

# REDUCING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

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Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a global public health crisis and human rights violation, with adverse consequences for women and girls, economies as a whole, and future generations. Existing multicountry evidence suggests that the high prevalence of VAWG in low- and middle-income countries could be holding back advances in many priority areas – such as education ([Gennari et al. 2014](#)), health ([Ellsberg et al. 2008](#)), nutrition ([Yount et al. 2011](#)), adaptation to climate change ([Le Masson et al. 2019](#)), and adoption of sustainable livelihoods ([Morrison and Orlando 2004](#)). In the context of agricultural development, VAWG can reduce agency ([Theis et al. 2018](#)) – preventing women from seeking control over assets and income (instrumental agency), participating in groups (collective agency), and building self-worth (intrinsic agency). In addition, fear of sexual harassment and/or sexual violence in public spaces can induce girls or women to choose lower quality educational outcomes ([Borker 2021](#)), limit their opportunities for safe and decent work ([Nordehn 2018](#)), and depress their labor market participation ([Chakraborty et al. 2018](#), [Siddique 2021](#)).

Research must prioritize understanding which programs and policies can effectively prevent VAWG, recognizing that VAWG can hinder progress in achieving many development objectives. This brief draws on research conducted under Flagship 6

## KEY MESSAGES

- Violence against women and girls (VAWG) can hinder progress in achieving not only women’s empowerment but also other development objectives.
- Research must prioritize understanding which programs and policies can effectively prevent VAWG, as well as how targeted objectives of development programs are shaped by VAWG.
- Evidence suggests that participatory educational programs and edutainment directly targeting gender norms around violence can be a promising strategy for reducing VAWG.
- A growing body of evidence highlights that cash transfers – a major component of development and social protection programming – can reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) through a number of pathways.
- New research is exploring linkages between agricultural development programming and IPV, as well as between women’s economic productivity and sexual harassment in the work environment, shedding light on how addressing VAWG could increase women’s opportunities for safe and decent work.

Cross-Cutting Gender Research and Coordination of the CGIAR's Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets (PIM) led by IFPRI. A body of current research focuses on understanding the effectiveness of programs and policies explicitly aiming to prevent VAWG, as well as the intended and unintended impacts of broader development interventions on VAWG. The existing research portfolio focuses particularly on intimate partner violence (IPV), the most common form of VAWG, emphasizing programming that can be implemented at scale and understanding how program design features and context shape impacts. New research also explores how women's economic productivity is affected by VAWG – particularly sexual harassment and hostility in the work environment. This brief highlights current work in these areas, as well as potential for future research on VAWG.

## VAWG framework

Worldwide, 1 in 3 women have experienced physical or sexual violence – mostly by an intimate partner. ([Devries et al. 2013](#)). A socio-ecological framework ([The Prevention Collaborative 2020](#)) identifies multiple risk factors at the societal, community, household, and individual levels that increase the likelihood of VAWG. These include patriarchal norms, lack of sanctions or institutions to prevent VAWG, economic insecurity, social isolation, women's lack of control over resources, and many more. Shocks and stressors that bring about economic uncertainty, civil unrest, and disaster can increase violence – by exacerbating risk factors such as stress due to poverty and economic insecurity, social isolation, community-wide conflict and instability, reduced access to services, and exposure to violence and coercion in response efforts ([Peterman et al. 2020](#)). Thus, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change have heightened both global attention to VAWG and the urgency of understanding its implications and strategies for prevention.

The World Health Organization has recently developed the "[RESPECT women](#)" framework, identifying action-oriented steps for policymakers and implementers to prevent violence against wom-

en using seven strategies: 1) R: Relationship skills strengthened, 2) E: Empowerment of women, 3) S: Service ensured, 4) P: Poverty reduced, 5) E: Environments made safe, 6) C: Child and adolescent abuse prevented, 7) T: Transformed attitudes, beliefs, and norms. Research at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) focuses on understanding and evaluating programs and policies related to many of these strategies. As highlighted by the RESPECT framework, VAWG should be studied not only in the context of programs that explicitly aim to influence gender dynamics – such as those directed at strengthening relationship skills ("R"), empowering women ("E"), and transforming attitudes, beliefs, and norms ("T") – but also a range of programs that aim to reduce poverty ("P") and influence the environment in which women and girls live ("E").

## VAWG-focused programming in low- and middle-income countries

Social norms that reinforce men's power vis-à-vis their female partners contribute to VAWG. Education interventions that address underlying gender and social norms that contribute to VAWG hold promise in VAWG prevention, linking to the "T" strategy in RESPECT. Current IFPRI research in this area includes two categories of intervention: 1) group-based participatory interventions, and 2) mass media interventions.

### Group-based participatory interventions

Group-based participatory interventions have generally targeted women. However, male engagement has been noted as critical to the goal of IPV prevention ([Jewkes et al. 2015](#)) and several studies suggest that promotion of equitable behaviors among men may reduce perpetration of IPV ([Peacock and Levack 2004](#); [Casey et al. 2018](#); [Barker et al. 2010](#)) and women's experience of IPV ([Doyle et al. 2018](#)). In addition, qualitative analyses suggest that working with couples may be an effective strategy in IPV prevention ([Starmann et al. 2017](#); [McLean et al. 2020](#)). Yet, the available body of evidence on men's

and couples' interventions remains thin. The evaluation of Unite for Better Life ([Sharma et al. 2020](#)) – co-authored by an IFPRI researcher – analyzed a gender-transformative, participatory intervention delivered to men, women, or couples in Ethiopia in the context of the coffee ceremony, a traditional community-based discussion forum. Using a randomized controlled trial, the evaluation found that the intervention delivered to men was effective in reducing men's self-reported perpetration of sexual IPV but did not reduce IPV when delivered to couples or women, highlighting the importance of further engaging men. Based on this evidence, the UN RESPECT framework also highlighted this program as a promising strategy to prevent violent relationships within its "Relationships" domain.

### Mass media interventions

Educational mass-media to promote positive behavior change through radio or television is also known as edutainment. Edutainment can contribute to behavior change by providing individuals with information in an entertaining manner that leads to a change in their understanding of facts and by changing the particular social norms that individuals adhere to ([Banerjee et al. 2019](#)). Edutainment has been associated with improved knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to HIV/AIDS, fertility, and family planning in Mexico, South Africa, Tanzania, Brazil, Nigeria, and India ([Banerjee et al. 2019](#); [Basten, 2009](#)). However, to date there have been few rigorous studies on the effectiveness of edutainment to improve women's outcomes with respect to IPV or VAWG. A recent evaluation by IFPRI was undertaken among adolescent girls and young women in rural Senegal of an edutainment intervention – *C'est la vie!*, a popular TV series in West Africa – with episodes focused on gender-based violence (GBV) as well as sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and maternal and child health (MCH). Using a randomized controlled trial, the study finds that watching *C'est la vie!* increases knowledge, particularly around GBV and SRH. However, attitudes and beliefs are unchanged. Impacts do not vary by the addition of pedagogical kits composed of post-screening discussions and

workshops. However, women who were randomly nudged to invite a male guest to the screening have larger increases in knowledge compared to those who were nudged to invite a female friend. Results show implementation and knowledge transfer is feasible in rural settings, however, more intensive exposure or directive messages may be needed for attitude and norm change.

## Other development programming and VAWG in low- and middle-income countries

### Cash transfers and IPV

A growing evidence base demonstrates that cash transfers can reduce IPV, even when IPV prevention is not an explicit objective of the programming. IFPRI hosts a [multidisciplinary research collaborative](#) on the linkages between cash transfers and IPV – with the overall goal of using research to effectively leverage cash programming for IPV prevention in low- and middle-income settings. To do so, the collaborative generates new evidence to address questions at the research frontier; disseminates existing evidence and technical assistance to stakeholders in order to influence policy and programming; and builds coherence in priorities among researchers and practitioners in this space.

Among the collaborative's influential outputs is a mixed-method review of 22 rigorous studies from low- and middle-income countries on the effects of cash transfers on IPV ([Buller et al. 2018](#)). Over 70 percent of the studies found that cash transfers decreased IPV, particularly in terms of physical/sexual violence. Only two studies showed mixed results, and no study showed increases in IPV from cash transfers. The review identified three pathways through which cash transfers could affect IPV: 1) increased economic security leading to improved emotional well-being of household members, resulting in less IPV perpetration by men, 2) less constrained budgets leading to fewer intrahousehold disputes over purchases, which trigger violence, and 3) increased empowerment of women, particularly when transfers were targeted to them, leading

to improved bargaining power for women and less acceptance of violence in their relationships.

Based on this review, the RESPECT framework has highlighted economic transfers as a promising strategy to prevent violence against women within its “Poverty reduced” domain (WHO 2019). Two case studies within the review have also been featured by UN Women as promising examples in its Implementation Guide package accompanying the RESPECT framework (UN Women 2020). A case study from Ecuador (Hidrobo et al. 2016) showed that cash transfers were as effective in reducing IPV as equalvalue food transfers or vouchers. A case study from Bangladesh (Roy et al. 2019a) showed that combining cash or food transfers with group-based training for women led to sustained reductions in IPV six months after programming ended, while transfers alone did not.

Since the review, the collaborative has published evaluations of large government cash transfer programs in Mali (Heath et al. 2020) and Ghana (Peterman et al. 2021), showing that reductions in IPV from cash transfers may depend on household structure, such as whether a relationship is polygamous. Recent follow-up work on the Bangladesh case study has shown that IPV reductions from the combination of cash transfers and group-based training for women were sustained even four years after programming ended (Roy et al. 2019b). Through a call for proposals on studies that address priority evidence gaps on cash and IPV, the collaborative is also shaping the next generation of research to inform cash programming for IPV prevention.

### Agricultural development programming and IPV

There is growing understanding around the importance of women’s empowerment in agriculture. Given the complex relationship between empowerment and IPV, the second phase of the IFPRI-led Gender, Agriculture, and Assets Project (GAAP2), along with its development of the project-level Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI) to measure agency, included exploration of how agricultural development projects can affect

IPV and how IPV relates to objectives of agricultural development projects.

A case study within GAAP2 – the Agriculture, Nutrition, and Gender Linkages (ANGeL) project in Bangladesh – carried out a quantitative assessment of the impacts of programming on IPV (Quisumbing et al. 2021). Using a randomized controlled trial that provided training to husbands and wives together on agricultural production, nutrition, and/or gender sensitization, it found that none of these trainings significantly reduced IPV. There was some indication that adding gender sensitization training, over and above trainings on agriculture and nutrition, led to higher prevalence of emotional IPV reported by women – although it could not be ascertained whether this was due to more emotional IPV experienced or greater reporting to enumerators of experiences.

Qualitative work in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, Nepal, and Tanzania as part of pro-WEAI (Theis et al. 2018) found that common strategies intended to strengthen women’s agency through agricultural development programming – including group membership, income generation, and transforming gender norms – can fail if women avoid participation out of fear of violent repercussions at home. Further, although development interventions can decrease IPV, they can also expose women to increased risk of violence. Thus, this work highlighted that development actors cannot ignore how IPV harms women physically and psychologically, influences their daily behavior, and keeps them from making decisions in their own best interest, and emphasized the need to collect data to study these relationships and inform the design of interventions.

In an effort to inform policy on how addressing VAWG could increase women’s opportunities for safe and decent work, a new area of research explores how women’s economic productivity is related to sexual harassment in the work environment. A case study among entrepreneurs in Malawi shows that women’s perceptions of how frequently women like them are sexually harassed explains a large share of the gender gap in profits (Duval-Diop et

al. 2021). Researchers at IFPRI are currently exploring the consequences of sexual harassment among women who work in agricultural value chains in both Benin and Malawi. This study looks at the relationship between women's economic productivity and their own experiences of sexual harassment, as well as perceptions of how frequently others like them are harassed. Better understanding of these relationships will help motivate efforts to reduce sexual harassment as a form of VAWG and inform programmatic strategies for doing so.

## Outlook and research priorities

A compelling research agenda lies ahead on VAWG. One key priority is investigating the effectiveness of large-scale programming aimed explicitly at changing harmful social norms that contribute to VAWG. New research should give particular attention to harmful norms that affect adolescent girls – for example, in relation to schooling and child marriage, both of which have long-term implications for women as well as their households and children. Focus should also continue on designing interventions to successfully engage men and boys in order to reduce their perpetration of VAWG.

It is also critical to continue research on how other development programs – such as cash transfers and agricultural development activities – affect VAWG and are affected by VAWG. New research should aim to fill evidence gaps on the role of complementary programming and the longer-term sustainability of impacts on VAWG, using mixed-method approaches to understand pathways for impact, including how the pathways are shaped by program design features and context. Timely research is also needed on what strategies can be effective

in reducing VAWG in the context of shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic and what design adaptations are necessary.

A core element of this research is measurement. Given the sensitivity of VAWG and the potential risk to respondents from answering questions about violence, it is critical to understand how best to collect VAWG data in a reliable and ethical manner that prioritizes safety of the respondents. One important question – particularly in the context of COVID-19-related restrictions on fieldwork – is whether VAWG can be measured through phone surveys, given that it is challenging to ensure privacy for the respondent, build rapport and trust, and provide referrals to services. Other questions include how best to collect information on VAWG using responses from men about their own engagement in perpetrating violence, and how to minimize bias in responses such as social desirability bias. The urgency of understanding and addressing VAWG makes safe, accurate measurement a high priority in the research agenda.

Lastly, research is needed that expands our understanding of how women's and girls' experiences of violence may limit progress toward other development goals – in an effort to more fully understand the costs of violence and improve the design of development interventions. These costs may include holding back progress on women's involvement in schooling or livelihood opportunities (such as limiting participation in the labor market or advancement in value chains), constraining coping responses to shocks, and limiting adaptation to climate change. Ultimately, the costs of VAWG are borne not only by women themselves, but also by families and whole communities.

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