



## PROGRAMME SUMMARY

# Becoming One, A Religious Couples' Counselling Programme to Prevent Violence in Western Uganda

## PROGRAMME AT A GLANCE

Becoming One is a religious couples' counselling programme designed to prevent intimate partner violence (IPV). It is delivered by Faith Leaders who teach communication skills, emotional regulation, shared control over finances, sexual consent and pleasure. Couples attend 12 in-person group sessions over 3-4 months and are encouraged to practice what they learn at home. Becoming One aspires to improve the quality of relationships to make them more equitable and reduce violence. In addition to building on trusted structures, the programme includes biblical principles and verses, and targets biblical justifications frequently offered to legitimise male dominance and violence against women.

## BACKGROUND

In 2017, the IRC's Airbel Impact Lab launched design and prototyping for an IPV prevention programme. The team conducted extensive field research to better understand perceptions of IPV as well as existing strategies that communities employ to address IPV. During this phase, it was observed that Faith Leaders were already providing pre-marital counselling classes to their congregations, sometimes for a fee. This presented an opportunity to design programming that works with Faith Leaders in order to reduce harmful messaging around women's obedience and/or sense of responsibility for violence and infuse practical and biblically justified skills building to foster more equitable, non-violent relationships.

After many iterations based on feedback from both Faith Leaders and couples, the team conducted a 10-week pilot in Gulu, Uganda in September–October 2017 with 40 Faith Leaders and approximately 900 couples.

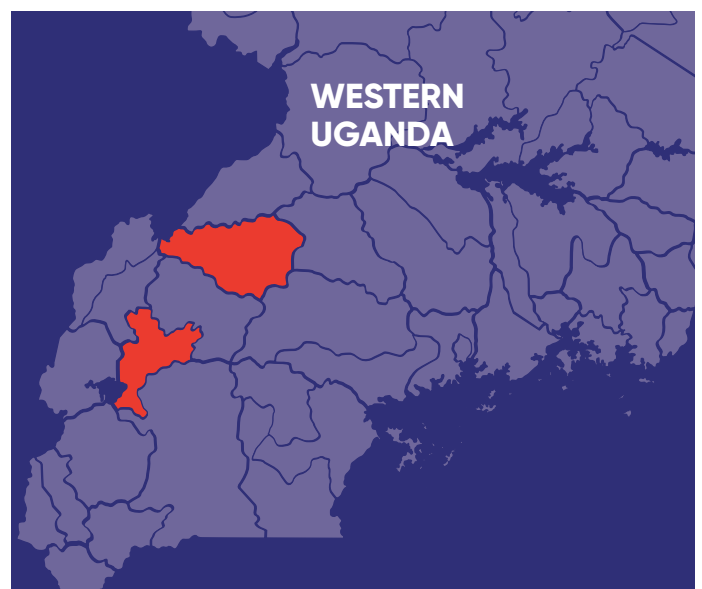
The Becoming One programme was then implemented by World Vision with support from the Airbel Impact Lab, World Vision (WV) and International Rescue Committee (IRC) with 145 Faith Leaders and 2,458 couples in Uganda. Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is conducting a randomised controlled trial and qualitative evaluation to measure the impact of the Becoming One programme.

## CONTEXT

The Becoming One programme was implemented in three districts in Western Uganda: Kamwenge, Kakumiro and Kagadi. National statistics in Uganda show that:<sup>1</sup>

- 42% of ever-married rural women reported experience of physical, sexual or emotional IPV in the last 12 months;
- 86% of people report religion to be very important to them;
- More than 80% attend religious services on a weekly basis.

In Uganda and other central and east African countries, Christian couples attend pre-marital counselling programmes at their local churches and often look to Faith Leaders to provide guidance when conflict occurs.<sup>2</sup>



## PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION

### Programme Objectives

The user-centered approach to design the Becoming One intervention resulted in a fit-for-purpose programme that takes into account the needs and incentives of key actors, with the following resulting objectives:

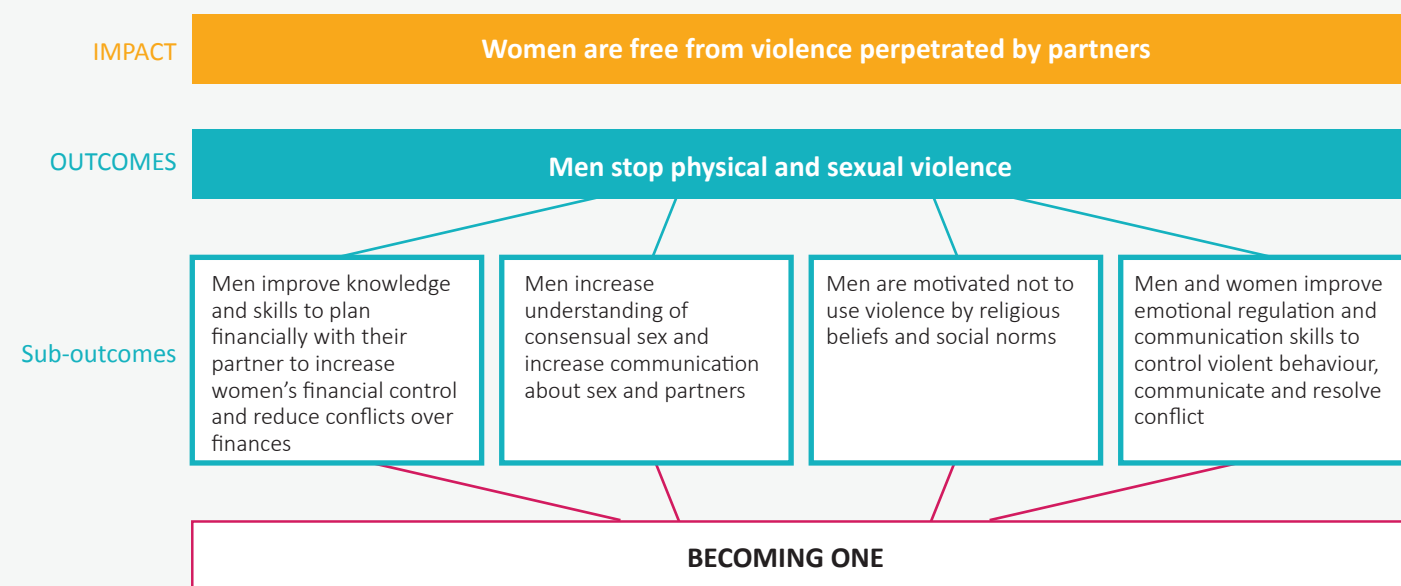
- To prevent intimate partner violence (IPV);
- To strengthen relationships, marriages and the church's abilities to support this;
- To improve communication, financial health and sexual pleasure among couples.

### Theory of Change

**The Becoming One Theory of Change also builds on existing global evidence.** At the heart of the Becoming One intervention is the idea that individuals and couples will more likely change their behaviours when 1) they are self-motivated to do so; and 2) the source of advice or counsel carries social, religious, or political significance.

Behavioural science theories suggest that behaviour change is more likely when interventions seek to allow pre-existing motivations to be expressed, as opposed to creating new motivations from scratch.<sup>3</sup> This can be achieved by making it easier to achieve goals (through reminders, forms of social or logistical assistance), or by clarifying ways in which people can achieve goals (such as through simplified instructions, using culturally relevant explanations or symbols).

A second set of social and behavioural theories that justify the Becoming One approach posit that patterns of behaviour for individuals and communities are influenced to a relatively large degree by individuals with cultural, religious, social, or political significance or authority.<sup>4</sup> Becoming One operates through the influence of Faith Leaders, who have high status within the programme communities, and who are regularly consulted by community members on social and religious matters, including about conflicts within households.



### Faith Leader and Couple Recruitment

Faith Leaders were identified as the ideal contact point for preventing IPV because: (1) They are a trusted source of knowledge and advice; (2) They are skilled in teaching and counselling as they already spend time counselling couples and are incentivised to prevent violence and not just respond to it; and (3) Marriage and premarital counselling are often revenue sources for churches.

In mid 2018, World Vision identified 145 Faith Leaders in the districts of Kibaale and Kamwenge in Western Uganda who were interested in facilitating the Becoming One programme, some of whom had previously completed World Vision's *Channels of Hope* programme. They were invited to a 1-day training, given an overview of the

programme, and instructions on how to recruit couples from within their communities. Each Faith Leader was asked to identify 15-20 heterosexual couples who have been living together for at least one year, and in the age bracket from 18-65. Faith Leaders were not instructed to target couples known to be experiencing marital problems.

The recruitment phase (July-August 2018) resulted in an initial list of 2,561 couples. A follow up survey confirmed the eligibility of the recruited couples- including whether both members of the couple intended to reside in the area for at least 1 year- and formally assessed their interest in participating in the Becoming One programme and the research study.







## Faith Leader Training and Programme Materials

The Faith Leaders were then invited to another two-day training where they received a Faith Leader guide, couples guides, an attendance and planning log, marketing materials, “I love my wife/husband” bracelets, and a smartphone with copies of the demonstration videos and instructional materials in a branded bag to help them start and administer the programme. They were also connected with other Faith Leaders who would be leading Becoming One sessions and were invited to join a WhatsApp group where they could share insights and learn from one another as they implemented the programme. Faith Leaders were also encouraged to call WV and IRC

staff in case they had any questions and/concerns around delivering the programme.

Vastly different levels of literacy require a communication and training approach fit for all. Both Faith Leader and couples guides were created with the principles of universal design, which ensure usability for literate and pre-literate users alike. The Becoming One guides rely on easy-to-understand graphics and storytelling methods that build on existing habits of consumption and use. These are designed to encourage the Faith Leaders to follow the guidelines, while having the flexibility to apply their preferred communication and facilitation style.

## Curriculum

The Becoming One programme comprises 12 sessions of 90 minutes delivered once a week, held at locations identified and agreed upon by Faith Leaders and couples; often in a church or at a couple’s home. Prior to each session, Faith Leaders are asked to watch a short video to help them understand the material in the Faith Leader guide and how to facilitate the session. The Faith Leader then guides the couples through readings and activities that are simple and easy to share. Sessions are meant to be participatory with couples regularly encouraged to complete interactive activities together.

Each couple is given a visual book to guide their home practice, usable by literate and non-literate couples. Thus, couples were able to quickly apply what they learned to create positive behavioural feedback loops, benefiting themselves and their partners. The Faith Leader and couples guides contain aspirational images of couples conveyed in emotional and evocative illustrations.

Sessions were sometimes rescheduled due to conflicting responsibilities of Faith Leaders, a community event, or lack of availability of meeting location, but Faith Leaders were strongly encouraged to complete all 12 sessions.

1. Introduction: Introduce Biblical Principles, Oneness, Blessings + Hurt, Vows
2. Communication (1): Biblical Principles, CLEAR Rules (Conversation, Listening, Encouraging, Appreciating, Respect)
3. Communication (2): Understanding Triggers, Calming Methods, Belly Breathing, Calming Prayers, If...then plans
4. Communication (3): Bible study of the Genesis Mandate, First Moves, When I...I need...
5. Communication (4): Quality time, conversation starters
6. Finance (1): Biblical Principles, positive thinking, PEACE Rules (Partners, Equal, Agree, Combine, Explore) for financial partnership, Budgeting
7. Finance (2): Bible Study for Servant Leader, Actions of Harmony
8. Finance (3): Business Tips, Sharing Goals, Saving Together
9. Sex (1): Biblical Principles, Best Actions, GGG (Good in Bed, Give equal time and equal pleasure, Get the go ahead to be intimate), Love Images
10. Sex (2)- Mutual Satisfaction and Submission, Go Ahead, Signals, Warm Ups, Love Languages
11. Sex (3): Mis-times Desire (i.e. that desires for sex can change), Physical CLEAR Rules, Rewriting Vows
12. Final ceremony- Vows



## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

In addition to the external impact evaluation, IPA, IRC and World Vision staff undertook continuous monitoring of the couples counselling sessions. This entailed recording attendance by participants and collecting observations through random audits of sessions on the quality of participation (frequency with which couples spoke, intensity with which they listened, engagement with each other), and the quality of the sessions (fidelity to the programme, Faith Leader facilitation style and confidence).

From November 2018- March 2019, all Faith Leaders were audited on a randomly selected week. Monitoring was scaled down once Faith Leaders became more comfortable

delivering Becoming One. They were called on a weekly basis by IPA staff to ensure the weekly sessions happened, and that couples attended. From these calls, a subset of Faith Leaders that would benefit from physical visits by WV and IRC staff were identified e.g. those that were falling behind or facing difficulties mobilising couples.

Through the monitoring visits, solutions were explored together with the Faith Leader e.g. to mobilise couples, resolve technical difficulties with their smartphones etc. Whatsapp engagements, including posts and conversations from the Faith Leaders, were also monitored by WV and IRC staff, which could be reacted to accordingly.

## PROGRAMMING LESSONS

This pilot suggests that **Faith Leaders can have a meaningful and positive role** in transforming relationships to reduce VAW. They are recognised community leaders, common mediators of relationship conflict, and respected figures in deeply religious environments.

Churches are often one of the only functioning institutions providing services in fragile contexts where governments fail to provide for citizen needs.

Utilising **existing services, biblical texts, resources, figures and beliefs** is an effective strategy for reducing cost, and increasing scale, uptake and adherence, but **it is not without risks**. For instance, Faith Leaders can also represent patriarchal, religious perspectives that justify the subjugation of women.

Becoming One was designed as a prevention tool for couples who were not experiencing violence. However, the baseline research revealed significant IPV prevalence. Thus, an iterative design process was implemented to add more content on violence response to the original 12 sessions. Faith Leaders were encouraged to understand their moral responsibility to stop violence and hold men accountable rather than place the responsibility on women. The additional 2 sessions were not included in the impact evaluation but are currently undergoing qualitative testing.



## SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Becoming One Faith Leaders' Guide  
Becoming One Couples' Guide

IPA (2018) [The Impact of Faith-Based Couples' Counseling on Relationship Dynamics and IPV in Uganda](#)

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Uganda Bureau of Statistics. (2018). Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016. Kampala, Uganda: UBOS and ICF.
- 2 Lugo, L., and Cooperman, A. (2010). Tolerance and tension: Islam and Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa. Washington, DC: Pew Research Centre.
- 3 Miller, D., and Prentice, D. (2016). Changing norms to change behaviour. Annual Review of Psychology 67:1, 339-361.
- 4 Watts, D., and Dodds, P. (2007). Influentials, networks, and public opinion information. Journal of Consumer Research 34: 441-458.

The Prevention Collaborative works to strengthen the ability of key actors to deliver cutting edge violence prevention interventions informed by research-based evidence, practice-based learning and feminist principles. For more information go to [www.prevention-collaborative.org](http://www.prevention-collaborative.org)

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