Reducing violence against women through psychological interventions targeting men

Men and boys are the main perpetrators of violence against women.[1] Psychological issues stemming from mental health problems or prolonged conflict are risk factors associated with men perpetrating violence.[2;3;4] Moreover, patriarchy and gender norms often normalise violence against women and girls. To successfully reduce violence against women, prevention interventions need to include men and boys.[5]

The Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI), in partnership with the World Bank Group, has funded several studies in East and Central Africa that target men. These interventions attempt to address local gender norms and context-specific risk factors associated with men abusing women.

ADDRESSING VIOLENCE IN A CONFLICT–AFFECTED SETTING

Years of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo have had serious psychological impacts on both men and women. A 2012 study[6] undertaken by Promundo revealed links between men's exposure to trauma and violence and their use of violence against partners. The study showed how men often cope with psychological problems and distress by using strategies that affirm social expectations that men should dominate women. These strategies include alcohol use, sexual promiscuity, physical or psychological violence, and rejecting partners who have been raped.

In response to these findings, in 2013 Promundo piloted "Living Peace",[7] a 15-week intervention targeting 324 men and their partners. Living Peace helps men and their partners to develop positive coping strategies and restore violence-free relationships in post-conflict and high-violence settings. During the intervention, men discussed how war and conflict influenced their idea of what it means to "be a man", explored their trauma, and learnt how to cope differently with stress, loss and anger. Through these discussions and educational activities men learnt to adopt non-violent coping strategies.

Three years later, Promundo conducted a follow-up study[8] that found a lasting reduction in intimate partner violence. The changes in men's behaviour and attitudes have positively affected the lives of women and children, extending to the broader community.

MENTAL HEALTH AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Recognising gendered coping strategies and the links between men with common mental health problems (such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder), alcohol and substance use, and high incidences of intimate partner violence, World Vision Kenya is assessing whether a mental health intervention for men may help them better manage stressors associated with their use of violence against their partners.[9]

This study is adapting the World Health Organization's Problem Management

THE PROGRAMME

The Problem Management Plus programme[10] is a psychological intervention targeting individuals with emotional distress. It comprises five sessions that deal with problem management and behavioural strategies.

Plus programme, which was offered to women affected by violence in peri-urban communities in Nairobi, to a group format for men with common mental health problems. The intervention will also raise awareness about intimate partner violence within the community through, for example, community dialogues.

INVOLVING MEN IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS

Although numerous interventions have been designed to involve men and boys in violence prevention activities, many of these have struggled to effectively engage them. In response to this problem, the Rakai Health Sciences Program and the University of California, San Diego, are working to create an evidence-based framework for effectively engaging men and boys in programmes that aim to transform gender norms and reduce violence against women and girls.

This study will build on the "Safe Homes and Respect for Everyone" (SHARE) project, developed by the

Rakai Health Sciences Program. SHARE was the first behavioural intervention to significantly reduce HIV incidence and community-wide levels of intimate partner violence.[11] Drawing on lessons learnt during the implementation of SHARE, the project team will assess gender norms, and identify factors leading to men perpetrating violence against their intimate partners and barriers to their engagement in prevention programmes.[12]

Results from this study will be used to inform the delivery and expansion of an intervention to prevent the perpetration of intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa and other low- and middle-income settings.

WAY FORWARD

The SVRI and World Bank Group support teams in widely disseminating these research findings to ensure that evidence from these studies informs policy and practice.

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