

# From Pain to Empowerment?

*Impact of an empowerment program for survivors of sexual violence in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) on attitudes towards female leadership*

*City of Joy* is an intensive six-month support program for survivors of sexual violence in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that aims to transform vulnerable women into community leaders. What transformations do we see in participants from the time of starting the program to the end of the program? Systematic survey results indicate that the women display significant changes in their attitudes and knowledge about women's empowerment and leadership, indicating that the program has a strong immediate effect on changing the participants' views on female leadership. However, further research is needed on the degree to which – and for whom – these positive changes endure after the women re-enter their home communities.

## Brief Points

- The *City of Joy* support program for sexual violence survivors in DRC has a strong immediate effect on changing the participants' views on female leadership
- No particular demographic or background characteristics are determinants of seeing such transformation
- Further systematic research is needed to explore the sustainability of the attitude changes and how they are translated into action in the long term

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## Sexual Violence in Eastern DRC

Sexual violence constitutes a massive challenge in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Although the DRC is officially a post-conflict country, the eastern provinces in particular are still in a situation of considerable insecurity and instability, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has been and still is widespread. Some of this violence is perpetrated by armed groups, but there are also significant levels of violence committed by civilians as well as domestic violence (see e.g. Peterman et al. 2011; Mukwege et al. 2009; Rustad et al. 2016). Many survivors of sexual violence report that they face marginalization; that they are often disempowered, sometimes shunned from their communities and families, and that they *live in precarious situations*.

## Phoenix Effects?

Violent conflict can have detrimental effects on those affected, and sexual violence in particular is often assumed to be especially traumatizing to the victims. On the other hand, it is also an old idea that great good can come from great suffering. In psychology, for example, it has been documented that positive change can occur as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises – often referred to as posttraumatic growth. Economists have also started to document similar patterns through field experiments. For example, a study from Burundi shows how people who had been exposed to violence directly or who lived in a community that was attacked displayed more altruistic behavior (Voors et al. 2012).

Yet, there are no clear documented “phoenix effects”, of sexual and gender-based violence in particular, meaning that survivors rise from the destruction associated with being attacked to feeling stronger and better than before. We were therefore interested in whether the effect of posttraumatic growth can also happen for groups that are shunned or marginalized due to their victim status. And in terms of what policies could potentially facilitate posttraumatic growth, to what extent can a program directed towards survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in eastern DRC assist participants to transform pain into power? Can posttraumatic growth occur? And can it be assisted by an intensive empowerment program for survivors, who are facing the challenges of social exclusion and marginalization as a group?

## City of Joy

To study the possible transformation of pain into power, we have studied the effects of one support

We conceptualize empowerment as knowing and being willing to exercise one’s rights. It enables overcoming a sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, and helps a person to recognize and eventually to use her resources and opportunities. We believe empowerment can also mean the power to decide for oneself.

program which has received considerable attention, and which has an explicit aim to transform pain into power for its beneficiaries – the City of Joy. Specifically, for the first part of this study, which this brief focuses on, we wanted to find out: **To what extent does the six-month program exposure affect participants’ perceptions of possibilities of female participation and empowerment?**

City of Joy ([drc.vday.org/splash](http://drc.vday.org/splash)) is a transformational leadership community for women survivors of violence, located in Bukavu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It is conceived, owned, and run by local Congolese. The City of Joy first opened its doors in June 2011.

The six-month program is designed to heal women from their past trauma and transform them into em-

powered women and leaders. The program is serving 90 survivors of gender violence at a time, and the participants live on the campus for the duration of the program and take part in various activities, such as therapy and life skills programming. This includes courses ranging from literacy and English, self-defense, theatre classes, cooking, sewing and soap making, to leadership training on rights awareness, judiciary and community activism.

The participants are selected according to various criteria, such as being female; 18 to 29 years old; and having experienced trauma due to sexual and gender-based violence. The program also prioritizes participants who have potential for leadership and positive change in the community. Furthermore, participants must sign an act of commitment to comply with the standards established by the program, and subscribe to ten central tenets.

The central tenets of City of Joy (CoJ) are to:

1. Tell the truth
2. Stop waiting to be rescued. Take initiative
3. Know your rights
4. Raise your voice
5. Share what you have learned

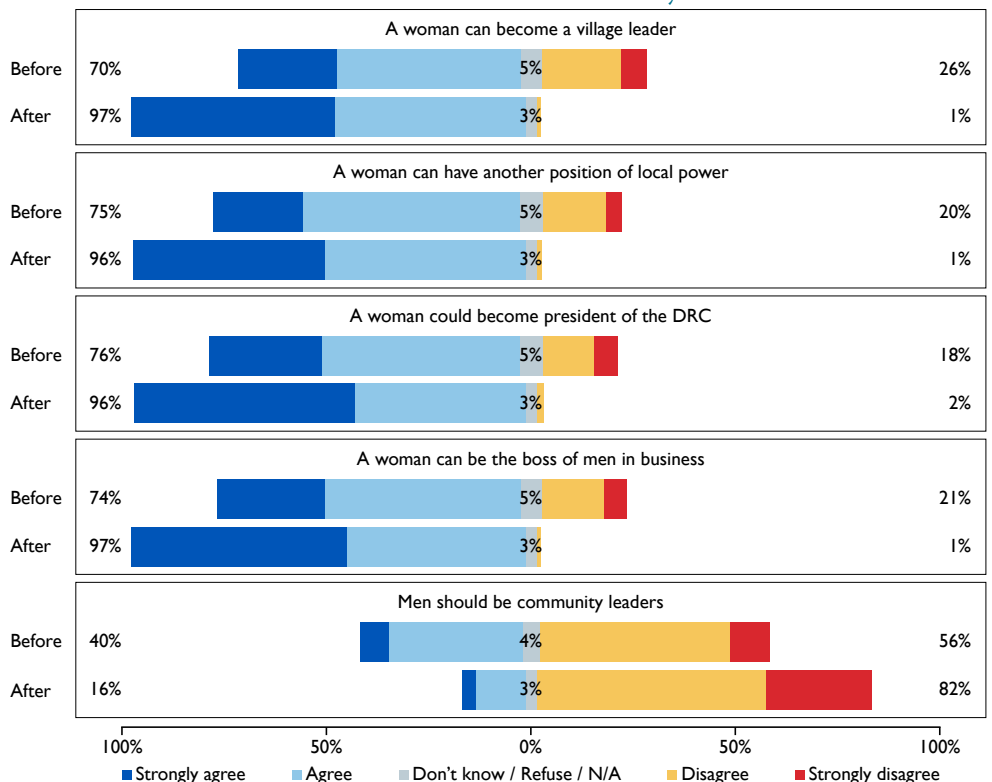


Figure 1: Comparison entry/exit surveys: Female leadership

6. Give what you want the most
7. Feel free and tell the truth about what you've been through
8. Use it to fuel a revolution
9. Practice kindness
10. Treat the life of your sister as though it were your own

## Data

To study this, we interviewed 179 women in total, including all 89 women who entered the CoJ program in June 2015 and the 90 women who entered the program in January 2016. The women were surveyed during the first days of entering the program, and then interviewed again during the last days of the program, to study what changes had taken place. The interviews contained closed questions on a range of issues. The surveys were conducted by ten female enumerators in Bukavu with university degrees who were selected and trained to carry out the surveys on electronic tablets. Interviews were carried out in Swahili, with French or Mashi (a local language) used as needed.

The age span of our respondents is 18–31 years (with an average age of 20.4 years). Most participants came from South Kivu (82%), with the remainder from the neighboring provinces of North Kivu and Maniema. 77.5% of the participants are single, and 50.6% have a level of education of some secondary school.

## Findings

In order to assess potential changes in attitudes, we first look at some graphs of the distribution on key attitude variables at the entry and exit surveys. Initially, we find that the aggregate difference between answers given at program entry and exit are significantly different. First, we focus in particular on questions that can illuminate how the participants see the role of women relative to men in various leadership related settings. These questions are in the form of statements, and the respondent replies whether she strongly disagrees, disagrees, agrees, or strongly agrees to the following statements:

1. “A woman can become a village leader”
2. “A woman can have another position of local power”
3. “A woman could become president of the DRC”
4. “A woman can be the boss of men in business”
5. “Men should be community leaders”

Figure 1 shows the distribution of these answer categories at the time when the woman joined City of Joy and after having completed the six months of training. The graphs clearly display a dramatic shift over the course of the program in the expected direction. Overall, the women are positive towards the idea that women can take leadership roles, but this sentiment is much stronger when they are asked after the completion of the program.

**Right to organize:** On the question regarding whether women have the right to organize to fight for a better situation for women in the DRC (Figure 2) the women overwhelmingly agree or strongly agree already in the first week of being at CoJ, and there is therefore not a very large shift. It is possible that this is due to the selection criteria of CoJ, and that these views are not equally prevalent in the general female population in the area.

**Resistance from men:** On a question on whether the women think that men are likely to block women from taking power, the answers interestingly become more pessimistic after the program has been completed. After the program, more women strongly agree with the statement that men will block women's rise to power than in the questionnaire prior to the program. Women might therefore become more aware or possibly worried about meeting resistance from men when trying to claim rights and power for themselves.

**Better or worse over time?** Looking at two questions tapping into perceptions of the time trends in the situation for women in the DRC, we can see a similar shift toward a more cautious view of the situation (Figure 2). After the program, fewer women than before think that the situation for women in DRC is improving, as more women disagree or strongly disagree with a claim about an improving situation in the post-program survey as compared to the survey at entry. Similarly, when asked about whether girls in the DRC today have more challenges than before, more women agree or strongly agree with this statement after the program than before, suggesting again a more pessimistic view, and/or a stronger awareness of the challenges facing women in the DRC today after completing the program.

**Gender roles:** On this dimension, the reported attitudes also change over the course of the program (Figure 3). The women display an expected attitude change towards thinking the relationship should be one of equality after having completed the training at CoJ. For example, whereas 70% of the women at the entry surveys strongly agreed or agreed with a statement that “women should always do what their husbands say”, 58% agreed or strongly agreed to this statement after the program. Similarly, on a question of whether men should make decisions about money, 70% agreed at entry and 66% agreed on exit. However, this is nevertheless a relatively small change in terms of how many women changed their initial response. The program also seems to

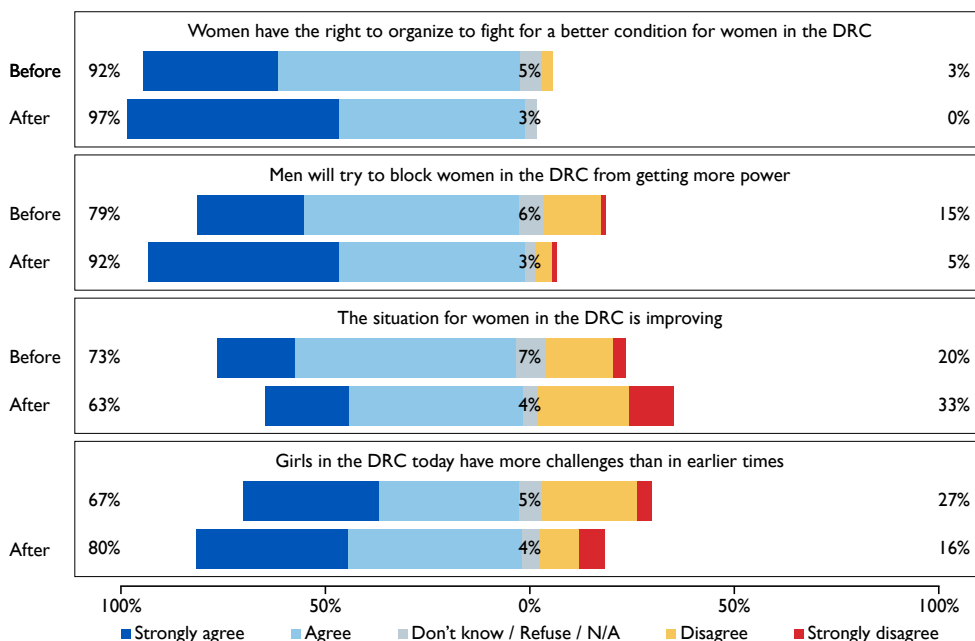


Figure 2: Comparison entry/exit surveys: Rights to organize and time trends

have shifted the opinions of girls' education, and the women generally are less likely to agree to a statement that it is more important for boys to go to school than for girls in the survey at exit from CoJ. The interesting observation here is that quite a few women in CoJ already initially held quite strong egalitarian views of what the relationship should be between men and women in the household, and between boys and girls in terms of schooling. However, there is still a relatively large share of the women at exit who agree with the statement that it is more important for boys to get schooling (42%), which could potentially be interpreted as an assessment of the situation for girls in the DRC suggesting that opportunities are fewer for girls than boys to benefit from an education and get better jobs as a result of their schooling.

### Who Changes Their Attitudes the Most?

To look into who changed their attitudes the most in the direction of empowerment of women, we look at one of the statements that the women are asked their opinion about: "A woman can be the boss of men in business" – do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)? We then tested whether the changes in responses were conditioned by education level and poverty level of the woman, as well as the woman's marital status. However, none of these factors predict the change in opinion on this question.

We also looked into the answer given regarding whether men should decide about money. The respondents were given the statement "men should decide about money", and gave their opinion about this statement in the entry and exit interview on whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The results do not show any strong relationships between the change in attitude on this question and the three possible predictors: a woman's education, poverty, and marital status.

### THE PROJECT

This paper is part of a collaborative project between PRIO and ICART on "Female Empowerment in Eastern DRC" lasting from 2014 to 2016. The project was funded by the Norwegian Research Council under their NORGLOBAL program.

### ICART

The International Center for Advanced Research and Training (ICART) was established in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo in 2013. We focus on research to address gender-based violence and clinical health issues. The ICART team is working hard to become the top regional research and training center in this region of Africa.

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.

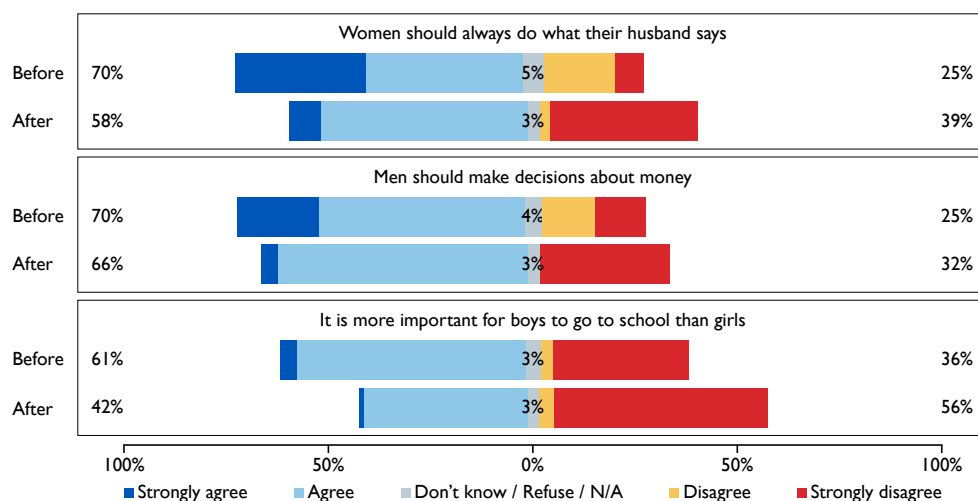


Figure 3: Comparison entry/exit surveys: Gender roles

In sum, therefore, we found no clear demographic or background factors that can predict which CoJ participants were most likely to change their attitudes towards female empowerment during the program exposure.

### Conclusions & Future Directions

Based on a survey of participants in the City of Joy empowerment program for young women in 2015 and 2016, we document changes in the opinions and attitudes towards female empowerment, gender equality, and female leadership over the course of the six-month program.

Many participants generally held quite gender-equal attitudes already at the beginning of the program. After six months, most participants exited from the program with strong egalitarian attitudes when it comes to gender equality, a positive view of women as leaders, and other indicators of female empowerment. But they also seem to have increased their concern about the problems facing women in the DRC and the possible push-back they can face when trying to assert their rights – such as from men who resent them gaining power.

Future research should study the longer-term changes and impacts of the City of Joy program and similar programs to see whether and how the lessons from the support programs are put into practical use after the program ends. What can achieve lasting positive changes, what challenges do the women face when trying to assert their power in their home communities, and how are the women trying to overcome these challenges, and with what success?

Our next step is therefore to focus on gaining a more systematic understanding of success stories as well as possible stories of backlash for the women who seek to improve their situation, and who seek power and leadership positions in society. ■

### References

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