Men turned to women and asked for forgiveness: Creating the Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre (RWAMREC)

Rwanda

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In June of 2006, a small stack of brochures about Men’s Resources International (MRI) was brought to Rwanda by an American activist, and given to members of ProFemme, the Rwandan national network of women’s organisations. One of the brochures found its way to a passionate and articulate human rights activist in Rwanda named Fidèle Rutayisire.

Fidèle was deeply troubled by local issues of gender-based violence and persistent gender inequalities. He saw that Rwanda was struggling from centuries of violence and oppression, cultural legacies of patriarchy, and extreme, pervasive poverty. Yet, inspired by the concept of a men’s resource centre and the success of MRI’s recent training with a men’s group in Zambia, Fidèle contacted MRI via email:

“I really appreciate your great work and I am ready to work with you in order to achieve your noble mission. I am a human rights activist, Rwandan by nationality and I want to join you. The purpose of this communication is to request you whether I can represent you in Rwanda.”

Through email and phone correspondence, MRI helped Fidèle clarify his vision and suggested steps that he could take to establish a centre for engaging Rwandan men as allies with women in violence prevention, healthy masculinity and gender equality. By August of 2006, a Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre steering committee had been formed, and in October the organisation (RWAMREC) was formally established and endorsed by ProFemme. MRI offered technical support in crafting founding documents, and encouragement by creating and hosting web pages, publishing news
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items, and introducing RWAMREC to a network of international pro-feminist men’s and women’s groups.

OUR VALUES

- We believe in the equality of men and women, boys and girls.
- We believe men are naturally loving, caring, compassionate and sensitive to gender issues.
- We believe that there are non-violent, non-abusive, and non-controlling means of solving problems and conflicts in societies.
- We believe that individuals, relationships, families, institutions, and the community at large need to change with respect to gender roles and responsibilities.
- We have to support and reflect the values of gender equality, diversity, non-violence, healthy connectedness.
- Being a better man means being a non-violent man.
- Men can practice compassion and non-violence.
This was the beginning of a strong collaborative relationship between RWAMREC and MRI.

Recognising the passion and commitment of Fidèle, and the tremendous potential in this newly formed organisation, MRI sponsored Fidèle to attend training on “Engaging Men in Eliminating Gender-Based Violence” in Nigeria as a delegate from Rwanda. The thirty-six men and women attending the training in Nigeria included doctors, lawyers, nurses, social workers, police, a traditional ruler, military, clergy, and other members of the community. The enthusiastic participation of Fidèle and a delegate from the Zambia Men’s Network (formed with assistance from MRI) lent a pan-African perspective and a feeling of international community.

Fidèle saw that a similar training session in Rwanda could propel his organisation and its mission forward. In his report on the Nigerian training experience, Fidèle wrote:

“There is a need of organising this type of training in Rwanda. A Rwandan training with MRI would strengthen the Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre, which is a young organisation that needs a capacity reinforcement. By training leadership, our members, and other key people from different organisations, especially women’s organisations, we will be able to affect significant change by continuing to spread the message at grass roots level.”

Planning soon got underway to bring MRI’s training to Rwanda.

In the fall of 2007, funded completely by individual donors to Men’s Resources International, MRI trainers Steven Botkin and James Arana, and associate trainer Adin Thayer, spent two weeks in Kigali where they conducted leadership training and consultations on engaging men in eliminating gender-based violence.

The main training was attended by nearly 40 Rwandan men and women, including all of the founding members of the Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre, representatives from ProFemme, community members and government officials, as well as delegates from Zambia and Nigeria.

Additionally, with support from Dean’s Beans Organic Coffee Company, four representatives from “up-country” coffee cooperatives travelled to Kigali to participate.

The training goals included the following:

- Understand how trauma and male socialisation are root causes in the cycle of men’s violence.
- Learn skills in empowering dialogue between women and men.
- Learn how men can engage as partners with women for violence prevention, gender equality and positive masculinity.
- Expand resources and skills for teaching others about gender-based violence, gender equality and positive masculinity.
- Develop insight, healing and empowerment for personal and collective experiences with men and violence.
- Develop action plans for engaging men within existing and newly forming community initiatives.

At the conclusion of the training, MRI executive director
Steven Botkin wrote:

“There is no doubt that the lives of the 40 participants have been changed. Once again, men learning how to listen to women is a transformative experience for both the men and the women. Once again, breaking the silence about the profound impact of violence on our lives offers an experience of healing and empowerment. And, once again, both women and men are eager to embrace a positive vision of men as partners with women in creating healthy families and communities. The idea of building a society of unity and reconciliation is a particularly relevant theme right now in Rwanda. Our observations about what is happening in the country are evidence that they have the individual and collective will to make this happen.”

Under Fidèle’s leadership, RWAMREC continued to expand both its membership and activities in the months following the training. In December 2007 (and again in 2008) RWAMREC undertook an ambitious collaboration with CARE International to lead a series of workshops, seminars and radio programs for the 16 Days of Activism.

In January 2008, RWAMREC launched a global petition to end gender-based violence in Kenya. Upon receiving the first communication about this passionate and independent call to action, MRI was able to support RWAMREC’s initiative by finding a free online platform to host the petition, and collect and deliver signatures. MRI publicised the campaign broadly to its own supporters.
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Building Networks and Alliances

and international networks.

The petition ultimately collected over 350 signatures from around the world and delivered them to the representatives from the Kenyan government. The following is an excerpt from the pledge:

**Today, Kenya is experiencing an unprecedented wave of sexual violence that has been directed at thousands of Kenyan women, girls and a number of men and boys.**

We recognise that men and male leaders have an important role to play in stopping gender-based violence, and acting as role models for other men.

**Today, we are joining our voices to denounce gender-based violence in Kenya and to publicly commit ourselves to working in active solidarity with women and NGOs struggling to end the ongoing gender-based violence in the conflict that has gripped Kenya.**

As men, we call upon other men and male leaders to publicly speak out, and to join in this global call to protect Kenyan women and children, to demand that the government act to protect citizens against sexual assaults, and to stop sexual attacks that are linked to police and armed militias.

During the time following the initial training in Rwanda, MRI’s relationship with Dean Cycon of Dean’s Beans Organic Coffee Company continued to develop and strengthen. In addition to roasting and distributing organic, fair trade coffee, Dean’s Beans supports community-based development in the coffee farming communities where they purchase coffee beans. Encouraged by the enthusiastic participation and receptiveness of the four representatives from the rural coffee farms at the September 2007 training, Dean was inspired to bring the training experience directly to the COOPAC Coffee Cooperative in Gisenyi, a rural area in the mountainous region of Rwanda on the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. Dean decided not only to sponsor the training, but to attend and take part as well.
Having now participated in multiple trainings with MRI and having independently led workshops and activities with RWAMREC as well, Fidèle agreed to take an active role in both coordinating and leading the COOPAC training, with RWAMREC officially co-hosting the event.

On September 17, 2008, MRI trainers Steven Botkin and James Arana met up with Fidèle and Dean Cycon in Kigali and travelled together to Gisenyi. Steven Botkin wrote the following in a blog entry from Rwanda:

Training participants, farmers and community leaders of COOPAC arrived Thursday morning from all around the region, along with representatives from several Rwandan NGOs involved in domestic violence prevention. As a bamboo pole was passed for each person’s introduction, the men and women were already talking passionately about their commitment to ending family violence. The activities and discussions over the next three days deepened and solidified their understanding.

The honesty and sophistication of the dialogue about the realities of violence in their lives was impressive. Men acknowledged and took responsibility for their personal and collective forms of violence against women and children, and women spoke out about the many ways they had been abused. Together they began to construct a new vision of men and women as partners, and how they would work together as agents of change in their communities.

The closing ceremony was witnessed by a large group of community members, where training participants spoke to their friends and neighbours about what they had learned and how they are changing, and provided positive role-models of women and men standing and speaking in partnership and equality.

Dean Cycon published this reflection on the Dean’s Beans website:

> At the end of the trainings, we held a big community gathering, full of traditional dancing and singing. Over two hundred community members witnessed the farmer participants stand up and tell what they had learned about gender violence in their lives. They saw men turn to women in a very public place and ask for forgiveness. They saw the women forgive. It was powerful modelling for the community, and many people in the crowd shouted encouragement to the participants, as if some deep pressure was being released. The men and women all vowed to take what they had learned back to their communities around the mountains, and COOPAC promised to create a Gender Committee to continue the work. We also said that we would take the work to other coops around Rwanda, and that some of the men and women could come and share their experiences with other farm communities, reinforcing my belief that cooperatives can be a powerful vehicle for social and economic development.

Following the success of these trainings, RWAMREC was selected to be part of a four country study (Rwanda, Brazil, India and Chile) of the implementation and impacts of male engagement programs funded by the United Nations Trust Fund, managed by the Global MenEngage secretariat with technical assistance from the International Center for Research on Women and MRI. RWAMREC is now adapting the MRI training, replicating it with other coffee cooperatives, planning follow-up activities and participating in a multi-country research project.
In June 2008 RWAMREC convened a national consultation meeting, with support from the United Nations Development Program, the Global MenEngage Alliance and MRI, where organisations interested in engaging men formed a Rwanda MenEngage network. This network, with 60 member organisations, developed an action plan, and elected RWAMREC as the first secretariat.

The Rwanda Men's Resource Centre continues to develop innovative programmes (such as their mentorship programme for male secondary school children), lead awareness and advocacy initiatives, and now sits on the Africa Regional MenEngage steering committee. And these experiences help us all understand the strategies and skills for organising and partnership.

In a very short time, the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre, with Fidel's leadership and support from MRI, MenEngage and other international organisations, has become a leading organisation nationally and an international role model in the field of engaging men and boys in violence prevention, promoting positive masculinity and gender equality.