Let’s Hear It for the Boys

The Kenyan group Men for Gender Equality Now (MEGEN) uses community outreach to get men involved in the fight against gender-based violence.

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“When I was a child, my father would verbally and physically abuse my mother,” recalls Raymond Kamau, 27, who lives in Kenya. “It was very trying to watch my father beat up my mother.” In response to those traumatic experiences, Kamau joined a Kenyan group called Men for Gender Equality Now (MEGEN).

Established December 2001, MEGEN uses community outreach to get men involved in the fight against gender-based violence (GBV) and inequality. As a team member, Kamau encourages men to end their physical, sexual and emotional abuse against women and girls.

“The main reason [some men commit violence against women] is the feeling that women are unequal and do not have similar rights that a man has, and men believe they [should be the ones] to give women and girls these rights,” Kamau says. “When the voices of women are stifled and their rights cut, they can’t be fruitful. Economically, this forces them to live in poverty and fear of physical violence.” And this constant stress and turmoil, he explains, can lead to ailments such as ulcers.

It was important for MEGEN to recruit men because having male advocates illustrates to women (especially those who’d been abused) that all men don’t share the same patriarchal ideas. And they don’t: The men of MEGEN challenge the prevailing societal and cultural views that women aren’t allowed to own land and that they can’t speak in the presence of men and interact with each other in the presence of men.

MEGEN gets its message across by speaking directly to men in the community and by distributing fliers, posters and brochures about the effect of GBV on women. To start a dialogue among men and women about GBV, the group stages skits about these topics in market centers, where the whole community gathers to purchase produce.

While violence against women can occur in the form of verbal or physical abuse, the most common form of GBV is sexual assault, which also increases the possibility of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

The men from MEGEN speak with their peers about this link between HIV and sexual gender-based violence (SGBV). They also offer sexual health education about HIV transmission and prevention, and they talk about living with the virus.
MEGEN also assists women who experience SGBV. The group set up a rapid response team to provide medical and police referrals, attend court sessions with the survivors and help them follow up with the legal system to ensure justice is served.

Since the organization's inception, MEGEN's message of gender equality has reached about 4.5 million Kenyans and 3 million Malawians. There are plans to replicate MEGEN programs in Mali, Uganda, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Senegal.

The more regions MEGEN reaches, the better. Because success shouldn't be limited to one country—or one gender.

For more information about MEGEN, visit megenkenya.org.

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