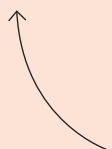


DEALING WITH THE WOUNDS OF LIFE – HOW MEN ARE CHANGING IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

In SDC's Psychosocial Programme in the Great Lakes Region, GBV is understood not only as an individual tragedy but as a violation that profoundly affects families and communities. Over the ten years since the programme started, the work with men and boys has become increasingly important in addressing the collective trauma caused by violence against girls and women.

Maja Loncarevic



Maja Loncarevic has been backstopping the Regional Psychosocial Programme of the Great Lakes since 2018. In 2020 she supported the Programme to capitalize the main learnings from their work with men and boys.

Most GBV programmes focus on providing medical care, psychosocial support and safe shelter to survivors of gender-based violence. The regional Psychosocial Programme in the Great Lakes, however, started in 2011 from the premise that the trauma of the survivors is closely interlinked with the community's response to the violence. If, for example, a young girl is raped by militia members, she not only has to deal with her experience of extreme violence, but also with the stigma – the rejection and exclusion by the family and the community. Violence against a woman affects the whole community.

PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS OF RAPE ON THE COLLECTIVE

Shame and disgrace are determined by prevailing (gender) norms and values. Like in most patriarchal societies, also in the Great Lakes the social status of a family is measured by the behavior of the women. The rape of a woman is considered a shame for the family, and by rejecting the survivor, the family attempts to maintain its social status. Expected to protect their family, men come under social and personal pressure. They fear being judged for not having protected their wives or sisters; they may feel shame and may try to prove their masculinity by rejecting or even punishing the survivor and in so doing to comply with the community's expectations. Also the community may exclude survivors, whom they see as tainted and having defiled the honour of the collective. Their pushing



away or splitting off those that have been wounded can be understood as their way of dealing with the trauma of war and destruction. Hence, the community-based psychosocial approach sees GBV as rooted in gender discrimination *and* in the traumatic experience of the war that affects all individuals of a community and their relationship with each other. Failure to address the individual and the collective trauma will prevent restoration of the group cohesion and its capacity to act as a community.

THE PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH OF WORKING WITH MEN

Men in their roles as fathers, brothers, husbands, religious leaders or village chiefs must be seen as determinants when it comes to social interaction with violence and survivors. They decide whether a survivor can seek professional help, whether her family rejects her, and whether she can continue to participate in social life.

The work with men in the community-based Psychosocial Programme in the Great Lakes follows a 3-phase model, which leads from the individual to the collective.

In a first step, the focus is on the men and their personal history. This life experience is related in a second step to the men's own behaviour. Finally, an arc is drawn to social expectations and prevailing practices and these are critically questioned with regard to overcoming conflicts at the family and community level.

For many men, this is the first time ever that they are given the opportunity to formulate and express personal thoughts and feelings and are taken seriously by the *vis-à-vis*, the project's psychologists and social workers as well as the trained community resource persons who facilitate the process. The men are enabled to reflect on their behavior and attitudes and on the negative consequences traditional notions of masculinity have for themselves. The

aim of this work is always to support the men in reflecting on their own vulnerabilities and the wounds they have suffered in the course of their life (*les blessures de la vie*). Such wounds may stem from traumatic events during childhood and young adulthood and from their experience during war and genocide.

While becoming aware of how life experience shapes their behaviour, they begin to understand the negative consequences their actions have on their partners, on their children and on other community members. The facilitators carefully accompany the men in this process and ensure that a dialogue about the painful issues is initiated and sustained with their partner and in the family. If the men can realize how they have hurt others and themselves, they will open up for real change.

At this point, the men are helped to critically question the cultural practices and customs that stand in the way of constructively dealing with the wounds of life and of positive change at an individual and collective level.

In the process, traditional and religious leaders play an important role. They together with the men and women of the community engage in the process of deciding to abandon or re-interpret traditional values and practices so that a constructive process of change becomes possible.

The 3-step-process can last between 3 and 6 months, depending on the frequency of meetings and the level of vulnerabilities of the participating men. The process is facilitated by trained professionals or lay resource persons from the communities. Both, the psychologists and social workers employed by the implementing organisations as well as the resource persons at community level undergo the same 3-phase self-reflection and are trained to accompany change processes with groups and individuals. The trained community resource persons attend regular supervision sessions after their training.

DIEUDONNÉE'S JOURNEY

Many of the men addressed by the programme grew up in strictly patriarchal families. As boys, they were asked to follow the example of their fathers and to comply with the dominant norms of masculinity. Only later, in the course of their work on their own wounds of life, did they realize how ambivalent they were about their fathers' position of power and how traumatically they had also experienced the oppression of their mothers.

Dieudonné is one of them. He is 32 years old, he is married and has 5 children. During his childhood, his family had to flee violent attacks on their village in the Eastern DRC. During the flight, his younger brother was killed and his elder sister was raped. After their re-settlement, his father became even more violent and oppressive towards his mother. Dieudonné tried to protect his mother, but also didn't want to be seen as a coward by the male members of his family. He continuously struggled with living up to the expectations of his dominant father. Although Dieudonné's life is marked by the hurts he experienced and losses he

suffered, he outwardly acts unaffected and demonstrates strength; inwardly he almost cracks under the burden of responsibility and social expectations. When his wife is raped during a raid on his village, he is unable to admit his feelings of powerlessness, grief and despair.

Instead of empathy and support for his severely traumatized wife, he keeps silent and spends more and more time outside the house.

He often comes back drunk and beats his wife. His children are increasingly scared of him and avoid him. The family's economic situation deteriorates; Dieudonné feels the pressure to provide income but doesn't know how. When he learns from a neighbour that a men's group in the village talks about life's difficulties, he decides to join. In the group, he hears other men who suffer in a similar way and he begins to understand that his wounds shape his behavior. For the first time, he finds a safe place where he can talk about his fears of failing as a man and about the burdensome social expectations. He realizes that with violence against his wife, of which he is increasingly ashamed, he tries to compensate his own humiliation and experienced weakness with power and control. In the group they discuss how they can start a conversation with their families and how they can really listen to each other without judging. Dieudonné experiences how his own reflections and change improve his relationship to his wife and children. He and other men who have gone through this process,

reflect on the prevailing gender relations and start changing their attitude towards women. They also understand the situation of men with their hurts and vulnerabilities in a new way and critically deal with social expectations. Many of them want to share their positive experiences and are committed to addressing the collective life wounds together in their communities.

CONCLUSIONS

By targeting men and boys in particular and opening up a space for reflection on their different roles and responsibilities as men and the norms, rules and expectations of society, this work initiates a self-reflection that goes to the root of the problem of violence and produces a basis for the development of new views on gender. It improves the communication of couples and within families and creates a new basis for more equal gender relations in the target communities. The result is more respect for women, increased well-being in the household, better management of household resources, and a positive contribution to the development of children.

Support for women and girls

The Regional Psychosocial Programme supports survivors of GBV and other violence through safe spaces for women and girls and referral or direct provision of specialized medical, psychosocial and legal services (in collaboration with governmental services). The objective is to offer emergency support and to help survivors to slowly address their mental suffering and become able to rebuild trusting relationships in the family and community.

Apart from the individual support, the programme helps survivors to go through a 5-step process together with their partners and other community members with similar experiences.

During this process, they are accompanied in 1. Gaining understanding of their own life wounds; 2. Mourning as a collective experience; 3. Managing related emotions; 4. Practicing forgiveness and reconciliation at the end of the mourning phase; 5. Developing a new life project.

In this systemic approach, the psychosocial programme takes into consideration different conflicts, which are caused by the violence at individual and community level. It helps to restore social ties and the capacity of caring for vulnerable members. This strengthens community resilience in a context of persisting insecurities.

The Regional Psychosocial Programme of the Great Lakes Region started in 2011 and is now entering its last two years.

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