Don on mission to empower men, women

Dr Grace Okong'o Mose: On a mission to help women and men.

By Brijid Chamacone

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Dr Grace Okong'o, the Executive Director and founder of the Foundation for African Women (FAW) is dedicated to empowering women and men locally and abroad. FAW is a charitable organisation that is dedicated to the elimination of gender disparities through economic empowerment and civic education. What distinguishes FAW from other similar organisations is its unique approach to not only empowering women but also men.

"We realise that there can be no stronger families and communities when focusing on only women as many organisations have been doing. Even though we have majority women participants in our projects, we welcome men to participate equally," she says. The recently launched Ongata Rongai FAW branch has been engaging both men and women in discerning economic empowerment projects to benefit them. "The great women in Kenya and men in this area have always been a source of inspiration," she says.

This comes as a result of their successful Kisi and Maua projects. The Maua women of Livestock have embarked on money-menace projects with the aim of purchasing horses and also putting them in pastoralism among other transformative cultural practices. They have also shown great resilience, gender equality, and access to reproductive health care. FAW supports these efforts by providing technical assistance and education.

Dr Okong'o, popularly referred to by many as Grace Mose, has been the Director for DISESA's (East Africa) project of the Education Fund of Family Planning Advocates (FFA) of New York State where she was overseeing vulnerable women's access to reproductive healthcare.

As a cultural competence speaker, trainer, and policy advocate, Dr Okong'o promoted cultural and linguistic competence for healthcare providers in New York State. She has done research on FGM in Kisi and provided strategies for eradicating it. Dr Okong'o and FAW's Co-Founder, Helen Njoroge worked with Kisi and Maua women with the aim of empowering them to take up leadership positions. For example, "rather than focus on telling people how to eradicate a problem that has been with them for decades, they direct them towards economic empowerment, eradication of poverty and domestic violence." As we engage them in their own priorities we are in ownership of issues," she adds.

Consequently, a natural focus is created for disseminating FGM. Over 27 Kisi women from Nyakura village have made a firm decision to "teach their daughters," she says. As a crusader and motivational speaker Dr Okong'o has a rich history of working on issues impacting on women and men.

In the United States she is recognised as a crusader and campaigner of women's rights and elimination of violence. Prior to joining FPA, she has worked as a director, Domestic Violence Hollars for New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NYSCADV) and also taught at the State University at Albany in the Department of Women's studies. As Ongata Rongai resident, Dr Okong'o is determined to share her skills to impact on Kenyan women and men.

A wife and mother of four boys she is a renowned public speaker who arouses local, regional, national and international forums. Dr Okong'o's mission is addressing gender-based violence including forced marriages, access to reproductive health, FGM, substance abuse through training. She is also a lecturer at Kenyatta University's Department of Gender and Development Studies. She holds a doctorate in Women Studies from the State University at Albany, New York, USA.
Women's engagement crucial in curbing gender violence

GENDER FORUM
with Grace Ong'o

I have had the privilege of meeting and having several dialogues with the Maasai women of Lolotok. They strike me as the most humble and modest women that I have ever met in my life. Just seeing them greet their elders by kneeling to allow the elder to touch their head as a sign of absolute respect is not one of those things you will see with many women in Kenya and the world.

While discussing with one and Maithoni Nyoroage, (MP, Maasai psychologist who has spent time advocating for Maasai women) during our recent visit to them, I found it immediately occurred to us that they are also among the most hardworking women in Kenya. These women have already single-handedly carry out all domestic chores at their homes including the roofings of their huts and sometimes do so while it is raining to stop a leakage.

You could imagine that such women will be enormously resented. Initially, these women are constantly undermined and oppressed by unequal gender relations in the name of culture. It is a well-established fact that the Maasai culture does not encourage women to own property. It is a culture where a girl who might be aged 10 may have no choice but to be married off for a few cows. Over 99% of women are subjected to the practice of female genital mutilation. Worst still women are doomed not only to the harshness of the world but also to domestic violence such as crying, humiliation, deprivation and sexual assaults.

The elders would defend this culture to death. (See the article by Birei-Neera in the associated news network “Maasai Female Circumcision: Don’t meddle with our culture, Maasai tell Kenya government” of April 26, 2011). Here the Lolotok elders usually tell the government and NGOs off by trying to intervene against FGM, a practice that is responsible for socializing women to be subservient. Are the Maasai women then all doomed? What are the most effective strategies to address gender-based violence?

Meeting The Rt. Rev. Canon Elias Ole Niptot, the Bishop of the Diocese of Mt. Kilimanjaro in the Christan Church, a staunch advocate for Maasai women’s empowerment, I was convinced that key approach to ending gender based violence will be engaging Maasai elders, the so-called cultural patriarchs. Bore in 1946 and a parent of 8 children, Bishop Niptot qualifies to be one of the patriarchs to define FGM but he does not.

Bishop Niptot not only interprets to facilitate our communication with the women, but strong voice for these women. He listened, encouraged them to abandon the practice, motivated them to take their girls to school and pressed to stand for and with them. Bishop Niptot is an educated man, holding a Bachelor’s degree and candidate for Master’s degree, which is important but that is not the point; for we know many Maasai men who are educated and defending FGM.

The point is that he has made a very conscious decision to work towards unconsciousness of women, which should be eradicated by many men in this community and country.

These women are not only others. They are sharp and technologically savvy despite the fact that they have not had the opportunity to attend formal education. All the women we spoke with had cell phones. These ladies are able to operate cell phones whose key in numbers were very fast and completely erased, something I tried to do unsuccessfully. For many people including myself, my phone will be dysfunctional if you erased all the numbers, not to say these women.

But what touched the core of my heart was the attention they paid to what we were saying about gender-based violence, their women’s rights, their need to plan families, their need to frequent healthcare facilities for breast cancer checkup and the eradication of FGM in their communities. And they were not just listening but expressed their desire to continue with the conversation.

It is not about raising awareness but engaging in participatory approach to issues while helping the women take ownership of these issues and provide leadership to the solutions.

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