

The Impact of Faith-Based Couples' Counseling on Relationship Dynamics and Intimate Partner Violence in Uganda



Globally, violence is a leading risk factor for premature death and morbidity for women. In Uganda, more than half of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime. A small but growing body of literature focuses on addressing intimate partner violence (IPV) by leveraging existing social institutions, but few studies have looked at faith-based sources of authority. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) designed and piloted a couples counseling program led by local faith leaders that sought to improve relationship dynamics that are thought to cause IPV. The IRC, World Vision, and IPA are now partnering with researchers to evaluate the impact of this faith leader delivered program on four primary outcomes: intimate partner violence; control and decision-making; sexual consent and autonomy; and, communication and conflict management techniques.

Policy Issue

While the rate at which women report experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) varies considerably across time and place, most estimates suggest the problem is substantial around the world.¹ In addition to the direct harm that IPV produces, it is also associated with poor physical and mental health outcomes, diminished productivity, and reduced economic opportunity.² Moreover, relationships in which IPV occurs often also include dynamics that restrict women's autonomy and ability to attain self-fulfillment.

In many low-income countries, the reach of state and non-governmental actors is limited, and local faith leaders often play an outsized role in influencing expectations about how partners should behave. Therefore, they may be an important channel for encouraging behavior change. This study is one of the first to rigorously evaluate the potential for faith-based interventions to improve relationship dynamics and reduce IPV.

Evaluation Context

In Uganda, about 86 percent of people report religion to be very important to them and more than 80 percent attend religious



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COUNTRY

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PROGRAM AREA

Health

TOPICS

Intimate Partner Violence, Training & Mentoring, Violence, Women & Girls

TIMELINE

2018-2020

services on a weekly basis.³ During exploratory interviews, it was consistently observed that, when couples experienced stressful events, they often went to their faith leaders for advice and mediation. Also, biblical justifications were frequently offered to legitimize male dominance and beating of women. This led to the design of Becoming One, a couples counseling program led by local faith leaders and designed to address relationship dynamics that cause IPV and other forms of behavior that restrict individuals' autonomy.

Details of the Intervention

After piloting the concept with World Vision in northern Uganda, a full-scale version of the Becoming One program is now being implemented jointly by World Vision, IPA, and IRC in the Kibaale and Kamwenge districts. Faith leaders guide couples through workbooks and videos that teach communication skills, emotional regulation, shared control over finances and household duties, sexual consent, and pleasure. Couples are invited to attend 12 in-person sessions over six months on these topics. Faith leaders use biblical principles to reinforce behaviors and messages thought to lead more equitable relationship dynamics.

IPA is currently conducting a randomized evaluation to measure the impact of Becoming One on intimate partner violence, control and decision-making, sexual consent and autonomy, and communication and conflict management techniques. Researchers have pair-matched 1,680 couples on baseline severity of IPV, and randomized couples to receive the program either in November 2018 or after the study is concluded in 2020 (the comparison group).

Researchers are conducting three rounds of surveys with the couples to measure the impact of the Becoming One program: an initial survey prior to the start of the program, a follow-up survey after the program has concluded for one group of couples, and another follow-up survey 12 months from the start of the program. Researchers are also conducting monitoring activities and interviews with faith leaders to understand how the program is implemented in practice.

Read more about the study design in the [pre-analysis plan](#).

Results and Policy Lessons

Study ongoing; results forthcoming

Sources

¹World Health Organization, 2013. "Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence". https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/85239/9789241564625_eng.pdf;jsessionid=D4E3255F3C63A1010F27F6B77778F72C?sequence=1

²Duvvury, Nata, Aoife Callan, Patricia Carney, and Srinivas Raghavendra. 2013. "Intimate Partner Violence: Economic Costs and Implications for Growth and Development." Washington, DC: The World

Bank. <https://bit.ly/1N5TNYn>

³Lugo, L., & Cooperman, A. (2010). Tolerance and tension: Islam and Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa. Washington, DC, Pew Research Center, 147.

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