

Community based approaches to tackling gender-based violence in Malawi: Lessons and challenges of involving women and men

ActionAid Ireland research report carried out by Dublin City University and funded by the Irish Research Council

ActionAid is an international federation working with over 15 million people in 45 countries. The people that ActionAid is working for are people that others forget; people in poverty who face discrimination and people whose voices are ignored. **ActionAid** is convinced that they need to use their own power to fight poverty and injustice.

ActionAid Women’s Rights Programme (WRP)

ActionAid Ireland, with funding from Irish Aid, supports interventions to promote Women’s Rights in four countries: **Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, and Vietnam.**

Why is Action Aid working to support Women’s Rights?

Violence against women does not discriminate according to class, age, social, political or financial details. Harmful acts perpetrated against a woman’s will vary across cultures, countries, and regions and are ascribed to traditional differences between females and males. These damaging acts include sexual violence and abuse; forced prostitution; domestic violence; human trafficking; forced or early marriage; and harmful traditional practices such as female genital cutting or even honour killings.

In Malawi, it has been estimated that one in five women have experienced sexual violence, mostly at home, which is viewed as a private family affair and is seldom reported to the authorities. Moreover, one in three girls who have sex under the age of 18 is

forced to do so and almost half of all girls in Malawi experience physical abuse.

Women in Malawi are in a situation of social, economic and political disadvantage and discrimination. While male dominance and control, wealth or poverty, lack of education or alcohol could be the principal causes at family level; there are also other underlying causes that involve the whole community, such as blaming women for social problems, restricting women to the domestic arena or seeing violence as an acceptable way to control women.

The **ActionAid programme** in Malawi has two primary objectives: To mobilise women and girls to reject violence and to support them to have more control over their income and more time to engage in commercial activities.



Frank Ndawandawa and Leonard Nyirango working over dominant behaviours against women.

Background to working with men and boys

In order to prevent and transform harmful norms and practices against women and girls and even more importantly to change attitudes, behaviours and roles in society in Malawi, ActionAid, since 2013, has begun engaging **men and boys** within its work to promote women's full enjoyment of equal rights and freedom from violence.

This simply means engaging them into a training process that develops their knowledge on Human Rights and Women's Rights and provides information on dedicated legislation preventing domestic violence or prohibiting harmful traditional practices against women. The spaces of reflection and discussion delivered by ActionAid help both women and men to understand their roles and reduce inequalities and violence in their daily lives and work.

Research initiative and objectives

Dublin City University conducted independent research in two districts in Malawi (Chiradzulu and Rumphu) in 2016, aimed at exploring the advantages of and challenges of involving both **women and men to tackle any form of violence against women.**

Research Objectives:

- 1) *To explore the factors causing violence and discrimination against women.*
- 2) *To explore how men are involved in the actions implemented by ActionAid Malawi.*
- 3) *To understand what would be the impact (positive or negative) of including both men and women in these actions.*
- 4) *To draw lessons on how to involve men in the future while ensuring that women remain the key focus group and take the lead on relevant struggles.*

The most remarkable findings were a **reduction in violence against women as well as a reduction in child marriages.**

These findings can be ascribed to three principal factors:

1. The inclusion of men and boys in the interventions
2. The improved communications between couples that were engaged together in the training processes
3. Reduced economic stresses within families involved in the literacy and numeracy classes and the Savings and Loans initiative delivered by ActionAid. These initiatives were very popular with communities because they encourage women to save their money, provide assistance to run small businesses and generate additional family income. They are useful therefore in attracting both women and men to the programme.

Recommendations

Drawing from these findings, some general recommendations were made to ActionAid:

- Continue to develop strategies for engaging men while keeping women to the forefront of all activities.
- Dominant norms have to be interrogated and challenged toward exploring new forms of roles associated with boys and men.
- Open a space to construct alternative ideas of women's attributes.

Over the next five years ActionAid Ireland will continue to support ActionAid teams in Kenya, Malawi, Nepal and Vietnam to work on a **'whole of community approach.'** This will involve not just women and girls but also men and boys and other community structures such as police, health services and local councils, to build their understanding of rights and equality and to reflect on and challenge the current norms that keep women in a place of inequality.