

FEATURE

From abuser to activist

Ken Otina was the ultimate abuser of women until his daughter was born and he found he could not imagine another man doing the same to her. By LUCY MORANGI

His office in Upper Hill, Nairobi, attests to his passion for his work. Posters advocating the end of gender violence take up every available space and make the office appear smaller than its actual size. Ken Otina refers to his work as a calling “because no amount of money can offer the satisfaction I get from doing my bit to make the world a better place for my daughters”. The regional co-ordinator of Men for Gender Equality Now (Megen) says the fact that only he can determine the environment his family lives in is what made him take the bull by the horns.

“My house is a safe haven for my wife and daughters but once they step out of the door, there are a lot of factors at play that I cannot directly determine. That is why I have committed my life to making a difference for all women – mothers, daughters, sisters and so on out there – so that they do not have to keep looking over their shoulder because of abusive husbands or other crimes committed against them,” says Ken, a soft spoken man.

Since the fight for gender equality came to Kenya more than 20 years ago, women have been at the forefront. While huge strides have been made in the recognition of women's rights, there is still a long way to go. According to Ken, this gap can only be met if radical measures are adopted.

House mice

He uses a story to illustrate his point: several house mice called a meeting to discuss how to survive being killed by the cat. The mice came up with the idea of tying a bell around the cat's neck to alert them when it was in the vicinity. However, not one of them was willing to tie the bell and eventually all the mice were killed.

“The campaign has reached a crucial point where the cat has to be belled, and the best way to do this is to involve the men. It is men who are violating women; once they start appreciating the women, the cat will be as good as tamed,” says Ken.

“The age of demonising men is over. All that has achieved is the creation of a brick wall between the sexes. We need to build bridges instead and this is through reaching out to the men folk. It is a difficult challenge but surprisingly, the response has been good so far,” he adds.

Coming from the mouth of a man whose background embraced abuse against women as normal, these are surprising words indeed. Ken is the oldest of four children – three boys and a girl. Growing up, he was used to listening to men throw degrading remarks at women. At home, he was often witness to his father's abuse directed at his mother, whom he describes as a hard-working businesswoman.

“Because of the nature of her work, my mother expected me to be responsible for my siblings. She insisted that life should go on in her absence. By Standard Two, I was able to cook a small-sized ugali for my siblings and this continually enraged my father. He considered house chores a woman's duty and it was, therefore, almost taboo for me to be doing them. He wanted Mum to come back home at lunchtime to cook for us and this was the cause of many heated exchanges between

them,” recalls Ken.

When his mum was home, Ken would do the house chores but stop immediately his father stepped into the house. This tug-of-war went on for some time and as a result he grew up with a very low opinion of women. This worsened when his parents eventually separated and his mother left the children behind according to culture.

“I grew up a bitter person. I convinced myself that women are around only for a short time before they leave. My dad's attitude rubbed off on me daily and by the time I was in secondary school, I treated all women with suspicion,” he says.



I firmly believed using vulgar language while verbally and physically abusing a woman was culturally right

His feelings were fuelled by peer pressure and Ken and his friends adopted a domineering attitude towards women and would treat them very badly before a relationship was finally called off. They totally believed the saying “women are like matatus, if you miss one, just wait for the next.” This continued into his adult life.

“At this point, I firmly believed that using

Ken Otina, who is the regional coordinator of Men for Gender Equality Now.

Photo/Lucy Morangi

vulgar language while verbally and physically abusing a woman was culturally right. I considered breaking a woman's heart and being involved with more than one at the same time a social privilege and something that was culturally accepted,” he says. “These actions also brought a sense of security and superiority and so there was no stopping us. One day I witnessed my friend fighting with his girlfriend and it was horrible. The girl would not relent and kept getting back on her feet and fighting back no matter how hard my friend hit her. In the end, she was taken to hospital. Their roller-coaster relationship continued but we advised our friend to look for another woman since that one was not ‘proper wife material,’” he says quietly.

Pregnant

Ken reveals that six months into his own relationship at the time, his girlfriend announced she was pregnant. Their relationship continued half-heartedly and when she gave birth, Ken visited the hospital, but only to ascertain the paternity of the child.

“I remember warning her that even though she claimed the baby was mine, it had to be a boy otherwise I would not accept them. But when she put the little girl in my arms, all my suspicions evaporated. The baby was quite special – she was tiny, tender, lovely, helpless and innocent. At that moment, I realised it was my job to protect her,” beams the proud father of two girls.

Ken says he realised that if he abandoned his daughter, her mother would not be in a position to offer adequate protection. The baby's helplessness struck him as a call for all the support she could get from both her parents to survive in this hostile world. He felt an immediate bond with the baby and suddenly realised how wrong he had been to inflict pain on the mother of his child and all the other women in his life.

New eyes

His transformation started then and he suddenly looked at his girlfriend through new eyes.

Two months later, they were married because he realised there was other way to fulfill his newly discovered role of protector. That was also when he joined Megen.

“The world is a harsh place, especially for women. I

made a life-long commitment to change my wife's world as long as she was with me. But my daughters are still vulnerable out there, starting with the time they go to school – we know about stalking rapists and even teachers who violate children's rights – right through to their adulthood where they may encounter an abusive partner. Therefore, I am committed to bringing change in my fellow men!”

Ken's message today is that women were not born to be hated, mistreated, violated, abused or ignored by their male counterparts. Instead, they are to be appreciated and respected. He says it is possible for men to change depending on how they are approached.

“Do not generalise them as bad and demonise their views because this only makes them block out any information targeting them.”

He acknowledges that change is a process and it is not so easy to shed old habits. “It has taken time for me to change but I can see the results – my wife is happy at home. Dialogue is the key to understanding each other but first we must realise that men and women have different thought patterns. For instance, whereas a woman would like to tackle a problem exhaustively, a man will be content with the bare details and get irritated when the woman insists the matter should be discussed further.

“Both partners need to know their limits. A wife must understand her husband's limit and postpone the issue to a day when he is calmer. And a man needs to understand what provokes him or drags him into conflict, and the consequences of violence. It would be better for him to leave the room rather than fight with his wife.”

Ken says he is aware in-laws can easily incite violence in the home, especially when the man wants to show who is in control. All these issues can be sorted out through maintaining good communication channels between partners.

Megen has made significant strides in incorporating men into the campaign. Currently, there are more than 200 members working in 15 constituencies around the country. Megen has also evolved from a movement to become a fully-fledged organisation reaching six countries in Africa. In 2007, Megen received global recognition by receiving the Ashoka Award for being a leading innovator in ending violence in intimate partners' relationships.

Ken says the work is challenging, especially in light of HIV and Aids. “There are increasing links between gender-based violence and HIV and Aids,” he says.

Approaching women

The organisation has adopted a strategy of approaching women who enjoy favour from the men in their lives. These could be mothers, sisters, daughters or wives. The men are then helped to understand how little sense it makes to be violent towards the women they love. Ken says although this strategy is still new, men are already streaming into the Megen office wanting to be change agents.

“The process of acknowledging gender violence, coming for training and then becoming a volunteer is long, but very worthwhile,” Ken concludes with a satisfied smile.

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