RESEARCH BRIEF

EA$ing into the United States

Adapting Economic and Social Empowerment (EA$E) from Côte d’Ivoire for forcibly displaced couples in Phoenix, Arizona

2021 - 2023
Acknowledgements

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TO CITE THIS BRIEF:
Introduction
Economic and Social Empowerment (EA$E)

EA$E is a unique evidence-based approach to addressing intimate partner violence (IPV) and gender equity in settings and populations affected by war and forced displacement by integrating gender equity using a household-centered financial lens. The theoretical underpinning of EA$E is that if women have access to financial services, increased and diversified sources of income, and job and career opportunities, and if men respect women and see them as valuable members of the household, then women will have more equitable relationships with their partners and will experience an increase in participation in household decision making and a decrease in intimate partner violence. Developed with over four years of research by IRC, EA$E invites couples who are engaged in economic empowerment activities to join EA$E Discussion Groups Series. The eight session discussion group series facilitates dialogue about attitudes and beliefs related to household financial well-being, budgeting, and communication and negotiation skills. Themes related to gender equity, gender roles and violence are woven throughout sessions with an emphasis placed upon valuing women’s significant contributions to the household, and engaging men to seek positive methods for affirming both women’s and men’s roles and resolving conflict.

From 2010 to 2013, IRC partnered with Dr. Jhumka Gupta to conduct an impact evaluation of EA$E using a two-armed randomized controlled trial (RCT). The RCT was conducted across 47 villages with 981 women and their male partners. The RCT found that the incremental impact of adding the EA$E Gender Discussion Series to ongoing economic empowerment activities significantly improved gender equity and mental health outcomes. Qualitative data also indicated shifts in men’s attitudes towards joint decision-making and gender equity.

Current Research

In the current phase of research, the IRC and Dr. Gupta aimed to inform the adaptation of the EA$E intervention for implementation with couples in Phoenix, Arizona who experienced forced displacement, using a multi-methods design. The research sought to apply the evidence from conflict and displacement settings to forcibly displaced populations (FDPs) in US-based resettlement and integration settings, recognizing (1) the immense financial strain and loss of assets upon arrival; (2) the opportunity to engage in robust economic empowerment programming through IRC, (3) rapid changes in gender roles; and (4) households characterized by inequitable gender norms and lack of women’s autonomy.

Research Questions
Three questions guided this phase of research:
1. What programmatic components from EA$E are perceived (or not perceived) as acceptable, appropriate and/or feasible by US-based communities who have experienced forced displacement?
2. Why are some programmatic components perceived as acceptable (or not acceptable) for US-based FDP communities?
3. What are the barriers and facilitators to implementing an adapted version of EA$E by IRC’s US-based offices?
Methods
Innovative Experiential Design

The research approach was guided by the ADAPT-ITT model comprised of eight sequential phases to inform the systemic adaptation of evidence-based interventions for new settings and populations. This study focused on Phase three of the ADAPT-ITT model, Administration, as outlined below. Approval and ethical oversight was obtained and provided by the George Mason University Institutional Review Board.

**Theater Testing**

The project employed an innovative approach called theater testing to allow the intended beneficiaries and facilitators--IRC clients in Phoenix, Arizona and IRC staff in the US--to experience the intervention by watching recorded videos created by the IRC’s Côte d’Ivoire team and EA$E graduates (Ivorian couples). The research team worked with the IRC Côte d’Ivoire team to develop and video-record simulated EA$E session role-plays; in turn, the IRC Côte d’Ivoire team worked with past participants in filming the sessions. The role-plays were recorded in Ivorian French and emphasized the key objectives of each EA$E session. After the recording completion, videos were professionally transcribed and translated to create English language transcripts. The subtitles were then added using video-editing software. The development of these videos allowed for US-based FDPs (IRC clients) and IRC staff to view and experience the original intervention.
Data Collection Methods
The research included multi-method data collection between June 2022 and October 2022 using purposeful sampling and recruitment of IRC staff dispersed across the United States and IRC clients in Phoenix, Arizona. IRC staff participants were primarily financial coaches or women’s safety and wellness team members. The majority of IRC client participants originated from Central Africa and the Middle East. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were initially held virtually via Zoom, with a subset of client FGDs held in person in Phoenix, Arizona. Client FGDs were held in either French or English. At the start of each session, the research team provided a brief overview of the EA$E intervention and eight sessions. Participants then watched each video session followed by a FGD to allow for an in-depth understanding of adaptation recommendations after viewing each session. Specifically, participants were asked a series of questions regarding the degree to which components of the session were (or were not) acceptable, appropriate and what they perceived (or did not perceive) as feasible. Participants were also asked what they liked and did not like, what they would add or take away, what they would like to change, as well as any broader comments on how the sessions would need to be adapted for the US. Brief surveys were also administered among IRC staff participants to collect data on demographics and acceptability, feasibility, and appropriateness of individual sessions and EA$E as a whole. Each FGD spanned two days and a total of approximately eight hours to allow for adequate time for video screening and discussion. Clients were provided with incentives in the form of gift cards for up to $200 based on the amount of time they participated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Category</th>
<th>Number of FGDs</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRC Staff</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcibly Displaced Women (clients)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcibly Displaced Men (clients)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
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Findings
An in-depth analysis of the FGD data generated insights into participants’ perceptions of the acceptability, appropriateness, feasibility and implementation barriers and facilitators of EA$E in the US context with forcibly displaced couples.

Key Findings
Acceptability: Participants strongly endorsed the acceptability of EA$E in the US. Participants indicated that EA$E can help families adjust to life in the US by addressing the harmful impacts of the financial and familial strain that can occur after arrival.

Appropriateness: Exact timing of implementation must be considered within the context of other resettlement demands and stressors.

- Clients and staff expressed that the earlier that EA$E is offered to clients, the more it can help clients navigate and resettle to life in the United States.
- There were differences between staff and clients regarding the exact timing of when to offer EA$E:
  - An overwhelming majority of the staff expressed that EA$E should be offered early on, “but not too early”. This was largely due to clients being overwhelmed upon arrival and needing to focus on housing and employment as well as language acquisition. Many of the staff recommended implementation around 9 months after arrival.
  - Clients, on the other hand, expressed wanting the program as soon as possible upon arrival. Some even suggested that portions of EA$E be offered prior to arriving in the US. One client stated that “their life would have been helped profoundly if they had EA$E when they first came.”

Appropriateness: Participants discussed the future EA$E participants’ various levels of comfort with EA$E topics and educational backgrounds as rationale for having a menu of activities to meet their needs. The original EA$E structure includes detailed session outlines with a clearly prescribed itinerary to follow with specific activities and little facilitation flexibility, which did not feel accessible to the research participants. Providing a menu of different activities for each session would allow for facilitator flexibility to respond to literacy and education levels and if discussions become too tense.

“.... I think maybe a higher level of how you present it. Not maybe the pictures. Some other way for them to interact. … it came off to me as maybe the education level wasn’t as high and they needed to use the pictures.”
– IRC Staff

Feasibility: When asked how to address potential barriers to participation among future EA$E participants, responses primarily focused on the importance of providing childcare and transportation support, addressing scheduling challenges, and providing incentives for sustained participation.

“I completely agree with including a child care component to it, or a transportation component and or both. I think we would have buy in from couples. But I'm really going to be able to sell it if I can tell them that their child is going to be safe and taken care of while they're participating, and I can tell them that they won't have to try and navigate the bus system with themselves [and] their kid in order to get here.”
– IRC Staff
Implementation: Research participants felt that EA$E should be implemented as originally intended as a group intervention for couples. However, there may be specific activities where individual couples may benefit from or prefer individual work due to privacy concerns. Therefore, participants recommended the facilitators be trained to integrate flexibility in terms of specific activity implementation to allow for the integration of individual couple activities.

- Participants expressed the benefits of participating in group-based sessions. Such benefits included learning from other couples, feeling supported, and feeling less alone.
- Individual couple participation was suggested for logistics with scheduling, privacy concerns, cultural considerations, and fear of retaliation with respect to IPV.

“I think for certain cultural groups, it would be incredibly difficult to get whole group participation. What I really like about the groups is it makes it less preachy. Like it's not about this couple, it's really more of a lesson and everyone can contribute. You can learn from other people in the group and it might feel less personal, which I think is positive in terms of creating change potentially because it doesn't feel like, oh this IRC worker is telling me that I have to consider this. It's presenting an idea and allowing change to occur…”

– IRC staff

Implementation: Participants shared many perspectives on facilitator characteristics and training needed to deliver EA$E. Comments focused on the approach, skills, area of specialization, and job type. Participants emphasized the importance of the facilitator having cultural humility, technical knowledge, and a trauma informed perspective.

- There was consensus on the need for cultural humility to be incorporated into all aspects of session facilitation. This includes a skillset on how to approach various cultural groups, levels of education, and social status.
- Ideally, there would be multiple facilitators who are language and ethnicity matched, and have lived experience with forced displacement and navigating challenges with resettlement in the US.
- Facilitators should have a mix of IPV and financial coaching expertise and should receive extensive training on how to address IPV and prevent harm.
- Some of the IRC staff noted that an outside consultant meeting the aforementioned criteria (cultural humility, language/ethnicity matched, IPV training) should be hired to facilitate EA$E sessions as IRC staff are overburdened.

“I'm not at all sure that we can all be Superman like this, this gentleman that is the facilitator. I think I would see it as being like a team activity something where multiple people are doing this particular role of facilitator.”

– IRC Staff
Session Specific Findings

Sessions 1 & 2
Sessions 1 and 2 resonated with both staff and clients due to the emphasis on a happy home and community. Participants appreciated how financial budgeting was taught in simple terms that could be easily understood by all and provided recommendations for how to "elevate a woman's status within the household":

- Both staff & clients discussed the importance of providing facilitators with tools for managing difficult conversations and potential discomfort/backlash from men.
- Participants discussed emphasizing men's successes in supporting their families as a strategy to engage them while minimizing.
- Participants discussed the importance of using US-based scenarios in examples.
- Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that women’s paid and unpaid contributions are respected.

Session 3
The activities in session 3 resonated with both staff and clients due to emphasis on money management and decision-making. These were seen as critical aspects of skills needed for life in the US. Both clients and participants discussed the need to integrate content on perceptions of life in the US; for example, the contrast between "the American Dream and the many hardships that come with resettlement."

“These programs are really helpful…First, they will learn a lot of things. They will know about controlling money, stress, and culture. They will know the necessary steps to take [when confronted by a major problem]. In the last video, one thing that really impressed me is the guy is working really hard and he’s tired when he comes, and then she gave him food when he come, coffee or tea or whatever, and then they discuss. So, these kinds of activities will help a lot of families.”

– Client

Session 5
Participants felt that the activity requiring participants to practice negotiation strategies would be vital for life in the US; however, they expressed the importance of modifying the scenario to avoid the possibility of triggering participants (i.e. of past traumatic events) and to make the situations more relevant for the US-based context. Staff and client participants offered a range of “extremely stressful” situations that are likely stressors faced by forcibly displaced families in the US, such as eviction risk, medical emergencies, immigration legal fees, and job loss.

Financial coaches who participated in the research offered recommendations to highlight a positive stressor--such as an influx of funds and how to best spend it. It was suggested that this would include the concept of short-term access to funds versus long term planning, which could be helpful in refugee resettlement where resources end after a certain amount of time.

“Personally, I didn’t like that exercise. I find it very triggering and traumatizing for clients. So maybe there could be a different way of delivering the same concepts.”

– IRC Staff

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1 Due to time constraints, sessions 4, 7 and 8 were omitted from theater testing and instead reviewed verbally by researchers during focus group discussions.
Session 6
Participants expressed the importance of discussing IPV and suggested that, consistent with the original EA$E intervention, facilitators should incorporate references to IPV throughout the program, especially linking financial stress with IPV.

Both staff and clients expressed that the use of role plays was a helpful approach to addressing IPV. Participants shared that it was helpful to see the impacts of communication strategies, and how positive communication is needed to avoid IPV. Notably, many of the staff, particularly the WPE team shared that it was important to be mindful that changes in communication style alone cannot reduce IPV. Both staff and clients shared the importance of not triggering IPV survivors in the performance of role plays and commented that the role plays as presented in theater testing could be upsetting to some participants. Specifically, participants were not in favor of acting out any form of IPV. One suggestion was to provide pre-scripted role plays to avoid and minimize the connection to any personal experiences of violence.

Beyond IPV, participants raised the importance of including discussions around family planning and pregnancy as it pertains to decision making and gender equity, and IPV. Participants also cited expectations to provide financial support to extended family members as another source of marital conflict. Lastly, participants stressed the importance of including adult children and other family members in discussions around household wellbeing and financial planning.

Adaptation Next Steps

- Adapt the EA$E Gender Discussion Group Curriculum informed by the research findings.
- Engage technical, cultural, and context experts to provide input to refine the adaptation.
- Design and roll-out the training for EA$E facilitators, supervisors and managers.
- Pilot-test the implementation of the EA$E adaptation.
- Rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of the EA$E adaptation in the US context.

Conclusions

- The positive response to the EA$E intervention overall speaks to the great appetite and need for IPV prevention programming in forcibly displaced communities in the United States. Participants emphasized the importance of programs focused on household wellbeing as integral to successful resettlement and integration. Yet, programs such as EA$E are not currently integrated into core resettlement and integration programming. Furthermore, funding is needed to support the implementation of effective IPV prevention programs such as EA$E.
- Staff participants provided insights into the enthusiasm for and apprehensions surrounding IPV prevention and gender transformative programming. Further investment in training, capacity building, and cross-cutting gender transformative approaches in resettlement agencies and other community-based service organizations are needed to alleviate apprehensions and build upon the enthusiasm.
- Given the dearth of research on IPV prevention among forcibly displaced populations in the US, this project highlights the importance of building and maintaining connections between researchers and practitioners to contribute to the evidence base for effective and culturally responsive programs through rigorous research rooted in practical applications.
Notes & References


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