sahiyo
United Against Female Genital Cutting

bhaiyo
MEN AGAINST FGC

How to Engage Men and Male-Identifying Community Members in Advocacy and Prevention Efforts to Address Female Genital Cutting/Mutilation

A Toolkit

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PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT

The global movement to end female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), a human rights violation and a form of gender-based violence (GBV), has historically centered the leadership, experiences, and voices of women and girls impacted by this form of harm. At the same time, sustainable change to end the cycle of FGM/C must broaden advocacy and allyship from men and male-identifying individuals who often exercise influence over the community's social norms, family decisions, and widespread community dialogue.

FGM/C, a social norm rooted in universal patriarchal norms, continues generation after generation and persists due to a variety of justifications, including social pressure, religious interpretations, and patriarchal influences that often relegate FGM/C to a "women's issue" or a "private and sensitive matter." While the various harmful physical and psychosocial impacts of FGM/C are borne by women and girls, ending FGM/C necessitates changing the attitudes and actions of men who may actively encourage it or silently look away from it. Fathers, brothers, partners, and community leaders hold significant decision-making power within communities impacted by FGM/C and subsequently hold the opportunity to end this harmful practice.

This toolkit was developed as a structured resource to mobilize men and male-identifying individuals as active allies in this movement, and to address gaps in facilitating effective male engagement to carry out advocacy and education work on FGM/C at both the grassroots and macro structural levels. A 2024 evaluation conducted in partnership with Sahiyo's Bhaiyo program, an initiative dedicated to mobilizing male allies in the movement to end FGM/C, found that 40% of participants were unsure whether FGM/C occurred in their communities, and over 30% were unaware of safe spaces to discuss the issue. These findings highlight gaps in awareness and the need for stronger engagement efforts that equip men with the tools to become effective allies, as gender-based violence interventions are less impactful without adequate engagement of men and male-identifying individuals in GBV, and GBV-related causes and issue areas.

A notable finding from the development of this toolkit is that the vast majority of documented FGM/C male engagement initiatives are focused on African men. This observation may, in part, reflect that FGM/C in other regions of the world has only gained recognition and visibility within the past ten to fifteen years. In fact, it wasn't until 2024 that the UNICEF released a newly updated report sharing global figures on FGM/C, that it was noted that 86 million girls have been known to have undergone FGM/C in Asia and other parts of the world.[1]

[1] https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/

Survivor-led advocacy, improvements in research and data collection, and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which call for the elimination of FGM/C by 2030, have contributed to a broader understanding of FGM/C as a global issue affecting communities across Africa, Asia, and other regions. Against this backdrop, Sahiyo's Bhaiyo Male Allies program remains one of the few prominent initiatives specifically focused on engaging men and boys in efforts to end FGM/C in Asia, highlighting both the importance of regionally tailored approaches and the need for greater investment in male engagement initiatives throughout the international community.

The toolkit seeks to equip advocates, community-based organizations, and practitioners with proven strategies, culturally informed guidance, and real-world case studies to effectively engage men and male-identifying individuals to end FGM/C. Ultimately, the toolkit supports the integration of men as powerful allies to raise awareness, challenge harmful norms, and drive public policy changes to help end FGM/C for future generations.

INSIDE THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit provides background information on FGM/C, examples of male engagement programs, and successful strategies that can inform best practices for advocates and organizers interested in expanding existing programs or introducing new projects aimed at integrating men as allies in FGM/C prevention work.

The toolkit is organized into the following sections:

Introduction to FGM/C

Why Male Engagement Matters

Challenges and Barriers

Strategies and Approaches

Lessons Learned

INTRODUCTION TO FGM/C

FGM/C "involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons."[2] Generally performed on girls anywhere from birth to puberty, FGM/C has no health benefits and instead carries both short-term and long-term harmful physical and psychosocial consequences[3]. Physical impacts can include complications related to sexual health, urinary and vaginal health, as well as risks during pregnancy and childbirth. In severe cases, FGM/C can lead to infections, excessive bleeding, and even death. The psychological and emotional consequences can include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and other mental health concerns.

Multiple international human rights organizations have declared FGM/C as a violation of human rights and a form of gender-based violence (GBV). Despite numerous laws around the world that ban FGM/C and the increasing awareness around the harms of FGM/C, more than 230 million girls have undergone this form of GBV.[4] Furthermore, 70 million girls are at risk of undergoing FGM/C between 2025 and 2030.[5]

Many factors contribute to the continuation of FGM/C across different communities. For some, FGM/C is tied to controlling sexuality by curbing a girl's sexual desire or preventing 'promiscuity.' Hygiene and cleanliness of a woman's body are also commonly cited reasons for FGM/C. In other communities, FGM/C is a rite of passage and is believed to increase marriageability. In some cultures where FGM/C occurs, religious leaders endorse FGM/C, deeming it a religious requirement, claiming that the procedure is backed by religious texts. Resulting from various methods of justification, FGM/C persists as it is associated with immense social pressure to conform to and respect cultural, religious, and family traditions. Subsequently, the fear of social isolation and communal ostracization, especially in cultures that prioritize community over individual identity, makes it challenging for families and individuals to break away from the cycle of FGM/C. As such, FGM/C has become a transgenerational practice and is widespread globally, affecting Asian, Middle Eastern, White American, South American, Indigenous, and diasporic survivors. In fact, FGM/C has been found to occur in at least 94 countries globally.[6]

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[2] https://www.who.int/health-topics/female-genital-mutilation#tab=tab_1
[3] https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240107281
[4] https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/over-230-million-girls-and-women-alive-today-have-been-subjected-female-genital
[5] https://www.unfpa.org/press/nearly-70-million-girls-face-genital-mutilation-2030-unfpa-warns
[6] https://equalitynow.org/news/press-releases/new-report-finds-female-genital-mutilation-cutting-in-94-countries/

CORE PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGING MEN IN FGM/C WORK

Effective engagement of men in FGM/C work should be grounded in the following principles:

SURVIVOR-CENTERED

Survivor-centered approaches prioritize the safety, agency, and lived experiences of individuals who have experienced FGM/C, ensuring their voices inform program design and implementation without exposing them to harm or retraumatization. Male engagement should not replace or overshadow survivor-led efforts.

DO NO HARM

'Do no harm' approaches ensure that engagement with men and male-identifying individuals does not create unintended risks for survivors or communities, including retraumatization, stigma, or unsafe disclosure of experiences. Programs should anticipate potential risks and prioritize safety.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability means encouraging men to take responsibility for challenging harmful norms within their peer networks and communities, including speaking out against beliefs and norms that sustain FGM/C and reinforce inequality.

SHARED POWER

Shared power promotes equitable participation in efforts to address FGM/C, ensuring that men's engagement does not dominate spaces or decision-making, and that women's leadership and survivor expertise remain central.

CULTURAL HUMILITY

Cultural humility requires respectful engagement with community contexts while still challenging harmful practices. It involves listening, learning, and recognizing communities as partners in change rather than subjects of intervention.

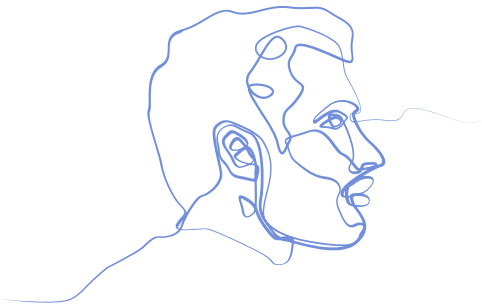
THE IMPORTANCE OF MALE ALLIES IN ENDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Women and girls have the right to bodily autonomy and deserve to live freely without fear of harm and coercion.[7] While FGM/C directly impacts women and girls, its consequences extend to families and broader communities.

Male engagement refers to intentional efforts to involve men and male-identifying individuals in preventing gender-based violence by encouraging reflection, accountability, and active participation in shifting harmful norms. Male allies are men and male-identifying individuals who support gender equality by challenging harmful behaviors and norms within their families, peer networks, and communities.

FGM/C persists within wider systems of gender inequality. Thus, engaging men is not about shifting focus away from women and girls, but about addressing the social dynamics that sustain the harmful practice. This requires expanding beyond awareness toward active, accountable allyship.

When engaged meaningfully, men and male-identifying individuals can help create space for dialogue, question harmful norms, and support shifts in attitudes and behaviors. However, effective male engagement must be grounded in accountability and shared responsibility. It is not about positioning men and male-identifying individuals as protectors or gatekeepers of change, but about recognizing their role in either reinforcing or transforming the conditions that allow FGM/C to persist.



[7] At Sahiyo, we acknowledge that not everyone who has undergone FGM/C may identify as female. However, in this report, we may use gendered terminology to assist with providing some descriptions. Nonetheless, Sahiyo believes it is essential to emphasize that the experiences of survivors encompass a wide range of identities, which is an important consideration for us as individuals- or as part of an organization or coalition - to be mindful of and inclusive in your approach with individuals impacted by FGM/C.

CHALLENGES OF MALE ENGAGEMENT WORK ON FGM/C

While male engagement is vital for transforming the social norms that sustain FGM/C, this work is frequently confronted by several significant challenges. These barriers, which are detailed in the following sub-sections, are often rooted in deep-seated gender hierarchies and a lack of community awareness.

Education and Community Awareness

FGM/C transcends socioeconomic and educational boundaries, occurring in communities with varied levels of awareness and access to information. In many settings, however, FGM/C is not widely discussed or recognized as a priority issue—particularly among men and male-identifying individuals, who may have limited exposure to conversations about it due to gendered norms that frame it as a "women's issue".

In communities navigating various challenges such as poverty, conflict, food insecurity, limited access to education and healthcare, or political instability, FGM/C may receive less attention, which can make it especially difficult to engage men, who may not see FGM/C as relevant to their roles or responsibilities. As a result, efforts to involve men and male-identifying individuals often require additional groundwork to build basic awareness, establish relevance, and create entry points for meaningful participation in dialogue and prevention efforts.

FGM/C as a Private and Gendered Issue

FGM/C is often treated as a private, gendered issue, which limits broader community engagement. In many patriarchal contexts, men and male-identifying individuals typically hold decision-making power within families and communities, yet remain excluded from or disengaged in conversations about FGM/C. Patriarchal norms refer to social systems in which men and male-identifying individuals hold greater power in decision-making, authority, and social status, often shaping expectations and control over women's bodies and roles within families and communities.

Strict gender roles create a culture of silence and barriers to open conversations about women's bodies, reproductive and sexual health, and harmful practices such as FGM/C. These issues are frequently treated as private "women's issues", limiting broader community dialogue around FGM/C as a public health issue that not only impacts women and girls, but also men and male-identifying individuals. Despite the many multidimensional implications on partners and families of FGM/C survivors, male participation in conversations about FGM/C amongst their communities is minimal.

Religious Justification

FGM/C is frequently rationalized as a religious requirement, despite various religious bodies condemning it. Local interpretations and the influence of religious leaders—who are often men—play a significant role in sustaining this form of violence.

These experiences present a specific challenge for male engagement: men and male-identifying individuals are often more exposed to religious justifications for FGM/C within male-dominated spaces, where questioning FGM/C may carry perceived social or spiritual risk. In contexts where religious authority is closely tied to male leadership, conversations about FGM/C may be met with resistance if they are seen as challenging faith-based teachings. As a result, male social networks and religious hierarchies can reinforce conformity, limiting opportunities for open dialogue and critical reflection.

In some contexts, these interpretations are also reinforced by broader social norms often described as "purity culture," which connects women's perceived value, honor, and marriageability to ideas of sexual purity and control over the female body. These norms, in turn, strengthen support for FGM/C and limit the ability to question its necessity.

For example, within the South Asian Bohra community, a structured male religious clergy has endorsed FGM/C as a religious obligation. Efforts towards resistance or questioning the acceptance of FGM/C can be met with disapproval, including organized ostracization, creating significant barriers for men and male-identifying individuals who may otherwise be open to dialogue or education on the issue.

Digital Engagement & the Limits of Online Outreach

Digital platforms and hashtag-driven campaigns have become important tools for raising awareness about the harms of FGM/C and expanding the issue area's global visibility. Virtual platforms help normalize conversations, share survivor stories, and engage broad audiences from around the world.

However, a key challenge in male engagement work is that digital awareness does not always translate into sustained participation or behavior change. Online campaigns often remain at the level of temporary visibility rather than deep engagement, particularly when they are not connected to ongoing dialogue or community-based programming. Meaningful community engagement requires relationship building, sustained participation, and concrete, real-world opportunities for individuals and communities to go beyond discourses that often remain confined only to online spaces.

In addition, the digital divide limits access to online spaces for many communities impacted by FGM/C, including men and male-identifying individuals who may have limited access to technology or prefer in-person communication. Concerns around privacy and confidentiality can also discourage participation in online discussions, especially in tightly connected communities where anonymity is difficult to maintain.

As a result, digital strategies are most effective when used as entry points to engagement, rather than standalone approaches, and when paired with trusted, in-person, or community-embedded models that support sustained dialogue.

Funding Gaps

In a sector already facing significant funding gaps in addressing GBV, FGM/C survivor support and prevention efforts remain chronically under-resourced despite being widely recognized as a public health issue. Within this landscape, initiatives involving gender-based violence focused on male engagement are further overlooked.

This creates a specific barrier to male engagement: limited funding restricts the development of targeted outreach strategies, culturally responsive programming, and sustained spaces for dialogue with men and male-identifying individuals. As a result, organizations may lack the capacity to build and maintain male ally initiatives, invest in long-term relationship-building, or evaluate the most effective approaches. Without dedicated resources, engaging men becomes inconsistent, short-term, or absent altogether.

SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS IN MALE ENGAGEMENT ADVOCACY ON FGM/C: STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

Despite ongoing funding barriers and structural challenges, the movement to address FGM/C has sought to include men, boys, and male-identifying individuals in prevention efforts that align with broader civil society interventions to integrate male engagement and gender transformative approaches into women's rights and gender justice work. Across regions, rights-based groups and civil society organizations (CSOs) have developed strategies tailored to their specific cultural and community contexts. The following section highlights several examples of male engagement approaches:

- *Direct Community Outreach and Education*
- *Culturally Specific and Community-Led Approaches*
- *Gender Transformative Approaches*
- *Peer-to-Peer Engagement*
- *Public Awareness and Community Mobilization*

STRATEGY: Direct Community Outreach and Education

Direct community outreach and education prioritizes sustained, in-person engagement to build the trust necessary for challenging social norms and fostering conversation within families and local networks. This approach creates space for learning, dialogue, and reflection on FGM/C and gender norms. In patriarchal societies, men are trained to leverage their roles as fathers, brothers, and local leaders to foster better relationships with their family members, specifically daughters. Specifically, through structured workshops designed for men that include facilitated discussions, learning modules, and educational games, participants explore issues such as girls' education, child marriage, FGM/C, and other women's rights topics.

Case Study: MenEngage Alliance Family Workshops in Kenya

In 2022, the Kenya MenEngage Alliance partnered with UCLA Fielding School of Public Health and Margaret Wanzuu Foundation, a women's rights and community-based non-profit in Kenya, to co-design the Baba Bora workshops. This multifaceted initiative includes Dads and Daughters workshops called Baba Na Binti, Wazazi Bora (Better Parents) classes, Ndugu Bora (Better Brothers) workshops, and an Elders Anti-FGM Forum. Comprehensive training manuals are developed and disseminated for use in both community and school settings.

The Baba Na Binti workshops strengthen relationships between fathers and their daughters by encouraging fathers to support their daughters' education, ambitions, and overall well-being. Workshops are conducted in accessible community centers or schools within walking distance of participating villages. Participants receive lunch, t-shirts, and a small stipend to cover transport. Conducted by male facilitators, the sessions include introductions, group discussions, educational games, and learning modules on topics of gender equality and positive male figures within the family. The workshops are highly interactive and introduce basic activities such as daughters and fathers introducing each other, having discussions, playing games, and more in-depth conversations, such as reading about the consequences of FGM/C and early marriage, and learning about Kenyan law. Local chiefs, traditional leaders, and religious leaders actively participate, contributing to strong community buy-in. Follow-up efforts for the father-daughter workshops include check-in phone calls with fathers to provide continued support, reinforce learning, and help address challenges. Wazabi Bora or 'Better Parents' workshops are tailored for young, married couples and include educational programs on sexual and reproductive health and child development, with a particular focus on FGM/C. The sessions employ a variety of strategies, such as storytelling, role-play, and group discussions between couples about the various detrimental harms of FGM/C.

Designed for secondary school boys, the Ndugu Bora workshops focus on basic sexual and reproductive health knowledge, including topics related to FGM/C. Through skills-building activities and facilitated discussions, boys are encouraged to see themselves as advocates for gender equality and participants in challenging harmful norms.

Case Study: Ecole de Pères, Father Schools in Senegal

Plan International, a global humanitarian and development organization, introduced the Ecole de Pères or Father's School initiative in the southeastern region of Senegal, in which fathers attend workshops to learn about violence against women and girls and the harms specifically associated with FGM/C. In an informal setting, the leading advocate facilitates discussions among other fathers about the rights of young girls, such as education, health, and equity. In particular, they emphasize positive behavior at home, such as protecting daughters from forms of violence, stress the importance of keeping girls in schools, and discuss the harmful impacts of child marriage and FGM/C.

After the workshops, father schools' leading advocates continue to engage the broader community on FGM/C awareness by sharing messages on their mobile phones, appearing on community radio shows, conducting home visits, and discussing FGM/C and its impact in village weddings. As of 2025, more than 300 members are enrolled in the father schools, and they have reached more than 20,000 people in the Kédougou region of Senegal[8]. As a result of these workshops, the rate of FGM/C has drastically declined, against the backdrop of a country where over 80% of women had been cut by the age of five[9].

[8] https://plan-international.org/case-studies/fathers-schools-senegal/
[9] https://www.fgmcri.org/country/senegal/

STRATEGY: Culturally Specific and Community-Led Approaches

Culturally specific and community-led approaches function as a foundational strategy, requiring that all engagement efforts be deeply rooted in the unique social, religious, and cultural contexts of the communities being served. Advocates who are also community members from FGM/C impacted communities can incorporate a culturally responsive lens into their advocacy work by highlighting the cultural contexts of how and why FGM/C continues, and what type of male engagement strategies could be most effective in such settings. For instance, practitioners ensure that programming respects broader community norms around gender segregated public spaces by accommodating privacy needs. Other approaches include engaging faith leaders and tribal authorities in efforts to address FGM/C, recognizing their influence in shaping community norms and clarifying religious misconceptions.

Case Study: Faith-based Engagement & Conversations with Religious Leaders

In Senegal, religious leaders or imams, who have participated in FGM/C educational programs, incorporate awareness about FGM/C into their Friday sermons, using their platforms to address FGM/C within a faith-based context. These religious clerics also teach boys enrolled in Quran classes about the importance of girls' rights, helping to reinforce messages of dignity and protection among younger generations.

Case Study: Indigenous Community Engagement

In collaboration with local organizations in seven countries, Plan International developed and implemented a five-year (2016-2020) 'Yes I do' Alliance initiative to address FGM/C, child marriage, and teen pregnancy. In Kenya, the program centered on working directly with the Maasai community leaders and Morans–youth warriors in Kajiado West and Kajiado Central, where rates of FGM/C remain high. Among the Kenyan Maasai, where FGM/C is widely viewed as a prerequisite for womanhood and marriage, men were engaged as allies in prevention efforts. Many Maasai men pledged to marry only uncut girls, helping to shift community attitudes toward the harmful practice.

[8] https://www.fgmcri.org/country/senegal/

Case Study: Intergenerational Engagement with Elder Men

Culturally responsive approaches such as engaging elders as "custodians of culture" to address FGM/C yielded positive results in Kenya in recent decades, as indicated by the Kenyan Demographic and Health Survey conducted in 2022. The survey revealed a steady decline in FGM/C prevalence in Kenya, which decreased from 32% in 2003 to 15% in 2022. Building on a successful 2021 initiative in which Samburu elders drafted an anti-FGM/C pledge, the Elders Anti-FGM/C Forum brings together elder men from the three target counties to share experiences and develop locally relevant strategies. This platform mobilizes elder men to develop and publicly commit to county-level pledges against FGM/C, accompanied by concrete dissemination and advocacy plans.

STRATEGY: Gender Transformative Approaches

Gender-transformative approaches can function as a foundational strategic framework for addressing FGM/C that goes beyond raising awareness to actively challenging and shifting harmful gender norms, power dynamics, and beliefs that sustain FGM/C. These approaches create space for critical reflection on masculinity, sexuality, and the social expectations placed on women and girls, including stigma and shame surrounding their bodies. By fostering open dialogue and encouraging more equitable attitudes and behaviors, gender-transformative programming supports men, boys, and male-identifying individuals in redefining their roles in ways that promote dignity, respect, and bodily autonomy.

Case Study: Husband School Model in West African Countries

Programs such as UNFPA-funded Husband Schools in Niger engage men in structured discussions that challenge traditional perceptions of masculinity, gender roles, and decision-making within the household. Designed as interventions for men, the husband's schools engage participants in supporting their partner's use of sexual and reproductive health care, including family planning and contraception use, and basic education around topics of women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), including FGM/C. Through facilitated dialogue, participants examine how harmful norms affect women, families, and communities, and are encouraged to adopt more equitable and supportive behaviors.

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[10] https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/a-79-514-submission-kenya-en.pdf

[11] https://africa.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2024/12/kenyasits abandonment-stand-against-gender-based-violence-engaging-elders-to-eradicate-harmful-practices

To join the Husband Schools, men must be over 25 years of age and be considered a 'model husband' by their community, one who is supportive of his family, supports his partner in decision-making around reproductive health, and volunteers in programs targeted towards community health improvement. About 8-10 members join regular monthly meetings in which local healthcare providers and other trained coaches from participating NGOs facilitate workshops and training about reproductive and maternal health, gynecological screenings, and related care. Model husbands later communicate with their wives and other men about their learnings, thereby engaging the larger community about a health imperative. Through the peer-sensitization approach and couples' joint decision making, men are encouraged to challenge social norms that perpetuate FGM/C and support its abandonment within their families and communities at large.

Similarly, pleasure-positive programs create space for conversations that de-stigmatize women's bodies and sexuality, addressing deeply rooted shame and misinformation. By promoting healthy, respectful understandings of sexuality and relationships, these programs contribute to shifting the underlying beliefs that sustain FGM/C and support more holistic approaches to gender equality.

STRATEGY: Peer-to-Peer Engagement

Peer-to-peer engagement leverages the influence of male networks to normalize conversations and challenge harmful norms from within. By facilitating direct dialogue between men, this strategy transforms individual awareness into collective accountability. While virtual platforms can serve as useful tools for connection and maintaining confidentiality—especially in settings where open discussion carries social risk—the core of this strategy lies in sustained, trust-based interactions where men educate and support one another in their roles as allies to end FGM/C. When designed intentionally, these initiatives help build supportive networks of male allies who can challenge the stigma of FGM/C as a "women's only" issue and encourage the idea that men's voices are an essential part of the movement.

Case Study: Sahiyo's 'Bhaiyo' - Male Allies Initiative

Recognizing GBV impacts all genders, and that all genders can support an end to violence, including FGM/C, Sahiyo created Bhaiyo, its male allies initiative. Through Bhaiyo, men being knowledgeable about FGM/C, both those from within FGM/C-impacted communities and those beyond these communities, help to facilitate and normalize conversations about how FGM/C can impact women in their lives - whether mother, daughter, sister, wife, or friend.

Recognizing GBV impacts all genders, and that all genders can support an end to violence, including FGM/C, Sahiyo created Bhaiyo, its male allies initiative. Through Bhaiyo, men being knowledgeable about FGM/C, both those from within FGM/C-impacted communities and those beyond these communities, help to facilitate and normalize conversations about how FGM/C can impact women in their lives - whether mother, daughter, sister, wife, or friend. Educational resources have been developed, such as digital and printed brochures with information about FGM/C and how men can educate on FGM/C in their communities. Other tools, such as community-led webinars with male-identifying panelists, help exemplify concretely how allyship can occur. The connection throughout these various methods is the emphasis on supporting men to connect with other male-identifying community members in their lives to discuss FGM/C, to challenge the stigma of FGM/C being a women's only issue, and encourage the idea that men's voices should be part of the movement to end FGM/C.

To further this peer-to-peer engagement strategy, Bhaiyo members hold periodic, confidential virtual meetings where challenges to addressing FGM/C can be discussed, along with the actions they are taking to hold conversations amongst their friends, families, and other networks. Various Methods of communication, such as online listservs and WhatsApp, support members to keep up to date about campaigns, programs, policies, and actions occurring on FGM/C locally and globally. In 2024, Bhaiyo hosted its first virtual meeting in Hindi to broaden participation and better engage Hindi-speaking members.

STRATEGY: Public Awareness and Community Mobilization

Public awareness and community mobilization strategies are essential for shifting collective attitudes and challenging the societal norms that sustain FGM/C. By strategically amplifying messages, fostering broad public dialogue, and mobilizing diverse populations, these efforts create the momentum needed for systemic change. While digital and virtual platforms—such as social media, online storytelling, and targeted multilingual content—are powerful vehicles for implementing these strategies, their primary function is to serve as accessible entry points. Through these channels, advocates can reach large audiences, challenge harmful norms, and promote positive models of masculinity and caregiving, ultimately translating broad public awareness into deeper community-level action and mobilization.

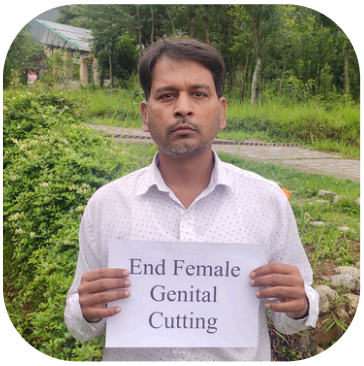
Case Study: Bhaiyo Male Allies Father's Day Campaigns

The Bhaiyo Male Allies Father's Day Campaign serves as a core strategy to mobilize men and male-identifying individuals by highlighting their unique roles as fathers, brothers, and allies in ending FGM/C. Beyond the digital awareness effort, the campaign acts as a vehicle for sustained engagement, encouraging men to share personal reflections and actionable commitments.

Through this annual initiative, Sahiyo invites community members and male allies already active in GBV work to contribute in diverse ways, including submitting personal quotes, recording video testimonials, and participating in blog interviews. These contributions frequently center on critical questions, such as when participants first learned about FGM/C, the impact fathers and brothers can have in their communities, and the broader necessity of male allyship.

Beyond raising public awareness, the campaign facilitates deeper community mobilization by:

- NORMALIZING CONVERSATIONS: Providing a structured platform for men to discuss FGM/C, an issue often silenced by patriarchal norms.
- GATHERING INSIGHTS: Leveraging engagement activities—such as participant surveys to better understand male engagement barriers and inform the development of future resources, including toolkits and advocacy strategies.
- FOSTERING PEER-TO-PEER COMMUNICATION: Highlighting diverse voices, including those from within and outside FGM/C-impacted communities, to build a network of support that encourages continuous learning and collective accountability.



Case Study: UNFPA and UNICEF #MenEndFGM 2023 Campaign

In 2023, the UNFPA and UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of FGM/C launched the #MenEndFGM campaign, designed as a strategic vehicle for community mobilization. Rather than treating digital outreach as the strategy itself, the initiative leveraged social media and virtual platforms as tools to reach men across diverse communities and mobilize them for collective action. By sharing stories and testimonials from men in both FGM/C-impacted and non-impacted contexts, the campaign urged participants to move beyond passive awareness and assume their active roles as allies. The use of Instagram and Twitter served as a medium to disseminate educational infographics and videos, reframing FGM/C from a "women's issue" to a societal imperative. Ultimately, this mobilization effort emphasized men's strategic influence as fathers, husbands, and community leaders in driving the protection of women and girls.

Case Study: #ProtectHerFromFGM in Egypt

The #ProtectHerFromFGM campaign, developed by the National Committee for Eradication of FGM in partnership with the National Council for Women and other civil society groups, serves as a strategic mobilization vehicle to engage men in ending FGM/C. Multimedia outreach served not as the strategy itself, but as a tool, with the campaign utilizing television commercials, theater plays, and digital platforms to reach men and communities across Egypt. By broadcasting creative public service announcements, including a poignant short film based on a real-life case of a girl who died after undergoing FGM/C, the initiative reframed the conversation, emphasizing the essential role of men in prevention. The campaign fostered broad public dialogue, reaching over 23 million people, and effectively translated awareness into collective action by highlighting men's influence as protectors and community leaders in ending the harmful practice.

KEY LESSONS FOR EFFECTIVE MALE ENGAGEMENT IN FGM/C PREVENTION

When it comes to addressing male engagement, across community-based initiatives, digital platforms, and culturally specific programs, a clear set of cross-cutting lessons emerges: impactful male ally engagement is sustained, trust-based, gender-transformative, and grounded in community realities. This section highlights key insights drawn from both successful approaches and persistent challenges in the field.

Reinforcing Patriarchal Norms & Gender Hierarchies

While community-led and culturally responsive strategies—including the engagement of influential male figures such as faith and traditional leaders are vital for securing community buy-in, they can also inadvertently reinforce the patriarchal norms and gender hierarchies that underpin FGM/C if not intentionally designed otherwise. For example, centering religious figures in male engagement FGM/C efforts may yield short-term results but upholds unequal power dynamics that position men as voices of legitimacy and leadership, whereas women, whose bodies, health, and lives are directly impacted by FGM/C, remain at the receiving end of instruction from a male authority.

Promoting Shared Accountability Through Gender-Transformative Allyship

Effective male engagement must move beyond participation toward gender-transformative allyship. Gender-transformative approaches seek not only to address harmful gender norms but to actively challenge and shift the underlying power dynamics and beliefs that sustain inequality and gender-based violence. This shift requires men to actively take responsibility for challenging harmful norms within their peer networks, questioning practices such as purity culture, and supporting changes in decision-making dynamics within their communities.

Importantly, male engagement should not displace women's leadership or place the burden of education on survivors. Instead, it must promote shared accountability, shared power, and meaningful behavior change that centers the agency and lived experiences of women and girls.

Blended Approaches Strengthen Reach and Depth of Impact

Neither digital nor in-person approaches alone are sufficient. Digital tools are effective for awareness-building and broad reach, while in-person and community-based engagement are essential for trust-building and sustained behavior change.

Most effective male engagement strategies integrate both approaches—using digital platforms to open conversations and community-based models to deepen them.

Sustained Engagement is More Effective than One-off Awareness Efforts

Across successful models, including father-daughter workshops, father schools, and structured community dialogues, a consistent pattern emerges: short-term or one-off interventions may increase awareness, but they are less effective in shifting deeply rooted gender norms.

Male engagement must be designed as an ongoing process that builds trust, reinforces learning, and allows for reflection over time. Behavior and norm change require sustained interaction rather than single exposure.

Trusted Messengers and Community Structures Increase Legitimacy

Male engagement programs are most effective when delivered through trusted community figures such as fathers, elder men, religious leaders, and trained local facilitators.
Trust determines participation and impact. External messaging alone is rarely sufficient; engagement is strengthened when embedded within existing community structures such as families, schools, and faith spaces.

Safe Spaces, Privacy, and Confidentiality are Essential

Both digital and in-person models demonstrate that participants engage more openly when spaces feel safe, private, and non-judgmental. A safe environment in male engagement work on FGM/C or general GBV issues allows participants to feel emotionally, socially, and also physically secure enough to speak about difficult topics without fear of harm, retaliation, or community ostracization.

Confidentiality enables honesty, reflection, and sustained participation. Without these safeguards, individuals may self-censor or avoid engagement entirely due to fear of stigma or community consequences.

Resistance is a Predictable and Necessary Part of the Process

Resistance, in the form of denial, discomfort, disengagement, or pursuit of other social justifications for FGM/C, is a common feature when initiating programs to engage men and male-identifying individuals in conversations on FGM/C.

Resistance is not a program failure, but a sign that deeply held norms are being engaged. Effective approaches anticipate resistance and respond with patience, trusted messengers, and non-confrontational dialogue strategies.

Male Engagement Must Be Properly Resourced and Sustained

Male engagement efforts remain underfunded and deprioritized within broader GBV and FGM/C programming, which limits the ability to build long-term, evaluated, and scalable initiatives.

Without dedicated investment, male engagement risks remaining fragmented, short-term, and inconsistent—reducing its potential impact on FGM/C prevention.

CONCLUSION

The global movement to end FGM/C has reached a critical turning point: its success hinges not only on centering the voices of women and girls but also on the active, transformative participation of men and male-identifying community members. The insights and case studies within this toolkit demonstrate that when men move beyond passive support to become genuine, accountable allies, they serve as powerful catalysts for change within patriarchal structures.

An effective male engagement program for FGM/C prevention must, therefore, be a multi-pronged, flexible, and deeply intentional effort.

By equipping advocates with the knowledge in this toolkit, this resource aims to accelerate a collective, community-wide shift. The end of FGM/C is not a "women's issue" but a societal imperative. Through deliberate, context-specific, and gender-transformative engagement, men and boys can become active allies through structured engagement approaches necessary to ensure that future generations of women and girls live free from this form of GBV.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This toolkit is made possible by the dedicated group of Sahiyo staff and volunteers who supported the drafting of this report.

Special acknowledgement to the following individuals:

Bahiyo Members:
Brad Mazon
Batool Mahesri

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Nuzhat Zaman

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