

# Perceptions fuelling gender-based violence and HIV

By Gamuchirayi Mandangu



Using drama to communicate HIV messages. [Photo courtesy of SAfAIDS].

**Mudzi, an area that is yet to benefit from modern technology, social and economic development, is a district in Zimbabwe's Mashonaland East province. It has a high rate of illiteracy, especially among people aged 35 years and below.**

Mudzi residents are still mired in negative cultural practices, while stigma around HIV is high and gender-based violence (GBV) is commonplace, especially between intimate partners. The district is a political hotbed and during the infamous 2008 elections, military bases were set up in the area. There were reports of rape and other sexual exploitation during the elections. The district was thus ripe for the 'Changing the River's Flow' intervention spearheaded by SAfAIDS and implemented in the district by their partner, Women's Action Group (WAG).

### Negative community perceptions

Women were and are still viewed as subordinate to men, who have complete control over them. They have been reduced to the level of children who must be physically reprimanded when they "err". Early forced and child marriages are common in the area and this is aggravated by the practice of girl-pledging to avenge spirits. This practice is common in Zimbabwe and involves the pledging of a young girl, usually a virgin, to the family of a deceased person, in

order to appease the spirit of the dead.

This occurs when a family member has committed a murder or accidental killing; the girl is pledged as a bride to the wronged family. Girl-pledging is an acknowledgment of wrong-doing and of the need to make peace with the wronged family. This practice is abusive to young girls.<sup>1</sup>

### Interventions by WAG

WAG has been undertaking various activities in Mudzi to address issues that have undermined women's rights for many years. Some of the activities they have carried out under Changing the River's Flow are: holding 10 women's dialogues in 10 wards; 10 men's retreats; 10 combined retreats as well as training



Girls marching at Seke Rural near Harare, Zimbabwe. Girl-pledging is still practised by some communities in the southern Africa country. [Photo courtesy of SAfAIDS].

for traditional and religious leaders.

Other activities include separate dialogues for problem identification; educational dramas during activities to illustrate how violence takes place in the community, and how it can cause HIV infection as well as violate women's sexual and reproductive health (SRH) rights.

The dialogues provided a platform to demystify those cultural practices that have, over the years, subordinated women to men. The retreats were meant to bring men and women together through edutainment and to discuss GBV and other cultural issues in an environment conducive to learning, as well as to suggest solutions to some of the issues raised.

The retreats and dialogues revealed that traditional and religious leaders are key stakeholders in addressing sustained behaviour change. Interestingly, among the traditional leaders who participated in the workshops were several women, who although they are married, do have decision-making power and

influence within the larger community. Unfortunately there are very few women in such leadership positions.

WAG also used educational dramas to illustrate how violence takes place in the community and how it causes HIV infection as well as violating sexual and reproductive health rights. This method made it easier for WAG to highlight the issues to participants, because they could identify with the issues that came out in the drama and provide feasible solutions.

#### Challenges faced

Implementers face the following challenges:

- Fear of change within communities
- Refusal by some traditional leaders and healers to accept alternatives to girl-pledging to appease spirits
- Communities are sometimes afraid to question their culture.

#### Lessons Learnt

Communities must have the opportunity to identify and assess their weaknesses and be given a platform to dialogue on the identified issues. Continued engagement of traditional leaders and reinforcement

of their position is essential for project success.

In order to counter negative socialisation, re-socialisation must take place and this must take all groups into consideration. For example, WAG noted that there was need to bridge the gap between the young and older generations through intergenerational dialogues in order to counter negative socialisation.

Critical alliances and partnerships need to be forged, for example with the District Administrator's office, which co-ordinates traditional leaders. Above all, behaviour change is a protracted effort and there is need for continued engagement with all stakeholders.

#### Way forward

Youth should be targeted in order to tackle negative cultural perceptions within the community. Also, sexual and reproductive health and rights services for both the youth and adults should be made more accessible and HIV awareness should be mainstreamed in community activities. Intergenerational dialogues on how HIV, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender-based violence issues affect people differently are also necessary. ■

#### Key lessons learnt

- Continued engagement of traditional leaders and reinforcement of their position is essential for project success.
- There is a need to bridge the gap between the young and older generations through intergenerational dialogues in order to counter negative socialisation.
- Critical alliances and partnerships need to be forged.

#### References

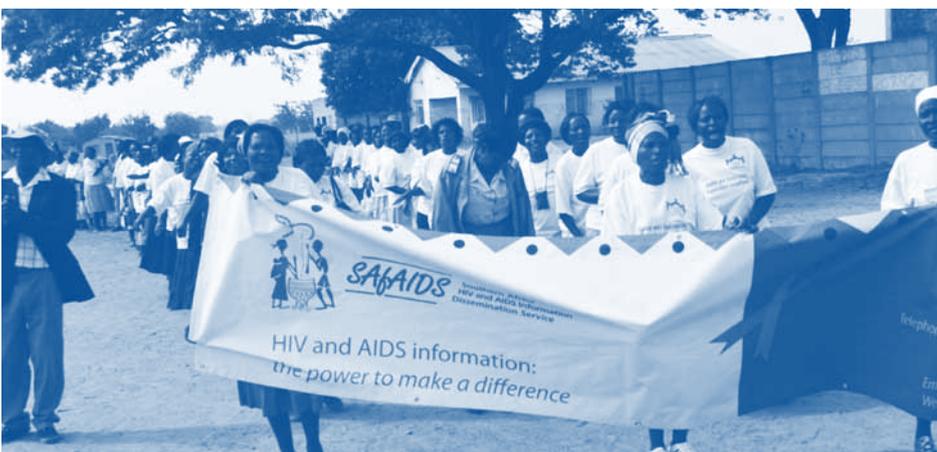
1. Gillian Makota in *Traditional Leaders On the Frontline: Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices to Reduce Gender-based Violence and HIV in southern Africa*. SAfAIDS. 2011.

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Zimbabwean women marching at Seke Rural. Some cultural practices violate their sexual and reproductive health rights. [Photo courtesy of SAfAIDS].