



OXFAM INTERSECTIONALITY SERIES

# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

LINKS AND LESSONS FOR PRACTITIONERS  
WORKING WITH INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES

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OXFAM

*COVER: OXFAM WISE PROGRAM Guatemala  
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# FOREWORD

On March 23-24, 2015, representatives from Oxfam affiliates and partners assembled on the Simmons College campus in Boston, Massachusetts. In a rare opportunity, gender experts and development practitioners donned their student hats to deep-dive into the topic of Intersectionality, an area of academic thought and feminist theory that is evolving into an ever-growing body of development discourse. The event was co-sponsored by Oxfam America, Oxfam Novib, and Oxfam Intermon, in close partnership with the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management.

Not just a learning space, the Symposium was also a conduit for the generation of knowledge. The centerpiece of discussions was a series of practice papers, authored by Oxfam staff and partners, which explore the issue of Gender and Intersectionality within the broader context of international development work. The intention is to share Oxfam's experience in Gender and Intersectionality with a wide audience in hopes of fostering thoughtful debate and discussion.

Oxfam America extends special thanks to all staff and partners who participated in the Symposium and who shared their expertise through these practice papers. We acknowledge the contribution of the advisory and planning committees, particularly of Sandra Sotelo Reyes (Intermon), Carmen Reinoso (Novib), Muthoni Muriu (Oxfam America), Patricia Deyton (CGO), Alivelu Ramisetty (Oxfam America), Maria Ezpeleta (Oxfam America), Eloisa Devietti (Oxfam America) and Lauren Walleser (CGO). We also recognize the support of Caroline Sweetman and Liz Cooke (Oxfam Great Britain) who made possible the publication of a special virtual issue of *Gender & Development, Intersecting Inequalities*, (<http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/bes/cgde-vsi-intersectionality>). Finally, we thank Irene Munoz (Oxfam International) and Aileen Charleston (Oxfam America) for their collaboration on communications.

Intersectionality is a feminist theory and analytical tool for understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities. The experiences of marginalization and privilege are not only defined by gender, but by other identity factors, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, to name a few – all of which are determined, shaped by, and imbedded in social systems of power.

## INTERSECTIONALITY PRACTICE PAPERS SERIES

- *Active Citizenship of Women and Youth in Nicaragua*, Damarius Ruiz and Carolina Egio Artal (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Building Gender-Sensitive Resilience through Women’s Economic Empowerment: Lessons learned from pastoralist women in Ethiopia*, Imma Guixé (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Re-politicizing Intersectionality: How an intersectional perspective can help INGOs be better allies to women’s rights movements*, Jenny Enarsson (Oxfam Great Britain)
- *Women’s Economic Empowerment and Domestic Violence: Links and lessons for Practitioners working with intersectional approaches*, Mara Bolis (Oxfam America), Christine Hughes (Oxfam Canada), Rebecca Fries (Value for Women), and Stephanie Finigan (Prosperity Catalyst)
- *“Your struggle is my struggle”: Integrating intersectionality in work with lesbian women, bisexual women and trans-women in Zimbabwe*, Sian Maseko (Oxfam Zimbabwe) and Sammantha Ndlovu (Sexual Rights Centre)

All papers are available as downloadable PDFs on our websites, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/> and <http://policy-practice.oxfamamerica.org/>, and may be distributed and cited with proper attribution.

# INTRODUCTION

Our paper examines the intersectional elements of the links between women's increased market-oriented economic activity and women's experience of domestic violence. Through a literature review complemented by perspectives from staff within the Oxfam confederation working on women's economic empowerment (WEE) and violence against women (VAW), our research found that WE has discernible and significant but often mixed impacts on women's risk of domestic violence (DV): WEE can contribute to decreasing DV risk and increasing DV risk, and result in mixed outcomes within a given setting. Our paper engages with intersectionality in two ways. First, this paper sits at the intersection between economic and gender-based expressions of power, between economic rights and the right to be free of violence. Violence against women is based first and foremost in unequal gender relations but through a certain lens, we investigate how economic status differentiates VAW risk among women. It should not be assumed that improvements in a woman's economic standing contribute to lowering her risk of gender-based violence. Second, we found that the relationships between WEE and DV<sup>1</sup> are profoundly contextual and overlaid by intersecting identities. Whether economic empowerment contributes to increasing or decreasing women's risk of violence depends on other factors of their circumstances and environments. This paper aims to encourage and assist practitioners to better integrate WEE and VAW in development programming in context-responsive ways, in order to facilitate more holistic empowerment of women.

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<sup>1</sup> We describe women's economic empowerment (WEE) as a process in which women "enjoy their rights to control and benefit from resources, assets, income, and their own time, and...have the ability to manage risk and improve their economic status and wellbeing" (Reference Group for the Oxfam Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Knowledge Hub 2014, 1). We define violence against women (VAW) as: any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (United Nations 1993). While not intending to minimize other forms of gender-based violence, we focused our research on men's domestic violence against women, meaning that which occurs in the same family, household, or intimate relationship. This includes what is referred to as intimate-partner violence (IPV).

# FINDINGS

The idea for this specific research emerged as a topic for collaboration between two new knowledge hubs within the Oxfam confederation – WEE in Agriculture, and Violence Against Women and Girls/Gender-based Violence. To our knowledge, this is the first in-depth research done within Oxfam on the interplay between WEE and VAW. We began our research by briefly surveying 12 WEE and VAW colleagues in our networks about the links between WEE and DV they had seen. With those insights, we did an extensive search of academic and grey literature (i.e., organizations’ reports) that included empirical studies, examples, and theory. The studies looked at different forms of WEE programming and focused mostly on the Global South.

## **Explanations – Why WEE impacts the risk of domestic violence**

We think that understanding why WEE may increase or decrease the risk of DV is important in order to understand what practitioners could do to address the links. We arrived at three economic explanations, meaning that they focus on the impact of economic resources. The first focuses on bargaining (Kabeer 1994; Sen 1990), where the household or conjugal relationship is seen as a site of negotiation over resources (Agarwal, 1997; Perova 2010). It is assumed that women depend economically on men, and tolerate some level of violence in return for economic support. If a woman’s income increases, this may decrease her risk of violence because her economic dependence decreases. The second economic explanation looks at violence as instrument of extraction where it is used to control others’ behavior or the allocation of resources (Hidrobo et al. 2013; Perova 2010; Anderberg & Rainer 2011). As women become increasingly economically empowered, the risk of DV may increase because men may use violence as an instrument to disrupt women’s market-oriented activity, seize women’s income, or exert authority over managing it. Third among economic explanations, we can look at domestic violence as an expression of frustration or dissatisfaction, or a way to improve self-esteem (Hidrobo et al. 2013; Macmillan & Gartner 1999). An increase in women’s income may decrease their risk of DV

because their households are better off, so men feel less economic stress, which they might otherwise express through violence (Vyas & Watts 2009; Jewkes 2002). However, a man may feel his economic and household status or roles threatened, which can lead to violence as a way of expressing those feelings. This is often called backlash, and was the outcome most emphasized by the Oxfam field staff we surveyed.

Although these three economic explanations are helpful, they tend to isolate economic concerns from important socio-cultural or ideological considerations and impacts. For instance, DV is more likely in contexts where gender roles are more rigidly defined (Heise 1998) and less likely in relationships that adhere more to principles of gender equality (Vyas and Watts 2009). Schuler et al. (1996) show that the financial component may not always be the most significant aspect of how WEE impacts DV, pointing to socio-cultural implications. WEE often disrupts or challenges existing gender norms and roles by facilitating new models of behaviour.

Based on a combination of economic and socio-cultural perspectives, we can say WEE could decrease DV if: it increases women's household bargaining power and ability to leave a violent relationship; household poverty decreases; women learn skills that help them negotiate household gender power relations, or; at the community level, it contributes to shifts in attitudes, gender relations of power and a reduction of the acceptance or impunity surrounding DV. On the other hand, WEE could increase DV risk if: men use violence as a way to take or control women's income or resources, or to express dissatisfaction about shifting household roles, or; there is more widespread anger or backlash among men at the community level in response to women's increasing market activity or economic status.

We found many examples of these possible scenarios and outcomes. For example, in rural Bangladesh, women's participation in a livelihoods programme contributed to reducing domestic violence through economic avenues by reducing household poverty, by increasing husbands' recognition of women's financial contributions to the household, and by decreasing women's financial dependence on men. And the program's education and training components



raised women's and men's awareness of the negative consequences of VAW (Haneef et al. 2014). However, other studies showed that WEE can be a risk factor for DV. For instance, also in Bangladesh, a micro-finance programme contributed to increased incidence of DV among participants because of household conflict over control of women's funds and men's anger about women not being able to secure new loans (Rahman 1999).

To our first point about intersectionality, then, where economic status shapes gender inequality expressed as violence against women, we see that shifts in women's economic activity differentiate their risk of DV in both positive and negative ways. Making these relationships even less clear, some studies show mixed results in the same context (such as Bangladesh) or even the same WEE intervention (e.g., Vyas and Watts 2009; Hidrobo & Fernald 2013). This brings us to our second engagement with intersectionality: what accounts for these different outcomes in the WEE-DV links?

### **Contextual and individual factors that differentiate WEE-DV relationships**

Our research showed that women's risk of gender-based violence in the context of their economic empowerment is profoundly influenced by other identities and aspects of power relations (for more detail, see Hughes et al. 2015). First are contextual or community-level factors, including the existing relative conservatism of gender relations and rural versus urban settings. Where gender relations are more patriarchal or where rates and acceptance of DV are already high, the risk of WEE programming contributing to DV is likely greater. As well, conservative cultural contexts that limit women's status and opportunities outside of marriage make it less likely that she can leave an abusive relationship, thereby in effect reducing her bargaining power (Sen 1999). Likely related to greater gender inequality in rural areas, selected studies of conditional cash transfer (CCT)<sup>2</sup> programs show that among rural women compared to urban women, CCT income is more likely to be a risk factor than a protective factor for DV (García Aísa 2014; Hidroboa & Fernald 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> These are poverty-alleviation government programs in which parents in poor households receive regular government funds as long as they meet set obligations, usually concerning health care and/or education for their children (Perova 2010). CCTs programs tend to target women as recipients, based in the belief that this will result in better improvements in children's education and health care than if fathers received the funds (García Aísa, 2014).

Second, at the household level, relative status between partners is very important, that is, how they compare to one another in terms of power and resources. WEE is more likely to increase than decrease DV if women arrive at a higher economic status than their husbands (Agarwal and Panda 2007) and if women have education levels equal to or higher than their partners (Vyas and Watts 2009).

Third, individual characteristics make a difference as well. Although we cannot draw generalizations from these, we found studies to suggest that women were at greater risk of violence in the context of WEE programming if they married at a younger age (Ahmed, 2005), had more children (Perova 2010), and were indigenous (Hidroboa et al. 2013)<sup>3</sup> – this last correlation being an important one to consider for Oxfam programming in indigenous communities.

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<sup>3</sup> A study of income increases as a result of a conditional cash transfer program in Ecuador found that indigenous women were 10 percentage points more likely to experience controlling behaviors from their partners and 16 percentage points more likely to report physical abuse than non-indigenous women.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

This research is important for Oxfam and other women's empowerment practitioners because it demonstrates, with instructive examples and explanations, that gender justice or women's rights goals need to be addressed in integrated ways programmatically, and that such integration must respond to context-specific relations of power that put some women at greater risk than others of negative consequences from empowerment efforts. Specifically, it is critical to know that economic status can differentiate women's risk of DV, and that WEE-DV links are shaped by other aspects of women's identities, status, and contexts. We offer here a few recommendations to make WEE programs more integrated and intersectional.

First, WEE practitioners need to be prepared to handle situations of gender-based violence among participants in their programs. This does not necessarily mean that they must become experts on VAW or offer services themselves to survivors. But it means, at the least, that they understand the reasons that WEE might increase DV risk, put in place confidential spaces where participants can disclose their experiences, know where survivors can seek help, and provide that information to women participants from the outset.

This requires some level of training for WEE practitioners, which leads to the second overall recommendation: enhanced communication and collaboration between WEE and VAW practitioners. At the community or country level, knowing where WEE and VAW programs are being supported by Oxfam and reaching out to make those connections is a great first step. VAW practitioners could provide information on the prevalence and acceptance of DV in a given context, insights on links between WEE processes and DV they have seen, DV awareness and risk mitigation training, and information on local resources and referral systems.

Other recommendations have to do with program design, with an emphasis on holistic empowerment and responsiveness to contextual factors that will impact

the outcomes of WEE programs. After outlining these suggestions, we provide an example of an Oxfam pilot project implementing some promising practices. First, any WEE program should assess its possible risk of contributing to gender-based violence and monitor the impacts it has on violence against female participants. This would include a participatory risk assessment and actual surveying of DV prevalence in the community and/or among participants at the project or program baseline, mid-term, and endline (Fries & Finigan 2015). This surveying should take account of characteristics such as age, ethnicity, and household demographics so as to identify what factors may differentiate the outcomes in any particular context. A baseline survey is critical so that we know whether DV was a pre-existing circumstance or an outcome of participation in the program.

Second in terms of program design, WEE interventions need to include components beyond providing economic resources and technical skills training. They should provide awareness-raising in about gender power relations and VAW, about how to avoid and handle household conflict (Ahmed 2005). It is also helpful to provide women with women-only spaces that encourage the formation of social networks and where they can discuss challenges, share advice, and learn about local services.

Third, awareness-raising components should involve male partners of female participants – either alone or together with women – in order to reduce the resistance and backlash that could result (CARE 2010). Working with men should focus on encouraging less biased gender attitudes, norms, and beliefs, promoting women’s rights, facilitating mutual respect and open communication, and generating common understanding about the benefits of women’s economic empowerment and the harms of violence (Fries & Finigan 2015)<sup>4</sup>. Men should also be given the opportunity to share their views and concerns about evolving household roles.

A promising example of some of these recommendations is Oxfam’s Economic Justice program in Colombia (see Fries & Finigan 2015). After a case of domestic homicide of a female WEE project participant at the hands of her

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<sup>4</sup> See this resource (Fries & Finigan 2015) for a suggested risk assessment methodology

husband, the following steps were piloted: a clause in agreements with partner organizations that commits them to a risk analysis and mitigation plan, and to monitor and act on VAW situations; awareness workshops and guidance on what to do in the case of VAW; psychosocial support for women; and review and modification of procedures followed in response to VAW detection. Another Oxfam program – Women’s Economic Empowerment and Care (WE-Care), aimed at addressing heavy and unequal care responsibilities that limit women’s ability to participate in economic activities – provides promising examples of baseline and endline questions to ask to assess DV risk and gender norms in participants’ communities. We encourage Oxfam practitioners to investigate, learn from, and build on these examples.

# CONCLUSION

This paper has presented an overview of our research into the links between women's economic empowerment and domestic violence, including explanations for the links, evidence and examples, and recommendations for practitioners. We have highlighted two main engagements with intersectionality that emerge from our research: first, although unequal gender power relations are at the root of violence against women, particular women's risk of DV is mediated by other shifting aspects of their status, including economic power; and second, the very relationships between WEE and DV are themselves differentiated by elements of socio-cultural contexts and household and individual factors. As our recommendations emphasize, it is important that WEE and VAW practitioners not only better integrate their respective programming, but that they do so knowing who is at heightened risk of DV resulting from WEE, based on context-specific analysis and knowledge. From a rights-based perspective, our discussion of the intersectionality of women's risk of DV allows us to better understand how the promotion of women's economic rights can either contribute to or detract from the fulfillment of their rights to security and freedom from gender-based violence, and that this very relationship between elements of economic equality and gender equality itself is shaped by other relations of power and privilege inherent in women's and men's lives.

# NOTES

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