

What Works To Prevent Intimate Partner Violence?

Evidence From Field Experiments



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Violence against women and girls (VAWG) represents a pervasive violation of human rights on a global scale, affecting approximately one third of all women throughout their lives. It stands as the primary cause of death and disability for women of all ages, inflicting various health consequences. Moreover, VAWG acts as a fundamental impediment to poverty eradication and peace-building efforts. Even conservative estimates indicate that the national costs of VAWG reach billions of dollars. [1]

Given the broad scope of violence against women and girls, it's critical to focus on specific forms, such as intimate partner violence (IPV), which calls for targeted prevention strategies. To effectively prevent IPV, we must tackle its underlying causes. Research reveals that violence doesn't stem from a single factor nor follow a single pathway to perpetration. Instead, it emerges from the intricate interaction of multiple factors at different levels of the social 'ecology.' These factors encompass developmental history, personality traits, dynamics within relationships, household and community structures, as well as macro- and global-level forces that influence prevailing norms, resource access, and the relative status of men and women [2]. As a result, interventions with the potential to reduce IPV rates are diverse and numerous. They may target one or more risk factors and operate within single or multiple settings.

From a public health perspective, a fundamental question arises: "Do prevention programs targeting intimate partner and sexual violence yield positive results?" In other words, are there specific programs or strategies that effectively prevent or reduce incidents of intimate partner and sexual violence? To study the possible role of policy interventions in reducing violence, several field experiments have been conducted, and their effectiveness tested by employing rigorous research designs such as randomized-controlled trials

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(RCT). These designs typically involve comparing the outcomes of an experimental group (receiving the program) with a control or comparison group (similar to the experimental group but not receiving the program). The primary objective is to eliminate alternative explanations for any observed changes in outcomes, ensuring confidence that the changes genuinely resulted from the program and not from other factors. This article discusses recent developments in field experiments and randomized trials that can offer actionable insights into policy action aimed at reducing violence against women by targeting essential risk factors associated with perpetration and victimization.

The Impacts of Economic Interventions

One widely recognized approach to mitigating IPV involves enhancing women's access to financial resources as a means to bolster their economic empowerment. This encompasses a range of economic initiatives, such as providing cash or in-kind transfers, facilitating access to microcredit, fostering savings groups, offering employment opportunities, and ensuring financial inclusion. Economic interventions specifically directed toward women can influence IPV through various avenues. Augmented income may serve to reduce IPV by enhancing the economic stability of families, thereby reducing household conflicts stemming from limited resources, amplifying women's decision-making authority and self-assurance, and potentially broadening their alternatives outside of marriage. Conversely, women's access to financial resources may also elevate the likelihood of disputes within households regarding resource allocation. In some instances, men may employ violence to extract income from their spouses or assert dominance within the household. [3]

A comprehensive examination of randomized evaluations conducted in low- and middle-income countries revealed that enhanced access to economic resources had diverse effects on women's exposure to violence. While some studies demonstrated that some form of economic transfer provided to women can help reduce the incidence of IPV, others indicated that increasing women's income resulted in more instances of IPV. For instance, two randomized evaluations of unconditional cash and food transfers in Ecuador and Kenya found that these programs reduced IPV by 19–52 percent. [4] [5] On the other hand, evidence from Mexico suggests otherwise. An assessment of PROGRESA, world's oldest conditional cash transfer program, which channels cash transfers to women, revealed that the effects on IPV exhibited variations contingent on the transfer amount and the cultural beliefs of husbands. In households where women received modest transfers, instances of domestic violence decreased by 37 percent. Conversely, substantial transfers heightened aggressive behavior among some husbands. These differing impacts may be attributed to the fact that larger transfers represented a more significant increment in the wife's portion of the household's overall income, a

change that might not have been acceptable to older and less educated men. [6] Another study that evaluated PROGRESA found that though the program reduced physical and sexual violence in households, it led to an increase in the levels of emotional abuse and controlling behaviours. This behavior can be understood as rent-seeking conduct by the male partner, where the female partner's increased resources provide her with more leverage to negotiate her way out of physical abuse. Consequently, the male partner escalates the level of threat to exploit this situation. [7]

Initial policy interventions that aimed at reducing gender-based violence were primarily based on this channel of economic empowerment. Unfortunately, this approach has not found universal success as discussed above and has been also found to be heavily context-dependent. This forced researchers and policy makers to look to other avenues and supplementary mechanisms that could complement this channel while at the same time reducing the possibility of intrahousehold conflicts that arise when trying to economically empower women.

Relationship and Family-Level Interventions

The second category of intervention adopts a relationship-based approach by directly engaging both members of a couple, utilizing gender-transformative strategies administered through participatory group sessions. These sessions are conducted either with men and women together or in single-sex groups. Typically, these sessions employ methods that encourage critical reflection on gender attitudes, relationship dynamics, and sources of conflict. They also focus on enhancing communication and relationship skills. There is substantial evidence supporting the effectiveness of couples' interventions when they are rigorously designed and implemented. [8]

One well-established, evidence-based approach involves facilitated gender dialogues. These dialogues encourage both men and women to scrutinize and challenge unfair gender norms and roles while practicing relationship skills within safe environments. An exemplar of this approach is the Unite for a Better Life (UBL) program in Ethiopia, conducted within the context of traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremonies, which serve as platforms for community-based discussions. A randomized evaluation of the UBL program demonstrated its capacity to reduce intimate partner violence by up to 50% when administered to groups of men. UBL fosters more equitable relationships, leading to increased shared decision-making, men's participation in domestic responsibilities such as cooking and childcare, and enhanced communication between partners on sensitive subjects like sexuality. Notably, the positive effects of the program extended beyond participating households, benefiting even those community members who had not attended UBL sessions. [9] This research underscores the paramount importance of involving men in violence prevention initiatives.

Media-based Interventions

Media awareness campaigns represent a prevalent strategy for primary prevention efforts against intimate partner and sexual violence. These campaigns pursue various objectives, which may encompass elevating public awareness, including awareness of the scale of the issue, recognition of intimate partner violence and sexual violence as violations of women's human rights, understanding men's roles in ending violence against women, dispelling misconceptions and stereotypes related to intimate partner violence and sexual violence, and altering public attitudes and opinions.

While the number of evaluations specifically examining the effectiveness of such campaigns in the context of violence prevention remains limited, some promising "edutainment" approaches have emerged. Evaluations conducted in Uganda, Mexico, and Nigeria have indicated that by integrating messages promoting social change into narratives, edutainment - often delivered through radio and television programming- can reduce the acceptance of violence against women, decrease its occurrence, and stimulate reporting. [10]

Media-based campaigns also offer a cost-efficient means of remotely engaging with a broad audience. For instance, the podcast-based adaptation of the Unite for a Better Life (UBL) program was explicitly tailored for use during humanitarian crises, facilitating access for individuals on the move via basic mobile devices. Although additional research is required to comprehend how other programs can be effectively adapted to assist people during crises like the pandemic, the existing evidence provides a solid foundation.

Conclusion

Evidence-based prevention efforts against intimate partner and sexual violence are still in their early stages, and much work remains to be done. This should not, however, deter us from taking policy action to prevent IPV. Programs that already have evidence supporting their effectiveness should be put into practice and, if necessary, adapted to specific contexts. Additionally, programs that show promise or have the potential to be effective can also play an immediate role, provided that rigorous outcome evaluations are carried out from the start. Additionally, it is crucial to conduct further research and evaluations of innovative or untested prevention strategies. To effectively combat violence against women, governments must extend their efforts beyond providing support for survivors and commit to implementing impactful violence prevention initiatives that challenge harmful gender norms and foster healthy, equitable relationships.

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