

The effect of civil society capacity building & civic engagement and empowerment initiatives on sexual and gender-based violence

Headline findings: There is no evidence that civic engagement and empowerment programmes reduce sexual and gender-based violence. Economic empowerment programmes may do so if male partners are also included in the programme.

Geographical distribution: Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia

Effect: Economic empowerment: positive effect. Civic engagement and empowerment: no reported effect

Confidence in study findings: Medium confidence

Short summary

There is a small evidence base for civic engagement and empowerment programmes which find no effect on sexual and gender-based violence. Economic empowerment may have an effect if men are also included in the intervention.

Long summary

Intervention

The interventions included in this summary are economic empowerment (livelihoods and vocational training), and other empowerment interventions which make women aware of their rights and how to protect themselves from violence, and community mobilization.

How is the intervention expected to work?

The interventions are expected to work by addressing both immediate and underlying risk factors that contribute to sexual violence in conflict and crisis settings. Civic engagement targets social norms, aiming to foster a community-wide rejection of sexual violence. These initiatives encourage collective support for victims and increase willingness to report violence, creating a safer environment overall.

Economic empowerment through vocational training and job support aims to decrease survivors' vulnerability by providing financial independence, which can reduce their reliance on exploitative relationships or situations. And general empowerment will support women in standing up or leaving violent relationships.

The evidence base

The summary cell consists of two systematic reviews by the same lead author. The review includes three studies on civic engagement, two on empowerment and four on economic empowerment. The studies are mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, but also include studies from Asia.

The review evidence

There is no evidence that the three civic engagement programmes analysed had any effect on gender-based and sexual violence, though there was increased awareness of women's rights and reporting of gender-based violence. Similarly, studies of the COMPASS empowerment programme in DRC and Ethiopia found no effect on gender-based violence.

In contrast, there is some evidence that economic empowerment can reduce abuse if men are also engaged in the programme. Five studies are considered, most reporting no effect on gender-based violence. But one study finds a reduction in psychological abuse, and one a reduction in intimate partner violence provided the male partner attended at least three-quarters of the couple's sessions. A third study also reported reduced abuse when male partners were also invited to attend training sessions.

Unintended consequences were noted, such as increased stigma or retaliation against survivors in settings where reporting was culturally sensitive or legally risky.

Confidence in study findings of the studies included in the review was generally low to moderate, with most studies lacking robust controls or long-term follow-up, which limited the strength of the conclusions.

Effect: The study did not mention any effect sizes.

Confidence assessment: The reviews are rated high confidence. But these effects are based on narrative synthesis of a small number of studies, but with explained variation in effects.

Sources

Spangaro Jo and Adogu Chinelo; Ranmuthugala Geetha; Davies Gawaine Powell; Steinacker Lea; Zwi Anthony;. (2013). What Evidence Exists for Initiatives to Reduce Risk and Incidence of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict and Other Humanitarian Crises? A Systematic Review. *PLOS ONE*, 8(5), pp.e62600.

Spangaro, J., Toole-Anstey, C., MacPhail, C. L., Rambaldini-Gooding, D. C., Keevers, L., & Garcia-Moreno, C. (2021). The impact of interventions to reduce risk and incidence of intimate partner violence and sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict states and other humanitarian crises in low and middle income countries: a systematic review. *Conflict and health*, 15(1), 86.