

African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)

The Men's Travelling Conference (MTC): November 27-December 6, 2003

By Njoki Wainaina

Introduction

The Men's Travelling Conference (MTC) was a dream come true for members of the Men for Gender Equality Now Network. This network is an initiative of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) that began in 2001, following a Men to Men Regional Consultation in Nairobi, Kenya. The Men for Gender Equality Now Network currently has members from Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Somaliland, South Africa and Zambia. The dream was that the MTC would cover all these countries—in reality, it covered Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia.

The MTC was a contribution to the 2003 annual campaign, Sixteen Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women. It was a partnership building event, involving men's groups from Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia. The men from Kenya and Zambia travelled to Lilongwe, Malawi by bus and sensitised thousands of men and the general public along the way on issues of gender based violence (GBV) and HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately, the men from Ethiopia had to travel to Malawi by air due to immigration problems.

The MTC culminated in a two-day conference in Lilongwe, the first day of which coincided with World AIDS Day on December 1, 2003. The second day took the MTC to communities in and around Lilongwe.

Main Objective

The aim of the MTC was to mobilise men who believe in and support gender equality to send a message to men in the eight countries that GBV and HIV/AIDS are destructive and expensive and that men hold the responsibility and the power to end them.

The specific objectives of the MTC were to:

- Organise a travelling men's conference, involving men from eight countries in at least ten locations in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe to sensitise men on the role of men in combating GBV and HIV/AIDS in Africa;
- Increase the number of men involved in eliminating GBV and HIV/AIDS through participatory activities by men to reach men during the annual campaign, such as songs, drama, discussions, written materials and media interviews and coverage;
- Mobilise male supporters at all levels—from community based organisations (CBOs), the youth, the media, religious organisations, the private sector and the transport industry in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe;
- Mobilise the media, the transport industry and the general public to create and disseminate messages about combating GBV and HIV/AIDS in the eight countries.

Why the MTC?

From the three years that FEMNET has worked with men, it has become evident that men in many countries join women in the annual campaign. The idea of mobilising and involving thousands of men during this time was to build on that experience. Many men participate in things that are exciting and participatory. The idea of the MTC was thus to involve them in an activity that would be exciting and participatory, utilising a diversity of skills and talents. Additionally, the choice of the MTC was motivated by the need to reach and involve in discussion thousands of men, young and old, who would otherwise not be reached through a conventional conference.

Who Were the Travellers?

The participants of the MTC from Kenya were men between 20-80 years, drawn from different interest groups, faiths, professions, socio-economic and political classes. They included faith leaders, policemen, lawyers, health personnel, artists, sportsmen, university students, gender activists, people living with HIV/AIDS, media personnel, administrators and senior citizens.

Ten men from the Men's Network Project of the Zambia National Women's Lobby participated in the MTC to Malawi. They included individuals from various walks of life and different professional backgrounds such as psycho-social counsellors, teachers, media practitioners and social workers. This diversity gave the group the leverage needed to undertake public awareness campaigns on GBV.

The participants were involved in public awareness campaigns on GBV and HIV/AIDS throughout the journey to and from, and whilst in, Malawi.

Methodologies

The MTC was characterised by song, dance, drama as well as the distribution of posters, T-shirts, caps, stickers and leaflets. The banners hoisted on the buses gave messages to thousands of people along the way. The MTC stopped in major towns to engage audiences in discussions and to deliver messages. At times, the participants split into smaller groups to get views from their audiences and give brief talks on their mission. Other methods used during the conference included:

- Individual interaction;
- Explanation of the messages in the posters and the flyers;
- Sharing experiences in small groups;
- Drama and skits;
- In some places, local musicians, artists and drama groups came out and joined the travellers in song and dance.

Highlights of the MTC

Kenya's Assistant Minister for Sports, Gender, Culture and Social Services, Honourable Alicen Chelaite flagged off the MTC from Nairobi on November 27, 2003, after a brief address. In her speech, she reiterated the Kenyan government's commitment to gender equality and informed the MTC that it was going to establish gender desks in every ministry. She also invited the team to plan on taking the MTC

to communities in Kenya, including her own constituency in Rongai, Nakuru. After the flagging off ceremony, the MTC travelled round the streets of Nairobi, spreading messages about GBV and HIV/AIDS via a megaphone, the banners on the bus, singing and drumming. The two large banners on each side of the bus had the messages, "Peace in Africa Begins in Your Home: men fight GBV" and "Men Working to Stop the Spread of HIV/AIDS." The participants of the MTC and the bus crew stood out as they all wore red, white or black T-shirts and caps, which also had the messages printed on them.

On November 29, 2003, the departure day, the Zambian group conducted public awareness campaigns in Nyimba district. On November 30, 2003, the group conducted public awareness campaigns in Katete and Chipata districts of Eastern province. In Nyimba, the campaigns were conducted at the market place while in Katete and Chipata, the awareness campaigns were done at the bus stations and in the markets. On the way back to Zambia, public awareness campaigns were conducted in Chipata, Sinda and Chongwe districts. The sites were strategically chosen as they attract a lot of people from many different backgrounds at any given time. To attract more people, the group converged at the bus stations and market places, played drums, sung songs and performed dances. This generated curiosity. The group then used a Public Address (PA) system to reach out to as many people as possible.

During the public awareness campaign, the focus was to sensitise the general public on the:

- Various forms of GBV, including rape, marital rape, battery and child defilement to mention but a few;
- Social, economic and political contributions that women make/could make in a society free from GBV;
- Negative ramifications of GBV and HIV/AIDS on victims/survivors and society as a whole, particularly with respect to women and girls;
- Laws relating to GBV.

As the MTC moved east, the people the group talked to complained of corruption among officers charged with enforcing the law. The gap between the rich and the poor is wide with respect to accessing justice. Women noted that people with money who commit sexual crimes can exert influence on the police in defilement and rape cases. Women told the group that some women do not know where to go when they are battered as the police are insensitive to their needs.

In another town, some men complained they were beaten by their wives but found it difficult to lodge complaints for fear of being mocked as men are expected to be strong. Cultural values of this nature are deep rooted among the Chewa and Ngoni speaking people of eastern Zambia.

The Kenyan group travelled a distance of over 2,000 km across Kenya and Tanzania, stopping at the Kenya-Tanzania border at Namanga, Moshi, Mombo, Chalinze, Iringa, Mbeya, Kusumulu and then Songwe at the Tanzania-Malawi border. They were met by the Malawi group at the border and then travelled to Karonga, Mzuzu and Lilongwe. The 3,000 km plus journey was undertaken in four days. The Ethiopians had already arrived in Lilongwe by air, had a chance to visit with the Malawi group ahead of the MTC and were also at hand to receive the road travellers. All the MTC travellers converged in Lilongwe to a warm welcome and the promise of a unique experience of men with men.

On World AIDS Day, participants from all four countries met to deliberate on issues of GBV and HIV/AIDS. The Malawian Minister for Youth, Sports and Culture, Honourable Henderson Mabeti officially opened the conference. The 70 participants discussed and proposed solutions on GBV and HIV/AIDS. They shared information on their national level activities and highlights of their encounters during the MTC. They then proceeded to discuss the role of men in combating GBV and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Among the highlights of the discussions were the testimonies of two men, one of whom was a survivor of GBV and a person living with HIV/AIDS. His message was that people living with HIV/AIDS can easily fall prey to GBV. Survivors such as himself want acceptance, equal opportunity, love and care from society. The other survivor of GBV, a senior police officer, suffered battering, the grabbing of property and other forms of violence at the hands of his policewoman spouse and her family.

Taking the MTC to Lilongwe Communities

On the second day, the MTC moved from the Meridien Capital Hotel to villages around Lilongwe. The MTC travelled in two buses, under a Community Policing Project escort, to reach communities and share messages about the role of men in combating GBV and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The sessions were held in the open air in market places in and outside of Lilongwe. They attracted a lot of interest—and some hostility from youths in a part of Lilongwe nicknamed Devil Street. In Mitundu, about 40 km outside Lilongwe, there was a crowd of more than a thousand of all ages. Besides the distribution of materials, a skit, songs and dances were performed, followed by a discussion and question session. Local artists soon brought out their instruments and joined in with songs on HIV/AIDS.

The second stop was in Kanengo in Lilongwe, the home of the model Community Policing Project. The MTC joined a large crowd and community groups to perform skits, songs and dances and to dialogue in small interactive groups. It was a wonderful encounter with people of all ages and social strata in their own environment.

The visit to the model Community Policing Station was an opportunity for the MTC to see a Victim Support Unit and dialogue with police officers who are trained to provide protection, support and model services in partnership with the community.

Challenges in Addressing Gender Based Violence (GBV)

From the awareness campaigns conducted, many challenges to addressing GBV were identified. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Lack of involvement of men in combating GBV and the spread of HIV/AIDS. GBV continues to be regarded as a women's problem given that women are by far the majority of survivors and men the major perpetrators;
- Persistent negative cultural values and practices. These include wife battery, marital rape and early forced marriages which legally constitute child defilement. In many African countries, culture and tradition subordinate women to men. The bride price that men pay for women makes men regard women as their personal property;
- Limited conceptions of gender and GBV due to entrenched cultural values and tradition;

- Limited knowledge of the laws on GBV and HIV/AIDS. Even when there have been stakeholder consultations by line ministries and non-governmental organisations (Egos), many African countries are yet to enact legislation on HIV/AIDS and on the rights of women and children specifically dealing with GBV;
- Lack of/inadequate support from service providers such as health care providers, law enforcement agencies, and counsellors to survivors of GBV. For instance, despite the fact that Victim Support Units have been in existence for some time now, they have not responded effectively and successfully to GBV due to human, material and financial resource constraints and also the negative perception that the general public has about them. The Victim Support Units are perceived as another unresponsive, user-unfriendly police service;
- Inadequate media coverage of gender issues. While the media has made strides in reporting cases of child defilement, it still attaches little importance to informing the gender public on the forms of GBV, its consequences and what to do in the event of being subjected to it. The media sensationalises GBV. In Kenya, for example, the Men's Network has been mistakenly called the network of abused men and the media has deliberately refused to correct that impression.

Lessons and Issues

The MTC was a wonderful opportunity to meeting people of different cultures and experience common concerns about GBV and HIV/AIDS:

- Participants learnt about the impact of culture on GBV and HIV/AIDS;
- Participants learnt that many men in Africa are also victims of GBV (especially psychologically) but are afraid of exposing this to society or the police for fear of being shunned as cowards and weaklings;
- The encounters with people living with HIV/AIDS were useful in influencing people to change their attitudes and behaviour;
- An important lesson was that people living with HIV/AIDS do not need sympathy, but empathy, love, care and acceptance by society as ailing but normal human beings;
- Many men are in desperate need of education, information and advice on protection against HIV/AIDS, including the supply and use of condoms. Illiteracy levels among ordinary people are high, a fact that slows down the learning process;
- The MTC provided the opportunity to tackle GBV and confront communities where it is accepted as a norm. It also provided the opportunity to present facts on gender equality and equity and the relationship between GBV and HIV/AIDS;
- It highlighted the urgent need to accelerate campaigns with local people to disseminate much needed information;
- There is need for a follow-up strategy, particularly to develop materials in local languages so that messages can be understood by local people;
- Men should take an aggressive role in dealing with gender related crimes because they are still predominantly the heads of institutions at all levels. For example, politicians could talk about the negative effects of politically motivated violence on women during campaigns and businessmen could also sensitise their peers during business meetings;

- There is excessive GBV during election periods in Zambia, because some party cadres have never accepted that women can make good leaders. The Men's Network has been involved in sensitising politicians and their cadres on the dangers of politically motivated violence by campaigning for women candidates regardless of their party affiliations.

Who Supported the MTC?

The MTC was made possible by the generous support of those who believed it was possible and an effective way of reaching many men who would not otherwise be reached. These include:

- The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the Heinrich Boll Foundation, through their on-going support to FEMNET's Men for Gender Equality Project;
- The German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) offices in Frankfurt, Lilongwe, Lusaka and Nairobi;
- The Malawi Human Rights Resource Centre as the host of the MTC;
- The Malawi National AIDS Council, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Malawi and the Malawi Government, through the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Community Services, who sponsored the Malawi part of the MTC;
- The Men's Network in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and Zambia, who were central to the mobilisation and management of the MTC.

Conclusion

The MTC was an exciting experience for the men who travelled as well as the men they encountered. While it may never be possible to assess the impact of the MTC, the challenges met and the issues highlighted will provide guides for developing further interventions to address African men on issues of gender equality and their roles in combating GBV and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The MTC will continue to be used as a vehicle for taking messages to men in African villages during the annual campaigns as well as at other times. The Kenyan group, for example, is already working with the Ministry of Sports, Gender and Culture to take the MTC to Kenyan communities before June 2004. For the anthem of the MTC was "wababa msilale, bando mapambano!"—men, do not sleep, the struggle is still on!

Njoki Wainaina is a gender consultant and a founding member of FEMNET who now coordinates its men's project.

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