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The doing and undoing of male household decision-making and economic authority in Rwanda and its implications for gender transformative programming

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores two key norms that underpin intimate partner violence in Rwanda: men's roles as economic providers and decision-making authorities in the household. It describes the political, legal and socio-economic factors affecting these norms and how they create opportunities and barriers to 'undoing' restrictive gender norms. Findings are drawn from an evaluation of *Inadshyikirwa*, an intimate partner violence prevention programme operating in Rwanda. Across three intervention sectors, 24 focus groups were conducted with unmarried and married men and women residing in intervention communities. Thirty interviews with couples and nine interviews with opinion leaders were conducted before they completed programme training designed to shift gender norms underlying intimate partner violence. The data indicate a strong awareness of and accountability to Rwandan laws and policies supporting women's economic empowerment and decision-making, alongside persisting traditional notions of men as household heads and primary breadwinners. Transgression of these norms could be accommodated in some circumstances, especially those involving economic necessity. The data also identified increasing recognition of the value of a more equitable partnership model. Findings highlight the importance of carefully assessing cracks in the existing gender order that can be exploited to support gender equality and non-violence.

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Gender norms; intimate partner violence; male headship; Rwanda

Introduction

Normative conceptions of gender affect a wide range of lived experiences, from the allocation of power and resources, to the more intimate domains of sexuality and relationships (Alexander-Scott, Bell, and Holden 2016; Uwineza and Pearson 2009). Empirical evidence suggests that intimate partner violence can be justified and sustained by a variety of gender norms and expectations (Heise 2011; Heise and Kotsadam 2015; Koenig et al. 2006). In various contexts, these include expectations that men should provide economically for the

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household; that women should undertake domestic tasks and be obedient to male authority; that men have the right to 'discipline' women; and that family privacy must be upheld at all costs. Gender theory, however, suggests that such norms can be contested and ultimately transformed. Theories of gender as performative maintain that gender-related norms and roles are never fully fixed, but must be repeatedly produced and reproduced through social interaction (Butler 1999; Deutsch 2007). In effect, men and women 'do' gender through symbolic signalling and an array of daily interactions (West and Zimmerman 2002). They may also 'undo' gender through acts of conscious resistance or by adopting new behaviours that respond to changing realities. Structural conditions and events such as large economic dislocations or social movements can disrupt the ability of individuals to enact appropriate gender norms and roles (Legerski and Cornwall 2010). For instance, economic shifts and policies can support women entering the workforce, which can challenge men's roles as primary breadwinners and thus, simultaneously create a 'crisis of masculinity' (Chant and Gutmann 2002; Slegh and Richters 2012).

Yet, gender differences may weaken over time (Chelsey 2011), especially as individuals fail to live up to hegemonic ideals of womanly or manly behaviour (West and Fenstermaker 2002). Sherman's (2009) study in a rural community in the USA found that for couples rigidly tied to traditional breadwinner and homemaker gender roles, men's inability to be the sole providers created marital and family tensions. Yet, men that were able to refocus their conceptions of masculinity on active parenting experienced less marital conflict and more satisfaction. Understanding such processes of change is critical to dismantling the gender norms that underpin gender inequalities and harmful behaviours, such as intimate partner violence.

The last decade has witnessed increased interest in gender transformative strategies and programmes that seek to 'shift' or 'transform' the discriminatory gender norms that help sustain practices such as intimate partner violence (Alexander-Scott, Bell, and Holden 2016; Haylock et al. 2016). Community mobilisation programmes and group-based strategies designed to build skills and foster critical reflection have yielded promising results (Fulu, Kerr-Wilson, and Lang 2014). For instance, a post two-year evaluation of *Stepping Stones*, a participatory training programme on gender roles, HIV, communication and relationship skills implemented with South African men and women, indicated a significant reduction in the number of men who disclosed perpetrating severe partner violence (Jewkes et al. 2008). Transforming normative expectations, through small and large-scale media and/or community mobilisation, appears to be a critical pathway for changing harmful gender norms (Alexander-Scott, Bell, and Holden 2016). For example, *SASA!* in Uganda uses community mobilisation strategies to engage a critical mass of people across all levels of society to foster norm change around the power inequalities that underlie HIV and intimate partner violence. An evaluation of *SASA!* reported changes in gender norms contributing to intimate partner violence including a significant increase in men's participation in household tasks and greater appreciation of their partner's work inside and outside the home (Kyegombe et al. 2014).

This paper draws on formative and baseline research to inform the evaluation and development of the *Indashyikirwa* programme, which seeks to transform harmful gender norms as a strategy to reduce intimate partner violence in Rwanda. *Indashyikirwa* (meaning agents for change in Kinyarwanda) is a four-year programme (2014–2018) funded by DFID Rwanda and implemented by CARE International Rwanda, the Rwanda Women's Network (RWN) and the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC) across seven districts in eastern, western and northern provinces of Rwanda. *Indashyikirwa* used CARE's micro-finance village savings

and loans associations (VSLAs) as an entry point for inviting heterosexual couples to attend a 20-session curriculum designed to build skills for healthy, equitable relationships and to transform the attitudes, norms and practices that underpin male dominance and violence in relationships. The majority of active VSLA members come from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds and the programme sites were selected based on higher reported levels of intimate partner violence according to the 2010 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS); this ensured that the individuals selected to participate were most likely to benefit from the programme. A subset of individuals who completed the curriculum received further training and mentoring to become 'community activists', with the goal of disseminating the programme content more widely. *Indashyikirwa* also worked with opinion leaders and established 'safe spaces' for women to create an 'enabling environment' for change. Known risk factors for intimate partner violence in Rwanda, such as men's heavy alcohol use (Thomson et al. 2015), were also addressed in the programme, including supporting participants to identify and manage triggers of violence due to jealousy, alcohol use and economic stress.

Rwandan context of gendered economic and decision-making roles

In the last few decades, the legal, material and lived reality of women in Rwanda has been in a period of major flux (Burnet 2008; Debusscher and Ansoms 2013). Prior to the devastating genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, Rwandan women were legally designated as minors, and were not permitted to control household resources, own or inherit land, engage in paid labour or enter contracts without their husbands' consent (Burnet 2008; Carlson and Randell 2013; Wallace, Haerpfer, and Abbott 2008). It was taboo for women to publicly challenge men, which discouraged their engagement in politics or the public sphere (Uwineza and Pearson 2009). With so many widowed survivors after the genocide against the Tutsi (Burnet 2008), women had to assume traditional male responsibilities including heading households, taking over income-generating activities, building houses and speaking in public (Debusscher and Ansoms 2013; Uwineza and Pearson 2009).

This period has witnessed a wealth of political will, policies and laws to promote women's rights. The 1999 Law on Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions established, for the first time, women's right to inherit land, including among divorced women (Debusscher and Ansoms 2013; Powley 2007). Given that the majority of Rwandans depend on subsistence agriculture, the right to inherit and own land is critical (Carlson and Randell 2013). Rwanda's 2003 constitution mandates 30% women's representation at all decision-making levels in government, and in the 2008 elections, women earned 56% of seats in the lower house, making Rwanda the first country to have a majority-female legislature (Uwineza and Pearson 2009). The government actively supports women's political and economic empowerment, which is regularly promoted as a development strategy to raise the living standards of families and society (Debusscher and Ansoms 2013). The government has expressed a strong commitment to addressing intimate partner violence and in 2008, adopted a law on the Prevention and Punishment of Violence Against Women (Rwanda: Law No. 59/2008 on Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence n.d.). The law includes all forms of intimate partner violence, and the minimum penalty is six months in prison, while sexual abuse or rape leading to terminal illness or death of one's spouse can lead to life imprisonment. The government has also implemented a variety of gender-based violence prevention programmes including prevention clubs in schools and universities, and committees at the

village level, which aim to improve people's knowledge about their rights and support reporting of violence (Slegh and Kimonyo 2010; Umubyeyi et al. 2016).

Despite recent advances in women's political and work opportunities, poverty and lack of access to education continue to thwart women's economic progress. Moreover, certain cultural values continue to encourage women's subordination to men (Burnet 2011; Debusscher and Ansoms 2013), especially around economic and decision-making roles. The 2010 IMAGES survey in Rwanda found that more than 50% of women and 57% of men said that men should earn more than women. Seventy-five percent of Rwandan women said their husbands dominated household decision-making, while 57% of men said they control household decision-making (Barker et al. 2011). Qualitative research has documented Rwandan men and women's perceptions of laws protecting women's rights as undermining women's respect for men, provoking husbands to re-assert dominance in their households, including through violence (Carlson and Randell 2013; Slegh and Richters 2012). Until recently, Article 206 'Equality of Spouses' of the Rwandan Civil Code defined men as the 'head of the household', in effect codifying men's authority in the family (Mwendwa Mechta et al. 2016; Uwineza and Pearson 2009). Importantly, in October 2016, this article was amended to recognise both spouses as having the same rights and obligations in the household, with each owing the other mutual fidelity, help and assistance.

For those women who have achieved some economic flexibility, it has not come without a cost. Rwandan women who have entered the labour market continue to be held responsible for traditional care and domestic duties, particularly women living in rural areas (Burnet 2011; Slegh and Kimonyo 2010). Other research suggests that some women who have improved economic and career opportunities have also experienced increased marital conflict over accusations of neglecting their household duties or husbands reacting negatively to having their role as economic provider challenged (Slegh et al. 2013; Thomson et al. 2015). CARE's assessment of their VSLA programmes found that while some men were supportive of their wives' VSLA involvement and appreciated the economic household benefits, other men continued to dominate household and economic decision-making, and a number of men reportedly increased their use of gender-based violence in response to shifting power balances (Slegh and Kimonyo 2010).

Research objectives

In summary, in Rwanda and elsewhere, a key trigger for partner conflict and violence is when women are perceived to challenge their husband's authority or threaten their identity as breadwinner, especially by taking up paid employment. Women entering the labour market can affect their ability to live up to gendered expectations regarding housework or childcare, which can further trigger conflict. Yet, there is limited understanding of the 'doing' and 'undoing' of such salient gender norms and roles in Rwanda. In this paper, we use formative research as part of the *Indashyikirwa* programme evaluation to assess the processes and fluidity of men's roles as providers and heads of households. We likewise examine specific historical, cultural and socio-economic realities that have affected and continue to affect the enactment of these roles and norms in Rwandan households today. In so doing, we hope to yield insights into the opportunities that exist to undo or challenge rigid gender norms in the context of rapid economic and social change, as well as the barriers to doing so.

Methods

The research discussed in this paper was conducted in November 2015 in three *Indashyikirwa* 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 across all intervention provinces including rural, urban and peri-urban locations.

For the formative research, 24 focus group discussions (FGDs) (eight in each sector) were completed with six to eight community members per FGD. In each sector, FGDs were conducted with unmarried women under the age of 25; married women over 25; unmarried men under 30; and married men over 30 in order to tease out variations of gender norms according to age, marital status and sex. Table 1 details demographic information of FGD participants. According to the 2014/2015 Rwandan Demographic Health Survey (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda 2016) the median age of marriage for women is a few years younger than for men, hence the different age selection criteria for the focus groups. A female Rwandan researcher facilitated all of the FGDs with women and a male Rwandan researcher facilitated the FGDs with men. Community members who met age, marital and sex criteria, and were not beneficiaries of the *Indashyikirwa* programme, were purposefully recruited through RWN's community contacts. FGDs were held at government offices and each group was interviewed twice. For the first round of FGDs, a social vignette used a relevant scenario of a couple named Albert and Francine to assess perceptions or likely actions of this couple including: Francine working out of the home; Francine being seen speaking publicly with other men at work; Albert being responsible for domestic duties; and how Albert's reaction to Francine coming home late from work might differ depending on his alcohol use or if he is known to be a jealous man. The social vignette probed for typical community attitudes and responses towards men who use violence against their wives, whether and to whom wives are likely to disclose a husband's abusive behaviour and what community members typically do, if anything, to intervene in intimate partner violence. Follow-up FGDs probed for typical sexual relationships between men and women and how these relate to expectations, economic support and commitment. These FGDs explored the characteristics men and women often look for when choosing a long-term partner, gendered expectations in marriage including division of labour in the home, household decision-making and common causes of conflict between couples. FGD participants were interviewed twice to allow for the richness of social vignettes followed by more traditional, semi-structured focus groups.

Table 1. Demographic information of focus group participants.

ID	Role	Gender	Age	Location	Marital Status
FGME<30	Focus Group	Male	Under 30	Eastern Province	Single
FGME>30	Focus Group	Male	Over 30	Eastern Province	Married
FGFE<25	Focus Group	Female	Under 25	Eastern Province	Single
FGFE>25	Focus Group	Female	Over 25	Eastern Province	Married
FGMW<30	Focus Group	Male	Under 30	Western Province	Single
FGMW>30	Focus Group	Male	Over 30	Western Province	Married
FGFW<25	Focus Group	Female	Under 25	Western Province	Single
FGFW>25	Focus Group	Female	Over 25	Western Province	Single
FGMN<30	Focus Group	Male	Under 30	Northern Province	Single
FGMN>30	Focus Group	Male	Over 30	Northern Province	Married
FGFN<25	Focus Group	Female	Under 25	Northern Province	Single
FGFN>25	Focus Group	Female	Over 25	Northern Province	Married

Thirty semi-structured interviews (10 in each sector) were also conducted with couples enrolled in but before having begun the *Indashyikirwa* couples curriculum. Male and female partners of couples were interviewed separately by same-sex interviewers. Table 2 details demographic information of couples interviewed. Couples were asked about their expectations of each other, how they resolve conflict, their communication skills and joint decision-making. Rwanda Men's Resource Centre staff purposefully recruited couples to include a mix of formally and informally married couples. Nine interviews (three in each sector) were also conducted with opinion leaders enrolled in but before having begun the *Indashyikirwa* opinion leader training to assess their involvement in and awareness of intimate partner violence prevention efforts in their sectors. Table 3 details demographic information of opinion leaders interviewed. Opinion leaders were also asked about common reasons couples have conflict, gendered decision-making roles in the family, how common intimate partner violence is in their communities and circumstances (if any) where this is justified. Rwanda Women's Network staff members purposely recruited a diversity of opinion leaders to include government leaders, members of anti-gender-based violence committees or the National Women's Council¹ and religious leaders. The ability to triangulate similar themes from a significant number of different perspectives (community members, couples, opinion leaders) enhanced our confidence of reaching saturation with our sample. All FGD and interview participants received RWF2000 as a token of appreciation for their participation and to cover transport-related costs. The design of the qualitative topic guides for the

Table 2. Demographic information of couples interviewed.

ID	Role	Gender	Age (at time of midline interview)	Province	Marital Status
FC01 W	Partner of Couple	Female	29	Western Province	Informally Married
MC01 W	Partner of Couple	Male	38	Northern Province	Informally Married
FC02 W	Partner of Couple	Female	29	Western Province	Formally Married
MC02 W	Partner of Couple	Male	30	Western Province	Formally Married
FC03 W	Partner of Couple	Female	37	Western Province	Formally Married
MC03 W	Partner of Couple	Male	37	Western Province	Formally Married
FC04 W	Partner of Couple	Female	33	Western Province	Informally Married
MC04 W	Partner of Couple	Male	32	Western Province	Informally Married
FC05 W	Partner of Couple	Female	35	Western Province	Formally Married
MC05 W	Partner of Couple	Male	33	Western Province	Formally Married
FC01 N	Partner of Couple	Female	27	Northern Province	Formally Married
MC01 N	Partner of Couple	Male	36	Northern Province	Formally Married
FC02 N	Partner of Couple	Female	21	Northern Province	Informally Married
MC02 N	Partner of Couple	Male	23	Northern Province	Informally Married
FC03 N	Partner of Couple	Female	28	Northern Province	Informally Married
MC03 N	Partner of Couple	Male	30	Northern Province	Informally married
FC04 N	Partner of Couple	Female	27	Northern Province	Formally Married
MC04 N	Partner of Couple	Male	29	Northern Province	Formally Married
FC05 N	Partner of Couple	Female	45	Northern Province	Formally Married
MC05 N	Partner of Couple	Male	45	Northern Province	Formally Married
FC01 E	Partner of Couple	Female	45	Eastern Province	Informally Married
MC01 E	Partner of Couple	Male	42	Eastern Province	Informally Married
FC02 E	Partner of Couple	Female	27	Eastern Province	Informally Married
MC02 E	Partner of Couple	Male	29	Eastern Province	Informally Married
FC03 E	Partner of Couple	Female	24	Eastern Province	Formally Married
MC03 E	Partner of Couple	Male	37	Eastern Province	Formally Married
FC04 E	Partner of Couple	Female	30	Eastern Province	Formally Married
MC04 E	Partner of Couple	Male	32	Eastern Province	Formally Married
FC05 E	Partner of Couple	Female	36	Eastern Province	Informally Married
MC05 E	Partner of Couple	Male	38	Eastern Province	Informally Married

Table 3. Demographic information on opinion leaders interviewed.

ID	Role	Gender	Province
OL01 N	Opinion Leader (Religious Leader)	Male	Northern Province
OL02 N	Opinion Leader (Government Leader)	Male	Northern Province
OL03 N	Opinion Leader (Gender-based violence Committee and Cell Mediator)	Male	Northern Province
OL01 W	Opinion Leader (Gender-based violence Committee)	Female	Western Province
OL02 W	Opinion Leader (Religious Leader)	Male	Western Province
OL03 W	Opinion Leader (Government Leader)	Male	Western Province
OL01 E	Opinion Leader (Government Leader)	Male	Eastern Province
OL02 E	Opinion Leader (CNF Member)	Female	Eastern Province
OL03 E	Opinion Leader (Government Leader)	Male	Eastern Province

CNF = national women council.

FGDs, interviews with opinion leaders and couples were briefed extensively with the programme and local research teams for contextual relevance and language.

Ethical approval to undertake the study was obtained from the Rwandan National Ethics Committee (340/RNEC/2015), the National Institute of Statistics Rwanda (0738/2015/10/ NISR), the South Africa Medical Research Council (EC033-10/2015) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Before each interview and FGD, information on the aims, risks and benefits of the research was provided and informed written consent was obtained from participants in adherence with the ethical approval guidelines given by the respective review boards. For the presentation of the data, codes have been used for the purpose of anonymity.

All FGDs and interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda and audio recorded. Using the audio files, interviews were transcribed and translated verbatim into English. The transcripts were then analysed by the first author using a thematic coding framework with the help of NVIVO 10 software, which ably assists with managing a large data-set (QSR International 2010). An additional transcriber coded a small subset of the transcripts using NVIVO 10 and inter-coder agreement was found to be 95%. The first author regularly workshopped the emerging findings with senior *Indashyikirwa* programme staff, who played critical roles in verifying the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Findings: the doing and undoing of gender norms in the household

Male provider role

The overwhelming majority of FGD participants and couples endorsed the view that it is a man's responsibility to provide economically for the family and to meet basic household needs. The social vignette prompted wide discussion about the implications of women working. Wives who work outside the home were accused of taking on a man's role and considered ungrateful for what their husbands provide financially. They were typically perceived to neglect their socially defined domestic and caregiving responsibilities, a transgression that could lead to conflict or violence.

Yet, many participants tempered their response based on how much money Albert, the character in the social vignette, made. The implication was that the appropriateness of a wife working outside the home is strongly related to what her husband earns. Most FGD participants concurred that if a husband does not earn or contribute enough to meet basic needs such as having enough food, it is acceptable for a wife to work in order to provide for

her children. Women were generally expected to use their acquired income in service of their domestic and childcare responsibilities, thus capitulating to traditional gender norms.

Several participants – particularly older, married men and women – maintained that wives should not work outside the home if a husband has sufficient income because this reflects badly on the husband for failing to provide:

What we can say about Albert? He is an inactive man, who is incapable of looking for an adequate livelihood for his household – especially because a man is the head of the family who should care for the household and satisfy all the needs. But Albert who we saw in the story is a man who wants to keep his hands in his pockets, who doesn't want to work; which is the underlying reason why the wife decided to look for something else which can help her livelihood. (FG01 M>30 W)²

All categories of FGD participants, especially the older, married FGD participants, noted that women who make more money than their husbands or have more successful jobs are considered to undermine their husbands. Several male FGD participants concurred that men were more likely to support their wives engaging in casual or poorly paid work because this was perceived as less threatening to the male provider role:

It becomes a problem when a woman earns more than her husband; her husband doesn't take it well. Because a woman can drink beer in a bar while her husband is at home and for that he doesn't take it well but if she goes to cultivate for someone or if she does casual work, there is no problem. (FG02 M<30 N)

Consistent with the notion that men should be the primary financial providers, several male and female FGD participants and partners of couples noted that women's economic advice and contribution to the household are often publicly disavowed or discounted.

Nonetheless, a generational shift around the acceptability of women working appears to be underway, especially among younger unmarried FGD participants:

Maybe it's because I am used to work but I feel that a woman should work in spite of the amount of money the husband sends. Let us not live like our grandmothers who used to ask for everything from their husbands. (FG01 F>25 E)

Participants observed that the government's economic empowerment agenda for women and the increasing presence of women in parliament and in the general labour force contributed to this shift:

In the past women would stay at home. Things have changed. Because of gender equality we should all work. Like in parliament and in business both sexes are working, we should therefore work. (FG01 F<25 E)

Shifts are also evident in expectations regarding male provision. Traditionally, young men could not marry until they could build or rent a home for their new bride (Sommers 2012). Several participants noted that this norm appears to be changing in the face of harsh economic realities; men who demonstrate an ability and eagerness to work hard may be desirable partners even if they cannot afford a home:

She may not base her decision on the house. She may see that you are poor, but you have good thoughts – to the extent that she believes that you may work together and make progress together. In that case, she can see that you can achieve everything. (FG02 M>30 E)

Given the increasing difficulty for men to be the sole economic providers, the male provider norm appears to co-exist with the dawning realisation that women also earning an income could be an asset. The majority of FGD participants and partners of couples acknowledged that wives who work outside the home help their husbands economically to develop the household. Many male FGD participants and interviewees highlighted their own desires for

women who are educated and/or hardworking because of the economic advantages for the couple:

Today I would look at a girl who knows how to work. If she knows how to work, it's enough. Because today, when one partner works, and the other partner stays in a seat, you can't achieve anything. When both of you work, you make progress and your household becomes strong. (FG02 M>30 E)

Moreover, the desire to work, particularly on behalf of younger women, appears strong. Several female FGD participants and partners of couples discussed how women often seek the support of family or friends to convince their husbands of the economic benefits of them working outside the home. Nonetheless, the ultimate decision over whether wives may work still lies with the husband; several male and female FGD participants and interviewees observed that disagreements among a couple over whether a wife should work was a common cause of marital conflict and violence.

Male household authority role

The majority of FGD participants, couples and opinion leaders noted that the dominant community perception is that men are the heads of households and have decision-making authority over their wives:

A husband is the head of the household. He is the one who thinks for the household; he is the one who also gives orders and the wife is there to help him. (FG01 M>30 N)

A few female partners of couples noted the frustration or disappointment caused by their husbands' insistence on making household decisions and not being consulted:

He can't consult me about doing a certain thing; he does only what he thinks and that also makes me sad. (FC04 E)³

Several opinion leaders attributed men's household authority to cultural norms:

Normally the person who has authority or the last word in the family is a man. Even if we are saying we have gender equity and equality, the culture also says that a man is a pillar of the family. (OL01 W)⁴

As the above quotations make clear, men's authority in the household is closely linked to and derives from the notion of male household headship.

In addition to headship, respondents noted several other sources of male authority. One opinion leader (OL03 N) said that many men believe that they have the right to make decisions in the household because they paid bride wealth to their wives' family. Another religious leader (OL02 W) discussed how many church members problematically misinterpret the Bible, such as verses prohibiting women from preaching, or that Adam was created before Eve, to justify men's decision-making authority.

Several male and female FGD participants discussed how men are prone to dismiss their wives' advice for contradicting the salient norm of men as ultimate decision-makers:

Women usually give advice to their husbands, but husbands dismiss the wife's advice because they feel they are the ones to lead the household. The husband thinks his point is the most important. From that he feels that 'what I said is what has to be done'. (FG01 M>30 N)

FGD participants, couples and opinion leaders shared the widespread perception that women who make decisions are domineering and constrain men's freedoms, which can be a source of marital tension. A few male FGD participants, partners of couples and one opinion

leader expressed the notion that wives may charm or bewitch their husbands as a means of gaining control, a view that implies that female authority threatens the natural order. One opinion leader highlighted how women tend to defer ultimate decision-making and/or public recognition of decisions to their husbands as a sign of respect:

Men whose wives make decisions are called dominated men. In that case, a man makes a decision, but the idea having been brought by the wife. In order to respect her husband, she brings the idea and the husband makes a decision because he is the head of the family. It may even happen that the wife has more means than her husband, but in order to show respect for her husband, she says 'I cannot make a decision without telling my husband first'. (OL03 W)

Several female partners of couples likewise spoke of the need to be humble and refrain from interfering if their husbands do not agree with their opinions. A few female partners of couples described the strategy of asking their husbands' male friends to help convince them of certain decisions, a strategy to harness the power of male influence to strengthen their bargaining position. Male and female partners, FGD participants and opinion leaders acknowledged women's decision-making authority concerning childcare, domestic responsibilities and commercial agriculture. However, one opinion leader (OL01 N) noted the common perception that such decisions are 'minor' or 'women's decisions'.

Nonetheless, significant challenges to men's inherent authority in the household were also identified. One opinion leader discussed how the government's promotion of gender equality and women's rights encourages joint decision-making between men and women:

The government of Rwanda has set some policies to establish gender equality. There are still those who make mistakes under the pretext of the former culture or the former mindset. But in terms of gender equality and shared decision-making in households, there is a remarkable change. There are clear examples of cases where a wife is given her rights. (OL03 E)

The majority of male and female FGD participants and opinion leaders discussed how in particular, local leaders hold couples accountable for making joint decisions about property, as required by recent reforms in Rwandan property law. A few opinion leaders asserted that the implementation of this law has helped shift social expectations around gendered decision-making roles:

Those land titles helped a lot, when they came out you could see the woman's name also is written on it, so you cannot sell it alone; that is why men and women now work together. (OL02 N)

However, one opinion leader perceived that the implementation of the law was shifting men's behaviours rather than their attitudes and beliefs towards gender equitable decision-making:

We as leadership ordered that if the wife hasn't signed, the buyer couldn't use the land so, if men do consult their wives' ideas, it is because they are afraid of being punished because there are strategies which were set by the leadership. But if you gave them freedom to make decisions alone, a husband would tell you 'I am the chief of this household. If I want, I could even remove a door!' (OL01 E)

This opinion leader lamented how many men subvert the property law by continuing to exert authority without consulting their wives:

Areas where men consult their wives are where they know they can be stuck at a certain point because of the law. But when they want to build a house – there are those whom we found that they had secret bank accounts, and therefore their wives couldn't know how much money was in the account. (OL01 E)

The reference to men being 'stuck' because of the law indicates the extent to which Rwandans are aware of and influenced by the law; this reflects the government's investment in publicising and enforcing these new rules and the highly regulated nature of the Rwandan state.

Nonetheless, opinion leaders and several FGD participants (especially young, unmarried participants) concurred that households with joint decision-making among couples generally have less conflict, make better decisions and appear to develop more quickly:

When you do not claim to be the only decision-maker at home, everything goes perfectly. But when I say for example, 'I am the man here and I reserve the right to make all decisions', there are areas where you can fail, and you don't achieve some things. We think that consulting each other's opinions is crucial and that it leads to development. (FG02 M>30 W)

Just as women's economic contributions were said to be regularly undermined, a few male and female FGD participants, several partners of couples and one opinion leader discussed how men tend to publicly discount their wives' contributions to decision-making, even if they privately take this into account:

Men themselves feel they should have the last word even if he listens to the wife, he does not want people to know that a woman had a contribution. (OL01 W)

There was also some indication, especially by female FGD participants, that if a husband is neglecting responsibility for the family, the wife should not be judged harshly for making decisions in the best interest of her family. For the most part however, women's household decision-making was restricted by their husbands, often not acknowledged publicly or relegated to the domestic sphere. This was strongly related to the common perception that women who have authority over household decisions are domineering and to the strong norm of male authority in the household.

Discussion

This paper demonstrates the rigidity of the male headship and provider role, and how this can perpetuate unequal relations, partner conflict and/or violence. Yet, the data also reveal how these gender norms are being contested in response to shifting socio-economic, legal and political realities.

What is relatively unique in Rwanda is the ability and willingness of the state to promote gender equality and to hold individuals accountable to revisions in traditional gender rules. In the Rwandan political context, participants are highly aware of the laws, policies and related social expectations that promote women's economic empowerment and decision-making ability, even if they personally disagree. Thus, in contrast to other settings, behaviours may shift in Rwanda prior to attitudinal reform. The disjuncture between attitude and behaviour may be particularly prominent in Rwanda given the social norm of *kwirarira*, which discourages openly disagreeing with a valued practice, such as the current government's agenda of gender equality (Carlson and Randell 2013). Indeed, the data suggest that men typically share property decisions with their wives out of deference to social and legal expectations, although they may not support this norm themselves. The fact that many strive to subvert their wives' related decision-making authority and involvement suggests widespread ambivalence to this emerging new norm.

Other studies in Rwanda have similarly documented that formally married women sometimes provide necessary written consent to sell jointly held land even if they disagree, to maintain peace in the household. These studies likewise demonstrate that women frequently

lack bargaining power to influence the management, use and control of land (Kaiser Hughes, Ndingiza, and Ikirezi 2016; Mwendwa Mechta et al. 2016; Uwineza and Pearson 2009). Cases of husbands coercing their wives to sign land transaction documents, and/or intimidating them to appropriate their inheritance have also been identified (Mwendwa Mechta et al. 2016). While the 1999 Law on Matrimonial Regimes, Liberties and Successions (Successions Law) requires spouses to consent to the transfer of marital property, problematically no provision requires spouses to share the profits associated with the transactions (Mwendwa Mechta et al. 2016).

The data suggest that deviation from the dominant norms of male provision and authority was accepted in certain circumstances, although often with caveats. For instance, women could acceptably work outside the home if economic necessity required it, which could make it more socially acceptable for women from poorer families than women from wealthier ones to work outside the home. However, acceptance was linked to men failing to fulfil their designated roles. Respondents tolerated women working outside the home if they earned less than their husbands, had a job of lower status than their husbands' or pursued work that was an extension of their care and domestic duties. Indeed, women working outside the home could be a potential source of conflict or violence if the husbands did not authorise it, it threatened the husband or if in the process, women neglected their domestic and care responsibilities. Finnoff's (2012) analysis of the Rwanda 2005 DHS similarly indicated that women who are employed when their husbands are not, experienced more sexual violence, interpreted as 'male backlash' against traditional gender roles being threatened. CARE's 2012 assessment of their VSLA programming also found that women who developed income-generating activities could be subject to increased levels of conflict and violence if they were unable to meet their domestic responsibilities.

These data speak to the common appraisal of men's decision-making and economic roles as more legitimate than those of women. There is little appreciation of the double burden of work and domestic obligations that Rwandan women face if they work outside the home (Barker et al. 2011; Thomson et al. 2015). It is important to note that all the couples interviewed were active VSLA members, predominantly from lower economic backgrounds and likely experience this double burden more heavily than women in wealthier homes who could hire domestic help (Uwineza and Pearson 2009). The Rwandan government has been criticised for inadequately acknowledging this double burden, which 'not only legitimises the unequal division of labour between men and women, [but] also devalues such work and overlooks its connection to development in general' (Debusscher and Ansoms 2013, 1123).

Nonetheless, there is an emerging counter-narrative of male and female partnership, whereby both partners share decision-making and contribute economically; this is perceived to have a positive impact on household development, relationship satisfaction and conflict prevention. Women's visibility as leaders in the community and in the workforce was said to contribute to changing norms and aspirations regarding women's societal roles. Mannell, Jackson, and Umutooni (2016) study in Kigali similarly found that traditional gender roles positioning women in the home and men as authority figures were thought to be changing with more women working professionally and being less financially dependent on men. The data indicates that many men desire an educated wife who works outside the home due to the resulting economic benefits, as has been documented elsewhere (Slegh and Kimonyo 2010). Relaxation of the expectation for men to own or build a house before marriage was evident with women increasingly open to a partner with insufficient means but with whom

they can work with in pursuit of economic development. Sommers (2012) revealed how with land scarcity and the rising price of roof tiles in Rwanda, the extreme pressure on young men to build a house for marriage could generate significant anxiety and lead to young men dropping out of school to work to create savings to build a house. Relaxing this norm could relieve men of sole responsibility for financial provision, expand possibilities for women working outside the home and challenge the socially prescribed provider and headship norms for men.

Implications for gender transformative programming

The findings highlight valuable lessons for the *Indashyikirwa* programme as well as for broader gender transformative programming to undo gender norms elevating men's authority and breadwinning roles. The data underscore the potential value of making visible shifting attitudes toward gender equality – a strategy even more important in countries like Rwanda where cultural norms, such as *kwirarira*, make it less likely that individuals will publicly acknowledge deviation from social expectations. The data highlighted the reluctance of men to publicly acknowledge their wives' economic and decision-making contributions, even if they privately support and/or benefit from this. An important component of *Indashyikirwa* will be to help publicise new models of shared economic and decision-making roles in the household and the benefits this shift has for the lives of women, men and children. Identifying and valuing the domestic and care work that women do and emphasising the benefits for men of sharing domestic and care responsibilities, including as active fathers, is also critical in this setting. Evidence suggests that providing role models of engaged fatherhood can support alternative pathways to successful masculinity in the household (Carlson and Randell 2013). Facilitating community dialogue on the recently enacted Family Law Article 206 'Equality of spouses', which for the first time in Rwanda mandates joint headship by both members of a couple, could also prove a fruitful way forward. This new provision potentially de-naturalises the notion of men as the primary authority and breadwinner in the family, and could be a platform for promoting the value of a partnership model for couples.

Although much work has taken place in Rwanda to redefine gender roles, it has happened relatively recently and mostly through top-down approaches (Wallace, Haerpfer, and Abbott 2008). The findings indicate both the potential and limits of legal reforms and top-down policies to shift gender norms and remind us that it is 'too simple to assume that the participation of women will lead directly to fundamental changes in itself and transform "the hegemonic order"' (Verloo 2005, 348; in Debusscher and Ansoms 2013). That being said, Rwanda's current social structure offers certain relatively unique advantages for widening the normative cracks in this 'hegemonic order'. Rwanda is a compact country, with an extremely effective administrative structure to implement social policy. The government's discourse on gender equality and 'household development' provides ready narratives to help justify departures from standard gender norms, for those so inclined.

There have been calls in Rwanda for more awareness-raising events, community level dialogues, open debate and media to raise awareness of and protect women's rights (Uwineza and Pearson 2009). The strategy given by women of asking friends to help convince their husbands of the benefits of them working or to condone their decisions indicates the value of community mechanisms to support gender norm change, and enhance women's agency

in household relations. *Indashyikirwa* is critically a community-based initiative, and the programme partners, Rwanda Men's Resource Centre and Rwanda Women's Network, are some of the few grassroots initiatives actively working on gender issues in Rwanda. The programme directly works with and seeks to balance power among couples, which is vital to target aspects of authority and control that continue to advantage men. In doing so, the programme could help reinterpret gender rules in light of the legal, political and socio-economic shifts in Rwanda to more holistically support alternative norms underlying gender equality and non-violence.

Notes

1. The National Women's Council in Rwanda, which was established in 1996, is a social forum where girls and women pool their ideas to solve their own problems and to participate in the development of the country. The council has structures from the grassroots up to the national level, and provides for women's participation in local governance at all administrative levels.
2. Focus Group 01 Male under age 30 Western Province.
3. Female Partner of Couple 04 Eastern Province.
4. Opinion Leader 01 Western Province.

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