



# Culture and Violence against Women: What is the Connection?

(3 hours, including break)



Local Activism Series  
Staff Skill Building Library  
Raising Voices



This module is part of a *Staff Skill Building Library* developed by Raising Voices. The *Library* consists of competency based training modules designed to strengthen skills of staff implementing or supporting community-based violence against women (VAW) prevention programs. The *Library* is designed for organizations using the *SASA! Activist Kit for Preventing Violence against Women and HIV* but can be used by anyone working to mobilize their community to prevent VAW. If you are not using *SASA!* simply replace the word *SASA!* wherever you see it in the text with the name of your methodology.

This module is part of the Violence against Women Basics series in the *Staff Skill Building Library*.

All materials in the *Library* can be downloaded at [www.raisingvoices.org/staffskills.php](http://www.raisingvoices.org/staffskills.php) or requested at [info@raisingvoices.org](mailto:info@raisingvoices.org). The *SASA! Activist Kit* can be downloaded at [www.raisingvoices.org](http://www.raisingvoices.org)



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# Culture and Violence against Women: What is the Connection?

(3 hours, including break)

*Note: This session is recommended after SASA! The New Planet and SASA! Root Cause modules, for groups that are having trouble distinguishing why culture is not the root cause of violence against women (VAW) and for groups who are speaking negatively about culture in the community. It is very important that the facilitator of this session not talk negatively about culture as a whole during the session. It is important for the facilitator to model the change the session covers, discussing both positive aspects of community norms as well as ones that might need to be changed to promote nonviolence.*



## Objective

- ☉ Explore practical and positive ways to talk about local tradition, culture and norms in discussions of women's rights and violence against women.

## Competencies

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Explain why culture is NOT the root cause of violence against women.
- Describe the role of local community norms in promoting and protecting women's rights and nonviolence.
- Demonstrate how to facilitate conversations when local community norms do not support women's rights and nonviolence.

## Preparations

- 2 small pieces of paper per participant, with tape.
- Photocopy 1 handout per participant: Norms Allowing Violence against Women and Norms Promoting Nonviolence.
- Pre-write table in Handout: Norms Allowing Violence against Women and Norms Promoting Nonviolence, leaving right side blank for group to insert (for use in Community Norms and Violence against Women No. 3).
- Pre-written group work instructions on flip chart (Community Norms and Violence against Women No. 7).
- Photocopy 1 copy of Group Work Scenarios and cut apart scenarios.



# Steps

## What is culture?

1. Explain: *Many people, even those who work with issues of violence against women (VAW) name “culture” as the root cause of the problem. This is a very important issue to understand and be able to explain, so in this session we will explore the concept of “culture” and discuss how it relates to violence against women (VAW).*

2. Ask: What is culture?

3. Write responses on flip chart, e.g.

- Language
- Food
- Music, dance, and artistic expression
- Beliefs around religion, marriage, children, birth, and death
- How people behave in a community
- Etc



4. Summarize:

- *Culture is very broad and includes a whole range of beliefs and behaviors. It changes over time.*
- *Many of these are good examples of culture, and there are a lot of definitions of “culture”. By culture in this training we mean: “a set of shared attitudes, values and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group.” It includes things like we mentioned in our list.*
- *We may belong to many cultures—our country, our ethnic group, our clan, our family, our organization—each of these groups have a slightly different culture or sub-culture. There are even different sub-cultures that make up different age groups of people.*
- *Culture is a very large concept that includes all aspects of life. Our culture is made up of a whole range of community norms. Norms are ideas, attitudes, behaviors, practices, etc that are considered ‘normal’ in that community.*
- *Often there is confusion in how the terms culture and community norms are used. This module will explore this more.*

5. Distribute 2 small pieces of paper to participants.



6. Invite participants to reflect and write:

Piece of paper 1:
Something they love about a culture they belong to.

Piece of paper 2:
Something they notice has changed about community norms since their grandparents' day and whether they think that change is positive or not. E.g. Children now go to school—positive (or both positive and negative)/ Loss of respect for elders—negative, etc.

7. Invite participants to post their ideas in 2 distinct places on the wall, one area for each slip of paper, at the front of the room.
8. Invite all participants to come forward to read each other's responses about what they love about a culture they belong to.
9. Briefly summarize the things you see participants like and are proud of about the cultures they belong to. If there are things that seem harmful to women in the things participants have listed, simply say that we can look at all of these things through the lens of what promotes violence and what protects against violence in the next part of the session.
10. Explain: *In general, many of us are very proud of our cultures and identify with them. There are many positive norms that define us in our cultures. It is really important that we remember this when we talk about culture in the community—remember it is a collection of values that people feel very loyal to, especially when any criticisms are coming from people they consider to be community outsiders!*
11. Invite group to read the things they noticed have changed about community norms since their grandparents' day.
12. Briefly discuss and summarize what you see.
13. Explain: *There are many things that have changed, even since our grandparents were young, about our community norms. It is not that our culture has changed as a whole, but certain norms within our cultures may have changed a lot. Some of these are seen as positive changes, while others are seen as negative changes.*
14. Ask participants to take their seats.



## Community Norms and Violence against Women

1. Ask: *Does culture promote VAW, or does culture typically protect people from it?*
2. Solicit responses very briefly, then explain:
  - *That is a trick question! Culture is too big and varied to say that it does one or the other—it does both! A better question might be: Do the community norms within our culture promote VAW or do they typically protect people from it?*
  - *This is one of the main ideas of this session—to get us to shift focus from talking about culture as a whole, to talking about what we really mean—what about the norms in our communities promote VAW, and what norms protect us against VAW.*
  - *To consider this question further, we will break up into groups.*
3. Split participants into 5 groups by asking participants to count off, 1-5. Post pre-written table Norms Allowing Violence against Women and Norms Promoting Nonviolence, with right-hand side blank, as in Handout.
4. Distribute Handout: Norms Allowing Violence against Women and Norms Promoting Nonviolence.
5. Assign each group 2 of the items in the left-hand column (e.g. Group 1 takes 1. Rigid gender roles and 2. Physical punishment of women and children is culturally accepted, etc).
6. Explain: *Your group will spend only 10 minutes, and think about the following questions (post pre-written flip chart with questions):*
  - *If this norm enables VAW, what opposite norm would help to protect against VAW? (It can help to just understand the concept and think about its opposite).*
  - *What protective and enabling norms are common in the communities where you work?*
7. After 10 minutes, call “stop!”



8. Invite each group to report back. Use the suggestions below to guide the discussion.
9. Write their responses into blank side of flip chart. (Note: It is NOT necessary to go through all of the below answers if the groups have already covered the content—simply go over ones they did not seem to understand):

### Norms Allowing Violence against Women and Norms Promoting Nonviolence

Norms Allowing VAW <sup>1</sup>	Norms Promoting Nonviolence
1. Rigid gender roles (What is considered “ok” for a man to do is different from what a woman should do—and people ridicule or judge if a woman or man steps out of their normal roles).	Flexible gender roles (What it is considered “ok” for a woman or a man to do is flexible—men or women can take on tasks or roles without negative community response).
2. Physical punishment of women and children is accepted by the community.	Violence toward women or children is not accepted
3. Common attitudes about what it means to be a man include dominance, aggression and control over women.	Common attitudes about what it means to be a ‘real man’ include encouraging men and boys to communicate, not dominate.
4. Acceptance of violence as a means of settling conflicts.	Encouragement of conflict resolution, mediation and other forms of communication to settle disputes. Lack of tolerance for violence.
5. Male control of wealth and decision-making within the family.	Women and men share wealth and decision making, equally.
6. Women are economically dependent and have limited access to education, employment.	Women have equal access to resources and education.
7. Women are isolated and lack community and social supports.	Women’s solidarity and community supports. (e.g. existence of women’s groups and social networks for women or for women and men together).
8. Children and women living/working in unsafe situations due to poverty.	Women’s and children’s living and working conditions meet their human rights.
9. Lack of law enforcement on crimes of violence against women and children	Access to formal and traditional justice for survivors of violence against women and children.
10. Lack of services, social activism and political advocacy on gender violence.	Accessible, comprehensive services for survivors of violence against women. Social activism and advocacy at every level toward gender justice and a community free from violence against women and children.

<sup>1</sup>Heise et al 1999 Population Reports, Ending VAW, cited in Bradley, C. (2006). *Strengthening a gendered approach to HIV/AIDS in PNG: Some issues for donors and development partners*. Port Moresby: National HIV/AIDS Support Project.



10. Ask: *What are some norms that protect women from violence, that are true for our local communities?*

*(Note: In some training groups, you may have to help people to think through this—some groups are very conditioned to see only the negative norms in local cultures. It is very important that they learn to also see strengths which they can build on, e.g. respect, community connectedness, existence of women’s associations, encouragement of conflict resolution, SASA! activism against VAW, etc.)*

11. Ask: *What are some other norms within local communities which might promote violence to continue (e.g. rigid gender roles, ideas of masculinity being linked to dominance and violence, etc).*



12. Explain:

- *We see that there are norms within every community around the world which help to protect people from violence—and these might vary community to community.*
- *We can use the information about norms that protect people from violence and norms that enable violence to continue to find ways to use this to create more nonviolence.*
- *This also means that we talk about culture in a different way in communities—culture is not the enemy, our culture is many things and within it are many norms that offer solutions to community problems.*
- *When we talk about “culture” it often feels very big and out of our control. It is hard to say who started culture, or to feel that we can be agents of change within it. However, it is easier to see that we each have the power to shift “community norms” and create them together, as members of our communities.*

13. Ask: *Remembering how much pride many people have about the good things within our own cultures, what might happen if we came into a community saying that their culture was a problem and needed to be changed?*

14. Solicit responses, e.g.

- Community members would get defensive.
- Community members might think we were coming with Western ideas that would harm their traditions.
- Community members might see us as outsiders, and as threats to their way of life.
- We would be ignoring all the good things within our communities which are helpful in stopping violence.

*Note: A break is suggested at this point in the training session*

### Approaching the Community

1. Explain: *In this last activity, we will practice how we might approach communities to talk about problems that have to do with community norms that enable violence. There are a few tips we can share, from the experience of activists across Africa:*

- *Talk about community norms rather than culture—it is more accurate, and helps people remember there are things within their community that they can change. Discussing community norms also provokes less defensiveness than “culture” as a whole—people see it as something they have influence over.*



- *In the community, you may choose not to initially raise issues that community members are used to hearing about linked to culture, like FGM, bride price, polygamy, forced or early marriage, honor killing, etc. You can lead up to the discussion and wait until the community members themselves bring it up. When ready, you can have a debate if that norm is harmful or not harmful.*
  - *Laws alone cannot end entrenched practices, and must be complemented by programs designed to mobilize communities about the practice, in a long-term way that involves changing the community consensus about that practice.<sup>1</sup> SASA! is set up to work on these community norms, over time.*
2. Explain: *Now we are going to consider these tips and split into 3 groups and practice different aspects of this conversation. You will have 10 minutes to develop a 5 minute role play based on the scenario you will be given.*
  3. Ask participants to count off 1-3, to form 3 groups.
  4. Distribute 1 of Group Work Scenarios, to each group, and ensure instructions are understood.
  5. After 10 minutes, call “stop!”
  6. Ask each group to present their role play, and the rest of the groups to act as the “community” and respond to the situation as they think the community would.
  7. After each role play, thank the group for their hard work and ask the rest of the group to provide feedback, assuring the demonstrations are accurate and promote positive feelings about local culture, and the idea that community norms can and do change to fit with the needs of the group.
  8. Summarize:
    - *In this session we have seen that culture is NOT the cause of VAW, but is an ever-changing context of our lives that includes everything from the way we dress to the way we eat and talk—and is something most of us want to defend, because it is so closely linked to our identities. This is normal, natural and good!*
    - *We have seen that community norms are the focus of our conversations in SASA! Community norms can change, and can promote nonviolence just as they can perpetuate violence. In fact, communities continue to thrive to the extent that they are able to change to respond to the needs of the members of that community.*

**Validation Option: Activity in Training**

This activity allows for group validation of the competency in the training:

- Demonstrate how to facilitate conversations when local community norms do not support women’s rights and nonviolence.

During the group role plays, do participants promote positive feelings about local culture? Do role plays present the idea that community norms can and do change to fit the needs of the group? Do community role plays help group members question local norms? If so, then they as a group have demonstrated the competency. If not, then further training is recommended.

<sup>1</sup>Muteshi J, Sass J. (2005). *Female Genital Mutilation in Africa: An Analysis of Current Abandonment Approaches*. Nairobi: PATH.





# Validation Options

Validation is another way to say “assessment” or “pre/post-test”. It is used to determine whether the participants in a training learned what the facilitator intended for them to learn. Instructions for how to use each validation method can be found in *Training Validation Methods: A how-to guide for assessing participant learning* downloadable at [www.raisingvoices.org/staffskills.php](http://www.raisingvoices.org/staffskills.php)

Select validation methods for each competency using the table below:

1. Choose whether the competency (specific skill) needs to be validated at a group or individual level.
2. Looking at the validation methods listed in that category (group or individual), select only **one** of the validation methods marked with and ‘X’ for each competency.
3. Plan a time in the training agenda to use the validation method you’ve chosen to test each competency.

Competency (Specific skill)	Suggested Validation Methods									
	Group Validation <i>Use if it is sufficient for the group, as a whole, to demonstrate the competency</i>					Individual Validation <i>Use if essential for each participant to demonstrate the competency her/himself</i>				
	Activity in Training*	Game Show	Card Game	Answers Bingo	Pick and Play	Activity in Training*	Exit Interview/ Role Play	Game Show (All Play)	Written Quiz	
Explain why culture is NOT the root cause of VAW**		X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Describe the role of local community norms in promoting and protecting women’s rights and nonviolence**		X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Demonstrate how to facilitate conversations when local community norms do not support women’s rights and nonviolence**	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		

\*Activity in Training includes many possibilities, depending on the module, including brainstorming, group practices, debates, agree/disagree/not sure exercise, and others. The *Teach Back* series can also be considered as an Activity in Training.

\*\*See Validation Questions for this competency, to be used in Game Show, Card Game, Answers Bingo or Pick and Play methods, on next page.



# Validation Questions

Why is culture NOT the root cause of VAW?

What is one local community norm common in your community that promotes and protects women's rights and nonviolence?

(Double points!!)  
Demonstrate how and describe when you would start a conversation about a locally accepted community norm that does not support women's rights or nonviolence.

Facilitator's Note: Find out what the participants really learned! These cards can be cut out and used with Game Show, Card Game, Answers Bingo or Pick and Play validation methods.

Full descriptions of how to use each of these validation methods are available in the *Staff Skill Building Library*. Download at: [www.raisingvoices.org/staffskills.php](http://www.raisingvoices.org/staffskills.php) and go to *Training Validation Methods: A how-to guide for assessing participant learning*.





## Handout: Norms Allowing Violence against Women and Norms Promoting Nonviolence

Instructions: Fill in the things that would promote nonviolence.

### Norms Allowing Violence against Women and Norms Promoting Nonviolence

Norms Allowing VAW <sup>1</sup>	Norms Promoting Nonviolence
1. Rigid gender roles (What is considered “ok” for a man to do is different from what a woman should do—and people ridicule or judge if a woman or man steps out of their normal roles).	
2. Physical punishment of women and children is culturally accepted.	
3. Common attitudes about what it means to be a man include dominance, aggression and control over women.	
4. Acceptance of violence as a means of settling conflicts.	
5. Male control of wealth and decision-making within the family.	
6. Women are economically dependent and have limited access to education, employment.	
7. Women are isolated and lack community and social supports.	
8. Children and women living/working in unsafe situations due to poverty.	
9. Lack of law enforcement on crimes of violence against women and children.	
10. Lack of services, social activism and political advocacy on gender violence.	

<sup>1</sup>Heise et al 1999 Population Reports, Ending VAW, cited in Bradley, C. (2006). *Strengthening a gendered approach to HIV/AIDS in PNG: Some issues for donors and development partners*. Port Moresby: National HIV/AIDS Support Project.





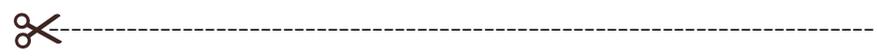
# Group Work Scenarios

**Group 1 Scenario:** During a community conversation, a community members says: “These problems are happening because our local traditions are bad. Our culture is causing violence against women to continue.”

What do you do? What do you say?

**Instructions:** Do a brief role play of what exactly you would say or do in that moment. All group members can participate, either as facilitators or “community members”.

Be sure clarify that it is power, not culture, that is the root cause of VAW—and you want to explain why culture is NOT the root cause of VAW.

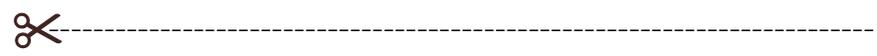


**Group 2 Scenario:** A very well-respected community elder becoming outspoken, saying: “NGOs talking about women’s rights are bringing Western ideas that have no place in our community!”

What do you do? What do you say?

**Instructions:** Do a brief role play of what exactly you would say or do in that moment. All group members can participate, either as facilitators or “community members”.

Be sure to help the elder and others see that the ideas *SASA!* brings are very much connected to community ideals of respect, and encourage people to take on the challenge of making nonviolent homes a valued community norm.



**Group 3 Scenario:** You are part of an NGO VAW working group. Some other members of the group say: “culture is the root cause of violence against women!”

What do you do? What do you say?

**Instructions:** Do a brief role play of what exactly you would say or do in that moment. All group members can participate, either as facilitators or “community members”.

Be sure clarify that it is power, not culture, that is the root cause of VAW—and you want to explain why culture is NOT the root cause of VAW.

