

## Research Brief: Exploring the Pathways to Improve Couple Communication about Family Planning in a Norms-shifting Intervention in Kinshasa, DRC

### BACKGROUND

**Can we determine how social norms and individual-level factors intersect to affect couple communication about family planning?** In Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Passages Project (see **Box 1**) developed and implemented Masculinité, Famille et Foi (MFF), a norms-shifting intervention (NSI) which aimed to address a broad range of social norms with the ultimate goal of achieving sustained improvements in voluntary family planning (FP) and reproductive health. An 18-month set of scalable activities supported by a research and learning agenda, MFF sought to build the evidence base for working with faith communities to shift social norms. In many parts of the world, there is now evidence to show that shifting restrictive social and gender norms is a critical element in enabling individuals to change a wide array of behaviors including FP (Okigbo, 2018; Kapia-Kundu, 2022) and intimate partner violence (Gonzalez and Rodríguez-Planas, 2021). Other research has shown that shifting norms is particularly valuable and successful among individuals during life course transitions such as when young adults are entering a new marriage or becoming first-time parents (Lundgren, 2013).

The MFF intervention addressed gender norms, a critical subset of social norms that govern the attributes and behaviors that are valued and considered acceptable for males and for females within a given culture or social group ([Social Norms Lexicon, 2021](#)). Gender norms have the power to shape how girls and boys are raised, and expected to act and interact, and the behaviors and roles they adopt over their life course. MFF also recognized the important role that religion and faith communities play in defining and defending gendered roles and expected behavior. Scripture and religious teachings influence how faith leaders and congregants understand, interpret, and perpetuate norms that place emphasis on what is appropriate within an intimate relationship, such as privileging men above women, and condoning male violence as an expression of their dominance. For example, ‘God created men as superior to women;’ and ‘as household decision-makers, men should dictate women’s ability to seek and use modern contraception.’ NSIs seek to shift these and other gender norms to those that value greater equity and agency for women and open communication among men and women. Improving the abilities of couples to communicate has been shown to facilitate FP method use (Grabert et al, 2021). As such, in this analysis, we sought to understand how the MFF intervention

#### Box 1. What is the Passages Project?

Masculinité, Famille et Foi is part of the global Passages Project, an implementation-research project that addresses a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in violence prevention, gender equality, family planning, and reproductive health. Passages uses norms-shifting approaches to build the evidence base and contribute to the global community’s capacity to strengthen reproductive health environments, especially for 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 family planning, especially healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.






In Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Tearfund, Église du Christ au Congo, Georgetown University’s Institute for Reproductive Health and local service provision partner, Association de Santé Familiale, led the implementation and scale-up of Masculinité, Famille et Foi.

affected couple communication about FP. In particular, we sought to understand the pathways linking the MFF NSI activities to couple communication for FP through impacts on both social norms and other individual-level factors.

## MASCULINITÉ, FAMILLE ET FOI INTERVENTION

From 2015-2020, the MFF intervention and study took place within eight congregational communities of the Protestant Église du Christ au Congo faith network across Kinshasa. The project’s major actors and activities are shown in **Table 1** below:

**Table 1. MFF Intervention Activities & Reach**

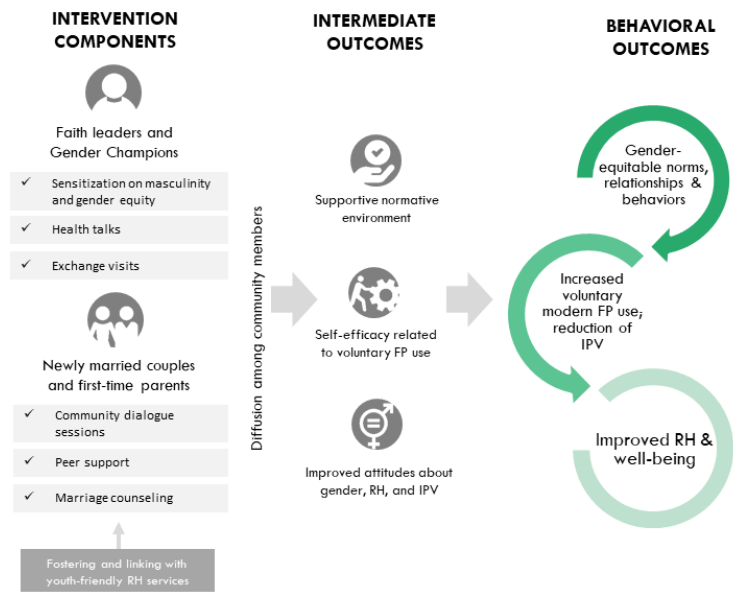
<i>Intervention Component</i>	<i>Brief Description</i>	<i>Intervention Component Monitoring Data</i>
 <p><b>Transforming Faith Leaders</b></p>	Gender transformative workshops for faith leaders held at National, Provincial and Congregational level to support change through the denominational hierarchy. Faith leaders support Gender Champions in the recruitment and running of the Community Dialogues and provide supportive sermons to the wider congregation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>42 faith leaders trained (12 national-level leaders, 14 provincial-level leaders and 16 congregational-level leaders)</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Building Capacity of Gender Champions</b></p>	Gender transformative workshops for peer role models to be trained as Gender Champions. Responsible for facilitating the Community Dialogues, supporting couples, and monitoring congregational-level activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>40 Gender Champions trained</li> <li>Representing 8 intervention congregations</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Community Dialogues</b></p>	Led by trained Gender Champions for newly married couples and first-time parents. Gender synchronized discussion groups on GBV, FP and gender inequality. Includes an FP health talk linking couples to FP services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7 Cycles of Community Dialogues were held over 18 months</li> <li>458 couples/916 individuals participated</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Organized Diffusion</b></p>	Organized diffusion activities included supportive sermons, stories of change shared by couples completing the Community Dialogues and community mobilization events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>384 supportive sermons given</li> <li>315 stories of change shared by couples</li> <li>24 community mobilization events held</li> <li>120,000 contact points across 8 intervention sites</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Enabling Service Environment</b></p>	An enabling service environment across both control and intervention sites for young couples where they received referral cards to linked, trained local clinics for each congregation, youth-friendly training for providers and a FP/RH hotline for confidential questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17 linked clinics</li> <li>42 CHWs trained in youth friendly service provision</li> <li>5,506 individuals sought services: 3,420 across the 9 control and 2,086 from across the 8 intervention sites</li> <li>1,699 calls were made to hotline: 1,128 calls made by men and 571 made by women.</li> </ul>

## MASCULINITÉ, FAMILLE ET FOI: THE THEORY OF CHANGE

The Masculinité, Famille et Foi project posited that by working within the context of faith communities — in this case, ECC congregations — their NSI approach would see effective and

efficient shifts in norms in this community. In concert, social connections, the influence of scripture on behavior, the desire to conform to congregation-approved behavior, and the prominence of known faith influencers would facilitate the diffusion of new norms surrounding gender equality, non-violent masculinity, and healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies (**Figure 1**).

**Figure 1.**  
Masculinite, Famille et Foi Theory of Change



## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE & ANALYTIC APPROACH

### Box 2. Types of Norms

Descriptive norms are perceptions about whether others perform the behavior (Chung & Rimal, 2016; Yzer, 2012), and injunctive norms are perceptions of that which others approve (Chung & Rimal, 2016). Evidence suggests that both types of social norms, descriptive and injunctive, can influence behavior, either alone or in combination with each other. Differentiating types of norms matters equally for evaluations as well as for informing program design.

2), including descriptive and injunctive norms (see **Box 2**). Endline data collected from young men and women was used for the analysis. We developed a structural equation model (see **Box 3**) to allow for a more complete assessment of all

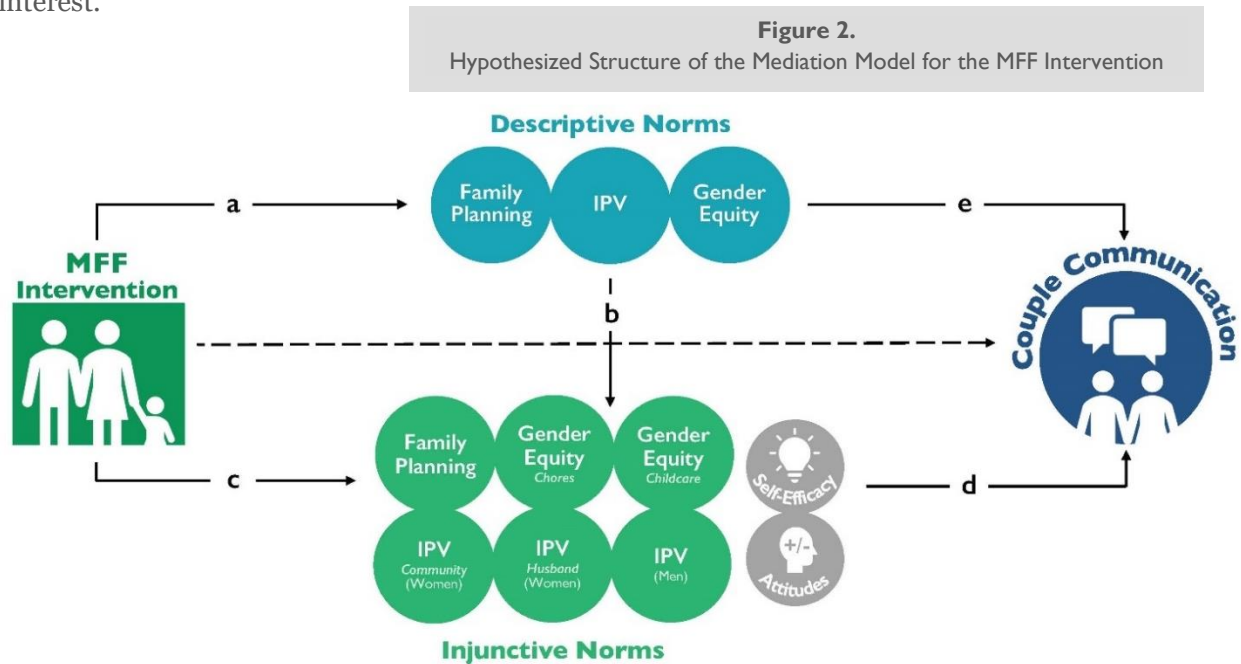
Despite emerging evidence, much is still unknown about how social norms and other individual-level factors intersect to yield improvements in couple communication. In this analysis, we sought to understand how the MFF intervention affected couple communication for FP along pathways involving changes to self-efficacy, attitudes, and social norms (see **Figure**

### Box 3: Research Methods

We used structural equation modeling to simultaneously examine multiple indirect pathways linking the MFF intervention to couple communication through its effects on self-efficacy, attitudes and social norms related to FP and the interactions between these factors.

simultaneous relationships, their interactions, and the ultimate impact on behavioral outcomes. In the structural equation model, we explored indirect effects of the intervention, which included the effect of the intervention on descriptive norms, which were then hypothesized to have an impact on the outcome (a\*e). We examined the pathway from the intervention to descriptive norms, from descriptive norms to injunctive norms, self-efficacy and attitudes, with those mediators ultimately affecting the outcome (a\*b\*d). We also explored the pathway from the intervention to injunctive norms, self-efficacy and attitudes, which then may affect the outcome (c\*d). In each of these models, both the descriptive and injunctive norms, self-efficacy, and attitudes were considered mediating variables.

Finally, in a previous analysis, we explored the direct effect of the MFF intervention on couple communication and did not find evidence of a significant direct effect. Instead, we examined the direct effects for each of the individual pathways listed in **Figure 1**, including the direct effect of: the intervention on descriptive norms (a); descriptive norms on injunctive norms, self-efficacy, and attitude (b); the MFF intervention on injunctive norms, self-efficacy, and attitudes (c); injunctive norms, self-efficacy, and attitudes on couple communication (d); and descriptive norms on couple communication (e). We modeled the descriptive and injunctive social norms as the aggregate scale measures identified in our previous work (Costenbader, 2019). These models were run separately for women and men. We also controlled for participant age, education, number of living children with current partner, and food security as we expected these characteristics would impact our outcomes of interest.



**Definitions of injunctive norms:** 1) family planning; 2) household gender equity regarding chores; 3) household gender equity regarding childcare; 4) community perceptions of IPV (women’s model); 5) husband’s perception of IPV (women’s model); and 6) community perceptions of IPV (men’s model)

## OUR LEARNINGS

Results of our analysis showed:

- The combination of MFF intervention components (i.e., aggregate effects of using Community Dialogues, alongside other intervention activities designed to improve self-efficacy and attitudes towards FP use) was successful in improving women’s reported couple

communication for FP with their partners ( $p=0.01$ ). This confirms the need for multicomponent interventions that work simultaneously to shift norms as well as to modify attitudes and increase self-efficacy to achieve desired behavior change.

- Self-efficacy was a significant mediating factor of descriptive norms (e.g., pathway b), having a significant direct relationship with social norms for FP (men and women, both  $p<0.00$ ), IPV (women,  $p<0.00$ ), and gender equity (men,  $p<0.00$ ). This highlights the importance of building an individual's self-efficacy to use FP methods both to facilitate agency in method use and to potentially alter perceptions of social norms.
- There were no statistically significant aggregate effects of the intervention and the mediating factors in the model for men. This suggests that NSIs may have different effects on women and men and that therefore NSIs may need to tailor approaches, messages, and theories of change for those of different gender-identities.
- Support for the Theory of Normative Social Behavior's suggestion that the first step in changing social norms is for an individual to witness others doing (or not doing) a behavior (i.e., descriptive norms). Since descriptive norms directly affected injunctive norms (pathway b for men and women) and couple communication (pathway e among women only), this finding suggests that a focus on shifting perceptions of how common a behavior is (i.e., descriptive norms) may be the most effective place to initiate interventions in anticipation of creating a ripple effect on other social and individual-level mediating factors.

## IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FINDINGS

**Findings from this analysis provide useful insights into how multi-component NSIs operate and may need to be designed for greater impact on couple communication for FP and similar behavioral outcomes of interest.** As program approaches to shifting social norms become an increasingly common component of interventions seeking to facilitate voluntary FP use, program planners are confronted with the important task of deciding which intervention elements to include, and in which order, so as to produce pathways to shifting social norms and supporting behavior change. In this analysis of the MFF multicomponent intervention, we focused on pathways to changing couple communication for FP as it has been shown to facilitate voluntary, autonomous FP use. In examining the direct effect of the intervention on couple communication, we did not see an effect. However, by simultaneously assessing the effect of the intervention on social norms, self-efficacy, and attitudes, we found a positive significant effect of the intervention on couple communication for FP among women when examining the total pathway (i.e.,  $a*b*d + a*e + c*d$ ). This means that social norms, self-efficacy, and attitudes are important mechanisms through which the intervention operates to improve couple communication for FP.

Distinct, albeit equally important for informing future interventions, we did not find statistically significant aggregate effects of the intervention and the mediating factors in the model for men. The implication is that pathways to achieving improved couple communication for men may be different than those among women. Although the MFF intervention sought to shift norms by engaging men and women together in the same activities, including through Community Dialogues, community celebration events, testimonials, and public sharing, it could be that interventions tailored to the specific beliefs, ideals, and concerns of either gender will yield different results. Consequently, it may be necessary for program planners to develop distinct theories of change for men and women or to vary some intervention messaging or implementation approaches across these groups, while still allowing couples to have time to discuss key concepts together.

Multicomponent NSIs are costly and time-consuming, and we need to advance our understanding of how and if they work to inform these investments. Our findings of sequenced pathways to and

aggregate intervention effects on couple communication for women confirms the need for multicomponent interventions that work simultaneously to shift norms as well as to modify attitudes and increase self-efficacy to achieve desired behavior change. Findings also point to the potential for exploring distinct norms shifting messages or approaches for men and women. Finally, these results signal the need for rigorous monitoring plans to safeguard against and document unintended outcomes as well as intervention evaluations that account for the synergistic effects of intervention components and directed pathways to program outcomes.

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