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# The transformative effects of a participatory social empowerment intervention in the MAISHA intimate partner violence trial in Tanzania

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## ABSTRACT

Intimate partner violence is an important public health problem, with far-reaching consequences for women's physical and emotional health and social well-being. There is evidence that intimate partner violence is preventable. The MAISHA study, a randomised controlled trial of the impact of a gender training intervention on intimate partner violence for women in Tanzania, found that those who participated in gender training were less likely to report past-year physical violence. As part of the study, a sample of women participated in longitudinal qualitative enquiry. To better understand the processes of change associated with intimate partner violence prevention, we explored narratives from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with women who had participated in the training. The study drew on feminist political theory on agency and change, which we sought to understand in a setting with high rates of intimate partner violence that a standalone intervention was unlikely to change. The study found that gender training, which seeks to develop political consciousness and transformation, can promote a sense of efficacy amongst participants who feel validated through the collective learning process. Important yet under examined cognitive elements of change processes deserve more attention in the design, delivery and evaluation of violence prevention gender training.

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Gender; intimate partner violence; women's empowerment; agency; Tanzania

## Background

Violence against women is both a driver and a consequence of gender inequality (García-Moreno et al. 2005). Defined as physical, sexual or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse, intimate partner violence (intimate partner violence) is the most common form of violence against women worldwide (García-Moreno et al. 2006; Devries et al. 2013a). Recent global estimates indicate around one

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third of women will experience physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner during their lifetime (Devries et al. 2013a).

Over the last 20 years, there has been a growing focus on the public health implications of intimate partner violence, as well as gender-based violence more broadly (Jewkes et al. 2010; Dunkle et al. 2006; Devries et al. 2013b; Stöckl et al. 2013; Maman et al. 2000). This has led to development and evaluation of violence prevention interventions. Amongst these, the SASA! programme in Uganda and the IMAGE programme in South Africa have shown that intimate partner violence is preventable (Pronyk et al. 2006; Abramsky et al. 2014). The MAISHA study, inspired by the IMAGE programme, is a community-based cluster randomised controlled trial (RCT) that aimed to assess whether a 10-session participatory social empowerment gender training intervention integrated into an established microfinance scheme has an impact on women's past-year experience of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence (Harvey et al. 2018). Women who were members of an established microfinance loan scheme took part in the study, which found that those who participated in the gender training were less likely to report past-year physical violence, and to have more gender equitable attitudes than those who did not (Kapiga et al. 2019). To understand how this gender training was transformative, we advance a process-oriented understanding of agency and change. In doing so, we caution that our findings among participants in urban and peri-urban communities of Mwanza may not be directly generalisable to all areas of Tanzania.

## History and critiques of gender training

Gender training has its foundation in the consciousness-raising workshops that emerged from the feminist movement in the 1970s in the global north. Such group work amongst women was based on a critical perspective whereby women were encouraged to perceive that their oppression and the structures of their oppression needed to be transformed, and working as a collective was an important way to start that process (Bailey 1976).

Many such workshops drew on Paulo Freire's theory that oppressed people can be liberated from oppressive structures through critical engagement with their own lived experience (Freire 2003). As Ferguson (2019) argues, such workshops were 'an important part of the feminist movement's engagement with women's experiences and struggles, and its questioning of how to connect these to broader structures of patriarchy, capitalism and other systems of oppression' (*ibid.*, 6). Gender training was developed and implemented widely across the development sector following the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) and featured in the UN Secretary General's Report on follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women entitled 'Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century' published in 2000 (United Nations 2000).

UN Women suggest that training for gender equality is a transformative process that aims to provide knowledge, techniques and tools to develop skills and changes in attitudes and behaviours (Ferguson 2019). It is a continuous and long-term process that requires political will and commitment from all parties in order to create inclusive

societies that recognise the need to promote gender equality. Gender training typically covers five themes: awareness raising and consciousness building; knowledge enhancement; skills training; change in attitudes, behaviours and practices; and mobilisation for social transformation (UN Women Training Centre 2017). There have been a number of criticisms about the ways in which gender training is delivered, especially when it tends to focus on measurable technical skills that show an organisation's progress in implementing a programme rather than addressing equality (Mukhopadhyay 2014). Mukhopadhyay argues that in this way 'governmentality as a form of power shapes the practice of gender training to provide a fit to the mainstream technical mandate of development institutions' (362). Alongside this, there is also a concern that gender training has supplanted the work of feminist social movements. This is particularly worrisome when the implementation of gender training perpetuates hierarchies of knowledge, such as Western feminist knowledge via international gender experts to non-Western contexts.

This, Kunz (2015) argues, 'contributes to the demobilisation of local social movements, a narrowing of feminist political vocabularies, and the marginalisation of alternative feminist agendas' (108). Ferguson (2019) argues that instead, gender training should be part of any change process towards gender equality at institutional, societal and individual levels, especially when it can be 'harnessed as a catalyst for disjuncture, rupture and change' (20). Thus, as Mukhopadhyay suggests, gender training implementation should seek to enhance political consciousness and actual transformation while highlighting the significance of learning processes (Mukhopadhyay 2014). To achieve transformation, approaches must involve both 'a *feminist* and a *political* endeavour' (Ferguson 2019, 20, *author's emphasis*). In reference to intersectionality, she also asks us to pay attention to how knowledge is selected, by whom training is delivered, and who participates. In particular, attention should focus on power relations at all stages of the gender training process—who commissions, who designs, who implements and who evaluates.

### **Agency and an epistemological lens on change**

In settings where intimate partner violence is commonly understood as normative, evaluating change in the experiences of intimate partner violence requires conceptualising the agency of victims and others to enact such change. If intimate partner violence is understood to be enacted not just interpersonally, but structurally by forces of patriarchy and global capitalism (True 2012), then it cannot simply be 'trained away' (Harcourt 2016) in isolation from structural change that needs also to address various drivers in the political economy of intimate partner violence. In understanding how change might happen with respect to intimate partner violence, constructions of agency that focus too closely on individual acts of resistance obscure the context in which resistance occurs and the complex combination of factors that may lie behind the action.

Where agency is understood as 'overt, discrete and identifiable actions by individual women at identifiable moments', this may lead us to conclude that women who do not leave or fully transform relationships characterised by intimate partner violence

are not exercising agency (Campbell and Mannell 2016, 12-3). Instead, we argue that the agency of women who experience intimate partner violence includes 'the often hidden and invisible strategies of persistence, resistance and survival that women engage in' (*ibid.*, 11). Such a conception of agency encompasses the 'more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis' (Pells, Wilson, and Thi Thu Hang 2016, 438) and maintains the view that victims who do not achieve transformation of their own context are agents nonetheless, albeit constrained. As agency is always influenced by context, this is where we direct our focus in the context of evaluating change from gender training. In particular, we seek to understand the nature of the change towards violence prevention that is possible and that which occurred, according to those who participated, even in the context of a highly coercive setting that a standalone intervention is unlikely to transform altogether.

To respond to Campbell and Mannell's (2016) call for careful thinking about pathways to change, from situations characterised by gender violence to situations characterised by gender equity, we use an epistemological lens to understand the effects of gender training. Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice hold the potential to clarify how existing gender inequalities may be challenged and changed in the transfer of knowledge, tools and techniques in gender training. Fricker describes two types of epistemic injustice in which someone is wronged 'specifically in their capacity as a knower'. *Hermeneutical injustice* occurs where dominant discourses obscure or erase collective interpretive resources for understanding one's lived experience of oppression. In this case, a 'cognitive disablement prevents her from understanding a significant patch of her own experience' and 'renders her unable to make sense of her ongoing mistreatment, and this in turn prevents her from protesting it, let alone securing effective measures to stop it' (*ibid.*, 151). *Testimonial injustice* on the other hands occurs where 'prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word' (*ibid.*, 1). Drawing on these theoretical positions, we explore narratives from women who participated in the MAISHA study gender training to better understand the processes of change associated with intimate partner violence prevention.

## Methods

MAISHA trial methods are described in detail elsewhere but in brief, the trial recruited 66 established microfinance loan groups (BRAC) in Mwanza city (Harvey et al. 2018). Women who consented to take part in the trial completed a baseline quantitative survey, using a structured questionnaire. Groups were then randomised to take part in a social empowerment (gender training) intervention (intervention arm) or to be wait-listed for the intervention post-trial (control arm). Over a 20-week period, intervention arm women attended 10 gender training sessions. Twenty-four months after intervention activities were complete, women completed a survey, to assess the impact on intimate partner violence. The trial was conducted between September 2014 and January 2018. The results of the trial are reported in Kapiga et al. (2019).

A qualitative study was conducted with a sub-set of participants. Eighteen trial participants were invited to attend a baseline qualitative in-depth interviews (IDIs). Of

these, six who had reported past-year intimate partner violence and six who had not reported past-year intimate partner violence during the baseline survey were randomly selected from the intervention arm, and then six women were randomly selected from the control arm irrespective of whether or not they had reported past-year intimate partner violence. Twelve microfinance groups (9 intervention and 3 control) were also randomly selected to take part in focus group discussions (FGDs). Each woman and group was invited to attend two follow up interviews immediately (within one month) post-intervention, and two years post-intervention. Interviews and discussions focused on women's social and economic lives, experiences of microfinance loan group membership, perceptions and experiences of violence, and future aspirations. Follow-up interviews also addressed experiences of the gender training. The analysis reported on in this paper focuses on findings from the 24 IDIs and 18 FGDs conducted with intervention arm women at post-intervention (9) and 2-years post-intervention (9). In addition, observations were conducted at gender training sessions over a six-month period by the first and third authors.

All IDIs and FGDs were conducted in Swahili and translated into English. Following each interview and discussion, the first and second authors conducted a debrief in order to refine questions. The transcripts were imported to NVIVO 12 software and a framework approach was used to analyse the data, which included both inductive and deductive analysis (Lewis and Ritchie 2003). A coding tree was developed according to the key research questions and all transcripts were coded in line with this tree.

Ethical approval both for the trial and qualitative study was obtained from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) Ethics Committee and the Tanzanian Medical Research Coordinating Committee (MRCC). Informed consent was obtained from all sub-study participants in addition to informed consent to take part in the trial. The trial and qualitative study were conducted in line with WHO recommendations on researching violence against women (WHO 1999). All women were provided with a leaflet providing information on legal and health services for women experiencing violence. Any women who required support were assisted by a dedicated member of the trial team to access services.

## **Maisha gender training**

The MAISHA gender training approach used a curriculum (*Wanawake Na Maisha*) developed by EngenderHealth drawing on other published curricula, including *Sisters for Life* that forms part of the IMAGE intervention. (Rolleri et al. 2014). The curriculum was designed to be participatory and reflective, and aimed to empower women to prevent intimate partner violence and promote healthy relationships by: increasing knowledge and awareness; developing relationship skills (e.g. communication and conflict resolution); and improving group dynamics and stability (e.g. increased peer support and social capital). The 10 sessions of the curriculum focused on the areas identified in Table 1.

Twelve Tanzanian women with a background in gender and development were trained over a three-month period to facilitate the MAISHA gender training sessions

**Table 1.** Wanawake na Maisha curriculum content.

Session	Content
1	Curriculum introduction and understanding gender
2	Act like a man, act like a woman
3	Healthy and unhealthy relationships
4	Power in relationships
5	Negotiating men's and women's roles inside and outside of the home
6	Communicating assertively with your partner
7	What is violence?
8	Setting personal boundaries in relationships
9	Non-violent ways to resolve conflict
10	Empowering change and curriculum closure

and the gender training sessions were conducted in Swahili (see Harvey et al. 2018 for further details).

## Findings

### **Kufahamu: articulating gender oppression**

As a direct effect of participating in the gender training, women described the different ways in which they understood gender oppression, and how socially constructed ideas of gender and male power can lead to intimate partner violence.

### **Understanding gender as a social construct**

The narratives of change that the women tell show that their learning began with understanding the difference between gender (*jinsia*) as a construct and biological sex (*jinsi*). For the women, drawing such a distinction was an important step in discussion about the relationship between gender and violence, and in establishing that gender norms are subject to change.

I understood that gender includes those habits, that a male child can't do [domestic work]. But gender can change, it can change a male child. He can wash the utensils, he can fetch water, he can cook, he can wash clothes and mop the floor. But on the side of sex, I as a woman, can't change and become a man. A cup can't change to a spoon, you see. So, I know the meaning of gender and sex; they are two different things. (FGD, Kirumba Group 3, Post-Intervention, 11/11/15)

Understanding that gender is socially constructed helped women better understand the implications of gender inequality and out-of-balance gender power relations, which they had articulated in their baseline interviews. If gender is not biologically dictated, then it can be subject to challenge and change.

One of the curriculum tools most referenced in IDIs and FGDs uses the metaphor of a box for discussing oppressive gender norms: 'Being inside the box is like being inside a cage... You are not able to do everything you want to do' (Rolleri et al. 2014, 31). Participants used this vocabulary to describe their understandings and experiences of oppression:

We were taught and we knew that if someone doesn't get her rights that means she is in her box. (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 1, Post-Intervention, 2/11/15)

In the MAISHA curriculum, the capacities for critical reflection and resistance are depicted as tools for ‘getting out’ of such gender boxes: ‘we have the power to break open the box. We can challenge those people who want to keep us inside the box’ (Rolleri et al. 2014, 31). This metaphor complements the distinction between sex and gender in the Wanawake Na Maisha curriculum by bringing out the restrictive functions of some gender norms—being ‘boxed in’ by one’s gender. Women discussed such coercive norms both with and without the box metaphor:

Regarding the relationship between the wife and husband in the family, the husband was controlling you very much. If you needed to do business, he was preventing you. If you had your income, he wanted to control it the way he wanted, that you hand it over to him then after that he would give you his accounts. (FGD, Kirumba Group 3, Post-Intervention, 11/11/15)

Women also used the box metaphor to describe the importance of learning experiences in their change stories around gender norms. They discussed the revelatory quality of identifying restrictions about gender roles, having experienced these restrictions as women in a highly patriarchal setting but without considering them as such. With critical reflection, they saw the situation differently:

You’ve taken us far from where we were. We didn’t know the meaning of being in a box but realised you could be in a box without being aware. (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 2, Post-Intervention, 10/11/15)

Unhinging the view of oppression as inevitable, along with other background assumptions about gender roles, was motivating. One participant referred to this as the ‘power of knowledge ... I realised that I know I have the power to do something’ (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 2, post-intervention, 10/11/15). Another woman referred to the same empowering and motivating element of understanding her experience of gender inequality through the curriculum tools: ‘I have changed because I have been educated’. Participants also drew direct links between learning and a sense of being liberated. One woman likened coming out of the box to being free: ‘Coming out of the box, we are then free’ (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 2, post-intervention, 10/11/15). Another described the process from the starting point of not being conscious of the box:

For example, we didn’t know that we were in small boxes... We were taught and then understood, and we have come out of our boxes... So, we are free... We are out of the box. (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 1, post-intervention, 2/11/15)

### ***Understanding male power***

Understanding gender as a social construct and its relationship to oppression was not limited to participants’ understanding of their own experiences as women but extended to their understanding of what gender inequity might mean to men. In particular, women challenged their partners’ presumptuous entitlement to their bodies:

The man believes that he has the final say over the woman. There is no love, he just rapes you when he comes home from his work. It is wrong. A woman needs to be prepared before having sex so that she can enjoy sex, but some men don’t know that. I



am married, I am like a hole. He doesn't think that we both need to enjoy sex. (IDI, 45yrs, Kilimahewa, Post-Intervention, 12/11/15)

These emerging convictions about sex carried a revelatory quality. Some women had not previously considered forced sex in marriage to be oppression because it is so firmly embedded in norms concerning wives' responsibilities to their husbands. In one example, a participant reflected on her experience of forced anal sex.

And you are also being oppressed if he wants to sodomise you. You think that maybe that is just how he feels, but really, that is itself oppression. (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 2, Post-Intervention, 10/11/15)

Women also described revelations about unequal power dynamics in household negotiations. For example, they reported that women's role in children's education, food planning, or income-generation is rarely acknowledged. One woman related how she was often made to feel insecure, and that her role as a parent was often undermined when her partner did not listen to her concerns:

Then when you get in, he doesn't have any time with you... You think that when he comes we will discuss some things... but you find that your fellow has no time with you. You feel hurt in your heart. (IDI, 43yrs, Nyakato, Post-Intervention, 7/9/15)

## **Kujibadilisha—Engendering change for themselves**

### ***Gaining confidence (kujiamini)***

In addition to gaining new knowledge, skills development such as effective communication in relationships, helped build women's confidence to challenge norms of male authority. One woman commented: 'I have been taught to communicate with confidence, perhaps to protect the boundaries' (FGD, Kirumba Group 3, Post-Intervention, 11/11/2015). More specifically, the gender training strengthened two aspects of women's understanding of their experiences: first, their conviction that oppression based on gender is wrong and ought to change; and second, their sense of efficacy that they could be agents of that change. Before the training, power imbalances were exacerbated by fear and a lack of confidence in challenging male partners, or even speaking to them:

Before we started this training, to tell the truth, when someone was talking with her partner, she really became afraid; she didn't trust herself... This was also the reason that they thought we don't have the ability, but in fact we [do] have the ability. (FGD, Kirumba Group 2, Post-Intervention, 16/11/15)

The suggestion that women did not trust themselves in their communication with their partners before the training is telling. Not only did participants fear challenging their male partners but they questioned their own conviction in testifying about the situation that they might seek to change: 'she didn't trust herself.' Such a description points to the importance of having conviction in one's understanding of injustice before one can protest it. Others referenced the same view of women as unable to speak against oppression because of dominant norms against their rights.

Really, we have been educated. Most of the time we were being oppressed, men were harassing us. Even where we have rights, we are seen to have no rights. (FGD, Kirumba Group 3, Post-Intervention, 11/11/15)

With new knowledge and skills, many women described gaining the ability to speak to their partners using positive communication. They gave examples to illustrate the changes they had experienced and the confidence they now felt in being able to speak to their partners, from a new starting point of trusting themselves.

We have been able to express ourselves, to give our opinions with confidence. Unlike before when we were inside the boxes, and you feared to explain [things] to your partner. (FGD, Kirumba Group 3, Post-Intervention, 11/11/15)

Participants also discussed the synergy between the gender training programme and their involvement in the parallel microfinance project as providing them a level of financial security and independence.

In the past it was because of the fear—that is why there was violence and women suffered a lot. But now because we are now well educated, that violence has gone down because we have some money. We stand up for ourselves in our families. (FGD, Kirumba Group 1, Post-Intervention, 4/11/15)

### ***Improving communication through conflict management and boundary setting***

Through the skills development activities of the Wanawake na Maisha curriculum, which focused partly on peaceful communication and conflict resolution, participants reflected on the ways they might change themselves to improve communication and reduce violence in their households. Women are less likely to be perpetrators of violence than men, but many participants recognised that their own behaviour change could have an effect on their partner even in the context of out-of-balance power relations within in their partnerships. Some even felt that they themselves may have contributed to violence and could change their own behaviour as a starting point to prevent it:

Since I learned those lessons, I came to realise that I was the one who caused the relationship in the house to be bad. But when I reached the period for rectifying myself ... if he sees me having that closeness to him, there will definitely be peace inside the house and things will be improved.

(IDI, 43yrs, Nyakato, Post-Intervention, 7/9/15)

Putting skills into practice beyond the training, women reflected on the changes that they were able to engender in their partners' behaviour by changing their own approach to how they engaged with them. Using new skills to prevent violence in their existing relationships, many women felt empowered by their own capacity to engender change. The reciprocal nature of controlling their own anger to manage their partners' behaviour was also recognised as a potential source of communicative power to reach new understandings and reduce the chances of violent outcomes in household conflict.

I learned that when you are in relationship with your partner you should be calm and polite. When your partner becomes impolite, be patient and talk to him in a good manner. He might become calm. (IDI, 45yrs, Kilimahewa, Post-Intervention, 12/11/15)

Participants directly acknowledged the possibility of promoting peaceful communication on their part to prevent violence in the relationship overall.

There are some bad things I was doing; I could say that I was doing them wrong. Because even if my [husband] asked me something, I became very harsh, I was going astray ... This habit can lead to gender violence because your partner can speak to you well with good faith. Instead of reacting positively, you find that you speak nonsense. He is supposed to be treated well. (IDI, 40yrs, Kilimahewa, Post-Intervention, 9/11/15)

This should not be understood to mean that women are responsible for intimate partner violence and for the behaviour change required to prevent it, but as an acknowledgement of the expansion of agency described in the narratives presented by the participants themselves. In addition to communicating more clearly and managing conflict, women saw improvements in the quality of communication with their intimate partners.

I learned how to live with my partner in a good relationship and that is why I tell you that those trainings helped me a lot ... I learned the language to use with my husband, how to live with him in the marriage, how we should advise each other on how better we could live with our family. (IDI, 27yrs, Kirumba, Post-Intervention, 3/9/15)

### **Kubadilisha wengine: *engendering change for children and other women***

Many women used their children as examples to illustrate negative norms around gender and showed a determination to ensure that their children were taught that gender roles are not restrictive.

About the second lesson we learned ... that you don't have to value boys more than girls, you don't have to give more work to girls than boy. (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 1, Post-Intervention, 2/11/15)

Their discussion of gender roles for children included making corrective efforts to shift the distribution of household responsibilities so that girls were not disproportionately burdened.

I am supposed to treat all the children equally. I shouldn't say that girls wash some utensils and cook. They should all share those activities, they should all wash their clothes, boys and girls should cook. That is how is supposed to be. (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 3, Post-Intervention, 10/11/15)

In addition to working on their own partnerships and with their children, many women expressed the desire to help other women with the skills and knowledge they had gained:

We are outside the box. Maybe what we could do is help our colleagues so that they can be free too. (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 1, Post-Intervention, 2/11/15)

One woman thought others would benefit because, 'They will understand well how to maintain their relationship. Then they will improve their relationship. Even they can use the training to educate their families' (FGD, Kilimahewa Group 3, Post-Intervention, 10/11/15). Another participant said she felt a responsibility to support others in learning and changing:

This is the same as a football. Now it has been thrown to me. After the training I am required to kick it to someone else so that we may be able to help the community. This means I have the responsibility of educating the community. (IDI, women, 41yrs, Tailor, Kirumba, Post-Intervention, 10/9/15)

In addition to a sense of motivation and responsibility, participants reported putting their new skills into practice to support other women and couples in their communities. They often utilise the 'box' metaphor to describe how they were supporting those using what they had learned in the gender training sessions:

We are also continuing to educate our colleagues. [My friend] was inside the box but I have helped her to a large extent... I had also taught her how to talk to him with confidence. (FGD, Kirumba Group 3, Post-Intervention, 11/11/15)

Others thought the training should be expanded and offered to more women in Mwanza. Referring to the Mwanza Intervention Trials Unit (MITU) that had developed and implemented the gender training curriculum, participants suggested that scale-up using participants as agents could help other women and families in Tanzania.

I want to advise MITU that they should extend their scope. MITU should take some of the women in the group, they should take us to other areas... We are walking here in the street with those who are still in the box. They will receive training through us and extricate themselves from the boxes. Then there should also be seminars. MITU should arrange seminars for teaching us. (FGD, Kirumba Group 3, Post-Intervention, 11/11/15)

## Discussion

Findings from this qualitative research reveal articulated and enacted change alongside a measured reduction in the physical intimate partner violence experienced by women who participated in gender training compared with those who did not (Kapiga et al. 2019). Our findings align with Cornwall's (2016) assertion that 'where empowerment initiatives include a dimension to actively engage women in critical, conscious, reflection on their own circumstances... there can be a marked enhancement of a programme or project's transformative effects' (347).

Specifically, the findings suggest that participation in gender training enabled women to articulate their own experiences of the injustice of gender norms and male oppression in Tanzanian society. They also gained the confidence and skills to be more effective agents of change toward violence prevention with their partners, children and neighbours. The women consistently described relocating their gender role 'outside of the box' and discussed the harms associated with rigid and inequitable gender norms for themselves, and their children. The skills-building exercises that formed part of the gender training facilitated women's ability to challenge their male partners and accepted societal norms around gender roles in the household, through effective communication and problem-solving techniques.

Drawing on Fricker's theories of epistemic injustice, we now describe how the gender training has contributed to reduced incidence of physical intimate partner violence by their male partners and the limits of gender training to address violence at the interpersonal and political level.

### **Repairing epistemic injustice**

Intimate partner violence can be an outcome of unchallenged, or only quietly contested, coercive social norms. Violence against women as a product of oppressive social norms is 'embedded in the unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following these rules' (Young 2011, 41). Such norms can positively disguise violent behaviour by re-describing it as otherwise standard behaviour. Heise (2011) argues: 'Implicit support for violence is frequently couched in terms of men's need to 'discipline' women for various infractions, generally to gendered expectations regarding female behaviour or deference to male authority' (13). An understanding of violence as discipline fills what Fricker calls a hermeneutical lacuna in which such behaviour would otherwise be interpreted as an injustice.

In the case of the participants in this study, acceptance of intimate partner violence and other injustices was considered normal in a context where prevailing discourses disguise abusive behaviour by male partners as something less objectionable—such as discipline or a woman's responsibility to serve her husband sexually. Through critical reflection during the gender training, understanding gender as a social construct enabled women to situate existing gender norms as one set of possibilities among others, rather than unquestioned, prescribed and fixed elements of reality. By understanding that such norms emerge as contingent products of particular histories, participants came to understand that they can be changed with new understandings and action. Thus, participants reported that actions that were previously interpreted as 'a man disciplining his wife' and 'a woman meeting her responsibility to satisfy her husband' can be understood, rather, as physical and sexual abuse.

It is important to note that women who experienced intimate partner violence encountered a sense of dissonance about their lived experience before the training. They were aware of what is fair and just and had a distinct sense of a mismatch between how their lives and relationships should have been, versus how they actually were. Through the gender training, collectively rendering explicit the injustice of such norms and practices motivated them to challenge such oppression.

An epistemological lens also reveals that the group setting of gender training provides an important element in the process of reinterpreting and then challenging experiences of gender injustice. Fricker (2007) argues that moral and intellectual courage are required for one to reject the dominant interpretations that violent or abusive behaviour is acceptable. Being alone in one's convictions about 'the dissonance between received understanding and your own intimated sense of a given experience... tends to knock your faith in your own ability to make sense of the world' (263). Considering that 'authoritative constructions... impinge on us collectively but not uniformly,' this plurality is an opportunity (*ibid.*, 166). By engendering critical reflection of women in groups with varied but similar experiences of lived dissonance, 'the sense of dissonance can increase and become critically emboldened' (*ibid.*, 168). This brings out the sense of conviction, efficacy and confidence that MAISHA participants expressed following the intervention. Thus, the gender training addresses hermeneutical injustice: 'the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to marginalisation in

collective interpretive resources' (*ibid.*, 158). Through the collective reinterpretation of norms that took place among women during 10 facilitated workshops, intimate partner violence was rendered explicitly as wrong, harmful and preventable. Many participants used the phrase, 'Ninajiamini,' which means 'I have confidence' or 'I believe in myself,' showing that a sense of efficacy emerged amongst the women whose lived experiences of oppression were made explicit. The gender training also offered participants the tools to go beyond critical understandings by providing skills in healthy communication, conflict resolution, the diffusion of tension, and being the agents of change. These tools promoted the possibility that participants could put their new realisations to work outside the training atmosphere by overcoming testimonial injustice.

Together, these changes from gender training should be understood in the context of its delivery to participants who are members of existing microfinance groups. If women in such programmes are actively seeking to improve their economic wellbeing already, some of the processes of repairing epistemic injustice may well have started before the gender training began. Ongoing participation in microfinance groups likely has an effect on expanding agency not just via capital and labour, but by membership in a group of at least minimally likeminded women. While the gender training alone offers knowledge and skills, it could have synergistic effects with other features of the profiles of participants who participate in microfinance programmes like the MAISHA study participants, and who are already engaged in an activity to improve their lives before gender training. There is some evidence that microfinance loans can extend women's agency to address unequal power dynamics in the home, although this is limited (Hunt and Kasynathan 2001). It is possible that both (a) the profile of women who join such groups and (b) effects of membership in such a group affect outcomes for repairing epistemic injustices and changing violence in intimate relationships. Gender training as a standalone intervention, then, may not have similar transformative effects without some existing group cohesion and the processes of change having already begun.

### ***Political transformation and gender training***

Whilst gender training allowed the collective reinterpretation of gender and intimate partner violence to address epistemic injustices, it does not erase the broader structural inequalities affecting women's lives. Additionally, criticisms of gender training, described in the introduction, highlight the potential for such training, especially when instigated by Western institutions, to undermine the work of local social movements (Kunz 2015). For broader political change in structural inequalities, such local efforts by gender activists and movements have been pivotal (Htun and Weldon 2015). The role of social movements, particularly in addressing gender and violence in Tanzania, is relatively recent since the liberalisation of the political system in the early 1990s (Hirsch 2003; Michau, Naker, and Swalehe 2002; Lugalla 2005) and the impact of their efforts has been limited by economic, social, cultural, political, and legal factors (Myamba 2009). To embolden social movements in Tanzania, these findings support Rowlands's (1997) assertion that empowerment 'must also include the processes that

lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to ... decision-making space' (87). Although there is truth in the claim that gender training interventions may threaten more socially organic feminist movements, the change process engendered by the MAISHA gender training, and the sense of confidence, efficacy and entitlement that emerged for participants, may be a catalyst to strengthen such movements in Tanzania (Ferguson 2019; Mukhopadhyay 2014).

## Conclusion

This study found that gender training, which seeks to develop political consciousness and transformation, can promote a sense of efficacy amongst participants who feel validated through the collective learning process (*ninajiamini*). While this is only transformative at the individual and household level, it may underpin the success of the subsequent political renegotiation of gender roles and intimate partner violence if delivered at scale, especially when the gender training is contextually situated and interrogates participants' lived dissonance effectively. In this paper, we have attempted to show how participants in MAISHA gender training told their own stories of change, from recognising the cognitive disablement of hermeneutical injustice to giving testimony after the training toward facilitating change for others. From these narratives of change, viewed through an epistemological lens, we can see that important elements of change processes deserve more attention in the design, delivery and evaluation of violence prevention gender training programmes.

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