

Social Inclusion of Survivors of Sexual Violence: How Do Support Programs Work?

Micro-level evidence from eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

New survey-based evidence indicates that survivors of sexual violence in eastern DRC feel less included across various social settings compared to non-survivors. Support programs for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are found to have a significant positive effect on perceived improvements in economic wellbeing. They also make women feel more socially included. However, the latter effect appears to be weaker for survivors than for non-survivors. Hence, increased focus and resources are needed to work actively with the local population in order to encourage social inclusion of SGBV survivors.

Brief Points

- Findings based on a new survey of about 1,200 women in Eastern DRC
- SGBV support programs studied have a positive effect on individuals' perceived improved economic wellbeing
- The effect on perceived social inclusion is less clear

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Sexual Violence in the DRC

Sexual violence constitutes a massive challenge in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has been and still is widespread in the eastern provinces. 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. Bartels et al. 2013; Kelley et al. 2011; Peterman et al. 2011; Mukwege et al. 2009; Rustad et al. 2016).

Many survivors of sexual violence report facing marginalization and social exclusion among family members and in their local communities because of what has happened to them.

Support Programs

We studied women who have participated in one of two support programs for SGBV survivors and other vulnerable women in South Kivu Province in eastern DRC:

USHINDI recruits female survivors of SGBV who have been declared psychologically healthy (i.e. lack of trauma) and identified as financially vulnerable. However, the program also includes non-survivor women and men, and the beneficiaries do not know who amongst them is a survivor of sexual violence. USHINDI organizes voluntary savings and loan associations (VSLA) and provides training in literacy, management, entrepreneurship, and leadership.

Dorcas Rural recruits (i) female survivors of SGBV, (ii) women with gynecological ailments who received medical care at Panzi general referral hospital, and (iii) women who are identified as vulnerable based on self-reported indicators such as number of meals per day, number of children in school, marital status, and living conditions. The participants were aware of each other's status as sexual violence survivors. Dorcas Rural provides participants with (i) a loan, (ii) seeds, (iii) livestock (pigs), (iv) school fees for up to two children, (v) training in income generating activities (soap- or basket-making), and (vi) literacy training.

Data

We interviewed about 1,200 women aged 15–87 in South Kivu (see Fig. 1) during 2 July to 1 August 2015.

Two groups of women were included: (i) **Women who had been affiliated with Dorcas Rural or USHINDI** (including both survivors and non-survivors), and (ii) **Women from the same geographic areas who had not participated in either program**. Respondents were asked about whether they had experienced sexual violence, as well as a range of other questions related to their sense of social inclusion, economic wellbeing, and participation in support programs. Not all survivors have been through support programs and not all program beneficiaries are survivors. Table 1 shows the distribution in the sample on status of survivor and participation in support programs.

		Survivor of SGBV		
		No	Yes	Total
Program participant	No	201 (26%)	50 (12%)	251 (21%)
	Yes	582 (74%)	370 (88%)	952 (79%)
	Total	783 (65%)	420 (35%)	1203 (100%)

Table 1: Sample distribution of survivor status and program participation

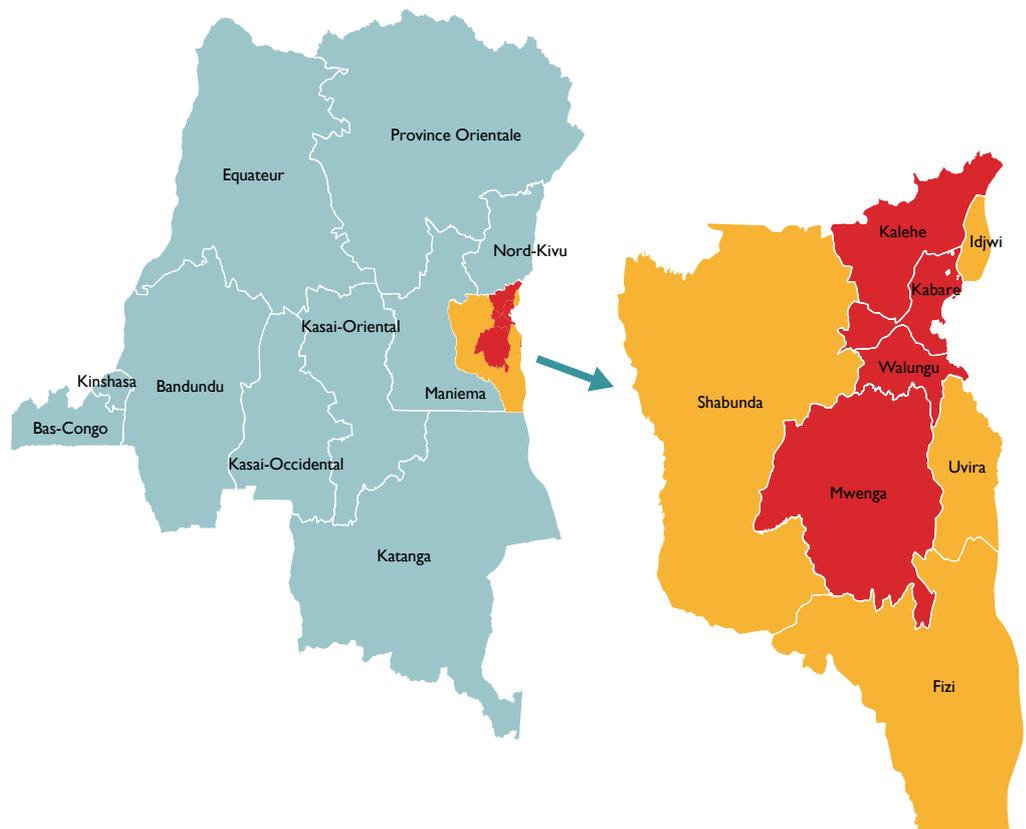


Figure 1: Map of DRC (left) and South Kivu (right) with survey areas (red)

Social Inclusion

Based on the survey data, we measured social inclusion based on whether or not women report that they feel welcome in six different but key social contexts:

- with family,
- with in-laws,
- with neighbors,
- at the market,
- at church,
- in the community at large.

On the positive side, women often do report that they feel socially included (Fig. 2). A large share (36.5% of our sample) reported that they often or always feel socially included in all the six social settings, whereas 5.9% never or only sometimes feel included in all the settings.

Economic Wellbeing

We further asked the women if they perceive their living conditions compared to one year prior to the survey to be much better, better, the same, worse, or much worse.

We use the answers to this question to capture a sense of improvement in economic wellbeing. A higher value on this factor corresponds to a more positive view of improvements in economic wellbeing.

The distribution in the answers is depicted in Figure 3. The overall picture is that the interviewed women feel their situation has improved since the previous year.

The Effect of Survivor Status and Support Program Exposure on Perceived Social Inclusion and Economic Wellbeing

To estimate the effect of survivor status on social exclusion and economic wellbeing we matched respondents on characteristics that are (i) unlikely to have changed due to survivor status, (ii) unlikely to be reported differently

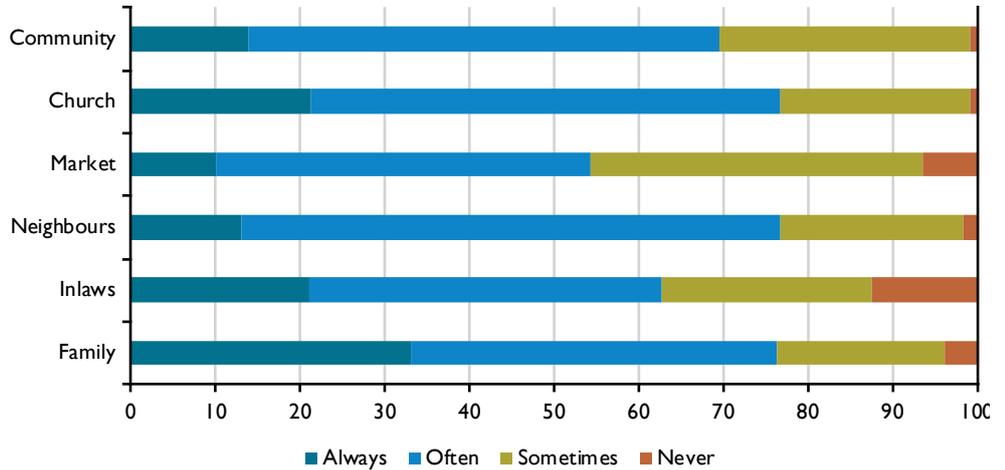


Figure 2: Share of respondents feeling welcome in various social settings

due to survivor status, but (iii) that are likely to influence social inclusion and perceived economic wellbeing.

Through the analysis, we are able to answer a series of key questions regarding social inclusion, being a sexual violence survivor, and effects of support programs:

1. Are sexual violence survivors less likely to feel socially included than women who have not experienced conflict-related sexual violence?

Yes. As expected, we find that survivors of sexual violence feel less socially included overall (not taking into account support programs).

2. Are program beneficiaries more likely to feel socially included than women who have not benefited from such programs?

Yes.

3. Are program beneficiaries more likely to rate their economic living conditions as improved during the last year than women who have not benefited from such programs?

Yes. The results from the survey show that support programs have a general positive effect on both social inclusion and perceived improvement in economic wellbeing, based on what the women say.

As mentioned above, the support programs tend to include a large share of non-survivors as

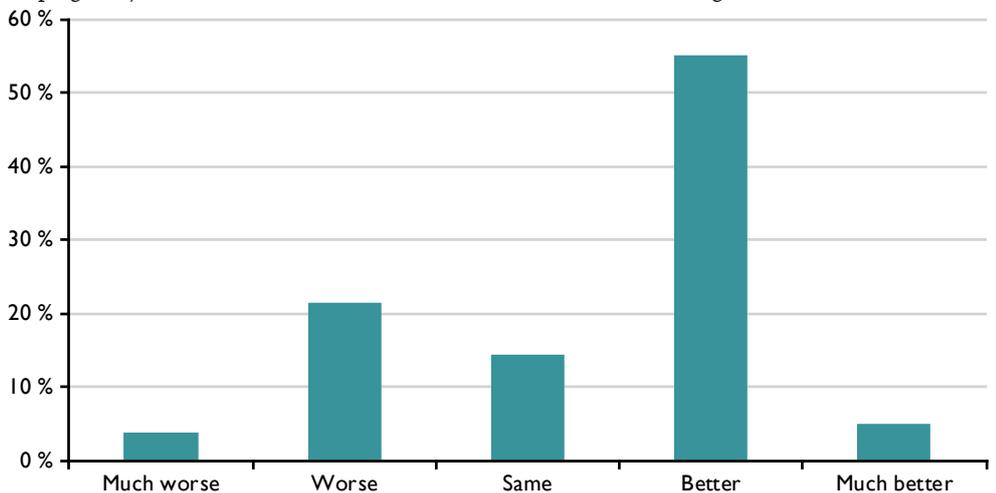


Figure 3: Perceived change in economic wellbeing

well. What then are the effects of the programs on the sexual violence survivors specifically? We asked:

4. Do support programs have a larger positive effect on perceived improvement in economic wellbeing for survivors compared to non-survivors?

Yes. The survivors are particularly likely to state that their economic wellbeing has increased.

Our last question related to the survivors' feelings of social inclusion or exclusion in the various social settings listed above. We asked:

5. Do support programs have a larger positive effect on perceived social inclusion for survivors compared to non-survivors?

No.

Unlike for the other findings, we do not find a particularly strong effect of the support programs on perceived social inclusion when we focus specifically on comparing survivors and other women.

This does not mean that programs are not good for social inclusion in general. We did find clear evidence that they are good for social inclusion overall. However, they are not benefiting survivors more than any other women in the programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Social exclusion and various other problems often follow in the wake of sexual violence. In eastern DRC, sexual violence has been a considerable part of the war and instability in the region for many years, and survivors of sexual violence are vulnerable to

stigmatization, in addition to health-related problems and poverty.

We have focused on two support programs that aim to assist survivors of sexual violence in eastern DRC to see what their impact is for vulnerable women.

We find that **women who have been in support programs report improvements in their economic wellbeing and social inclusion.**

The programs have more clearly improved the perceived economic wellbeing for survivors of sexual violence compared to other women: **programs increase perceived economic wellbeing even more for survivors than for non-survivors.**

However, **when it comes to social inclusion, the support programs do not have a greater positive effect on survivors than non-survivors.**

If we take into account that survivors feel more excluded to begin with, this is bad news. Survivors of sexual violence have particular needs for improving their social inclusion, and it seems to be difficult for the support programs to achieve this and make survivors feel (or be) as included in social settings as other women.

This said, succeeding in eliminating the experience of social exclusion amongst sexual violence survivors is a tall order for any support program. Additional work and programming is needed to also focus more on the families and communities of the survivors, to reduce social exclusion in the women's daily lives. ■

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THE PROJECT

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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

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