



Engaging Missing Populations in Gender-Transformative Programs



Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Background and objectives of this brief

In implementing gender-transformative programs, interventions often tend to focus on direct family members or immediate duty bearers – but this may mean that some populations go under-served or end up missing from programming. Populations missing from gender-transformative programs include low-literacy populations, family members beyond the immediate couple, and the broader community. Populations with low literacy tend to be left out of facilitating or attending group sessions even though literacy is not a prerequisite for raising critical consciousness or doing the work that transformative change demands. Mothers-in-law, multiple wives, siblings, and other family members who affect household dynamics in complex and myriad ways are frequently ignored – but should not be – if change is to be created in couples' lives. Finally, the broader community has to be brought on board to initiate and respond to change processes that tackle structural barriers to gender equality.

The brief is organized as follows: The introduction provides a brief background of Plan International's **Strengthening Health Outcomes for Women and Children (SHOW)** program and Fathers Clubs, including the sources from which the brief draws. The next three sections each deal with one of the groups mentioned in the previous paragraph – low-literacy populations, other family members, and the broader community – and share best practices and lessons learned on engaging these groups effectively before concluding.

Background to the SHOW program

SHOW is a multi-country, 4.5-year gender-transformative project aiming to reduce maternal and child mortality among vulnerable women and children in underserved regions of five countries, namely, Bangladesh, Ghana, Haiti, Nigeria and Senegal ("Global Affairs Canada Online Recognition Stories," n.d.). SHOW comprises a set of comprehensive gender-transformative approaches to engage men and boys as partners and beneficiaries of gender equality. These include targeted engagement of male partners of women of reproductive age in groups, of adolescent boys in groups, and of community-based traditional and religious leaders; broad social and behavior change communication (SBCC) campaigns; and male engagement initiatives by frontline health providers, including community-based health workers, to create a broader enabling environment for male engagement. Of these initiatives, **Fathers Clubs** promote men's equitable and nonviolent involvement as partners in maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH) and in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Fathers Clubs sessions allow men to reflect on what it means to be a man and a father in the context of these MNCH and SRHR health needs as well as in broader power relationships. Through this reflection, men become aware of how some gender expectations negatively affect their own lives and the lives of their partners and children.

Male engagement is one of three gender-transformative approaches applied in SHOW. The second approach focuses on increasing the individual and collective agency of women and girls through actions designed to increase knowledge, decision-making capacity, and participation and representation in public decision-making through activities such as targeted groups and engagement of influencers in communities like grandmothers and women’s mothers-in-law. The third approach is supporting health systems to deliver gender-responsive and adolescent-friendly services.

Programmatic experiences and examples

While lessons in this brief are drawn from several years of experience of Promundo and Plan International in implementing gender-transformative programming, specific examples in this brief – *italicized in text* – refer to the following gender-transformative programs.

Programs	Countries of Implementation
SHOW	Bangladesh, Ghana, Haiti, Nigeria, Senegal ¹
Changemaker Families ² (World Vision)	Bangladesh ³
Change Starts at Home	Nepal
Living with Dignity (Zindagii Shoista)	Tajikistan ⁴

1. Examples drawn from Promundo’s monitoring and trip reports from the project sites in 2018. Quotes also drawn from qualitative research done in these countries for the Fathers Clubs study (Plan International, 2019).
2. The program is also referred to as Nutrition Sensitive Value Chains for Smallholder Farmers Bangladesh.
3. Examples drawn from Promundo’s training and monitoring reports from Bangladesh in 2019.
4. Examples drawn from the two programs in Nepal and Tajikistan are from Bartel, 2018.

Working With Low-Literacy Participants and Facilitators

Assumptions of manuals and activities

Group activities and facilitator manuals often assume a certain literacy level of those using them. The gender-transformative programs under review here often include tasks that require high literacy levels for both facilitators and group members. Reading and using the facilitator manuals require literacy, as do using and filling out various monitoring and reporting tools. For participants, group activities can often require writing and so can filling out feedback materials and evaluation forms. Having formats that do not account for lower literacy levels risks alienating groups that are already marginalized in other ways.

Developing critical consciousness does not require literacy. Even though the implementation of gender-transformative programming can sometimes exclude low-literacy groups due to their design, literacy is not a prerequisite for sparking the core transformative process of critical consciousness. Paulo Freire conceptualized the process of developing critical consciousness as including “discussing and reflecting on one’s own experiences; engaging in political

and ideological analysis while critiquing the distribution of social power; developing a sense of solidarity with a social group; and making a commitment to making changes in one’s own life and context.”⁵ None of these steps leading to transformative change requires the ability to read and write.

Adaptations for accessibility

Focus on and prioritize the practical over the theoretical. The program and facilitators should prioritize participants understanding and deriving value from the lessons over theoretical or conceptual definitions. *In Bangladesh, participants in the Changemaker Families program were confused by theoretical definitions of power and were beginning to lose interest in the sessions. The facilitator picked up on the disengagement and replaced flipcharts showing definitions of terms with role-plays that demonstrated how people had power over others in different scenarios, allowing the group to engage in the important discussions around power without overwhelming them with technical terms.*

5. Paulo Freire’s conception of critical consciousness – an understanding of how social conditions privilege some but not others – is key to confronting and challenging oppressive social structures. Quote from Bartel, 2018.

In Ghana, a SHOW staff member had this to say about how a practical approach overcomes constraints related to literacy:

It is the composition of the group, in the sense that, most [group members] are illiterate. In this group, you can notice that the Fathers Club leader is not educated, but because of the training he took it to heart and practice is what helped him. He was not reading the manual because he is illiterate, so during the training we had to make it practical so that the facilitators could practice the activities and guide them.⁶

Organize additional refresher sessions for facilitators. Facilitators with lower literacy levels are not able to rely on the manual and may find it difficult to retain the curriculum for long periods of time. Additional training sessions are one possible solution to support facilitators in engaging with and retaining the content without being too dependent on the manual. *In Ghana, the SHOW team planned and conducted additional refresher sessions to allow facilitators to have more practice and better recall of key concepts and messages and to help facilitators not feel helpless because of their limited comfort with reading.*

Use media and technology to facilitate more access. Verbal, audio, and visual materials can be used to accommodate facilitators with limited literacy. For instance, cell phones can be used to record practice sessions for review and sharing feedback during training. Phones can also be used by facilitators to report on their sessions, ask questions, or request support. *In the Change Starts at Home program in Nepal, facilitators shared verbal “call-in” reports, where voice-recognition software was used to create transcripts to save facilitators time. Supervisors also did random reviews of group session audio recordings and checks via phone interviews to monitor facilitation without overly increasing the workloads of everyone*

involved. In the SHOW Program in Bangladesh, the community health workers used tablets to play informational video clips that helped keep the participants engaged and allowed them to share key program messages with a broader audience.⁷ While not in the scope of this brief, technological solutions can also be used to extend access to people with disabilities and help make programs more inclusive along multiple dimensions. For instance, in the SHOW program in eastern Ghana, the facilitator manual was translated into braille to accommodate a visually impaired facilitator. Audio recordings of the facilitator’s sessions were used to monitor and share feedback with them.

Consider developing low-literacy versions of existing program manuals. *The SHOW program has developed a “low-literacy-friendly” version of the Fathers Clubs manual that is more visual and uses simpler language to enable wider access. This adapted version includes more games and activities to engage participants with lower levels of literacy. For example, instructions were changed for a group activity on how men and women spend time on different tasks during the day: Participants are now asked to represent these tasks and different times through simple drawings instead of by writing.⁸*

6. Quote drawn from Promundo’s monitoring report from Ghana in 2018.

7. Reflections from SHOW program staff in Bangladesh.

8. Examples drawn from Promundo and Plan International’s original and adapted manuals for Fathers Clubs.

Box 1

Pictorial Resources

Images and illustrations can be a powerful way to extend access. In facilitation manuals, classroom activities, and community mobilization materials, illustrations that represent gender-transformative messages are an effective way of reaching groups with low literacy. *For instance, the Changemaker Families facilitators in Bangladesh often expressed the need for illustrated information, education, and social and behavior change communication materials to reach the community more effectively and spread gender-transformative messages to a wider audience.*

Illustrations must be contextually relevant to be effective. Merely adding illustrations to program content without appropriate contextual adaptation may not be very effective. *Feedback from the SHOW Nigeria team revealed how only adding illustrations to materials may not be sufficient, as the target audience needs to be able to see themselves in the materials. In this case, the women should have been wearing hijabs and the men wearing hats common in the region to make the messages more relatable.* In cases for which manuals need to be used across contexts and are thus constrained to generic illustrations, a workaround may be having facilitators elicit responses from the group on how the illustrations in the materials do or do not resemble them. The discussion that follows can be used to contextually adapt the images.

Local artists and illustrators should be involved. A possible way to ensure that images are contextually relevant is to involve artists from the region. *In Bangladesh, the SHOW team was able to commission a local artist to complete the illustrations. The results were attractive images that were contextually relevant and relatable. The team believed that the high uptake of information, education, and communication materials and the success of community mobilization were in large part thanks to these illustrations. They plan to include more illustrations, games, and cards to make their mobilization more effective and ensure they are reaching low-literacy populations.*

Images should not replace gender-transformative messaging. A note of caution about the use of pictorial resources is that they should be used to complement the messages in the curriculum and not replace or dilute them. *In SHOW Nigeria, in some instances, the facilitators had started to replace discussion-based activities with lecture-style facilitation centered on the pictures.* Pictorial resources should be used to center and provoke discussions. The use of pictorial resources should not take over the objectives of the curriculum or sessions.

Key considerations

Be mindful of and manage power dynamics resulting from differing literacy levels. Within a group, members may have differing literacy levels unless groups are explicitly recruited based on shared levels of education. Facilitators should watch for how these interactions take place in the room and respond accordingly. *For instance, in the SHOW program in Nigeria, participants*

with high literacy levels were often the ones taking notes for the group during discussion activities. This would often lead to them dominating the discussion or to other members feeling reticent to share their views and going along with whatever the person writing things down shared. The facilitators responded to this situation by removing the need to write things down in group activities and by facilitating only discussion-based interactions.

Working With Other Family Members

Partners are only one element of households.

Family structures vary greatly across contexts, and not considering members of the household other than couples or partners means not accounting for complex power dynamics based on participants' differences in gender, age, and social status, among other areas. One group that can be particularly influential in the household are in-laws – especially the woman's in-laws or man's parents in the home. Effectively engaging mothers-, fathers-, and siblings-in-law can be a powerful way of changing norms within the household about duties, distribution of care work, child-rearing practices, and so on. This section looks at some considerations when working with in-laws in gender-transformative programming.

Women in the home can be victimized by violence from multiple sources.

In-laws can often be a source of violence and backlash in the target communities where the gender-transformative programs are being implemented. Getting in-laws' buy-in and engaging them as change agents can be a powerful way of sparking lasting change. *In Tajikistan, the Living with Dignity (Zindagii Shoista) program targeted entire families, specifically groupings of in-laws, as they recognized that these groups are often responsible for perpetrating violence against daughters-in-law, who typically move in with them after marriage. The program was an adaptation of the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures programs, where gender-transformative curricula were combined with income-generating activities but focused on*

the extended family instead of only on the couple dyad. The adapted program helped participants set up family-led enterprises with active involvement from the daughters-in-law, along with conducting sessions on addressing violence in the home. The intervention helped reduce violence perpetration in the home and improved the economic situation of the target families (Mastonshoeva et al., 2019). The Changemaker Families program in Bangladesh engaged mothers-in-law strategically to mitigate backlash, as they are often the harshest critics of their sons who attempt to change household duties to make the distribution more gender-equitable.

Support – or lack thereof – from in-laws can influence how sustainable gender-transformative change is.

In-laws frequently hold positions of respect and power in the home and may continue to conform to older gender norms and roles. Qualitative research from Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, and Tanzania reveals how men and women who participated in gender-transformative programming often felt thwarted by resistance to any changes in household duties from older family members – especially the woman's in-laws. Conversely, as the following quote from a young man in a focus group discussion in Bangladesh reveals, support from older generations can also be a strong positive influence on increasing men's involvement in MNCH and SRH. In-laws should thus be viewed as potential allies and agents of change and not as obstacles (United States Agency for International Development, 2011).

See, how my younger brother's family has developed better communication among themselves and what are we [rest of the family] doing actually?

—Young father, in-depth interview, Bangladesh, 2019 (Plan International, 2020)

Engaging in-laws will mean managing power differentials in the room.

Bringing in-laws into the same sessions with men and women may make for difficult group dynamics given the power differences among them. Care should be taken to ensure that all participants feel able to contribute and participate without fear. *In Bangladesh, the power differences between mothers- and daughters-in-law can be quite stark. The facilitators of Changemaker Families ensured that the two were in separate groups when it came to discussion-based activities or role-plays to ensure that the women, especially the daughters-in-law, felt comfortable opening up about their experiences and were able to participate freely.*

Adapting curricula to accommodate in-laws should be done with care.

As with other adaptations, accommodating in-laws and other family members in group sessions or events should be done with an eye on any unintended consequences. *For instance, in Bangladesh, the Changemaker Families team organized a cooking competition that was initially meant only for the male participants but was changed to a partner activity to mitigate backlash in the*

community. However, the facilitators had to take care to ensure that the partners actually shared the work equitably and that the competition did not devolve into women doing all the work and men supervising or barely participating. Adapting a curriculum that is primarily designed for men and their partners should thus be done carefully. Facilitators should be trained on engaging in-laws effectively and facilitators' manuals should include content on facilitating sessions with women's in-laws specifically.

Expectations for different groups should be addressed early and clearly.

Bringing family members with significant differences in power into the same group may potentially derail the session from its objectives. *To avoid mothers-in-law dominating the conversation or inadvertently preventing the daughters-in-law from participating, the Changemaker Families team in Bangladesh held separate orientation sessions for the group of mothers-in-law before inviting them to join the larger group. This allowed the team to clarify the purpose of the program and to reiterate the characteristics of gender-equitable distribution of care and housework.*

Mobilizing the Broader Community

Community mobilization can often get left out of planned program activities. Mobilizing the community is a key part of gender-transformative programs that use the socio-ecological model, but one that often receives less attention or gets removed entirely due to budgetary and other considerations. Engaging the broader community is essential to positioning the male engagement program positively in the community and building buy-in from men. Sustainable, transformative change is unlikely without the support of the community.

The potential benefits of engaging communities are many. Effectively engaging the community can help make recruiting male participants easier, improve retention, and motivate facilitators. An evaluation review by the World Health Organization found that interventions that integrated community outreach and mobilization with group education or sessions or with service-based intersections were more effective on a range of outcomes—including improved uptake of SRHR services, better relationships with partners, and more equitable treatment of children – than interventions that were not integrated (World Health Organization, 2007).

See the brief [“Recruitment and Retention of Male Participants in Gender-Transformative](#)

[Programs” for examples and recommendations on engaging the community effectively to mitigate backlash and improve participant retention.](#)

“Engaging the community” can have different entry points in different contexts. Depending on the context of the program, there may be structures already in place that would be ideal points of entry in engaging the community and reaching otherwise-excluded groups. These could include working with community health workers, religious leaders, and other influential stakeholders in the community or even helping the participants themselves mobilize and share their stories and experiences from the program at town halls or village meetings. *In some instances of the SHOW program, for example, village savings and loans associations were used as a platform to not only manage savings but also learn about MNCH and SRHR; the associations partnered with health workers to have those workers attend sessions and become connected to an MNCH social fund for emergency cash for health needs. In Ghana, community mechanisms such as durbars – platforms of public gatherings led by traditional chiefs – were leveraged to engage and mobilize communities toward gender-transformative change through edutainment activities.*

Conclusion

Experiences from diverse settings reveal that engaging groups that have so far remained hidden or excluded from gender-transformative programming can help challenge resistant barriers to transformative changes in the household and in the community. Facilitators and participants with limited literacy can, with some adaptations, also be included in the important process of developing critical consciousness

and effecting social change. In many contexts, engaging family members beyond the couple is necessary to initiate changes in the distribution of household duties and care work responsibilities. Finally, ignoring the community mobilization component of gender-transformative programs can risk the sustainability of the program and is a lost opportunity to secure broader buy-in for the program's objectives and vision.

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