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

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Violence committed by men against women in intimate relationships is a pervasive problem around the world. Patriarchal norms that place men at 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 pastoral 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, pair-matched, randomized controlled trial among 1,690 heterosexual couples in which participants were non-dominated 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 pastoral 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 spouse, 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 the percentage points a year later. Given the ubiquity of pastoral counseling within churches, the intervention has the potential to reach a massive audience.

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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 male 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 norms 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 authorities 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. At the 12-month end line in a pair-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,

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Religious Leaders Can Motivate Men To Cede Power And Reduce Intimate Partner

Violence: Experimental Evidence From Uganda

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