

Breaking barriers: From being seen to being heard.



For years, discriminatory social norms against women and girls, fuelled by instability, have continued to put them at a disadvantage in the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, this is changing. Programmes with a gender-resilience nexus approach by development organisations are igniting change for women and girls towards economic development, meaningful participation in decision-making, and peace-building processes.

by Elizabeth Kameo and Nicera Wanjiru

Anifa Kavira Mwenge resides in Karisimbi municipality in South Kivu, Goma. She refers to herself as a 'female leader, female entrepreneur, and a free woman' in her community. Ten years ago, she would have never imagined such a description fitting her. A professional nurse, Mwenge settled for being a mother and a stay-at-home spouse as was dictated by her husband after marriage. Today, things are different, and she is one of the local leaders in her municipality. She owns and manages a pharmacy set up with support from her husband.

Economic and political achievements, she says, were made possible through sensitisation from the *Mwanamke Amani Na Usalama* (MANU, meaning: Women, Peace, and Security) programme, and the resulting mentality change of her husband. 'I used to be a stay-at-home mother and wife. However, after participating in the programme and sensitisation, my husband recognised that I too could take part in decision-making, at home and in the community,' she says.

'It was after this that I gained the confidence to tell my husband that I could play an essential role.' She is a member of Women Rights Activists, president of the Association of Muslim Women in her community mosque, and secretary of the Muslim Women Association. Before the MANU programme, women and girls in this region were considered inferior as compared to their male counterparts. Discriminatory social norms meant women and girls were seen but not heard.

Women are not just members of local peace councils. They issue early alerts and denounce cases of violence and conflict in their communities. They also function as mediators; they have become human rights watchdogs

Women could not ascend to any leadership posts, and early marriages were the order of the day. Mwenge attests that acquiring knowledge and information has changed relationships between men and women at household and community levels. She describes her current relationship with her husband as a 'collaboration.' He encourages and supports her in her economic and political development. Mwenge believes her economic independence, made possible by her husband's involvement, has also played a significant role in her political participation.

'This would not have been possible if I was still a stay-at-home mother and wife. Men need to accept that women can be part of the decision-making processes. Once my husband accepted this, his attitude changed,' she says. According to her, while changing mentalities has not been easy, great strides have been made towards women's participation.

The impressive rise of women in decision-making positions is evidence of this. 'I used to participate in community development activities, but it was only after joining the MANU 2 programme that I understood women could participate in the decision-making process of their communities. Before, like other women, I was ignorant, but this is not the case anymore.'

Activities of the second phase included training, sensitisation, reflection groups, and advocacy. Lack of economic independence and men's mentality towards women and girls were the biggest challenges facing women in accessing decision-making positions in their communities, Mwenge says. 'Today, there is a mentality change. However, the economic challenge women face persists. To access a position of power, one must have the financial means, because it is with these that one advances.'

Economic development is instrumental to women's participation in decision-making and peacebuilding as it shifts the power dynamics within the household. It also facilitates their participation in public spaces and enhances their credibility and status within the community. This independence allows them to confidently participate in decision-making and peace-building processes. Economically independent women are perceived as more responsible, capable, and powerful—that opens more space for them in the decision-making process.

When women start working outside the home and gain financial independence, they improve their agency. That includes their confidence, particularly in public speaking, and their capacities on topics on finance, savings, governance, and women's rights. Additionally, economic development also contributes to social cohesion and peacebuilding. Women can see their role in the community changing as their economic independence grows, leading to a better-defined, positive identity in the community and harmonious relationships with those around them.

Ensuring that women living in conflict and post-conflict areas are economically independent is essential to sustainably promoting women's rights, peacebuilding, and conflict prevention. Women will most likely engage when they have economic independence because their access to resources will pave the way for their recognition in society, as is Mwenge's case.

Today, she encourages other women to seek economic independence—hers has paved the way to fully participate in the community's peace-building and decision-making processes, conflict prevention, recovery and relief.

Since men and boys are key actors in gender transformation, they can either be obstacles or allies. Within the MANU programme, they are engaged to become allies through sensitisation programmes, training, and youth clubs, leading to a noticeable transformation. Since its first phase, MANU has included CARE's men-engagement approach in its programme. CARE has used it to fight toxic masculinities, question patriarchy, facilitate individuals' transformation, and promote societal inclusivity since 2013.

Engaging men and boys is essential, because it enables addressing deep-rooted social norms, enhances programme effectiveness, helps prevent gender-based violence, prevents backlash against women for gender equality gains, and promotes the psychological well-being of men and families.

Engaging men and boys to become allies towards achieving gender equality and rejecting toxic masculinity is a critical step toward achieving women's inclusion. When engaged, they reinforce positive behaviour, which supports and advances gender equality.

One of CARE's priorities in engaging them is to promote their role in changing discriminatory social norms towards women and girls. The other priorities are a contribution to gender equality, the promotion of the participation of women and girls in the consolidation of peace and security, and improved protection against gender-based violence.

With more women in decision-making positions, there is a better commitment towards inclusive, gender-sensitive justice systems. It also gives them more confidence to come forth and highlight issues of GBV. The guiding principle for male engagement in challenging gender inequality is shifting beliefs, behaviours, and practices at household and community levels for gender equality.

Initiatives which engage men and boys encourage them to abandon harmful stereotypes that discriminate against women, embrace respectful healthy relations, and support the human rights of all. In this approach, men and boys are integrated as allies for gender equality, especially towards economic opportunities for women, prevention of HIV and AIDS and of violence against women and girls (including child marriage and female genital mutilation), and family planning initiatives.

Their engagement reduces barriers women and girls face in building their agency, addresses inequitable power relations, and ensures sustainable changes in power dynamics and social structures. Advocating for women's equality in all sectors is crucial for societies. It involves everyone since it is not only women who suffer from male-controlled attitudes. Promoting gender equality requires the involvement of every individual. Engaging men is crucial as it helps eliminate the obstacles that discriminate against women.

Men washing their clothes at a community laundry bay



When men become role models and champions of change, it inspires others to follow suit and facilitates the development of a more equitable society. Since they can also experience vulnerabilities due to their identities, they also benefit when harmful norms are challenged, thus the significance of promoting positive masculinity—allowing men and boys to use their physical and emotional strength to champion inclusive and equal behaviour for stronger communities.

Nelly Mbangi, a lawyer and focal point person at SMM, says today they see positive changes in the attitudes of men and boys in supporting women's participation in decision-making and peace-building processes, as well as their economic independence. 'There is a change in the local leadership councils brought about by the MANU programme. Before, the leaders were only men, with women acting merely as observers. Now women are part of these processes,' she observes.

The programme is changing the system by engaging men and boys to address barriers that hinder women's participation in decision-making and peace-building. The EMB approach has helped to deconstruct patterns and messages of violence around which masculine identity is built. It has led to men's and young boys' acquisition of attitudes and behaviours that support gender equality. It has also led to establishing dialogues between men and women to identify issues within households and communities and find joint resolutions to promote positive masculinity.

It further emphasises the importance of women's participation in conflict and post-conflict decision-making processes to align their rights with sustainable peacebuilding. Mbangi says changing social norms which are discriminatory against women, such as restriction of women's participation in decision-making processes, and the rights of girls to education and early marriage, were a key component during the first phase of the programme. That, she says, is the reason phase two of the MANU programme focuses on preventing violence against women and on issues that promote peace.

The MANU programme is implemented by Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani (SMM) and Parlement d'Enfants (PARDE), meaning Children's Parliament, in collaboration with CARE DRC. The objective is to ensure women's and girls' meaningful participation in conflict prevention, resolution, mediation, peacebuilding, and protection.

This objective is supported by the fact that incorporating gender adequately in peacebuilding initiatives is essential to make peace more inclusive and ensure effectiveness and sustainability.

According to the report *From the Ground Up: Women's Roles in Local Peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone*, there is also evidence that women can play a particularly important role at the community level in building peace and social cohesion, and should be supported to bring these skills to national level peace processes.

Women's participation in processes can 'increase the chances that the community will buy into the process and that the root cause of conflict will be addressed, particularly as women can bring a different perspective to that of warring factions regarding what peace and security mean,' says the ISS report *Sustaining peace: Harnessing the power of South Sudanese women*.

An Engaged Man's Story

'I am an example of an engaged man. Before, I never helped my wife with household chores. This has changed. My wife now tells other women about the change and how our home is peaceful. We support each other,' says Calvin Balunza Balume.

The change in his home, he says, is reflected within the homes of other engaged men. Consequently, this change has trickled down into the communities and led to a mentality change and respect for women through changing discriminatory social norms.

These norms include, but are not restricted to barring women from participating in the decision-making processes, engaging in economic activities, and child marriage. This means girls only access primary education, putting them at a disadvantage in meaningful future participation within their communities.

Balume, a pastor at the Evangelical Church of Christ, is a MANU programme participant and a member of the reflection group for men's engagement in Katoyi, Karisimbi municipality, Goma.

He says participating in training for engaged men led to his acknowledgement of the importance of changing social norms. Today, he organises monthly training sessions for men and young boys.

Calvin Balunza Balume's engagement and that of other men in changing the discriminatory social norms has translated into communities' commitment to ensuring that the status of women and girls becomes participatory and that women's rights are fully respected.

Discrimination against women and girls perpetuates violence and is one of the causes of gender inequality by hindering their decision-making participation. Poverty persists not only because resources required to eliminate it are not made available, but also because of the way societies are organised. Policies, practices, power relations and mental models keep inequality in place and do not allow for all people living in poverty to develop their capabilities and pursue their well-being.

By addressing root causes that will support women's economic development, MANU seeks to address those conditions that keep poverty in place to bring about a systems change. The programme addresses harmful social norms, such as early marriages, which hinder girls' access to higher education and women's participation in the economic sector. It seeks to provide an enabling environment to ensure women's economic independence.

Since social norms are part of the root causes that hinder women and girls from participating in decision-making, the programme seeks to engage men and boys in transforming this system. Their engagement is significant in paving the way for girls' education and women's economic development. However, social norms alone will not be enough. They should be complemented by influencing formal institutions on laws and policies.

Over the years, women's economic independence has been recognised by development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding frameworks as significant to ensure women participate in the peacebuilding process. Their inclusions lead to more peaceful and resilient communities. In 2000, the UN Security Council passed *Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)*. It calls for women's participation in peacebuilding, protection from human rights violations, and access to justice.

Member states were called upon to implement National Action Plans (NAPs). The DRC adopted its most recent NAP in 2018 for the period 2019-'22. Within the MANU programme, the focus is on implementing the UN 1325 Resolution in the context of conflict and post-conflict areas in the communities. In 2022, the DRC reported a breakthrough in the implementation of its NAP, reporting a 27 per cent rise in women in government. A woman was elected speaker of the National Assembly for the first time.

According to Mbangi, having these laws in place, both national and international, has been crucial in the advancements in women's and girls' rights in communities where the programme is implemented. But amidst the progress challenges remain, which Mbangi

says are linked to security, peace, and protection of women. However, one remarkable success stands out: the integration of women within several local authorities into the local peace councils in their communities.

'Women are not just members of them, they issue early alerts and denounce cases of violence and conflict in their community. They also function as mediators; they have become human rights watchdogs,' she reveals. She adds there is change right from the household level, which creates a ripple effect of change in the communities. 'We see it amongst the men in how they treat their wives. They let them speak out and participate in community decision-making activities. Men involve their wives in obtaining family property and finances by discussing and consulting with them,' she remarks.

By involving their wives in obtaining family property, they are, in turn, granting women access to assets, which is crucial for women to achieve economic independence. Through approaches incorporating training and sensitisation sessions for men and young boys, the programme has set off sparks that have ignited a string of change, as proven by Mwangi's story. It starts with women becoming advocates in their households, within their families, communities, and beyond. From being heard at home, women are then heard at all levels of society.

The experience built up over the phases of the programme shows that even in contexts that are troubled by ongoing conflict, there are approaches that can combine development and peacebuilding successfully. They are vital in combining working on social norms to improve women's self-confidence, gender relations, and economic independence, thereby preventing conflict. Gender inequalities, violence, and women's lack of economic development are part of the major root causes that hinder their full participation in the decision-making and peace-building process.

The MANU approaches work on the basis that addressing root causes in conflict and post-conflict contexts is significant if perceptions that hold women and girls back are to be changed. When these approaches are used to address the root causes of gender inequality, they lead to sustainable solutions. These ensure women's rights are respected and lasting peace from the household to the communities, and inevitably to the national level.

In communities in DRC where the programme has been implemented, this started at the individual and household levels. It built its way up to the community levels, with a promise to create ripples in a pond that widens up to provincial and national levels.