

Authors

Joseph Kamara
Research Associate

Ellen Bates-Jefferys
Research Manager, Intimate Partner Violence Initiative

"Modern Men" — Harnessing the Telecommunication Boom to Reduce Intimate Partner Violence

Editor's note: This post originally appeared [on Medium](#).

Over the last several months, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and the IRC's Airbel Center have been searching for innovative methods and new engagement tools to prevent intimate partner violence (IPV) in Liberia. We interviewed a sample of Monrovia residents, including community and religious leaders, and held informal discussions in bars and on the street. Many men and women in Liberia described a man's key responsibility in a relationship as "someone who provides financially for the home." Failing to meet this expectation could lead to frustration by both partners and reflected how both men and women have rigid gender roles.

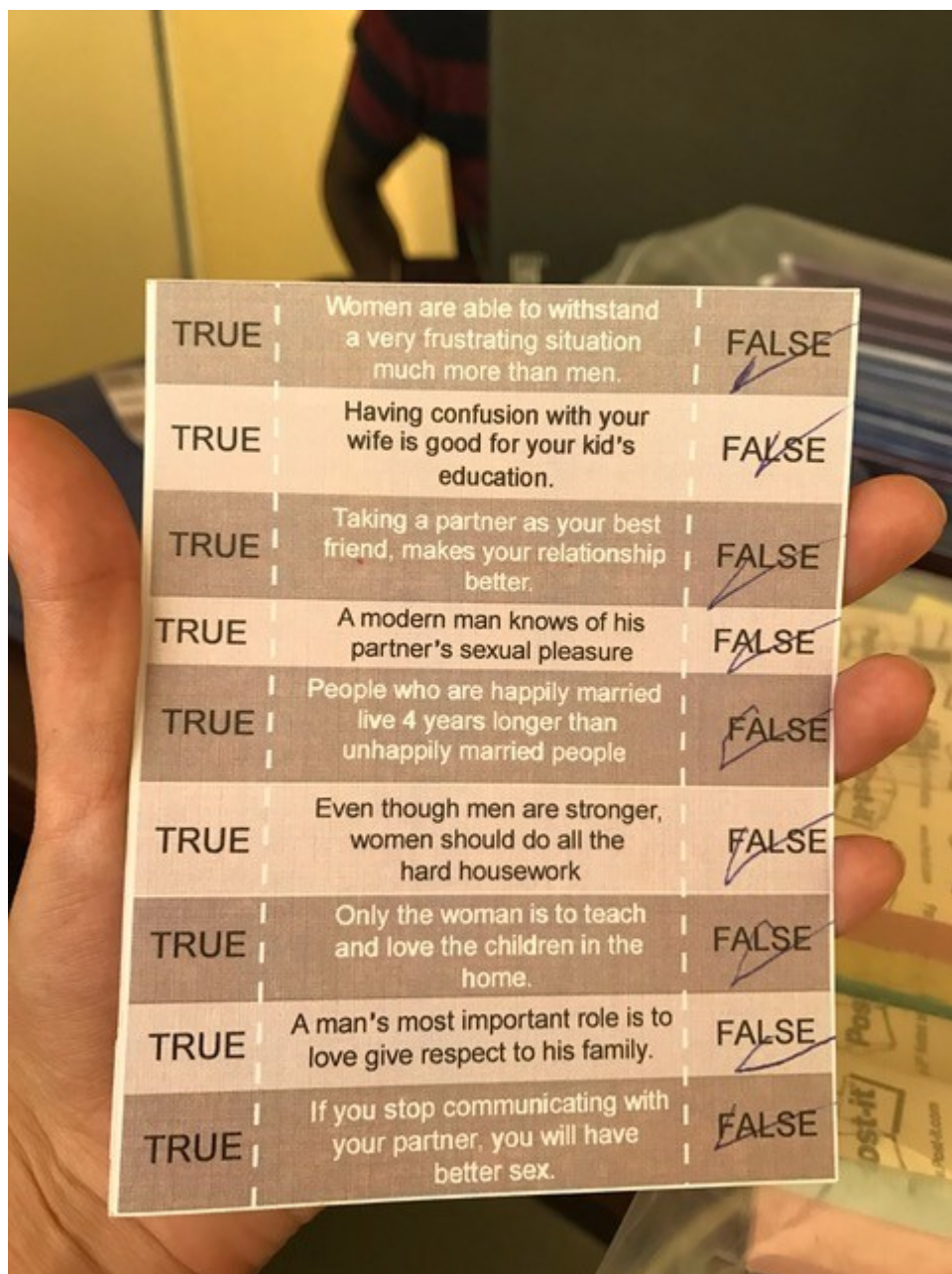
We chose to cultivate a dialogue about masculine identity with men, ages 18 to 45, not only because men in this age range have a higher rate of perpetrating IPV, but the meaning of masculinity is changing and social movements—obvious and subtle—are happening around the world. We wanted to capitalize on this trend and work to reshape how men view their roles in relationships and hypothesize that this could reduce intimate partner violence. While there has been impressive violence-reduction work with men, there are still few men-focused interventions that have shown reductions in intimate partner violence.

With this goal in mind, our research staff went to cafes, bars, and generally around the community and spoke with lots of men to understand how to interest them in having conversations around relationships and family life. The cafes were a convenient open space for male-dominated discussions, given the number of men that gathered there, but we had to figure out how to initiate a more in-depth conversation, and this is when we began to search for potential tools and methods that would be successful in the Liberian context.

How does a 'Modern Man' look like?

We put together a 10-question quiz with questions like, "Does a modern man tell his partner how much money he has?" and, "Does a modern man know of his partner's sexual happiness?" and approached men in cafes, bars, and sports betting parlors. Every man who

completed the quiz was entered into a lottery to win phone credit or cash. After we announced the winner, we'd then discuss the quiz and their answers. We saw that doing recruitment this way really engaged the men. Certain subjects elicited significant debate, especially questions about child-rearing and money management. But how could we broaden this level of engagement?



A "Modern Man" quiz.

We began to consider what a mobile messaging campaign would look like. Sub-Saharan Africa has leapfrogged the rest of the world's communication infrastructure and wireless signals reach even remote places. Many men have cellphones, even if they lack access to other forms of technology. For example, in areas so remote that one needs to hitch a 3-hour

ride to the nearest market using a road that is impassable during heavy rain, men may still regularly use a cellphone. While our current focus is on urban areas, mobile could also be a potential access-point for getting behavioral interventions to traditionally hard-to-reach populations.

There was a lot of debate among ourselves about creating a SMS-based system to connect with men—after all, isn't it just a series of texts? But after holding focus group discussions with men, they showed interested in the idea of sending tips via SMS that could help them have a more peaceful and enjoyable relationship with their partner. A text message system can also be easily scaled for a larger reach.

We began exploring ways to make the messages as engaging as possible. Airbel and the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) developed messages relating to sexual consent, anger management, financial planning, and household responsibilities. Designed to be both fun and thought-provoking, these series of text messages became part of the 30-day “Modern Man Challenge.”

Exploring the Potential of SMS Messaging

With our draft of messages, we set out in June to do the first round of programmatic testing. As a team of four, we went from cafe to cafe and after a long day of recruitment, we sent out our first text messages and awaited a response.



Joseph holding a focus group discussion.



Joseph holding a focus group discussion.

A few days passed, but almost no men had sent responses to the specific challenges. However, more men sent us text messages saying they were confused and that they were trying to figure out what to do. It was obvious—our messages were not clear or understandable. We put together an ad-hoc monitoring survey and began calling participants to find out why they weren't engaging with the Modern Man Challenge. A few things became clear:

1. The language in the texts was confusing.
2. Many phones would split up longer texts and men would only receive partial messages.
3. Many men did not have enough phone credit to respond to the messages (even though we sent a \$1 USD phone credit at the beginning of the week).

We reviewed all of the messages and made changes to syntax and diction to better fit the

Liberian context, while also dividing our longer messages to send out separately. After we made these changes, participation soared and men began responding to the challenges and actively participating. To overcome the third obstacle, we're working with local telecom companies to find a way to pay for all incoming messages from the men.

We learned a lot of useful information on how to further refine our content, how men were reacting to the messages, and we even received suggestions to expand the program. By-and-large, the men appreciated being part of the Modern Man Challenge and many reported thinking about/trying new things with their partners. This ranged from helping their partner with the housework, to talking about what is "good sex" for her, to making joint decisions about how to spend the household money. One participant shared that he told her partner he would cook for her one evening, and she thought he was joking. According to him, "She said that the meal was well prepared and that she liked it, though I am not sure if that was true but she was really happy throughout and all we shared was smiles." When discussing the messages that addressed anger, a few men even opened up about their anger and the shame they felt when their anger spilled out into their relationship.

Where We Are Now

We have come a long way, but we still have a lot to learn about the potential of the Modern Man Challenge to prevent intimate partner violence. We're continuing to refine the challenge and we'll run a larger programmatic test. Liberia's presidential election is on October 10th, so we are racing against the clock to complete our updated Modern Man Challenge.

Intimate partner violence is both ubiquitous and untenable, and everyone on the Liberia Innovations for Poverty Action team is excited to continue working on this project.

The Modern Man Challenge is part of The Palava Project, aimed at preventing intimate partner violence in Liberia. [Read more](#) about how we're using human-centered design and behavioral science to reduce violence against women.

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