



AN IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF PREVENTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE THROUGH SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD PROGRAMMING IN DIYALA, IRAQ

2022

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ACRONYMS

GBV	Gender-based violence
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPV	Intimate partner violence
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OXFAM:	Oxford Committee for Famine Relief
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WAHO	Wand Al-Khair Human Organization
WHO	World Health Organization

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research aims to ascertain lessons learned from the adaptation and implementation in Iraq of the “Indashyikirwa” programme, first carried out in Rwanda. Renamed “Khali Netghair” (“Let’s Change”) in Iraq, the programme seeks to improve the relationships of married couples. This includes reducing intimate partner violence (IPV), altering gender roles, enhancing joint decision-making, and bolstering communication skills and effective problem-solving.

“Khali Netghair” made major modifications to an adapted version of “Indashyikirwa” programme used in Lebanon. This included alterations to a couples curriculum, which was translated into Arabic in Lebanon. Some sessions were reduced in length or removed, such as those relating to the consumption of alcohol, as this is not a common problem for Muslim families in Iraq. The curriculum maintained fidelity to core concepts in terms of emphasizing gender equality and ensuring participatory sessions as well as wider community activity.

Implemented in Diyala Governorate, the programme had two components. The first involved 17 participatory sessions guided by the adapted curriculum for married couples. The sessions used different activities, such as discussions, game-playing and take-home exercises, as in the “Indashyikirwa” programme. The second component comprised 11 sessions for community leaders based on a specific curriculum for them also from the “Indashyikirwa” programme. The community leaders engaged in two types of community activities: organizing sessions for people in their neighbourhoods and daily interaction with community members to spread understanding of gender equality.

“Khali Netghair” broke with the dominant culture of segregation between men and women by bringing both together in the sessions. This was completely new in this context but greatly welcomed by participants, both men and women, as this report will explain. They appreciated a safe setting that allowed all partners to listen to each other. The division of the sessions into subgroups according to gender was also welcomed when discussing sensitive subjects, mainly around sexual relationships.

Research findings show that despite restrictive social norms and a dominant patriarchal system, new understanding emerged reflecting changes in participants’ views and behaviour, for both men and women. These related to gender roles, decision-making and problem-solving.

The main findings of the research are as follows.

1. Despite the dominance of patriarchal values and the prevalence of a ‘men-centred’ culture, there are opportunities for making positive changes related to gender equality and confronting IPV. Women were enthusiastic about changing gender roles. Some men also approached new ideas and values with open minds. The persistent power of traditional social norms, however, remains a major obstacle to change. Some programme and community leaders agreed that more time is needed to make significant progress.

2. Changes occurred in views and behaviours relating to children's rights. Most participants agreed that violence against children in the home should end. They had already started to take steps towards this goal. While prevention of violence against children was not a primary aim of the curriculum, many sessions touched on this topic. Participants' new views about child-rearing stress rejecting violence, using dialogue to communicate with children and encouraging values related to gender equality. Shifts in gender roles were evident in many parents pronouncing their rejection of underage marriage and agreeing that their daughters should continue their studies.
3. Views and behaviours related to gender roles changed for most married couples after attending the sessions. Examples were men having more trust in their wives going out; men participating in domestic chores for the first time, even with simple tasks; men refraining from using violence; and couples adopting 'diplomacy' as a new strategy in communication with their partners as well as staying calm and not escalating a heated situation. Consultation in making decisions improved in many married couples. Some reported changes in communication, such as men for the first time saying 'thank you' or 'well done' in appreciation of some activities undertaken by women, like cooking a tasty meal.
4. More understanding of different forms of violence was evident. Initially, the common idea among participants was that physical violence is the only form, with others, such as psychological, movement control and economic deprivation, not considered as violent acts.
5. The concept of 'power' was not easy for some participants to understand. At the beginning of the course, it was difficult to grasp the power dynamics that shape relationships between men and women, where men play a superior role and women are confined to a subordinate one. Later stages of the course saw increasing understanding of these issues.
6. The "Khali Netghair" programme faced contextual challenges, in particular, the lack of rule of law in Iraq. Existing laws and the institutional and judicial system do not encourage a balance of power between men and women. This is despite several policies and strategies, such as the National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women and Girls 2018-2030,¹ the National Action Plan for the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325² and the national strategy to combat violence against women in 2018,³ to name a few, all aimed at addressing gender equality. Yet specific laws, institutional structures and true political will are absent in a context that is not oriented around upholding the values of equality and justice. Despite psychological, health-care and other forms of support provided by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations, women subjected to IPV have few options to seek help in the absence of supportive laws and institutions. Community leaders and other activists use their traditional ways, mostly favouring men, with a negative impact on relations between women and men. Both programme participants and programme implementers positively evaluated the "Khali Netghair" programme as a breath of fresh air that introduced ideas they had never considered in their lives, such as 'equal gender roles' and the 'illegitimacy of violence in all its forms'. Women and men described a boost in self-esteem with the former exuding greater confidence in claiming their rights.

1 UNFPA 2018.

2 Federal Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government.

3 UNAMI and UNFPA 2018.

7. A few lessons on tools and approaches deployed by the programme included offering more relevant gender-based challenges faced by women in Iraq. Examples comprise providing more strategies to improve some aspects of marital relationships, such as around communication and problem-solving. More reflection on Iraqi national strategies relating to women's rights should be included as well as advocacy for passing an anti-domestic violence bill. More specific criteria for selecting community leaders should stress that they explicitly value gender equality. Future sessions would also benefit from putting more emphasis on violence against children.

INTRODUCTION

This study sought to identify impacts and important lessons learned from adapting the evidence-based “Indashyikirwa” programme, an IPV prevention initiative originally used in Rwanda, to Diyala Governorate in Iraq. Research endeavoured to understand how to integrate effective prevention programming in larger-scale development projects. This report presents data analysis at baseline, midline and endline to ascertain any changes in attitudes and behaviours among married couples.

The programme adapted in Iraq used the Arabic name “Khali Netghair,” meaning “Let’s Change.” The title speaks to the key aim of the intervention, which is to transform social norms and harmful practices. Modifications to the programme made it resonate in the Iraqi context. Specifically, a couples curriculum from “Indashyikirwa”, translated into Arabic and further adapted for a programme in Lebanon, was slightly altered. Some sessions were reduced in length or cut out, such as those relating to the consumption of alcohol, as this is not a common problem for the majority of Muslim families in Iraq. The Iraqi adaption maintained fidelity to most of the core concepts of the original programme⁴, however, in terms of the overall content, topics, organization of the sessions and activities with community leaders.

This report has seven sections. The first describes the socioeconomic and political context of Diyala, showing the impact of displacement due to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) occupation on marital relationships. The second section introduces the methodology and tools used to conduct this report. The third section presents findings from fieldwork on the impact of the programme. The fourth section reports findings on impacts on community leaders and the wider community. The fifth section provides the views of programme implementers. A sixth section evaluates the programme overall followed by a final section with concluding remarks and lessons learned.



SECTION 1

SECTION 1: ADAPTING THE “INDASHYIKIRWA” PROGRAMME

IPV is a serious public health problem that affects millions of women all over the world. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines it as “one of the most common forms of violence against women (that) includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and controlling behaviours by an intimate partner.”⁵ IPV is preventable, and prevention strategies have been pursued in different parts of the world. These include SASA! and the “Indashyikirwa” programme in Rwanda.⁶

Programme adaptation refers to “the process of revising and re-implementing an established programme in a new context in a way that maintains fidelity to the originally tested goals, activities, delivery techniques, intensity, and duration.”⁷ Adaptation requires first understanding the context for programme implementation, followed by modifying some elements accordingly while maintaining fidelity to the key principles of the original.

A global project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Ending Gender-Based Violence and Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals,” aimed to find innovative ways to address gender-based violence (GBV), including through integrating GBV programming in development programmes. Seven pilot projects participated, conducted by UNDP country offices in Bhutan, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Moldova, Peru and Uganda. UNDP Iraq funded Oxfam to adapt and implement two components of the “Indashyikirwa” programme to reduce a prominent form of GBV, namely, IPV.

UNDP Lebanon with its partner, Abaad, and a local psychologist adapted the “Indashyikirwa” curricula for couples and for opinion leaders to the context in Lebanon and translated the materials into Arabic. UNDP Iraq and Oxfam further adapted these materials for piloting in Diyala Governorate within a livelihood strengthening project. The first component consisted of 17 participatory sessions for married couples guided by the couples curriculum, adapted from 21 sessions conducted in Rwanda. Oxfam implemented the sessions. The second component comprised 11 sessions of training for community leaders implemented in cooperation with the Wand Al-Khair Human Organisation (WAHO).⁸ This component was guided by another curriculum component of the “Indashyikirwa” intervention—the opinion leaders curriculum. In Iraq, the term ‘community leaders’ was used instead.

The programme lasted one year, from October 2020 until September 2021, with the first three months being a preparatory phase. It ran in two districts, Khanaqin and Muqdadiyah. Experienced facilitators from the local community were recruited to run both components, including four facilitators (two females and two males) for the married couples component: one female and one male in Muqdadiyah and one female and one male in Khanaqin. WAHO recruited two gender officers, comprising one female and one male.

5 WHO 2012.

6 Stern, Martins, Stefanik, et al. 2018.

7 Ibid.

8 WAHO is implementing a livelihoods project within Diyala and Salhalden City, targeting 318 beneficiaries in the area under the jurisdiction of the Diyala government (208 Jalawla - Saadiyya).

At the programme's inception, implementers obtained approval from the governor and other authorities in the two districts, who did not intervene in any way as activities moved forward. Programme organizers put in place security measures, including to ease passage through checkpoints. Staff needed to state the starting and finishing times for each session for security purposes. The community leaders component started in March 2021 while the married couples sessions started in Khanaqin in mid-June and in Muqdadiyah during the first half of July. The selection and training of community leaders took two months. Oxfam implemented sessions for married couples over two months. In Khanaqin, this was from 15 June 2021 until the end of August 2021. In Muqdadiyah, the sessions started on 13 July and finished at the end of September.

Programme participants were selected from people taking part in cash-for-work activities in a larger livelihoods strengthening project by the same consortium of organisations (UNDP, Oxfam, WAHO) as well as those involved in vocational training and with grants for asset replacement and micro-business support. Married couples interested in programme activities were identified through the Emergency Food Security and Vulnerable Livelihoods questionnaire. One of the partners in the couple needed to be a participant in this programme. The selection included literate and illiterate people as well as those with special needs.

Sessions were community-based. In Muqdadiyah, the first session involved 22 couples, who were then divided into two groups in two different villages. In Khanaqin, 18 couples in the first session were divided into two groups from two different villages. All precautionary measures were considered, including health and safety measures given the spread of COVID-19. Coordination with local authorities mitigated security concerns. Given the limited time for the programme and initial delay in its implementation, the frequency of sessions increased from one to two per week, each lasting around two hours, starting in the morning and finishing by noon. The programme took the participants' comfort and health into consideration, providing childcare and a safe space to approach programme implementers whenever needed. Community leader sessions took place in Muqdadiyah and Khanaqin. An assessment of 40 people selected 30 participants, 10 women and 20 men, with 15 from Muqdadiyah and 15 from Khanaqin.

Diyala socioeconomic and legal context

The governorate of Diyala is in eastern-central Iraq, bordering Iran and occupying an area of 17,685 square km.⁹ Diyala has a diverse population of Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen people, with a total population of 1.65 million.¹⁰ Khanaqin is Diyala's second-largest district. It had a population estimated at 300,000 in 2017;¹¹ Muqdadiyah comprises about 200,000 people.¹²

Economically, agriculture is the most reported source of income for households in Diyala. The sector suffers from poor infrastructure and limited water supplies, however. Other major sources of income are manufacturing, such as the chemical industry; hospitality; food services; construction; metal works; automotive; carpentry; general trade and textiles.¹³ Agriculture used to be the largest

9 Oxfam 2020a.
10 Oxfam 2021.
11 IOM Iraq 2019.
12 Kärmer 2010.
13 IOM 2019.

employer but is no longer a source of new employment since the political events of 2014-2017. Families spend a high proportion of their income on food, indicating the deterioration of local agriculture.¹⁴ A 2020 humanitarian overview lists Diyala as having very severe living conditions and protection concerns.¹⁵ People in its rural areas suffer from violence, a lack of economic opportunities and poor infrastructure.¹⁶

Women, in particular, often do not benefit from economic opportunities due to household gender inequalities. Legally, women have the right to own land and work. Yet socioeconomic challenges such as unemployment, security risks and restrictive social norms prevent them from working outside their houses. International Labour Organization (ILO) statistics indicate that women's participation in the labour force reached only 11.2 percent in 2017.¹⁷ Agriculture was once the biggest employer for women but its decline has further constrained women's economic opportunities. As a result, women rely on family support to meet household needs.¹⁸

Iraq has no universal social protection policies to protect women from poverty. While women living under the poverty line are entitled to cash assistance, it is not sufficient to cover basic living expenses. Married women must rely on their husbands or extended families. Women in Diyala, like other parts of the world, shoulder the full responsibility of domestic work, which takes up most of their time and is usually neither valued nor recognized. Women in Iraq generally spend around six hours per day performing unpaid care work, such as cleaning, cooking and caring for children or the elderly.¹⁹ Despite the importance of this work to the functioning of communities, social policymakers have largely ignored it.²⁰

No law criminalizes violence against women; the Iraqi Parliament has refused attempts to do so. The Penal Code of 1969 Article 41 explicitly states that "no crime can occur where an act is carried out while exercising a legal right—such as a husband disciplining his wife."²¹

Marked gender inequality and the dominance of patriarchal gender norms are evident in a national survey where 70 percent of respondents stated that men should play a leading role in the family and women do not have the same rights as men.²² According to the survey OXFAM conducted in Diyala, 92.5 percent of participants stated that women and girls were responsible for keeping the house clean and preparing food, while 81 percent said that caring for children and/or sick people was the responsibility of women and girls. More than 40 percent of male respondents reported that they do not participate in housework chores at all.²³

Illiteracy is widespread in rural areas of Diyala. People lack access to training and new technology and struggle with security, political, economic and infrastructure barriers as well as a lack of

14 IOM Iraq 2019
15 Oxfam 2020b.
16 ICRC 2011.
17 ILO, n.d.
18 UNESCO 2019.
19 Vilardo and Bittar 2018.
20 Ibid.
21 Global Justice Center 2018.
22 Cripovich 2020.
23 Care 2015.

service providers. In addition to discriminatory social norms imposed by tribal culture, women face restrictions on mobility, family pressure, heavy domestic responsibilities, the perception that they are inferior to men and a lack of skills for employment. These factors limit them from participating in decision-making, which negatively affects their economic security and personal agency.

Tribal norms put women's lives under continuous threat. So-called 'honour' killing results in the perpetrator getting a light sentence for killing a female member of his family because this is justified as defending the family's honour. Gossa bi gossa (woman for a woman) is a wedding arrangement where the groom marries his sister to the brother of his bride. Faslia, another tribal code, allows the use of women as compensation to resolve issues and conflicts between tribes and families.²⁴

According to the patriarchal culture predominant in Iraq and social norms in Diyala, IPV is a disciplinary action sanctioned for men. This reflects the power relationship between men and women that underlines gender inequality. Family life in a male-dominated, conservative culture is structured around the concept of husbands providing financially for their family, wives and children and controlling the behaviour of the family.²⁵ Women's aim is seen as satisfying men. They owe submission, obedience and access to their bodies to their husbands, including at any time when husbands want to have sexual intercourse.²⁶ This is considered a 'man's right'; it is a woman's religious duty to comply with her husband's wishes.²⁷ Women in such systems often keep silent rather than speaking out or seeking outside help. They may stay calm and not respond to their husband's anger in order to de-escalate the situation.²⁸

24 Kaya and Makki 2021.

25 Sultana 2012.

26 James 2016.

27 Ibid.

28 Tonsing and Tonsing 2017.



SECTION 2

SECTION 2: OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research objectives were to analyse the experiences and impacts of two intervention components: the couples curriculum and the community leaders curriculum. Qualitative research involved interviewing a sample of participants from the sessions for married couples, several community leaders who took part in the workshops designed for them and programme implementers from local and international organizations. The following research questions guided the process:

How have relationship skills, the relationship quality of couples, household development, conflict resolution, decision-making and communication on different issues been affected by participation in the programme? What skills have been learned and developed?

How have the views and behaviours of community leaders on issues related to IPV, decision-making, gender roles and problem-solving been affected by participation in the programme? What skills have been learned and developed?

What are participants' experiences and what is the feedback from the workshops?

What experiences with and feedback on programme implementation do facilitators, supervisors and other implementers report?

What are the important lessons from the “Khali Netghair” programme within Iraq's context as well as more broadly in preventing GBV?

Methodology

This research was qualitative, comprising a literature review, data collection through interviews and focus group discussions with programme participants and implementers. Data were collected from married couples at baseline and midline interviews in July 2021. Another course of interviews at endline started in early October 2021 in both districts. A total of 54 interviews took place in the three stages. At baseline, 12 individual interviews involved six couples; these same people were interviewed again at endline. At midline, 12 further individual interviews were carried out with six couples; they were interviewed again at endline. Twenty interviews were conducted with married couples, rather than the planned 24, as two male members could not be reached owing to job commitments. One couple was in the process of getting a divorce, with the male partner not fit to attend the interview and the female partner not living with her husband anymore.

Six online interviews took place with six community leaders. Four interviews were held with programme implementers responsible for training community leaders in July 2021 and those who delivered the programme for the married couples in October 2021. One focus group brought together five programme implementers for the two components from both Oxfam and WAHO. Data were also collected from desk reviews of literature on women in Iraq, in general, and in Diyala, in particular.

All interviews were recorded and took place in interviewees' homes or those of others attending the sessions. Only one community leader said he would not like the interview to be recorded for his safety. Instead, his responses were written down. Information on the aims of the research and the participants' rights were explained. Written signed consent was obtained from each participant before interviews began. All were assured that no identifying information would be used and quotes from couples would be coded so their identities would remain untraceable. All interviews were transcribed in Arabic and translated into English by the author. Each transcript was coded for five categories relating to the issues explored for this research:²⁹ IPV, gender roles, communication, decision-making and problem-solving. These categories were further subcategorized into baseline, midline and endline.

While the researcher had the opportunity to investigate changes in the views and behaviours of the married couples in three stages, this was not possible for the community leaders as they had already completed their sessions before the research started.

Table 1: Implementation of the ““Khali Netghair”” programme

Programme components	Activities
Married couples	17 sessions, twice a week with take-home exercises
	Mixed groups/segregation when discussing sensitive subjects
Community leaders	11 sessions, twice a week
	Neighbourhood meetings
	Daily intervention with the community

29 Clark, Silverman, Everson-Rose, et al. 2010.



SECTION 3

SECTION 3: FINDINGS FROM MARRIED COUPLES

Intimate partner violence

Married couples' views and behaviours related to IPV at baseline

Baseline reports indicated that almost all interviewees, male and female, saw the use of IPV as legitimate and socially acceptable. They viewed IPV as an unquestionable right of men in responding to the shortcomings and bad behaviour of their wives. In fact, IPV was seen as men's duty to exert an authority that they can use at any time they see fit. While interviewees mentioned some triggers of IPV, such as economic pressures or a lack of jobs, most men and women held women responsible for provoking it. A woman who had erred or did not follow her husband's instructions would provoke him to use violence.

One woman expressed her views of IPV as a legitimate action, stating that:

I know there are some kinds of women who would not learn unless they are beaten up. If a woman disobeys her man, she deserves to be beaten. If she does not listen to him, or if she goes out without his consent... If a man sees there are shortcomings in the house, or a woman has failed to provide a comfortable status, like a clean house, or food, the man definitely would be agitated, but if everything was in place, he would not be angry (BF2).

The predominant view among interviewees was that violence against women is justified if they do not meet men's expectations or adhere to dominant gender role norms. A delay in carrying out domestic chores, for instance, could result in women receiving physical or verbal punishment. A woman at baseline contended that if women do not obey their husbands, that would be grounds for the latter to divorce the former. The interviewee stated: "If I want to go shopping and he tells me not to go out, I should respect his opinion. If anything happens and you go out of the house, he has the right to divorce you" (BF5). The threat of divorcing women or sending them forcibly to their natal families or even marrying another woman was mentioned by most interviewees as ways to discipline women. One interviewee stated: "There are trivial issues that do not need the use of violence but other things that pass the red line are punishable, such as committing adultery or doing things without consent or behind her husband. If a man came to the house and saw there was a mistake, of course, he would erupt" (BM2).

Women subjected to IPV often hesitated to share their experiences with others. A 'good woman' was described as "one who keeps the secrets of her house to herself and would not expose them to her relatives or even close family" (BF3). In particular, talking against one's husband as the breadwinner of the house was described as unacceptable behaviour (CF2). For this reason, seeking help or support from others, such as services provided by state or non-state organizations, would be seen as disloyal. A programme implementer stated that "when they presented some options for a woman who had been subjected to violence, the latter protested 'do you want to destroy my family?'" (PF1). These attitudes and behaviours undercut healthy relationships and impact women's health and self-esteem, rendering them more vulnerable to IPV.

Interviewees rarely mentioned the impact of IPV on women's health and well-being. But one woman did explain, in tears, the ways that her husband insulted and hurt her: "Women should not be beaten. There should be no shouting. It is not good to use violence against women" (BF6).

To avoid this 'punishment', interviewees stressed that women should take extra caution not to trigger their husbands' anger. To this end, the most common strategy used by women was to behave calmly and not talk back to the angry husband as this could lead to physical violence. An interviewee explained that "the woman should not put her head to the head of the man. Women should obey their husbands, otherwise, what is his role in the house?" (FB3).

Married couples' views and behaviours related to IPV at midline

Following seven sessions, interviews with another group of married couples surfaced new views. These revolved around the notion that violence was wrong and alternative practices could communicate partners' sentiments. A female partner recalled that, before the sessions started, her husband had used severe forms of violence against her. She remembered that once he stabbed her hand with scissors when she was praying. Following the sessions, she had asked him whether he would do it again. She stated, "I reminded him when we spoke about violence in the session. I asked him would you stab me again. He replied, 'God's will, it will not happen again'" (MF6). This interviewee shared her view that "openness is the alternative of using power. Good negotiation is better than violence."

Some interviewees at baseline attributed the use of IPV to "the women's wrongdoing, the nagging of women as well as the unemployment of men, leaving them sitting at home doing nothing" (MF6).³⁰ Interviewees at midline reported no noticeable difference in understanding of the causes of IPV. Only one female interviewee expressed the view that "those who used violence were sick, thus needing treatment and that they should be held accountable for their actions" (BF3).

One common form of IPV is sexual violence. The programme talked about the social norms that reinforce men's power vis-à-vis their female partners³¹ and challenged the common myth that sex is a right for men and the duty of women. The general impression among men and women at midline was that sex should not be forced. Couples should enter into a mutual agreement and there should be sexual consent. The participants recognized that forcing sexual contact is a form of violence. A male member explained, "When we want to have sex, she should agree. You cannot force your wife to have sex with you...otherwise, this would be considered as violence" (MM6). One female participant explained the shift in her partner's thinking: "Before, he used to force me to have sex with him. He would get cross with me. Now, if I am tired, he will leave me alone" (MF5).

Married couples' views and behaviour related to IPV at endline

All participants stated that the sessions had provided them with new perspectives on life, involving respect, trust and awareness of women's rights. One illustrative example is a female interviewee summarizing changes in her husband's behaviour owing to their attendance:

³⁰ Statistics during COVID-19 showed that men staying with women for a long period of time without work contributed to GBV.
³¹ Sharma, Leight, Verani, et al. 2020.

They—the sessions—raised our awareness about new things. All that we knew is the chores and work. We did not know anything about life... Yes, my husband was very harsh with me... He was not like a human being. But now he knows what life is. He was extreme and now he has changed because of the course, or maybe because of the teachers (the facilitators). They were so respectful. We did not know what our rights are. We did not know what children's rights are. Now, he is very good (BF6).

New thinking was evident where participants expressed that using violence is wrong and men should use 'diplomacy' instead. This meant more communication and self-control in interacting with wives and children. A male interviewee affirmed that "women should not be beaten. We should be diplomatic. By diplomacy, I mean, not to lash out or shout at my wife" (MM6).

One positive shift put forward by a few men and women was a reduction in the former's control over the latter's freedom of movement. A male interviewee explained, "In the past, I did not allow her to go anywhere without my permission. I used to swear at her a lot. Now, after they advised us that we have to communicate with each other in a better manner, I would not mind if she goes to places as she likes without me being at home. She goes to visit her family as she chooses and if she asked me, I would accept this. My relationship with my wife and children has improved a lot" (MM3).

All participants, male and female, criticized their own previous behaviour of using violence against children. Rejection of violence against children appeared in all interviews as something new that they had not heard about before. They described the severity of their punishments of children to bring them 'back on track' as something in the past. Critical of their previous behaviour, they talked of using 'diplomacy' instead of violence.

Two cases of married couples provide examples of patterns of change related to IPV.

The story of BF1 and BM1

This couple had been married for a few years. The husband forced his wife to go to her in-laws twice a day to do chores. The female partner explained:

I had to go and clean his parents' house twice a day even when I am ill. He stood with his family against me. For me, now the situation has changed. Now, he trusts me. Once I was in my parents' house and I wanted to come back home. My brother was not home to take me back home. My husband said rent a taxi and come home; he trusted me. Before, he would not permit me to go to see a doctor. But now, he would not mind. Now, he would not care about what people say. He told me satisfying people is an unreachable aim (BF1).

The husband, for his part, who came to the interview calm and confident, said that he would allow his wife to go out. "In the past, I did not allow her to go out, because I would be worried about her. You know, we live in a tribal area. But now, she goes out freely" (BM1). This statement was confirmed by his female partner (in her own interview session), stating: "We have been influenced a lot by the sessions. Now, the situation has changed" (BF1).

The story of BF6 and BM6

A female interviewee who was in tears throughout the 40-minute interview at baseline shared her experience, saying that the violence used by her husband had left her feeling unsafe and threatened most of the time. "I could not talk to my husband, because he would shout, and our neighbour would hear us. Sometimes, he would beat me up. He would swear at me in front of our guests; he did not respect me. He did not respect my family and he had no responsibility towards our home" (BF6).

At the endline stage, she came to the interview with a wide happy smile and shining eyes. When asked how it was going, she replied: "He has changed a lot. The difference is like that between sky and earth!" (BF6). Her partner, who was very nervous at the baseline interview, appeared at the endline interview more relaxed and content. When the husband, who used to answer questions very curtly at baseline, was asked about the impact of the programme, he said, "I will sign with my 10 fingers that the sessions have had a good impact" (BM6). This idiomatic phrase demonstrates that he was positively influenced by the sessions.

Table 2: Married couples' changes in views and behaviours related to IPV

Subject	Baseline	Midline	Endline
IPV	Acceptance of violence by married couples (male and females)	The use of violence is wrong; there are alternatives	Using diplomacy (communication and self-control)
	Legitimizing anger/violence (men)	Women provoke men to use violence	Rejecting violence yet justifying it on some grounds
	Women's wrongdoing, nagging cause violence		
	Understanding physical forms as the only form of violence	Understanding that insulting women is wrong	More understanding of different forms of violence (e.g., emotional, sexual, controlling behaviours)
	Forcing women to have sex with men (men)	Men did not force women to have sex with them	Seeking women's consent
	Submission to men's sexual desire (women)	Women criticized partners' violent behaviour	Asserting women's right to say no
	Preventing women from using mobile phones		Allowance for the use of mobile phones
Controlling women's movement outside the house	Preference of good negotiation over using violence	Allowing women to go out (in some cases still only if she is accompanied by a male family member)	

Gender roles

Married couples' views and behaviour related to gender roles at baseline

Patriarchal gender norms and roles in Iraq, as in other Arab States, are shaped by the notion that men provide for the family as the sole breadwinner and should act as the protector of the family's honour and dignity. Women are charged with domestic chores and complying with the order set by men. The workloads and daily activities of women and men are unequally distributed. As in many other countries, women work longer hours than men, without payment.³² They provide unpaid care and other domestic services, such as securing water and fuel supplies.³³ From a religious point of view, men should be responsible for the family's livelihood; women are not obliged to make a financial contribution to the family income. All interviewees, men and women, saw women's roles as carrying out domestic chores as well as other handy work, such as repairing broken machines, moving furniture around the house, extending water pipes from outside to inside the house,

32 IFAD 2016.

33 Ibid.

carrying gas tubes from vans, gardening and watering the plants, and feeding chickens, among others. In addition, they provide caregiving for children and the husband.

One female participant explained how she saw the labour division within her family: “Men’s work is to bring living means to the family, and women should carry out domestic work. He (the husband) does not allow me to work outside the home, because I have children. He told me if I want to work, this has to be inside the house” (BF2). Another woman summarized the roles and responsibilities of men as: “Men should go out and work. If someone is sick, he would take him to the hospital. The man should watch out. His responsibility is to watch for any wrong behaviour. If I want to go shopping and he tells me not to go out, I should respect his opinion. If anything happens and you go out of the house, he has the right to divorce you” (BF5).

Married couples strongly adhered to the authoritarian roles of men in the family. The predominant beliefs shared at the baseline interviews were that women should not go out or do anything without permission from their husbands. A male member of one couple explained: “In our society, women’s freedom is limited. Men intervene in everything women do. They would say, for example, wear reasonable clothes or decrease your going out. Women in the village understand this and they accept it. They are not rigid. If you ask me whether women have choices, I would say only 50 per cent do in our Arab society. Women used to see this in their natal families; when they move to their husband’s house, they would be expected to do the same” (BM4).

Married couples’ views and behaviour related to gender roles at midline

During midline interviews, the couples’ reports differed from the baseline reports in three main areas. The first one relates to women working outside the house, one of the most important aspects of women’s economic empowerment. A female interviewee stated at the midline interview that she did not accept the idea that women could work outside the house until she attended the sessions; her mind had changed. Many who accepted women’s paid work said this had to be in the government, not at private firms, or involve work from home. In any case, they said, the husband should approve women’s work outside the house.

Secondly, working women were expected to undertake domestic work without the participation of their male partners. A female participant explained that she “had to wake up early in the morning to finish the housework before she went to work” (MF6). The notion that men should take part in domestic work was not familiar to most of the married couple interviewees, men and women. Men felt that they would bring themselves down if they did “women’s work” (MM3). The essence of this programme as well as other women’s economic empowerment initiatives should be to engage with men to transform problematic, burdensome gender norms that ultimately are an obstacle to successful economic empowerment.

A dominant perception remained that it is men’s duty to police women’s behaviour. Women’s physical mobility and right to make independent decisions on matters affecting them were, to a vast extent, constrained by men’s authority. At the baseline stage participants described how men usually made their wives wait for days before permitting them to go to their parents. One interviewee explained the reason for this delay: “Men cannot run the house in the absence of women and there

is the feeling of boredom” (BF1). Statements from female and male interviewees, however, showed a slight change in men’s views regarding women’s decision-making about matters important for them, such as visiting the family or seeing a doctor. This does not mean, however, that women at midline had a better situation at home in terms of their rights.

Married couples’ views and behaviour related to gender roles at endline

Changing gender roles was challenging for married couples in both sites. Most men still had reservations about women working outside the home. A few of those interviewed accepted the idea that women could do so but this had to be in the public sector and not the private one. A male partner shared his rejection of the notion of changing gender roles as socially unacceptable, saying, “It is difficult to change gender roles outside the home. How can a woman exchange her role with me? I am a taxi driver. Would it be possible to drive a taxi? If it is a governmental job or working for an organization this would be possible” (MM1). Men and women agreed that when working outside the house, a woman should maintain her husband’s reputation and honour in the surrounding community, as these are powerful values in this society.

Men’s participation in housework was not seen favourably by most men and even some women. At the endline, however, most couples accepted the notion that men should ‘help’ with or ‘share’ domestic work as an ‘urgent intervention’. These ‘emergencies’ included the woman being too ill, during childbirth or pregnancy or when she is absent from the home. One female interviewee stated: “Men can participate in the housework, if their wife is ill, or if they are employed. They (men) would feel they are losing their power if they did that (housework). My husband does help if I am away from home” (BF3).

These roles could be described as secondary to tasks carried out by women, who still carried the major burden when it came to care and domestic work at home. Men said they took on some tasks, such as feeding chickens, watering the garden, bathing boys and filling tanks with water. In addition, they engaged in some other activities that require strength, such as carrying heavy things in the house or outdoor activities, such as shopping (MM4 and MF6). A male participant expressed how he had changed his perspective of the division in gender roles and applied it to his children. He said, “I am encouraging my son to help his sister, if he is a man, in washing dishes. I want him to have the feeling of helping his sister” (MM6). This is an example of new thinking and practices starting in a highly patriarchal community, demonstrating some initial steps towards forging equitable power relationships among married couples and their families.

The policing of women’s behaviour seemed changed at the ending, with evidence of a fresh mood of trust by some husbands in women having the freedom to carry out personal and social activities outside the home. A female partner explained that the change in her husband’s views towards her requests to go out, stating, “In the past, he would carry out a complete investigation with me before he allowed me to visit my family; now he would not mind” (MF4). A male member explained that he trusted his wife to go out more often than before. He explained, “I do not pay a lot of attention to the social norms, and I do what I believe is right for myself and my family” (BM2).

The most significant change related to gender roles mentioned by many interviewees was their acceptance of their daughters continuing their education owing to what they had learned from the sessions. For a few, views regarding girls' education had progressed during displacement and seeing girls go to school and university in their new location (MF4). Others adopted this perspective through the course of the sessions. It is a reasonable conclusion that during the sessions, some views slightly changed among women and men, in particular around roles in the home.

The story of MM4 and MF4

One married couple (MM4 and MF4) provided an example of changes in perspectives. The husband explained, at the midline stage, that the sessions had encouraged him to share some household responsibilities. He stated:

I did not help my wife in the past. I used to bring money home, hand it to her and she would manage everything. She would go shopping and do the cooking, cleaning and other things. When she asked me to help her because she did everything in the house, or when she complained that she was tired, I would say, it is your problem, not mine. I would tell her, it's my responsibility to bring money home, the rest is your responsibility. But now, I have started to prepare breakfast for her and the children, and they are very happy about that (MM4).

The female partner explained how her husband had started to change his behaviour. In the past, he would wake her up any time he wanted, but after the sessions, he stopped doing that and did things that he had never done before. She shared her experience by stating: "I am more tired than him. He could go to take a rest in the afternoon or the evening, but my work is day and night. I can rest only when I sleep. Before, when I was asleep, and no matter what time it was, he would wake me up to make him breakfast, but now he is doing his food himself" (MF4).

Table 3: Married couples' changes in views and behaviours related to gender roles

Subject	Baseline	Midline	Endline
Gender roles	Rejection of women's paid work	Accepting the idea that women could work outside the home	
		Women can work from home or in the government sector but not at private enterprises	Women can work in the government sector but not the private one, depending on men's approval
		Women's work outside the home should be approved by the husband	
Domestic Chores	Chores and all house duties are women's responsibilities only	Working women should undertake domestic work with no participation of male partners	Men can participate and contribute to housework (e.g., making breakfast, shopping, moving furniture)
	Men do chores only if women are unable (ill, pregnant, outside the home)		Men can share chore responsibilities even while women are at home
Policing women's behaviour	The traditional division of labour for boys and girls	A slight change in men acceptance of women's movements, such as visiting family or seeing a doctor	Teaching children new gender roles through assigning similar chores to both boys and girls
	A dominant perception that policing women's behaviour is a man's duty		Men would accept women's freedom to go out but women need to ask for men's permission in advance
Opportunities for girls	Refusing higher education for girls	Starting to accept the idea of girls attending schools and higher education	Accepting and encouraging girls in continuing their studies

Communication skills

Married couples' views and behaviour related to communication at baseline

Good communication is important for married couples as a prerequisite for a healthy relationship and for solving problems and decision-making.³⁴ It enables partners to manage distress.³⁵ Good partnership promotes emotional well-being, which is part and parcel of marital satisfaction. Almost all interviewees confirmed the importance of good communication as an asset for healthy relationships that ensure respect and trust. Most interviewees described the most important characteristics of good communication as listening to each other, trusting each other and not believing in rumours against each other. A male member described good communication as: “When you are on the same page with your wife, if you understand each other, the family will be happy. If she goes out, I do the chores. I would talk to her about what happened outside. If I am upset, she would comfort me and calm me down” (BM3). A female participant also painted a picture of what fosters good communication: “The partner should not listen to the gossip of other people. They must be open with each other and listen to each other before they judge each other. A good and healthy relationship should be based on respect and trust” (BF4).

At baseline, some interviewees confirmed a lack of good communication with their partners. They stated that sorrow, sadness or frustration were rarely shared openly between partners; it was common for men to keep their problems to themselves if they were upset or angry. Women were also reserved and kept their concerns away from their husbands. Lack of communication was attributed to distrust in the partner, fear of bringing self-worth down and fear of the misuse of shared information to shame the woman. A few women said they would not feel safe disclosing any problems they may face, whether in their own home or their natal family. This caution was to avoid any possibility that their husbands would use such information against them if things went wrong. From a male partner's point of view, men did not share concerns with their wives because they believed they should not be seen complaining or suffering as they would be perceived as weak and vulnerable. A male interviewee at baseline explained:

In the village, the man would not expose their concerns to their wives, whether he is sad or upset so that she does not think he is a weak man. If she felt so, he would be afraid that would impact his position as head of the family. Even in sickness, he would not tell his wife until he reaches a point that he has to tell her. If a man hides nothing and shares things with his wife, he would be criticized. This would be seen as a failure on the man's part. The men in villages are unlike men in urban cities, who are more open with their wives. Men in the village are more in control than men in the city, because of the traditions and religion (BM4).

Other male partners reflected on the power imbalance in the married couple relationship that portrayed men as superior to women: “A man usually does not want to come down to talk to his wife. His dignity would not allow him. He has the feeling that he is superior to her” (BF3).

34 Rajan and Naufal 2018.

35 Ibid.

Many obstacles constrained communication related to sexual intercourse. In patriarchal marital relationships, the sexual enjoyment of men is put first over women's needs.³⁶ Women attempt to fulfil their partner's needs regardless of their desire. From a woman's point of view, a sexual relationship is "an effort to reduce marital conflict."³⁷ From a man's perspective, women rejecting sex with their husbands is only acceptable if they are pregnant or ill. Intimacy, love, desire or readiness were not mentioned as prerequisites to engage in sexual intercourse. Both males and females explained sex as a 'duty' or 'right'; a duty for women and a right for men to control women's bodies. Several female interviewees described men's use of violence and forced sex. To avoid negative consequences or even violence, women would acquiesce to their husband's sexual needs. The following statement by a female interviewee sums up a wide range of issues connected to sexual intercourse.

Women sometimes cannot give their husbands their rights. No one should pressure the other person because the psychological state is very important. The problem is when the husband does not care about his wife's feelings, whether she is ready or not. If a woman refuses to sleep with her husband, he would start to suspect that she is seeing someone else. To avoid such accusations a woman would keep silent and satisfy her husband's desire. The same thing happens to a woman if she initiates (sex) and he refuses. She would feel that he may have a desire for another woman or maybe he wants to marry someone else (BF4).

The sexual satisfaction of women was rarely mentioned. A female interviewee explained that: "The man would satisfy his desire and then, he would leave her alone. He would not think that, if he did not satisfy her needs, she might go out to find someone else. The problem is that wives do not talk freely with their husbands about these feelings. They are either shy or they feel this would harm their dignity" (MF3).

Interviewees did not view creating good communication as a shared responsibility of both partners but invariably the woman's obligation. Women, according to the interviewees, have specific skills that enable them to foster good communication. One woman stated: "If the woman is not close to her husband and her behaviour is dry, and she is busy all day with her chores, the man does not talk to her. A woman should sense if something is going on in her husband's mind" (BF1). Despite men enjoying the superior role in the home, they took no responsibility for creating good communication. Women were held responsible even though they had less power than men in their relationships.

Married couples' views and behaviour related to communication at midline

During the midline interviews, participants described how their views or behaviour had changed somewhat. Male partners explained how their behaviour had changed towards their wives and that they had started to take care of them. Some actions taken by male partners were as simple as saying "thank you" or "well done" for meals women had cooked or showing appreciation of some of their contributions.

³⁶ Azar, Bradbury-Jones and Kroll 2021.

³⁷ Elliott and Umberson 2008.

A male partner said: “Things have changed. Now, I thank my wife and I would say ‘well done’. Before, I used to beat her up” (MM6). Another interviewee explained that he had told his wife “thank you” during Ramadan (the fasting month for Muslims) “because she had cooked a delicious meal” (MM3). Couples began to realize that husbands had not prioritized taking care of women’s well-being. One male interviewee stated, “Before, if my wife was ill, I would have asked my wife’s sister or my brother to take her to see a doctor. Now, I am doing that myself without asking anybody else” (MM4).

A few interviewees described improved communication skills. One man stated: “We have become more aware of how to communicate with others, with my wife, and with my neighbourhood and how to respect people in the session” (MM6). A woman reported that she felt a big difference in communication with her husband: “Now we go out with each other. If I am bored he would take me to my family...in our sexual intercourse, now he cares if I am sick or I am not in the mood. Before, he used to get cross with me” (MF1).

A few women reported having the strength to share their concerns with their husbands. A female interviewee said: “Men tell their wives what concerns them, so wives say something to comfort them. But sometimes men shut down, they say, ‘It is secret, and I should not tell my wife’. Me too, if I have a problem, I would not share it with him. Now I have psychological power because of the sessions. I will talk with him about any subject” (MF1).

The other aspect of improved communication related to children’s upbringing. Many male and female interviewees noted that their communication with their children had greatly improved. A male member said: “The sessions were very useful and good. Before, when my children made noise, I would beat them. I used to beat my children on their heads. Now, I have stopped doing this” (MM4). A similar change was also reported by another female interviewee: “I was always angry and tense with my kids. He used to be angry at me, then I will reflect it on my kids. Now, my daughter’s picture crosses my mind when we talk in the classes, because I oppressed her a lot. She is only 12 years old. Now my behaviour has changed with my kids and with my husband” (MF6).

Some interviewees reported treating the wife respectfully as starting to occur following a few sessions. Men began responding positively to their wives requesting to go out or visit their natal families. One man explained: “The way I treat my wife has improved. In the past, when my wife asked me to visit her family, I would tell her ok, tomorrow or after tomorrow until she forgot the subject. Now things have changed. The talks in the session have influenced both of us” (MM5).

Married couples’ views and behaviour related to communication at endline

Male partners mentioned that, following the sessions, they were more prepared to spend time with their wives or go out with each other. A male partner explained: “Now when I go out, I take my wife with me. Thank God, we apply what we have learned. We have become more aware of how to communicate with each other, with neighbours, with females and males. How to better communicate with the wife. How to respect people in the session” (MM3).

A male partner said: “We used to shout and scream at each other. Following this course, we have more conversations with each other... We did not understand each other; we did not go out together, whether to the market or other [places]. Being in the course allowed us to listen to new views and ideas.”

The story of MF1

A female member of a married couple described shifts in her husband’s behaviour and communication after the sessions. Before, her husband had not usually talked to her or conversed with her. He did not share with her where he went, whom he met and what they would do when he went out and socialized. She said:

He does not talk to me about stuff and things happening with him. The society where we live does not allow men to talk to women about everything. But following the sessions, he started to talk about many things going on in his surroundings. When I see him upset, I will ask him why he is so. I asked him if he can tell me what bothers him. I would tell him, “I may be able to help if you share with me your problem” and he will do the same. He will ask me what bothers me if he sees me not in a good mood. If there is a problem in the house, I will tell him. Before, if anything happened between me and my in-laws, I would not say anything, because he would take their side. But now, I do not feel afraid. I will tell him. Since we have been on this course, he has started to balance between me and my in-laws” (MF1).

The story of BF6

A female partner explained that people used to describe her as a weak person. Her husband used to swear at her and her family. He would humiliate her family when they came to visit her, while when his family came, he would celebrate their visit. Even when he and his wife had sexual intercourse, he would do it, as she described, “without any sign of love or intimacy.”

After attending the sessions, she saw herself as becoming more confident in expressing her feelings. If he wanted to do what she saw as ‘wrong’, she would voice her opinion. She said: “He wanted to sell our house furniture, but I did not allow this to happen.” She asserted her opinion. In the past, as she explained, she would keep quiet and let things go to avoid his anger. But now, she felt confident in discussing matters, defending her opinion and objecting when she saw that something wrong was about to happen (BF6).

Table 4: Married couples' changes in views and behaviour related to communication

Subject	Baseline	Midline	Endline
Communication	Talking only about necessities	More awareness of how to communicate with others	More talk and chat about a variety of topics
	Shouting and screaming		More calm conversation
	No appreciation of women's work (e.g., rarely saying "thank you")	Men had started to say "thank you" and "well done" to their wives.	More appreciation of women's work with men saying "thank you" and "well done"
	Women do not express their views or concerns to their husbands	Women feel more confident in talking to their husbands about any subject	Women are more assertive in voicing their opinions and more open in sharing their concerns
	Men do not expose their concerns	Men share concerns with their wives; more women share concerns with their husbands	More openness and sharing
	Asking others to accompany the wife to carry out her tasks	Husbands take responsibility for supporting their wives' health instead of asking others to do so	Going out with the wife to the market or doctor
	Not spending time with the family		Going out with the family, organizing picnics
	Ignoring women's health and well-being		Men taking more care of women (leaving them to sleep and rest)
	No attention to what women want or need	Changes in the way husbands treat their wives.	More attention to what women want and need

Decision-making

Married couples' views and behaviour related to decision-making at baseline

The fieldwork revealed that women have a lesser role in making decisions compared to men. Men view women, including their wives, as less capable, weak and inferior. Men have power over women to control their movement in their household, including to stop them from working outside the home or even choosing the clothes they wear. While many research participants confirmed acceptance of the notion that married couples should make decisions together, very few women reported that they had a role in decision-making, with most saying that this was in the man's hands. One interviewee involved in decision-making stated:

In general, men take decisions by themselves; they do not consult with their wives. They think women are less than them and that they understand more than women. We always make our decisions together. For example, when we built our house, we did it together to save on workers' wages. But other families waste their money and they do not share their ideas (BF4).

A female interviewee explained the justification for not allowing women to make decisions on an equal basis with men. She stated: "Men are more knowledgeable and they are more aware than women. Women usually stay home for homemaking, while men are outside the home making a living for the family and they know what is the best thing to do" (BF2). Such views were common among males and females. A female interviewee said: "The man is in charge of making decisions. But if he died, then the woman would assume this responsibility" (BF2).

The role of men and women in decision-making varied. Married couples explained, for example, that financial decisions are the responsibility of the man. A female interviewee said:

Men are in charge of financial decisions because they go out, do shopping, and everything needed in the house; the husband would take care of all these things. Men may consult with their wives, but they make the decisions at the end of the day. Society kills any capacity of women to have a say; everything is in the man's hand (BF2).

Husbands approve decisions on women's work, going out, visiting family or friends and conducting social duties, such as attending wedding parties or similar events. One man reported:

I would tell my wife what she can and cannot do. If the husband does not want his wife to go out, then she should not go out. Women cannot enforce what they want on men. Women could use their power over children and their homes, but the big decisions should be taken by men. The final decision is in the men's hands. Men order and prevent women from doing what they see as inappropriate behaviour (BM2).

Women who enjoy decision-making on par with men are often stereotyped as controlling their husbands. A female interviewee explained: "Some women decide for their houses when men have

weak personalities. If a man has a weak personality, the woman would become the man of the home, because he has no opinion on what is going on in the home” (BF1). This shows the need to challenge the dominant gender norms.

Men mainly determine financial decisions. As mentioned earlier, bringing cash into the home is perceived as their essential role. Since they make a living for their family, they have the right to make financial decisions as the custodian, protector and maintainer of the family, according to one man (BM4). For women, even if they work and earn money, their financial contribution will not make them an equal partner in decision-making. Interviews with both male and female partners revealed that very few men handed their income to women to spend on the household without questioning them how they had spent it, with the majority having complete control over the family’s income. A male member explained:

Most of the money decisions are made by men. Women rarely have a say regarding finance. Men are the breadwinners, and they are usually in charge of how money should be spent in their homes. In Islam, the man is responsible for his family. Even if his wife has an income or his wife works on the farm, he is still responsible for her living expenses, her food and her clothes. If a woman has an income, men are not allowed to use it unless she agrees to do so. I believe that men and women should share decisions related to their finances (BM4).

Some female interviewees mentioned living with extended families as a factor affecting their ability to make decisions, as they were influenced by in-laws’ opinions. A woman living with an extended family stated the following: “Living with extended families affected our family decisions. We had four daughters-in-law, with 20 children. We wanted to build a house in a faraway area. They (the in-laws) objected, so we had to build a house close to them” (BF3). Many married couples lose their ability to make decisions regarding their nuclear family as they must prioritize commitments to extended families. A male member explained that: “Living with extended families impacts on the husbands as they should consult their fathers, mothers, elder brothers, maybe their cousins. The wives are less consulted with, or even their opinion is not required. But if I live alone with her, I will consult with her” (BM3).

Regarding the impact of extended families on the ability of couples to freely make decisions, some women referred to displacement as an important opportunity to live on their own and have the freedom to make their own decisions. A female partner explained:

We cannot live like before. We started to find joy by being with our children, with no interference from the wider family. After displacement, life has changed for us; relationships have changed. There is no interference in our own decisions. We have become more independent. We have seen a new way of life. This has impacted our daily practices (BF3).

Married couples’ views and behaviour related to decision-making at midline

Among the couples interviewed at midline, women described men as still holding the power to make decisions. A female who shared her experience stated: “It is true that men’s word prevails,

but participation is nice. Men should consult with women, but men do not do that. They do not listen to women because the man feels he has enough wisdom and thinks that he does not need to listen to his woman. He would ask, 'Why should I consult with her?'" (MF1). A few male partners took the matter lightly, saying they would not mind consulting with their wives. A male member reported: "It would not hurt, and you would not lose anything if you ask her opinion. Because she is your life partner" (BM2).

Simple decisions relating to women's freedom to go out to see a doctor or to socialize with persons outside the home should be approved by husbands. A male partner explained:

Every month or two months a driver from our relatives in the village comes to drive her to her family and when she wants to come back, he would bring her back. The decision is between both of us. The same thing happens if she wants to go to the market. She does not go alone because we have to be careful. She cannot take a taxi from the road; her husband or son has to be with her, and it is not right to deal with strangers (MM2).

Regarding paid work, men indicated they would accept this for women as it would support the household financially. A male member explained, "I have no problem if she works; that would lighten my responsibility" (MM2). This suggests that the programme encouraged more acceptance of women having paid work. A graduate female interviewee explained: "In the past, I had a chance to work as a lecturer, but my husband had prevented me from taking the job. Now, following the attendance at the sessions he regretted his act" (MF1).

Married couples' views and behaviour related to decision-making at endline

The impact of the sessions on married couple's decision-making is far from being straightforward, given that men enjoy more autonomy, power and privilege because of a multi-level system of patriarchy. Fieldwork revealed some slight changes in husbands' views about women's roles in decision-making. A few saw the advantage of consulting women, although some beliefs remained rigid with respect to this. Some changes in behaviour around decision-making had occurred. A male interviewee explained: "Before, I used to follow a saying of our prophet Mohammed, consult them (women) and disagree with them. But I found that consulting my wife could be beneficial. I asked for her opinion, and she provided good ideas and some advice, which was reasonable" (MM1). A female interviewee explained how her husband had changed and become closer to her: "In the past, he used to be very stubborn, but now we make decisions together. Before, he insisted to name our child. Now, he said I should give him the name I want. Now, we consult one another" (BF1). The views and practices of interviewed married men living within extended families did not seem to change very much. A male member shared in the endline interview: "The husband is the first person in charge of making decisions. However, I have to ask my mother who lives with us in the house. I would ask her opinion about anything I want to do. I also consult with my wife" (MM6).

Men appear to maintain the upper hand in decision-making, with isolated cases where women are in more powerful positions and make decisions for the family. There is no evidence that women are regularly consulted on big decisions; these still appear to be the domain of men.

Table 5: Married couples' changes in views and behaviour related to decision-making

Subject	Baseline	Midline	Endline
Decision-making	Men mostly make decisions	A hesitant acceptance of consulting women's opinions	Men still make decisions but a few do so after consultation with their wives
	Men consult the extended family before their wives		A few men consult both the extended family and their wives
	Men should approve women's work outside the home or any other decision related to them going out	Men welcome and appreciate the economic role of women to support the household financially	Men should approve of women working in some form but are more flexible in allowing them to go out
	Men delay making decisions if women want to go out	Consultation with women is good but men's word should prevail	
	No consultation with women	Husbands should approve decisions related to going out	Consultation with women is seen as a good idea
	Men make big decisions; women make decisions related to the children and homemaking	Men are more prepared to negotiate in the decision-making process	More advisory and cooperation roles between the two, including on broader decisions (not just on children and the home)
	Men have a major role in financial decisions	Women have a limited role in financial management	Big financial decisions are still in men's hands
	Girls prevented from going to school	More acceptance of girls going to school	Joint agreement about allowing girls to continue their education

Problem-solving

Married couples' views and behaviour related to problem-solving at endline

Data on problem-solving were only explored at endline with some questions posed to participants to reflect on their previous experiences. The communication patterns used by married couples in solving problems, as the initial fieldwork revealed, often involved a destructive style of escalation of conflict, withdrawal and little or no dialogue. The use of violence, shouting, screaming and imposing one's will on the other was common. Interviewees reported no positive, constructive resolutions or skills for resolving conflicts. Listening, negotiating or reaching a compromise benefitting both partners were absent. Imposing the will of one party on another appeared to be a common strategy to settle conflicts. Given the powerful role of men in families, situations almost invariably ended with them having the final word.

The sessions provided the married couples with a few strategies for problem-solving. One of the most common, which most interviewees repeatedly mentioned during interviews, was 'withdrawal'.³⁸ Withdrawal involves staying calm and refusing any discussion of the problem at hand during heated moments until the two parties have calmed down (Wagner et al., 2019). This can be an important strategy for de-escalating and avoiding any aggressive interaction, such as violence or insults.³⁹ Interviewees adopted different options that they found useful in solving their problems, including changing locations, standing instead of sitting down or leaving the place and going outside for a few minutes to cool down—in other words, any action that would take one's mind away from the heat of the moment. Interviewees greatly admired this kind of behaviour and nearly all of them accepted it as a good practice to calm the situation down.

Many interviewees reported this approach as helping to solve problems. One male member explained that solving his problems with his partner had changed. He stated: "I do not use force anymore. They have taught us, if a problem happens between a husband and wife, we should do something. When I get angry, I remember what we have been told in the sessions, so I feel calm" (MM6). A female partner explained that she used 'diplomacy' to tackle problems. This meant, in her view, staying calm and peacefully dealing with the matter. She explained the changes in her problem-solving skills: "In the past when we had a problem happen, we each would talk over the other person. But now, I leave him until he relaxes and then, I come to talk to him" (MF6). Another female participant noted: "The impact of the course on my behaviour is that when I see him nervous and tense, I leave him until he calms down. You have to give it some time until he becomes quiet. Then, I will talk to him. We have to choose the best time to talk again" (BF2).

38 Wagner, Mosmann, Scheeren, et al. 2019.

39 Ibid.

Table 6: Married couples' changes in views and behaviours related to problem-solving

Subject	Baseline	Endline
Problem-solving	Men impose their will on women	Using diplomacy to tackle problems
	Screaming, shouting and talking over each other in the heat of the moment	Using withdrawal and waiting for a calm time to address the problem



SECTION 4

SECTION 4: FINDINGS FROM COMMUNITY LEADERS

People often turn to community leaders for advice, opinions and guidance on their lives. The role of these leaders is crucial in reducing IPV and improving marital relationships, as they enjoy recognition and power that can influence people's behaviour.⁴⁰ The "Khali Netghair" programme engaged community leaders in a workshop series to influence positive changes in matters related to equitable relationships, for themselves and in their communities. Through engagement with their communities, they were expected to spread the word and advance positive messages about healthy married relationships.

The community leaders curriculum spanned 11 sessions, aiming to foster an environment for IPV prevention. Topics covered power relations, gender, social support, self-confidence and self-appreciation, gender roles and women's economic empowerment. Sessions drew on Islamic religious texts familiar to participants. A programme implementer explained the importance of these:

They (community leaders) will benefit more from the discussions if the examples I use are from the same fabric of their thinking. They are villagers. We could use positive examples from their heritage. It is better to use religion and its values that advocate openness and women's liberation. If I talk about international conventions, they would not understand what I am talking about, but if I bring verses or examples from religion, they would understand more (PM1).

Among 14 community leaders participating in the workshops, 6 were women selected by programme implementers in Muqdadiyah and Khanaqin. The identification process was based on self-selection, requiring the solicitation or recruitment of individuals to volunteer as community leaders. The community leaders had different ages and social positions, but all had influence in their villages. They comprised dignitaries and tribal sheikhs, men with powerful connections to the government and mokhtars. Tribal sheikhs were introduced as leaders who "usually play a role in solving tribal confrontation and engage in coordination with the state" (CM1). Mokhtars are community leaders who act as representatives linking the local community and the government.⁴¹ They usually support families and the community in solving their problems. In addition, the leaders included young people influential in youth circles and women with high academic attainment and/or who are active in their communities.

Identifying individuals as community leaders inspires them to work in a more organized way. A male community leader explained: "The label community leader encouraged me to act as a reformer guide to our society. Our society is a village and traditions here are very strong, and I can serve the aim [of the programme]" (CM6).

The sessions supported participants in gaining certain skills that can put them in a better position to act as role models, including skills for communication, listening, negotiation and self-control. They also sought to support community leaders in becoming more aware of adopting and promoting

40 Stern, Heise and Cislighi 2020.

gender equitable values in their communities. Leaders' roles in influencing communities were activated in two ways, through neighbourhood sessions organized by leaders in their localities as part of the programme and through daily interventions with communities. This current research sheds light mainly on the impact of the programme on community leaders as individuals.

The programme's impact on community leaders as individuals

The community leaders all appraised the programme contents positively but interacted with curriculum topics differently. A few interviewees (two out of six) showed that they had learned new ideas and their behaviour had changed. The views of community leaders varied about IPV; a few stated that their violent behaviour was now a thing of the past. A male community leader attested:

I benefited a lot from attending the sessions. The most important thing I learned is to improve my communication with my family. I used to be angry and would be agitated for any simple thing. I used to quarrel with my family. I used to swear and shout at my wife and children. I used to have very dry communication with them because we live in a rural society. I was wrong. After this course, all this has changed (CM6).

A female community leader defended the notion of using violence against women, stating: "If women cross their boundaries they deserve to be beaten. If he does not want me to go out, I should not do that. Then, I could discuss it with him. Some women insist on going out; they used to be beaten" (CF2).

A few participants mentioned developing communication skills in the sessions. They described more openness to and acceptance of different views in the families. One interviewee explained that he started to challenge his previous superior role in the family: "The impact on me is that I understood that my wife has an opinion, my children have an opinion too, that I should listen to them and not dictate the situation. Discussion inside the family is important. In the past, I did not accept any opposition to my opinion, but now things have changed" (CM5). A female community leader explained that: "It is for the first time in my life I heard about gender and violence against women. I felt encouraged and empowered by attending the course that confirmed my rights. I used to be quiet, but now I understand I have to speak up" (CF2).

Views and attitudes related to gender roles appeared more challenging. In interviews, most community leaders described gender roles as being appropriately divided. That is, a woman should take responsibility for the housework while men should be in charge of earning money. Even though no one opposed the idea of women having paid work, their view was that domestic chores and caregiving are women's key responsibilities. Both men and women expressed this notion. One female community leader voiced concerns regarding men participating in domestic work, stating: "We do not have such a thing; not in my in-laws nor my natal family. I was surprised when they wrote this down (in the session). I did not accept this idea; it is enough that he works outside the home" (CF1). The participation of men in domestic chores was explained by most interviewees as involving specific tasks, some needing physical power, such as "fixing broken things in the house" (CM1) or carrying heavy things because the wife was unable to do so.

Women's rights issues raised a lot of debate in discussions, whereby, "Men defended men and women defended women" (CM6). Female participants felt they were enlightened and empowered by the knowledge they had received; their beliefs in their rights were enhanced. A female community leader reported how the sessions boosted her self-confidence and self-esteem, such that now she did not "ask" others to give her rights but just took them herself (CF2). To put her new views into practice, she said that in the past, she had thought about not letting her daughter attend higher education so she did not face the same problems that her mother had encountered when she was at university. By attending the sessions, her thoughts had changed. She stated:

There is resistance for girls to continue their education, but this is not haram (religiously forbidden). Yet, our society does not accept it. I wanted to continue my studies but people around us kept asking my mother and father why they were spending money on me. It is the husband's responsibility to provide for me at the end of the day. They said women who go to school have no honour. Before the sessions, I was thinking, if I have a girl, I would not let her go to school, because of my previous experience. But now, after I attended this course, I will encourage her to continue her studies (CF2).

The sessions encouraged participants to question their behaviour and dominant social norms. One male interviewee explained:

The course witnessed a lot of debates. In (the session), the discourse was about why women are oppressed, why society oppresses women? We said that the rural environment differs from urban cities. We cannot allow women to travel alone because we are concerned about them and their honour. [The facilitator] said that women should be granted the right to travel alone. We engaged in a very long discussion. It is true some people changed their mind; others stuck to their views (CM6).

While autonomy for women was appreciated in some activities, it was denied for issues related to women making decisions for their own sake, such as choosing a job or other activities outside the home that have always required the approval of the husband. Regarding women's economic role, several viewpoints were presented. One female community leader affirmed: "If women have their income, that would make their living conditions better. It would help both partners to be equal in terms of their income, and definitely would help her" (CF1).

Despite changes in community leaders' views and behaviours, some issues remained challenging. For instance, most interviewees remained unclear about what constitutes IPV and the forms of GBV. Violence was mainly seen as beating women. Shouting, spitting, preventing women from going out and controlling their movement were not seen as violent acts. A male community leader explained: "My son had beaten his wife on her head because she went out to the market with her sisters without asking for his permission. I criticized him for this kind of violence, advising him why he needed to beat his wife, he could have spat on her, that would be enough" (CM2). This shows clearly that gender-based violence was not understood by at least some session participants.

Most saw the way out of a violent situation as solely being women's responsibility. While IPV is invariably committed by the male member of the married couple, the dominant belief remains that wives should not provoke men's anger in the first place. If violence happens, women must be tolerant and have self-control. This exempts men from taking any responsibility or being held accountable.

In the face of IPV, women use similar strategies as married couples in conflict, attempting to stay calm or even to be indifferent. A female community leader revealed how she had developed a strategy of being “indifferent to her husband shouting, ‘since he did not use violence’” (CF1). These views did not resonate with a key aim of the “Khali Netghair” programme, which was to encourage community leaders as agents of change in their personal lives.

Community leaders’ roles in neighbourhood sessions

Community leaders were tasked not only to use new knowledge in their own lives but also to spread values relating to gender equality to their communities. The programme conducted 80 awareness sessions, including 15 sessions for females and 25 sessions for males in Khanaqin, and 16 sessions for females and 24 sessions for males in Muqdadiyah. Community leaders organized 10 dialogue sessions with their communities in both Khanaqin and Muqdadiyah, usually held in their own houses. These sessions were organized based on sex, with female community leaders meeting with women and male leaders with men.

The community sessions for men discussed different subjects in line with the programme. One male community leader explained: “We invited men to talk about their relationship with their wives, telling them how they should help them in cooking and other housework. The participants benefited from these social sessions. Some agreed with the ideas we presented while others rejected them” (CM1). Female community leaders organized their sessions to break the silence around issues related to gender, IPV and other marital relationship matters. Women from the neighbourhood appeared hesitant to share their thoughts or even experiences with the rest of the group, however, particularly on IPV. A female community leader explained: “Even when women face violence, they do not talk about it. If a woman said my husband beats me up, other women would spread this and talk about it not only in our village but in the city. Our tradition is that it is shameful that women talk against their husbands” (CF4).

Another topic that female community leaders discussed was underage marriage. One female community leader explained that she talked about it in her sessions, clarifying that families were inclined to marry their underage girls either for economic or social reasons or both. Families would transfer the economic responsibility of their girls to the new family and also ‘protect’ them from engaging in unwanted relationships with men. The consequence of this behaviour is a high rate of divorce among underage girls (CF1). One community leader evaluated the impact of the sessions on community members as limited, noting: “The programme was good, but it is not enough. If we confine our efforts to these sessions, the benefits will be little. These efforts must continue if we want to make a change because our society’s awareness is limited. I benefited from this course, but others may do not. There must be more effort and time to make change” (CM6).

Community leaders’ daily interventions in their communities

Community leaders’ interactions with their communities take different forms and involve a wide range of issues. Living and working in small communities, leaders usually meet with others daily at social events such as weddings or in the evenings after dinner in one of their neighbours’ houses. These informal meetings usually involve only men, who talk about concerns related to community life. A male community leader explained that “most of the disputes could be settled by

the intervention of the tribal leaders or mokhtars, some of whom were already on the programme. Then, solutions are usually put forward in the meetings with the community” (CM1).

On problem-solving, community leaders advised community members not to use violence or leave their wives in their parents’ house as this would not solve disputes between husbands and wives. A community leader explained his strategy to solve problems in families. If he was approached by community members, male or female, he would send his wife to talk to the woman while he would talk to the man. These talks would revolve around soothing differences and asking the two parties to calm down, reminding them of their duty to protect their family (ICM1). The community leader said that: “If a man complains that his wife does not satisfy his sexual needs, we would intervene. I would do that by asking my wife to go and talk to the other woman” (CM1). Another community leader stated:

We are a small community, and we stick with each other. Some families have children with special needs; they want to know how to communicate with them. Some women bear unbearable pressure, so we talk about what can they do? They cannot share their concerns, because women who complained about their married relationships would be stigmatized by society. We talk about these things (CM6).

In these informal community meetings, some people accepted the community leader’s views with no objection; others disagreed with him, as explained by an interviewee (CM6). There was no clear answer as to whether the community leaders had influenced their communities in line with the knowledge gained from the sessions, in particular, new notions related to IPV, gender quality and gendered roles. A female community leader described her response when women from the community approached her talking about their problems: “I always do that. I try to calm the situation down. I advise women who have trouble that their father in-law is like your father. Your mother-in-law is upset with you, I would advise you to respect her, your mother-in-law is like your mother, you would not raise your voice over hers” (CF1).

To shed light on the absence of a women-centred approach as well as limited resources that community leaders have, this section will end with a story told by a community leader that demonstrates the limited options to put key principles of the programme into action. This community leader reported on his intervention to save two families from bloodshed through a conflict that could have happened following a rape. The raped woman had been threatened with death because she was accused of bringing dishonour to the family. The rapist might have been killed as well for committing the crime. The community leader convinced the victim’s family to accept an offer to marry the raped woman to the rapist and take a woman from the latter’s tribe as compensation to settle the dispute between the two tribes. When the community leader was asked about the girl who had been raped and the fate of the other woman forced to marry against her will, he replied that it would be better than bloodshed. This shows the limited role of community leaders in protecting women’s rights through speaking with all involved parties and using informal dispute resolution. Active and positive interventions by community leaders are vital especially without a law to punish forced marriage or so-called ‘honour’ killing. Unless community leaders are willing to intervene effectively to defend women, including against the harsh enforcement of tribal norms, it will be difficult to see how they will play a powerful role in advocating gender equality or ending gender-based violence.



SECTION 5

SECTION 5: EXPERIENCES AND FEEDBACK FROM PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTERS

This section discusses the views of programme implementers.

The programme implementers described a positive impact of the programme on themselves as individuals. A male programme implementer shared his experience by stating: “At the personal level, I felt that this programme has changed me. I gained a lot of information. I understand the impact of violence on the partners. I can say that there is a change in the way I was thinking. I trust now that women should play a leading role.” A female programme implementer explained: “I benefited from this course. Despite the fact I was aware of the topics discussed in the sessions, I benefited from the information relating to the rights of others and how these should be considered. It has enhanced my knowledge.”

Views on the component for married couples

The programme implementers confirmed a considerable impact on participants. According to one: “The programme succeeded in changing some of what seemed to be holy concepts and it has also broken the mould among husbands and wives.” To increase the impact, the programme implementers introduced Koranic verses and religious texts in the sessions alongside the stories presented in the curriculum.

The focus group discussion affirmed that the curriculum topic on IPV had provoked vigorous debate. A male programme implementer explained that: “The subject of violence raised a lot of debate as no one questioned this matter before and it was the first time this subject had been talked about. Their views were that women should be beaten if they made mistakes. Even women were convinced that violence was a normal act of men.” The focus group discussion revealed very limited awareness of IPV among participants, with one stating that: “Women are victims of violence, but they are not aware of their victimization” (PM1).

Programme implementers testified to a visible transformation in programme participants’ behaviour. A female programme implementer offered an example of this change:

We have a man who did not like even to sit beside his wife in the session—as everyone did. He was always nervous and angry and even did not believe in the sessions as a whole at the beginning. He did not care about his wife; however, close to the end of the programme, his behaviour changed. It happened that once his wife wanted to drink water, he stood up and brought her a glass of water... we thought...wow...he has changed a lot.

Women fear social stigma if they complain about their partner’s violent behaviour, as they were taught that their husbands are their protectors and maintainers of the family (PF1).

Views of gender roles changed to some extent. One programme implementer noted that while some participants did not accept changes in gender roles, others had been influenced by the discussions. One programme implementer reported: “More than one person stated that they now helped their wives in the house. This is a success for the project because the domestic chores for Iraqi men are like a red line that they do not cross” (PF1).

On decision-making, the programme implementers reported transformation of the views and behaviours of a few programme participants. A male programme implementer explained: “At the beginning of the sessions the participants believed that making big decisions was the man’s responsibility. This related to issues such as marriage, selling and buying, study and work. But after the discussions, they started to think these views were wrong.” In matters related to problem-solving, as discussed in other places in this study, the proposed strategies were limited to staying calm to prevent a situation from escalating. A programme implementer said: “We discussed some ways to deal with the anger, such as breathing from the nose and closing the eyes or changing where one is located.”

Participants raised a few concerns about sustainability, according to the programme implementers. One stated: “I asked a wife about whether she had seen any changes in her husband’s behaviour. She replied yes, there has been a change, but am not sure for how long it will last and if the influencer (facilitator) disappeared, he might go back to his old habit.”

The “Khali Netghair” programme contributed to empowering women through greater self-esteem and confidence. This empowerment, however, may have triggered a backlash.⁴² One programme implementer suggested: “In the married couple sessions we have seen women speak better than men, which has upset men. They asked us not to talk about these issues as we are encouraging women to go against them.”

Even though programme implementers modified the married couples curriculum on sensitive subjects such as love, intimacy or sex outside marriage, more changes were mentioned as necessary for any future scaling up of the programme. For example, a story about the peer pressure on a schoolgirl to have a boyfriend or a discussion about parents dealing with the pregnancy of their daughter outside marriage were challenging issues, seemingly taboo in Iraq’s culture. One male programme implementer “thanked God” that he was not living in the same area where he had delivered these sessions as he would be accused of spreading ‘Western ideas’ or seen as ‘destroying the culture’. This kind of accusation would have had undesirable social consequences for the programme implementers. For this reason, a few suggestions were put forward to address more burning issues women face in Iraq, such as forced marriage, underage marriage, gossa bi gossa (women for women), faslia (using women to settle disputes) or even so-called ‘honour’ killing, instead of the stories mentioned in the curriculum.

The programme implementers sought to divide the sessions into subgroups based on sex when it came to discussing sensitive subjects, such as sexual relations. This was to ensure that each

42 The facilitators responded by reminding all participants, male and female, that the sessions aim to create healthier and better marital relationships.

party could speak freely and openly in a safe environment. This was also required because many participants came from the same villages or were related in some way. Discussing topics such as whether women initiate sex with relatives present, including brothers, was not possible.

Other general observations were raised about financial incentives as being important in encouraging participants to join the sessions. A female programme implementer said: “While the participants joined this programme, because of its financial incentive and not for their desire to know what gender roles are, this did not stop them from benefiting from the knowledge they received. The participants were engaged in the discussions and exchanging ideas and thoughts” (PF1). The programme implementers maintained that society needed such a programme. One explained: “The programme was a success and our community needs this kind of programme and 17 sessions was not enough, I wished we could have two sessions a week” (PM2).

Delays in session starting times or even changes in dates for security reasons had a slight impact on the flow of the programme. A female programme implementer said, “These delays were not acceptable to the participants. They felt we were not punctual, and these delays left us with less time to conduct the session, as we had to leave at a specific time” (PF3). The security situation led to holding back programme staff for an hour every week. These checks took place even though the programme had already obtained the required documents to move freely around the area. More than one programme implementer suggested that this kind of intervention should be organized in cities where facilities are better and security concerns are much less (PF1).

Views on the component for community leaders

The community leaders, including sheikhs and mokhtars, welcomed the programme. A male programme implementer stated: “I think the way they (the community leaders of the participants) perceived us and communicated with us demonstrates that they welcomed the programme. We did not provide them with any cash or aid. Yet there was positive interaction” (PM1). Another programme implementer said: “The content was good, the activities were liked by the participants and thus, it has achieved positive impact as there was a real desire amongst community leaders to make a change” (PM2).

The impact of the programme on the community leaders, however, according to one programme implementer, was not clear as not enough evidence was provided by programme participants. A male programme implementer stated: “It is difficult to say whether we have succeeded in making changes in their view, because the impact should be felt in the community, in the village...we cannot ask him how your behaviour has changed in your family. He might not tell me the truth. It is difficult to change human thoughts in a month or two” (PM1).

The programme implementers saw the neighbourhood sessions as spread too thin in reaching the wider community. They thus failed to open in-depth conversations with community members, making them less influential than they might have been. A programme implementer commented on this by saying: “Attending only one session will not enable people to remember what has been discussed. A lot of rich information was injected into 100 pages [of] curriculum delivered in five days only, which made the work of the [programme implementers] difficult” (PM2). This was viewed

as a shortcoming in the impact of these sessions, thus thwarting the aim of spreading the word about gender equality and the eradication of IPV. The programme implementers recommended that community leaders focus on specific groups in the community to engender in-depth discussion and greater knowledge on the issues at hand (PM1 and PM2).

Programme implementers mentioned both sex and age as important factors in the programme's influence. A female programme implementer stated: "The impact of the programme was much more on women than on men. The men I met with listened to me, agreed verbally with me, but they went on doing what they wanted and what they believed in. Women did listen to me, and they tried to implement it. For example, things relating to children" (PF1). Social barriers did not allow women to have similar opportunities to impact the community compared to men. One programme implementer reported a female community leader saying: "Being a woman is in itself a barrier that prevents me from fulfilling my duty as I cannot intervene in solving problem between men and women, as men can. My position in the village would not allow me to go out and move freely" (PF1). This is not to say that female community leaders did not play a role in advancing the values of "Khali Netghair" in their social networks, however. Female community leaders talked in sessions about the harmful consequences of underage marriage and the benefits of allowing girls to continue their education.

Younger women appeared more aware of IPV than those who were older. A programme implementer explained: "Some women know that they are abused, but they accept this reality. Those who are over their 40s are less aware of these things, while the younger are more aware of what IPV means. This is because they watch TV series and are influenced by them." One programme implementer stated:

Women face violence, they accept it, and they would accept anything from the husband. So she does not go back to her natal family because her family will oppress her more. To accept the violence from one person is better than the whole tribe if she goes back to her family. No institution to help her and no law, for sure, she would feel weak and helpless (PF2).

The programme implementers criticized considering power and influence as the main criterion for selecting the community leader, without considering age. This concern stemmed from the idea that elderly people are less likely to accept new ways of thinking. One focus group participant stated: "Those of a youthful age are more open to accepting the change; they are more active and move freely." A male programme implementer explained: "The elderly usually have a strong adherence to their beliefs and ideas. Those aged 50 or 60 years would not change their views in five days." Another programme implementer questioned:

How can I change his ideas? He has his traditions and customs. It is better to select young people between the ages of 25 and 30 years old, and we could register them in such courses to build community leaders. We need to think of building community leaders. To work with graduated people is better than working with sheikhs as the latter could inherit this position from their father without having enough knowledge or skills (PM2).

The programme implementer described how one young community leader was seen in his car with his wife taking a tour and reportedly said: "I oppressed her before this course, after what I learned about her rights, I would not do that again" (PM1).

Programme organizers put no formal mechanism in place to follow up on the work of the community leaders. Programme implementers stated this would be important to ensure that new views and ideas move forward and gain traction. According to one programme implementer, however, community leaders, men and women, had found methods to sustain their work through channels such as WhatsApp. These brought participants together during and after the programme. A female programme implementer stated that they were still in contact with the community leaders who still posed questions. She said: “Until now they send messages and they ask questions about their interventions. If women have sensitive questions, they will contact me through my private number, not in the group” (PF1).

The programme implementers criticized the limited days allocated for community leader sessions, referring to insufficient time to make changes among those who had a long and strongly established culture and beliefs. According to one focus group discussion participant: “We did two sessions a day for the 11 sessions we had, and on the final day we had three sessions. This means not enough time was given to people to engage in dialogue and conversation with the facilitators to enable them to reflect on the new ideas and information. The time was very limited and thus, the results would be limited.” One programme implementer queried, “How can you change the way the community leader thinks in six days ” (PM2). Another commented that “to change ideas is not like changing the furniture; it requires a very long time” (PM1).



SECTION 6

SECTION 6: DISCUSSION

Married couples

This research has provided evidence that the patriarchal system and social norms influence all aspects of married couples' relationships. This dynamic plays out in the use and justification of IPV, the division of gender roles, and the nature of communication, decision-making and problem-solving. Shifts in couples' views and practices have occurred but the impacts have not been even across all aspects of their lives. Advocacy for better parenting skills and anti-violence views towards children were popular issues even though these were not the focus of the programme. The experience from implementing "Khali Netghair" also showed that working with married couples in mixed-sex sessions is feasible, acceptable, and successful in Diyala.

IPV

Positive changes in married couples' views and perceptions of IPV were apparent at endline. At baseline, all accepted IPV as a legitimate behaviour. By endline, there was less acceptance or justification of the use of violence against women. Participants' understanding of different forms of violence grew over the course of the workshop series. Female partners had taken initial steps to make their voices heard, such as refusing to have sex if they were not willing to do so.

Gender roles

Transformation in the views and behaviours of married couples around gender roles, especially around domestic chores, was reported. While at baseline, domestic work performed by men was seen as unthinkable and strange among men and women, at endline, many men had taken some steps in their own houses, even though they were quite basic. Moreover, there was greater openness to the idea that women could take paid work if some conditions were met. More acceptance of girls studying and continuing their education was reported. In one case, a male member of the couple had started to equally divide domestic chores between his children, girls and boys.

Decision-making

The programme provided scope for women's empowerment as they made their voices heard and asserted their views and opinions. In decision-making, however, men retained a powerful role in any 'big decisions'. Through the programme, some men had at least started to consult with their wives and acknowledged the benefit of sharing thoughts during the decision-making process. The need for male approval for women to engage in social life still strongly prevailed, although most men showed more flexibility in allowing their female partners to exercise these rights with less delay and/or fewer objections.

Communication skills

The impact of the programme on married couples' communication was also evident. They reported more talk between husbands and wives along with spending more time with each other during picnics or other social activities. Some men stated they were now accompanying their wives to visit a doctor or family. Showing appreciation for women doing domestic chores was also part of changed behaviour.

Problem-solving

The problem-solving discussions in the workshop series brought forth a few strategies to prevent the escalation of heated situations but there was no evidence of comprehensive conflict resolution strategies from participants' reports. Women were still held responsible for creating a peaceful environment. This is common in Iraqi family traditions, where women facing IPV endeavour to tolerate it by taking responsibility for their victimization.

The main findings of this research showed that serious obstacles still prevent programme participants from achieving comprehensive transformation in their views and behaviours. These are listed as follows.

IPV was still believed to be a family matter by women and men. There was no mention of government policies and non-government organizations working to address IPV and other forms of violence.

Social stigma still labels women as disloyal for seeking help or even talking about IPV in their household. This means they either do not seek support or turn only to members of a close family circle, who are not always helpful.

Policing women's behaviour is still seen as men's duty. The norm is for men to decide where and when women can engage in social activities, placing women in an inferior position.

Men are still considered as having a superior role in making decisions, even those related to women's personal affairs, such as work or their social lives. For women to gain empowerment and take part in decision-making, more structural, institutional and legal changes would need to take place.

The financial independence of women does not necessarily prevent them from being subjected to IPV or treated as unequal partners in decision-making.

Community leaders

The "Khali Netghair" programme provided an opportunity to introduce fresh ideas to community leaders, both men and women, in both focal districts. Concepts such as gender equality and men's role in domestic chores were completely new for a few of them, opening their eyes to new ways of thinking. Community leaders appraised the programme positively even though some were reluctant to change the views they held. A few changed their own behaviour and made IPV a thing of the past. But most still believed IPV to be legitimate for men to discipline women, using one form or another.

The programme affected female community leaders in some respects more than men. This is understandable as women are on the receiving end of IPV. Female participants saw the programme as enlightening and empowering through new knowledge and awareness about their rights. They described a boost in their self-confidence and self-esteem. As a result, some polarization between the views of women and men occurred in the sessions, where women appeared to defend women's rights while men tried to shore up their own.

All female and male community leaders defended IPV as a legitimate action for disciplining women if they behaved in a socially unaccepted manner. The legitimizing of IPV, rather than rejecting this behaviour and holding men accountable for their actions, discourages women from seeking help of any sort. The fieldwork revealed the stigma attached to any woman who complained about IPV. Hence, it was not strange that women attending neighbourhood sessions did not share their views about the issue. The perspective prevailed that women are responsible for any violence committed against them; in other words, they deserve it.

Accepting equal positioning with women in decision-making remained challenging. This also applied to gender roles, with a predominant belief in the fairness of the traditional division of the labour based on sex. A few community leaders stated that their communication skills had improved in terms of accepting different views within their own families. The research showed, however, that half of the community leaders were continuing to enforce the same values of male domination, whether in their neighbourhood sessions or their community daily interventions.

A more cautious approach to identifying community leaders is warranted before they are tasked with delivering sessions for the community. Criteria related to community leaders' basic views, such as their acceptance of gender equality and opposition to IPV prior to the course, should be assessed. If community leaders have strong patriarchal views based on the superiority of men and the inferiority of women, they may not be influenced by the curriculum or by attending the sessions. The impact of the programme on community leaders as individuals and their work through the neighbourhood sessions and daily interventions has likely only started to scratch the surface.

Programme implementers repeatedly mentioned age as an important factor in selecting community leaders. Elderly leaders, like mokhtars and sheikhs, can exert greater influence and power in their community but tend to be unwilling to accept change even after attending sessions. Younger leaders may be more open to new ideas such as gender equality and challenging IPV. In general, the readiness of community leaders, regardless of age or status, to advocate programme values is essential before asking them to run community sessions. This would mean having a more rigorous procedure for identifying those willing to promote new ideas.

Joining the sessions, for women in particular, was an opportunity to have some time away from home. As this report has articulated, these women had limited freedom to leave their dwellings. This was conditional on their male partner's approval. The sessions allowed them to meet with new people and discuss issues related to their marital lives in a safe environment, with open-minded facilitators. For this reason, all the women said they would love the sessions to continue and the journey to last longer.

Abstract and unfamiliar concepts such as ‘power’ were understood disparately by participants, whether at baseline, midline or even endline. For some, power meant bodily strength, social capital, financial capacity and authority. The Arabic meaning of the word ‘power’ means strength, while the notion of power in the context of a social relationship means the ability of a person to control his or her partner’s decision-making or to have a final say in problem-solving or even to exercise violence in its different forms.⁴³

There were no concerns raised regarding having mixed-sex sessions in communities that usually segregate men and women in both public and private places. Men and women were enthusiastic about attending sessions jointly. Participants also appreciated dividing into two groups based on gender to discuss sensitive issues, especially sexual relationships.

The take-home exercises comprised an important component in strengthening understanding and skills gained. The beginning of every session reviewed previously learned materials. For the illiterate, however, this was problematic, reducing the impact of take-home exercises. Alternatives should be found to enhance acquired knowledge for this group of participants, such as through using posters or just having a discussion to recall what stood out for participants from the previous session.

To sum up, the fieldwork showed that community leaders did not experience the same level of transformation as married couples. This could be attributed to the following factors.

Programme implementers made repeated remarks that age makes a difference in advancing the sort of values embedded in the “Khali Netghair” programme. They consistently maintained that young people are more open to new views.

Selecting participants based on their position and influence in their community does not necessarily mean that they are willing to espouse the values of the programme. Making acceptance of programme values and gender equality a precondition for selection as a community leader would facilitate the delivery of programme objectives.

No follow-up system was in place to evaluate any changes in community leaders as individuals and their actions within their community. While it was possible to trace changes in married couples’ relationships, using testimonies on shifts in views and behaviours, no system investigated changes in the views of community leaders apart from what they themselves reported.

This study did not compare the impact of the programme in the two districts. But the fieldwork revealed that the impact of the programme on community leaders was more evident in Khanaqin than in Muqdadiyah. Moreover, the impact on women was more visible than on men.

The local organization that administrated the community leader component probably needed more support from the international organization, namely, Oxfam, which took the lead in implementing the whole programme.

43 Sarantakos 2000.



SECTION 7

SECTION 7: CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

This research has provided evidence that the “Khali Netghair” intervention was well-received in general and appeared to contribute towards changes that could lead to ending IPV. Social transformation requires a long process of addressing core obstacles to gender equality. These pertain to the patriarchal system, gender norms, customs and traditions, and social pressures, all of which influence all aspects of married couples’ relationships and women’s safety, rights and freedoms.

The transformation of traditional attitudes to gender roles, IPV and decision-making requires well-designed interventions. The “Khali Netghair” programme opened an opportunity to transfer universal values around women’s rights and gender equality. It had a positive impact with participants learning and changing their behaviour, and demonstrating more openness to gender equality. Nevertheless, change is a gradual process and not linear.

The programme used a participatory approach, guided by a specifically modified curriculum and collaboration with the targeted community. Fewer sessions took place than in the “Indashyikirwa” programme. The evaluation and lessons learned from the Iraq adaptation speak to the possibility of now further improving and scaling up the intervention for future programmes. The following paragraphs offer some lessons on the curriculum, session organization, community leader components, and the social and political context, along with suggestions for improving the programme.

The curriculum for married couples

The programme needs to weave more local constructs, concepts and practices into the curriculum, with stories that reflect the local context. Contextualization is essential for ensuring the appropriateness of subjects and examples to the local culture. Issues such as forced marriage, underage marriage, so-called ‘honour’ killing, faslia (compensation in the form of women), gossa bi gossa (women for women) and nahwa (forcing girls to marry their cousins) need to be integrated alongside the various forms of IPV, particularly in rural areas where these practices are dominant.

A focus on violence against children and parenting skills proved to be very useful and rewarding for participants. While this subject is not a core issue in the current curriculum, the fieldwork showed the importance of adding a session on this topic. This would be beneficial for parents and children, both males and females. Influencing children to refuse to accept patriarchal gender norms and roles from an early age would have an impact on a new generation more likely to adhere to these values and make faster strides towards gender equality and an end to gender based violence. Given that women lamented the end of the sessions, it may be possible to create a follow-on programme where participants can choose to engage in an evidence-based parenting programme that also includes aspects of gender equality. Several evidence-based parenting programmes could be adapted.

Expanding the contents of the problem-solving topic by providing more concrete tools and problem-solving strategies would be useful to improve participants' skills beyond relying on men to become calm. Sessions relating to constructive dialogue, listening skills and anger management would be particularly useful for both husbands and wives.

It is crucial for IPV interventions engaging with men as well as women to challenge problematic, burdensome gender norms that ultimately are an obstacle to successful economic empowerment.

Session organization

Organizing mixed gender sessions was a successful initiative despite Diyala's conservative context and the cultural sensitivity around unrelated women and men socializing in public activities. Participants welcomed the mixed sessions. Separation was only necessary for sensitive subject matters (e.g., when content focused on sexuality), an approach important to retain.

Organizing one session a week instead of two would allow enough time for participants to reflect on and practice what they learn. Women participants expressed their willingness to attend two sessions a week so they could get out of their homes and socialize. Programme implementers may consider a second session in a week as a time for continued and unstructured dialogue on the theme for that week, rather than the structured activities from the manual.

Ensuring different methods for take-home exercises is important especially for the illiterate. The use of technology, such as sending voice notes via a WhatsApp group, might serve this purpose.

The facilitators and implementing organizations need to be better trained and prepared to recognize and manage various forms of backlash and resistance.

More mentorship or collaboration with intervention experts would develop the capacity of the local organization and enable programme implementers to address challenges this kind of programme may face.

The component for community leaders

The criteria for selecting community leaders should expand to identify not just well-known elders, with formal positions in the community, but also candidates who support gender equality and have some degree of influence. Special attention could be paid to female and male graduates willing to proactively advocate gender equality.

Increasing the duration of the course would allow enough time for people to absorb new knowledge and act on it.

Allowing enough time for follow-up activities, such as quarterly meetings, would ensure the effectiveness of advocacy and the continuity of efforts to support those in need, delivered by

people with appropriate knowledge. Community leaders should only be encouraged to organise these kinds of activities once they have shown that they are embracing and adopting the values and skills promoted with the programme including gender equality and non-violence.

Organizing fewer meetings with a specific targeted number of community members would foster more in-depth discussions that build a more robust understanding of gender equality.

Since community and tribal leaders or mokhtars play more significant roles in localities than the police, community policing or government, it is important to mobilize their support for the key principles of the “Khali Netghair” programme in Iraq.

Data collection from community leaders took place at the end of the programme. It would be useful to have their perspectives at baseline and midline to ascertain changes in their views or behaviours.

There was no particular difference between the views of female and male community leaders on gender roles. One female community leader did not accept men taking part in domestic chores while a male community leader did accept that.

There is no law criminalizing GBV, although national plans and policies could be used in advocacy for gender equality, such as Iraq’s national anti-violence against women strategies. Community leaders could be educated about and encouraged to call strongly for the long awaited anti-domestic violence law.

Integrating gender equality advocacy into the community leaders curriculum is important. This entails encouraging community leaders to take part in efforts to mitigate GBV and IPV, such as by advocating a law to criminalize GBV, securing shelters or other centres to provide protection and support for abused women, and finally, promoting a new culture around reporting IPV and GBV. The last should include different tools to challenge the social stigma around reporting and to open avenues for women to report easily and safely.

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ANNEX 1: LIST OF PERSONS INTERVIEWED

Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Stage	District	Time
Couples participating in Khali Netghair sessions				
BM1 BM1	BF1	Baseline and endline	Muqdadiyah	4 July–3 October 2021
BM2	BF2	Baseline and endline	Muqdadiyah	4 July–3 October 2021
BM3	BF3	Baseline and endline	Muqdadiyah	5 July–4 October 2021 (only BF3 available)
BM4	BF4	Baseline and endline	Muqdadiyah	5 July–4 October 2021
BM5	BF5	Baseline and endline	Muqdadiyah	6 July (none available at endline)
BM6	BF6	Baseline and endline	Muqdadiyah	6 July–4 October 2021
MM1	MF1	Midline and endline	Khanaqin	7 July–5 October 2021
MM2	MF2	Midline and endline	Khanaqin	7 July–5 October 2021
MM3	MF3	Midline and endline	Khanaqin	8 July–5 October 2021
MM4	MF4	Midline and endline	Khanaqin	8 July–6 October 2021 (only MF4 available)
MM5	MF5	Midline and endline	Khanaqin	10 July–6 October 2021
MM6	MF6	Midline and endline	Khanaqin	10 July–6 October 2021
Community leaders and influential people participating in Khali Netghair sessions				
CM1		Endline only	Muqdadiyah	4 July 2021
CM2		Endline only	Muqdadiyah	5 July 2021
CF1		Endline only	Muqdadiyah	6 July 2021
CM3		Endline only	Khanaqin	7 July 2021

CF2	Endline only	Khanaqin	8 July 2021
CM4	Endline only	Khanaqin	7 July 2021
Khali Netghair session facilitators			
PM1	Endline only	Khanaqin	10 July 2021
PF1	Endline only	Khanaqin	10 July 2021
PM2	Endline only	Khanaqin	7 October 2021
PF2	Endline only	Khanaqin	7 October 2021
Focus group	Endline only	Khanaqin	7 October 2021



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