

Economic and Social Empowerment to Reduce Violence against Women

Pairing a dialogue group that engages couples on household gender dynamics with an economic empowerment program for women was more effective in reducing intimate partner violence in conflict-affected communities in Cote d'Ivoire than the economic empowerment program alone.

Based on evaluation by Gupta, J., Falb, K.L., Lehmann, H., Kpebo, D., Xuan, Z., Hossain, M., Zimmerman, C., Watts, C. & Annan, J.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) violates a woman's human rights, threatens her physical and mental health, and limits her educational and economic opportunities, with repercussions for her family and community. In conflict-affected settings, where various forms of violence persist, IPV is likely the most common type of violence experienced by women, and may even spike during and after bouts of unrest. The link between women's financial dependence and gender-based violence has inspired programs aiming to empower women economically as a potential violence-prevention strategy. On their own, however, these programs fail to explicitly address the harmful gender norms that make IPV possible, as well as the potential for increased violence as women become more independent. Emerging research¹ suggests that programs focused on challenging gender biases directly, including by engaging men, may hold a key to reducing violence against women.

To further test this hypothesis, a research team from the Yale School of Public Health and Innovations for Poverty Action² evaluated the impact of an intervention engaging couples on a range of gender-related relationship and household dynamics. Participation in Gender Dialogue Groups (GDGs) was randomly offered to half of the women already participating in Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) run by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in conflict-affected communities in Cote d'Ivoire, as part of their Economic and Social Empowerment program (EA\$E). This design allowed the researchers to estimate the additional impact of the GDGs over and above the impact of the savings intervention.

- **The Gender Dialogue Groups led to greater reductions in intimate partner violence than the savings groups alone.** The more couples participated in the dialogue program, the greater the impact: women in couples who attended at least three-quarters of the sessions had a 55% relative decrease in the likelihood of experiencing physical violence by the end of the study, compared to women in the savings group alone. Women in the GDGs also reported decreases in sexual and emotional violence, with larger effects for women in couples with high attendance, though these results are not statistically significant. This suggests that pairing an economic intervention with an intervention aimed at challenging men's and women's gender biases can play an important role in preventing intimate partner violence.
- **The Gender Dialogue Groups contributed to a significant decrease in economic abuse.** Women who participated in the dialogue groups reported a 61% relative decrease in the likelihood of being forced to hand over their earnings to their partner or having their partner withhold money for household necessities, compared to women in the savings groups.

¹ Houssain, Mazed, et al. (2012). Impact of the Men & Women in Partnership violence prevention intervention in Côte d'Ivoire: Preliminary quantitative findings from a cluster randomized controlled trial (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine).

² Gupta, J., Falb, K.L., Lehmann, H., Kpebo, D., Xuan, Z., Hossain, M., Zimmerman, C., Watts, C. & Annan, J. (2013). Gender norms and economic empowerment intervention to reduce intimate partner violence against women in rural Côte d'Ivoire: a randomized controlled pilot study. *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 13, 46.

Evaluation

The West African country of Cote d'Ivoire enjoyed several years of relative stability following the end of its civil war in 2007. This peace was interrupted by months of violence following the presidential election in late 2010, during the study period. Ongoing, sporadic violence continues to affect parts of the country. Recent research underscores the scope of gender-based violence in Cote d'Ivoire: 47% of women report experiencing intimate partner violence in their lifetime, with 25% reporting physical IPV and 15% reporting sexual IPV within the past year.³

The Economic and Social Empowerment program (EA\$E) was developed by the IRC in response to an understanding that even when women are able to earn money, they often do not have the autonomy to use it, reinforcing their relative poverty in the household and making them more vulnerable to intimate partner violence.

Two components of the EA\$E program were evaluated in this study:

- *Village Savings and Loan Associations*. VSLAs provide a means for people, often and in this case women, to save their money and access loans without the barriers to entry of formal financial institutions. The IRC initiated the VSLAs and provided training and basic materials, after which groups were managed largely by their members, with support from IRC staff.
- *Gender Dialogue Groups*. The GDGs were an eight-session series designed to engage female VSLA participants and their male partners on various aspects of household and relationship dynamics, including financial planning, communication and negotiation skills, power dynamics and decision-making. Couples met on a bi-weekly basis for 1½ to 2 hours over a four-month period.

What impact does adding the GDGs to the economic empowerment component have on reducing IPV? To find out, 24 villages were selected across two regions of Cote d'Ivoire especially affected by conflict. Women 18 and over were invited to participate, and formed a total of 48 VSLAs of 15-30 members each. In a public lottery performed by the chief in each village, VSLAs were randomly assigned to the 'control' arm—which received only the VSLA intervention, or the 'treatment' arm—which received both the VSLA and the Gender Dialogue

Group interventions. This design allowed the researchers to compare results across the two arms and identify any impact the GDGs may have had on reducing violence, beyond what the VSLAs alone might accomplish.

To measure results, a quantitative survey was administered to all women before the VSLAs were formed (October 2010) and after the GDGs were completed (July/August 2012). Qualitative interviews were conducted with a subset of women and men from treatment and control arms, to gain insight into the pathways and experiences that led to the results.



Results

The Gender Dialogue Groups led to a slight reduction in intimate partner violence. The most significant reductions occurred for women who attended at least three-quarters of the sessions with their partners. These high-attendees had a 55% relative decrease of reporting physical IPV compared to women who only participated in the savings groups (see Figure 1). Women in the GDGs also reported decreases in emotional violence and small decreases in sexual violence, with larger effects for women in couples with high attendance—though these results are not statistically significant. Women participating in the VSLAs but not the dialogue groups reported very small reductions in IPV that were not statistically significant. These findings suggest the GDGs have the potential to reduce partner violence, and that the more active a couple’s participation in the program, the greater the impact potential.

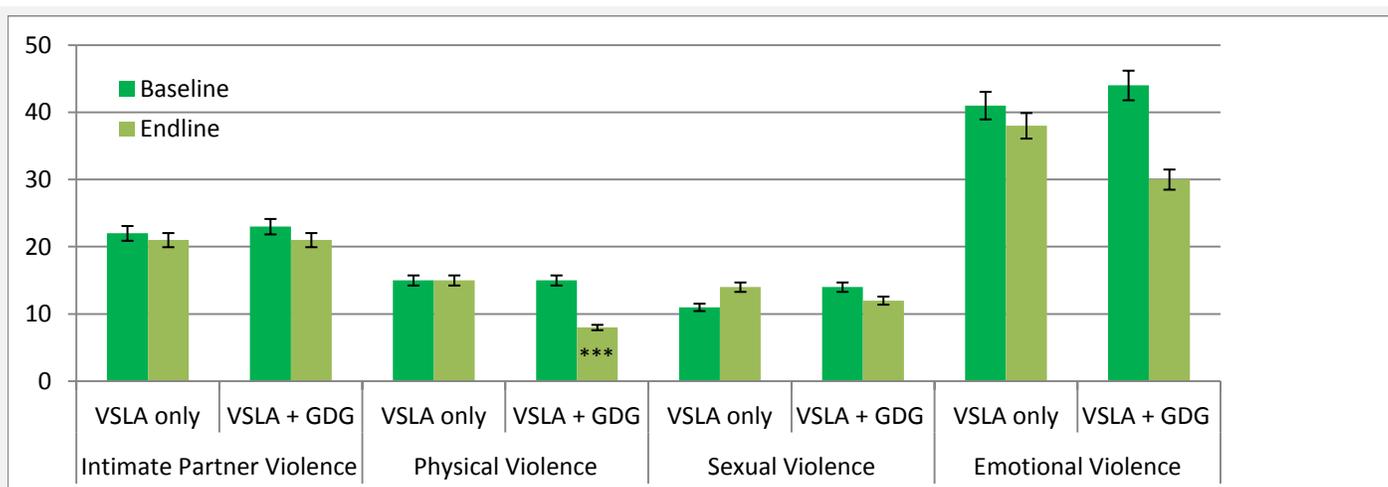


Figure 1: Percentage of women reporting intimate partner violence within the past 12 months at baseline and endline, by treatment arm. Results for the VSLA + GDG group are for couples who attended at least 75% of the sessions. Confidence intervals: 95%; *** indicates statistical significance.

The Gender Dialogue Groups contributed to significant decreases in economic abuse.

Women who participated in the GDG program had a 61% relative decrease in the likelihood of reporting being forced to hand over their earnings to their partner or having their partner withhold money for household necessities, compared to women in the savings groups. Qualitative interviews with men suggest a shift toward a shared decision-making process and

greater cooperation, especially regarding household financial matters.

“When we save, for example, if I have problems or if my husband has problems, he can resort to me for having a loan and refund it later. It is better than asking for a loan elsewhere. My husband can resort to me to solve the problem. If there were not VSLA, I would never have a loan in this village.” ~ Woman in VSLA and Gender Dialogue Group

Participation in the Gender Dialogue Groups created a shift

in women’s expressed attitudes about intimate partner violence. After participating in the interventions, both groups of women—those in the VSLAs only and those in the dialogue groups—were significantly less likely to accept the social justifications for the use of violence against them, such as burning the meal or refusing sex, than they had been before the interventions began. This shift was more pronounced for GDG participants.

Lessons

Women’s economic empowerment programs may be critical to reducing intimate partner violence, but on their own may not be sufficient. Challenging the gender norms that underpin violence should also be an integral part of any violence-prevention strategy. While providing women with access to economic means can be an important factor in reducing their vulnerability to violence, alone it could be unproductive or even counter-productive if expectations about power and the acceptability of violence are not simultaneously addressed. The results of this study suggest that engaging both members of the couple on relationship dynamics may have an important role to play in violence prevention. Both components—economic and social empowerment—should be seen as key aspects of a comprehensive approach that includes responses and services for victims and survivors of gender-based violence.

Engagement with both men and women is key to reducing gender-based violence. The significant declines in intimate partner violence in this study were observed among couples in which both men and women attended most of the dialogue group sessions. When women attended without their partners, the program had less impact. While women may benefit from interventions that support them to engage beyond their traditional gender roles, for them to do so safely requires a change in men’s attitudes and a reduction in their perpetration of violence. Delivering programs that are interesting and meaningful to men is critical to ensure changes that benefit women.

Programs engaging couples on sensitive issues related to intimate partner violence should ensure they are safe, appealing and culturally appropriate. Over half of the couples attended at least 75% of the GDG sessions. Interviews with men cited improving their own financial management skills, learning how to be better husbands and fathers, and the social support developed with other male participants as rewarding and motivating aspects of the Gender Dialogue Groups. Programs developed in other contexts should carefully consider how to address gender dynamics through meaningful, useful and non-threatening content and formats in order to sustain men’s effective participation.

Violence-prevention programs should consider identifying explicit strategies to address sexual violence. The intervention evaluated in this study did not address sexual violence explicitly. Sexual violence showed the smallest reduction overall, and was not brought up by participants in qualitative interviews. While the program may have succeeded in pre-empting an otherwise increase in sexual violence, it is also possible that it had no effect on sexual violence. Interventions intending to have impact on the incidence of intimate partner sexual violence should consider developing programmatic components tailored to address this specific form of violence, bearing in mind the difficulties in naming and recognizing sexual violence within an intimate relationship.

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