

A Mass Media Intervention to Reduce Violence Against Women in Rural Uganda

Researchers:

Jasper Cooper

Donald Green

Anna Wilke

Sector(s): Crime, Violence, and Conflict

Fieldwork: Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)

Location: Uganda

Sample: 112 villages

Target group: Men and boys Rural population Women and girls

Outcome of interest: Empowerment Gender attitudes and norms Gender-based violence

Intervention type: Information Norms change Edutainment Media

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Partner organization(s): Peripheral Vision International

Governments and organizations around the world employ media messaging to effect behavioral and attitudinal change. In Uganda, researchers evaluated whether videos encouraging communities to speak out about and counter violence against women (VAW) in the household could change behavior, attitudes and norms related to VAW. In surveys conducted eight months after the intervention, the proportion of women who reported any VAW in their household over the preceding six months was substantially lower in villages where the videos were screened relative to villages in the randomly assigned comparison group. The impact appears to be driven by a reduction in the perception that those who speak out against violence will face social sanctions. The results suggest education-entertainment has the potential to markedly reduce the incidence of VAW in an enduring and scalable manner.

Policy issue

Violence against women (VAW) in the household, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse by an intimate partner, is a widespread problem estimated to touch the lives of 30 percent of women globally.¹ In developing countries, those with the ability to intervene and stop violence – such as police or, more commonly, local-level authorities – are often inhibited from doing so due to a lack of information. The private nature of VAW coupled with reticence on behalf of witnesses make it difficult for would-be interveners to detect and address incidents of VAW where they occur. Mass media may constitute one way to address VAW in contexts faced with such difficulties, either by decreasing the social acceptability of behaviors related to domestic violence and gender discrimination, or by increasing the willingness of victims and bystanders to come forward and report cases of violence. Despite the widespread use of such messaging campaigns, however, there is little evidence of their effectiveness. This research aims to help fill this gap by providing rigorous evidence on the impact of an anti-VAW mass media campaign in the context of rural Uganda.

Context of the evaluation

Video halls, known as bibanda, are ubiquitous in rural Uganda. They typically hold 10-50 people and are located in the center of a village or trading center. Since few households in rural Uganda own TVs, bibanda are popular places to watch movies and soccer, especially among young men.

Nationally representative opinion polls suggest that some forms of VAW are widely viewed as legitimate in Uganda.² However, not all violence is condoned. While 31 percent of respondents in our study said a husband is justified in beating his wife when she disobeys him, only 2 percent would condone violence perceived as more severe than slapping. Eighty-eight percent stated that others should intervene to stop violence. Nonetheless, almost a third of women reported in 2011 that they had experienced violence such as being punched or threatened with a knife.³ Communities do not seem able to prevent such violence, partly because witnesses do not speak out; just one quarter of respondents in this study said they would tell authorities if their cousin had been beaten by her husband. Only one in ten would report to police. A common justification for withholding information was fear of being branded a gossip.

Details of the intervention

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation in villages throughout Central Uganda to measure the impact of a mass video campaign designed to convince audiences that VAW is common and that they should speak out when they learn of it.

Three short anti-VAW videos were produced in collaboration with Peripheral Vision International. Ranging from 4-8 minutes each, the videos depicted deadly violence by a husband towards his wife and appealed to viewers to speak out about VAW in order to prevent it from escalating.

Audiences saw the videos via film festivals held in bibanda throughout 112 rural villages. Every village in the study featured a film festival comprising six popular Hollywood films unrelated to VAW that were shown once a week over consecutive weekends from July through September 2016. In 48 randomly selected villages, the three short video vignettes on VAW were inserted into the intermission of the Hollywood film. In the other 64 villages, the film festivals featured video vignettes on other social issues (teacher absenteeism or abortion-related stigma), or just the Hollywood films with no video vignettes at all. These 64 villages thus constitute a comparison group that received a “placebo” film festival unrelated to VAW.

As is typical in Uganda, the Hollywood films were narrated by a VJ who added his own commentary to the movie’s storyline. Unlike most entertainment screened in bibanda, however, the anti-VAW videos were produced in the local language (Luganda) using local actors, enabling villagers to identify with the characters in the videos.

Admission to the film festivals was free of charge to encourage the attendance of a broad-based audience, and was notably successful in attracting women (31 percent of all attendees). The screenings were advertised using posters, fliers, announcements through community address systems and word-of-mouth. In total, over 10,000 adults attended 670 film screenings.

The research team interviewed 6,449 individuals across all villages through two waves of surveys conducted two and eight months after the film festivals. Importantly, the surveys were presented as opinion polls unrelated to the video campaign. Questions measured behavior and attitudes among a random sample of the adults living in the catchment area of the video hall, irrespective of their attendance of the festival. Respondents therefore include not only those who attended the screenings, but also their neighbors, community leaders and village health workers.

Results and policy lessons

The anti-VAW vignettes significantly reduced the likelihood of VAW occurring in villages where the vignettes were shown. Results suggest that this reduction may have occurred because the videos reduced the perception that those who speak out about VAW will face social sanctions and thereby increased individuals’ willingness to report incidents of VAW.

Impact on violent incidents: Eight months after the anti-VAW vignettes were shown, women in the treatment group were 5 percentage points less likely to indicate that a woman in their household experienced any violence over the previous six months relative to the comparison group. Around 20 percent of women respondents in the comparison group reported that there was at least one case of VAW in their household over the previous six months. The campaign thus reduced the proportion of women respondents who reported any violence in their household by approximately one quarter. These estimates imply the campaign prevented women from experiencing any violence in roughly six households in each of the 48 villages where the anti-VAW campaign was implemented.

Impact on social norms and attitudes: Among men and women who watched the videos, there is little evidence the anti-VAW videos had an effect on attitudes about the legitimacy of VAW or on perceptions of whether others in the community see VAW as legitimate behavior. Nor is there statistically significant evidence demonstrating increased empathy for VAW victims or a change in their perceptions about whether initial acts of domestic violence are likely to escalate.

The most plausible causal channel for the reduction in VAW appears to be a change in the willingness of victims and bystanders to speak out about violence. Both men and women who watched the anti-VAW videos were more willing to report instances of VAW to village authorities. This effect was particularly pronounced among women. When asked whether they would report a hypothetical incident of VAW across a range of different scenarios two months after the campaign, women in the treatment group were 9 percentage points (22 percent) more likely than those in the comparison group to say they would report violence across all scenarios. Eight months after the campaign, this willingness remained higher in the treatment than the comparison by 13 percentage points (35 percent). This increased willingness to report VAW may be related to a concurrent change in the perceived social consequences of speaking out, particularly among women. Women who watched the anti-VAW videos were 11 percentage points (18 percent) less likely to believe they would face social repercussions, such as scolding for gossiping, for intervening in a VAW incident.

Cost effectiveness: The total cost of writing, filming, editing and distributing the sequence of VAW vignettes used in this study was \$15,000, making it a scalable, cost-effective approach to reducing VAW in rural areas. Further research is needed in order to properly assess various implementation aspects of media campaigns of this kind, such as the number and setting of video screenings.

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1. Devries, Karen M, Joelle YT Mak, Claudia Garcia-Moreno, Max Petzold, James C Child, Gail Falder, Stephen Lim, Loraine J Bacchus, Rebecca E Engell, Lisa Rosenfeld et al. 2013. "The global prevalence of intimate partner violence against women." *Science* 340 (6140): 1527–1528.
 2. Demographic and Health Surveys 2011-2015. Uganda Bureau of Statistics. <https://dhsprogram.com/publications/index.cfm>
 3. Demographic and Health Survey 2011. Uganda Bureau of Statistics. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/fr264/fr264.pdf>