



Programming to Prevent Violence Against Women:  
**PRACTICE BRIEF**

## Preventing Partner Violence **Working with Couples**

### OVERVIEW

Intimate partner violence (IPV) prevention programming in the Global South initially focused on working with women. Yet, over the last few years this has expanded to engaging both women and men both in small group work and at the community level. More recently, some violence prevention programs have begun specifically targeting couples. This practice brief explores the emerging area of working with couples on violence prevention, highlighting three programs using this approach in Africa: *Indashyikirwa* in Rwanda, *Becoming One* in Uganda, and *Unite for a Better Life* in Ethiopia. Although impact evaluations of these programs are not yet available, this practice brief is informed by qualitative research findings, reflections from program staff on the value of working with couples and issues that need to be considered during program design. It contains lessons that may be useful for practitioners looking to enter this field and for organizations planning to expand into couples programming.

### EXAMPLES OF WORKING WITH COUPLES TO PREVENT PARTNER VIOLENCE

#### 1. INDASHYIKIRWA, RWANDA

The *Indashyikirwa* program used CARE's Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) as a platform for identifying individuals interested in participating in a new couples program designed to strengthen relationships. The program's participatory curriculum was designed to equip couples to positively transform power imbalances in their lives and households; to identify and manage triggers of IPV; and to build skills for equitable, non-violent relationships. The curriculum focused on promoting change in knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviors and moved step-by-step from intensive self-reflection to concrete actions

taken at a community level. The training included take-home exercises to help couples consolidate and strengthen their learning. *Indashyikirwa* was implemented by CARE Rwanda, the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC), and Rwanda Women's Network (RWN). The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) provided input into the design of the program and evaluated its impact as part of the *What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls Programme*.

#### 2. BECOMING ONE, DEVELOPED IN LIBERIA AND PILOTED IN UGANDA

*Becoming One* is a faith-based couples counseling program that builds relationship skills with the aim of preventing IPV. The Airbel Center – International Rescue Committee's (IRC) research and innovation lab – designed and implemented the program in Uganda, following its initial fieldwork in Liberia which revealed that faith leaders were seen as wise advisors who provide counseling that reduces violence and conflict. The Airbel Center partnered with World Vision to use the latter's existing networks

to identify faith leaders motivated to create change in their communities. Through manual and video-based instruction, the program trains faith leaders to conduct skills-based counseling inspired by religious values. Faith leaders then train couples, drawing on biblical verses to reinforce and exemplify positive relationships. Couples use a fully-illustrated couples' guide to practice their newly-learned skills at home.



### 3. UNITE FOR A BETTER LIFE, ETHIOPIA

*Unite for a Better Life* aims to prevent and reduce IPV and HIV in Ethiopia, utilizing the traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony – an important culturally-established forum – for community discussion. The program integrates into these ceremonies conversations about gender norms and sexuality, as well as skill-building sessions, to increase the acceptability and uptake of gender-transformative behaviors. *Unite for a Better Life* is being tested with male-only, female-only and couples groups as part of a cluster randomized control trial.

The curricula and delivery methods vary slightly for each group. For example, the couples curriculum includes activities, skill-building and role plays relevant for couples. For sensitive discussions, the group is broken down into smaller same-sex groups before coming back to the larger group. The program was implemented and tested by Engender Health and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) with the Ethiopian Public Health Association and Addis Ababa University School of Public Health.

	INDASHYIKIRWA	BECOMING ONE	UNITE FOR A BETTER LIFE
<b>Target audience</b>	Heterosexual couples in which at least one partner (often the female partner) is a member of CARE Rwanda's Village Savings and Loan Association program.	Dating, engaged or married Christian heterosexual couples	Male-only, female-only, and couples' groups.
<b>Sessions led by facilitators</b>	20	12	14
<b>Length of facilitator training</b>	2 weeks and they go through the program as participants first.	Pastors participate in a 1 week "Gender and Faith" curriculum conducted by World Vision. They receive 4 additional hours of instruction on using the <i>Becoming One</i> materials. The program provides 14 short instructional videos modelling how to deliver each session of the curriculum.	14 days on basic facilitation skills and then they go through the 7 week program as participants first before becoming facilitators.
<b>Frequency of sessions</b>	3 hours, once a week	Weekly or every other week, as preferred by participants	2 sessions per week over 7 weeks for a total of 14 sessions
<b>Participants per group</b>	30	Each session is run with groups of 5 to 10 couples	20
<b>Content</b>	Foundational concepts of power and gender; rights and realities; causes and consequences of violence; managing triggers of violence, including alcohol use, jealousy, and economic inequalities; gender roles in the household; foundations of healthy relationships; introduction to activism; and providing empowering responses to survivors of IPV to minimize their sense of shame and stigma.	Communication; emotional regulation; shared control over finances; and sexual consent and pleasure.	Gender roles; healthy sexuality and relationships; power and control in relationships; joint decision-making; task sharing; communication; IPV; boundaries and sexual consent; emotional regulation; conflict resolution; and supporting survivors.

# WHY WORK WITH COUPLES?



Historically, the violence prevention field has been hesitant about working with couples, due to concern that this may increase existing violence within relationships. For example, a man might retaliate against his wife if he thinks she has told others, during program sessions, about his use of violence. Yet, there is also increasing evidence that enhanced relationship skills around conflict management, emotional regulation and financial decision-making can contribute to reduced partner violence.

The *Indashyikirwa* program in Rwanda, for example, chose to target couples because data emerging from the SASA! evaluation in Uganda suggested a key pathway to change was at the couple level. Qualitative findings also suggested that change was more likely to occur when both partners were engaged.

Similarly, while the *Unite for a Better Life* study found few programs and little evidence on working with couples, they decided to include a couples-only arm in their trial to compare the effectiveness of working with couples versus working with just one partner at a time.

While *Becoming One* initially did not plan to implement violence prevention programming with couples, the IRC decided to build the program around couples after formative research illustrated that existing couple relationship education sessions with Christian leaders were a key entry point to intervene.

## WORKING WITH COUPLES IN GROUPS

*Indashyikirwa* and *Unite for a Better Life*, as well as some programs in the Global North, show emerging evidence that violence prevention work with couples in group settings can be both effective and of value to couples. *Indashyikirwa* observed that engaging both members of a couple helped sustain commitment: couples supported each other to change and held each other accountable. Couples also reported that they came to know their partner better, as they often shared things in sessions that they were not comfortable sharing one-on-one.

In *Unite for a Better Life*, participants in the couples' groups also found it very helpful and effective to work through the sessions together and in the single-sex groups participants asked that their partner also be involved. Being with similar people experiencing similar life and relationship challenges in group sessions allowed participants to feel more comfortable and supported. For example, in *Indashyikirwa*, men reported that it helped to have the support of other men in the program when they engaged in behaviors that were counter to traditional gender roles, such as taking their children to the health center for the first time. They also shared tips on how to handle relationship challenges between each other over the course of the program.



## TIPS

Consider the size of the group. If the group is too big it can be difficult for couples to open up and have an opportunity to share.

Holding sessions at a time that works for couples is also essential. Ask when couples normally engage in social time in your program context, such as on weekends or traditional days of rest. Try out different options until you find the best time for most people.

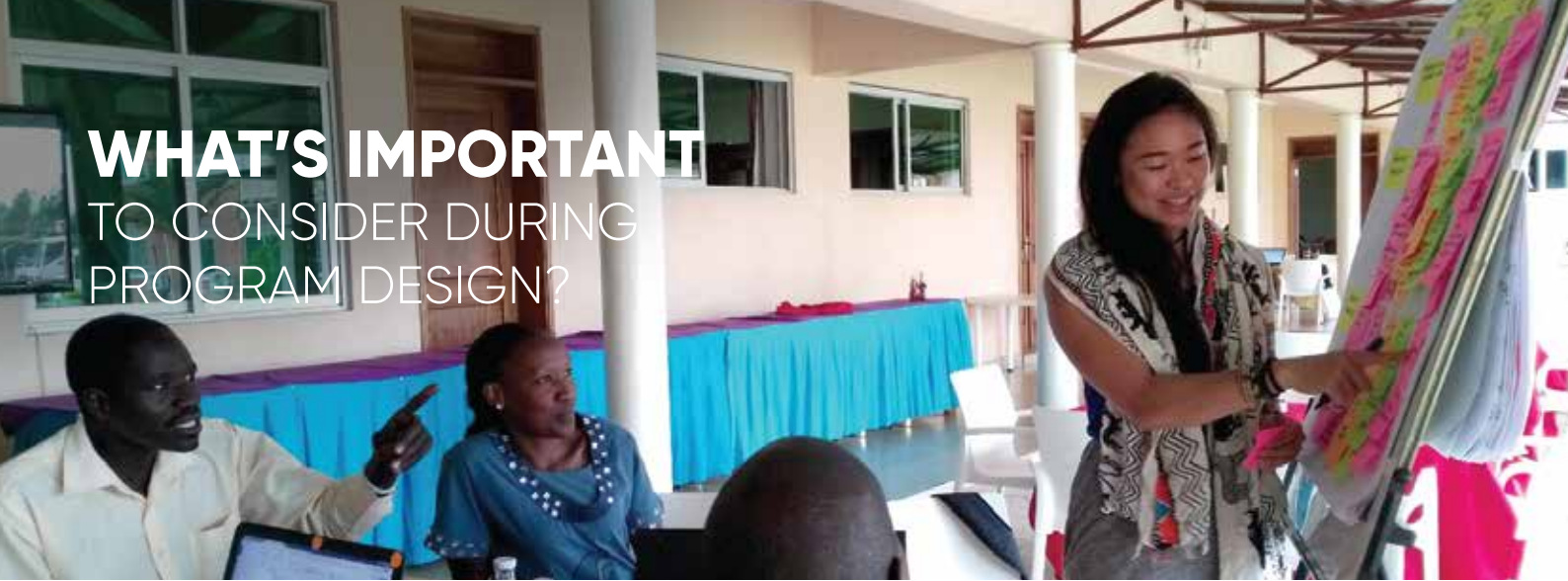
## INCREASING SAFETY FOR PARTICIPANTS

Steps should be taken to increase safety for participants in couples' programming. During the *Unite for a Better Life* program in Ethiopia, for example, session ground rules were set and posted on the wall. They included "no naming names" during discussions and no sharing of personal couple experiences in the larger group.

*Indashyikirwa* and *Unite for a Better Life* both used a male and female facilitator for each session and *Becoming One* found many faith leaders naturally began including their spouse as a co-facilitator in the sessions to help the opposite gender open up. The *Indashyikirwa* team noted this was helpful as certain topics could bring up a previous trauma for a participant and it was useful for the same sex facilitator to be able to step out to support them as needed while the other continued the session.

Having both female and male facilitators was also helpful during *Indashyikirwa* for running single-sex sessions on more sensitive topics related to sex and partner violence. And while the team initially referred couples to an outside counselor for additional support, they found that couples wanted support from the facilitator they had been working with. Piloting also illustrated that facilitators needed more training in vicarious trauma and basic couples' counseling, so this was increased in the training.

# WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER DURING PROGRAM DESIGN?



## CONNECT AND ALIGN WITH **EXISTING VALUES**

All three programs intentionally aligned their curriculum with existing values in their context. For example, in Liberia, the IRC designed the *Becoming One* program around how couples and faith leaders defined a 'successful relationship.' The program explored transformative life moments, when people in Liberia were most likely to be influenced, and the key influencers in the community at these moments. The IRC found this key juncture occurred when Christian faith leaders were providing relationship counseling to couples before they got married.

They reached out to faith leaders to see where their values aligned with the theory of change the IRC had developed from the evidence base on healthy relationships and violence reduction. Although the faith leaders' values and couples' own relationship goals were only about 80 percent aligned with the IRC's approach, everyone agreed that they wanted to foster peaceful homes and harmonious relationships.

While the *Indashyikirwa* team in Rwanda similarly found that existing values did not always completely align with their evidence-based program design, they found it key to approach communities with a spirit of openness and respect for cultural and religious values. In Ethiopia, coffee ceremony facilitators felt it was helpful to identify challenging cultural processes and unpack them together with communities.

In Ethiopia, the *Unite for a Better Life* design team linked their program to a coffee ceremony. Although this ceremony is traditionally performed by women, it is a space where couples already come together regularly for a two-to-three-hour period. This provided the team with an opportunity to explore mixing up gender roles as a group, having men take their turn preparing and serving the coffee for women.

Potential backlash to mixing gender roles was identified in early stakeholder consultations, so the team carefully designed these sessions in way that the mixing of gender roles would be non-threatening to participants, then piloted this approach before starting program implementation. The program has now been adapted for use with Somali refugees and is built around a tea ceremony common in that context.



### TIPS

Explore if there are existing cultural practices, community activities, groups or ceremonies where couples come together already. Consider how you could incorporate program activities with couples into these practices or shape the program around them. Learn about the gendered roles in these ceremonies and practices and keep this in mind during your design.



### TIPS

Consider who influences on relationships in your community? Who do couples go to for support with their relationship problems? Who gives guidance on this traditionally? Explore the transformative moments in couples' lives to identify who in the community has influence over relationships at those times.

## LINK CONTENT TO AN **EXISTING COMMUNITY ACTIVITY, CULTURAL PRACTICE OR CEREMONY**

Program content will have faster uptake and be more sustainable if it is built into existing community activities. *Indashyikirwa* was linked to an ongoing village savings and loan program that had been operating for some time in Rwandan communities. Similarly, *Becoming One* was linked to the existing pre-marital counseling traditionally provided by Christian faith leaders.



## ADAPTING EXISTING MATERIALS

As working with couples is an emerging approach, program designers adapted parts of existing curricula and, in some cases, tools from relationship education literature.

The *Indashyikirwa* curriculum drew on adaptations and lessons learned from Promundo's Journeys of Transformation curriculum and SASA! in Uganda. In particular, the curriculum drew upon SASA!'s emphasis on positive ('power to', 'power with', 'power within') and negative ('power over') types and uses of power.

Other key aspects of SASA! that were built into Indashyikirwa included how to move incrementally from self-reflection to collective action, highlighting the benefits of gender equality and

non-violence, developing skills to manage partner violence and recognizing multiple power imbalances beyond gender roles.

As IRC's program worked with faith leaders, they drew from Christian relationship guides, general relationship literature, and World Vision's Channels of Hope gender equality curriculum that is used during theological training. The team drew practical and relevant skills-building tools from these resources that would help couples in their daily lives. They also examined Bible passages around sex, communication, finances and decision-making that were in service of gender equality and peaceful relationships. They then worked closely with faith leaders to develop the *Becoming One* couples' curriculum.



TIPS

Consider starting with existing curricula and explore how they may be appropriate for the couples in your community. It may also be helpful to engage a Prevention Mentor or curriculum consultant to support your organization (<http://www.prevention-collaborative.org/technical-accompaniment/our-prevention-mentors/>).



# KEY ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

Learn the SECRETS to a SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP  
Grow your love with our new program for dating, engaged or married couples.



## ASPIRATIONAL MESSAGES

Aspirational and inspiring program content and messages often work best. *Indashyikirwa* staff reported that SASA's inspiring approach was very helpful when designing their curriculum. While developing content they continually asked, "Is this a positive message?" and, "How will it make people feel?"

Both *Becoming One* and *Unite for a Better Life* explicitly chose not to frame their programs around violence prevention and instead used the terminology of cultivating 'harmonious and peaceful relationships', 'healthy families' or 'healthy relationships'.

To inspire participation and to avoid a situation of potential participants not wanting to be associated with a partner violence program, IRC's design team found it helpful to frame and advertise *Becoming One* as 'learning the secrets to a successful relationship,' with images of happy couples. These images and the accompanying messages were informed by formative research on couples' values.

## COLORFUL AND VISUAL MATERIALS

All three programs noted that couples appreciated colorful and visual materials they could take and use at home. For example, *Indashyikirwa* participants requested a list of women's rights and laws, reminders for their relationships, and pledges written down for them to post on their walls at home. *Becoming One* has a tool called the "Clear Rules" which participants wanted written on business cards to carry around.

Highly visual materials were also found to be essential in communities with low levels of literacy. *Indashyikirwa* chose to not make literacy a requirement for couples to join, which was highly valued as other programs often excluded illiterate members.

*Becoming One* found that, after numerous rounds of testing, even participants who were literate preferred exclusively visual content over written content. In response, IRC made the *Becoming One* Couples Guide 95 % visual, with a beautiful, aspirational design.



### TIPS

Consider framing your program around healthy or happy relationships/families and in a way that will appeal to couples. Ensure messages are positive and ask, "How will this make people feel?"

Test the content to see if the language makes sense to users and reflects how they talk about issues. Consider the literacy of your users and get their feedback on whether they prefer written or illustrated materials.

## ACCESSIBLE AND RELEVANT CONTENT

The *Indashyikirwa* and IRC *Becoming One* teams learned that it is important to understand people's needs and desires in order to develop content that is accessible and relevant to them, using people's common language instead of technical jargon.

For example, instead of 'emotional regulation techniques' the IRC used the term 'calming methods,' which made more sense to users. *Becoming One* also reinforced messages by grounding them in users' daily practices, in this case daily prayers.



# TEST TWEAK REPEAT



Each of the programs emphasized the importance of rigorous and extensive testing and piloting. The IRC employed a human-centered design process when developing *Becoming One*. This involved showing users multiple versions of content as quickly as possible after the draft curriculum was developed to obtain feedback from users on the content and ideas on how it could be improved. They proceeded to tweak and re-test materials repeatedly over four months, until the content made sense to users and achieved its intended purpose.

The team noted that, during the design process, it was important to remind each other that the content was not only about what they wanted to communicate, but about what users wanted and how they would best learn. They also found it essential to have a design team mainly comprised of individuals from the program

communities or similar contexts (i.e. their design team was mainly Ugandan and included Christian leaders).

*Indashyikirwa* had a similarly extensive inception period that involved adapting the curriculum and thinking through how it linked with their theory of change, followed by rigorous pre-testing and tweaking. Piloting also brought important learning around implementation.

The *Unite for a Better Life* team ran a pilot with two cohorts side-by-side to see how users and facilitators found having the program twice per week over seven weeks versus once per week for 14 weeks. From this they learned that participation rates were significantly higher when held twice a week and facilitators reported people retained more information between sessions.



## TIPS

Test out your draft curriculum with a pilot group comprised of the types of community members you intend to work with (your 'users'). Try to have your users drive the design process as much as possible. Cultivate a space where everyone's ideas are welcome and trialed. Do the session topics make sense to users, can they grasp the concepts introduced, do they identify with the examples or scenarios, are they able to learn the skills intended, do they like the materials, delivery method and design? If not, ask for and explore users' ideas for improvement.

## TRAINING FACILITATORS

Like many transformative program models that aim to shift normative behaviors, *Indashyikirwa* and *Unite for a Better Life* reflected that extensive training of facilitators is often essential and takes time. Facilitators needed time to be able to go through their own process of transformation and learning before taking others through it. Both programs noted it was important for facilitators to actually experience the program first as participants before they were ready to be facilitators.

*Becoming One* took a different approach. As the faith leaders facilitators had already participated in training around gender equality and relationship counseling (as part of their theological

studies), the IRC team found that the two-day training during the pilot proved an unnecessary use of time and resources. Instead, faith leaders were provided with a tablet with video guides on how to facilitate each session. They also set up and participated in a WhatsApp group amongst themselves, discussing challenges and sharing their progress, ideas and learning.

To achieve scale, the IRC recently designed an apprenticeship model for existing *Becoming One* facilitators to take new faith leaders through the program. Faith leaders participants reflected that THIS is the way to learn, by experiencing and doing, not by sitting in a big training.



## APPRENTICESHIP MODEL

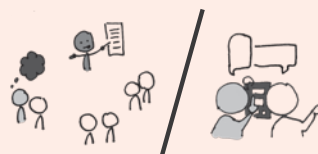
DESIGNED BY BECOMING ONE TO TRAIN NEW FACILITATORS



**1** Apprentice applies or is chosen to be an apprentice.



**2** Apprentice receives and watches videos from Faith Leader.



**3** Apprentice participates in 1-3 sessions with partner and watches the Faith Leader lead OR practices 1-3 sessions with partner.



**4** Apprentice helps Faith Leader facilitate 1-3 sessions.



**5** Faith Leader helps Apprentice facilitate 1-3 sessions.



**6** Faith Leader watches and evaluates Apprentice as he/she facilitates a session.



**7** If Apprentice passes evaluation, Faith Leader certifies the Apprentice.



### TIPS

When developing the budget and timeline for roll out, leave ample time and funds for training facilitators.

Consider putting facilitators through an accelerated program as participants before they begin facilitation. This can also help with piloting the curriculum and finding out which sessions work well and which need further work.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

While working with couples on violence prevention is an emerging practice in the Global South, initial learning from these three programs suggests that this approach is appreciated by couples and may be transformative in improving relationships and ultimately preventing IPV.

*Indashyikirwa* and *Unite for a Better Life* are currently undergoing rigorous impact evaluations and the results will be published late in 2018. *Becoming One* has recently completed its first pilot in Gulu, Uganda. After promising initial qualitative findings, plans for an impact evaluation are underway.

While we do not yet have impact evaluation findings indicating a reduction in violence, positive shifts in intimacy - which are evidenced to be an important pathway to reduced IPV - have been reported. Program staff also found working with couples extremely gratifying as they could visibly see positive changes in how couples interacted with each other.

This preliminary feedback is promising and provides a basis for further exploration and development of couple approaches by practitioners and impact and learning studies by researchers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- <sup>i</sup> Abramsky T, Devries K, Kiss L, Nakuti J, Kyegombe N, Starmann E, Cundill B, Francisco L, Kaye K, Musuya Tet al: Findings from the SASA! Study: a cluster randomised controlled trial to assess the impact of a community mobilisation intervention to prevent violence against women and reduce HIV risk in Kampala, Uganda. *BMC Medicine* 2014, 12(122):1741-7015; Starmann E, Collumbien M, Kyegombe N, Devries K, Michau L, Musuya T, Watts C, Heise L: Exploring Couples' Processes of Change in the Context of SASA!, a Violence Against Women and HIV Prevention Intervention in Uganda. *Prev Sci* 2017, 18(2):233-244.
- <sup>ii</sup> Journeys of Transformation focused on involving men as partners in women's economic empowerment programming in Rwanda and was implemented by Promundo, CARE International and the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC); more information available at: <https://promundoglobal.org/programs/journeys-of-transformation/>; accessed 9th March 2018.
- <sup>iii</sup> SASA! is a community mobilisation approach for the prevention of violence against women and HIV, developed by Raising Voices; more information available at: <http://raisingvoices.org/sasa/>; accessed 9th March 2018.
- <sup>iv</sup> Channels of Hope is an approach used by World Vision to mobilize community leaders to respond to core issues in their community, including HIV and AIDS, maternal and child health, gender equity and gender-based violence, and child protection; more information available at: <https://www.wvi.org/health/publication/channels-hope/>; accessed 10th March 2018.

## THE PREVENTION COLLABORATIVE

The Prevention Collaborative works to strengthen the ability of key actors to deliver cutting edge violence prevention interventions informed by research-based evidence, practice-based learning and feminist principles. For more information go to [www.prevention-collaborative.org](http://www.prevention-collaborative.org)

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