



# Empowering Rural Women through Women's Groups: EVIDENCE FROM DRC JENGA JAMAA II PROJECT

## BACKGROUND

ADRA implemented a five-year project in South Kivu, DRC, called Jenga Jamaa II, beginning in 2012. The main goal of the project was to sustainably reduce food insecurity among vulnerable households in Fizi, Uvira, and Kalehe territories in the country's South Kivu Province.

Women in DRC have suffered tremendous violence. An astonishing 40% of all DRC women have faced domestic and sexual assault, spurring international outcry from several organizations including the United Nations<sup>1</sup>. Evidence shows that sexual violence has potential impacts on both physical and mental health through physical injury, increased risk of sexual and reproductive health problems, stigmatization, and ostracization<sup>2</sup>.

About 39% of women in DRC have been threatened or injured in their lifetime while 27% are victims of harmful traditional practices such as

early marriages (39% of women in their early twenties are married or in a union before the age of 18). Malnutrition is high, predominantly among children under 5 years (24%) and pregnant and lactating women<sup>3</sup>. Congolese women and girls have less access to education than the country's men and boys and have a much lower literacy rate. The combination of nutritional taboos, harmful practices against women, discrimination against the female child, and women having the sole responsibility of tilling the fields creates a more stressful environment that further increases the vulnerability of these women<sup>4</sup>.

To achieve the objective of improved food security, it was important to shift the way women were seen in their communities, expand their control over productive assets, and advance gender justice to reduce their vulnerability to gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices.

## WOMEN'S GROUPS IN JENGA JAMAA II

With all of this context in mind, the Jenga Jamaa II project established women's groups to strengthen women's engagement in both household and community-level decision making processes.

The groups provided opportunities for women to receive training in business literacy and numeracy to enhance their business skills and bargaining power. The women also received training in proper family nutrition, leadership skills, life skills, and entrepreneurial skills.



Jenga Jamaa II is one of the few projects that integrated women's empowerment activities in a nutrition and food security enhancement project.

In 2015, ADRA conducted a research study in DRC to evaluate the effectiveness of the women's groups in achieving the target of (1) increasing women's control over household resources, (2) increasing women's participation in community leadership, and (3) reducing gender-based violence at household and community levels.

This brief presents some of the highlights of the research carried out by ADRA, focusing on four main "sociocultural dimensions" of empowerment:

- ▶ **Socio-Economic Dimension:** Pertains to women's economic contribution (from both farm and non-farm activities) to

households, as well as women's access to, and ownership of, productive and non-productive household assets.

- ▶ **Familial Dimension:** Refers to women's participation or involvement in household decision making, which includes the use of household physical, human, intellectual, and financial resources.
- ▶ **Psychological Dimension:** Includes perceptions on gender, rights of women, and the role of women in both the household and community level, and strategies to overcome different shocks, particularly gender-based violence.
- ▶ **Leadership Dimension:** This consists of the role women play in community development.

## SAMPLING DESIGN

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The research utilized qualitative data collected through:

1. Key Informant Interviews (KII)
2. Women's Focus Group Discussions (WFGD)
3. Men's Focus Group Discussions (MFGD)
4. Individual Stories

The territories (Fizi and Uvira) and communities included in the study were purposefully selected

based on ease of access and time constraints. In each of these territories, three intervention and one non-intervention communities were selected. Within the women's group communities, a random sample of the women's group members and men from the community were selected to participate in focus group discussions; similarly, men and women were randomly selected from the control communities to participate in focus group discussions.

## FINDINGS

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### Descriptive Statistics of Respondents

A total of 117 respondents were interviewed in 7 FGDs, 5 with women, and 2 with men. Of these, 66% (77) were from the women's group communities and 34% (40) from the non-women's group communities. With regard to the key informants, a total of 29 community leaders, religious leaders, school headmasters, teachers, and others were sampled of which 95% were

men. The youngest respondent was 20 years of age and the oldest was 60 years old.

### Socio-Economic Dimension of Empowerment

The women's group members explained that they are now able to claim part of the family property upon separation or death of their spouse rather than everything going to the man or his family due to changes in the legal process in some

areas and informal agreements between families in others.

**WFGD:** *“Today we share the property upon death of a spouse ... previously, the husband’s family took everything and the woman was left with nothing.”*

In addition, women are now allowed to own land, something they were previously not allowed to do.

Previously, there existed a cultural norm that prevented women from eating chicken eggs and gizzards, because these were reserved only for men. After the intervention, some women reported they now freely eat both food items, because men now understand the nutritional value of women consuming these food products. This change is significant because it impacts women’s nutritional and food security needs—the primary purpose of the Jenga Jamaa II project.

**WFGD:** *“Before we could not eat eggs and chicken gizzards; these were for men only. Now we can also eat eggs and chicken gizzards.”*

The women’s group members explained that they are now able to manage their incomes without men directing them. They are also able to control the use and sales of produce from their farms while women in non-intervention areas complained of still grappling with men stealing their money and taking their farm produce to sell without their consent. The business literacy and numeracy activity also helped to enhance the businesses of women in the women’s groups.

In addition, women’s group members expressed that before their involvement in the intervention, men used to have separate savings. Now they save together, which allows them to make joint decisions on the use of household income.

**WFGD:** *“We are now talking to our husbands. Previously if my husband harvested 5 bags of crop, he would sell all of it and take all the money*

*and use it to drink. But now the money is shared with me.”*

**MFGD:** *“Now, we keep our income together with our wives although this is not practiced in all homes.”*

The women’s group activities broke through the barriers of men controlling incomes and assets and the nutritional norms against women. As a result, women have increased control over the use of household income and assets and make healthier food choices for their families.

### **Familial Dimension of Empowerment**

The findings indicate that men changed from making individual decisions to involving women in making decisions relating to household resources. The majority of the women’s group respondents highlighted that the practice of making decisions consultatively between husband and wife only started after the implementation of the women’s groups.

**WFGD:** *“One day, a man came to ask my husband if he could sell our land, but my husband requested for time to discuss with me first if I wanted to sell or not. This never used to happen; he would just go ahead and sell.”*

**MFGD:** *“Before, we did not understand our wives, and we would be upset and fight. Now we can understand and listen to them. When they have great ideas, we take them.”*

The women’s groups also received training on how to prepare nutritious food for their families, especially how to feed their children, which was vital to tackling malnutrition.

### **Psychological Dimension of Empowerment**

The majority of women reported that their relationships with their husbands have greatly improved since they became part of the women’s groups as men now have higher respect for women’s rights. In addition, the ability of the women to read and

write was reported as essential in improving the relationships of couples.

**WFGD:** *“Before I could read and write, my husband would leave a piece of paper with instructions and money, and I had to ask the children what was written. Now I can read those notes myself without a single problem.”*

Before the women’s group intervention, women did not contribute to the decision regarding their children’s education. But now, women are making decisions on educating their children, especially their female children.

**WFGD:** *“We can now also pay school fees for the children and buy food for the family, even when the man is away, we can now assist financially.”*

**WFGD:** *“I am now able to read and write. I can now control my children and what they learn at school. I can read my child’s report and interpret their performance in school. I can help them with their homework.”*

Also, mothers, who were previously excluded from negotiations regarding their daughters’ marriages and marriage proceedings, are now recognized and allowed to contribute to the planning of their daughters’ weddings. Furthermore, the women’s group participants mentioned that men are now helping with household chores and participating in land tillage, an activity men were culturally not supposed to do.

**WFGD:** *“There is now love in our homes. Before, we could not be physically close to our husbands, but now we can get close to each other. Our husbands even help with household chores like bathing children, cooking food, and going to the spring. In the past, this was like a dream.”*

**MFGD:** *“I am now able to cook food for my woman even if she is not ill. I draw water, cook food, and help her cook even when she’s around.”*

The men also highlighted that before the intervention, women would usually consult their husbands for everything in the home, but now they are able to make decisions when problems arise and their husbands are away. Also, they indicated that women are now able to complain about and voice their opinions on sexual abuse and be taken seriously by their husbands and the community.

**MFGD:** *“My wife is in the women’s group, and she used to be very quiet. Now she can share ideas, even things I never thought about.”*

**MFGD:** *“Before, we considered a woman who complained of sexual abuse or violence as a prostitute, but this is no more.”*

### Leadership Dimension of Empowerment

The study found that after the women’s empowerment intervention, women now occupy positions of responsibility and are often elected presidents, treasurers, and secretaries to important community committees, with the women in authority sometimes fighting for and defending other women’s rights. In addition, women can now preach and speak in public.

**KII:** *“In our community development committees (CDC), the president cannot decide himself without first discussing with the group. The*



*counselors for this board are all women. Before the president takes a decision, he has to consult the counselors first.”*

**KII:** *“Women used to be seen as domestic helpers, today we value our women because they can contribute to building the family. We could sell*

*land without the women’s knowledge but today that cannot happen because you can’t even sell her goat without informing her.”*

**KII:** *“When men try to have bad conduct, the women presidents defend the women, and men are now valuing women.”*

## CONCLUSION

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- ▶ The evaluation of the women’s empowerment intervention on the “socio-cultural context” of households and communities in South Kivu suggests that the program achieved its intended objective of changing the ways women are viewed.
- ▶ This shows that integrating women’s empowerment interventions in nutrition and food security projects is feasible and can be very successful, with possible impacts on development.
- ▶ Culturally, men hold the power and authority in the communities where we work in DRC, and norms will not change if both men and women are not engaged in the education and sensitization process, so integrated women’s empowerment interventions should be sure to engage men to sustain change as successfully demonstrated in this project.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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For questions or comments on this brief, contact Sonya Funna Evelyn at [TWG@ADRA.org](mailto:TWG@ADRA.org).

## ENDNOTES

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1. Johnson, K., Scott, J., Rughita, B., Kisielewski, M., Asher, J., Ong, R., & Lawry, L. (2010). Association of sexual violence and human rights violations with physical and mental health in territories of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Jama*, 304(5), 553-562.
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3. Ministry of Planning and Macro International. (2008). Demographic and Health Survey, Democratic Republic of the Congo 2007. Calverton, Maryland, U.S.A.: Ministry of Planning and Macro International. Available at <http://dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-fr208-dhs-final-reports.cfm>
4. ADRA and TANGO International (2010). Needs Assessment for DRC. JENGA II Proposal.