

No.3

Learning from
Practice Series
**Research
Perspectives**

Walking *In Her Shoes* inspires a pathway of change in sub-Saharan Africa

Overview

In Her Shoes is an interactive group activity designed to give women and men the opportunity to walk “in the shoes” of women and girls experiencing various forms of violence. It is often an emotional and personal exercise that goes beyond traditional awareness raising to provide a direct experience of the realities that women and girls regularly face—in particular, the stigma and discrimination they commonly encounter when seeking support.

An innovative toolkit from the start, *In Her Shoes* was first developed by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence in 2000, and then later adapted in 2005 for Latin America by Alianza InterCambios/PATH. Inspired by the toolkit’s success, the GBV Prevention Network—a regional network of over 800 members in the Horn, East and Southern Africa coordinated by Raising Voices—adapted *In Her Shoes* for the sub-Saharan African context. The adaptation process involved 28 Network members from 21 countries.

Since the adaptation’s release, *In Her Shoes* has been used in over 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and translated into two languages (Kiswahili and Setswana), with plans for an Amharic translation. In addition, it has led to further adaptations and creative programmatic initiatives in the region (Box 1). In light of this rapid uptake, it seemed essential to more systematically understand how *In Her Shoes* was being used and to what extent it was strengthening the prevention and response to violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Thus, in 2014, Raising Voices distributed an online questionnaire to *In Her Shoes* facilitators to capture insights about implementation (e.g., duration of sessions, strengths and challenges emerging during facilitation, types of participants, etc.). The questionnaire gathered encouraging responses from 22 facilitators representing eight countries, suggesting that the adaptation is engaging and relevant, and influences participants’ understanding of violence against women and girls. These results inspired Raising Voices to conduct a subsequent qualitative study in 2015 to more explicitly explore the potential impact of *In Her Shoes*. This paper summarizes the context, methodology and findings of this qualitative study with the aim of supporting further advancements in the prevention of and responses to VAWG.

Box 1 Creative uses and adaptations of *In Her Shoes* in sub-Saharan Africa

Adaptation: The Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) and Sisonke in collaboration with the Story Telling Group in South Africa used *In Her Shoes* as inspiration to develop *In Her Heels*, a toolkit focusing on the violence experienced by sex workers.

Education: A national feminist organization in Uganda instituted *In Her Shoes* as a foundational capacity building tool across all their programming to sensitize key service providers and duty bearers on VAWG and the types and the challenges survivors face. In University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, *In Her Shoes* has been formalized as part of a course on Gender Based Violence and Reproductive Health.

Inspiration: *In Her Shoes* stories inspired a TV drama series in Botswana, linked to a social media platform where viewers can participate in interactive discussions and seek help if they are experiencing violence themselves.

Program Context

An *In Her Shoes* session typically lasts three hours, during which time the group moves through a series of ten fictional yet realistic stories, each portraying a woman or girl experiencing a different form of violence including: intimate partner violence, sexual violence (including sexual violence in conflict), violence against vulnerable groups (e.g., sexual minorities, women living with disabilities, sex workers, women living with HIV and AIDs, etc.), economic violence, early marriage, and female genital mutilation.

As each story unfolds, participants are presented with a series of decisions to make, as if they were the woman or girl protagonist in the story (Box 2). The stories are followed by group discussions, in which facilitators help participants critically analyze the experience, including the types of violence highlighted, the paucity of choices and positive support encountered, and how these realities negatively impact the women and girls, as well as the people around them. At the end of this discussion, facilitators guide participants through an exercise for finding emotional closure using techniques such as a guided imagery about safe and happy relationships. Finally each participant explores specific actions she or he can take—personally and professionally—to better support women and girls experiencing violence and to help prevent violence for others. Through this act of walking in the shoes of women and girls the *In Her Shoes* process aims to do the following:

- To increase the awareness of, and empathy for, the difficulties survivors face when seeking support.

- To demonstrate that all women and girls can experience violence no matter their circumstances.
- To encourage participants to actively think about what they can do in their personal and/or professional lives to better prevent and respond to VAWG.
- To begin a rights-based discussion and analysis of common misperceptions about VAWG.

Box 2 Amina's Story

In one *In Her Shoes* story, participants join Amina as she is fleeing the political violence in her home country, and walk with her to the border where she is sexually assaulted by a security officer before being permitted to cross. Participants next accompany Amina in the refugee camp, where they are required to make some difficult choices on her behalf. For example, should Amina try to forget the incident at the border or share what happened with her close friends in hope of receiving support? If she makes the brave decision to get help, should she approach the overburdened medical staff at the camp or try to speak with the sheikh? With each decision, participants learn about the consequence for Amina. Many of the potential caregivers she turns to cannot, or will not, offer the assistance she needs, and in some cases, even become perpetrators of violence. By walking in Amina's shoes, participants begin to understand that despite the appearance of "choices" her reality is heavily constrained, and the places where she should be able to receive help frequently lead to stigma or secondary trauma, or expose her to further risk.

Research Method

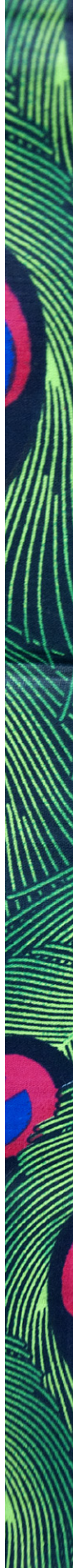
The qualitative study was specifically designed to address the following questions about the sub-Saharan African adaptation of *In Her Shoes*: What tangible shifts, if any, in attitudes or behaviors do participants experience after *In Her Shoes*, both personally and within the workplace? How specifically did *In Her Shoes* contribute to any such changes that emerge?

To explore these questions, the study included in-depth interviews with both *In Her Shoes* facilitators and participants. Interview guides were structured to ask open-ended questions followed by incisive probes to substantiate responses. Facilitators were purposively identified from those who responded to the online questionnaire (conducted in 2014) to select a diverse group in terms of sex, nationality, and frequency of facilitation. To reach participants, a snowball sampling approach was used whereby each facilitator provided a contact list of session participants. Participants were then intentionally selected from this list to achieve a balanced group in terms of sex, nationality, and profession/community role. All respondents gave their informed consent to be interviewed and recorded, and verbatim transcripts were captured to facilitate analysis. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to maintain confidentiality. The study included:

- Twenty-one individuals representing five countries (Botswana, Kenya, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Uganda) were interviewed, either in person (for respondents residing in Kampala, Uganda) or by phone/Skype.
- Of those interviewed, there were eight facilitators (six women, two men) and thirteen *In Her Shoes* participants (seven women, six men).
- Participants included three police officers, three healthcare providers, two religious leaders, two students, two community members, and one NGO staff member.

Limitations

While *In Her Shoes* is being used in over 20 sub-Saharan African countries, the qualitative sample is relatively small and represents only five countries. Most interviews were conducted in English, further limiting the diversity of participants. In addition, the snowball sampling approach was initiated with facilitators who responded to a voluntary, online questionnaire—and who, thus, may be among the more engaged facilitators. Indeed, most respondents had participated in (or facilitated) *In Her Shoes* several times (on average, the facilitators interviewed had led 8.5 sessions, while participants interviewed had attended an average of 2.8 sessions). As such, the perspectives shared may not reflect the experience of all individuals—particularly those with more limited engagement. However, findings are nonetheless valuable in highlighting potential change trajectories emerging from the *In Her Shoes* exercise.

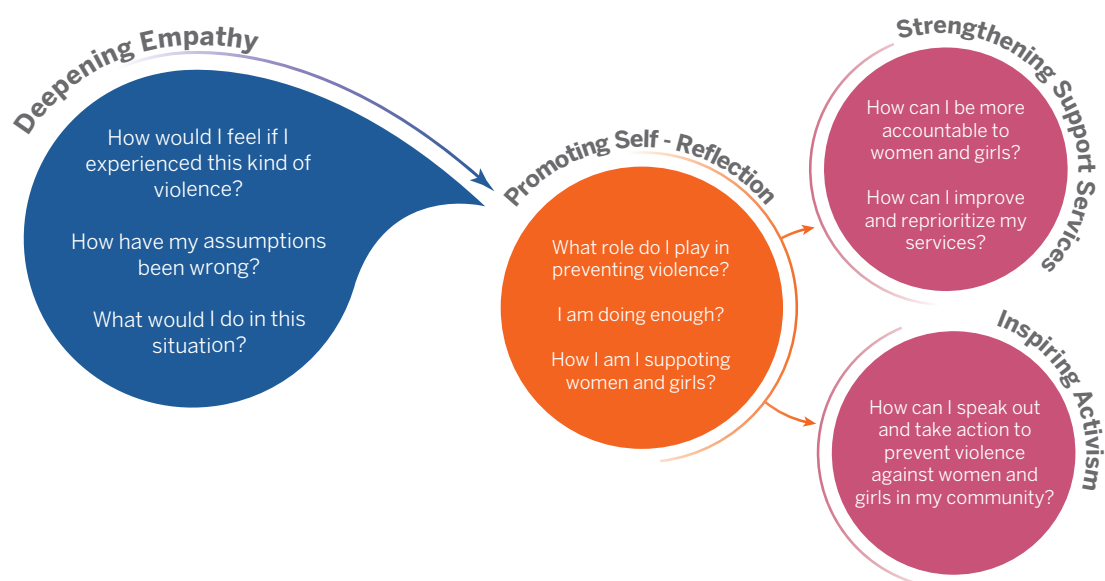


Findings

Interview data were analyzed through an iterative, participatory process, which focused on identifying the changes consistently described across participants and exploring perceptions about why such shifts had occurred. Four themes emerged from the analysis related to the following areas of potential impact: deepening empathy, promoting self-reflection, strengthening support services, and inspiring activism. Taken as a whole, these findings suggest a pathway of change (Figure 1) consisting of three distinct phases:

- By stepping into the shoes of women and girls experiencing violence, participants gain an intimate knowledge of VAWG and its consequences. Moreover, by having to navigate realistic situations and make decisions on the behalf of these women and girls, they connect to the realities on a personal level and gain a deepened sense of empathy.
- Empathy triggers a critical self-reflection, as participants begin questioning their own attitudes and behaviors related to VAWG and reflect on how they have previously interacted with survivors of violence. This introspection is often accompanied by the emergence of more supportive and less judgmental attitudes, as well as an intention to change.
- For some participants, this process contributes to tangible shifts in their own actions, most notably strengthened support services and personal activism.

Figure 1 The *In Her Shoes* Pathway of Change



Box 3 Ismail's Pathway of Change


In his interview, Ismail described how *In Her Shoes* encouraged him to reflect on the issue of VAWG in a way that more deeply considered women's and girls' own experiences. This new empathy and understanding led Ismail to re-evaluate his own role as a religious leader—and ultimately act on the insights that emerged:

“ I was quiet; people never used to approach me. They would fear to open up . . . After the *In Her Shoes* sessions, I felt empowered, and I changed even in character. I became more passionate about gender-based violence issues . . . I am [now] more welcoming and talk about women's rights everywhere I can get an audience. For example, after addressing the people in the mosque, many times women come and confide in me about their domestic issues . . . Previously, even when a person came wailing to my door seeking help in the night, I would never open. I had a designated time to work, and I would tell them to wait until morning. But now they know that even beyond midnight I come out of my house and listen to their issues, and we find a solution together. I realized that we don't always know what happens next to the survivor if we postpone help.

1. Deepening Empathy: “I understand them with my heart.”

Nearly all respondents described feeling a strong connection to the women and girls in the stories, suggesting that the stories were relatable and considered realistic in various contexts. Several respondents, including both facilitators and participants, described becoming highly emotional when reading the story cards, for instance crying out of compassion for the protagonist's circumstances or growing frustrated by her limited options. Many participants explained that they continued to think about the women and girls in the stories after the exercise was completed, illustrating the intense compassion the fictional characters provoked. For some, such as Jenifer, this empathy then transferred into real life, through a newfound solidarity towards the women and girls who came to her for help:

“ I came from Criminal Investigation Department—CID. In CID, we record statements, and we don't mind about any person's emotions. But *In Her Shoes* has helped me to remain empathetic. I don't cry with the victims, but I always feel what they explain to me. I get to understand them with my heart, though I never shed tears. ~ Jenifer, Police Officer, Uganda



“ [In Her Shoes] has made us more sensitive with the fact that not everybody has the same opportunities . . . some people are stuck and we don't have to blame them for their decisions or choices . . . You may just think, 'why don't they just go to the police?' I can see that the police couldn't have been an option. Maybe they did go to the police, and they didn't get any help. It's giving me a lot of contextual sensitivity. ~ Ayanda, Student, South Africa

2. Promoting Self-Reflection: “Change has to begin with me.”

Seven of the twenty-one respondents shared that the *In Her Shoes* process led them to question whether they are doing enough to support survivors and/or prevent violence. The focus of this introspection varied—from a healthcare worker considering the outcomes of his many small decisions, to a police officer cultivating more awareness of interpersonal dynamics at work and home. Despite each respondent coming from her/his own self-assessment, the experience for many culminated in an increased awareness of the consequences of actions (or lack of action) both in their own lives and the lives of survivors. This spurred a few participants—such as Bongile—to make a clear commitment to change:

“ After the *In Her Shoes* sessions . . . I resolved to break the silence. Sometimes we keep quiet about the things around us. We remain silent. It opened my eyes. Such could be an opportunity for another to stop the violence. We should start to act about violence in both families and the community. ~ Bongile, Student, South Africa

“ The fact is I didn't have interest [in helping survivors] . . . I would never identify with clients at all and would think [domestic violence] is a family issue that women should sort out by themselves . . . When I attended the *In Her Shoes* sessions, I realized that I had not done a thing in my work. I saw that this domestic violence can affect one negatively, and this triggered me to feel that I have to do more . . . I felt I really had to do a lot to help [survivors] walk their lives normally . . . Really change has to begin from me to be able to help others. ~ Alice, Police Officer, Uganda


3. Strengthening Support Services: “It’s important to listen first, and then evaluate.”

While *In Her Shoes* does not explicitly provide guidance for quality service delivery, it does include several examples where the failure of the healthcare and criminal justice systems results in secondary trauma or further violence against the women and girls in the stories. For many respondents, “walking in the shoes” of survivors receiving these inadequate and unjust services became the motivation for enacting practical changes in their own service delivery—whether formal services (e.g., police and healthcare providers) or informal community support structures (e.g., counseling through local leaders).

For instance, out of the six police officers and healthcare providers interviewed, five shared that since participating in *In Her Shoes*, they have deliberately shifted how they respond to women and girls experiencing violence, mainly by cultivating more attentive and nonjudgmental communication skills. Some also mentioned taking more care to provide women and girls a comfortable and private space to talk about violence, and that this enabled survivors to share their experiences more openly. Lastly, four respondents noted a stricter adherence to protocols, such as providing proper documentation, ensuring that survivors of rape have access to post-exposure prophylaxis, and conducting more comprehensive assessments that consider the woman’s external environment and risk for recurrent violence prior to referral.

“People come from as far as Namugongo for help here at the Family Protection Unit. They say they prefer our services. I think our services are better ever since we interacted with the [*In Her Shoes*] workshops on violence against women. People come from as far as Mbalwa because they want justice. They say they want justice, and it’s here where they can get it, because the officers understand their issues. ~ Jenifer, Police Officer, Uganda

“Before we could not identify with these victims well . . . They would come to the health center with cuts or abdominal pain, but we would never care to ask what the causes of were. We would only treat what they would report and let them go. After *In Her Shoes*, we realized that those women could have many other underlying problems. Really, we didn’t used to probe at all. I think even when the women wanted to open up to us, we never gave them the opportunity . . . We now provide them a conducive environment while diagnosing their cases. ~ George, Healthcare Provider, Uganda



“ The relevance [of *In Her Shoes*] is that it has given us the value of listening. It’s important to listen first, and then evaluate . . . Listening to the survivors now greatly helps me to make informed decisions based on their decisions and choice.
~ Alice, Police Officer, Uganda

4. Inspiring Activism: “I am also changing other people’s lives.”

While less common than the themes described above, the analysis uncovered several instances of *In Her Shoes* prompting participants to take action by speaking out against VAWG or by actively supporting women and girls experiencing violence. For example, Saida described how she now talks about women’s rights and violence in her Village Council and that, as a result, a woman experiencing violence in her community came forward and received help. As described in Box 3, Ismail shared that he now engages his religious community in discussions about VAWG during prayers. Other respondents discussed smaller steps, such as talking to family members and friends about VAWG.

“ And when it came to violence in families between husband and wife, I would stand up and tell women [at the Village Council] that they should not die silently . . . I would always tell them that there is something burning you, in your homes, that is killing you that you are not telling me. So one time a lady came and shared something and said, ‘You people are going to help me in this—my man comes home every day drunk and beats us all.’ We helped this lady . . . and things worked out for her. So I am seeing myself changing some people, other families and also changing myself. Really [*In Her Shoes*] changed me, and I am also changing other people’s lives. ~ Saida, Healthcare Provider, Uganda

“ We have so many widows in our place . . . we have gone back to sensitize people about the importance of letting women work. Because of the *In Her Shoes* toolkit, I started up a market. We encourage the widows to work so that they are able to fend for their families. ~ Ismail, Religious Leader, Uganda

While the types of actions respondents shared were largely positive, in two instances respondents described inappropriate actions triggered by *In Her Shoes*. One recounted how *In Her Shoes* “opened her eyes” to VAWG, and as a result, she began restricting her daughter’s movements to reduce her risk for violence. Another respondent noted that she did not allow her domestic worker to engage in certain tasks to ensure her husband was not “tempted.” While only two such examples emerged and should not be overstated, they point to a potential limitation of carrying out the *In Her Shoes* exercise in the absence of more comprehensive programming or follow-up support. It should also be noted that not all respondents gave examples of having progressed to the “activism” stage in the change pathway, suggesting an opportunity for more direct support in combination with *In Her Shoes* to help people move to this level of engagement.

Turning Research into Action

The findings from interviewing 21 *In Her Shoes* facilitators and participants poignantly illustrate the deeply personal, oftentimes emotional, journey of walking “in the shoes” of survivors. Across respondents, the experience of reading the story cards and participating in decision making connected them to the lives of women and girls experiencing violence and their often-futile attempts to access support or realize justice, blurring the boundary between these fictional characters and participants’ own lives. For many respondents, the *In Her Shoes* experience extended beyond the session itself, triggering increased empathy for women and girls in their own communities or workplace and prompting a critical self-reflection about their responsibility to act. For some, the process was transformational: police and healthcare providers described engaging in more respectful, compassionate, and appropriate service delivery, while others shared examples of personal activism, from speaking out against VAWG, to reaching out to survivors in their own communities.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest a pathway of change (Figure 1), revealing key learnings and a powerful framework for strengthening programming, namely efforts aimed at preventing and responding to VAWG. The following are practical ideas for applying the research findings:

- **Invest in Building Empathy:** Although technical skills and systems are essential to service delivery and prevention, the empathy of providers and activists is also critical. By creating opportunities for people to personally connect with the lived realities of survivors, it is possible to increase the motivation to prioritize and respond more effectively to the needs of women and girls experiencing violence.

- **Make Time for Self-Reflection:** While an experience may create empathy, the power of this emotion lies in the subsequent self-reflection—having the time and support for integrating an experience into one’s own identity and sense of purpose. There are many moments in the work of preventing and responding to VAWG when practitioners are awakened to a new understanding of survivors needs. Structured time and space within the workplace to reflect upon these insights, alone and with colleagues, helps to harness the personal learning that can become an inspiration for action.
- **Bridge the Gap between Awareness and Action:** A new awareness or intention to act does not always result in action. While action will sometimes emerge naturally from empathy and self-reflection, it is a difficult leap for many. Therefore, it is important to support the development of practical skills that service providers, activists, programmers and others may need to take action and create change—whether in their jobs, in their personal lives, or for others.
- **Sustained Programming.** When activities on violence against women and girls like *In Her Shoes* are conducted, they are more effective when embedded in a larger program that includes sustained support and engagement. One-off activities may make a profound impression but longer-term impact emerges when personal and professional transformation of activists or service providers is supported.

Interested in learning more?

- *In Her Shoes: A Toolkit for reflecting on violence against women in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2011)
The GBV Prevention Network and Raising Voices, Uganda
<http://preventgbvafrica.org/in-her-shoes/>
- *In Her Shoes: A methodology for preventing violence against women in Latin America* (2005)
Alianza InterCambios / PATH
<http://alianzaintercambios.org/noticia?idnoticia=11>
- *In Her Shoes: Sexual violence and pregnancy in girls and adolescents* (2015)
InterCambios / Puntos de Encuentro
www.alianzaintercambios.org
- *In Her Shoes: Living with Domestic Violence* (2000)
Washington State Coalition against Domestic Violence (WSCADV)
<http://wscadv.myshopify.com/products/in-her-shoes-living-with-domestic-violence>



The Learning from Practice series is a collection of articles that synthesize perspectives and activism emerging from Raising Voices' experience in preventing violence against women and children.

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