



## BRIEF

# AWARENESS RAISING TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

December 2021

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Awareness raising activities are widely used and have an important role to play in preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG). However, **there is little evidence that awareness raising activities on their own are able to significantly reduce VAWG.**<sup>1</sup> There is often a mismatch between the intended aims of awareness raising activities and what they are likely to achieve. For instance, an organisation might publicise information about a new VAWG law with the objective of reducing violence perpetrated by men, but this strategy alone is highly unlikely to do so.

**It is important to clarify what awareness raising activities can achieve as well as how to mitigate the limits of this approach.** This can inform decision-making around implementing awareness raising approaches. It can help to design theories of change more closely aligned with intervention activities, and identify best practices for more effective awareness raising efforts.

## → What is awareness raising?

Awareness raising encompasses a diversity of activities and often includes efforts to increase knowledge about the causes and consequences of different types of violence, to challenge attitudes, beliefs and norms that condone VAWG, and educate people about relevant laws, policies, services, and rights.

Awareness raising approaches rely on a variety of avenues to communicate messages: television, radio, podcasts, exhibitions, billboards, performances, the Internet, comics, magazines or other publications, theatre, music, posters, art, social media, workshops, community dialogues or debates.

<sup>1</sup> R. Jewkes, S. Willan, L. Heise, L. Washington, N. Shai, A. Kerr-Wilson and N. Christofides (2020). Effective design and implementation elements in interventions to prevent violence against women and girls. What Works to Prevent VAWG? Global Programme Synthesis Product Series. Pretoria: South African Medical Research Council.



### Awareness raising to prevent violence

Campaigns and events to advocate for VAWG prevention, such as the annual 16 days of activism against gender-based violence (GBV) often are supported by awareness raising activities. They can be targeted to diverse audiences, including the general public, intervention communities, national and local government and service providers. They can be intended for individual or communal engagement.

**Such activities range in design from one-off messaging to long-term programmes**, such as television or radio-based shows, or as part of an ongoing activism campaign. Many awareness raising approaches are designed to shift attitudes related to VAWG, as well as gender norms, which define acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society. The conviction that it is morally unacceptable to beat one's wife, for example, is distinct from the expectation that the survivor will not report violence to authorities.<sup>2</sup>

2 D. Green, A. Wilke and K. Cooper (2020). Countering violence against women by encouraging disclosure: A mass media experiment in rural Uganda. Available at [http://jasper-cooper.com/papers/Green\\_et\\_al.pdf](http://jasper-cooper.com/papers/Green_et_al.pdf); A. Bandura (2004). Social cognitive theory for personal and social change by enabling media. In A. Singhal, M.J. Cody, E.M. Rogers and M. Sabido (eds) *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice*, pp. 75–96. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

### What can awareness raising achieve?

Awareness raising approaches are attractive because **they can generate knowledge of relevant issues and reach many people at a relatively low cost**. By providing information to challenge gender norms or by attaching stigma to unwanted behaviours, they can support positive norms and prompt reflection on harmful norms that drive VAWG.<sup>3</sup>

→ For example, programmes to discourage alcohol abuse – a risk factor for VAWG – might use messages such as “men in this community don’t support drinking to get drunk” or feature a prominent man from the community who supports this message.

Mass media as a culture creator can powerfully shift public opinion around VAWG.<sup>4</sup> This is important, as attitudes, roles and harmful social norms that reinforce gender inequality are some of the most powerful drivers of VAWG<sup>5</sup> and they can be an obstacle to social change unless they are addressed.<sup>6</sup>

**Awareness raising approaches can help publicise relevant VAWG laws and policies**, which can send the message that violence is unacceptable.<sup>7</sup> Awareness raising activities can support movements for women’s rights and an enabling environment for women to exercise their rights by building community buy-in or political will.

3 E. Paluck and L. Ball (2010). Social Norms Marketing Aimed at Gender Based Violence: A Literature Review and Critical Assessment. International Rescue Committee. Available at [www.alignplatform.org/resources/social-norms-marketing-aimed-gender-based-violence-literature-review-and-critical](http://www.alignplatform.org/resources/social-norms-marketing-aimed-gender-based-violence-literature-review-and-critical).

4 C. Mcloughlin (2011). Impact evaluations of programmes to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report. Available at <https://gsdrc.org/publications/impact-evaluations-of-programmes-to-prevent-and-respond-to-violence-against-women-and-girls/>; M. Alexander-Scott, E. Bell and J. Holden (2016). Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence against Women and Girls. DFID Guidance Notes.

5 R. Jewkes, E. Stern, and L. Ramsoomar (2019). *Community activism approaches to shift harmful gender attitudes, roles and social norms: Evidence Review. What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls Programme*.

6 L. Heise and K. Manji (2016). Social Norms. GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack No. 31. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.

7 Mcloughlin (2011).



→ For example, the [annual 16 days campaign against GBV](#) reflects the collective power of global mobilisation around a shared goal of breaking the silence around VAWG and encouraging activism.

Campaigns have the potential to increase knowledge about laws against violence, the negative consequences of VAWG and the right women have to live free from violence and report it.<sup>8</sup> Care must be taken to ensure campaigns are coordinated, innovative and supported by sufficient funding. They must support a human rights agenda within a broader strategy, and they should be carried out with monitoring and evaluation to generate evidence of their impact on VAWG. Assessments of awareness raising campaigns have shown they contributed to changes in attitudes towards gender, and reduced acceptance of VAWG.<sup>9</sup>

→ A study in Leon, Nicaragua, documented a significant drop in physical intimate partner violence over a 20-year period. One possible contribution for this decline was widespread awareness campaigns led by the women's movement documenting the changing laws and policies to prevent VAWG, aiming to transform harmful social norms and encouraging women to exercise their rights.<sup>10</sup>

8 C. Thompson (2017). A life of its own: An assessment of the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. Center for Women's Global Leadership and Rutgers.

9 M. Ellsberg et al. (2015). Prevention of violence against women and girls: what does the evidence say? The Lancet, 385(9977), 1555-1566.

10 M. Ellsberg et al. (2020). Long-term change in the prevalence of intimate partner violence: A 20-year follow-up study in León, Nicaragua, 1995-2016. BMJ Global Health.

Awareness raising approaches are often considered to be a VAWG prevention strategy but have a key role to play in response efforts.

For example, **they can generate awareness of existing laws or policies** or the availability of response services, which can help reduce barriers to accessing support, or affect decision-making of survivors to report violence.<sup>11</sup> Awareness raising can help break the silence and stigma of disclosing violence and support empathy and solidarity for survivors.

→ The #MeToo movement seeks to empower women through strength in numbers, by revealing how many women have survived sexual assault and harassment, especially in the workplace.

Awareness raising approaches may have a particular role to play in crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, as many strategies can be implemented remotely and safely during lockdowns and periods of social distancing.

→ An Italian government domestic abuse prevention campaign launched amidst the COVID-19 pandemic led to a sharp increase in calls to the national domestic violence helpline. However, the media campaign led to less reporting in areas with stronger gender stereotypes, which speaks to the need to also address gender stereotypes to increase reporting of domestic violence.<sup>12</sup>

11 Green, et al. (2020).

12 C. Deiana, A. Geraci and L. Giua (2020). Hang Up on Stereotypes: Domestic Violence and Anti-Abuse Helpline Campaign. SSRN. Available at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3643922](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3643922)



## Limitations of awareness raising activities

Despite the importance of awareness raising activities, there is very limited evidence of their impact on preventing VAWG on their own.<sup>13</sup> Emerging evidence on intervention design and implementation to reduce VAWG demonstrates the importance of participatory group sessions, critical reflection to address power and gender inequality, experiential learning, relationship skills building and efforts to support empowerment. Awareness raising activities — particularly didactic, short-term, or one-way interventions — seldom incorporate those features.<sup>14</sup>

VAWG is not only driven by attitudes, beliefs and norms, but by a variety of other triggers (i.e. lack of relationship skills, poor mental health, alcohol abuse), which is why awareness raising approaches on their own are often insufficient to reduce violence.<sup>15</sup>

**Shifting attitudes towards VAWG and gender equality require more intensive interventions than awareness raising approaches typically offer**, since attitudes can be deep-seated beliefs developed during formative childhood years, which are continually reinforced.<sup>16</sup>

## Moreover, shifting awareness and attitudes does not necessarily lead to changed behaviours.

As experience in public health shows, people may know certain behaviours are harmful and continue to do those things – for example they may have a sedentary lifestyle, remain overweight or continue smoking.

Values, beliefs, attitudes, norms and behaviours influence each other and their relationships are complicated.<sup>17</sup> Providing information does not necessarily lead to optimal choices, because people do not always consider the benefits and consequences of a choice to then make a rational decision on the best course of action.<sup>18</sup>

Experiences with implementing violence prevention programmes repeatedly show how **social environments can be obstacles to sustainable behaviour changes**.<sup>19</sup> To support individuals to change and sustain new behaviours, awareness raising should be part of multi-component interventions and play a supplemental role to other effective components.<sup>20</sup> Specific examples of multi-component interventions are discussed in the companion brief on behaviour change.

13 Ellsberg, et al. (2015).

14 Jewkes, et al. (2020).

15 B. Cislighi and L. Heise (2018). Using social norms theory for health promotion in low-income countries. *Health Promotion International*, 14(1), 1-8.

16 C. Brooks and C. Bolzendahl (2004). The transformation of us gender role attitudes: Cohort re- placement, social-structural change, and ideological learning. *Social Science Research*, 33(1):106–133; Green et al (2020).

17 L. Heise (2011). What Works to Prevent Partner Violence? An Evidence Overview, London: DFID, available at; <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/R4D/PDF/Outputs/Gender/60887->

18 V. Petit (2019). The Behavioural Drivers Model: A Conceptual Framework for Social and Behaviour Change Programming, UNICEF. [https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/5586/file/The\\_Behavioural\\_Drivers\\_Model\\_o.pdf\\_20.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/5586/file/The_Behavioural_Drivers_Model_o.pdf_20.pdf)

19 J. Mannell et al. (2019). Why interventions to prevent intimate partner violence and HIV have failed young women in southern Africa. *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, 22(8).

20 A. Gevers and E. Dartnall (2020). What good does “16 Days” do? Reflecting on the role of awareness raising and communication campaigns. SVRI Blog. <https://www.svri.org/blog/what-good-does-16-days-do>





## Designing effective awareness raising activities

Awareness raising efforts are **more likely to be impactful if they are tailored to the audiences they are intended to reach**, encouraging people to think and feel something about what is explained or portrayed.

Conducting formative research (e.g. interviews and focus group discussions) can help to determine prevalent attitudes, beliefs and norms within the target audience.<sup>21</sup> This can help identify how strong or rigid beliefs and norms are, and where opportunities exist for change. Beliefs may be especially malleable if people are uncertain about how others would behave in a situation or have little experience.

→ Someone who has never reported a case of VAWG before may be more open to changing their perceptions around the likelihood of receiving a sympathetic response to disclosing, compared to someone who has previous negative experiences reporting violence.<sup>22</sup>

To ensure accountability and that no one is excluded, a diversity of women (inclusive of age, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity) should be consulted on the content and messages. **Messages should be pre-tested among target audiences** to ensure they are relevant and understood correctly and to minimise any unintended negative effects.<sup>23</sup>

→ A common awareness raising strategy is to highlight the prevalence of VAWG. For instance, the figure that “1 in 3 women have experienced domestic violence” has been widely used. But it may unintentionally normalise violence or portray it as a part of culture, which could be used to justify violence. Moreover, such global figures may not apply to every setting – rates may be quite a bit higher, or lower – in different settings.

Effective awareness raising approaches have sufficient intensity and reach to target audiences.<sup>24</sup>



**Positive aspirational messaging** (e.g stressing benefits of non-violent, equitable relationships) is much more likely to appeal to audiences than punitive or corrective messaging (such as solely emphasising the consequences of violence or identifying risk factors as implicit causes of violence). Indeed, the latter can unintentionally generate resistance or backlash.

→ Media and communication materials developed for the SASA! programme strive to envision positive non-violent realities and offer a credible example in the local context.<sup>25</sup> They avoid blame and accusation and maintain the dignity of individuals. Publicising the commonality of benefit of positive norms can be more effective than challenging entrenched negative norms.

Materials that tell people what to think rarely have meaningful impact on their attitudes or behaviours. This is why it is important to invite people to discuss and question by **combining awareness raising with follow-up opportunities for dialogue and reflection**.<sup>26</sup> While media can spread and diffuse information, it is peer-to-peer conversations and networks that spread adoption and are more influential over time.<sup>27</sup>

21 Mcloughlin (2011).

22 D. Green, A. Wilke and K. Cooper (2020). Countering violence against women by encouraging disclosure: A mass media experiment in rural Uganda. Available at [http://jasper-cooper.com/papers/Green\\_et\\_al.pdf](http://jasper-cooper.com/papers/Green_et_al.pdf).

23 Ibid.

24 Jewkes, et al. (2020).

25 Raising Voices. Media and Communications. <https://raisingvoices.org/activism/media-communications/>.

26 Raising Voices. How to develop communication materials. SASA! Start Activist Kit.

27 L. Robinson (2009). A Summary of Diffusion of Innovations. Available at [http://www.enablingchange.com.au/Summary\\_Diffusion\\_Theory.pdf](http://www.enablingchange.com.au/Summary_Diffusion_Theory.pdf)



#### Discussion Questions

1. How are you using your power in your relationship?
2. How are you using your power in the community?
3. How could you use your power to help others become aware of the connection between violence and HIV/AIDS?
4. How could you join your power with others' to support people living with violence and/or HIV/AIDS?
5. How could you use your power to support others speaking out about the connection between violence and HIV/AIDS?
6. How could you use your power to take action to prevent violence against women and HIV?
7. Whose responsibility is it to create change in our relationships? Our families? Our communities?
8. Why is it important to use our power as individuals and as a group?

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## → Tips for awareness raising activities

- Tailor messages and format to your audience
- Pre-test messages with diverse target audiences
- Solicit input to messages from women in all their diversity
- Ensure sufficient intensity and reach among target audiences
- Favour positive aspirational messaging
- Avoid punitive or corrective messaging
- Avoid messaging that presents VAWG as 'normal' or part of culture
- Avoid reinforcing inequitable or stereotypical gender roles (i.e. messages that 'real men' protect their women)
- Integrate awareness raising activities into wider efforts to prevent VAWG
- Avoid one-off messaging

## Implications for programming

It is important to be realistic about what different types of VAWG prevention and response strategies can and cannot achieve. Awareness raising activities can contribute to preventing VAWG. For instance, online messaging to raise awareness is especially feasible and relevant amid the COVID-19 crisis, given the restrictions on mobility and face-to-face work. They have a particular role to play in spreading new ideas, generating knowledge, and ensuring wide reach.

Awareness raising efforts are more effective when they are carefully targeted and relatable to intended audiences, rest on positive messaging, and provide opportunities for dialogue and reflection. They are also more likely to reduce VAWG when embedded as a strategy among interventions that address multiple drivers of violence and incorporate features and best practices to support behaviour changes.



## Acknowledgments

This brief was authored by Erin Stern from the Prevention Collaborative with inputs from Lyndsay McLean of the Prevention Collaborative and Melissa Alvarado and Tamara Goeth of the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. It was edited by Mary Ann Perkins and designed by Kung Termvanich.

This publication has been funded by the Government of Australia through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Government of Australia.

Suggested citation: UN Women and Prevention Collaborative (2021). "Awareness Raising to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls". Practice Brief.

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