

MEN'S FORUM

THE STORY OF ONE
CONGOLESE MAN WHO
REFUSES TO BE "NORMAL"

OXFAM NOVIB CASE MARCH 2015



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SUMMARY

CHALLENGING MEN'S ATTITUDES TO VIOLENCE IN DRC

While much attention focuses on the use of rape as a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the number of Congolese women who suffer violence at the hands of their male partners is much higher. The We Can (End all Violence against Women) campaign challenges the cultural norms that make men feel justified in treating women violently. Animated debate at the campaign's "Men's Forums" has inspired men to join nearly 70,000 "change makers" in the country, who are committed to ending violence against women.

CASE DESCRIPTION

AIM OF THE PROJECT

The We Can campaign contributes to the struggle to end violence against women and girls. Founded on the principle that women have the same rights as men, and that all forms of violence against women and girls violate those rights, the campaign aims to change societal attitudes and beliefs that justify and condone such violence. The campaign employs two strategies: mass alliance building and community-level engagement of individuals.

The period of this project is 1 September 2013 till 31 August 2015.

CONTEXT

Sexual and gender based violence is widespread in the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to research by the We Can campaign, two out of three women can expect to experience violence at the hands of an intimate partner in their lifetime – equating to a total of 46 million out of the country's 70 million women.

Many Congolese women do not have access to any form of contraceptive, resulting in DRC having the highest fertility rate in the Great Lakes region; population growth, in turn, puts pressure on access to land, a driving factor behind the country's ongoing conflict. One in five girls become pregnant while still an adolescent, and maternal mortality rates are alarmingly high – 540 deaths per 100,000 live births. Sexually transmitted infections affect an estimated 11.7% of adolescent girls.ⁱ According to research by the Ministry of Health, only 15% of women aged 15 to 49 have a good understanding of HIV/AIDS prevention.ⁱⁱ

According to research by Promundo in eastern DRC, "forced sexual relations are described as a conjugal 'right' for men and an obligation for women. Women are seen as not being allowed to refuse or negotiate sex or condom use within the context of marriage".ⁱⁱⁱ A mere 22% of women believe they have the right to refuse sex with their male partner without justifying themselves, while acceptance of gender-based violence is widespread: fully three-quarters of women believe that their male partners are justified in

using violence against them for reasons like not preparing food well, or leaving the house without permission.

RATIONALE - WHY DID OXFAM NOVIB GET INVOLVED?

Most organisations which focus on gender-based violence in the DRC do so in the context of rape as a weapon of war. Oxfam wanted to draw attention to the roots of the problem, as shown by wider prevalence of intimate partner violence.

THE INTERVENTION

Oxfam has supported the We Can campaign for nearly seven years. Having established strong community links in five provinces and an understanding of attitudes and behaviours, the campaign has set out to create “change makers” who reject all forms of violence against women and girls.

Oxfam provided We Can with over 300,000 euro’s in the last year for advocacy, visibility materials (including t-shirts, banners, flags, flyers, posters and bracelets), administration and monitoring and evaluation. Each of the five provincial alliances get budgets for use on activities such as concerts, awareness raising sessions and TV and radio airtime.

RESULTS

So far the campaign has created almost 70,000 change makers, who have each agreed to change a further 10 people in their lives. The campaign has begun to be recognised as one of the few preventative initiatives targeting intimate partner violence in DRC.

LESSONS LEARNED

Oxfam Novib has commissioned an impact evaluation of We Can, which will provide more concrete results and lessons learned.

HUMAN INTEREST

Major Joseph Witekeyi, of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC), is nearly 40 years old and married with children. Before he encountered the We Can campaign, six years ago, he remembers himself as the master of his home and his wife, and says he felt even more dominant than most men because of his military uniform: *“It’s the gun; the ability to overpower anyone no matter what their size or influence is a powerful feeling. It is the feeling of being a ‘Mukubwa’, or chief”.*

Even though Major Witekeyi’s wife is university educated, she became submissive after their wedding, in line with cultural norms that say a wife must obey and never contradict her husband. The major says he was never physically violent towards his wife, but came to realise that he had been psychologically undermining her by not questioning her self-imposed obedience.

When the major was offered a job as a human rights officer in the FARDC he began studying the theory behind human rights, and the UN and African Union conventions that support them. However, it was only when the We Can campaign contacted the FARDC to discuss protecting women and girls from violence that Major Witekeyi started to realise

how the theory of women's rights related to his own marriage. He watched a campaign movie about a male "change maker" in the campaign who showed everyone how he helped out with domestic chores at the house, and realised how unequal the gendered division of labour was in his own household. Gradually, and in the face of ridicule from his family and friends, Major Witekeyi started to do the same.

"My family says that my wife must be a witch," he says, "that she has a strong magic or power over me so that I do not act as a normal man". His army colleagues initially expressed incredulity that a military man could give his kids a bath or help to prepare food in his own home.

A year ago, Major Witekeyi agreed to host the We Can campaign's first Men's Forum. In these forums, men are encouraged to question the cultural justifications for the way they treat women – the concept of bride price, for example, is commonly seen as signifying ownership or enslavement, whereas it was originally conceived as a gift to the wife's family. Major Witekeyi says the two hours scheduled for discussion is never enough, and that men who are vocally opposed will often approach him afterwards to carry on the discussion.

Through the forums, men from the same neighborhood have made a pact that they will together confront neighbours who are known to be violent to their wives. Major Witekeyi says he is proud to be involved in the men's forums, and believes he has made a real difference by countering arguments that men use to excuse their violence – but there is still much work to do.

ⁱ Annual Statistics 2013, PNLIS Nord Kivu.

ⁱⁱ «Enquête Démographique et de Santé» by the DRC Ministry of Health » (2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Slegh, H., Barker, G. and Levtov, R. (2014). Gender Relations, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Effects of Conflict Women and Men in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Results from International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES). Promundo-US, Washington DC and Sonke Gender Justice Institute, Cape Town, South Africa.

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