



EQUITY, ETHICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE:

Real-Life Case Studies Charting a Way Forward



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Passages

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The Passages Project supported the development of this workbook. Passages is a USAID-funded seven-year implementation research project that aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in family planning, reproductive health, and gender-based violence. Passages seeks to build the evidence base and contribute to the global community's capacity to strengthen normative environments that support reproductive health and wellbeing, especially among young people at life transition points, including very young adolescents, newly married youth, and first-time parents.

INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICAL THINKING TO SOCIAL CHANGE INITIATIVES

Project teams are constantly making decisions that, consciously or unconsciously, reflect their individual and collective values and perceptions of how communities are organized and how projects should work within the complex social realities that comprise a community. Decisions, though, may lead to unintended consequences for certain groups, people, or communities unless we are more conscious of our and the partner communities' values as we discuss programming issues and make decisions on moving forward.

Understanding issues clearly and from multiple perspectives before making decisions or actions should be a part of good development practice throughout the project lifecycle. Ethical thinking can guide these processes of reflection, discussion, and decision-making. Ethical thinking is “the process of analyzing and understanding multiple connected variables in a changing context AND applying ethical values to make responsible choices. It requires doing the work to understand issues clearly be-

fore making decisions or taking actions that are ethical”¹ (Thornton, 2019).

The following questions are examples of issues that arise during the design and implementation of norms shifting interventions. How a project discusses and decides programming questions are often crucial to its success. What strategies should a project use to engage communities in design and implementation? Why and how should a project decide to work with some partners or community groups and not others? Which groups are not represented as decisions are being made? How should projects respond to backlash when their activities address community-sensitive topics? What processes ensure that the community's opinions, including those most vulnerable, are considered? Who might gain and who might lose resources for social development?

While there is no one way to design and implement a project, decisions often get made that do not involve sufficient deliberation, weighing of options, or communication on why decisions are made. Decisions might reflect conscious or unconscious biases such as valuing data or research over practice and lived experience. Some decisions may maintain existing power structures between organizations and communities even when projects describe their work as participatory.

In the case of norms shifting interventions, which aim to engage with social inequities and community beliefs about the behaviors that members should follow, these questions are crucial as projects are designed and implemented. The multiple consequences of decisions need to be considered as the stakes can be high, even when those consequences are not directly related to project goals. For example, who or which groups might be placed in

A grounding in ethical thinking can guide discussions and decision making for questions like the ones below

- Who decides how projects address social/health issues within the broader sociocultural and structural context?
- How are community members and others engaged in discussion and decision-making?
- Who decides which outcomes are achievable and valuable to the community?
- How can adaptive management support maximizing values inherent in normative strategies and the effectiveness of norm change interventions?

¹ Thornton, L. F. (2019). *The complexity of ethical thinking and decision making (Part 1)*. *Leading in Context* [online]. Available at: <https://leadingincontext.com/2019/07/31/the-complexity-of-ethical-thinking-and-decision-making-part-1/>

Ethical thinking is “the process of analyzing and understanding multiple connected variables in a changing context and applying ethical values to make responsible choices. It requires doing the work to understand issues clearly before making decisions or taking actions that are ethical”²

positions where they become further stigmatized or face a more significant social backlash? Which groups might consolidate their power to the detriment of the less powerful? How should implementers mitigate and respond to these situations?

Local activist movements and community organizations have pushed the social norms field to decolonize their practices in transformative ways, including greater power-sharing, transparency and trust, valuing local

knowledge and capacity, and being intersectional. Yet, large institutions, organizations, and donors working on social norms have been slow to consider such issues systematically. Little guidance exists on the ethics of projects and programs desiring to foster health by influencing communities’ gendered, social-normative environment. As these social change initiatives become more mainstream, ethical thinking can help clarify the process and outcomes of making decisions that respect community beliefs and achieve public health aims.

PASSAGES’ EXPERIENCES ON GAPS IN ETHICAL THINKING

Before and during the past six years of the Passages Project, we have brought up the subject of program ethics during training events, meetings, and conferences with project donors, designers, and implementers. These discussions were crafted to move beyond research ethics which focus on protecting research participants. Some people had first-hand experience with the challenges of being ethical in the context of social change. We also found uncertainty amongst those who had not previously worked on social change initiatives. Others punted the question, saying that program ethics concerned their partners but not them. Others agreed in principle with the need for ethics and asked for a step-by-step guide. Some said they applied ethics in their work without being able to articulate their processes or values. Most struggled to understand how ethics applied to their work.

To start thinking about how ethics can be systematically incorporated into your work, look at the ten common values in the box. They come from a scoping review of the ethically-themed literature in human rights, social justice, and public health, which represent the program

nexus at which social norms interventions operate.³ Explicitly naming, revisiting, discussing, and grounding partnerships and programming in values is essential to ensure that one’s intentions to do good are not used to justify (in)action without considering local community and organizational perspectives, values, and needs. A project and its partners would benefit from deliberating on their values and discussing their meaning and application. This workbook can help implementers and others demystify the application of ethical thinking in programming.

Values that can guide ethical decision making

- Do good, Minimize Harm
- Fairness
- Inclusiveness
- Openness
- Reasonableness
- Reciprocity
- Respect
- Responsiveness
- Responsibility
- Solidarity

² Thornton, L. F. (2019). *The complexity of ethical thinking and decision making (Part 1)*. *Leading in Context* [online]. Available at: <https://leadingincontext.com/2019/07/31/the-complexity-of-ethical-thinking-and-decision-making-part-1/>
³ Igras, S., Kohli, A., Bukuluki, P., Cislighi, B., Khan, S., and Tier, C. *Bringing ethical thinking to social change initiatives: Why it matters*. *Global Public Health*, DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2020.1820550

ABOUT THIS WORKBOOK

The workbook is for designers, implementers, donors, and organizations working on social change initiatives and desiring to learn more about integrating ethics into social change programming. While we don't offer a roadmap, the case studies seek to help people advance their ethical thinking using real-world examples of how organizations and projects have considered and applied ethics to partnership, project design, and implementation decisions.

Each case study begins with a scenario that project staff faced in designing or implementing their norms-shifting intervention. Pause-and-reflect questions then focus learner deliberation on ethical decision-making, ending with how the different organizations moved forward using an ethical lens. Learners can use the cases for self and group study. The diverse situations that staff faced include:

- The **Voices for Change** consortia in Nigeria wanted to reach and support young women and men as gender activists throughout Nigeria yet did not want to diminish the decades of gender work by adult activists. Was there a way to find common values that could bring cohesion to the more diverse movement?
- The NGO Breakthrough-India was early in the design phase of their **Bell Bajao!** approach to prevent domestic violence. Could staff design violence-prevention strategies, with men engaged as advocates, not saviors, and women having their collective voices heard?
- In Columbia, an edutainment group had developed a multimedia youth- and rights-focused health communication initiative called **Revalados**. They needed to decide with whom to partner to maximize project coverage while staying true to their rights-focused values.
- In Uganda, the NGO Raising Voices found that early attempts of the **SASA!** program to use international best practices on partner violence prevention led to fights between couples and other negative consequences. They needed to determine a way to adjust SASA! to be more acceptable to local realities.

VOICES4CHANGE IN NIGERIA

Using a values lens to design a youth activist program to share adult gender activist spaces

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Explore project design decisions that respond to norms of adults ‘powering over’ young people and young men ‘powering over’ young women

THE STORY

Projects working with young people as social change agents frequently confront generational differences in adults’ perceptions about when and how youth can influence change. Community and adult expectations about the capacities of young people and social power dynamics around what is acceptable behavior of young people, in turn, create barriers to young people’s ability to lead change efforts. At the same time, youth internalize unequal gender roles, creating barriers for young women to act as change agents, compared to young men. V4C conducted two formative assessments – one focused on norms the other on values - to understand such realities better and gain ideas on designing their project to address them.

Values are general guidelines, while norms are specific guidelines.

Values are general standards that decide what is good and what is wrong.

Norms are rules and expectations that specify how people should and should not behave in various social situations.⁴

One formative assessment explored how norms, or community-held attitudes and beliefs, played out in inter-linked ways in the project area:

- Some adults infantilize young people and do not fully acknowledge their capacity to engage in change. Adults often commented that young people were unmotivated; they didn’t understand or fight for gender equality. Adults’ lack of faith in youth capacity then undermined their self-confidence to participate in change.
- Adult activists had championed gender equality for years and were unwilling to share the activist space. Young people wanted to learn from them but felt excluded from adult spaces, particularly in politics, but also in spaces that should be youth-led such as student union organizations.
- Gender and leadership expectations also affected young women’s confidence to lead. Young women and men often accepted without reflection the values that prioritized ‘big, strong, reliable’ male leaders and role models who had the strength and energy to be activists and leaders.

Another formative research (see box) focused on commonly-held community values that could aid the development of values-embedded activities to foster solidarity for and mitigate opposition to gender equality between and within generations. If young people and adult influencers shared over-arching values (which underpin norms), it could harmonize the project’s wide-ranging gender-equitable activities.

⁴ What is the Difference Between Norms and Values? Pediaa. 2020. Available at: <https://pediaa.com/what-is-the-difference-between-norms-and-values/>

Based on the formative assessment findings, the V4C project theory of change aimed to shift these social norms by fostering a cadre of young female and male activists for gender equality. Young people would offer new ideas and model behaviors to challenge existing gender norms, joining older activists. With growing skills, capacities, and visibility, youth activists would

help catalyze shifts in their communities' understanding of women's voice and leadership, decision-making roles, and violence against women and girls. An approach based on shared community values would create a greater sense of inclusiveness and respect towards and between the existing and new generation of gender activists amplifying messaging in the process.

Some values upon which to anchor V4C programming and messaging

- **Partnerships** support men and women working together to achieve their goals, supporting each other in businesses, relationships, families, and communities. This idea could potentially show that men need not lose out through greater gender equality, but rather that could be a “win-win” situation.
- **Youth fulfillment.** If gender equality could be linked to images of completion - a successful future career, family, and social-economic life – it might be very appealing to young people, most resonant in Lagos and less so in Kano.
- **Serving the community** was most relevant to young women who aspired to contribute to society rather than seek personal gain. Playing a more significant public role of leadership and decision-making in communities and institutions might appeal to women and provoke less resistance from men, particularly in Kano and Kaduna.
- **Community support and helping the family** were two traditional values important to the community and young people. There was a feeling these traditional values were in decline, threatened by “Western” values of individualism and materialism. If gender-equal behaviors were consistent with such African values, it would appeal to parents and young people.

Some values may conflict with V4C programming and messaging.

- **Gender-and age-based values of respect, obedience, patience, and adherence to traditional and religious authorities** were not well aligned with V4C and might work against gender-equal messages. In Kano and Kaduna, women were often expected to adhere to these values, defer to male authority, tolerate discrimination, and not speak out. Presenting a real challenge to the V4C core message of “speak out and speak up.”

Source: VOICES4CHANGE. Core Values Research: Report of a Qualitative Inquiry. Internal report. 2016

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. As a project designer seeking better adult-youth power balance, what activities could you plan during a project introduction phase to sensitize adults in partner organizations to have more power-equal attitudes and actions vis-a-vis young people? Is there a way to use commonly-held community values to address the power-over dynamic in ways that reassure adults while welcoming young people as decision-makers and activists?
2. V4C activities would emphasize the benefits of gender equality for young women and men. That leadership could be collaborative and participatory, and that young women and men should speak out and speak up. How might you use traditional values of community support and helping families in V4C's communication strategies to foster community reflection on gender-equal behaviors reinforcing traditional values? Likewise, how might communications strategies address traditional values that work against gender equality, such as good girls showing respect by deferring to male authority and showing patience by not speaking out?

STORY ENDING:WHAT HAPPENED?

Designers anticipated that some adult staff in partner organizations might reinforce the 'power over' dynamic that prioritizes adults as leaders and decision-makers and undermines young people's contributions, a substantial value underpinning youth-led social change. Early in the project years, V4C staff did intensive ongoing training of civil society CSO partners both in-person and online to raise awareness and deepen personal and professional reflection on gender and power issues, social norms, and values underpinning masculinities. Adult Mentors who coached young leaders undertook activities such as personal reflections to raise their awareness of the importance of learning from young people's experiences and letting go of their adult authority to share activism with the next generation.

Designers developed different campaigns that were underpinned by the values noted above to reach other peer influencers and young women and men. The campaign used the color Purple to visually reinforce the gender equality aim (stereotypical boy-blue and girl-pink colors become purple when equally mixed). For example, Purple Spaces provided a space for young women to talk about current issues, allowing discussion of how they could incorporate positive role models of female leaders and decision-makers. The Purple Academy on social media and the radio drama series 'Purple Tinz,' among other Purple strategies, reached across generations and women and men. In Purple Tinz's episodes, Characters modeled how leadership could move away from male domination and control towards a more collaborative and participatory model across sexes and generations.

VOICES FOR CHANGE

Voices for Change (V4C) was a 5-year UK Aid funded program that ended in 2017 and focused on challenging gender discrimination. V4C provides a unique example of a program applying social norms theory at scale and addressing the social and structural barriers to gender equality, particularly discriminatory and harmful attitudes, behaviors, and social norms. The three normative areas that V4C sought to change were women's voice and leadership, decision-making roles, and violence against women and girls. The program aimed to improve the enabling environment for women and girls by shifting attitudes and behaviors among 16-25 year men and women and targeting the broader community with mass communications and local interventions. The program operated in Kano, Kaduna, Lagos, and Enugu.

For further reading: *DFID Nigeria Voices For Change (V4C). Social Development Direct. 2022. Available at: <https://www.sddirect.org.uk/our-work/projects/dfid-nigeria-voices-for-change-v4c/>*

BELL BAJAO! IN INDIA

Designing a gender-transformative approach allowing communities to question domestic violence and also take preventive actions

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Understanding design considerations for norms-shifting interventions to reduce domestic violence without sidelining women or reinforcing female-victim responses

THE STORY

In many parts of the world, domestic and other forms of violence are accepted, unquestioned behaviors, and viewed normatively as a mechanism of discipline and control. Bell Bajao! (Ring the Bell! in English), implemented by Breakthrough-India from 2008 to 2011 and then expanded, sought to make domestic violence unacceptable, and aimed to include men as part of the solution. To disrupt the prevalent binary of men as perpetrators and women as victims, Bell Bajao! asked men to play a role in challenging violence, moving away from dominant frameworks of masculinity and machismo.

The formative assessment findings guided design decisions. The assessment used action research approaches to engage communities in exploring social norms and community behaviors around domestic violence, including why people were afraid to report cases to authorities. Staff learned that there was a surface-level understanding of what constituted domestic violence. Many thought it was limited to physical violence and mental abuse. The community's belief in how to react to and prevent domestic violence was equally restricted. Domestic violence is considered private, and even if family and friends know about it, they are unlikely to interfere. People, especially men, were wary of intervening. What if the woman refuses help? Men saw it as too risky; they could be harmed for helping. Interestingly the few times that people reported that someone had tried to step in to stop violence, the actions were taken by men.

When you work on violence against women, it's not about rescuing them but helping women increase their agency. How do projects have conversations on women's rights in contexts of heavily loaded conversations that can lead to confrontation and pushback? Breakthrough didn't go in with a fixed approach to designing Bell Bajao!; instead, their more flexible approach demonstrated values such as responsibility and responsiveness to where the community was at.

The design team discussed strategies to engage men and women to take action to prevent domestic violence. Breakthrough felt it was essential to complement community engagement activities with online activities to create conditions where peers and neighbors will speak up when seeing violence, essentially creating conditions for a new norm to take hold. Online efforts could reach more people with new normative possibilities. The assessment revealed a core normative issue that the team needed to grapple with: It is acceptable for men to inhabit specific public spaces and online social platforms but not for women. They were not sure if women would occupy such public spaces if they were invited. Essentially, the team struggled to find strategies that were easy to implement to create women's spaces without stigma and male reproach. They discussed how to engage men to take action without harming women in the process, not reinforcing power structures or putting women at higher risk of violence than before.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Based on your values, do you think women and men can and should participate equally in the Bell Bajao! project? Why or why not?
2. Men are often the perpetrators of domestic violence. Project designs need to help men become advocates for non-violence. What community and media strategies might give men roles to address domestic violence without reinforcing men as power-holders and women as powerless victims?
3. Every social change strategy involves risk. There is a risk, for example, that a project strategy could increase violence against women. Or could damage community trust in a project aiming to halt domestic violence. How would you determine what level of risk is acceptable to the project? How might your project anticipate pushback and ensure safety?

STORY ENDING: WHAT HAPPENED?

Bell Bajao!'s strategic design decisions successfully fostered community actions against domestic violence and aimed to ensure a 'do no harm' approach. Two are shared below; a final decision addresses monitoring implementation to check if those design decisions worked as planned.

- The act of ringing a physical bell became a hallmark of the project. Belling ringing created a new way of engaging, rather than telling people what was right and wrong. It gave people a new way to act, conveying new normative behaviors. The community could hear and see that domestic violence is unacceptable and not private.
- Bell Bajao! carefully also used video and other media campaigns and interpersonal activities to break the silence around private behaviors. The video campaign was conscious of not reducing women to roles of powerless victims with men as saviors. It intentionally avoided typical images of a perpetrator, for example, ensuring the male protagonist who rang the bell was not perceived as using stereotypical 'assertive male' behavior.
- Project monitoring included regular discussion check-ins with community members to learn how the community reacted to project activities and ensured the Bell Bajao! project would not inadvertently reinforce power structures or put women at higher risk of violence than before.

BREAKTHROUGH INDIA

Breakthrough is an Indian and U.S.-based international human rights organization that mainstreams discussions about violence against women and girls and its relationship to HIV/AIDS by harnessing the power of pop culture, media, and community mobilization to inspire people. Breakthrough's campaigns use popular multimedia message formats, including billboards, music videos, print ads, radio spots, Public Service Announcements (PSAs), and internet channels such as blogs and online video games.

For further reading

- *Virtual Knowledge Centre to End Violence against Women and Girls. Case Study: Breakthrough Campaign Bell Bajao! UN Women. Undated. Available at: https://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/bell_bajao_case_study_english.pdf*
- *Breakthrough's Bell Bajao! A Campaign to Bring Domestic Violence to a Halt. BreakthroughTV. 2011. Available at: http://www.breakthrough.tv/o/wp-content/files_mf/1330816837BellBajao_Insight.pdf*

REVELADOS IN COLUMBIA

Making partnership decisions to expand project coverage while staying true to your organizational values

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Explore how project values guide partnership choices at political, national, and local levels

THE STORY

Citurna Producciones and Universidad del Norte (the production team) have a long history of developing evidence and rights-based, youth-aligned film-making. Revelados was no exception: it sought to improve Colombian youth sexual and reproductive health through an entertainment-education (edutainment) platform. The approach contributed to critical reflection and the transformation of individual, family, sociocultural and political practices to effectively exercise sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of adolescents and young people. Finding the right organizational partners to implement Revelados would be crucial to the project's success. The production team sought like-minded partners to integrate the project and ensure that Revelados would reach as many young people as possible through partner program platforms. They had three options, described below.

The production team was already connected to many activist and rights-oriented civil society organizations and institutions with similar values. They were confident that social mobilization could produce significant autonomous changes in sexual and reproductive rights matters. However, they had to consider how different partners could affect the project's focus when deciding on partnerships. Some NGOs and national and international institutions with broad reach and relationships in the country believed that adolescents should not have sexual relations and considered abstinence as key to preventing teenage pregnancy and promoting their sexual and reproductive health. Some institutions thought abortions immoral even when the law allowed abortion

under most conditions. Some organizations approached SRHR programs from a top-down perspective, using communication campaigns that prescribed specific behaviors for young people without focusing on social change based on autonomous decisions. These positions were deeply rooted in these organizations and represented a challenge to build alliances since some positions were incompatible with Revelados.

The production team asked themselves, would it be possible to work through national government programs to increase reach and improve sustainability? The Revelados team considered whether to partner with national structures such as the Presidential Cabinet, whose country-wide reach and resources could lead to a sustainable program benefiting many young people. Members of the Revelados team expressed hesitancy; many NGOs and activists were unhappy with the current government's priorities and actions towards civil society, including their restrictions on human rights. Yet, the national government also included the First Lady of Colombia, a progressive and robust advocate for SRHR programming, working closely with UNFPA and others to push for youth rights and leadership, with funding designated for First Lady priorities. The Revelados team had to consider whether their link with the Presidential Cabinet would override their relationship with the First Lady and her team of rights-focused, technical experts. Connecting the edutainment project to the national government might not be acceptable among youth, NGO, and activist partners, yet working with the First Lady could lead to policy change.

Revelados also considered the Ministry of Health (MoH), as the MoH was keen on improving adolescent sexual and reproductive health- using information, education, and communication (IEC) approaches. MoH programming, though, used more static, knowledge-based approaches and fear-based messaging, asking young people to ‘just say no.’ These programs ignored social and structural barriers to reproductive health, which the Revelados team considered foundational to their work, with programming focused on dialogue and social change. The Revelados project did not align well with the Ministry

program. Yet, using wide-reaching Ministry platforms with links to services might lead to significant coverage and impact.

To sum up, partnerships with some organizations, the national government, and ministries presented opportunities and challenges. How could Revelados’s values shown in their right-based and youth-prioritized approaches be balanced with increasing project reach and sustainability?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In the civil society partnership scenario, how should the Revelados team make partnership decisions when some partnerships compromise content related to abortion or other behaviors against their values? Should they work only with like-minded groups? Would changing content to focus on abstinence-only and removing content on abortion be a worthwhile trade-off?
2. Given that Revelados organizational values were not well aligned with the national government policies, what would you consider deciding whether to partner with the First Lady, who is independent of yet part of the national government? What are the potential risks to such a partnership? How would you navigate decisions and potential pushback from civil society and NGOs?
3. The Revelados team considered it essential to partner with government health institutions in the MoH scenario, and their values were more aligned. However, they were uncomfortable with the MOH’s individual-only focus on behavior change strategies. To what extent should Revelados negotiate with the MOH to change MOH program strategies? Or should Revelados change its approach to align with MOH policy?

STORY ENDING:WHAT HAPPENED?

Revelados understood early on that human rights were fundamental to their project and would have implications about who they partnered with and what content could engage youth while being culturally acceptable. The project approached each of these three critical questions in the following ways:

- Revelados decided to associate with the First Lady of Colombia, clarifying that this did not imply they shared or associated with the policies of the National Cabinet. Some local organizations and activists were upset by the decision, arguing that it uplifted the national government’s power, helping them to white-

wash their actions. Revelados stood firm in the face of pushback, countering that the government is not one person or institution. They pointed to the First Lady’s progressive advocacy and commitment to youth and believed that her presence in the project could be transformative for youth in the country.

- The MoH was a vital partner, given its scope, resources, and sustainability potential. However, their focus on IEC programming at the expense of other approaches would have limited the educational entertainment project to be effective. When navigating the decision, the project team understood that

the Colombian government could consider changes in its IEC approach based on the evidence-based decision-making approach. They decided to partner with the MoH and debate the evidence on different approaches to health communication in the Technical Committee. The MoH could change its direction to SRHR towards an approach based on Social and Behavior Change Communication.

- On the other hand, understanding that the Health System in Colombia is decentralized, the production team also understood that it was possible to associate with the municipal and district health offices. They focused on municipalities, selecting those where young people most needed the educational entertainment project (as reflected in local adolescent pregnancy rates) and progressive leadership in local government and health institutions. This preserved the potential sustainability and scope of the project. The team advocated for participatory, rights-based programmatic approaches at the national Ministry level.

- The Revelados team partnered with organizations that believed in or practiced programming that focused on youth rights. This allowed them to leverage existing relationships and trust, accounting for local culture and needs, and engage youth across the country. Some international and national organizations could not partner with the group, despite their interest, due to the rights focus. For example, Revelados produced content that showed young people around the country navigating different paths and opportunities, making decisions on what to do as their circumstances changed. Even when youth decisions resulted in teen pregnancy or when youth were assaulted, the Revelados platform did not shy from presenting the situation. Instead, they showed how young people dealt with the problem, demonstrated resilience, and moved towards the next phase of their life. The team insisted that people who could serve as exemplary role models were not needed in their project approach. They were not promoting a perfect model but instead facilitating a process of personal growth.

REVALADOS

Revelados is a multimedia, TV, and social mobilization edutainment for social change platform for adolescents and youth. Revelados was developed jointly by Citurna, Fundación Imaginario, UNFPA, Presidency of the Republic, Ministry of Health, Universidad de Los Andes, and The Communication Initiative. The first of its kind in Colombia, it aims to facilitate dialogue and critical reflection about sexuality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and contribute to transforming individual and family behaviors and sociocultural norms and practices.

For further reading

- Trujillo, A. *Revelados, Desde Todas las Posiciones* (“Revealed, From All Positions”). *The Communication Initiative Network*. 2013. Available at: <https://www.comminit.com/global/content/paquete-educativo-revelados-desde-todas-las-posiciones>
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SASA! IN UGANDA

The journey to adapt project strategies to fit local realities for gender transformation between couples

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Explore project responsibility and responses when theory and good practice has unintended negative consequences

THE STORY

Addressing a core driver of intimate partner violence – unequal power between men and women in a personal relationship – is essential for any effective violence prevention project. However, far less is known about what works to change longstanding power imbalances within intimate relationships. When *SASA!* started implementation in 2008 in Kampala, Uganda, much of the existing good practice around gender transformative approaches included challenging traditional expectations around women and men’s roles and responsibilities in the home as a pathway to and fundamental part of violence prevention programming.

After many months of implementation, the *SASA!* team learned, though, that this strategy of promoting non-traditional gender roles, such as household work and caregiving by men, increased tensions among couples and detracted from the core intention of *SASA!*—to balance power. Community activists and staff from Raising Voices and the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP) observed heated discussions and resistance among women and men. Women were reluctant to share household roles in light of the normative context that deeply connected women’s value to their domestic responsibilities. Men expressed concern that community members would mock them and that they may also lose

the respect of their partners. During *SASA!* activities, conversations often got stuck on these contentious topics, limiting the unfolding of more profound reflections intended by the methodology—to unpack how more balanced power within relationships can benefit everyone.

The focus on household gender roles created considerable conflict and antagonism at home. Couples argued over what would constitute a fair allocation of domestic responsibilities, and men often viewed their participation as “helping” their wives. Often this created a transactional dynamic, where couples kept track of what they did more like a scorecard or competition, rather than supporting their partner or the family. For example, if the men engaged in cooking, would women find more paid work to reciprocate; or if a woman cleaned the dishes, would the man wash the clothes? It was essentially dividing couples more than it was bringing them together. Rather than seeing their relationship as a partnership and family as a joint project, partners were suspicious and lacked collaboration. Upon reflecting on these trends, the team realized the critical tenets of the *SASA!* project—fundamentally shifting power between women and men and improving relationship dynamics—was being undermined.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. The *SASA!* team realized the unintended consequences of emphasizing household roles. Do you think they should have continued prioritizing the gender imbalance in household roles as an entry point to violence prevention? Why or why not?
2. What is the project's responsibility to community women experiencing or expressing concern about how shifts in gender roles may negatively impact the sphere where they commonly experience the most power (the home) and pose risks to their marriage? How could the project respond to women's concerns while retaining feminist values and a clear focus on violence prevention?
3. Social change and pushback are interlinked processes. For example, community activists may be verbally or physically threatened as they facilitate conversation to foster change in power relationships. How should the organization protect its staff and community activists from strident social pushback? How do projects balance the need for catalyzing social change with staff safety? Who should be involved in these discussions and decisions?

STORY ENDING:WHAT HAPPENED?

The *SASA!* team at Raising Voices and CEDOVIP listened to and carefully considered the concerns raised by community activists and community members. In light of tensions emerging, staff paused to re-strategize how best to challenge power imbalances within relationships while mitigating some of the emerging difficulties. During a multi-day workshop, the team deeply explored what people need and want in their intimate relationships, informed by what was unfolding in the community. They identified four relationship values and centered these as the cornerstone for the revised approach: respect, care, shared decision making, and safety. Over several months, staff worked with community activists to unpack this programmatic shift and revised *SASA!* content as needed. For example, the team crafted several new reflection questions to focus community conversations toward values-oriented questions. For example, a discussion question accompanying an illustration of a man doing laundry was changed from “How are you sharing household roles with your partner?” to “How can you show your partner you respect her?” The shift away from household roles took time to realize, as staff and community activists experimented with content that could spark discussion, ideas, and behavioral changes to realize relationship aspirations. With time, community members responded positively. While some resistance

continued, there was significantly less conflict between couples and *SASA!* activities were less contentious—making them more accessible for community activists to facilitate and more hopeful for community members. Rather than debating and itemizing each partners' contribution to care and domestic work, discussions could focus on how best to promote and achieve positive relationship values, which resonated and aligned with cultural beliefs in Uganda. Community activists applied this shift from household gender roles to relationship values in their relationships. Their first-hand experience helped them support community members in these conversations as the community also transitioned to a new way of talking about power dynamics within the relationship. And importantly, as *SASA!* activities oriented around relationship values, the project opened up reflections around care and mutual respect between couples, leading to a critical understanding of how any act of violence against women directly contradicts these values. This became part of the motivation for community members to change—a genuine desire to experience respect, care, shared decision-making, and safety within their relationships. These shifts also enabled women and men to see their relationship as a collaboration and a family as a joint project requiring connection and cooperation between partners.

SASA!

SASA! is a community mobilization methodology to prevent violence, developed by Raising Voices and first implemented by CEDOVIP in Uganda. The central aim of SASA! is to transform imbalances of power by sparking community-wide critical discussion and positive action. Trained Community Activists engage men and women from different socio-economic strata in interactive and reflexive activities, moving through a structured change process. The four essentials of the SASA! methodology includes benefits-based activism; gender power analysis; four phases of change (i.e., pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation for action, action, and maintenance); and holistic community engagement. SASA! Together is a guide demonstrating the methodology.

For further reading

1. Abramsky T, Devries K, Kiss L, et al. *Findings from the SASA! Study: a cluster randomized controlled trial to assess the impact of a community mobilization intervention to prevent violence against women and reduce HIV risk in Kampala, Uganda. BMC Medicine 2014; 12(122).*
2. Kyegombe N, Starmann E, Devries KM, et al. 'SASA! is the medicine that treats violence'. *Qualitative findings on how community mobilisation intervention to prevent violence against women created change in Kampala, Uganda. Global Health Action 2014; 7(1).*