

Transforming Gender Biases to Reduce Violence against Women

A program designed to work with men to transform beliefs and attitudes about gender contributed to a reduction in intimate partner violence in Cote d'Ivoire.

Evaluation by Mazedra Hossain, Drissa Kone, Cathy Zimmerman, Ligia Kiss, Tammy Maclean Tanya Abramsky, Charlotte Watts

Intimate partner violence (IPV) takes a tremendous toll on women's physical and mental health, with harmful impacts on the lives of their children and families. Even in conflict-affected settings, intimate partner violence may be the most prevalent form of violence women experience and has, in some settings, been shown to increase during periods of conflict. To date, the limited evidence generated on the impacts of gender-based violence (GBV) programs in conflict-affected settings has focused on the response to survivors, and little is known about what works best to prevent violence from happening in the first place. Emerging research, however, suggests that addressing gender inequality as a root cause of violence, including by engaging men directly to transform harmful beliefs and attitudes about gender, can be effective in reducing partner violence against women.

An evaluation of the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Men and Women in Partnership Initiative program measured the impact of a men's discussion group intervention on gender equality and gender-based violence among couples in conflict-affected Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa. The discussion groups were a four-month series of weekly sessions designed to confront deep-seeded gender biases and discriminatory beliefs that influence men's decision to use violent behavior, educate men about the consequences of gender-based violence in their families and communities, and provide them with tools to manage their emotions to avoid violence. Researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine conducted the evaluation by identifying pairs of communities already receiving a comprehensive set of GBV interventions run by the IRC, and randomly selecting half of them to receive the MDG intervention as well. This design allowed the researchers to estimate the additional impact of engaging men through a behavior change intervention.

- **The Men's Discussion Groups contributed to a decline in intimate partner violence.** Women whose partners had enrolled in the program reported a decrease in both physical and sexual violence over the 12-month period after the program ended. Results did not reach statistical significance.
- **Men's attitudes about violence changed after enrolling in the discussion groups.** Participants were less likely than their counterparts not in the program to report inclinations towards violence against their partner one year after the intervention ended. Results did not reach statistical significance.
- **The discussion groups were effective in increasing men's involvement in some household chores normally performed by women, such as cooking, cleaning and caring for children.** This is an important development, since it suggests a shift in the gender biases that underpin violence against women. The groups did not, however, have any impact on women's participation in household financial decisions or in altering the general power dynamics in the relationship.
- **Men in the discussion groups learned to manage their emotions to avoid violent behavior.** Participants were more likely to report using newly learned skills to control negative emotions and diffuse their inclinations towards violence.

Evaluation

2007 marked the end of Cote d'Ivoire's five-year civil war, initiating a period of peace that was interrupted by several months of post-election violence beginning in late 2010 (during the study period). Ongoing, sporadic violence continues to affect parts of the country. Community-based surveys reflect high levels of intimate partner violence in areas where the IRC works: 47% of women report experiencing intimate partner violence in their lifetime, with one in four experiencing physical violence and 15% reporting sexual violence within the past year.

Men's Discussion Groups

Thirty participants led by one IRC facilitator. Sixteen 3-hour weekly sessions over a 4-month period, aiming to:

1. Raise awareness of the harmful impacts of gender-based violence on women, girls, and communities;
2. Transform beliefs and attitudes about gender and violence;
3. Develop emotional management skills to help men avoid violence.



The IRC implements a multi-pronged strategy to respond to and prevent gender-based violence in conflict-affected settings in several countries in West Africa, including in Cote d'Ivoire. This programming includes a community mobilization component, the Men and Women in Partnership Initiative, which aims to transform the attitudes and norms that condone and reinforce violence against women. One aspect of this initiative is a discussion group series that engages directly with men. These Men's Discussion Groups (MDGs) encourage participants to think about the devastating impacts violence has on women and girls and reflect on the discriminatory social norms and attitudes that contribute to this violence. The groups also teach men techniques to more effectively manage their emotions and curb their violent behavior.

Does engaging men directly about gender inequality and gender-based violence reduce intimate partner violence, above and beyond other types of GBV programming? To answer this question, researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine conducted an evaluation of the discussion group intervention in six districts of Cote d'Ivoire from 2010-2012. In each district, a pair of communities where the IRC runs its GBV programs was selected. Both communities in a given pair were similar to each other in population size and demographic characteristics. In each set, one community was randomly selected to receive the MDG intervention alongside the rest of the IRC's GBV programs, and the other was not. This Clustered Randomized Trial design created 'treatment' and 'control' groups that allowed the researchers to isolate any impact the MDGs may have had on intimate partner violence.

To measure outcomes, quantitative surveys were conducted before the MDG intervention began in 2010, and one year after the program ended in 2012. All surveys were administered separately to men and their partners in both the treatment and control groups. Qualitative interviews were also conducted with a subset of treatment group participants to gain a more nuanced perspective of how and why norms and attitudes may or may not have changed as a result of the intervention.

Results

Logistical and financial constraints limited the study’s sample size, thus while the results presented below show unbiased effect estimates indicating a positive impact of the MDG program, the first two of the four results are not statistically significant (potentially due to insufficient statistical power).

Violence against women declined within couples in which men had enrolled in the discussion groups. Women whose partners had enrolled in the groups reported a decrease in violence one year after the program ended: 12% of women in the treatment group

reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence in the previous 12 months, compared to 25% before the program – though this result is not statistically significant. Women in control group couples also reported a decrease in violence, though only in physical, not sexual violence, and to a lesser degree than women in the treatment group, and the results were not statistically significant (See Figure 1). This decrease could be the impact of the other ongoing GBV programs in the study communities.

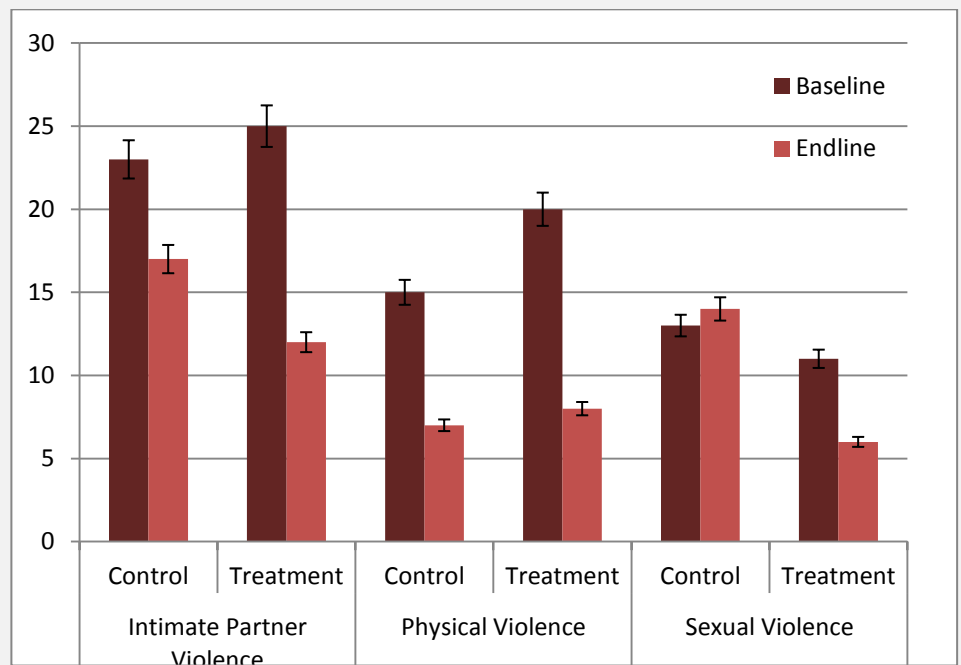


Figure 1: Percentage of women reporting intimate partner violence within the last 12 months, at baseline and endline, by treatment group. Confidence intervals: 95%.

“Yes he has changed. Before, my husband when I did something that made him angry, he would slap me. But now I have noticed that it doesn’t happen anymore. Even when he is angry, I will speak and he doesn’t hit me. His behaviour has changed.”

- Woman whose partner attended discussion group

Interviews with women indicated that in some cases violence had not abated but had simply moved from public, visible spaces to the private sphere. This suggests that for some men the MDG program may have not succeeded in creating deep-seeded change in beliefs and behaviors, but instead only taught

them to hide behaviors they learned were socially undesirable.

Men’s ideas about using violence against their partners changed after enrolling in the groups. One year after the intervention, men who had enrolled in the discussion groups were less likely than men in the control group to report the inclination to use violence against their partners under various scenarios, though the result is not statistically significant. While the inclination towards violence was lower among men in the treatment group, it did not disappear. Fifteen percent said they would still act violently if their partner tried to control them or came home late; nearly one quarter said they would hit their partner if she flirted with someone else.

The discussion groups were effective in increasing men’s involvement in some household chores, but not in increasing women’s participation in household financial decisions or otherwise shifting power within the relationship. Men who had enrolled in the discussion groups reported making a greater contribution to household chores normally handled by women—such

as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children—than their counterparts in the control group. This is a promising result, since it suggests a breaking down of the rigid gender binaries that enable violence. Women agreed that men’s contributions had increased, but to a much lesser extent than reported by men (and the change reported by women was not statistically significant). Why might this be? Men may have indeed been inclined to exaggerate their contributions. Women’s own socialization may also have led

“Yes, before he didn’t do little chores in the village. Before, he didn’t chop wood, if he was going to the field, he take down manioc to send back to the village. But now he does everything. He cuts wood, he grinds rice, he fetches water...and if he makes money, he gives it to me. Before he didn’t do that but now he does.”

- Woman whose partner attended discussion group

them to either under-report or even discourage their partners’ efforts.

Women overwhelmingly reported being embarrassed by the notion of their partners being observed performing chores normally done by women, likely reflecting their concern with being seen as failing to fulfill cultural and social expectations of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’.



The discussion groups helped men manage their emotions to avoid violence. Men enrolled in the discussion groups were significantly more likely to report using at least one newly learned technique to control their negative emotions and stop their own violent behavior before it started.

Lessons

Engaging men to transform beliefs and behaviors that underpin gender-based violence is an important – but not sufficient – component of reducing violence against women. The results of the study suggest that the discussion groups played a positive role in supporting men to examine their own gender biases and begin to modify their behavior toward their partner. But for large and sustainable changes, interventions engaging men should be part of an ongoing, comprehensive package of policies, programs and services that continue to address the underlying causes of violence with all members of the community, as well as deliver critical supports to victims and survivors of gender-based violence. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of multi-level approaches.

Interventions focused on transforming beliefs and attitudes related to gender should target both men *and* women in order to affect meaningful, lasting change. Men are not the only ones with gender biases that foster discrimination. Women themselves are constrained by socially-prescribed expectations of their behavior, as well as the violence used to enforce them. As interventions prompt behavior change in men, programs that support women to understand their rights and foster their self-confidence and agency may be critical to their ability to take a wider role in their families and communities. Programs should consider threats to women's safety, the time required for women to develop trust in men's behavior change, and the ways in which norms in the wider community contribute to women's self-limiting behavior.

Success in recruiting and sustaining men's participation in violence prevention programs does not depend on financial incentives. The MDG sessions in the study were well attended despite offering no material incentive: over half of the men enrolled attended at least 13 of the 16 sessions; another quarter attended at least 10. Programs that offer remuneration to men and not to women—as is sometimes the case in this type of programming—send the wrong message about the value of men's time and participation relative to women's. Attendance levels of the men in this study, as well as the outcomes, reflect a solid commitment to meaningful participation in the program.

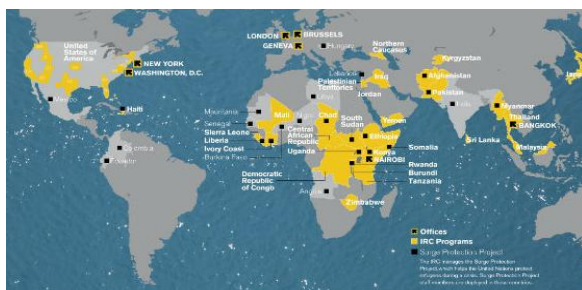
It is critical for programs that engage men in violence prevention to emphasize that violence does not result from anger. Violence is a choice, and men can make the decision to avoid violence. Any curriculum that teaches emotional management skills as part of a violence-prevention strategy should be accompanied by clear and careful messaging about intimate partner violence, focusing on the underlying discriminatory beliefs and attitudes that engender violence. Participants must understand that their emotions, including anger, are not an excuse for violence.

Full report: Hossain, M., Kone, D., Zimmerman, C., Kiss, L., Maclean, T., Abramsky, T., & Watts, C. (2013). Impact of the Men & Women in Partnership violence prevention intervention in Cote D'Ivoire: Preliminary quantitative findings from a cluster randomized controlled trial.

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