

GUIDANCE NOTE

WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS TO PROMOTE MALE ENGAGEMENT IN MATERNAL, NEWBORN AND CHILD HEALTH/SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

PART 1: BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Promoting male engagement in maternal, newborn, and child health and sexual and reproductive health (MNCH/SRH) is an important gender transformative strategy for MNCH/SRHR projects. In the context of MNCH/SRH programs, Plan International Canada defines male engagement (also referred to as men's engagement or male involvement) as "men taking an active role in protecting and promoting the health and wellbeing of their partners and children."¹ This definition is premised on a vision of lasting and sustainable behavioural and relational change and more gender-equitable relationships between male and female partners. It views male engagement **as a broader concept rather than a list of actions or decisions in which men should participate** in the MNCH/SRH continuum of care. It encompasses:

- Men's **subjective experiences, motivations, relationships and active participation** rather than specific actions as indicative of engagement.
- Focuses on **men's agency and relationships as distinct from male participation or involvement**, which can be understood to be more passive.

This guidance document is for Plan International country offices designing and implementing male engagement interventions within MNCH/SRHR projects. The document can accompany the Male Engagement Strategy and Fathers Clubs male engagement Curriculum (and a training of trainers) and specific guidance on training health providers, conducting advocacy, and developing communication materials for male engagement in MNCH/SRH.

Plan International has partnered with [Promundo](#), a global leader in promoting gender justice and working with men and women to challenge harmful gender norms, to provide technical assistance on male engagement for the SHOW¹ project. Promundo is the co-coordinator of [MenCare: A Global Campaign](#) to promote men's involvement as non-violent, equitable fathers and partners, and an author of [Program P: A Manual for Engaging Men in Fatherhood, Caregiving and Maternal and Child Health](#).

WHY INVOLVE RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN MNCH/SRH AND MALE ENGAGEMENT?

Religious and traditional leaders around the world play an important role in shaping community life and the beliefs and behaviours of those they serve. Religious leaders and traditional leaders do not

¹ SHOW (Strengthening Health Outcomes for Women and Children) is a multi-country, 4.5 year (2016-2020) project implemented by Plan International in Bangladesh, Ghana, Haiti, Nigeria and Senegal, supported by Global Affairs Canada.

necessarily carry out the same roles, nor do they have the same relationship to or level of influence on communities. **Religious leaders'** standing and connection to communities is based primarily on an understanding of religious scripture. Religious or faith leaders often hold prominent positions within specific communities, but may not have the same level of connection to community members of other faiths. Religious leaders can often build communal consensus around specific issues, but may not be able to influence policies or community frameworks.ⁱⁱ **Traditional leaders** uphold the customary laws within local government areas. These leaders may also be religious or spiritual leaders, but their position in society is primarily founded on social standing informed by ancestral ties.ⁱⁱⁱ

The belief systems and institutions in which religious and traditional leaders are embedded strongly influence community norms and value systems – positively or negatively – particularly with regard to gender and family relations.^{iv} Religious and traditional leaders often provide spiritual and moral guidance, but also act as gatekeepers, trusted advisors and providers of information on MNCH/SRH (and other) issues.^v As a result, religious or traditional leaders at times can create barriers to MNCH/SRHR, particularly ASRHR or male engagement. For example, religious leaders may promote rigid or inequitable norms that endorse men's dominance over women or dissuade men's caregiving, or promote practices that limit women's ability to access MNCH/SRH services or make decisions about their health. Traditional leaders may also uphold customary laws that disempower or discriminate against women, limiting their mobility or decision-making power. Both groups of leaders may be involved in regulating the behaviour of their followers or constituents.^{vi}

On the other hand, religious and traditional leaders can also serve as strong allies in transforming community norms and practices that hinder MNCH/SRH and gender equality. Plan International Canada recognizes the importance of working with religious and traditional leaders as influencers of community beliefs and behaviours in MNCH/SRH programming. Plan International Canada's approach to male engagement includes conducting dialogue, education and mobilization with traditional and religious leaders as **male gatekeepers**.^{vii} Where there are female traditional and/or religious leaders, Plan International Canada engages them to promote gender equality and successful male engagement, particularly in creating the necessary conducive environment and support for men to engage in MNCH/SRH, where strict patriarchal norms impede men from taking on caregiving roles. Plan International country offices implementing the WATCH (Women and Their Children's Health) project reported success in working with religious and traditional leaders to mobilize men in MNCH in their communities.^{viii} In Zimbabwe, Plan International has also worked to engage religious and traditional leaders in preventing child, early, and forced marriage.^{ix}

Therefore engaging religious and traditional leaders proactively as champions of change, as part of the equation, to create the enabling environment for successful and sustainable male engagement in MNCH/SRH as well as gender equitable relationships in the home and beyond, is a key strategy in many MNCH/SRHR projects.

This guidance note gathers some of the lessons learned from Plan International country offices, global MenCare Campaign partners, and other organizations working with religious and traditional leaders to promote MNCH/SRH and/or gender justice. The guidance note is intended to assist projects in implementing male engagement interventions with religious and/or traditional leaders.

PART 2: A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH TO ENGAGING RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS

Projects that take a gender-transformative approach to male engagement in MNCH/SRH seek long-term changes in gender relations and power dynamics that will improve men's relationships with their partners and their children well beyond the perinatal period. A gender-transformative approach engages participants in actively questioning what it means to be a man and a woman in society and in challenging inequitable gender norms and power imbalances.^x **Applying a gender-transformative approach to work with religious and/or traditional leaders requires acknowledging and situating these leaders within the religious, political and patriarchal systems that they represent and are embedded.** Religious and cultural practices often perpetuate harmful norms that strengthen men's power and control over women, but religious and traditional leaders can be allies in changing in these norms. When religious and traditional leaders condone changes in norms, others are more likely to follow suit.^{xi}

We recommend you bear in mind the following overarching considerations (these are further detailed below) when engaging religious and traditional leaders to transform gender norms:

- ✓ **Gender-transformative work with religious and traditional leaders requires spaces to engage them in reflecting on their own gender attitudes.** Most programming with religious and traditional leaders has fallen short of being gender-transformative because it failed to directly question and transform the gender attitudes and norms among religious and traditional leaders and within their institutions. Without these spaces, there is a risk that work with religious and traditional leaders may reinforce, rather than transform, inequitable gender norms.
- ✓ **Actions with religious or traditional leaders should, as much as possible, be accompanied by attempts to question the gender inequities of the patriarchal institutions they represent.** This includes questioning the lack of female representation in leadership positions. This is not recommended as an entry-point, but can come after sufficient mutual trust and acceptability has been built with leaders and institutions on a case-by-case basis. But, there is the need to be mindful that these institutions are by and large influential sites of gender socialization where gender hierarchies are maintained.
- ✓ **Local women's rights movements should be consulted and/or included in efforts to work with religious and traditional leaders on gender equality.** Women's right groups have express resistance to the idea of working with faith leaders, and the field of engaging men and boys globally has worked hard to build meaningful engagement with the women's rights movement. Invite women's organizations and activities to participate in an advisory group on the project, or provide input into training materials, or in the delivery of training to religious and traditional leaders.
- ✓ **Female staff should be supported, not excluded, to work with religious and traditional leaders.** Women often face specific barriers or challenges when working with religious or traditional leaders. For example, they may be excluded from particular locations, their movements may be restricted within them, or they may be required to wear particular forms of dress. Acknowledge how these regulations are manifestations of patriarchal norms and structures, and provide support to female staff members working with religious and traditional leaders. It is recommended that initially, observe norms to gain acceptance and trust and gradually work on deconstructing patriarchal norms.

- ✓ **Evaluation of efforts to work with religious and traditional leaders to transform gender norms should be prioritized in order to contribute to the evidence base.** There is currently little rigorous evidence of programs engaging religious or traditional leaders in leading to gender norm change, although there is evidence that work with these leaders can promote certain causes and behaviours, such as family planning campaigns or MNCH or immunization campaigns.
- ✓ Development programs have historically excluded religious and traditional leaders from gender equality efforts for the very reason that they occupy and reinforce structures of patriarchy.^{xii} **However, there may be more potential risk and harm if religious and traditional leaders are excluded from development efforts.**

PART 3: WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS ON MNCH/SRH AND MALE ENGAGEMENT

This section outlines key steps and recommendations for working with religious and/or traditional leaders to promote MNCH/SRH and male engagement. Several steps include worksheets to assist you in planning your work with religious and/or traditional leaders. Lessons are drawn from existing research and resources, and consultation with partners of the MenCare Global Campaign.

STEP 1: MAPPING RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS OF INFLUENCE

Gender-transformative work with religious or traditional leaders requires a clear understanding of whom you want to target and why. The first step is to identify the religious and/or traditional leaders that have power and influence in project communities. Religious and traditional leaders comprise two distinct groups, diverse in their own right, and may or may not co-exist in the same communities. Use the Step 1 Worksheet to assist you in mapping the influential religious and traditional leaders and institutions in your project communities.

- ✓ **Consult community members to know which leaders and institutions they rely on** for advice, counsel, or services related to MNCH/SRH or family matters. Make sure to gain input from women, men, and adolescent girls and boys.
- ✓ **Identify both male and female religious and traditional leaders.** Although the majority of these leaders are male, you should work with both, and must not exclude female religious or traditional leaders.
- ✓ **Work with female religious leaders can be especially helpful in promoting MNCH/SRH.** Where they exist, you can work with networks of female religious leaders, such as the Queen Mothers in Ghana. In Nigeria, dRPC supported female religious leaders to advocate for reproductive health and to work with their male colleagues on these issues.^{xiii}
- ✓ **Remember that communities are diverse: traditional and religious leaders, and multiple religious groups may coexist within a given community.** Make sure to identify all of the influential religious or traditional leaders in a given PROJECT community and do not assume that only one group has power or influence.
- ✓ **Identify organizations, networks, or umbrella groups that include religious and/or traditional leaders.** Some platforms bring leaders together around common problems, such as gender-based violence or HIV, and take rights-based approaches. These structures can serve as useful entry-points for engagement.^{xiv}

- ✓ **Faith-based organizations (FBOs) or development agencies can be avenues for reaching religious leaders**, especially where key leaders are not readily identifiable. These organizations may already work with these leaders on gender inequality or providing MNCH/SRH services or education, and can be useful partners in promoting male engagement.

Step 1 Worksheet: Mapping Religious and Traditional Leaders

Use this worksheet to assist in identifying religious and/or traditional leaders in PROJECT community(s). Consider using a separate worksheet for distinct regions or communities, or for different religions within a single community.

<p>1. Which religions or religious institutions are present in this community? If more than one religion is influential in the community, consider using a separate worksheet for each group.</p>	
<p>2. Which religious leader(s) or institution(s) have the most power and influence in this community?</p>	
<p>3. What traditional leadership structures exist in this community? (if applicable)</p>	

<p>4. Which traditional leaders have the most power and influence in this community?</p>	
<p>5. Do these leaders participate in any networks, coalitions, or umbrella groups? For example: religious or inter-faith networks; development groups or networks; umbrella groups addressing maternal health, HIV and AIDS, or against gender-based violence; structures for female leaders.</p>	
<p>6. Are there any faith-based development organizations or faith-based organizations (FBOs) working in this community? These organizations can be a pathway to religious leaders or can collaborate in training.</p>	
<p>7. Are there any other development organizations, NGOs or women's rights groups working with religious or traditional leaders in this community? These actors can be key allies for training or contacting these leaders.</p>	

Key questions to consider when deciding to work with religious and/or traditional leaders to promote male engagement in MNCH/SRH include:

- What role(s) do you envision for religious and/or traditional leaders within the project?
 - What opportunities exist?
 - What challenges or risks exist?
- Which specific religious and/or traditional leaders are we talking about? Do these differ by area or community?
- What views do these religious and/or traditional leaders hold on MNCH/SRH, male engagement and gender equality?
- What role do community members (women and men) want religious and traditional leaders to play in promoting MNCH/SRH and male engagement?
- What are the best entry-points to engage with these leaders (e.g. via specific individuals or organizations, on a particular topic, during a specific event or time of year)?
- What role or responsibilities do religious or traditional leaders want in promoting MNCH/SRH and male engagement?
- How can religious and/or traditional leaders fulfil these roles and responsibilities?
- What resources or support do religious and/or traditional leaders need to gender-equitably promote male engagement and MNCH/SRH?

STEP 2: DECIDING WHICH RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS TO TARGET

The next step is to assess how the religious and traditional leaders you identified in Step 1 view MNCH/SRH and male engagement. Religious and traditional leaders have diverse beliefs and attitudes. Leaders within the same faith or community may have different levels of understanding or acceptance of male engagement or gender equality. Leaders may support maternal health but hold certain beliefs that undermine MNCH/SRH. For example, a leader may promote women's access to maternal care, but simultaneously prohibit the use of contraceptives. You need to understand the beliefs and any actions they have taken in support of or in opposition to MNCH/SRH, male engagement, and gender equality. Use the Step 2 Worksheet to decide which of the leaders you want to engage.

- ✓ **Engaging religious or traditional leaders that are allies in MNCH/SRH or gender equality provides an opportunity to create champions of male engagement.** Leaders that demonstrate some degree of support for MNCH/SRH or gender equality may be easier to engage and more open to male engagement. See Box 1 for an example of working with religious leaders as allies in Indonesia.
- ✓ **If successful, work with leaders that visibly oppose MNCH/SRH or gender equality can assist in removing barriers to MNCH/SRH and male engagement.** In some communities, opponents may outnumber allies or you may not find influential allies. Although more difficult, if you manage to change the attitudes and perceptions of these opponents, you may have greater potential for changing behaviours. See Box 2 for an example of working with opposition in Nigeria.

- ✓ **Work with allies and opponents offer different risks and benefits** depending on the context and the level of influence of key religious or traditional leaders. You must weigh the benefits and risks of inclusion or exclusion of different religious or traditional leaders within the project.
- ✓ **Work with religious and traditional leaders should include (and must not exclude) female religious or traditional leaders.** Where female religious leaders are few or lacking, you can also work with the wives or female partners of religious or traditional leaders. These women are often influential in the community, and may be the ones who have access to and advise women and girls in conservative communities.
- ✓ **You can target individual religious and/or traditional leaders as well as their leadership structures or coordinating mechanisms.** You can engage directly with individual leaders in specific churches, mosques or communities. You can also partner with the leadership of a specific faith or traditional community, which has influence over a larger network or religious or traditional leaders.

The *Advocacy Guidance Note: Male Engagement in Maternal, Newborn and Child Health/Sexual Reproductive Health* has additional information conducting advocacy on male engagement. See Part 2, Step 2: Defining your policy priorities.

Box 1: Working with imams as allies in gender equality and men's caregiving in Indonesia

In Indonesia, Rutgers WPF has worked with Islamic leaders through MenCare+, or Laki Laki Peduli, to promote men's caregiving and gender equality. They found success working with religious leaders, like Ustadz Muhammad Nur Salim, who promote gender equality in their personal and professional roles. The documentary ['A Little Piece of Heaven in Bondowoso'](#) by filmmaker Nia Dinata, captures the story of the Ustadz and his work to promote equality and alternative forms of masculinity.

The Ustadz, who is an Islamic teacher, lives with his family in Bondowoso, an area in East Java. The film shows how Ustadz Muhammad takes an active role in his children's lives, supports his wife's role as the head of a local school, and preaches about the moral need for men and women to respect and support each other to his students. He emphasizes how gender equality has educational, professional and economic advantages. He sets an example for the broader religious community and has inspired other imams in East Java to include messages of gender equality in their Friday prayers. You can [view the film on the MenCare blog](#).

Step 2 Worksheet: Deciding which religious or traditional leaders to target

Use this worksheet to assist in deciding which religious and/or traditional leaders to target in project community(s). Consider using a separate worksheet for distinct regions or communities, or for different religions within a single community.

<p>1. How do the religious and/or traditional leaders you identified in Step 1 view MNCH/SRH, male engagement and gender equality? Consult community members, partner organizations, or local government; review key documents or websites (if applicable), or existing research on religious institutions in your country (where available).²</p>	
<p>2. Which of these leaders are allies in promoting MNCH/SRH, male engagement or gender equality? What actions have they taken to demonstrate their support?</p>	
<p>3. Are there any risks to working with these allies? For example, if there are very few allies, work with these leaders may have little influence and not be able to promote significant change.</p>	

² The [Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs](#) at Georgetown University has published resources on the role of religious leaders in **Senegal** on the [religious landscape](#), role of religious leaders in [reproductive health](#) and engaging faith leaders in [promoting women's and family health](#). The center also has resources for **Bangladesh** including an overview of [faith and development](#) and a resource on [religion and women's empowerment](#).

<p>4. Which of these leaders are opponents of MNCH/SRH, male engagement or gender equality? What actions have they taken to demonstrate their opposition?</p>	
<p>5. Are there any risks to working with these opponents? For example, a risk may be that not working with influential opponents can lead to backlash or resistance from the community.</p>	
<p>6. Which leaders (or institutions) do you want to target? Consider whether you want to work with allies, opponents, or both? Do the opportunities outweigh the risks? Are there specific leaders that you want to work with? Is there a particular leader who is very influential? Are there leaders that you have worked with before?</p>	

Box 2: Transforming religious leaders into champions of maternal health in Nigeria

In the predominantly Muslim north of Nigeria, Islamic scholars have used verses from the holy texts to oppose maternal care, family planning and child vaccines because they believe it is *haram*, forbidden in Islam. In response, the [Development Research and Projects Centre](#) (dRPC) founded a program, funded by Saving Lives at Birth, to transform Islamic scholars opposed to these forms of medical care into champions for MNCH. The organization deliberately sought out male and female religious leaders who were suspicious of maternal health care. The organization sent a group of 15 leaders to Egypt for training from scholars specializing in Islamic teachings and maternal health, including representatives from the Egyptian Family Planning Association and Al-Azhar University. dRPC showed religious leaders data about the mortality rates for women and children and framed family planning, maternal care and child vaccination as part of the Muslim duty to safeguard the body. In addition, the organization found that leaders were worried about leaving women alone with male doctors and health providers. The Egyptian trainers argued that in the Prophet Muhammad's time, it was not considered improper for a member of one sex who had medical expertise to examine a patient of the opposite sex. The program also suggested that husbands could accompany their wives during doctor visits. The organization has also trained health care students and health workers. You can [listen to the story on NPR](#).

STEP 3: APPROACHING RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS

Organizations engaging religious and traditional leaders in promoting male engagement have had success by starting with less contested entry points and progressively bringing in issues of gender equality.^{xv} Maternal and child health is a successful entry-point for promoting gender norm change. Many religious and traditional leaders support women's and children's health, and very few actively oppose these issues. Yet, these leaders may undermine MNCH/SRH in different ways, for example: by prohibiting contraceptive use; or discouraging men's participation in maternal health; or by endorsing gender norms that limit women's decision-making. Religious and traditional leaders may be resistant to discuss issues of gender inequality at first, but generally open up once relationships are more established.^{xvi} Use the Step 3 Worksheet to frame your approach to the religious and/or traditional leaders you identified in Step 2.

- ✓ **Frame your work in ways that speak to the interests of religious and traditional leaders, but do not 'force points of intersection'.**^{xvii} Invite leaders to group discussions or consultations to identify areas of common interest. Where appropriate, include government, development actors, and community members in these discussions.
- ✓ **Do not approach religious and/or traditional leaders with contempt, disdain, or judgment.**^{xviii} Religious and traditional leaders may be suspicious of development actors or foreign organizations, whom they may feel disprove of their beliefs or positions. Clarify misconceptions about your work and work to build trust and rapport.
- ✓ **Provide religious and traditional leaders with data on MNCH/SRH to illustrate the rationale for male engagement and gender equality.** These leaders may not know the scope of the problem or its impact on their communities. In Nigeria, dRPC used data on maternal and child mortality rates to convince Muslim leaders to allow women access to maternal health care.^{xix}
- ✓ **Contextualize the data by using local stories.** The experiences and perspectives of local women and men can situate MNCH/SRH issues within the local community.^{xx} Invite community members to participate in dialogues on MNCH/SRH with religious and traditional leaders, or publish their stories in briefs for these leaders.

- ✓ **With religious leaders, educate yourself on the relevant religious texts and their interpretations in order to ‘speak the same language’.**^{xxi} Religious texts form the core of faith and beliefs, and it is important that you are knowledgeable about the relevant beliefs of the leaders you are approaching. Part 4 includes links to a range of resources. Box 3 highlights Faith, Gender & Sexuality: A Toolkit, which includes relevant materials.

The *Advocacy Guidance Note: Male Engagement in Maternal, Newborn and Child Health/Sexual Reproductive Health* has additional guidance on developing messaging. See Part 2, Step 4: Tailor the messaging and the approach.

Box 3: Faith, Gender & Sexuality: A Toolkit

The toolkit on [Faith, Gender & Sexuality](#) was produced by Sonke Gender Justice, the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), organizations bringing together extensive experience working with religious leaders or implementing male engagement programs. The toolkit takes a gender-transformative approach to promoting gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) with religious leaders. The toolkit has six modules, which contain background information, case studies, lists of resources, and activities for use in raising awareness or training religious leaders on issues of SRHR and gender equality.

Plan country offices working with religious (and traditional) leaders may find the modules on [Women, Gender and Power](#), [Culture, Faith and Sexuality](#), and [Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights](#), particularly useful. For example, module 4 contains an [activity](#) to promote discussion on gender norms and equality within religion and module 5 includes an [activity](#) that uses the MenCare Global Campaign films to facilitate dialogue with religious leaders on gender norms.

Step 3 Worksheet: Framing your approach to religious or traditional leaders

Use this worksheet to assist you in designing your message and approach to religious and/or traditional leaders you want to work with. Complete a separate worksheet for each distinct group of religious or traditional leaders that you are targeting.

<p>1. Which individuals or institutions are you targeting (as identified in Step 2)?</p>	
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<p>2. How do you plan to approach these leaders? For example, will it be a one-on-one meeting, a community or development event, or a round table consultation? Do you need contacts to facilitate an introduction?</p>	
<p>3. What type of evidence or message will appeal to these leaders? For example, is this leader an ally or opponent of MNCH/SRH, male engagement or gender equality?</p>	
<p>4. What data exists that may be used to convince this individual(s) to collaborate with the project? For example, do you have data from the project Gender Assessment, or country Demographic and Health Survey or the project Baseline?</p>	
<p>5. Are there local stories that can situate this data into the local context? For example, from past projects, or from community consultations/case studies/videos developed for the project? How can you share these stories?</p>	

STEP 4: MITIGATING AGAINST OPPOSITION OR BACKLASH

Backlash, resistance or opposition is possible, and even likely, when working with religious or traditional leaders to transform gender norms and relations. Resistance or opposition may come from religious and traditional leaders, who may feel excluded or perceive men’s engagement in MNCH/SRH as in opposition to their practices or beliefs. However, resistance is also possible from women’s organizations and activists, who may view the work with religious and traditional leaders as reinforcing inequitable norms and the power of patriarchal institutions. A third source of resistance or backlash can come from the peers or communities of the religious and traditional leaders who are engaged in promoting men’s engagement in MNCH/SRH. Below, you will find several mitigating strategies that you may want to consider when designing your work with religious and traditional leaders in the project.

Potential risks	Mitigating strategies
<p>Opposition or backlash from religious and traditional leaders or their communities, who may perceive the project to be importing beliefs from ‘outside’.^{xxii}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage religious or traditional leaders early on (where possible and relevant) to avoid or reduce potential backlash from them or their institutions and communities. Secure the commitment of high-level religious and traditional leaders and their leadership or coordinating mechanisms. Foster dialogue with these leaders by holding learning forums and in-person to gain their support and buy-in. Ask religious or traditional leaders (or scholars) to review the content of the training curriculum and supplement with contextual information and messages (where appropriate). Engage with the media to ensure that the support of religious and traditional leaders/leadership structures in the project is highlighted to address pushback from communities or other religious or traditional leaders. Highlight the voices of involved religious or traditional leaders in media outreach. Engage local government/authorities, particularly health and women’s departments to avoid/reduce potential backlash. The presence of government often contributes to “legitimizing” the project activities and creates buy-in.
<p>Opposition or backlash can also come from women’s rights organizations and activists, who may perceive work with religious or traditional leaders as reinforcing the patriarchal authority of (mostly) male leaders.^{xxiii}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with women’s organizations and activists to designing the work with religious and traditional leaders. Find out their concerns and integrate their recommendations into the project. Involve them in designing and delivering training to religious and traditional leaders. This can strengthen the gender-transformative approach to work with religious and traditional leaders. Promote interaction between religious and traditional leaders and women’s organizations and activists. This creates opportunities for leaders to hear from women, and enables women’s organizations to deepen their engagement with religious and traditional leaders and hold them accountable. Engage with the media to ensure that the gender-transformative approach of the project is highlighted within any media mentions. Highlight the voices of involved women’s organizations or activists in media outreach.

Resistance or backlash against religious or traditional leaders, who challenge inequitable norms and practices, by their peers, institutions, or communities. Leaders may want to limit their continued involvement for fear of isolation from their peers or communities.

- Provide ongoing support to trained religious and traditional leaders. Meet with them and validate positive changes they have made. Assist them in addressing any immediate threats to their safety or security (where needed).
- Develop a support group(s) or network of religious and/or traditional leaders who are challenging gender norms and promoting male engagement in MNCH/SRH.
- Secure the commitment of high-level religious and traditional leaders and their leadership or coordinating mechanisms from the very beginning to ensure there is support from the very top.

The *Advocacy Guidance Note: Male Engagement in Maternal, Newborn and Child Health/Sexual Reproductive Health* has more information on risks related to male engagement in MNCH/SRH. Within Part 2, Step 3, see the box on *Considerations and risks when advocating for male engagement in MNCH/SRH policies and services*.

STEP 5: TRAINING RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS ON MNCH/SRH & MALE ENGAGEMENT

Religious and traditional leaders require training and resources to be able to effectively promote male engagement in MNCH/SRH. Training can provide religious and traditional leaders with information and tools to communicate about how male engagement improves women's, children's and men's own lives. However, to be gender-transformative, this information needs to be accompanied by training and tools that situate male engagement within gender equality more broadly. Staff and trainers therefore need to be confident with the training material and be comfortable to have challenging discussions with these leaders. Use the Step 5 Worksheet to help you plan your training for religious and/or traditional leaders.

- ✓ **Gain input from religious or traditional leaders or their leadership structures when designing training.** Gather their input in the design of the curriculum and have them review the final curriculum prior to the training to assist in gaining their buy-in and to ensure the training is designed in a context-appropriate way.^{xxiv}
- ✓ **Partner with women's organizations or relevant ministry or department of women's affairs/gender equality** to ensure the training is grounded in women's rights and gender equality principles and national commitments. These partners can assist in designing or reviving the curriculum, and/or and in conducting the training. Government can also provide context on national MNCH/SRH policies and male engagement.
- ✓ **Organize specific workshops with high-level leaders to openly discuss MNCH/SRH and male engagement, and their concerns.** These meetings can draw on religious texts and/or customary principles and help to develop consensus.^{xxv} This can be a first step to gain approval for training at the lower levels of leadership.
- ✓ **Train targeted leaders within a community, or cascade training from the top down through religious or traditional leadership structures.** For religious leaders, consider training and working with future leaders at religious educational institutions, such as seminaries.^{xxvi}
- ✓ **Provide positive alternatives to inequitable norms, which are culturally or religiously relevant.** For religious leaders: utilize examples of religious texts or doctrine that promote gender equality or demonstrate men's participation in MNCH/SRH. Equip them with the

resources to hold their peers accountable for misuse and misinterpretation of scriptural texts.^{xxvii}

- ✓ **Create opportunities for religious and traditional leaders to reflect on their own gender attitudes and experiences.** Promote discussion of leaders' own attitudes and beliefs about men and women, societal expectations, and men's role in MNCH/SRH and caregiving.
- ✓ **Encourage religious and traditional leaders to challenge harmful and discriminatory norms and practices within their institutions/structures.**^{xxviii} Where feasible, get leaders to discuss the role of faith and traditional leadership structures in perpetuating gender inequality and identify ways that these leaders can promote changes from within.
- ✓ **Provide tools and resources to support religious and traditional leaders to effectively communicate about male engagement in MNCH/SRH.**^{xxix} Provide support to these religious/traditional leaders to develop their communication capacity, and work with these leaders to create action plans for communicating about male engagement in MNCH/SRH and gender equality with their communities and constituents.

Box 6: Suggested content for training religious or traditional leaders

Gender-transformative training content for religious or traditional leaders on MNCH/SRH and male engagement can be adapted from the *Fathers Club Manual: Engaging Men in Maternal, Newborn and Child and in Sexual and Reproductive Health for the Multi-Country SHOW Project*. It may not be possible or appropriate to include role-plays or games, but you can use the guiding questions and key messages to facilitate discussion, reflection, and dialogue. Activities should be combined with information on MNCH/SRH and the benefits of male engagement, additional topics (as context appropriate), supplementary materials, or activities from other manuals or toolkits that are culturally or religiously relevant.

- **Gender attitudes and roles:** Activity 3: Values Clarification, Activity 5: The Man Box, and Activity 6: Gender Stereotypes, from the SHOW Fathers Club Manual
- **Gender norms within religion (for religious leaders):** the activity [Debating the Issues](#) from the Faith, Gender and Sexuality Toolkit
- **Power:** Activity 7: Persons and Things from the SHOW Fathers Club Manual, or the activity [Who is On Top?](#) from the Faith, Gender and Sexuality toolkit
- **Men's engagement in MNCH/SRH:** adapt Activity 8: How to Support Your Partner during Pregnancy from the SHOW Fathers Club Manual, to promote discussion with religious or traditional leaders of ways they can promote men to be involved. This will be more effective after presenting information on the broader benefits of male engagement. You can also share some of the [Global MenCare films](#) to spark discussion.
- **Healthy relationships:** Activity 13: Who Makes Decisions, Activity 14: What is Violence?, and Activity 16: Healthy Relationships from the SHOW Fathers Club Manual. For religious leaders, it can be especially beneficially to accompany discussion of these topics with discussion of whether or how religious texts describe or promote healthy, equitable relationships.
- **Family planning:** Activity 17: Parents by Accident or By Choice? from the SHOW Fathers Club Manual. This activity could be adapted to be a discussion of some of the negative impacts of having multiple children on women, children and men, especially when parents cannot afford to raise them.

Step 5 Worksheet: Training religious and traditional leaders

Use this worksheet to plan your training for religious and/or traditional leaders. Complete separate worksheets for trainings with different target groups.

<p>1. Which religious or traditional leaders are you training? Have these leaders ever received any training on MNCH/SRH, male engagement or gender equality?</p>	
<p>2. What is the aim of the training? What do you hope to achieve from the training? For example, is it to increase support for male engagement in MNCH/SRH, or is the aim to increase support for gender equality?</p>	
<p>2. What content will the training include? What key topics should the training address?</p>	
<p>3. Who will conduct the training? Consider working with Ministry of Gender or Women's Affairs or women's organizations to ground the training in gender equality principles.</p>	
<p>4. Who should provide input/review the curriculum/training content? Are there key religious or traditional leaders who should review the curriculum? Government? Women's organizations?</p>	

5. How and where will you conduct the training? For example, will the training be rolled-out from the top down? Will it be a step-down training? How long will the training last?

Box 4: Grounding work with religious leaders within faith and religious doctrine

Religious leaders in particular need to be provided equitable alternatives to support them in contextualizing their beliefs and challenging harmful practices.^{xxx} This includes working with them to promote positive interpretations of spiritual, faith and religious values, which support gender justice and equality.^{xxxi} Tools that ground MNCH/SRH and gender equality within religious texts are particularly useful, since religious doctrine is often used to justify inequitable gendered power dynamics within communities.^{xxxii} Religious and feminist scholars have documented many ways in which religious texts promote women's rights and gender equitable norms. Resources exist that highlight alternative interpretations of major religious texts. In Part 4 you will find a list of some resources and tools that can help you contextualize or present MNCH/SRH and gender equality in ways that are grounded in religious text.

Tearfund and the We Will Speak Out coalition note that it's important to show religious leaders that you are not trying to 'strip away people's faith' and to emphasize 'partnership, and working from within scriptural and specific cultural contexts.'^{xxxiii} Their approach helps religious leaders (and faith communities) to see that faith and gender equality are not mutually exclusive or incompatible by showing alternative ways of behaving that are culturally relevant. In their training, pastors reflect on how toxic masculinities are harmful to themselves and to others, in order to encourage a new way of thinking.

STEP 6: ENGAGING RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN PROMOTING MALE ENGAGEMENT IN MNCH/SRH

After you have trained religious and/or traditional leaders, you can engage them in promoting male engagement in MNCH/SRH in different ways. With the right information, resources and support, religious and traditional leaders can help to exercise positive influence among other leaders, within their communities, and on policy- and decision-makers.

- ✓ **Ask religious or traditional leaders to convene meetings with community members or constituents.** Community members may be more likely to attend community meetings or events, and to listen to the messages conveyed, when invited by religious or traditional leaders they respect.^{xxxiv} Plan International staff, partner organizations, or religious and traditional leaders, can convey the messages.
- ✓ **Support religious and traditional leaders to provide information on male engagement and MNCH/SRH** through existing structures or regular events such as Friday prayers, Sunday service etc.. For these events, it is recommended to provide tools and resources

with clear messages for these leaders to use to ensure the messages are accurate and in line with project goals.

- ✓ **Engage trained religious or traditional leaders in training others**, they have first-hand experience and can offer suggestions on how to address potential barriers or backlash.^{xxxv} Mentorship can also promote sustainability, as these leaders will be able to provide continued guidance after the training.
- ✓ **Support trained religious and traditional leaders to integrate male engagement in MNCH/SRH into existing (or new) structures or support groups.** For example, male engagement in MNCH/SRH and the importance of men's caregiving can be integrated into marriage counselling or other rites provided by religious or traditional leaders. These leaders can also promote the creation of parents' or fathers' groups.
- ✓ **Engage trained religious and traditional leaders in targeted advocacy on male engagement in MNCH/SRH.** These leaders have influence on policy-makers and can be powerful partners in asking for policy change. Invite key leaders to speak out on key issues, but be selective, and provide support to ensure a clear, unified message is conveyed.
- ✓ **Support religious and traditional leaders to make public declarations** committing themselves, and calling on others, to take positive actions in support of MNCH/SRH, male engagement or gender equality.^{xxxvi} For example, invite a trained leader to voice his or her commitment to promoting male engagement in antenatal care at an advocacy event or at a training of other leaders.

STEP 7: MONITORING AND EVALUATING WORK WITH RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS

You need to monitor and evaluate work with religious and traditional leaders to promote male engagement in MNCH/SRH, like the other components of the project. Evaluating the impact of work with religious and traditional leaders is particularly important because little evidence currently exists of programming with religious or traditional leaders successfully contributing to social norm change. That does not mean that effective strategies do not exist, but very few projects have assessed whether work with religious or traditional leaders changed the attitudes and behaviours among themselves, their followers, or their communities.

- ✓ **Go beyond measuring the number of religious or traditional leaders trained or engaged in community mobilization activities.** Monitoring and evaluation of gender-transformative approaches requires measuring changes in attitudes and behaviours *among* religious and traditional leaders and *within* their communities.
- ✓ **Monitor how religious and traditional leaders promote MNCH/SRH, male engagement and gender equality to their communities and constituents.** Track how these leaders incorporate MNCH/SRH, male engagement and gender equality within their messaging at community meetings, sermons or prayers. Assess whether these messages challenge or reinforce inequitable gender norms and power dynamics.
- ✓ **Measure changes in religious and traditional leaders' own attitudes and practices.** Use pre/post surveys (where possible), interviews or focus group discussions to measure changes in leaders' attitudes about men's and women's roles, and their acceptance of men's engagement in MNCH/SRH and gender equality over time.
- ✓ **Measure changes in the perceptions, attitudes and practices of communities.** Use surveys, interviews, or focus group discussions to understand how community members perceive these messages and whether they have led to changes in their attitudes or behaviour.

- ✓ **Assess whether engagement of religious and traditional leaders has contributed to increased MNCH/SRH service use or male engagement.** Ask community members, and/or use health facility data to understand if the actions of specific leaders have contributed to changes in health-seeking.

The *Guidance Note on Male Engagement in Maternal, Newborn and Child Health/Sexual Reproductive Health* has more information on monitoring and evaluation. See Part 2, page 14.

STEP 8: LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT WITH RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS

Work with religious and traditional leaders to foster social change requires long-term engagement, including time to build relationships and trust.^{xxxvii} Religious and traditional leaders are likely to need continued support when facing resistance or pressure from their communities when attempting to change norms or power structures, or adopt new behaviours.

- ✓ **Hold periodic follow-up meetings with religious and traditional leaders** after the training to identify challenges, assist with solutions, and validate and support positive changes. Consider maintaining these meetings after the project ends.
- ✓ **Conduct peer dialogue sessions with small groups of religious or traditional leaders** to discuss challenges, achievements, and create a support network among trained leaders. Where possible, consider holding inter-faith dialogues to foster connections among different religious leaders (where appropriate), or between faith and traditional leaders.
- ✓ **Organize knowledge-sharing or networking events** to share information on MNCH/SRH, male engagement and gender equality, and to build relationships between trained leaders and other stakeholders.^{xxxviii} This could include the creation of a formal network of leaders promoting MNCH/SRH.
- ✓ **Carry out refresher training sessions** where possible or needed. Plan to conduct at least one refresher training for religious and/or traditional leaders during the project.

PART 4: RESOURCES FOR ENGAGING RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS

Below are select resources for working with religious and traditional leaders that you may want to consult or utilize within the project. It may be beneficial to consult resources from different religions or geographic areas. Some of the resources are specific to MNCH/SRH, while others were designed to promote gender equality or address violence against women. Be mindful that while some of these resources take a gender-transformative approach, others do not.

Manuals, Guides and Toolkits for Working with Religious Leaders:

- [CCM Advocacy Guide: How to Integrate Local-Level Advocacy Into Church and Community Mobilization.](#) Tearfund, 2016.
- [Faith, Gender & Sexuality: A Toolkit.](#) Sonke Gender Justice, Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, and IDS.
- **Field Practitioners' Toolkit: Responsive Program Strategies for Ending Child Marriage in Zimbabwe.** Plan International Canada, 2014.
- [Mobilizing Muslim Religious Leaders for Reproductive Health and Family Planning at the Community Level: A Training Manual.](#) USAID, 2008.
- [Mobilizing Religious Communities to Respond to Gender-Based Violence and HIV: a training manual.](#) USAID, 2009.
- [Muslim Khutbah Guide to save the lives of mothers and newborns: a toolkit for religious leaders.](#) USAID, 2009.
- [Religions For Peace: Ethiopian Orthodox Church Faith Leader Toolkit to Address Harmful Traditional Practices in Your Community.](#) Religions for Peace, 2013.
- [Christian Sermon Guide to Save the Lives of Mothers and Newborns: A toolkit for religious leaders.](#) USAID, 2009.
- [Love, Children and Family Planning: Seven discussion guides for Christian small groups.](#) Georgetown University, Institute of Reproductive Health (IRH), revised 2013.

Informational Resources on work with Religious Leaders:

- [Faith and International Family Planning.](#) World Faiths Development Dialogue, 2014.
- [Faith-based Approaches to Transforming Masculinities for Gender Justice & Equality: A two-day consultation.](#) MenEngage Alliance, 2016.
- [Faith Matters: International Family Planning from a Christian Perspective.](#) Christian Connections for International Health, JSI, USAID, 2012.
- [Partnering with Religious Leaders for Children.](#) UNICEF, 2012.
- [Reducing Maternal Mortality: Actual and Potential Roles for Faith-inspired Institutions and Communities.](#) Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2013.
- UNFPA. (2016) [Religion, Women's Health and Rights: Points of Contention and Paths of Opportunities.](#) New York, New York: United Nations Population Fund. (English & French)
- [Strategy on Working with Religious and Traditional Institutions and Leaders.](#) Voices for Change, 2014.
- [We Believe: Engaging Faith Leaders. Case Study.](#) MenEngage Alliance, 2016.

- [We Will Speak Out: Engaging Faith Leaders. Case Study.](#) MenEngage Alliance, 2016.

Informational Resources on Working with Traditional Leaders:

- [Strategy on Working with Religious and Traditional Institutions and Leaders.](#) Voices for Change, 2014.
- [Traditional Leaders On The Frontline Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices to Reduce Gender-based Violence and HIV in southern Africa.](#) SafAIDS.
- [Traditional Leaders Wield the Power, and They Are Almost All Men: The Importance of Involving Traditional Leaders in Gender Transformation.](#) Sonke Gender Justice, 2014.

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