



# ENGAGING OPINION LEADERS IN AN IPV-PREVENTION PROGRAMME

## Lessons from Indashyikirwa in Rwanda



Erin Stern, Lori Heise and Lyndsay McLean

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An opinion leader introducing an Indashyikirwa activism activity. Photo: Franz Stapelberg

**A** critical component of community level gender based violence (GBV) prevention programming is meaningful engagement of opinion leaders, including local government officials, religious leaders, and service providers. This can help facilitate an ‘enabling environment’ for social norms change, disseminate programme messages, support advocacy efforts, and improve responses to IPV survivors. This practice brief *highlights – and assesses the value of – lessons learned from engaging opinion leaders as part of a comprehensive intimate partner violence (IPV) prevention programme.*

### BACKGROUND

Despite the importance of working with opinion leaders for comprehensive IPV prevention programming, there is limited understanding of best practices to do so. Indashyikirwa is a four-year programme (2014–2018) implemented by CARE Rwanda, Rwanda Women’s Network (RWN), and Rwanda Men’s Resource Center (RWAMREC), funded by DFID UK. Indashyikirwa operates across 14 sectors in Eastern, Western and Northern provinces of rural Rwanda.

The programme aims to reduce experiences and perpetration of IPV, shift social norms and attitudes condoning IPV, and provide more empowering responses to IPV survivors. The programme components include:

1. Participatory training with couples
2. Community-based activism with a sub-set of trained couples
3. Direct support to survivors of IPV through women’s safe spaces

This brief reviews the fourth component: training and engagement of opinion leaders, to support an enabling environment for GBV prevention.



## INDASHYIKIRWA OPINION-LEADER ENGAGEMENT

At programme inception, RWN staff purposefully recruited a diverse group of approximately 40 opinion leaders per intervention sector (560 leaders in total). Leaders included local government officials, service providers, religious leaders, justice officials, and members of the National Women's Council (1) RWN staff invited selected leaders to complete a two-week curriculum aimed at raising their awareness of gender inequalities and GBV equipping them with skills to prevent and respond to GBV.

The training with opinion leaders strongly drew on SASA!, established by Raising Voices, Uganda, with its emphasis on positive [power to, power with, power within] and negative [power over] types and uses of power related to gender inequalities and IPV. The training moved incrementally from knowledge, attitudes, skills and actions to prevent and respond to GBV including IPV. Topics covered included gender roles and socialization; causes and consequences of different types of GBV (economic, emotional, physical, sexual); rights and laws; gender and sexuality.

The curriculum was pre-tested, supported by the DFID-UK funded What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls evaluation team. This involved observing a version of the training over one month. After each session, focus groups were conducted with opinion leaders and interviews were conducted with RWN facilitators to obtain their feedback. The pre-test strengthened the curriculum including more accessible timing (to be 10 half days instead of originally planned 5 full days), and improving translations into Kinyarwanda.

Throughout the rest of the intervention (30 months), RWN staff hosted quarterly meetings with trained opinion leaders, to collectively identify opportunities and commit to more effective IPV prevention and response. RWN staff used an 'Opinion Leader Commitment Form' to monitor commitments on behalf of groups of opinion leaders (i.e. religious leaders, government leaders). These forms detailed advocacy issues, frequency, successes and challenges. RWN staff offered annual refresher trainings with opinion leaders, and to engage newly elected government leaders after local elections in mid-2016. The programme also worked with religious opinion leaders to design activism messages promoting gender equality and non-violence using religious values. At the beginning of the programme, RWN staff also delivered a four-day training to local journalists to reflect on fundamental concepts of power and violence and encourage gender sensitive reporting and dissemination.

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

As part of the What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls Programme, longitudinal qualitative research was conducted to evaluate the opinion leader engagement:

### How?

Three rounds of qualitative interviews were conducted with nine opinion leaders across three intervention sectors. Two rounds of interviews were conducted with RWN staff.

### Where?

Three intervention sectors were selected from each of the Western, Eastern and Northern Provinces in Rwanda to recruit engaged opinion leaders. Sites were purposefully selected to represent a diversity of peri-urban and rural sites. RWN staff were recruited across intervention locations.

### Who?

Nine baseline interviews (three per sector) were conducted with opinion leaders enrolled in and before completing the Indashyikirwa opinion leader training in November 2015. RWN staff members purposefully selected a diversity of male and female opinion leaders including religious leaders (Muslim and Christian), government leaders and members of the National Women's Council. Six RWN staff that facilitated the opinion leader training were interviewed in May 2016.

Six midline interviews were conducted with the same sub-set of opinion leaders after twelve months (November 2016), as three opinion leaders were lost to follow up due to being replaced as local leaders after elections. Three additional opinion leaders were interviewed in June 2017, after completing a refresher training and being incorporated into the programme. Six RWN staff were interviewed in May 2017.

Eight endline interviews were conducted with the same sub-set of opinion leaders in May 2018, towards the end of the programme.

### What?

The interviews with opinion leaders assessed their expectations and impressions of the Indashyikirwa programme, and whether the programme has influenced their actions for IPV prevention and response. The interviews with RWN staff assessed successes and challenges of the opinion leader training and ongoing engagement.

## FINDINGS

### Perceptions of the Opinion-Leader Training

The training was commended by all opinion leaders, particularly for the unique *participatory approach*, *effective facilitators*, and relevant content for opinion leaders' lives and work.

Opinion leaders especially appreciated learning about rights and laws, positive and negative types of power, and different types and causes of IPV. Many opinion leaders initially struggled to minimize their use of 'power over' in their work, indicating the need to regularly reflect on this concept:

*They used to think it is their right to use their power the way they want. But with knowledge of how they can positively use their power, they are witnessing change, although it is still a process. They keep telling us about the notion of power, it shows it touched them.*

**RWN Field Supervisor**

Opinion leaders appreciated the *skills-building emphasis of the training*, including listening skills for those who disclose violence, communication and conflict resolution skills. They also appreciated the emphasis on healthy, equitable relationships. Yet, some opinion leaders lamented that their spouses did not complete the training to support relationship changes, as was the case for the Indashyikirwa couples curriculum.

### Opinion-Leader Engagement

The majority of staff and opinion leaders appreciated the quarterly meetings with leaders in order to share experiences, obtain support, set goals, and identify solutions to challenges regarding activism or advocacy efforts. The majority of opinion leaders appreciated the ongoing trainings, to build upon and refresh what was learned in the initial training. A few opinion leaders requested more training materials and handouts, especially around rights and laws, for being relevant to their work.

Common activities opinion leaders committed to and conducted were informal discussions around GBV prevention and healthy relationships, including at schools, religious institutions, or government events. A few leaders reflected on the significant reach and impact of their awareness raising efforts, given their influence as leaders:

*As a leader when you train other leaders and you show them different things around GBV, including those change agents, they spread the message to many people.*

**Opinion Leader, Endline interview**

They also regularly responded to requests for GBV response, including home visits. They were highly supportive of, and provided valuable opportunities for CAs and WSFs to conduct activism activities, such as at community meetings. The Indashyikirwa quarterly meetings with opinion leaders, CAs and WSFs, was critical to support these linkages.

Opinion leaders self-evaluated their progress and challenges as groups, captured through the 'Opinion Leader Commitment' monitoring form. A local dialogue forum was also held annually using community score cards (2) whereby community members assessed whether opinion leaders' commitments were implemented.

### Challenges of Engaging Opinion Leaders

One challenge was that only some local leaders were trained through the initial curriculum. Yet, the majority of Indashyikirwa community activists (CAs) and women's space facilitators (WSFs) did not feel comfortable delivering activism activities until each local village leader had been briefed about the programme. Programme staff responded to this request by hosting one day meetings with all village leaders, but this delayed the start of the activism activities. Another challenge was the high turn over of opinion leaders during the programme, including village leaders and police.

Another key challenge identified by RWN staff was feeling they did not have the mandate to hold opinion leaders accountable to their commitments, track or monitor the quality of their efforts.

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

**RWN Field Supervisor, Western Province**

The approach and effectiveness of opinion leaders' commitments were not individually evaluated or monitored by RWN staff. It could be challenging for opinion leaders to commit to proposed actions given their other priorities or work pressures. Opinion leaders were not provided with activism tools and trainings to use these, unlike CAs and WSFs. Yet some staff members and opinion leaders suggested they would have benefitted from activism tools, such as quick chats or posters.

Another challenge at the beginning of the programme was opinion leaders providing limited time (i.e 5 minutes or less) for CAs and WSFs to facilitate activism activities at community meetings. This gradually shifted after encouragement from programme staff, and opinion leaders' greater recognition of the value of these activities. Yet, a few staff members noted their concern that opinion leaders could place heavy demands on CAs and WSFs, such as asking them to facilitate activism outside of intervention areas. It was necessary for programme staff to continually emphasize the voluntary roles and commitments of CAs and WSFs.

### Impact of Opinion Leader Engagement

Despite the identified challenges, positive impacts of engaging opinion leaders were evident. Many opinion leaders self-reported a significant change to minimize their use of 'power over' in their work and relationships, and their greater awareness of gender inequalities:

As an executive secretary and a married man who has children I have had some changes, especially with regards to giving orders, complementarity in my household, the use of equal power with my wife. I used to feel I am the head of the family and that I should do anything I want without consulting my wife but when I learnt about power over, I wanted to change and be able to change others as well.

**Opinion Leader, Endline Interview**

Some opinion leaders noted how their greater engagement in GBV prevention and response held them accountable to promote equality and reduce conflict in their own relationships.



A local government leader who was engaged with the Indashyikirwa programme. Photo: Peter Caton

Many opinion leaders noted that greater awareness of different types and causes of GBV enhanced their responses when cases were reported:

'After being trained we know different types of violence and what gender based violence is, and it has helped me a lot, even today when I go to resolve a problem related to a family conflict, I go there knowing what this violence is based on.' (Opinion Leader, Endline Interview)

Service providers' responses to GBV improved through service feedback forms initiated and monitored by the women's safe spaces. Many opinion leaders shared their appreciation for the CAs and WSFs, and how this supported their own work. Opinion leaders' greater awareness of laws and rights equipped their ability to intervene in GBV and raise community awareness of these laws. For instance, as one leader said:

We studied laws protecting women. There is a law that no woman should be a victim of violence. After receiving that training I felt that I also have to play a role, that I should not only listen but instead I should also stand up and protect others.

**Opinion Leader, Endline Interview**

Several opinion leaders emphasized their commitment to Indashyikirwa given how this aligns with political will in Rwanda to address GBV. There was consensus among opinion leaders of their desire to sustain Indashyikirwa, and their engagement and actions could play a key role. For example, some opinion leaders started a savings group to support the continued operation of the women's safe spaces, and one local government official submitted the request for the local government to own land of a women's safe space.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Opinion leaders constitute a circle of influence that once trained and supported can contribute to an enabling environment for change and activism. The findings generated lessons for effective engagement of opinion leaders:

1. *The need to establish strong links between opinion leaders, WSFs and CAs.* The Indashyikirwa strategies of hosting quarterly meetings with these stakeholders, and use of women's spaces feedback forms, were critical to ensure this.
2. *The need for ongoing and regular engagement of opinion leaders.* There was relatively high turn over of opinion leaders due to local re-elections or job transfers half-way during the programme. Opinion leaders valued the refresher trainings to better grasp and apply the concepts learned, and quarterly meetings helped to hold opinion leaders accountable to their commitments.
3. *The need to carefully map key opinion leaders to be engaged in programming.* While not all intervention village leaders completed the initial Indashyikirwa training, it was essential for programme staff to meet with all village leaders to ensure their support of the programme. The programme would have benefitted from identifying this need from the outset, and engaging more village leaders in the initial curriculum.
4. *The need to consider power dynamics for work with opinion leaders, including between opinion leaders and programme staff and participants.* Although it was challenging for programme staff to appear to be asking too much of opinion leaders, the programme would have benefitted from providing opinion leaders with activism tools and trainings to use these, as requested by some. In addition to the collective monitoring forms, it would have been helpful for opinion leaders to individually self-monitor, to clarify their efforts. Given the difficulty for staff to monitor opinion leaders, the programme may have benefitted from more regular use of community score cards. It was necessary for programme staff to brief opinion leaders on the role of WSFs and CAs as volunteers. The programme importantly supported opinion leaders to reflect on these power dynamics and their use of 'power over.'
5. *Engage opinion leaders around GBV prevention not only as leaders but as those in relationships.* While opinion leaders reported changes in their relationships, they would have benefitted from their spouses attending some of the training sessions, as requested by some. The training with opinion leaders would have benefitted from incorporating more relationship skills sessions, drawing on the Indashyikirwa couples curriculum. This would help opinion leaders model equitable, non-violent relationships.
6. *Adapt programming in response to research findings.* The evaluation research informed the ongoing programming. For instance, the pre-test strengthened the opinion leader training, including further integration of cultural examples and Kinyarwanda proverbs. The ongoing evaluation informed content of refresher trainings with opinion leaders, and the development of activism materials, such as messages incorporating religious scriptures. The interviews with programme staff particularly helped identify implementation challenges and solutions.

## REFERENCES

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 problems and participate in the development of the country. The council has structures from the grassroots up to the national level, and allows for women's participation in local governance at all administrative levels.
2. A Community Score Card, originally developed by CARE Malawi in 2002, is a citizen-driven accountability measure for the assessment, planning, monitoring and evaluation of service delivery. The score card can be used to gather feedback from service users and improve communication between community members and service providers.

## PROGRAMME TEAM

This study is being led by Dr. Kristin Dunkle, Dr. Lori Heise, Dr. Lyndsay McLean, and Dr. Erin Stern

CARE Rwanda Management: Sidonie Uwimpuhwe, Lea Liliane Niyibizi, Ernestine Uwamwezi, Rachel Kwizera, Sonia Martins

RWN Management Team: Mary Balikungeri, Annette Mukiga, Richard Badacoka, Andrew Ndahiro, Betty Muteteri

For more information on the contents of this brief please contact the author: **Dr Erin Stern**, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, [erin.stern@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:erin.stern@lshtm.ac.uk)

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evidence from rigorous primary research and evaluations of existing interventions to understanding what works to prevent violence against women and girls generally, and in fragile and conflict areas. Additionally the programme estimates social and economic costs of violence against women and girls, developing the economic case for investing in prevention.



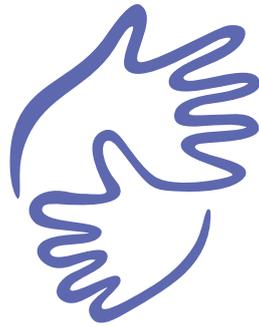
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