

# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN EASTERN DRC

The impact of interventions addressing social norms around gender



📌 A mother of six in conflict-affected DRC who's supporting her family through making and selling dresses and doughnuts. Investing in women's economic empowerment has been recognised as essential not only for upholding women's rights but also as a precondition for sustainable development. Photo: Tim Magowan/Tearfund

Economic empowerment depends not only on women having the skills, capacities and confidence to advance economically but also on men recognising and respecting women's right to participate in productive activities and decision-making. Such recognition and respect only come when gender roles and responsibilities are based on positive social norms.

## Background

Since 2011, Tearfund has been implementing projects in 15 countries that tackle gender-based violence (GBV) by focusing on changing social norms around gender roles and responsibilities. Tearfund wanted to test the assumption that changes in social norms around GBV can prepare the ground for women's economic empowerment and reduce the risk of a backlash against women who have their own income.

## Summary of the study

A research study was undertaken in three villages in Ituri province, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in October 2017. The study examined the current socio-economic situation of women in these villages and the degree to which interventions designed to combat gender-based violence have impacted their economic empowerment. The study had its genesis in Tearfund and HEAL Africa's project, 'Engaging with faith groups to prevent violence against women and girls in conflict-affected communities' (2015–2018), which was

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**'WHEN MY WIFE HAS GONE TO FETCH WATER... I CAN HELP HER TO PREPARE BY TAKING THE BABY WHEN IT CRIES.'**

Male respondent, village B

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- ❑ Women are central to the labour force in the DRC and yet negative social norms can result in continuing economic hardship and gender inequality.  
Photo: Tim Magowan/Tearfund

implemented in 15 villages in Ituri. This project engaged with faith leaders and gender champions, key male and female members of the community trained as facilitators, to shift attitudes, behaviours and social norms that support gender inequality and encourage violence against women and girls. It was assumed that changing these social norms could also help to improve women's economic agency and power, for example by decreasing violence and promoting more equal relationships.

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**'IF OTHER MEN SEE YOUR HUSBAND SWEEPING, THEY CAN ASK HIM: WHY ARE YOU SWEEPING? YOU GOT MARRIED SO THAT YOUR WIFE CAN DO THAT, SO IF YOU SWEEP THE HOUSE, YOUR WIFE HAS NOTHING TO DO.'**

Female respondent, village C

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**'SOMETIMES, YOU CAN TELL YOUR WIFE [YOUR THOUGHTS] AND THEN YOU WILL DECIDE WITH YOUR WIFE WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO. AND THE WIFE HAS TO LISTEN TO ALL THAT YOU SAY.'**

Male respondent, village A

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## Key findings from the study

- Study participants reported a reduced incidence of physical violence and a degree of willingness by men to engage in different behaviours, including being more open to discuss and consult on household decisions with their partners, being more transparent about their economic activities and reducing their alcohol consumption.
- However, there has been limited progress on women's autonomy and involvement in decision-making, and on equitable control of assets, especially land and harvests.
- Women continue to bear the burden of unpaid work in the productive and domestic spheres. They have their prescribed areas of resource management that correspond with their reproductive roles and responsibilities, eg food, child health and education, and find themselves in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis their partners when it comes to decision-making and control over resources.
- There are also few spaces where women can meet to express collective action and exercise leadership. Women seem to be more isolated than men as far as sharing experiences and finding support is concerned, due in part to their heavy workload and their limited independent mobility.
- To secure their own income and have more financial independence, women have resorted to finding their own land to farm. They are, however, acutely aware this can cause tension, even conflict, at home. Their economic autonomy is at odds with the household harmony they seek – a harmony which in practice often means accepting that they have to submit to their husband's perceived superiority and decision-making authority. This internal conflict and pressure is often reinforced by faith leaders and Gender Champions, who frequently emphasise harmony, at the same time as urging couples to work and make decisions together.

## Conclusions from the study

The research concludes that social norms around gender roles and responsibilities continue to have a strong hold and that interventions addressing violence are successful at an individual level when they do not challenge the roles, status and power relationships between men and women. Even though men and women recognise certain negative aspects of cultural norms (such as the unequal division of labour between them), these norms are too ingrained to have begun to change significantly, and more reflection and engagement with both men and women is needed to address the underlying causes of continuing economic hardship and gender inequality.

## Additional findings

Findings from the final evaluation of Tearfund's project 'Engaging with faith groups to prevent violence against women and girls in conflict-affected communities' are showing that the acceptance of violence has significantly decreased and the incidence of physical violence has reduced as a result of addressing harmful social norms. The GBV interventions can also impact other aspects of gender inequalities (such as economic abuse, where one partner has control over the other partner's access to economic resources), but for the impact to be meaningful

- Gender champions are encouraged to hold community dialogues within congregations to promote gender equality and positive models of masculinity from a faith perspective. Photo: Tearfund



- Tearfund's partner HEAL Africa provides livelihoods training to women affected by the conflict in the DRC. Photo: Aubrey Graham/Tearfund

and transformative these other issues need to be addressed intentionally with specific interventions.

The experience of violence has a deep impact in the social life of a survivor as well as in disrupting their livelihoods. A required next step in survivors' support programming, especially in conflict-affected areas, must be to help them improve their livelihoods while also working on the social stigma associated with violence.

Social norms transformation is a long-term process that touches on deeply interiorised behaviours and it can go beyond the project lifetime and even experience periods when progress is reversed. This timeframe often doesn't align with short-term interventions and remains a challenge in integrating this work into livelihoods projects.<sup>1</sup>

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**'MEN UNDERSTAND THAT IT IS NOT WOMEN'S WORK, THEY DO IT TOGETHER. FOR EXAMPLE: IF A MAN'S WIFE WENT TO THE MARKET AND SOON HE IS GOING TO RECEIVE VISITORS, CAN HE WAIT FOR THE WIFE TO COME AND SWEEP THE HOUSE? NO, NO, HE WILL DO IT BY HIMSELF.'**

Male respondent, village C

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📍 Tearfund is training volunteers from churches and mosques in Ituri province to address the root causes of gender inequality and violence against women and girls. Photo: Tearfund

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**‘BEFORE, MEN WERE THE ONES  
TO DO THE COMMERCE, GOING FAR AWAY  
TO LOOK FOR MARKETS LIKE ISIRO,  
KISANGANI AND MAMABASA ETC. BUT NOW  
WOMEN ARE DOING IT AND THERE IS NO  
SHAME OR PROBLEM.’**

Male respondent, village C

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## Recommendations for Tearfund

- **Integration**  
For future livelihoods interventions that are linked to women's economic empowerment, it is crucial to build in project components that address harmful social norms and promote women's autonomy, alongside components for increasing income.
- **Gender norms and discriminatory social norms**  
Facilitate inclusive gender-specific support groups, reinforce faith leaders' and Gender Champions' capacities to positively influence changes to social norms, and engage at the community and institutional levels for better conditions that promote gender equality.
- **Collective action and leadership**  
Facilitate spaces for networking and mutual support for women, to increase their self-confidence and improve their coping strategies.
- **Skills development and training**  
Provide livelihood training opportunities for women, coupled with mentoring support, both to alleviate their isolation and increase their economic power.

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<sup>1</sup> Sandilands M, Jewkes R, Baghuma Lele U and Scott N (2017) *Does faith matter? Faith engagement, gender norms and violence against women and girls in conflict-affected communities: baseline research in Ituri province, Democratic Republic of Congo*. Tearfund, UK.

This research has its genesis in Tearfund and HEAL Africa's project, 'Engaging with faith groups to prevent violence against women and girls in conflict-affected communities' (2015–2018), which was funded by UK aid from the UK government, via the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls? Global Programme.

This paper is a summary of the following research report: Andrae K and Piscoi D (2018) *Women's economic empowerment in Eastern DRC: The impact of interventions addressing gender-based violence* Tearfund, UK

The full research report is available at: [learn.tearfund.org](https://learn.tearfund.org)

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[learn.tearfund.org](https://learn.tearfund.org)

100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 3906 3906 E [publications@tearfund.org](mailto:publications@tearfund.org)