

“We have come out of our boxes, so we are free”

Voices of MAISHA participants

STORIES
OF
CHANGE

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 “We didn’t know that we were in small boxes... we were taught and then understood, and we have come out of our boxes... So we are free” (MAISHA participant)

Within the MAISHA training programme for women in Tanzania, ‘the box’ is used as a metaphor to describe oppressive gender norms that restrict women in their daily lives and work, and condone partner violence. The women who participated in the training learned how to challenge these norms and reduce violence in their relationships.

The scale of violence against women

Almost one in three women worldwide will experience physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime. In Tanzania, this figure is even higher, with almost two in five women experiencing partner violence.

Intimate partner violence is a major problem for public health and development, with far reaching consequences for women’s physical and emotional health and social well-being: women who experience violence or abuse show more physical symptoms of poor health and are more likely to suffer from mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety. Convincing evidence shows that women experiencing violence are also at higher risk of acquiring HIV.

In Tanzania, violence against women is closely linked to harmful gender norms that disguise violent or controlling behaviour by men as “inevitable”, and oppress women by restricting their freedoms over their bodies and their ownership and control of resources.

 “We farm together, we reaped, but then he tells you that, according to our culture, women can’t inherit. Women don’t have the right to own anything” (MAISHA participant)

ABOUT MAISHA

The MAISHA intervention in Mwanza, Tanzania, consisted of a series of gender training sessions for women to increase their awareness of gender issues, promote healthy relationships and reduce partner violence.



The intervention was carried out by the Mwanza Intervention Trials Unit (MITU) in collaboration with LSHTM. The women were selected from amongst those involved in groups organised with BRAC, an established microfinance NGO. These groups take out and repay collective loans to pay school fees and invest in small businesses to benefit their families. Some microfinance groups received the training whilst others did not, enabling researchers from MITU and LSHTM to evaluate the impacts of the intervention through a randomised controlled trial.

Of the women participating in the MAISHA study, more than 60% had experienced physical or sexual violence by their partners, with many reporting severe forms of abuse including being hit, kicked, choked or threatened with a weapon. They also reported suffering from high levels of economic and emotional abuse and very high levels of controlling behaviour.

Impact

Greater confidence in challenging male authority

One goal of the training programme was to develop women's ability to stand up to their partners and to resolve tension or disagreements in non-violent ways. Prior to the training, many women were afraid to question their partners and lacked belief in their own judgements. After the training, they gained the confidence to challenge gender norms of male authority.

 "We have been able to express ourselves, to give our opinions with confidence. Unlike before, when we were inside the boxes, you feared to explain [things] to your partner. In fact, MITU has opened our minds." (MAISHA participant)

For another participant, her newfound confidence extended beyond her relationship to her role in the microfinance group, of which she became a more active member: taking place.

 "A BRAC Chairperson told me 'Mariam, get up and go to see the visitors.' Had it been before we had this training, I would have said 'aah, let someone else go'. But, because my mind has been opened, I got up and I went to see them." (MAISHA participant)

Building healthy relationships

With women's increasing confidence, the training also focused on empowering women to develop healthy relationships by managing anger, improving communication and setting boundaries – especially in relation to partner violence.

 "When I came from [the training] I asked my husband 'It isn't good that you abuse me in front of the children, that itself is violence. Because when you abuse me in front of the children, they say that 'oh, so mama is making mistakes, and father is abusing her.' Therefore, I changed that." (MAISHA participant)

More information:

<http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/projects/maisha-microfinance-and-gender-training-reduce-violence-against-women>

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Becoming agents of change

As they challenged oppressive gender norms and used new skills and techniques to build healthy relationships, women in the MAISHA intervention were less likely to experience partner violence. Over a two-year period, the intervention reduced the risk of physical and/or sexual violence by a quarter among women who participated in the gender training intervention compared with women who did not, and the effect was strongest for physical violence, which was reduced by one third.

These positive benefits for the MAISHA participants have begun to spread to their families and communities. Since the training programme took place, some former participants have started to put their learning into practice by supporting other women in challenging male behaviour and violence.

 "This is the same as a football. Now it has been thrown to me. After the training I am required to kick it to someone else so that we may be able to help the community. This means I have the responsibility of educating the community." (MAISHA participant)

Resources

- Video: MAISHA -- Life <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/maisha-life>
- Journal publication Prevalence of intimate partner violence and abuse and associated factors among women enrolled into a cluster randomised trial in northwestern Tanzania <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/prevalence-intimate-partner-violence-and-abuse-and-associated-factors-among-women-enrolled>
- A cluster randomized controlled trial to assess the impact on intimate partner violence of a 10-session participatory gender training curriculum delivered to women taking part in a group-based microfinance loan scheme in Tanzania <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/cluster-randomized-controlled-trial-assess-impact-intimate-partner-violence-10-session>

STRIVE research consortium

STRIVE is a research consortium led by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, working with six key research partners in Tanzania, South Africa, India and the USA. STRIVE provides new insights and evidence into how different structural factors, including gender inequality and violence, poor livelihood options, stigma, and heavy alcohol use, work to influence HIV vulnerability and undermine the effectiveness of the HIV response.

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