



Thinking Outside the Gender Box

Through tea and podcasts, Somali refugees combat gender norms and intimate partner violence

THE FOUR WOMEN SIT AROUND A TABLE LISTENING INTENTLY, HEADPHONES positioned carefully over their colorful hijabs. For a few of them, it's the first time they've used headphones to listen to anything. All four fled Somalia only to end up in a refugee camp across the border in Ethiopia, where they are now learning how to end intimate partner violence and have healthy relationships through podcasts created by other refugees in the camp.

The podcasts are part of Unite for a Better Life, an innovative program working to stem intimate partner violence in humanitarian camps. Two researchers from Harvard University, in conjunction with partners such as Women and Health Alliance Ethiopia and Fondation Hironnelle, developed the program—a series of 16 podcast episodes featuring the characters Abdi and Fawzia. The couple navigate situations like women working outside the home and the chewing of khat, a harmful stimulant used in the Horn of Africa. The podcasts honor the Somali tradition of oral storytelling, and there's a portion in each episode when participants break for tea—an important part of Somali culture—to reflect on lessons learned.

“What’s unique about this project is its participatory, human-centered approach that actually empowers individuals to create solutions that improve their own lives and com-

UN PHOTO/ESKINDER DEBEBE; DR. VANDANA SHARMA; KRISTI EATON

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At a Somali camp in Ethiopia (far left) refugees record, edit and act in narrative podcasts about domestic violence, healthy relationships and gender equality.

munities,” says Dr. Vandana Sharma. One of the creators of the program, Sharma is a global public health researcher at Harvard and an expert in impact evaluation.

Eight women and men from the camp received digital storytelling training before recording the podcasts in a makeshift studio, using mattresses to soundproof their workspace. They also recorded content in the camp and edited each episode together.

“I was fearful [about the camp’s reaction] at first,” admits Hodan, a senior podcaster. “But I adapted.” The 20-year-old, who is using only her first name for safety reasons, adds, “If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a family.”

As part of the program’s pilot testing in November and December 2019, a team of refugees fanned out to collect data from others living at the camp, one of five along the border in Ethiopia, together housing more than 212,000 Somali refugees. Community members were then invited to take part in group or individual sessions, listening to the episodes at centers set up in the camp.

Typically, programs involving intimate partner violence require in-person sessions, Sharma notes, but in humanitarian settings with mobile populations, a lengthy in-person intervention may not be possible. “[This tool] could actually have a much farther reach,” Sharma says, “as people could download the podcasts and share them person-to-person, so in this context, we could reach many people very quickly.” In fact, prelimi-

nary data from the study shows a lot of promise. Roughly 200 households took part.

“Most of those who participated in the program reported that they had changed their behavior as a result of what they had learned—close to 90 percent, both men and women,” Sharma says. “They reported changes in how they communicate with their partners, solving conflict in a healthy way.” She adds that many participants shared their new knowledge with others in the camp who did not participate in the program. To Sharma, this suggests the program could potentially create a ripple effect, leading to changes beyond direct participants.

Producing a podcast series in such a stark locale was not without obstacles. One was sheer logistics. Getting the necessary approvals to bring equipment to the camp was difficult, as was the daily commute that research manager Theodoros Woldegiorgis had to undertake, through flooded roadways with deep pockets of mud and a variety of wildlife settled in the middle of the road.

The World Bank Group and the Sexual Violence Research Initiative, together with the Swiss Cooperation Office, funded the pilot project. Sharma and her colleague, Dr. Jennifer Scott, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and a physician researcher focusing on gender-based violence in humanitarian crises, hope to expand the program with additional funding. Dr. Negussie Deyessa, an associate professor at the Addis Ababa University School of Public Health, works with Sharma and Scott. He says he’s “eager to see the [project] findings ... and consider scaling it up in similar populations in the world.”

The podcast series expands on

Unite for a Better Life’s in-person sessions about intimate partner violence, which were implemented in the same camp in 2018. That project used tea to foster discussion around partner violence, joint decision making, healthy sexuality and gender norms.

Amina took part in those earlier, in-person sessions. She says that after learning about gender roles through the program, her relationship with her partner improved. Before, they had been living “inside the gender box,” she says in a nod to the curriculum, which emphasizes how gender-role adherence can keep people in restricted lives.

Other couples were also impacted. Abdullali participated in the in-person program with his wife. Previously, he had not allowed her to be employed or to share in the family decision making. But after, with Abdullali’s support, his wife opened a restaurant—she now serves tea and food to other community members in the camp.

“I used to make the decisions,” he says, “but now we make decisions together.” While his wife is working at her restaurant, he handles household duties—fetching water, cutting firewood and caring for their seven children, ages 1 to 11. He brings the baby to the restaurant several times a day so she can breastfeed.

He says he’s sometimes mocked for doing what some perceive as women’s work, but he doesn’t worry about it. “Before, I believed it was only the husband who has the power to work,” he confesses.

For such couples, Unite for a Better Life has lived up to its name.

—KRISTI EATON

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