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, Gender

Fieldwork: Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)

Location: Uganda

Sample: 5,534 women and men in 110 rural 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

Data: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/TMDHDH...

Research Papers: Countering Violence Against Women by Encouraging Disclosure: A Mass Media Exper..., Reducing Violence Against Women in Uganda through Video Dramas: A Survey Experi..., A Placebo Design to Detect Spillovers from an Education-Entertainment Experimen...

Partner organization(s): Peripheral Vision International

Education entertainment campaigns ("edutainment") have the potential to spark behavioral and attitudinal change. In rural Uganda, researchers evaluated whether videos encouraging communities to speak out against violence against women (VAW) could change behavior, attitudes, and norms. Women exposed to the videos were more willing to report VAW to authorities. More broadly, women in villages where the videos were screened experienced less VAW in their household. The impact seems driven by a decline in perceived social sanctions for speaking out, despite no changes in acceptance of VAW.

Policy issue

Violence against women (VAW) is a global problem that affected at least 35 percent of women worldwide as of 2013.[1] Its drivers include attitudes that make violence socially acceptable, and also low reporting rates among victims and witnesses, which prevent authorities from detecting and addressing incidents.

Mass media campaigns may help address these issues by reducing the acceptability of VAW and encouraging victims and bystanders to report—two effects that may be amplified if the campaigns' messages are further discussed with other members of the community. However, gender attitudes tend to be deeply rooted and hard to shift by light-touch interventions like media content. This study sheds light on the effects of mass media interventions on VAW, as well as their channels of impact, by evaluating an anti-VAW educational-entertainment campaign in rural Uganda.

Context of the evaluation

Opinion polls conducted between 2001 and 2015 suggest that permissive attitudes towards intimate partner violence are widespread in Uganda.[2] However, not all violence is condoned. While 31 percent of respondents in this study said a husband is justified in beating his wife when she disobeys him, only 5 percent of those who think the beating is justified would condone violence perceived as more severe than slapping. Meanwhile, 86 percent of respondents in the study's comparison group stated that others should intervene to stop daily violence.

Nonetheless, almost a third of rural Ugandan women reported experiencing violence such as being punched, kicked, or threatened with a knife in 2011.[3] Formal police and community-level actors do not seem able to prevent such violence, partly because witnesses do not speak out—only one quarter of respondents in this study said they would tell local village leaders if their cousin had been beaten by her husband, while fewer than one in five would report to police. A common justification for withholding information was fear of being branded a gossip and the perceived risk of ostracism by community members who may question a witness's motivation for coming forward.



Photo Credit: Pecold / Shutterstock.com

Details of the intervention

In rural Uganda, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to measure the impact of a mass video campaign designed to encourage audiences to speak out against VAW. A total of 112 rural villages were randomly assigned to one of two groups:

1. *Anti-VAW videos group (48 villages)*: In these villages, three short anti-VAW videos were screened during intermission at film festivals held in video halls once per week over consecutive weekends for a little over a month. The videos were produced in collaboration with Peripheral Vision International in the local language (Luganda) and were filmed on site, enabling

villagers to identify with the characters. Ranging from 4.5-8 minutes each, the videos depicted violence by a husband towards his wife and appealed to viewers to speak out about VAW in order to prevent it from escalating. The festivals showed Hollywood films, were free of charge, and were advertised using posters, fliers, and announcements through public loudspeakers when they were available. In some of these villages, the anti-VAW videos were screened in addition to another set of videos on stigma surrounding other social issues (e.g., abortion and teacher absenteeism).

2. *Comparison group (64 villages):* In these villages, the film festival movie was screened without any anti-VAW videos during intermission.

In total, over 10,000 adults attended 670 film screenings. Two and eight months after the film screenings, the researchers surveyed 5,534 randomly sampled adults living in the catchment areas of the video halls, irrespective of their attendance of the festival. Importantly, the surveys were presented as opinion polls unrelated to the video campaign. Questions measured general attitudes about VAW, expectations around the disclosure of violence, willingness to report VAW to formal and informal authorities, and self-reported VAW incidents.

Researchers took steps to ensure the intervention and data collection protected participants' rights and well-being. They vetted video content through focus groups and NGO consultations to reduce the risks of triggering past trauma and conducted interviews privately using general, household-level questions to safeguard privacy and prevent partner retaliation.

Results and policy lessons

The anti-VAW videos reduced the likelihood of VAW occurring in villages where the videos were shown. Results suggest that this 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.

Willingness to report VAW: Two and eight months after the campaign, women who attended the anti-VAW screenings were 8.5 percentage points (22 percent) and then 12.6 percentage points (35 percent) more likely to say they would report violence as bystanders in hypothetical scenarios (e.g., involving the victim's parents, a counselor, or village leader, or reporting to the police) than women in the comparison group. Men who attended the screenings were also 4 percentage points (11 percent) more likely to state they would report hypothetical incidents of VAW eight months later relative to men in the comparison group.

Incidence of violence: Eight months after the screenings, the proportion of women who reported any VAW in their household fell by 7 percentage points in campaign villages, from an average of 19 percent in the comparison villages. This effect referred to all women in the campaign villages, regardless of if they personally attended the anti-VAW screenings or not. It implied the prevention of VAW in hundreds of households in villages where the VAW campaign occurred.

Social norms, attitudes, and beliefs around VAW: Among men and women who attended screenings, there was little evidence that the anti-VAW videos affected attitudes towards VAW or norms concerning gender equality. There was also no evidence of increases in empathy for VAW victims or a change in perceptions that initial acts of domestic violence were likely to escalate to more severe forms of violence. Men and women's perceptions of the efficacy of reporting to prevent future violence also did not change with the campaign.

On the other hand, women who watched the anti-VAW videos were 11 percentage points (18 percent) less likely to believe they would face social repercussions for intervening in a VAW incident eight months after the screening, such as scolding for gossiping. When asked about their willingness to report VAW in the presence or absence of witnesses who could support their claim, participants who attended the screening said they would report cases similarly regardless of the presence of witnesses, while those in the comparison group were more willing to report VAW if they had corroborating witnesses. This result further suggests that the campaign reduced the fear of social sanctions for reporting.

Indirect effects: While discussions between audiences and others in their social network could have amplified the effects of the anti-VAW videos by expanding exposure to its messages, there were no such indirect effects of this mass video campaign. Friends and family of audience members who did not attend the film festival were no more willing to take action to assist victims of VAW nor to report incidents to village authorities (victim's parents, a counselor, village leader, or the police).

Taken together, these results suggest that higher willingness to report was not driven by shifts in attitudes or changes in the overall perception of the impact of reporting on VAW. Rather, it is likely that participants became more willing to report because the campaign alleviated their concerns about sanctions related to gossiping, an important barrier to reporting.

---

1. World Health Organization. 2013. "Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-Partner Sexual Violence." https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564625.
2. Demographic and Health Surveys 2001-2015.
3. Demographic and Health Survey 2011.