



Getting down to business: Women's economic and social empowerment in Burundi

Women's economic and social empowerment is an accepted part of development programming,¹ yet many questions remain about how or if these programs also put women at risk.² Understanding the risks and benefits of economic empowerment programming is crucial in



designing programs that maximize benefits and minimize harm. Can increasing a woman's access to resources also increase her control over those resources in the household? Can increased economic empowerment influence how much abuse she experiences at home? Can improving communication between couples help women safely assert more control over the economic resources they contribute to the household?

The International Rescue Committee seeks to determine what is the most effective way to support women's empowerment in conflict-affected settings. Drawing on extensive field experience, the IRC designed a program in Burundi that actively involved both women and men in an economic program and a discussion series around household finances. IRC's EA\$E (Economic And Social Empowerment for women)³ program ultimately aims to increase women's decision-making in the home and decrease intimate partner violence (IPV). The IRC partnered with Professor Radha Iyengar from the London School of Economics to rigorously examine if adding a discussion series for couples was more effective in increasing decision-making and reducing violence, rather than just an economic program on its own.

Results of the evaluation show that adding the discussion series resulted in significant reduction in the incidence of partner violence. The discussion series also positively affected attitudes towards violence against women, as well as brought about relatively significant and positive changes in household decision-making and negotiation between couples.

¹ World Health Organization (2005). Addressing violence against women and achieving the Millenium Development Goals. Department of Gender, Women and Health, Family and Community Health, WHO: Geneva.

² Vyas, S. & Watts, C. (2008). How does economic empowerment affect women's risk of intimate partner violence in low and middle income countries? A systematic review of published evidence. *Journal of International Development*, 21, 577-602.

³ In the EA\$E program, the economic component is a Village Savings and Loan Association (VLSA) and the discussion group curriculum is Talking about Talking, developed in 2008 by Radha Iyengar and Tom Vogl, Harvard University, in consultation with the IRC.

Does an increase in income decrease women's experience with violence? What past research tells us.

There are numerous programs around the world that aim to increase women's empowerment and decrease violence against women; yet relatively few have documented their actual effectiveness.

In a review of 30 studies⁴ that investigated the relationship between women's economic empowerment and intimate partner violence in low and middle income countries, the results are mixed:

- Increased household assets were associated with decreased risk of IPV for women;
- Households where both the man and woman have higher levels of education (primary or secondary education for the man; secondary education for the woman) were associated with decreased risk of IPV for women;
- Households where the woman has higher levels of education than the man were associated with increased risk of IPV for women;
- Households where the woman (but not the man) has increased access to income were associated with both increased and decreased risk of IPV for women;

Men typically have more education and more income-generating opportunities than women. The evidence suggests that when women upset this gender status quo they are at a higher risk for violence. However, the causality has not been proven in most studies. This means further research is needed to



understand the ways that economic and social interventions for women impact their empowerment, their ability to make decisions in the household, and their experience of violence. The strongest evidence to date suggests microfinance interventions should be paired with social interventions in order to improve outcomes on women's empowerment. Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity (IMAGE) in South Africa paired a microfinance intervention with a series of female-only training sessions covering topics related to gender-equity and sexual and domestic violence. These trainings resulted in an increase in women's empowerment and a 55% decrease in IPV.^{5,6} The combination of microfinance interventions and training sessions was proven to increase empowerment and decrease partner violence.⁷

Programming for economic and social empowerment in Burundi

Marred by civil war for over 40 years until a peace deal was signed in 2009, 68% of people in Burundi currently live below the poverty line.^{8,9} In addition to violent conflict and poverty, women in Burundi also face a myriad of social challenges. They are often seen as inferior to men, dependent on husbands or

⁴ Vyas & Watts (2008).

⁵ Kim, J.C., Watts, C.H., Hargreaves, J.R., Ndhlovu, L.X., Phetla, G., Morison, L.A., Busza, J., Porter, J.D.H., & Pronyk, P. (2007). Understanding the Impact of a Microfinance-based Intervention on Women's Empowerment and the Reduction of Intimate Partner Violence in South Africa. *American Journal of Public Health*, 97(10), 1794-1802.

⁶ Pronyk, P.M., Hargreaves, J.R., Kim, J.C., Morison, L.A., Phetla, G., Watts, C., Busza, J., & Porter, J.D.H. (2006). Effect of a structural intervention for the prevention of intimate partner-violence and HIV in rural South Africa: a cluster randomised trial. *Lancet*, 368, 1973-1983.

⁷ Kim, J., Ferrari, G., Abramsky, T., Watts, C., Hargreaves, J., Morison, L., Phetla, G., Porter, J., & Pronyk, P. (2009). Assessing the incremental effects of combining economic and health interventions: the IMAGE study in South Africa. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 87: 824-832.

⁸ Gordon, D. L. (2011). Burundi. *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*. Retrieved March 22, 2011, from Grolier Online <http://gme.grolier.com/article?assetid=0046930-0>.

⁹ The World Bank. (2011). *Burundi*. Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/country/burundi>.

male relatives, unable to make decisions about household resources, children's education, or even when to have sex. Husbands consider physical violence as a form of discipline for their wives, sometimes even for small offenses, like serving dinner late.¹⁰ Sexual violence is understood as common in Burundi's traditional and patriarchal society, and was often used as a weapon during the civil war.

Since September 2007, the IRC has been establishing Village Saving and Loan Associations (VSLA) in southern Burundi. VSLAs are self-selected groups of women and men created to increase savings opportunities and access to economic resources. Participants contribute to a savings fund on a weekly basis and then cash out with interest after 8-12 months. During the cycle, participants can take loans from the savings that must be paid back within an agreed upon time-frame.

Previous experience and research indicated that having women participate in VSLAs could possibly put them at a higher risk of violence. In addition, programs that involve only women may unintentionally place the burden on women to decrease the violence they experience rather than placing the responsibility on the men who perpetrate it. To mitigate these risks, IRC added a six session discussion group series called *Talking about Talking (TaT)* to the VSLAs, providing opportunities for dialogue about joint economic decision-making between men and women in the household. The discussion group series challenged gender norms about financial decision-making (money and assets) using non-threatening entry points focusing on improving overall household well-being and participatory methods.¹¹

IRC's research aimed to determine whether adding the discussion group series improved the following outcomes:

- 1) **Incidence of IPV:** does the VSLA program plus couples' discussion series reduce the incidence of intimate partner violence among participants more than the VSLA alone?
- 2) **Household decision-making:** are female participants of the discussion groups more likely to be involved with household decision making?
- 3) **Negotiating resolutions:** are discussion group participants more likely to use negotiation skills in order to reduce the risk of conflicts escalating into violence?
- 4) **Attitudes towards IPV:** are discussion group participants more likely to think that violence is never justified in a relationship?

Measuring our results

We used a randomized impact evaluation to determine whether the discussion series had an impact. By holding a lottery where members drew numbers out of a hat, we randomly assigned half of the participants from the savings and loans groups into the *Talking about Talking* discussion series. Half of the participants drew winning numbers, giving them the opportunity to participate in the discussion groups with their partner. The other half were told that they would be given the same opportunity at a later time. Two groups were formed: 1) those who participated in the VSLAs only; and, 2) those who participated in the VSLAs plus the *Talking about Talking (TaT)* discussion series.

Random assignment was used in order to ensure that the two groups were the same across all dimensions. This allowed us to be confident that it was the program that caused any changes rather than other characteristics that might make participants join such a discussion group (i.e. harder working, more interested, worse relationships with partners, etc.).

¹⁰ International Women's Rights Action Watch. (2000). *Burundi*. Retrieved from <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/iwraw/burundi.htm>.

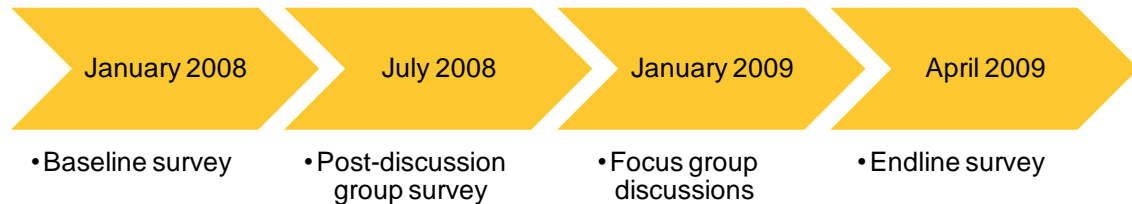
¹¹ International Rescue Committee. (2011). *Programs in Burundi*. Retrieved from <http://www.rescue.org/program/programs-burundi>.

Impact Evaluation Data Collection: Surveys and Focus Group Discussions

Women's empowerment was measured through household decision making (woman, man or joint), negotiation, attitudes towards violence and women's rights, and incidence of IPV. Incidence of IPV was measured with the Hurt Insult Threaten Scream (HITS) screening tool,¹² which documents the frequency of physical abuse, insults, threats, and screaming in the past two weeks using a 5-point Likert scale. Both males and females were interviewed.

We conducted three surveys: a baseline survey, a survey after the end of the discussion group, and an endline survey.

Figure 1. Data collection timeline



In addition to the surveys, we conducted four focus group discussions broken down by gender and treatment group (VSLA-only vs. VSLA-TaT). These focus group discussions investigated perceptions and customs regarding topics covered in the discussion series such as household decision-making, family planning issues, women's ability to negotiate sex, and intimate partner violence. The purpose of these focus groups discussions was to further inform and contextualize the quantitative data gathered by the three surveys.

Table 1. Data collection timeline and details

JANUARY 2008 – Baseline Survey (#1)		
What we measured	Number of participants	Time
Socio-demographic characteristics Incidence of IPV Household decision-making patterns Avoiding conflict Changes in attitudes towards IPV	VSLA-only: 226 VSLA + TaT: 257	Before VSLA activities and discussion series started
JULY 2008 – Post discussion group Survey (#2)		
Incidence of IPV Household decision-making patterns Avoiding conflict Changes in attitudes towards IPV	VSLA-only: 219 VSLA + TaT: 255	After the end of discussion series; VSLA ongoing
JANUARY 2009 – Focus group discussions		
Perceptions and customs regarding household decision-making, family planning, asset use, intimate partner violence, and other issues covered in discussion group series	1 FG with men in VSLA-only 1 FG with men in VSLA + TaT 1 FG with women in VSLA-only 1 FG with women in VSLA + TaT	After the end of the discussion series; VSLA ongoing
APRIL 2009 – Endline Survey (#3)		
Incidence of IPV Household decision-making patterns Avoiding conflict Changes in attitudes towards IPV	VSLA-only: 215 VSLA + TaT: 251	After the end of the VSLA

¹² ¹² Sherin, K.M., Sinacore, J.M., Li, X.Q., Zitter, R.E., & Shakil, A. (1998). HITS: a short domestic violence screening tool for use in a family practice setting. *Family Medicine*, 30(7), 508-512.

Table 2. Who participated? (n=483)¹³

Demographic characteristics	Average age: 37.9 years (range: 15-80 years)
	69% female
	Average number of children living at home: 4 (max = 12)
	97.8% have been displaced due to conflict
	61% attended some primary school
Decision-making authority	60% of men and 46% of women decide how to spend their income alone
	68% of men and 36% of women report men decide major purchases
	37% of women and 39% of men report men decide how many children to have
Attitudes about women's empowerment at baseline	70% of men and 80% of women said that women should do as their husbands say
Intimate partner violence at baseline	8% of respondents were in relationships with a high risk of IPV
	12% of respondents were in relationships with a marginal risk of IPV

Small but significant steps: Discussion groups decrease incidence and acceptance of IPV and increase joint decision-making and negotiation

The *Talking about Talking* discussion series reduced the incidence of threats, increased women's household decision making, increased couples' use of negotiation skills, and decreased women's tolerance of violence in the household. While the gains were small, the evaluation showed that it is possible to make changes through a targeted intervention focusing on couples.

Table 3. Key Results

Outcome 1: Incidence of IPV Measured using the HITS screening tool, ¹⁴ which asks about the frequency of physical abuse (hurt), insults, threats, and screaming.	Incidence of IPV decreased
Outcome 2: Household decision-making Household decision-making patterns were considered improved when resolution was reached through joint discussion rather than a unilateral decision by a man.	Women reported increased decision-making
Outcome 3: Negotiating resolutions Negotiation skills were considered improved when resolution was reached through joint discussion rather than a unilateral decision by a man.	Use of negotiation skills increased
Outcome 4: Changes in attitudes towards IPV Changes in attitudes towards IPV were considered improved when tolerance of IPV decreased.	Acceptance of violence decreased

Outcome 1: Incidence of IPV decreased

Women in the high or moderate risk category at baseline (between 8-10 or over 10 on the HITS scale) reported a 22% significant reduction in the incidence of violence in the last two weeks and a 46%

¹³ There was no statistical difference between socio-demographic characteristics of the VSLA-only and VSLA + TaT groups. The baseline results were similar as well, except that more husbands in the VSLA + TaT groups decided how the wife's income was spent. As there are so many outcome variables measured in the study, it is not a problem that one variable showed a significant difference between the groups.

¹⁴ Sherin, K.M., Sinacore, J.M., Li, X.Q., Zitter, R.E., & Shakil, A. (1998). HITS: a short domestic violence screening tool for use in a family practice setting. *Family Medicine*, 30(7), 508-512.

reduction in physical harm. Men who were in the low risk category reported a 20% significant reduction in total violence. This indicates that *Talking about Talking* has the promise to dramatically decrease violence against women in their homes.

Decision making areas:

- Spending own income
- Major household purchases
- Deciding number of children
- Daily household purchases
- Alcohol and cigarette purchases
- How the household's income is spent
- Visiting friends and family
- When to have sex

Outcome 2: Women reported increased decision-making

Female clients in the discussion series reported statistically significant increases in three of eight major decision-making areas:

- 26.6% increase in deciding how to spend her own income
- 14.7% increase in what major household purchases to make
- 14.7% increase in deciding the number of children the couple will have

The remaining five decision-making areas (daily household purchases, alcohol and cigarette purchases, how the household's income is spent, visiting friends and family, and when to have sex) also showed increases but they were not statistically significant. While women in the VSLA + TaT group tended to report large increases in their roles in household decision-making, male clients in the VSLA + TaT group reported very small decreases in their own decision-making roles, ranging from 0.3% to 6%. This could imply that the discussion series made women more empowered and involved in household decision-making while men continued to feel involved.

Outcome 3: Men and Women in discussion groups negotiated resolutions more often

Improvements in negotiation were counted as disagreements between couples resolved by discussion as opposed to unilateral decisions made by men. Only disagreements critical to women's empowerment were considered, such as decision-making on income or assets, family planning, women's safety, and women's political rights. Female discussion group members reported an increase in negotiated resolutions for all disagreements except for alcohol and cigarette purchases and when to have sex; however, all changes were small and none were statistically significant. Of note, male discussion group members reported an 11% significant increase in the use of negotiation skills during disagreements about the number of children to have.

Focus group discussions with both VSLA-only and VSLA + TaT groups indicated that certain types of decision-making will be easier to influence than others. For example, men and women across both focus groups accepted that women should be involved in decision-making about property management, but that women have no input regarding when to have sex. In addition, qualitative work highlighted that while negotiated resolutions are culturally acceptable for certain situations, women do not have the opportunity to veto a decision made by their husband.

Outcome 4: Acceptance of violence decreased

Acceptance of violence was measured by asking whether violence is excusable in certain scenarios. Discussion group members reported statistically significant decrease in tolerance of IPV against women in the following cases:

- A 4% decrease in tolerance of IPV in the case of a wife refusing to have sex with her husband.
- A 10% decrease in tolerance of IPV in the case of the wife neglecting the children.

While only these two cases had significant results, other results from male and female discussion group members showed small but positive trends for the following cases: if the wife goes out without telling the husband, if the wife argues with the husband, if the wife burns the food, and if the husband is annoyed or angered by the wife's actions.

Conclusion

Practitioner Takeaway:

Adding a tailored discussion group series that addresses gender equity and communication skills to a savings and loans program creates significant and positive changes in the incidence of intimate partner violence (IPV), attitudes towards violence against women, in household decision-making and negotiation.

Programs can improve women's empowerment outcomes by strategically involving men through a tailored discussion group series to existing economic programming.

Results from this impact evaluation highlight that the IRC's EA\$E program:

- Does not impact all areas of domestic life equally; some roles, responsibilities, and attitudes are more firmly entrenched than others;
- Increased the use of negotiation in *some* types of conflicts;
- Helped women feel more involved in household decision making without making men feel substantially less involved.

Remaining questions

- If cases of IPV reported by men increase initially, do they decrease over time?
- Does an initial reduction in insulting later result in a reduction in physical violence?
- Does this program work similarly in different countries and contexts?

The IRC used these evaluation results to improve the discussion group curriculum, with a special focus on methodology and the attitudes and skills needed to improve negotiation techniques and safely increase women's decision making power in the household. This improved curriculum is now being used in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote D'Ivoire and is being rigorously evaluated in Cote d'Ivoire to answer the remaining questions listed above.

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