

Journeys of Transformation

Engaging men in Rwanda as allies in women's economic empowerment and partners in caregiving



"I thought that I have to be the boss, and when when I grow older I should do nothing in the house. Now, I know that a man can do what a woman can do."

(A young participant. Huye, Rwanda, November 2011)

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Introduction

Today, women represent 40% of the paid workforce and more than half the world's food producers, but men are clearly not carrying out half of the world's care work. Global statistics suggest that the average time women spend on unpaid care work is two to ten times that of men. Indeed, a core and enduring aspect of gender inequality globally is the fact that men are generally expected to be providers and breadwinners and that women and girls are generally expected to be responsible for caregiving and domestic tasks.

In order inspire a change to this breadwinner vs. caregiver dynamic, most livelihood and economic empowerment initiatives in the Global South currently focus on women; firstly because women's income is lower than men's on average, and secondly, because of research findings that men tend to contribute a lower percentage of their incomes to the household and to children than do women (Bruce, Lloyd & Leonard, 1995; Wyss, 1995).

Unfortunately, many economic empowerment initiatives focusing solely on women note that household decision-making continues to be dominated by men. As women begin to earn money, many men may feel offended or threatened as heads of their households and may work to retain their authority by controlling family finances, provoking conflict, or using violence against their partners. In order to realize the full benefits of women's economic empowerment for the whole family, men need to be engaged as allies in this process.

Previous experience shows that some men do change positively when their female partners participate in Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and women's empowerment activities. Theresa, a participant in CARE's community workshops in Rwanda, said of her husband, "Eventually when I would return from the workshops, I would find that he was sharing my responsibilities. If there was cooking to be done, he would do it. We worked well together."¹ The challenge is how to speed up this change and to increase the likelihood that more men will share in positive and gender equitable attitudes rather than negative ones.

Intervention

To develop a strategy for thoughtfully involving men in women's empowerment, Promundo began by conducting formative research with stakeholders and key informants from CARE Rwanda to assess the impact of Village Savings and Loan (VSL) program participation on household and partner dynamics.² Promundo also conducted two focus groups with beneficiaries of CARE's VSL program in the Huye District.

Built upon findings from the baseline results, the Journeys of Transformation training manual includes training for men on:

1. Business skills, information about the VSL program, and income-generation planning and activities, including sessions that focus on negotiation and decision-making patterns between men and women.
2. Health and well-being, including practical information about general health, reproductive health, sexuality, alcohol consumption, and strategies for coping with stress.
3. Gender-based violence laws and policies promoting gender equality in Rwanda.

This training intervention was implemented with an experimental group, consisting of 30 female beneficiaries of the VSL program. Husbands of these women were engaged in 16 weekly group-education sessions, while a comparison group continued VSL training and issuing loans for women without the engagement of their partners.

Results

The families of men who participated in the intervention group saw a significantly higher gain in income compared to those families of men who did not participate. Additionally, some men became more supportive of family planning and many men became more involved with child care activities – changes that were not seen in the comparison group (where the VSL was carried out without engaging the male partners of women participants).

Other changes in family dynamics when male partners were engaged include:

- ***Conflicts between partners were reported to have been reduced*** and men and women reported being in better health.
- ***Knowledge about different forms of violence***, the laws related to gender equality as well as the overall experiences in the training raised awareness about actions that are, post-sessions, considered to be violent.

- The improved partner relations were reported to have a ***positive spin-off for children and family life*** and were observed by neighbors.
- The new insights from the workshops for men in the experimental group have, according to women and men participants, resulted in ***acceptance of the laws in Rwanda that promote gender equality.***
- The positive ***engagement of men in sharing household activities***, taking care of children and positive relations with their wives was considered by participants in the group sessions to be a way out of poverty and toward family life improvement.

Conclusion

Based on the findings from the experimental group, men and women seem to be ready to discover alternative ways to manage their households and partner relations. While these results are preliminary, they suggest the potential of scaling up the engagement of men in deliberate ways as partners in women's economic empowerment in order to bring benefits to children, women and men themselves. In other words, women's and men's lives can improve at the same time. As men become more integrated into these initiatives, not only will their families benefit economically, but there will be less violence, and greater gender equality and participation by men in household duties and care work.

To download Journeys of Transformation: A training manual for engaging men as allies in women's economic empowerment, visit: <http://www.promundo.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/VSLManualFinal.pdf>.

Notes

¹To watch the full story of Theresa and her husband, visit: <http://www.men-care.org/videos> or <https://vimeo.com/53463406>.

² VSLAs are self-managed groups that do not receive outside capital. They provide participants with a secure place to save their money, and the opportunity to borrow small amounts on flexible terms and to obtain basic insurance. Generally, groups of 15-30 individuals borrow and save from a common fund to generate capital for short-term loans; the interest is shared between members at the end of a given period.

References

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Wyss, B. (1995). Gender and economic support of Jamaican households: Implications for children's living standards. Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.