

**KNOW-HOW**  
**3000**

Learning from Failure  
*IN DETAIL*

# Ignoring the power of women to influence men



**HORIZONT**  
**3000**

AUSTRIAN ORGANISATION  
FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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Loyoro Catholic Parish  
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## 1. General Information

Loyoro is a catholic parish with passion to serve the neediest and most abandoned. As Mill Hill missionaries we have worked in Karamoja area, Uganda, since 1998.

This document presents the experience of *“ignoring the power of women to influence men”*. This experience was made in 2014 in the Karamoja Region, Kaabong District, Uganda.



Figure 1 Location of the experience

Traditionally, it is assumed that in all patriarchal societies, men are the ones wielding the power in decision making and resource access. In the case of Karamoja, there is a patriarchal and very traditional society, and so we assumed that women had no power and power was with men. This assumption made us ignore the power of influence women have on men and especially to their sons and daughters.

Thus, this experience can be relevant for other organisations as this assumption continues to be made by development agents and it results into failure of projects that are aimed at changing attitudes and livelihoods of the less fortunate people in the society



## 2. Context of the Experience

When we arrived as Missionaries in Loyoro, the parish had been closed for over 10 years due to insecurity. No government services were present as all government offices had run away from the area. There was rampant insecurity such as raiding of animals, looting of gardens and killing and robbing of women of the properties when they would go to

the bush to search for vegetables, fruits and firewood. All these atrocities were being carried out by men. So, in seeking to address the problems, the logical target group were men. The idea was to work with men for reconciliation and provide them with an alternative livelihood to enable them to abandon cattle rustling.

The initial goal was to bring peace among the Dodoth and Jie people. The Objective was to reduce by half the cattle rustling and killing among the Jie and Dodoth people within a period of two years. This was done through cross boarder dialogue and sharing of the experiences and impacts of cattle rustling and killing. In addition, men were introduced to an alternative source of livelihood through farming and skills training. More than 20 cross boarder meetings were held and seeds and farm inputs were given to men.

From 2010 to 2012, it was very clear that the project was not making any headway as the atrocities were never reduced and women continued to suffer most. So one day, gathering and discussing the challenges with women, they pointed out that even though men have physical power, women had the emotional power that is more powerful. We discovered that we had been failing, and not only us but other organizations too, for ignoring where the real power for change was, in this case with women.



## 3. Main Characteristics of the Experience

At the beginning men were enthusiastic about participating. But when we held cross boundary meetings, more raiding took place. After providing men with land to cultivate, we realised that their wives and daughters were the ones who worked on the farms. Moreover, when men harvested the crops from the gardens, they sold the products and spent the money on alcohol instead of on their families. Besides, women still suffered humiliation and death when going to search for vegetables and fruits from the forest.

The assumption that led us to act this way was the traditional thinking that men wielded the power and for any change to occur it had to be through men. Women were viewed as victims of

men aggression with no power to change their condition.



#### 4. Stakeholders and Partners – Roles and Responsibilities

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- **Men from Loyoro:** exchange visits offered them the perfect opportunity to scout for more raid opportunities. While the farms provided them with power over their women and a source of cash for alcohol.
- **Local leaders:** they were engaged in peace meetings. This raised their status in the community and outside, which attracted funds from other agencies.
- **Women:** as indirect beneficiaries ended up suffering more as the project failed to understand the underlying issues and position of power in the society.



#### 5. Reason and Impact of the Negative Experience/Failure

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From the implementer's point of view, this experience was a failure due to the assumption that power resides with men and the refusal to change our thinking, even though we were becoming more aware that we were not making progress. So, actually, women held the power to change the situation and they were also the real victims; while men, though held physical power, were the beneficiaries of the raiding and killings. As a consequence of this thinking, the intervention perpetuated cattle rustling and killing rather than reducing it.

One reason for this to happen is the lack of experience and deeper knowledge of the culture and social interactions between genders and the assumption that the majority are right, as this was the approach other organisations were also taking.

The greatest impact of this experience is the lessons that came from the failure. Even though it was painful, it gave us an opportunity to re-think and re-evaluate everything, not from our point of view but from the point of view of the victims. We learnt that in every intervention we get involved in, the victims must be the central focus and we should empower them to deal with the issues affecting them. Perpetrators of

violence and oppression cannot be agents of change; they can only change when victims stand up against them. Thus, we changed the direct target group to be women and girls rather than men and warriors.

Thanks to the success we have had since the change of strategy, more organisations have adopted our approach of women and girls empowerment initiatives. The change was much visible between 2013 and 2014, after the change of strategy. Today, men have joined women and agents of change after seeing the impact women and girls make in the society.



#### 6. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

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It is important to spend time learning about a culture and underlying social relations before embarking on any project. A project not based on indigenous knowledge can do much harm to the society by supporting the very problem one is trying to address. One should take the point of view of the victims and let them formulate project interventions. Overall, we should have a learning attitude and do not just assume or copy projects that are implemented in other areas, regardless of how successful they might be in those areas.

With this failure we learnt that we were wrong and needed to take a different path. We accepted that our intervention was perpetuating the very problem we were trying to solve and so we decided to change the whole approach of the project. First of all, we shifted the target group from assumed power holders (men) to real power holders (women and girls). We also started to focus on small groups, which caused a ripple effect impact, rather than big bang projects.

Finally, we created a sharing forum for the victims where men could only listen and watch. For example, in one event we invited women who widowed due to cattle rustling from both sides to share their stories. Men were only allowed to listen and not to respond. In another event we invited women and girls, who had been disabled, to share their emotional struggles in coping with their disabilities. In this case, we stopped talking about intellectual causes and consequences of raiding and killing, but brought in women and girls to share their emotional experiences.

My suggestion to someone in a similar situation is not to fear failure. Actually, in any project implementation, we learn much more from failures than from successes. If we have a

learning attitude, knowledge will come from unexpected sources, like failures and those ignored by the society.