



# COMMUNITY ACTIVISM WITH COUPLES ENGAGED IN AN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAMME Lessons from Indashyikirwa in Rwanda



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Description: An Indashyikirwa CA facilitating activism  
Photo: Peter Caton

**C**ommunity activism is increasingly being used as a strategy to shift harmful social norms, and ensure an enabling environment for preventing and responding to gender based violence. The Indashyikirwa programme in Rwanda equipped trained couples as community activists. This practice brief *highlights the lessons learned from engaging couples as community activists as part of an IPV prevention programme.*

## BACKGROUND

To date, there has been limited experience of working with couples as community activists as part of gender-based violence (GBV) prevention programmes. Indashyikirwa is a four-year programme (August 2014–August 2018) implemented by CARE Rwanda, Rwanda Women's Network (RWN), and Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC), which opted to use this approach. The programme is funded by DFID Rwanda across 14 sectors in the Eastern, Western and Northern provinces of rural Rwanda. The programme aims to reduce experiences and perpetration of IPV, shift social norms and attitudes condoning IPV, and provide more empowering responses to IPV survivors

The programme components include:

1. Participatory training with couples to support equitable, non-violent relationships
2. Training and engagement of opinion leaders
3. Direct support to survivors of IPV through women's safe spaces

This brief reviews lessons learned from implementing an additional component: community-based activism with a sub-set of trained couples, which was designed to diffuse the benefits of the programme more widely.



## INDASHYIKIRWA COMMUNITY ACTIVISM COMPONENT

The Indashyikirwa Couples Curriculum trained a total of 840 heterosexual couples over 5 months from November 2015-May 2016. After curriculum completion, 420 male and female partners of couples (25% of trained individuals) were identified to facilitate voluntary community-based activism for the duration of the programme.

The activism component heavily drew on SASAI, established by Raising Voices in Uganda. RWAMREC staff offered community activists (CAs) a ten-day training in activism skills, including participatory facilitation and supportive responses. RWAMREC staff also offered ongoing support to CAs and a series of refresher trainings around the use of SASAI-adapted activism activities and materials. CAs were selected based on their dedication to the programme, basic literacy, and an ability to conduct at least three activism activities per month.

More trained individuals than the programme had budgeted for expressed their interest to be CAs. RWAMREC staff therefore encouraged CAs to involve their spouses in activism activities, and coordinated several meetings with trained individuals that did not continue as CAs. In 2017, RWAMREC staff offered the activist training to an additional 80 partners of trained couples who had shown ongoing dedication to the programme, which widened the pool of CAs.

Throughout the activism component, RWAMREC staff hosted monthly meetings with CAs to report on activism activities completed, reflect on successes and address challenges. RWAMREC staff also conducted regular observations of CAs conducting activities, to provide constructive feedback to CAs. Observations were documented through an adapted version of the SASAI monitoring and evaluation community activism report form.<sup>1</sup>

1. This tool can be accessed on the Raising Voices website: <http://raisingvoices.org/sasai/>

## METHODOLOGY

As part of the DFID-funded What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls Programme, longitudinal qualitative impact evaluation research was conducted with community activists engaged with the Indashyikirwa programme:

### How?

Two rounds of qualitative interviews were conducted with twelve CAs across three intervention sectors. Two rounds of interviews were also conducted with RWAMREC staff.

### Where?

Three sectors were selected from each of the Western, Province and Northern Provinces in Rwanda to recruit engaged CAs. Sites were purposefully selected to represent a diversity of peri-urban and rural sites. RWAMREC staff were recruited across intervention locations.

### Who?

In December 2016, twelve baseline interviews (four per sector) were conducted with six male and six female activists after they had completed the Couples Curriculum and activism training, and had begun activism activities. All twelve CAs were also observed facilitating activism activities.

Twelve endline interviews were conducted with the same sub-set of CAs in May 2018, towards the end of the programme. Eight CAs were observed facilitating activism activities.

Eight RWAMREC staff were interviewed in May 2016. Seven RWAMREC staff were interviewed in May 2017.

### What?

The interviews assessed CAs' expectations and impressions of the Indashyikirwa programme, their motivations to continue as activists and the successes and challenges they faced when facilitating activism. The interviews with RWAMREC staff assessed challenges and successes of the community activism component.



## FINDINGS

### Motivations to be CAs

The majority of CAs said that their commitment to facilitate activism was based on how much they had benefitted and learned from the Couples Curriculum. They wished to continue to learn and be involved as CAs. A few female CAs said that they wished their activism would benefit other women, including to encourage the self-confidence they felt they had developed and help reduce GBV. Other motivating factors were the programme transport allowance accorded to CAs to facilitate activism, the opportunity to work in partnership with local leadership, and the status they would obtain as CAs.

### Community Activism Activities

From the SASA! activist kit, community conversations, power posters, dramas and quick chats were adapted for use by CAs in Rwanda. These materials, which did not require participants to be literate, were designed to create opportunities for personal reflection, critical thinking and public dialogue about power and IPV. These tools were said to be extremely valuable for detailing common issues communities face and highlighting the benefits of non-violent relationships. Several staff members and CAs identified the challenge of having too many images on the posters, which could make it difficult for community members to agree upon an image to discuss, or because the same image continued to be chosen for discussion. In response, the Indashyikirwa programme team adapted SASA!'s singular posters with multiple images to a calendar format with each image printed on a separate page.

Observations of CAs facilitating activism activities found that participants were actively engaged and fairly open to discussing culturally sensitive issues (e.g. sexual violence). The researchers found that CAs generally had good facilitation and public speaking skills, but that ongoing support and training was essential, especially to coach them on how to use participatory approaches. Several CAs and staff members identified the initial challenge of this unfamiliar approach:

Participants are the ones who should find the answers but sometimes one could forget and give the answer instead of the participants. I think that has reduced considerably thanks to the experience. At the beginning, it was hard but as time passes, it changes

**Male Activist, Baseline Interview**

Several staff and CAs interviewed emphasized that the participatory, benefits-based approach was highly motivating for community members' engagement.



CA with an Indashyikirwa poster. Photo: Peter Caton

Initially, CAs primarily conducted activist activities at more formalized venues, including at village savings and loan association meetings, local authority-led community meetings, community work (*umuganda*)<sup>2</sup> or parents evening forums,<sup>3</sup> and were often invited to return regularly to these community forums. This was related to the contextual difficulties for CAs to engage in more informal activism, which is unfamiliar in Rwanda. Moreover, Rwanda has many structured, formalized community groups, which provided opportunities for regular activism:

The [CAs] do not do informal activism. We push them to go to markets, churches, bus stations but they are shy. They don't dare go there. When we ask local leaders or pastors, they say we have those opportunities but when we ask community activists to go there, they are still shy. I think this is related to the new approach because Rwandans are not familiar with this kind of thing. At first people were scared to talk in public but there is improvement, slowly.

**RWAMREC Field Supervisor, Second Round Interview**

2. Umuganda refers to community work where traditionally people gather as a group to provide free labour for the vulnerable members of the community (Rwiyereka, 2014). It takes place on the last Saturday of the month where people gather including ministers and leaders from all levels to sit and discuss national goals, issues and possible solutions and apply these to their local contexts.

3. Parents evening forums or 'Umugoroba w'ababyeyi' allow issues concerning family welfare including child abuse, domestic violence and family conflict to be identified and solved at the village level during regular meetings, apart from those which require the law to intervene.



Community activist couple. Photo: Peter Caton

By the endline interviews with CAs however, this appeared to have shifted with CAs offering more spontaneous and informal forms of activism. The majority of CAs responded to regular requests to support individuals privately (i.e. home visits).

The engagement of local leaders boosted the confidence of CAs and supported their access to various forums to conduct activism (i.e. government meetings). The quarterly meetings between CAs, opinion leaders, and WSFs also supported such linkages. The ongoing trainings offered by RWAMREC staff were highly appreciated by CAs to further develop their skills, learn new activism techniques (i.e. dramas), and refresh concepts learned.

## CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

**Monitoring challenges:** Several staff members highlighted the difficulties they faced in monitoring the activism activities of CAs. This was for various reasons: many CAs chose to conduct activities early mornings, evenings or weekends; some CAs had poor access to electricity to charge their phones to be in contact with staff; or local leaders sometimes changed the timing of activism activities at short notice.

**Adaptation challenges:** The activism activities were originally intended to be implemented according to four SASA! phases (Start, Awareness, Support, Action). However, it was challenging to move effectively through the phases as this was a new approach for the majority of implementing partners. The inception period to finalize the programme design, pre-test the programme curricula, choose and adapt the SASA! activist tool kit materials required for each phase took longer than anticipated. Given these delays, the programme combined the Start and Awareness activism phases together, and the Support and Action phases together. The curricula with couples, opinion leaders and WSFs, combined with significant diffusion levels from the activism generated significant impacts. Yet the programme would have benefitted from additional time for the activism component.

**Burden on volunteer CAs:** Some staff shared their concerns about the burden on CAs. Given the rural environment, some CAs travelled far to facilitate activism activities. Many community members and local leaders regularly asked CAs for support and in some cases, local leaders asked CAs to facilitate activism in areas beyond the programme reach. CAs were provided with basic counselling and referral skills, and programme staff regularly emphasized the role of CAs with opinion leaders (i.e. not to replace local leaders, to not go beyond programme areas or commitments as volunteers).

In terms of addressing these challenges, the support offered to CAs via the monthly meetings coordinated by RWAMREC, were critical. The extent to which CAs supported each other, after having developed close relationships through the Couples Curriculum, was also a valuable source of support.

Every village has at least four activists and we take time to meet and exchange the challenges we have faced. If there is someone with a better idea about a certain challenge, we help each other. We also talk to RWAMREC staff where we show them the challenges we had and how we overcame them.

**Male Activist, Endline Interview**

### Being CAs as Couples

It was rare for both partners of couples to be initially trained as CAs, since more individuals than expected wanted to be CAs. Staff were also concerned about the potential challenges for both partners of couples to be CAs including the difficulty for both partners to neglect household duties, and the distances to be travelled sometimes to conduct activism activities. RWAMREC staff encouraged CAs to involve their spouses with their activism efforts. Spouses were generally supportive of their partners as CAs after having also completed the Couples Curriculum. The majority of CAs had some experience engaging in activism with their spouse, especially by the endline interviews. CAs testified that their spouses could add legitimacy to and enhance their activism efforts, especially for being familiar with the programme content. Having CAs' spouses present could also change the dynamic of the interaction to be more effective:

When I conducted a discussion and he was there, the people were more interested to follow the discussion because they could see that my husband also supports me and that his mindset is changing.

**Female Activist, Endline Interview**

The majority of staff concurred about the value of couples as CAs. Several partners of CAs were trained as CAs in 2017, when an additional 80 individuals were incorporated to the pool of CAs.

### Community Perceptions of CAs

A few female CAs noted how initially, some community members (especially men) disapproved of them facilitating activism and speaking publicly. However, they also testified that this shifted over time, to the point where both male and female CAs were respected

as knowledgeable leaders and sources of advice. Several CAs said they take pride in being identified as change agents, and regularly wear their branded vests and carry branded umbrellas.

Staff and CAs noted how CAs being from communities where they conducted activism was critical for harnessing trust and rapport, as community members could witness change among CAs and draw on their support. Several CAs noted that facilitating activism in the communities where they lived was a strong factor which held them accountable to changes in their relationships:

For myself who conducts the teaching session, there is no way that I can use violence while I have been teaching people that it is not good. The impact on my side is that I must stick by my beliefs.

**Male Activist, Endline Interview**

## IMPACT OF COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

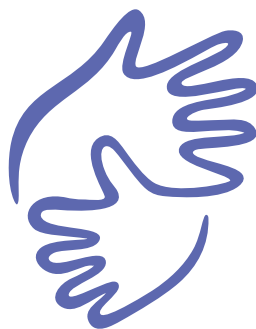
At the time of writing, the qualitative data from endline interviews is still being cross-referenced with the quantitative data. At this preliminary stage, the impacts of the community activism related by staff and CAs include the following:

- CAs feel better equipped to respond to IPV including not victim blaming, listening actively, applying basic counselling skills, and awareness of referral pathways (to women's safe spaces or formal service providers).
- CAs and staff testified that the activism led to greater community awareness, openness and ownership to address different types of IPV, including types there was less general awareness of (sexual, economic and emotional IPV)
- They also said they felt that there has been a reduction in acceptability of and experiences of IPV, increased household cooperation and improved family relationships.
- Several CAs said that community members increasingly intervene in cases of GBV and are more supportive of GBV survivors.
- CAs also suggested that there was greater community wide acceptance of shifting roles among men and women, such as men supporting care and domestic duties, and women taking on leadership and provider roles.

Overall, the innovative, participatory approach of the community activism was strongly appreciated by community members. These impacts will be explored by further data analysis and triangulation with the quantitative randomized control data from communities.

## LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Value of Couples Curriculum as a platform for community activism.** The curriculum generated motivation among CAs; ensured that CAs were supported by and could facilitate activism with their spouses; and built up support networks among CAs. This was especially important in these disparate rural, areas where it was more difficult for programme staff to be actively present on an ongoing basis.
2. The community activism also provided **an enabling environment** for couples to continue to enact and be accountable for changes learned through the Couples Curriculum. Given the value of couples facilitating activism, the programme would have benefitted from training more couples as CAs from the outset.
3. **Community activism plays out differently in different settings.** Many CAs and programme staff related how community activism and participatory approaches are unfamiliar in Rwanda. Thus, this approach required significant support and effort to adapt it for Rwanda – for example, drawing on the many existing and regular community groups. Rwandan programme partners were actively involved in adaptation processes – including adapting SASA! activism materials to Rwandan dress, common activities, and environment – which was critical to ensure contextual relevance.
4. **The importance of a substantial inception period, especially for new programmes.** The inception period of Indashyikirwa took over one year, which was longer than anticipated. Yet this inception period was critical to design relevant and appropriate activism activities.
5. **New programmes need to stay open to modification in response to research findings.** The Indashyikirwa programme was open to modifications as the ongoing evaluation research informed programme implementation.
6. **Programme partners were also provided with regular opportunities to interpret and validate the evaluation findings.** Insights from beneficiaries and staff were used to inform the programme, including adaptation to the cultural context, content of the refresher trainings, responses to contextual challenges, and design of the activism materials. Staff were generally more open about implementation challenges than beneficiaries, and provided a valuable perspective that is often neglected in evaluations.
7. **The importance of linkages between CAs and other Indashyikirwa programme components.** The linkages with women's safe spaces and opinion leaders were critical to support the work of CAs; the former for referral and the later to support CAs access to activism venues, and enhance their credibility. It was necessary for programme staff to brief all intervention village leaders about the programme, for CAs to feel comfortable facilitating activism activities. The quarterly meetings with CAs, WSFs and OLs were valuable for fostering these linkages.



## PROGRAMME TEAM

This study is being led by Dr. Kristin Dunkle, Dr. Lori Heise, Dr. Lyndsay McLean and Dr. Erin Stern.

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The What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls Programme is a flagship programme from the UK Department for International Development, which is investing an unprecedented £25 million over five years to the prevention of violence against women and girls. It supports primary prevention efforts across Africa and Asia that seek to understand and address the underlying causes of violence, and to stop it from occurring. Through three complementary components, the programme focuses on generating

evidence from rigorous primary research and evaluations of existing interventions to understanding what works to prevent violence against women and girls generally, and in fragile and conflict areas. Additionally the programme estimates social and economic costs of violence against women and girls, developing the economic case for investing in prevention.



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