



Engaging Men to Protect and Empower Women

During conflict, women are uniquely vulnerable to violence and exploitation. They are at risk of sexualized violence as a tool of war and of partner and domestic violence always. Victims of sexual and gender-based violence are often stigmatized and face enormous obstacles trying to provide for a family with limited social support, resources or education. Women for Women International (WfWI) believes that women are society's bellwethers. When women are empowered in education and employment, society as a whole benefits. When women are deprived of opportunities and trapped in cycles of victimization, social stability is at risk.

The Women for Women International Men's Leadership Program has trained over 2,100 male community leaders in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, and Nigeria

As such, Women for Women International works to achieve social and economic development through women's empowerment. We work with **women survivors of war** to provide them with tools and resources to leverage themselves and their communities out of poverty. We also work with traditional, civic and military leaders—**men**—to engage them as advocates and allies for women. To date, we have piloted our Men's Leadership Program (MLP) in four countries.

WfWI understands that in order to achieve our ultimate goal—establishing viable civil societies where men and women work together as partners in peace and prosperity—we must engage both women and men in our quest for change.

During the conflict and war in Afghanistan, relationships between men and women became worse. Men do not respect women as human beings, and incidents of violence and abuse against women have increased. Women are used to resolve debts or conflicts between families – men who cannot pay back their loans will give their sisters or daughters to the lender instead, while the women involved have no say in the matter. – Sweeta Noori; WfWI-Afghanistan Country Director

The Men's Leadership Program

Women for Women International's Men's Leadership Program sensitizes male leaders to crucial women's rights issues and prepares them to leverage their community influence on behalf of women. Covering topics on post-war community rebuilding, violence against women, reproductive and family health, and women's community participation, MLP session objectives (below) are tailored to each country's specific social codes and gender norms.

- Train and educate community and traditional leaders on violence against women and its impact on the community;
- Enhance the capacity of community and traditional leaders to develop strategies to address the varied impact of violence against women on the community;

- Build awareness of how leaders can be more responsive to issues of concern to different sectors of their communities/constituencies.
- Help leaders become more aware of the factors affecting the development of their communities, ranging from economic and political participation of women, to health issues such as HIV/AIDS.
- Give leaders a forum in which to discuss their ideas for a stronger community where men and women are equally respected and valued.

I never understood the importance of women in the community and also never understood the impact of rape on women. Rape cases brought before the military were treated with apprehension due to this lack of awareness and I therefore showed little concern for the victims. I did not see the importance of punishing the perpetrators. After the MLP training, I understood that I needed to change my perceptions... Above all, it is important to continue to sensitize the military be they perpetrators or not, so that the guilty ones will wake up to the consequences of their actions or better still take the relevant preventive measures.

- DRC Military Officer and MLP Participant

Methodology

MLP participants are culled from traditionally male-dominated, critical sectors of society. These sectors often include government, religious groups, police, military, traditional institutions, and civil society. The leadership roles that these men hold in their communities allow them to reach out to other men, spread awareness and **mobilize men to actively advocate for greater respect for women's rights**, thereby facilitating community development by engaging both men and women as partners.

MLP training typically begins with 50 male leaders, known as "Level One" participants, who are trained by WfWI staff or specially-retained Men's Leadership consultants. They are trained on topics including the value of women and girls, female participation in family and community decision-making, violence against women, and personal and family health.

The second stage of the MLP focuses on training participants on how to further educate men in their respective constituencies. Upon completing the MLP, each "Level One" participant commits to training at least 10 to 15 other local men, called "Level Two" participants, on MLP topics. MLP participants thus become agents of change in their communities.

Functional working groups, the third component of the MLP, allow community and traditional leaders to develop strategies to promote women's participation in family and community life and to stem the tide of gender-based violence. These working groups are comprised of MLP participants, as well as local men and women community members who come together to share ideas on how to promote women's rights, prevent gender-based violence, and protect victims of rape and sexual violence from stigmatization and exclusion. Working groups provide a forum for community members at various levels to work together toward viable solutions to gender inequity and violence against women in their communities.

To date, we have trained over 2,000 male leaders, to great success. Graduates are more aware of women's rights, committed to preventing violence against women and supporting survivors, and more likely to view women as equal partners in the home and community.

Women for Women International believes that when women are well, sustain an income, are decision-makers, and have strong social networks and safety-nets, they are in a much stronger position to advocate for their rights. Women's progress will not be sustained without the **active engagement and support of male traditional, civic, and military leaders**. As we have learned in 16 years of development and humanitarian practice, when women and men together understand and advocate for women's rights and participation in society, dramatic, societal change is possible.

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