The Role of Cultural Leaders in Influencing Negative Social and Cultural Norm Change: Experiences from MEMPROW

HOPE ATIM[1], IMMACULATE MUKASA[2]

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MEMPROW has worked with cultural leaders and was able to secure a commitment and pronouncement from the King of Ker Alur kingdom to work together to protect women and girls and to end violence against women in the West Nile region.

Abstract

The Mentoring and Empowerment Program for Young Women (MEMPROW) is a Ugandan feminist organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of girls and women, particularly against Sexual Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) and teenage pregnancies.

Through our project implementation experience in the West Nile region, cultural and social norms highly perpetuate violence in the communities. These norms are based on shared beliefs and expectations about how people should behave. Some of the cultural beliefs that women can't deny their partner's sex and should be available to men for sex have contributed to intimate partner rape and other forms of abuse. Women and girls are expected to be submissive; men are expected to exercise power and control over their families and relationships. Rigid gender roles, ie women are expected to do all domestic chores and gardening while the men sit at home have contributed to GBV cases in the community.

MEMPROW has worked with cultural leaders and was able to secure a commitment and pronouncement from the King of Ker Alur kingdom to work together to protect women and girls and to end violence against women in the West Nile region.

Cultural leaders have significantly supported the enactment of by-laws in the communities to protect women, encouraged girl child education, and created awareness in the communities. MEMPROW has leveraged the cultural leader's influence and experiences to support survivors' access to justice, scale up knowledge of traditional leaders on gender-based violence and its effects on families and communities, support cultural leaders to empower and inform their communities about the laws and penalties relating to violence against women, trained cultural leaders on gender and human rights, referral pathways for them to deal effectively with perpetrators and compassionately with survivors.

Through this collaboration, we have learned that partnership with cultural leaders is critical in preventing and responding to SGBV. As custodians of culture, traditional leaders have the greatest influence on altering underlying values and beliefs that are detrimental to community members and promoting positive change in our communities. However, their potential remains untapped most of the time. Our findings show that when traditional leaders are actively involved in prevention activities and projects to eliminate violence against women, much can be achieved.

Background

Cultural leaders have long been central to shaping societal values, traditions, and behaviors within communities. As respected figures of authority, they hold significant influence over social norms and play a vital role in guiding communities through change. Their role extends beyond preserving traditions to actively influencing positive cultural transformations. Their role is particularly significant in contexts where deeply entrenched negative social and cultural norms contribute to gender inequality, violence, and limited opportunities for marginalized groups, especially women and girls.

Globally, cultural leaders have been instrumental in advancing gender justice and dismantling harmful traditions, aligning with global frameworks such as the ***Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)***—particularly ***Goal 5 on gender equality***, and regional commitments like the ***Maputo Protocol (2003)*** under the African Union.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, cultural norms are deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions that shape power dynamics, often perpetuating gender-based violence, early marriages, and restrictions on women's rights. While legal and policy frameworks exist to address these issues, their implementation remains a challenge without the buy-in of cultural leaders, whose authority significantly influences societal attitudes and practices (Tadesse, 2020). Many African nations, including Uganda, have increasingly recognized the importance of engaging cultural leaders in social transformation efforts. Uganda's ***National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy (2014/15 – 2019/20)*** emphasizes collaboration with cultural and religious leaders to address harmful practices that limit the potential of young girls. Moreover, organizations such as ***UN Women and the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF)*** have worked to strengthen partnerships with traditional leaders to promote gender justice and social norm change (Kameri-Mbote, 2018).

Within Uganda, cultural leaders have significant influence over local governance, dispute resolution, and social cohesion. Despite progressive legal frameworks, such as the Children's Act (2016) and the Domestic Violence Act (2010), many negative cultural norms continue to be perpetuated, requiring a multifaceted approach that includes community-based advocacy, dialogue, and strategic engagement with cultural institutions. ***Mentoring and Empowerment Programme for Young Women (MEMPROW)*** has over the years been actively engaging cultural leaders in their efforts to challenge and transform harmful norms. Through their community initiatives to end ***early and forced marriages, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and promote girls' education*** among others. MEMPROW has successfully worked with traditional leaders especially *Alur Kingdom* and *Lugbara Kari* to shift perspectives and promote rights-based approaches to community development.

Drawing from MEMPROW's experiences, this paper highlights how cultural leaders have been critical allies in social norm transformation. The study explores best practices and key lessons in engaging cultural institutions to drive sustainable change and challenges. The findings contribute to broader discussions on feminist organizing and the role of cultural leadership in community-driven transformation, particularly in Uganda.

This paper presents findings on the significance of cultural leadership in influencing social norm change through a combination of methods, such as field engagement experiences, Focus group discussions, literature reviews, and interviews. It highlights the importance of strategic engagement, feminist advocacy, and sustained partnerships to dismantle harmful practices and promote equitable, just, and violence-free societies.

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Literature Review

Culture plays an important role in perpetuating the values and norms of society; however, it also offers significant opportunities for resourcefulness and change.

Culture refers to the ways of life of society's members or groups within it. It includes how people dress, their marriage customs, language, family life, patterns of work, religious ceremonies, and leisure pursuits (Giddens, 2005).

Culture is defined as that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Edward B. Tylor). Social norms, on the other hand, are the perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable and appropriate actions within a given group or community, thus guiding human behavior. They consist of what we do, what we believe others do, and what we believe others approve of and expect us to do. Social norms are therefore situated at the interplay between behavior, beliefs, and expectations. Social norms are learned and accepted from an early age, often in infancy (Cislaghi, Ben, and Lori Heise 2017).

Culture varies from place to place and country to country. Its development is based on the historical process operating in a local, regional, or national context. For example, we differ in our ways of greeting others, our clothing, food habits, social and religious customs, and practices from the other community. In other words, the people of any country are characterized by their distinctive cultural traditions.

Culture plays a primary role in a person's perception of the world. Many studies have shown that people from different cultures perceive things differently. Perception is the process by which we become aware of our environment. Culture and perception are closely related because it is through their own culture that people view and perceive themselves and others in the environment.

Culture is important because it gives a community its unique identity and character by being shared and passed down through generations using symbols like language, art, and religion. Culture also acts as a bond that ties community members together through shared customs, traditions, clothing, food, and values.

The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda is the first legal instrument in the history of Uganda to directly provide for the protection and promotion of our heritage. It is also the first legal instrument to provide for the promotion and development of Ugandan languages as part of our culture. The 1995 Constitution of Uganda recognizes the importance of Ugandan culture and supports the promotion and preservation of those cultural values and practices that enhance the dignity and well-being of Ugandans. It encourages the development and preservation of Ugandan languages as part of the culture and encourages the protection and promotion of Uganda's built heritage. Objective XXIV of the Constitution thus states that *"cultural and customary values that are consistent with the fundamental human rights and freedoms, human dignity and democracy and with the Constitution of Uganda may be developed and incorporated in all aspects of Ugandan life".* Objective XXV also mandates the State and citizens to preserve and promote the public property and Uganda's heritage

Regarding the right to culture and similar rights, the Constitution (Art. 37) states that *"every person has a right as applicable to belong to enjoy, practice, profess, maintain and promote any culture, cultural institution, language, tradition, creed or religion in community with others."*

The National Cultural Policy of 2006 is the first comprehensive instrument taking into account the diversity of Ugandan cultures. It recognizes the importance of culture in Ugandan's development processes and the institutions responsible for the promotion of culture.

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The National Policy defines culture as the total of how a society preserves, identifies, organizes, sustains, and expresses itself. The policy aims at promoting culture and enhancing its contribution to community empowerment through cultural industries, research and development, performing art, Indigenous knowledge, language and literary art, cultural beliefs, traditions and values, and cultural sites and monuments. The policy recognizes institutions that promote cultures such as traditional/cultural institutions, the institution of the family, statutory institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

Cultural leaders such as traditional chiefs, elders, religious figures, and clan heads play a critical role in shaping societal norms, values, and behaviors. Their influence stems from their authority, historical significance, and ability to mobilize communities. Cultural leaders act as custodians of traditions, ensuring that cultural practices and beliefs are passed down through generations. They reinforce community identity by upholding norms related to family, gender roles, and social responsibilities.

Cultural leaders can influence harmful gender norms that perpetuate discrimination, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and gender-based violence. They promote positive cultural practices that empower women and girls, such as inheritance rights, access to education, and participation in leadership. Cultural leaders can influence policies by working with governments and civil society organizations to integrate local traditions into national development efforts. Their endorsement can increase the acceptance of policies on gender equality, climate justice, and public health.

While cultural leaders hold significant power, some may resist change due to deeply ingrained beliefs. However, strategic engagement through training, dialogues, and partnerships can transform them into allies for positive norm change.

Therefore, Cultural leaders are key agents of social transformation. Their role in shaping norms can either reinforce inequalities or promote justice and inclusion. Engaging them in advocacy efforts is crucial for achieving gender equality, ending violence against women and girls, and fostering progressive cultural shifts.

Magnitude of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Uganda

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is widespread in Uganda and affects all people irrespective of their social, economic, and political status. It occurs in families, communities, workplaces, and institutions. The Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) 2011 revealed that 56% of women aged between 15 and 49 years in Uganda have experienced physical violence at some point in their lives and that 28% of women in the same age group have experienced sexual violence, compared to 9% of men. Perpetrators are often parents/guardians, current or former spouses, employers, domestic workers, and close relatives.

The Government of Uganda has enacted laws and developed policies, guidelines, regulations, plans, and programs that address GBV. These include among others: The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda; The Penal Code Act (Cap 120); the Uganda Gender Policy (2007); The Domestic Violence Act (2010) and the Domestic Violence Regulations (2011); The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2009); The Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act (2010); the National Action Plan on Women (2008); the National Action Plan on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, 1820 and Goma Declaration (2008); and the National Development Plan II (NDP) 2015/16 – 2019/20.

Despite government policies and legal frameworks aimed at preventing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), the persistence of harmful cultural norms continues to fuel its prevalence. Deeply

rooted beliefs about gender roles, power dynamics, and societal expectations often normalize violence against women and girls, making it difficult for laws and policies to be fully effective.

Cultural leaders such as traditional chiefs, and clan elders, hold significant influence over communities. Their authority and respect position them as key agents in shifting harmful norms and promoting gender equality. By speaking out against SGBV, cultural leaders can challenge the acceptance of practices such as domestic violence, child marriage, and sexual harassment in their society. For these policies to be effective, they must be supported by cultural norm change. Therefore cultural leaders are instrumental in transforming the social fabric that sustains gender-based violence, making them critical partners in achieving a violence-free society. By leveraging their influence, they can promote new norms that uphold the dignity, rights, and safety of women and girls.

METHODOLOGY / Approach to Cultural Norm Change

MEMPROW has used a transformative and participatory approach to engaging cultural leaders. The approaches include community dialogue, capacity-building, advocacy, and partnership-building to create sustainable change. The following are the methods that MEMPROW employed;

☑ Community Dialogues

MEMPROW has been organizing community dialogues that bring together cultural leaders, community members, and other community leaders to discuss the impact of harmful gender norms. These sessions discuss issues like Gender-Based Violence (GBV), child marriage, and girls' education encouraging cultural leaders to reflect on their roles in shaping societal attitudes and ways to promote the creation of a violence-free society.

☑ Capacity-Building and Training Programs

MEMPROW has conducted several pieces of training and workshops to equip cultural leaders with knowledge on gender and human rights, gender equality, Violence against women and girls, and cultural norms change among others.

☑ Collaborative advocacy campaign

MEMPROW, has engaged cultural leaders in advocacy campaigns such as in the advocacy walks in Nebbi against gender-based violence, during the 16days of Activism, they have engaged in radio talk shows where they advocated for girl child education by emphasizing the importance of educating a girl child to their communities.

Results

MEMPROW has actively engaged cultural leaders in challenging harmful norms and practices by promoting gender-equitable practices.

The key results of MEMPROW's engagement include:

Increased Advocacy Against Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Through MEMPROW's programs, cultural leaders have begun publicly condemning practices that perpetuate Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), such as child marriage and domestic violence. Many have taken on advocacy roles, using their platforms to educate communities on the harmful effects of these practices. they have done community gatherings and meetings, radio talk shows among others.

There has been a progressive shift in attitudes towards Girls' Education Previously, cultural norms prioritized boys' education over girls'. However, MEMPROW's engagements over the years have led to cultural leaders actively encouraging families to take girls to school and keep them in school. This is evident with the establishment of ordinances/ by-laws (pronouncements) within their communities to discourage early marriage and promote education for girls in West Nile.

In 2018, MEMPROW successfully facilitated the development of a groundbreaking pronouncement on gender-based violence GBV within the Alur Kingdom under the **#He4She** program, led by the **Ubimu or King Phillip Olarker Rauni III,** This pronouncement addressed harmful cultural practices contributing to GBV, such as prolonged marriage celebrations that promoted forced and early marriages, **and traditional dances like "Aburaka" a young women and girls' entertainment held in the afternoons and closing before nightfall. The current version fuels physical and sexual violence, and its negative impact has to be curtailed.** As a result, the kingdom reduced marriage celebrations to one day and prohibited unauthorized traditional dances. This impactful pronouncement continues to serve as a reference for implementing partners in the ongoing fight against GBV in the region.

MEMPROW's capacity-building initiatives in the Alur Chiefdom have significantly advanced women's representation within the kingdom. Through our gender, women's rights, and human rights training programs, we have empowered women to take on leadership roles and influence decision-making processes.

A prime example is Mrs. Yunes Kayeny, a 60-year-old woman from Cana village of Paidha sub-county, who has become a powerful advocate for women's rights in her community. Using knowledge gained from MEMPROW's training five years ago, she successfully influenced the installation of herself as a women's traditional leader in Paidha Umua Chiefdom -an unprecedented achievement. She also successfully opposed resistance by some male clan elders who had rejected the installation of the current traditional chief Rwoth Emmanuel Angia. She took her fight up to the office of a Resident District Commissioner. The young chief was installed. Mrs.Kayeny continues to inspire other women and leaders within the entire Alur kingdom to support gender equality, demonstrating active leadership and confidence.

Discussion

One of the most significant outcomes of MEMPROW's engagement with cultural leaders has been the successful development of the pronouncement on gender-based violence GBV within the Alur Kingdom. MEMPROW's engagement has led to increased acceptance of girls' education, with cultural leaders championing practices that promote education for girls and discouraging early marriages by ensuring that girls are not withdrawn from school for marriage, ensuring that cases of child marriages are reported, and that those who exceed the recommended duration for traditional marriage ceremonies are brought to book. This transformation is significant and will ensure the protection of girls from early marriages and teenage pregnancy among others.

Furthermore **there is a growing number** of cultural leaders actively condemning GBV. Traditionally, cultural norms normalized or excused acts of violence against women, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and child marriage. However, MEMPROW's efforts have led to a shift in how cultural leaders address these issues. Through targeted training sessions, dialogues, and awareness creation, cultural leaders now use their influence to speak out against GBV, advocate for survivor support, and encourage girls' education.

MEMPROW's engagement with cultural leaders has also demonstrated that norm change is possible when key influencers are equipped with the right knowledge and tools. MEMPROW's engagements with Cultural leaders have **helped to reduce** negative cultural norms by influencing community perspectives on education for girls, gender roles, violence against women and girls, and the rights of women and girls among others, these leaders are fostering safer, more equitable communities where the rights and dignity of women and girls are upheld. This partnership continues to be essential in creating long-term, sustainable social norm change for a violence-free society.

Recommendations

☑ Cultural leaders are vital in promoting societal norm changes when adequately trained and supported. MEMPROW's experiences underscore the necessity of continuous dialogue, capacity building, and culturally sensitive approaches to fostering sustainable change. Engaging cultural leaders requires sustained efforts to build trust, provide relevant education, and create platforms for open discussions on transforming harmful traditions.

☑ There is a pressing need for stronger collaboration between civil society organizations, cultural institutions, and government bodies to accelerate norm change in Uganda. Strengthening these partnerships will enhance outreach efforts and provide the necessary resources to support cultural leaders in advocating for progressive social norms.

☑ Additionally, the development of culturally relevant educational materials is essential for ensuring easier understanding and acceptance of new norms. By contextualizing feminist principles within local traditions and values, these materials can facilitate meaningful dialogue and gradual societal transformation.

☑ Nurturing inclusive partnerships and prioritizing community-driven advocacy, cultural leaders can serve as powerful allies in advancing gender equality and dismantling oppressive structures. MEMPROW's work highlights the importance of integrating feminist strategies into cultural leadership engagement to create a more just and equitable society.

> *Feminist organizations like MEMPROW need to engage fully with cultural institutions, the guarantors of culture, to learn philosophies behind some of the negative cultural practices and use such learning to challenge cultural practices that work against the welfare of women and girls. Some cultural leaders resist change because they perceive CSOs as lacking in cultural knowledge and arrogant.*

Conclusion

Cultural leaders are custodians of tradition and have significant influence in shaping community values, practices, and behaviors because of the respect and influence they hold in society. Their perspectives on gender roles and power structures can either reinforce inequalities or serve as a foundation for progressive change. MEMPROW's engagement with cultural leaders has shown that while harmful norms are deeply rooted, they are not unchangeable. By strategically engaging these leaders, it is possible to foster a shift towards gender-equitable norms that uphold the rights and dignity of women and girls.

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This is a publication by Mentoring and Empowerment Programme for Young Women (MEMPROW)

Plot 1476 Muyenga Road, Kampala, Uganda

+256(0) 761 848 408

+256(0) 761 848 408

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