The power of friendship and conversation for preventing violence against women and girls

Andrew Gibbs from the gender equality and health unit at HEARD and Nwabisa Jama Shai from the gender and health unit of the South African Medical Research Council on strengthening government, civil society and academic relationships for evidenced-based policy and programming to prevent VAWG

Evidence-based interventions to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG) cannot shape government or civil society policy and programming unless academics engage both sectors and are receptive to understanding the challenges they face. Such engagements need to be on-going and sustained over time. Ensuring evidence-based policy and programme implementation also requires that relationships are built between the sectors so that trust can be established. These processes take time and care.

South Africa has vibrant civil society organisations, government officials and academics, committed to the prevention of VAWG. Yet, there remains a feeling of disconnect between the three when it comes to understanding the evidence and putting it to work. The Institute of Security Studies (ISS), supported by UNICEF South Africa has established a dialogue forum that seeks to overcome this disconnect as a step towards the scale-up of evidence-based violence prevention in the country. The second meeting of the forum in April 2016, uniquely managed to attract government civil servants from a range of departments including Social Development, Department of Basic Education, Department of Women in the Presidency, Treasury and the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation alongside civil society representatives from NGOs engaged in delivering services and programming around VAWG. Also in attendance were academics and a strong contingent of What Works core staff and grantees representing two of the South African evaluations, Stepping Stones and Creating Futures and CHANGE trial.

Over two days the group heard about the constraints and opportunities in each sector as far as strengthening evidence-based programming to prevent VAWG is concerned. These discussions sought to build rapport between the sectors and enable participants to understand the challenges to establishing a new way of working and sharing information. In addition, it gave the What Works grantees a chance to share the background to the evaluations they are engaged in, begin to discuss the best way to frame interventions for government and what government were interested in as the projects progressed. Most importantly the group recognized that this meeting of the forum needed to be the first in a series of engagements that would continue to build relationships between all the groups and share information with the common goal of ensuring the sustainability of evidence-based programmes to prevent violence in South Africa. Significantly for the What Works to Prevent VAWG Programme the meeting offered another opportunity to work towards ensuring that as the evaluations of Stepping Stones and Creating Futures and the CHANGE trial are released the results are made known and used to inform resource allocation and programming. Finally, the forum established a secretariat to ensure that this process continued and the vibrant dialogue between different sectors remained ongoing in order to strengthen the scale-up of evidence-based VAWG programming and policies in South Africa.