Sent to working group members via email on 21 July 2011

Greetings, all!

First and foremost, I want to extend my sincere thanks to those of you who engaged in this provocative discussion, whether you contributed insight, passion, and perspective directly to the discussion or whether you took it into your offices, your homes, your lives.  The original email sent in early June focused on questions that had been raised by a staff member from CARE Tanzania.  The questions asked what discussions were taking place among CARE staff on the subject of polygamy, whether there were any conflicts (between staff, as well as philosophically) around the practice in the workplace, and how those differing viewpoints were addressed.  Also asked was whether any CARE offices had (current or potential) policies regarding polygamy.

In terms of institutional-level reactions and responses, there were a few references to policies.  One comment referenced a policy in Niger that supports one wife and five children, which prompts several questions – which wife and what children are covered, who decides this and how is it monitored, and how are health needs of the other wives and children met?  What financial implications and ethical considerations does this raise?    A second comment was from Pakistan, where polygamy is practiced only when the first wife grants permission and signs a legal document.  In response, my mind goes in *at least* two directions:  one part recognizes the shared decision-making and empowerment of the first wife, and the other part begins worrying immediately what might be happening to ‘convince’ a reluctant wife.  Is this system empowering women or putting them at risk?  That I can’t answer.

There were many personal reactions and responses – I’d expected even more, actually!  I want to recognize that it took courage to express these sentiments and applaud the bravery of those who wrote in.  For the dozens of unexpressed opinions, I hope that you were all out in your offices and communities having conversations!

The benefits of marriage for women (social inclusion, legal protection, access to resources, among others) were raised, including comments addressing that becoming a co-wife was preferable in that it cut down on workload and offered strong sister-like bonds (among co-wives).  These sentiments were countered with stories of spousal abuse – in some instances, the wife who was beaten will ‘show off’ her bruises because it demonstrates to the other wives that the husband is passionate about (or truly ‘loves’) her.  What does it mean to us as a poverty reduction and women’s empowerment organization that polygamy really can be beneficial?  I really wrestle with the fact that (in polygamous and non-polygamous societies alike) a woman’s worth is determined by her marital status.  Being a 2nd, 3rd, or 4th wife is a great option if it provides access to security, shelter, and resources (food, land, etc.) with the alternative being things like societal scorn and abandonment, homelessness, violence, and worse.

These issues run to the core of a culture’s value system and clearly won’t be resolved in an email conversation.  It’s my belief that if we were to ask 50 people on this working group for their true opinion about polygamy, we might get 40 different responses – but then again, we might get 100!

We were reminded to start with ourselves – what experiences, life’s lessons, values, do *I* bring to CARE as an employee?  What might need to be further examined?  Do my values fully support CARE’s vision and mission?  We were also reminded of our vision as an organization:  *We seek a world of hope, tolerance and social justice, where poverty has been overcome and people live in dignity and security. CARE International will be a global force and a partner of choice within a worldwide movement dedicated to ending poverty.  We will be known everywhere for our unshakable commitment to the dignity of people.*

There are men who cause harm to women and other men who work to empower women.  There are women who are able to grasp opportunities to make their lives better and others who never even have an opportunity presented.  Our work encompasses all of these scenarios.  The work may be slow, but the dedication is enormous.   Any way you look at it, CARE Tanzania and each and every one of us has been given valuable food for thought.  I hope the discussion was insightful!

Until next time,

Monica