

# Engaging men in rural Uganda

Male involvement strategies in Bushenyi, Arua and Kapchorwa



Reproductive Health Uganda (RHU) is one of the leading NGOs in Uganda that advocates for access to Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services for men and women. The organisation has strong male engagement strategies, including involving fathers through positive parenting interventions and encouraging men to support women's economic empowerment. Other strategies include community mobilisation and advocacy to promote gender equality and challenging negative traditional norms, as well as harmful cultural beliefs and practices.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is prevalent in Uganda. About half of GBV incidents occur within homes. More than two-thirds of married women (68%) have experienced some kind of GBV and close to 78% of women in Uganda overall are subjected to domestic violence. The problem is worse for rural women, where 61% experience GBV, compared to 54% of urban women. Given the high incidence of GBV in rural communities, RHU works with local partners to implement evidence-based GBV prevention interventions in the rural districts of Bushenyi, Arua and Kapchorwa, to address this challenge.

## INTEGRATING MEN INTO WOMEN'S GROUPS

Over the years, the government of Uganda and other development partners encouraged the formation of women's groups, called Women in Economic Empowerment (WEE) groups, in order to ease access to financial support, as one way of increasing household income and empowering women. However, this exposure to disposable income has been, to some extent, a contributor to GBV because of the limited involvement of men, as culturally they are expected to take key decisions on family assets and income.

As a result of RHU adopting positive parenting training, known as Programme P, increased numbers of men are joining WEE groups. Now, father involvement programmes are integrated into WEE interventions, which includes facilitating regular sessions with women and men to strengthen gender equal parenting and decision making processes.

During the sessions the topics were inspiring, touching the realities in family life, where men began to acknowledge and appreciate their mistakes as fathers who perpetuate GBV. As the sessions went on, men began to participate actively in the discussions and give personal examples as to how they were changing their attitudes. **Some of these men today have become examples to other men in their communities and are slowly inspiring more men to join the groups, helping break the cycle of GBV.**

## HOW RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARE INCORPORATING GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE MESSAGES INTO THEIR SERMONS

Faith leaders in Uganda, like in other countries, are considered key influencers of societal norms and values and are sometimes referred to as gatekeepers, as well as role models. Their word and perspective on social change holds significant weight. Therefore, training these religious leaders in the gender transformative approach has the potential to shift harmful gender norms in society.

**Faith leaders in the project sites who benefited from training in gender transformative approaches to GBV prevention now integrate the messages into their religious teachings.** For example, the district Khad Arua whose responsibility is to draft the Friday sermons and distribute it to all mosques in the district, now incorporate messages on positive parenting and gender equality. A quote from one of the Friday sermons includes, "The prophet also said, men and women have duties and rights over each other, and if they fulfil these duties and rights, there shall be no violence but rather equality."

## THE IMPACT

By engaging men in rural Uganda, we achieved the following in the last two years:

- Testimonies from couples involved in the groups of improved communication at household level on family resources
- Increased involvement of men in WEE activities
- Formation of local networks of civil society organisations, faith institutions, media outlets, cultural leaders and elders, and youth leaders to address GBV

**Overall, there is a noticeable cultural shift in terms of how men and boys view gender roles in these communities.**

Men and boys now actively participate in dialogues to challenge negative gender norms and values. After becoming more aware of GBV and the important role that men can play in its reduction, religious and cultural leaders and teachers are now at the forefront of promoting gender equality in these districts. There is also an increased number of civil society organisations that are adopting male involvement strategies to address GBV. Furthermore, there is now a stronger commitment from government on the local and national level to review policies and to adopt strategies that promote male involvement in GBV prevention.