**A future state where gender equality and diversity is achieved: summary of working group discussion**

**October 2013**

In September 2013, we launched a discussion in the GED Institutional Working Group as a result of some questions from Theresa in the US, they were:

* *What does success (in advancing gender equality and diversity) look like to you? What would it feel like? What would people do (how would they behave)? What would be different?*

We were encouraged to think about this from a personal, work place or community perspective.

In total we received 10 contributions from a wide variety of contributors. The contributions were thought provoking and inspiring! We received links to two videos, the first about some work that we do in the Caucasus[[1]](#footnote-1) and the second a reflection on TED Talks on the danger of a single story by Chimamanda Adichie.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This second one is a good reflection for the whole discussion since many people shared their own stories. Some focused on the way that they were brought up and others about how challenging it is to bring up their children in gender equitable ways given the contexts in which we live. One contributor spoke about being a mum and the primary income earner. How this influences the need to achieve a balance in the families workload. For this contribute it meant that at home they were able to model positive and constructive negotiation, demonstrating what is fair, sharing workloads, applying their diverse talents and working towards a balance at home. This up-bringing is bearing fruit because the daughters in this family are now clear about their own expectations in their relationships with others. The shifts in gender roles in the household influence each generation. This story was echoed by others. One contributor shared that her mother was often left with her son and four daughters (her father travelled regularly). In a context where religion and tradition played a big role, a woman’s place was at home and she should not be concerned with earning money. Her mother suffered stigma as a result of being the head of the household in such a context. Her reputation was negatively affected. Her mother was, however, a role model. She managed to maintain gender sensitivity at home. She broke the expected roles. Her father was often reluctant to adopt the new ways when he was home, but he changed over time. As a result the contributor and her sisters learned not to treat men differently from women. Her sisters now continue this tradition in their families.

A third contributor also talked about her childhood, her father was a very important influence in her life. He refused to adopt the South Asian culture of passing on his name, and instead gave each child their own name. He sent his girls to an expensive private school, while the brothers went to public school. He explained that women needed a better education because they confront challenges at all levels and will have to prove themselves more than men. He inspired his girls to dream and aim high, he encouraged them in their careers. He supported their mother in getting a post graduate degree overseas and enabled her to work. He encouraged the family to read and debate; often stories about great women leaders which influenced the contributors view of women and womanhood. Finally, he broke with the very entrenched tradition of dowry. In this story, those who had teased the parents for raising the children differently were now accepting that they had done a good job. These things profoundly influenced the world view and experience of this contributor.

The power of the story was also echoed by the facilitator who shared a poem (Ithaca) with the group. The poem speaks about how the experience of the journey is as important as the destination. Honoring the learning and adventure along the way and becoming ‘rich with all you have gained on the way’.

Another fascinating story shared was from a contributor who has decided to stay single. She shared her experience as an employee of an INGO who had to visit government offices to get signatures. ‘Big men’ in her country of origin (Government Officials) expected two things from her, a bribe or sex. Often the conversations would start with them inquiring about her marital status. When realizing that she was single, they would invariably (it was only a matter of time) ask her to marry them, always claiming that they were single. She had to manage her outrage with her desire to get the papers signed. Often they would not be signed, necessitating another visit to the official. This experience was often made worse by the fact that at the office she would be referred to as ‘being left on the shelf’ or being accused of jealousy when she had to deal with the poor performance of a married woman in her team. Others accused her of hating men or simply not knowing how to behave like a woman. Fortunately, she had consistent support for her choice from her sister and mother. Others (friends and other family members) would also constantly want to find her a husband. Her conclusion about what success in advancing gender equality and diversity would look like, was this:

* Society at large sees me as a person with rights like anyone else in the community
* Being treated and given opportunities like others in a similar situation and not treated differently because I am a single woman
* Able to make choices about how I want to life my life so long as it does not impact on others negatively.

Another contribution echoed the experience of this contributor; in this case the contributor was grabbed by the arm by a young man who pulled her over because he wanted to talk to her. He had no recognition that he was a stranger – he was not interested in what she wanted. She reflected on how this might reflect an ‘over-sexualized and misogynistic’ culture in the US. She further questioned how the man in question might perceive his action as the ‘norm’ and how this might be reinforced by young women who accept this type of behavior as the norm. This led her to think about how one in three women experience gender based violence, and how what is the acceptable ‘norm’ might affect women around the world. She also had a vision of the future, here it is:

“A world where women and girls wherever they are in the world do not have to defend themselves in any way against men (or women) because they think they have some kind of right to harass them. Success is when boys and men don’t grab women for any reason. Success is when these types of behaviors don’t constitute an accepted norm for boys and girls, men and women.”

This story chimed with another contributor who talked about how she battles with the what is considered ‘normalized’ behavior in her son’s school. Her 5 year old returns from school with comments about girls such as “Girls are weak, girls can’t play football, boys always win.” She challenges his comments and has raised concerns with the teachers. Sadly their response is, “That is how boys play, and there is nothing we can do about it.” Her son is also keen to be the strongest and was upset when he lost a fight to a stronger boy. She tried to explain that strength was not only about physical power. She reflected on the things that shape boys and the men that they will become – whether cartoons, the heroes he admires, his friends – these things are forcing him to fit a mould. She sees her role as helping him explore these things and stay in touch with his own emotions and the emotions of those around him. Her conclusion was that in the future she would like to see different ways of being a boy and a girl, to the extent that one won’t really notice the difference between them by simply observing their behavior in the playground. She reminded us of a powerful story shared in a previous discussion of our working group about bringing up our boys:

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kim-simon/prevent-another-steubenville-moms-of-sons_b_2896131.html>

The final contribution was from the person who raised the question! Here it is in full:

“For every girl who is tired of acting weak when she is strong, there is a boy tired of appearing strong when he feels vulnerable. For every boy who is burdened with the constant expectation of knowing everything, there is a girls tired of people not trusting her intelligence. For every girl who is tired of being called over-sensitive, there is a boy who fears to be gentle, to weep. For every boy for whom competition is the only way to prove his masculinity, there is a girl who is called unfeminine when she competes. For every girl who throws out her E-Z bake oven, there is a boy who wishes to find one. For every boy struggling not to let advertising dictate his desires, there is a girl facing the ad industry’s attacks on her self-esteem. **For every girl who takes a step toward her liberation, there is a boy who finds the way to freedom a little easier.”**

Empowerment is people living their authentic selves – able to live their potential as defined by themselves, contributing meaningfully to their communities.

Sincere thanks to all who contributed!!!

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ7WT7zeDoc&feature=youtu.be> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)