Embedded Ethnographers: Unpacking the Black Box of Program Implementation

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Religious institutions create and reinforce gender norms through daily interaction and biblical interpretation of the creation narrative.
Masculinité, Famille et Foi

Working with faith communities to reduce violence and improve family planning use

Kinshasa, DRC
17 faith communities

Tearfund, Eglise de Christ au Congo (ECC)
Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH)
Association de Sante Familiale (ASF)
Through MFF youth leaders have the opportunity to...

• Reach young couples at transitional life moments

• Address the formative role of faith in gender roles

• Approach gender equality and violence within a faith framework

• Explore links between gender norms, health, and violence
**INTERVENTION COMPONENTS**

- Sensitization on masculinity and gender equity
- Health talks
- Exchange visits
- Faith leaders and Gender Champions
- Newly married couples and first-time parents
- Community dialogue sessions
- Peer support
- Marriage counseling

**INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES**

- Supportive normative environment
- Self-efficacy related to FP
- Improved attitudes about FP/RH and gender; against IPV

**BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES**

- Gender-equitable norms, relationships & behaviors
- Increased modern family planning use; reduction of IPV
- Improved FP/RH & well-being

**Diffusion among community members**
Ethnography: A View Into The Messy Reality Of Implementation

- Observe what is happening on the ground
- Talk with participants about their experiences of change
- Avoid probing from self-interested project staff
- Move beyond direct questions reflecting staff views of the program
Mid-term Ethnography: Document Implementation And Inform Improvements

**Data Collection**

- Months 5-10 of implementation
- Semi-structured participant observation
- Informal unstructured interviews before/after sermons and public gatherings with faith leaders, gender champions and other congregants

**Analysis**

- Phased approach for review of notes/memos and adjustments
- Semi-structured matrices (environment, actors, actions, themes discussed)
- Identified recurring themes and patterns
- Validation by field team
4 of 17 Congregations selected for ethnography

- Urban/Peri-urban
- Small/Large
- Low/High Leader Engagement
- Socio-economic status
- Conservative/Progressive
- Different Denominations
INSIGHT 1

Gender norms are deeply rooted and profoundly influence women’s ability to live their lives free from violence and control their fertility. These norms are often defined and reinforced by ECC congregations.
Violence attributed to...

**Situational factors:**
psychological distress, illness, unwanted pregnancy, marital disharmony, infidelity, alcoholism, unemployment, infertility, lack of faith in God

**Gender role transgressions:**
men irresponsible/neglectful, women earning more than men, not adequately caring for husbands

Widespread accounts of physical, sexual and psychological abuse
Men’s power is largely uncontested and held in place by interpretation of scripture

‘Following the announcement of the subtheme of gender equality, there was a strong reaction from the [community dialogue] participants. It is perceived as negative to speak of equality between men and women. It is against the Bible because in the writings of counting the children of Israel, women were not counted. Additionally, the Apostle Paul forbade women to preach in public before men.”

- Ethnographer observation, high engagement congregation
Many faith leaders advocate for an authoritarian view of the family, citing scripture, especially in comparison congregations.

"In the discussion, some men emphasized the dominating power endowed to man by God. This Biblical message is clear and for them, society cannot change these words. They did not want to change from this stance, despite discussing with the gender champion and other men."

- Ethnographer observation, comparison congregation
A few gender champions and faith leaders blamed women for acts of violence committed by their partners.

As household head, the father is expected to discipline his wife and children, which may manifest in violence.
Women are pressured intensely to conform to social expectations related to violence & fertility
Enforcing Gender Norms

At the presentation of the gifts, the faithful of the church recommend that they produce as many children as God wills. Some tell the woman to prove her motherhood by the birth of several children.”

- Ethnographer observation, low engagement congregation

There is a churchgoing mother who told a young mother, ‘You shame Bumbu commune by giving birth without planning, without thinking of the future.’ All the mothers supported this advice given to this young mother

- Ethnographer observation, high engagement congregation
INSIGHT 3

Although contested and gradual, women and men report changing beliefs and norms related to gender, violence and family planning.
Men and women note reflection and reassessment, prompted by dialogue, testimonies and sermons
Recognizing the Need for Change

“Through community dialogue, the father understood his misbehavior, repented, and promised to consider his wife as a partner.“

- Ethnographer observation, high engagement congregation
"Before, I believed that **women are objects**, but after this training, it made me love my wife as much as I love myself. I do not mean to say or speak in the place of my wife. **She speaks for herself.**"

-Male community dialogue participant, high engagement intervention

“While living like this, he saw it normal to not pay attention to me, nor to take into account my opinions. I did not speak at all, it was him that spoke, the chief of the household. **But this tendency has changed today**, thanks to the benefit of the project.”

-Female community dialogue participant, high engagement intervention
“But following the training, there was a change, although it is a process. She continues the dialogue....she now participates in some decision-making, her point of view is taken into account.”

- Ethnographer observation, high engagement congregation
Resisting Change

Men are adopting new ways to partner, but many still believe that caregiving work is unmanly.

“Before these lessons I used my authority as a man. It is only now that we find that there is equality of power between men and women at home. But let's know that certain tasks are reserved for women.”

-Male community dialogue participant, high engagement congregation

“Community dialogue participants did not move understandings beyond traditional categories of the feminine and the masculine…”

- Ethnographer observation, high engagement congregation
Christian values of forgiveness may result in women bearing the burden of violence for the sake of domestic harmony
Prayer And Forgiveness...  
A Christian Approach

Create harmony in the home. Pray for non-violence and for women who have been abused.

“Even if in your home you are mistreated and violated and you can no longer go on, do not seek divorce but rather invoke the name of Jesus Christ. He is able to change impossible situations because the Bible tells us whoever will invoke the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved.”

- Pastor remarks during sermon in low engagement congregation
Prayer as a Solution

“This mother, without children, was abused by her husband. He hit her and insulted her publicly and daily. The lady confided in the Pastor who recommended her of the mothers' prayer group. After many prayers, her husband changed his behavior; he loves and respects her well before she has given him a child. They live in coordination and in harmony."

- Ethnographer, low engagement congregation
Key Learnings
What Insights Can Ethnographic Methods Offer?

**ADVANTAGES**

- Uncovers what people do and believe rather than what they say
- Reveals discrepancies and inconsistencies between expected and actual
- Effective in exploring the nuances of transformation
- Identified unexpected effects and influencing factors

**LIMITATIONS**

- Difficult to assess diffusion
- Challenging to compare across study groups
- Requires skilled observers
- Analysis time consuming
Recap

Insights

1. Gender norms are deeply rooted and profoundly influence women’s ability to live their lives free from violence and control their fertility.

2. Intense pressure to conform to social expectations related to violence and fertility

3. Although contested and gradual, women and men report changing beliefs and norms related to gender, violence and FP

4. Christian values of forgiveness may result in women bearing the burden of violence
Mid-course Assessment: Where are we in the change process?

- Faith leaders and gender champions promoting positive masculinities and gender equality, condemning GBV/IPV and supporting FP
- Most participants receptive, coalescing around complementary roles for women and men
- Increasing couple communication and shared decision-making but patriarchal power still largely uncontested
- Men report reevaluating their beliefs about gender, violence and FP, women report improved lives
Reflection on a Scripture-Based Approach

- Faith leaders still sometimes reinforce the subordinate status of women in sermons.
- Sometimes conflicting points of view are shared in the same communication event.
- The interpretation of scripture is nuanced and used to both positive and negative effect.
From Insight to Action

• Work with faith leaders and gender champions to deepen transformation and address contested domains

• Deep transformation of faith leaders and faith structures will take time and setting up feedback loops will support the process

• Continue to highlight the complementarity of forgiveness and justice

• Leverage increased male caregiving to foster shifts in norms related to gender roles

• Carefully monitor and mitigate negative consequences and establish strong linkages to violence response services
THANK YOU!