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Using evidence to prevent violence against women in Uganda

Globally, as many as 30 per cent of women experience physical or sexual intimate partner violence during their lifetime. Women are often unable to protect themselves from HIV because they are not able to refuse sex or insist on condom use with their intimate partners.

To address these serious issues, the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP), in partnership with Raising Voices, is implementing the SASA! programme in Uganda. This is a community-based approach that aims to change attitudes, norms and behaviours that perpetuate both a gendered power imbalance in male-female relationships and violence against women.

The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) funded an impact evaluation of the SASA! programme to assess its effectiveness in preventing violence against women. The evaluation found that SASA! was effective in changing social norms, attitudes and behaviours.

In Uganda, where almost 60 per cent of women over 15 years of age have experienced violence, the findings resonated among policymakers and contributed to policy discussions at the national level. At CEDOVIP, the evaluation was instrumental in institutionalising the value of data-driven programming.

Highlights

Evidence use

- The findings from the impact evaluation prompted the government to take note of the effectiveness of SASA! approach in preventing violence against women.
- Participation in the impact evaluation helped CEDOVIP, the implementing agency, to strengthen its monitoring systems.

Contributing factors

- Keen interest among stakeholders to understand the impact of the programme
- Strong partnership between researchers and the implementing agency in the planning and roll-out of the study
- Robust stakeholder engagement and communication strategy
- Enabling in-country policy environment.

The SASA! approach: how it works



SASA!– a community activism kit for preventing violence against women

SASA! means 'now' in Kiswahili. It is also an acronym of the four phases of this intervention's approach: start, awareness, support and action. Raising Voices, a Ugandan non-profit organisation, developed SASA! It is currently used in more than 20 countries by more than 60 organisations and institutions in various contexts and settings.

In Uganda, CEDOVIP is implementing this intervention with a cross-section of men and women in the local community, including local and religious leaders, police and health workers. SASA! employs a multi-pronged approach, combining local activism, media and advocacy, communication, and training to engage with various stakeholders and raise awareness about gender-based violence.

SASA! community workers use a combination of these strategies to introduce new ideas and concepts among men and women as well as enable the communities to develop the much needed skills to act on their awareness to create positive change. They stimulate discussions to increase knowledge about violence against women, HIV and AIDS and societal norms about power. The objective is to encourage participants to explore alternative norms, attitudes and behaviours to the status quo.

SASA!'s impact in the community

This approach positively influenced harmful gendered social norms in Uganda. It increased community acceptance of women refusing sex in certain circumstances, as well as increasing disapproval of physical violence in heterosexual relationships.

The women who participated in the 3ie-funded study reported that SASA! brought about a change in attitudes and beliefs that helped reduce physical violence. The intervention also had an impact on lowering the incidence of multiple or concurrent sexual partnerships, with fewer men reporting having had other sexual partners.

The SASA! study was conducted between 2008 and 2012 in two administrative divisions of Kampala, namely Makindye and Rubaga, and close to 2,500 men and women participated in the study.

Policy and programme impacts

CEDOVIP used the findings from this study to advocate for changes in government policies and programmes to reduce gender-based violence. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD), with support from Irish Aid, is now piloting the SASA! programme in Bugosa subregion.

This pilot has involved tailoring SASA! to government priorities and implementing it as part of a larger community development programme. The government's community development officers are experimenting with an approach that is scaled down but more focussed on men as agents of change.

Participation in the impact evaluation helped CEDOVIP strengthen its monitoring and evaluation system and integrate it more firmly into programming. The impact evaluation necessitated close monitoring of the programme to ensure it was implemented as planned. Monitoring reports led to a better understanding of what was working and what was not working, enabling adjustments to help achieve the desired outcomes. For example, CEDOVIP tweaked its approach to enhance community members' receptivity to the intervention.

What factors promoted the uptake and use of study findings?

A number of factors contributed to why the findings of this impact evaluation resonated among policymakers, which in turn informed the two policy changes.

The implementing agency's keen interest in assessing the impact of its work

The impact evaluation was demand-driven. CEDOVIP and Raising Voices were keen to understand whether its claims about the effectiveness of its approach, based on anecdotal evidence, were in fact true. Programme managers wanted an objective assessment that was robust and independent to back up claims it was making at various forums and to ensure that the approach was effective before it was replicated in other settings.

Raising Voices approached researchers at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) who have expertise in studying gender-based violence to evaluate SASA! and worked with them to design a randomised impact evaluation.

Strong partnership between CEDOVIP, Raising Voices and researchers

CEDOVIP was committed to conducting an impact evaluation, which laid the foundation for a strong partnership between the implementing agency and the researchers.

Staff from CEDOVIP and Raising Voices worked closely with LSHTM researchers from the outset to make sure that the evaluation design was based on an accurate understanding of the SASA! approach. They wanted to ensure that the impact evaluation would generate programmatically relevant findings.

At Raising Voices and CEDOVIP, we felt anxious about anyone asking us if our community mobilisation approach to prevent violence against women worked. We would say, "Yes, it works. It is in our reports". But then we thought, why not partner with a research institution to help us scientifically answer the question of effectiveness of the SASA! approach for ourselves and others?

Tina Musaya,
executive director, CEDOVIP

There were extensive discussions about how a randomised design was likely to affect programme beneficiaries and implementation. CEDOVIP and Raising Voices contributed actively to designing the survey instruments to meet their objectives and accurately translating them into local languages.

Researchers from LSHTM held workshops with programme staff, focusing on the merits of doing a randomised evaluation and getting their buy-in. Lead researchers visited Uganda once every quarter during the study period. They also had a full-time staff member based in the Raising Voices office in Kampala, which ensured ongoing and timely communication between the research and programme teams.





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Robust engagement and communication strategy

The implementing partners' own mandates as advocacy organisations contributed immensely to the conceptualisation and execution of a successful communication strategy. As well-established and respected organisations, CEDOVIP and Raising Voices were uniquely placed to present the study findings to key local, national and global audiences in an effective way. However, presenting technical information in digestible forms without oversimplifying the key findings was a new experience for the implementing partners. CEDOVIP and Raising Voices worked with LSHTM to accurately frame key messages from the study drawing on the findings.

The team reached out to stakeholders at both community and national levels. They met regularly with MoGLSD officials and held large public events and round tables with civil society representatives, academics, donors and other policymakers to discuss the study findings.

Three aspects were noteworthy about the team's approach to engagement and communication.

Firstly, the team put together an advisory committee with representation from the School of Public Health at Makerere University, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, MoGLSD and a few civil society organisations. The committee received updates on the study every six months. This mechanism was crucial to build early support for the study and to get technical guidance. CEDOVIP uses this mechanism regularly in its programming and it works well in the Ugandan context, especially for ensuring government support.

Secondly, researchers and implementing partners worked together to communicate study findings. The audience determined who took the lead in presenting findings. For example, CEDOVIP and Raising Voices mostly led high-level, in-country engagement, given their knowledge of the context and their relationships with key stakeholders. Researchers provided scientific credibility to findings shared at these forums.



[Research] gets very technical and you cannot do advocacy using research findings. You have somebody's ear for only three minutes and you have to use those three minutes without qualifiers. We came up with material for a popular audience which talked about impact rather than statistical significance!

Lori Michau,
co-director, Raising
Voices and co-principal
investigator on the
SASA! study



Thirdly, the team invested significant time and resources in identifying messages that would appeal to different audiences and aid in building an understanding of SASA's impact. For instance, while addressing the government, the team focused on issues of scalability and cost-effectiveness. However, their messages to the community focused on the programme's overall benefits and its impact on community members' well-being. CEDOVIP and Raising Voices used a range of communication tools to disseminate study findings, especially among community members. This included holding public events where participants' testimonies about SASA's benefits were shared as audio-visual material or through pamphlets in local languages.

Enabling in-country policy environment

The study timing coincided with the growing realisation in Uganda, especially among government officials, of the need to address the issue of violence against women. CEDOVIP was among the key actors that had helped draft Uganda's Domestic Violence Act, which was adopted in 2010.

The presence of a legal framework that required the government to address violence against women increased policymakers' interest in SASA's effectiveness in changing social norms and reducing gender-based violence. MoGLSD's participation in the study's advisory committee meant that it played a role in setting the research agenda and had ownership of the findings. This was crucial in influencing government policy and programming on gender-based violence, given that implementation of Uganda's National Gender-based Violence Policy, and developing appropriate standards and guidelines, are primarily MoGLSD's responsibility.

‘CEDOVIP is not seen [by the government] as challenging it, but in fact supporting them to do their job well.’

Charlotte Watts,
principal investigator, LSHTM

Conclusion

The study team, comprising implementing agency members and researchers, made a significant collaborative effort to successfully implement the evaluation and promote the use of its findings.

The team understood the need for early buy-in and put in place systems for the periodic review of the study by, and feedback from, key stakeholders. It leveraged the strengths of the implementing partners to produce a robust engagement and communication plan. It also used the enabling policy environment to facilitate uptake of the study findings by the government.

CEDOVIP and Raising Voices, in particular, used the research to further legitimise the need for concerted action to prevent gender-based violence and guide their advocacy work with the government.



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About this brief

The link between evidence and its use is often not immediate or directly attributable. Evidence is one of a number of other important factors that can contribute to programming or policy change. Producing good evidence does not ensure that it will be used, or used appropriately.

This brief is based on 3ie's monitoring of the impact evaluation, *The SASA! study: a cluster randomised trial to assess the impact of a violence and HIV prevention programme in Kampala, Uganda*, 3ie Impact Evaluation Report 24 by Charlotte Watts, Karen Devries, Ligia Kiss, Tanya Abramsky, Nambusi Kyegombe and Lori Michau.

Through regular monitoring of the study's implementation and the research team's engagement with key stakeholders, 3ie tracks how context, actors and other mechanisms contribute to evidence use. 3ie uses grant documents, progress reports and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders to identify factors that contribute to the use and uptake of findings.

This brief was authored by Stuti Tripathi with editorial support from Beryl Leach. CommsConsult contributed to the research for this brief. It was designed and produced by Visual Best, Akarsh Gupta and Angel Kharya.

Suggested citation: Tripathi, S, 2017. *Using evidence to prevent violence against women in Uganda*, 3ie Evidence Use Brief Series. New Delhi: International Initiative for Impact evaluation (3ie)

About 3ie

The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) is an international grant-making NGO promoting evidence-informed development policies and programmes. We are the global leader in funding, producing and synthesising high-quality evidence of what works, for whom, why and at what cost. We believe that high-quality and policy-relevant evidence will make development more effective and improve people's lives.

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April 2017

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