

PASSAGES PROJECT

How Norms-Shifting Interventions Foster Social Norms Change:

A Realist Synthesis of Four Community Level Interventions



SEPTEMBER 2021

Prepared By
The Institute for Reproductive Health,
Georgetown University



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Passages

© 2021 Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University

Recommended Citation:

How Norms-Shifting Interventions Foster Social Norms Change: A Realist Synthesis of Four Community Level Interventions. September. 2021. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The Realist Synthesis analysis and this working paper was prepared by Susan Igras (team lead), Carley Burroughs, Mariam Diakit , Anjalee Kohli, and Natacha Stevanovich-Fenn.

This working paper was prepared by IRH under the Passages Project. This working paper and the Passages Project are made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of the under Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-A-15-00042. The contents are the responsibility IRH and do not necessarily reflect the views of Georgetown University, USAID, or the United States Government.

Passages Project

Institute for Reproductive Health | Georgetown University
3300 Whitehaven Street NW, Suite 1200
Washington, DC 20007 USA

info@passagesproject.org
www.irh.org/projects/Passages
Twitter: @PassagesProject

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Setting the Scene.....	4
2. Analytical Approach & Methods	7
3. How Change Happens, and New Norms Start to Take Hold	9
Social Change Agents.....	9
Norms Change Mechanisms.....	11
Reference Groups as Change Agents.....	13
Thinking Visually Over Time: How NSI Foster Norms Shifting	14
4. Closing Thoughts.....	16
Moving Forward	16
References	18
Annex A: Detailed Theories of Change for Masculinit� Famille et Foi, Husbands Schools, Girls Holistic Development, And Growing Up GREAT!	20
Annex B: Reference Groups to Beneficiary Groups in the Four NSI	24

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Norms-shifting Interventions in the Realist Synthesis.....	5
Figure 2. NSI Change Mechanism: Social Change Agents Including Reference Groups.....	9
Figure 3. NSI Change Agents Having the Main Contact with Communities.....	10
Figure 4. How NSI Foster Social Norms Shifts at Community Level	15

TABLE OF BOXES

Box 1: Key Findings	4
Box 2. What is Passages?	6
Box 3. Definitions: Key NSI Elements that Guided the Realist Synthesis	8
Box 4. Recommendations for Designing Community-based Norms Shifting Interventions.....	17

TABLE OF TABLES

Table 1. Common NSI Change Mechanisms	12
---	----

I. SETTING THE SCENE

Between 2017 and 2020, Passages provided multi-year research, documentation, and technical support to community-based interventions aiming to address socio-normative and other factors that influence adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health (AYSRH). Although they operated in three country contexts, reached different adolescent groups, and consequently aimed for different results, the four norms-shifting interventions (NSI) included in this analysis all worked to improve AYSRH. Each used a combination of activities that i) built adolescent and adults' awareness, capacities and agency to act on AYSRH issues, ii) created better adolescent and youth linkages to RH and other services; and iii) fostered an enabling socio-normative environment in adults and school/health care settings that improved young people's choices and options. These activities aimed for gender-equal opportunities for young people and improved peer and intergenerational dialogue and support for achieving AYSRH. See snapshots, on the next page, of Growing Up Great!, Girls Holistic Development, Husbands Schools, and Transforming Masculinities.

Community-based health promotion projects look similar in that they engage with communities to foster behavior change. Yet not all social and behavior change (SBC) interventions are designed to explicitly lead to norms shifting. Likewise, community-based health agents aim to improve access to services and information, yet they differ from social change agents who aim to provoke debate and reflection on social aspects of health issues, aiming to change social system dynamics. ***This working paper provides greater clarity on what to consider in designing norms-shifting interventions so future interventions are more strategic in their norms-shifting strategies to support behavior change.***

The Passages Project employs a Realist Evaluation approach,¹ which uses program theories of change to understand and test how project activities lead to a series of intermediate changes that eventually

BOX 1: KEY FINDINGS

To understand in a programming sense how NSI activities lead to norms shifting, the synthesis focused on *norms change mechanisms* defined as having two interlinked parts: 1) the NSI activities including the social change agents that implement activities, and 2) the subsequent changes in the reasoning of the receiving community.

NSIs employ similar norms change mechanisms. Some are direct, such as using dialogical activities to foster social comparison and learning, and role modeling to legitimize new behaviors in front of the community. Some act to amplify change, such as including community-services linkages to allow achievement of intentions to use services.

Project and community-level change agents are key to facilitating supportive processes of social change. The four NSI reflect similarities in social change agent types - project staff, community volunteers, and reference groups - in supporting change.

Reference groups - those who influence young peoples' attitudes and AYSRH actions – are often peers and family. NSI reach these reference groups either directly or indirectly via diffusion. In the process, reference groups assimilate new ideas and attitudes allowing them to play opinion-setting and legitimization roles for norms-shifting.

The findings lead to a middle-range theory explaining how project activities and their change mechanisms, including change agents, foster shifts in community reasoning that grow over time via diffusion effects and information feedback loops, leading to behavioral and normative changes.

Also, the findings help to clarify to programmers how NSI aims and subsequent conceptualization of mechanisms and change agents can improve the enabling normative environment for health. The working paper shares seven design recommendations that cover NSI aims, strategies and change agents, and considerations for implementing NSI within complex social systems.

¹ See Technical Brief explaining how Passages is using the realist evaluation approach to explore norms shifting: <https://irh.org/resource-library/realist-eval-hs-brief/>

lead to project outcomes. We conducted a Realist Synthesis, a form of analysis used in the evaluation of complex social interventions, of the four interventions. (See Methodology for a fuller description.) All four NSI developed program theories of change showing pathways to normative and individual change. The theories were confirmed by outcome evaluation studies assessing individual and community-level shifts in norms, and showed the NSI achieved individual and normative outcomes predicted in their theories with some variations. All conducted rapid studies to learn about intermediate effects, which confirmed expected changes along change pathways.



Figure 1 | Norms-shifting Interventions in the Realist Synthesis

BOX 2. WHAT IS PASSAGES?

Passages aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in FP and RH. This applied research project is building the evidence base and contributing to the capacity of the global community to strengthen normative environments that support RH, especially among very young adolescents, newly married couples, and first-time parents. Passages capitalizes on these formative life course transitions to test and scale up interventions that promote collective change and foster an enabling environment for voluntary FP, especially healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies

Why address social norms?

Social norms — the often unspoken rules that govern behavior — shape the reproductive journeys of young people. In many settings, sustained improvements in FP and RH will only be achieved by addressing norms that inhibit family planning access and use. Passages is using Realist Evaluation and applied research to unpack the 'S' in SBC programming. Its focus on community-based norms-shifting interventions that aim to shift social norms and reduce stigma and myths related to fertility, healthy timing and spacing of pregnancy and modern family planning use, male engagement in family planning, gender-based violence, and gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors.

2. ANALYTICAL APPROACH & METHODS

The aim of a Realist Synthesis is ‘...to articulate underlying programme theories and then to interrogate the existing evidence to find out whether and where these theories are pertinent and productive (Rycroft-Malone et al 2012).² Our comparative exploration of NSI began in July of 2019 in a workshop with NSI project staff that analyzed change pathways in program theories and explored implementation commonalities across the four NSI, including a preliminary analysis of change mechanisms, contexts, and outcomes. We then furthered the analysis to confirm if the change pathways were correct to identify systematically where and how change occurs. The research used a Realist Evaluation framework – understanding the relationships between activities, contexts, and expected outcomes or results of implementation – which was visually depicted in detailed program Theories of Change (Annex A). These theories were developed by project staff and stakeholders in 2017-2018 to reflect a shared stakeholder understanding of how change occurs, which can be updated as new evidence on pathways is found. Program evaluations and other outcome and process studies (see resources consulted at the end of the paper) validated the change pathways and outcome achievements allowing us to include the visual theory diagrams as data in our analysis. We held consultation sessions with project staff in all interventions to check the accuracy of the analysis findings and gather additional insights into norms change processes based on staff implementation experiences.

In our analysis, we identified the *change mechanisms* operating within each NSI, the role of *social change agents* in sparking these change mechanisms, and the role of *social reference groups* in influencing public opinions and behaviors. To ensure clarity, we defined terms operationally. The operationalization of terms was informed by definitions found in the literature with some adaptations (see Definitions Box).

When thinking about social change mechanisms, we conceptualized them as operating on a continuum rather than an ‘on/off’ switch. We assume that norms-shifting occurs over time and becomes stronger as more people engage with new ideas. Program activities inspire norms-change reflections, and after repeated exposure and reasoning moments, they lead to a collective shifting of attitudes and actions. Time is also important when thinking about social change agents. A project may be designed to train and support a set number of change agents. Yet the number of change agents grows over time; as more people buy into new ideas, some will become active change agents in their own right. Though we recognize the element of time, we did not have enough data across different time points to analyze how it affects change pathways. The one exception was the reference group analysis, discussed later on.

Six questions guided the Realist Synthesis to understand in a programming sense how NSI activities lead to norms shifting:

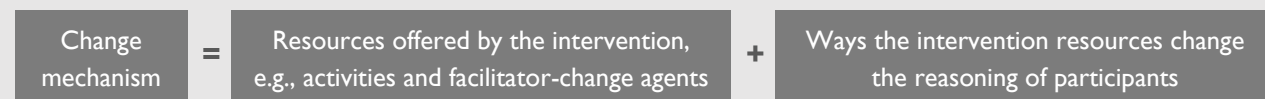
- **Are there commonalities of norms-shifting mechanisms across the four NSI?**
- **Do mechanisms differ when NSI aim to improve the health/wellbeing of younger adolescents versus young adults?**
- **What can we understand about who a change agent is and what they do? Are there commonalities in change agents (implementing NSI activities) across the four NSI?**
- **What are the similarities in reference groups vis-a-vis adolescent and young adult RH behaviors?**
- **How do the NSI engage reference groups?**
- **At what point do reference groups become norms-shifting agents supportive of new behaviors?**

² Rycroft-Malone, J., McCormack, B., Hutchinson, A.M. et al. Realist synthesis: illustrating the method for implementation research. *Implementation Sci* 7, 33 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-7-33>

BOX 3. DEFINITIONS: KEY NSI ELEMENTS THAT GUIDED THE REALIST SYNTHESIS

What is a change mechanism?

In realist evaluation terms, a change mechanism is an element inherent in activities that leads to changes in attitudes, behaviors, and intentions of those who engage in an activity (Dalkon et al. 2015):



What Makes a Change Agent a Catalyst of Social Change?

While no standard definition exists, the following are characteristics of social change agents. (The definition also allows comparison of social change agents to community health workers, who often serve to extend formal health services rather than change community beliefs.)

- **Roles.** NSI change agents advocate for health improvement through social change processes that encourage participants to adopt behaviors that lead to better health and increased gender and social equity.
- **Skills.** They lead activities that facilitate knowledge building and critical reflection of social norms. They encourage open dialogue, expansion of network linkages, and increased social cohesion using various techniques: intergenerational and mixed-sex/same-sex meetings, safe spaces for examining new ideas, multilevel activities to create a broad social environment, and role modeling.

What makes Reference Groups crucial in norms change?

A social reference group 'includes all those who count for a person in a certain situation' (Mackie et al., 2015). These are individuals who listen, provide information and advice, and influence a specific group's attitudes, behaviors, and decisions.

- Socially, a reference group is a collection of people who influence others. Reference groups provide a standard of comparison for ourselves and the worth or appropriateness of our attitudes, beliefs, behaviors. How we relate to reference groups is central to how social groups and society exert social force on us as individuals.
- Reference groups can exist at a meta-level (defined by race, age, class, gender, sexuality, religion) or localized (defined by neighborhood or school, among others).
- As individuals, we see in reference groups accepted social norms and dominant values, and we choose to either embrace them in our thoughts, behavior, and interactions with others. Or, we reject and refute them by thinking and acting in ways that break from them.

Sources:

Dalkin, S.M., Greenhalgh, J., Jones, D., Cunningham, B., & Lhussier, M. (2015). What's in a mechanism? Development of a key concept in realist evaluation. *Implementation Sci* 10, 49. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-015-0237-x>

Maisons de Retraite. (2019, July 3). Les métiers du social : Animateur. <http://www.maisons-de-retraite.fr/Les-metiers-du-grand-age/Les-metiers-du-social/Animateur>

Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change. (2019). *Considerations for scaling up norms-shifting interventions for adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health*. Annex 6. <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/considerations-scaling-norms-shifting-interventions-adolescent-and-youth-sexual-and>

Crossman, A. (2019, July 3). What is a reference group? ThoughtCo.com. <https://www.thoughtco.com/reference-group-3026518>

3. HOW CHANGE HAPPENS, AND NEW NORMS START TO TAKE HOLD

NSI activities and actors are the key implementation elements that lead to norms-shifting. We first discuss essential change agents who 'fire' the change mechanisms (Figures 2 and 3). Then move to the eight mechanisms (Table 1) found in the comparative analysis, explore the role of reference groups as change agents, and end with a visual representation (Figure 4) of how these program elements foster norms shifting. The Working Paper concludes with recommendations for the future design of NSI.

SOCIAL CHANGE AGENTS

Who is an NSI Change Agent? Change agents in community-based NSI are the human actors that activate a norm change mechanism. They bring the theory of change to life, working with the community through a set of activities and dialogues to move from a starting point through a process of changed knowledge, attitudes, norms and behaviors. They serve as the liaison between the community and a project. Though their skills, responsibilities and outcome areas may differ between and within projects (i.e., a project can have more than one type of change agent), depending on their outcome area focus, roles, skills and location of action within a project. NSI change agents are critical to building relationships in the community, facilitating dialogue, resolving problems, and bringing about or instigating change. By their conscious actions to foster new ideas and norms shifting, change agents move a project activity from being seen as a one-off or repeat activity or service to one whose actions deepen community reasoning over time.

An initial review of the project documents and theories of change for the four NSI clearly articulated **Staff Change Agents**, also known as Animators within the Passage Project. These Staff Change Agents/Animators are trained and bring a set of skills, aptitudes, and attitudes to the job that foster change within the multiple communities they support. Much depends on these Staff Change Agents as they draw on their relationship and trust within the community to facilitate dialogue, foster reflection, advocate for change and link the community and the organization aims and implementation context. Staff Change Agents work with **Community Member Change Agents**, who are project-supported as group facilitators and opinion leaders. These agents are well known and respected within their communities and often adopt their new role with support from community members. See Figure 3 summarizing the Change Agents in the NSI projects.

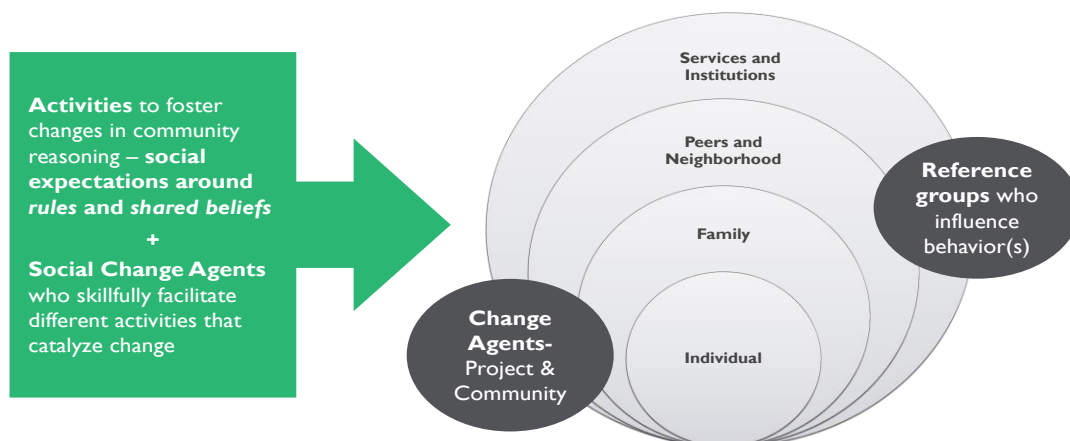
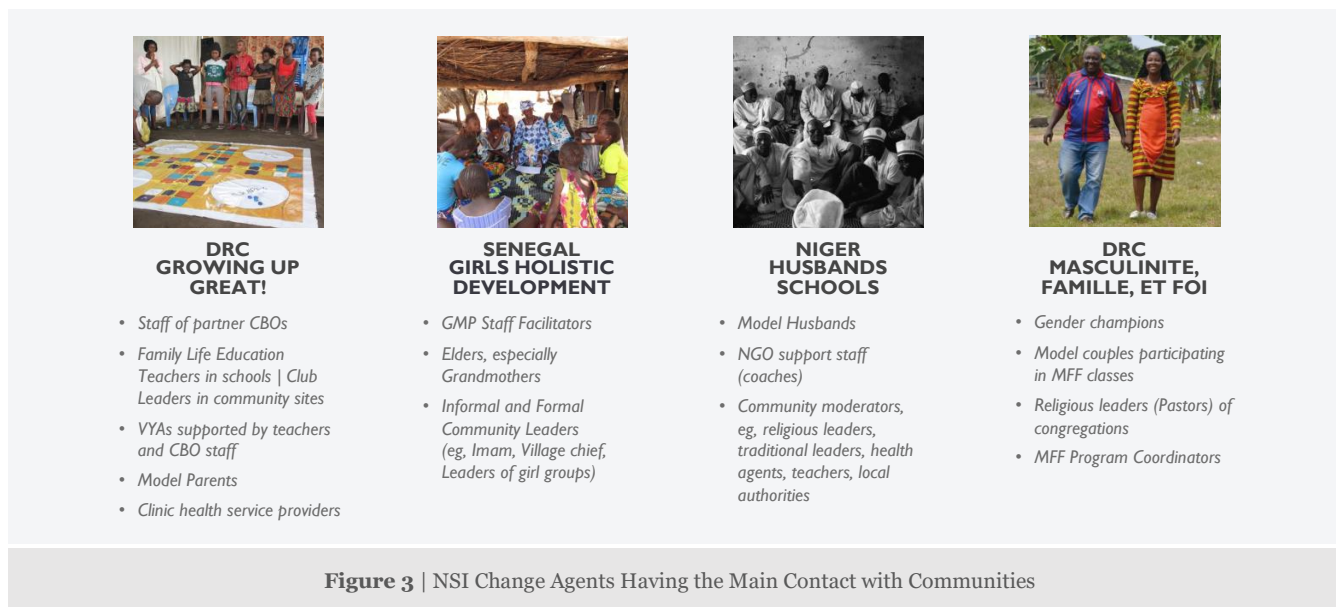


Figure 2 | NSI Change Mechanism: Social Change Agents Including Reference Groups



As the figure shows, each project determined its **NSI staff and Community Member Change Agents** based on project aims and outreach structures. All projects began activities with NSI Staff Change Agents who were trained on the specific animation function they performed in the project, which also included some level of personal values-reflection activities vis-à-vis norms.³

An example: The Masculinité Famille et Foi project staff trained Gender Champions, equality-leaning members of participating congregations to work with Model Couples as part of the Masculinité Famille et Foi approach. The Masculinité Famille et Foi project also oriented Program Coordinators who worked on the legitimization and institutionalization of the project, gaining support from community leaders, and facilitating training. It reflected the project's focus on working with institutions (the Protestant Church) to support the project and promote gender-equitable sermons that reflect the project aims.

NSI began operations with a discrete set of Community Level Change Agents, and the number continued to grow throughout the project. In the beginning, projects conceptualized specific Community-Level Change Agents related to their project activities and trained them as change agents.

An example: The Girls Holistic Development intervention engages Animators (Girls Holistic Development staff) and Grandmother Leaders as Community Member Change Agents. The project initially fosters a cohort of Grandmother Leaders as change agents; these GMLs go through a process of reflection, confidence building, leadership training and relationship building with adolescents. Once their status in the community and their confidence increased, these GMLs take on roles of Community-Level Change Agents.

It was evident that over time many of **the participants in project activities assume Community-Level Change Agent roles**. These new community-level change agents were reached indirectly via planned diffusion of new ideas, norms and values and model behaviors as key to shifting norms in the wider community. In other words, the project relied on participants' transformation, uptake of norms, values and behaviors and effort to influence others to achieve the NSI project aims, even if not explicitly stated in the theories of change. These new NSI Community-Level Change Agents were not responsible for reporting to the project, and they were not visible early in project activities. Instead, their engagement and commitment to norms and behavior change came about due to their participation in the project.

³ This analysis did not look at, only assumed, that the training activities supported the achievement of outcomes.

For example: Within Girls Holistic Development, other grandmothers, not identified and trained by the project as Grandmother Leaders, would become community-level change agents by assuming the new behaviors they see in Grandmother Leaders performing new functions.

All types of change agents are responsible for facilitating discussion and guiding communities to examine their social norms, values and behaviors, reflect on what they want in their community and propose new or uplift existing norms and behaviors deemed necessary to the community.

NORMS CHANGE MECHANISMS

While change agents ‘fire’ change mechanisms, they do so in the context of activity implementation. Both Change Agents and Activities are needed for norms mechanisms to be activated. This Realist Synthesis aimed to unpack norms-shifting change mechanisms as both the action and effect of or reaction to project activities that lead to norms shifting. In this conception, mechanisms operate incrementally in a complex environment, meaning that each change affects another change, possibly magnifying this or other effects or leading to feedback loops for collective change, which contributes to sustained community-level shifts.

The eight change mechanisms (Table 1) reflect common mechanisms used by the four NSI to foster norms shifting. Whether VYA or Young-adult focused. Note that mechanisms are project activities (column 1) that change the reasoning of participants (column 2). The term 'reasoning' is used broadly and contextually to include cognitive, emotional, and other ways that a person's reasoning shifts.

In looking at these change mechanisms, both the resources and changes in reasoning, we noted that each NSI had theorized how the intervention would lead to shifting norms, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly *via* diffusion. These mechanisms were acting throughout the project period, with some people engaging with them earlier and others later. The twofold nature of change mechanisms - mechanisms consist of activities and change agents which result in new ways of community reasoning - helped unpack how these different activities facilitate change. This theorizing can then guide the design of activities, structure NSI monitoring and learning plans, and guide operations and evaluation research. Further, this more holistic cause-effect thinking on change mechanisms helps to define how these projects are different from projects seeking to increase factual knowledge of target groups but not shift community norms.

Five of the eight change mechanisms were characterized by three dimensions, which help to explain where or how the change mechanism operates.

- **Critical Reflection Processes** are facilitated dialogues designed to elicit individual reflection on emotions, values, experiences and behaviors and to generate discussion, understanding and consensus-building;
- **Behavioral Modeling** reflects how change agents and community members model the behaviors that they seek from the community; and
- **Location** defines the place where change mechanisms occur, for instance, in schools, congregations, community gathering sites.

The remaining three mechanisms amplify the effects of the above change mechanisms.

- **Diffusion Processes** are planned processes designed to spread new norms and behaviors promoted by the project to other community members who do not directly participate in project activities, for example, the new community change agents discussed earlier. Diffusion can be structured, for example, by motivating each participant to speak to three specific people, or can work through local media, or public displays of the behavior and home visits to promote the adoption of new behavior.

TABLE 1: COMMON NSI CHANGE MECHANISMS

Note: Unless specified, the four NSI in the synthesis used all mechanisms.

NSI ACTIVITIES	HOW THEY CHANGE THE REASONING OF PARTICIPANTS	EXAMPLES
Information provision	Improves the quality of critical reflection on norms and behaviors	Masculinité Famille et Foi: Gender champions and Pastors provided RH information via facilitated reflective dialogs on masculinities and men's roles in FP and intimate partner violence with couples and during sermons.
Dialogical, experiential approaches	Allows critical reflections grounded in real-life	Growing Up GREAT!: Club and video-session discussion and reflection on one's life (experiential) allowed internalization and incorporation of new gender-equitable ideas by younger adolescent girls, boys, and their parents
Role modeling or testimonials	Demonstrates publicly new attitudes and behaviors, and break norms on appropriate behavior	Husbands Schools: Model husbands (school members) were trained and shifted their attitudes and roles at the community level. They became visible public advocates for RH services use and discussed with other husbands about RH in their own homes, and some even accompanied their wives to services.
Safe spaces	Permits a frank examination of sensitive issues	Growing Up GREAT!: VYA club settings and in parent video sessions created safe spaces with peers to discuss sensitive topics of puberty, reproductive health and family planning, adolescent wellbeing, as well as gender equality in teen and adults' actions.
Within community meetings (Intergenerational, same-sex, mixed-sex gatherings)	Equalizes information access and reflections; fosters shared understanding across community groups and different age/sex/social group members	Holistic Girls Development: Staff organized meetings - Days of Solidarity, Intergenerational Forums, Grandmother Appreciation – engaged leaders, parents, girls and boys, health and education providers, leading to shared understanding of issues and support for pro-girl RH and wellbeing actions.
CHANGE AMPLIFICATION MECHANISMS	HOW THEY CHANGE THE REASONING OF PARTICIPANTS	EXAMPLES
Planned diffusion	Maximizes the reach of social change mechanisms at a community level	Husbands Schools: Although a male-oriented engagement approach, husbands shared RH information and new ideas with their wives, who diffused RH information and men's support of services to women, who men were not socially allowed to reach directly.
Cross-community meetings of change agents (HS, MFF, GHD)	Creates conditions for solidarity and reciprocity among social change actors	Holistic Girls Development: Annual meetings of Grandmother Leaders and stakeholders across villages allowed sharing ideas of school retention, delayed marriage and childbearing beyond one's community, fostering regional solidarity for pro-girl actions.
Community-service linkages (HS and MFF for health services; GHD for schools)	Allows achievement of service behavior aims, an endpoint of social change	Masculinité Famille et Foi: Gender champions (change agents) included local health workers in reflective dialogue sessions in congregations meetings for couples – the last two sessions of 13 sessions – to create interpersonal relationships between congregations and providers, encouraging visits to seek FP services.

- Somewhat related to diffusion are **cross-community meetings of change agents**, which created interpersonal and inter-community linkages that foster solidarity and increase motivation and support among change agents. Note this mechanism operated between villages in rural interventions (Husbands Schools, Girls Holistic Development) and between congregations in urban interventions (Masculinité Famille et Foi).
- **Linking services to NSI activities.** While NSI may foster new ideas and help to concretize intentions to act, people may not know what to do next. A specific linkage to services can increase the odds of more people acting on their choices.

REFERENCE GROUPS AS CHANGE AGENTS

Multiple reference groups and influential people can influence a specific behavior or numerous behaviors. Often a person behaves because they think it is what their social reference group is doing or how they expect them to act. Thus, reference groups uphold target group behaviors. Indeed, reference group behaviors also have their reference groups upholding behaviors, and so on. These layers help explain community complexities. The comparative analysis extended only to the most proximal reference groups (see Annex 4).

One of the contributions of the Passages Project is a practical approach ([Social Norms Exploration Tool](#)) to identify reference groups influencing a particular behavior. Two of the four NSI (Growing Up GREAT! and Masculinité Famille et Foi) had conducted social norms explorations and systematically identified reference groups. The other two did not, and instead, reference groups were determined either by past project action-research studies (Girls Holistic Development) or based on social-cultural understandings of NGO field workers (Husbands Schools).

All NSI included Peers and Immediate Family Members as reference groups. These similarities hold by location, that is whether urban and rural communities, by the age and sex of the target group, and by outcome behaviors, whether family planning, puberty-related, or intimate partner violence. **Another commonly-cited group is Respected Adults outside the family.** But, again, the profile of respected adults, e.g., mothers, teachers, religious leaders, varies depending on the NSI configuration.

How is the reference group involved in NSI? Theoretically, interventions that aim to change social norms should take into account the reference group for a target population's behaviors. NSI engage reference groups to be role models in encouraging new attitudes and appropriate behaviors and promoting and advocating (giving permissions) to changing norms. In some programs, the reference groups are engaged as an intervention begins, while others engage them later and to a lesser extent.

We identified three strategies and share examples by which NSI engage reference groups to challenge existing norms.

- Directly, as change agents. As trained community-member change agents supported by NSI projects, they challenge others to change norms, such as Model Husbands of Husbands Schools, Grandmother Leaders in Girls Holistic Development. Because some project change agents hold other social roles, they may have a larger norms-shifting effect. For example, Husbands Schools members are change agents defined by a set of criteria such as being married, in good community standing, with wives who use an RH service. But some members have other roles; an Imam may be a change agent by being a member of a Husbands School, but he is also already a reference group to community husbands.
- Directly, as participants in NSI activities. After benefitting from participating in NSI activities and going through their transformation, these reference groups begin to support norms shifting publicly. For example, parents in Growing Up GREAT! and Pastors in Masculinité Famille et Foi were reference groups and also reached by project activities so that they would support new behaviors of each project target group, VYAs and young couples.

- Indirectly or via diffusion. Diffusion of new ideas and behaviors may reach reference group members via others who attended NSI activities. For example: Men in communities where Husbands Schools operate may get interested listening to comments of peers who heard about or attended its outreach activities. Pastors in nearby congregations who know of Masculinité Famille et Foi work through other pastors and parishioners engaged in Masculinité Famille et Foi may become interested in furthering gender discussions in their congregations.

How do reference groups become supporters of change and change agents? The aim is for reference groups to shift their attitudes and behaviors. Then influence and support the target groups (and others members in the community) to move their mindset and behaviors. Hence, the reference group can encourage acceptance and adoption of new attitudes and behaviors and new norms.

For example: As a core strategy, Growing Up GREAT! engaged parents, who are an essential reference group for VYA. Using parent-video sessions to foster shifts in parents' attitudes and behaviors and normative expectations vis-à-vis good parenting and gender equality in the family, Growing Up GREAT! supported parents to support their VYAs to practice more gender-equitable behaviors.

For example, Girls Holistic Development, Masculinité Famille et Foi, and Husbands Schools did not target reference groups as part of the intervention. Instead, they aimed to create new reference groups for target groups. Girls Holistic Development sought out grandmothers for Grandmother Leader GML training and, over time, created a reference group to other grandmothers that reinforced and updated traditional elder roles. Husbands Schools sought out pro-reproductive health-leaning husbands for training, and over time, 'Maris models' became a reference group for other husbands in their communities. Masculinité Famille et Foi sought out pro-gender equality congregation men and women for Gender Champion training, and over time they became a new reference group for others.

THINKING VISUALLY OVER TIME: HOW NSI FOSTER NORMS SHIFTING

The Figure 4 diagram summarizes the different NSI activities and their norms-shifting effect: The NSI activities that occur over time (top blue arrow) aim for an outcome (green circle) that reflects community adoption of new norms and behaviors. The community context (bottom green arrow) also changes over time and is influenced by NSI activities and other factors. NSI operate at this project implementation /community reaction intersection: The helix in the middle reflects this dynamic and deepening intersection of growing blue project dots reflecting NSI-produced activities and growing green dots reflecting changes in community reasoning and, ultimately, actions and beliefs and norms.

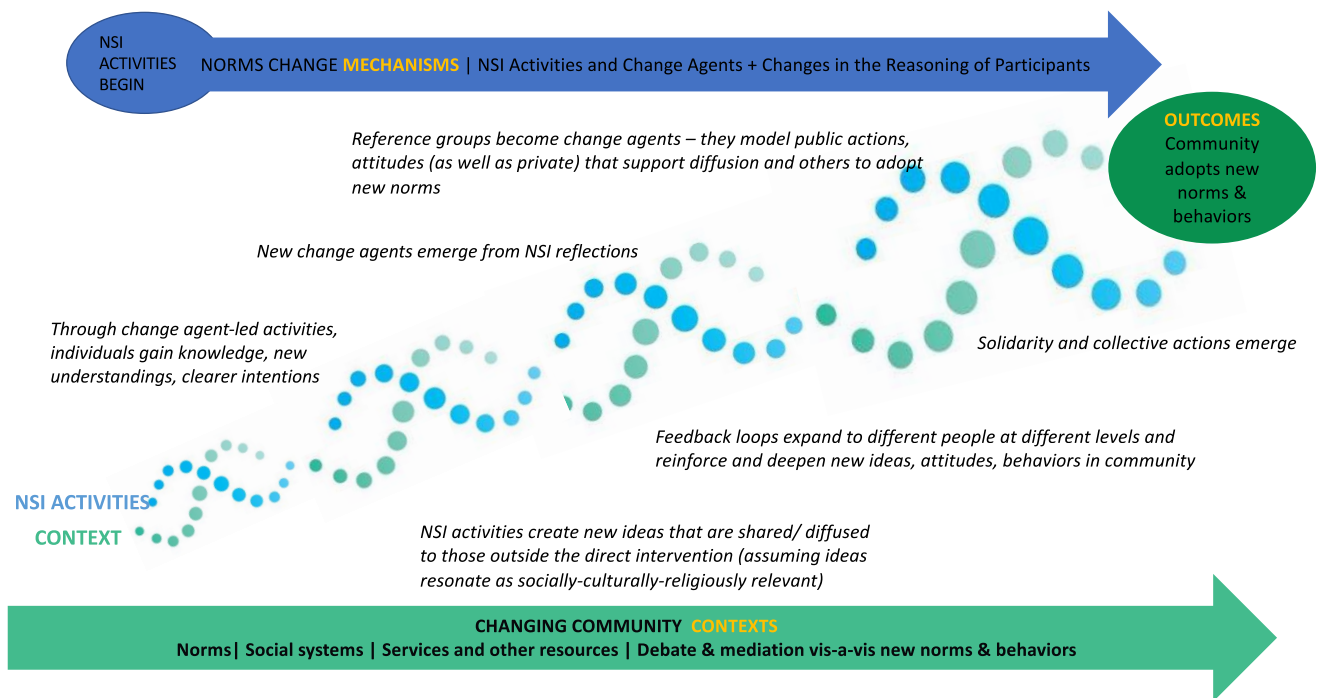


Figure 4 | How NSI Foster Social Norms Shifts at Community Level

The top line of NSI activities and their effects seen above the helix indicate the growing number of change agents over time. The bottom line of reactions seen below the helix shows the deepening changes in community reasoning over time. A subset of community members is reached directly by NSI activities and skilled change agents, triggering reflections on new ideas. These people react to NSI activities and interpret them in ways that lead to new reasoning (new beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and normative expectations). The ideas spread (diffuse) to others in the community, who also interact and interpret new ideas in ways that resonate with them. Expanding interactions and feedback circles grow between members. Community contexts also shift in response to these changes, and reference groups' influence also grows in support of changes. This expanding web of support for new ideas and normative expectations helps create tipping points of solidarity for new behaviors and normative change.

4. CLOSING THOUGHTS

NSI play essential roles in health promotion, especially when norms are critical influencers of health behavior. The objective of NSI is to influence community-level beliefs (or norms) about what is expected and acceptable behavior of its members. Which, when aligned, will support individual opinions and behavior changes. To achieve this, community-based NSI focus less on personal knowledge and self-efficacy improvements and more on the group dialogs, including intergenerational dialogues, around normative expectations and their link to health outcomes. Such distinctions imply different approaches to program design, strategies, and activities, which the analysis helped distill. See Box 4 for recommendations.

The use of theory-based Realist Evaluation was crucial in this analysis. All NSI initially developed program theories of change that visualized change pathways, which guided rapid studies and outcome evaluations to assess whether activities led to expected individual and normative changes (intermediate effects) along the pathways. These visual displays substantiated by effects data from rapid studies provided evidence that change was occurring in expected directions along pathways and led to normative, social, and behavioral change. Our findings contribute to middle-level theory that integrates high-level social norms and behavior change theory, and empirical evaluation research.

The Realist Synthesis focused on identifying cross-project similarities in activities and their embedded change mechanisms and the roles of social change agents who, initially via NSI activities, catalyze and foster community-level change.

The different NSI shared eight norms-shifting mechanisms. The change mechanisms' *modus operandi* included interpersonal critical reflection processes, modeling new attitudes/ behaviors, and planned diffusion to spread new ideas and actions to the larger community. All deepened the reach and community or population-level exposure to new thoughts and actions and facilitated changing reasoning and support for normative and SBC shifts. Social change agents were the driving force behind the change mechanisms.

While change agents in the four NSI were initially project-affiliated and supported, new community change agents emerged later in implementation, including reference group members. Motivated by information and ideas circulating from project activities, these individuals changed their thinking and willingness to advocate for change and consequently took on role modeling new ways of communicating and acting that foster norm shifting.

Reference groups can become crucial players in behavior change when included in project designs or, equally, when exposed *via* diffusion to new ideation fostered by project activities. They then publicly disseminate new ideas and model new behaviors, which helps build social solidarity in favor of behavior change and normative shifts. Social norms theory views reference groups as influential in upholding norms that influence behaviors. When beliefs of reference and target groups align in ways that build good health, reference groups act as allies. But often, the two groups are not aligned, and reference groups uphold beliefs that lead to poor health outcomes. In such cases, NSI aim to shift the reasoning and actions of reference groups, which help change the logic and behaviors and norms of the target and other community groups.

MOVING FORWARD

Realist Syntheses can advance understanding of how NSI support behavior change; we think it worthwhile for others to conduct additional comparative analyses using a Realist Evaluation frame to test whether our findings from four NSI and middle-range theory hold up. Building a body of systematically gathered information and experience with NSI norms-change mechanisms, change agents, and reference group engagement can help further clarify good practice in NSI design.

BOX 4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DESIGNING COMMUNITY-BASED NORMS SHIFTING INTERVENTIONS

This realist synthesis provides insight into programs working with very young adolescents and young adults. Notably, the approach and findings may be helpful for others working on norms shifting interventions, helping to clarify who needs to be involved, when, and how. We summarize our learnings in seven points:

- 1. Ensure a complete understanding of the norms-change mechanisms.** A full understanding of how an NSI conceives norms change mechanisms can strengthen the design, implementation, monitoring and learning from NSI. Such conception should be instilled in the entire project team to understand how activities expect change to happen and monitor whether this is true. Not all activities can affect participant reasoning on norms and behaviors, but they may create an enabling environment for this.
- 2. Skilled staff and community change agents are essential to activating norms shift.** Staff and community change agents benefit from training, including reflection activities that examine their values, perceptions, beliefs and actions. Taking the time to build their technical and interpersonal skills and to take part in personal values/norms reflection is vital to NSI facilitating norms shift. Norms reflection activities may need to occur at the beginning and throughout the project period to ensure continued alignment and enactment of the norms and behaviors the project seeks.
- 3. Be deliberate in who, how, and when to integrate reference groups into change theories and NSI strategies.** Understanding which reference groups are essential to the population, how they influence behaviors and which norms they uphold is vital for program design. Though some reference groups are obvious, programmers may overlook those that are less visible. And sometimes the obvious reference groups are not influential! Conducting formative assessments can build this understanding.
- 4. Not all reference groups need to be engaged at the same time or in the same way.** Some members of reference groups, even the same reference group, may be more willing to engage in project activities. Others may decline participation. An NSI does not need to reach all members of a reference group or all reference groups. Instead, being purposeful in which groups a project works with and how they are engaged can be more meaningful and facilitate feedback loops and the development of new community change agents.
- 5. Recognize systems complexity.** NSIs operate in complex environments, and the relationship between norms, reference groups, behaviors and main population groups is not linear. Projects should be realistic – what level of change is feasible within the project resources and timeline. People often hold contradictory thoughts and values; understanding these can help predict opportunities for norms to shift and where there may be potential resistance. Considering the socio-cultural-religious system, the structures of hierarchy, support and relationship and the roles of different actors can guide NSI in their design and implementation identifying where there are opportunities for change and potential resistance to it.
- 6. Allow for flexibility. Over time, as community needs change, and so should the NSI.** NSI effects deepen in a population group, their reference groups, and the community with time and resources. As more community members demonstrate agreement with values and norms, others start to explore and uptake these values. Community understanding evolves, and with it, so should a project. Some activities may reduce over time, with others becoming more active to reflect the new needs and changed understandings of a community. Similarly, monitoring systems should adjust with the project, focusing on what's important within that time.
- 7. Be prepared to adjust; you might not get it right the first time.** Even guided by well-designed assessments and community consultations, NSI staff should be ready to make mistakes, experience resistance and adjust strategies. Building in regular review of activities and data, feedback loops between different staff people and consultative processes to improve project strategies can enhance project success and reduce resistance.

REFERENCES

Workshop Reports

Rapport de l'atelier sur le synthèse réaliste des interventions Bien Grandir !, Développement Holistique de Filles, Écoles de Maris, et Masculinité Famille et Foi. 2019. Passages Project (internal report)

Detailed program theory of change developed by Girls Holistic Development staff to visualize change pathways leading to social and behavior changes. Passages Project (internal document)

Detailed program theory of change developed by staff and stakeholders of Husbands' Schools to visualize change pathways leading to social and behavior changes. 2016. Passages Project (internal document)

Detailed program theory of change developed by staff and stakeholders of Growing up GREAT! to visualize change pathways leading to social and behavior changes. 2017. Passages Project (internal document)

Detailed program theory of change developed by staff and stakeholders of Masculinité Famille et Foi to visualize change pathways leading to social and behavior changes. 2017. Passages Project (internal document)

Husbands Schools

Study of the effects of Husbands' School intervention on gender dynamics to improve Family Planning and Reproductive Health in Niger. 2019. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University, for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). See: https://irh.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Niger-Report-HS-Gender_ENG_Final.pdf

Saley, Djibo. Evaluation of the Niger Initiative, Husbands' Schools. 2014. UNFPA-Niger (internal document)

Personal communication with Haidara Mohamed of SongES and Issa Sadou of UNFPA-Niger on 1 February 2021

Girls Holistic Development

Evidence Synthesis Review of the Grandmother Project's "Girls' Holistic Development" Programme. 2017. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). See <https://irh.org/resource-library/evidence-synthesis-review-grandmother-project-girls-holistic-development/>

Camara, AD and Ngong B. Exploration des normes sociales liées au mariage et à la grossesse précoces pour le maintien des filles à l'école (Vélingara, Sud Sénégal). 2018. Commissioned by the Passages Project (internal document)

Grandmother Project –Change through Culture: Girls' Holistic Development Program Quantitative Research Report. 2020. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). See <https://irh.org/resource-library/ghd-quant-report/>

The Grandmother Project –Change through Culture: Girls Holistic Development: Executive Summary of Qualitative Research Report. 2020. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). See <https://irh.org/resource-library/ghd-qual-report/>

[Personal communication with Mamadou Coulibaly and Judi Aubel of the Grandmother Project Change Through Culture on 2 February 2021](#)

Growing Up GREAT!

Diakité M et Wa Matchabo, D. Rapport sur l'exploration des normes sociales sous l'intervention Bien Grandir ! 2017. Passages Project (internal document)

Passages Project. Brief: Growing Up GREAT! Shows Promise in Skills Development and Norms Shifting After One Year. 2021. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. See <https://irh.org/resource-library/gug-wave-1-and-2-impact-brief/>

Mafuta, Eric. Exploration des perspectives des enseignants, prestataires et délégués des organisations à base communautaires sur les activités de Bien Grandir ! réalisées par les très jeunes adolescents scolarisés. 2019. Washington, D.C. : Institut de la santé reproductive, Université de Georgetown pour l'Agence Américaine pour le Développement International (USAID). (internal report)

Mafuta, Eric. Growing Up GREAT! The Way Forward : Rapport d'évaluation rapide des activités de session vidéo-discussion avec parents. 2019. Washington, D.C.: Institut de la santé reproductive, Université de Georgetown pour l'Agence Américaine pour le Développement International (USAID). (internal report)

Mafuta, Eric. Growing up Great!: Rapport d'évaluation rapide des activités de session vidéo-discussion avec parents. 2019. Passages Project and Kinshasa School of Public Health (internal report)

Mafuta, Eric. Comment savons-nous que les activités du projet Bien Grandir ont réussi ? Rapport de l'évaluation participative par les très jeunes adolescents évaluateurs. 2018. Passages Project and Kinshasa School of Public Health (internal report)

Personal communication with Jen Gayles and Pierrot Mbela of Save the Children on 3 February 2021

Masculinité Famille et Foi

Diakité M et Wa Matchabo, D. Report on the piloting of social norms exploration tool for the intervention, "Transforming Masculinities." 2017. Passages Project (internal report)

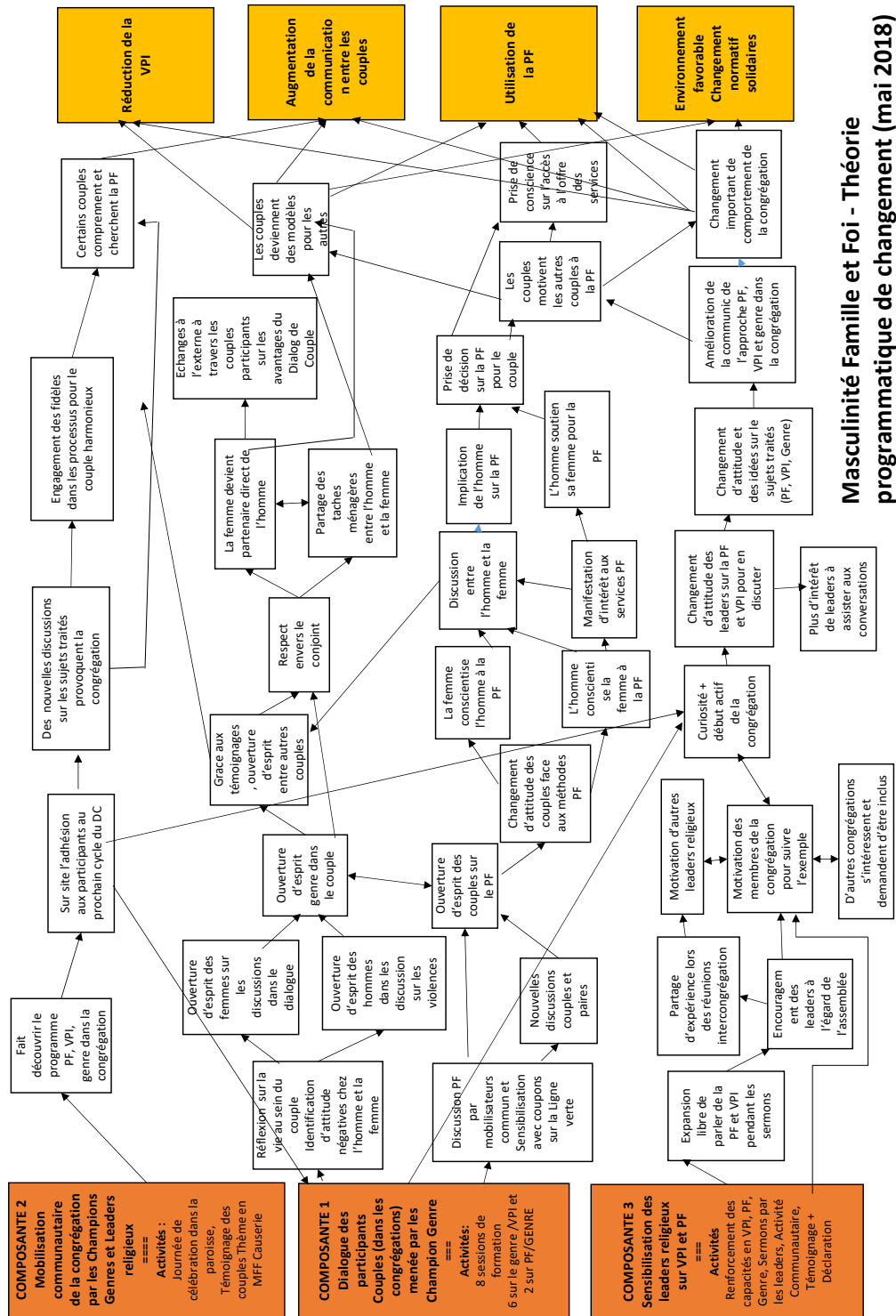
Transforming Masculinities/Masculinité, Famille, et Foi Intervention; Endline Quantitative Research Report. September 2020. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH) and Center for Child and Human Development, Georgetown University with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). See <https://irh.org/resource-library/transforming-masculinities-endline-quantitative-report/>

Transforming Masculinities and Promoting Family Planning in Faith-based Communities: Midline Ethnography Report. 2019. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). 2019. See <https://irh.org/resource-library/transforming-masculinities-midline-ethnography-report/>

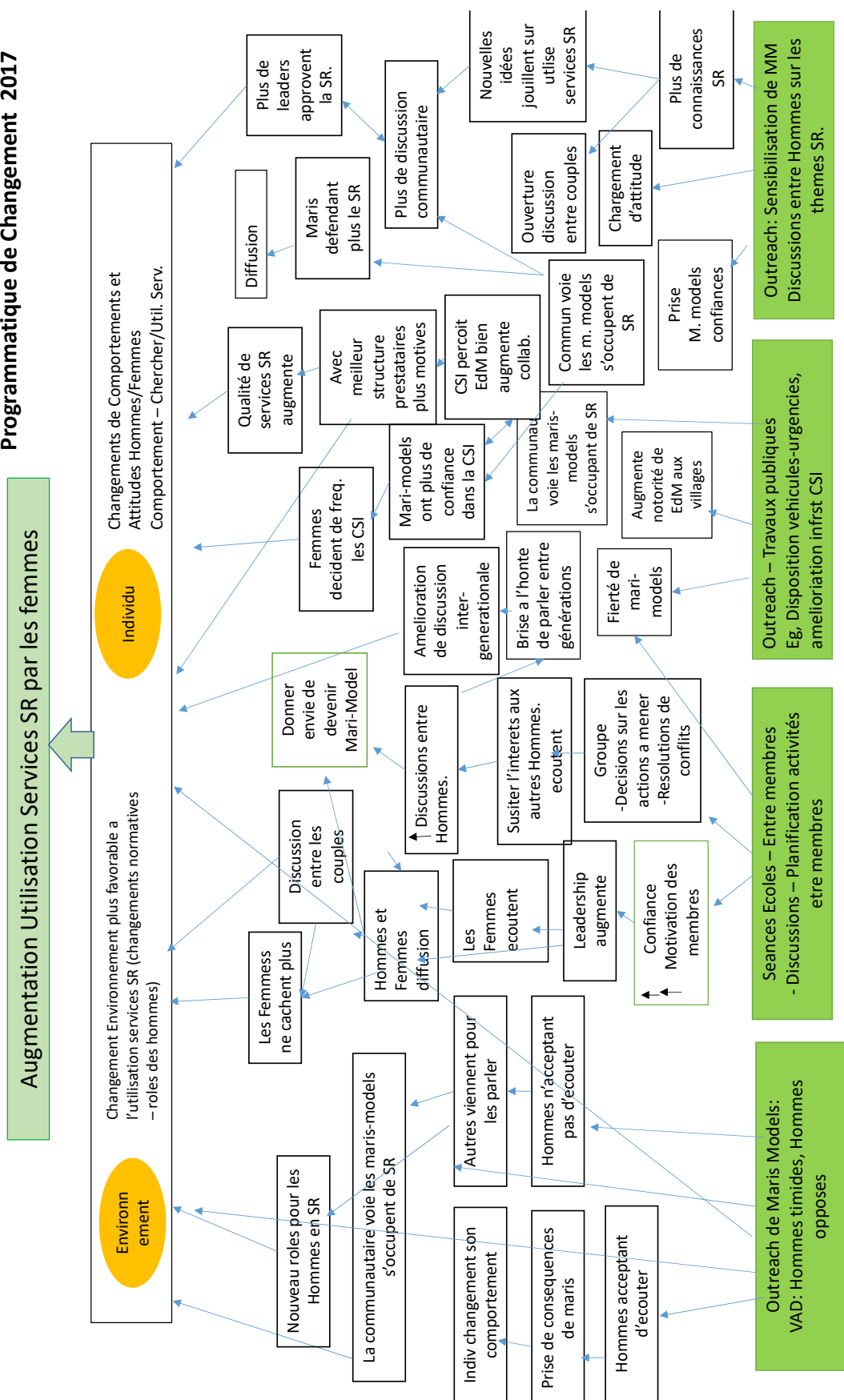
Personal communication with Opsey Nzagire, ECC, and Francesca Quirke and Luke Martin of Tearfund on 8 February 2021.

ANNEX A

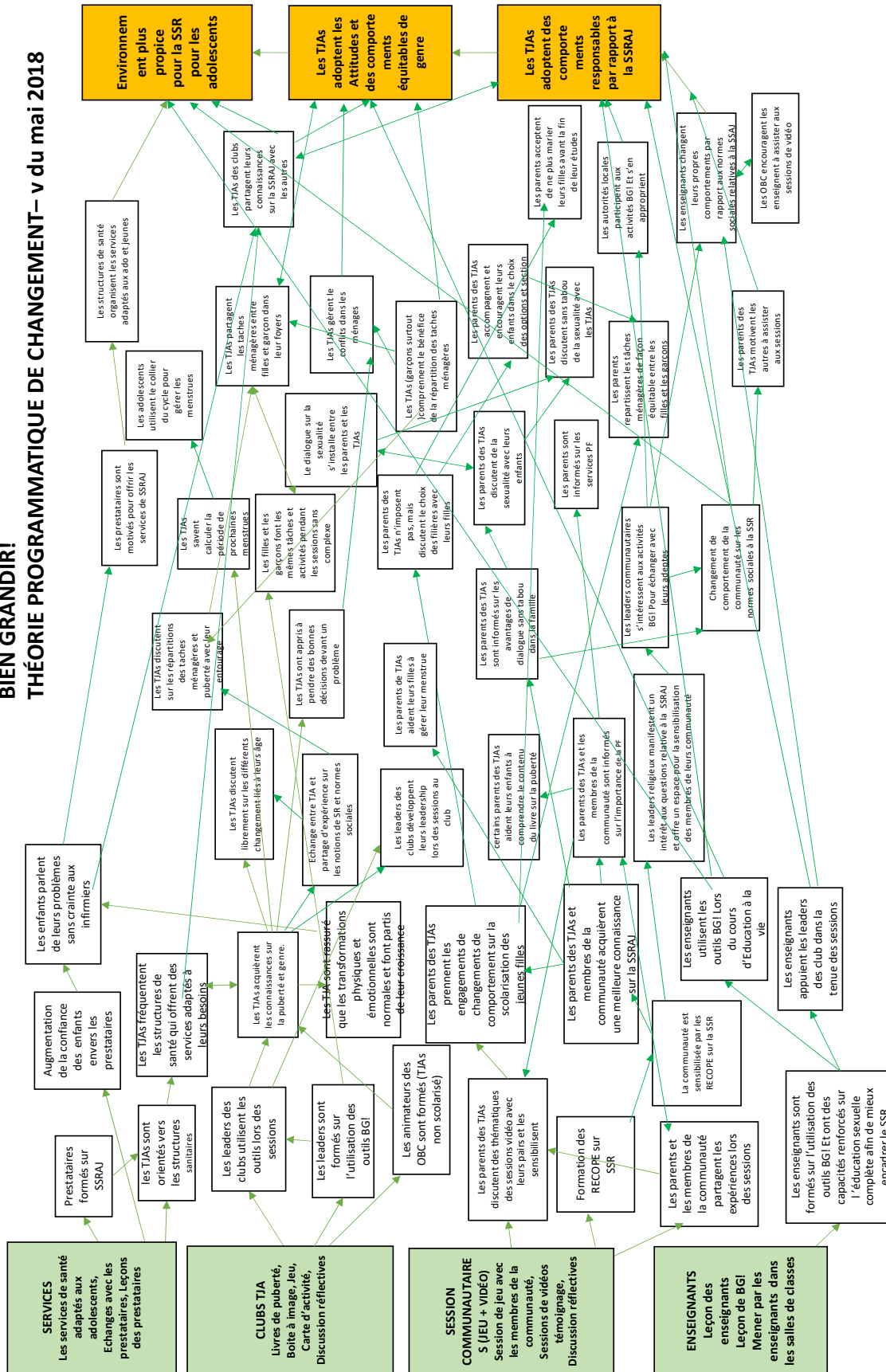
Detailed Theories of Change for Masculinité Famille et Foi, Husbands Schools, Girls Holistic Development, And Growing Up GREAT!



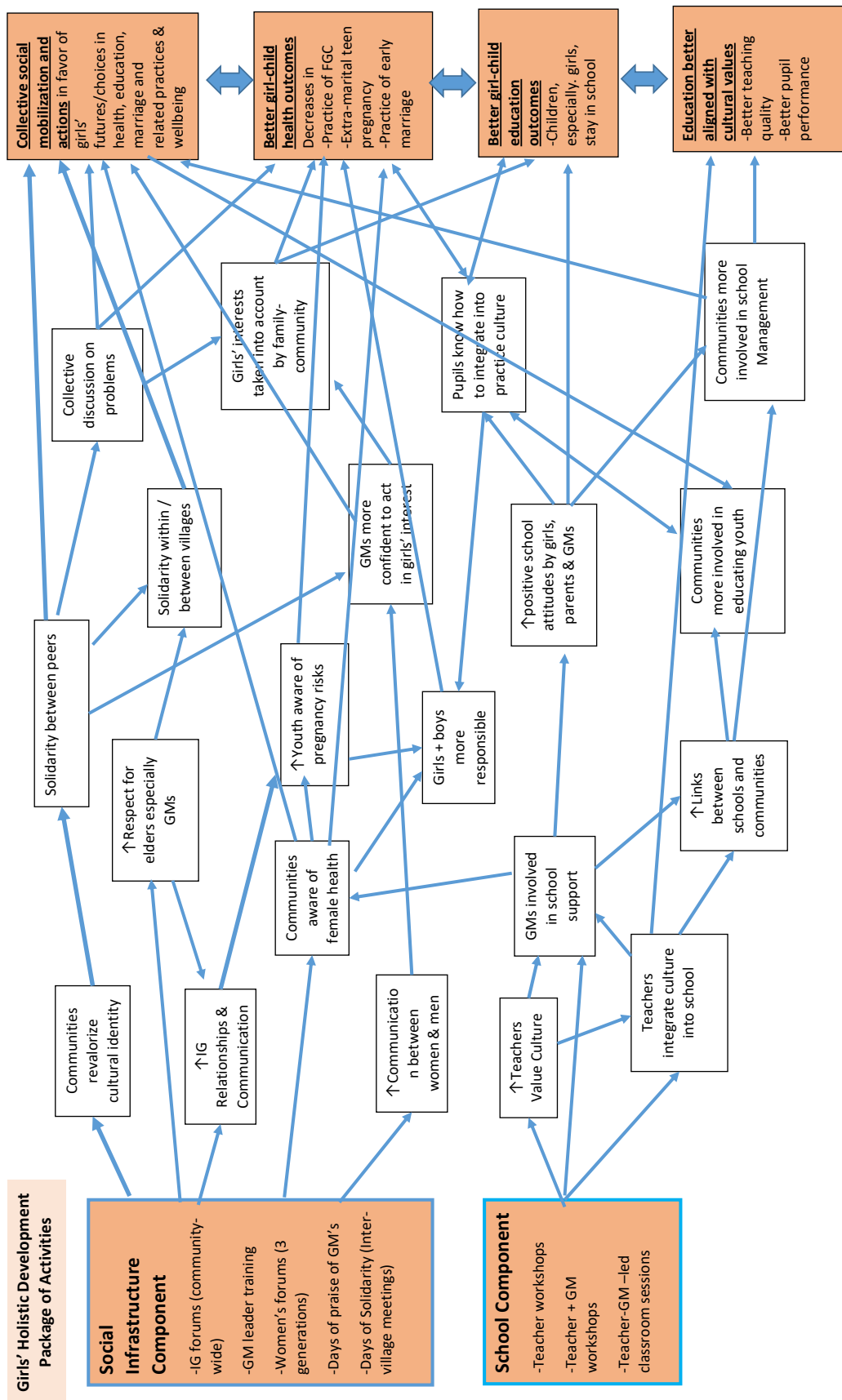
Écoles de Maris - Théorie Programmatique de Changement 2017



BIEN GRANDIR!



PROGRAM CHANGE THEORY – GIRLS' HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT – Revised 2019



ANNEX B

Reference Groups to Beneficiary Groups in the Four NSI

DRC GROWING UP GREAT!



Communication taboos between generations and peers limit the sharing of information on health, prevention, puberty and sexuality. Low gender awareness and gender roles manifest in prioritizing girls for household chores; boys for school. Physical and verbal punishment is accepted

- **VYA Girls:** Parents, Friends / Peers, Big Sisters, Teachers
- **VYA Boys:** parents, friends / peers, grandmothers, teachers
- **Mothers of VYAs:** Church members, friends / peers, neighbors
- **Fathers of VYAs:** pastors, spouses, older children

SENEGAL GIRLS HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT



Poor communication between generations limits reflection on the value, education and wellbeing of VYA girls. (stay in school, get married later, give birth as part of a later marriage; abandon practice of FGC)

- **VYA girls:** Peers, Male and female leaders (youth and adults)
- **Mothers and fathers of VYA girls:** Peers, Teachers, Elders

NIGER HUSBANDS SCHOOLS



Men in the community are unaware of their role in supporting the use of RH services by women

- **Husbands:** Model husbands; Peers
- **Husbands' wives:** Wives of HS members; Local midwife
- **Members of HSs:** Religious leaders, village chiefs, local health center chief, NGO coaches, HS peers
- **Wives of HS members:** husbands; local midwife

DRC MASCULINITE, FAMILLE, ET FOI



Couples and the community believe that domestic violence is normal. It is taboo for couples and the community to discuss and use FP

- **Newly married women:** Friends / couples; Mother (FP only); Stepmother (FP); Neighbors (FP); husband (FP); wife of the pastor (IPV)
- **Newly married men:** Wife; Pastor; Dad (IPV only)
- **Moms/Parents for the first time:** Husband; Health worker; Mother; Friends
- **Dads/Parents for the first time:** Wife (FP); Friends (FP); Dad (FP); Mother; Pastor (IPV); Stepmother (IPV); Godmother (IPV)