



EQUITY, ETHICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE:

Real-Life Case Studies Charting a Way Forward



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Passages

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Passages Project

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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?
1. 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?
1. 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).*