

How public service announcements reduced violence against women

You might think PSAs are cheesy — but they appear to work!

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A still from one of the anti-domestic violence short films. | Via Innovations for Poverty Action

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As a kid who watched a lot of cheesy educational videos in school growing up, I used to be of the opinion that they were just pointless. No one pays attention during those, right? Or the preachy public service announcements during TV commercials or movie preshows?

Wrong! People do pay attention to PSAs. And a **recent randomized study** conducted in Uganda by Columbia researchers Donald Green, Anna Wilke, and Jasper Cooper suggests that they are an incredibly effective tool at combating a serious problem: domestic violence.

The researchers and the implementing organization, **Innovations for Poverty Action**, hired local screenwriters to script three vignettes, which were filmed with local actors in Luganda, the dominant local language in central Uganda.

The first vignette depicts what the researchers describe as a “sympathetic and personable woman whose husband beats her severely despite her sincere efforts to appease him ... the protagonist’s

neighbor overhears her screams but decides not to speak out.”

(Note: All three videos are disturbing and deal with an upsetting subject, so exercise caution in watching.)

“In the second vignette, which begins with the protagonist’s hospitalization and ends with her funeral, we learn that not only her neighbor, but also her daughter and parents knew about the violence,” the researchers write. “They express regret for failing to speak out sooner.”

The third vignette offers a more hopeful example of a victim disclosing to her parents, who then tell the *nabakyala*, or local women’s counselor, who visits the home. “The vignette closes with the couple in visibly better relations with one another,” the researchers write.

The videos were designed to illustrate the importance of reporting and speaking up about domestic violence — and intervening when a neighbor or loved one is being hurt. The choice of language and local actors was meant to make it easy for viewers to identify with the characters; in a survey the researchers conducted, 84 percent of respondents said “the stories could have happened in their village.”

To distribute the videos, the researchers partnered with local video halls (or *bibanda*) to add them to screenings of Hollywood movies, specifically *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Creed*, *Furious 7*, *Spy*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Oz: The Great and Powerful*. The video halls showing the messages were selected randomly, and then attendees who saw screenings with and without the anti-domestic violence message were surveyed and compared.

The first findings the researchers report are negative. Attitudes toward violence against women didn’t appear to change for either men or women, in the short term (a few months later) or medium term (nearly a year later). People’s answers to questions like “In your opinion, does a man have good reason to hit his wife if she disobeys him?” or “Do you agree that the father, not the mother, should have the final say in the household?” did not change.

But the rate at which women were subject to violence, it appears, *did* change. “We estimate the probability that women in a household experienced violence over a six-month period following our films decreased by at least five percentage points, effectively preventing violence in hundreds of households,” the authors write. Given that 20 percent of women in the control group reported being victims of violence, the videos cut the share of women victimized by a quarter.

This effect appeared to be driven by a greater willingness and determination on the part of women to report violent incidents. Women in the treatment group were substantially less likely to say they’d “face social sanctions” for reporting domestic violence, and substantially more likely to say they’d be willing to report domestic violence to their parents, a counselor, or the police.

This isn’t the only successful intervention against domestic violence targeting women that development researchers have identified. **Cash transfers appear to reduce reports of intimate partner violence**, at least for as long as the transfers last. Offering a nutrition program with home visits, costing only \$50 per year per person, **cut physical violence by 26 percent** in one Bangladeshi study.

And it's hard to know just how scalable the approach here is. Similar approaches in different regions with different cultural attitudes and modes of media consumption might prove less effective.

But a growing body of research is finding that TV shows and other video content, from **Sesame Street** to **16 & Pregnant** to a **Rwandan radio soap opera** can generate widespread social changes. In that context, the Ugandan findings feel less like an aberration and more like a confirmation that the stuff we watch really, really matters.

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