

# The Abatangamuco

*Engaging men for women's empowerment in Burundi*

The Abatangamuco are both a formal organization and, less formally, a movement of rural men in Burundi. The main task these men have set themselves is to challenge traditional gender-role expectations in their communities through personal change, testimonies and local community outreach activities. Its origin is a group of rural Burundian men who had begun to question their traditional ways of life: Was domestic abuse, family tyranny, squandering of the family's limited financial resources and forcing the wife to carry a vastly disproportionate amount of the burden of work conducive for prosperity and economic development? The name, organizational structure and outreach activities in which they are now involved followed an initial collaboration between these men and CARE Burundi, who were seeking ways of working with local men in support of women's empowerment. The name 'Abatangamuco' literally means 'those who shine light', and men involved in the organization see themselves as individuals who have realized the errors of their old ways, have 'seen the light' in terms of how they ought to live, and wish to spread this knowledge and outlook to as many others as possible.

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## Why Study the Abatangamuco?

The Abatangamuco have had considerable success in terms of spreading their values of respect, nonviolence, and equal sharing of burdens and resources within the family, as well as with the recruitment of new members among men in rural Burundi. Their success should thus be of considerable interest to aid organizations struggling to find appropriate models for working with men as part of their women's empowerment programmes. Accordingly, this policy brief sets out the key policy-relevant findings of a field-based study of the Abatangamuco carried out by PRIO Researcher Hilde Wallacher in collaboration with CARE Norway and with the assistance of CARE Burundi.

## What Do They Do?

At the core, the Abatangamuco are engaged in an effort to challenge persisting values, behavioural patterns and gender roles through the format of testimonies. The main goal of their activities is to help as many men as possible to realize that activities such as domestic violence, heavy drinking, leaving the majority of the income-generating and household-related work to their wives, and excluding their wives from all decision making are not only morally wrong, but also hamper their possibilities for achieving financial and social progress. Activities in which the Abatangamuco engage in support of this overarching goal can be roughly divided into two sets of approaches which I brand the public and the personal.

### Public Activities

These activities involve visiting communities when some form of open meeting is scheduled to take place – sometimes in the context of micro-financing programmes, sometimes under the auspices of the local authorities, and sometimes arranged by religious organizations. Here they take the opportunity to present their own testimonies to the audience, focusing on how their lives have improved since they began to make changes to themselves, their value sets and their behaviour. These sessions may also include the giving of direct advice and arguments for why the Abatangamuco approach is the right way to live, both in moral terms and pragmatically.

In addition to the testimonies that form the backbone of the organization's activities,

members also seek to present their message through entertainment activities, such as traditional dancing and theatre. Wedding parties are particularly targeted through such performances, as the Abatangamuco attempt to communicate their message to young newlyweds about to establish their own families.

### Private Activities

The personal approach is much less formal, but nevertheless a very important factor in terms of the impact that the organization has had within Burundi. If an Abatangamuco member hears of a family in which the wife is being mistreated or where there are other significant problems in the family, he may decide to approach this man directly and informally. Such consultations can also involve a small group of Abatangamuco men from the local community visiting the man at his home. They will try to reason with him, telling him their own stories and advising him to change his behaviour, both for his own sake and for the sake of his wife and family. These counsels are often angrily rejected at first, sometimes even violently, but as they persist in visiting without seeking to retaliate or to advance any form of personal agenda, husbands would often calm down and make at least some changes in line with the advice offered.



An Abatangamuco member and his wife.

## Making the Change

For those who are convinced by the arguments of the Abatangamuco and subsequently seek to change their way of living, change tends to occur in one of two ways. The least complicated outcome is when a man simply listens to the advice given by local peers or to the testimonies and performances at a community meeting and makes changes accordingly. He may receive some support and guidance from Abatangamuco members in his community if there are any. The man thus implements the Abatangamuco principles and philosophy according to how he views their relevance to his particular situation, without further involvement with the group.

A more involved outcome is when the man in question opts to become an Abatangamuco member himself. Here a very important distinction needs to be noted: Formally speaking, the Abatangamuco is a legally recognized organization, with registered members and an inner structure. Not all of the men that change their ways after being at the receiving end of the messages and testimonies of the organization's members become themselves an Umutangamuco ('one who shines light') – an Abatangamuco member. In order to be an Umutangamuco, a man must make various commitments and expose himself to the scrutiny of his local peers: He can no longer beat or otherwise abuse his wife, and must commit to treating her as an equal. This means that there can no longer be tasks within the household or their agricultural work that are solely for the man or the woman. In addition, the man can no longer be the sole guardian and beneficiary of the family's income: he must share with his wife all access to and control over the money they have. He must also apologize to his wife for his former behaviour, and commit to apologizing to his wife and testifying to his Abatangamuco peers should he transgress again at a future date.

In addition to making these changes, the prospective Umutangamuco must commit to testifying at open meetings about his former behaviour and his change. He must also commit to helping other men to change, both through the format of the public testimonies and through personal consultations with men in his community who are abusing their wives. These commitments mean that there is a significant difference between those men

who make changes solely for the sake of improving their own and their families' lives, and those who join the Abatangamuco and commit to the activism that goes with that involvement and identity.

### What can be learned?

The Abatangamuco experience offers valuable examples from which other organizations working to engage men for women's empowerment at the grass-roots level can learn. It is an unusual movement in that its members are challenging aspects of established male gender-role expectations in their communities while at the same time carving out an alternative masculine status for themselves in the same local context. While gender roles and the ways in which they are embedded in individual cultures and societies is a highly complex and context-specific matter, some fundamental lessons can be drawn from the experiences of the Abatangamuco.

### Internalized Experience of Benefits

It seems sound to assume that behavioural change that is based on a perception of real benefit to the individual is more likely to be sustainable in the long run than change motivated by desire for externally provided incentives. Externally created incentives, such as the promise of a material goods or access to a beneficial scheme of one sort or another, represent easy solutions for actors such as aid NGOs who are struggling to help end problematic traditional practices such as gender-based violence. What has served the cause of the Abatangamuco extremely well has been that they make no such promises. The predicted benefits of change came from the stories of progress told by men who had already changed their own ways of living and thinking, and who shared their experiences with potential new members. One can say that the change itself was the only, and sufficient, promised benefit.

### Peer-to-Peer

How men conceptualize the potential benefits of implementing Abatangamuco values in their own lives is closely dependent on the organization's peer-to-peer strategy. A man's first point of contact with the Abatangamuco would usually be either at a public event or through a neighbour who had already become involved, but either way the introduction would come through a social peer with whom

the man could identify. Crucially, such an approach meant that the men being targeted could easily identify with the men that were addressing them. The testimonies that are an essential part of how Abatangamuco members spread their message consist of stories that are instantly familiar. Usually, the man testifying will speak of the problems and frustrations of his life prior to his change, before going on to relate how the changes he has made have led to real and tangible improvements in his life situation. Because both the testifier and the listener in most cases will be from very similar socioeconomic backgrounds, the listener will be well placed to consider the merit and believability of the testimony from his own particular point of view.

The men explain how they recognized their own current situations in the tales of past destitution told in the testimonies. This gave them an opportunity to examine their own situations in a more critical light, and to consider whether they were in fact, as the tales of the testimonies suggested, sabotaging their own potential for progress through their adherence to traditional conceptions of masculinity. Those who were convinced of the validity of the arguments they heard, and who accepted the link between their current behaviour and their lack of progress, were still often hesitant to accept that they might need to relinquish their traditional male privileges and take on tasks usually regarded as women's work. They understood why this might be necessary and beneficial, but were ashamed and afraid of the social repercussions they would face from their friends. Not everyone who has listened to the Abatangamuco statements has been convinced by their arguments, and it is unlikely that all of those who accepted the validity of the arguments were willing to accept the ridicule and hostility they could expect to face from parts of their own communities.

For those who decide to make this leap, however, the strong peer-based support provided by the Abatangamuco movement is crucial. It shapes the men's expectations of what their change would entail both in terms of reactions from their surroundings and in terms of the benefits they would gain. The Abatangamuco structure also provides the men with an alternative to the group that would normally make up their social network. They form a peer

group that has experienced the process of change and are enjoying its benefits, and who can support newcomers through the initial period when they are most likely to experience and be vulnerable to negative reactions from their surroundings.



An Abatangamuco member and his wife in front of the tree where she used to spend the night when he beat her. 'This tree will never be cut down. It reminds me of my old ways', he explained.

### Renegotiation over Revolution

Rather than seeking to completely transform the masculine gender roles with which rural Burundian men identify, the organization is rather renegotiating them. These men regularly negotiate conflicting notions of masculinity in their everyday lives. On the one hand, they want to be perceived as prosperous and successful, as men of honour, whose integrity stems from their success. Being trusted is a quality that is very highly valued in Burundian culture, and trustworthiness follows from stability, material progress and helpfulness towards the community.

On the other hand, these men have grown up with a notion of manliness according to which a man is defined as someone who has the power to follow his own whims and desires without having to answer either to his wife or to anyone else. He has the power to not have to work but rather to make others – primarily his wife – wait on him and fulfil his every wish. The idea that a man has the right to spend the family's income to satisfy his own

personal desires if he wishes to do so seemed to follow from this aspect of masculinity for many men, primarily expressed in a tendency to squander limited financial resources on alcohol. Social pride among male peer groups of co-drinkers was intimately tied to the ability of these men to spend money on things they desired, such as beer, rather than on things that the family might need for sustenance or to improve their livelihood.



Abatangamuco members from Gitega performing with their traditional Burundian drum band.

The Abatangamuco challenge such an idea of masculine pride from a position that both is logically sound and has a certain cultural foundation in rural Burundi. By arguing – from own experience – that living according to such an ideal of masculinity makes one both poor and unworthy of the community’s respect, they are not in fact asking these men to move away from being ‘men’ in the sense that manliness is understood within their own culture. Rather, the Abatangamuco can be seen as offering a persuasive argument that Burundian men need to get their priorities right and to give up certain established practices in order to be able to improve both their material and their social well-being. In all likelihood, these arguments are persuasive to a lot of men because they accord with aspects of their established view of masculinity, as

well as being based on the personal experiences of peers who are enjoying a certain increased level of status within their own communities.

### Summary of Recommendations

Actors engaged in women’s empowerment projects throughout the world are required to navigate a complex and context-dependent sea of gender-role expectations, cultural norms, questions of identity and a host of other intangible issues. Care is needed, therefore, when it comes to drawing conclusions from efforts made in one specific context and applying the lessons learned to a different one. Nevertheless, there are a number of generalizable lessons that can be drawn from the Abatangamuco example that ought to be relevant beyond the Burundian setting.

- *Internalized Experiences of Benefits Make for Stronger Incentives*

Sustainability is improved when the benefits of change are inherent in the change itself, rather than simply coming in the form of some externally provided reward. What Abatangamuco members gain is an improved daily life, greater income, higher status in their local communities and an overall increased sense of well-being. Such benefits are in contrast to rewards that are provided externally, which only provide incentives to change your behaviour insofar as it is instrumental to receiving a promised reward.

- *Peer-Based Exchange of Experiences Provide Believable Examples and Role Models for Change*

When changing the fundamental ways in which people live is being advocated, it helps if the target group can identify with those promoting such change. The activities of the Abatangamuco are structured around the idea

of men from an impoverished rural background speaking to other men with a similar background, and the advice these men give is based on their own lived experiences. This gives a strong local ownership and sense of relateability to the initiative.

- *Building on Existing Foundations*

The Abatangamuco are not introducing radically new ideas. Rather, they are promoting a new perspective on old ideals, urging men to see how particular aspects of traditional ideals of masculinity are counterproductive for efforts to achieve other ideals – such as prosperity, status and harmony. Building on existing and recognizable ideals rather than trying to introduce new ones has made it much easier for men to relate to the organization. In the same vein, utilizing the familiar structures of community meetings, grass-roots organizational structures and pseudo-religious rhetoric has helped frame the Abatangamuco message in a recognizable and familiar form. ■



#### THE AUTHOR

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