**SASA! Together: An evolution of the SASA! approach to prevent violence against women**

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**Abstract**

One in three women globally will experience intimate partner violence (IPV) with devastating consequences for individual survivors, their families and communities. While prevalence remains high, violence against women is not inevitable and community mobilisation approaches have emerged as particularly promising for transforming the gender inequitable norms and practices that underlie violence. The SASA! Activist Kit to Prevent Violence Against Women (SASA!), developed by Raising Voices in 2008, provides a theory-based approach for mobilising communities to transform power imbalances between women and men through critical discussion and positive action. In this article, we provide the rationale for revisiting SASA! after ten years of program learning and formal research. We aim to contribute to the knowledge base around what works to prevent IPV by describing the core enhancements in the revised version—called SASA! Together—and linking these changes to Raising Voices’ program learning and broader advancements in the field. In addition, we reflect on how current debates—such as how best to “scale up” violence prevention programs—were considered and resolved in SASA! Together. The paper concludes by sharing lessons learned that may provide guidance for future revisions and revisions of evidence-based programs.

**Introduction**

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most prevalent form of violence against women (VAW), affecting one in three women globally (Evtimova et al., 2013). All forms of violence violate women’s fundamental human right to safety and numerous studies have confirmed the devastating long-term sequel of IPV for individual survivors, their families, and communities. Encouragingly, in the previous decades, there has been steady progress and innovation in programming that can effectively address the inequitable gender norms and practices that underlie violence against women. Thus while the prevalence of violence against women remains high, it is not inevitable. As the evidence base of programs with demonstrated impact on preventing IPV against women grows, we are cautiously optimistic—and also feel greater urgency in expanding—and strengthening—programming that has the potential to make communities safer for women around the globe.

Prevention programs use a range of strategies and approaches, however a common characteristic across most successful interventions is a focus on transforming power imbalances between women and men to foster more equitable and respectful relationships within families and communities, that reject men’s use of violence (Dillich, Hoss, Bank, Dutt, & Zimmermann, 2015; Eliasberg et al., 2015; Jessor et al., 2020). Various guidance tools and other resources, synthesize the latest research and learning from the field with the aim of fostering more safe and effective programs (e.g., Carter, Jossi, & Hemme, 2018; Kerr-Wilson et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2019). Alongside such advances in understanding what works to prevent violence, funding initiatives (e.g., the Department for International Development’s ‘What Works to Prevent Violence’ £25 million flagship program, and the ‘Spotlight Initiative’ by the European Union and United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls) and international policy mandates (e.g., the Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 16) have made explicit commitments around preventing violence and addressing risk factors, helping to galvanize political will and resources worldwide.

These are exciting developments that reflect decades of committed activism by women’s rights organizations and their allies, as well as deep investments in research and learning. At the same time, the VAW...
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SASA! Together

SASA! is an evidenced-based program with demonstrated impacts on preventing violence at the community level (evaluation results are further described below). Both SASA! and SASA! Together use community mobilization as the core strategy, an approach consistently highlighted as an effective strategy in various evidence reviews (Ellsbeg et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2020). At the heart of both methodologies is the aim to transform inequalities of power by sparking community-wide critical thinking and positive action. This work is led by women and men who live and work in the community, with training and support by dedicated organizational staff.

SASA! is a Kiswahili word that means “now”—understanding the urgent need to prevent VAW—and the acronym for its four phases: Start, Awareness, Support, and Action. This phased approach reflects the transformation of change model (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992), where community members from different social and economic strata are engaged in a structured process—beginning with pre-contemplation (Start), to contemplation (Awareness), preparation for action (Support) and action and maintenance (Action). Using interactive and reflective activities, SASA! unpacks different dimensions of power and other key themes (gender, violence, accountability, collective responsibility), and the specific content evolves throughout the program cycle.

- **Start:** Involves learning about the community through a baseline survey, relationship building and the selection and training of women and men who live and work in the community to connect with their power within.
- **Awareness:** Introduces (or deepens) a feminist analysis of men’s power over women as the root cause of IPV and the community’s silence about this injustice as key drivers that enable violence to continue.
- **Support:** Builds momentum as more and more community members learn skills around balancing power and join their power with others to support women experiencing violence, couples trying to change, and community activists speaking out and holding men who use violence accountable.
- **Action:** Cultivates the power to take action and formalize mechanisms that sustain new norms that reject violence and encourage balanced power between women and men.

From 2008 to 2012, the SASA! Study was conducted in Kampala, Uganda by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Raising Voices, the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention, and Makerere University, in Kampala, Uganda. The study included a randomized controlled trial (RCT), an economic evaluation, rigorous monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and qualitative research. The RCT results indicated that SASA! had community-level impacts on reducing women’s risk of physical IPV by 52%, reducing sexual concurrency among men (27% of men in SASA! communities, compared to 45% in control communities), and reducing social acceptability of violence (76% of women and men in SASA! communities rejected men’s use of violence against women, compared to only 26% in control communities) (Abramsky et al., 2014). Qualitative findings emphasized that participation in SASA! enhanced various aspects of intimate partner relationships, such as increasing trust and cooperation, more open communication, and a broader aspiration to strengthen the partnership (Kyeongbe et al., 2011). Overall, the study marked an important moment within the broader field of violence against women, as the first rigorous study in an African setting to demonstrate that it is possible to achieve meaningful change and prevent violence at the community level—beyond the individual women and men engaged in program activities—within a relatively short time frame of about three years.

Why revise?

The RCT results led to global uptake, and in the last decade SASA! has been used by over 10 organizations ranging from small community-based groups to large multi-lateral institutions, in over 25 countries. This diversity of experiences has rapidly deepened experiential learning, for instance highlighting: the essential ingredients for high-quality SASA! implementation; the content that resonates most strongly across settings and aspects that typically require adaptation; gaps and strengths of the materials themselves; activities requiring further guidance; ethical requirements; etc. In addition, the SASA! Study generated a rich body of knowledge around SASA!’s impact as well as its intensity, reach, and mechanisms of change, as reflected by the eight peer reviewed articles currently available that analyze different aspects of the study data (see Abramsky, Musing, Namby, Watts, & Michau, 2018; Kyeongbe et al., 2015; Bannan et al., 2017; among others). At the same time, there have been considerable advancements and changes in the broader field since SASA! was first published—with a notable increase in the number and quality of prevention programs as well as the evidence base on which these approaches are effective. Raising Voices felt an ethical responsibility to update SASA! to integrate this robust learning around current needs, priorities and strengths within the field—as well as to ensure the program is applicable to the diverse context in which it is now being used. The two-year revision process was motivated (and

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2 Raising Voices defines practice-based knowledge as the cumulative knowledge acquired from designing and implementing ideas and methodologies over a sustained timeframe, including insights gained from observation, direct experiences, and program monitoring (http://raisingvoices.org/innovati on/generating-evidence/).
sustained) by this commitment to strengthen the global community working together to end violence against women.

Revision process

Raising Voices initiated the revision in early 2018, with the broad aim of updating, streamlining and enhancing the methodology. Given the lack of existing guidance in the literature for undertaking a practice- and evidence-informed revision, we developed the following multi-step process: (1) consultation and synthesis; (2) conceptual framework; (3) content revision/creation; (4) review and testing; (5) revision; and (6) design and production.

The ‘consultation and synthesis’ step ensured a dedicated space to reflect on and consolidate expertise related to key questions for the revision: what was working in SASA!, what was not, what was missing, and recommendations for how the program could be improved in light of the current VAW prevention landscape. The process lasted 10 months, and involved a diverse group of stakeholders—SASA! programmers and technical assistance (TA) providers, funders, and global VAW experts—through an online survey (n = 48), key informant interviews (n = 8) and three half-day seminars engaging over 65 colleagues. Selection of participants was purposive, with the aim of including diverse experiences to meaningfully validate (or challenge) Raising Voices organizational perspectives. As such, we reached out to long-term partners and colleagues, organizations who had decided against using SASA!, as well as experts who have supported and/or criticized the work.

All input from the consultations were reviewed, synthesized, and exhaustively discussed within the revision team at Raising Voices, informing the development of SASA! Together’s conceptual framework. For instance, based on this analysis, one key learning was that SASA!’s content, indicators and expected outcomes needed to be more tightly aligned, as some of the program materials did not explicitly link to the desired changes for that phase. In response, the conceptual framework identified four central themes—power, IPV, sexual decision-making, and activism—which were mapped across the SASA! Together phases using a simple matrix.

During the content revision/creation step, the matrix served as a guide to ensure adequate attention to each theme. Flag content that needed to be revised (or replaced), and enhance coherence across newly created materials. In addition, we drew on our experiences of effective programmes, our knowledge of community preferences, collective brainstorming and deep immersion in a creative process. Thus while we followed a clear structure, the process also allowed for the freedom and experimentation required for original work. Ultimately these initial steps in the revision process ensured a strong alignment between underlying theory, program content (written and visual) and desired program impacts within relationships, communities and institutions.

Draft SASA! Together content was critically reviewed by staff, selected partners, TA providers and other experts in the field of VAW prevention. In addition, several activities and data collection tools were pre-tested with selected partners. Emerging feedback led to an iterative process of revision and further review lasting about 6 months, until all content was finalized. Raising Voices also crowd-sourced a new title for the revision, with over 100 friends and partners weighing in on what would resonate in their communities, be easily translatable and represent the spirit of SASA!.

The final step (design and production) focused on creating a new book and feel for SASA! Together and a more user-friendly layout (e.g., bound books, color coded tabs, digital access, etc.) while retaining familiar elements and style for continuity. Each step took significant time and effort, particularly as all aspects were designed and produced by Raising Voices, rather than having specialized teams focus on each aspect. Program development and design required grounding in community, as well as sufficient time for iterative learning and meaningful collaboration. Moving systematically through each step in the revision process contributes to innovation and quality, ultimately enhancing the potential for the methodology to create change.

SASA! Together’s core enhancements

SASA! and SASA! Together share the same programming essentials—which all must be present to ensure program fidelity (Raising Voices, 2017). Alongside these essentials, the revision process resulted in several core enhancements (see Fig. 1). The following sections describe the experiential learning and the broader evidence that informed each of these substantive changes.

Hitting in on IPV

SASA! Together explicitly focuses on intimate partner violence against women, rather than the wider range of violence women experience (e.g., non-partner sexual violence, early marriage, transactional sex, female genital mutilation, etc.). This was a strategic decision, given that IPV is the most prevalent form of violence against women globally (Ellsberg, Jensen, Heise, Watts, & Garcia-Moreno, 2009). Even in conflict situations where levels of sexual violence are frequently elevated, women are still most likely to experience violence from their male partners (Murphy, Blackwell, Ellsberg, & Contreras, 2017). In addition, program learning from Raising Voices and partners suggested that including content highlighting diverse forms of violence can be confusing or overwhelming, and—depending on the specific context—potentially alienate community members, for example with materials on early marriage in a setting where the practice rarely happens.

Further, an emphasis on IPV against women illustrates how all relationships require active and intentional use of positive power; this dismisses the stigmatizing and othering mindset of ‘us’ (those not experiencing/violence) versus ‘them’ (those experiencing/violence). Rather, this focus encourages everyone to use power positively, especially in their intimate relationships. As such, everyone appreciates they have a unique role to play in improving their own lives and their communities—which, in turn, can inspire further activism and change. In addition, while assessing non-partner violence was not a core outcome of the SASA! RCT, neither the qualitative evaluation (Yeggele et al., 2015) nor program monitoring data found any indication that SASA! was effective in this area. This further supported the decision to hone in where the methodology is most impactful—and also suggests that non-partner sexual violence prevention requires a specialized approach.

Realigning strategies

Both social norm theory (Bicchieri, 2017) and the diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 2003) Contoshaw, 1991) recognize the importance of systematically engaging individuals across socio-ecological strata to create sustainable change. By intentionally engaging individuals from different social and economic strata (referred to as ‘circles of influence’, see Fig. 2), SASA! sought to mobilize a critical mass to catalyse and sustain change across different levels of the community. However in practice, many partners prioritized the Local Activism strategy, that primarily engages women and men as individuals. Subsequently, engagement that would support structural change (at levels beyond the individual) was often limited, and at times led to a misalignment of intended SASA! ideas undermining the community transformation process. To address this gap, SASA! Together uses three distinct strategies, each focused on sparking change within a specific circle of the social ecology (individual, interpersonal, community, institutional and society) supporting individual, social norm and systemic change:

- In Local Activism, SASA! Together is led by community activists (women and men who live and work in the community) who
SASA! and SASA! Together are based on the same four programming essentials: benefits based activism, gender power analysis, four phases of change, and holistic community engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Enhancements</th>
<th>SASA!</th>
<th>SASA! Together</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honing in on IPV</td>
<td>Multiple forms of violence against women addressed.</td>
<td>Emphasis on intimate partner violence against women as the most common form of violence women experience around the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realigning strategies</td>
<td>Structure organized around four strategies: Local Activism, Media &amp; Advocacy, Communications Materials, and Training</td>
<td>Structure organized around three strategies, each aligned with a specific circle of influence: Local Activism (individual &amp; interpersonal); Community Leadership (community); and Institutional Strengthening (institutions &amp; society).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on sexual decision-making</td>
<td>Content evolves over time, exploring different dimensions of power as it relates to VAW and HIV.</td>
<td>HIV content shifted to focus on the deeper driver of HIV risk for women: power related to sexual decision-making and healthy sexual relationships (e.g., consent, bodily autonomy, pleasure, etc.).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversifying activities &amp; training materials</td>
<td>Reflective and interactive activities to engage community members in personal reflection, critical thinking and public discussion.</td>
<td>Developed new activities to deepen critical thinking, including sessions specially designed for couples, religious leaders and institutions. Developed additional training sessions focused on personal development, self-care and relationship building. Overall updating for the present day—including design, packaging and integration of social media.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovating around Learning and Assessment (L&amp;A)</td>
<td>SASA! specific L&amp;A tools created to track activities and outcomes in the community over time, starting with knowledge (start phase); and subsequently emphasizing attitudes (awareness); skills (support); and behaviors (action).</td>
<td>Reoriented L&amp;A framework around specific “know”, “feel” and “do” outcomes at each phase to reflect the iterative (non-linear) change process and better link content to desired impacts. Tools revised for a more comprehensive assessment and new guidance added on data analysis and program integration.</td>
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<td>Integrating guidance throughout</td>
<td>Materials provided for phase-specific training and bi-monthly meetings, and “Tips Booklet” to address common challenges and questions; however in-depth, tailored support offered through Raising Voices technical assistance program. Guidance included in SASA! materials aimed primarily for use in East and Southern Africa.</td>
<td>Strengthened guidance throughout, including: new “Set-Up Guide” to better support organizations in getting started (e.g., staffing, design considerations, etc.); content to support mentorship for staff, activists, leaders and allies; explicit guidance on sustaining change in the Action phase; and practical steps to adapt for diverse global contexts.</td>
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Fig. 1. What’s New in SASA! Together.

- In Institutional Strengthening, SASA! Together impacts systemic change at the level of institutions and society, by working with one or two institutions that influence how the community addresses VAW (such as a religious institution or media house) or serves women experiencing violence (e.g., health services, police department, local government, etc.).

facilitate reflective activities and support change at the individual and interpersonal levels.
- In Community Leadership, community leaders (diverse group of formal and informal leaders) use SASA! Together materials to integrate new ideas into their leadership roles and platforms, with the aim of influencing broader transformation and social norms at the community level.
Focusing on sexual decision-making

SASA! was developed in 2008 in Uganda, at a time when the public health sector was intensely focused on the HIV response and many social justice actors directed their advocacy efforts toward addressing structural drivers of the pandemic. By explicitly drawing attention to the interconnections between violence against women as both a cause and a consequence of HIV, SASA! also aimed to reduce women’s vulnerability to HIV transmission. However, as SASA! expanded to new contexts including those with a low prevalence of HIV, this component was less resonant. In addition, even in settings where HIV remains relevant, Raising Voices found that the focus on HIV prevention could obscure other critical aspects of sexual decision-making for women, such as the attitudes and practices around consent, pleasure, and bodily autonomy. The salience of these broader issues emerged strongly during the consultative step of the revision process—particularly from partners who had experience using SASA! and felt that this aspect of women’s sexual agency was insufficiently addressed in the approach. Some partners observed, for example, that while conversations around power and gender norms expectations were beginning to shift in the community, women and men lacked support for addressing imbalances of power within the most intimate aspects of their relationships. As such, partners recommended that the revised program better support couples in building practical skills to increase intimacy and communication.

Based on these insights, SASA! Together elevates sexual decision-making as a core theme, replacing the previous content on HIV. Importantly, this new area uses an aspirational framing that highlights three needs that are universal in most relationships: to feel valued, cared for and respected. SASA! Together materials help community members to reflect on and prioritize these relationship values. This differs from the focus in SASA! on reallocating household gender roles, which was frequently met with resistance, frustration, or a temporary surface-level change—all of which undermined deeper shifts in the power dynamic within a couple. For example, program learning reveals that emphasizing equal division of housework can provoke a “fit for tat” mentality among men, or that by engaging in domestic work they are “helping” or “doing a favor” for their partner, which reinforces hierarchical power dynamics and does not address deeper emotional needs. These experiential insights reflecting the importance of relationship values are supported by qualitative research from the SASA! Study in Kampala, Uganda, which found that many women and men desire for more authentic partnership, mutual care and respect, and closer communications (Marmann et al., 2017). Through its unfolding of sexual decision-making and skill building during each phase, SASA! Together strives to help couples fulfill and meet these universal aspirations. Further, once these core needs are addressed, it can create space for couples to naturally experiment with non-traditional gender roles and family structures as a reflection of care and support within a values-based relationship.

Diversifying activities & training materials

SASA! Together introduces new materials, including activities designed specifically for intimate couples during single-sex and mixed-sex sessions. ’Deeper Discussions,’ facilitated with the same group of individuals throughout SASA! Together. Deeper Discussions integrate various approaches (games, group discussions, skill building, etc.) that direct attention to women’s frequent lack of power in sexual decision-making, and provide opportunities to practice and develop skills to balance power. This new element in SASA! Together aligns with a growing recognition that working with couples can be done safely within VAW prevention programs, and that engaging both partners—rather than women or men on their own—is important for fostering more sustainable changes and violence-free relationships (Jewkes et al., 2020).

SASA! Together also introduces new materials—from an adaptation of SASA! called SASA! Faith (Raising Voices, 2014)—that are specifically designed for Christian and Muslim faith leaders, such as sermon notes and community dialogue and media ideas. The inclusion of content linking religious texts with SASA! Together themes is intended to help mitigate potential backlash from religious institutions, as experienced with SASA! in some settings (Naray et al., 2019). The revision also provided an opportunity to integrate social media as a strategy to amplify ideas and initiate dialogue, which was not as accessible on a wide-scale when SASA! was developed.

Program learning across SASA! partners points to the emotional and physical demands of working in communities to challenge patriarchal structures and prevent violence against women, including the possibility of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burn-out (Rodgers, 2010). The need to better support the well-being and resilience of staff and community activists, leaders and allies emerged strongly during the consultation stage of the revision. Subsequently, new training materials were developed for SASA! Together, that focus on defining—and applying—contextually relevant models of self-care, as well as professional development and relationship building. These sessions are not treated as optional or supplementary. Rather, they are central to the
program, signalling the importance of engaging the whole person—body, mind and spirit—as a core value in social justice work that deepens solidarity and activism.

Innovating around L&A

Several revisions to the learning and assessment (L&A) process were made to help foreground learning and enhance program agility, accountability, and safety for women. In SASA!, change was assessed in a linear trajectory based on shifts in knowledge (Start phase), attitudes (Awareness phase), skills (Support phase) and behaviors (Action phase). However, in practice, communities often experimented with changes more organically—making gradual changes throughout rather than until the Action phase to adopt new behavior. This non-linear, at times “messy” aspect of social change is also reflected in the literature (Goldmann et al., 2019). To provide a more precise assessment of the underlying changes that might be happening right from the Start phase, SASA! Together introduces a “sense-feel-do” framework that articulates expected outcomes in what community members know, how they feel and what they do across each phase (see Outcome Table in the Supplementary Materials), with new tools designed to systematically track progress along the way.

Another limitation in SASA! was limited guidance around how to apply monitoring data, which often resulted in organizations exerting considerable time and energy collecting data, yet failing to interpret and draw lessons from the numbers in a way that could easily be translated into programmatic decision-making. Based on this learning, SASA! Together includes a detailed Learning and Assessment (L&A) strategy, that is described as a full cycle—tracking progress, analyzing data, and applying what is learned—with detailed guidance provided at every step. For example, there is considerable attention given to quarterly feedback sessions, where staff collectively review, interpret and expand on L&A findings, culminating in a list of priority actions to build on strengths, swiftly and safely respond to any signs of backlash, and problem solve around emerging challenges. This integration of learning from both formal data collection and day-to-day program experiences also aligns with a growing recognition in the field around the value of diverse forms of knowledge and the importance of developing mechanisms to synthesize staff expertise and informal observations as part of the learning process (Heath & Jayashree, 2017).

Finally, new data collection tools were created to reflect methodological advancements around assessing social norm change, where qualitative “case vignettes” (i.e., short stories) are demonstrating promise as an assessment approach (Stiefelk & Tsuang, 2017). For example, SASA! Together uses focus group discussion guides that include a vignette featuring “Sarah” and “David”—a fictional married couple experiencing relationship difficulties. Inviting the group to imagine and discuss different aspects of their married lives helps to clarify existing norms related to violence and gender roles, and more easily detect how these may be shifting in SASA! Together deepens in the community.

Integrating guidance throughout

In over a decade of experience developing and implementing SASA!, some of the most profound learning relates to the creativity and energy required to support quality programming in practice—for example how to prepare and mentor staff, support community activities on developing “softer skills” such as self-confidence and facilitation, creative problem solving, how to structure and sustain a team, supporting women who are experiencing violence (particularly when existing services are scarce), among many others. During the revision process, these insights were synthesized and embedded as guidance within the program materials. For example, SASA! Together weaves practical considerations and tips throughout, in a section called “Details that make a Difference” (see example in Fig. 3).

Comprehensive guidance was also developed to address topics that often proved challenging during implementation, such as:

- An entirely new module on how to get started (“Set-Up Guide: The What, Why and How to get started with SASA! Together”), which discusses considerations around staffing, size of programming, budget etc. as well as accessible elaborations of key concepts such as “Using a Feminist Analysis,” “Balancing Power” and “Sustainability and Doing No Harm.”
- An entirely new module on L&A (“Learning & Assessment Guide”), that covers topics such as the ethics of feminist research, how to train data collection teams, suggestions for data analysis, and how to integrate SASA! Together’s L&A into larger organizational M&E systems.
- More practical guidance in each of the Phase books, such as ideas for mentoring and supporting staff, activists, leaders and allies, and sample works. In addition, the Start phase was revised to include more community engagement activities, based on feedback that SASA! took “too long” to get up and running in the community. New guidance was also included in the Action phase around how organizations can better sustain change and responsibly transition out of a community at the end of the program.

While the spirit and four essential program components remain unchanged in both SASA! and SASA! Together, the enhancements in SASA! Together are designed to make the approach easier to use, accessible to more organizations and communities, and—most critically—even more effective at sparking transformational change (both individual and community) and preventing violence against women.

Challenges and tensions

The revision process was not without challenges. Two main areas of tension are discussed below, as well as how each was resolved in SASA! Together.

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Fig. 3. “Details that make a Difference”.

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Simplify and shorten SASA!?

The first challenge concerned the question of whether (or not) to use the revision as an opportunity to simplify and shorten SASA! so it could be used more easily in typical “scale-up” programming, with the objective of achieving wide geographic reach and engaging a large numbers of community members. It is important to note that SASA! Together’s community mobilisation approach aims to achieve population-level change beyond those directly participating in program activities, and therefore can be considered as already “at scale.” However, during the revision there was interest and some pressure to enhance scalability by creating a more simple version that could be implemented in a condensed time frame.

After much discussion and debate, Raising Voices decided not to create a shortened version. Downplaying the methodology would contradict our core learning around what has made SASA! successful: sustained person-to-person engagement that can elicit critical reflection and action. For instance, shortening SASA! Together would risk jeopardising several core building blocks for quality community mobilisation, such as proving to learn about the community and developing trusting relationships; both of which take time and requires moving beyond sharing information to genuinely listening and learning about the others’ experiences and perspectives. In addition, there is value in allowing time to elapse between trainings, so participants can digest (and test-out) new ideas. Perhaps most importantly, it is essential to meet community members where they are, respecting that they are experts in their own lives and challenges, and cannot be expected to meaningfully lead a change process that ascribes to an externally imposed agenda.

The SASA! RCT further underscored the intensity and duration of programming required to achieve impact on violence prevention. For example, during the nearly three years of implementation, over 300 community activists facilitated 11,877 SASA! activities, both directly and indirectly reaching an estimated 260,000 plus community members (Michaels et al., 2019). Thus, shortening SASA! Together evolves organically with no predetermined number of sessions. Instead, activists, leaders and allies are encouraged to facilitate a minimum of six sessions to ensure teaching and reinforcement of key messages. Along the way, there were mistakes when the team had to regroup or start fresh. In doing so, several insights emerged. Taken together, this learning underscores the importance of providing resources—both time and funding—for active organisations to lead efforts to create (or revise) methodologies that can successfully prevent violence against women.

Lessons learned

The two-year creation of SASA! Together was motivated by a firm commitment to evolving the SASA! approach to better reflect experiential learning, contextual realities and advancements within the broader field. The process required time, stamina and deep listening—as well as a group of donors who provided core support, thus enabling a new space and freedom for Raising Voices to go deep into the creative process as it unfolded rather than being bound by pre-determined timeframes or expected outcomes. Along the way, there were mistakes when the team had to regroup or start fresh. In doing so, several insights emerged. Taken together, this learning underscores the importance of providing resources—both time and funding—for active organisations to lead efforts to create (or revise) methodologies that can successfully prevent violence against women.

First, while drawing on the existing evidence-base is critical, there is no substitute for grounded expertise gained through deep programming experience. The learning accumulated through over a decade of observation, technical assistance and programming, and documentation of these insights, was critical in creating SASA! Together. Further, the consultative phase of the revision process drew on the vast experiences of Raising Voices and its partners—collectively providing input on programming realities from a multitude of contexts and types of organisations in a structured and systematic way. This rich source of knowledge shaped the revision, identifying the core enhancements needed to strengthen the approach.

Second, revising a comprehensive methodology that works across the socio-ecological framework for sustainable change is a substantial undertaking. Particularly for smaller organisations that do not have in-house writing teams, editors, designers, production and printing experts, etc. Assembling and coordinating all the specialized skills while also leading on all the content development was a considerable stretch. When methodologies are out in the world and being used, it is easy to underestimate the personal and organizational commitment it requires to produce such work.

Third, it is not possible or even healthy for a single program to meet the needs of all organizations or contexts. Developing authentic materials—that have the potential to resonate and spark change—requires...
designers to draw on our direct experiences and learning. Subsequently the quality of the work is best served by honing in on areas where the authors have specific expertise and communicating these limits with openness and transparency. For example, SASA! Together is designed specifically for preventing intimate partner violence within heterosexual relationships. While it can be adapted to address different forms of violence and areas of social justice activism, it is important for organisations to leverage their strengths rather than attempting to try to meet the needs of all contexts and potential partners.

Finally, SASA! Together is an expression of values, not just a set of materials designed to share information. The authors aspired to ensure that the language, types of activities, content, structure and overall approach is firmly grounded in-and actively encourages—the feminist values of activism, solidarity, a politicized analysis of power, collaborate and deep respect for women in men who are striving to create more equality in their own lives and the community. The more personal the work, the more profound an impact it can have on an individual, a community and a wide range of social justice issues.

The development of SASA! Together is itself a form of activism—it is Raising Voices’ activism. In order to prevent violence against women and create safer communities around the world, a wide range of organizations are needed, each playing different roles from program design and development, implementation, research, etc. If each organization can leverage and use their niche to build the collective ecosystem, we can better strengthen, support and foster growth in the VAW prevention field.

Author statement
Lori Michau is the first author of SASA! Together, leading the conceptualization, writing, and full revision process. She co-authored this paper.
Sophie Nany is a co-author of SASA! Together and synthesized the practice-based learning information the revision. She co-authored this paper.

Declaration of Competing Interest
Lori Michau is the lead author of both SASA! and SASA! Together. Sophie Nany is a co-author of SASA! Together.

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References


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