

MASIMANYANE

WOMEN'S RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL

Incorporating MASIMANYANE WOMEN'S SUPPORT CENTRE

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

Involving men in the fight against violence against women

Christopher Harper Deputy Director Masimanyane Women's Support Centre

Published by FOKUS – Forum for Women and Development – Norway

I have had the privilege of being part of Masimanyane Women's Support Centre for the past 15 years. Masimanyane is a social justice and equality nongovernmental organisation working to end all forms of discrimination against women.

We are based in East London, South Africa. Our specific focus is on ending violence against women which is an expression of the oppression of women and girls in society. During this time I have had the opportunity to see first-hand the impact of men's violence directed against women because they are women and to be part of programmes aimed at ending this. I have seen the hurt and fear in women as they have sought help and I have witnessed their courage as they have made radical changes in their lives. I have seen our staff members struggle to assist and support when no-one else could and have seen the sparkle in their eyes as women have made breakthroughs. It has been frustrating. It has been exhilarating. It has been depressing. It has been joyful.

It has brought home to me many lessons. I am a man and was the first man ever employed by Masimanyane. I have a pride in this, but also am acutely aware that I will be judged accordingly. That who I am and what I do will be put under the microscope and scrutinised intensely for any signs of cracks or of being someone other than who I claim to be.

There is nothing special about who I am. I am not separate from other men, neither men who act violently nor those who don't. I can't go and claim any moral high ground. It is not a "them" (the baddies) versus "us" (the goodies) issue. We are all in it together. Of course not all men act in violent ways, but we cannot hide from the fact that our lives have been socially constructed within many different contexts and ultimately all our masculinities have been forged within the patriarchal systems which dominate our social landscape.

I too grew up in the same culture of male privilege, where men were feted and women's value recognised in their relation to men. I was brought up in a militaristic society where manliness was equated with power and the ability to control others. It is important for me to acknowledge that I

have within me the same potential for violence as those whose actions I work to change. For it is only when we recognise this that we are given the space to be able to challenge the behaviour of other men. By setting ourselves up in opposition to instead of as part of the same struggle we deny ourselves the chance to engage fully with other men and show them alternative ways of being.

As a man engaging in this work it requires of me a sense of self-knowledge and of awareness of what I do, the way I do it and my motivation for doing it. Because for us as men to tackle this issue means delving deeply into what it means to be a man, our attitudes, real values, it means examining how our lives are constructed, looking at the structural inequalities that are the foundation of and which perpetuate women's subordination. It is a task that requires of us to look both within and without.

For unless we focus on these structural inequalities we will never really make a significant change. While it is important to maintain responsibility for violence with an individual, understanding his possible change away from violence needs to consider men's change in terms of a very broad combination of social forces that sustain and allow such violence to go unchallenged. It is within this spectrum that a man has been violent and within which he may or may not move away from this violence.

It is easy to fall into the traps of male dominance and authority, of not recognising our own power, both that which is real and that which we imagine.

This is part of our need as men to take responsibility for who we are. When we as men try and individualize violence instead of recognizing its roots, and make a separation between "them" and "us" we are being dishonest about our relationship to our own gender and dishonest in our dealings with women. The higher ground means that we are untouchable and helps us to be untouched by the pain of women and girls.

I have seen the impact of my presence at times, how my being in a place can change the tone of the situation, how my presence can make some women feel unsafe. After all if you knew me you would know that I am not the small retiring type. I take up a lot of space. And size can be intimidating. Even if I choose not to be violent, that doesn't mean that others are going to know that is my choice. I am not defined by my behaviour alone in the eyes of others, but also by their own experiences, expectations and presuppositions.

Added to this, I am a white South African which carries with it the legacy of Apartheid, the way in which our identities were defined and opportunities provided. These things don't just disappear overnight. Definitions formed by people's engagement with oppressive violent dominant privileged white men remain. It's not just about race as whatever racial, religious, cultural group we belong to impacts on the way in which we are seen by others.

Is this way of defining me or men in general fair? I don't think that's relevant. Rather it is a reality that men have to address and learn to be comfortable with if we enter into this field of work.

By choosing to work in this field I have to make myself accountable to others, and especially to the women I work with. I cannot challenge the socially constructed violence of other men, while I engage

in behaviour that, though of a different type, falls on the same continuum. Otherwise this creates a situation where I can fool myself and others about the work I am doing and who I am in this world. If we as men choose to do this, it creates a dissonance between the private and public persona that ultimately requires that we need to remember when to put on our anti-violence mask and when to take it off again.

It is my experience of men that we don't like to be accountable to anyone, never mind being accountable to a woman. In South Africa the situation has been created in much of the work men are engaging in where they repeat the same tactics of paternalism and protectionism which are marks of male dominated society. There are numerous examples of men attempting to take over the leadership of work that women are engaging in, relegating them to the side-lines and guiding discussions about women's lives while attempting to define their experiences. In doing so we do exactly what patriarchy has tried to do for so long, to silence women and minimise their contribution to changing society.

So what then can we do as men? The first thing we need to do is to stop talking and listen, really listen to the cries of pain and the exultations of joy that are part of women's lives. We must learn to accept that it may take time for women to trust us fully within this context, especially given their experiences of men's behaviour in the past. But we must persevere, be patient if need be, and learn from women's experiences.

Secondly we must create spaces for women's voices to be heard. We must learn to step off centre-stage and be prepared to be in the wings, supporting, encouraging and acknowledging women's achievements which have most often been done in the face of considerable opposition and at great personal cost. We must create the platforms where their achievements can be valued and celebrated and where we can be seen to celebrate them too.

Thirdly, by not separating ourselves from other men, we must make use of our experiences and understandings to challenge men who in many varied ways live out male dominance and perpetuate women's submission. It means making ourselves vulnerable, being willing to be seen as not fitting in with the dominant paradigm of masculinity and taking risks. But if we fail to do so, we do not honour those many women activists who have given up so much in the struggle to make our world a more equitable place.

As men, for us to be involved in this work is a challenge. It challenges us at an individual level, at the core of our existence by asking the question of each one of us, what does it mean for me to be a man? It also challenges us as to how we live in the world and how we relate to each other as men, as well as to women and girls. It challenges us not to see violence in narrow individualistic terms, but as part of broader social forces which continue to subordinate women worldwide. Above all it challenges us to get up, to be involved and make a difference.

CHRISTOPHER HARPER
Masimanyane Women's Support Centre
East London, South Africa