

Living Peace Initiative: Main lessons learned from Concern Worldwide's gender-transformative intervention in Sierra Leone

Context

In Sierra Leone, many families face deep-rooted gender inequalities and harmful social norms that fuel conflict, limit women's participation in decision making, and perpetuate gender-based violence (GBV). Violence against women and girls remains widespread: an estimated 62 percent of women aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence, according to the Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (SLDHS) 2019.

Despite the scale of the problem, reliable and comprehensive national data on GBV remains limited. While services such as Rainbo Centres provide critical support to survivors, access is uneven and often restricted to those who can reach these facilities. At the same time, reports from Family Support Units (FSUs) indicate a year-on-year reduction in reported cases, alongside stagnating conviction rates, highlighting ongoing challenges in reporting, access to justice, and accountability. These dynamics affect victims and survivors, but also households and communities, reinforcing cycles of violence, poverty, and social fragmentation. In response, Concern Worldwide identified the need for a gender transformative approach that addresses harmful norms and power dynamics at the household level, as a foundation for safer families and more peaceful communities.

In 2014, Concern Worldwide introduced the Living Peace approach in 22 communities in Tonkolili District as part of a programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The programme aimed to engage men to contribute to safer communities and to reduce sexual violence against women and girls in Tonkolili through increased awareness, shifts in attitudes, and strengthened referral systems.

The Living Peace approach was developed and piloted by the organisation formerly known as Promundo (now Equimundo) in collaboration with local partner organisations. It brings together husbands and wives (monogamous and polygamous couples) from the same village in a group of about 15-30 participants. Over a three-month period, the group meets for 11 sessions, facilitated by trained Concern Worldwide staff - followed by a ceremony where learnings are shared and celebrated with the wider community.

The pilot demonstrated that when men and women come together to reflect, heal, and openly discuss their relationships, they can begin to break cycles of violence and build stronger, more equal partnerships. Based on this success, Living Peace has since been expanded to other Concern programmes including Yoti Yoti and Linking Agriculture and Natural Resource Management towards Nutrition Security (LANN).

Why Living Peace?

Concern is implementing Living Peace because it directly addresses one of the root causes of poverty and inequality: gender inequality and violence within households. Many communities experience high levels of intimate partner violence. Living Peace works with couples to reflect on power, masculinity, and relationships, helping to reduce violence at home. It also promotes positive masculinity by encouraging men to become supportive partners, sharing decision-making, reducing harmful behaviours, and contributing to household wellbeing.

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When relationships improve, families communicate better, resources are shared more fairly, and women and children are safer, contributing to stronger outcomes in nutrition, education, and livelihoods. Living Peace also strengthens the impact of sectoral programming. For example, livelihood activities (including VSLA), nutrition interventions, and farmer field schools are more effective when there is less conflict in the home, when women can participate safely, and when couples make joint financial decisions. Finally, Living Peace supports longer-term social change by helping to shift harmful social norms, not only individual behaviours so that equality and non-violence become accepted community standards. Because participants are drawn from across Concern programmes, the approach contributes to peace and harmony within targeted households and the wider communities.

The Approach

Community based approach: The Living Peace approach is participatory, reflective, and transformative, focusing on changing mindsets first, followed by behaviours, and ultimately community norms, so that peace begins within the household and spreads outward. It is a community-based approach that addresses attitudes, behaviours, and social norms related to gender and relationships.

Engage with couples (men and women): The approach creates a safe and trusted space where men and women engage as couples to reflect on their relationships, explore the root causes of conflict, and develop more equitable, respectful, and non-violent ways of living together. By working with couples rather than individuals alone, Living Peace actively engages both women and men in questioning norms around masculinity, femininity, power, and decision-making.

Baseline survey: A baseline survey, led by the Gender Advisor, was conducted before the start of Living Peace sessions to understand the initial situation regarding gender norms, relationships, and behaviours, and to provide a reference point for measuring change over time. Findings helped inform programme design by identifying key gaps and needs, supported realistic target-setting, and strengthened accountability and learning by enabling progress tracking.

Facilitation: To ensure effective facilitation of the Living Peace approach, staff are first trained in gender-transformative approaches through Sonke Gender Justice. This training equips facilitators with the knowledge, skills, and sensitivity required to handle complex and often sensitive issues related to gender, power, and relationships that may arise during sessions.

Emphasis is placed on building facilitators' capacity to manage discussions in a respectful and non-judgmental manner, while also ensuring strict confidentiality. Creating trust is central to the success of Living Peace, as participants are encouraged to openly share personal experiences and reflect on deeply rooted social norms.

The manual: The Living Peace manual, developed by Concern Worldwide, provides a structured and practical guide for facilitating the Living Peace approach at community level. It is designed as a step-by-step curriculum comprising 11 interactive sessions that support participants through a gradual process of reflection, learning, and behaviour change.

The manual is participatory in nature and uses a variety of facilitation methods, including group discussions, role plays, storytelling, and guided reflection. These methods are intended to encourage active engagement, allowing participants to relate the content to their own lived experiences.

Each session builds on the previous one, starting with foundational topics such as understanding gender roles and power dynamics, and progressively addressing more sensitive issues including conflict, violence, communication, and shared decision-making within households. The sessions also promote positive practices such as mutual respect, joint financial planning, and supportive parenting. In addition to session guides, the manual provides facilitators with clear objectives, key messages, and practical tools to manage discussions effectively, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. It emphasizes creating a safe, respectful, and confidential environment where participants feel comfortable to openly share and reflect.

Safe environment: To further support this safe environment, sessions are conducted in private and secure locations identified by the communities themselves. These spaces are carefully selected to ensure participants feel comfortable, protected, and free to engage without fear of stigma or exposure.

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Adoption: Recognizing that meaningful change, particularly around deeply rooted social and gender norms, does not happen overnight, the Living Peace approach allows participants time to gradually internalize and apply what they learn. Behavior change is a process, and participants need space to reflect and practice new ways of thinking and interacting within their households.

For this reason, sessions are held twice a month, giving couples adequate time between meetings to apply the concepts and skills discussed. This interval enables participants to test new behaviours, such as improved communication, shared decision-making, and non-violent conflict resolution, in their daily lives.

Sharing of experience: During subsequent sessions, participants were encouraged to share their experiences, challenges, and successes. This ongoing cycle of learning, practice, and reflection strengthens behaviour change and supports the gradual transformation of attitudes and relationships over time.

Graduation ceremony: A graduation ceremony is organized upon completion of the 11th session to mark the successful participation of couples in the Living Peace programme. This event serves as both a celebration of progress and a public recognition of the commitment demonstrated by participants throughout the learning process.

During the ceremony, couples are awarded certificates and presented with branded T-shirts, symbolizing their achievement and identity as champions of positive change. The event is attended by key community stakeholders, including local leaders and other influential actors, which helps to reinforce community ownership and support for the initiative.

Graduates as role models in communities: Graduates of the Living Peace programme are encouraged to act as role models and change agents within their communities. By sharing their experiences and demonstrating positive behaviours, they contribute to the wider transformation of social norms, promoting more equitable, respectful, and non-violent relationships beyond the initial participant groups.

The three core elements of Living Peace

Concern documentation consistently describes Living Peace as comprising three interconnected core elements:

1. **Community based activities:** Living Peace groups are established in close collaboration with local leaders and community structures. This helps ensure acceptance, legitimacy, and relevance, and strengthens links between household level change and wider community norms. Couples and polygamous units are both self-identified and nominated to join from within the pool of our programme participants.
2. **Restoration of social relations:** The approach supports couples to rebuild trust and repair relationships by promoting shared decision making, mutual respect, and understanding. This process helps mend relationships that have been damaged by conflict or violence.
3. **Conflict resolution:** Living Peace develops constructive coping strategies at individual, couple, family, and community levels. These strategies are explicitly gender transformative and culturally appropriate, enabling participants to resolve disagreements without violence and to challenge norms that justify inequality or abuse.

The Living Peace curriculum

The Living Peace approach follows a structured curriculum set out in the Living Peace manual. Sessions progress from reflection on gender roles and relationships to deeper exploration of violence, power, and healing, before moving outward to community level change. The sessions include:

1. Introduction of the group and the programme
2. Our roles in society as men, women and persons
3. Understanding and sharing roles and responsibilities

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4. Learning from our elders and building trust for better partner relations
5. What is violence? Why and how does it happen between partners?
6. Power, violence and their consequences
7. Dealing with bad memories and building stronger partner relationships
8. Supporting victims of violence in our community
9. Challenging harmful actions in our community
10. Taking positive action as changemakers
11. Connecting with the community for positive change

The cycle concludes with a Changemakers' Ceremony, where participants share their learning with the wider community, reinforcing positive norms and recognising couples as agents of change.

Examples from the Living Peace manual.

Session 11: Connecting with the Community for Positive Change

Format: Men and women are in separate groups for part of Exercise 2, but otherwise are together for the entire session.
Duration: 2 hours and 30 minutes

Facilitator's Note: Make sure you have brought the details about the Community Action Plan developed by the group in the previous session as it will be referred to in this session and be part of the basis for the Changemakers' Ceremony in the Community.

Check-in:
Time: 30 minutes

"How are you doing today? For check in today, in addition to sharing how you are doing, please share anything you have to say about our last session. If you recall, last week we received a presentation about laws in Sierra Leone and referral pathways, and also worked on our Community Action Plan."

Exercise 1: Preparation for Changemakers' Ceremony in the Community

First part:

Time: 30 minutes
With the group, discuss and develop an agenda for the ceremony in the community. Include consideration of who will speak, who from the community to invite, and all other logistical details. Make sure you discuss this in the context of the Community Action Plan.

This should be at a time that is convenient for all members and guests; perhaps the same time as the Programme has been meeting. It should be held in a large clearing, big community hall or other special place.

Invitations can be sent via letter, delivered in person or communicated by the media. Consider inviting many different people from the community, including both adults and young people/children, to watch or participate in the ceremony including:

- Family members and friends of each of the participants.
- Community representatives you can consider inviting include: village chiefs, religious leaders, political leaders, youth leaders, women's organization leaders, society leaders and community development committees.
- Local police, judges and representatives from the FSU.
- Health workers, PHU staff, birth attendants, herbalists.
- Representatives from Concern and other development organizations.
- School representatives and leaders including principals and headmasters, teachers and school management committees.
- Representatives from other communities.
- Members of the media including radio stations and newspapers.

Session 9: Challenging Harmful Actions in our Community

Format: Men and women are together for the entire session.
Duration: 2 hours and 30 minutes

Purpose of the Session:

- To learn and develop safe and effective outcome-based interventions to prevent and end violence and conflict in community settings.
- To begin to develop a plan for sustainably engaging the community in preventing violence and challenging harmful norms.

Check-in:
Time: 30 minutes

Facilitator Says:

"How are you doing today? For check in today, in addition to sharing how you are doing, please share anything you have to say about our last session. If you recall, last week we had discussion and role plays about how we and our community can support others who have experienced violence in their household. Did anyone have any additional ideas for how to support the men, women and children who are victims of violence?"

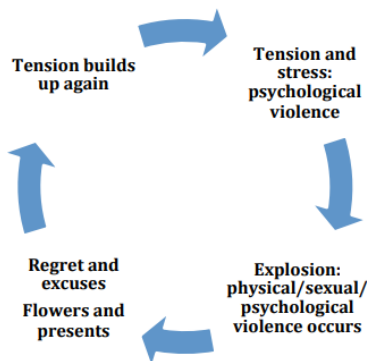
Exercise 1: How Do You Challenge Harmful Actions? **Time:** 15 minutes

Ask participants the following question and encourage them to think about the answers as they prepare the next exercise.

- "When you have done something wrong or made a mistake, such as something that creates conflict in your family or in the community, how do you prefer that people let you know?"
(Possible answers include the following. If some of these are not mentioned, feel free to bring them up for discussion.)
 - "I would prefer that someone takes me aside after it happens and speaks to me privately instead of embarrassing me in front of the whole community."
 - "I would prefer constructive criticism telling me what I can do better, rather than just attacking me for what I did wrong."
 - "I think it is more effective when the criticism is focused on the behavior, and is not a personal attack on my character."
 - "I like it when someone explains why the behavior is wrong so I understand it, rather than just saying it is wrong."

Facilitator Says: (After list is completed):

"Thank you all for your thoughts and contributions, now let's think about how these apply in day-to-day life."



Facilitator's Note: Explain and discuss each of the four phases above (with descriptions below) one at a time, and explain how they repeat in a cycle. The facilitators should also offer a role play to illustrate this for participants. It is important to remember that in the cycle we see the MAN who is using violence against the WOMAN. This reflects the reality of the cycle of violence in almost all cases, and it is important not to confuse participants by showing both partners using violence against the other.

Participatory Learning in Practice

A key strength of Living Peace is its use of practical, reflective exercises. For example, in the '24-hour activity', couples map how they spend a typical day. This exercise often reveals the heavy burden of unpaid care and domestic work carried out by women alongside farming and childcare. For many men, this is a moment of realisation that sparks honest discussion about fairness, workload, and responsibility sharing.

Through exercises like this, trust grows and couples begin to communicate more openly. Participants report improvements in joint decision making, listening and negotiation skills, and nonviolent problem solving. Importantly, these changes do not remain confined to the household: they extend into the wider community, contributing to stronger social cohesion and laying foundations for sustainable peace and development.

The Impact

Living Peace has contributed to positive change for individuals, families, and communities. The sessions strengthen communication, cooperation, and problem-solving skills. Participants report more open communication between partners, increased responsibility sharing, and greater joint decision-making. These changes are associated with reductions in violence in the home, contributing to safer environments for children.

Monitoring data collected during sessions indicate substantial increases in women's participation in household decision-making: from 60% at baseline to 79% in cohort 1, and from 43% at baseline to 87% in cohort 2. Harmful attitudes are also shifting. Gender role attitude scores improved from 5.6 at baseline to 6.84 in cohort 1, and from 2.44 at baseline to 6.74 in cohort 2. Together, these results indicate strengthening partnership between women and men and progress towards more peaceful households.

The impact of the approach becomes more pronounced as projects continue. The 2025 Annual Outcome Survey for the Irish Aid-funded Yoti Yoti project showed an increase in joint household decision making from 60% (69 female; 58 male) at baseline to 83% (89 female; 82 male) in 2025. Cascading the Living Peace approach also informed previous programming, including the LANN project. The endline evaluation conducted in 2025 found that the risk of violence in the project communities reduced from 81% to 34.3%. By 2025, 87% of households reported that women were consulted in key decisions, exceeding the annual target. In addition, community conversations and the integration of gender messaging across sectoral activities strengthened positive household dynamics.

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Living Peace activities have cumulatively reached 2,160 individuals (1,080 female; 1,080 male) since 2023 and have contributed to improved gender role attitudes. Scores increased from 5.6 (5.5 female; 5.7 male) at baseline to 7.1 (7.3 female; 6.9 male) in the third year. By year three, up to 88% of respondents rejected any justification for beating a wife; 87% rejected the belief that violence should be tolerated to keep the family together; and 69% rejected the belief that women cannot refuse sex with their husband. For the LANN project, Living Peace has reached 740 couples (370 male; 370 female).

Men also supported their wives to establish backyard gardens, contributing to improved nutrition and dietary diversity. Annual assessment results show that the proportion of households with functional home gardens increased from 29% at baseline to 84% in 2025, surpassing the annual target. This progress was supported by Living Peace sessions, the integration of nutrition education with the distribution of diverse vegetable seeds, and ongoing technical guidance.

The impact extends beyond individual households and families, as communities increasingly view Living Peace as a source of hope and reconciliation. As participants gain knowledge and skills, they are better equipped to solve problems peacefully and collectively, with Living Peace playing an important role in promoting harmony. Due to the success of the approach, it has been integrated into other interventions, including Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) and community conversations, extending learning beyond the household level. Facilitators also receive ongoing mentoring through internal staff trainings focused on facilitation skills and methodologies, delivered either as part of structured support or on a need's basis. In addition, the Sonke Gender Transformative Training provides a key platform for lead facilitators to strengthen their knowledge and capacity to effectively cascade the Living Peace sessions. During this training, each facilitator leads sessions from the Living Peace manual, enabling trainers to observe facilitation approaches, clarify questions, and provide tailored guidance.

Challenges

Irregular attendance of some participants: Some participants, particularly community leaders, missed sessions due to farm work, migration, or limited commitment, which affected continuity and overall impact.

Community misconceptions: Some community members questioned the relevance of Living Peace or viewed it as threatening to traditional norms, which discouraged participation. At the outset, some men perceived the initiative as encouraging wives to challenge their authority or disrupting marriages, leading some participants to disengage. Women, meanwhile, were often hesitant to speak openly, frequently deferring to their husbands as the primary decision-makers.

Resistance to behavioural change: Deeply rooted gender norms and beliefs about masculinity made it difficult for some participants to fully accept and practise the behaviours promoted during the sessions.

Initially, logistical constraints also hindered participation as sessions were frequently held in open spaces that lacked privacy, limiting open and honest engagement. Attendance was also affected when sessions coincided with market or farming days. In some cases, sessions were reduced to 5 weeks instead of the full 11, thereby reducing the depth and quality of learning.

Lack of trust: Over time, trust was established. Facilitators shared their own experiences to encourage couples to remain engaged. By the third session, discussions had become more open and constructive, setting the stage for positive transformation.

Lessons Learned

The roll-out of Living Peace has provided valuable insights into what it takes to shift deep-rooted norms and foster equality within families. One of the learnings is that change takes time. Harmful beliefs and behaviours passed down

Concern Worldwide Sierra Leone: Gender Equality Learning Paper

for generations cannot be transformed in just a few sessions. Couples need space to reflect, practice new ways of communicating, and gradually rebuild trust.

Engaging men and women together: This has proven to be one of the approach's key strengths. Activities such as cooking demonstrations initially faced resistance from some men, who viewed Living Peace as a threat to their authority. Over time, participants increasingly understood that the aim was not to remove power, but to support more equitable relationships and greater harmony in the home. This shift contributed to reduced conflict and increased responsibility sharing.

Safe, private spaces are essential for open dialogue: When sessions were held in public or noisy areas, participants were less willing to share personal experiences. Privacy allowed couples to speak honestly and confront difficult issues without fear of judgment or gossip.

Ongoing support is necessary: Even after 11 weeks, many couples were still in the early stages of change. Without follow-up, old patterns may resurface. Continuous mentoring and the involvement of community-level champions are vital to sustaining progress and extending benefits to those not directly involved in the sessions.

Facilitators require emotional support: Guiding couples through sensitive discussions can take a significant emotional toll. Regular debriefing and psychosocial support are essential to maintain staff wellbeing and prevent burnout.

Living Peace is more than a methodology: it is a sustained process of growth and reflection for couples, communities, and staff.

Recommendations

To build on these achievements and ensure lasting change, the following steps are recommended:

Provide follow-up sessions and mentoring to sustain progress and prevent a return to harmful behavioural patterns.

Recognise participants' efforts through public ceremonies and certificates, motivating other couples to participate.

Strengthen institutional partnerships with entities such as the Family Support Unit and Social Welfare Department to reinforce legal support and referral pathways for cases of GBV.

Train community-based champions to serve as focal points for conflict resolution and peer-to-peer support within villages.

Improve session scheduling to avoid conflicts with market and farming days, ensuring consistent attendance.

Provide psychosocial support for facilitators, including regular debriefings and mental health care for their wellbeing.

Promote the local dialect name "Mayireneh mi thuful" alongside Living Peace to deepen community ownership and strengthen cultural relevance.

Establish an up-to date GBV service mapping and train staff how to link people to these services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Living Peace has demonstrated potential as a gender-transformative approach to strengthening relationships and reducing violence at household level, with broader benefits for families and communities. Through structured, facilitated sessions and opportunities to practise new skills, participants report improved communication, mutual respect, and non-violent conflict resolution. The approach also supports shared decision-making and can reinforce sectoral outcomes when integrated across programmes. As graduates' model these changes within their communities, they can contribute to wider norm change and more peaceful, cohesive communities.

Testimonials

"Before the LANN-NSC intervention, our home was known for frequent disagreements that often resulted in quarrels and fights. Through the living peace sessions, I acquired skills in respectful communication with my husband and children. As a result, our home is now united, and we resolve conflicts through constructive dialogue." **Ibrahim Gbla, Magbodos Community in Port Loko District.**

"As a leader and a mother, Living Peace has strengthened my role both in the community and at home. I encourage couples to talk instead of fighting, and I have seen families become more stable and supportive of one another." **Hawa Kamara, Chairlady, Magbokwor Community.**

"The training helped me understand that peace begins in the home. I now handle family disagreements calmly, and this has made it easier for me to promote peace and mediation within our community group." **Mohamed Bangura, Secretary, Gbonkokasoko Community.**

"Through Living Peace I learned how to solve conflict. I can advise that it is not good for you to embarrass your wife. Whenever you want to decide or you want to take any action, you need to involve her. This inclusion is very important. Everyone in the family is very important." **Issa Conteh, Mathoranka Village.**



Cooking demonstration in Mampamant community following a Living Peace session. Photo: Valentino Kargbo/Concern Worldwide.



Osman helps take care of son while his wife Marie washes the dishes. Photo: Fatima Koroma/Concern Worldwide.



Issa Conteh, Mathoranka Village. Photo: Eugene Ikua/Concern Worldwide.