



Role of Facilitation in Gender-Transformative Programs That Engage Men and Boys

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Background and objectives of this brief

Skilled facilitators are essential to the success of gender-transformative programs.

Experiences of gender-transformative programs that engage men and boys in diverse settings highlight the importance of high-quality facilitation in achieving program objectives and initiating transformative change. This brief is intended for practitioners in the field of male engagement in gender equality and summarizes programmatic lessons on facilitation. It uses examples from Plan International's **Strengthening Health Outcomes for Women and Children (SHOW)** program, funded by Global Affairs Canada, as well as from other program experiences from settings as diverse as Bangladesh, Ghana, Haiti, Nigeria, Senegal, Tajikistan, Nepal, Rwanda, and the United States.

The brief is organized as follows: The introduction provides a background on Plan International's SHOW program and what high-quality facilitation looks like. This is followed by a section on best practices and lessons learned on selecting and training high-quality facilitators, on facilitation strategies, and on motivating, supporting, and monitoring facilitators 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.

What good facilitation should achieve

Effective group interventions foster critical consciousness¹ and belief in the group’s power to create change. In addition to participants learning new skills and practicing equitable behaviors, the most effective gender-transformative programs start a process of critical reflection and build solidarity among group members to mobilize change. Skilled facilitators can ignite and support this process of developing critical consciousness. *For instance, Promundo’s approach often includes exercises during which men have the opportunity to listen to the voices of women and vice versa. The stories men hear often have to do with women’s experiences of bearing the unequal caregiving*

load or of discrimination in the workplace. Critical reflection following such sharing of experiences, if guided by a skilled facilitator, can ignite the process of critical consciousness.

See the “Teacher vs. Facilitator” box in the next section for how facilitation differs from traditional teaching.

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 ²
Changemaker Families ³ (World Vision)	Bangladesh ⁴
Boys to Men	United States (Keddie, 2019)
Stepping Stones and Creating Futures	South Africa (Gibbs et al., 2015)
Change Starts at Home	Nepal
Living with Dignity (Zindagii Shoista)	Tajikistan
Indashyikirwa	Rwanda ⁵

1. 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. For Freire, this involved “discussing and reflecting on one’s own experiences; [...] developing a sense of solidarity with a social group; and making a commitment to making changes in one’s own life and context” (quote from Bartel, 2018).
2. Examples drawn from Promundo’s monitoring and trip reports from the project sites in 2018.
3. The program is also referred to as Nutrition Sensitive Value Chains for Smallholder Farmers Bangladesh.
4. Examples drawn from Promundo’s training and monitoring report from Bangladesh in 2019.
5. Examples from the three programs in Nepal, Tajikistan, and Rwanda are drawn from Bartel, 2018.

Facilitation Considerations: Programmatic Lessons and Best Practices

Selecting suitable facilitators

Consider the background of the facilitators selected to implement your program. For instance, facilitators who have been previously trained as teachers can find it difficult to adopt a participatory style. *In the Living with Dignity program in Tajikistan, seven of the 12 recruited facilitators were former teachers. These facilitators were skilled and highly trusted in the community, but they tended to revert to the traditional lecture style of leading sessions, which is not conducive to developing critical consciousness.*

See the earlier section “What good facilitation should achieve” for more on how facilitators are essential to building critical consciousness.

Successful strategies for recruitment may include casting a wide net and screening. Advertise widely in the community and highlight strong interpersonal skills as a key requirement for the facilitator position. Screening interviews that incorporate role-plays can be an efficient way to check for the necessary “soft skills” required of a facilitator.

The following is an indicative list of the interpersonal skills and qualities that suitable facilitators possess:

- Authentic and sincere
- Humble
- Possesses emotional maturity
- Able to think on one’s feet
- Open to other people and new ideas
- Listens actively
- Makes others feel safe
- Guides discussions
- Invites feedback
- Responds to criticism constructively

Feminist and progressive social justice organizations are a good starting point for identifying strong facilitators. Community organizations with progressive agendas and feminist non-governmental organizations typically already have deep experience in the communities and can help identify candidates. They are also likely to already epitomize the values of gender-transformative programs, such as using a participatory approach, minimizing harm, centering experiences of women, children, and vulnerable and marginalized groups, among others.

Consider your program objectives to identify facilitator demographics, as these demographics may yield different power dynamics in the group. The ideal age range of the facilitator will depend on the objectives of the program. Depending on the region, cultural norms around interactions between different age groups may affect the program. *In Tajikistan, young facilitators leading sessions in the Living with Dignity program found it difficult to guide discussions with older participants present due to norms in the region around reverence for older adults.* In some contexts, married participants may find it difficult to receive information on SRHR and gender equality from unmarried adult male facilitators. Similar effects on group dynamics may also result from hierarchical relations between community members: If a respected local leader is selected as facilitator, participants may not feel comfortable opening up or sharing contrasting opinions.

Facilitators should ideally be familiar to the community and able to relate to their lived realities. The program should ensure that facilitators are from similar backgrounds as participants. *In the Indashyikirwa program in Rwanda, the participants who were from rural communities perceived the facilitators (who were from cities) as untrustworthy, unable to speak the local dialect well, and hence, unable to understand their realities on the ground.*

Training high-quality facilitators

Sufficient time and intensity of training are critical – but there are differing opinions on what is ideal. Bartel suggests that ten days of training is inadequate and that depending on newly recruited facilitators' skills and experience, 25 days (including booster trainings) might be more suitable (Bartel, 2018).

In South Africa, Stepping Stones and Creating Futures conducted five weeks of training and ongoing support, including two weeks of facilitators experiencing the curriculum as participants themselves and two weeks of training on key concepts. In Nepal, the Change Starts at Home program decided to split the training days over a longer period of time, opting for six trainings of one, three, or five days each that occurred two to three months apart. Promundo's facilitator trainings usually last five days (or ten days if the program is implemented over many months). Following the experience of the SHOW team in Bangladesh, who felt that their three-day training was inadequate, Promundo does not recommend "cascade models" of training and prefers that the facilitators who will lead the group sessions be directly trained as much as possible. Facilitator training in the SHOW program for most countries was done using a cascade model, given challenges of geographical spread. The training lasted for three to five days, except in Haiti, where the training was done directly with facilitators over two weeks, which was possible given the relatively small number of facilitators in Haiti. Refresher trainings were also held periodically within the SHOW program. Programs should include mechanisms for ongoing and refresher training and support, such as group observations, periodic refresher trainings, and troubleshooting. Creating opportunities for learning from each other is also an effective way of promoting learning and collaborative problem-solving among facilitators.

Discussing the theoretical underpinnings of facilitation can help clarify objectives. Facilitators may revert to lecture-style modes of teaching if they do not fully appreciate the motivation for choosing a participatory approach. Sharing the motivation and

theoretical basis for this choice can help prevent this. *In South Africa, for instance, the two programs discussed in detail the “banking” versus “liberating” models of education as conceptualized by Freire as a way of helping facilitators understand the importance of not regressing to authoritarian styles of teaching.*

Necessary elements of trainings include

- Content that includes gender as a social construct, power, and violence against women
- Adequate time to practice facilitation skills
- Learning to respond to disclosures of violence and trauma
- Building cohesion in the group
- Strategies to mobilize for social change
- Identifying and addressing facilitators’ own biases

Clarify long-term goals together at the beginning. Program goals like questioning traditional gender norms, learning skills, and building networks to organize and enact activism need to be made explicit and agreed upon with all facilitators and partners. Failing to do so can risk losing or changing focus in

practice. *For instance, in Creating Futures in South Africa, facilitators had a different idea of success than the broader program – namely, around increasing rates of condom use – and missed opportunities to challenge gender norms in their sessions.*

Involve facilitators in curriculum design.

Having facilitators participate in the curriculum development stage of the program can help build facilitators’ buy-in and demonstrate the importance of the participatory approach. *In Indashyikirwa in Rwanda, facilitators reviewed the curriculum for two weeks. The heated debate that ensued allowed for testing and adapting the content and showed facilitators the importance of dialogue over getting the “right answer.” In the SHOW program in Ghana, facilitators’ input on the manual helped identify literacy as a key barrier to participants’ attendance. The manual was thus adapted with images and illustrations to make it more low-literacy friendly. A useful strategy, in circumstances where it is impossible to include facilitators in the design stage, may be to develop a core curriculum that is then shared with local partners and facilitators for further adaptation and inputs.*

Box 1

Teacher vs. Facilitator

Traditionally, a teacher is an expert expected to have all the answers. A facilitator need not have all the answers and instead creates an open and safe space to facilitate dialogue and critical reflection among participants. Facilitators ask unbiased and open-ended questions to elicit detailed, reflective responses. Facilitators should also model gender-equitable relationships; when men and women facilitators are co-facilitating, they should ensure they switch roles of note-taking and leading sessions equitably, share the delivery of content equally, and interact with each other comfortably and respectfully. Additionally, facilitators must ensure that all participants are able to participate and that the discussion is not dominated by the loudest voices or by those who hold power in the community. The following are a few examples of mitigating strategies and techniques to avoid:

An example representative of many Promundo experiences is from the Changemaker Families program in Bangladesh, where gender-inequitable views were brought up in the group, often by powerful community members, stifling other opinions. Promundo's approach has been to encourage facilitators to not impose their own views on the group but instead probe the group's views on the statements to encourage reflection, guide discussion, and allow dissenting voices to emerge. Another representative example comes from SHOW in Nigeria, where facilitators would often describe what was happening in an image and tell the group the "right" conclusions to draw. As a result, there was little interactive discussion, and the activity time was almost halved, likely reducing the potential impact of the program. In Bangladesh, SHOW facilitators demonstrated the participatory approach by sitting on the same level as group members and maintaining eye contact. Even such small gestures can be effective in minimizing power differentials between facilitators and participants.

Box 2

Same-Gender vs. Different-Gender Facilitators

Programs can often have more than one facilitator leading the group sessions. **Depending on contextual appropriateness, different-gender facilitators are usually preferred for leading mixed-gender groups and same-gender facilitators for same-gender groups.** Different-gender facilitators working together provides a potential opportunity to model gender-equitable behavior.

See the "Teacher vs. Facilitator" box for how co-facilitators can model equitable behavior.

Facilitation Strategies and Potential Pitfalls

Tackling difficult and sensitive topics needs time. *Lessons from the Changemaker Families program in Bangladesh suggest breaking up longer sessions (if feasible) to ensure adequate depth of coverage for key topics.* Promundo's broader experience suggests that speaking about violence in a generalized way also makes sensitive discussions easier for participants. It is imperative that facilitators never force participants to share experiences they are not comfortable sharing.

See the "Teacher vs. Facilitator" box for more examples of facilitation strategies.

Empathy as a learning tool has strengths – and potential pitfalls. *A review of the Boys to Men program in the United States notes how positive representations of women and empathizing with their challenges can lead to powerful "Aha!" moments of learning in the group. However, facilitators have to be careful to not reinforce the idea of good and bad types of challenges or that only some*

forms of suffering are worthy of empathy. This lesson is particularly important when working with men and boys for gender equality. As Amanda Keddie (2019) describes through an example, women might be valorized as being more emotionally mature than men in an effort to have male participants empathize with women's experiences, but such framing can end up reducing conceptions of women as inherently able to express emotions and men as inherently not, which is problematic and counterproductive to the goals of gender-transformative programs.

Reward and acknowledge positive behavior – with caution. Facilitators may want to reward desirable changes to reinforce positive behavior. Acknowledging that this form of positive reinforcement is important to encourage participants, it is critical to not overly praise the smallest of improvements, as was noted in some instances, since this may undermine the need for participants to keep pushing for deeper change.

Box 3

Common Challenges Faced by Facilitators

Facilitators may have difficulty operationalizing complex concepts. Gender-transformative programs tackle complex and nuanced topics. Being able to simplify these ideas in a group can be challenging. *For instance, facilitators in South Africa found it difficult to operationalize concepts like power and gender in their sessions. In SHOW Nigeria, even where Hausa translations were available, facilitators ran into problems conveying technical terms and ended up reading from the manual, which disrupted the flow of the session.*

Pressure to show results can affect facilitation quality. *Facilitators in the SHOW program in Bangladesh appeared to be pushing participants toward the “correct” answers in sessions in an attempt to demonstrate progress. It is important to help facilitators understand that norms change is a slow process and that they should focus instead on critical reflection and dialogue.*

Absenteeism can be demotivating. *In South Africa, facilitators grew quite frustrated with youth who would not appear for the sessions. As a woman facilitator put it:*

Eh, [laugh] I don't know where to start seriously because I have run out of strategies and I realize that I am getting really pissed off with that group. [...] the first challenge is that some people won't come for three sessions; they come on the fourth session and be all lost and cocky about it and then not come for three after that

(Gibbs et al., 2015)

Strategies like reminder calls and delaying or changing session timings had not worked. Facilitators began to resent these participants instead of investigating reasons for their absence. In the South African context, it was important for facilitators to acknowledge the structural barriers that kept participants from attending group sessions and empathize with their inability to attend regularly.

See the brief “Recruitment and Retention of Male Participants in Gender-Transformative Programs” for ways to improve the retention and attendance of participants.

Facilitators also may find it difficult to lead discussions and managing group dynamics.

Managing the session time and balancing time between group discussions and interactive activities is important to meeting the session's objectives. But this can be challenging for facilitators for various reasons: for instance, the presence of challenging participants who may dominate the group and act as “gatekeepers” by stifling discussion or the presence of participants who are reticent in sharing personal experiences. Conducting roleplays during training and refresher sessions may be helpful in building these group management skills.

See the earlier “Teacher vs. Facilitator” box and the “Monitoring and supporting facilitators” section for strategies to mitigate this challenge of managing group dynamics and time.

Motivating facilitators

Paying facilitators can help ensure greater commitment. Facilitation of gender-transformative sessions is intensive and demanding. Not paying facilitators may make it difficult for them to commit the time needed to do it well, and challenges of sustainability can often make it difficult to budget for facilitators. The balance between program sustainability and the need for motivating and fairly remunerating facilitators for work done has to be assessed in each context. A strategy to address sustainability could be to work with institutions and service providers that already exist and add gender-transformative content to their menu of services offered to communities.

Provide constructive criticism with sensitivity. While constructive feedback to facilitators should be provided from time to time, it is important to do so with sensitivity. *In SHOW Bangladesh, a perhaps nervous facilitator was speaking quite fast, and staff members from Plan intervened at a few points in the session to provide feedback.* Such constructive criticism is best shared with facilitators away from the group to avoid undermining or demotivating them.

Create spaces and mechanisms for facilitators to reflect and recuperate. *In South Africa, facilitators of Stepping Stones and Creating Futures found reflection diaries and group learning sessions particularly helpful in reflecting on their own facilitation practice and staying motivated.* Allowing facilitators to reflect on their own techniques of facilitation and build a sense of community with other facilitators can be a powerful motivator.

Correct any perceptions of facilitation as too "passive." *Facilitators in South Africa found*

their roles not active enough since they were no longer following lecture-style methods. Orienting facilitators on ways to engage participants and clarifying how transformative changes might be slower to observe may be helpful in setting facilitator expectations early on.

Monitoring and supporting facilitators

Include recommended times for activities in manuals. *In Bangladesh, the Changemaker Families team suggested including timelines not just for the entire session but also for specific activities to help facilitators make sure they were leaving time for critical reflection.* This can help address the challenge of balancing sessions between discussion and interactive activities.

Watch out for the continued perpetuation of harmful ideas. *In SHOW Nigeria, a few facilitators voiced the opinion that violence was a "misunderstanding" and that women sometimes provoked violence.* Facilitators must be encouraged to push back against such harmful norms even if they are reflected in the communities around them. Any refresher sessions and monitoring and supervision structures must ensure that harm to women is minimized and that such harmful notions are not perpetuated by facilitators.

Establish a clear supervisory process and structures from the beginning. Ensuring supportive supervision processes and mechanisms are understood by all and in place from the program's design phase can help make monitoring and supporting facilitators a more seamless process. To prevent reporting processes from becoming too onerous for facilitators, technological solutions have worked in some cases. *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. When possible, meetings with facilitators should be regular, with at least one or two occasions per year in which facilitators

gather to reflect. In many contexts where the program sites are remote, it may be difficult to have regular check-ins with facilitators. In such contexts, using social media – like having WhatsApp groups – has been successful in helping facilitators troubleshoot and ask for help in real time. It is also recommended that issues and challenges be documented during implementation to be able to respond adequately in future iterations of the program.

Box 4

Gender-Transformative Impact on Facilitators

Facilitators often experience deep transformational change through their participation in the program. In Promundo’s experience across settings, programs that aim to challenge harmful gender norms cause facilitators to re-examine how they treat people who they care about. For men, this can mean desiring to be closer to their children, communicating with their partner about their dreams for the future, or talking with friends about how to be more gender-equitable men. For women, it can be more challenging; critical consciousness makes them aware of how unequal many of their relationships are, in that they do so much of the domestic and care work. Many exercises in Promundo’s programs thus ask women to step outside their box with small acts of “rebellion” by doing less, while for men it can be about doing more. *In South Africa, a male facilitator shared how he had internalized the processes of dialogue and critical reflection:*

But ya, they are grasping everything that we are learning in class and there is a high level of [...] discussion, and I guess in this point in time they are just showing they are now relaxed with each other and they can relate to one another’s feelings and, ya, because there is so much respect in the room.

(Gibbs et al., 2015).

In SHOW in Ghana, a partner shared how her husband who had initially been resistant to the program messages had changed his behavior over time:

Just last month I saw [my husband] post on Facebook that he made my first boy [second born] wash bowls. He snapped it and put it on Facebook and said, “it is good to encourage our boys to help in the kitchen.” This was from somebody who was very against it... For me, it’s a big impact. He tries to say, ‘Hey, do this...’ [to our son] and he tries to support gender equality.” **(Plan International, 2020).**

Conclusion

Experiences from diverse settings reveal the importance of skilled facilitators – i.e., facilitators with strong interpersonal skills who encourage reflective dialogue rather than teach or lecture – to the success of gender-transformative programs. Ensuring

that the program’s participatory approach is maintained and choosing and supporting suitable facilitators who embody the values of gender equality are among the key themes that emerge across the range of programs.

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