

## No.4

Learning from  
Practice Series  
**Research  
Perspectives**

# Stronger together: Engaging both women and men in *SASA!* to prevent violence against women

## Overview

Increasingly, programs for preventing violence against women are engaging both women and men to affect change. Voices from programming and research are underscoring the need to engage both sexes together, since their joint involvement facilitates key changes in related gender roles and inequalities (Heise, 2011, Michau et al., 2015, Jewkes et al., 2015, Greene and Levack, 2010). However, there is little formal evidence on the effectiveness of mixed-sex approaches, and a particular lack of research examining the perceptions and experiences of community members who participate in this kind of programming.

*SASA!* is one of the few non-curriculum-based violence prevention approaches that works to engage both women and men at the community level to change related social norms (Raising Voices et al., 2015). Designed by Raising Voices and first piloted in Kampala, Uganda, by the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP), *SASA!* is being adapted and used in other countries across sub-Saharan Africa, as well as in the Caribbean, Latin America, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. Between 2008 and 2012, a large multidisciplinary study was conducted on *SASA!* in Kampala, Uganda, by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Raising Voices, CEDOVIP and Makerere University. This included a cluster randomized control trial, qualitative studies (including a couples study), a process evaluation and a costing study. Using data from the couples study, this paper investigates the value of *SASA!*'s engagement of both women and men and how learnings can inform future programming for the prevention of violence against women.

## Program Context

*SASA!* is a community mobilization approach for preventing violence against women and HIV. It is designed for catalyzing community-led change of norms and behaviors that perpetuate gender inequality, violence and increased HIV vulnerability for women. At its foundation is a gendered analysis of power and power inequalities—not only of the ways in which men use power over women and the consequences of this for intimate relationships and communities, but also of how women and men can use their power positively to effect and sustain change at individual and community levels.

*SASA!* means “now” in Kiswahili. It is also an acronym for the four phases of the approach: Start, Awareness, Support, and Action. In the Start phase, an organization using *SASA!* begins by orienting staff to the approach and key concepts of power. They then identify an equal number of female and male community activists (CAs)—regular people in the community interested in issues of violence, power and rights—and similarly identify “institutional activists,” for example, members of police, health care systems, local government and faith-based groups. All activists are introduced to new ways of thinking about power and power imbalances in their own lives and within the community, and are mentored in the *SASA!* approach.

With the support of staff, the activists then take the lead as the approach moves forward into the Awareness, Support and Action phases. In these phases, the activists lead informal, benefits-based activities within their existing social networks—fostering open discussions, critical thinking and supportive person-to-person and public activism among their families, friends, colleagues and neighbors. Together, they introduce the community and its institutions to new concepts of power, encouraging a gendered analysis of power imbalances using four strategies: Local Activism, Media and Advocacy, Communication Materials, and Training. The combination of these strategies ensures that community members are exposed to *SASA!* ideas repeatedly and in diverse ways within the course of their daily lives, from people they know and trust as well as from more formal sources within the community. Each phase builds on the others and addresses a different concept of power, with an increasing number of individuals and groups involved, strengthening a critical mass committed and able to create social norm change.

### Box 1 SASA!'s Theoretical Foundations

**Stages of Change Model:** A key element of SASA! is that ideas are introduced over time and based on the readiness of individuals and the community. Using the Stages of Change Model, the approach scales up the stages of change observed in individuals (pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation for action, action, maintenance) to a community level (start, awareness, support, action).

**Ecological Model:** SASA! uses the Ecological Model for understanding the risk factors for violence and opportunities for prevention. It engages people and institutions in all circles of influence (individual, interpersonal, community, societal) in each phase of SASA!

**Gender-Power Analysis:** SASA! uses a gender-power analysis of violence against women, bringing the concepts of power (*power within, power over, power with, power to*) to everyday language and experiences. With this approach, activists stimulate personal reflection and critical thinking among community members, enabling them to see the benefits of nonviolence for all.

## Research Method

This paper aims to address the following research question: *What is the value of SASA!'s approach of working with both women and men to prevent violence against women?*

The data used in this analysis was mainly drawn from the qualitative SASA! couples study. The couples study explored the change process within intimate relationships when one or both partners had been exposed to SASA! This included investigating what emerged within the relationship as a result of both direct SASA! participation and the new discussions and behaviors around partner violence within the couple's social network.

Couples were selected purposively—using the criteria in Box 2—from the respondents to a survey in 2012 (the follow-up survey for the randomized control trial, after SASA! programming had ended). Twenty individual interviews (10 female, 10 male) were conducted with partners from ten heterosexual couples. After both partners agreed to the interview, a female and male research team went to their home and interviewed them separately, but concurrently, in a private place. To ensure the safety of respondents, WHO ethical guidelines for researching violence against women were followed as well as other guidelines developed specifically for the couples study. Each partner was asked a series of open-ended questions about the characteristics of the couple's relationship before and after SASA! exposure, the

details and timeline of the couple's experience with *SASA!*, and her/his views on *SASA!*'s engagement of both women and men. Participants gave informed consent to be interviewed and recorded. Recordings were translated from Luganda into English and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect confidentiality.

### Box 2 Selection

The selection criteria for participants in the couples study were as follows:

- The couple lives in a community where *SASA!* programming occurred.
- The couple has been in a relationship for more than two years.
- The couple has a history of partner violence against the woman, but not in the last year.
- One or both members of the couple have been exposed to *SASA!*
- The partner who participated in the follow-up household survey reported positive change in the relationship since becoming involved in *SASA!*

## Limitations

The qualitative sample was small and as such not a representation of the wider population. In addition, since the interviews took place post-intervention and involved community members who had been exposed to *SASA!*, some responses may have been influenced by a desire to portray *SASA!* in a favorable light. To address the latter limitation, interviewers made efforts to develop rapport with respondents and emphasized that they were only interested in understanding people's honest experiences. Interviewing the partners separately and comparing their accounts also helped to address this limitation, as overlaps in the two narratives increased the validity and trustworthiness of the changes reported. While the findings must be interpreted with caution due to these limitations, they are reinforced by the findings in another qualitative *SASA!* study with a larger sample (Kyegombe et al., 2014), suggesting that the changes observed in the couples study may be found beyond the couples sample.

## Findings

Interview data were analyzed to identify common themes across the interviews, specifically, by examining the factors influencing couples' change processes as well as participants' reflections on SASA!'s engagement of both sexes. From this analysis, a number of findings emerged regarding the impact of engaging women and men:

### 1. Mixed-sex activities enhance and deepen understanding.

SASA!'s engagement of both sexes within the same activity was valued by participants and perceived as instrumental in promoting learning at SASA! activities. Having both women and men at activities was deemed important because both sexes "have different issues" and mixed-sex activities provide the opportunity to discuss these issues together, thus "combining ideas." Participants felt that learning the viewpoints of the opposite sex while also having the opportunity to voice their own viewpoints deepened their understanding of the issues.

“ [Women and men] have different problems. When they share them, others learn from these experiences. If it was one group, we would only learn from one group. ~ Jean, community member

“ It works when everyone hears about common mistakes. When ladies exchange ideas on how we men treat them and [how] sometimes it gets hard for them, and then also gentlemen exchange ideas on how and where they find difficulties, I think that helps. Then they also discuss their weaknesses. In that way, everyone can talk about what they expect. ~ Paul, community member

The value participants placed on having both women and men in attendance also led to comments about how to ensure this logistically, with some emphasizing the importance of holding activities at times when both women and men would be available:

“ You should do a research on that, so that you know that by this time, people have completed their chores, or on Sunday most of the people are at home, instead of using weekdays when most of the people are busy. ~ Peter, community member



## 2. There are greater gains when both members of a couple participate.

Participants' views of *SASA!*, combined with the analysis of couples' change processes, indicate that working with *both* partners in a couple may be more effective in facilitating positive change and reducing partner violence. There was a pattern observed in which partners' joint involvement in *SASA!* nurtured a reciprocal change process between them, as seen in the example of Jean and Charles in Box 3. This is not to say that couples with only one partner involved did not experience positive changes; however, they did seem to encounter more hurdles, such as feared or actual partner resistance, resulting in less change overall relative to their prior relationship dynamics.

In the interviews, participants emphasized that engaging partners together provides women and men an opportunity to learn from each other and thus, more effectively improve their relationships. This is because Most women, despite living in abusive relationships, wanted to remain with their partners and find ways to end the violence, rather than leave their relationships altogether.

“ The man will teach his wife and the woman will teach her husband, if they both attend. . . I believe that, if a wife and husband can be together and talk about those things that we have been discussing [at *SASA!* activities]. If you give the woman time to talk, and then the man also talks, then *SASA!* comes in the middle to mediate... [to] help the couple. ~ Stella, community member

“ If you invite only the men and leave the wives at home, you will not get the intended results. ~ Joseph, community member

Interestingly, two participants who had extensive exposure to *SASA!* activities, expressed strong views that to start, women and men should be engaged concurrently but *separately*, and then after some time, together. Their broader narratives suggest that these viewpoints were mainly derived from what they observed during their involvement with *SASA!*. They reasoned that some issues involve both members of the couple while others are sex-specific or sensitive and benefit from same-sex discussions.

“ There are personal problems to a man and personal problems to a woman, but there are problems that unite them. There should be first sensitization sessions for men only and women only, but at the end, there should be sensitization sessions for all of them.  
~ Frank, community member

“ [It is better for things] like sexual issues. Maybe the women could feel shy talking about them when their husbands have attended . . . [or] when a man has two women, like for my case, it is not good for them [the wives] to attend in an activity [together]. They cannot be free, and they can even start arguing in an activity. ~ Charles, community member

### Box 3 Jean and Charles' Process of Change

In their separate interviews, Jean and Charles described how their joint involvement in SASA! helped them each make changes in their behavior, improving their relationship and ending the violence. Their ongoing conflict over Charles not providing financially had led Jean to report him to the Local Council leader. This resulted in them receiving relationship support from a SASA! community activist (CA) from within the same community, who encouraged them to start attending SASA! activities. Their narratives about their subsequent experiences with SASA! demonstrate how participation in SASA! led to their growing awareness of the qualities of a healthy relationship. They came to better understand their relationship dynamics, and each noted that they now “listen to each other” and “try as much as possible not to argue.” A key turning point came through the suggestion and support of the SASA! CA who encouraged Charles to reconsider his opposition to Jean working. This eased the economic burden for the couple and was empowering for Jean, who perceived that her work gave her more control, making her less dependent on Charles.

### 3. Participants benefit from activities being led by both female and male activists.

To address potential sensitivities between women and men, SASA! activities are led by both female and male CAs from within the same community. There were no strong patterns across the couples' narratives indicating that having a same-sex CA was a central factor motivating their attendance or influencing them in seeking support or adopting new ideas/behaviors. Instead the findings indicate that it was helpful in some situations to have a same-sex CA and in other cases helpful to have someone of the opposite sex. For example, there were participants who found that having a same-sex CA made seeking advice more comfortable.

“ It is better to have both [male and female CAs]. The woman can open up more to a woman, like I am doing now [with female interviewer] . . . I'm free... the woman CA would be more approachable than the male CA, [whereas] males would easily approach them [the male CAs]. ~ Jean, community member

There were also examples of participants who valued when the CA was the opposite sex. For example, some men perceived that a female CA could provide a woman's perspective, offering better insight into a man's situation with his wife. Overall, both same-sex and opposite-sex interactions influenced engagement with SASA! and supported change in different ways, suggesting that there is value in having both women and men facilitating activities in each community.

#### 4. Engaging women and men together enhances discussion and diffusion of new ideas.

The findings suggest that working with both sexes increased the diffusion of SASA! ideas and community buy-in. It created the perception among community members that partner violence against women is an issue of importance for women as well as men, in turn increasing community members' willingness to consider SASA! ideas as something of potential value. The quantitative SASA! study revealed that among those who reported talking to others about SASA!, 75% of men and 49% of women went on to share their SASA! experiences with both women and men. Their perception of SASA! and the topics it raises about relationships as relevant for both sexes likely influenced this behavior. Furthermore, having program content that appears aspirational rather than punitive toward both women and men was also deemed important.

“ It is very important [to work with both] because then both men and women learn at the same time, for instance . . . staging a non-biased drama, because . . . the cause of the problem is when a session comes and it is biased in favor of one side. ~ Isaac, community member

Some participants also suggested that engaging both women and men eased resistance to new ideas and reduced backlash, particularly around contentious topics like gender equality. One community member explained how men initially resisted such ideas, but through continued engagement their perspectives and understanding changed:

“ I believe that if you get [ask] the very first people who trained SASA! in this community, they must have got very many problems with the people they taught (short laugh) . . . we the men were so tight on our superiority and would say, 'how can I be equal to the woman?'. . . But now... many people have come up [changed]. Even the impossible men no longer argue about that. For instance, in the past, we never used to let women work (group laugh). Do you remember that thing? ~ Andrew, community member



Engaging both sexes at informal discussion activities and dramas created the opportunity for more conversation about violence and relationships. It simultaneously demonstrated that these issues can be discussed between sexes in a public arena and similarly, in private between community members and within relationships. As a result, participants frequently noted that participating in SASA! activities made them feel more confident about discussing these issues with others, including friends experiencing challenges in their relationships and women experiencing partner violence.

“ I learned to speak in front of people, and this is something I used not to do . . . I gained confidence when I saw Patrick [CA] talking during activities . . . yes this has given me a lot of courage, and I have examples of people I have helped by giving them advice . . . I tell them what I learn. ~ Patience, community member

“ I go there and watch. Sometimes I come back and just tell her [his wife] about it. I tell her that this is what was there; they talked about this and that. ~ Frank, community member

SASA! helped to enhance community members' conversational competency and as a result, the introduction of new ideas into the community through participants' sharing within their social networks and relationships.

## Turning Research into Action

By sharing qualitative insights about the perceptions and impact of engaging both women and men in SASA! programming, this paper sheds light on a salient topic for current and future violence against women prevention programs. The learnings demonstrate that actively involving both sexes in programming sends a powerful message that partner violence is an issue that concerns everyone, while also reducing potential backlash between sexes. It enhances the diffusion of new ideas about healthy relationships and can generate a new level of discussion between women and men, helping to diminish the acceptability of partner violence. Altogether, the findings demonstrate that involving both women and men in social norm change is critical for effective violence prevention.

The following are practical ideas for violence prevention programming based on the research findings as well as program experience and learning:

- **Encourage the simultaneous involvement of intimate partners.**

While not right for all stages of programming or all couples, engaging both partners may be more effective when supporting change in intimate relationships – provided that both partners freely choose and desire this. Joint programming speaks to the reality that many women experiencing violence would rather remain in the relationship and make it better than leave. However, care needs to be taken when involving intimate partners to safeguard against increased risk of violence against women. Further, even if partners do not attend activities together, it can still be useful if both partners are exposed to similar ideas about healthy relationships in different ways within their community and within similar timeframes.

- **Offer same-sex activities for sensitive topics.**

A core strength of community mobilization approaches such as SASA! is the organic, informal way that community activists conduct activities with both single- and mixed-sex groups. However, having some single-sex sessions for discussing sensitive topics is also helpful and important. This is particularly true in contexts where women and men do not openly discuss intimate issues together and at the very beginning of programming, before trust and credibility have been established in the community.

- **Tailor activities to the interests and availability of both sexes.**

To effectively engage both sexes, it is essential to know the communities well: what timing, format and location for activities will be most engaging for women and men. Each community is different and activities can be tailored to suit the convenience and needs of both sexes, whether separate or together. Offering a variety of activities (e.g. dramas, films, radio, community conversations, door-to-door discussions, etc.) led by female and male activists is also important, as different activities and same- or opposite-sex activists may appeal to women and men differently. Delivering both single- and mixed-sex activities necessitates an equal balance of female and male activists in each community.

- **Use aspirational programming to catalyze a growing conversation between women and men.**

Community conversations, dramas and communication materials that are aspirational rather than punitive toward either sex can give participants practical ideas about how to talk about violence against women and relationship issues with others in the community. These types of activities also provide opportunities for practicing more difficult one-on-one relationship discussions that people may wish to have with their partners.

### Interested in learning more?

- *The SASA! Activist Kit for Preventing Violence against Women and HIV (2008)*  
Raising Voices, Uganda  
<http://raisingvoices.org/sasa/download-sasa/>
- *Creating change: Mobilising New Zealand communities to prevent family violence (2015)*  
Sheryl Hann and Cristy Trewartha, New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse,  
University of Auckland  
<https://nzfvc.org.nz/sites/nzfvc.org.nz/files/issues-paper-8-creating-change-2015.pdf>
- *Communities Leading Change (2015)*  
Aimee Thompson, Close to Home  
[http://static1.squarespace.com/static/52111975e4b0da5fb641737a/t/558d8baae4b04bedec813f4c/1435339690274/ClosetoHome\\_CommunitiesLeadingChange\\_2015.pdf](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/52111975e4b0da5fb641737a/t/558d8baae4b04bedec813f4c/1435339690274/ClosetoHome_CommunitiesLeadingChange_2015.pdf)



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.

This paper was written by Elizabeth Starmann (LSHTM) with support from Sophie Namy (Raising Voices) and Lori Michau (Raising Voices). Editing by Stephanie Sauvé. Design by Samson Mwaka. Special thanks to all of the respondents who kindly shared their time and experiences; to Tina Musuya and Tanya Abramsky for their thoughtful reviews; and to our funders Sigrid Rausing Trust, an Anonymous Donor and Irish Aid.

Suggested citation: Raising Voices. 2015. "Stronger together: Engaging both women and men in SASA! to prevent violence against women." *Learning From Practice Series, No. 4: Research Perspectives*. Kampala, Uganda: Raising Voices.  
Available online at <http://raisingvoices.org/resources/>

## References

Greene, M. & Levack, A. 2010. Synchronizing Gender Strategies: A Cooperative Model For Improving Reproductive Health And Transforming Gender Relations. Washington D.C.: Interagency Gender Working Group.

Heise, L. 2011. What Works To Prevent Partner Violence? An Evidence Overview. *Working paper*. London: DFID.

Jewkes, R., Flood, M. & Lang, J. 2015. From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *The Lancet*, 385, 1580-1589.

Kygombe, N., Starmann, E., DeVries, K. M., Michau, L., Nakuti, J., Musuya, T., Watts, C. & Heise, L. 2014. 'SASA! is the medicine that treats violence'. Qualitative findings on how a community mobilisation intervention to prevent violence against women created change in Kampala, Uganda. *Global Health Action*, 7.

Michau, L., Horn, J., Bank, A., Dutt, M. & Zimmerman, C. 2015. Prevention of violence against women and girls: lessons from practice. *The Lancet*, 385, 1672-1684.

Raising Voices, LSHTM & CEDOVIP 2015. Is Violence Against Women Preventable? Findings from the SASA! Study summarized for general audiences. Kampala, Uganda: Raising Voices.