**MASIMANYANE**

**WOMEN’S RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL**

**Incorporating MASIMANYANE WOMEN’S SUPPORT CENTRE**

**Building local, national and global partnerships to eradicate violence against women**

**ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS IN ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Dr Lesley Ann Foster

Working with men and boys to end violence against women has become a global discussion. More so, it has become a major focus of the development community and donor agencies. Recognition has been made that male violence against women is one of the most critical problems facing women across all racial, education social and economic divides in the world and it is a result of patriarchy and the unequal relations between men and women. While Violence against women is not a women’s problem but it is a man’s problem, women bear the brunt of men’s violence.

The global debates skirt around the fact that male violence towards women and girls is not about individual responses but it is located in the broader societal context of patriarchy. Masimanyane believes that “Much of the work being done with men and by men does not fully recognise the fact that the way that society is constructed is that it privileges men and gives voice to men’s voices and men’s experiences.

All facets of individual, family and community life are structured around this construct of society. Work with men and boys often sidesteps the institutional and collective reality of the problem of oppression. It is the collective of men and the history of patriarchy which has created the environment that privileges the decisions and actions of men over women. No matter how committed a man may be, he may still continue to benefit at every level in a patriarchal society, at their expense”[[1]](#footnote-1).

The correlation is that women’s experiences and women’s voices are not given the recognition and space equal to that of men. The result is male violence against women.

Masimanyane’s experience has been that some men working to end violence against women perpetuate the power imbalances. It is not uncommon to hear men say that “women have worked so hard and gained so little in the struggle to end male violence that men have to help them”. This is said without men seeing the contradictions. Men speak of ensuring women’s empowerment but shrink the spaces hard won by women.

The real gains come when men understand deeply women’s experiences and their lived realities and acknowledge the oppression of women in every facet of political, social and economic life. In addition, men have to have a clear analysis of how power imbalances exist between men and women and how male privilege plays out amongst individuals and the male collective. When men accept this and was willing to make themselves vulnerable through constant personal reflection, then the work can begin alongside of women. To much of the work with men and boys lacks these insights and such an analysis so that it merely enlarges the spaces that men occupy and continues to garner the resources (privileges) that a partriarchal society already affords men.

In summary some of the challenges of men working to end violence against women is

* the lack of a political analysis where male violence is taken beyond the individual responsibility to an acknowledgement that it is a wider societal problem
* the failure to recognise and accept the intersectionality of violence against women and the complexities of race, class, education, socio and economic factors
* not recognising that there are different types of masculinities which require different analysis and approaches
* homophobia is a real threat in that men who claim to fight discrimination are in fact homophobic and they cannot see the contradictions
* the rescure and save approach is about male dominance and a great deal of the work that men do takes this approach.

Further recommendations are:

* Women’s groups must **not** assume that men or women have conceptual clarity with regard to gender equality or that they subscribe to it fully even when they say so.
* The women’s movement needs to be clear about the role that we think men should play. Men cannot shape the agenda when working to end violence against women as women have worked hard and have the knowledge and experience and analysis required to take the work forward. Current work with men and boys is not aligned to the agenda which women have who are working on violence against women.
* Mechanisms of accountable for working with men must be developed in a partnership between women and men who do this work. This must include strong indicators for measuring change in the attitude and behaviour of men who do the work and for whom the work is being done.
* Men who work to end violence against women must be prepared to meet and talk with women about their experiences so that their work is strongly grounded in women’s lived realities.
* Men who support the work sincerely and honestly should be invited to support the work that the women’s movement is engaged in so that they are acknowledged and so that women can bring them on board in campaigns and advocacy initiatives. Caution must be given to closing women’s spaces including speaking on their behalf or even silencing women’s voices.
* Men who are known to be non-violent and sensitive to women should be encouraged as role models for young boys in communities.
* Men should identify all the spaces that they occupy and work in those spaces first. Sports clubs, golf clubs included, political spaces, places of worship /religion etc should all be targeted for our interventions by men.
* We should have different strategies for working with different groups of men. We cannot use the same entry points for all men when talking about violence against women.
* We should ensure that men working to end violence against women do not develop their own “men’s movement” just because it appeals to other men. This is a continuation of patriarchy.

Ultimately the work that men do to en violence against women has to be centred on the principle of feminism, accountability and responsibility. Only the can women agree that the value which men bring to ending violence against women has resulted in addressing gender equality and bringing about gender justice.

Men can and should becomes allies in ending violence against women if men can defer to women and ensure that women lead and inform all aspects of male involvement in the struggle to end violence against women. Anything less perpetuates patriarchy in all its forms.

**LESLEY ANN FOSTER**

**Executive Director: Masimanyane Women’s Support Centre**

**East London, South Africa**

***August 2009***

1. Christopher Harper – Masimanyane Women’s Support Centre March 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)