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Preparing for constructive engagement with men's resistance to gender equality messaging: lessons from an intimate partner violence prevention programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to engage men and boys in programming to promote gender equality and prevent violence against women and girls are increasingly common. Through a close examination of one such programme implemented in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this paper critically explores expressions of men's resistance to gender equality messaging. Grounded in the findings of a longitudinal qualitative study in eastern DRC conducted in 2016–2017, we identify five resistance scripts that men participating in the programme used to negotiate, appropriate, challenge and sometimes push back against ideas of gender equality promoted by EMAP. These are as follows: (i) controlling the process of change; (ii) equating respect with obedience; (iii) assigning responsibility for gender inequality and gender-based violence onto other men; (iv) offering competing meanings of equality; and (v) emphasizing women's secondary status. Each of these scripts simultaneously reinforces gender inequality, surfaces the contested boundaries of acceptable behaviours within a current gender order *and* opens space for debate that is a necessary part of any socio-cultural transformation.

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Gender equality; resistance; backlash; engaging men and boys; violence prevention

Introduction

Globally, one in three of women will experience physical or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner during their lifetime (World Health Organization 2021). This scourge of violence against women is both a manifestation of gender inequality and a contributor to

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the reproduction of that inequality (Dworkin et al., 2013; Equimundo, 2022; Ricardo et al., 2011). Male violence against their female partners is enabled by men's hierarchical advantage and is sometimes used to maintain that advantage (Fulu, 2013). For this reason, programming to reduce rates of violence against women is designed not only to address the acceptability of the use of violence, but also to challenge gender inequality in relationships and gender unequal social norms (Ellsberg, 2015; Jewkes et al., 2015).

Recent years have seen a rapid growth in the body of evidence around the promises and pitfalls of programming that engages men to shift gender norms and reduce rates of violence against women (Cullen et al., 2025; Mertens & Myrttinen, 2019; Peacock, 2025; Vaillant et al., 2020). To contribute to understandings of how such programmes work in practice, this study examines men's discursive engagement with ideas of gender equality promoted as part of a violence prevention programme. By observing a programme in action, including during men's critical reflection dialogue groups, we document the ways that men make sense of and contend with the ideas presented by the programme. Doing so, we identify how men resist a more gender equal distribution of power and authority, but also the spaces for debate that are opened through the process of collective meaning making and inter- and intra-subjective negotiation. The findings highlight the need for more theoretical and programmatic attention to engaging with resistance to gender equality, acknowledging the possibility for incremental and messy social change processes, rather than expecting instant, linear and wholesale adoption of new paradigmatic forms of socio-relational organization (Rooney et al., 2022). Viewing men's resistance as part of a non-linear social change process opens both conceptual and programmatic possibilities to better understand, prepare for and engage constructively with men's resistance to ideas of gender equality. This study shows that dismissing resistance as wholesale rejection of gender equality obscures the ways that existing cultural repertoires must be engaged as part of a process of socio-cultural transformation (Tamale, 2008).

Over the course of 16 weeks in 2016, approximately 620 men across eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) volunteered to take part in EMAP, or the Engaging Men through Accountable Practice programme. Designed and implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), EMAP is an intimate partner violence (IPV) prevention intervention. Through weekly discussion groups, male participants are invited to critically reflect on what it means to be a man in their households and communities and to become allies to women and girls. Programmatic emphasis on engaging men and boys stems from the recognition that men's dominance in patriarchal societies affords men a powerful position from which to reinforce, question or challenge the subordination of women (Jewkes et al., 2015). Programmes attempt to create safe social spaces where men engage in facilitated discussions to critically reflect on their beliefs and the social norms that justify inequality (Gibbs et al., 2015). Such interventions take different forms, with some emphasizing social norms, others centring socio-religious norms, while others adopt explicitly trauma-informed approaches. These differences notwithstanding, programmes typically share the core objectives of promoting more gender equitable norms and preventing gender-based violence in households and communities (Lewis et al., 2025).

Existing evidence on the impact of gender norms shifting interventions to reduce violence against women and girls is mixed (Kerr-Wilson et al., 2020; Le Roux et al., 2020; Vaillant et al., 2020). While some impact evaluations document promising and substantial

reductions in levels of men's violence against women, others find that the programmes caused little or no reductions in IPV (Kerr-Wilson et al., 2020). A quantitative impact evaluation of EMAP found, on average, no reduction in IPV (Vaillant et al., 2020). Yet, heterogeneity analyses indicated that men who were most physically violent in the year before the programme were encouraged by the programme to reduce the frequency and severity of their violent behaviour (Cuneo et al., 2023). This mixed picture highlights the importance of capturing the mechanisms of and meanings ascribed to change by participants.

Qualitative studies illuminate individual and collective experiences of programming. Such studies are especially attentive to the ways participants react to, make sense of and ultimately appropriate or reject the ideas debated during group discussions (Masta & Garasu, 2025; Maubert, 2024; Pierotti et al., 2018). This work recognizes that new ideas are not introduced into an empty social vessel (Merry, 2006), that people use their existing cultural knowledge to make sense of what they hear (Johnson-Hanks et al., 2011) and that people are, therefore, likely to express some resistance (Flood et al., 2020; Ratele, 2015). Dismissing men's resistance as motivated by malice or ignorance means disregarding processes of reinterpretation and negotiation that are inherent in any process of social change (Maubert, 2024; Rooney et al., 2022). As such, this article contends that there is a great deal to learn about the process and potential of gender transformative change by taking men's resistance, its underpinnings and manifestation seriously. As Equimundo affirms, 'There is no single path towards men's equitable attitudes and behaviours, but there is much that can be learned from men in diverse settings who are on that path already' (2022, p. 69).

Research on men's responses to women's rights advocacy and gender equality programming document variation in men's reactions (Mojola, 2014). Responses among men to South African political movements for women's rights ranged from defensive and reactive, to tolerant and accommodating, to responsive and progressive (Morrell, 2002). In urban Uganda, Wyrod reveals a hybrid response that 'accommodates some aspects of women's rights while retaining previous notions of innate male authority' (2008, p. 799). This aligns with Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) more recent conceptualizations of 'hybrid masculinities', which emerge out of men's performances of gender that simultaneously distance themselves from 'traditional' patriarchal masculinities, while continuing to sustain gender privilege. Centring resistance more explicitly, Flood et al. (2020) define resistance as 'an *active* pushing back against progressive and feminist practices and policies' and use the term interchangeably with 'backlash' to refer to 'any form of resistance toward progressive social change' (2020, p. 2). However, characterizing all resistance to gender equality as backlash and active opposition, has the potential to foreclose opportunities to identify, better understand and constructively engage with men to advance social and gender transformative change. With this in mind, we build on existing work by critically examining how specific forms of rhetorical resistance simultaneously and paradoxically reveal openings for socio-normative change, while drawing on and reinforcing traditional gender hierarchy.

Drawing on a qualitative study of EMAP, this article identifies five non-violent resistance scripts that men in EMAP communities deployed when engaging with gender equality messaging. These scripts include (i) controlling the process of change; (ii) equating respect with obedience; (iii) assigning responsibility for violence onto other men; (iv)

contesting the meaning of equality; and (v) affirming women's secondary status. We define scripts as abstracted stories or explanations that communicate a particular interpretation of reality by appealing to shared understandings of the social world, much like collective narratives (Frye, 2017; Mohr et al., 2020). Scripts communicate meaning by drawing associations between behaviours and consequences (e.g. shared decision-making and loss of respect) or between behaviours and stereotypical actors (e.g. wife beating and drunkards). Scripts are 'dynamic structures that allow [people] to comprehend, process, and predict events and event-related information' (Levy & Fivush, 1993, p. 129). Scholarship on men and masculinities demonstrates that men's sense of identity and behaviour are shaped by "a complex process of interaction with culture in which [men] both learn the gender scripts appropriate to [their] culture and attempt to modify those scripts to make them more palatable (Kimmel and Messner in Way, 2011, p. 58). In this study, by examining the scripts that men deployed in their group discussions, we can learn about how participants collectively made sense of, accommodated and rescripted ideas of gender equality conveyed by the programme.

We show that these five resistance scripts identified through the study have socio-cultural resonance among participants – as well as programme facilitators who were recruited from the communities to lead the EMAP discussion groups. These scripts were, at times, expressed alongside demonstrations of support for the programme's objectives, especially the goal of eliminating violence against women. As a result, they were not always identified as expressions of resistance by programme participants and facilitators. Each of the scripts, however, reinforces existing ideologies of gender hierarchy or gender difference. Through the public declaration of these scripts, men reproduced core socio-normative dimensions of the gender system that emphasize men's dominance over women. At the same time, the data show that by bringing the programme messages into conversation with these commonly recognized scripts, men were (subconsciously) reinterpreting them in ways that pointed to possibilities for and boundaries of gender norm contestation. Those points of contestation included appropriate levels of women's participation in household decision-making, whether respect requires obedience, acceptability of men's violence, the meaning of 'equal' and the socio-relational meanings ascribed to the distribution of household responsibilities between husbands and wives. We argue that it is important to be attentive to those topics of culturally resonant debates to productively engage with opportunities and constraints for progressive social change. Our empirical case builds on the theoretical argument of Tamale (2008), who asserts that cultures are never static and therefore the goal of achieving gender equality does not compel opposition to a fixed culture, but rather requires a process of socio-cultural change.

Identifying the ways that men 'vernacularize' (Merry, 2006) debates about gender equality has both practical and theoretical importance. Planning for men's resistance to gender equality messaging is important to ensuring high-quality implementation of gender transformative interventions (Ratele, 2015). For programme actors and architects, it can help them prepare to respond to a range of resistance scripts – as they balance the tension between 'meeting men where they are' and challenging men to 'transform the gendered relations and identities among men which sustain men's violence against women' (Flood, 2015, p. 169). More conceptually, our findings illustrate that there are insights to be gained by focusing on the process of socio-cultural negotiation as

instantiated in the rhetorical debates prompted by the programme. Several decades ago, writing about gender and household bargaining, Agarwal (1997) drew attention to the importance of examining not only relative bargaining power, but also the limits and contours of what could be bargained about. She highlighted that one possible dimension of women's empowerment is the expansion of the domains or decisions over which negotiations can occur. In a similar vein, our data illustrate that attention to the meaning making processes that occur in response to the promotion of gender equality can provide insights on which aspects of gender norms and relations are open to contestation and the contours of that socio-cultural negotiation process.

This article makes three contributions to the literature on gender transformative programming: empirically, this study advances, enriches and expands understanding of men's expressions of resistance to gender equality messaging as part of gender norm change initiatives. Methodologically, this study affirms calls for more qualitative and ethnographically informed approaches to evaluating gender norm change, permitting insights into *processes* of gender norms change, including men's inter- and intra-subjective processes of contestation, negotiation and meaning making during such interventions. Theoretically, this study builds on the insights of scholars of social and cultural change to argue for the importance of examining the debates that are fuelled by resistance scripts as windows into the aspects of gender relations that are within the realm of contemporary socio-cultural negotiation. Even if the resistance scripts have the immediate effect of reproducing unequal gender norms and dynamics, they also have the potential to contribute to incremental change as men accommodate, contend with and debate new gender scripts.

The EMAP programme and gender-based violence in DRC

This study was carried out before and during the implementation of an IPV prevention programme – Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP) – in eastern DRC in 2016. Populations in this region experience chronic insecurity, severe economic hardship, lack of access to basic services and public health crises of epidemic proportions, resulting from and exacerbated by decades of armed conflict. Gender – and gendered violence in particular – represents an important lens through which the conflict has been addressed by national and international actors (Eriksson Baaz & Stern, 2013; Lewis, 2022; Mertens & Pardy, 2017).

In this context, gender norms have been both exacerbated and challenged (Hollander, 2014; Slegh et al., 2014), with high levels of IPV recorded (Lewis et al., 2025; Peterman et al., 2011). To address this, the DRC government, with the support of international partners, has developed mechanisms to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. EMAP was designed and implemented by IRC, which has been working in DRC since 2002 to support women's empowerment and address the root causes of gender-based violence. The programme starts with an eight-week curriculum with women to capture their priorities and preferences, which were then integrated into the curriculum for the men's discussion groups. The men's groups met once per week for 16 weeks. In each programme site, the discussions were led by two trained facilitators recruited from participating communities.

EMAP participants were men who volunteered to join the programme; there was no compensation for participation. Men were told that the programme was about preventing violence against women and girls and were informed that they would need to commit to not using violence in their homes throughout the duration of the intervention. Presumably, this recruitment strategy would result in a group of male participants espousing relatively egalitarian attitudes and non-violent behaviours. Yet, a baseline survey of programme participants for a quantitative impact evaluation found that about half of the female partners of male participants reported experiencing physical or sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the preceding 12 months (Vaillant et al., 2020).

Methods

This qualitative study consisted of two phases of data collection. In the first phase, in-depth interviews were conducted in 14 programme communities before the men's discussion groups began. The Congolese research assistants who conducted the interviews were trained by the principal investigators on interview techniques and the goals of the research. As part of the training, the principal investigators and research assistants collaboratively translated the semi-structured interview guides from French into the primary local languages. This facilitated further discussion of the goals of the interviews, which were to probe gender attitudes and areas of normative consensus and contestation before the start of the EMAP programme. In each community, the DR Congolese in-country research team interviewed one local religious leader, one customary leader, the two EMAP facilitators, two men who had volunteered to participate and two men who had been informed about the programme and had not volunteered. The interview guides were designed to encourage participants to reflect on gender norms in their homes and communities, their awareness and understandings of EMAP, as well as their motivations for volunteering to participate or not. The first author accompanied the in-country research team throughout the data collection period and held daily team debrief meetings where they discussed what they were learning, challenges encountered and how to adapt to gain greater insights from subsequent interviews. This phase resulted in more than 100 audio-recorded interviews. All interviews were simultaneously translated into French and transcribed.

Phase two of the research involved ethnographic data collection from August 2016 to January 2017. It consisted of longitudinal, observational data collection with programme participants in six purposively selected programme sites to understand how the EMAP programme operated in practice and how it was (or was not) shaping individual behaviour change. The third, fourth and fifth authors, who had participated in the first phase of data collection, were each assigned two communities for observation for phase 2. They generally alternated weeks between the two communities. They sent detailed field notes at the end of every week to the lead researchers who responded with follow-up questions and guidance. As embedded local researchers, they were able to conduct a range of qualitative and participatory data collection activities (Angotti & Sennott, 2015; Schatz, 2015; Watkins & Swidler, 2009).

During the second phase, the in-country researchers conducting data collection observed as many of the men's discussion groups as possible. They did not

participate in the group discussions, but they did interact with participants before and after the meetings. Similarly, they held informal conversations with individual men and groups of men in the community. These included both EMAP participants and non-participants. The researchers frequented spaces where men often gathered, including churches and local drinking houses. These informal conversations were complemented by in-depth interviews with some EMAP participants. A random selection of participants was interviewed several times over the course of programme implementation to capture processes of reflection and change. Also, the researchers purposively selected some participants for interviews, including men who eagerly adopted EMAP recommendations, men who expressed sustained resistance to programme messages and men who expressed acceptance of EMAP principles but who the researchers suspected harboured private doubts. Finally, the EMAP facilitators were interviewed several times. The interviews captured facilitators' communication strategies and their reflections on which EMAP sessions were mostly accepted and which inspired the greatest resistance.

The analysis was conducted in several phases. First, during phase 1, all transcripts were read as they were produced and interesting and recurring themes were noted in research team memos. Initial thematic coding of a subset of the transcripts was used to inform the design and content of the second phase of research. During phase 2, continuous review of the field notes was complemented by two breaks for analysis. Midway through the longitudinal data collection, one of principal investigators led a two-day in-person analysis workshop with the researchers conducting data collection. This was used to document emerging themes and prioritize research questions for attention in the subsequent weeks of data collection. Towards the end of data collection, the researchers took 1 week to reflect on what they had learned and to respond to a series of analysis question prompts from the principal investigators. The researchers also wrote comprehensive profiles of the facilitators, communities and discussion groups that they had come to know. After data collection was complete, the principal investigators re-read the data collection notes alongside the analysis memos. Finally, the principal investigators developed a list of broad thematic codes, such as 'gender equality resistance' and 'gender equality support', and systematically coded all interview transcripts and field notes using the qualitative coding software called Dedoose. For the findings described in this manuscript, we conducted a second round of focused coding of all data initially marked as 'gender equality resistance' to develop sub-categories of types of resistance.

This qualitative study formed part of a wider mixed-methods randomized controlled trial evaluation of the EMAP programme conducted by the World Bank in collaboration with the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The qualitative and quantitative components of the evaluation were conducted separately and by separate teams. IRC offered logistical support for the data collection, including by providing logistical and security arrangements for the data collection activities conducted in conflict-affected areas. The full research team collaborated to identify a balanced approach to the ethical sensitivities associated with conducting research on sexual and gender-based violence, in conflict-affected settings and in collaboration with a humanitarian organization (Lewis et al., 2019).

The study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Ethical approval was received from International Rescue Committee's Internal Review Board with approval number IRB #: 00009752 on 7 March 2016 and from the DRC Ministry of Women, Family, and Children with approval number # 433/DR/IRC/015.

Men's resistance to gender equality messaging: five scripts

As illustrated elsewhere, this study revealed evidence of EMAP participants showing willingness to introduce changes in their intimate partnerships, including by performing domestic work typically undertaken by women (Pierotti et al., 2018; Vaillant et al., 2020). Yet, the research also demonstrated that while some men were willing to challenge gender norms, they typically did so while simultaneously upholding the broader gender architecture (Pierotti et al., 2018). In the remainder of this manuscript, we develop our analysis of five ways in which men contested and resisted the ideals of gender equality introduced by EMAP. While we highlight the resistance scripts and show how they reproduced gender hierarchy, we also note that each script prompted discussion of a particular aspect of gender relations. As such, analysis of the resistance scripts illustrates the boundaries and contours of ongoing processes of socio-cultural normative change, which necessarily have inconsistent, uncertain and sometimes contradictory outcomes.

Equality on his terms: controlling the process of change

The first manifestation of resistance documented among EMAP communities throughout the delivery of the curriculum was men's insistence on maintaining control over their performance of gender-nonconforming behaviour in the household. Such assertions of male power were underpinned by men's normative status as the head of household, which for some men was considered immutable. As a community leader interviewed before the programme explained, '*Even if he fails in all areas, a man is always standing as long as he maintains his power as head of the family; that is the pillar of all men. You will be comparable to an ant once you are no longer respected as head of the family*' (Community Leader, Community 4 May 2016). The idea that men might be expected to relinquish, or even share, decision-making power in their household was strongly resisted at baseline and, for some, throughout the intervention delivery. It was typical for resistant statements drawing on this script to invoke fear that the erosion of gender hierarchy would inevitably lead to the oppression of men. There was a concomitant belief that women should not be made to feel entitled to give men orders. An EMAP participant in a baseline interview from a community not included in the longitudinal study summarized this sentiment, '*I embrace equality, but a woman can never give the orders – that's not right*' (Participant 1, Community 17 May 2016).

During the EMAP discussion groups, men were not altogether resistant to introducing changes encouraged by the programme in their household; many nevertheless insisted that any such changes could only happen on their own terms. The research documented men's deliberate efforts to maintain control over what contributions they would make in the household. Such efforts were openly and repeatedly considered during the discussion groups. For example, in one discussion group held relatively early in the curriculum,

a participant proclaimed that, '*There can't be a shared agreement because this would mean that the husband would ask his wife permission to do or not to do something, while he is the head? This would provoke problems because the wife will think that a husband will always act according to her will*' (fieldnotes, Community 2, 9 September 2016).

Underpinned by a similar concern, EMAP participants in another community opposed the idea of discussing any changes with their wives and proposed instead that if men wanted to introduce changes in their household, including by contributing to household tasks, they should not tell their wives. Their concern was that discussing any potential contributions with their wives could have the adverse effect of placing women in a position of power, from which she could make orders, which could create discord in the household (fieldnotes, Community 3 September 2016). Illustrating the tenacious nature of this form of resistance, a man in another community warned his fellow participants several weeks later that, '*when sharing power with [your wife], one must be intelligent because if you do it wrong, my friends, women will walk on the heads of men*' (fieldnotes, Community 6 November 2016). While some men upholding this form of resistance proclaimed to support equality, it is apparent that their understanding of equality refers to progress towards an equal division of labour on men's terms and timeline – rather than an equal or shared division of power (Pierotti et al., 2018).

This first type of resistance script reaffirms men's authority and therefore reproduces gender hierarchy. At the same time, these statements were embedded in discussions of how men could help their wives with domestic tasks or could engage their wives in household decision-making. Thus, while taking care to construe potential changes in the gender division of labour as consistent with norms of male authority, programme participants debated acceptable boundaries of less rigid gender roles.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me: associating respect and obedience[1]

A second and related resistance script drew on notions of respect and, specifically, on its association with obedience. Throughout the baseline and longitudinal data, there were frequent references to the importance of a 'good wife' acting respectfully towards her husband. This emphasis on respect acted as a constraint on changes in gender relations in two ways. First, it constrained change by associating greater voice for women with disrespectful behaviour. When the act of a woman contributing a differing opinion is interpreted as a sign of disrespect, that behaviour is likely to be condemned and discouraged. Second, some indicators of respect were explicitly tied to the performance of certain tasks in a way that reinforced a narrow social role for women. The following paragraphs illustrate both of these ways that the emphasis on respect operated as a form of resistance to gender equality. This association of respect with obedience did not go unchallenged, however, as some groups of men were willing to debate this claim.

When asked what advice they give to young women seeking guidance on how to have a good marriage, community leaders typically foregrounded the importance of respect. In contrast, advice given to young men generally did not centre the importance of respecting their wives. As one community leader explained, '*I would tell her that the first thing is to respect her husband*' (Community Leader, Community 26 May 2016). When pressed to describe respectful behaviour, many men linked respect with obedience. As stated by

a leader in another community: '*I tell her to always respect her husband, to always obey everything her husband says*' (Community Leader, Community 7 May 2016).

During baseline interviews, men were asked about the qualities that are admirable in a wife. Responses to this question often centred the importance of respect, compliance and obedience. For example, one of the EMAP participants recounted that his wife's behaviour encouraged him to propose marriage: '*[I] realised that she was good because she obeyed my orders*' (Participant 3, Community 7 May 2016). Similar ideals were evident in interviews with men who would not be participating in EMAP, as illustrated by one respondent who explained that an ideal wife '*respects her husband and complies with her husband's orders without getting angry, without complaining. That is what we expect of our women*' (Non-Participant 4, Community 24 May 2016). Strikingly, such ideals were also espoused by some EMAP facilitators. One facilitator stated without any indication of self-reflection that, '*when looking for a wife*', he looked for '*a girl who would be obedient to my words*' (Facilitator 1, Community 8 May 2016). The role of EMAP facilitators centres on guiding discussions that encourage more gender equal attitudes and behaviours and to identify and challenge resistance to such ideas. Facilitators who maintain gender unequal attitudes may be less able – or willing – to identify and challenge such ideas during discussion groups.

A related explanation of respectful behaviour was ensuring that the man was properly served or cared for. This definition of respect reinforced both hierarchy within the household and a narrow social role for women. A community leader explained that a wife demonstrates respect when she helps her husband. When a wife is truly helpful, '*she cannot accept for her husband to wear dirty clothes or clothes that are not ironed, for her husband to not have water for a bath when he returns home from work, for her husband to arrive home and have to serve himself food, no. When he comes home, they sit together. She helps him*' (Community Leader, Community 16 May 2016). The emphasis on service conveys an adherence to a hierarchical and subservient relationship. Furthermore, women's time constraint due to the burden of domestic work may become especially acute when the inadequate performance of this work is taken as a sign of disrespect. An EMAP participant explained that his expectations for his wife were that '*she would be attentive to and respect her husband*' (Participant 3, Community 24 May 2016), emphasizing a wife's duty to serve her husband.

The observational data indicate that discussion groups did debate these notions of respect and obedience. Some EMAP participants were willing to challenge conceptions of intra-household respect. During one discussion group relatively early in the intervention, participants were asked to reflect on the characteristics of an ideal wife. One participant explained that, '*someone may say that an ideal wife doesn't speak in front of men, who demonstrates great respect towards her husband, who doesn't challenge her husband's decisions, but someone else will say the ideal wife is the opposite of the one I just described*' (*fieldnotes*, Community 3, 9 September 2016). This assertion prompted debate among the group. Some men said that EMAP was leading them to reflect on these expectations for women. They recognized that this characterization of respectful behaviour represented forms of violence imposed on women (*fieldnotes*, Community 3, 9 September 2016). This was not universal. During a later meeting of the same group, a participant pushed back against these changes, saying that EMAP was coming to '*revolt against men whose*

authority is being trampled on by his wife and means that women no longer show any respect to men' (*fieldnotes*, Community 3, 23 September 2016). Thus, while some EMAP participants demonstrated a willingness to question the correlation of respect with obedience, others continued to use a narrow definition of respect in defence of existing gender hierarchy and men's authority over women. The programme activities did not lead to a conclusion of this debate, nevertheless we argue that it is meaningful that it sparked debate about the connection between gender roles, obedience and respect.

It's not me, it's him: assigning responsibility for violence onto 'other' men

The third resistance script centred on men assigning responsibility for violence against women and girls onto 'other' men in their community. At times, this resulted in limiting men's self-reflection on their own attitudes and practices, such as those discussed above. This form of resistance was usually not manifested as overt rejection of gender equality messages. In fact, it was often expressed alongside statements of support for EMAP and its ideals, emphasizing that *other* men in the community – who they defined as being not like them – are most likely to disagree with and resist the messages promoted by the programme. These 'other' men were primarily described as men who consume alcohol excessively, are unemployed or idle and are not religious or 'responsible men'. The EMAP curriculum is careful to explain that all men benefit from gender inequality and, therefore, have a role to play in challenging unequal gender norms and their consequences within their households and their communities (IRC, 2013, pp. 14–15). In practice, efforts to promote this idea of collective responsibility were limited by the attribution of responsibility to delinquent men. This tendency to assign blame to others had two main consequences: it discouraged some men from participating in the programme and it stymied self-reflection among some participants.

Descriptions of men who are perceived to be the source of violence against women often highlighted violent men's propensity to drink alcohol and not be a responsible breadwinner for their family. While such descriptions were captured among most categories of respondents, these were especially frequent among men who had opted not to volunteer for EMAP. Illustratively, one man who had heard about the programme but opted not to participate explained, '*Those who will not accept the instructions [of EMAP] are mostly drunks. It's those who spend their days drinking, who spend their days roaming around the village who will think that these instructions are not important*' (Non-Participant 2, Community 5 May 2016). Another non-participant described men in his community who spend their days drinking and who are not able to provide for their families. '*These men who drink*', he continued, '*cannot treat their wives in the same way as those who do not drink*' (Non-Participant 2, Community 25 May 2016). Indeed, these 'other', problematic, men were also frequently contrasted with men who go to church and, therefore, were purported not to engage in violence in the household: '*the churches help people to change behaviours like drunkenness, hitting children, and repudiating their wives*' (Non-Participant 4, Community 24 May 2016). Having opted not to participate in EMAP, these men differentiated themselves from the problematic men in their community who, unlike them, drink alcohol, do not attend church, beat their wives and who, unlike them, are more likely to be the source of gender-based harms in their community.

Regardless of whether these men are themselves perpetrators of harm, their insistence that the programme is not for them limits the extent of direct exposure to the programme messages within communities.

Dynamics of assigning responsibility to disparaged men were also perceptible during the EMAP discussion groups. Observational data from lively debates about a fictional anecdote of a couple – Miriam and John – demonstrated this dynamic. In the vignette, Miriam was described as a woman who works hard to look after her household, while her husband John spends his days drinking alcohol. When he would return home, unable to support his family's needs, John would beat Miriam. EMAP participants were asked to discuss the types of violence they could identify in the vignette as well as who was at fault. With respect to the second question, the observational notes indicate that participants almost unanimously identified John as in the wrong, notably because he does not support his family and he beats his wife *without reason*. In effect, John was perceived to represent the problematic 'other' men described in interviews.

Among discussions pointing to John's culpability, there were undertones illustrating a second risk inherent to assigning responsibility for violence against women to a particular subset of disparaged men. Specifically, it may limit self-reflection among men vis-à-vis their own beliefs and practices. In one discussion surrounding the vignette, a participant stated that to him, it was '*impossible that the man could beat his wife without there being a reason*' and suggested that perhaps the husband had found out that Miriam had engaged in extramarital affairs. If that was the case, he continued, '*Miriam deserved her fate and that there is no violence, rather an educational punishment*' (*fieldnotes*, Community 4, 28 October 2016). One participant was sympathetic to his position explained that '*when a man is a drunk, he sometimes beats his wife, and even his children, without reason*' (*fieldnotes*, Community 4, 28 October 2016). Later, some participants turned their attention to Miriam's qualities as a wife that made her undeserving of such violence and concluded that '*Miriam is a good wife, the kind that you can't find in society anymore. If Miriam was obedient like that and had a respectful husband, she would make a model household*' (*fieldnotes*, Community 4, 28 October 2016). Overall, most participants in this discussion affirmed that John's violence was wrong on three principal grounds: 1) John was irresponsible and drunk; 2) the violence was without reason; 3) Miriam is a respectful and obedient wife. It was easy for the participants to distance themselves from John's behaviour. This reasoning echoed ideas of there being a 'threshold of acceptability' within which intimate partner violence may be perceived as 'acceptable' or 'justified', and beyond which it is not (Lewis et al., 2025, pp. 362–365).

This script discourages self-reflection among men who perceive themselves as already being 'good men' and who wish to distance themselves from the men they see as problematic. And yet, the quantitative baseline data clearly indicate that intimate partner violence is widespread, including among EMAP participants. In a quantitative survey that occurred before the programme began, nearly 50% female partners of EMAP participants reported that they had experience either physical or sexual violence in the preceding 12 months (Vaillant et al., 2020). Assigning blame for violence against women to other men is evidently a strategy for disavowing responsibility, limiting the scope for short-term change. And yet, these collaborative negotiations of what is considered 'acceptable'

gender violence point to possibilities for collective contestation of this existing norm among EMAP participants.

Different but equal: contesting the meaning of equality

A fourth form of resistance to transformative change was the assertion that men and women can be different but equal in the household. This was often an endorsement of an equal sharing of work or equal value, while maintaining differences in roles and responsibilities. Crucially, however, maintaining different roles and responsibilities also meant maintaining the gender hierarchy. One religious leader explained, '*Everyone can do equal work with still keeping their status as a man or a woman*' (Religious Leader, Community 5 May 2016). Similarly, a community leader explained that in his culture, '*women and men are equal*' but problems in the community happen because:

> couples do not know their rights and responsibilities, meaning that the wife has her rights and the husband also has his rights [. . .] Rights of women include bride price, food, clothing, a roof, and medical care when she is sick; Rights of husbands include obedience, that women guard men's belongings, and that women do not go out of the home without permission. And when one or the other does not respect the rights of their partner, it creates problems and leads to violence. (Community Leader, Community 9, May 2016)

Otherwise stated, this leader is claiming that men and women have equal worth but that their value stems from the performance of different roles and from different positions in the household. One specific version of the notion that men and women have equal worth, but different roles, was the idea that a man must love his wife and a woman must respect her husband. This idea was elaborated by a religious leader who stated that:

> Given that once you are married, the young man becomes responsible for the household, in that role he is obliged to love his wife because this is the greatest commandment of God. When no one loves his wife more than he does, he will be capable of supporting her and protecting her against all dangers. And on the part of the wife, she must respect her husband because when she does so, she will pay attention to everything her husband says to her and in those circumstances, she will manage to assist him. At that point, the difference will become clear, notably that the man must love [his wife] while the woman must respect [her husband]. (Religious Leader, Community 14, May 2016)

A related version of this reasoning emphasized that although the man is the head of the household, all other members of the household have value – although not authority – equal to his. One EMAP participant explained:

> The scripture tells us that Christ is the head of the Church. The man is also the head of the household. But, he must recognise that he could not be the head if there were no wife and children. What makes you the head are your wife and children and you, for your power to be visible, you must recognise that without them, you could not be the head of a household. That is to say, you must recognise that in the same way that you have value in your household, your wife and children do also. (Participant 1, Community 7, May 2016)

In discussion groups, the tension between equal value and equal power emerged during conversations about household tasks. The observational notes document some men resisting the idea of engaging in household labour. As described above, they feared that it would undermine their status as household head and would encroach on their

wives' domain. In response, some facilitators encouraged changes in task allocation by insisting on the durability of status differences. To make the point that reallocating tasks would not in and of itself affect a man's status in his household, facilitators at times focused on tasks that would generate the least resistance and then built towards more contentious tasks. In one group, a facilitator asked participants: '*if a man comes back from the field carrying his hoe on his shoulders, can that change his status?*'[2] Once the participants agree that undertaking this task would not alter a man's status, the facilitator asked: '*if a man cooks or does the laundry, can that change his status?*' To which participants exclaimed that '*no, no task can change someone's status*' (*fieldnotes*, 18 November 2016). In these exchanges, facilitators simultaneously promoted greater equality in the division of labour and endorsed hierarchical status differences.

Resistance scripts in this category emphasize women's value or endorse a more equitable division of labour, while affirming men's status as household heads. This type of resistance poses a particular kind of challenge for programmes seeking to promote gender equality that is based on equal status and power. The men who made these types of statements were ostensibly supporting the EMAP goals, but they were also reinforcing gender difference and gender hierarchy (e.g. Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This type of reaction to the promotion of gender equality may help to encourage a process of incremental change by encouraging men to take on tasks typically coded as 'women's labour'. On the other hand, it may indicate limits to the near-term transformative potential of the programme as taking on these tasks rendered palatable by being reconciled with men's dominant status rather than challenging it. Ultimately, this script surfaced debate among EMAP participants around the meaning and markers of gender roles and their relationship to gender equality and men's status inside and outside their households.

It's a man's job, anyway: emphasizing women's secondary status

In contrast to the notion that men and women are different but equal, the data also captured a justification for the abolition of the gendered division of tasks. While this script normalizes men's contributions to household labour, it is rooted in the notion that men and women are fundamentally unequal. Several men, including some EMAP facilitators, explained that all work – including domestic work – is the responsibility of men, and women are only their assistants. They used this logic to support the idea that men can do housework, since everything is their responsibility. This idea was typically attributed to biblical teachings, suggesting that churches may be the origin of this script. A religious leader explained:

> You see that it is mutual support in the household for everything. There is not work that a man cannot do in his household because he can even cook. The women can return home tired and, at that moment, the man can prepare food and serve the table. This is neither insult nor ridicule. Even the Bible tells us that all work is assigned to the man and the woman is only the complement to the man. (Religious Leader, Community 7, May 2016)

Some facilitators drew on this script when confronted with men who were resistant to the idea that men should do housework. As one facilitator recounted, '*they asked if the husband can make the bed when his wife has gotten up earlier. I told them . . . when you were single you made your bed. When you brought assistance, it is assistance; the assistant*

cannot replace the responsible. The one responsible is you, according to the Bible' (Facilitator 1, Community 9 May 2016). In this statement, the facilitator is asserting that all work is men's work, and women are brought into their household as wives to assist with these tasks. A facilitator in another community drew on a similar script, explaining that

> In the Bible you will find that when God created woman and put her before man, he said this woman will be your help . . . . That is to say that all work that [the man] will do is on his shoulders, but this woman, out of pity, she can help him. This means to say that EMAP is also on the side of the Bible. But, in contrast, we do the opposite by leaving women to do all the work. But the work is normally intended for men. (Facilitator 2, Community 12, May 2016)

Here again, this facilitator affirms that all work is the responsibility of men, so they should not hesitate to contribute to housework.

The data indicate that this script also resonated with some participants. A participant in a discussion group drew on this idea when giving context to resistance expressed by another participant in his group several weeks into the programme. In the discussion, the facilitator asked participants to share with the group examples of domestic work they had contributed to that week and to reflect on how they felt when undertaking these tasks. One man who was called on to respond to this discussion prompt explained that despite participating in EMAP, he still could not do housework at home. This statement frustrated the facilitator. In response, another participant spoke up and stated that he understood where this resistance came from. He explained that

> When we are engaged [to be married], we are used to warning our fiancées that I, as a man, I don't like a lazy wife who does not have the courage to do everything in my place; once in the household, the wife does everything to please her husband and respect his instructions. Now, if a man hasn't had the chance to participate in trainings and seminars on gender or in quality teachings like EMAP, he will always have a hard time understanding that a man must not abandon all domestic work to the detriment of his wife. (*fieldnotes*, Community 5, 4 November 2016)

This resistance script is supportive of an important element of the behaviour change encouraged by EMAP, notably the sharing of household labour. By grounding discussion of the division of labour in this script about men's status and masculine ideals, facilitators created a broader opening for men to debate gender roles. And yet, while this script may usefully normalize men's contributions to domestic labour, it simultaneously reinforces the notion that women are subordinate to men; they are men's assistants. Like the previous form of resistance, this script may facilitate incremental change, especially by reallocating domestic labour and encouraging debates about the meaning of men's contributions to housework. In the immediate term, however, socio-cultural change is limited by the script's emphasis on men's superior status.

Conclusion

Men's resistance to gender equality messaging should be expected and can take different forms, ranging from violent to non-violent backlash and from overt rejection to more subtle appropriation (Flood et al., 2020). Grounded in a qualitative study of a gender transformative intervention delivered in eastern DRC, this article presented five non-violent manifestations of men's resistance and described how men drew on commonly

recognizable socio-cultural and socio-normative scripts to make sense of the programme messages. While each of these expressions of resistance has the potential to slow, constrain or undermine gender transformative change, they may also represent a step on the way towards more incremental normative, attitudinal and behavioural change. The potential for incremental change is inherent in the debates that were opened when men drew on their existing cultural repertoires to reinterpret the gender equality messages (Johnson-Hanks et al., 2011).

The scripts simultaneously point to men's willingness to engage with the ideas of gender equality promoted by EMAP, while also revealing the ways they sought to reconcile these newer ideas with their conceptions of themselves as men in their homes and in their communities. By paying attention to men's discursive engagement with gender equality messaging, the scripts surface the possibilities for change and debate and brought into view their individual and collective boundaries of normative contestation around intrahousehold gender relations. For instance, men were, as whole, open to taking on household tasks to support their wives – yet, many would only do so on their terms and timelines, with the assurance that taking on household tasks would not undermine their authority, respect and primary status as the head of household. Similarly, when it came to men's violence against women, participants largely supported EMAPs objective of preventing violence against women, including intimate partner violence. That said, these expressions of support for ending violence against women were often targeted towards 'other' men in the community – often 'idle', 'non-religious' and 'irresponsible' men – who were perceived as perpetrators of problematic, excessive and unacceptable violence against women. This script, in particular, revealed that some forms of violence against women are deemed 'acceptable', for example, if a husband believes that his wife has disobeyed or been unfaithful to him. While we identified some debate and disagreement expressed within EMAP discussion groups around this idea, it was far from conclusively challenged. Surfacing these five resistance scripts and their socio-normative underpinnings enables us to better understand the possibilities, limits and meanings ascribed to gender transformative change as men contend with, accommodate, resist, reconcile and render palatable new gender scripts and move towards generating performances of what some have called 'hybrid masculinities' (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

It is important to note, however, that while each of the scripts evidently resisted some core tenets of gender transformative change, none of the scripts represented active opposition to or outright rejection of introducing more gender equitable practices in their households. This finding is encouraging and points to a more nuanced view of resistance – one which does not necessarily or automatically equate resistance with backlash (Flood 2020). Instead, viewing these resistance scripts as part of messy, inconsistent and sometimes contradictory processes of social change may create possibilities for contextual and constructive engagement with men's resistance, in turn, laying the path for more incremental change in men's daily lives.

Tamale (2008) reminds women's rights activists and scholars that cultures are constantly shifting. Efforts to advance gender equality should not be conceptualized as in opposition to a static culture, but rather as something to achieve through cultural change (2008: 55). Promoting gender equality means encouraging

cultural and social transformations. That type of process necessarily involves negotiation and contestation (Maubert, 2024). Transformation requires working with existing cultural repertoires, not against them. This study identified scripts that men in EMAP communities drew on to resist, appropriate and push-back against gender equality messaging. At their core, in the short term, each of these scripts operate to maintain men's superior position in the gender hierarchy. We argue, however, that listening carefully to how participants in gender norms shifting programmes mobilize existing cultural scripts to respond to encouragement for change is critical to the ultimate success of these efforts. Identifying non-violent, sometimes subtle manifestations of resistance to gender equality messaging will enable programmes to respond to such scripts as they emerge in future programming and will enable a more complete conceptual picture of gender norm change and contestations among men.

Notes

1. Section title inspired by Aretha Franklin. 'Respect'. Atlantic Records, 1967.
2. In farming communities in eastern DRC, it is expected for women to carry the hoe to and from the fields.

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Author contributions

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