

Transforming social norms, affirming equality

Learning from successes in the DRC

*'The aim was to facilitate sustained changes in social norms related to violence against women and children, so that violence becomes unacceptable, survivors are supported and men and women form gender-equitable, violence-free relationships.'*¹

What impact are we celebrating?

In 2015, Tearfund and its partner HEAL Africa initiated a project in 15 villages in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – villages in which, according to a baseline survey, 69 per cent of women had experienced violence by an intimate partner in the preceding 12 months and 68 per cent of men had perpetrated such violence. Just over two years later, a second survey was conducted, comparable to the



📷 Through the doorway of a home in Ituri Province, DRC. Photo: Arlette Bashizi/Tearfund

¹ Palm, Selina et al. (2019) *Rethinking relationships: moving from violence to equality. What works to prevent violence against women and girls in the DRC*, Teddington, UK: Tearfund, p 5 <https://learn.tearfund.org/-/media/learn/resources/reports/2019-tearfund-consortium-rethinking-relationships-en.pdf>.

first.² Women's experience of intimate partner violence (IPV) had more than halved (to 29 per cent) and men's perpetration of IPV had also decreased substantially (to 24 per cent). Moreover, in 2017 as compared to 2015, four times as many men reported having intervened in cases of IPV involving friends or neighbours.

Such **behaviours** related to IPV are often influenced by **social norms**. In their simplest definition, these are 'the informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable, appropriate, and obligatory actions in a given group or society'.³ In 2015, a majority of men (76 per cent) and women (67 per cent) in the participating communities agreed with the 'unwritten rule' that a man is entitled to sex from his partner, even if she does not feel like it. These figures had changed markedly by the time of the endline survey, reduced to 40 and 46 per cent respectively. There was a similar decrease in justification of physical IPV: significantly fewer male and female respondents agreed that there are times when a woman deserves to be beaten.⁴

Social norms or 'unwritten rules' related less directly to IPV, and more broadly to gender, power and responsibility in relationships, also shifted. In 2015, 90 per cent of male respondents believed that men were superior to women, and 81 per cent believed that a wife should always be obedient to her husband. These figures dropped to 70 and 61 per cent by 2017. At the outset, nearly 90 per cent of both men and women saw a woman's primary role as taking care of and cooking for her family. By 2017 this had reduced to 63 per cent for men and 75 per cent for women. We note that these particular social norms are still acknowledged and accepted by the majority. Thus they require further work, particularly among women who seem to demonstrate a deep internalisation of gender-inequitable beliefs.

Finally, we are also celebrating greater support for survivors of violence. A particularly significant behavioural change was that by 2017, 40 per cent of survivors of past-year IPV had talked to or sought assistance from faith leaders, up from just 2 per cent in 2015. Moreover, there was a decrease in normative stigmatisation of survivors of any kind of violence against women and girls (VAWG). For instance, the proportion of men who *disagreed* that a man should reject his wife if she is raped increased from 53 to 72 per cent. This is a crucial shift that supports women to seek assistance. So too is the fact that survivors themselves were less likely, by 2017, to feel guilty for the violence they had experienced. The proportion of survivors of VAWG who disagreed with the statement 'I feel guilty' increased from 47 per cent at baseline to 72 per cent at endline.

² Baseline data collection took place in June and July 2015 (ie at the beginning of the project); 769 individuals from randomly-selected households were interviewed (369 men, 400 women). Endline data collection took place at the project end, in November and December 2017, during which 1218 people (599 men, 619 women) were interviewed. Though the size of the sample increased between baseline and endline, other demographic characteristics were not significantly different, including the mean age and level of education of respondents. Nonetheless, statistical techniques were applied to determine whether differences in the variables of interest (including experience of and perpetration of IPV) between baseline and endline could be explained by incidental social and demographic differences between the samples. No evidence of this was found.

³ Cislaghi, Beniamino and Lori Heise (2018) 'Theory and practice of social norms interventions: eight common pitfalls', *Globalization and Health*, 14 (83) p 2.

⁴ At the time of writing this case study, Tearfund has been working with partners to develop research methods that target and measure social norms even more effectively. This means, for example, that in order to measure social norms related to IPV we would now not only ask the question, 'is it acceptable for a man to beat his wife?'; but also 'do people in your community find it *acceptable* for a man to beat his wife?' and 'do men in your community *typically* beat their wives?'. In fact, Tearfund and its partners are applying these new methods to social norms related to family planning as well as IPV, and the latest publication can be found here: <https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/research-report/masculinities-faith-and-peace-in-nigeria>.

Engaging with faith groups to prevent VAWG in conflict-affected communities

Location: 15 villages in Ituri Province, DRC

Period of implementation: April 2015–2017

Implemented by: Tearfund and HEAL Africa

Funded by: The UK government, under the *What Works to Prevent VAWG* Global Programme

Evaluated: In 2017 by a team of independent researchers from Stellenbosch University, South Africa

What contribution are we making?

We believe that the project by Tearfund and HEAL Africa contributed to the changes observable between 2015 and 2017. It is important to note that no other organisation was implementing any intervention in this geographical location at the time.

Based on Tearfund's *Transforming Masculinities* approach, the project worked primarily through local faith leaders and members of faith communities, both Christian and Muslim.⁵ Seventy-five faith leaders received training to help them to assess their own knowledge, attitudes and behaviour on gender, masculinities and VAWG. Thereafter they were mentored by project staff as they incorporated what they had learnt into their existing activities, such as sermons, prayer groups, youth groups, and couples' counselling; thus providing leadership on these issues. In addition, 30 lay members of faith communities were trained as 'Gender Champions' to engage men and women in the wider community through a series of community dialogues. These dialogues bring gender, masculinities and IPV within the context of participants' faith and culture, and accompany them in a process of identifying and unlearning harmful norms that impact their lives.

Though people of active faith were core implementers of the project, the project's impact was not limited to people actively engaged within faith communities. Rather, positive shifts in social norms related to IPV, gender and relationships were in evidence across the entire community. The same was true for experience and perpetration of IPV. This signals the ability and influence of faith leaders in this project context, and thus the diffusion potential of messaging and training with them. Through them the project reached not only those highly involved in religious activities, but also those nominally engaged, and even those not aligned with a faith group. Nonetheless, positive shifts in social norms were more pronounced – of a greater magnitude – among those who had attended couples' counselling, a public talk on VAWG by a trained faith leader, or community dialogue led by a Gender Champion. This increases our confidence that the project did, indeed, make a substantial contribution to the changes observed: the project activities triggering a 'spillover effect' whereby a shift in **social norms** amongst those who participated directly resulted in a shift in **behaviours** amongst the broader (non-participating) community.

⁵ For more on the *Transforming Masculinities* approach, see: https://learn.tearfund.org/en/themes/sexual_and_gender-based_violence/changing_gender_norms.

Author: Rachel Paton, Research and Learning Analyst (Tearfund)

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- Palm, Selina et al. (2019) Rethinking relationships: moving from violence to equality. *What works to prevent violence against women and girls in the DRC*, Teddington, UK: Tearfund <https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/research-report/rethinking-relationships-moving-from-violence-to-equality>
- Le Roux, Elisabet et al. (2020) 'Engaging with faith groups to prevent VAWG in conflict-affected communities: results from two community surveys in the DRC', *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 20 (27)

Each year, we analyse the past year's worth of Tearfund and partners' project evaluations. We then synthesise key learning and evidence of impact from them. This evaluation as published in *BMC International Health and Human Rights* was one of 39 that we synthesised in 2021. It was selected for this case study because it was one of the most high scoring against the [Bond Evidence Principles](#) of voice and inclusion, appropriateness, triangulation, contribution, and transparency.

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Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom.

☎ +44 (0)20 3906 3906 ✉ publications@tearfund.org learn.tearfund.org

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