



# Recruitment and Retention of Male Participants in Gender-Transformative Programs



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# Introduction

## Objectives of this brief

**How to effectively recruit and retain male participants in gender-transformative programs remains an abiding question.**

Experiences from diverse settings reveal some persistent challenges in the effective recruitment and retention of men and indicate effective strategies and ideas that may help mitigate these challenges. This brief is intended for practitioners in the field of male engagement in gender equality and summarizes programmatic lessons on recruitment and retention. 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 in settings as diverse as Bangladesh, Ghana, Haiti, Nigeria, Senegal, Rwanda, and the United States.

**The brief is organized as follows:** The introduction provides a background on Plan International's SHOW program, the motivation for engaging men in gender-transformative programming, and common barriers to and pitfalls in recruiting and retaining male participants in such programs. This is followed by a section on best practices and lessons learned on recruiting and retaining male participants – including on targeting and scheduling, messaging and approach, relevance of content, and ongoing strategies – 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.

## Why engage men?

### **Men’s engagement in MNCH and SRH means more than simply checking off a list of actions.**

Plan International Canada defines “male engagement” in MNCH/SRH as “men taking an active role in protecting and promoting the health and wellbeing of their partners and children” (Comrie-Thomson et al., 2015). This definition is premised on a vision of sustainable behavioral and relational change and more gender-equitable relationships between male and female partners. It views male engagement as a broad concept rather than a list of actions or decisions in which men should participate in the MNCH/SRH continuum of care. It views men’s subjective experiences, motivations, relationships, and active participation, rather than specific actions, as indicative of engagement and sees a focus on men’s agency and relationships as distinct from male participation or involvement, which can be understood to be more passive.

### **Men’s sharing of care responsibilities benefits everyone.**

There is emerging evidence on the positive impact of involved fatherhood on children’s physical and mental health, learning and development, and adult relationships (Levtov et al., 2015). A recent review of male engagement in MNCH programs highlighted the positive health outcomes for women, including better antenatal care attendance, higher rates of skilled birth attendance, improved postpartum care, and improved maternal nutrition. The Nurturing Care Framework released in 2018 at the World Health Assembly emphasized the importance of engaging men beyond just helping women to instead playing a more

central caregiving role. Operationalizing such an objective will require addressing barriers that stand in the way of engaging men as more involved caregivers – especially gender norms that continue to deeply influence men’s and women’s roles in the household (Swan et al., 2019). Men themselves benefit from involvement in caregiving, with improvements in physical, mental, and sexual health outcomes and reductions in risk-taking behaviors (van der Gaag et al., 2019). *In Rwanda, a randomized controlled trial of Promundo’s Program P revealed a range of positive effects from gender-transformative sessions for men and their partners, including lower rates of partner violence, improved contraception use, and a reduction in men’s dominance in household decision-making* (Swan et al., 2019).

### **Men want to be more involved and can be powerful agents of intergenerational change.**

Many men want to have stronger emotional relationships and better communication with partners and children. They want to learn how to discipline their children or resolve conflict with their partners in nonviolent ways (Swan et al., 2019). Data from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) show that most fathers (ranging from 61 percent in Croatia to 77 percent in Chile) report that they would work less if it meant that they could spend more time with their children (Levtov et al., 2015). The SHOW project impacted a total of 15,105 fathers through 1,055 Fathers Clubs, with preliminary evidence suggesting these men learned and valued new nonviolent ways to support their partners and children.<sup>1</sup> Expectant and new fatherhood is an especially effective entry point to engaging men in gender equality

1. Statistics drawn from the forthcoming “Fathers Clubs: Engaging Men in the MNCH/SRHR Continuum of Care” by Plan International Canada, 2020.

more broadly, as this is usually an important transformative moment in parents' and fathers' lives – one where guidance, knowledge, and skills on navigating the changing circumstances may be welcome. Fathers who are actively involved in caring for and raising children in equitable ways also pave the way for future generations of gender-equitable individuals and caregivers.

**Group-based strategies – like SHOW's Fathers Clubs – help lay the groundwork for lasting change.** Interventions like the Fathers Clubs that have been implemented in the Global South typically involve small groups of expecting or new fathers meeting regularly with a facilitator in community spaces to engage in critical reflection on gender roles and on how these roles impact their lives and the lives of their partners and

children. Working with groups of men allows the gradual introduction of gender-transformative messages in sync with men's lives, allows men to learn from each other, and creates a critical mass of men who can take on leading change in the community. This process of raising critical consciousness is crucial in sparking lasting transformative change.<sup>2</sup>

## 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 <sup>3</sup>
Changemaker Families <sup>4</sup> (World Vision)	Bangladesh <sup>5</sup>
MenCare+ and Bandedereho	Rwanda (Doyle et al., 2014)
Program P	United States <sup>6</sup>

- 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).
- 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 Fathers Clubs study (Plan International, 2019).
- The program is also referred to as Nutrition Sensitive Value Chains for Smallholder Farmers Bangladesh.
- Examples drawn from Promundo's training and monitoring report from Bangladesh in 2019.
- Examples drawn from reflections of staff who worked on an adaptation of Program P in Pennsylvania.

## Common barriers to recruitment and retention

### **Many programs report challenges in recruiting and retaining male participants.**

Specific challenges may vary greatly across local contexts, program objectives and design, and participant profiles. However, many of these challenges are the result of a few main barriers, like social norms and economic factors. This section details a few of these broad barriers before listing a few specific pitfalls to avoid when recruiting male participants.

### **Norms that do not ask enough of fathers discourage men from improving.**

In some communities where the SHOW program was implemented in the Global South, gender norms around fatherhood allow men to feel they already live up to the expectations of “good fathers.” As a result, they may not feel the need to participate in programming that promotes involved fatherhood, i.e., where fathers play a major, intimate, unchanging role in the care and upbringing of their children and who work to ensure their children’s overall well-being. The general prevailing concepts of good fatherhood in such contexts may revolve around the roles of “protector” and “provider” without much emphasis on fathers’ role as “nurturer.” Since these concepts persist community-wide, and not just amongst male community members, it may be useful to complement group-based interventions with SBCC campaigns to expand the definition of fathers from only protectors and providers to include nurturing caregivers (Swan et al., 2019). *In the SHOW program, Fathers Clubs orient men on this expanded definition of fatherhood and allow reflection opportunities for men to take on the role. Strengthening SBCC campaigns to focus on fathers’ nurturing*

*role can help improve enrollment and retention by sensitizing family members and gaining buy-in and trust in the expanded definition of fatherhood.*

### **Men who do not see “what’s in it for them” may not want to participate in gender-transformative programming.**

Men may wonder why they should participate in a gender-transformative program that appears to explicitly benefit their partners and children and is not advertised as directly or clearly benefiting them. Especially if the prevailing norms do not expect more of fathers beyond their traditional role of protector and provider, it will be essential to work to change these norms and widely advertise the benefits to men during recruitment of participants. These include a range of benefits to men from greater involvement in caregiving, including improvements in physical, mental, and sexual health outcomes and reductions in risk-taking behaviors (van der Gaag et al., 2019)

*See the earlier section “Why engage men?” for more evidence on how gender-transformative sessions benefit men themselves.*

### **Economic constraints can affect participants’ ability to attend.**

In the Global South (where the SHOW program was implemented), challenges may arise from economic constraints related to participants’ conflicting work schedules or the broader need to attend to their daily income-generating activities, particularly in rural areas where agriculture is a prevailing source of income. *In Bangladesh, for instance, the most common reason for participants missing Fathers Clubs sessions was a conflict with paid work opportunities.* Thus, gender-transformative programs may need to review the time-of-day and seasonality of Fathers Clubs meetings

to encourage regular participation and offer make-up sessions for sessions missed. The program could also consider combining gender-transformative activities with income-generating activities, like creating savings groups or selling artisanal products (with the objective of women's

economic empowerment), where the group meets to counter this barrier (Swan et al., 2019).

See the "Targeting and scheduling" section for more on accommodating the seasonality and timing of work.

## Box 1

### Common Pitfalls to Avoid

**Unappealing spaces for sessions.** *In SHOW Bangladesh, a complaint many participants had was about not having snacks to eat or mats to sit on at the venue. Participants of SHOW Haiti also complained about not having snacks provided during the Fathers Clubs sessions. Where possible, simple, local solutions to improve amenities at the facilitation venue may help retain participants and are recommended, given the long hours participants and facilitators spend there.*

**Not considering participants' schedules when deciding on times.** *Some participants in SHOW Bangladesh felt the sessions went on for too long. Depending on what constraints participants face, some flexibility of scheduling could be arranged. However, the quality of the work must not be compromised by skipping content. Sessions could be made shorter but more frequent, for instance.*

See the "Targeting and scheduling" section for more such strategies.

**Not designing the program to appeal to participants.** To be effective in recruitment, gender-transformative programs that target men must frame the work to appeal to their aspirations.

See the "Messaging and approach" section for more on framing such work.

**Ignoring the local context.** Adapting programs to different cultural contexts also includes considering which community stakeholders to include in the design for maximizing reach and uptake of the program and thinking through logistics.

See the "Relevance of content" section for more on contextually adapting curriculum.

**Ignoring potential pushback from within the households.** *In the SHOW program in Ghana, members of Fathers Clubs were encountering pushback within their own households. To address this, a more specific intervention that was designed to also engage women was added in the program. Across the five SHOW countries, concurrent SBCC campaigns and community influencers integrated the importance of male engagement in their messaging, helping to build broader social support for men to engage effectively.*

# Recruitment and Retention: Best Practices and Lessons Learned

## Targeting and scheduling

**Meet men where they are.** Meeting male participants where they are is both a metaphorical and literal need. To initiate transformative change, it is important to meet men where they are emotionally and expect gradual transformation in attitudes and behaviors. It is also crucial to ensure that the physical venues for group sessions are not difficult for participants to get to. *Feedback from the SHOW program in Bangladesh revealed that many men found the distance to the group sessions overwhelming, citing it as a reason for not attending the sessions regularly. In the Bandebereho program in Rwanda, strategies that worked to address challenges around session location included using transportation incentives for participants and meeting and deciding as a group on the location of the group sessions.*

**Consider the timing and seasonality of work.** Holding sessions in the evenings or on weekends tends to work better to accommodate men's and couples' schedules. *In Bangladesh, the SHOW team avoided scheduling sessions*

*during the harvesting season, when most men would have agricultural work to attend to. Even men who are not currently employed may not want to attend sessions during usual work hours (Swan et al., 2019).*

**Understand learner profiles early on.** *In the SHOW program in Ghana, migrant fathers were difficult to retain in the Fathers Clubs sessions, as they were not present in one location for long. Identifying suitable participants and understanding their specific circumstances may help reduce dropouts. Low literacy could also be a disincentive for members to participate in the program. For instance, in the SHOW program in Ghana, the low literacy of participants was identified by facilitators as a barrier to their attendance. Thus, the program was adapted to include illustrations and images to engage even those who were not literate.*

**See the brief "Engaging Missing Populations in Gender-Transformative Programs" for more details on adapting programs in low-literacy settings.**



## Box 2

### Role of Incentives

**Whether to incentivize participation.** Gender-transformative interventions consider financial incentives to compensate participants for their time or reimburse expenses incurred in attending the session, like on transportation. However, such incentives can negatively impact programs' long-term sustainability, and some programs opt for non-monetary incentives instead. In the case of either monetary or non-monetary incentives, it is imperative that incentive structures do not perpetuate or further inequalities – for instance, only providing incentives to male participants may further undermine women's economic decision-making power in the household. Decisions about incentives should, thus, be made after considering potential implications on existing inequalities.

**Non-monetary incentives and pitfalls.** Given the impact that monetary incentives can have on budgets, many programs opt for alternatives. *In Bangladesh, SHOW participants were given awards for "best fathers." The staff also organized quiz competitions to gauge retention of the content.* While acknowledging improvements in participants is important, and awards and events can encourage retention, program staff must be careful to not overly celebrate the smallest of changes, as this may impede genuine transformative change.

**Perceptions of incentives in the community.** In deciding whether to use incentives to recruit or retain participants, programs should gauge how the community views incentives. *In Ghana, for instance, a SHOW facilitator expressed how the community distrusted him for expecting them to attend without payment:*

[The members] think I am being paid and don't take it seriously. They think I'm being paid to say these things. They wonder why they should continue coming if they [as members] are also not being paid.<sup>7</sup>

## Messaging and approach

**Appeal to men's aspirations as fathers and partners.** Understanding what men's ambitions are for themselves and for their involvement with their children and partners can help frame the message to appeal to their self-interest.

**Use a strengths-based approach.** Build on what men and fathers already know. A focus on

practical, active lessons that accommodate a diversity of men and learning styles works better to encourage men to continue participating in the program.

**Frame gender equality as not just a women's issue.** *SHOW staff in Ghana found that men initially thought the program was about maternal health and were disinclined to attend. After the first session, men realized it was also*

7. 2018 Ghana monitoring trip.

*about issues that affected their lives – such as their involvement in their partner’s pregnancies and the potential related benefits such as greater relationship satisfaction and better health outcomes for their children and partners – and attendance improved.*

### **Introduce power and gender gradually.**

Starting with talking about relationships and about men and women’s lives generally before moving on to more difficult and contentious topics like power and gender can help prevent disengagement and dropouts. Issues of power and gender inequality are complex and can ignite debate or make men feel defensive. Introducing topics that male participants can relate to in their own lives in nonjudgmental

ways can be a more effective way to start the process of change.

### **Clarify that participants are not being punished.**

It is important to let participants know that they have not been targeted for “bad” behaviors. Clarifying what the program objectives are will help minimize any feelings of stigma associated with participating. This also entails recruiting a diversity of men, including men who already embody positive masculinities and demonstrate caring, involved, and nonviolent fatherhood. Recruiting men who already demonstrate healthy masculinities will help provide role models to other participants and may prevent stigmatization in the community that the group is for “bad” men or fathers.

## **Box 3**

### **Using Community-Based Solutions to Improve Retention: A Mini Case Study**

A partner of Promundo shared the following brief case study of how, during an adaptation of Program P, they used a participatory approach to update the messaging to appeal to their target audience – Nepalese and Bhutanese fathers in Pennsylvania, United States – and improved recruitment and retention.

I really think the shift had to do with integrating fun activities that were chosen by the community members. Once we got a few men committed to the second cohort, we had them **choose activities** that they wanted to do the first time we met. They chose playing cards, playing soccer, watching World Cup matches (it was perfect timing that the World Cup was going on when we started the group), playing karam [a Nepali game], and they eventually asked if we could go on field trips. Once we spent a few of the sessions doing the fun activities, we used the **field trips as incentives** for people who kept up with group attendance. The few community members that joined early on ended up inviting friends and other community members, so the group was able to grow. By the time we started the curriculum, the participants had already **formed relationships**, which seemed to make it easier for them to be open in the group. Getting to know each other also helped because they would call each other and give reminders about the group. We met for two hours each session and spent the first 30 minutes doing an activity;



usually it was playing cards or a game. The other thing that made a big difference was **having a van driver** that picked people up in the community. We didn't need this for the first round because we were still in our old office within the community, but since [moving], we have been providing transportation for groups.<sup>8</sup>

The partner organization used creative “crowd-sourced” ideas to tweak their approach and messaging, allowing relationships to form within the group, using incentives for participation, and helping members overcome a real barrier – in this case, transportation.

## Relevance of content

**Include participants and communities in the design stage.** Participation of the target community early in the program – through formative research in the form of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews – can help ensure that the content and implementation are relevant to the lives of the people who will go through the curriculum.

**Planning enough time for contextual adaptation is particularly important for**

**international programs.** The importance of contextual adaptation of curricula is especially important for programs like SHOW that are implemented across multiple countries and very diverse settings. The formative research and community involvement can help facilitators come up with contextually relevant scenarios and examples in the group activities to prevent participants from becoming disengaged due to finding the material irrelevant, boring, or imposed by “outsiders.” It is also important to allocate sufficient time in the work plan for this process of adaptation.

### Box 4

#### Involving the Community and Managing Backlash

**Backlash in the community as a deterrent.** *In Bangladesh, facilitators implementing the Changemaker Families curriculum noted that “backbiting” or criticism in the community was a major reason that men and women stopped coming to the sessions. Similarly, a cooking competition did not succeed – unlike other events in the program – because of its public nature: Participants felt they could not change their behavior in public and feared backlash.*

**Participants value programs despite such backlash.** *Testimonies from participants in SHOW's Fathers Clubs in Ghana and Nigeria and in Program P in Rwanda indicate that many men consider the value from the program enough to resist the backlash.*

8. Quote shared by Promundo staff. Emphasis added by author.

I was there, and my wife was pregnant and couldn't carry the child to the clinic. I did it out of love and I felt very good. People could say I am bewitched or stupid. But, if someone can bewitch you to empower yourself and your family, what's wrong with that?  
—**Young father in Rwanda, 2014 (Doyle et al., 2018)**

Nothing can make me change [these] positive changes I am enjoying now; even if I experience stigma outside, immediately [when] I enter my home, I forget everything.  
—**Fathers Clubs member in Nigeria, 2018 (Plan International, 2020)**

Initially some friends of mine did not understand the reason for my change [and they tried] to mock me. But I rather explained to them and they now understand the reason for the change, hence their support.  
—**Fathers Clubs member in Ghana, 2018 (Plan International, 2020)**

**Engaging the community as an opportunity.** Where governments, community leaders, and influential stakeholders have been engaged in programming, recruitment and retention rates are impressive. *In the MenCare+ program in Rwanda – which included an adaptation of Program P in addition to other programmatic components – partnerships with the government and the involvement of respected community leaders, in addition to other contextual factors, helped keep attrition rates low (Doyle et al., 2014).*

**Possible pros and cons of involving community and religious leaders.** *The involvement of religious leaders in SHOW Nigeria meant high uptake of the Fathers Clubs program in the community and success in recruitment. In gender-transformative programs generally, the advantages of greater acceptance and uptake in the community as a result of engaging faith leaders may also come with some pitfalls. In Nigeria, a context where conservative norms were prevalent, religious leaders often intervened to frame messages in the curriculum in ways that aligned with religious texts, leading to an approach that sometimes was more gender-accommodating than gender-transformative, where the former approach acknowledges gender differences and inequalities while working around them, and the latter approach seeks to change and transform gender relations to promote equality.*

*See the brief “Engaging Religious Leaders in MNCH, SRHR, and Gender Equality: Field Experiences from the SHOW Project in Sokoto, Nigeria” for more information on effective strategies to mitigate such challenges.*



## Ongoing strategies

**Use community participation and mobilization beyond the sessions.** Participants can be encouraged to do voluntary community service to build strong connections in the community beyond their own cohort. Couples and households who are open and willing to do so can share their stories of transformative change at town halls or other community events.

See the preceding “Involving the Community and Managing Backlash” box for more applications.

**Recruit through the most suitable means of communication.** Depending on the target audience, the ideal channels of recruitment differ greatly: for example, leaflets and posters at the community center, follow-ups over the phone, communicating via platforms like WhatsApp, or word of mouth through community members or leaders.

**Plan for “family days.”** Many men and women appreciate the opportunity to participate in programs as couples or families. Creating spaces for togetherness in the program and scheduling sessions for the family where the household members can practice positive behaviors, envision an equitable future together, or plan and make a budget could be a powerful way

to engage the entire family and help link the program messages to participants’ own lives.

**Engage through “homework” and discussions.**

*In Bangladesh, SHOW participants appreciated the thought-provoking discussions that would result from reviewing homework in a group. They cited these discussions and role-play activities as reasons for their regular attendance.*

**Equip facilitators with resources during home visits.**

Individual home visits can be an effective mode of ensuring retention. However, facilitators need to feel equipped to carry these visits out. *In Bangladesh, community health workers and SHOW staff felt supplementary materials like visit protocols and communications materials would make it easier to engage the community in improving MNCH and SRH outcomes and mainstream the gender-transformative messages of the program.*

**Clarify participation eligibility and objectives.**

*In Ghana, entire communities would sometimes turn up for Fathers Clubs sessions. While the program staff did not want to alienate the families of the participants, it was understandably a challenge. Using the first session as an introduction to the program objectives and clarifying the intended audience may help address such potential risks to dropout from overcrowded sessions.*

# Conclusion

Experiences of gender-transformative programming from diverse settings reveal that paying attention to the diversity in men's aspirations, expectations, and constraints is key, as is involving influential community stakeholders to minimize the impact of stigma and backlash. In the experience of the SHOW program, the Fathers Clubs curricula did not directly address social stigma and community backlash. However, the Fathers Clubs members advocated for positive

masculinities in their families and communities, leading to a gradual evolution of norms that reduced stigma against men who participated in the program. The complementary SBCC activities and engagement of community leaders and health workers who integrated male-engagement messaging in their work also helped to create an environment conducive for men to begin engaging more meaningfully in transforming gender relations in their communities.



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