

## The Vulnerability of Men in Light of Women-targeted Programmes

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### **Introduction**

The idea of making reference to the “vulnerability of men” appears to be a contradiction in terms. If Nicodemus asked, “how can a man be born when he is old?”(John 3:4), one could also ask, “how can a man be vulnerable?” Indeed, how can a man – strong, intelligent, efficient in all areas of life, spiritual giant – ever be vulnerable? How can a man, just below God in everything, ever be vulnerable? How can a man – tough, imposing and secure – ever be vulnerable?

In this presentation, I am arguing that two key processes, namely, the social construction of masculinity and the pre-occupation with “women’s empowerment,” have left men and the boy child vulnerable in the face of sexual and gender-based violence and HIV. However, instead of swinging to the other extreme of getting pre-occupied with men and boys, I am proposing that we need to employ a more holistic approach. I am suggesting that from hereon, we appreciate the need to empower women and men, boys and girls, **together**.

### **The Social Construction of Masculinity**

It is not possible to get into a detailed discussion of the social construction of masculinity. However, it is clear that society plays a major role in shaping boys and men. In a real sense, boys and men are consistently *performing* masculinity. This suggests that there is a pre-existing script that men are expected to act out in any given society. One might be born *male*, but one strives to become *masculine*. Masculinity is not given once and for all: one constantly struggles to achieve it. Religious and cultural factors influence this script. Although there are variations regarding the social expectations of masculinity, there are some qualities that tend to run through. What Uchendu discovered in Nigeria applies to many other contexts:

In general, the youths regard masculine subjects as possessing, or being associated with, certain physical, biological, and psychological qualities, along with elements of personality. These include superior physical strength,

firmness, fearlessness, decisiveness, an ability to protect the weak, to be principled, to control, to conquer, to take risks, provide leadership, to be assertive, to enjoy a high social status, and to display versatility in martial arts. Also added to the list are: intelligence, bravery, sobriety, unemotionality and an absence of smiles (2007: 283).

I am persuaded that these qualities have led to men's vulnerability. Why should anyone pay attention to one who has superior physical strength, has a high social status and can apparently take care of others? My core argument here is that the social construction of masculinity has left programmers convinced that men "are alright" and can take care of themselves. However, the reality is that, men are "not alright" and cannot take of themselves.

### **Exclusive Focus on Women's Empowerment**

The other reason relating to the vulnerability of men and boys is the exclusive focus on women's empowerment. It is closely related to the foregoing discussion since the social construction of men as strong and self-sufficient has been accompanied by the social construction of women as weak and as requiring help. According to Kopano Ratele (2011: 415), "[t]he most revealing part about all of this is that the same behaviour that receives active or tacit support when expressed by boys and men is almost always vehemently discouraged or at least frowned upon when engaged in by girls and women." The net effect has been to invest resources in the struggle for women's empowerment and thereby completely overlooking boys and men. I do agree that women's empowerment is an urgent and critical undertaking. Nonetheless, it needs to be undertaken **alongside** the empowerment of men.

There is now a growing realisation that leaving men and boys out of gender empowerment programmes is counterproductive. Men are key stakeholders and their "buy in" is vital if programmes are to succeed. Furthermore, men need to be targeted for their own sake. They (We) too need empowerment. Patriarchal definitions of masculinity leave men vulnerable. How can a man who has been defined as "all powerful" come to terms with his weaknesses? How can a man who has been socially constructed as a "protector" live with his failure to protect his loved ones, for example, from state-sponsored violence? How can a man who has been made to believe that he is an "ever ready" and "exceedingly competent" sex machine come to grips with his impotence?

Realising that “men matter,” there has been a notable shift in discourses on gender, sexuality and HIV. The Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA) has been actively involved in Transformative Masculinity programmes in the region. These workshops emerge from the realisation that religion plays a key role in shaping masculinities. EHAIA conducts Transformative Masculinity training in order to empower boys and men within the faith community to adopt more positive interpretations of what it means to be a man. Contextual Bible Studies feature prominently in this exercise. Through critical community readings of the bible, participants realise that there are positive models of masculinity in the text that are contrary to death-dealing and oppressive masculinities.

Historically, this focus on men is consistent with developments within the gender sector. Ricardo and Barker write:

The last 20 years have witnessed a growing consensus on the need to engage men in achieving gender equality and, within this consensus, an increase in research and discussion on the specific issue of men, masculinities, sexual exploitation and sexual violence. It is now more widely recognized that sex work, exploitative forms of pornography, and other forms of sexual exploitation are more about masculinities and “men’s sexuality, not women’s” in that they are driven or motivated by men’s sexuality and sexual behaviour...(2008: 3).

### **Conclusion: Reaching out to the Missing Boys and Men**

EHAIA has realised the urgency of bringing boys and men on board in efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence and HIV. In particular, religious leaders need to be visible in the overall response as they are strategically placed to influence change. Transformative Masculinity training therefore focuses on equipping religious leaders with the necessary skills and attitudes to cultivate liberating ideas regarding what it means to be a man. However, this training seeks to avoid the limitations of previous approaches by ensuring that men and women “come to reason together” in order to initiate social transformation.

In order to “dare invent the future” as Thomas Sankara put it, churches need to invest heavily in training boys and girls, and young men and young women. The transformation of masculinities and femininities provides hope for the future. It is only empowered women and men who can become

agents of social transformation. **Together**, they can work for the emergence of a new heaven and a new earth.

## **References**

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- Ricardo, Christine and Gary Barker. 2008. "Men, Masculinities, Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Violence: A Literature Review and a Call for Action," *Promundo and MenEngage*.
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## **Discussion Questions**

1. Discuss how churches can use already existing structures to influence the emergence of liberating masculinities.
2. "We are the men that our mothers, sisters and partners want us to be." Debate this assertion in the context of the role of women in shaping masculinity.