

# Approaching old problems in new ways: community mobilisation as a primary prevention strategy to combat violence against women

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*The Uganda-based NGO Raising Voices has been exploring and experimenting with community-based primary prevention methodologies that seek to shift attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate violence against women. This article shares some of the lessons learned from this process in East Africa over the last six years. It begins by setting forth a rationale for engaging in primary prevention efforts at the community level. It argues that comprehensive community mobilisation is essential if we are to see meaningful, sustained change on the issue of violence against women. It also describes the theoretical underpinnings of the approach and illustrates how these come to life in day-to-day programming in communities.*

As a result of sustained advocacy by activists from all over the world, violence against women (VAW) is now recognised as a critical human rights and public health issue. It is on the agenda of local and international organisations, donors, faith-based institutions, and even governments in a way that is unprecedented. While the cessation of all forms of violence against women is the ultimate vision, practical approaches toward realising that vision are diverse, and include legal reform, service delivery, policy advocacy, and public awareness campaigns. Despite a divergence of approaches, consensus is emerging that working to prevent violence before it starts must be a priority (Heise 1996; Pickup *et al.* 2001; Krug *et al.* 2002; UNAIDS *et al.* 2004; Garcia Moreno *et al.* 2005). As Heise argues, prevention holds powerful potential: ‘the most important shift the antiviolence groups could make to improve their effectiveness is to place greater emphasis on primary prevention’. This means changing ‘social norms and behaviors that promote violence against women’ (1996, 25).

## Primary prevention

What primary prevention of violence against women involves and what it looks like in practice are still being explored. Recommendations from policy makers include a host of measures, from parenting programmes to community policing, and activists and practitioners are still grappling with what primary prevention means in practical detail in their communities. While the need for comprehensive approaches is recognised, as the WHO *World Report on Violence and Health* acknowledges 'there are insufficient programmes aimed at primary prevention – measures to stop violence before it happens – compared with secondary or tertiary prevention. There is also an imbalance in the focus of programmes – community and societal strategies are under-emphasised compared with programmes addressing individual and relationship factors' (Krug *et al.* 2002, 28).

Individual and relationship approaches to primary prevention of VAW within the family and the community are many in number (Welbourn 1995; Afkhami and Vaziri 1997; EngenderHealth and Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa 2001). Programmes and interventions aimed at encouraging individuals and small groups of people to re-examine their attitudes and beliefs open up new possibilities and potential for changing deep-seated beliefs and behaviours; such interventions are life-altering for many, and enlightening for most who participate. These approaches are clearly essential and important. On their own, however, their impact at a *societal* level is limited; yet societal shifts are critical if violence is to be prevented. 'Ending VAW means changing the community norms and cultural attitudes and beliefs that give rise to men's abusive behaviors toward women and that permit it to persist' (Heise *et al.* 1999, 38).

Many activists subscribe to the importance of developing more holistic approaches, yet it is difficult to translate this principle into practical strategies. At meetings, from rural villages to international fora, we hear activists and practitioners acknowledge the importance of focusing on primary prevention, who state that their ultimate aim is 'to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women and to eliminate prejudices, customary practices and all other practices based on the idea of the inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes and on stereotyped roles for men and women' (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women 1993). Yet in the next breath, these activists strategise about stand-alone awareness campaigns, workshops with specific sectors, or the production of a brochure, poster or radio programme. The task of challenging an entrenched value system is complex, and in efforts to make it manageable, a 'do what you can' strategy is often adopted, with the underlying assumption being that doing *something* is better than doing nothing.

Raising Voices' experience over the past six years in East Africa has been that ad hoc activities and short-term engagement, where individuals and communities are provoked to question the status quo, but are not supported to find workable

alternatives, can be counterproductive. They can build hope and then demoralise. When it comes to prevention of violence against women, without synthesis of values underpinning individual activities, without a longer-term plan for managing the process, without pragmatic sequencing of interventions aimed at challenging normalised acceptance of VAW, and without shrewd strategising, interventions are likely to have little long-term impact.

### **Community mobilisation: Raising Voices' approach**

Community mobilisation can provide a viable alternative to ad hoc programming. Community mobilisation adds up individual interventions, sequences them into a logical progression, strives to build on what is achieved, and has an overview on how various activities will slowly come together to change the social climate. It is responsive, participatory, and based on a holistic analysis of the root cause of violence against women.

Raising Voices' approach to community mobilisation as a strategy for the primary prevention of VAW emerged from the organisation's co-directors' prior experiences in Tanzania, of struggling with how to respond to women experiencing violence, and develop anti-violence awareness campaigns. We recognised that it was crucial to go beyond working with individuals, and sporadic community-awareness activities, if we were to make any kind of impact at a community level in how women were perceived and valued. At the beginning of our work at Jijenge! Women's Center for Sexual Health, we had energetic bursts of campaigning, intense workshops with individuals or institutions, and made a media splash by putting forth broad demands for women to enjoy a full spectrum of rights. As a result, we touched the lives of individual women and maybe some men, but on the whole, did little to affect the broader social climate. We failed to recognise several key factors: (a) thrusting rights messages into communities where people do not yet recognise that violence is a problem often creates defensiveness, confusion and rejection; (b) focusing on an end result (i.e. cessation of physical violence) is meaningless when the context of a relationship is not explored; (c) sporadic engagement with different sectors (e.g. religious leaders, police, health care providers, local government officials) results in fragmented and often counter-productive interventions.<sup>2</sup>

With these lessons learned we stepped back to reflect on how programming could become more effective, systematic, and comprehensive. We realised that if preventing violence against women requires changing the hearts and minds not just of individuals but of communities as a whole, then we had to abandon our narrow approach to programme implementation, and develop a more expansive vision of social change. We realised this could not happen with 'development as usual'. It required moving from being practitioners to being activists, from delivering messages to injecting ideas, from sharing information to sparking critical thinking. We began Raising Voices to

grapple with the challenge of how to transform a big vision of social change into practical programmes and activism on the ground. We strive to establish how we can help bring about the fundamental shift in perspective and behaviours of individuals and communities that policy documents repeatedly call for, and that we know is required to prevent VAW (see box 1).

**Box 1: Comprehensive community mobilisation is . . . .**

- Working with the whole community – women and men, young people, and children
  - Seeking to encourage individuals as well as the community to embark on a process of change
  - Using multiple strategies over time to build a critical mass of individuals supportive of women’s rights
  - Supporting people to face the fact that violence isn’t something ‘out there’ that ‘happens to other people’: it is something we all grapple with in our relationships
  - Inspiring and creating activism among a cross section of community members
- Multi-faceted

**Community mobilisation is not . . .**

- Only raising awareness
- Only capacity building
- Working with one sector, group, sex
- Ad hoc or sporadic
- A series of one-off activities
- Pointing fingers, blaming, assigning fault
- Top down programme implementation by an NGO to a community
- Neat and completed within short timeframes
- Message-based

**Theory into practice: guiding principles**

The work of community mobilisation is large and broad and as such can often degenerate into compartmentalised activities and strategies. To avoid this, Raising Voices uses six guiding principles to inform and structure the process. These guiding principles emerged directly from our experience of mobilising communities in Uganda and Tanzania, and provide the conceptual foundation for our approach to community mobilisation (Michau and Naker 2003).

### ***Prevention***

Prevention of violence means influencing the value systems and environments that tolerate and allow VAW to occur. In order to do this, programmes must focus on the root causes of VAW. Despite the variety of manifestations of violence across cultures and communities, women experience violence because they are seen as having lower status, and thus enjoy less power than men in their relationships, in their families, in their communities, and in the larger society. VAW is normalised in many communities, so much so that women and men do not identify it as a problem or a violation of rights: it is taken as a fact of life, part of marriage, or part and parcel of being in a relationship with a man.

A focus on primary prevention means addressing and engaging the entire community in a process of examining these core issues, on the understanding that if we only deal with individual acts of violence after the fact, violence will never end. If we understand VAW as a manifestation of women's low status and lack of power in relationships, then it is the context of women's lives that we aim to influence, rather than responding to specific forms of violence. Working to prevent violence requires changing the core dynamics within relationships as well as in the broader community. It means inspiring the community to promote equality and mutual respect in intimate relationships, and not accepting the subordination of women. Ultimately, an individual can only sustain a change in behaviour if the community around that person endorses the change and supports its maintenance through an enabling social environment.

We have found that a focus on prevention, and on the root causes of VAW, rather than its diverse manifestations, means that the framework for community mobilisation can be used across cultures. This has important implications for the field of violence prevention in scaling up efforts and cross-cultural learning. While we originally published *Mobilising Communities to Prevent Domestic Violence* (Michau and Naker 2003) for use in east and southern Africa, it is now being used in more than 50 countries around the world.<sup>3</sup> For example, the 'We Can' Campaign against VAW in South Asia has adapted the community mobilisation methodology for different contexts. The campaign focuses on prevention, community ownership, and the causal factors of violence against women. This allows a consistent framework and methodology across the five countries of the campaign, despite obvious differences in manifestations of violence in specific cultural contexts.<sup>4</sup>

### ***A holistic approach***

To prevent violence, we need to examine and understand why violence against women happens. The Ecological Model (Heise 1998) provides a useful framework, as it recognises that violence is the result of a complex interplay between individual, relationship, community, and societal factors. It illustrates the multiple causes and factors that come into play for women experiencing, or men perpetrating, violence. If

this model is useful for understanding why violence happens, then it makes sense that interventions to prevent violence against women must also occur at each of these levels. Only this will lead to the creation of the critical mass necessary to change societal norms (see Figure 1).

For Raising Voices, a comprehensive community mobilisation approach includes engaging at every level of the community, following a systematic and structured process. This means working not just with individual women and men, but with their friends and family, the institutions they rely on for services and support, the media which inform them, the opinion leaders who shape public opinion, and the government officials who design and implement policy and legislation. The process combines a variety of strategies, including community education, capacity building, media campaigns, intense workshops addressing interpersonal relationships, policy review and reform, and service delivery. Using one of these strategies on their own can have impact, but is less likely to transform community values. But when these actions take place simultaneously and in gradation over time, they can contribute to a shift in the value system of individuals and the community as a whole.

Community mobilisation may seem daunting, due to the apparent complexity of the task and the wide range of individuals involved. But the communities that Raising Voices has worked with in East Africa are much more cohesive and connected than one

Figure 1: Building critical mass



might imagine. Most people are connected to others; they rely on neighbours, go to their local health clinic, their church or mosque, see the same police officers in their community, buy their vegetables from the same market vendor, know their local government officials and clan elders. This cohesion is a characteristic of many different types of community, ranging from densely populated urban 'slum' areas, to rural communities, refugee and internally displaced people's camps. Thus, the process of community mobilisation is applicable in diverse settings.

*Repeated exposure to ideas*

Holistic engagement with a community helps build a critical mass of individuals and groups who no longer tolerate VAW. While everyone in a community cannot be reached or convinced, if enough people from different walks of life are actively supportive of women's right to live free of violence, the climate in the community can shift from tolerating to rejecting VAW. Reaching different individuals and groups requires a diverse use of strategies: what will be a compelling medium to one group or individual will not necessarily be to another. This also ensures repeated exposure to ideas. Hearing about VAW from different sources slowly influences perceptions, brings more gravity to the issue and makes it hard to ignore.

Raising Voices uses five strategies under which a wide array of activities can be organised (see Table 1). This helps structure a variety of approaches, from in-depth and deeply personal engagement with individuals to far-reaching mass media campaigns.

*A process of change*

Many organisations make the mistake of going into communities and encouraging an end to violence, before forming a common understanding within the community of what violence against women is, and without truly engaging community members in

*Table 1: Strategies and example activities*

<b>Learning materials</b> such as booklets, posters, stickers, story cards, information sheets, murals, etc.
<b>Strengthening capacity</b> of staff and professional sectors, through a Community Activism Course, training of community volunteers and professionals, and structured, on-going dialogue with various decision-makers.
<b>Media and public events</b> that create public forums for exploring ideas and values, such as community theatre, radio, newspaper, exhibitions, and media collaborations.
<b>Advocacy</b> that focuses attention on women's needs with specific groups, including collaborations with NGOs, professional sector partnerships, and community leadership forums.
<b>Local activism</b> that engages community members to participate actively in preventing VAW in their community, such as a community volunteer network, domestic violence watch groups, newly wed mentoring, community action groups, and community dialogues.

analysing how violence negatively affects their relationships, families, and communities. This means that efforts are met with limited success. Through trial and error at Raising Voices we came to realise that for our prevention efforts to have impact, we needed to understand the natural process of change, and we needed to work to facilitate this process. This led to our third guiding principle, namely that changing long held beliefs takes time and happens in gradation. Inspiring community members to rethink long-held attitudes about women and men requires a systematic process. It requires helping individuals and communities to create practical alternatives to violence. These new ways of being need to be practised and tried out over time and in a supportive environment with friends, colleagues, and institutions supporting and reinforcing these efforts. Successful change needs to be recognised, celebrated, and formalised within local structures and mechanisms such as by-laws and operational policies.

As we have learned from public health researchers, change at the individual level can happen in a fairly predictable and systematic way (Prochaska *et al.* 1992).<sup>5</sup> But societal change requires moving beyond individuals, so Raising Voices scaled up the Stages of Change model (*ibid.*) to the Phases of Community Mobilisation (Michau and Naker 2003). This provides a systematic structure and process to community mobilisation efforts (see Table 2).

A phased-in approach to community mobilisation helps organisations facilitate a process of change by gauging and planning their responses in relation to community attitudes to VAW, avoiding haphazard, reactionary responses (see Figure 2). Working through a structured process allows an organisation to avoid remaining stuck in a cycle of chronic awareness raising, or remaining reactive rather than seizing the initiative and becoming pro-active.

Phasing in ideas about violence prevention in a slow and gradual way avoids telling people what to think, and instead promotes personal reflection (the Community Assessment and Raising Awareness phase), stimulates critical thinking (Building Networks), encourages practical change (Integrating Action), and solidifies or formalises those changes so they become routine and normalised (Consolidating Efforts). It is important to recognise as well that the emphasis is on ideas not messages. Communication materials, impromptu discussions, and training workshops strive not to give answers and tell community members what to think, but to provoke personal reflection and critical thinking. Sustained exposure to arguments promoting women's right to live violence-free lives keeps issues alive in the public domain, in people's minds, in homes and workplaces. Slowly acceptance of these ideas around women's rights and VAW becomes so common that they become viable alternatives to the negative normalised attitudes and practices. It sets a new tone or climate in the community – one where violence and disrespect of women is no longer tolerated.



Table 2: Stages of individual change and phases of community mobilisation

Stages of individual change	Phases of community mobilisation
<i>Stage 1: Pre-contemplation:</i> an individual is unaware of the issue/problem and its consequences in her/his life.	<i>Phase 1: Community assessment:</i> a time to gather information on attitudes and beliefs about VAW and to start building relationships with community members and professional sectors.
<i>Stage 2: Contemplation:</i> an individual begins to wonder if the issue/problem relates to her/his life.	<i>Phase 2: Raising awareness:</i> a time to increase awareness about VAW. Awareness can be raised on various aspects of VAW including why it happens, and its negative consequences for women, men, families, and the community.
<i>Stage 3: Preparation for action:</i> an individual obtains more information and develops an intention to act.	<i>Phase 3: Building networks:</i> a time for encouraging and supporting community members and various professional sectors to begin considering action and changes that uphold women's right to safety. Community members can come together to strengthen individual and group efforts to prevent VAW.
<i>Stage 4: Action:</i> an individual begins to try new and different ways of thinking and behaving.	<i>Phase 4: Integrating action:</i> a time to make actions against VAW part of everyday life in the community and within institutions' policies and practices.
<i>Stage 5: Maintenance:</i> an individual recognises the benefits of the behaviour change and maintains this change.	<i>Phase 5: Consolidating efforts:</i> a time to strengthen actions and activities for the prevention of VAW to ensure their sustainability, continued growth, and progress.

Source: Michau and Naker (2003)

### Community ownership

Prescriptions from outsiders rarely take root in the value system of a community, but community ownership can be fostered by engaging community members to take up the issue and become activists themselves. For example, in Tanzania, Kivulini Women's Rights Organisation works with over 200 community action groups. Representatives from each of these groups have a close connection to Kivulini and they participate in training, receive learning materials about VAW, and are visited by staff. These representatives then go back to their groups, share the ideas and encourage group members to think about this approach to violence prevention. Group members are then encouraged to go out and speak to others about violence and women's rights. The ideas take on a life of their own and community members themselves become the activists. While Kivulini provides ideas and support to the representatives of the community action groups, it is these groups who become active on the issue of violence in their own way, in their own social circles, thus grounding the ideas in local reality.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2: Linking individual and community change



In order to encourage activism on a large scale, there needs to be hope and excitement regarding alternatives to violence, as well a sense that everyone has her or his part to play in solving the problem. While violence against women is obviously serious, a negative, punitive approach is unlikely to foster acceptance and change. Instead, defences rise, finger pointing begins, and community members start to talk of extreme cases, with the implication that violence is something that happens 'out there', to other people, rather than in most relationships in varying degrees of severity. Extreme violence of course does happen, but the majority of women struggle with a fundamental imbalance of power in their relationships with men, that at times manifests itself in identifiable violence (beating, forced sex, verbal abuse, etc). By personalising the process, we break the sense of isolation. By reflecting that each one of us can be a part of the solution, we promote agency and a sense of power regarding our own situation.

Careful framing of the issue facilitates the critical involvement of key power brokers in the community, particularly men. A community-based approach presents the problem of violence against women as the community's responsibility, not as individual women's problems. Men are a part of the community and addressing them in isolation has limited impact (just as addressing women in isolation has limited impact). If programmes include men as part and parcel of the community mobilisation, there is less resistance and less finger pointing. Men become stakeholders right from the beginning and work alongside women to create benefits for all.

### *Human rights framework*

Community mobilisation efforts to prevent violence against women must be rooted in a human rights framework. Departing from a traditional human rights approach, which holds states accountable and focuses on condemning violations of human rights, Raising Voices' approach seeks to engage non-state actors in a positive dialogue about the benefits of women enjoying basic human rights. While fear of reprisal or punishment might prevent someone from engaging in a specific act of violence against a partner or family member, it is unlikely to motivate a person to analyse the use of power in his or her own relationships. On the other hand, if we approach the issue of violence against women by highlighting the benefits of human rights and non-violent relationships for both women and men, there is more potential for sustained change.

Violence against women and women's rights are extremely controversial and sensitive subjects in many communities around the world. Therefore, it is important to exercise care when using the language of rights in public debate on VAW. When we began working at Jijenge! Women's Center for Sexual Health in Tanzania, we made strong statements on a variety of human rights issues relating to VAW, including the right to work, the right to autonomy, and the right not to be beaten, on the grounds that we saw all these rights violations as interconnected. However, to a community unfamiliar with and sceptical about the language of rights (especially individual rights) this was seen as quite threatening. Women shied away from identifying with these statements so as not to be seen as 'troublemakers', and men became very defensive, accusing the project of encouraging rebellion among women. So while the language of rights felt empowering to a few, it alienated the majority.

Therefore, how the issue is framed will largely determine how individuals and communities respond to it. While programmes must guard against watering down the ideas so much that they become bland and meaningless, it is strategic to frame the issue in a language that will promote exploration, acceptance and dialogue, instead of defensiveness and anger. In some communities it is more fruitful to encourage the discussion of violence and rights in the context of healthy relationships and healthy families, rather than taking an individual, rights-based approach (box 2, figure 3).

### **Opportunities and challenges**

Mobilising communities to prevent domestic violence holds considerable promise, but also many challenges. Change is dependent on community members taking up the call of activism themselves, and leading efforts within their own community. This has great potential, yet also means that the process is organic, and as such cannot be monitored or controlled in all aspects. Organisers must recognise that the process will not be straightforward, and accept that true social change will take on a life of its own. In addition, every organisation may not be able to implement a comprehensive community mobilisation project independently. Given the size of the community,

### Box 2: Putting theory into practice

In Kampala, Uganda, the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention was committed to working in Kawempe Division over a period of four years. The centre involved community members, staff from institutions such as the police and health centres, and other key stakeholders in analysing the situation regarding domestic violence. 'Ordinary' community members (85 in fairly equal numbers of women and men) became community volunteers, counsellors, and activists. They involved their friends, colleagues, neighbours and relatives with help and support from the organisation. Opinion leaders such as parish chiefs, traditional 'aunties', and village level local government officials were engaged as allies, who went about inspiring others and shifting their own practices. So for instance, local government officials recently passed the first domestic violence prevention bylaw in Uganda that covers all of Kawempe Division. Officials from institutions such as the police, religious establishments, and health care facilities were identified and encouraged to engage in a process of reassessing their existing policy and practice, and were guided toward instituting more pro-woman attitudes and practices. Gradually, as a result of these activities, a new value system is taking root in Kawempe Division. Domestic violence is now seen as a problem in the community, there are local support mechanisms that help women, people are more willing to confront men who use violence, and institutions are more responsive to violence. Domestic violence still happens in Kawempe Division, but there has been a shift in the level of social acceptance of that violence.<sup>7</sup>

organisational capacity or the level of resistance to ideas, it may be more fruitful to harmonise objectives and strategise with other organisations working on the same issues, so that each may take different approaches according to their skills, outreach, and capacity.

The expansive nature of community mobilisation means that monitoring the effectiveness and impact of a programme of this nature is a considerable challenge. It is difficult to monitor the myriad of activities, interventions, discussions, and events when they are facilitated by community activists independently, and in many cases several steps removed from the organisation that originally initiated the process of change. In addition, when activities happen at various levels, it is often difficult to link specific activities to changes within the community. But in general, there is a lack of knowledge and skills in carrying out operations research in the field of violence prevention. This area has fertile potential for collaborations between researchers and activist organisations.

While we are still learning what it takes to design and implement primary prevention programmes on violence against women, there are a growing number of

Figure 3: Practical ideas for violence-free communities, a Raising Voices poster



community mobilisation efforts that seem promising. While we do not yet have definitive answers on the exact formula that works, it is important that many efforts are underway. The challenge is to continue developing fresh approaches, learning from our experiences and sharing them, so as to build up a new body of skills and knowledge that can move us closer to the ultimate goal of ending violence against women.

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## Notes

- 1 The author wishes to thank Dipak Naker for his comments and feedback on this piece.
- 2 Jijenge! Women's Center for Sexual Health was a joint project between AMREF and kuleana, center for children's rights. It is now an independent project of AMREF. For more information about the early efforts to mobilise communities to end violence at Jijenge! see 'Mobilizing Communities to End Violence against Women in Tanzania' in

- Responding to Cairo: Case studies of changing practice in reproductive health and family planning*, Nicole Haberland and Diana Measham (eds), The Population Council, 2002.
- 3 To download copies of 'Mobilizing Communities to Prevent Domestic Violence: A Resource Guide for Organizations in East and Southern Africa', please go to <http://www.raisingvoices.org/publications.php> (last accessed 7 December 2006).
  - 4 For more information about the We Can campaign, please visit [www.wecanendvaw.org](http://www.wecanendvaw.org) (last accessed 7 December 2006).
  - 5 The Stages of Change Theory developed by Prochaska and colleagues recognises that change happens over time, and individuals typically go through a similar process of change. It is not linear and often there is regression, but generally there is a predictable progression that includes: a) pre-contemplation (not aware of the issue) b) contemplation (becoming aware of the issue and identifying it as a problem) c) preparing for action (learning more, thinking of alternatives, garnering support) d) action (trying a new behaviour) e) maintenance (maintaining the behaviour change).
  - 6 For more detailed case studies Kivulini Women's Rights Organisation see [www.raisingvoices.org/kivulini.php](http://www.raisingvoices.org/kivulini.php) or [www.kivulini.org](http://www.kivulini.org) (last accessed 7 December 2006).
  - 7 For a more detailed case study of the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP) see [www.raisingvoices.org/cedovip.php](http://www.raisingvoices.org/cedovip.php) (last accessed 7 December 2006).

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