

Abstract

THPE0683 - Women's economic empowerment can reduce gender-based violence: results from the IMAGE study, a cluster randomized trial in South Africa

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Background: Studies have demonstrated linkages between gender violence and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. However, in the absence of intervention studies, it is unclear how and if reducing such violence is a realistic programmatic goal. The IMAGE study is testing an intervention that aims to empower women and thus reduce intimate partner violence (IPV).

Methods: A Gender/HIV training curriculum was integrated into microfinance meetings and structured sessions were followed by community mobilization. Using a cluster-randomized design among 8 villages, 430 women were enrolled to the intervention and an equal number as matched controls. Participatory methods were used to generate locally appropriate indicators of empowerment.

Results: Participants ranged in age from 20 to 98 years, with a mean age of 44 years. Overall, lifetime prevalence of physical or sexual abuse from an intimate partner was 21%, while 9% had experienced such violence in the past year. After 2 years, the intervention had reduced the risk of IPV by half in the Intervention group compared to Controls (5.7% vs 12.4%; adjusted RR 0.48; 95% CI 0.21-1.10). Qualitative data suggests that although economic aspects of the intervention were important, other non-financial aspects of empowerment were also significant. Quantitative analysis defined some of these components as “power within” (self confidence, progressive attitudes to gender), “power to” (autonomy in decision making, communication with partner) and “power with” (participation in social groups and collective action)

Conclusions: This is the first CRT to demonstrate that adding a gender/HIV focus to an existing development intervention can reduce rates of IPV. Economic and social aspects of the intervention appear to work synergistically to empower women and reduce violence. Given the linkages between violence and HIV, we suggest that existing development initiatives, such as microfinance, may provide an important entry point for addressing HIV in areas where poverty and gender inequalities continue to confound prevention efforts.