

Religious leaders can reduce intimate partner violence in Uganda: study

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Intimate partner violence—or abuse and aggression in a romantic relationship—is a pervasive global issue. In Uganda, a primarily Christian country in East Africa, 56% of women who've been married report being sexually violated by a current partner. Strong patriarchal beliefs often influence this behavior, but those in positions of power, like religious leaders, can shift traditional gender roles.

A team of psychologists, [public health](#) and [political scientists](#), human-centered design experts, and NGO researchers, including Betsy Levy Paluck of Princeton University, wanted to determine whether [religious leaders](#) could reduce intimate partner violence by incorporating more progressive interpretations of Bible teachings on romantic partnerships into their couples counseling.

They conducted a [randomized controlled trial](#) among 1,680 [heterosexual couples](#) in Uganda who were either enrolled in a 12-session group counseling course or wait-listed. Those in the course experienced a curriculum in which men and women were viewed as equals. The approach intentionally skirted the topic of violence and instead highlighted the benefits and religious importance of a more egalitarian relationship.

Findings

When Christian leaders in Uganda offered these types of courses, [intimate partner violence](#) decreased by 5 percentage points a year later.

- Couples who participated in the 12-week course experienced less violence, greater power-sharing in the relationship, and grew closer compared to the couples on the waitlist.
- Couples enjoyed their time together and reported less depression.
- Couples were more likely to see eye-to-eye when it came to financial decision-making.
- Men voluntarily ceded their power—rather than being coerced or pressured to share. Losing power can lead to a backlash against the partner, but it didn't, perhaps due to the new benefits stemming from a more equal partnership.

Policy point

Religious leaders can be effective change agents for reducing violence. This type of intervention—which included a shift in religious instruction—also has the potential to reach a massive audience.

"This approach is unique because it's driven by leaders within a longstanding cultural and religious tradition who shape how couples relate to each other. It is a benefits-centered approach, meaning that couples are motivated by religious and interpersonal reasons to respect and enjoy one another in a more power-balanced relationship. This change-from-within strategy could be useful if there are constraints on state capacity," says Elizabeth Levy Paluck of Princeton University.

Data

This study measures the effect of the Becoming One program, which was designed by the International Rescue Committee's Airbel Impact Lab team. Religious leaders are trained for two days and given instructional materials for themselves and the couples.

The study involved a pair-matched randomized control trial with 3,360 men and women in monogamous heterosexual relationships and with 140 religious leaders (mainly catechists, pastors, and priests) identified by World Vision, the implementing NGO partner, in three districts in Western Uganda.

Men and women were invited to participate through informed consent. Within each pair, they randomized one couple to begin the 12-session program immediately (October 2018) and the other to begin in December 2019.

More information: Religious leaders can motivate men to cede power and reduce intimate partner violence: Experimental evidence from Uganda, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2200262119](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2200262119)

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