms like 'equivalent', 'coequal', 'even' or 'balanced'. Providing these terms and paying close attention to today's society functionality, we could understand why there is a constant need to talk about equality.

The UN Programme on Family launched a new publication called 'Men in Families' in February of 2011, which mentions the importance of "men embracing women as equal partners and participating in more equitable ways in all aspects of social and family life". The unemployment situation and to vision men with a status role of providers has brought men without a job to "shame, stress, depression, lack of social identity, and for some young men in some settings, increased likelihood of engagement in delinquency, armed violence or other antisocial behaviors".¹⁰

Conclusions

A new push to "the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls"¹¹ could start with a campaign to promote women, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women. Following the recognition of women, education of methods that ensure communication and conflict resolution are needed to achieve non-violent relationships and peace, as preventing ways to avoid abusive behaviors. Lastly, governments should implement policies that empower women in the different stages of their lives, and they should punish those who use any form of violence against women and girls.

Cristina Napolitano.

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¹⁰ 'Men in Families and Family Policy in a Changing World' (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Division for Social Policy and Development, 2011).

Available at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/men-in-families.pdf>.

¹¹ United Nations Resolution 57/181 on 'Elimination of all forms of violence against women, including crimes identified in the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century'.