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**Timeline**

2018-2020

**Study Status**

Results

**Study Type**

Randomized Evaluation

**Sample Size**

1,680 couples (3,360 women and men)

**Research Implemented by IPA**

Yes

**PNAS** RESEARCH ARTICLE SOCIAL SCIENCES OPEN ACCESS

**Religious leaders can motivate men to cede power and reduce intimate partner violence: Experimental evidence from Uganda**

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Edited by Simon Schorer, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, received January 7, 2022; accepted June 16, 2022; by Editorial Board Member Mary C. Waters

**Violence committed by men against women in intimate relationships is a pervasive problem around the world. Patriarchal norms that place men as the head of household are often to blame. Previous research suggests that trusted authorities can shift perceptions of norms and create behavior change. In many settings, a compelling authority on behavior in relationships is religious leaders, who are influential sources of information about proper conduct in relationships and gatekeepers of marriage, but may also uphold traditional gender roles. One way leaders exert their influence is through premarital or couples counseling courses. In this study, we test whether, if given an opportunity to offer a more progressive religious interpretation of gender roles during these courses, religious leaders could motivate men to share power and thereby reduce violence. Building on existing faith networks of Christian religious leaders in western Uganda, we conducted a large pre-matched, non-blinded controlled trial among 1,680 heterosexual couples in which participants were randomized to attend a 12-session group counseling course or wait-listed. We find that the program shifted power from men to women and reduced intimate partner violence by five percentage points, comparable with more intensive secular programs. These improvements were largest among couples counseled by religious leaders who held the most progressive views at baseline and who critically engaged with the material. Our findings suggest that religious leaders can be effective agents of change for reducing violence.**

**Significance**  
In most societies, religious leaders play an influential role in the construction of gender norms. One setting in which they exert their influence is the premarital or couples counseling course. We hypothesized that if leaders offered a more progressive religious interpretation of gender roles during these courses, emphasizing the need for men to improve their relationships by balancing power and decision-making with their spouses, violence would reduce. We find that when Christian leaders in Uganda offered these types of courses, power shifted from men to women, and intimate partner violence decreased by five percentage points a year later. Given the ubiquity of premarital counseling within churches, the intervention has the potential to reach a massive audience.

**What causes men to abuse women in romantic relationships? While the proximate trigger may vary, researchers agree that male violence is a physical manifestation of historic imbalances in power between men and women that place women in a subordinate role (1–6). Globally, this form of violence is pervasive, affecting nearly a third of women across their lifetimes, and often spikes during times of crisis, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic (7, 8). Violence persists, in part, due to strong social norms that position men as the head of the household who are entitled to sex and to their partners' obedience and money and due to norms that permit violence as an appropriate means of enforcing men's position and entitlement (9). Thus, to reduce violence, many programs aim to shift people's perception of the roles and expectations that are socially or morally normative in heterosexual relationships. To change perceptions of norms, interventions use the legal system to criminalize intimate partner violence (10) or use mass media campaigns (11–14) and community mobilization (15–19).**

**Research suggests that norm perception is strongly influenced by signals from influential community members—and that targeting those people is an effective channel for behavior change, even when individual attitudes or beliefs about the topic are highly stable (20–23). In many contexts, the social and moral authority of religious leaders lends substantial weight to their messages about topics like violence and health (13, 24–27). Yet, to date, there exists little to no empirical evidence about the influence of religious authority on changing norms regarding intimate partner violence.**

**In this study, we tested whether a program delivered to couples by religious leaders from within the church would motivate men to cede power and reduce intimate partner violence within heterosexual couples in rural Uganda. As the 12-session and free-to-join pre-matched, randomized, controlled trial, we found that the program significantly reduced the proportion of women who reported any form of violence by their partner and significantly increased women's decision-making authority within the household.**

**There are theoretical and historical reasons to expect that the church could meaningfully shape heterosexual relationship norms and behavioral patterns. As a moral and social authority on appropriate conduct, churches influence which behaviors are socially acceptable, especially in contexts where religious identification is strong. Through sermons,**

Author contributions: C.B., E.L.P., J.A., T.N., J.C., and L.H. designed research; C.B., T.N., J.C., and J.N. performed research; C.B. and J.C. analyzed data; J.A., J.N., and R.L. designed the program; and C.B., E.L.P., J.A., T.N., J.C., J.N., and R.L. wrote the paper. The authors declare no competing interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission. S.S. is a guest editor reviewing this article.

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This article contains supporting information online at <https://www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.2200262119/-/DCSupplemental>.

Published July 26, 2022.

PNAS 2022 | Vol. 119 | No. 31 | e2200262119 | 1 of 9

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2200262119>

# A Faith-Based Couples' Counseling Program Reduced Intimate Partner Violence in Uganda



In This Image

An IPA enumerator (right) shows a faith leader how to use a smartphone for the Becoming One program. © 2018 Aude Guerrucci

## Abstract

Uganda has one of the highest prevalences of intimate partner violence (IPV) globally. Research suggests community leaders can promote behavioral change, thereby reducing IPV. In Uganda, researchers conducted an impact evaluation of a faith-based couples counseling program called Becoming One. To attract a wide audience, Becoming One does not directly address violence, focusing instead on improving couples' relationships and shifting decision-

making power. A year later, the program reduced IPV by 12 percent and shifted power within the relationship towards women, while also improving intimacy and communication.

## Policy Issue

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is widespread, affecting nearly a third of women<sup>1</sup> over their lifetime, and often spikes in times of crisis such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Violence persists in part due to strong social norms that position men as the head of the household entitled to sex and the deference and money of their partners, and to norms that allow violence as an appropriate means of enforcing men's position and entitlements.<sup>2</sup>

To reduce violence, many programs aim to change people's perception of roles and expectations that are socially or morally acceptable. Research suggests<sup>3</sup> that these perceptions are strongly influenced by community leaders, and that targeting these people can be an effective channel for behavioral change. As moral authorities and gatekeepers of religious marriage, faith leaders are a compelling target for changing perceptions about behavior in relationships. However, in many places they also often uphold or reproduce patriarchal gender roles. This research tests whether, when given the opportunity to present a more progressive vision of relationships, faith leaders could reduce intimate partner violence.

## Context of the Evaluation

In Uganda, more than half (56 percent) of ever-married women had experienced spousal violence, while 39 percent of ever-married women had experienced it in the last year.<sup>4</sup> Biblical justifications are often offered to legitimize male dominance and violence against women. Roughly 70 percent of those surveyed by the research team agreed that the Bible placed men at head of household. Overall, about 86 percent of Ugandans report that their faith is very important to them, and more than 80 percent attend religious services weekly.<sup>5</sup> It is common for churches to require counseling courses if couples want a church wedding, and many couples seek advice and mediation from their faith leaders when stressful events occur.

Using a dynamic human-centered design process, the Airbel Impact Lab at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) developed a group faith-based couples' counseling program that leverages existing trusted systems and messengers to deliver a different vision of a religious relationship and prevent intimate partner violence. World Vision then implemented the program named Becoming One, and IPA conducted a randomized evaluation to measure its impact.

## Details of the Intervention

The Becoming One program was implemented in three districts in Western Uganda—Kamwenge, Kakumiro, and Kagadi. World Vision identified 140 faith leaders who then recruited the 1,680 couples who participated in the program. To measure the impact of the

program, researchers grouped couples within congregations based on their self-reported experience with IPV before the program implementation. Half were assigned to receive the program immediately (October 2018), while the other half began the program in December 2019 (the comparison group) after the conclusion of the research.

Couples attended twelve in-person group sessions over three to four months that focused on improving couples' relationships in a way that benefited both women and men, rather than on violence specifically. Thematic areas included communication, emotional regulation, shared control over finances, and sexual consent and pleasure. Faith leaders took couples through illustrated workbooks that provided stories, biblical principles, exercises, and skills to practice at home.

*\* Due to the sensitivity of researching violence committed by an intimate partner, researchers took additional measures to minimize the risk of study participants' retraumatization, to support research staff experiencing vicarious trauma and to prepare the team to follow ethical guidelines and protocols in conducting IPV research. Read more in the [Ethics Appendix](#) and [this related post](#).*

## Results and Policy Lessons

A year later, the Becoming One program shifted power from men to women and reduced intimate partner violence. Although men reported loss of control and decision-making authority relative to their partner, the overall benefits were not exclusive to women, as both men and women reported improvements in their relationship. Researchers found that the faith leaders whose personal views on gender equality aligned with those of the program and those who most closely followed the program content produced the largest changes.

### *Violence Reduced*

Intimate partner violence decreased by 12 percent one year after Becoming One was implemented. Reductions in violence were driven by decreases in the proportion of women reporting their partner coerced sex or raped, punched, or pushed them – the acts most commonly reported before the program.

For women in relationships where violence persisted, the frequency of emotional, physical, and sexual violence decreased, as did the severity.

Becoming One also reduced violence within the household more broadly. The number of women reporting hitting their partner decreased (by about 1 percentage point), as did the number of reports of disciplinary violence against children (by about 4 percentage points).

### *Power Shifted from Men to Women*

Women participating in the Becoming One program gained control and decision-making power – mainly through increased participation in decisions about what to do with men's earnings – while men reported a loss of control and decision-making power. Across an index

composed of 24 items measuring women's status within the household, women in Becoming One saw their position improve by about 0.2 standard deviations.

### *Relationships Improved for Both Partners*

Both men and women experienced improvements in their relationships. Couples participating in Becoming One reported greater trust and intimacy, less depression, improvements in sexual intimacy, and more time spent together. Couples who participated in counseling were also more likely to engage in joint financial planning and less income hiding practices.

The positive effects, both on the reduction of violence and on couple dynamics, were closely linked to improvements in the couple's communication and conflict resolution skills. Couples reported fewer arguments, and the arguments they did have were resolved using positive communication strategies.

### *Some Leaders Produced Greater Impacts Than Others*

Given that program content may be counter to traditional values, the research team conducted random audits of sessions to monitor faith leader performance. By combining data from these audits, and interviews with faith leaders themselves, researchers found that leaders with the highest progressive views, who also engaged with the material, produced the greatest changes. Among these leaders, violence decreased by more than 20 percentage points (about 17 percentage points more than the reductions achieved by their peers), with similar increased improvements in other relationship measures.

## Sources

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August 11, 2022

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