

The Interdepartmental Men's Forum

BACKGROUND

The Interdepartmental Men's Forum is an initiative started by two male public servants, Hector Madima and Giff Buthelezi in 1999. Both Hector and Giff were employed as gender focal persons within the departments of Justice and Finance respectively and reported to the Office on the Status of Women. The majority of gender focal persons were women and Madima and Buthelezi were amongst a few men who took on these positions within government.

They envisioned that through an inter-departmental men's forum it would be possible to impact on government policy and legislation dealing with violence against women.

During the 16 Days of Gender Activism in 1999, the forum met with gender activists from Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training Project (ADAPT). This meeting led to the establishment of the Forum in March 2000, at an event sponsored by the Department of Correctional Services.

The Forum was an attempt to integrate men's voices into the gender debate within government. Run by men, for men, about men and women, the Forum ultimately dissolved, and has been unable to achieve its objectives. It provides lessons for those interested in impacting on policy by mobilising men within government.

At the time of being interviewed for this report, both Madima and Buthelezi had transferred from their work as Gender Focal Point officers into other public service positions.

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OBJECTIVES

Outlined in its founding statements, the Forum sought to:

- Create an environment for men to open up and deal with their fears, uncertainty and emotional feelings that move them to abnormal actions, thoughts and behaviour towards women and children;
- Regard the workplace as a platform for meaningful reconstruction, reformation and as a vehicle for men in government to be converted to agents of hope and change;
- Workshop cultural beliefs and traditions that act as a barrier to restoring the value and dignity of women and children in society;
- Provide a framework to link men with the international gender and human rights instruments and frameworks, such as CEDAW, Beijing Platform of Action, as well as the gender machinery and relevant Chapter Nine institutions in South Africa.
- Affirm and encourage men who are supportive in promoting issues of gender equality, and have been instrumental in mentoring women in business/workplace and other societal engagements;
- Create a structure that will prioritise, target and challenge men to join gender forums;
- Provide a peer counselling programme for Gender Focal Points;
- Provide a safe space for individual counselling for men;
- Actively participate in social and economic justice campaigns;
- Highlight the plight of the covert abuse of men through creating a mechanism for sharing their fears, inadequacies and uncertainties;
- Promote gender mainstreaming in all policies and strategic business plans with the aim of prioritising women's development and women's budgets linked to clear targets, goals and objectives.²

CHALLENGES

A major challenge for the Interdepartmental Men's Forum was the lack of infrastructural and political support. The forum representatives argued that the OSW did not consider the establishment of a Forum as a priority. The OSW, in their view, regarded itself as a platform for women to raise gender issues within government.³ It was the forum's view that without the support of men who understood the destructive nature of patriarchy, women would achieve far less. Their argument was based upon the presumption that men and women working together for progressive ends could accomplish far more than either group working apart.

The Forum found it hard to mobilise support in its early days. This may have been indicative of government's attitude towards gender issues in general, which was perceived as supportive of the concept, but with little real-time involvement.

The founders received feedback from commentators within government that the aims of the Forum were perhaps too ambitious and unfocussed.

The Forum was an initiative of men, for men, without effective consultation with women. The initiative could have been alienating to both women and men.⁴ The sense of alienation for women could have arisen from a perceived 'hijacking' of their own agenda within government, and for men, it could have been viewed as threatening and disconcerting. These perceptions are indicative of the dangers of limited perspectives raised by the literature around men as partners in development, i.e. men can be seen by women as attempting to dominate, by force of habit, and men can feel confused by new ways of thinking.

The Forum initiators both experienced a large amount of negativity and aggression from their female counterparts, partly due to a lack of trust. The Forum believed that it operated within an environment of active opposition and hostility from the OSW. This may have been linked to the initial process of engagement with women utilised by the Forum, but may also indicate the lack of exposure by the OSW to partnerships with men. This questioning of the Forum's intent, when they have expressed their willingness to work, engage and interact, discouraged further co-

operation. Forum founders Madima and Buthelezi felt as if they were ignored until big public events (Women's Day, 16 Days of Activism) when they were brought out as positive examples.⁵

While they asserted that they had wanted to stay in their gender-related jobs, it became obvious that they had experienced very high levels of frustration. While their aims were well-intentioned, the initiators were unable to negotiate the sometimes fraught political terrain of practitioners who work in the field of 'violence against women' (VAW). They were unable to establish relationships of trust with their counterparts in order to develop a deeper and common understanding of the motives and rationale in the struggle against VAW.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Forum attempted to make connections between government departments, and powerful individuals within those departments, who were responsible for policy and implementation. Madima and Buthelezi envisaged that through training, they could begin to enable men to understand their power in relation to the lives of women.

SUMMARY

While the forum attempted to engage men as change agents within government, it exposed the need for structural support when working for and with men.

The Forum raises issues of trust between women and men working towards gender equality. It must be recognised that at times organisations dominated by women working in the field have chosen to demonise men, and categorise men under broad stereotypes such as 'all men are abusers.' These stereotypes tend to alienate men who would be allies, and it creates a paradigm in which change is not possible, nor even desired. To cast woman in the role of eternal victim is also to disempower her and undermines her ability to become a survivor, and compounds the 'us' vs. 'them' dynamic.