

Gender policy and practice Study group meeting, Friend's Meeting House, Euston Road, London on 18th November 2009, 1.30-5.30

Convenor, Tina Wallace

Chair, Ceri Hayes

What really works for women experiencing violence?

The purpose of the afternoon was to explore different approaches to addressing violence against women (VAW), analysing what is working and where the challenges in each approach lie. An earlier study group session focused on working directly at the grassroots with women and men to address HIV and AIDS and gender, exploring the work of Stepping Stones – a gender and HIV training process- and related policy work (especially around the criminalisation of women with HIV in Africa) with Alice Welbourn, and the realities of gender work in communities in Africa carried out by local NGOs done by Seri Wendoh while working for Transform Africa. The strengths and challenges of work at the community level were discussed at that meeting. The focus in this meeting was on other approaches: legal aid and individual case work with women experiencing violence, mobilising support for stopping violence against women by creating social movements, and working intensively with women emerging from conflict who have experienced terrible violence. An overview of the field of work on VAW was presented at the end.

There were four excellent speakers: Emilia Muchawa, Director of ZWLA (Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association); Suzanne Williams a freelancer who has evaluated Oxfam's 'We can' campaign; Brita Fernandez Schmidt, Policy Director at Women for Women and Purna Sen Head of Human Rights at the Commonwealth Secretariat. The meeting was well attended by 40 women – no men attended this session though they have been to other meetings of the study group. Those attending were students, practitioners, consultants and some researchers.

The approach of ZWLA

Emilia set the context for the work, which is very challenging politically and economically as well as in terms of human rights. ZWLA is committed to promoting women's rights and addressing VAW in a context of impoverishment. Initially it was set up by women lawyers offering their time for free to give women legal aid; over time they expanded their work to include education and awareness of domestic violence because women did not know their rights and VAW was seen by many as socially acceptable. The community has to take responsibility for holding perpetrators of violence to account and they realised that many communities viewed VAW differently to the legal definitions so they worked in communities to address the negative attitudes towards women through facilitating discussion, training and awareness-raising. They now also train the judiciary; work with traditional and religious leaders; partner with some sympathetic men's organisations; lobby for legal reform, for example around inheritance of land which is not allowed in customary law, and monitor the implementation of new laws, e.g

the passage and implementation of the Domestic Violence Act which took 14 years to be passed.

Just using the legal system to get justice for women experiencing domestic violence was not enough, because so many other factors affect women believing in and accessing their rights, including discriminatory laws, lack of knowledge about laws and rights because of language barriers, literacy and distance from sources of information, and negative attitudes towards women. They spread their net to work across the legal system, with faith based leaders and organisations because of their critical role in peoples' lives, in communities and with women themselves.

Their challenges have been many:

- the lack of resources for the implementation of the DV Law and also for sustainability of their work
- Making complaints and legal challenges are very costly yet they need to close the gaps in the justice system, and gaps in the criminal justice and sexual offences acts need to be reformed
- Combating the negative attitudes and the common acceptance of VAW is difficult; there is a social backlash against some work with women and confronting harmful traditional practices is contentious and demanding
- The team gets exhausted and burnt out with the volume of work and the range of issues to address; they are continually learning
- Following up women they have helped is difficult so it can be hard to know how their lives have changed

Suzanne's presentation on the Oxfam 'we can' campaign

This is a campaign to build grassroots social movements to address VAW by changing attitudes, ideas and beliefs around VAW, which was started in Asia and is now being introduced in Africa. They want to reduce the social acceptance of VAW, bring the issue out into the open, and empower those involved in the campaign to bring about changes in their communities. The campaign works with women and men, is non-confrontational and aims to build networks of mutual support.

The core elements are as follows:

- The We Can campaign was launched by Oxfam GB and its partners in 2000/01 in 6 countries in the South Asia region.
- The main focus has been on building a mass movement of activists campaigning against VAW, starting at the level of the individual. The approach is to encourage people to become 'internal activists' and change their own lives before they can go out into the wider world and their communities to advocate for an end to violence against women
- Individuals are known as 'change-makers' and take a pledge not to commit violence and to encourage others to do the same. They are encouraged to refer survivors of VAW to the relevant support services
- There are many tools and messages used to inspire and invite people into the campaign. They promote raising local voices

- Ownership of the campaign currently sits with national secretariats of change-makers, but they form broad alliances with a range of organisations, with the specific intention of this not becoming an Oxfam-branded campaign
- Some of the challenges they have faced include how to work with religious/faith leaders when their structures and principles are so very different; how to measure attitudinal change and provide evidence of change or impact when working on VAW in this way; how viable is it for an outside NGO to promote a real social movement that is sustainable; what can be changed through this kind of approach? Many of the stories of success are currently self reported and not easy to verify.

Brita's presentation of the work of Women for Women

This organisation works with women emerging from violent conflict, women whose experiences have often been very traumatic, who are ostracised by their communities because of e.g. rape, who have little/no status in their societies because of the violence (e.g. as sex slaves) they have suffered. Brita used stories and pictures to illustrate the reality of these women's lives and what the project that focuses on a year long programme of healing and support for maintaining an income means to them.

- Honorata's story was a very powerful example of how the shift from victim to survivor can take place – she experienced terrible violence, but after enrolling on a W4WI programme she received some economic support, education about her rights, solidarity through W4W's connections with sponsors, technical support and access to resources and has now become an activist herself
- W4W works very holistically – in addition to the support to individuals, they also conduct research (annual surveys to ask community women their views on the state of the nation)
- These women are learning to speak out to achieve change and to speak out when they see women's rights abused; they no longer want to stay silent. They learn to appreciate their value and worth
- The factors that contribute to positive change are direct and immediate help with cash for food, uniforms, healthcare; contact with a sponsor in the north who write to them and accompanies them for a year; working in groups to break their isolation; learning about their rights, the investment in their literacy and numeracy; learning to name their atrocities and speak out; working with men to change their behaviour. As they grow in confidence so the men need to learn to change their attitudes and relations with them.
- They plan to launch a major campaign on International Women's Day 2010 and encourage others to get involved

The critical reflections Brita raised were that this approach is NOT a magic bullet and the approach can be more pragmatic than demanding rights, for example

- working with men in the DRC they have persuaded men not to rape/re-offend because they will catch STDs and/or HIV i.e. they use an instrumental argument, rather than rights language because it seems to be more effective,

but this sits uncomfortably with a women's rights approach. And men could simply use condoms then and continue their violence

- They have noted data that shows that women are more likely to be targeted for violence if they are economically empowered
- It is hard to overcome a legacy of violence (80% of women in DRC experience violence) and not all respond well- there is no 'one size fits all' answer

W4W put great store by learning from experience, tracking all the women they work with individually over time and seeing what does and does not work in different communities and for different women.

Purna Sen reflected on where we have come from and what has been achieved

Purna first spoke on VAW at a DSA meeting in 1993 and wonders what has really changed on the issue since then. There has been some real progress, such as:

- The discourse of gender and VAW has a legitimacy now
- Many governments have specialist gender advisors
- Rape in marriage is recognised as a crime
- the International Criminal Court's has progressive definition of rape sexual violence, which can be prosecuted
- more than 120 countries have now adopted legislation to end violence against women
- UN resolutions 1325 and 1820 are in place and being implemented
- The use of human rights legislation to tackle crimes against women and women's rights accepted as human rights in Vienna

Yet huge challenges remain: conceptually, VAW and domestic violence are still understood synonymously; VAW is still not seen as a central concern in mainstream development discourse. There are no men at the meeting and it is not an issue that many men find it easy to engage with, however hard women try to involve them.

Purna sees real potential around using the power of the language of rights to promote the intersection of VAW and human rights agendas, she also sees opportunities to educate women about their rights, to work to change institutional cultures and to conceptualise discrimination more broadly. She finds the instrumentalist argument very shaky and says we should be promoting a broader contextual understanding of rights.

Her challenges were— can we imagine a life free of violence, do we believe in the right to freedom from violence, can we change the institutional culture of those who should end violence (e.g. police, prisons), can we influence the change makers and deepen their understanding of discrimination and oppression, can we work with development rights and dignity?

Questions asked (many were not answered and the discussion generated more issues to discuss rather than providing answers)

- How can we address intersecting forms of discrimination more effectively (e.g violence against disabled women)?
- How can we use rights language in a way that makes people listen?
- There have been a number of new instruments developed in the last few years to tackle VAW in conflict – what is the analysis of the situation of VAW in conflict? Is it getting worse or better?
- Why aren't there any men in the room?!
- Are there any generational differences in attitudes and practices re: VAW and how do we address this?
- Do we have enough policy instruments now? Should we now be focusing our attention elsewhere?
- How do we balance the need for individual change with the importance of movement-building and mobilising women?
- How are people working on the frontline (women's human rights defenders) being supported?
- How can we engage with the MDG +2015 agenda?
- Remember the huge stigma and silence around violence and the deep pain and loss of confidence and often isolation it causes to individual women, it is not easy to heal or address and the scars go very deep
- Faith based organisations and human rights agencies find it hard to reach a common language/perspective

Notes from some audience responses

Re. support to women human rights defenders– Emilia said ZWLA aims to provide these women with access to a counsellor, but this is not always possible. They are also trying to establish spaces for peer support for the survivors of violence against women. As colleagues they try to support each other in their work, but there is often not the time to do this as much as they would like to.

Re. generational differences – the challenge is to see women as allies and not enemies, although women can also be perpetrators of VAW e.g mother-in-law abuse, but we need to talk about this rather than resorting to simplistic analysis. We need to promote the voice of women in decision-making, as well as demanding greater accountability around the VAW work

Re. language of rights –we tend to use negative language when working on VAW in a UK context when instead we should be talking about promoting peace, dignity, respect and safety. Purna added that people can often find rights-based language scary, but there are different entry points we could use; the rights approach requires voice, participation and accountability and these principles should underlie all the work on VAW (but often do not)

Re. findings of Comic Relief's Women & Girl's programme shared by the evaluator:

- There's a gap in the monitoring of implementation of VAW programmes so knowledge and evidence about what works is hard to find

- Weakness of state agencies in relation to VAW services and support was highlighted
- Women's economic dependence keeps them in a vulnerable position and in violent relationships
- One of the key concerns was what happens to women human rights defenders – they need to be offered counselling, but also basic safety to enable them to go about their work
- VAW is not always recognised at the grassroots level and often manifests itself in psychological violence or neglect as well as physical violence

Re, working with men – we need to always ask ourselves the question what's the aim of involving men in particular space and do they need to be there. If not, we should make sure we continue to make space for women-only discussion of these issues

Ceri Hayes and Tina Wallace
5th January 2010.