

10

'We have seen a light': participatory activities to explore HIV/AIDS vulnerability

by V. COREY WRIGHT

Introduction

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa is disproportionately affecting and infecting women and girls. The Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has referred to this trend as the 'feminisation of the epidemic': 57% of adults infected in sub-Saharan Africa are women, and 75% of infected young people are women and girls (UNAIDS, 2004). Women and girls face a host of cultural, social, economic, and political factors that, often inadvertently, obstruct the realisation of women's and girls' rights, fostering their risk and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

This article discusses two participatory learning and action methodologies that were used in a participatory action and research project entitled, 'A Gender Issue: Reducing the Vulnerability of Girls to HIV/AIDS', working with Maasai communities in Northern Tanzania. In collaboration with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and World Vision Tanzania, the project had the objectives of collectively exploring the factors contributing to women's and girls' vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, facilitating discussions to create a mutual understanding about vulnerability within the community, and identifying potential strategies for reducing risk and vulnerability.

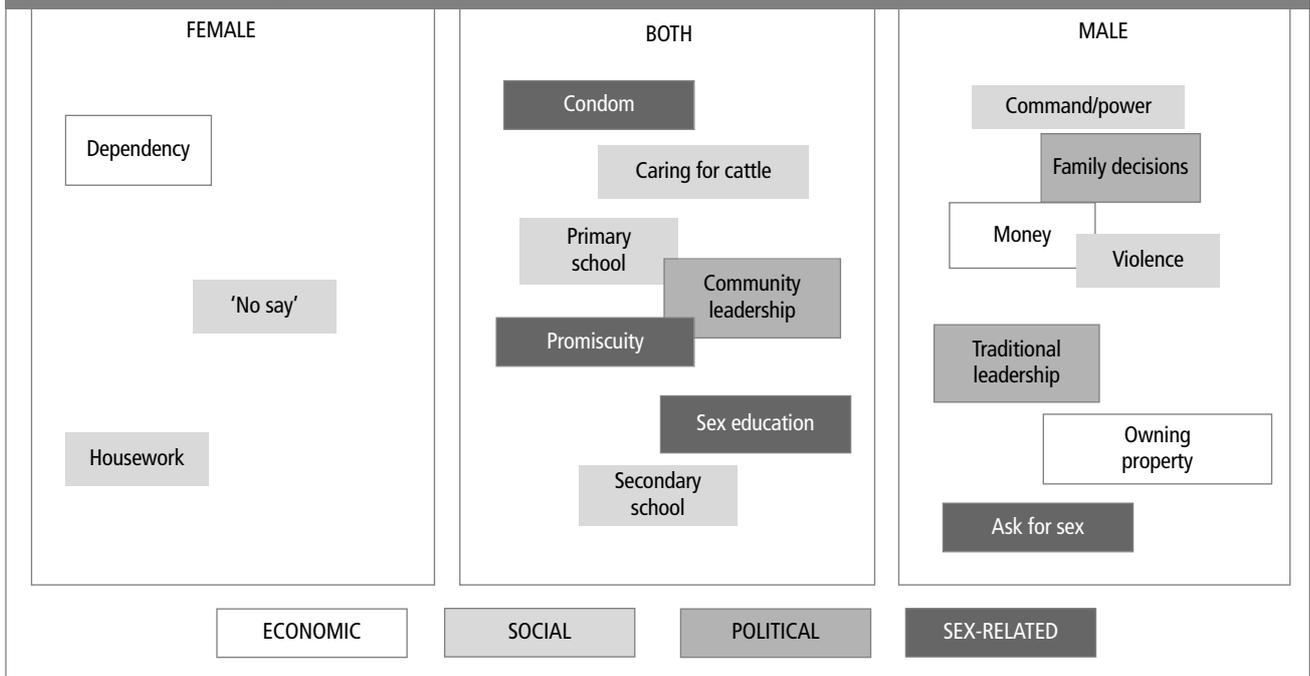
"The activity was carried out with adolescent and adult groups that were gender-segregated and organised according to the male and female age-class system, in accordance with the power dynamics that pervade the Maasai community"

In the initial sections of this article, I will describe the gender matrix activity and drawing activities that were employed in the project. I will then discuss their contribution to the project and to promoting women's and girls' rights.

The gender matrix activity

The gender matrix activity was adapted from a 'gender cards activity' described in the American Peace Corps' Life Skills Manual (2001). It consists of a simple matrix with three columns headed 'male', 'female' and 'both female and male' (Figure 1). We also used a selection of large, visible, gender cards representing different gender related behaviours, activities, roles, and attitudes, as shown in Figure 1. These were identified through extensive engagements with community members and a children's advisory committee prior to the discussions with the wider community. The cards represent

Figure 1: Figure of a completed gender matrix



the following pertinent issues:

- power within male-female relationships;
- gender roles, issues, and norms relating to sexual behaviour;
- access to education;
- ownership and access to economic resources;
- decision-making authority; and
- political participation.

As indicated by the different shading on the cards in Figure 1, each card was colour-coded according to whether it was associated with social, sexual, economic, or political dimensions of women's and girls' vulnerability. During discussions, colour-coding the gender cards served to raise awareness of the multiple layers of risk and vulnerability. For example, participants recognised that women were excluded from economic issues, such as owning property and access to money, and were identified with economic dependency.

The activity was carried out with adolescent and adult groups that were gender-segregated and organised according to the male and female age-class system, in accordance with the power dynamics that pervades the Maasai community. It was also important that the group facilitators shared similar age and gender characteristics to those of the group participants.

Steps for conducting a gender matrix activity

1. Hang three large, blank sheets of paper on the wall, writing the category headings – male, female, both – at the top of each sheet of paper.
2. Distribute gender cards to participants, and confirm with each participant that they understand what is written on their card.
3. Instruct the participants to place their gender card under the matrix category they consider most suitable for their card. Encourage the participants to consult each other during this step.
4. Facilitate an in-depth discussion about each card, exploring the participants' reasons for placing the cards in their respective categories. For example, in Figure 1, the facilitator may ask, 'Why is the "housework" card placed under the female category?'
5. Repeat the above steps – distributing the cards, asking participants to place cards, and discussing their placing – for each dimension of vulnerability, social, economic, political, and sex-related.
6. After completing the gender matrix, facilitate discussion about the completed matrix. Challenge participants to consider the social, sexual, economic, and political inequalities illustrated in the gender matrix.

The youth groups prepare a gender matrix



Photo: V. Corey Wright

Facilitating the matrix

In **step 2**, it was very important that the facilitators ensured each participant understood the different gender categories displayed on the matrix. Facilitators found it useful to facilitate some discussion to distinguish clearly the gender categories, providing examples when necessary. After distributing the gender cards in step 2, it was also important to ensure that each participant understood what was written on the cards, especially those who were not literate.

In **step 3**, facilitators encouraged participants to consult each other while distributing their cards on the matrix. This created a positive group atmosphere and encouraged good interaction and involvement, and plenty of laughter and talking. This was particularly important for generating good, in-depth discussions in the following steps.

The discussions in **step 4** were semi-structured. For each gender card, the facilitator explored the actual practice/behaviour that exists in the community, the perceived

reasons for it, relevant attitudes/perceptions, and perceived impact. In reference to the 'owning property' gender card in the Figure 1 example, some of the questions that the facilitator asked included: 'Why was this card placed under the male category?' 'Is ownership of property exclusively associated with men?' 'Are there exceptions?' 'What are the conditions or factors that determine exceptional cases?' 'What property may women own?' 'Why are women generally excluded from owning property?' 'Is this a positive or negative norm?' 'Why?' 'Does this impact or negatively affect women?' 'How?'

As indicated in **step 5**, each dimension of vulnerability – social, economic, political, sex-related – was discussed separately. For example, participants would place the cards related to the social dimension of vulnerability on the matrix, discuss these cards, then go on to the economic related cards and place and discuss them. This served two purposes. First, it helped to break up the sometimes-lengthy discussions and

Children
prepare a
gender matrix



Photo: V. Corey Wright

kept participants energised, maintaining good participation throughout the entire activity. Second, it helped to further highlight the different dimensions of vulnerability and encouraged participants to recognise the many factors that increase women's and girls' vulnerability.

Step 6 of the activity proved very effective and was a good way of initiating discussions about strategies to reduce vulnerability. The completed matrix, with its colour-coded cards, provided a dramatic illustration of the inequality that women and girls face. It challenged participants to reflect on the difficult experiences of women and girls, and the impact these have on their ability to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. This provoked participants to evaluate critically some of the attitudes, behaviour, and practices illustrated on the matrix.

Good facilitation skills, especially in-depth questioning, proved to be very important for adequately exploring the complexity of the gender relations shown by the gender matrix. The simple, categorical nature of the gender matrix

activity tended to generate simple, popular perceptions of gender, often neglecting the diversity and complexity of gender relations. For example, although the 'owning property' gender card was commonly placed under the male category, after exploring this phenomenon in more depth, the discussions often conveyed that 'owning property' is not exclusively associated with males. Contrary to popular perceptions, in certain contexts and at certain periods of their life, women and girls exercise some ownership and control of certain property items.

Adapting the gender matrix activity for children

With pre-adolescent children, the gender matrix activity was facilitated differently. The pre-adolescent groups included girls and boys, and followed the steps below:

1. The participants were divided into gender-segregated small groups – one boys' group and one girls' group. The groups were positioned on the floor in opposite sections of the room.

2. After youth facilitators explained the process, the children worked by themselves in small groups, organising the gender cards on the matrix. In contrast to the intimidating environment of a large group, providing small group formats where the children could work amongst themselves fostered higher levels of interaction and participation.
3. The boys and girls then reconvened into a larger gender-integrated group. The matrices prepared by each group were posted on the wall as visual aids for the discussion.
4. The facilitator adopted a contrast and compare approach to explore the similarities and differences illustrated on the girls' and boys' matrices. This generated a lot of debate, particularly in cases of contrasting perspectives. It generated excellent interaction and constructive dialogue between male and female children, and encouraged the children to question and reflect on the differing situations of women and men, and girls and boys.

Drawing activities with children

The focus groups involving pre-adolescent children also included drawing activities to complement the gender matrix activity. These involved the following steps:

1. The youth facilitators created an informal and relaxed group environment by playing games, singing songs, and sharing locally understood riddles.
2. After distributing the drawing materials, the children were asked to spread themselves around the room, so they could work by themselves, without distraction or influence from other group members.
3. The group facilitator then presented the children with a topic or question, and directed the children to illustrate their thoughts or responses to the question through a drawing. For example, in one group, the facilitator asked, 'What are the most significant challenges or problems that you think women and girls face in your family or community?'
4. After giving the children adequate time to complete their drawings, trained youth assistants spent time with each child, reviewing the images conveyed in their drawings. They used unstructured questioning to explore and record the children's perspectives and experiences.

Facilitators found that children seemed more comfortable discussing the issues illustrated in their pictures, as compared to a more typical interview style. It was an effective way to hear their experiences and perceptions. Issues identified and discussed included gender-based violence, impact of alcohol

Figure 2: Child's perception of the impact of alcohol consumption on men's behaviour



Drawing: Moses Kelenbu (male, age 10)

consumption on behaviour, women's and girls' limited influence on decision-making, and the impact of the unequal distribution of labour on women and girls. Figure 3 shows one of the children's drawings, depicting a man abusing a woman. The child explained that the man was holding a bottle of alcohol, and that his alcohol consumption contributed to his mistreatment of women.

Findings

Although a thorough discussion of the findings exceeds the limitations of this paper, the following list highlights the broad categories that were identified within the activities and discussions, and provides a few specific examples of the different factors that participants identified as contributing to vulnerability:

- *Cultural values concerning masculinity and femininity.* Discussions indicated that females are often seen as inferior to males, which participants identified as negatively affecting their ability to influence relationships with men and boys, and contributed to the discrimination they often faced in the community. One participant explained that, 'Women are children compared to men and they cannot respond back to men'.

- *Cultural customs and institutions.* The custom of marriage exchange and bride price was frequently identified as affecting girls' access to education, which contributes to their vulnerability. One participant stated that, 'The Maasai prefer to admit the boys more than girls. This is because they are used to send the girls to the husband so they get dowry: some cows, some goats. So they prefer to admit boys more than girls'.
- *Unequal distribution of social, sexual, economic, and political power.* Women and girls most often have very little influence on their male counterparts. In all of the gender matrices, the 'no say' gender card was associated with females. Participants said that women and girls are often not listened to, and that, 'A man's advice or idea is given priority'. Sexually speaking, participants recognised that cultural expectations often prevent girls from determining and influencing their sexual relationships: 'She has no control over her body'. Participants said males usually assume control of all the economic resources within a household, even when women own a certain resource. One participant explained her frustration with this norm in the following comment: 'What does she really own if she only owns something by name? They call something yours and use your name in reference to it but, in fact, it is not yours'.

Discussion: effectiveness of the gender matrix and drawing activities

The activities generated a comprehensive mutual understanding of women's and girls' status and vulnerability. More importantly, they encouraged participants to reflect on the cultural values, customs, and other factors that compromise women and girls' human rights and contribute to their vulnerability. Participants began to recognise their contribution to the problem and their responsibility to make individual change as well as promote social change. When asked the question, 'Who is responsible for women and girls' vulnerability?', men commonly identified themselves as the responsible party. One

man expressed his experience and feeling of responsibility in the following comment:

In my opinion, I thank you very much, because this discussion has been very good, especially because it is those affected who are the ones discussing it...we are very thankful because we have seen something bad, and we have seen something good because we are the ones who are involving ourselves. We have seen a light and we know now what is bad and what is good.

The critical reflection and mutual understanding that emerged from the activities seemed to empower participants, and facilitate a sense of individual and collective responsibility. Some of the strategies identified have already been implemented. These include:

- building special accommodation for male visitors so as to protect women's and girls' sexual rights and autonomy;
- traditional leaders helping change harmful customs, such as the sexual practices and relations between adolescent males and young girls;
- traditional leaders acting as key educators and custodians, educating men about the implications of their behaviour;
- using the strong peer networks associated with the age-class system to provide education, encourage behaviour that reduces girls' vulnerability, and distribute condoms.

A traditional leader made the following comment after his participation in one of the discussions. It is a remarkable comment that highlights the awareness, sense of responsibility, and the mobilisation that seemed to have been generated through the project:

Normally, when you see a lion coming running to you and you do not have any weapon, what you can do, you need to make a lot of noise to call other people to help you, make a loud noise to call other people. This AIDS is like a lion, which is running to us, and we don't have weapons, there is no cure, you can never go to the hospital and get treated, that is life, you don't have a weapon. But to make noises, it is to call people and to try to make solutions to make our strategies to overcome that disease.

CONTACT DETAILS

V. Corey Wright
PO Box 12950
Arusha, Tanzania
Email: wohconsulting@yahoo.ca

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The accomplishments of this project must be attributed to the youth who guided the development of the above methodologies and facilitated the implementation: Elizabeth Lesitei, Beatrice Lendii, Edward Ole Lekaita, Ezekiel Elisante, Ruth Arega, and Godson Athuman.

REFERENCES

Human Rights Watch (2005). *A dose of reality: women's rights in the fight against HIV/AIDS*. Online at: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/03/21/africa10357.htm>.
Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (1996). *Human Rights in Development*. Online at: www.unhcr.ch/development/approaches-04.html.
Peace Corps (2001). *Life Skills Manual*. Online at: www.peacecorps.gov/library/pdf/M0063_lifeskillscomplete.pdf.