REFLECTION AND ACTION TOOL

Integrating a **Life Course Approach** in Programming
with Boys & Men for Greater Gender Equality

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What is the Reflection & Action Tool?

The **Integrating a Life Course Approach in Programming with Boys & Men for Greater Gender Equality**[1] ('Reflection and Action' tool for short) helps users apply a life course approach to programming with boys and men. The purpose of this tool is to apply the life course to more effectively engage men and boys across development sectors to improve gender equality. The Reflection and Action Tool provides a framework for reflecting on the life course across three program phases: *Design*, *Implementation*, and *Monitoring & Evaluation*.

[1] *This tool provides a framework for boys and men, and male-identifying individuals. For gender definitions, see Annex 1: Glossary of Terms at the end of this tool.*
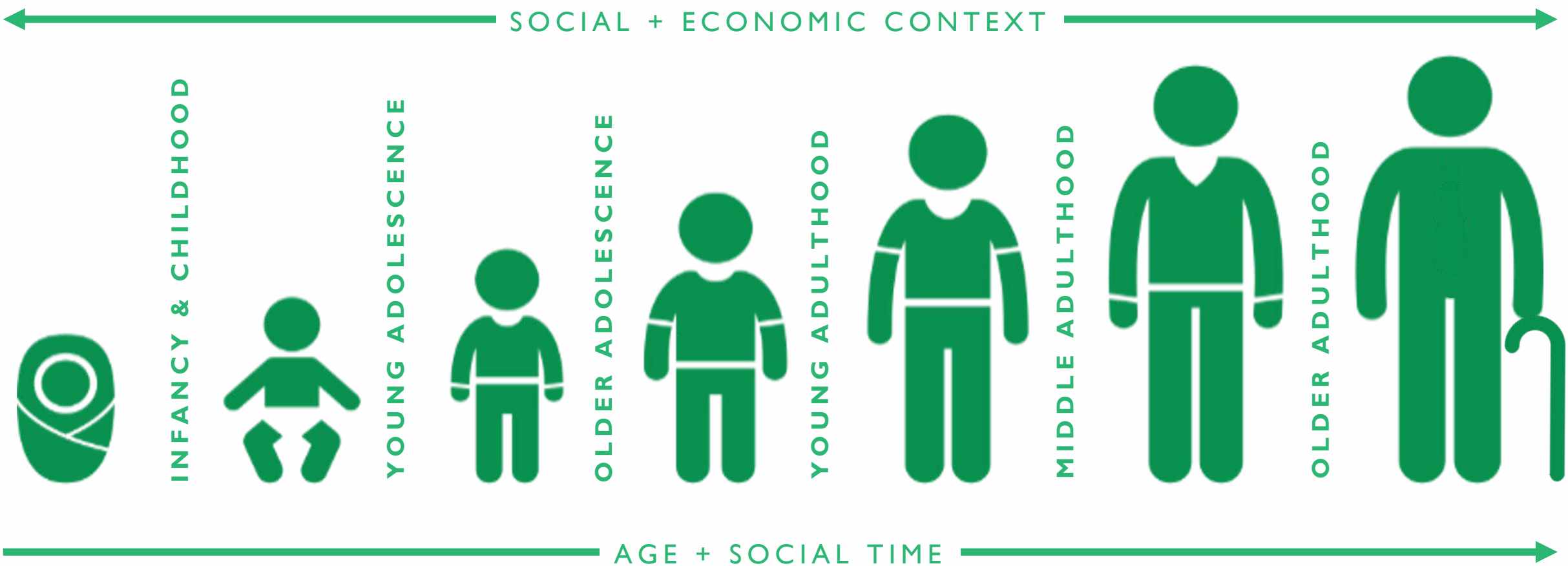
A briefer on life course theory

A life course approach applies life course theory throughout the lifespan of individuals within their social context (see **Box 1**). This approach emerges from the theory that one's life course is a **series of age-related patterns of behavior reflected in social institutions, personal experience, and social history** in ways that give meaning to the passage of biological time (Elder et al., 2007; Roy, 2014). It is important to note that there is considerable variation globally in the expected roles that boys and men should play throughout the life course. In the case of international development programming, a life course approach supports designing, implementing, and monitoring, learning, and evaluating programs. The life course is divided into seven segments that are not age or context specific. Below, the segments are described in relation to men and boys:

The **infant and childhood** stage begins with birth and ends with the transition to adolescence. It is a critical time for development (including bonding, language, interactions with caregivers, etc.). During this stage, boys and girls are both socialized and taught how social rules differ masculinity from femininity through interacting and observing the behavior of others, mostly family and/or their immediate peer circle, community members, and to varying extents, media.

As boys become **adolescents**, there is an expectation for them to adhere to masculine norms. Younger boys often become more receptive to information they view as relevant to their growth into manhood and becoming men. Prevalent norms around gender roles, including masculinity and femininity, are solidified, which in turn influences behavior. As boys transition into older adolescents, they often face greater social pressure to demonstrate masculinity by conforming to gender expectations, for example by assuming a protector role or breadwinner role within a family. During adolescence, boys and young men start engaging in romantic relationships, and face additional expectations related to sexual activity and relationship dynamics. Adolescence is also when boys and young men 'try out' behavior within relationships, creating patterns that may continue in later relationships in adulthood. Further, in this life stage, adolescent boys are thinking about, preparing for, or beginning to engage in the workforce.

Finally, **adulthood**, marks a transition towards expectations and responsibilities around the family and community. Men typically face increased pressure to perform the roles of protector and provider, with the degree of social and financial obligation varying across contexts. Middle adulthood is generally the longest of the life course stages, with expectations centering around livelihoods, raising children, and remaining in partnerships. The final life stage transition is from middle to older adulthood, during which time expectations for men's behaviors may move away from the roles of provider and protector to other roles, including family or community leadership. While in many cultures, older men occupy important social positions with leadership responsibilities, in others this is seen as a life stage where men take a step back from public engagement.

SOCIAL + ECONOMIC CONTEXT

INFANCY & CHILDHOOD · YOUNG ADOLESCENCE · OLDER ADOLESCENCE · YOUNG ADULTHOOD · MIDDLE ADULTHOOD · OLDER ADULTHOOD

AGE + SOCIAL TIME

Why use a life course approach in programs with boys & men?

BOX 1

Life Course, Gender Equality, Equity & Gender Transformative Approaches

Applying a life course approach **helps determine how and when to work with men and boys to achieve greater gender equality** for individuals and communities. Using a life course approach in general, but specifically for boys and men, allows programs to factor in the unique opportunities and challenges of specific life course stages and transitions – childhood through adolescence and adulthood. Specifically, applying a life course approach to programming with boys and men allows programs to:

1. Identify social norms and other factors that influence behaviors or program outcomes during a particular life stage or transition.
2. Understand when and how gender roles related to masculine norms change over the life course.
3. Identify opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing of men and boys, and for greater gender equality.

Integrating a life course approach has the potential to inform program decisions, such as knowing when to intervene

within a specific context to reach longer-term outcomes. These approaches benefit all people, and have long been used in regards to programming with women and girls, in particular in reproductive health. The World Health Organization reports that the returns of a life course approach are up to 10 times the investment, noting it helps to "realize each person's potential and rights for health and wellbeing at and across life stages, which contributes to reduced ill health and longer lives" (WHO, 2019: 3). For all people, conforming to gender norms and conventional gender roles during these life stages has clear implications for health outcomes and wellbeing (S. Solimeo, 2015). For example, men and boys may feel pressured to conform to expectations of repressed emotions, dominance and aggression, reinforcing the potential for boys to engage in acts of violence. Here, we suggest that a life course approach provides a framework for considering different stages – *infancy and childhood, adolescence, and adulthood* – recognizing how life course factors accumulate, creating opportunities to intervene to address inequities.

Meaningful engagement of boys and men as participants as well as stakeholders is critical to advancing gender equality and equity. It is necessary not only for women's empowerment, but also to transform the social and gender norms that reinforce patriarchy and inequality and harm both women and men (Glinske et al., 2018). Gender transformative programming aims to transform unequal gender norms and their attendant behaviors and attitudes (ICRW, 2000). The life course approach recognizes that boys and men have agency and the capability to make choices, but that these choices are embedded within systems of opportunities and constraints. Gender transformative programming should work with boys and men throughout their lives, using different approaches, depending on what stage they are in. Taken together, gender transformative programs that apply the life course principles more thoroughly have greater potential for long term impacts and achieving gender equity.

Five principles to apply a life course approach

The five principles of the life course approach: **lifespan, agency, time and place, timing,** and **linked lives** have powerful effects on individuals' lives, particularly on relationships, health, violence prevention, livelihoods, employment, and learning (formal education and otherwise). Many programs work with particular ages and population groups, some in specific transitional moments (*e.g. very young adolescents or first-time parents*). However, not all programs factor life course considerations into their programs. Programming for men and boys that is planned with understanding of the life course and guided by these five principles can have powerful effects through more intentional engagement. The five principles underlie the framework in this Reflection and Action Tool.

1 Lifespan	**2 Agency**	**3 Time and Place**	**4 Timing**	**5 Linked Lives**
People change in biological, psychological, and social terms throughout their lives, adapting to changes in their environment and continuing to learn from others through adulthood.	People's life courses are formed through their choices and actions, which are shaped by social institutions like the family, religious organizations, and the economic system, as well as political and social changes over time. Their choices, however, are limited by the options they believe they have available to them. One example is in places where choices about fundamental aspects of life (*e.g. desire and timing of marriage and childbearing*) are limited, so people's agency in terms of shaping their life course may also be limited.	Agency and actions are dependent upon the social, political, economic, and environmental structures in which individuals live. The geographic, cultural, and social features of the places people live shape their life course, as well as their ability to factor in to historical events that influence their behavior (such as a past civil unrest or a pandemic). For example, an urban context may offer many opportunities for youth to be fully employed, while countries with strict legal restrictions on child labor or mandatory education may limit full-time employment for some.	The consequences and meaning of an event in people's lives depends on when it takes place in the life course (or stage). For example, the meaning and consequences of being pregnant is very different for an unmarried high school student than a new bride. Events that take place early in the life course have lifelong effects, with disadvantage or advantage accumulating over time. For example, childhood poverty may have lifelong effects on health by limiting access to health services or stunting development.	Events in the lives of other people can influence the life course of all those with whom they are linked with socially. For example, unemployment may have both immediate and long-lasting effects on the individual and their family.
Human development and change are a lifelong process	**Individuals have a role in determining the direction of their lives**	**Individuals are shaped by the context in which they live**	**The effect of specific events that shape behavior depends on when they happen in people's life course**	**People live inter-dependently with others**

Additional concepts to the five principles for applying a life course approach

These additional life course concepts may be included in various reflection questions. This Reflection and Action Tool builds upon the Background Paper Understanding the Male Life Course: Opportunities for Gender Transformation published in 2020 by the Passages Project. Additional information on the Male Life Course can be found within that paper.

+ **Social pathways** are the paths people follow that are shaped by historical, political, and economic forces. All people live within the boundaries of social pathways. For example, while there is more variety today than in the past of the types of families people form, most who are able to follow similar patterns of marriage, having children, and spending the majority of their lives working. Both marriage and livelihood activities are supported by social and political institutions, including religion, economic systems, and state policies.

+ **Chronological age** acts as a marker to determine whether individuals are progressing through life course stages according to social expectations. Norms and expectations are often loosely linked to chronological age. Deviation from the expected "social timetable" can have positive or negative consequences for men. For example, in some societies, a young man who becomes a parent as an adolescent faces stigma and pressure to work full time and drop out of school, thus changing the trajectory of his life course.

+ **Transitions** are the beginning and end of life course stages. Exit from one stage and entry into the next (e.g. childhood to adolescence) may be fluid, but may also be marked by single point in time or even a series of events, such as ceremonies to mark the entry into adulthood, or leaving the parental home and entering into full-time employment.

+ **Turning points** are pivotal moments shaping one's life course. Some transitions are so significant in altering one's life trajectory that they become turning points. Examples of these turning points may include a marriage or a divorce, the birth of a child, death of a parent, gaining or losing a particular job, emergence of war or conflict, displacement, droughts, flooding, etc. Shifts marked by such a turning point provide an opportunity for acceptance of new ideas.

+ **Critical or sensitive periods** may be present during certain times in men's lives. For example, children exposed to violence at a young age are at risk for poor educational outcomes or may later become violent themselves (Fleming et al., 2015). In the adolescent stage, there are contradictory expectations for male behavior in many settings, with risky and otherwise antisocial behavior often tacitly accepted or encouraged while at the same time pressure to behave as a responsible adult increases. Adolescence and young adulthood are generally marked by sharp increases in risk-taking, with added pressure to demonstrate heterosexuality, use violence, and partake in the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, which can result in poor health outcomes.

Using the Reflection & Action Tool

This section helps you to:

✓ Plan for your life course reflection meetings.

✓ Determine what resources (financial, human) and materials are needed for your life course reflection meetings.

How to use the **Reflection and Action** Tool

The Reflection and Action Tool is used by program teams to identify strategic program entry points by engaging boys and men in order to foster gender equality. To begin using this tool, first reflect on the five life course principles (lifespan, agency, time and place, timing, and linked lives) as they relate to where you are in your program cycle, **Design**, **Implementation**, or **Monitoring, Learning & Evaluation**, then identify and apply learnings and actions.

Note:
- The Reflection and Action Tool is divided into sections based on the program cycle, with the key life course principles woven throughout for consideration.

- In each section, the Reflection and Action Tool offers questions (general and program-focused) to consider and actions to take.

  - ✓ The *questions* are linked to suggested actions and are meant to help programmers and implementers reflect on how they can be most effective in engaging boys and men for gender transformation in that program cycle phase. Not all questions need to be answered for each life course principle. Working together, program teams should review and select which principles and questions to consider.
  - ✓ Meanwhile, the *actions* act as recommendations for activities to integrate a life course approach into that program phase. Each section includes illustrative case studies and additional resources for digging deeper.

- Within your team, you should determine which section will be most useful to you depending on where you are in your project cycle. If you want to consider multiple points in the project cycle, you can draw from questions from each of the sections.

Using the Reflection and Action Tool

When to use the tool: The Reflection and Action Tool can be used at any point during the program cycle and is meant to complement other design tools and frameworks. It does not replace, for example, required broader gender analysis tools.

How: We suggest that you use the Reflection and Action Tool in a participatory team-based setting, such as a ½ day team workshop during program design or during key points where program adjustments are considered.

Who should be involved? The Reflection and Action Tool can be used by practitioners of international development programs, working in any discipline. Staff responsible for program design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation will find it particularly helpful.

What materials are needed? Computers, flipcharts, and post-it notes would all be helpful materials for these meetings. To support note-taking and documentation of discussions, **Annex 3** provides a template for adaptation and use within your project reflections.

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Before you start, consider using the Ice Breaker activity in **Annex 2**.

Program Design

This section helps you to:

- ✓ Consider how boys and men are uniquely affected by the life course principles and how their needs can be met in program design.

- ✓ Identify where along the life course existing intervention activities are and highlight opportunities to strengthen program design to better engage men and boys.

- ✓ Inform potential formative research to identify the needs of boys and men based on where they are in their life course.

Many factors go into **program design**, but it often begins with clearly defined goals and objectives. This may take place while finding and securing funding, or shortly thereafter (or often a combination of the two). In reflecting on how boys and men are engaged in your program, design teams should **consider where boys and men are within their life course and what expected outcomes can reasonably be achieved**. Conducting formative research to guide program planning can help pinpoint social expectations at each life course stage and identify where men fall within (or outside) the expected social pathways. For example, young men who are unable to find employment diverge from the social pathway expected of older adolescents to be considered fully adults. This deviation may result in stress coping behaviors, including, for example, excessive alcohol use.

Using the guiding principles of the life course approach described above, consider the questions proposed in **Reflection Matrix 1** and discuss and reflect on answers as a team. Use the answers to help identify how interventions can incorporate ways to best engage boys and men across life course stages in program design.

Questions to Consider to Apply the Life Course to Program Design

LIFESPAN	• Do certain behaviors you are seeking to address link across one or more life stage(s) of the men and boys? • What biological, psychological, physical, or social events are occurring in the life stage(s) of the men and boys in your program? • What events have taken place in earlier life stage(s)? How have such events in earlier life stages of men and boys led to their current experiences? • **Do you think your program engages boys and men early enough in their life course to achieve the intended program outcomes?**
AGENCY	• What are the constraints (individual, social, structural) on the ability of men and boys to exert their agency? What choices do boys and men feel they have the ability to make? • What might be the social, emotional, or economic cost of breaking with social norms? • **How will the agency of men and boys in their life course stage impact program outcomes?**
TIME AND PLACE	• What are any important social factors influencing the lives of the boys and men for your program? • What are any economic factors influencing the lives of the boys and men for your program? • What are any environmental factors influencing the lives of the boys and men for your program? • **Are these factors current or historical? How will they impact the design of activities?**
TIMING	• What have been the major experiences in the lives of the boys and men in your program? At what point in their life course did they occur? • What are the opportunities or challenges faced by boys and men that have accumulated across earlier stages of their life? • How can experiences from earlier life course stages be factored into program design? • **How will program activities impact subsequent life course stages? Can you plan for early intervention to address and minimize risks?**
LINKED LIVES	• Who (e.g., Partners, families, communities) are linked to the boys and men in your program? How so? • How are men and boys influenced intergenerationally (across generations e.g. Parents to children, grandparents to grandchildren)? • **How will your program plan to include activities that address linked lives?**

Actions

With the responses to the questions above in hand, you're ready to design a program that considers the unique life course experiences of boys and men in your program setting. Concrete actions you can take at this point could be:

1. **Develop or review your program** log frame, theory of change, and monitoring plan, considering the answers to the questions above (and other reflections within this Reflection and Action Tool).

2. **Prioritize entry points** to address life course stage(s) and principles and consider how they can help you achieve your program goals.

3. **Develop or adapt program activities** to include life course considerations.

4. If you don't have enough information to answer the questions in Reflection Matrix 1, **review the available evidence** or consider conducting (additional) formative research to better understand the life course considerations for men and boys.

Additional Resources

- Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG 2021)
- The life-course approach: from theory to practice. Case stories from two small countries in Europe (WHO, 2018)
- Life Course Health Development: An Integrated Framework for Developing Health, Policy, and Research (Halfon & Hochstein, 2002)

Using a Life Course Lens to Design a Livelihoods Program

Many young men leave their homes in Country A to seek employment opportunities. This leads to increased burdens on young women, who are left behind for long stretches of time, caring for their children and elders. A community-based organization working on livelihoods in Country A conducted formative research using the life course approach to inform their program design. They asked questions about what would decrease men's migration, such as:

- Why are men leaving home for work? At what point in their economic lives? (**Time & Place**)
- At what life stage would programming have the most impact on improving men's economic opportunities? (**Lifespan, Timing**)
- What effect will labor migration have on their wives and children? (**Linked Lives**)

The program found that intervening during childhood to decrease school dropout, plus creating vocational programs that ease the transition between school and employment, as well as continuing educational opportunities during vocational training were the interventions most likely to improve men's lives. Formative research revealed that parents and partners influence young men's decision to migrate because they count on men's remittances from overseas employment for survival. Therefore, the program explored other livelihood options for the parents and partners of the young men who migrate. Careful consideration of life course issues resulted in a program in Country A which better served the needs of men and their families.

Source: USAID, 2017a and Edmeades, J, 2020, personal communication

Program Implementation

This section helps you to:

✓ Consider how your program engages boys and men in broader implementation strategies or activities.

✓ Implement activities that engage boys and men while responding to the five principles of the life course approach: lifespan, agency, time and place, timing, and linked lives.

✓ Focus on how transition periods, sensitive/critical periods, turning points, and social pathways will affect your program's populations and outcomes.

f your program is currently in **implementation**, it is not too late to consider how boys and men are situated within their life course(s) and how that may affect your activities, goals, and results. Together, your team, partners, and community representatives can identify opportunities to address life course principles during implementation. The questions below can foster reflection during regular team meetings, workshops, quarterly or mid-point reviews, or in response to monitoring results to identify any needed adjustments.

Using the guiding principles of the life course approach described above, consider the questions proposed in **Reflection Matrix 2** and discuss and reflect on answers as a team.

Questions to Consider to Apply the Life Course to Program Implementation

LIFESPAN	• How are your program activities tailored to address the specific life course needs of boys and men? Does your program need to factor in transitions between life course stages? • Do your program activities currently address social pathways (e.g. appropriate timing of marriage, children, etc.) for boys and men?
AGENCY	• How is the ability of boys and men to make their own decisions affected by social pressures? How is this factored into program activities? • **During which life course stage do/can your program activities most effectively address the ability of boys and men to reach their goals (agency)?**
TIME AND PLACE	• How do the economic and political realities affect men's participation in the program and subsequent behavior change? • How do social events and expectations affect boys and men's participation in the program? • **How can the program adjust implementation activities to address relevant and social, political, economic, and environmental realities for the boys and men?**
TIMING	• How do your program activities support or facilitate boys and men as they transition into new life course stages? • How might your program activities affect boys and men as they transition into new life stages? • **What more can your program do to address timing of important events or support life course transitions?**
LINKED LIVES	• How do your program activities engage families and the wider community to support boys and men? • How do your program activities address the connections between boys/men and others in their lives (e.g., partners, families, communities) in relation to the program's goals? Would an intergenerational focus help your program achieve its outcomes and/or promote gender equality? • **How can the program shift implementation activities to better include those who are linked to the boys and men?**

Actions

With responses to the questions above in hand, consider what adjustments or course corrections you wish to make. Concrete actions you may take at this point include:

1. **Adapt program activities** to include life course considerations.

2. **Use existing evidence** (*e.g. monitoring data, or other information*) to determine how effectively your program is reaching boys and men.

3. **Set aside time during a workshop or regular meeting to reflect** on the ways that the life course principles described above are employed in implementation.

4. **Engage relevant program staff and stakeholders** (*e.g. communities, other implementers engaging boys and men, etc.*) to reflect on how your program reaches boys and men, and suggest course corrections.

Additional Resources

- Program P: A manual for engaging men in fatherhood, caregiving and maternal and child health. (Redmas, Promundo and EME, ND)
- Mentor training curriculum: Using mentors to increase positive fatherhood practices and non-violent couple communication with newly married young men. (Institute for Reproductive Health and Save the Children, 2013)
- Typologies and Trajectories: A descriptive study of men's reproductive life course. (DHS, Edmeades, J et al., 2020)
- Health matters, prevention, a life course approach. (Government of UK. 2019)

Using a Life Course Lens to Monitor & Evaluate a Learning Program

Men are at high risk for tuberculosis and represent the majority of cases (UNDP, 2015), due to occupational exposure through mining. This increased risk of acquiring tuberculosis (Dodd et al., 2016), and occupational gender segregation means that miners are generally men. A program used a life course lens to tackle the tuberculosis epidemic through the following strategies:

- Health clinics near mines that use active case finding to diagnose and treat men for tuberculosis. (**Time & Place**)
- Trained men treated for tuberculosis as positive role models to raise awareness among miners of tuberculosis symptoms. (**Agency**)
- Trained nurse advocates to provide services to men prior to their visits home, which require several days of travel from the mines, to reduce the risk of transmission of tuberculosis on their families. (**Linked Lives**)
- Tuberculosis is a serious condition with lifelong impact. If treatment is not taken as prescribed, more serious illness can develop. Therefore, nurse assistants in the mines ensured that tuberculosis medication was taken as prescribed. (**Lifespan**)
- Addressing tuberculosis while men are at the height of their earning potential to prevent lifelong health problems. (**Timing**)
- Focus on screening men for tuberculosis as they begin working in the mines. (**Transitions**)
- Creating alternative employment opportunities for younger men before they begin working in the mines. (**Lifespan**).

Source: UNDP. 2015; Dodd et al. 2016; Houben et al. 2016; Auld, S et al. 2017

Program Monitoring, Learning & Evaluation

This section helps you to:

✓ Adjust monitoring, learning, and evaluation activities to address life course principles and approaches.

✓ Expand monitoring plans and processes to include the perspectives of boys and men and to factor in unanticipated outcomes and changes that may occur as boys and men move through their life course.

✓ As appropriate and feasible, evaluate your program and make mid-course corrections using the five principles of the life course.

Program monitoring is a continuous effort to track inputs, activities, and outputs of the planned intervention. **Evaluation** is the periodic measurement of the intervention outcomes, and is designed to assess the effectiveness or impact of a program. As time passes during the course of the program, men and boys may move through transition periods or experience life-altering turning points. Monitoring and evaluation can identify these moments and suggest ways to refine the program by asking: how are men uniquely affected by these turning points/deviations from expected social pathways and how does that affect gender equality? Questions to assess life course dimensions can be built into program evaluation baseline and endline surveys.

Using the guiding principles of the life course approach, reflect on the questions proposed in **Reflection Matrix 3** together with your team. Use the answers to support your monitoring and evaluation efforts to determine whether your program is achieving its goals and how it could be adjusted to improve gender equality and meet the needs of boys and men.

Questions to Consider to Apply the Life Course to Program Monitoring, Learning & Evaluation

LIFESPAN	• How are life course stages currently addressed in your program monitoring and evaluation? Are your indicators disaggregated by life stage, age, etc.? • What life course-related outcomes could be attributed to your program? How can this be measured? • **How can your monitoring and evaluation plan take into account the unique needs of boys and men at different life stages, if at all?**
AGENCY	• Does your program include agency as a result? How is it defined and measured? • How is the agency of boys and men in relation to their life stage, other social determinants, and the focus of the program monitored or evaluated? • How are you assessing the ways that your activities affect women's agency and well-being? • **How can your measurement or monitoring of the agency of boys and men be strengthened?**
TIME AND PLACE	• Are you tracking political, economic, and social trends and how they affect boys and men in your program? • How can your monitoring and evaluation plan take into account the context that influences program results? • Have you adapted indicators or measures for your specific context and the life course stages of your program participants? • **How can your program develop or adjust M&E plans to respond to relevant social, political, economic, and environmental realities for the boys and men?**
TIMING	• Does your program offer the opportunity to generate knowledge on the effect of program elements that address different turning points (e.g. before and after becoming a father)? What could you do to generate knowledge? • Has your program considered how to monitor or measure key transitions and/or turning points in your monitoring and evaluation plan? • **How can your program develop or adjust M&E plans to include timing of events and transitions?**
LINKED LIVES	• Are you monitoring or measuring the effect of changes in key actors in the lives of boys and men (e.g., how mothers-in-law can impact fertility decisions)? • Are you assessing the effect of your program on other people in men's lives, such as their partners and daughters? If not, should you? • **How can your program include other people in plans to monitor and measure how their lives are linked to men and boys, and its impact on program outcomes?**

Actions

With responses to these questions in hand, you can develop or adjust monitoring and/or evaluation activities to better address life course principles. Concrete actions you could take include:

1. **Incorporate life-course related indicators** relevant to your program objectives (e.g. considering agency, timing, linked lives, etc.) as well as program outputs and outcomes.

2. **Consider planning a rapid assessment, small study, or evaluation** that specifically focuses on the life course to better understand its impact on program outcomes.

3. **Monitor unintended consequences of programming**, in particular, impacts on girls and women.

4. **Share life course indicators and findings** so others can learn from your programming.

Additional Resources

- Integrating gender in the monitoring and evaluation of health programs: A Toolkit. (J Fehringer, B Iskarpatyoti, B Adamou and J Levy, 2017).
- What quantitative and qualitative methods have been developed to measure the implementation of a life course approach in public health policies at the national level? (C Jacob, C Cooper, J Baird and M Hanson, 2019).

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDY
Using a Life Course Lens to Monitor & Evaluate a Learning Program

A school-based program for boys and girls wanted to document changes in school attendance and continuation to make sure they were meeting the needs of all students. The program conducted formative research to inform their program design, conducted a baseline, monitored progress throughout program implementation, and conducted an endline evaluation in its final year. Methodologies and indicators relevant to a life course approach included:

- Focus group discussions comparing the reasons why boys and girls dropped out of school. The discussions explored unique pressures on boys regarding financial or work responsibilities, social and gender norms related to school attendance, and the comparative lived experiences of girls. (**Time & Place; Timing**)

- Percentage of children of eligible age attending school, disaggregated by sex and wealth quintile. (**Time & Place**)

- Percentage of children not on grade level disaggregated by sex (e.g., 10-year-old children just starting school). (**Timing**)

- Percentage of mothers/fathers who are literate. (**Linked Lives**)

- Parental expectations for education and employment for sons. (**Timing**)

Source: Mount-Cors, MF, J Gay and R Diop. 2020. Towards a radical transformation: Promoting gender equality when children start school. Current Issues in Comparative Education.

YOU'VE APPLIED THE LIFE COURSE TO YOUR PROGRAM.
What now?

Applying a life course approach to working with men and boys allows programs to factor in the unique opportunities and challenges of life course stages and transitions – from childhood through adolescence and adulthood. These transitions often represent strategic opportunities to intervene, as they are often formative phases in an individual's life. Further, the five principles of **lifespan, agency, time and place, timing,** and **linked lives** can influence an individual's life in powerful ways, particularly in the areas of relationships, health, violence prevention, livelihoods, employment, and learning. Many programs already work with specific age and population groups, some in life course transitional moments (*e.g. very young adolescents or first-time parents*), however, not all programs factor this framing or these considerations more broadly into design, implementation, or monitoring and evaluation.

The **Reflection and Action Tool** was developed to help you determine how to intervene more effectively by applying life course principles and the recommendations set out in the Background Paper Understanding the Male Life Course: Opportunities for Gender Transformation.

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Whether you applied the **Reflection and Action Tool: Integrating a Life Course Approach in Programming with Boys & Men for greater Gender Equality** in program design, implementation, or monitoring and evaluation (or in multiple phases), we encourage you to document your experiences and to share your learnings with other practitioners.

SELECT
Recommendations

⭐ **Apply a lifelong perspective** (including considering linked lives) to program design, implementation, and monitoring, instead of focusing only on the life stage your program addresses.

⭐ **Remember that people have agency** despite the social determinants that may influence their lives.

⭐ **Recognize that both social norms and structural factors matter** for sustained change.

⭐ **Consider the effect of the timing of specific life events** and how these may affect your population(s) of interest.

⭐ **Consider the importance of cumulative and longitudinal advantages and disadvantages** within your population(s) of interest's lifespan and across generations.

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Glossary of Terms

Agency
Inherent in agency is freedom of choice to determine what behaviors are to be performed and the belief that one can perform them (i.e., self-efficacy). People who have high levels of agency are more free to behave in a manner of their choosing. People with low levels of agency are less free to behave in a manner of their choosing. Agency applies to individuals and groups of individuals (i.e., individual agency and collective agency). Degree of agency may determine whether an individual challenges or adheres to a social norm that is misaligned with their personal attitudes. (**Source**: Social Norms Lexicon, 2021)

Critical or Sensitive Periods
In life course theory, critical or sensitive periods are defined as various windows of time when there is heighted risk of exposure to an adverse event. Events that take place within windows that are critical for an individual may have long-term or ripple effects for later life stages, as well. (**Source**: IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Chronological Age
Defines the real age of an individual. Chronological age also has an important role in the life course. Norms and expectations for behavior are often loosely linked to age, which acts as a marker that can be used to determine whether individuals are progressing through life course stages according to social expectations. (**Source**: IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Gender Equality
Refers to the absence of discrimination, based on a person's sex, in the allocation of resources or benefits or access to services. Gender equality entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make

choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles, or prejudices. Gender equality means that the different behaviors, aspirations, and needs of women and men are considered, valued, and favored equally. It does not mean that women and men must become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Inequality, discrimination, and differential treatment based on sex can be structural (i.e., it is practiced by public or social institutions and maintained by administrative rules and laws and involves the distribution of income, access to resources, and participation in decision making). (**Source**: USAID Gender Terminology)

Gender Equity
Gender equity means fair treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations, and opportunities (e.g., equal treatment before the law, equal access to social provisions; education; equal pay for work of the same value). In the development context, a gender equity goal often requires built-in measures to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages of women. Specific measurements and monitoring are employed to ensure that, at a minimum, programs, policies, and projects implemented do not leave women worse off than men in their peer groups and families and that measures are taken to compensate for historical and social disadvantages. (**Source**: USAID Gender Terminology)

Gender Identity
Gender identity refers to one's own personal sense of gender. Gender identity can correlate with a person's assigned biological sex at birth (male, female, or intersex) or can differ from it. Gender identity can

present as male, female, a mix, or neither. Gender identity can remain the same throughout one's life, or it can vary. Gender expression typically reflects a person's gender identity, but this is not always the case. (**Source**: Human Rights Council LGBTQ+ Terminology)

Gender Norms
Communities and societies create collective beliefs about what behaviors are appropriate for men and women and about how the genders should relate; these beliefs are known as "gender norms." Because gender norms are created by a given culture, they are referred to as "socially constructed." However, biological differences between men and women are often used, many times inappropriately, to justify social differences. Gender norms set standards for a range of important decisions individuals make throughout their lifespans. These norms often reflect and cement existing inequitable roles and relations between the genders. Gender norms are shaped by (and in turn shape) power dynamics. They typically define the expected behavior of people who consider themselves men or women or who are considered by others to be either men or women. Gender norms collectively ascribed to men are referred to as "masculinities" while gender norms collectively ascribed to women are referred to as "femininities". Gender norms are a sub-set of social norms but have some unique characteristics and considerations. (**Source**: Social Norms Lexicon, 2021)

Gender Synchronization
Gender synchronization means working with men and women, boys and girls, in an intentional and mutually reinforcing way that challenges gender norms, catalyzes the achievement of gender equality, and improves health. The target audience for this dialogue includes reproductive health and development practitioners and program planners—many of whom are already

integrating gender into their programming and are looking for the most effective approaches to achieving better reproductive health and long-term change. (**Source**: IGWG Gender Synchronization: A new approach)

Gender Transformative Programming
This approach attempts to promote gender equality by: 1) fostering critical examination of inequalities and gender roles, norms, and dynamics; 2) recognizing and strengthening
positive norms that support equality and an enabling environment; 3) promoting the relative position of women, girls, and marginalized groups; and 4) transforming the underlying social structures, policies, and broadly held social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities. (**Source:** IGWG Gender Integration Continuum)

"Life Course Approach"
A life course approach is to consider life course theory, including the social expectations throughout the course, into account in analysis of a situation. In the case of international development programming, here we suggest value in this approach in designing, implementing, and monitoring and evaluating programs. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Lifespan
The life course principle that people continue to change in biological, psychological and social terms throughout their lives, adapting to environmental changes and continuing a process of social learning well through adulthood. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Life Trajectory(ies)
As people age, they are expected to move between a series of socially created, recognized and shared sequential life course stages that together represent life trajectories. In most societies, life trajectories feature similar life course stages– typically, a period of childhood, a period of transition between childhood and adulthood (often referred to as 'adolescence' or 'youth'), adulthood and, finally, old age. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Linked Lives
The life course concept that events in the lives of other people can influence the life course of all those with whom they are socially linked. For example, economic hardship caused by unemployment has both immediate and long-lasting effects on the individual and family members. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Male Engagement
Male engagement refers broadly to engaging men and boys in programming, with gender equity as the central focus and goal. Engaging men and boys in gender equity work is that both women and men live within patriarchal power structures, uphold these structures, are harmed by these structures and are responsible for transforming them. At its core, engaging men and boys is about recognizing how social norms of power and gender affect men and women as individuals, in their relationships with each other, and in the structures and institutions that organize societies—and bringing this recognition to bear on gender equity programming. Male engagement programming posits that men and boys are both co-beneficiaries of programs, and stakeholders to them. (**Source:** ICRW, Gender Equity and Male Engagement)

Social Norms
Social norms are the perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable, appropriate, and obligatory actions within a given group or community. Social norms are learned, sometimes explicitly but often implicitly, and evolve over time. Social norms can encourage or discourage behavior and, as a result, influence individual and community well-being. There are two primary types of social norms: (1) descriptive norms and (2) injunctive norms. Importantly, people's perceptions of social norms within their community may or may not reflect actual realities. Social norms operate within and across multiple social levels, ranging from friend groups to schools or workplaces to state- and national-level communities. (**Source:** Social Norms Lexicon, 2021)

Social Pathways
Unique patterns of events, transitions and trajectories that take place across the life course and are structured by social institutions and shaped by historical forces. Life trajectories take place within the boundaries of social pathways, unique patterns of events, transitions and trajectories that take place across the life course. They are shaped by historical forces and structured by social institutions. For example, while there is more variety in the type of families people form now than in the past, most follow the same pattern of entering into marriage, having children, and spending the majority of their lives working. Both marriage and employment are supported by social and political institutions, including religion, economic systems, and state policies. Simultaneously, social norms ensure that the majority of life trajectories take place within the boundaries of these social pathways. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Social Timetables
Set times and orders tied to social expectations of life course stages. Due to their socially defined nature, timetables can and do change over time, reflecting either large scale structural drivers of change, such as war or prolonged economic depressions, or a process through which enough people adopt behaviors that depart from the norm to shift the norm itself. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

"Time & Place"
The life course principle that both time and place have a bearing on the lives of individuals throughout the life course. Agency and actions are dependent upon the social structures by which individuals live. The geographical, cultural, and social features of the places people live play a central role in shaping not only how their life course is structured, but also how responsive they are to historical events that may influence behavior. For example, an urban context may offer many more opportunities for youth to engage in full-time employment, while countries with strict legal restrictions on child labor or mandatory education may limit full-time employment to those above a particular age. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Timing
The life course principle that the significance and meaning of a given event in people's lives depends on when it takes place in the life course. For example, having a child has different implications for people who are very early in their life course than for those at later stages. Furthermore, events that take place early in the life course have lifelong effects, with disadvantage or advantage accumulating over time. For example, experiences with poverty in childhood may have lifelong effects on health by limiting access to health services or stunting development through lack of sufficient resources at the household or community level. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Transitions
In life course theory, the beginning and end of life course stages are marked by transition points that serve as markers for the end of one life course stage and the beginning of the next. In some cases, these are single events. For example, in certain societies, there are specific ceremonies to mark entry into adulthood. More often, this transition is marked by a grouping of transition events, such as leaving the parental home and engaging in full-time paid employment. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Turning Points
In life course theory, transitions involve changes that are so significant that they alter the trajectories of individuals, these are referred to as turning points. Examples might include: receiving a scholarship that allows a person to attend university, divorce and remarriage at older ages, the loss of a job, or the birth of a child. (**Source:** IRH, Life Course Background Paper)

Ice Breaker: Life Course Diagramming

This life course ice breaker is an optional activity you can conduct prior to your life course reflections. In this ice breaker, together as a team, you will do a quick socio-ecological 'mapping' of where the boys and/or men that you are engaging in program activities, acting as a reference tool. **Note**: if it's multiple groups, consider doing a mapping per group.
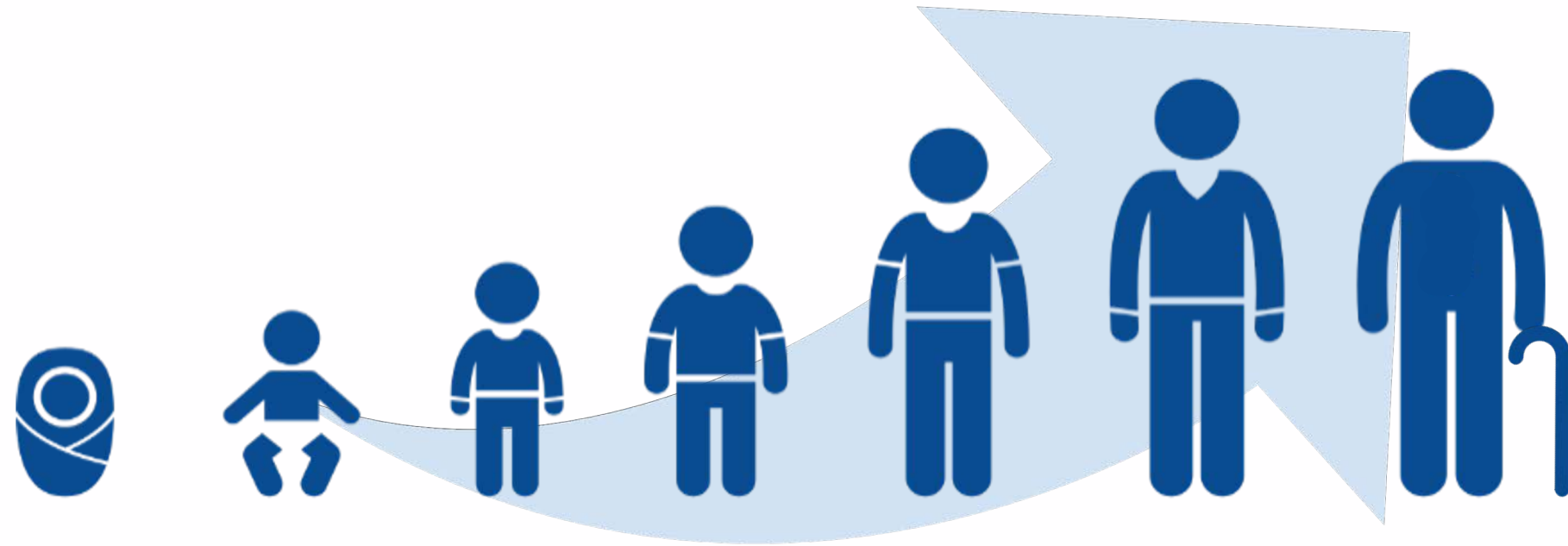
Life Course Diagramming Instructions

1
Determine which boys and/or men you are engaging, or seek to engage, in your program. What stage are they in their life course?

2
Draw a visual representation of the boy or man, at their life course stage, at the center of a page.

3
Begin to map out key facts about the boy or man on the four quadrants of the page as a starting point in your life course reflections, to refer to throughout ▶▶

In the upper left corner, reflect on their **key character traits**, *such as: age, marital status, number of children, level of education, profession, interests, etc. that may be relevant in the life course stage of the boys/men.*

In the upper right corner, reflect on their **social context**, *consider ethnicity, culture, known social norms, gender roles that may be relevant in the life course stage of the boys/men.*

In the lower left corner, reflect on their **environmental context**, *considering political, economic, structural factors that may be relevant in the life course stage of the boys/men.*

In the lower right corner, add any other factors that may be relevant in the life course stage of the boys/men.

Reflection Matrix Worksheet

Program Name	
Program Overview: (Geographic Area, Program Objectives, Timeframe, etc.)	
Profile Of Boys And/Or Men:	

Selected Life Course Principle(s)*	Selected Reflection Notes	Actions/Implications
Lifespan	•	•
Agency	•	•
Time And Place	•	•
Timing	•	•
Linked Lives	•	•

if using the reflection matrices for more than one program stage, you can choose to replicate this template, build out more rows, or indicate in the questions which program stage they refer to.

PASSAGES PROJECT

The Passages Project aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in family planning and reproductive health. The project is building the evidence base and contributing to the capacity of the global community to strengthen normative environments that support reproductive health, especially among very young adolescents, newly married youth, and first-time parents. The Passages Project has distilled and packaged its work to help other global health and development practitioners, researchers, and evaluators design, implement, and measure norms-shifting approaches. The project seeks to advance research and practice on social norms for social and behavior change by contributing evidence, tools, and resources to promote better understanding, implementation, evaluation, and scale-up of normative approaches. Please visit https://irh.org/projects/passages/ to explore the Passages Project legacy resources.

For questions, please contact info@passagesproject.org.

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