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ABSTRACT

A critical component of community-level efforts to reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) is the meaningful engagement of opinion leaders. This paper assesses the successes, challenges, and processes of change that *Indashyikirwa* – an IPV prevention programme in Rwanda – encountered while engaging opinion leaders to combat IPV. The paper draws on three rounds of qualitative interviews with 13 opinion leaders, two rounds of interviews with 12 community activists, and two rounds of interviews with six staff members. Thematic analysis was conducted and the data triangulated. The paper offers lessons learnt regarding how to effectively engage opinion leaders for IPV prevention programming.

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Introduction

The devastating effects of violence against women by an intimate partner on women's health and well-being are well established (Campbell 2002), and eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls is a fundamental Social Development Goal (5.2). A critical underlying factor of intimate partner violence (IPV) is social or gender norms – rules that define acceptable behaviour for men and women and that frequently sustain power imbalances between them. Gender norms can contribute to IPV directly (for example, through notions of masculinity linked to the ability to control women); or they can perpetuate the practice indirectly, such as by making it unacceptable for women to report violence. There is thus significant interest in approaches to preventing IPV through efforts to transform inequitable gender norms and relations, and attitudes condoning violence (Fulu, Kerr-Wilson, and Lang 2014). There is increasing evidence that interventions should apply a socio-ecological approach, to address the interplay of personal, situational and socio-cultural factors influencing IPV including individual attitudes, social norms, and socio-economic contexts (Cislighi and Heise 2018).

A critical component of IPV prevention approaches based on the socio-ecological model is meaningful engagement of opinion leaders; influential community members to whom others often turn to for advice and opinions. Their engagement can help facilitate an “enabling environment” to disseminate programme messages, support advocacy efforts, and improve responses to IPV survivors. They are also influential regarding gender norms-change related to violence, as they often serve as powerful role models (Jones et al. 2006). Opinion leaders can be gatekeepers for social norms change, through endorsements of norms and/or critical access to social norms change programming (Ellickson 2001). Faith leaders in particular often have significant authority and are highly trusted by their community, making them valuable for encouraging health behaviour change (Baruth et al. 2015). For example, faith leaders have played important roles promoting public health including preventing HIV/AIDS, promoting sexual and reproductive health and family planning, reducing female

genital mutilation and circumcision (Walker 2015), and encouraging healthy eating and physical activity behaviours (Baruth et al. 2015). Faith leaders can help provide resources for successful programming, enhance sustainability, and identify solutions to address implementation challenges (Steckler, Goodman, and Kegler 2002). They can effectively provide direct support, such as informational or emotional support and initiating health-promotion activities (Baruth et al. 2015). Given their influence, faith leaders can also have negative effects on the health and well-being of others, if they demonstrate harmful behaviours, or offer religious justifications for inequitable norms or beliefs (Baruth et al. 2015).

Although there is much literature attesting to the important role of faith leaders for health promotion, there is less evidence on faith leaders' influence on health-related issues, including from their own perspectives (Bopp and Fallon 2011; Williams et al. 2012). There is likewise a gap in understanding of the value and experiences of working with other types of opinion leaders with respect to IPV prevention and response, including government leaders. This paper addresses some of these identified gaps by exploring how to more effectively harness the strengths of diverse opinion leaders for implementing IPV prevention and social norms change programming. To do so, we uncover the successes, challenges and processes of change through engaging opinion leaders as part of a comprehensive IPV prevention programme in Rwanda.

Rwandan context

The Rwandan government has supported the development of various initiatives to address IPV such as prevention clubs in schools and universities; IPV prevention committees at the village level; parents evening forums to raise awareness, identify, and assist survivors of violence¹; gender-based violence (GBV) desks at the Ministry of Defence and National Police (Slegh and Kimonyo 2010), and one stop centres for medical care, psychosocial support, and legal services to survivors of IPV (Umubyeyi et al. 2016). In 2008, the Rwandan government adopted the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence Law.

A relatively unique aspect of the Rwandan government is its ability and willingness to promote gender equality and prevention of IPV and hold citizens accountable to the related policies and laws. While Rwanda is regularly praised for its target-driven development and success in improving its business environment, education and health care, the government has also been criticised for limiting citizens' freedom of speech and enacting reforms without allowing public contestation (Ansoms and Cioffo 2016). Yet, both critics and supporters of the Rwandan government recognise its capacity to "reform the state effectively and enforce control over its citizens" (Ansoms and Cioffo 2016, 1248). This has been done through decentralising government and increasing the power of lower-level government officials to regulate citizens' behaviours through fines (Sommers 2012). The country has strong administrative mechanisms for ensuring implementation of policies and laws including performance contracts (*Imihigo*), which make public officials accountable to specific targets and timelines (Sommers 2012). The Rwandan government has also adopted the use of community score cards (CSCs) to monitor and evaluate government services and projects by community members and service users. CSCs have been found to enhance community participation, transparency, and improve accountability among decision-makers, although this is dependent on the strength of community and government engagement in the process (Blake et al. 2016).

The Indashyikirwa programme

Indashyikirwa (meaning "agents for change" in Kinyarwanda) is an IPV prevention programme that was funded by DFID Rwanda and implemented by CARE International in Rwanda, Rwanda Women's Network (RWN), and the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC) from August 2014 through August 2018 (which included a 14-month inception period). The programme aimed to reduce experiences and perpetration of IPV, shift social norms and attitudes condoning IPV, and

provide more empowering responses to IPV survivors. The programme was implemented across 14 sectors, in seven districts in Eastern, Northern and Western provinces of Rwanda, in predominantly rural, widely dispersed communities.² In addition to training and engagement of opinion leaders, the focus of this paper, there are three other main programme components: participatory reflection and skills-building groups with couples (couples' curriculum); community-based activism with a sub-set of trained couples; and support to survivors of IPV through women's safe spaces.

At programme inception, RWN staff purposefully mapped and recruited a diverse group of approximately 40 opinion leaders per intervention sector (599 leaders in total), including local government officials (cell and sector leaders), service providers, religious leaders, justice officials, and members of the National Women's Council.³ This included 414 male opinion leaders and 185 female opinion leaders, reflecting the fact that men were more likely to occupy local leadership positions than women. RWN staff invited these leaders to a two-week, participatory training on gender inequalities and IPV. The training drew strongly on core messages promoted by SASA! – a programme established by Raising Voices, Uganda that helped participants distinguish between positive [power to, power with, power within] and negative [power over] forms of power in relationships.⁴ Topics covered included gender roles and socialisation; causes and consequences of different types of IPV (economic, emotional, physical, sexual); laws and policies; and psychosocial support. The training moved incrementally from related knowledge and attitudes, to skills and actions to prevent and appropriately respond to IPV, and participants were given take home activities to apply what they learnt. The curriculum was rapidly pre-tested and revised, with support from the What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls programme team, including the first and second author. To obtain feedback on each session, focus group discussions were facilitated with opinion leaders, and interviews were conducted with RWN facilitators. Throughout the rest of the intervention, RWN staff hosted quarterly meetings with trained opinion leaders to identify opportunities to enact more effective IPV prevention and response. RWN staff used an "opinion leader commitment form" to monitor opinion leaders' commitments and activities, detailing their successes and challenges. RWN staff offered refresher training on an annual basis and to engage newly elected government leaders after the local elections in mid-2016.

In May 2016, an additional 589 village leaders (521 males, 68 females) were offered three-day training across the 14 intervention sectors by RWN staff. This was done to obtain their support for the community activism and women's safe space activities, in response to feedback by activists and safe space facilitators that the programme activities could not start without the buy in from every intervention village leader. The programme also worked with religious opinion leaders to design activism messages promoting gender equality and non-violence using religious values. In the last year of the programme, RWN staff held a series of reflection meetings with opinion leaders using CSCs, to engage community members in holding opinion leaders accountable to the commitments they had made. As a separate process, RWN staff also worked with opinion leaders to assess whether the *Imihigo* across the intervention sectors identified gender equality and GBV as priorities, detailed and implemented activities to address GBV, and allocated specific and adequate resources to promote gender equality and address GBV.

Methods

Data collection

This paper presents longitudinal qualitative interviews conducted with 13 opinion leaders (11 male and two female) engaged with the *Indashyikirwa* programme, as part of the broader impact evaluation of *Indashyikirwa*. Interviews took place in three intervention sectors (Rurembo Sector, Western Province; Gishari Sector, Eastern Province; and Gacaca Sector, Northern Province), which were purposefully selected to represent a diversity of environments including rural and peri-urban locations. In order to assess processes of change, opinion leaders were interviewed at three intervals

throughout the programme. Nine baseline interviews (three per sector) were conducted with opinion leaders scheduled to attend the *Indashyikirwa* opinion leader training in November 2015. RWN staff members purposefully suggested a diversity of opinion leaders, and they were asked about their expectations of the programme, and their engagement with IPV prevention and response in the past. Six midline interviews were conducted with the same sub-set of opinion leaders after 12 months (November 2016); three local leaders had to be replaced because they were unseated in local elections. Three additional government opinion leaders were interviewed in June 2017, after completing one of the refresher training events and being newly incorporated into the programme. Midline interviews assessed opinion leaders' impressions of the training, whether and how their involvement with *Indashyikirwa* influenced their actions for IPV prevention and response. Eight endline interviews were conducted with the same sub-set of leaders interviewed at the midline in May 2018, before the end of the programme. These interviews assessed opinion leaders' impressions of their ongoing engagement with the programme, and their actions for IPV prevention and response (Table 1).

Analysis of the broader evaluation data indicated the value that *Indashyikirwa* community activists placed on working with opinion leaders. Qualitative data from the activists were thus also included. Twelve members of couples who were elected and trained as community activists (four per sector) were interviewed in November 2016, after having completed the *Indashyikirwa* activist training and begun conducting activism activities, and again in May 2018, before the end of the programme. They were recruited through RWAMREC staff and asked about their impressions of the activism training, what motivated them to continue as activists, whether they had faced any challenges, and how their community efforts changed over time (Table 2).

Interviews with staff are a good way to triangulate programme evaluation data obtained through participants' self-reports (Lee et al. 2008). In May 2016, six in-depth interviews were conducted with RWN field officers and supervisors across all intervention sectors, which assessed their perspectives of successes and lessons learnt from facilitating the opinion leader training. Another round of interviews was conducted with seven RWN staff in May 2017, where they were asked to describe key successes and challenges of engaging opinion leaders. The interviews with opinion leaders, community activists and staff lasted 1–1.5 hours and were conducted at locations deemed appropriate and private for participants. Two female Rwandan qualitative researchers external to the programme conducted the interviews with opinion leaders and community activists. One male Rwandan

Table 1. Demographic information of opinion leaders interviewed.

ID	Interview timings	Role	Gender	Province
OL01N	Baseline, Midline, Endline	Religious leader (Christian)	Male	Northern Province
OL02N	Baseline, Midline, Endline	Government leader (Executive secretary)	Male	Northern Province
OL03N	Baseline	GBV committee member and cell mediator	Male	Northern Province
OL04N	Midline, Endline	Religious leader (Muslim)	Male	Northern Province
OL01W	Baseline, Midline, Endline	GBV committee member	Female	Western Province
OL02W	Baseline, Midline, Endline	Religious leader (Christian)	Male	Western Province
OL03W	Baseline	Government leader (Charge of Resolving Community Conflict)	Male	Western Province
OL04W	Midline, Endline	Government leader (Executive Secretary)	Male	Western Province
OL01E	Baseline	Government leader (Executive Secretary)	Male	Eastern Province
OL02E	Baseline, Midline	National women's council member	Female	Eastern Province
OL03E	Baseline	Government leader	Male	Eastern Province
OL04EE	Midline, Endline	Government leader (Cell Secretary)	Male	Eastern Province
OL05EE	Midline, Endline	Government leader (Executive Secretary)	Male	Eastern Province

Table 2. Demographic information of community activists interviewed.

ID	Gender	Province
MA01E	Male	Eastern Province
FA01E	Female	Eastern Province
MA02E	Male	Eastern Province
FA02E	Female	Eastern Province
MA01N	Male	Northern Province
FA01N	Female	Northern Province
MA02N	Male	Northern Province
FA02N	Female	Northern Province
MA01W	Male	Western Province
FA01W	Female	Western Province
MA02W	Male	Western Province
FA02W	Female	Western Province

qualitative researcher conducted a sub-set of the baseline interviews with opinion leaders. The interviews with opinion leaders and community activists were conducted in Kinyarwanda and audio recorded. The first author conducted both rounds of interviews with RWN staff in English. All identifying information of participants have been removed for the presentation of the findings.

Data analysis

The first author debriefed with the qualitative researchers after data collection to capture their initial impressions, non-verbal and contextual insights. These research summaries were used to inform the analysis. Using the audio files, data were transcribed and translated verbatim into English by a language specialist and professional translator. Thematic analysis was conducted to uncover dominant themes in order to provide a grounded and holistic account of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). After carefully reading the transcripts, the first author established a preliminary coding structure to thematically analyse the data. All of the transcripts were analysed by the first author using this thematic coding framework with the assistance of NVIVO 11 software. An additional transcriber coded a small subset of the baseline transcripts using NVIVO 10 and inter-coder agreement was found to be 95%. The first author regularly workshopped the emerging findings with the *Indashyikirwa* senior programme staff to gain their perspectives on the findings and to validate programmatic insights. Findings and interpretation were then triangulated across data from opinion leaders, community activists, and RWN staff.

Findings

We identified four inter-connected themes based on analysis of the evaluation interview data: (1) appraisal of the opinion leader programme; (2) processes of change among opinion leaders; (3) engagement of opinion leaders; and (4) the value of working with opinion leaders for the broader programme.

Appraisal of opinion leader programming

Several opinion leaders emphasised their commitment to *Indashyikirwa* generally, given how the programme aligns with political will in Rwanda to address IPV. In terms of the programme components, all opinion leaders strongly valued the initial curriculum, citing its unique participatory approach, effective facilitation, and contextually relevant content. They especially appreciated the content on women's rights and the law, positive and negative types of power, and different types and causes of IPV. The majority of leaders valued the training's emphasis on healthy, equitable relationships and skills-building, including how to listen and respond appropriately to individuals

who disclose abuse, as well as communication and conflict resolution skills. Many further noted that the curriculum's sequencing of topics facilitated comprehension. Interestingly, some opinion leaders lamented that their spouses did not also complete the training, noting that their relationships would have benefitted more, if their spouse could have attended. The value opinion leaders placed on the training may help account for the extremely high attendance and completion rate achieved. Hosting the training over 10 half days, instead of 5 full-days, based on feedback during the pre-test, undoubtedly also facilitated attendance.

In addition to this inception training, the majority of opinion leaders appreciated the follow-up training that allowed them to build upon and refresh what they had learnt. They likewise appreciated the quarterly meetings for opinion leaders, where they had an opportunity to share experiences, address challenges, set goals, and self-evaluate progress. There were separate *Indashyikirwa* quarterly meetings with opinion leaders, community activists and women's safe space facilitators, which were also highly valued by opinion leaders, staff, and activists to support coordination. As one community activist said:

When I prepare a discussion, I ask for help from the village leader. The village leader tells the community members to come for a meeting; comes to start a meeting for you, then you continue with the discussion and he closes for you. These are thanks to the quarterly meeting you had together, about taking measures and solutions. (MA01W Endline)

An implementation challenge identified was that not all village leaders had been selected for the initial training as opinion leaders. Yet, the majority of *Indashyikirwa* community activists and women's space facilitators did not feel comfortable conducting activities until each village leader had been briefed about the programme. Programme staff responded to this request by hosting three-day training with all village leaders in the intervention areas; this delayed the start of the activism activities by a few months. A few community activists referenced the importance of engaging all village leaders where *Indashyikirwa* was implemented:

After training those leaders, it made us be known and the leaders started to welcome us in meetings and groups. We would have had problems if the project trained only the change agents and they didn't train the local government leaders. (FA02W Endline)

A final implementation challenge identified by participants was the high turnover of opinion leaders during the programme, including village leaders and police, especially given that local elections were held in early 2016. In response, RWN staff recruited an additional sub-set of newly elected government leaders in June 2016.

Processes of change among opinion leaders

One of the key tenets of *Indashyikirwa* is to challenge male dominance and other forms of power over, especially in relationships. Gender-based power inequities were identified as an underlying cause of partner violence. This concept strongly resonated with the majority of *Indashyikirwa* participants, including couples and women's safe space facilitators. However, a challenge identified by the majority of staff members was that some opinion leaders initially defended the use of power over as inherent in the nature of their work:

Some of the opinion leaders see power over as an obligation. They must do this because of their positions. Opinion leaders are in a system of power. Sometimes they say the power over you are talking about can become positive! To get people to do something, sometimes you should just use power over to make it successful. (Field Officer Round 2)

Several staff members noted that some opinion leaders requested that the programme train their superiors, since the authorities regularly use power over them. This speaks to the importance of more comprehensively linking the concept of power over in relationships to power over in the workplace, especially when engaging opinion leaders. By the midline and endline interviews, many

opinion leaders self-reported minimising their use of power over in their work and relationships, related to greater recognition of the negative consequences of unfettered power over and the benefits of more equitable collaboration:

Opinion leaders were saying I will use my power correctly. If your partner has the same power, you can do something at home that is good. They found power to be the cause of many issues at home, even at work and in the community. (Field Officer Round 2)

The *Indashyikirwa* training and programme also emphasised balancing power among intimate partners, including sharing household roles and decision-making. A few staff members related how many male and female opinion leaders, especially male leaders, initially disagreed with the notion that men and women could share household tasks. One field officer noted how it was critical to encourage discussion when opinion leaders disagreed with such content, to prompt self and group reflection:

The men complained; they said they work in policy and how can they go to wash dishes at home or take their child to go for vaccination? Some opinion leaders did not understand but when you continue to teach or facilitate, they become aware. They said the women have hard work. Because we use participatory methods. If we respond, I can confuse them and they say it is because you are a facilitator. And if one asks a question, I ask another who can respond. That is how they come to understand. (Field Officer Round 1)

Several opinion leaders shared testimonies of change in their relationships by the endline interviews, including men more actively supporting domestic and caregiving roles, more equitable decision-making, and improved conflict resolution. Both staff and opinion leaders emphasised how critically reflecting on the consequences of power over, the benefits of shared power, and identifying gender inequalities, was fundamental to this process of change for opinion leaders. One religious opinion leader noted the importance of *Indashyikirwa* drawing on religious messages and principles to support processes of change regarding gender equality:

The *Indashyikirwa* training has been very useful to us even though it is hard in the beginning because there are some who didn't understand. There has been a challenge of mentality but because we are used to learn the word of God, we know everyone should have the equal right regardless of their gender. That has been very helpful to us. (OL02W Midline)

Engagement of opinion leaders

At the *Indashyikirwa* quarterly meetings, opinion leaders committed to undertaking specific activities to prevent and/or respond to IPV and tracked whether they had met these commitments at subsequent meetings. Opinion leaders commonly committed to conducting informal discussions around IPV and equitable relationships, including at schools, religious institutions, and government events. One religious opinion leader discussed using religious values as a platform to promote gender equality through his facilitation efforts:

There are even some Christians or churches which think a woman was not created by God but by man. I was having a discussion with them and one was like: can a woman go in front and lead a mass? I told them: don't nuns do the same work as priests? Even in the Bible, Paul said there is no man or woman now, you are all Abraham's descendants. (OLO2W Endline)

A few opinion leaders discussed how greater awareness of laws and rights related to IPV equipped them to intervene in IPV and raise community awareness of these laws:

We studied laws protecting women. That has made us more confident because if I see a victim of violence, it would not cause me any problems to look for a leader and tell him there is a person who is victim of violence there. After receiving that training, I felt I also have to play a role. I should not only listen but instead I should stand up and protect others. (OL02W Endline)

Opinion leaders also provided valuable opportunities for *Indashyikirwa* community activists and women's safe space facilitators to conduct local activist activities, predominantly by inviting them to

attend community meetings, introducing and/or securing venues for activism efforts. Several opinion leaders noted how their joint efforts support each other, underpinned by the programme concept of power with:

They [community activists] come as volunteers without being paid. That act gives them so much respect and that it why I empower them, give them office room to use for conflict resolutions. I would have been resolving all of these conflicts alone, but they are going to finish it. This will help a lot in my work. This is a team we have created thanks to the training. To understand that everyone has power, then what is important is to put our power together to make a great thing. (OL04E Endline)

Many opinion leaders also committed to and reported providing more supportive responses to IPV survivors, including through offering dedicated home visits. Several opinion leaders emphasised feeling equipped to more appropriately respond to different types of violence:

We used to face cases of violence in our work but ignored how to classify the types of violence. I and my colleagues who had the training, we came to understand this. Now it became easier: when a person brings us a case, we immediately understand what it is about and how to solve it quickly. (OL05E Midline)

Many leaders also appreciated considering how to provide more empowering responses to survivors of IPV including to actively listen, not victim blame and ensure confidentiality:

Before the training I already knew that listening is necessary, but when they taught it to us during the training, I realised that it is very crucial and important. It makes me feel comfortable because when you listen to someone, you usually give them a good service. (OL01W Endline)

The data also revealed several challenges to effectively engage opinion leaders. Unlike *Indashyikirwa's* community activists and women's safe space facilitators, opinion leaders were not given activism materials or training on how to use such tools. Staff explained this decision as an effort to avoid overburdening opinion leaders and a few staff members and opinion leaders noted the challenge for opinion leaders to follow through on actions given their other priorities and work pressures. Yet, some staff and opinion leaders suggested that leaders would have benefitted from certain *Indashyikirwa* activism tools, such as "quick chat" guides or "power posters" to help facilitate their activist activities and encourage their engagement and accountability (Figure 1). Some leaders suggested that these materials would help them retain the training content, and a few particularly requested a handout with details on rights and laws related to IPV prevention and response.

Additionally, RWN staff did not see themselves as having the ability to hold opinion leaders accountable to their commitments, or to track and monitor the quality of their efforts. Several staff members emphasised this limitation:

They commit, we discuss in the meetings, we agree what to do, but when we are back at the following meeting, they keep telling us they have improved, but we don't have a tool to track and ensure that what they are saying reflects what they do. It is not under our mandate to monitor what they are doing. When we try to ask them to ensure what they are telling us is matching up, they tend to take it as, who are these people, our bosses? (Field Supervisor Round 2)

One staff member discussed how some opinion leaders did not follow through on their commitments related to disagreements with the programme:

Some opinion leaders did not do their actions even if they committed but until now, they are there, waiting for another quarterly meeting. We ask them what they have done, and they keep quiet. As religious leaders, some don't even talk about gender equality. They say a woman should always obey a man. Some opinion leaders are not yet engaged. (Field Officer Round 2)

To address the monitoring challenges, RWN staff held a series of local dialogue forums using community score cards whereby community members were given the opportunity to assess whether opinion leaders were making progress on their commitments. The notion of community members holding leaders accountable to their commitments is consistent with the practice of *Imihigo*, where all levels of government are evaluated by citizens against a signed performance contract.



Figure 1. A community activist holding an *Indashyikirwa* power poster.

Another challenge related to the engagement of opinion leaders was that many only allowed limited time (5 min or less) for community activists and women's safe space facilitators to undertake activist activities in the settings they oversaw. This was due to the frequent use of existing forums (e.g. parents evening forums, *umuganda*)⁵ for activism activities, which meant opinion leaders had other agenda items to also prioritise. This gradually shifted as opinion leaders came to appreciate the value of the activities and received encouragement to allow more time as necessary for these activities from RWN staff. A few staff members also shared their concerns that opinion leaders could place heavy demands on community activists and safe space facilitators, such as asking them to facilitate activism outside of intervention areas. Staff had to continually emphasise with opinion leaders the voluntary nature and role of the work of activists and safe space facilitators.

The most challenging and limited aspect of the opinion leader programming was the assessment of the *Imihigo*. RWN staff noted the difficulties since local leaders do not always have indicators or budget related to IPV or felt IPV was sufficiently addressed through an existing programme (i.e. parent evening forums) rather than needing to be comprehensively applied across *Imihigo*. This was also related to the challenge related by many staff of not being able to access the data, given the various levels of higher approval needed to do so, and/or concerns on behalf of local leaders of how the data would be used and whether they might be critiqued through the assessments.

Value of engaging opinion leaders

Despite the identified challenges and limitations, staff and opinion leaders nonetheless recognised the value of their engagement, given their significant reach and influence:

Opinion leaders, they are authorities so they use their authority so people can understand and obey them. Not with power over but they can encourage laws, they have influence. Without them, people can't understand what we are doing. Their influence is key in what we are implementing. (Field Officer Round 2)

According to the explanation we were given as the reason why they selected us, it is because we are the ones who can speak to people and are understood, and we can also reach out to many people. (OL04W Midline)

A few opinion leaders noted how their greater engagement in IPV prevention and response held them accountable to promote gender equality and reduce conflict in their own relationships, which was significant given their perceived status as role models:

A leader must be a role model in his own family, a role model in his extended family, a role model where you live, where you work because you cannot be a bad example while you are a leader. After being trained, I gained a lot; starting from my family, even if we did not have conflicts, but it helps me be humble, and to spread a good message. (OL05E Endline)

The majority of community activists and staff members related how the credibility of the programmatic activism efforts was secured through opinion leaders, especially government leaders introducing activists and/or identifying opportunities:

The reason why they listen is that the government itself sensitises people about that [IPV prevention]. When there is a meeting, they tell the community members: these people are going to conduct a discussion about change, about how to live well together so you should listen to them. (MA01E Endline)

A few staff members asserted the value of engaging religious leaders to support gender equality messages for the activism grounded in religious values, and to respond to gender inequitable attitudes that could be condoned by religious values or messages. There was consensus among opinion leaders of their desire to sustain *Indashyikirwa*, and their engagement and actions could play a key role to equip this. For example, some opinion leaders started a savings group to support the continued operation of the women's safe spaces, and one local government official submitted a request to grant the property to an *Indashyikirwa* women's safe space.

Discussion and implications

The data indicate that opinion leaders constitute a circle of influence that once trained and supported can contribute to an enabling environment for IPV prevention programming, as gatekeepers, role models and message amplifiers. Important achievements of the opinion leader programming were identified, including the participatory and relevant curriculum, and the coordination mechanisms among leaders, safe space facilitators and community activists. Opinion leaders appreciated the skills-building emphasis of the curriculum, especially to provide more empowered and dedicated responses to IPV survivors. The four types of positive and negative forms of power were critical to opinion leaders' processes of change, to prompt leaders to critically reflect on the consequences of inequitable power dynamics, in their work and relationships, and the benefits of more constructive uses of their authority. Yet, it was especially difficult for opinion leaders to distinguish between legitimate institutional authority with mutual accountability and abuses of power in relationships, which speaks to the importance of nuancing this messaging, especially for effective communication with opinion leaders. The findings speak to the value of ongoing and regular engagement of opinion leaders, especially given the high turnover of many local leaders. For instance, offering the three-day refresher training to newly elected government leaders halfway through the programme, was an important strategy to engage key stakeholders. Programmes should consider the availability and duration of opinion leaders' positions when planning and considering recruitment, given the disruption this can cause. This also speaks to the importance for community interventions to engage a diversity of opinion leaders, and not solely government leaders, as the sustainability of their leadership roles can be uncertain within programmatic timeframes.

The findings suggest that the engagement of opinion leaders was the least well-theorised aspect of the *Indashyikirwa* programme. At the design phase, programme staff had not fully appreciated how village leaders were key gatekeepers to community activism efforts, thus only recruiting a small number of them. Because of the frequent use of the many existing community forums in

Rwanda for activism, village leaders are gatekeepers in ways that may be stronger than in other contexts. This speaks to the importance for programmes to carefully map and recruit opinion leaders in ways that align with contextual realities. The data further suggest that the programme could have more comprehensively equipped and considered opinion leaders as agents of change. RWN staff did not actively support opinion leaders to be activists, for fear of placing too many demands on them. Yet, some opinion leaders would have preferred more programme tools and activities to support their activism efforts, which speaks to the importance of tailoring programme materials and strategies to the needs and interests of different leaders. It is important to recognise the potential limitation of having recruited significantly more male than female opinion leaders, especially given the programme focus on IPV prevention. Although this reflected the gender reality of opinion leaders, an approach could have been taken to balance recruitment more equitably as the government of Rwanda has done in national parliament. This may have required engaging different types of opinion leaders, such as community health care workers, a position largely occupied by women in rural Rwanda.

It was especially difficult to monitor or assess opinion leaders' commitments to the programme, including whether there were actual changes in the ways they work. More active and earlier use of CSCs public accountability mechanisms would have been useful to monitor and enhance accountability of leaders to the engaged communities. Programme staff also faced great difficulty gaining access to the *Imihigo* data. Sommers (2012) suggested that Rwandan government officials are often reluctant to mention limitations of the implementation of policies and programmes, because they are carefully held accountable given Rwanda's decentralised mode of government. This may explain the challenge for leaders to critically reflect on their progress or challenges. This is also a potential limitation of this study, as there may be social desirability bias on behalf of opinion leaders. We attempted to mitigate this by using field researchers who identified themselves as clearly external to the programme and emphasising the confidentiality of their answers. It was also critical to triangulate opinion leaders' self-reports with the perspectives of staff members and community activists. Indeed, staff were much more open around implementation challenges, and provided important suggestions for more effectively working with opinion leaders.

Overall, opinion leaders were fundamental to the programme implementation. The engagement of opinion leaders helped boost the confidence of community activists and provided valuable opportunities for their activism activities, such as at community meetings. Many opinion leaders discussed the importance of their involvement with the programme given their influence as role models. Baruth et al.'s (2015) study of faith leaders similarly found that the majority of leaders related the importance of being role models, and believed they had influence on their congregation regarding health and wellness issues. Given their position as roles models, some opinion leaders noted how their greater engagement in IPV prevention and response through *Indashyikirwa* held them accountable to changes in their intimate relationships. The training with opinion leaders would have benefitted from incorporating more relationship skills sessions, drawing on the *Indashyikirwa* couples curriculum. This would help opinion leaders to model more equitable, non-violent relationships, which could be especially powerful for encouraging attitude, social norm and behaviour changes.

Conclusion

Recent attention to seeking helpful models to engage opinion leaders to prevent IPV has mostly focused on the importance of doing so and on potential strategies that could work in theory. Less is available in the literature on practice-based learning of working with opinion leaders to ensure an enabling environment to reduce IPV. Here, we assessed the *Indashyikirwa* programme in Rwanda as a model for engaging opinion leaders to prevent IPV and offer lessons learnt. We provide these insights, hoping that additional research and implementation will further increase

our understanding of best practices to work with opinion leaders as a critical component of IPV prevention and response programming.

Notes

1. Parents evening forums (*Umugoroba w'ababyeyi*) allow issues concerning family welfare, including child abuse, domestic violence and family conflict, to be identified and solved at the village level during regular meetings, apart from those which require the law to intervene.
2. Sectors are the third level administrative sub-division in Rwanda. Rwandan provinces are subdivided into 30 districts, which are divided into 416 sectors. Sectors are further divided into 2148 cells.
3. The National Women's Council in Rwanda, established in 1996, is a social forum where girls and women pool their ideas to solve their problems and participate in the development of the country. The council has structures from the grassroots up to the national level, and allows for women's participation in local governance at all administrative levels.
4. The SASA! activist kit can be accessed at: <http://raisingvoices.org/sasa>.
5. *Umuganda* refers to community work where traditionally people gather as a group to provide free labour for the vulnerable members of the community (Rwiyereka 2014). It takes place on the last Saturday of every month where people gather, including ministers and leaders from all levels, to discuss national goals, issues and possible solutions and apply these to their local contexts. This allows for rapid and effective communication between central and local leaders.

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