

**“Transforming the norms of manhood and gender relations
in the Middle East and North Africa”**

**Discussion panel held at the
Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict**

Tuesday, 10th June 2014, 16:30-18:00

Hosted by the Womanity Foundation

Introduction

Yann Borgstedt, president and founder of the *Womanity Foundation*, introduced the representatives of the two event partners, Anna Leach from *The Guardian*, and Antonio Zappulla, Director of Communication at the *Thomson Reuters Foundation*. Anna Leach described the work of the *The Guardian Global Development Professionals Network*. Antonio Zappulla then described the work of the *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, which strives to inform, connect and empower people around the world and has been involved in women’s initiatives ever since it was founded 30 years ago. It trains journalists in over 175 countries, organizes the yearly “TrustWomen” conference which touches upon different issues such as human trafficking, access to land or climate change and strives to connect NGOs and social enterprises with the best law firms around the world through its “TrustLaw Connect” program.

After thanking the supporting partners, Yann Borgstedt shortly described the work of the *Womanity Foundation* he founded 9 years ago. After starting his philanthropic work by sending girls to school in Morocco, he decided that the foundation’s programs should focus on women’s empowerment. He therefore expanded the foundation’s activities to other countries such as Afghanistan, Palestine, Israel and later to India and Brazil. Today, Womanity’s priority is to find and implement innovative programs that can be scaled or replicated in other contexts, so as to increase their reach and use the resources and ideas that have already been proven successful in the past.

Yann Borgstedt then described the genesis of the new Womanity Award which was developed in collaboration with *Accenture Development Partnerships*, who examined how the *Womanity Foundation* could best add value to the work already being done in the field of prevention of violence against women. In Yann Borgstedt’s opinion collaboration is an essential element to tackle the problem of violence against women successfully, but is unfortunately often lacking. Therefore, the Womanity Award brings two partners together – the Innovation Partner (in 2014: *Promundo*) and the Scale-Up Partner (in 2014: *ABAAD*) – to scale-up an innovative and

evidence-based program (in 2014: *Program H*, developed by *Promundo* and to be replicated by ABAAD in Lebanon).

Discussion

Carla Haddad Mardini of the *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)*, opened the discussion by inviting the panelists to share their views and insights on manhood in the Middle East and North Africa.

Shereen El Feki, a renowned author, journalist and gender expert, took the floor first to depict the situation with facts and relevant statistics. Since 2007, headlines of violence against women and shocking reports of rapes in Syria, sexual assaults in Libya and forced virginity tests in Egypt have raised attention on the issue of violence against women. Gender-based violence in the Arab region is widespread, with 37% of women in the Eastern Mediterranean reporting intimate partner violence (IPV) and/or non-partner sexual violence. Though collecting data is still difficult due to the taboo surrounding this particular topic, research in the Arab region has grown in the last decades. National surveys in Morocco, Egypt and Palestine revealed for instance that verbal and psychological abuse is pervasive and is committed mainly by family members. However, the reported rates of violence against women are still very low with levels as small as 8 to 10 % of cases reported.

The data also clearly shows that nearly every woman and girl is vulnerable. Regardless of whether she is educated or not, married or a widow, or lives in the city or in the countryside, she will be exposed to violence. Furthermore, we have to be aware that even in countries like Tunisia, with a history of 50 years of progressive laws on women, there is only a minority of women who report violence: 40% say they would leave their family if they experienced violence, but an equal proportion says it would stay because they think it is part of the experience as a woman or out of fear of exacerbating violence or ruining the family's reputation. The family is indeed very often a double-edged sword, a source of security and vulnerability.

When being asked what exactly the drivers for violence against women are, Shereen El Feki answered that the reasons are highly complex, a combination of economic, political and cultural causes. In fact patriarchy and authoritarian power struggles have a great influence on the exercise of violence in general and there might be sometimes some other factors such as islamic fundamentalisms that can explain the very narrow view societies have on women's body and sexuality for instance. We also have to recognize that men are the main drivers of patriarchy, but that women might as well defend these ideas. Furthermore, we have to be aware of the different point of views women have depending on their social status, age and

other factors. Data shows that educated women are more intolerant to violence for instance or that older women are less tolerant to violence as younger ones. It is therefore important to look at these differences and take them into consideration to better understand the situation on the ground.

Finally, Shereen El Feki was also asked if we were aware of what men actually want. For her, men are indeed a big mystery as they seem all-powerful but are rarely being asked any questions about their own experiences and views. In Iraq for instance, the majority of men thinks that they can use violence against their wife or daughter if they disobey, but many reject child marriage. We therefore have to acknowledge that there are differences in men's attitudes. Moreover, in the Palestinian territories, 16% of unmarried men and women have experienced violence by family members, which shows that men are vulnerable as well.

Gary Barker, founder and international director of *Promundo*, confirmed that many men are also vulnerable and therefore need particular attention and care. The video by the umbrella organization *MenEngage* depicted the expectations societies have towards men and boys. Gary Baker reminded the audience that men are not born as rapists or violent human beings but that patriarchy and the spaces where they are socialized teaches them to be violent. By not reacting and responding to the latter, boys are not only encouraged to pursue these brutal and criminal behaviours, they also face impunity and think they can get away with it easily.

It is thus important to look into this problem to truly understand what triggers this behaviour in men and boys. Gary Baker insisted that we have to identify men that believe in gender equality and turn up the volume of their voices. These men and boys exist all over the world, and they have to encourage their peers to participate in prenatal care or do school-based work for instance. We have to change the environment in which people live but also initiate institutional reforms to build a strong foundation. In Brazil, *Promundo* elaborated online qualitative trainings for teachers through which they could reach thousands of students.

Naturally, the situation is different in conflict situations. That is why *Promundo* had to adapt the program to the particular context in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). During conflict, because both men and women have witnessed and experienced violence, the trauma is very important on both sides and can only be lifted through qualitative psychological support at the community level. Both men and women have to be engaged to truly see changes in the lives of these communities.

Anthony Keedi, coordinator of the Engaging Men and Boys Programme at the organization *ABAAD*, took the floor after being asked how we could change norms that have existed for generations. He then answered that the key to this kind of change was to bring men and boys

to realize by themselves that what they are doing is wrong. In a country like Lebanon, which has been torn apart for so many years by violence and conflict, men and boys are constantly witnessing deaths and despair, so how can they not think that they were born to be violent? When boys are not allowed to show emotions, have to take care of their sisters and mothers, how could they not think that they are the king in the family?

Society is giving men and boys a specific role and many of them suffer because of that. Antony Keedi stated that the system of patriarchy eventually fails miserably, as it is not human. It is not human for a woman to be quiet or give everything up because she is a mother. It is not human to feel excited about dying on the battlefield and not having to show emotions. That is why ABAAD is showing these boys another way where they are free to express themselves, show their emotions, and are given a space where they will not be laughed at when they cry or show affection. They also learn that fighting can be done peacefully by seeking justice. Eventually breaking the silence opens a new and powerful path for gender equality.

Finally, it is also important to acknowledge that ABAAD's work is not a separate movement but is complementary to the projects of women's organizations. Men and boys are part of the solution and engaging them will eventually make women stronger. ABAAD also works with community and faith leaders, which is crucial to have direct access to the communities and to have an impact on discriminatory religious perceptions.

The audience showed great interest in the speakers' presentations and reacted accordingly by asking many questions to the panel. Shereen El Feki gave her insight in what she thought might explain the differences of perception towards violence against women between younger and older generations. She answered that older women, having probably experienced violence many times in their lives, are surely more critical than younger women. She added that this could also explain why older generations of women are more tolerant to women's empowerment. When it comes to men, Gary Baker stated that older men might have realized throughout the years that violence was not the right way to treat their wives and daughters and therefore reconsidered some of their patriarchal mindsets.

Another important factor that has to be taken into consideration is the economic pressure men have to face. Increasing unemployment rate, especially among young people, hinders them from fulfilling their prescribed role as providers which lets them think that their manhood is gradually being taken away from them.

The panel then turned to the issue of the media, which on the one hand has a real potential to tackle stigma, but on the other hand can also be used as a tool to misrepresent and

disempower women or even to reinforce stereotypes. At the time of the demonstrations at Tahrir Square newspapers wrote that women were not visible and thus assumed that they were not participating in the struggle of the Egyptians. But in fact, the media did not understand that women were not in the streets because they were held home by their family. We thus have to be careful when reading the newspapers which very often only shows us a rough picture and can give a very inaccurate picture of reality.

However, social media has also given women new opportunities to express themselves. *Promundo* is using the media and other tools such as soap operas that are very famous in Latin America to change the image of women and men. They present stories depicting men showing emotions and fear. In fact, Shereen El Feki emphasized that the media is already trying to change the image of women but that still very little is being done to change the one of men. Anthony Keedi added that it is also crucial to let women speak for themselves and not let men speak for them. Even if men think they are acting in women's interest by protecting them, Anthony Keedi stated that protecting is not supporting and that women do not need to be protected but supported.

A Kurdish woman from the audience, who had fled Iraq because she was a women's activist, took the floor to highlight women are not only mistreated, but that they are also murdered because of their gender. In her opinion, giving women a political voice and separating religion from the state are crucial to achieve women's equality in the Arab region, and she urged the international community to take action as well and pressure states who do not respect women's rights.

Another important question that had been raised throughout the summit was how to tackle cultural prejudices and open dialogue to eventually challenge deeply rooted norms. The panel agreed that a holistic approach to the problem is key to change mindsets. Governments have to take action, as well as community leaders, men and women together. We have seen that education is part of the solution, but not the only one. In fact, studies have shown that women that are educated are less tolerant to violence but that educated men are not necessarily less violent towards women. We thus have to work on every level possible to eventually eradicate these crimes.

Engaging religious leaders is key to tackle this problem in the Arab region as well, especially since religion is aligned with many states. Every religion advocates peace and Islam is not black and white on many issues, so there is room for discussions with faith leaders and the communities to challenge and change their perceptions and certain interpretations. In fact, the media should also start to move away from emphasizing the voices of fundamentalists and start to shed light on the voices of faith leaders who advocate women's rights.

Conclusion

Finally, Charlotte Watts, director of the Gender, Violence and Health Centre at the *London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine* summarized the discussion by reminding the audience once again that violence against women is a reality today and that prevention is the only way to eradicate these crimes and change patriarchal mindsets. Scaling-up promising projects through collaboration enables us to have a large impact in many different countries around the world and might help us to tackle the problems more quickly and efficiently. Eventually, men and women have to join forces and lessons have to be documented if we want a world free of any kind of violence against women and men.

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