Chapter 48
An NGO's Efforts to Empower Ex-Convicts in Botswana:
Opportunities and Obstacles

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case-study drawn from a qualitative study which explored how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Botswana perceive and respond to recent global emphasis to engage men as stakeholders in gender and development so as to achieve gender equality and to empower women. This case-study was purposively selected from sixteen focus group discussions held with different organizations across the country. The chapter specifically looks at efforts by the Botswana Institute of Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Offenders (BIRRO), an NGO established by a group of rehabilitated ex-convicts to empower other ex-convicts by way of facilitating their re-integration into society. They established this NGO after realizing that the rate of reoffending is high due to negative stereotypes attached to ex-convicts. Despite facing some challenges, BIRRO is trying to counteract the disenfranchising criminal identity which members of the public attach to people who once committed a crime.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a case-study from a large qualitative study which explored how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Botswana perceive and respond to recent global emphasis to engage men as stakeholders in gender and development. The subject of men and masculinities has gained increasing attention in recent years both in academia and in policy-making processes and practices. This recent focus on men is a reconceptualization of earlier approaches to gender equality in general and the empowerment of women in particular. It is based on the realization that although great efforts and progress have been made to empower women in developing countries, there is a critical link missing to sustain this and make gender equality a reality. This missing link is the role of men and boys in gender and development.

The literature shows that men have been largely viewed as a 'problem' within the mainstream approaches to gender and development. This attitude has made it possible for development strategies to ignore the positive role males can play in bringing about change. The recent developments indicate an interest in men's role in gender and development. As such, there are calls to rethink the stereotypical ways in which men are conceptualized in research, policy and practice. Of particular interest are gender and development issues that interweave with complex and contemporary social challenges like poverty, HIV/AIDS pandemic, gender-based violence, sexuality and social exclusion especially in developing countries.

Botswana is among the developing nations experiencing a shift of approach to gender and development. The emerging focus on men in Botswana is generally informed by a development narrative which came to be known as 'male involvement'. De Bryun states that "male involvement is used as an umbrella term to encompass the multiple ways in which men relate to sexual health issues and programmes, reproductive rights and the reproductive behaviour" (as cited in Mmonadibe, 2009, p.79). There is a growing body of research informed by this narrative (Datta, 2007; Maundeni, Osei-Hwedie, Mukamaambo, & Ntseane, 2009; Ministry of Health, 2007; Rakgoasi, 2010). This new trend of academic and policy research generally acknowledges the lack of or inadequate attention given to men in promoting sexual and reproductive health and in curbing gender-based violence.

A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) commissioned study conducted by International Consultancy for Research and Evaluation (2013) reports that "currently, the role of men in gender equality is at best not clear and at worst perceived as adversaries to be overcome rather than partners" (p. 79). Kang'ethe (2009) suggests that "government, civil society organizations and NGOs dealing with HIV and AIDS campaigns should boldly face factors that contribute to inadequate male involvement and gender-based violence" (p. 9). As number of strategies are suggested on how to operationalize male involvement the Government of Botswana and its development partners adopted a multi-sectoral approach as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and associated challenges. Through this approach different stakeholders are engaged in the rollout of male involvement programs. Civil society organizations particularly NGOs play a crucial role. The study from which this chapter is based was situated within this broader understating and shift towards involving males in gender approach to development. The study took as its point of departure the widely emphasized role of NGOs in engendering development as dealt with in detail in the following section.

This chapter specifically looks at the efforts by Botswana Institute of Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Offenders (BIRRO), an NGO established in 2008 to advocate for the empowerment of ex-convicts or ex-offenders. Although this case-study is not necessarily a successful grassroots empowerment initiative, it provides useful insights in understanding how disenfranchised identity-based organizations try to transform lives. The chapter looks at the opportunities and challenges, which this identity-based organization is faced with in its attempts to empower ex-convicts. The first section of the background briefly looks at the links between masculinities and crime to foreground the case-study of BIRRO. The second section briefly looks at the notion of empowerment and the role of NGOs as agents of change. The third section summarizes the methodological approach the study adopted. The main focus of the chapter discusses the main themes that emerged from the analysis of data from BIRRO. The interrelated themes discussed shed light on how this identity-based organization is trying to contribute to grassroots empowerment and the challenges it encounters. The chapter suggests ways to empower marginalized organizations such as BIRRO.

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