Linking psycho-social and economic empowerment for women survivors in Northern Uganda

Lessons learned from a project implemented by the Foundation for Women Affected by Conflicts (FOWAC) in cooperation with medica mondiale

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What context and background is this report based on?
Introduction to the lives of women and girls in the North of Uganda

Atim was abducted by the LRA in 1997, and stayed with the rebels’ army for 7 years. In 2004, she was released and went back home. Since then she often suffers flashbacks, and has bad dreams about the things she went through. She did a little farming, but had no work that gave her a stable income. She did not have much support from her family, relations with her husband were very tense, and her in-laws took her belongings and whatever food she harvested. She felt stigmatised by her community.

In 2014, she joined one of FOWAC’s savings groups, and was given both life- and business-skills training. The women in her group shared about their joys and problems, and supported each other. She felt more and more encouraged from seeing that women like herself were able to generate an income. She was soon able to start her own small business, buying things in town and selling them on the market. With the money she earned, she was able to buy a motorcycle for her husband, who now works as a boda boda. The relationship with her husband got even better after they took part in one of FOWAC’s couples seminars. A community dialogue that was organised for her village also helped to overcome the stigma that she was facing. Her neighbours seemed to be friendlier towards her. Since all these improvements in her relationships, she has fewer nightmares and can feel some healing taking place in her life. She has developed self-esteem, and now feels strong enough to say no when her in-laws want to take her belongings.

These days the couple are doing well together, they have plans for the future and want to build a ribbed roof on their hut. Otim has regained hope.

Introduction

To understand the approach that we want to explain here, it is necessary to appreciate the context in which it was developed and to which it wants to give answers.

We are FOWAC (The Foundation for Women Affected by Conflicts), a women-led, non-political, non-profit making organization that was founded in 2007. FOWAC operates in Northern Uganda with the aim of improving the quality of lives of women, girls and other members of their communities in the Kitgum and Lamwo Districts who were affected by conflict. These districts are amongst the poorest in Uganda mainly due to the continuing and heavy impact of a war that was waged in this region for two decades. The story behind this report is therefore a story of both war and resilience.

Our interlinked psycho-social and economic empowerment project started in 2014 with financial support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and lasted until early 2017.

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Twenty years of war

In 2006, twenty years of war in the North of Uganda finally ended when the Ugandan government and a rebel group called the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) agreed a truce. This war was characterised by massive terror against the civilian population by the rebels. Both the LRA and the Ugandan Army have been accused by victims of committing serious crimes and human rights violations, including killing, torture, slavery, forced marriage, forced recruitment, mutilation, and rampant physical and sexual violence. According to the research carried out by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium in 2012, it is estimated that, in the heavily affected sub-region of Acholi, the LRA abducted up to one-third of male and one-sixth of female adolescents.

The war also led to massive displacement, particularly in the 1990s and most intensely in 2002/3 when, as part of its strategy against the LRA, the Uganda People’s Defence Forces (UPDF), the Ugandan army, forcibly relocated the population to ‘protected villages’ or internally displaced person (IDP) camps. At the height of displacement in 2005, nearly 2 million people, which is around 90–95 percent of the Acholi population, had become internally displaced as a result of the conflict, and many had lived in camps for more than a decade. IDP households were largely unable to access land for cultivation due to the threat of attack from outside the camps and the sheer number of people within them. The residents of IDP camps therefore suffered from serious malnutrition, high mortality rates, low life expectancies, high primary school dropout rates, and early pregnancies and marriages in the camps. To put this in context, in 2005, according to WHO, mortality rates in Northern Uganda were the highest of any emergency situation in the world, at 1.54 per 10,000 people per day and 3.18 per 10,000 children under the age of five.

As in all conflicts, while both women and men are affected by war, they are affected in different ways due to the gendered experiences of conflict. Women and girls (and some men) suffered sexual torture and enslavement by the LRA. Girls were strategically abducted by the LRA as part of an incentive system whereby rebel soldiers would be given “wives” after fighting successfully. Within the IDPs, girls were forcefully married at an early age to older men or soldiers as an income generating strategy for families, and to lessen the burden of feeding too many people in the family. Even in the refugee camps, women and girls were exposed to violence. Being restricted to the camps, many people had neither the access nor opportunity to conduct their normal livelihood activities. Moreover, cultural and social fabrics were destroyed and hopelessness and frustration grew. In these confined conditions, many forms of sexual and gender-based violence occurred, such as domestic violence, rape, and separation, and women were increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, for instance through commercial sex. The rates of teenage pregnancies and child marriages increased rapidly during these years of displacement.

2 Following the collapse of the Juba Peace Talks (2006–8) between the government of Uganda and the rebel LRA in Juba, Southern Sudan, the LRA withdrew from Northern Uganda, but it continued to commit atrocities in the neighbouring Central African Republic, DRC and Sudan.

3 See http://www.who.int/hac/crises/uga/Uganda_StrategyPaper_February06_draft.pdf?ua=1
Wounds that have not yet healed: Poverty and broken relationships

Although the war has been over for a decade and most people have gone back to their homesteads, the social, economic, cultural and psychological wounds are still obvious, and ongoing abject poverty and instability within communities and families create an atmosphere where the pain reproduces itself in the lives of communities, families and couples – and so creates more harm and more pain.

For decades, the primary livelihood activity in Northern Uganda was agriculture. However, conflict has resulted in widespread asset depletion across the entire North of the country. The length of the displacement means households now have a dearth of assets. While the prevalence and severity of poverty has decreased in Northern Uganda over the past years, much of the poverty that remains is chronic, defined as “poverty where individuals, households or regions are trapped in severe and multi-dimensional poverty for an extended period of time (several years or a lifetime), and where poverty is linked with intergenerational transmission”. Northern Uganda is therefore currently facing various severe challenges to livelihood recovery that specifically relate to land, and in particular to lack of land ownership, inheritance issues that primarily affect women and children, land disputes, and poor land policies.

A key factor hindering livelihood recovery relates to the massive psychosocial effects of the war. Several studies have been conducted that show the debilitating long-term effect of the war on the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of the Acholi population. According to an article published by Busingye, the rate of mental illness in post-war northern Uganda is among the highest in the world, and can be attributed to the prolonged experience of war, displacement, and high levels of poverty. Various studies reveal high levels of posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorder, depression, and other mental health disorders, as well as alcoholism. There is a high suicide rate, particularly for young people. Amongst the various psychosocial problems that exist in Northern Uganda, the increase of alcoholism seems to be one particularly strong outcome of the protracted conflict. Uganda holds the unenviable distinction of having the highest per capita consumption of alcohol of the 185 countries included in the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Status Report on Alcohol 2004. The primary effects of alcohol abuse include lower productivity, risky sexual behaviour, domestic violence, injuries and accidents, petty crime, and violence. Alcohol abuse also impairs households’ ability to maintain their livelihood and health, and to educate their children. Linked to this is that men’s participation in labour activities has decreased due to living in camps, where a culture of ‘male idleness’ developed. Adoko and Levine describe how, prior to being displaced, men in Northern Uganda would generally only drink after completing a day’s work. However, once living in an IDP camp, they fell into the habit of drinking rather than working. Ironically, although alcohol is clearly a destructive force for livelihood recovery, it must also be acknowledged that for many women, brewing alcohol is a core livelihood activity.

On a political level, a number of government bodies and institutions have been established to support livelihood recovery in Northern Uganda by encouraging greater development, peace building and poverty reduction. The most prominent include the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for Northern Uganda (PRDP) and the National Development Plan (NDP), and progress has been made. However, the long-term consequences of the war are still a major blockage to development and recovery: it is almost impossible to bring economic

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6 See Lenhart & Whyte (2016).
empowerment to people living in states of depression and facing the ongoing traumatic violence that is reproduced in families and couples’ lives – but without economic empowerment, poverty will continue to erode people’s psychosocial well-being. For us, the main rationale driving FOWAC’s program lies in this intersection between extreme poverty and a debilitated psychosocial situation.

A gender perspective on the post-war situation in Acholiland

More than two decades of horrific violence, constant threat, abuse and impunity, along with a life in camps that lacked any kind of creative or recreational environment, have also resulted in types of relationships between men and women that are still “militarised”. Many women have simultaneously experienced war-related and domestic violence during the war, but the violence against women continues now that the war is over. Women and girls who were abducted find it particularly hard to reintegrate into their communities, and continue to face stigma and rejection. Since Acholi tradition holds that children always ‘belong’ to their fathers, women who return with children are especially disadvantaged, finding it extremely hard to reintegrate or find a husband, while their children, who belong to the rebels, are rarely accepted by their families or communities.

As suggested above, gender-based violence is very common in post-war society: 60 percent of women aged 15 and above experienced physical violence, 15 percent of women undergo violence during pregnancy, while 24 percent report that their first sexual encounter was a forced one. The 2011 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey indicates that 25% of female Ugandan teenagers are pregnant or have had a child by the time they are 19 years old. Since poverty and the instability of relationships often leaves child mothers without any support, they constitute an important vulnerable group, along with single mothers in general. Other vulnerable groups include child-led households and women with chronic diseases such as HIV/AIDS and the so-called nodding disease, who are prone to violence and oppression in the communities.

Laws against domestic violence lack implementation. A new law, the Marriage and Divorce Bill, was defeated in April 2013. It would have abolished old traditions like polygamy, set the marriage age to 18 years, punished rape inside marriage, and would have given women access to the Divorce and Heritage Law.

At the same time, important gender disparities continue to persist in areas such as decision-making, ownership of and control over productive resources such as land and household assets, and access to education and employment. Despite national legislation which proclaims the equality of men and women, widows and single mothers are very often still excluded from inheriting, especially land. Through these and other (customary) practices, women are often excluded from using and owning resources and from any significant participation at community and district levels, and are rarely considered in the national development planning and implementation. As a result, the special needs of women and girls, especially those of female survivors, are rarely met.

Given this gendered analysis, our project focuses especially on former abductees/ ex-combatants, child mothers and/or single mothers, as well as on young women and widows as heads of households, and aims at increasing their psycho-social and economic empowerment.

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Why an interlinked approach of psychosocial and economic empowerment?

The disempowerment of women and girls in the North of Uganda is thus multi-layered, interdependent and complex. Women and girls suffer from various sources of stress, such as traumatic stress due to wounds from the war that remain unhealed and have far-reaching consequences in contemporary families and communities, as well as ongoing existential stress. This can be seen as long-term consequences of war, community disruption and displacement. These factors severely reinforce the poverty that the region is already struggling with due to the long-term consequences of the conflict and the dependency syndrome that was acquired during years of living in IDP camps. As a result, it is unlikely that the socio-economic situation will improve if people are not helped to overcome these personal and social-relational blockages and rediscover their ability to develop the economic potential of the area. Economic success clearly needs stable minds and stable and empowering relationships.

There are several arguments that underline the interdependency of psychosocial well-being and economic empowerment. International trauma research and practice in the field of trauma psychology have given us clear evidence that socio-economic empowerment and especially having work that secures a stable income can contribute to psychosocial healing and stabilisation after massive trauma. Work therefore constitutes an important resource for healing, and is a protective factor in the aftermath of coming to terms with severe traumatic experiences.

Another important impact of economic empowerment on healing relates to socio-cultural issues: In collective contexts such as in Northern Uganda where specific traumatic experiences, particularly sexual and gender-based violence, are also connected with social exclusion, trauma is more than the individual experience of certain typical posttraumatic problems such as nightmares, flashbacks and constant anxiety. In these situations, trauma is also interpreted as a social experience, and is accompanied by isolation and stigmatisation within the community, which creates additional emotional pain. Therefore, economically empowering the survivors of sexual and gender-based violence not only enhances their individual self-esteem and their personal sense of mastery. It also has the potential to reconnect them with their communities and families and reinforce a sense of belonging that is crucial for survivors of violence to heal, for example through the benefits their business brings to the community, or the financial support they can offer family members for things such as health care or school fees.

Most empowerment programs separate economic and psychosocial empowerment. For instance, they might initiate a cashbox group, and offer counselling, but without linking the two. We believe that it is important to combine economic and psychosocial approaches to facilitate the empowerment of women and girls. Our approach strives to integrate the two levels, mainstreaming all socio-economic activities while also supporting the contribution they make towards enhancing the women’s self-efficacy and self-esteem, and helping them to experience security and control over their lives, so they can regain their sense of control. Socio-economic activities are shaped by and accompanied with additional measures which are intended to enhance social support within their families and the wider community and mitigate against processes of stigmatisation and rejection. They are conceptualised in a way that enhances solidarity, mutual support, acceptance and empathy amongst the participants. This entails shaping the group’s rules, meetings and interactions in a psychosocially empowering way.
Conversely, all psychosocial interventions are also looked at to determine how they can enhance the potential for economic empowerment, e.g. introducing self-assertiveness skills to help group members to actively promote their products; or training the women in how to make good business plans and achieve positive results as a group.

In our experience, there are several advantages to interlinking both forms of empowerment in the Northern Ugandan context, rather than offering the components separately: For example, psychological problems are often interpreted within the Acholi culture as “madness”, which leads to stigmatisation, so people who suffer from them often choose to hide their problems rather than openly seeking help. However, saving groups are very common in the region, and if psychosocial activities such as counselling or empowering group meetings are integrated into economic trainings for the group members, they become more acceptable than, for instance, a counselling group for survivors would be.

In addition, offering counselling groups alone would not attract women to attend, especially those who feel already low and depressed and are not motivated to look for help. It is easier to persuade women to join saving groups, which facilitates personal contact with other women in similar situations of distress and poverty, allowing support and solidarity to be built amongst the women in a protected way.

Time and experience have shown us that this approach works best when a number of additional measures are integrated to facilitate the mutual empowering impact. These activities and elements of the psychosocial and economic empowerment component will be explained below in detail. The most important factor, however, is that the approach is well integrated into the community, which enables the groups to have an empowering impact for the whole community, e.g. when people or community structures are involved in mediations and conversations about community issues, and allows the group’s economic gains to contribute to economic empowerment within the wider community. We will describe our community-based approach below, too.
What are the central elements of the economic empowerment component?

The Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) groups

It is clearly evident that economic empowerment is crucial for the psychosocial wellbeing of FOWAC’s women’s groups, and a central element of the economic empowerment component is the VSLA approach. A Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) is a group of people who save together and take small loans from those savings. The group’s activities run in cycles of one year, after which the accumulated savings and the loan profits are distributed back to members. The purpose of a VSLA is thus to provide simple savings and loan facilities in communities that do not have easy access to formal financial services. A VSLA can be considered a transparent, structured and democratic version of the informal savings groups found in many parts of the developing world. It has proven to be an adequate financial methodology for the situation in Northern Uganda in general, and for FOWAC in particular.

VSLA groups begin with 25-30 women who fit the vulnerability criteria to join such a group. Members are selected by FOWAC staff after thorough initial interviews with the women, or at the suggestion of community leaders or advisories (i.e. elected members of the community, who play a crucial role in accompanying a VSLA group). After the group is established, they elect the respective group leaders and develop their own constitution and guiding group rules. We then open a bank account for the group and register and certify them at the sub-county level. The groups all receive a thorough training not only in the functioning and rules of VSLA, business planning and other entrepreneurial skills, but also in life skills such as group dynamics, conflict resolution and self-esteem. These “soft skills” have proven to be extremely important to enhance the group’s social cohesion and capacity for mutual support amongst women who very often have a background of neglect, gender-based violence and disempowerment.

As already mentioned, the groups are based on democratic principles. They hold elections, and the roles and responsibilities of the management committee are clearly defined and decentralised. This encourages the participation of all members in the operations of the group, and protects the group from being dominated by a single individual. In many VSLA groups, elected leaders change with every yearly project cycle, but we have encouraged members to keep leaders in place for longer periods of time where possible, since this reinforces group coherence and constitutes a stabilising factor given the many disruptions and discontinuities that women have faced in the region due to the long-term consequences of the war.

After the preparatory steps have been done, each group receives a starter kit with a cash box. Every member then regularly contributes a certain amount defined by the group, and can borrow money in relation to her savings. The groups meet weekly, and members save through purchasing shares. The price of a share is decided by the group. At each meeting, every member must purchase between 1 and 5 shares. The share-price is set by the group at the beginning of the cycle, and is fixed for the entire cycle. After between one and three months, members must pay back their loans, with interest. In a VSLA, saving is flexible across members and over time. Members do not always have to save the same amount; and they do not have to save the same amount at each meeting. Also, by saving more frequently in very small amounts, the women can build their savings more easily, which contributes to improving the security of their households.

See also www.vsla.net
Savings are maintained in a loan fund from which members can borrow in small amounts. They can borrow up to three times their individual savings, but in our experience they should borrow less, since borrowing a bigger amount of money implies a high risk and if they lose the money it will be difficult to refund, making the borrower feel bad and stigmatised within the group. We are dealing with women with very low self-esteem, and such an experience of failure can have a very negative emotional impact and may even lead to the woman withdrawing from the group.

The women meet weekly to discuss their progress and decide together which member can borrow how much money. The money they have saved allows the women to supplement their income, and experience shows that the women in our VSLA groups mainly use it for domestic necessities and school fees.

A cashbox meeting (Photo: FOWAC)

**The revolving fund as a second system of economic empowerment**

FOWAC has also introduced a second saving system within their groups. Since the VSLA only allows for small investments, FOWAC collaborates with a local bank to provide a **revolving fund** for the women. The biggest difference is that the revolving fund grows faster since the interest is higher than with the VSLA system, but the money that can be lent is also considerably higher, which allows bigger investments. This fund is rotational, so members have to wait until it is their turn to borrow from it. Whoever wants to borrow must first present her business plan to the group and to the FOWAC staff who accompany the group. The group decides jointly if they want to support the woman’s business plan with a loan (max. 1,000,000 Ugandan Shilling or 2,000,000 Ugandan Shilling). When money is lent to one member, the whole group co-guarantees the loan.

The effects that we observed from this system are multiple: The members of the groups are able to contribute substantially to the family income through livestock or agricultural activities or small businesses, or paying medical bills and school fees. This in itself is an empowering aspect for their self-esteem. Through the group, they also become part of a wider social network at a community level, which in our experience is very important, given the breakdown of families and communities as a result of the long-term conflict. The training provided finally reinforces skills development and makes the women proud of their educational advances in a region where so many have been denied a continuous education for two decades.
Training and capacity building in business skills as a central element

We have learned that it is of utmost importance to prepare the groups well. Therefore, before they begin operating, we offer a training package that includes psychosocial contents, business skills and knowledge about income-generating activities, along with basic finance planning. Our trainings are always adapted to the reality of the women and girls on the ground in the North of Uganda where economic possibilities are limited, and where the general situation of severe poverty plays a big role. Some of the core exercises are provided in the annex.

What are the central elements of the psychosocial empowerment component?

Psychosocial aspects of the project are of enormous importance, not only in dealing with the past wounds of violence due to the war and displacement experiences, but in order to create an environment of non-violence, security and healing within the women’s communities. We have developed various aspects of this psychosocial empowerment that we see as deeply important alongside our capacity building and our constant practice of trying new interventions with the women and communities and evaluating what is helpful and what is not. We have found that the following aspects and intervention strategies have a great impact.

The group setting as a place of healing and empowerment

From both literature and research, we know that groups can offer an excellent opportunity for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence to grow and to heal. Along with enhancing savings and generating income, the following factors play a significant role in helping to increase the psychosocial healing power of VSLA groups, and make them places for healing.11

Universality:
Members in a group recognise that other members have similar problems, which reduces emotional stress and feelings of low self-esteem.

Helping others:
Members realise that they can help other members in the group, which raises their self-esteem and reduces their feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness.

Interpersonal learning:
Members can learn from other members’ feedback and their experiences in resolving problems.

Giving hope:
Members recognise that other members have successfully managed their own (similar) difficulties, which gives hope and optimism.

Release of strong feelings in a protected space:
Given a framework of confidentiality and safety in the group, members can cry or speak about difficult feelings in a contained, safe and secure setting where they feel accepted.

Sharing of information:

11 For the following group factors, see Irvin Yalom: The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy, adapted here for FOWAC (presented at the first training in 2015).
Education / information provided by other group members about where they found help in similar situations.

**Reshaping negative experiences in the family or community through a positive experience of interaction in the group:**
Members may have experienced stigma and have been put down by members of the community or their family for what they have gone through; in the group, they have the healing experience of being valued and accepted.

**Imitation of behaviour:**
Members expand their own knowledge and skills through observing what other group members have done in similar situations to solve their problems.

**Development of socialising techniques:**
The group provides an environment that fosters adaptive and effective communication, which is especially important for group members who might find it difficult to express themselves.

**Cohesiveness:**
A group can foster feelings of trust, belonging and togetherness, which are essential healing experiences that counteract the traumatic core experience of loneliness.

**Self-understanding:**
The women gain a better understanding of their problems, motivations and behaviours through being in the group, e.g. through the feedback that others give or from questions that other members in similar situations ask.

**Existential experiences of learning about life:**
Learning that suffering is part of life and that everyone has to take responsibility for one’s own life, while also realising that this is possible.
Life skills training for the preparation of VSLA groups

Group members undergo a series of preparatory trainings. The life skills training touches upon the more psychosocially-oriented competences that the women currently lack, which a number of evaluation exercises have shown to be much appreciated and very helpful.

What are life skills? To become empowered personalities, it is critical that we learn key life skills. Life skills include critical and creative thinking, decision-making, effective communication, as well as skills for developing healthy relationships and a positive self-concept. Life skills may be defined as skills for a positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the challenges and adversities of everyday life. Life skills play an important role in preventative health education, such as HIV / AIDS prevention, but they are also prominent in economic empowerment because they aim at developing people’s cognitive, social and personality-based skills that are all essential for income generation.

The following life skills play a special role in our psycho-social and economic empowerment project, and the groups are trained in them for 3-5 days. Regular refresher trainings are also considered helpful, and the women often request these themselves. In the annex, we have compiled some very powerful life skills trainings exercises that the VSLA groups found to be extremely helpful.

- Communication
- Team building / group dynamics
- Self-awareness
- Stress management
- Emotion management
- Self-esteem / Self-assertiveness training
- Primary health care, hygiene and sanitation

Transforming the VSLA groups into trauma-sensitive groups

Not all people who have gone through traumatic experiences and feel burdened by them ask for counselling, and some in remote areas do not even have access to it, but everybody can be helped and some even healed by a supportive social environment. In fact, most of the post-trauma healing work around the world is done informally by people close to us, our families, and our communities.

We call the kind of supportive environment that families and communities can create a trauma-sensitive environment. It aims at stabilising traumatised people so that they regain a sense of safety and trust; it also tries to reduce stress by helping women to avoid being re-traumatised, i.e. trying to ensure that the past bad experiences are not re-evoked.

The German feminist organisation medica mondiale e.V., who are supporting us with capacity building for this project, have developed an approach that is guided by certain principles of stress- and trauma-sensitivity. Here we want to give an overview of how we see the linkage between the VSLA group and trauma-sensitivity, and how we have put in practice a trauma-sensitive approach that is tailored to our reality in these groups.  

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12 The table below was developed in the first training with medica mondiale’s consultant Dr. Simone Lindorfer in 2015. It was adapted here for the purpose of the report.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles of trauma-sensitivity that can be easily put into practice in FOWAC’s VSLA groups</th>
<th>Ways how to put this in practice in FOWAC’s VSLA groups</th>
<th>Why is this important for healing?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Work for safety! Let people participate in the things that concern them, so that they can have control over their lives!** | - Create safe group rules of confidentiality.  
- Be transparent in what you plan to do with survivors. Explain your interventions properly.  
- Enable group members to take time to trust each other. Don’t force members into a group if they don’t feel safe there. Do a lot of life skills training on trust building.  
- Prepare yourselves as helpers that traumatised women in your group will need MORE TIME to be able to trust. Do not resent them for their mistrust, but see it as a sign of what they have gone through. | Trauma is the fundamental experience of loss of safety and control. Therefore, in order for survivors to heal, they first need a safe and secure environment where they can regain trust in others and in themselves. Safety is the precondition for healing. We cannot heal if we are still afraid that something bad might happen. |

| **Enable survivors to reconnect to their strengths!** | - Ask questions in the groups that focus the members’ attention on what they are still capable of doing, despite their difficulties.  
- Involve them from the very beginning in the group processes, so that later they can feel: WE have done it (instead of: FOWAC has done it!)  
- Do not only see survivors as vulnerable and traumatised, but also see their beauty, their sense of humour, their talents. | Trauma is the experience that the bad things that happened keep survivors trapped in feeling as if this is not over, but is still continuing. Even helpers sometimes tend to think that trauma survivors are completely helpless. Yet, reconnecting survivors to their strengths also means reconnecting them to those areas in their lives where they are capable of performing well, of doing something valuable. This encourages their healing in seeing themselves as people who can grow despite their wounds. |

| **Enable survivors to get access to social support and solidarity** | - Create conditions whereby the group members can feel supported by their fellow group members.  
- Use the potential for compassion and empowerment within the group: Members feel empowered by the experience of helping each other! | Trauma is about feeling lonely and isolated from others. Therefore, it is so important to feel that there is support from others and that understanding and compassion are possible. This helps in overcoming the typical posttraumatic feeling of just being alone with the experience. |
| Acknowledge the pain and suffering! | - We as helpers often fear the tears and strong feelings of our clients. However, it is important NOT to tell people that they should not cry, BUT to allow them to express their pain and to be with them. Just be present. You do NOT have to remove their pain, just validate their feelings: “This was such a painful experience for you.” | From research, we know that what trauma survivors want the most and what helps them a lot in counselling is feeling that there is somebody who acknowledges how difficult it is. This helps them believe that, rather than being crazy, what they are feeling is absolutely appropriate. It also helps in overcoming their sense of loneliness. |
| Accept your own limitations as a helper, and look for self-care. | - For advisories and FOWAC staff: Regular peer support and counselling and self-care strategies are needed both on a personal and on an organizational care level to be effective in this demanding work.  
- Advisories should learn how to set boundaries, so that e.g. beneficiaries do not constantly come to their homes for help, and that there are clear limits to their commitment. | Whenever anyone works with survivors of trauma, their powerlessness has an impact on the lives of helpers and of organisations. As helpers, we might feel overwhelmed, suffer from nightmares about our clients’ stories, and feel guilty about being in a better place than so many other women. Therefore, to keep the capacity to have helpful interventions and in order for organisations to remain places of safety and sanity, it is important to set boundaries and accept limitations. Remember the palm tree story (see annex): We cannot take the stones away from our clients, but we can help them reconnect to the water in their lives! |

Since integrating the trauma-sensitive approach, we have reorganised the weekly VSLA group meetings and introduced a new format to reflect the principles of trauma-sensitivity and to integrate trauma-sensitivity and psychosocial empowerment into the logic and dynamics of the meetings in a more substantial manner.

The groups were helped to implement the following steps in their meetings, and they soon started reporting positive changes in the atmosphere and trust within the group and an enhanced sense of cohesion. It thus reinforced the empowering effects of the groups.
### Steps of the VSLA group meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Why?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Start the group meeting with a song or dance and / or prayer that expresses hope and strength.</td>
<td>A jointly-sung song or dance and / or prayer at the beginning reinforces the feeling of safety and togetherness / trust in the group; it also reinforces the idea that all members, no matter what they went through, still have their strengths.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Ask the participants to consciously greet everybody in the group by going around to all members of the group and offering them some welcoming words.</td>
<td>A consciously-practised greeting gives everyone a feeling of safety and a sense of belonging to the group. It also helps members to focus their attention on what is going to come.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Ask neighbours (i.e. participants sitting next to each other) to share with one another ONE EXPERIENCE since the last meeting where they felt STRONG and were able to ACHIEVE something. It can be something small, it can be something bigger. It does NOT necessarily have to be an economic achievement, but anything that made them feel strong. The neighbours first share with one another and later report to the group what they have shared, i.e. the members do not tell their own experience of achievement, but that of their neighbour.</td>
<td>Speaking about things we have achieved despite all our problems gives us a sense that we can still manage parts of our lives; it makes us feel strong and reinforces our self-esteem. Contrarily, when we constantly focus on our problems, challenges and unmet needs, this drags our energies down and makes us feel low. These challenges are still there, but we gain energy from focusing our attention on the things we ARE able to do. <strong>NOTE:</strong> If participants in the group keep coming back to the negative experiences, validate their experience and acknowledge how difficult this might be (“Yes, this is very difficult”), while at the same time encouraging them to think about what they have already been able to achieve.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Have a song or dance or a game that makes the meeting fun.</td>
<td>This creates togetherness and trust (thus reinforcing safety) and reconnects to strengths and power.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>WHEN APPLICABLE, AND WHERE IT IS PROPERLY PLANNED AND PREPARED, give an input on a relevant theme, i.e. women’s rights OR reproductive rights / problems OR resilience building OR stress management OR leadership, etc.</td>
<td>Knowledge reinforces our sense of safety and makes us feel in control of our lives and our choices, and of what we feel we can influence. The input should NOT be longer than 10-15 minutes, though, so as not to overstretch the group’s concentration.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Cash box / revolving loan activity: The advisory should ensure that the principles of democracy (everyone has a vote) and good, constructive communication are followed, no matter what is discussed. She reminds the group of these rules in the beginning, e.g.: “Let us now have our discussions in a way where everyone is heard and has a voice. Let us not interrupt members. And let us give each other a</td>
<td>Economic empowerment is a strong means of reinforcing safety in life, being productive and strong, and managing to cover basic needs despite the challenges. This also reinforces self-esteem and self-assertiveness. The group follows the rules and regulations, as well as the principles of democracy, collective ownership and collective management, to make the group a place of economic empowerment. If they do not FEEL</td>
</tr>
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</table>
feedback that helps us do better and does NOT put us down."

E.g. if members of the group feel that a woman’s business plan is not well founded and should therefore not be funded, they need to communicate this in a way where she is not discouraged but feels encouraged to do more research.

NOTE: As an advisory, you are NOT supposed to influence the group discussions. It is the group alone that decides. DO NOT INTERFERE INTO THE GROUP’S DECISIONS.

### 7. A closing song / dance or game / and or prayer, and saying good-bye to each other.

A clear framework for the meeting gives a sense of safety and togetherness / shared responsibility.

### 8. After the group meeting is over, those members who have special problems or who seem to be in difficult emotional states can approach the FOWAC staff member who is present for individual counselling sessions.

Some problems need special attention and a confidential setting. This is where the group members can also approach FOWAC-trained staff for individual counselling sessions, that take place after the group meetings.

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**Group counselling: In-depth sharing within a group**

Our experiences in developing this interlinked empowerment approach show that some group sharing sessions go deeper than others, and so require more time. As suggested above, it was originally intended for these needs to be met through individual counselling sessions.

However, we realised that as well as integrating trauma-sensitivity into the regular VSLA group meetings, the group’s healing effects could be further enhanced by distinct group counselling sessions which focused on sharing within the group. The idea behind the counselling groups is that the group can encourage, support and reinforce the strengths of individual women who are part of the group and who share their personal problems in depth. We usually encourage no more than two women to share during a meeting, as otherwise the session becomes too long and tiring. As part of the sharing, the women can decide as a group who will have the opportunity to share at the next meeting.

In our experience, this group counselling session format works best with groups of 10-15 members, and should never be either a part of, or a replacement for, ‘normal’ VSLA group meetings, where members deal with the cashbox. Rather, it is an additional meeting with a different format that you can hold once every 4 to 8 weeks, OR when you set up a new counselling group in a community.

It is strongly advised to have two group counsellors present during a group counselling session, because of the heaviness of the experiences and in case some women need a break during the session or become destabilised emotionally. The format for the group counselling session is as follows:

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14 See training report compiled by Dr. Simone Lindorfer (medica mondiale) (unpublished document).
1. As a group coming together for group counselling, start with a song, dance or prayer that expresses hope and empowerment.

2. Set group rules in the first session, and remind participants of them in all subsequent meetings. Put a strong emphasis on CONFIDENTIALITY and THE RIGHT OF EVERYONE TO SPEAK AND TO BE LISTENED TO.

3. Opening round: start the session with an opening exercise, such as the battery of energy (“My battery is at 70% ...”). Alternatively, you could invite all the group members to briefly share how they feel, but ask them not to go too deeply into their problem(s), otherwise there will not be enough time for the member(s) who are going to share their feelings in depth later in the meeting.

4. Do a body exercise that helps to release tension or raise the group's energy levels.

5. Recall what has happened since the last group counselling session: “In the last session, Mary shared with us what she wanted to do about her case... Let us ask Mary, what did you do? Were you able to do what you had wanted to?”

6. If the person who will share today was decided at the last meeting, remind the group who it is, and ask them if they still want to share. If nobody has been decided, or the person does not want to share today, the meeting should decide together who will share their problem.

   If necessary, explain that the rest of the group will have to wait for another meeting, or ask for individual counselling, if they have any pressing problems.

   Step 1: The counsellor asks: “Anna, can you tell us your problem while we listen?” Anna tells her problem, while the others listen.

   Step 2: When Anna has finished, the counsellor asks: “Have we all understood the problem or do we still need more information?” (NOTE: Make sure that at this stage, the group members ONLY ask questions to help them understand the problem; they do NOT ask questions about, or offer, a solution, and do NOT offer advice).

   Step 3: The counsellor reflects on what Anna has shared and summarises the problem: “Anna, if we got you right, you were saying that.... and your main problem now is that...Is this true?” Anna responds.

   Step 4: The counsellor asks Anna: “What have you already tried to solve this problem yourself?” Anna then narrates her attempts to solve the problem.

   Step 5: The counsellor asks the other participants in the group session: “After everything Anna has told us about her problem, where do you see her strengths?” The women give Anna feedback, and she listens, e.g. “I can see that Anna is so committed to...” / “I can see Anna’s endurance despite all the problems that she is going through.”

   Step 6: The counsellor asks the other participants: “If you were in Anna’s place, what would you do to solve the problem?” The participants give their suggestions, while Anna listens.
Step 7: The counsellor asks: “Anna, you have heard many suggestions, what will you take away with you from them? What do you think you will try to do next?” Anna gives the group feedback and talks about what step she wants to take next.

Step 8: The counsellor repeats what Anna is planning to do next, and notes it down for follow-up in the next session.

**Express appreciation to the presenting woman,** e.g. “Anna, we thank you for your courage and for sharing your problem with us. This was not easy for you, but we learned a lot.”

**The counsellor reminds the group of confidentiality again.** If applicable, **another participant will be fixed to share next time,** e.g. by the facilitator asking: “Who wants to present next time when we are having our group counselling?”

**A song or prayer or dance or game for closure.**

**Individual counselling**

Individual counselling is and will always remain in our programme an important psychosocially empowering intervention for women and girls. There are issues that cannot be shared in group settings either because the client has feelings of mistrust or shame, or because the depth of her suffering necessitates an individual intervention.

Our trained staff members offer individual counselling after VSLA group meetings, and after group counselling sessions, when we feel that a member is emotionally destabilised or when we are approached by a member.

*Individual counselling session (Photo: Inga Neu, medica mondiale e.V.)*
What is the importance of the community in the interlinked psychosocial and economic approach?

We cannot explain the interlinked approach that we have developed without mentioning the importance of it being firmly rooted in the community setting. Communities have the potential for support and solidarity, but they can equally be places of stigmatisation and violence. Therefore, the community is crucial in the interlinked psycho-social and economic empowerment approach: A community that is jealous and blames survivors of sexual and gender-based violence has the power to substantially block the process of empowerment and reinforce violence and blame against women in the VSLA groups. A community that is supportive and sees the potential of the women’s VSLA groups for its own empowerment can be a strong factor in the group’s success.

The same applies to the families and particularly the husbands of women who can either completely block their wives’ economic activities – perhaps out of frustration of being unable to provide themselves – or be supportive of their wife’s participation in a VSLA group. The community is therefore an important factor for the success or failure of the groups, and we have created important implementation structures and specific interventions that have proven to be helpful for encouraging the community to get on board and support the groups. Here, we are sharing our lessons learned of what proved to be helpful in terms of linking up with the communities, and the core interventions we identified for doing so.

Advisories: the gate to the community

Advisories are people from the community to which a group belongs. Every group usually selects three advisories who then have the task of accompanying the group. Advisories are thus an important structure within the project. They are not part of the savings group, but they are present at and facilitate the VSLA meetings. They function as a connection point between the community, the VSLA group, and FOWAC. They are thus also our contact persons in the communities, since we cannot always be on the ground and know the local situation in detail, given the wide range of our activities. If there are problems within the VSLA groups or when individual members have problems, the advisories can be contacted and intervene wherever it is possible, while we provide technical support such as transport to health centres in emergencies. They are not part of our regular staff, but they get a monthly allowance which is paid when they meet with FOWAC staff for a meeting once a month where they present their report. During these meetings, there is also space to share about difficult cases or failed mediations, so they can get feedback from their colleagues and sometimes even reinforcement, in that other advisories may decide to team up with their colleagues to handle difficult cases.

Advisories may also act as mobilisers for community events, make referrals to other organisations, groups or community institutions, give advice to group members, and even support in mediations in the communities. Since they are elected by the group members themselves, advisories are also sometimes male, even though we strongly encourage all groups to have female advisories, since the women can only share openly amongst themselves with other female advisories. However, the groups may elect some male advisories usually for security issues, since having male advisors may make the women in the group feel more protected from harassment from the community and, more especially, their own husbands. Male advisories may also be helpful in talking with the husbands and other male members of the wider community, but they should not be present at group counselling sessions.
What we found to be helpful in having advisories

Advisories are crucial for the project, because they do not only help us as FOWAC and support the group members, they also help other community members. Sometimes even other communities may call them for help, since they are seen as people with a certain standing and as role-models to the whole community. This influence may be very helpful to counteract any jealous reactions that may arise because the VSLA groups get special attention from FOWAC. Given the general situation of aggravated poverty, this kind of jealousy is a big issue and a constant threat to the women.

We also often involve advisories in family mediation, because they can do a close follow-up on the family in regard of the actions that were agreed, which makes mediations more successful.

Advisories strengthen the community referral system since they can make immediate referrals when problems occur, only calling on us to intervene when a referral fails, or the process becomes stuck. Many problems are therefore resolved in the communities without our help, which makes the system more sustainable.

The challenges we see in working with advisories

Personalities are different, and so are advisories. Some fulfil their role in better ways than others. Some of them also have problems with reporting due to limited literacy skills. We have learned to make the role of advisories very clear both to the selected advisories and to the groups themselves, and also to make sure that they are aware of their limitations and understand when they will need our staff member to come in. However, we only facilitate this contact between advisories and groups and allow the groups to make their own decisions. Refraining from controlling empowers the women and allows them – individually and as a group – to make their own experiences.

Advisories need their own regular group meetings and refresher trainings to constantly review and revise their actions and to improve, especially in handling conflict situations in the group or in the beneficiaries’ families.

Awareness raising meetings with communities before a new group starts

One central and crucial part of initiating new groups is having awareness raising meetings in their community. We first talk with community leaders on their own, so that they know and can understand the purpose of the VSLA groups and help us in identifying potential women who would benefit from such a group. The leaders are also asked to support the VSLA groups. If the leaders are supportive of our ideas we make a needs assessment in the community, hold interviews with the women identified by the community leaders, and look for other vulnerable women in the community. Then we start the group and give feedback to the community on the group’s purpose. We have found it to be important to get the leaders on board and talk to them first because otherwise, given the high level of poverty, the community would always try to interfere in the selection of beneficiaries.

Security plays a major role, for us and for the groups themselves. We do not work in communities where the leaders are not supportive, as this would be too threatening. We make sure that nobody knows how much the groups save, and that the money goes directly into the bank wherever possible. We have learned to focus strongly on ensuring the leaders’ support, since they can be a great security to the groups.
Community dialogue

We have another regular monthly intervention called “community dialogue”. It is a meeting with local community leaders, duty bearers, cultural leaders and youths on topics that concern the community. Some of these issues are identified by the leaders themselves during our needs assessments; others are raised by the VSLA groups. During the meetings, which last for around two hours, we discuss the issue and ask the leaders what can be done about it. Usually a by-law will then be issued to regulate how the problem will be handled at the community level in the future. This procedure of holding a dialogue amongst the leaders and passing by-laws has, for example, helped to reduce alcohol-related crime rates in some communities. It makes the problems public and visible without personalising them, and people acting against these by-laws can be corrected by the leaders or even arrested, while in severe cases local leaders can call on us to intervene.

Of course, there are limitations: The problems are often complex, and sometimes more is needed than just having a discussion. For instance, many people in the communities suffer from psychosocial problems that affect their behaviour, and they would need a more one-to-one intervention to change their situation. However, the community dialogue has proven to be a helpful tool in breaking the silence about problems affecting the women, and for involving the community in finding solutions.

Mediative talks in families

Conflicts in families and amongst husbands and wives – often resulting in violence – are common in Acholiland. Families – including those of women from the VSLA groups - can feel overwhelmed by their problems and tensions, and have few possibilities to solve the conflicts by themselves. The ongoing stigma faced by women and girls who are part of our project makes it even harder for them to resolve conflicts.

We therefore offer family talks, with the aim of mediating in the conflict (i.e. hearing both sides). We only do this at the request of a woman from one of our groups, making them an important empowering intervention. Two members of our staff visit the family to discuss the conflict with them. Our main intention is to listen to both sides, and make sure that all parties to the conflict feel heard and understood. Our usual procedure is to first ask the family members who are there if it is alright with them if we come into their house. We then sit, have prayers, introduce ourselves, and explain why we are there. We establish the rules for mediation, such as listening to all the people concerned without judging them, and to make sure that the discussion remains confidential. We explain that although we have come at the request of the woman from our group we are impartial, and want to help them find a way out of their conflict. After the discussion, we finish by agreeing on a way forward, and setting assignments to be followed up. We end with a closing prayer, and fix an appointment to come back and follow up on what has been discussed and agreed. This usually takes around 2 hours, sometimes longer, and we have found that the most important part of the meeting is to make sure that everyone present has the space to say what is on their minds. Where possible, follow-up is left to advisories, who ensure that assignments are completed.

We have found that our family talks often have a positive impact on conflicts.

Couples seminar

Problems between couples and in their lives are also common, and the women in the groups often suffer from a lot of conflict in their relationships, along with emotional, physical and sexual violence. In response, we started holding one-day couples’ seminars for all women from
different groups, together with their husbands. The day is structured along different elements such as brainstorming and discussing the various problems that couples face, but also includes individual counselling for couples. Typical topics are communication, sexuality, issues around child bearing, and education.

In our follow-up visits and monitoring, we found out that the impact of these seminars is extremely big. Couples talked about how their communication and their attitudes towards sexuality had changed. The forum of a couples’ seminar helped men to understand better from listening to their wives and to other men. The seminars are also a great opportunity to work on men’s attitudes towards their masculinity, and are an opportunity to influence behaviour change. Offering a forum to discuss issues that are culturally tabooed helps enormously to create changes in relationship patterns, and we are thinking of holding these seminars more often.

**Male involvement in communities**

All these examples show how important and helpful it is to involve the men in communities in the empowerment of women to improve the lives of woman in the VSLA groups. However, we have also learned that we need to be careful to balance the need to get men to be supportive while at the same time making sure that the men do not end up overruling the women again and taking power. The women in the groups themselves would sometimes like men to be more involved in the saving groups, for instance they feel more secure from harassment in the communities if there are men in their group, or they feel that the men will be role-models for their husbands. These are all understandable needs, yet as a feminist organisation, we also see them as signs of internalised feelings of inferiority – which we want to overcome. So, we need to balance the wishes and needs of the women against our belief that the women should not be overruled. We prefer to help them to realise that they can be empowered themselves to learn and to acquire new skills.

We are learning every day from experience how best to conceptualise men being involved, where they may play an important role, and how they can be part of the struggle against violence against women – while at the same time closely monitoring the power issues raised by this involvement that, at the end of the day, are not beneficial to the women.
What conditions are essential to be fulfilled for setting up an interlinked psycho-social and economic empowerment approach?

Here we want to reflect on those conditions that we see as very important for a successful implementation of an interlinked psychosocial and empowerment project. Of course, these conditions must always be adjusted to match the situation on the ground, which can differ from place to place.

The need for a sound preparation phase and a clear sequence of actions

The intervention should obviously be prepared as well as possible, and we recommend the following activities that we have found particularly helpful, which should occur in the following order:

1. Before you start: Carry out a baseline survey and share it with key stakeholders; the stakeholders need to be involved in identifying beneficiaries.

2. Before you start: Make sure that you have sufficient resources to carry out the project, and also to react to any problems and needs that arise; funds should be adequate, particularly in terms of skill building for the staff (through the provision of ongoing training and capacity building for staff and other key players involved) and logistics. For example, it is very important to have a car to get women who have undergone sexual and gender-based violence to the health centres and to the police in time. It is especially important that sufficient money is budgeted for emergency support and resettlement packages for individuals in urgent need: Given the high level of vulnerability of the women, there are always unforeseen circumstances like a child’s serious illness, or a woman having to leave her home due to ongoing threats of violence in the family. Saving groups may not be able to provide for such situations, but extra emergency support can. The VSLA groups should also have a small emergency fund.

3. Properly identify your target group, with clear criteria of vulnerability.

4. Identify and plan for a sound implementation strategy, according to the defined psychosocial and economic activities that you have decided to undertake.

5. Identify actors in the community through actor mapping, and make sure that you have a sound entry point to the respective communities.

6. Organise awareness raising meetings first with the local leaders at district, sub-county, parish and village levels (see above), and then with the whole community on the purpose, functioning and process of the saving groups and the organisations’ contribution to it (because a lot of jealousy might exist regarding the question of the extent to which FOWAC supports the groups). It is important to convey the message in the preparatory phase that this project is not just for the women, it is for the whole community.

7. Form groups according to the criteria set.

8. Do a sound preparation with training: train your own staff, train the groups both psychosocially and economically, and train those advisories whom the groups select.

9. Only then distribute the cash box.
10. Constantly monitor all psychosocial and economic activities.

11. Continue to work on and reinforce a stable and well-introduced referral system through intense networking with key players such as local leaders, health institutions and legal institutions, as well as other NGOs.

12. Prepare your exit strategies in advance, but be aware that the situation of the groups will remain fragile and highly vulnerable, so there cannot be a complete exit. Therefore, make sure that sub-county monitoring teams are in place to ensure that the groups can continue and that their strategies remain in line with the programme.

**The importance of capacity building in the project**

Training – including regular refresher and follow-up trainings – has already been mentioned several times, and it is crucial for all levels of the project. We therefore want to dedicate a special section here to underline its importance, and have added some selected exercises in the annex.

**Trainings to FOWAC staff**

Project staff working directly in the field and with the groups in particular are given the following trainings on both economic and psychosocial aspects of their work:

- VSLA Management training
- Training on economic aspects: sustainability, financial control, strategic planning, project planning, report writing
- Basic counselling skills
- Group counselling skills
- Trauma awareness and trauma sensitivity
- Training on addiction counselling and the AA (Anonymous Alcoholics) system
- Training on psychiatric conditions and what needs to be done if clients need psychiatric intervention
- Self-care and stress management
- Training on the documentation of economic and psychosocial activities and data management
- Community conflict resolution methods
- Feminist leadership training

It is extremely important that our staff has a strong background in counselling skills, since the level of psychosocial suffering that we are dealing with is so high and the women and girls so vulnerable that there is always also danger of causing harm by inappropriate interventions. In particular, the level and quality of confidentiality are absolutely crucial, since women and girls asking for help are often in an acute danger of violence. Clients must therefore feel completely safe when they communicate with us or when they share with other members of the group on personal issues. Another important sign of high quality counselling is not to get too close to the client and not to get too deeply involved with her problems, especially not with problems related to the client’s family, without her clear consent and without having discussed it with colleagues. This is important because it may endanger both the client (for having talked too much about problems to people outside the family) and the counsellor (because she may interfere without the client having given her the mandate for it). Apart from the physical danger, getting too involved with the client’s problems may also increase the risk of burn-out for the counsellor.
Training to the VSLA groups

Before getting their starter kit with the cashbox, the VSLA groups are trained in technical skills, most importantly in:

- Business skills, e.g. customer care, market research, marketing, value addition.
- Record keeping with proper accountability and proper share out during the cashbox saving.
- Financial literacy.

These technical trainings are arranged in phases and are usually carried out in-house over 5 days, but can sometimes be organised as one-day sessions on a weekly basis.

In addition to psycho-social elements, we offer training in life skills, which are helpful psychosocial competences aimed at strengthening both individuals and groups. The most important topics are as follows:

- Group dynamics
- Communication
- Team building
- Self-awareness
- Stress management
- Emotion management
- Self-esteem
- Health management

A life skills training also usually lasts 5 days.

Training to the advisories

The advisories play an important role and therefore need a sound capacity building so they can fulfil their tasks. The most central topics that we train them in are:

- General introduction and basic counselling skills
- Mediation skills
- Logical Referral pathway
- Awareness on human rights and gender-based violence
- Conflict management skills
- Trauma-sensitive group meeting format for VSLA groups

The training for the advisories usually lasts three days.

For all levels – the VSLA groups, the advisories and the staff members – we have regular assessments to determine what they may still need in terms of technical input, and organise trainings accordingly with technical experts.

The role of self-care and organisational care mechanisms

In our experience, working with highly vulnerable women and girls who have gone through traumatic experiences and often still live in abusive relationships is very rewarding, but at the same time also draining: the constant emergencies and multiplicity of problems that they face, but also the over-all precarious situation in the area where they live, always carries with it a
sense of never having done enough. Apart from the suffering of our clients, it is important to remember that often staff members were also affected by the long-term consequences of traumatising violence during the war, both personally and in their relationships. We know from experience and also from colleagues worldwide that many women activists are drawn into this work because it creates a great sense of purpose, and it helps us to overcome our own wounds when we are able to help others in similar situations. However, this contact also carries a great emotional burden and a risk of re-activation of past wounds: When being confronted with stories of loss and trauma, one’s own losses and trauma may be re-evoked and may block the relationship with the clients, leading to serious exhaustion or even burn-out. Therefore, to keep the personal stability and emotional balance, we consider the following self-care and organisational care mechanisms as central, and have introduced them to our system:

- We have regular seminars and retreats on self-care with a special focus on boundaries;
- We organise staff meetings such as intervision meetings (i.e. peer-to-peer support) where difficult cases can be shared and collegial support be received from others; this is also when we have exercises of relaxation together;
- We offer individual counselling for all our staff members.

Some lessons learned in the interlinked psycho-social and economic empowerment project

*Change the way the world tackle poverty and build a world based on dignity by doing what is right, not what is easy (Acumen Manifesto)*\(^{15}\)

Through our interlinked empowerment project, we have indeed changed the way of working on poverty reduction. We have tried things out, sometimes failing and sometimes succeeding. Our project is, and remains, a living process of action and reflection.

Here, we want to summarise our main lessons learned regarding the interlinked empowerment project. We shall concentrate on a few of the most central ones.

When groups struggle with economic problems, we found the following to be useful:

- Group counselling, because it reinforces the interacting and sharing in the group and helps the women to encourage each other and use their strengths;
- organising exchange visits with strong groups so that they can learn from the strong ones;
- organising more refresher trainings on those areas that are weak; often problems arise from conflicts in the group; group dynamics and conflict resolution training may therefore help;
- revising the selection criteria for the group formation: we have found that members should have the same background of ideas and values to work well together;
- organising frequent follow-up and monitoring visits for the groups that are not doing so well.

\(^{15}\) See [http://acumen.org/manifesto](http://acumen.org/manifesto).
What else have we found to be helpful for advancing the programme?

- Use appropriate and proper communication to members. Respect and value the women in the groups.
- Put a lot of time into defining clear regulations and group rules, especially in setting up the constitution.
- Link the groups with financial institutions as soon as possible. This will further empower them.
- Look for a stable referral system, especially for the survivors’ legal and medical needs. The more connections the women have to other organisations and institutions, the more holistically can their needs be dealt with and the more they will be able to look for help themselves later on, which is a criterion for sustainability.
- Give the group the power to decide whether to take on new members if others drop out, e.g. due to changing their location or getting married somewhere else.
- Encourage women who may not have money to save to still join the group so they can benefit from the solidarity and therapeutic effect of being in a group.

Group dance (Photo: Inga Neu, medica mondiale e.V.)
ANNEX

In this annex, we would like to offer some helpful and empowering exercises that we learnt in our own training sessions, and from other places. Specific sources are given for some of the exercises, while others are so common in trainings and their sources so widely documented that we have not quoted them here. You will need experienced facilitators for these exercises. Please let us know if you would like more information on our trainings.

Games for fun

Games for when you are starting a new group; a name game

NOTE: Our names have stories which connect us with our identity and history. This name game is fun, helps to get to know each other, but also tells us stories about ourselves, and helps us to make connections between ourselves.

Part 1: Your name

Steps:
1. Put up a newsprint with the following two questions:
   - Please tell us your name, and the story and meaning behind it.
   - What do you like about your name?

2. The participants then take turns to stand either in front of the group or in front of their chair and tell the story behind their name. When they have finished, the group can offer them a welcoming clap, after which the next participant gives her story.

Part 2: Put a gesture to your name

Steps:
1. After everybody has given their name, the participants are asked to stand in a circle, facing the centre. Each participant says her name again, and this time accompanies it with a body gesture that she feels comfortable with. Everyone in the group then repeats the name and makes the same gesture. For example: Doris might say “my name is Doris”, and fold her arms. All the other participants then repeat “you are Doris”, and copy her by folding their own arms.

2. The person standing next to Doris goes next. She might say “My name is Rebecca”, and kick her foot in the air as her gesture. Then everyone repeats “You are Rebecca” and kicks their own foot in the air. The group then starts from the beginning, saying “You are Doris” and folding their arms, then “you are Rebecca” and kicking a foot. The person standing next to Rebecca then gives her name and gesture, which the group repeats and then goes through all the names and gestures, until everyone in the circle has had a turn.

Exercise to close: Finding a symbol

At the end of the training, participants are asked to gather into groups of 3 and find a symbol that represents the things they learned in the training. This can be an actual object, like a piece of wood, or a drawing of an object.
Here are some examples of symbols after the first training that our staff members found for the training experience:

- A twig from a tree. This is a symbol for the palm tree story (see below), since economic empowerment is like water and bears fruits in terms of both money and togetherness within the group;
- A drawing of a fig tree. This is a symbol for the community, since a fig tree’s roots go deep down into the water and can nourish the whole tree;
- A flower. This symbolises our inner strength, since it manages to stay alive although it has been wounded in the dusty, hard ground where people are always walking on it;
- A rock. This also symbolises our strength and power, since if we are as strong as a rock we are not shaken, despite our problems;
- A bottle of water. This is a symbol for the source of life and nourishment, and for our livelihoods, since mineral water is sold.

**Life skills exercises**

**Exercise on communication: The broken telephone**

NOTE: Communication is crucial for group cohesion and solidarity. This exercise is about the challenges of communication and how they affect the way that we understand information. It aims at encouraging reflection on how to communicate effectively within groups.

Steps:

1. Ask the participants to sit in a circle. One participant volunteers to start by whispering a phrase into her neighbour’s ear. The neighbour, once she has heard the phrase, whispers it into the ear of her neighbour and so on, until the phrase has gone around the circle and reached the last person. The phrase should not be too complicated or long; something like “My mother is preparing sweet potatoes for supper” would be perfect.

2. The last person then says the phrase that she heard aloud to the group, after which the first person tells the group the phrase that she originally whispered into her neighbour’s ear.
This exercise often involves a lot of laughter, since the original message has usually been completely distorted once it has passed around the group.

3. Ask the participants whether they have seen such communication problems happening in their lives, for instance with the spreading of rumours. Also, ask them what they can learn from the exercise.
Animal codes on conflict behaviour in groups

NOTE: Conflict is a part of living in a group. Conflict is not necessarily bad; a certain level of conflict within a group is actually normal and healthy. It is also normal that not everyone wants the same things, and that we need to negotiate and see where we can go together. This exercise increases participants’ of and share about one’s own conflict behaviour in groups.

Steps:
1. Distribute the photocopies of the animal codes (see below). Explain that animals sometimes behave in similar ways to humans, as we can learn from the following exercise, which will help us to reflect on ourselves and how we behave in a group in general, and in conflict situations in particular.

2. Present each animal code in turn, and read what is written below the respective picture. Make sure that they understand how each animal is behaving, and how this is connected to the specific conflict behaviour that they represent.

3. After reading the explanations below the pictures and clarifying the animals’ behaviours, ask them to get together with another participant and to share with each other their thoughts on the following questions on the handout (prepared on newsprint beforehand):

   How do I behave when there is conflict in a group?
   Which animal (or animals) behaves most like me?

   Invite them to share as much and as openly as they want and are able to, considering how well they know their partner. Also explain that everyone has a variety of ways in which they respond to conflict, and some of those ways may not be included on the handout. Ask the pairs to see if they can identify other ways that they sometimes behave in conflict situations that are not on the handout. Ask them to take turns at sharing so that one listens while the other talks. Allow some 10-15 minutes, depending on how lively the sharing is.

4. When both members of each pair have finished sharing, bring the participants back to the plenary and ask them how it was to talk about their behaviour in conflict situations. Make sure that they understand that they do not have to tell the group which animals were most like their behaviour, but they should talk instead about whether they felt good or uncomfortable when sharing with their partner, and whether it was easy or hard to find an animal that reflects their conflict behaviour best. Stress the fact that we might behave differently in different conflict situations, and that these behaviours might be represented by different animals.

5. Finally, emphasise that all behaviours have their advantages and disadvantages: none is better than the others. Rather, it is important that we recognise how we behave in conflict situations, what our strong points are, and where we need to extend and improve our range of behaviours.

HANDOUT Animal Codes

**FROG**

Croak...
Croak...
Croak....

The Frog
who croaks on and on about the same subject in a monotonous voice.

**HIPPO**

who sleeps all the time, and never puts up his head except to yawn.

**DONKEY**

"I won't be moved"

The Donkey
who is very stubborn, will not change his/her point of view.

**CHAMELEON**

Change Colour Quick!

The Chameleon
who changes colour according to the people she is with. She'll say one thing to this group and something else to another.

**RABBIT**

Run away.

The Rabbit
who runs away as soon as (s)he senses tension, conflict, or an unpleasant job. This may mean quickly switching to another topic (flight behaviour).

**OSTRICH**

"I don’t think there is any conflict"

The Ostrich
who buries his or her head in the sand and refuses to face reality or admit there is any problem at all.

**MONKEY**

Fooling 'em joking

The Monkey
who fools around, chatters a lot and prevents the group from concentrating on any serious business.

**ELEPHANT**

"Blocks, I need my way down the road!"

The Elephant
who simply blocks the way, and stubbornly prevents the group from continuing along the road to their desired goal.

**GIRAFFE**

"Above it all"

The Giraffe
who looks down on the others, and the program in general, feeling, "I am above all this childish nonsense."
The Mouse
who is too timid to speak up on any subject.

The Fish
who sits there with a cold glassy stare, not responding to anyone or anything.

The Owl
who looks very solemn and pretends to be very wise, always talking in long words and complicated sentences.

The Tortoise
who withdraws from the group, refusing to give his or her ideas or opinions.

The Lion
who gets in and fights whenever others disagree with his/her plans or interfere with her/his desires.

The Rhino
who charges around “putting her/his foot in it”, and upsetting people unnecessarily.

The Snake
who hides in the grass and strikes unexpectedly.

The Cat
who is always looking for sympathy. “It is so difficult for me... miaw...”
Exercise on leadership styles\textsuperscript{17}

NOTE: All groups have and need leaders. Leaders need to become aware of existing leadership styles and learn to reflect on their own leadership behaviour. This exercise increases participants’ awareness of different leadership styles and how they influence interactions in groups.

Steps:
1. Explain that you are going to do a role-play on different leadership styles. Ask for some 5-7 volunteers to play members of a group. Explain to them without the others hearing that they are going to make a decision about a problem, and that each of them will have a specific role to play in the group. (NOTE: Prepare the problem in advance; it should be a typical day-to-day problem of minor importance, not something complicated that will absorb too much interest).

2. Ask one of the volunteers to play a dictatorial chairperson who calls for ideas, but never actually listens to anyone else’s point of view. The others are given different roles, e.g. one is asked to support whatever the chairperson suggests, another one tries to suggest other possibilities, another interrupts and openly opposes the chairperson.

3. Allow them to role-play for a few minutes, and then interrupt.

4. Ask another 5-7 participants to act out the scenario with similar roles, except that the chairperson is now a laissez-faire / passive leader who shows little interest in the discussion, offers no input, does not respond to the group’s suggestions, and doesn’t help them to reach decisions.

5. Allow this group to role-play for a few minutes, and then interrupt.

6. Ask the participants what they observed in the first role-play and how they saw the participants reactions; then ask the same questions about the second role-play. Write down the main points mentioned.

7. Ask them what a democratic leader would be like, how she would do things, and how the outcome might be different. Note down their contributions.

8. If there is time, ask a volunteer to play a democratic chairperson in the same situation.

Games in the context of IGA and economic empowerment

Capability and vulnerability Game

NOTE: In a community, there are various categories of people who have different capabilities and vulnerabilities that influence their range of actions. This exercise is meant to help reflect on these preconditions of community stakeholders for actions.

Steps:

1. Cut pieces of card and, on each card, write the name of a type of person/stakeholder that is found in the community. Make sure that the cards include the following categories, but you can also mention others:

| ✓ child    | ✓ child soldier |
| ✓ LC1      | ✓ boy          |
| ✓ women leader | ✓ girl       |
| ✓ advisor  | ✓ man          |
| ✓ police   | ✓ woman        |
| ✓ nurse    | ✓ LC3          |
| ✓ teacher  | ✓ cultural leader |
| ✓ head teacher | ✓ elder     |
| ✓ child mother | ✓ Member of parliament |
| ✓ orphan   | ✓ peasant farmer, etc. |
| ✓ widow    |               |

2. Show the cards and what is written on them to the participants and ask them to pick the card of a group within the community that they would like to represent for this game. Alternatively, you could just distribute the cards randomly.

3. Ask them to pin the card on their chest and to stand in a single straight line in an open space, so that they are all standing next to each other on the same line.

4. Now read the following statements one at a time. If any of the participants feel that the group they are representing is capable of doing this, they can move two steps forward. If a participant feels that the group that they represented is not capable of doing this, they must stay where they are and not move forward. Ask participants not to discuss the statements, but simply to move silently if they feel that their group is capable of doing what the statement says.
   - I can go to school when I want
   - I can marry when I want
   - I can have someone arrested
   - Action will be taken if I report my concerns to the appropriate authority”
   - I can call for a meeting and people will come
   - I can eat food when I want
   - I can fix the price of agricultural products in my favour

5. After you have read all the statements, ask everyone to stay where they are and look around them to see who is more advantaged, and is now in front of them, and who is more disadvantaged, and could not take the same steps forward as other groups.

6. Ask the participants what they feel they learnt from the game.
Searching for identity

NOTE: This identity search game helps participants to understand how stigmatising and painful it may be to search for identity based on sex, age, status, colour, etc., in a transcultural community.

Steps:
1. Prepare a number of stickers all with the same shape, but so that there are 4 or 5 of the same colour. So, if you had a group of 20 people, you could have 5 red, 5 green, 5 yellow and 5 blue stickers.

2. Put one sticker randomly on each participant’s forehead. Do not let them see which colour they have on their own forehead.

3. Tell the participants to organise themselves into whatever groups they think they should be in. They are only allowed to use sign language and gestures for this; they are NOT allowed to talk.

4. When they have finished, ask them to sit in the groups they have created. Ask them not to look at their own stickers yet.

5. Ask the participants how they felt about the exercise. They can now look at their own stickers. What do they feel now about the groups they created? What lessons do they think they may have learnt from the game?

Income distribution exercise

NOTE: This exercise wants to stimulate reflection on how income is distributed in a family and how money can be budgeted in ways that allow a more sustainable family income.

Steps:
1. Tell the participants that, for the purposes of this exercise, they each have 100,000 Ugandan Shilling to spend to meet the needs of their business and their family.

2. Explain to the participants that they should distribute the money across the following four areas;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a) Business</th>
<th>Replacing goods they have sold with new stock (restocking)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b) Loan</td>
<td>Paying back money they have borrowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Saving</td>
<td>Putting money aside for the for the future, e.g. for school fees or medical bills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Family expenses</td>
<td>To buy the families’ basic needs, such as food</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Give each participant a piece of paper with the following grid drawn on it, and ask them to write in each box how much of their 100,000 Ugandan Shilling they would allocate to each heading.
4. Ask the participants to hold their piece of paper in front of them, so the group can see how everyone distributed their money. As facilitator, look at how the participants allocated their funds, and ask them why they chose to distribute the money in the way that they did.

Normally in this exercise, the participants will allocate most of their money to family expenses. In this case, explain to the participants that this is why most businesses fail. Most of the money should be put into restocking since that is the engine of their business, and the money for other expenses such as savings, loan repayment and family expenses comes from their profits.

**Creative IGA identification and selection**

**NOTE:** This game can be played at the beginning of the training to stimulate reflection on the potential of income generation.

**Steps:**

1. After the participants have introduced themselves and shared their expectations and fears, ask them to go outside the training room for 5-10 minutes and look for one thing that they like or admire. Tell them that the object could be anything, as small as a pebble or as big as a mountain, and they do not have to bring it back to the training room; just to identify it.

2. When they come back, ask the participants to share one by one the thing they chose, the reason why they picked it, and to think of a way that they could earn an income from it. Some of the participants might not have an idea how they could earn money from the item they chose. In this case, ask the group if anyone else can think of a way they could earn an income from it.

   The participants will be surprised at the wonderful, creative ideas they have between them about how to earn money from things they see around them every day, but never thought of as opportunities to generate income.

3. Identify the items that were picked the most often and the least often, and ask the participants why they think that was.

4. Explain that the group will be looking at IGA identification, selection, and marketability later in the training, and ask them if they think they learnt any lessons about those things from this exercise.
Relaxation and meditation exercises

NOTE: Trauma is always associated with feeling anxious, tense and hypervigilant. Therefore, survivors of traumatising violence need to learn ways of relaxing and distancing themselves from painful thoughts and from the tension that has been stored in their bodies. Here are some exercises that have proven to be helpful for our clients and for ourselves.

Breathing exercise

Rationale: Breathing in a mindful way helps us to reconnect with ourselves, our strengths, and our lives. This is especially necessary in times of stress and when we are feeling overwhelmed. This is also very important for helpers, since we cannot be effective if we do not know how to find relief for ourselves when we feel that our clients’ problems are making us feel helpless. The following exercise is accompanied by a tune and with gestures that reflect the meaning of the words that are being sung.18

“Breathing in, Breathing out (x 2)
“I am blooming like a flower; I am fresh as the dew!”
“I am solid as a mountain; I am firm as the earth!”
“I am free.”
“Breathing in, Breathing out (x 2)
“I am water reflecting what is real, what is true.”
“And I feel I have space, deep inside of me.
“I am free.”

Self-awareness and self-affirmation exercise19

Rationale: For helpers as well as their clients, dealing with trauma means confronting difficult experiences of helplessness and horror. This experience can have a very deep effect on us, and exercises in self-affirmation can help us to maintain a sense of balance and to reconnect ourselves with our potential to grow and be strong.

The love dance:
Love yourself
Love all
Let go
Move on and grow
In beauty and wisdom
Feel strong
To stand tall

Giving each other appreciation and strength: The massage exercise

Ask the participants to stand in a circle, all facing the centre. Now ask them to each turn to their right, so that they are looking at the back of the person in front of them. Ask them to each put their hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them. Now ask them to gently massage the neck, the shoulders, and the back of the person standing in front of them, while at the same time someone is massaging them. Make sure to tell the participants to check with the person they are massaging if they are comfortable with the way they are being touched.

18 This exercise was introduced by Leocadia Kabibi, a trainer of FOWAC.
19 This exercise was introduced by Leocadia Kabibi, a trainer of FOWAC.
The exercise should last for about 5 minutes.
When they have finished, ask the participants to bow to each other and say, “thank you”.

**Imagination Exercise: Feeling joy through my body (Instructions)**

The facilitator should read the following text aloud to the participants:

“I would like to invite you to an imagination exercise, in which we will travel through your body and feel how the different parts of your body can help you to enjoy. Try to sit as comfortably as possible. If you like you can close your eyes, or find a neutral spot in front of you to look at, perhaps by lowering your gaze. Be aware of the way your feet touch the floor, and try to make them as stable as possible on the ground. Feel your bottom and your back touching the chair. You do not have to stay completely still during the exercise, and if you need to change your position to feel more comfortable you can do so at any point. Be aware of your breath. Breathe in and breathe out in your own rhythm. Be aware of how your body moves while breathing: feel your chest and stomach going up and down.

And now imagine that while you are breathing out you are letting go of all the tension in your body; all your unpleasant thoughts or worries are leaving with your breath. When you breath out you let them go and a soft wind will take them away. .... While breathing in you will get new energy along with the fresh air, and a deep peace and calmness will flow through your body.

Breathing in getting new energy, breathing out letting go of tension... breathing in – energy, breathing out, letting go of tension (PAUSE).

Now you feel as relaxed as possible and in the moment, and I want to take you on a little journey through the different parts and organs of your body: First turn your attention to your eyes. Remember the ways your eyes have helped you to enjoy things: seeing lovely colours..., looking at nice things...., dear people...... Remember the ways you enjoy seeing nature: the sun..., trees...., flowers......., lovely landscapes ... remember special situations in which your eyes gave you joy......

Then go to your ears. Remember when your ears helped you to enjoy: lovely music....., birds singing...., the sound of the sea or a river....., the voice of someone you love..... remember special situations in which your ears gave you joy....

Then you can turn your attention to your mouth, remembering the joy your mouth has given you: speaking......singing.....eating a lovely meal......drinking a cool fresh drink..... remember special situations in which your mouth gave you joy....

Then you can go on to other parts of your body, which help you to enjoy: your nose, your hands..., your legs..., your feet......, your skin....., your hair...or maybe other parts of your body, which I haven’t mentioned. Remember these parts or organs and the way they have given you joy. Remember special situations in which these parts of your body helped you to enjoy. Remember how you felt in these situations, and feel those feelings again now.....

You can always remember the joy the parts of your body have given you, you can always remember these special situations and you can always feel those feelings of joy and relaxation again. Whenever you want you can do this exercise on your own.....

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20 Adapted from: Training manual compiled by Gabriele Mueller Copyright: medica mondiale e.V.
back into this room, move your hands and your legs, and open your eyes.

**NOTE** for facilitators: This exercise is meant to strengthen body awareness, self-esteem and support a self-accepting approach towards one’s body. It can be used in both individual and group counselling, but it should only be used in a calm atmosphere where the women feel comfortable enough to relax.

**Imagination exercise: A healing light (Instructions)**

Sit comfortably. Imagine a lovely place somewhere in nature. Imagine the sun or the moon shining on you with its either warm or cool light. Decide for yourself what is more comfortable for you in the moment.

Imagine the beams softly touching your skin and streaming through your body, energising, regenerating and healing every part of you.

Begin with your feet and lead the light over and through your legs, over and through your pelvis and your stomach. Imagine that there is a flower in your belly, and as soon as it is touched by the light it opens its petals and is totally filled with the light. And now you can ask this flower to shine its light on your back. And your back will be filled with the light of the flower, regenerating and healing......

Then lead the beam further over your shoulders, your arms...all the way down to your fingers, so that these parts of your body are also energised and healed.... And when the flower is totally full of the healing light, you can ask it to transmit the light to your whole body, giving energy, regeneration and healing to every part of your body.

And finally, imagine that you breathe in through the top of your head, that your breath passes through your body, and that you breathe out through the soles of your feet. Imagine breathing like this for several times, and then come back into the room with your full attention.

**NOTE** for facilitators: This exercise can be used during both individual and group counselling sessions. It helps the participants to learn how to pay attention to their body, and usually helps them to relax without giving up control. The exercise can also be used for stress reduction.

**Muscle Relaxation Exercise**

Steps:
1. Explain that during life-threatening events, we tend to tense our body automatically - which is a healthy reaction as it energises our muscles to make us better at either fleeing or fighting. However, once the life-threatening situation is over, this tension sometimes stays with us and, little by little, causes aches and pains in our muscles. Our body can maintain this tension for a long time, and if it does, we have to help our body to realise that the situation is over and that the tension is no longer necessary, and is actually stopping us from feeling well and strong.

2. Introduce the following exercise as one way of learning how to release that tension in a controlled way.

3. Ask the participants to sit and to listen to your instructions.

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21 Adapted from: Training manual compiled by Gabriele Mueller (Copyright: medica mondiale e.V.)
22 Adapted from: medica mondiale Afghanistan (2009). Training Manual: Exercises for relaxing, energising, connection (internal use only).
Muscle relaxation exercise (Instructions)

Sit in a comfortable position. I want to invite you to enter into a state of deep relaxation by guiding you to first tense and then relax specific muscles in your body.

Please close your eyes and concentrate fully on your breathing. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. (PAUSE) It is important that you feel how the air enters your body, reaches into the lowest parts of your lungs, and then leaves again through your mouth. (PAUSE) After you have breathed this way for several minutes and your breathing has become more regular, follow my instructions:

- Let us start with your forehead: Frown. Now raise your eyebrows as high as you can for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Now let's go to your eyes and nose: Close your eyes as tightly as you can for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Let’s now concentrate on your lips, cheeks and jaw: Draw the corners of your mouth back and grimace for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Now let’s go to your hands: Stretch your arms in front of you and clench your fists tightly for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Now your forearms: Push your arms out as if they are touching an invisible wall and press your hands against it for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Let’s go to your upper arms: Bend your elbows. Tense your biceps (the muscles in your upper arms) for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Let’s concentrate on your shoulders: Lift your shoulders up to your ears for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Let’s go to your back: Arch your back away from the chair. Do this for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Now it is time for your stomach: Tighten your stomach muscles for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Let’s concentrate on your hips and buttocks: Tighten your buttocks for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Let’s go to the thighs: Tighten your thigh muscles by pressing your legs together as tightly as you can for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- Now the feet: Bend your feet up toward your body as far as you can for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).
- And finally, your toes: Curl your toes under your feet as tightly as you can for 10 seconds (PAUSE FOR TEN SECONDS). Relax (PAUSE).

When the whole exercise has been completed, ask the participants to share their experiences during the exercise. How do they feel now, AFTER the exercise? How did they feel when they were tensing and relaxing parts of their bodies? Did they feel any kind of pain in their body during the exercise?
Yoga Exercise: Greeting the universe

1. Greeting the whole universe

Breathe in. Lift your arms to the position in the photo, and breathe in deeply.

2. Greeting myself

Breathe out. Let your hands meet in front of yourself, then bring your thumbs in to touch your body so you can feel your heart beat.

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23 This exercise was introduced by Dr. Simone Lindorfer during the self-care seminar in April 2016. One of our colleagues, Jennifer Ajok, volunteered for the photos.
3. **Greeting heaven**

Breathe in. Lift your arms up and stretch them high to the sky.

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4. **Greeting Mother Earth**

Breathe out. Let your arms go down until your hands are touching the ground. Bend your knees, if this feels more comfortable. Remember that during this exercise you should never do anything that causes your body to feel pain, or move your body into a position that feels unnatural.

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5. **Forming a circle that greets everybody**

Breathe in. Move your arms in a circle as if you were stretching out to everyone, until finally letting the palms of your hands meet above your head. Keep your hands in this position, and your feet firmly on the floor, throughout the rest of this exercise.
6. Greet the people on your left-hand side

Breathe out. Bend slightly to the left, but only from the waist; do not move your hips.

7. Come back to the centre

Breathe in. Turn back to the centre.

8. Greet the people to the right

Breathe out. Still with your hands above your head bend slightly to the right, but again only bend your waist; your hips shouldn’t move.
9. **Come back to the centre**

Breathe in. Turn back to the centre.

10. **Turn your attention to your left-hand side**

Breathe out and, again without moving your hips, turn slightly to the left, while your feet remain on the ground.

11. **Come back to the centre**

Breathe in. Turn back to the centre, keeping your arms above your hand, with the palms of your hands touching each other.
12. Turn your attention to your right-hand side

Breathe out and turn slightly to the left, but without moving your hips.

13. Come back to the centre

Breathe in, and turn back to the centre.

14. Greet the universe again, and return to the beginning.

Breathe out and lower your arms from above your head until they are hanging next to your body again.
Self-care and self-awareness exercises

The battery of energy

NOTE: This exercise can be used as an opening exercise for any group meeting, but it also lets the facilitators know about the need of the participants to relax.

Steps:
1. Give each participant a sheet of paper, and read the following instructions aloud:
   First, imagine that your body is a battery. When you are full of energy your battery is 100% charged, and when you have no energy your battery is 0% charged. Think for a moment and decide how charged up your battery is right now, from 0% to 100%.

   Draw a battery in the middle of your piece of paper, and shade it in to show how charged it is at this moment.

   Think about the things that drain your energy. Write them down to the right of the battery.

   Now think about what things give you energy, and write these on the left side of the battery.

2. Ask participants now to share with their neighbour about their battery of energy and what they learned from this exercise.
Exercises reflecting on trauma

The story of the palm tree

NOTE: This story helps to understand trauma in a creative way and encourages sharing about pain and resilience amongst group members.

Steps:
1. Explain that instead of telling them what “trauma” is, you will read them a story and then discuss it together to see how it relates to women’s lives in general, and probably also to their own lives.

2. Slowly read the “The story of the palm tree” (see handout below). Pause from time to time while reading, and when you have finished hand out copies of the story and ask the participants to take turns to read each paragraph aloud. Then ask how they liked the story and what touched them most about it. It is unlikely that all the participants will feel happy with the story’s solution. Some might share feelings of sadness that the stone didn’t disappear completely. Explain that this is what trauma recovery is all about: not getting rid the stone, but reaching water. And as helpers, we can’t take away what happened, but we can support people in finding their water.

3. On a flipchart, draw a simple sketch of a palm tree with a stone on top of it, and some roots. Make sure the stone is big enough so you can write words inside it. Explain that the stone represents all the experiences that hurt women, or make them feel sad and desperate. Ask them to name the stones that they, or other women they know, have felt in their lives, and then ask them to walk over to the flipchart and write the name inside the stone in the drawing.

4. Then draw a blue stream of water at the bottom of the picture, so that it is just out of reach of the roots. Ask the participants what the “water” in women’s lives where they live is: What gives them strength to grow despite the stone? What helps them to heal? They can also name their own sources of “water”. Ask them to get up, come to the flipchart and write their ideas in the middle of the stream.

5. Explain that in the story of the palm tree, we can see two things that the stone does:
   - It creates pain and leaves a wound that does not disappear. In technical words, such wounds are called “trauma”.
   - It gives an opportunity to grow – and some people manage to become stronger after terrible times, just as the palm tree grows into a big tree.

Distribute the handout on “What trained helpers should learn from the palm tree story” and go through it together by inviting the participants to take turns to read paragraphs of the handout aloud.

6. Finish the exercise with a song and a dance that shows that pain AND growth are both part of women’s experiences in life. OR: Read the story of the palm tree again as a way of closing.

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24 The original version of the story and the sharing exercise were developed by Simone Lindorfer and first used at Uganda Catholic Social Training Centre, Kampala. It was adjusted to this version in the medica mondiale & medica Liberia (2013). Women’s Empowerment Manual.
The palm tree drawn by FOWAC staff during the first training in 2015
The story of the palm tree

Long, long ago there was a young palm tree who lived in the desert. She loved life, and looked forward to experiencing everything that came her way. She felt joy in each sunrise as the first rays of sunlight touched her branches, she was happy when birds came to rest in her shade as the day grew hotter, she danced in the desert winds that blew through her leaves, and she listened with a grateful heart to the silence of the night. She thanked God for the gift of being alive.

One day a man passed by. He had run away from a nearby town where people had cheated him, and now he boiled with anger as he crossed the pitiless heat of the desert without food or water. In his fury he resented the youth and happiness of the palm tree, and shouted at her; “Hey, you, palm tree, why should you be so happy when I am so miserable? If I have to suffer, then you will suffer, too”. On saying that, he picked up a big, heavy stone and slammed it down on top of the tree’s trunk. The palm tree could hardly breathe as she watched the man running away, still grumbling about his life.

For a moment she was completely still, feeling nothing other than numb, confused and deeply shocked. But then the pain started; it began to fill her heart, spreading from top of her trunk to the smallest twig at the tip of her longest branch. It was an overwhelming pain that left her unable to feel anything else. She felt her heart break and, in her desperation, she cried long and loud but there was nobody to hear her; the desert was silent, and the dark night was the only witness to her suffering.

For a long time she did nothing; hoping every minute, every hour, every day that the pain would finally stop. She was both sad and angry; her life had been so beautiful, so full of promise, and it had been twisted into this painful and unjust existence. She did not want to suffer any more, and after some time she decided to try and do something to end the agony. If she could only move the stone ... She took a long, deep breath and tried to push it away, but it wouldn’t move. She tried again, gathering all her strength, but she could not move the stone a hairsbreadth; it remained in place, its weight still crushing down upon her. She kept trying, over and over again, her strength ebbing away as she grew more and more tired, until she finally realised that she was incapable of pushing the stone away and she gave up.

That sense of hopelessness grew within her, and for a long time she couldn’t see any way of fighting the pain. She wanted to live, yes, but if life promised nothing other than this pain, why bother to endure it? Why should she wake up in the morning if there was nothing waiting for her but desperation? She no longer felt pleasure in the sunlight, the birdsong, the evening breeze; she began to hate life, and wanted to die. “If life is only pain”, she cried to the desert silence, “then I don’t want to live any more”. Overwhelmed by these feelings of helplessness, she drifted off into sleep.

But when she woke up the next morning, she knew that something had changed. At first she didn’t know what it was, but then she realised she could feel cold, nourishing water coming up through her roots into her trunk, soothing her and easing the pain. She tried to understand what was happening, and then she realised – while the weight of the stone had been crushing her, it had also pushed her deeper into the earth, until finally she had reached an underground stream. Its restoring powers gave her a moment of renewed hope, and she felt strength coming back into her branches. Although she could still feel the stone, as heavy as before, she was once again able to feel the power to grow pulsing inside her. After a time of grief that had seemed endless, this was the first moment of joy she had known and it filled her heart until it felt as if it would burst.
The water continued to nourish the palm tree, and enabled her to grow until she became one of the biggest trees in the desert. All the while she carried the stone, it’s weight always there, sometimes hurting more and sometimes less, until she learned to accept it as a part of herself, and embrace the stone with her leaves as if she were protecting her most vulnerable, most painful part. Despite the stone, she learnt to feel joy again, and to feel happiness when birds came to rest in her lush, inviting branches, and people sheltered beneath her from the sandstorms that ravaged the desert. Once again, she felt deeply grateful for the gift of her life.
Exercise: Sharing about signs of trauma

NOTE: This exercise helps to understand the typical signs of trauma and what happens in the body and brain during traumatic events.

Handouts: Some of the common posttraumatic problems
What happens in our body and brain during traumatic events?

Steps:

1. Ask the participants if they have ever had any introductions to the topic of trauma and, if so, what they remember about it, and what they thought were the most important pieces of information in that introduction. How would they explain trauma in their own words, without using the “technical words”? Remind them of the palm tree story, and note down their contributions.

Make sure that they understand the difference between “trauma”, which is the result of certain experiences, AND “traumatic events” or “traumatic stressors”, which are causes of trauma. Drawing a diagram “Traumatic events -> Trauma”, where the arrow indicates that it is the event which leads to the trauma, can help to illustrate this.

2. Ask the participants to suggest words that people in their communities use for trauma, and agree on which term the group would like to use. Brainstorm on the signs of trauma that they might have noticed in their communities, and note down their responses. They may mention signs that are not usually considered to be typical signs of post-traumatic stress as identified in the common definition of “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder”. This is absolutely fine, given the number of inter-cultural expressions of trauma.

3. Also write down signs that might be arising from problems in relationships within families or communities.

4. Explain that the signs on the handout they are about to be given are often displayed by survivors of traumatic events who are suffering from something called “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder”. Stress the fact that all these signs are normal reactions to abnormal experiences, and are shared by many people who have gone through painful events. Some people are able to recover from these problems after a while, but others carry on suffering for longer.

Warn the participants that this exercise might remind them of some of their own experiences with trauma and might therefore be a little upsetting emotionally. If it gets too much for them they can do some deep breathing exercises, or leave the room with a facilitator who can help them to calm down.

5. Distribute the handout “What is trauma?” and go through the text by asking the participants to take turns in reading. Ask the participants to always look at the picture first, and then read what is written below it. Pause for a moment after each part. After going through the pictures and the texts, ask them: Have they ever heard people in their communities talk about these signs? Have they experienced what is portrayed

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25 The exercise was adjusted to this version from the medica mondiale & medica Liberia (2013). Women’s Empowerment Manual.
on the pictures themselves? Which signs are the most common ones? Allow some time for discussion.

Be aware of the energy level in the group, and either take a break or use one of the self-care exercises if you think that seeing the pictures and talking about difficult experiences is becoming too stressful for the participants.

5. Explain that all the signs presented in this exercise can be seen as examples of our brain and body trying to “understand” what has happened.

6. Take time for the participants to fully understand the theory behind trauma. Answer any questions they might have. Emphasise that it is important for us to understand why traumatised people sometimes seem to feel as if they are being threatened at this precise moment right now, even though the actual traumatic incident is over; their anxiety levels are so high because they constantly relive their memories of the images, and don’t feel that the incident is over and that they are now safe.

7. Finally, distribute the handout “What happens in our body and brain during traumatic events?” Ask the participants to read through the handouts again after the training session.
HANDOUT: Some of the common posttraumatic problems

The DSM-V clusters the symptoms of PTSD along the following four categories:

“The body is always on alert” (hyperarousal)

The survivor acts as if the world is dangerous and she cannot relax because she must constantly be prepared for danger, e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sleeping problems</th>
<th>Problems with concentration</th>
<th>Exaggerated startle response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Irritable behavior / anger outbursts</th>
<th>Hypervigilance</th>
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[Image of illustrations for each symptom]
Painful memories of the event come back (Intrusion)

A survivor cannot get the event out of her mind. It is as if she keeps playing the event over and over in her head in order to try to grasp what happened; e.g.

| Recurrent nightmares | Flashbacks | Intrusive memories of the event |

Avoiding thinking and talking about it

A survivor tries to forget and get away from things or people that remind her of the frightening event, e.g.
Negative changes in thinking and feeling

A survivor might lose interest in things that she once liked and isolate herself from other people. She may feel totally alone or even not feel anything anymore or feel (self-)blame, fear, shame or guilt, e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diminished interest or participation in activities which once brought joy</th>
<th>Feeling detached and estranged from people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having persistently negative feelings such as shame, or guilt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HANDOUT: What happens in our body and brain during traumatic events? 27

When we are confronted with a serious threat to our life, our whole body and especially our brain makes use of our *survival* functions: we go into the *fight-or-flight* mode. Our body produces lots of hormones that make us able to run faster (if we want to flee) or be stronger (for fighting back).

When these hormones circulate inside us, those parts of our brain that record images and body sensations (which is called Amygdala) and that function like an alarm system are very active, but other parts that record the logical order of events and that puts a beginning and an end to a story (the hippocampus, the “librarian” of our brain) are blocked off. Because of this, the information is not stored in that part of the brain which enables it to sort our experiences into a logical, chronological order. It can therefore happen that an event which takes place in the present will trigger a memory of something that happened in the past, and we might start to recall unspeakable images from that earlier time, and even believe that the thing we are remembering is actually happening now; our brain is unable to recognise that this is only a memory of something that happened long ago. This is shown in the picture28 below:

Something else that sometimes happens inside our body when we can neither fight nor run away (e.g. during rape) is that we **“freeze” both physically and emotionally**: we hardly experience any pain, and it feels as if the things that are happening are not real. We may even feel as if we are watching everything from a distance.

One trauma researcher, Mardi Horowitz, suggests that our brain reproduces traumatic images in flashbacks and nightmares because we cannot “store” these experiences as easily as memories, and so we cannot integrate them into our normal life. We are able to absorb, and later to remember, most of the things that happen in our lives, and then carry on with the normal business of living, but traumatic events are so threatening and produce so much horror inside us that our brains cannot process them. Our brain cannot find a good place to store these horrible memories so they stay ‘present’ and keep coming back uninvited.

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28 Artist: Grace Bithum, Kampala (Uganda), picture produced for FOWAC in 2016.
Exercise on assessing “stones” and “flowers” in my life\textsuperscript{29}

**NOTE:** This exercise helps to reflect on both the difficult and even traumatising moments in life, but also about life-giving positive experiences. Done in a group, it reinforces members’ understanding of and empathy towards each other.

**Steps:**

1. In advance, cut the shapes of flowers from yellow manila cards and stones from grey ones. You will need 5 stones and 7 flowers for each participant. You will also need one piece of rope of about 3-4 metres for each participant.

2. Reassure the participants that this exercise will take place in a confidential setting, and remind them that nothing that is shared in this exercise should leave the room, but should remain amongst themselves. Also explain another rule: Everyone should feel free to share whatever they want; and they can also freely decide to not talk about experiences that may be too painful for them.

3. Ask the participants to find an area of the training room where they have some space to work. Give them each a piece of rope and ask them to arrange it on the floor so that it represents a “river of life”. The end nearest them represents their birth, and the end furthest away represents the present day. The rope should have both curved parts, which represent difficult periods in their life, and straight parts, which represent calm periods.

4. Give each participant 5 stones and 7 flowers, and ask them to think about their lives. They should first try and think of 5 painful experiences they have had. These will be represented by the 5 stones. They should think of a name for each painful memory, and write it on the card. They should then place the stones on their life-river at the point at which they happened. So, if a memory happened when they were very young it would be at the start of the rope. If it happened half-way through their lives, it would be in the middle of the rope. If it happened recently, it would be at the furthest end of the rope.

   They should then repeat the exercise by thinking of 7 happy experiences, giving them names, writing the names on a flower, and placing that flower in the appropriate place on their river of life.

5. Make sure you give them enough time to finish the exercise, and only when everyone has finished their life-stream should the sharing begin. Ask for a volunteer to start, and remind them again only to share as much as they feel comfortable sharing, and to leave out anything that they do not feel happy about sharing. Make it clear that they do not have to explain every stone and flower on their rope if they do not want to.

   When she has finished sharing, ask the group to give feedback and discuss the strengths they see in her and her sharing.

6. When everyone has given their feedback, the facilitator should ask the person who was sharing what she thinks she has learnt from the exercise. It can be something she realised while placing the stones and flowers, something that she discovered when she was sharing with the others, or something she learnt in the feedback round.

\textsuperscript{29} Introduced by Dr. Simone Lindorfer during self-care training in 2016.
7. Finally, ask the sharing person what she would need now – this may be a hug from the others, or a song, or a prayer, or to go out of the room and be by herself, or with somebody else, for a moment.

8. Then the next one shares, until everyone has shared.

This exercise needs a lot of time and should not be done in a hurry. If the group has more than 10 members you should allow 2 days for it, so that the sharing does not become too intense.