



**EVIDENCE-BASED PREVENTION
OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:
*BUILDING AFRICAN FEMINIST
MOMENTUM***

**Report of a convening
19–20 August 2019**

CONTENTS

Violence Against Women – A Preventable Pandemic	3
About the Convening	4
Lessons From Practice	6
Navigating the Field: Key Tensions	8
Scale-Up	10
Building What We Need	11
Further Reading and Resources	12

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN – A PREVENTABLE PANDEMIC



The rates of violence against women have reached pandemic levels across the world. It is estimated that 1 in 3 ever-partnered women above the age of 15 have, at some point in their lives, experienced some form of physical or sexual interpersonal violence. In some parts of Africa, the prevalence rate is almost double that of the global average at 65.6%¹. The far-reaching physical, emotional and economic impact of this violence on the lives of African women cannot be overstated. However now, more than ever before, bringing violence against women to an end is a tangible possibility.

At this critical moment, there has been a shift to focus on evidence-based prevention of this violence against women with programmes producing quantifiable results that reflect the magnitude of their impact in this area. African feminists - and the political lens with which they approach the issues - have been essential to prevention work, pioneering efforts to bring violence fuelled by gender inequality and patriarchal power to an end. With international interest in this field growing, AWDF saw the need to convene African practitioners and donors to look at ways of galvanising the efforts of African feminists operating at every level to advance the work and even more firmly establish African feminism as the centre.

ABOUT THE CONVENING



Facilitated by Jessica Horn, AWDF's Director of Programmes, the convening aimed to draw out practice-based experience and analysis, and identify practical steps to grow the field. Opening presentations by AWDF and Raising Voices grounded participants in an African feminist lens and the long history of feminist work that has defined violence against women, in law and policy on the regional, national and international level.

Case studies of the SASA! and COMBAT approaches were presented by Tina Musuya of CEDOVIP Uganda, and Dorcas Coker-Appiah of the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre, Ghana respectively, two women who were instrumental in the development of these prevention models. Lina Digolo from the Prevention Collaborative also presented the group with an overview of the evidence on prevention that exists, citing examples from across the continent that reinforced the depth, breadth and impact of the prevention work being done on the continent.

Lastly, Fatou Wurie presented interim findings from a scoping commission by AWDF to map current levels of engagement with and investment in evidence based prevention by African donors and women's rights organisations. With this as a base, participants engaged in active dialogue and think sessions aimed at identifying areas for further discussion, further investment and for action in advancing African-led prevention efforts with a feminist lens.



"How do we harness the collective experience, energy and influence in the room? How do we ensure that feminists in Africa are centred and lead global discourse"

-Lori Michau, Raising Voices

From 19 to 20 August 2019, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) hosted a two-day convening on Evidence-Based Prevention of Violence Against Women in Accra, Ghana. The space was created to enable African actors making strides in the fight against violence against women on all levels to have open and honest conversations about the current state of the field and to facilitate a deeper collective understanding of the key concepts, trends, approaches and evidence of what has already been successful. In so doing, participants could establish a common purpose as to the way forward and strengthen their own work in programming, funding, advocacy and research for evidence-based prevention in Africa.

At the convening AWDF and Raising Voices launched their joint publication *Preventing Violence Against Women: A Primer for African Women's Organisations* - a guide to help African women's organisations navigate the terrain of academic research and varied programming approaches, and support greater engagement with the field of evidence based prevention from a feminist perspective and guided by feminist principles.

The convening was born out of the very real need for African actors operating at every level of the fight against violence against women to establish a community of practice and harness their collective experience and influence in order to reinforce African feminists' position at the centre of the global discourse around the prevention of violence against women. The 29 participants represented African women's funds, private philanthropy, programming, research and community activism, ensuring that all the various aspects of the prevention conversation could be adequately deconstructed by people with the relevant experience to do so properly.

OBJECTIVES

- *To create a common base of understanding around the latest evidence, the state of programming and the nature of research on evidence-based prevention of violence against women in Africa, and role that African donors, women's organisations and researchers are playing in shaping this*
- *To identify the core issues, creative tensions, centres of gravity, and critical gaps around supporting transformative, African-led, pro-feminist work on evidence-based VAW prevention*
- *To develop a shared sense of priorities and commitment for action in programming, funding and knowledge production, and ways to support transformative African-led approaches*

LESSONS FROM PRACTICE

“Gender hierarchy and patriarchal power dynamics are at the root of violence against women”

- Natsnet Gebrebrahan, Raising Voices

Using a gender power analysis: It was made clear that programmes are most effective when they take a critical look at the power dynamics within communities and examine the ways in which the power imbalance between men and women reinforces and enables the attitudes and thoughts that underlie the violence itself. Deconstructing and transforming existing power relations is the only way to create sustained changes within communities.

Acknowledging intersectionality: African women are not monolithic. While there are shared aspects of their lived experiences, it is essential that we understand that all women do not experience violence in the same way, have the same level of vulnerability to violence, experience the same degree of violence or the same forms of violence. Some women’s experiences of violence are compounded by other factors. Disability and class/economic status in particular, were issues that were emphasised. Building on that understanding, it was emphasised that programmes must address multiple forms of violence and be informed by the needs of diverse women. Inclusion is paramount.

Do no harm: The safety and well-being of women remain at the forefront of everyone’s minds at every level of the field. No matter how well-intentioned the action, if it could potentially expose women to any forms of violence it would have to be re-evaluated. Participants noted the reality of backlash in work on women’s rights and violence against women in particular, and the fact that there is often a lack of consideration for the consequences that women working in the field are forced to bear for going up against patriarchal power structures. Participants agreed that preemptive measures should be put in place to mitigate backlash and that not only should there be ongoing monitoring of resistance and risk, but that all members of the prevention community should be ready and willing to stand in solidarity with people facing backlash for the work that they do.

A feminist approach to prevention²

1. Uses a gender-power analysis
2. Is intersectional
3. Strives to ‘do no harm’
4. Is accountable to women and girls
5. Fosters activism



² Raising Voices and the African Women's Development Fund. (2019). Preventing Violence against Women: A Primer for African Women's Organisations. Kampala, Uganda. Retrieved from: http://raisingvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Raising_Voices_Primer_English.pdf



Stay accountable to women and girls: As a foundational ethic, participants agreed that programmes must remain accountable to women and girls - both within the programmes themselves and within the larger organisational structures that support them. There was a general understanding that women need to be prioritised and that the promotion of their leadership and rights are critical if programmes are to contribute to broader changes in gender power dynamics. Programmes aimed at preventing violence against women should necessarily be proactively linked to feminist movement space and focus on advancing women’s status on every level. The organisations themselves should ideally be women-led and women driven.

Foster activism: As unequal gender power relations are the root cause of violence against women, participants discussed how vital it is to maintain a focus on analysing and working to end the root cause, and not just focus on behavioural ‘symptoms’ of unequal power. Participants noted that this activist spirit has been foundational to the movement to end violence, which is firmly situated in feminist activism across Africa and globally, and is required to maintain and keep calling for greater political will to prioritise prevention, and to the design and analysis of prevention interventions.

NAVIGATING THE FIELD: KEY TENSIONS

As the field of evidence based prevention grows, there are a number of key tensions that are important to consider and to navigate.

"Our focus is not just about single incidents of violence. Depatriarchalisation is our goal"
- Jessica Horn, AWDF

Apolitical vs feminist grounded

Participants were mindful of the fact that the surge in interest in evidence-based prevention is beginning to have an impact on the work being done. With more and more international actors entering the field, there seems to be a dilution of the feminist politics that have been at the centre of the field from the very beginning. As more technical and less movement-grounded actors enter the field there is a risk that the valuable work that feminist organisers have been doing for years in the field will begin to be devalued, as will the lessons from effective approaches that show how critical it is to maintain discussions around gendered power, and visions of transformed society as part of work to prevent violence against women. There is tremendous value in and need for multi-disciplinary collaboration around prevention. What a more political approach brings is tools to tackle the root causes of unequal power dynamics and the social tolerance of violence that this creates.



"How do we address the urgency of the work and the long term vision?"
- Lakshmi Moore, Liberian Feminist Forum

Focus on reducing violent acts vs focus on changing violent norms

While there is undoubtedly a need to continue engaging in work that focuses on reducing incidence of violence, it was highlighted that an approach that prioritises targeting the root causes of the violence would be even more successful at creating long-lasting, sustainable change and ultimately reducing prevalence. Tackling the underlying social norms that support and reinforce violent behaviour in men deconstructing the power dynamics within the societies that place women in a position of oppression and designing programmes that seek to address the deeper causes of the problem rather than the manifesting symptoms are the only ways to ensure that change is truly sustainable.



Focus on where information exists vs focusing on multiple forms of violence, and the full range of actors

The majority of current evidence on prevention focuses on intimate partner violence, and to a lesser extent, sexual violence. Because of this, there is a tendency within the field to focus on working in this area to the neglect of other forms of violence, and the full range of types of perpetrators (including both state and non-state actors). While it is important to keep growing work around IPV and sexual violence given their prevalence, it is equally important to build up programming and the related evidence base around the many forms of violence that women face across their lifecycle and in all contexts of their lives. In this light donors need to consider investing in work on different forms of violence- as per demand from communities and movements to end violence. Further information and knowledge production around effective models to prevent this broader range of forms of violence will in turn equip the field with the breadth and depth of informed knowledge that those working on intimate partner violence already have.

"RCTs are not the holy grail; I'm glad that so many of us feel as uncomfortable with that as we do and it's not just me."

- Gail Smith, Soul City

Quantitative vs Qualitative

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are important in evidence generation and analysis around violence against women. Quantitative analysis around prevalence and economic impact for example have both been critical in catalysing government action and investment to end violence against women. However many participants noted concern around the bias towards the production of quantitative data alone. An example is the popularity of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and what was felt to be an over-reliance on them as a 'gold standard' of evidence. While RCTs were universally acknowledged as useful to the field as their results form a large part of the evidence base that exists now, the general consensus in the room was that qualitative evidence could provide insights into prevention work that are just as valuable, given the ability to capture nuance and context in a way that purely quantitative data cannot. The larger conversation around which kinds of knowledge are valued and which kinds are not was revisited multiple times over the two-day period, with the general consensus being that equal significance should be placed on insights captured from experimental trials and from practitioners' interactions with communities. Participants also agreed that the relevance and usefulness of practice-based evidence could not be overstated and it was imperative that the community find ways to document it properly and increase access to it.

SCALE-UP

"I'm interested in scale, making it more meaningful, planning for it and not assuming it's going to happen, and making sure all bases are covered and no harm is done"

- Lusungu Kalanga, Coffey-Malawi

With the interest of international NGOs and larger bilateral donors in the field growing, there has been a resultant push towards a focus on scaling up. While implementing already successful programmes on much larger scales than they were initially intended for may seem like a natural next step towards eliminating violence against women, there were several issues raised around the rate at which this was happening and the ways in which it was being done.

Participants discussed the question of how to take programmes to scale ethically, agreeing that efforts to take programmes to scale should still prioritise accountability to communities. Real people living real lives and dealing with real problems on a daily basis exist at the centre of prevention work. When programs are scaled up, there is the risk that this truth can get lost if there isn't a conscious effort made to maintain the members of the communities where programmes are being implemented as the primary focus at all times. The commitment to doing no harm should remain.

Aligning with the central values and principles of the original methodology and staying faithful to the core elements of the original programme design are a necessary step. What makes programmes successful in the first place is the values and principles that exist at the core of them. Attempting to implement any programme on a larger scale without ensuring that these are maintained would undoubtedly affect quality and effectiveness. Where possible, participants felt it would be best to actually include the originators of successful programmes in any efforts to scale them up as they would have the best understanding of how to maintain their programmes' integrity.



BUILDING WHAT WE NEED



Consensus emerged around the following ways to invest in feminist informed evidence-based prevention, and greater participation of African women's rights organisations in this growing field:

Strengthening programming- initiatives to support African women's rights organisations to build and share capacity on evidence-based programming

Spaces- creating more opportunities for multi-disciplinary learning, linking and affirming on feminist evidence-based programming in Africa that are accessible to women's rights organisations and activists.

Knowledge production- to contribute to the literature and challenge perception that practice-based knowledge is not "technically sound". This includes supporting practice-based knowledge production (producing citable content); and encouraging more interdisciplinary collaboration including with disciplines such as political science and sociology and not only with public health.

Information sharing and analysis: Create greater access to emerging evidence, encourage more evidence-informed dialogues for African practitioners and keep women's movement actors informed of new information produced by the research community. Looking at access, consider ways to break down information including the use of infographics and visual media to communicate fundamentals of prevention approaches. Consider languages including French, Portuguese, Arabic as well as disability access issues.

Resourcing: There is a need for focused and consistent funding to grow and sustain innovation, support capacity building and African knowledge production around evidence based prevention. There is donor advocacy needed regarding realistic timeframes for sustainable work, costing, accessibility needs and ways to sustain African and feminist-led evidence based prevention.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

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