



## STEPPING STONES AND CREATING FUTURES: An evidence-based intervention to prevent violence against women and improve livelihoods

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Violence against women and girls is widespread in South Africa. Women who experience intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-partner sexual violence have poorer health outcomes, including higher levels of depression and alcohol use, and are more likely to acquire HIV [1].

In the eThekweni Municipality of South Africa, approximately 40% of the population live in informal settlements. With a combination of poverty and unemployment, widespread

violence, racism and xenophobia, urban informal settlements have very high levels of violence against women, mental trauma, alcohol and drug abuse, and HIV

Research conducted by the South African Medical Research Council and Project Empower in 2015 and 2016 as part of the *What Works to Prevent Violence Programme* has shown that violence against women is particularly prevalent in informal settlements.

### Stepping Stones and Creating Futures

- Reduces men's perpetration of violence against women: the evaluation showed a 39% reduction in physical IPV, a 54% reduction in economic IPV, a 32% reduction in sexual IPV, and a 28% reduction in non-partner rape perpetration in the past year
- Increases women's monthly earnings, and increases women's and men's savings, and engagement in the labour market
- Improves women's and men's ability to communicate with their partners in ways that build stronger, and longer lasting relationships

# STEPPING STONES

# Creating

# Futures

*What Works'* baseline research in eThekweni, showed that 65% of women had experienced physical and/or sexual IPV in the previous year, and 57% of men reported perpetrating it.

A third of women (33%) had been raped by a non-partner in the previous year and 39% of men had perpetrated rape. As an indicator of poverty, 30% of women and 25% of men reported severe food insecurity [2].

Research has shown that a key driver of IPV perpetration amongst men, and experience amongst women, is the combination of food insecurity/poverty and gender inequalities [2].

*What Works* tested an intervention, "Stepping Stones and Creating Futures", to alleviate poverty and prevent violence against women in informal settlements. This evidence brief presents a summary of the results.

## **Stepping Stones and Creating Futures**

Stepping Stones (South African, 3rd Edition) [3] is a participatory intervention with activities that are based on critical reflection. Topics covered include HIV-risk, abuse of women, and gender and power. Ten sessions are delivered over about 30 hours to single sex groups. A two-year evaluation completed in 2006 in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, showed that a lower proportion of men reported perpetrating IPV across two years of follow-up. It also reduced the incidence in men and women of Herpes Simplex Virus Type 2 (HSV2) by 33% (a sexually transmitted virus), and, for men, was also shown to reduce transactional sex and problem drinking at 12 months and improve mental health [4].

Creating Futures [5], is a eleven session intervention that seeks to tackle poverty through encouraging reflection and action among young people on their livelihoods. Sessions include securing and keeping jobs, saving, and identifying specific work related objectives.

Combined, Stepping Stones and Creating Futures, is a 21 session, peer-facilitated intervention, delivered twice weekly, to single sex groups of 20 people. In total participants are engaged in the intervention over approximately three months.

The theory of change for Stepping Stones and Creating Futures is that poverty, and gender inequalities, are key drivers of IPV experience for women, and IPV perpetration for men [2]. Simultaneously strengthening livelihoods and transforming gender relationships should therefore reduce women's experiences of IPV and men's perpetration of IPV.

To evaluate whether the combined Stepping Stones and Creating Futures intervention can reduce violence against women and strengthen livelihoods, we undertook a cluster randomised control trial (RCT), in 34 informal settlements in South Africa, in eThekweni Municipality [6].

Between October 2015 and October 2018, the study recruited 1,355 young (aged 18-30) women and men resident in informal settlements, and randomly allocated settlements to either receive the intervention immediately, or after 24 months. The majority of women and men recruited were not in relationships with each other. We asked participants to complete questionnaires at baseline and at 24 months.

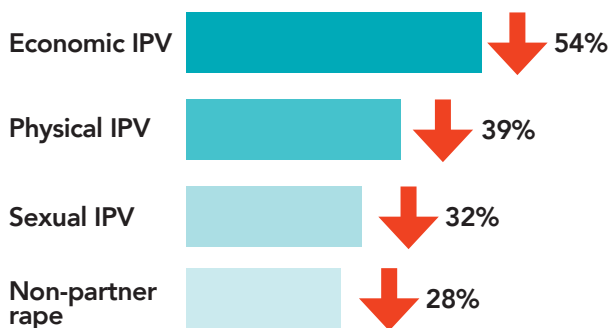


# Impact of Stepping Stones and Creating Futures

Stepping Stones and Creating Futures was successful in reducing men's use of violence against women and their alcohol use. It also resulted in improvements in women's and men's livelihoods, with higher earnings, greater savings and entry into the labour market.

## Men were less likely to perpetrate violence against women

Men's self-reported perpetration of physical IPV in the past year was reduced by 39% in the intervention group.<sup>1</sup>



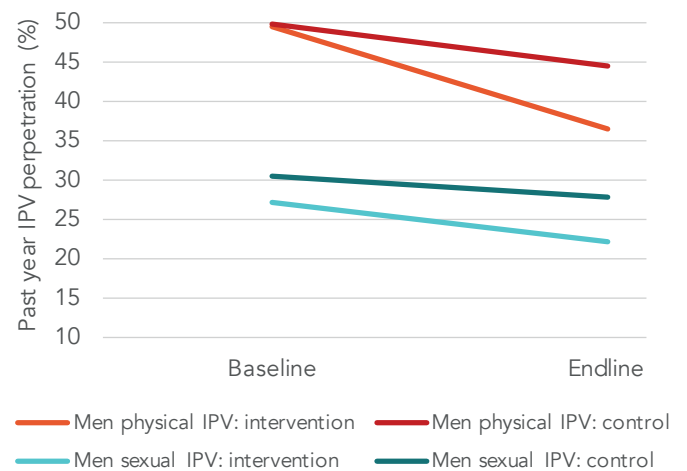
In the intervention group past-year physical IPV perpetration fell from 50% at baseline to 36% at endline. This was a significantly greater decline than the control group.<sup>2</sup>

A similar decline was seen in past year sexual IPV perpetration, which reduced by 32%. For men who participated in the intervention this decline was from 27% at baseline to 22% at endline. This was a greater decrease than in the control arm, and was significant at  $p < 0.1$ .

1 Percentage reductions were calculated using statistical models, including adjustments for the control arm prevalence.

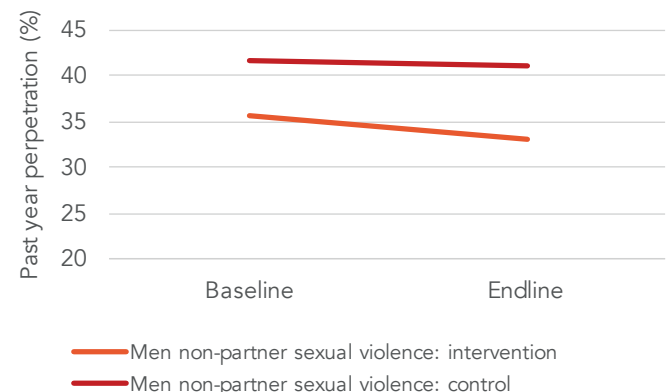
2 We assessed significance through regression models, comparing 24 month prevalences, controlling for baseline term and food-insecurity.

## Men's perpetration of IPV



Men who received Stepping Stones and Creating Futures also reported perpetrating significantly less economic IPV at endline compared to those in the control group (a 54% reduction).

## Men's perpetration of non-partner sexual violence



A smaller proportion of men in the intervention group (33%) reported perpetrating non-partner sexual violence compared to those in the control group (41%) at endline. This was a 28% reduction in non-partner sexual violence for those in the intervention group.

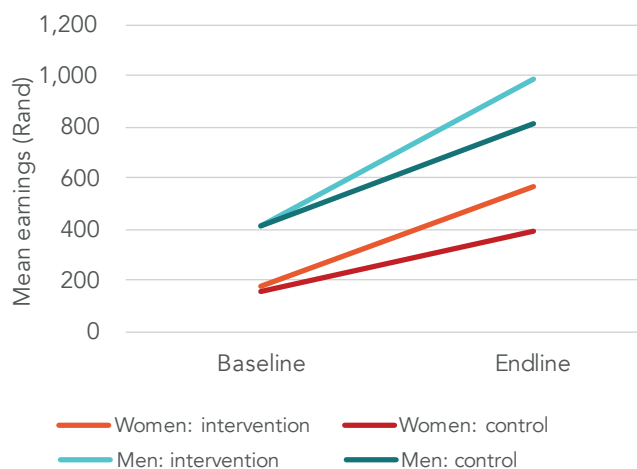
Women who participated in the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures intervention did not report any reduction in their experiences of IPV and non-partner sexual violence over the project period. Rates of IPV and non-partner sexual violence remained exceedingly high and sustained during this time.



## Women and men reported increased earnings, savings and access to work

Women and men who received Stepping Stones and Creating Futures reported higher past month earnings than those in the control group. For women, past month earnings increased more than three times, from R180 (US\$13) to R565 (\$40). This was significantly more than the control group.<sup>3</sup>

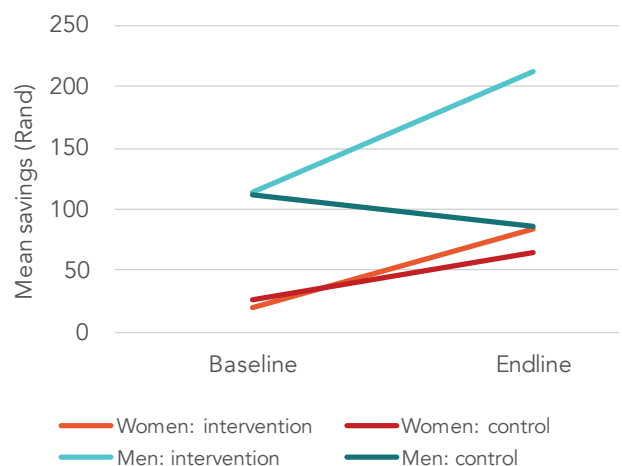
### Women's and men's earnings (past month)



For men there was a similar increase in earnings from R410 (\$29) to R989 (\$70) amongst those receiving Stepping Stones and Creating Futures. However, while earnings in the intervention group were higher at endline compared to the control group (which increased from R410 to R817), this increase was not significantly different to the control group.

Women and men who participated in Stepping Stones and Creating Futures also saved significantly more money in the past four weeks at endline, compared to those in the control group. For women, past four week savings increased from R21 (\$1.50) at baseline to R83 (\$6) at endline. For men, the corresponding increase was R114 (\$8) to R212 (\$15).

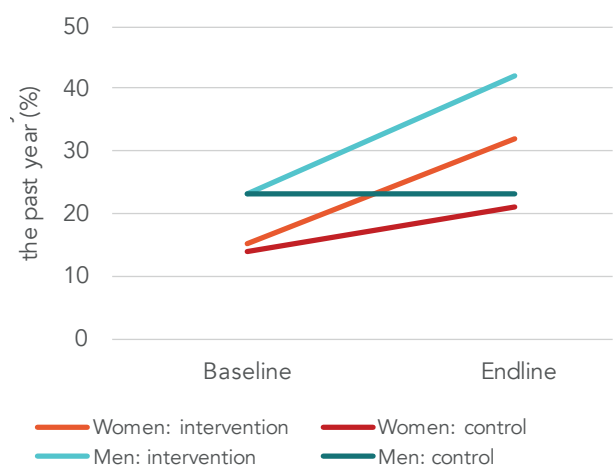
### Women's and men's savings (past month)



Women and men also reported greater engagement in the labour market in the past year. For women who received Stepping Stones and Creating Futures, at baseline 15% reported working every month or most months in the past year, and by endline this had increased to 32%.

A similar increase was seen for men, where at baseline 23% reported working every month or most months, and at endline this had increased to 42% of those who had received Stepping Stones and Creating Futures. Both these increases were significant, and greater than those people in the control group.

### Women's and men's work in the past year



<sup>3</sup> To assess changes in earnings, and savings we did a log-transformation to smooth the distribution, and then did a regression, controlling for baseline term and food insecurity.



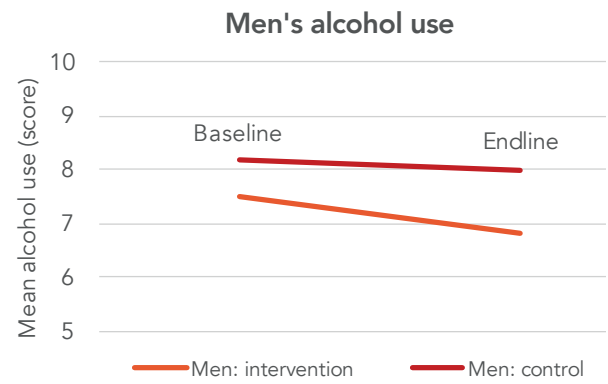
## Improved communication and relationship skills

Qualitative research highlighted that women and men who had been through Stepping Stones and Creating Futures had improved communication and relationship skills. They reported greater ability to deal with stressful situations, express their emotions more clearly in ways that did not increase tension in relationships, and build stronger more positive relationships. Women also reported being able to articulate their needs to partners more clearly.

### Men's alcohol use reduced

Men who participated in Stepping Stones and Creating Futures reported a significant reduction in alcohol use at endline<sup>4</sup> compared to those in the control group.

<sup>4</sup> Alcohol was assessed using the AUDIT scale; participants answer 10 questions creating a score, with higher scores indicate more alcohol use.



There was also indication that men's use of drugs decreased over the intervention period, with a lower proportion reporting past year drug use at the endline in the intervention group, compared to those in the control group.

## Understanding pathways to change

The precise pathways to change that underpin the success of Stepping Stones and Creating Futures require further time to reflect on, and necessitate further analysis of qualitative and quantitative data that have been collected as part of the study to properly understand this. However, early analysis and reflection suggest some potential pathways.

The reduction in men's perpetration of violence against women is likely a combination of strengthened livelihoods, reducing stress in men's lives, alongside greater recognition that violence against women is unacceptable. Having an expanded range of communication strategies and approaches may also have offered ways of engaging with women which did not use violence. This broadly supports the hypothesized pathways of change for the intervention for men.

For women, there were changes in the pathways that are expected to lead to reductions in women's experiences of violence. Women reported greater earnings and savings, and overall improved livelihoods. In addition women reported greater confidence in engaging in relationships and improved communication. These are all pathways through which violence in relationships should reduce, and can therefore be seen as steps towards future violence reduction in women's lives.

That there was not an immediate reduction in women's experiences of violence, may be down to several reasons which require further analysis. It may be that while women who went through Stepping Stones and Creating Futures did increase past month earnings, they still earned incredibly little overall, and this may not have been enough to build different relationships with intimate partners.

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In addition, a focus on strengthening livelihoods and transforming relationships may be incredibly challenging for young women who, because of the extremely high levels of violence they experience, are struggling with high levels of unresolved prior trauma, poor mental health in the form of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, and often struggling substance use as a form of self-medication. In order to maximise the

benefit Stepping Stones and Creating Futures provided, it would be important to work with young women on resolving these lingering traumas.

Building a stronger understanding of how and why interventions enable change, or the barriers to change, remains a critical challenge within the field of violence prevention.

## **Beyond the intervention: core elements in our success**

### **1. Facilitators are the crucial link between the intervention and participants**

Facilitators are the face of the intervention, and interact daily with participants as they deliver the intervention. As such, identifying the correct facilitators and adequately supporting them are critical components for project success.

### **2. Investment in identifying the right facilitators**

Recruiting facilitators takes time when it is done carefully. Stepping Stones and Creating Futures used group and individual activities to identify people who embrace diversity, have gender equitable attitudes and practices, are generally egalitarian in their outlook, are self-reflective and have experiences/lived in communities where we work.

### **3. Facilitators were trained extensively and received ongoing support**

Facilitators received six weeks of training. This included participating in Stepping Stones and Creating Futures, as well as additional content knowledge and training in facilitation skills. Facilitators also received ongoing support including weekly debriefing and refresher training. There was also ongoing observation and supervision of intervention delivery.

### **4. Implemented by an organisation with a track-record in this field**

Project Empower has worked for over 15 years on gender, HIV and violence against women, including many years in informal settlements. They are familiar with the context, have a long established reputation in the community, and a commitment to the methodological underpinnings of participation and facilitator guided approaches to behaviour change, on which the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures curriculums are based.

### **5. Resource support for participants**

Participants received food and a transport stipend to enable travel to the venue to participate in sessions. This enabled them to concentrate on the materials and activities, rather than being distracted by hunger.

### **6. Delivering the whole intervention and allowing for experiential learning**

Stepping Stones and Creating Futures is intensive, with 21 sessions delivered through two sessions per week. There are now two evidence-based evaluations – the initial Stepping Stones study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, and this one of Stepping Stones and Creating Futures - that have shown that delivering group-based participatory interventions over an extended period allows time for reflection and experiential learning to occur between sessions, and is critical to achieving the impact. More condensed delivery has been used, but never evaluated.



## Implications

This study has demonstrated that Stepping Stones and Creating Futures reduces men's perpetration of violence, builds relationships and strengthens women's and men's livelihoods. This confirms the findings of the effectiveness of Stepping Stones first shown in the rural Eastern Cape. There are three immediate implications of this:

1. The Stepping Stones and Creating Futures intervention model of group-based participatory interventions, building off the Stepping Stones model, has been proven to work in contrasting settings of the rural Eastern Cape and urban informal settlements, in South Africa. The intervention can be delivered at low cost (a full cost and cost-effectiveness study of this intervention is currently being finalized by collaborators) within *What Works* at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM, UK). It has strong potential for scale-up.
2. Stepping Stones and Creating Futures is effective in strengthening young people's livelihoods and supporting them to enter the labour market. Governments and NGOs working on strengthening young people's job seeking behaviour should consider implementing this evidence-based intervention as part of efforts to promote youth employment.
3. Given the exceedingly high levels of violence that young women experienced in urban informal settlements during the study, there needs to be continued effort at a national level to improve policing and prosecution of these crimes, and provide adequate support services for women experiencing violence.

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3. Jewkes R, Nduna M, Jama-Shai N: **Stepping Stones South Africa: A training manual for sexual and reproductive health communication and relationship skills**. In. Pretoria: MRC; 2010.
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6. Gibbs A, Washington L, Willan S, Ntini N, Khumalo T, Mbatha N, Sikweyiya Y, Shai N, Chirwa E, Strauss M: **The Stepping Stones and Creating Futures intervention to prevent intimate partner violence and HIV-risk behaviours in Durban, South Africa: study protocol for a cluster randomized control trial, and baseline characteristics**. *BMC Public Health* 2017, 17(1):336.



## Project Publications

1. Sikweyiya Y, Shai N, Gibbs A, Mahlangu P, Jewkes R: **Conceptualisations of fatherhood and socio-contextual dynamics influencing father involvement in informal settlements in Durban, South Africa.** *Social Dynamics* 2017, **43**(1):131-147.
2. Gibbs A, Washington L, Willan S, Ntini N, Khumalo T, Mbatha N, Sikweyiya Y, Shai N, Chirwa E, Strauss M: **The Stepping Stones and Creating Futures intervention to prevent intimate partner violence and HIV-risk behaviours in Durban, South Africa: study protocol for a cluster randomized control trial, and baseline characteristics.** *BMC Public Health* 2017, **17**(1):336.
3. Gibbs A, Jewkes R, Willan S, Washington L: **Associations between poverty, mental health and substance use, gender power, and intimate partner violence amongst young (18-30) women and men in urban informal settlements in South Africa: A cross-sectional study and structural equation model.** *Plos One* 2018, **13**(10):e0204956.
4. Gibbs A, Dunkle K, Jewkes R: **Emotional and economic intimate partner violence as key drivers of depression and suicidal ideation: a cross-sectional study among young women in informal settlements in South Africa** *Plos One* 2018, **13**(4):e0194885.
5. Gibbs A, Dunkle K, Washington L, Willan S, Shai N, Jewkes R: **Childhood traumas as a risk factor for HIV-risk behaviours amongst young women and men living in urban informal settlements in South Africa: A cross-sectional study.** *Plos One* 2018.
6. Hatcher AM, Gibbs A, Jewkes R, McBride R-S, Peacock D, Christofides N: **Effect of Childhood Poverty and Trauma on Adult Depressive Symptoms Among Young Men in Peri-Urban South African Settlements.** *Journal of Adolescent Health* 2018.

## Project Team

The Stepping Stones and Creating Futures intervention trial is a collaborative project of Project Empower and the South African Medical Research Council.

The research was led by Dr Andrew Gibbs, with Prof Rachel Jewkes, Dr Yandisa Sikweyiya, Dr Nwabisa Jama-Shai, Samantha Willan, Dr Esnat Chirwa, and Nada Abdelatif of the South African Medical Research Council, and Laura Washington (Project Empower).

The implementation of Stepping Stones and Creating Futures is led by Laura Washington and Project Empower; an NGO with 15 years experience of working in urban informal settlements around gender, violence and HIV.

Further information about the project is available at: [www.whatworks.co.za](http://www.whatworks.co.za)

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