PARTNERING TO ENGAGE MEN IN ELIMINATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA

Nigeria

Steven Botkin

Introduction

In November 2006, staff members from Men’s Resources International (MRI) travelled to Ebonyi State in Nigeria to provide 10 days of training and consultations for the development of the Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center. The visit was hosted by DOVENET, a women’s safety and empowerment organisation. During the visit, MRI conducted a three-day training on “Engaging Men in Eliminating GBV”, which was attended by 36 men and women from Nigeria, as well as delegates from the newly formed Zambia Men’s Network and the Rwanda Men’s Centre. As a result of this international partnership between MRI, a U.S. men’s organisation and DOVENET, a Nigerian women’s organisation, two new grassroots NGOs have formed with both women and men working in partnership for the prevention of gender-based violence and the promotion of “positive masculinity.”

Nigeria Men’s Pledge

We, men of Nigeria, are publicly stating our commitment to ending violence against women. We understand the pain of women and men, and the costs to society, caused by this violence. For the health of our families and the future of our communities, we pledge to challenge gender-based violence in its many forms, and to support women’s safety and empowerment. Together with women, we will advocate for legal protections, victim services, educational programs for violence prevention and gender equality. We will be role models of positive masculinity for our children in our words and actions. And we will invite other men of Nigeria to join us in signing this pledge.
Nigerian Women’s Pledge

We, women of Nigeria, call upon our fathers, brothers, husbands and sons to join us in ending gender-based violence in our families and communities. We understand the pain of women and men, and the costs to society, caused by this violence. We support men in their own journey of healing from violence, and welcome men as partners in creating healthy families and communities.

Background

During the 2005 UN Commission on the Status of Women conference, Men’s Resources International executive director, Dr. Steven Botkin, was a presenter at the Institute on Engaging Men and Boys. One of the conference delegates who attended his presentation was Ugo Nnachi of Nigeria, founder and director of Daughters of Virtue and Empowerment Initiative (DOVENET), and one of the few women chiefs in her state (Ebonyi). After returning to Nigeria, Chief Nnachi wrote to Steven:

“The role of men in eliminating violence against women has often been neglected and I must confess that Men’s Resources International has offered us a deeper insight into how men can intervene and partner with women in eliminating violence in our families and society.

As an organisation already working in the area of Women and Human Rights, we have identified men allies who are willing to join the crusade but who need to be trained in skills to carry the process forward.”

Thus began a pioneering collaboration between MRI and DOVENET towards the launch of the Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center – a network of men, allied with women, acting as role models in violence prevention and positive masculinity.

About Men’s Resources International

Founded in 2004, Men’s Resources International (MRI) provides training and consulting to help local, regional and international organisations engage men and boys to become allies with women to prevent violence and promote healthy, compassionate, and responsible models of masculinity. MRI works with initiatives in all stages of development, using participatory, experiential education to promote personal growth, leadership development and organisational sustainability. MRI has provided training and technical assistance to programs in the United States, Canada and many African countries, including Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Cote d’Ivoire, and Zambia.

About DOVENET

Daughters of Virtue & Empowerment Initiative (DOVENET) was established in 2001 to strengthen and empower women and young people to become confident contributors in all areas and levels of Nigerian society. DOVENET’s efforts are focused around the following areas:

- human rights, peace building, and conflict resolution
- networking and coalition building
- raining and capacity building for women, men and
Examples of change: strategies for gender transformation and social justice

Formation of the Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center (EB-MRC)

Energised by MRI’s vision, Chief Nnachi began to envision a men’s initiative in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. With strategic support from MRI, she identified male allies who would be willing to promote campaigns to combat gender-based violence — a cause that was hitherto seen primarily as a women’s issue. In June of 2006, MRI sponsored one of these men, Patrick Amah, to represent DOVENET at the MRI Men’s Leadership Training in Zambia. Soon after, Ugo organised a meeting of more than 30 people — mostly men — to formulate plans to establish an Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center.

The emerging vision included the following goals for the organisation:

1. Organise a workshop on the theme: “Partnering with Men to End Violence Against Women.”
2. Construct and equip a Men’s Resource Centre.
3. Cultivate a group of gender sensitive men who will join in stopping violence against women and children and be prepared to work for a better community.
4. Initiate legislative reform to change societal behaviour and attitudes towards violence against women.
5. Identify and cultivate potential stakeholders: CBOs, women organisations, traditional rulers and community leaders.
6. Train men on practical behaviour changes to promote healthier families and communities.
7. Initiate an exchange programme between MRC-Nigeria and men’s projects in other parts of the world.
8. Work towards replicating the Centre in three (3) zones of the country.
9. Facilitate additional consultations with MRI (USA) staff members.

The Training

Encouraged by the success of the June training in Zambia, DOVENET and the newly formed Ebonyi MRC steering committee invited Men’s Resources International to conduct a similar training in Nigeria. Inspired by the MRI’s vision, a small group of individuals in the United States provided funding to fully underwrite
all of the expense for MRI staff to travel to Nigeria and for DOVENET to organise the training.

In November of 2006, thirty-six members and supporters of the Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center gathered in the small city of Abakaliki in southern Nigeria to participate in the MRI training, “Engaging Men In Eliminating Gender-Based Violence.” The group of men and women participants included doctors, lawyers, nurses, social workers, police, traditional rulers, military, clergy, and other members of the community. Delegates from the Zambia Men’s Network and the Rwanda Men’s Centre (both recently formed with assistance from MRI) were sponsored to attend and provided an enthusiastic pan-African perspective.

Responses from Training Participants

“As a result of this training, I look at women and see them as partners.”
Patrick Amah

“I was surprised to learn how serious the abuses are ... and I am more aware of the relationship of violence to HIV/AIDS and the role of men. ... This training is important because it promotes the formation of culturally rooted solutions.”
Stencilous Phiri of Zambia

“This training was fantastic - please invite other groups of people! It has exposed the depth of violence against women. I am determined to educate members of my council to prevent gender violence, and to visit schools to educate and empower students.”

Inya Agha Patience, Police Officer

“This training is important because it is the first of its kind in Ebonyi State and in Nigeria. I have learned about compassion, listening, understanding, and support...and how this can resolve violence in a community. I believe this movement will continue to grow in strength.”
Captain Beatrice Ngozi Okoroafor, Nigerian Army

“I have learned a new approach to relationships that is compassionate, empathic, and symbiotic. I will work with EB-MRC as vanguards of men fighting gender-based violence.”
Chief Anthony Uguru

“The training was practical and down to earth, and touched on real social problems. I was surprised to learn that violence can be emotional, and that some traditional ‘rights of men’ are actually violence against women. I will use my knowledge and position to sensitize my community about gender-based violence, to council victims, and to influence community leaders to outlaw gender-based violence.”
Ewa Agha Ewa, Esq., Barrister and Solicitor

The Practicum: Ebonyi Women’s Day Celebration

The day after the MRI training, participants had the opportunity to practice some of the skills they had learned. For the first time ever, a delegation of men...
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Consultations

Just as important as the formal training were the many meetings and informal consultations that took place throughout MRI’s stay in Nigeria. Over 50 men and women, in addition to the training participants, were directly touched by MRI’s message about men’s role in eliminating gender-based violence, promoting positive masculinity, and working for family and community health.

These activities included meeting with male and female community leaders in Ugo’s village, meeting with a Senator and representative from Ebonyi State, attending church services, and meetings with the Executive Chairmen of the State Basic Education Board, the Independent Electoral Commission, and the Executive Secretary of the Women’s Development Center. Informal evening meetings with the delegates from Zambia, Rwanda and Nigeria provided valuable opportunities for mentoring, coaching and mutual support.

MRI Hosts Chief Nnachi for US Study and Speaking Tour

Ugo returned to the U.S. in 2007 to attend the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women conference in New York City. Men’s Resources International arranged to host Chief Nnachi in Western Massachusetts after the conference to facilitate networking and learning opportunities and foster
connections between organisations and individuals in Massachusetts and Nigeria.

Ugo was enthusiastic about the opportunity and articulated the value in the following statement:

“The visit will spark information sharing and ongoing communication with international organisations that are interested in our work. It will provide opportunities to learn best practices in implementing programmes and fund-raising techniques to ensure sustainability. It will create opportunities to publicise the Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center Project and help to distribute and publicise the three-year strategic plan in order to facilitate possible collaboration in implementation. It will also help me carry out a study tour of Men’s Initiatives in Massachusetts for possible improvement of our work in Nigeria. The tour will not only build my capacity, but what I take back will improve the running of DOVENET and Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center. It is my hope that you will continue to support initiatives that seek to protect the rights of women to create, peaceful societies.”

During her stay in Western Massachusetts, Ugo spoke at a welcome reception at MRI’s offices in Springfield, Massachusetts, meeting with city government representatives, local citizens, activists, and business people. She attended church services, spoke at a reception at a Springfield community centre, and gave presentations at Springfield College, the University of Massachusetts and Smith College. She visited Stop It Now!, an NGO dedicated to preventing child sexual abuse, and spent time at the Men’s Resource Center for Change, a pioneering organisation that has served as a model for men’s centres around the world.

Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center Sends Delegates to Rwanda Training

In the Fall of 2007, two delegates from the Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center were sponsored by MRI to attend the MRI training for the newly formed Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre. This experience reinforced their understanding of and skills for engaging men as partners with women for preventing gender-
based violence, and strengthened the pan-African connections for this movement.

**Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center Activities**

Building on the momentum of the MRI trainings and the U.S. study tour, the Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center has embarked on a number of programs and projects, including:

- Establishing community groups in the villages of Ebunwana-Edda and Afikpo
- Forming “Youths Against Violence” clubs in Ebonyi state University and the College of Education Ikwo.
- Organising a workshop for faith-based groups on the relationship between GBV and HIV/AIDS. The training involved leaders from the Moslem, Traditionalist and Christian communities.
- Partnering with DOVENET to identify about 20 disadvantaged women and grant micro credit facilities to assist their families.
- Distributing the printed materials “Celebrating Fathers” to churches on father’s day recognising the roles, responsibilities and opportunities fathers have in the family and society.
- Conducting paid advocacy visits to the Command Cantonment, Nigerian Army Abakaliki, and the Central Police Station to promote the elimination of gender-based violence.
- Arranging to receive reports of gender-based violence directly from police so that EB-MRC can track cases and offer counselling to victims and perpetrators.
- Providing educational materials and resources to students on GBV and gender issues.
- Encouraging attitudinal change in families and groups by speaking out against GBV when witnessed.
- Being recognised by various organisations such as The Global Funds for Women and IFESH, Nigeria.
- Offering mentoring and bi-monthly counselling sessions for youth.
- Collecting over 2500 signatures in support of ending GBV.
- Training over 70 community members in two local government areas of Ebonyi State on community involvement in violence prevention.
Formation of the Grassroots Development and Empowerment Foundation

A second local NGO addressing issues of gender-based violence, the GRADE (Grassroots Development and Empowerment) Foundation, was also launched as a result of the MRI training and consultations. Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center founding member, and participant in the MRI trainings in both Zambia and Nigeria, Patrick Amah, formed GRADE “to help close a gap in the development, education and empowerment of women and young people in the underserved rural communities.”

The Partnership Approach: Lessons Learned

The complementary strengths in the partnership between Men’s Resources International and DOVENET provided an effective foundation for the work of engaging men in the prevention of gender-based violence. MRI brought to the relationship expertise in the field of engaging men, training and consulting skills, and funding for training and technical assistance. DOVENET brought its expertise in women’s safety and empowerment, credibility as a local women’s advocacy organisation, and ability to engage and recruit diverse community leaders.

This organisational relationship modelled how men can support women’s leadership and how women and men can be allies in preventing violence and promoting positive masculinity. Including both men and women in the training reinforced this relational partnership approach, developing cross-gender dialogue skills that allowed everyone to learn from and with each other.

The primary challenges in this partnership reflect the intersecting limitations of both organisations. In particular, neither has been successful in identifying financial resources for follow-up training, programme implementation or evaluation research. Communication and technical assistance via email and telephone is not sufficient for the early stages of programme development, especially in rural areas where access to technology is limited.

Nevertheless, the Ebonyi Men’s Resource Center, has established itself as an important resource in southern Nigeria. Further partnership with Men’s Resources International and other regional and global networks will help fulfil the potential of this pioneering organisation.