



PASSAGES PROJECT

Powerful Partnerships: Engaging Faith Leaders in Norms-Shifting Interventions

Social norms, or the “unwritten rules governing behavior shared by members of a given group or society”¹, have a strong influence on behaviors. Social norms impact our behaviors by showing us what those around us typically do, and will approve of us doing². Social norms, therefore, depend heavily on context³. The people who uphold or enforce norms related to a certain practice or behavior are often referred to as ‘**reference groups**’ - for example mothers-in-law, peers, and colleagues. They can do this through punishments or rewards for ‘correct’ behavior.

In many contexts, faith leaders are a key reference group who have specific, recognized, and institutionalized power in a community. As ‘**power holders**’ they are seen to hold considerable influence over the emergence of a norm, have a stake in existing norms, and can also be change agents to support shifting norms⁴. Because of the power they hold, it is important to engage faith leaders effectively when looking to shift community norms to support behavior change for improved health and wellbeing. In this brief, **we share implementation insights and recommendations on partnering with faith leaders and supporting them as change agents to promote norms change, improve reproductive health, and prevent gender-based violence.**

¹The Social Norms Learning Collaborative. How and Why Norms Matter for Sustainable Development [Internet]. Washington, DC: 2019. Available from: <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/how-and-why-social-norms-matter-sustainable-development>

²Goldstein NJ, Cialdini RB. Using social norms as a lever of social influence. In: The science of social influence. Psychology Press; 2011. p. 167–91.

³The Social Norms Learning Collaborative. The Flower for Sustained Health: An Integrated Socio-ecological Framework for Normative Influence and Change [Internet]. Washington, DC: 2017. Available from: <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/flower-sustained-health-integrated-socio-ecological-framework-normative-influence-and>

⁴Legros S, Cislighi B. Mapping the Social-Norms Literature: An Overview of Reviews. *Perspect Psychol Sci* [Internet] 2020;15(1):62–80. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31697614>

BOX 1 : What is Passages?

Passages is an implementation research project that aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in violence prevention, gender equality, family planning and reproductive health. The project uses norms-shifting approaches to build the evidence base and contribute to the capacity of the global community to understand and shift norms to strengthen reproductive health environments. Passages capitalizes formative life course transitions - very young adolescents, newly married youth, and first-time parents - to test and scale up interventions that promote collective change and foster an enabling environment for voluntary family planning, especially healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.

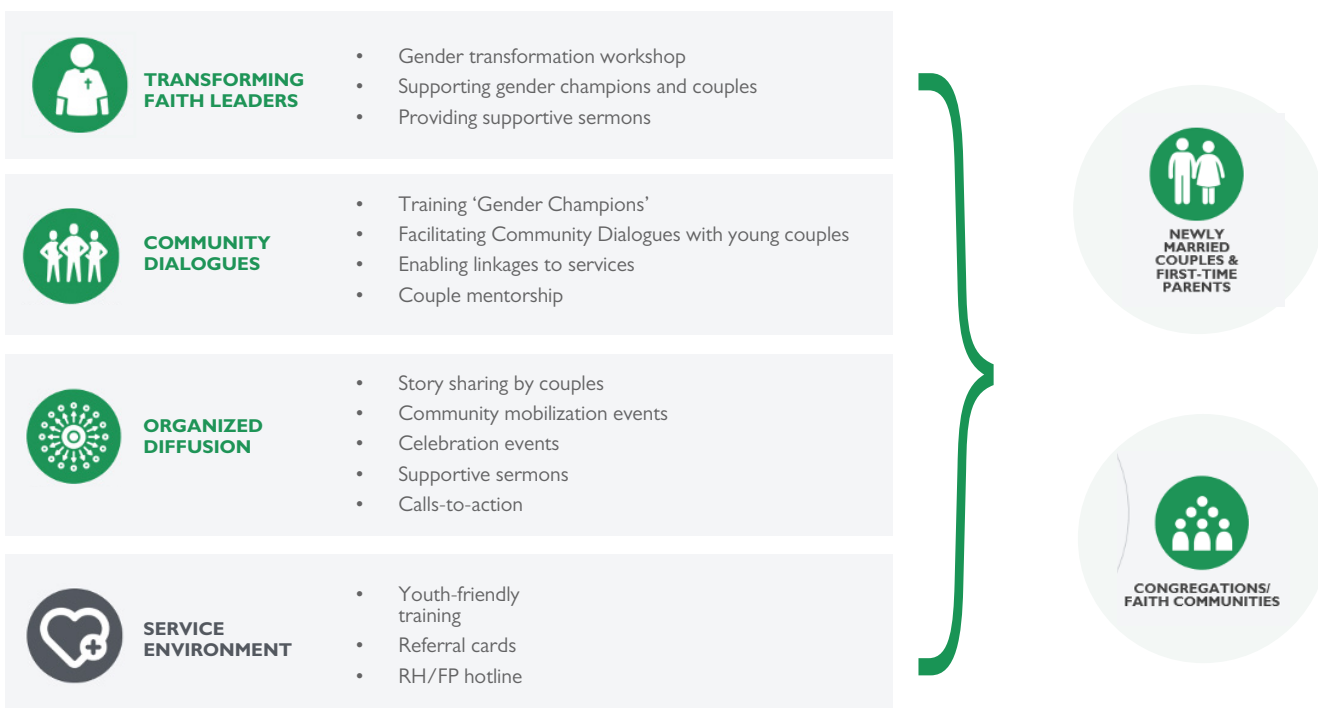
BOX 2 : Social norms addressed through MFF

1. God created men as superior to women.
2. It is acceptable for a man to use violence to correct his wife’s behavior or discipline a child.
3. As household decision-makers, a man can dictate whether a woman can seek and use family planning

Masculinité, Famille, et Foi: A faith-based, norms-shifting intervention

With a focus on engaging and partnering with faith leaders and faith communities, Masculinite, Famille et Foi (MFF) worked to increase voluntary family planning use, reduce intimate partner violence (IPV), and improve gender equality and male engagement in household work and childcare amongst newly-married couples and first-time parents. MFF was implemented in 17 Protestant churches in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo in partnership with the Eglise du Christ au Congo (ECC) from 2015-2020. ECC is an umbrella network that unites a large number of diverse Protestant denominations with a reach of 300,000+ parishes and 25 million members nationally.

As in many other settings, religion and especially Christianity is important in the DRC, with faith leaders having a strong influence over communities' beliefs and practices ⁵. According to the MFF baseline data in Kinshasa, 75% of male and female respondents considered religion to be very important in their lives and attended a church service weekly ⁶. Faith leaders and congregations can shape and sustain equal - as well as unequal - gender norms through references to Biblical scriptures and guidance on marriage and family life ⁷. Formative research using the Social Norms Exploration Tool ⁸ indicated that faith leaders were key reference groups for male and female couple members, influencing young couples' decisions, shaping behavior, and enforcing norms for both FP and IPV.



MFF is a multi-component intervention which focuses on young couples at transition moments in their lives, namely, entering marriage and becoming parents. Faith leaders were engaged to create a supportive environment for young couples and to effect a change in norms across the congregation. Congregation members were selected and trained to be Gender Champions. Gender Champions facilitated community dialogues for young couples, both in gender-separate groups and together as groups of couples, over a period of 8 weeks. Using scripture-based reflections, the groups discussed unequal gender norms and the use of power as related to IPV, and the need to make family planning choices as a couple. Health workers delivered a short family planning presentation and offered referral cards to nearby services at the end of the final dialogue session. Planned diffusion activities such as supportive sermons and public testimonies of change shared intervention messages with the wider congregation to shift the prevailing social norms. Across the intervention, faith leaders

played a key role in modelling change, sharing MFF values in their sermons and pre-marriage counselling, selecting congregation members to be trained as Gender Champions, and supporting the community dialogues and the family planning presentations.

Faith leaders with national, provincial, and local congregational roles took part in separate facilitated, reflective workshops designed to affect attitude change amongst faith leaders and produce behavior changes in their personal lives and relationships. In these workshops, they drew on Biblical scriptures to discuss gender equality, IPV, family planning, and positive masculinity. This personal change in faith leaders enabled them to role-model and share scriptural messaging in favor of family planning and gender equality, and against IPV. Project staff continued to discuss these themes with faith leaders during implementation and additional sessions were held to revisit core concepts on IPV, family planning, and gender equality. Below are four lessons from MFF's three years of implementation on how to partner with and support faith leaders to be agents of change in norms programming.

Power holders as agents of change: Partnering with faith leaders to model new behaviors and promote norm change



INSIGHT I

Address faith leaders' patriarchal power

While the project team recognized the importance of working with faith leaders to shift norms and improve health, there was a risk that the intervention design and implementation could reinforce or increase the power that faith leaders hold as key influencers in the community. For example, the majority of ordained faith leaders were male. If these male faith leaders were the main representatives and agents of MFF, the project risked consolidating male power and authority rather than demonstrating more equitable gender norms and behaviors during MFF implementation. To mitigate this, male and female faith leaders were selected from each congregation to participate in the project; attend the facilitated scriptural reflection workshops; and speak out on MFF topics in sermons, congregational events, and group discussions. In addition, the unequal distribution of power and status in communities based on gender and class was a key reflection topic with faith leaders. For example, following scriptural reflection on the sacrificial leadership of Jesus Christ, faith leaders were asked to examine how they used their power in the home, the community and in their leadership. They were asked to practice listening and sharing decision-making with their spouses and colleagues. Faith leaders from throughout the church hierarchy attended reflective workshops to gain their support and approval for the community-level activities, but also to encourage this normative shift within the faith institution towards gender equity, greater shared-decision making and collaborative leadership. As recorded in project learning studies, faith leaders were seen as role models for change in the congregations due to the sermons they shared and, importantly, the behavior they modelled. It was noted by congregation members that some faith leaders began to engage their junior clergy and female faith leaders more equitably in discussion and decision-making, and to share domestic tasks with their wives.

⁵ Pew-Templeton Global Religions Futures Project. Democratic Republic of the Congo [Internet]. Pew Res. Center's Relig. Public Life Proj. 2016; Available from: http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010®ion_name=All Countries&restrictions_year=2016

⁶ Institute for Reproductive Health. Transforming Masculinities Quantitative Report on Masculinity, Family and Faith in Kinshasa, DRC: Baseline Couple's Survey Findings. Washington, DC: 2017.

⁷ Institute for Reproductive Health. Working with Faith-Based Communities: Baseline Findings from the Masculinit , Famille et Foi Study in Kinshasa, DRC. Washington, DC: 2019.

⁸ Social Norms Exploration Tool. Washington, D.C.: 2020.



INSIGHT 2

Encourage faith leaders to reflect on their attitudes and social norms

Faith leaders are strongly influenced by scriptural texts and aim to both live and preach in accordance with their teachings. They are also affected by the prevailing social norms. In order for faith leaders to effect change and enable social norm shifts in their congregations, it is important for them to first reflect on their own personal attitudes and how these align with key scriptural teachings on gender equality and positive masculinities. Rather than approaching faith leaders solely as gatekeepers to the congregations, the MFF intervention engaged with faith leaders as individuals and groups who were both impacted by and invested in sustaining existing social and gender norms. Facilitated, reflective workshops with faith leaders created space for discussion on the impacts of unequal gender norms on individuals and their relationships. These impacts fall disproportionately on women, and include unequal decision-making and IPV. Faith leaders were invited to share anonymous stories from their communities of the impact of IPV and lack of access to family planning on the lives of young people.

Highlighting the role of some social and gender norms in perpetuating these harmful outcomes enabled faith leaders to reflect on how and why these norms were held in place, their role and power in maintaining them as leaders, and their ability to effect change. Facilitated scriptural reflections presented an alternative model of positive masculinities, drawing on the principles of men and women's equal value to God, and of the importance of stewardship and care in planning for children. Referring to these scriptures created a counter-narrative to influence faith leaders' attitudes, which resulted in a sense of responsibility for faith leaders to make changes in their personal lives and their leadership to align with scriptural teaching on gender equality.

As with other powerholders, not all faith leaders are the same. Their different positions or status within the church, their education, age, denomination, and role in their institutions affected how they received the MFF training. Faith leaders are unlikely to all have the same perspective or respond in the same way to

new messages or information during facilitated scriptural reflections. There was, for example, initial resistance from some faith leaders to discussing family planning in churches and to the use of certain family planning methods. This resistance was primarily from faith leaders from more conservative denominations. In response, family planning providers attended the facilitated, reflective workshops with faith leaders and later met with them to share information and answer queries and concerns. Faith leaders who were supportive of family planning, typically from more progressive denominations with more advanced educations, also met with their peers to allay concerns, highlight family planning-related challenges in their congregations, and encourage them to be involved in MFF. This success of faith leaders working with fellow faith leaders to bring them along with the project and discuss their attitudes and concerns highlights the advantage of working with multiple leaders of different ages, genders, and theological positions.



INSIGHT 3

Establish personal and relational accountability for faith leaders

In order to encourage an ongoing self-interrogation of the power that they hold as faith leaders, the MFF intervention promoted the importance of accountable practices, adapted from the International Rescue Committee's Engaging Men in Accountable Practices (EMAP) intervention⁹. A series of reflective exercises were introduced during the faith leader workshop sessions as tools to help them continue their reflection on power, equality, and social norms outside of the reflective workshops. The goal was to support faith leaders' personal change in attitudes and behaviors so they could be effective role models and advocates for gender equality, family planning and against IPV.

As faith leaders are motivated by religious belief, emphasis was also placed on accountability before God, using scriptures discussed in the workshops that focus on equitable treatment of others to assess their behavior. Relational accountability was also highlighted, encouraging faith leaders to regularly ask their spouses, families and community members whether they felt valued and treated equitably by them in their interactions. At the end of the facilitated workshops all faith leaders were encouraged to create groups or pairs with fellow faith leader participants to discuss their reflections and learnings on an ongoing basis. However, MFF did not monitor whether and how these accountability groups were run. Helping to establish and monitor accountability groups could be a useful way of embedding self-reflection for faith leaders as power holders in future.



INSIGHT 4

Monitor and support diffusion activities for alignment with program principles

Faith leaders hold positions of influence and counsel in their congregations. By inviting faith leaders to share messages demonstrating their support for violence prevention, family planning, and gender equality during their sermons and conversations, MFF sought to influence the attitudes and actions of whole congregations - including those not engaged in the community dialogues - in order to shift the normative environment. It was important that faith leaders delivered supportive sermons after their participation in the workshops, once they had started reflecting on their own attitudes, in order to model change.

A challenge, however, was that some faith leaders re-interpreted scriptural messages on gender equality as discussed in the workshops when delivering their sermons. In addition to discussing the importance of communication in a couple, how women and men are equals and should seek to understand each other, some faith leaders' sermons emphasized the need for women to be subordinate to their husbands to maintain harmony in the home, and the importance of distinct, assigned and inequitable male and female roles and tasks to ensure family wellbeing. These sermons did not focus on Biblical concepts of equality and shared decision-making through dialogue as discussed in the reflective workshops. This issue was not identified in the program monitoring as the tools primarily tracked the number of sermons and their general theme rather than the content and framing of the messaging. It was revealed during the MFF ethnographic study, which included listening to and documenting sermons. In response, MFF staff continued to revisit concepts of gender equality and gender norms in their discussions with faith leaders and during refresher workshops.

⁹ International Rescue Committee. Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls: Engaging Men Through Accountable Practice [Internet]. New York, NY: 2014. Available from: <https://www.fsnnetwork.org/sites/default/files/EMAP-Implementation-Guide.pdf>

Although the facilitated, reflective workshops with faith leaders created space to discuss and shift attitudes towards a more equitable direction, this discrepancy between the sermons and the project messages illustrated that not all faith leaders internalized the messages or agreed with them in the same way. Shifting norms on gender equity takes time, and faith leaders still continued to demonstrate their commitment to MFF and gender equality through supporting community dialogues, attending meetings with project staff, and identifying ways to expand MFF in other congregations and the ECC as a whole. More sensitive, regular monitoring would help better understand the alignment of faith leaders' sermons with MFF messaging, as well as how and when to provide ongoing support to faith leaders on these topics

Conclusion

In many contexts, faith leaders are key influencers and power holder, and have the ability to be champions for positive change to support family planning and prevent IPV. As faith leaders internalize more equitable attitudes, preach these messages, are vocal and active supporters of changing unhealthy behaviors and norms, and are seen to make sustained changes in their own behaviors and interactions with family members and colleagues, they build momentum for longer term change. Faith leaders modelling positive behavior reach the community they belong to, but also reach more broadly to their peer faith networks and the hierarchies in their own faith institutions. Through partnering with faith leaders as power holders to reflect on their beliefs, values, and social norms, and by encouraging reflection on why and how they hold power, their influence can be maximized for long-term, widespread change.

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