

## **Gender Inequality: the Cause of Gender based violence**

### **Jane Kiragu, AWLN on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Family Planning**

The Hon Minister, Nicky Morgan, fellow panelists, distinguished ladies and gentlemen. All protocols observed. Thank you for being here. Thank you to the National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO) for extending the invitation to me and the African Women Leaders' Network on Sexual Reproductive Health and Family Planning.

This presentation makes a case for a sense of urgency in prioritizing Gender Equality and GBV at the centre of any future human development agenda. If the world is to witness any improvements in: health particularly amongst new-born, children and mothers; education; reduce poverty levels and hunger; improved nutritional status and sanitation; increased access to safe clean water; improved security and environmental sustainability, concerted efforts of visibly positioning gender equality are integral.

Where human development measures do not capture gender equality as a key driver to improvements in all developmental indicators, little changes/transformations are likely to be witnessed. Often these changes are not sustainable as they are not anchored on the fundamental pillars of development.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been successful in guiding global development efforts. They managed to: mobilize governments to reshape the architecture of their development and service delivery; triggered new aid modalities amongst funding agencies; motivated the private sector to invest in a more structured manner towards human development, as well as increasing civil society organizing, advocacy and community mobilization. In sub Saharan African most of the MDG targets are unlikely to be met even though progress (uneven) has been realized.

Gender inequality and disempowerment of women lie at the heart of slow progress on MDG targets. With regard to gender equality, the Millennium Development Goals framework was silent on key development issues such as ending violence against women, recognizing women's unpaid work, and achieving sexual and reproductive health and rights, including comprehensive sexuality education for young people. It failed to address the rise and escalation of violence being perpetuated by extremist and fundamentalist actors in the name of religion, culture and tradition, which is a growing global threat to women's rights, sexual health and rights and minority rights. And that is why a conversation around Post 2015 must bring greater visibility to these issues so that they are focused on and tackled with renewed determination.

## **Gender inequality as a driver of GBV**

Gender-based violence is a manifestation of unequal power relations between women and men, takes place in domestic settings, work and educational contexts, as well as during civil conflict. Gender-based violence occurs across all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Violence of any kind has a serious yet unnecessary impact on the economy of a country; by exacting a social toll on women who bear the brunt of domestic violence, they also bear the health and psychological burdens. When women and girls are expected to be generally subservient, their behavior in relation to their health, including reproductive health, is negatively affected at all stages of the life cycle.

While sexual violence continues to be perpetuated by several factors including: historical unequal power relations between men and women; socio-cultural factors; a culture of impunity which is rooted in the normalization of violence against women; a complex, burdensome and humiliating justice system; the breakdown of law and order; and conflict.

In addition to the harm they exact on the individual level – threatening one’s security and sense of self-worth, traumatic, the consequences of GBV also exact a social toll and place a heavy and unnecessary burden on health services and law enforcement. Gender based violence undermines efforts of reducing poverty through depleting resources and time of women, children, families and communities. Gender based violence affects women and girls disproportionately reflecting and reinforcing gender hierarchies and perpetuating gender inequities and inequalities in most African societies.

GBV continues to reverse gains being made in other human developmental issues – beyond it being a public health issue, it is also a security issue as it causes instability amongst families yet they are the core for the development.

## **Kenyan women’s experiences of GBV**

During peace time, GBV prevalent and manifests itself in different ways:

The stories of Lucy’s and Mary’s captures some excerpts from different interviews that I have conducted undertaking different assignments which are merged to demonstrate the various faces of GBV.

**Lucy** – an MBA graduate with an economic background has been working her way up in the civil service and has recently been elevated to a deputy secretary (high level position). As she looks back on her 28 years of service, she notes how her male colleagues were quickly mobile attaining Ministerial and Principal Secretary Level only with 10 years’ service. It has taken her 28 years – she recalls the moments she would work well past 5pm as her male boss would inquire “why are you in such a rush you know I need to talk to you privately...”, she would stay well past 8pm extremely tense and anxious; when her male boss would call her in for an assignment “size her up” as she walked into his office and ask her to walk back to the door and re-enter as he stared at her uncomfortably; when the Minister would deliberately touch her bottom or hit it with a file as they left a briefing; when she would miss a promotion purely by

declining her male colleagues invitation to “socialize and be friendly”. She recalls the derogatory off the cuff remarks that the male Minister would make in meetings “despite all this agitation for women’s rights, women need to know their place, making us men happy and providing us with the necessary pleasure to enable us perform our work....some of you know how these things work, don’t you?”; Or other colleagues remarks, “those legs are so beautiful and I wonder how far that beauty goes?”

Sexual harassment in the work place greatly undermines women’s ability to exert their full potential in waged employment; it affects their ability to optimally perform; it affects their psychological, emotional and physical well-being. Most importantly it retains women in lower cadres of employment as the “price” for promotion undermines their self-worth and dignity. Kenya’s constitution and the governments renewed efforts in propelling women to leadership in public service have had a remarkable effect in shaping new perceptions around women's leadership. Today, out of the 18 Cabinet secretaries 6 of them are women in powerful docket previously profiled as male portfolios managing resources nearly 40% of the national budget. The presence of Sexual Offences Act and new government development of a GBV policy in the work place are some of the tools towards reducing the incidence of GBV.

**Mary** is a single mother of five children living in a Nairobi slum– she married at the age of 16 after her teacher made her pregnant. She could not report him as she had no hope that he would take responsibility neither did she know whom to report to. Her efforts to procure an abortion were thwarted after hearing about her neighbours relatives death due to an unsafe and illegal abortion. With little education, she started a tailoring business which doubled up with sex work. Sometimes her clients are violent to her, most times they refuse to use protection and negotiate to pay a higher fee. The city council has frequently harassed her for illegal levies, which she opts to pay through coerced sex. She has not been able to access family planning information and services. Whilst delivering her fifth born, she was diagnosed with HIV and her son (nearly 2 years) is also positive. To fend for her family, her two daughters 9 and 12 have been introduced to sex work and she is procuring the clients on their behalf.

This trend or aspects of Mary’s life are common. If GBV is not at the centre of the new developmental framework then key aspects identified in the MDGs will remain gravely compromised and must be highlighted in the new developmental framework: women and girls education will be severely undermined if institutions of learning are not held accountable for sexual violence- lack of education retains women at the frontline of poverty; efforts to improve maternal health and combat HIV/AIDs will remain unattainable due to unplanned pregnancies and exposure to sexual and reproductive health ailments including contracting HIV amongst others.

### **Violence in times of conflict**

Kenyan women experience violence during peace time but also in the times where there have been incidents of conflict including land clashes, attempted coup, and electoral violence incidents. GBV incidents are ever so present. The most publicized incidents of conflict were during the 2007-2008 post electoral conflict. GBV was a common occurrence and it took many forms including rape, slavery, forced impregnation/miscarriages, kidnapping/trafficking, forced

nudity, and disease transmission, with rape and sexual abuse being among the most common. Since women do not have the same advantages as men, they remain victims of gender-based violence and discrimination.

Some of the quotes of the survivors of violence talk to the horrendous experiences they witnessed and experienced.

In Burnt Forest, several women spoke about their anxiety every election year when they have to anticipate violence and displacement. “Every election, we are moving, as we are raped and abused – we have temporal accommodation here, sometimes after the calm, we return only to find our farms have been taken away, our shops and homes have been looted and we restart afresh....waiting for the next election. What does this mean for us and our families, instability, children are constantly disrupted from their schooling, we try to get our girls to other relatives for fear of rape and or abduction, we cannot meaningfully invest so we live a life of hand to mouth.....”

In Nyanza, women who had moved to Rift Valley regions and were displaced, ‘we didn’t anticipate to ever return here, we visit our relatives but have rooted ourselves within the communities we live with. We speak their language and are not fluent in our mother tongue, we have adopted the lifestyle of the areas and become farmers. Since we returned we feel isolated, we are not able to integrate into the economic activities as the opportunities are not the same. Many of us were raped, what will happen to the rape babies, will I ever be able to return home. The most disturbing element was that we assumed that the security were there to protect us, but when there is lawlessness they are the ones raping us one by one, how does it happen? Some contracted sexually transmitted diseases as well as injury to reproductive organs, traumatic fistulas, and infertility often accompanies brutal or repeated rapes. Some of us told our daughters to use what they have – to ensure we were secure and that we had food. We know they were trading their bodies but with a family what else can one do?”

GBV must therefore no longer be a periphery issue; it must be seen as one of the elements and targets for attaining gender equality. We have tools in terms of prevention (legal frameworks and policies in workplaces), the challenges of implementing them must be overcome by increasing accountability alongside global measures. We have additional tools in creating awareness providing response and management through multi-sectoral engagement. There is need for a structured architecture that positions Gender equality as an integral component for sustainable development and alongside these solid targets and resourcing for the next decade. Gender must be mainstreamed in all other aspects of development.

We are at the tipping point, where the realization to move from anecdotal experience sharing must be accompanied by concrete measures as those seen in reducing malaria and having malaria free zones in less than 10 years. We must be the first generation of activists and policy makers to utilize this remarkable opportunity to change the world to be a better place for all – equitable, safe, healthy and prosperous!