The advocacy debate: changing policy, changing people

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Why will not policy change in itself bring about social change? Policy change can set up new rules of engagement, shift priorities, and resources, or codify rights and commitments. This is significant, but advocacy concerned with social justice, basic rights, and participation has to also address values and behaviour that do not change simply because law changes. Changing policy is about changing people – in civil society, government, and in the private sector. Unless strategies are aimed at people explicitly, political decisions will often not be realised on the ground. The case from Zimbabwe in Box 1 below may help groups understand the importance of the different dimensions of advocacy strategies.

Box 1 The Legal Age of Majority Act, Zimbabwe

In the early 1980s, soon after the Rhodesian apartheid state was dismantled, the new government of Zimbabwe embarked on a number of important legal and policy changes. Influenced by leading human rights lawyers, the country passed the Legal Age of Majority Act which made all women legal adults at the age of 18. Prior to that time, women were perpetual legal minors, unable to have a bank account, get a licence, have custody of their children, or make any other legal decision without approval from their husbands or fathers.

The passing of the Act was mired in controversy. When the news of the new law reached villages, especially in rural areas, many men and women rejected it outright. Many mothers (and fathers) were angry because the law meant their daughters could get married at 18, with or without their permission, and whether or not *lobola* (brideprice) was paid to the girl's family. There was very little public consultation about the Act, outside of the main urban areas, before it was passed. Rural people felt thiswas yet another imposition from city folk who did not respect custom and family. Few people – women particularly – understood the law's benefits.

Part of the reason the Act was passed quickly was that the party in power wanted to expand the number of voters, including women and men between the ages of 18 and 21, as the law also previously made men legal majors only at 21. Unfortunately, the opposition to the new law deepened resistance by women and men to all subsequent women's legal rights-related reforms. This became a serious obstacle to further progress on women's rights for the following two decades. Some people said that the law aggravated the generation gap among women, and contributed to conflicts within families. Others argued that these tensions were inevitable, and that legal change was needed sooner rather than later for such an urgent human rights matter.

The following questions provide some ideas on how to conduct discussion on this case as it relates to policy and social change.

- What does this story tell us about social values and legal change?
- What does this story tell us about the impact of legal change on the public? On custom and cultural beliefs?
- What alternative legal reform strategy might lessen the possibility of backlash and resistance?

Source: Adapted from VeneKlasen, L. with Miller, V. (2002) *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, World Neighbors, Oklahoma City, OK: Ch.10.

Citation: VeneKlasen, L., Miller, V., (2002) *The advocacy debate: changing policy, changing people.* PLA Notes, 43: 13