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Erin Stern & Lori Heise

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# Sexual coercion, consent and negotiation: processes of change amongst couples participating in the *Indashyikirwa* programme in Rwanda

Erin Stern<sup>a</sup> and Lori Heise<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Gender, Violence and Health Centre, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK;

<sup>b</sup>Population, Family and Reproductive Health, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and Johns Hopkins School of Nursing, Baltimore, MD, USA

## ABSTRACT

Sexual coercion among married or cohabitating couples is a complex phenomenon with few effective strategies for prevention. This paper explores sexual coercion among couples from rural Rwanda who participated in *Indashyikirwa*, a 4-year intimate partner violence prevention programme that included a 5-month couples curriculum to promote equalitarian, non-violent relationships. Drawing on three rounds of longitudinal qualitative interviews with partners from 14 couples (28 individuals), this paper explores processes of change in experiences and conceptualisations of coerced sex over the course of the intervention and 1 year after. The data were analysed using thematic and dyadic analysis. Both partners of couples reported significant changes in their sexual relationship, including reduced experiences of coerced sex, greater communication about sex and increased acceptability for women to initiate sex. Men and women became more willing to disclose sexual coercion over the course of the interviews, both current and past experiences, and couples' accounts generally became more concordant. Findings yield insights to inform programming to prevent coerced sex among spouses. These include grounding discussion of sexual coercion in an analysis of gendered power and norms, reflecting on the consequences of broader forms of sexual coercion and employing a benefits-driven, skills-based approach.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Couples; sexual coercion; Rwanda; gender norms; prevention programme

## Background

Sexual coercion includes a wide range of sexual experiences that occur against a person's will as a result of verbal pressure, intimidation or physical force (Byers and Glenn 2011). Sexual coercion among married or cohabitating couples is a complex phenomenon deeply rooted in gender norms and social expectations around marriage. In many settings, marriage is interpreted by both men and women as granting men unencumbered sexual access to their wives (Khan, Townsend and Pelto 2014;

Heise, Moore and Toubia 1996). Perceived entitlement to sex, for example, was the number one reason men gave for forcing women to have sex in a recent multi-country study (Fulu et al. 2013). Such norms can legitimise men's perceived right to demand and control the terms of sex (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002), limit women's ability to refuse unwanted sex (Khan, Townsend and Pelto 2014) and/or to negotiate safer sex, including the use of contraception (MacPhail and Campbell 2001).

Coerced sex can have significant impacts on women's health and wellbeing, including heightened risk of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and negative sexual self-perceptions (Brousseau et al. 2011; de Visser et al. 2007), and may be especially harmful if it occurs repeatedly in the context of marriage or a long-term relationship (Jeffrey and Barata 2017). Yet, coerced sex among married or cohabitating couples has received little attention in comparison to other forms of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Logan, Walker and Cole 2015), especially in lower- and middle-income countries (Kaplan, Khawaja and Linos 2011). Moreover, there are few studies that have examined the phenomenon from the perspective of both members of a couple. As Brousseau et al. (2011, 63) note, 'despite the fact that coercive sexuality most often occurs in couples as opposed to strangers, research to date has almost exclusively focused on one member of the dyad rather than involving both'. This limits our understanding of how programming can effectively prevent and address coercive sex among spouses.

This paper addresses this gap by assessing participants' understandings of sexual consent and experiences of coerced sex among married and cohabitating couples in rural Rwanda who participated in a 5-month couples curriculum as a part of *Indashyikirwa*, a community-based violence prevention initiative implemented between 2014 and 2018. Importantly, we used dyadic techniques to analyse in depth qualitative data from both members of 14 couples collected as part of a prospective qualitative study embedded in a community randomised controlled trial (RCT) designed to quantitatively assess the impact of the *Indashyikirwa* intervention on behaviour. This paper advances our understanding of how local sexual and gender norms affect notions of sexual consent and coercion within marriage and whether and how a couples-based curriculum can begin to successfully challenge these norms, to support more equitable, non-violent sexual relationships.

## Context

In Rwanda, the majority of women's sexual activity takes place within marriage or cohabitation, which is the primary sanctioned context for sexual relations (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda [NISR] 2016). According to the Rwanda 2014/2015 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the median age for first sexual intercourse among women was 21.8 years of age, which is nearly identical to the age of first marriage, implying that most Rwandan women have their first sex within marriage (NISR 2016). The median age of first sex for men is 22 years, which is 3 years younger than the median age of first union for men. In 2008, the Rwandan government adopted the Prevention and Punishment of Gender Based Violence Law, which criminalises sexual violence, including within marriage (Umubyeyi et al. 2016). Yet, sexual IPV in

Rwanda is common. According to the 2014/2015 Rwandan Demographic and Health Survey (NISR 2016), 12% of ever-married women reported sexual coercion or violence by their current or most recent husband or partner, 11% reported being physically forced to have sexual intercourse and 8% of women reported forced sex within the last 12 months. This contrasts significantly with 2% of ever-married men having experienced forced sex by their current or most recent wife or partner, and 1% of men experiencing sexual violence in the past 12 months. Among ever-married women, the most common perpetrators of any type of sexual violence were their husbands/partners (34%), followed by former husbands/partners (22%).

An analysis of the 2010 Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey found that women with low education, poor life circumstances and with more than two children were more likely to have experienced sexual IPV (Umubyeyi et al. 2014). Past research has linked various beliefs and norms to sexual coercion within marriage in Rwanda, including that both sex and IPV are private matters that should not be discussed outside of the home, men's perceived entitlement to unfettered sexual access to their wives, the inability of women to legitimately refuse sex and that wives should silently endure spousal abuse unless their lives are threatened (Umubyeyi et al. 2014; Uwineza and Pearson 2009). The continued practice in Rwanda of a groom paying 'bride price' to the woman's family has also been criticised for perpetuating the notion that men 'own' women and therefore have authority over them (Uwineza and Pearson 2009). Despite recent gains for gender equality in Rwanda, including the wealth of laws and policies to promote women's empowerment, patriarchal norms continue to position men as the head of household and primary decision-maker in the family (Stern, Heise and McLean 2017) – a social status that can further justify coerced sex between intimate partners.

### ***The Indashyikirwa programme***

*Indashyikirwa* is a 4-year (2014–2018) community-based IPV prevention programme in Rwanda, coordinated by CARE Rwanda and implemented by Rwanda Women's Network (RWN) and the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC) across 14 sectors in the Eastern, Western and Northern Provinces of Rwanda. A fundamental component of the programme is a 5-month participatory curriculum implemented with 840 heterosexual couples to support couples to identify and manage triggers of IPV and build skills for non-violent, equitable relationships. To be eligible for the curriculum couples had to be between 18 and 49 years of age, legally married or living together for at least 6 months (considered 'illegally' or informally married in the Rwandan context). One partner (often the female partner) had to be an active member of CARE's micro-finance village savings and loans associations (VSLAs), and both partners elect to enrol via a lottery. CARE Rwanda's VSLAs target women from deprived socio-economic backgrounds, and using this platform responds to CARE Rwanda's (2012) assessment which found that many women were not benefiting from the VSLA programming due to household inequalities. The curriculum drew on insights from a couples curriculum, 'Journeys of Transformation', implemented by Promundo, CARE and RWAMREC in Rwanda to foster men's support of women's economic empowerment and improve

household relations. The curriculum also incorporated key elements derived from *SASA!* – a community mobilisation approach to violence prevention established by Raising Voices, a Ugandan NGO. The curriculum drew on many elements of *SASA!*, including an asset-based approach to consider positive alternatives to violence, distinguishing between negative ('power over') and positive forms of power ('power with', 'power to', 'power within') in relationships and moving incrementally from intensive self-reflection to community action against violence (Stern et al. 2018). After completing the *Indashyikirwa* couples curriculum, 25% of couples received additional training from RWAMREC in community mobilisation. For an additional 22 months, these 'community activists' went on to diffuse messages about the positive uses of power and the benefits of non-violent relationships.

The curriculum ran for 20 sessions, which covered concepts of power and gender; human rights; managing triggers of IPV, including alcohol abuse, jealousy, economic inequalities; healthy relationships; activism and providing empowering responses to those experiencing IPV. Each session had 1 male and 1 female RWAMREC facilitator and engaged 15 couples. Two curriculum sessions are especially relevant to the focus of this paper. The session on 'GBV (gender-based violence): The basics' helped participants to identify various types of IPV, including sexual coercion, to consider how violence reflects a negative form of 'power over', and to identify the effects of such violence. The take-home exercise for this session encouraged participants to recognise examples of GBV in their own lives and strengthen awareness of how the social acceptability of such violence allows it to continue. The session 'Gender, power and sexuality' aimed to increase awareness about how gender impacts the assumptions and judgements made about women's and men's sexual desires and behaviours, and helped participants identify common norms, myths and misperceptions about men and women's sexuality. For the take-home exercise, partners were asked to reflect together on the session as a means to begin talking about sex. Throughout the curriculum, participants had support from RWAMREC facilitators, who were trained in basic counselling skills; they could also be referred to the *Indashyikirwa* women's safe spaces, which were created to provide dedicated support for GBV survivors.

## Methods

### Approach

The paper is based on qualitative data generated through the external evaluation of *Indashyikirwa*, which is being conducted as part of the DFID-UK funded 'What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls Programme'. Qualitative research was conducted across 3 of the 14 sectors (Rurembo Sector, Western Province; Gishari Sector, Eastern Province; and Gacaca Sector, Northern Province) participating in the randomised impact evaluation. The sectors were chosen to represent a diversity of environments included in the wider trial, including rural, urban and peri-urban locations.

For the recruitment process, the first author informed staff from the Rwandan research company Laterite, which conducted the RCT component of the evaluation, of recruitment criteria, benefits and risks of the study, so that these could be

disseminated to potential participants. Laterite staff members provided the qualitative researchers with couples' contact details after obtaining their consent to do so, and purposefully selecting both formally and informally married couples. The 1999 Law on Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions established women's rights to inherit land for the first time in Rwanda (Powley 2007). Yet, informally married women in Rwanda face greater barriers to accessing rights, including to property (Stern and Mirembe 2017), which is why it was important to differentiate by this category. The qualitative researchers then contacted these participants and set up a time and location for conducting the interviews.

Thirty baseline interviews were conducted in November 2015 (Table 1) with couples enrolled in the programme (who had not started the curriculum). In each sector, five male and five female partners of couples were interviewed separately by same sex Rwandan interviewers. The interviews asked partners about their expectations of each other, including concerning sexual relations, and what typically happens if one spouse wants sex and the other does not. If an experience of IPV was raised, couples were asked about the perceived causes and implications of their last episode of IPV. Twenty-eight midline interviews were conducted with the same sub-set of couples immediately after their completion of the *Indashyikirwa* curriculum in May 2016 (due to one couple being lost to follow-up). Interviews probed whether gendered roles and responsibilities, including expectations and behaviours around sex, changed as a result of participating in the curriculum. Twenty-eight endline interviews were conducted

**Table 1.** Demographic Information of Partners of Couples Interviewed.

ID	Role	Gender	Age (at time of endline interview)	Province	Marital Status	Relationship Duration (years)
FC01W	Partner of Couple	Female	29	Western Province	Informally Married	10
MC01W	Partner of Couple	Male	38	Northern Province	Informally Married	10
FC02W	Partner of Couple	Female	29	Western Province	Formally Married	8
MC02W	Partner of Couple	Male	32	Western Province	Formally Married	8
FC03W	Partner of Couple	Female	37	Western Province	Formally Married	17
MC03W	Partner of Couple	Male	38	Western Province	Formally Married	17
FC04W	Partner of Couple	Female	33	Western Province	Informally Married	14
MC04W	Partner of Couple	Male	34	Western Province	Informally Married	14
FC05W	Partner of Couple	Female	35	Western Province	Formally Married	15
MC05W	Partner of Couple	Male	34	Western Province	Formally Married	15
FC01N	Partner of Couple	Female	29	Northern Province	Formally Married	8
MC01N	Partner of Couple	Male	37	Northern Province	Formally Married	8
FC03N	Partner of Couple	Female	28	Northern Province	Informally Married	5
MC03N	Partner of Couple	Male	30	Northern Province	Informally married	5
FC04N	Partner of Couple	Female	29	Northern Province	Formally Married	9
MC04N	Partner of Couple	Male	30	Northern Province	Formally Married	9
FC05N	Partner of Couple	Female	43	Northern Province	Formally Married	22
MC05N	Partner of Couple	Male	45	Northern Province	Formally Married	22
FC01E	Partner of Couple	Female	31	Eastern Province	Informally Married	10
MC01E	Partner of Couple	Male	42	Eastern Province	Informally Married	10
FC02E	Partner of Couple	Female	28	Eastern Province	Informally Married	5
MC02E	Partner of Couple	Male	29	Eastern Province	Informally Married	5
FC03E	Partner of Couple	Female	26	Eastern Province	Formally Married	4
MC03E	Partner of Couple	Male	37	Eastern Province	Formally Married	4
FC04E	Partner of Couple	Female	31	Eastern Province	Formally Married	10
MC04E	Partner of Couple	Male	32	Eastern Province	Formally Married	10
FC05E	Partner of Couple	Female	25	Eastern Province	Informally Married	3
MC05E	Partner of Couple	Male	38	Eastern Province	Informally Married	3

with the same sub-set of couples in May 2017, one year after the midline interviews. Couples were asked whether and how their involvement with *Indashyikirwa* continued to impact their relationships, including their sexual relations, conflict resolution, experiences or perpetration of IPV. The baseline, midline and endline interviews with couples lasted approximately 1–1.5 hours and were conducted at preferred locations deemed appropriate and private for participants.

A male Rwandan qualitative researcher external to the programme conducted the baseline and midline interviews with male partners of couples. A different male Rwandan researcher conducted the endline interviews with male partners of couples. A female Rwandan qualitative researcher external to the programme conducted the baseline, midline and endline interviews with female partners of couples, which was especially useful for building rapport with the interviewees. All researchers had significant qualitative research experience, and underwent rigorous training conducted by both authors on GBV-related interviewing. All interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda and audio recorded.

## **Ethics**

Ethical approval to undertake the study was obtained from the Rwandan National Ethics Committee (RNEC) (REF: 340/RNEC/2015) and the National Institute of Statistics Rwanda (REF: 0738/2015/10/NISR). Secondary approval was also obtained from the South Africa Medical Research Council (REF: EC033-10/2015). Before each interview, information on the aims, risks and benefits of the research was provided, and participants gave informed written consent, consistent with the ethical approval guidelines mandated by the respective review boards.

## **Analysis**

Using the audio files, the data were transcribed and translated verbatim into English by a language specialist and professional translator. After carefully reading the baseline transcripts, the first author established a preliminary coding structure to thematically analyse the data using NVIVO 11 software. Thematic analysis was used to uncover predominant themes and provide a rich, detailed and holistic account of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). A similar coding scheme was used to analyse the midline and endline interviews, also using NVIVO 11 software. The first author then created tables comparing responses from each member of the couple on key themes, at baseline, midline and endline. Dyadic analysis benefits from identifying overlaps and contrasts among couples as partners (Eisikovits and Koren 2011). The tables supported 'dyadic analysis' to assess contrasts and similarities among couples, and whether this shifted over the course of the interviews.

Both authors then conducted secondary analysis of the coded transcripts and the dyadic tables created. Applying the thematic codes of 'sexual coercion', 'sexual initiation' and 'sexual pleasure' across the interviews, we detailed whether each partner reported sexual coercion at each time point, whether their understanding of and experiences of sexual coercion changed over time, whether there was concordant reporting



from both partners and if concordance shifted over the interviews. Given the general cultural taboo around discussing sexuality, the secondary analysis also captured if sexual topics were avoided in the interviews. This structure guides the presentation of the findings below.

Both authors actively supported the intervention design, and the first author regularly presented the emerging findings to the *Indashyikirwa* programme staff through participatory workshops. At these workshops, staff members offered their insights into the interpretation of the data, including around social norms, and to validate programmatic insights.

## Findings

### *Shifting perceptions of men's entitlement to sex with their spouses*

Those who commented on expectations of sex within marriage expressed an abiding notion that marriage entitled men to unrestricted sexual access to their wives. This belief was sustained by a number of interrelated cultural norms and practices, including ideas around male headship, common marriage instruction and the notion that men's sex drive is physiologically 'uncontrollable'. As one male partner observed:

I could tell her: 'Let us go to bed, I need you' so I would tell her that without even discussing it. When she told me that she was tired I would tell her, 'come on, let's go! Are you the man of the house?' (MC02W Midline)

The perception that men are entitled to sex was reinforced by the corollary belief regularly offered by participants that women cannot refuse sex with their spouse. One male partner justified this view by observing that women leave their own families and marry into their husband's family and home:

There is a mindset that a wife came from her parents' home, and this [sex] is what she came here for. So, when she told you that she didn't want to have sexual intercourse, you felt she wronged you and therefore you would do it by force. (MC01W Endline)

To some women, this idea extended to the notion that their body and sexual capacity 'belonged' to their husbands. As one woman observed: 'When he wants sex and I don't want it, I am obliged to also want it. How can I refuse him what belongs to him?' (FC04N Baseline). A few women shared that they had learned a sense of sexual obligation in marriage during religious pre-marital counselling: 'It's not good to make him sad; we learn that especially during the religious marriage service, it is one of the lessons they teach the brides and the bridegrooms, because those are just your responsibilities as the wife' (FC02E Baseline). Several female and male partners invoked the concept of 'rights' when describing men's entitlement to sex with their spouses; denying men this 'right' could lead to conflict. For instance, one female partner asserted that forced sex between spouses could not be defined as rape, as sex is a husband's 'right':

It's not rape because it is his right. Normally, it is even forbidden to refuse that your husband has sexual intercourse with you. Even if you may be angry you should endure and let him satisfy his sexual desire because he may become angrier than you are. (FC02E Baseline)



A few partners considered women withholding sex from their partners as denying men's rights to sex, noting that this was a common trigger of men having extramarital affairs: 'If I was that man I would also see other women. If he waits for sex and the whole week has passed, in that case the man is also violated' (MC01E Baseline). Similarly, one male partner of a couple (MC01W Baseline) labelled it 'sexual harassment' for a woman to not have sex with her husband after two or three days without any major reason. One woman emphasised that there is 'nothing worse' than refusing sex with her husband, and that 'when he desires you and you refuse it. In that case you are making him very sad' (FC05N Baseline). At baseline, several women reported giving in to sex with their spouses to appease their partners:

When you see that he becomes angry and there is no peace at home, you just accept and do it because it is one of your responsibilities. You endure in order to give him peace and then he becomes happy. (FC03E Baseline)

One man noted that many women acquiesce to sex even if they are uninterested, in order to avoid being beaten, and indicated that this also hinders reporting sexual coercion:

It's like rape to her because she has sex unwillingly. She thinks, instead of him beating me, let me accept; it's kind of forced sexual intercourse. But because they live together, she cannot file a case saying, 'he has raped me'. (MC03N Baseline)

Indeed, at baseline there was strong agreement that women refusing sex with their spouses was a significant source of conflict and/or could underlie or justify physical IPV:

People can have conflicts because of sexual intercourse – I once heard people arguing about it in a meeting. A man said 'two months have passed that I never had sexual intercourse with her; it is a serious problem and I am tired of that. Why did I marry her?' So, you can see that they can have conflicts because of that, because she doesn't fulfil her responsibilities as a wife. If he beats her, it is her fault. (FC03E Baseline).

Nonetheless, even during the baseline interviews, several men and women discussed acceptable and legitimate reasons for women to refuse sex with their spouses, including menstruation, ovulation, exhaustion from work or having a reduced sex drive due to injectable contraceptives. Several women mentioned the importance of communicating such reasons to their partners, as a way to encourage understanding, and reduce the likelihood of conflict or forced sex. Yet, the need for 'legitimate' reasons to be shared still indicates the sense of men's initiation, control over and entitlement to sex with their spouses. One woman shared how her husband might not believe her reasons to refuse sex: 'Sometimes you tell him that you don't want to have sex, and he thinks you are doing so on purpose or because you don't love him' (FC01N Baseline). Several men and women relayed how, through reflection prompted by the couples curriculum, they acknowledged that men's sexual entitlement was a deeply held cultural idea that could be an abuse of power. One male partner emphasised that the roots of this entitlement derived from cultural norms:

I felt that starting sexual intercourse was my responsibility alone and I also felt that whenever I need to have sexual intercourse – because of the society where we were

born, it was a culture that a wife has to wait for what you give her; you are the one to decide what she needs. But after starting these trainings, I discovered many things that we have been ignoring because of our cultures that we copied from our forefathers. (MC03E Midline)

The majority of men and women noted that they learned about women's rights to refuse sex through the programme curriculum and the value to understand and openly communicate sexual preferences. Several women noted how they previously feared initiating sex or communicating sexual preferences with their partner. This was strongly related to the notion that female initiation of sex was taboo because gender roles dictated that solely men should control and initiate sex. Yet, several male and female partners commented on the growing acceptability for women to initiate sex as a result of their involvement with the *Indashyikirwa* programme.

I came to know that a woman also has the right to start sexual intercourse. I thought that if a woman does it they would say that she is a prostitute. But we studied, and my husband also received it well. Now everyone is free in everything. That surprised us, and we liked that lesson. (FC04E Midline)

The benefits of both partners participating in a common process in considering the acceptability for women to initiate sex is evident as it does not raise issues it might otherwise. As one man said:

When you marry a wife, you make her acquainted to your habits. If we have been living together for five years and one day I ask her to kiss me, she will suspiciously ask me, 'where did you learn this?' I would react the same way. I would think, I am the one who always initiates sex, how come she asks me to do it? It would be a problem. (MC03E Midline)

A few female partners of couples and several male partners (especially older men) noted their initial resistance to the notion that women can initiate sex or that men do not have the right to always have sex with their wives. Yet, this resistance appeared to be mitigated through reflecting on broader forms of coercion, the benefits of consensual sex and consequences of non-consensual sex and learning communication skills as discussed in the next section.

### ***Shifting notions of sexual coercion among spouses***

Data suggest that the majority of couples developed a broader, more nuanced understanding of sexual coercion as any act that is non-consensual: 'I didn't understand preventing sexual violence; I thought that it was only about a woman being raped. I didn't know that it is any action done against someone's will' (FC04E Midline). This often included newfound or greater awareness of coerced sex and inequitable sexual decision-making as abusive or the use of 'power over'.

She accepted forced sex because she knew that it was necessary according to the culture. You understand that in any case there was a kind of violence because there was something I didn't know yet, and there was also something she didn't know yet, because we were ignorant about that. (MC03W Endline)

The majority of couples said that the couples curriculum helped them reflect on the consequences of non-consensual sex, including undermining relationship quality,

love and/or sexual pleasure for men and women. One female partner shared how coerced sex caused harm through sadness and anxiety: 'He even would force me to have sexual intercourse when I didn't want it. He would also hurt me, and I was very sad where I would think, what is this that he is doing to me?' (FC05E Midline). At both the midline and endline interviews, the majority of couples reported an appreciation of learning the benefits of consensual, equitable sex, as a powerful alternative to the harmful consequences of coerced sex.

From those lessons, men understood the mistake they were committing and now we prepare each other before we do it and we see that it is good. (FC05W Midline)

The curriculum also encouraged couples to openly discuss sex to ensure consent and avoid use of coercive tactics:

If you want to ask her to have sex with you, you should not ask her forcefully and you should not force her because she is not a domestic animal; but it was a problem because it was something I did without having agreed or talked about. I kind of raped her because we would not talk about it. (MC02E Endline)

Openly communicating about sex was a new experience for many couples, and several partners noted the value of practising communication skills through the curriculum's take-home activities. At the midline or endline interviews, several interviewees observed that open communication about sex not only facilitated mutual consent but enhanced sexual pleasure.

When you have sex after talking about it, you feel the pleasure, you enjoy it and both of you feel pleased about the act you are doing; but when you are doing it by force you don't enjoy it because you don't like it. During the action, you are just like a log. (FC04N Endline)

However, after reflecting on what it meant to respect one's husband, one woman reported feeling even more compelled to acquiesce to unwanted sex with her husband, suggesting that there was some misinterpretation of the programme's messages:

I was disrespecting him, concerning the sexual intercourse I was not treating him as my husband. Even when he told me: 'come here and I tell you' sometimes I would decide just to leave him but now it has changed. I humble myself and I respect him. (FC04E Midline)

### ***Dyadic processes of couples interviews***

Comparing both partners' accounts of sexual coercion generated valuable insights around their conceptualisation and experiences of sexual coercion. During baseline interviews, several partners gave discordant accounts of coerced sex, which primarily involved women disclosing coerced sex and men denying it had occurred in their relationship. For instance, one female partner of a couple (FC04E Baseline) noted how her husband often forces her into sex, and she framed these experiences as rape. Yet, her husband (MC04E Baseline) said 'when she tells you I am really exhausted you should let her be because it is understandable because she is tired. If you force her as a husband, that is violence. In that case you are doing violence on her'. By the midline

interview, however, he admitted to having previously forced his wife to have sex and described how this regularly generated conflict in their relationship. During the end-line interview, he further reflected on reasons for this:

I felt that the reason why I married her was to have sexual intercourse with her. But I now know that doing sexual intercourse requires that you prepare each other, and you do it both feeling happy. But previously on my side I felt that preparation was not necessary and that we must do it whenever I wanted to do it. (MC04E Endline)

Indeed, among a few sets of couples, both partners denied sexual coercion at baseline, but by endline acknowledged that coercion had indeed previously occurred in their relationship. For instance, with the couple below, the husband argued at baseline that he would not coerce his wife into sex for fear that she could report him to the police; by contrast, the wife denied any experience of coerced sex. By the endline interview, however, the husband admitted that he previously had coerced his wife to have sex, and the wife noted her limited pleasure from sexual relations, because it was often forced.

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**Female partner**

When he wants to have sex, you can tell him 'I am not feeling well'. He understands that very easily. He never insists or says, I will do it by force. I can also tell him 'I am on my period', because you cannot hide it from somebody who lives with you, but he says that it is not good to have sex in that case. (FC01E Baseline)

With sex, he was like doing it by force; I didn't have the sexual desire and he didn't have the desire too. We didn't talk about it, so neither he nor I could feel the pleasure of doing it. (FC01E Endline)

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**Male partner**

Forcing a woman to have sex with you is a violation and I would never do that not because my wife could take me to the police. But if a wife regularly refuses sex, some men visit single women for 2 or 3 nights and go back to their household after. This is because it is a violation for a man if his wife does not have sex with him for a whole week. If I was that man I would also see other women. (MC01E Baseline)

I would eat brochette and drink beer and when I came back home, I would immediately tell her 'I want you, come here'. As at that time women did not have right to refuse, she respected that order promptly. (MC01E Endline)

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Overall, there was high concordance among couples around previous experiences of sexual coercion in their relationships at the midline and endline interviews. The only cases where concordance around sexual coercion could not be confirmed at the endline interviews were where the issue of sexual coercion did not come up in the interview. Partners also generally reported similar changes in their sexual relations at the midline and endline interviews, including reduced experiences of sexual coercion, shifts in sexual decision-making and in conceptualisation of sexual coercion and sexual pleasure. For instance, both partners of the following couple shared how improved communication and more equitable decision-making around sex has had a positive impact on their relationship:

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When he was coming from drinking he would simply say: 'I want to do it [sex]!' but the reason why we are thankful to these lessons that we had is that now when he arrives at home you ask him: Do you think I don't have any rights too?' and he understands it. We talk about it and we do it when we both want to do it and we are both happy. (FC03W Midline)

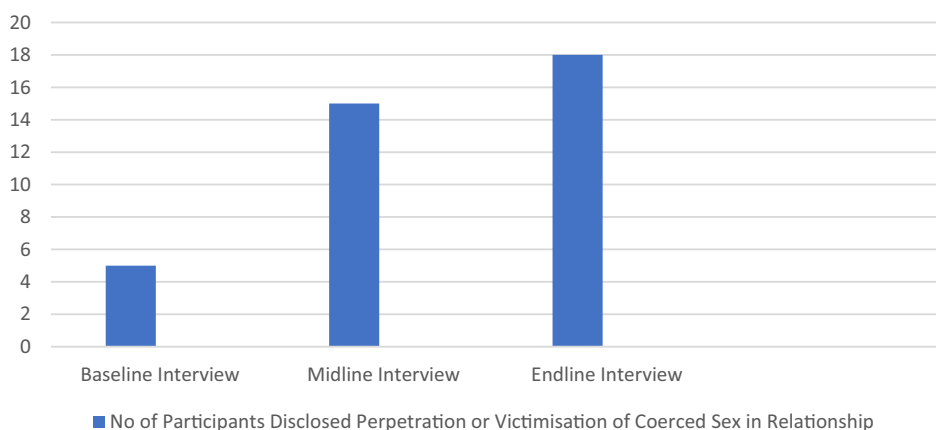
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There are things I used to do somehow by force and when we did it sometimes she was also angry. So, it made me very happy because when we talked about sex, she also told me: It also made me very happy! so we found it very good and one of the things that has strengthened our marriage. (MC03W Midline)

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**Figure 1.** Longitudinal disclosure of sexual coercion in relationships.

### ***Disclosure of experiences of sexual coercion in relationships***

As demonstrated in [Figure 1](#), the number of participants who felt comfortable disclosing sexual coercion in their current relationship increased over the course of multiple interviews, with 5 individuals reporting lifetime sexual coercion at baseline, 15 reporting lifetime coercion at midline and 18 acknowledging lifetime sexual coercion at endline.

At the baseline interviews, 12 partners did not discuss whether they had ever experienced sexual coercion in their relationships, 7 partners explicitly reported *not* having experienced sexual coercion in their relationships and 3 partners did not disclose experiences of sexual coercion but observed that it frequently occurred among couples. During baseline interviews, four female partners of couples reported having experienced forced sex by their partner, but only one of their male partners (MC03E Baseline) acknowledged having sexually coerced his wife, reported as being in the past. This partner reported that he had stopped using coercion once he realised the negative consequences of his behaviour. Unlike at baseline, none of the partners at midline flatly denied that sexual coercion existed in their relationships, although 13 remained silent on the matter. Fifteen out of 28 partners mentioned previous experiences of coerced sex in their current relationship at midline, up from 5 at baseline. At endline, none of the partners explicitly denied experiences of partner sexual coercion, 8 did not mention forced or coerced sex and 18 partners reported past experiences of forced sex in their current relationship, 4 of whom had denied experiences of sexual coercion at baseline. None of the partners reported currently experiencing coerced sex but spoke of past behaviours that were said to have shifted after participating in the couples curriculum.

## **Discussion**

These data highlight gender norms that have served to perpetuate sexual coercion among married or cohabitating partners, namely: marriage entitles men to unconstrained sexual access to their spouse; men alone should initiate and decide the terms of sex; and women should never refuse sex with their husband or partner. As in other studies, many women reported engaging in unwanted sexual relations with their

husbands to avoid other negative consequences – marital conflict, risk of extramarital affairs and/or for fear of disappointing their spouses (Valdovinos and Mechanic 2017). As Jeffrey and Barata (2017) note, women may learn that their refusals are not taken seriously or simply choose to ignore or de-prioritise their own sexual and non-sexual desires. In this study, no men reported being coerced into sex by their spouse, although a few men identified their wives' denying them sex as a form of 'sexual abuse'.

In terms of relationship changes, the data highlight that the *Indashyikirwa* programme encouraged couples to critically examine cultural norms and appeared to prompt changes in how they understood sexual coercion and consent. There also appeared to be shifts in both the occurrence of and perceived acceptability of coerced sex, greater acceptance of women's right to both refuse and to initiate sex and greater recognition of the importance of both partners communicating openly about their sexual needs and preferences. The majority of couples noted how more open communication helped both ensure mutual consent and enhance sexual pleasure, which speaks to the value of the skills-building and assets-based approach of the *Indashyikirwa* curriculum. Strategies that emphasise communication have been suggested to be especially important for preventing sexual coercion (Conroy 2014; Khan, Townsend and Peltó 2014). Through participatory approaches and encouraging critical reflection, the curriculum supported couples to reconsider conceptions of sexual coercion and how societal norms help perpetuate the practice. Recognising the negative implications of 'power over' and the benefits of positive forms of power (including balancing power in negotiating sex) appeared to support couples' processes of change.

While the majority of research around IPV interviews couples separately for safety reasons, some researchers have begun to document the benefits of couples research around IPV (Starmann et al. 2017; Mellor, Slaymaker and Cleland 2013) and the ways to do so safely. Our experience reinforces the value of this dyadic approach. Analysing couples as a unit using separate interviews allowed us to examine overlaps and contrasts in couples' accounts, thus offering a rich understanding of relationship dynamics. Importantly, the data demonstrated strong concordance between partners around the processes of change in their sexual relations. The high concordance rate among couples in our sample by midline and endline is likely a function of both partners having completed the same curriculum together, where they jointly reflected on their experiences and understanding of sexual consent and coercion.

Our data, however, do suggest that sexual coercion at baseline was significantly under-reported by both men and women. Both partners were more likely to disclose coerced sex in their relationship in later interviews, with many admitting that coerced sex had previously occurred in their relationships, but that they had failed to disclose it or actively denied it at baseline. This finding underscores the value of dyadic analysis and repeat interviews with the same respondent over time. It also calls into question our ability to get accurate quantitative measures of coerced or forced sex in one-off cross-sectional surveys. The increased disclosure of previous experiences of sexual coercion may be related to the taboo nature of sexual coercion in their ongoing relationships, recognising sexual coercion as a form of violence and 'power over' through the couples curriculum, and/or rapport building over time during the study. It may also be easier to report stigmatised behaviours that occurred in the past.

Brousseau et al. (2011) and Basile (2008) found women were more able to share experiences of sexual coercion of a previous partner because they happened in the past. Brousseau et al. (2011) noted a general under-reporting of sexual coercion in ongoing relationships, and that men and women minimise the occurrence of this for not coinciding with their image of a loving relationship.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. The data were collected to assess the impact of the *Indashyikirwa* curriculum on multiple outcomes, rather than focusing explicitly on sexual coercion. This limited our ability to explore concordance or discordance among partners around coerced sex and how notions of coercion shifted, because sexual coercion was not probed specifically in all of the interviews. Moreover, although repeat qualitative interviews over time are one way to improve disclosure of sexual coercion, no method completely solves the problem of under-reporting (Basile 2008). There may also be social desirability bias around participants wanting to report favourably on an intervention they clearly valued. 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. Yet, we recognise that these narratives deserve a degree of scepticism in light of the fact that people may want to emphasise what they learned. Participants may have been reluctant to acknowledge ongoing sexual coercion given that the Rwandan law criminalises marital rape and there is generally strong awareness of and respect for the laws in Rwanda.

### **Conclusion**

The findings suggest the value of longitudinal and dyadic research with couples to better understand the nuances and dynamics of sexual coercion, and processes of relationship change in response to IPV prevention programming. Despite the promising shifts reported in this study, including reduced sexual coercion, women's accounts suggest extremely constrained opportunities to initiate and communicate sexual desires, which speaks to the importance of working with couples to enhance women's sexual agency. Programmes also need to carefully assess how curriculum approaches and messages intended to promote gender equality are interpreted. As noted in the findings, one female partner misinterpreted the *Indashyikirwa* messaging on respect, to mean that she should always have sex with her husband when he wanted it. Supporting couples to communicate more openly about sex, or allow women to initiate sex, may not in itself shift men's sense of sexual entitlement, which is why it is critical to ground such programmes in an analysis of gender power. Overall, there is a need for research to further unpack the complexities and magnitude of sexual coercion among intimate partners, in order to inform and evaluate interventions that seek to reduce sexual coercion and support equitable, beneficial sexual relations among couples.



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