

**Youth Voices in Development****Topic One - SDG # 5**

In many cultures and communities, including within Uganda, there often exists an unequal power dynamic between women and men rooted in cultural and societal beliefs and ideas. These beliefs can manifest in a number of ways in society. The most extreme and acute example of this manifestation is the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV). The 2011 Uganda Demographic Health Survey indicates that 60% of women had experienced spousal violence in their lifetime<sup>1</sup> (this statistic does not include other types of gender-based violence). In many communities within Uganda it is culturally and societally acceptable for men to physically abuse their female partners and wives, which is viewed as a way to discipline and control them. This behaviour rests on underlying beliefs that women are subordinate to men and that men have the right to control and hold power over women. This subordination contributes to creating a dependence of many women on their male partners, particularly economic dependence, which arises largely due to the division of labour based on gender roles. An unequal power dynamic also puts women at a greater risk for GBV, poverty, and morbidity and mortality due to health related issues. These outcomes are inextricably linked and interrelated. Because women do not always have the freedom to make choices that directly impact their lives, attempts to exercise and express these rights within a relationship, the home, or their family can put them at risk of violence. Without the freedom to make these choices and to exercise certain health rights, this can also put them at a greater health risk. For example, they may not have the freedom to choose if their partner wears a condom (either with them or with extramarital partners), putting the woman at risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.

The unequal power dynamic that underlies many of the issues related to gender and the disempowerment of women in Uganda is founded on socially constructed ideas and beliefs, meaning that this is something that can evolve and change over time. The path to changing ideas about gender roles and norms is not straightforward, but there are opportunities to foment change at many levels. Workshops and discussions about gender could be facilitated at individual, community, and institutional levels and used to increase awareness about key gender issues; improve understanding of the circumstances and beliefs that contextualize and perpetuate these issues; and to stimulate discussion about the impact of these issues on individual men and women, families, and communities as a whole. These discussions could be used to engage influential members of society including traditional community leaders, teachers, and religious leaders; as well as within and among key institutions and groups including schools, religious communities, and police and armed forces. Additional entry points for facilitating change in the beliefs and behaviours that contribute to gender inequality in a community could be through

engagement of influential figures in the public eye, including celebrities, athletes, and politicians, to model positive gender-conscious behavior and to promote gender equality and respectful relationships between men and women. In connection with this, conscious media campaigns could be used to change the way gender roles and relationships between men and women are portrayed in media.

On a governance level, policies providing greater social support for women and mothers are needed to relieve some of the pressures that women face through economic dependence on men and to provide options for women to support themselves and their families if they choose to gain independence from partners. Additionally, safe spaces must be created for individuals who have experienced or are experiencing GBV including domestic abuse. Currently in Uganda, the availability of shelters for individuals (particularly women) seeking sanctuary and support are extremely limited. A support network for these women should be developed, otherwise many have nowhere to go and no other option than to stay with abusive partners, putting the lives, health, and well being of them and their children at risk.

In Canada, gender inequality may not seem as prevalent or as obvious as in some Ugandan communities, but despite this perception, many of the same issues and underlying beliefs exist in our culture and society. Unequal power dynamics between men and women are also observed in Canada. One example of how power imbalances between men and women are evident in our society, is through the portrayal of men and women in the media and in marketing, which often uses the objectification of women to market products (inherently perpetuating an unequal power dynamic between men and women). The presence of the belief that a man has a right to hold power and control over women is observed in our society through the prevalence of GBV, including domestic abuse, which is a direct manifestation of these beliefs.

The entry points for encouraging change in these beliefs and cultural expectations of gender are similar to those suggested for Uganda. Gender-conscious workshops and discussions could be held with key community leaders, within institutions, and among certain groups. I would highlight gender sensitization and education as being particularly relevant among members of the police and armed forces, as these groups hold significant power in our communities and thus members of these groups are both in a position to misuse this power but also have an opportunity to be influential figures and enforcers in strides towards gender equality.

We cannot speak about gender equality in Canada without mentioning the specific impact of gender inequality on our indigenous communities, and indigenous women in particular. Indigenous women and girls are disproportionately affected by violence in

Canada; rates of “self-reported violent victimization” are almost three times higher among Aboriginal women as compared with non-Aboriginal women in Canada<sup>2</sup>. The failure of our system and government to protect the rights of indigenous women is even more starkly apparent when considering appallingly high numbers of indigenous women and girls that have gone missing or been murdered in Canada. We need to prioritize the protection of indigenous women and girls; better support survivors of GBV, their families and their communities; and commit to prevention of GBV in our communities.

In addition to providing analysis on entry points for change and improvement in gender equality within Uganda and Canada, I think it is important to recognize the successes and advances in gender equality that have been achieved in these countries. Uganda has a wealth of organizations dedicated to the empowerment of women, improvement of gender equality and the promotion and protection of sexual and reproductive health rights including Reproductive Health Uganda, Women Rights Initiative, and Raising Voices Uganda, which are just a few of these groups. Another area worth celebrating is that the Uganda Ministry of Health provides all family planning methods free of charge for men and women. The uptake of these methods varies, and the social and cultural determinants of this need to be explored and addressed further, but increased accessibility of these methods is a great start. Canada has seen recent small but notable changes in gender equality, an example being the recent change to 50-50 gender representation in the federal cabinet (though it should be noted that the house of commons sits with only 26% of seats represented by women<sup>3</sup>). The newly elected Government of Canada has also commenced a national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, which is the first step in a process exploring how we can prevent further tragedy and GBV, with particular emphasis on protecting indigenous women and girls.

Both Uganda and Canada have significant room for growth in terms of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Change is happening slowly and positive strides are being taken. We need to remain committed to engaging men and women in our communities to work towards achieving the targets outlined in the fifth Sustainable Development Goal.

### **Literature Cited**

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