



LESSONS AND EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recruiting and Retaining Men in Gender Transformative Programs: *The Journeys of Transformation*

GUATEMALA



### Brief Summary

There is increasing recognition among development practitioners that engaging men in gender-transformative interventions is key to promoting gender equality. This brief presents the experience of Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice (previously known as Promundo-US) and Global Communities in the implementation of the adapted *Journeys of Transformation* program in Guatemala, designed to engage men as allies of women's economic empowerment. It outlines the strategies used and challenges that came up during the implementation, as well as what worked to address these. The brief presents emerging recommendations to effectively recruit and retain men's participation in gender transformative programs that can be considered by practitioners seeking to work with men to advance gender and economic justice.

### Background

Evidence-based practice in the development sector has established the importance of engaging men in gender-transformative programs designed to challenge restrictive gender norms sustaining power imbalances and inequitable relations (1). Engaging men in gender-transformative ways goes beyond male participation in a program otherwise targeting women. It means that men share the workload of caregiving and paid work outside the home with their partner; that they foster a respectful and caring relationship with their children and female partner if living together, make informed decisions with their partner, and support their partner's autonomous decision-making; resolve conflicts in a constructive way and work to prevent violence by promoting caring and respectful relationships in the family (2).

Studies have also shown that male engagement is particularly important when considering women's economic empowerment, as men play a key role in limiting women's participation (3). Indeed, programs that focus solely on women without engaging men and community wide processes to question rigid norms around male dominance in the family that condone their authority over women and children can thwart change, put women

at risk, generate backlash from men or others supporting traditional ideas around masculinity and men's honor, and even increase intimate partner violence (4). Thus, programs that promote the role of men as allies of women's economic empowerment must ensure that men participate in the intervention and understand how to engage men in ways that generate the transformative shifts and support to women described above.

This brief is intended for practitioners in the field of women's economic empowerment and gender equality. It outlines strategies used to promote the uptake and retention of male participants based on Equimundo and Global Communities' first implementation of the adapted *Journeys of Transformation* program. The program was renamed *Caminos a la Transformación* and was implemented in rural and indigenous communities in Guatemala from March to October 2021. Findings from the endline evaluation of the implementation process as well as the monthly monitoring reports written by local facilitators are incorporated to share programmatic lessons, challenges, and successes in achieving male recruitment and retention. This brief is complemented by the Outcome evaluation findings brief and the Program summary brief.

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## Program Description and Implementation

In 2020, Equimundo and Global Communities began preparing for the first implementation of Journeys of Transformation (JoT) in Latin America. JoT was first created and piloted in Rwanda by Equimundo, Care Rwanda and Rwamrec in 2011 (5). Prior to adapting JoT, Equimundo and Global Communities conducted a formative study to explore the sociocultural context and gender and power dynamics in two rural communities in Guatemala, where Global Communities had formed women's savings and empowerment groups called Women Empowered (WE). Based on the findings, the structure, methodological approaches and content of JoT were adapted and contextualized, creating the Caminos a la Transformación (CaT) program.

CaT is designed to undermine some of the gendered barriers to women's economic empowerment based on the understanding that restrictive shared beliefs around masculinity and expected gender roles in society support attitudes and norms that directly limit women's autonomy, decision-making, and participation in communities' economic activities and civic lives. The program works with male partners of women in Women Empowered groups and promotes attitude and behavior shifts at the personal, couple, family, and community level. The CaT curriculum comprises 13 group learning and discussion sessions, six conducted with men and women separately, and seven with men and women together. These are led by trained local male and female facilitators and promote critical reflection, discussion, and the sharing of experiences with same-sex peers as well as together as couples. Two of the sessions are co-facilitated with local specialized response service providers for survivors of domestic violence and for family planning.



### Access to Communities

Fifteen communities where Global Communities had formed Women Empowered groups in the department of Huehuetenango were selected as potential communities for CaT implementation. All were visited

by local male facilitators who shared the objectives of the CaT program with local community leaders and communal organizations (mostly men). Nine communities agreed to CaT implementation.



### Participant Recruitment

As CaT was designed to complement the WE saving groups, women members of WE were invited to attend an informative session with their male partners designed to motivate their participation by allowing them to experience a sample of what the program

would include. This was called 'session 0'. Community leaders were also asked to support the process by promoting participation in 'session 0' among men. In total, 215 couples participated in 'session 0' of which 145 asserted their interest in participating in the program.



### Implementation process

In the nine communities, 12 CaT groups were formed to engage men and women in critical reflection and dialogue. From March to September 2021, all 13 sessions were implemented with 11 groups as one dissolved

during the first session. Each session lasted around two hours and sessions were held in local schools and community halls. No stipend, reimbursement, or rewards were offered to participants.

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## Programme Context: Huehuetenango – Guatemala

Guatemala has made gains in human development indicators over the last decade, however it continues to be one of the worst countries for women's and girls' rights in the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region:

- In 2019, Guatemala ranked 122 out of 156 countries in the Global Gender Gap (GGG), which measures parity between men and women in economic participation, educational attainment, health, and survival and political empowerment (6).
- Guatemala has the highest number of women in LAC (51%) who do not generate their own income, meaning that about half of all women depend on others for their own subsistence (7).

In the department of Huehuetenango, 21.9% of women aged between 15 and 49 years that have ever married/partnered have experienced physical, emotional, or sexual intimate partner violence (8). The municipality of Cuilco registers some of the highest poverty levels of the department, where around 8 out of 10 people are poor, with rural poverty levels standing at 81% and extreme poverty at 17% (9)(10). In 2018, around a quarter of the population in Cuilco were illiterate (23%) and the municipality reports less female participation in income generation activities than the national average with 86% of women and 34% of men reporting no labor activity (11)(12). In Cuilco, most men and women work in subsistence agriculture with only 51% of men and 4% of women reporting agriculture as an income generation activity (13).

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## Profile of men

3 Insights shared in this brief are based on the experience and reports of the Global Communities program team leading CaT implementation in Huehuetenango and male participants who took part in the program's endline qualitative and quantitative evaluation.

**AGE:** The mean age of male participants was 45 years and there were representatives from all age groups: 4.8% were aged 18 to 24 years, 22.6% were aged 25 to 34 years, 37.1% were aged 35 to 49 years, and 35.5% were aged 50+ years.

**CIVIL STATUS AND CHILDREN:** 50% of men were married and 50% reported being in a relationship.

Ninety-six percent of the couples reported having children. On average, couples had four children and the maximum number of children for any one couple was 12 (2 men).

**ETHNICITY:** 77% self-identified as mestizo (mixed indigenous and Spanish descent) and 23% as members of a Maya community (Mam indigenous group).

**EDUCATION:** 65% of men reported completion of primary schooling.

**WORK:** 90% of men dedicate themselves to agriculture, 7% to construction, 1.6% to commerce and 1.6% had a professional job.

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## Strategies and successes



### Uptake and recruitment

#### ESTABLISHING ALLIANCES AND BUY-IN FROM MALE COMMUNITY LEADERS

The local team of facilitators established good relationships and buy-in from community leaders,

who were primarily men. This was critical in negotiating acceptance for the implementation of the program in their communities and to count on their support in promoting and inviting men to attend the informative session (session 0).

## INVOLVE WOMEN IN THE RECRUITMENT OF MEN

During the WE group meetings, local facilitators presented women with the CaT program that had been adapted to address some of the barriers they had identified during formative research that hindered their participation in economic activities and family well-being. By appealing to their aspirations to have healthier and more supportive relationships, they were able to build on their commitment to invite their male partners to the informative session. This strategy proved useful as many men reported that they attended the sessions only because their partners had asked them to.

## APPEAL TO MEN'S ASPIRATIONS TO HAVE POSITIVE AND HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR PARTNERS

Even though CaT was developed to promote women's economic empowerment, the strategy for its presentation in the informative session was to appeal to men's aspirations of having healthy relationships as

a couple and family. This indication was included in the CaT manual, which framed program objectives as improvements in relationships with family, financial planning, communication, and sexual and reproductive health. This strategy captivated the interest of two thirds of couples who registered on the program at the end of the informative session (145 out of 215).

## HAVING SOME FLEXIBILITY IN PARTICIPANT CRITERIA ALLOWS FOR A SNOWBALL EFFECT TO RECRUITING MEN

Even though the CaT program focused on the male partners of women participating in WE saving groups, facilitators were flexible in allowing the participation of some men who showed a strong interest in the program (mainly community leaders) even if they did not meet the criteria. These men helped promote the program among friends and family members and their participation reinforced other men's interest in the program, which aided the recruitment of men who did meet the criteria.



## Retention

### ENSURING PROGRAM ADAPTATION AND STRUCTURE THAT IS SENSITIVE TO THE NORMS AND ATTITUDES HELD BY LOCAL MEN

To adapt CaT, the Equipundo team conducted a formative study to understand gender norms and power dynamics existent in the communities where it would be implemented. This allowed for successful adaptation of the content and structure dealing with sensitive topics (for example decision-making around sexual relationships and intimate partner violence) to be covered in the final sessions of the program. As a result, the initial sessions served to build trust and awareness about gender norms and how these affected relationships, family health, and well-being, before sensitive issues were tackled. This helped to gradually guide and build men's awareness and acceptance of the topics.

### CONSIDERING MEN'S SCHEDULES WHEN COORDINATING SESSIONS

At the start of the program, together with the participants, the facilitators identified the best days and

times to conduct the sessions, which were usually in the evenings or weekends. Coordinating sessions based on men's time led to good attendance rates, with 89% of men participating in at least 75% of the 13 sessions.

### FOSTERING FUN AND NONJUDGMENTAL ENVIRONMENTS

The nature of the topics addressed in the CaT program can cause men to feel uncomfortable, limiting their reflection and engagement in discussions. A nonjudgmental environment was therefore essential for the sessions. To promote this, the training of local male facilitators included participatory, engaging, and nonjudgmental facilitation strategies, which were also included throughout the CaT manual. Equally, the facilitators' good interpersonal skills and positive experience of internalizing key messages throughout program implementation proved beneficial in terms of their ability to connect with men and establish positive relationships with them. These strategies contributed to 99% of men reporting that their participation in the program was positive or very positive.

## FRAMING CONTENT AROUND FAMILY ECONOMY AND WELL-BEING

Strategies to improve family economy which included acceptance of women's contribution to the family economy, joint decision-making about expenses and having a vision for the future were reported by men as some of the most beneficial program takeaways. Though women's economic empowerment is not discussed directly, developing its acceptance through this approach can help to reduce barriers in a way that appeals and engages men.

*"I feel happy, we have put a lot of what we have learned into practice, I feel positive. My wife motivated me; I didn't want to participate but I came to the first session and I liked it, because I saw that it would help me improve. It is hard to change but we are trying not be chauvinistic even though that is the way that we have been raised" (Male Participant).*

## METHODOLOGY THAT PROMOTES INTERGENERATIONAL REFLECTION

The CaT activities integrate community learning and participatory methodology. Men reported enjoying this approach and highlighted the sessions that encouraged

them to reflect on their experiences with their fathers, exposure to violence, and household chores while growing up as the ones that engaged them the most by making them aware of their actions and the influence that these have on their children and their future.

## SETTING WEEKLY COMMITMENTS TO PRACTICE SKILLS AND MOTIVATE SOCIAL LEARNING

The CaT manual includes tasks and activities that men are encouraged to try at home in between sessions. These were received very positively by male (and female) participants, as it gave them an opportunity to put what was covered in the session into practice with their families. Also, the exchange of these experiences with other men (and couples) promoted retention as participants were motivated to attend the next session wanting to hear the experiences of others in the group as well as share their own.

## FEEDBACK AND REACTION FROM FEMALE PARTNERS ENCOURAGE MEN

Men reported high levels of motivation to participate in the sessions and put into practice the learnings because they enjoyed their partners' positive reactions and feedback. For example, a man reported that there was more intimacy in his relationship after he began to ask his wife if she wanted to have sexual intercourse.

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## Learnings and emerging recommendations



### Build relationships with community leaders and other members of men's reference groups

Six community leaders rejected the implementation of the CaT program, deeming the topic unnecessary for their communities. This response was not unexpected, as the program challenges masculine identities, privilege, and existing power dynamics. To promote uptake, facilitators can gradually build relationships with community leaders by visiting them several times, having informal conversations about the

benefits of the program for families' well-being, and sharing experiences and testimonies of the program's implementation in other settings. In doing so, they can work toward gaining their trust and promoting better understanding of the aims of the program. This process needs to be included in program design as it requires time and resource allocation.



## Integrate the program into interventions offering livelihood-related benefits

Men, and to some extent women, in communities that had previously received material support or cash transfers from NGOs, reported less interest in participating in the program. Some assured facilitators that they would not have time for 'chats' only but that they would participate if the program offered a monetary or in-kind productive incentive. It is worth noting that even though no incentive was offered, around two-thirds of participants registered to join the program (145 couples out of 215). CaT and similar programs that complement women's economic

empowerment initiatives may benefit from integrating the program as part of projects that include material or livelihood-related benefits for the family. For example, its integration with programs that promote improved agricultural practices, or support with small businesses can offer participants tangible benefits to meet their livelihood needs and indirectly promote program uptake. But, this needs to be assessed with caution as the provision of tangible benefits may also generate backlash from other community members.



## Identify and understand migration and seasonality of work patterns

The majority of participants dedicated themselves to small agricultural activities, therefore their available time was affected by agriculture cycles. Likewise, the Huehuetenango department borders Mexico, making economic migration a common practice among residents. It is important to identify and understand

these contextual elements when designing the program, as both can severely affect uptake and retention of men. This can be done by conducting a community assessment and including migration and work seasonality as part of the selection criteria of communities where the program is to be implemented.



## Differentiate interest in participation from attendance

At the end of session 0, men and women were asked to register if they were interested in participating in the program. Though this step helped to filter and identify men (and women) from the community who were interested in the program, registering them as participants created issues in calculating retention

rates, as some participants only registered their interest but did not actually attend a session. To better calculate retention, we suggest that men should only be recognized as participants when they attend the first or second session.



## Train facilitators in strategies to handle program rejection and the questioning of its aims

There were reports that during the first and second sessions, some men publicly rejected the program's aims and walked out. Others mentioned that some men just stopped attending the sessions. In total, 24 men attended fewer than four sessions and interviews with some of these men pointed to lack of time, accepting an employment opportunity, disagreement with the program's objectives, and confirmation that

the program would not provide material benefits as the main reasons for leaving. While some of these factors cannot be controlled, when implementing gender-transformative programs, it is important to bear in mind that this is a sensitive issue that can generate rejection, questioning, and negative responses from some men that are more attached to restrictive gender norms and practices. Thus, facilitators require training in effective

strategies to handle these situations, accept that some people will not be willing to join these community discussions, and minimize the influence that these

participants may have in deterring others who are willing to engage in the program



## Backlash from community deteriorates program participation

Male participants reported being subject to negative comments from other men in their communities, who teased them as being “controlled” by their female partners or accused them of receiving economic incentives to participate. Community leaders can help create a more supportive environment for

male participation by encouraging men with positive experiences to share them with others, influencing other community members to have a favorable perception of the program and publicly showing support for male participation.

*“Some people thought that I was participating because I was interested in receiving an economic benefit, and that they were paying us to attend; others questioned me, asking why was I participating if they were not paying me.” (Male participant, FGD)*

## Conclusions

7 Recruiting and retaining male participants in gender-transformative programs has its challenges. The experience of implementing the CaT program with rural and indigenous men in Guatemala has shown that these can be managed by using various strategies. Any intervention intended to engage men with their female partners to ultimately support women needs to first ensure that the women agree with and have been consulted to inform the design of a program approach that considers their needs and concerns and will prioritize their safety and well-being. In particular, through this experience we have learnt that:

- 1) the percentage of men who favor taking part in these

- programs is higher than those who reject it, even when no incentive is offered; 2) establishing alliances and buy-in from community leaders (mostly men) is essential in the recruitment and retention of male participants; 3) ensuring that the program approach, content, and framing address men’s and women’s key concerns around family well-being and relationships, livelihoods or other topics based on formative research involving participants; and 4) participatory methodology, the interchange of experiences, setting of homework, intergenerational reflection, and positive feedback from partners all foster retention and ongoing engagement with the program’s key messages.

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