



# HEALTHY FAMILIES, STRONG COMMUNITIES IN KURDISTAN



**seed foundation**  
Social Educational Economic Development



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# PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

With funding support from the U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, SEED Foundation and Equipundo developed a new program to prevent and reduce gender-based violence (GBV) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) by engaging men and boys as supporters of gender equality and by transforming harmful norms through awareness raising, facilitating critical reflections about the consequences of these norms, as well as strengthening communication skills to improve interpersonal relationships.

This program engages with both fathers and their adolescent sons (ages 14-19) to reduce intergenerational violence and foster healthy, caring, and supportive relationships within the family. Locally branded as Healthy Families, Strong Communities, it has engaged members of the host community, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the Syrian refugee population across Erbil, Sulaimani, and Duhok governorates in KRI. The men and sons who participated in the program were from a variety of different linguistic, ethnic, religious, geographic, and professional backgrounds; which allowed implementers to see the potential benefit of the program across different groups.

From 2021-2023, Equipundo and SEED Foundation jointly conducted formative research, and developed two curricula that have been adapted for the context of the KRI aiming to create more equitable outcomes for women and men in violence prevention and healthy relationships. SEED Foundation led the implementation of the program in 2022-2023 with a total of 215 participants (96 fathers and 119 sons). Drawing from the quantitative and qualitative results from the evaluation of intervention, both the father and son program participants reported increased levels of knowledge regarding types of violence, attitude shifts that reject normalized justifications of violence, and an increase of behaviors related to emotional regulation. Results from fathers show an increased knowledge for techniques for non-violent parenting, and more self-efficacy and self-reported behaviors of positive parenting, including attitudes that welcome shared decision-making in the home. The focus group discussions with program participants and their wives/mothers highlight the unquantifiable impact of the program in strengthening family relationships and preparing fathers and sons to embody non-violent and caring notions of masculinities.

## TESTIMONIALS FROM PARTICIPANTS

In reflecting on the program's impact, one of the young men who graduated from the Healthy Families, Strong Communities Program for Sons in Erbil said, "I learned that using your power against people is not something good and I learned how I can solve problems without violence".

A participant from the father's group in Baharka Camp said the key lessons he learned included emotional expression, learning how to understand and respect his children's feelings including helping them pursue their talents and dreams, and the harms of "honor" codes and concepts, as well as understanding solutions to family and community problems that don't end in violence and death. "I now see the bigger picture and look at it from different perspectives before making decisions," he says. "Power should be equal in the family. There should be free will and ways of discussing things calmly."

## BACKGROUND

The development and implementation of Healthy Families, Strong Communities was launched under a broader Protection and Gender-based Violence (GBV) program which included three main objectives. From 2021 to 2023, the program provided various services to vulnerable individuals and groups across the KRI, trained other organizations in GBV and Protection, and engaged men and boys in support of violence prevention and gender equality more broadly. As SEED and Equimundo's first collaboration together, this program offered an opportunity for both organizations to learn from each other's expertise and successfully adapt an existing, evidence-based program for the Iraq context.

**SEED Foundation** is a women-led, local non-governmental organization in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), committed to protecting, empowering, and supporting the recovery and reintegration of survivors of violence and others at risk. Guided by a survivor-centered, trauma-informed approach, SEED delivers holistic services to clients, including case management, mental health, psychosocial support, legal services, cash assistance, and shelter; educates and trains frontline service providers and government actors; and undertakes policy and advocacy initiatives to strengthen laws, policies, and practices and to promote social norms and behaviors affirming human rights and dignity in the KRI. SEED has been working with women, men, boys, and girls since its inception in 2014, including direct work with survivors of GBV, awareness at the community level and with the general public, and other advocacy to strengthen equality and protections for vulnerable people. While SEED has always worked with and provided services to men and boys, this initiative marks the start of a new deeper engagement with men and boys for the promotion of gender equality. SEED has been working in camp and non-camp settings across the KRI in Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaimani governorates, where this program was also launched.



**Equimundo:** Center for Masculinities and Social Justice works to achieve gender equality and social justice by engaging men and boys in gender equality and nonviolent manhood. Previously called Promundo-US, it was founded in 2011 and born out of community-based and evidence-based work with men and boys in numerous settings in Latin America, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and North America. In the past decade, Equimundo has worked with partners across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region adapting and technically accompanying partners to implement and learn from similar research and program initiatives, including in Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and others. Equimundo's flagship International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) is the largest multi-country study of its kind in the MENA. Exploring key gender related dynamics at home and at work, in public and private life, the research confronts many of the stereotypes commonly associated with men in the region and highlights pathways to gender equality. From 2021-2022, Equimundo designed an intergenerational program similar to Healthy Families, Strong Communities in Jordan that engaged both fathers and mothers, along with their children.

## CONTEXT

Across the world, gender disparities are still vast, and if anything, only grew under COVID-19 lockdowns and economic stagnation, which caused widespread unemployment and isolated people in the home. Although the public health emergency of COVID-19 is over, one of the most alarming consequences of the pandemic has been increased GBV.

Iraq ranks among the countries with the highest prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in the world - suffered physical or sexual some form of violence from their partner in the past 12 months, the highest percentage of the other countries in the survey.<sup>1</sup> Iraq also scored as one of the ten worst countries in the world on the Women Peace and Security Index (168 out of 177)<sup>2</sup>. Here, high levels of IPV and other forms of GBV are linked to high levels of gender inequality – exacerbated by hyper-masculine social norms, and the destructive impacts of prolonged conflict and exposure to violence.

Women and men's roles in Kurdistan's society have been heavily shaped by conservative religious and cultural norms. The dominant forms of masculinity in Iraq emphasize men's role as protectors and breadwinners – strong physically and financially – while women are characterized as caregivers and responsible for the majority of domestic work. When men perceive that they are unable to fulfill their role, they may resort to 're-masculinizing' themselves through aggression and violence.<sup>3</sup> In many conflict and post-conflict settings, this is a common trauma response that underpins the need for control and power over others, especially women and girls.

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1. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo. 2023. Women, Peace, and Security Index 2023/24: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. Washington, DC: GIWPS and PRIO.

2. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo. 2023.

3. Valeria Vilardo and Sara Bittar, "Gender Profile Iraq," UN Women and Oxfam, Oxfam GB, December 13, 2018, DOI: 10.21201/2018.3460.



Iraq's history of conflict shapes gender dynamics, including the ways that both genders experience conflict differently, and how conflict itself affects movement toward or away from gender equality. Conflict-related disruption to law and social order has increased women and girls' vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence and reduced access to protection mechanisms. Unresolved trauma and the normalization of societal violence, caused by the multi-decade conflict and cycles of mass displacement, have deeply affected men's identities and shaped cultural norms and behavior around violence.<sup>4</sup> Conflicts in Iraq have led militaries and armed groups to capitalize on the norm of men as protectors to incite men to fight, and have led to a disproportionate amount of men killed during conflicts as fighters or civilians compared to women who have more often been raped, enslaved, or displaced. This context is crucial in the design and framing of the program as it intentionally engages men and boys from displaced communities with a history of exposure to violence and conflict.

In addition to IPV, there are other insidious forms of violence embedded in the culture justified by cultural norms. 'Honor' based violence, which is linked to the expectation that men are responsible for protecting their family and its reputation, can manifest as physical, emotional, or socioeconomic violence towards women and girls as punishment for breaking traditional gender expectations.

These acts of violence are increasingly occurring on online platforms, which poses an additional threat. Technology-facilitated GBV (TFGBV), which has also become widespread, is used to sexually exploit, harass, and abuse individuals, including using threats, stalking, coercion, and blackmail for sex or money via mobile phone, email, or social media. Although this can happen between any genders, there is a higher incidence of men and boys perpetrating TFGBV against women and girls.

## THEORY OF CHANGE

The intended outcomes of Healthy Families, Strong Communities include reducing gender-based violence in the home setting; and increasing men and boys' dedication and involvement in gender equality efforts across KRI. The program adopts an approach to violence prevention and gender equality which focuses on the contextual drivers of violence while building a foundation of more equitable norms. Through shifting individual attitudes and behaviors associated with likelihood of perpetrating or experiencing GBV, the program aims to support families to have healthier, happier, violence-free, and more gender equitable family structures. As illustrated in the Theory of Change (Image 1), by focusing on key knowledge and attitudes related to power, roles and responsibilities, violence, and positive discipline, the program works to make incremental shifts towards more equitable attitudes and eventually behaviors. The intervention primarily addresses attitudes that legitimize 'honor' killings and other forms of violence, subjugate women in the home and other private spaces, and uphold the inherent power and authority of men.

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4. Sleggh, H., Spielberg, W., & Ragonese, C. (2021). *Masculinities and Male Trauma: Making the Connections*. Washington, DC: Equipundo.

Intended behavioral shifts include increased communication within the family, shared decision-making, using positive parenting techniques, as well as other non-violent conflict resolution. For example, by knowing the types of violence and their consequences, and understanding the role power dynamics and gender play into violence, and learning and practicing non-violent conflict resolution skills, participants will make strides to adopt these behaviors.

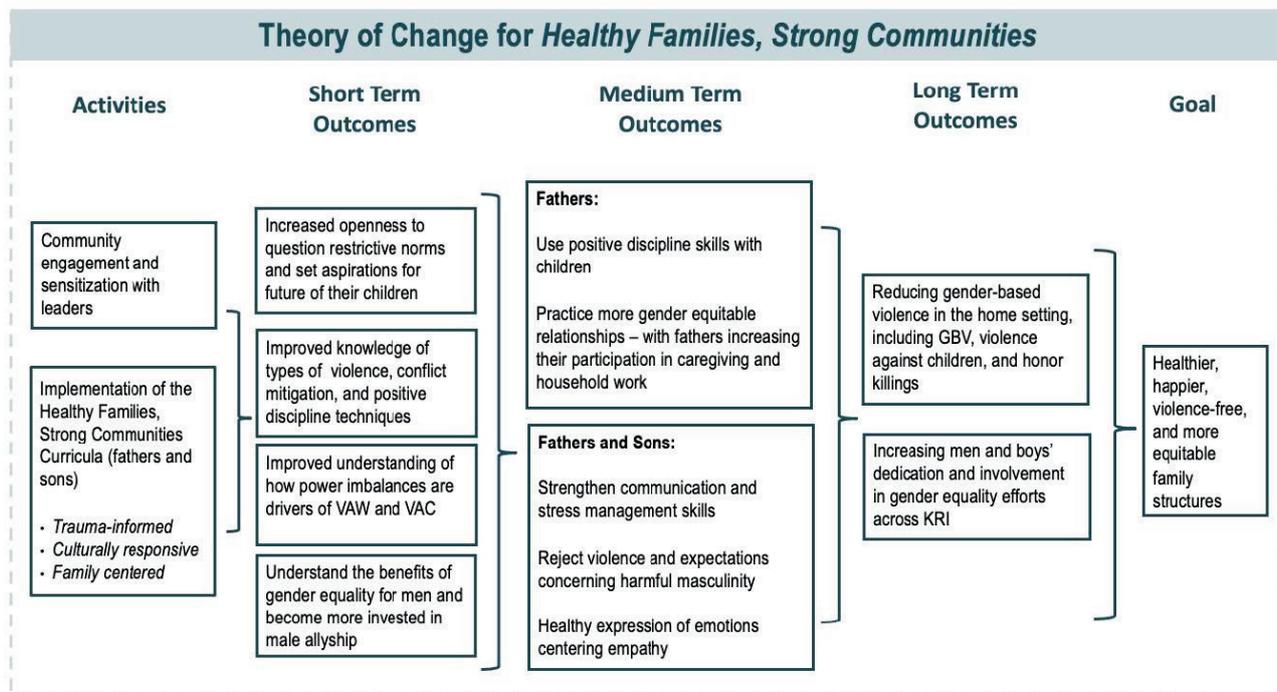
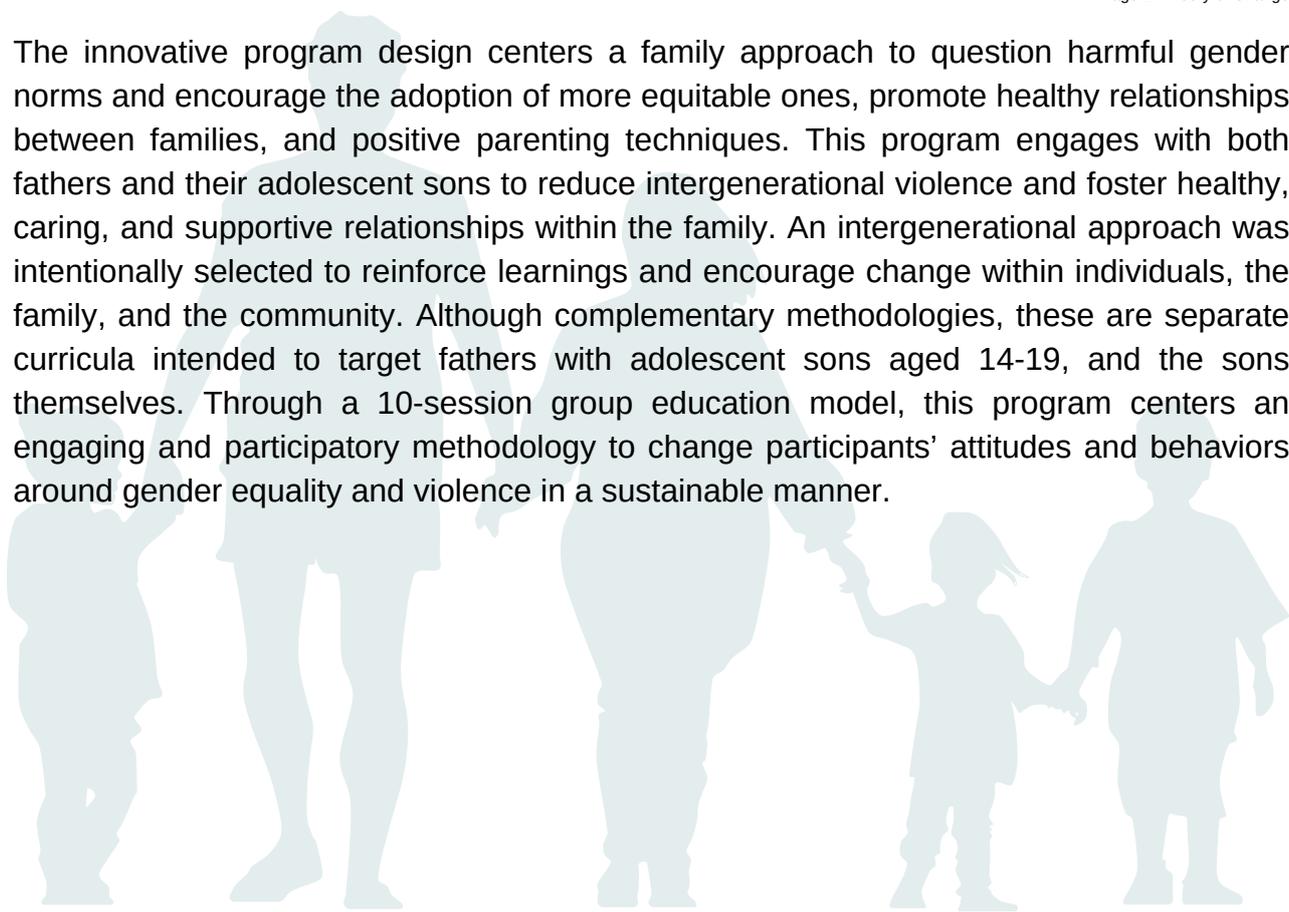


Image 1: Theory of Change

The innovative program design centers a family approach to question harmful gender norms and encourage the adoption of more equitable ones, promote healthy relationships between families, and positive parenting techniques. This program engages with both fathers and their adolescent sons to reduce intergenerational violence and foster healthy, caring, and supportive relationships within the family. An intergenerational approach was intentionally selected to reinforce learnings and encourage change within individuals, the family, and the community. Although complementary methodologies, these are separate curricula intended to target fathers with adolescent sons aged 14-19, and the sons themselves. Through a 10-session group education model, this program centers an engaging and participatory methodology to change participants' attitudes and behaviors around gender equality and violence in a sustainable manner.



## EQUIMUNDO'S EVIDENCE DRIVEN APPROACH

Gender norms are the accepted and expected characteristics, behaviors, and roles for people based on gender identity in each community. These norms are determined by culture, not biology. Therefore, as cultures change and shift, so do gender norms. Generally, people conform to social norms because they want to fit in with their community and avoid sanctions such as disapproval, punishment, and isolation. Gender norms influence many aspects of our life, including our attitudes and behaviors related to our health, safety, and relationships.<sup>5</sup>

All of Equimundo's programs aim to create more gender-equitable outcomes, fostering constructive roles for men, women, and people of other genders in gender equality, violence prevention, and healthy relationships.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to other Equimundo programs, Healthy Families, Strong Communities is a participatory small group education intervention that employs critical thinking and reflection among a group of 7-15 people. Fostering meaningful discussions, mixed in with didactic activities and fun games, immerses the participants in an experiential learning process that unpacks complex topics like power and gender norms. In each of the 60-90 minute sessions within the curricula, there are a few activities related to that particular topic that use diverse modalities to convey equitable and healthy messages, teach life skills, and reflect on deeply held beliefs. Fictional storytelling, personal introspection, and small group work and discussion, are some of the ways Equimundo and SEED designed its program sessions to engage men and boys.

Based on findings from SEED Foundation and Equimundo's [formative research](#), these curricula have been largely adapted from Equimundo's Program H and Program P, designed for young men and fathers respectively.

[Program H](#) was developed to engage youth in critical reflections on gender and help them build the skills necessary to act in more empowered and equitable ways. These programs have been adapted around the world to sensitize young men to some of the harmful ways they are socialized and to take on more gender-equitable attitudes. The original Program H methodology combines group education sessions with youth-led campaigns and activism, and it has been adapted in more than 35 countries around the world. [Quasi-experimental evaluations](#) of Program H have found that the program positively shifted young men's gender attitudes, decreased their self-reported use of violence, increased couples' communication on sexual and reproductive health and relationships, increased condom use, and decreased STI symptoms.

5. Roller, L. (2022, January). Shifting gender norms using a gender transformative approach.

6. Interagency Gender Working Group. (2017). Gender integration continuum. [https://www.igwg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/FG\\_GendIntegrContinuum.pdf](https://www.igwg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/FG_GendIntegrContinuum.pdf);



[Program P](#) supports men at all stages of their fatherhood to be more caring, involved, and healthy figures in their children's and families lives. Over the years, various adaptations of Program P have targeted expecting or new fathers with a focus on maternal, newborn and child health, while other iterations have focused on early childhood development. [Findings](#) from multiple adaptations in different settings show that it has contributed to positive shifts in men's and women's gender-related attitudes and behaviors, particularly on caregiving, maternal, newborn, and child health, joint couple decision-making, shared domestic responsibilities, and violence perpetrated by men.

## PROJECT DESIGN AND ADAPTATION

Equimundo adapted its [Program P](#) and [Program H](#) curricula to support the attitudes and behavior shifts described in the theory of change, following an intergenerational program design to fit the Kurdish cultural context. To inform the development of the curricula content and approach, SEED Foundation and Equimundo conducted [formative qualitative research](#) to explore attitudes, values, and interest in the approach with host community members, IDPs, and Syrian refugees in the KRI.

### WHO WAS THIS INTERVENTION DESIGNED FOR?

This program was designed for older adolescents (14-19 years old) and their fathers in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). This intervention was designed for multiple socio-demographic groups in the region, including host community, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the Syrian refugee population across Erbil, Sulaimani, and Duhok governorates. The men and boys who participated in the program were from a variety of different linguistic, ethnic, religious, geographic, and professional backgrounds; which allowed implementers to see the potential benefit of the program across different groups.

### Formative Research

For this investigation, the research team developed tools for focus group discussions (FGDs) and then conducted FGDs with fathers, mothers, and older adolescents of both genders. They also conducted in depth interviews with individual mothers and fathers and held key informant interviews with faith leaders, teachers, and protection workers.



The findings of this formative research demonstrate that men and boys in the KRI hold traditional, patriarchal attitudes about the distinct roles of men and women in society. This leads to power imbalances and inequitable gender norms at the household and community levels that have widespread consequences for the health, safety, and personal autonomy of women and children.

**In general, the findings suggest that women, men, and children's roles in the family and community are clearly influenced by the protracted conflict, economic conditions, and traditions.** Women and girls acknowledge the existence and impact of unhealthy patriarchal norms much more than men and boys do. The concept of male privilege is conceptually understood by most men, but not easily acknowledged by men who mostly do not live a life of privilege (i.e., ethnic minority, low socioeconomic class, rural, etc.). The research participants have lived through conflict, especially the IDPs and refugees, whose children have lived most of their lives in displacement. Their lived experience has included prolonged exposure to or perpetration of violence, severe restriction of movement, instability of housing and employment, and discrimination from authorities and host communities. The toll of these conditions deeply impacts mental and physical health and interpersonal relationships, including power dynamics and roles and responsibilities within the home. **Any proposed intervention must consider the factors of oppression that men, women, and children alike suffer in such a context.**



**The research findings highlight that parenting is highly gendered, with mothers and fathers showing substantial affection for girls over boys, while restricting girls' mobility and career aspirations as they grow older.** Fathers love their daughters and want what's best for them, but defining what is "best" is subject to what they perceive to be possible in a gender-unequal context. Fathers love their sons but generally lack the capacity to spend much time with them, as these men often work long hours to make ends meet. These factors are further influenced by a patriarchal system within the family structure, in which the man of the family often has the final say in household decisions.

**Both mothers and fathers consider discipline and restrictive behavior as a necessary part of children's upbringing, but fathers are more likely to use harsh physical punishment than mothers.** When it comes to disciplining children, fathers are more likely to use harsh physical punishment than mothers are, which often leads to mothers hiding their children's mistakes from the patriarch. But parents tend not to acknowledge this use of physical violence for discipline, as one community worker highlighted during a key informant interview.

The formative research supports other literature that in the KRI, high levels of IPV and other forms of GBV are linked to ingrained beliefs around justification of violence, low awareness of what constitutes forms of GBV, and women's disempowerment to make decisions and control of resources.<sup>7</sup> These detrimental elements of high gender inequity are exacerbated by hypermasculine social norms and the destructive impacts of prolonged conflict and exposure to violence.<sup>8,9</sup>

7. Equimundo and UN Women. 2018. Understanding Masculinities: Results from the IMAGES – Middle East and North Africa.

8. UNFPA Iraq. 2022. Male Engagement Strategic Plan 2023-2026. Available: [https://iraq.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/male\\_engagement\\_strategy\\_-\\_website.pdf](https://iraq.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/male_engagement_strategy_-_website.pdf)

9. Dietrich, L., Skakun, Z., Khaleel, R., Peute, T. 2021. Social Norms Structuring Masculinities, Gender Roles, and Stereotypes. Available: <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621237/rr-masculinities-misconceptions-women-girls-empowerment-310821-en.pdf;jsessionid=511D80FCD2098AC3C5F10F2D51097625?sequence=1>



**And lastly, findings demonstrate that gender and age largely determine parenting techniques and family relationships.** When children are younger, differences in treatment and relationships with parents are not as pronounced as they are beginning with puberty. Teenage girls develop a closer relationship marked by kinship and companionship with their mothers, while teenage boys start gaining independence due to their relative freedom of movement and social interaction. Men start spending less time with their children of both sexes, although boys have more opportunities to socialize with their fathers than girls do.

## **Adaptation of the Methodology**

Based on these formative research results, there were several design adaptations for these curricula that were unique for the piloting of this program. The final session topics are found in Image 2 below.

- Given this project's design, the team developed a methodology that aims to support fathers of older adolescents in building family communication skills and adjusting to maturing teens in the home. The age of the sons was a new adaptation for Equimundo as **it introduces new content regarding romantic relationships and honor, teenage independence and autonomy, and a shared family vision (including marriage and education).** In previous curricula where the children are younger, there is a deeper focus in positive discipline, caregiving in the household, and early childhood development. This emerged as a priority for this design through the formative research and a review of relevant literature and other curricula.
- Given the focus on breaking cycles of violence, this program **centers an intergenerational family approach, which focuses on teaching and reflecting upon healthy roles and relationships within families.** It engages with both fathers and their sons to foster healthy, caring, and supportive relationships between them. This plays out in a session whereby the sons and father go through a lesson together – and talk about how they communicate with each other and seek to outline a shared family vision. Although Equimundo has recently designed similar programs in Jordan, the evidence about the effectiveness of gender transformative intergenerational approaches to prevent GBV is limited and therefore this remains a key learning opportunity for Equimundo and SEED Foundation and the field of parenting adolescents and violence prevention through healthy masculinities.

There were also main content adaptations to make the curriculum more applicable to the audiences.

☀ Evidenced by the formative research findings, ‘honor’ surfaced as a uniquely pertinent focus of gender-based violence in the KRI. As a result, Equipundo **designed a session focused on values and ‘honor’ particularly for this context**. Although this session ties closely into conversations of violence, there was apprehension from formative research participants to speak directly on the topic given is cultural sensitivity. Therefore, the session in the curriculum explores the concept of honor as a masculine and paternal value more broadly, encourages men to identify other family values that motivate their decisions, and then interrogates the drivers of honor related violence.

☀ Throughout the curriculum, the team **adapted the scenario examples, character names, and cultural references to be more applicable and relevant** to the populations in Kurdistan, including Kurdish, Iraqi, and/or Syrian populations.

	Fathers' Group	Sons' Group
1	Welcome and Introductions	Welcome and Act Like a Man
2	Understanding Roles in Our Society	My Father's Legacy
3	Anger and Emotions	Understanding Power in Society
4	Identifying Violence	Understanding Violence
5	Power and Family	Violence, Anger, and Emotions
6	Resolving Conflict	Healthy Relationships
7	Reducing Honor Violence	Challenging Violence in the Community
8	Communicating with My Family (sons and fathers together)	
9	Positive Parenting	Where am I going?
10	Moving Forward Together	

Image 2: Curricula Session Topics

Throughout the adaptation process, Equipundo shared ideas to validate with SEED to ensure contextual appropriateness and implementability of the program. This included multiple reviews of early drafts of the curriculum, conversations about how to strengthen the product, curriculum workshops with SEED staff from various backgrounds, and piloting sessions in the community. Once the curricula were finalized and translated for implementation, Equipundo hosted a 2-week Training of Facilitators (ToF) for SEED’s facilitators, who were men who lived in the implementation sites. Learning and iterative adjustments continued through the pilot phase with the first cohort of participants.

Consistent feedback from fathers was that there were too many sessions for the time they were able to commit to the program. Therefore, Equipundo made an adjustment and combined two sessions into one, resulting in a 10-session curriculum instead of 11 sessions (as shown in Image 2). Anticipating the challenge of retention for the sons, the curriculum was originally designed with one session less for the sons, shown below.

## LEARNING FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

From October 2022 through July 2023, the Healthy Families Strong Communities program reached a total of 215 participants in Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaimani governorates who were living in camp and urban settings. Sessions were conducted with Syrian refugees residing in camps in Duhok, IDPs residing in camps in Erbil, and host community members in Sulaimani. The men who participated in the program were from a variety of different linguistic, ethnic, religious, geographic, and professional backgrounds; which allowed implementers to see the potential benefit of the program across different groups. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the 215 participants who completed the program.

	Number	%
<b>Family Member</b>		
Fathers	96	44.6%
Sons	119	55.4%
<b>Age</b>		
19 years or younger	100	46.5%
20 – 35	31	14.4%
36 – 50	51	23.8%
51 – 65	28	13%
66 years or older	5	2.3%
<b>Migration Status &amp; Location</b>		
Duhok   Refugee   Camp Setting	99	46%
Erbil   IDP   Camp Setting	84	39%
Sulaimani   Host Community   Non-Camp Setting	32	15%

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants



An important lesson learned which led to success during the program was the extent to which SEED ensured that group facilitators were provided with supervision and support while facilitating their sessions. Supervisors regularly visited sessions and supported the facilitators; thus, facilitators' skills continued to grow throughout the program implementation. Each group was facilitated by two trained SEED facilitators who worked together for recruitment, session planning, and implementation.

## **Participant Recruitment**

The approach to recruitment and retention of participants varied slightly across the various implementation locations. In one of the implementation sites, SEED already employed members of the target community as "community mobilizers". These staff members were trusted by the community and had strong relationships which they leveraged while recruiting participants. They conducted outreach within the community and invited potential participants, many of whom were already benefiting from other services SEED was already offering. Cognizant that lack of employment opportunities are one of the key challenges that men in this community encounter, SEED was able to offer complementary skills-building workshops in tailoring and barbering for men in addition to the sessions which demonstrated SEED's recognition that these are also key needs that men face. These skills-building activities as well as SEED's case management, cash assistance, and other services provided an entry point for referrals to the Healthy Families Strong Communities groups and helped ensure that the program was linking participants' to support services to address their broader needs.

In other locations, SEED relied on coordination with government entities and other NGOs to elicit interest in the program. SEED staff began by conducting meetings with relevant stakeholders such as the Directorate of Education, Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women and Families (DCVAW), camp management, universities, professional associations, and other organizations working in the same communities to share the goal of the program and seek support in recruiting interested participants. Engaging community leaders was also a key strategy. In one location, SEED met with the section leaders of the camp and explained the program and sought their support to recruit participants. Section leaders often felt burdened by having to resolve the issues of the men in the community, so were thankful to know such a program may reduce the workload they had.

One community dynamic which supported the program implementation in a positive way is the interconnectedness of families and extended families. Thus, as the first groups of participants had positive experiences in the program, others in the family could see the difference first hand and were curious to see for themselves what the program was about. The close connections between family and community members also allowed for more people to be impacted by the teachings of the program, as people were able to share what they learned with one another in natural ways. The recruitment of subsequent groups were aided by the referrals from neighbors, family members, and community leaders who had participated in the intervention and saw its benefit.

## HIGHLIGHTED LEARNINGS ON PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

1. **Engaging community leaders** at each stage in the process, from formative research through evaluations – this will increase buy in and their ability to spread the word.
2. **Leverage former participants** of the program as recruiters – the snowball effect will garner a lot of interest in your second and third cohorts in the same community.
3. **Be somewhat flexible** in your participant criteria, especially with intergenerational programs in conflict or post-conflict settings. You may find men without sons, or boys without fathers who are interested.
4. **Integrate your program** into an already existing system of services, if possible. This increases your initial pool for referrals and people are probably more likely to join sessions if there is already a level of trust with the implementer.

### Participant Retention

In order to promote retention, facilitators ensured that potential participants had clear expectations about what the program entailed and gathered those who were interested, providing an in-depth briefing of the program's objectives, content, and expected outcomes. This initial engagement provided an opportunity to get direct input from participants about their preferred times and days for the sessions to occur, which whenever possible, were taken into account. This proved to be an effective strategy as one father said in a post-program focus group, “the time of session is perfect because we selected it ourselves.” SEED staff registered those who were interested and formed cohorts of fathers and sons. Facilitators and/or community mobilizers maintained regular communication with all group participants by forming Whatsapp messaging groups to easily share updates and communicate with all the participants. Reminder messages and calls were given ahead of time (typically one day before and an hour before each session). Other barriers such as transportation were mitigated, through provision of transportation stipends when sessions were held in urban areas.

In order to encourage participants to attend the majority of the sessions, participants who attended over 75% of sessions would receive a “Certificate of Completion” in the program. This motivated participants to try to attend as many sessions as they could.

By implementing these strategies, the program successfully recruited participants, maintained their consistent attendance, and promoted their sustained engagement throughout the program's duration. As shown in Table 2, only 13.65% of the registered program participants attended less than 5 of the 10 sessions. This attrition rate is considerably low for a multi-week intervention with highly mobile populations.



	<b>Registered</b>	<b>Completed the Program</b>	<b>Dropout (or attended less than 5 sessions)</b>
<b>Fathers</b>	103	96	7
<b>Sons</b>	146	119	27
<b>Total</b>	249	215	34

Table 2: Retention Across Groups

In the implementation process, several community dynamics emerged as both barriers and promoters of successful retention of this program. Particularly within more vulnerable or displaced communities, economic needs are one of the key challenges and are at the forefront of community members' minds. This meant that participants who had employment opportunities prioritized work opportunities over attending sessions especially when the work opportunities available to them were often seasonal, temporal, or very long hours. Additionally, the participants who were not employed were skeptical that such an intervention (which did not have financial benefit) could be something useful when other needs they had were not being met.

Another strong value in the community is academic success. Thus, especially at the end of the school year when students needed to focus on studying for and taking their exams, they were not able to prioritize attending sessions which made implementation in some of the school-based settings or during the spring months more difficult.

Additionally, resistance to changing social norms and cultural values emerged as a common barrier, particularly in communities affected by migration and displacement. Reluctance on the part of some community members to embrace new practices required careful navigation. Through a strategic and empathetic approach, SEED staff demonstrated that they understood and respected each community's culture and underlying values, and built trust through collaborative decision-making and inclusivity. SEED identified common goals and benefits of the program for community members, and promoted past participants of the program as inspiring examples. SEED staff addressed participants' concerns with sensitivity and patience. By engaging respected community leaders and elders, SEED garnered support from key influencers. SEED's dedication to providing a culturally sensitive program, while celebrating equitable practices, contributed greatly to the positive experience and outcome within the communities.



## HIGHLIGHTED LEARNINGS ON PARTICIPANT RETENTION

1. **Clearly establish expectations from the beginning** – during your recruitment pitches, it's important to emphasize the time commitment and how the men will benefit from the program. A clear explanation of what the program is AND isn't will avoid surprises during implementation for both you and the participants.
2. **Let the participants lead on logistics decisions** for each of the group's meeting days, times, and location. Flexibility and constant checking in is key to make sure there's commitment at the end of each session to attend the next one. This is especially true for men who work outside of the implementation area and school-going youth.
3. **Be engaging and supportive as a facilitator** and don't treat this as a classroom lecture. Men like to discuss among other men and be interactive. They generally don't enjoy being talked at – so avoid that as much as possible.
4. **Introduce an incentive structure** that appreciates them for their time and energy. This could be snacks during the session, a generous transport stipend, a certificate of completion, or anything else you think they would value.

### Adjustments throughout implementation

Throughout the implementation, several adjustments were made to enhance the program. While the typical model for implementing this program is to have one session per week to allow more time between sessions to practice what is learned, through consultation with participants and observation of the most effective approaches, the amount of sessions per week, or even per day were modified, based on what best suited the needs of that particular group. In general, having two sessions a week promoted engagement and more active participation since what participants learned remained fresher in their minds. Additionally, finishing the course in less total weeks helped retain participants who may have to move or return to employment opportunities and could not commit to such a long course duration. The SEED team also tried to leverage specific times of year which were easier for participants to attend the sessions and avoid the times of year which would be more difficult. For example, summer was an easier time for young people to attend due to not having school responsibilities.

Furthermore, while the program was ideally designed for a father and son within the same family to participate for maximum impact, adjustments were made to accommodate the circumstances of the participants. For example, some fathers expressed interest in participating, despite not having sons to accompany them to the sessions. Similarly, there were sons who wished to participate but did not have fathers present. Thus, specific cohorts were created for either "only fathers" or "only sons/young men" which ensured that all interested individuals could fully participate in and benefit from the program.



Similarly, SEED also implemented the sessions with different groups of people who had the potential to keep taking the message of the program forward. For example in one location where it was a challenge to recruit both fathers and sons together, SEED began a partnership with a university and engaged social work university students in the program; this not only showed the ability for the program to be impactful for a slightly older age group, but it also helped future social work professionals take time for their own development and self-reflection.

Throughout implementation SEED not only reached out to individuals and communities, but engaged with educational and governmental institutions who wanted to see the program integrated within their contexts. This expansion of interest highlights the program's ability to resonate with diverse groups and its potential for making a positive impact in the community. Another important aspect of the adjustments pertained to the curriculum. Feedback from facilitators played a crucial role in shaping the program's content. Based on their valuable input, the overall length of the program was shortened, some activities were changed, and the sequence of sessions in the manual was modified. These changes were implemented to improve the overall effectiveness and relevance of the curriculum, aligning it more closely with the needs and preferences of the participants. By making these adjustments, the program organizers demonstrated their commitment to flexibility and responsiveness. These modifications allowed for a more tailored and impactful program, fostering a positive and enriching experience for all participants.

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

During the implementation, various monitoring tools were utilized to support facilitators, ensure fidelity to the sessions, and be responsive to the changing needs of the program. This included observation and after-session forms, which were completed by SEED staff.

The team adopted a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the process and outcomes of the intervention. This included a pre- and immediate post-survey (with close-ended questions), focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted by an independent monitoring and evaluation team staff member, and in-depth interviews.

- Participants were asked to complete a quantitative pre- and post-test survey to measure any changes demonstrated from the beginning of their participation in the program and at the end. These tools specifically examined measures that reflected their knowledge, attitudes, and self reported behaviors about topics covered in the curriculum – particularly violence and conflict resolution, household decision-making and interpersonal power, and positive parenting.
- A selection of participants were then chosen to join a focus group discussion, with open-ended questions about their experience in the program. Other participants volunteered to participate in in-depth interviews where they reflected more on their own journey during the course.
- Finally, a sample of women who were related to the men and boys who attended the groups participated in focus group discussions to provide their input about the impact of the program on their male family members.

The addition of the FGD involving the wives/mothers of the participants is important both for triangulating impact data, as well as ensuring the program's accountability to the needs of women and girls in the communities.

	Fathers	Sons	Wives/Mothers	Total
<b>Number of Pre- / Post-Tests</b>	83	103	N/A	186
<b>Number of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Participants</b>	25	51	22	98
<b>Number of Key Informant Interviews (KII)</b>	20	9	N/A	29

Table 3: Participants included in the Evaluation

As shown in Table 3, the team was able to clean and analyze pre-/post-tests from 186 of the 215 participants who completed the program. Using a comparative analysis, the results in this section show two snapshots in time – one before the intervention and one afterwards. These pre-/post-tests were completed in the language the participants felt most comfortable in (English, Kurdish Badini, Kurdish Sorani, or Arabic were available); and for low-literacy participants, the facilitators verbally administered the survey. A subset of 76 participants joined focus groups, as well as 22 women who were the wives and mothers of the participants. Over the course of the program cycle, SEED staff including facilitators, supervisors, or members of the Communications team conducted 29 interviews from a standardized questionnaire to gather case studies and deeper insights about the impact of the program.

Although the quantitative results discussed in the following sections are promising, caution must be taken when drawing conclusions from a small sample size of participants. Other limitations in the qualitative data include the convenient selection of respondents, and potential desirability bias given that the FGDs and KIIs were administered by SEED staff. Additionally, the implementation team noticed challenges with the comprehension of some of the measures, especially the double negative questions, which was at times further compounded by some participants' limited access to education and/or limited literacy. This highlights the importance of cognitive testing of measures to ensure participants' understanding of the questions by the time pre-tests are administered. Despite these limitations, the triangulation of the quantitative data with qualitative methods does strengthen the overall impact narrative. For future implementation and measurement of this program, the instruments have been modified based on participant and facilitator feedback.

## General Perceptions of the Program

Post-test data shows the program was well received by the participants, and met their expectations – **with 96% of fathers, and 98% of sons reporting their experience in the program was “positive” or “very positive.”**

“After engaging in this Program, a profound transformation has taken place in our thoughts and beliefs. Many of our previous misconceptions and negative notions have been replaced. As an example, it's now within our understanding that engaging in bullying behavior towards someone is both impolite and considered unacceptable.” - Youth FGD participant in Duhok

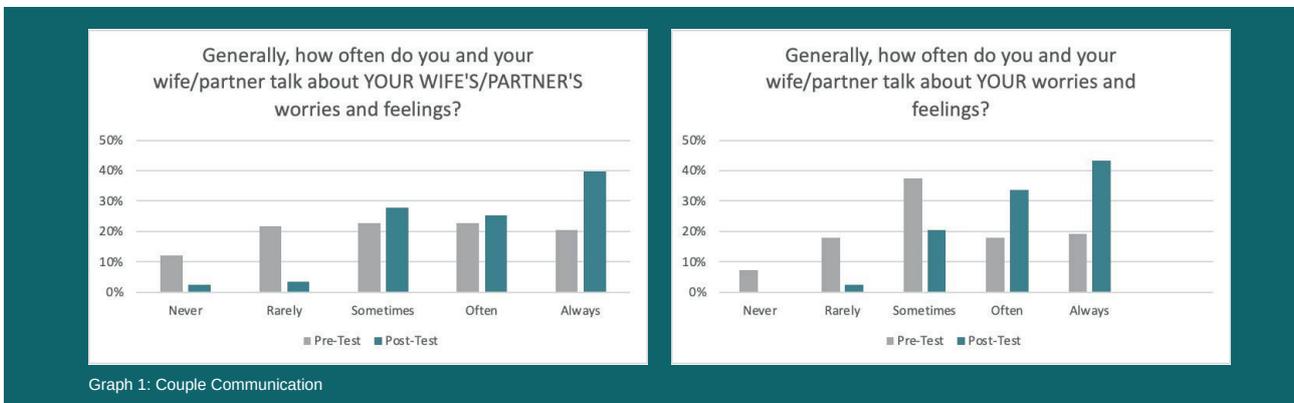
When asked about the applicability of the session content, one youth FGD participant in Erbil stated that **“all topics were relevant for our daily life particularly, contents that are related to gender, power, violence, and communication with our families.”** Additionally, a father in Erbil commented that **“the program was realistic because it addressed some sensitive matters in the community which we were not able to discuss due to closed minds in our surroundings. This course made us share information between us and also enabled us to plan and manage sensitive issues in family and community.”** From a facilitation and logistical standpoint, focus group discussants affirmed the importance of strong facilitation that is organized, supportive, and flexible, which led to much of this program's success.

## Intergenerational Approach and Communication

The focus groups highlighted the program's impact on strengthening family relationships due to the intergenerational design. Sons, fathers, and the women in their lives reported a closer relationship between fathers and sons as a result of this program. One father in Duhok said “I hadn't really talked to my son much before, but after participating in this program, I reached out to him. Now, our relationship has grown stronger.” One woman in Duhok saw this as a major benefit from the program, saying, “My husband and my son are very happy to participate in your program and their relationship has become stronger.” This closer relationship positively impacts both the father and son, and the entire family dynamic. In the pre-/post-test data, sons reported the project has contributed to their parents more regularly asking for their opinions, as well as listening when they share their plans for the future. One Erbil-based father affirmed this finding by saying “Our communication and relationship with children have changed after participation in this program. We become open to their opinions and suggestions on some matters related to their education, collaboration, and their life.”

Participants also reported that the program has strengthened the relationship between couples. One father in Sulaimani mentioned, “this training enhanced my relationship with my wife and children. Before the participation, I was handling them in a harsh way but now I listen and am flexible with them.”

This is also evidenced through the data in Graph 1, which shows that prior to the program 37% of men reported that they “always” or “often” speak with their partner about their worries, whereas following the intervention, this increased to 77%. Conversely, before the program, 43% reported that they “always” or “often” speak with their partner about their partner’s worries or feelings, while after, this increased to 66%. One wife in Duhok mentioned that after the program “[Her] husband [now] always communicates with me and takes my ideas and decisions for family themes.” When reflecting on any changes she has seen in her husband as a result of the program, another woman adds that, “Yes, a lot has changed. He always solves problems in a calm manner and takes the time to calm down when angry.”

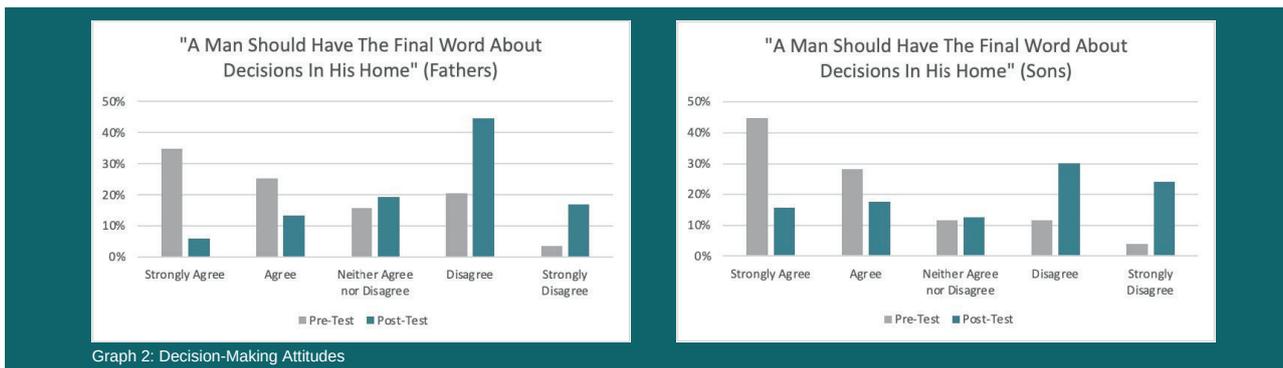


While reported satisfaction about the quality of the communication between partners was already strong at the pre-test with 90% of participants reporting they were satisfied or very satisfied with their communication, this increased to 100% at the post-test.

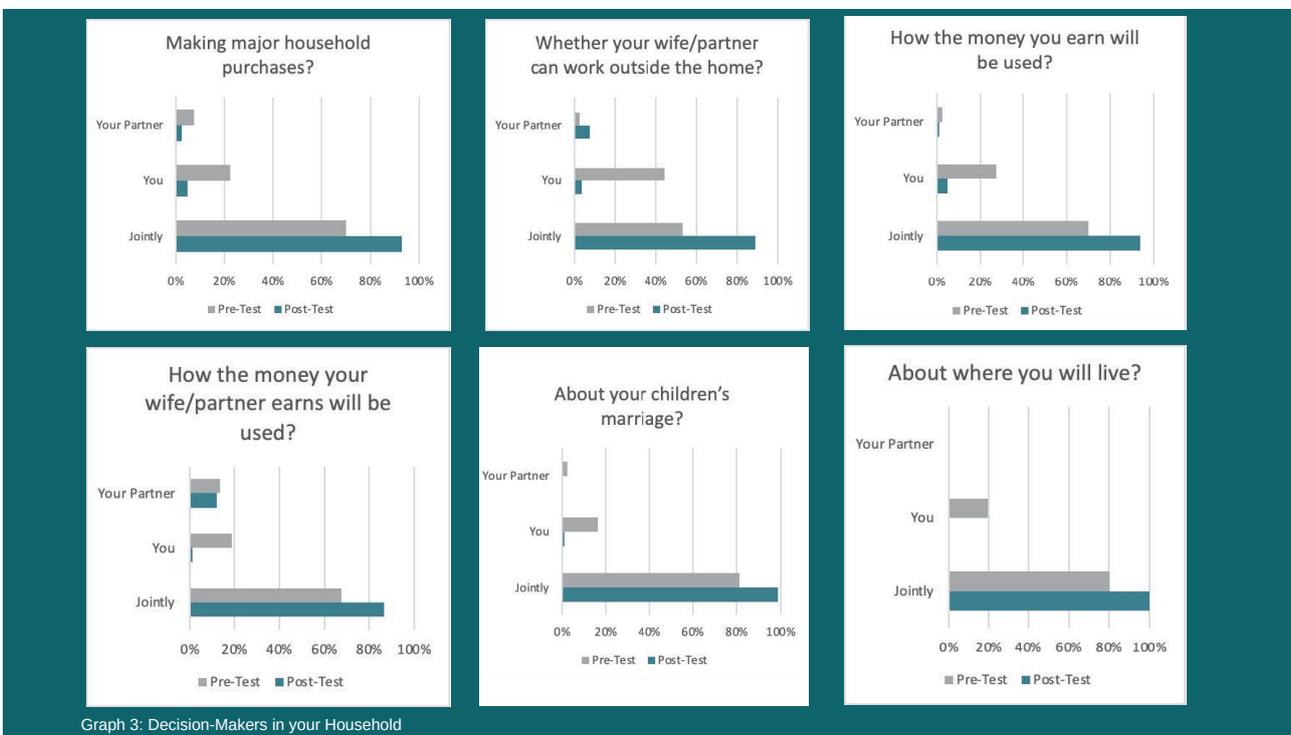
### Decision-Making and Household Power

Throughout the program, participants explored concepts of power and how that manifests in the household and community setting. In a patriarchal context like KRI, men are the predominant decision-maker in the home. Through critical reflections and various activities on privilege and power, the participants showed a considerable shift in their attitudes towards their uncontested decision-making power. As shown in Graph 2 of the pre-/post-test data, both sons and fathers have demonstrated a shift in attitudes away from patriarchal decision-making. Before the intervention, 60% of fathers and 73% of sons either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement “A man should have the final word about decisions in his home”; whereas after the intervention these percentages dropped to 19% and 33% respectively. One youth participant in Sulaimani stated that “Being a man doesn't mean having power and using violence against family members and imposing on his wife and children.” Another youth participant in Erbil shared that “These sessions taught me that decisions should be shared between a man and his wife, not only taken by husbands. In addition, men should help and support their wives at home.” Reflecting on manhood and his masculinity, one father remarked that “Before the program, we believed that manhood is power and authority.”

However, after his participation, he realized the benefits of joint decision-making and the promise of sharing authority and decision-making in the household.



When asked who normally makes a variety of decisions in the home, the fathers' responses indicated changes in their behavior related to this attitudinal shift about shared decision-making in the household. One father in the Erbil focus group said, "The program has changed our perspective toward decisions that should be made in a couple. Now, we share our decisions and ideas with each other, particularly those that are related to finances, children's education, and work." Another remarked that "This program has changed me in all aspects such as a change in behavior with partners and organizing goals for the present and future. Shared decisions are always the best way to go forward." These anecdotal quotes are supported by the pre-/post-test data which shows a shift in household behavior related to decision-making. For the decisions below in Graph 3, fathers were asked before and after the program who normally makes the decision – themselves, their wife, or jointly.



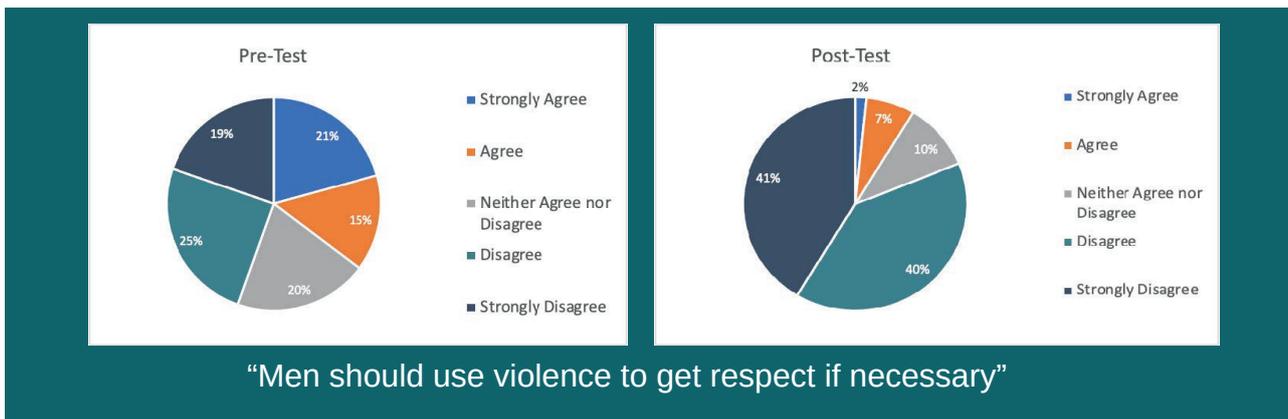
As shown in the graphs above, there were considerable shifts in reported decisions made solely by fathers to decisions that were made jointly in the family. These trends were supported by many wives who participated in focus groups. For example, one wife in an Erbil focus group stated that "[My] husband has been showing great progress in becoming more open-minded and understanding.



As a result, he has given me and our daughters the freedom to make plans and leave home whenever necessary. This new level of trust and flexibility has been a welcome change for our family.” Another stated that “My husband [now] always communicates with me and takes my ideas and decisions for family themes.” Along with this increase in joint-decisions making across many domains traditionally dominated by men, there were also some indications that decisions that were historically made by wives are now being made jointly. However, this finding may be caused by imperfect data and needs to be further understood.

### Violence and Conflict Resolution

Measures related to knowledge and attitudes about the use of violence showed positive shifts among the father and son groups via a decrease in attitudes that justify or contribute to drive violence. The two beliefs measured in the pre-/post-test were around the acceptance of violence. In Graph 4 below, the data shows a decrease in the agreement to the following statement: “Men should use violence to get respect if necessary.” The combined data from father and sons shows 35% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement in the pre-test, whereas in the post-test this opinion decreased to a quarter – with only 9% selecting agreed or strongly agreed.



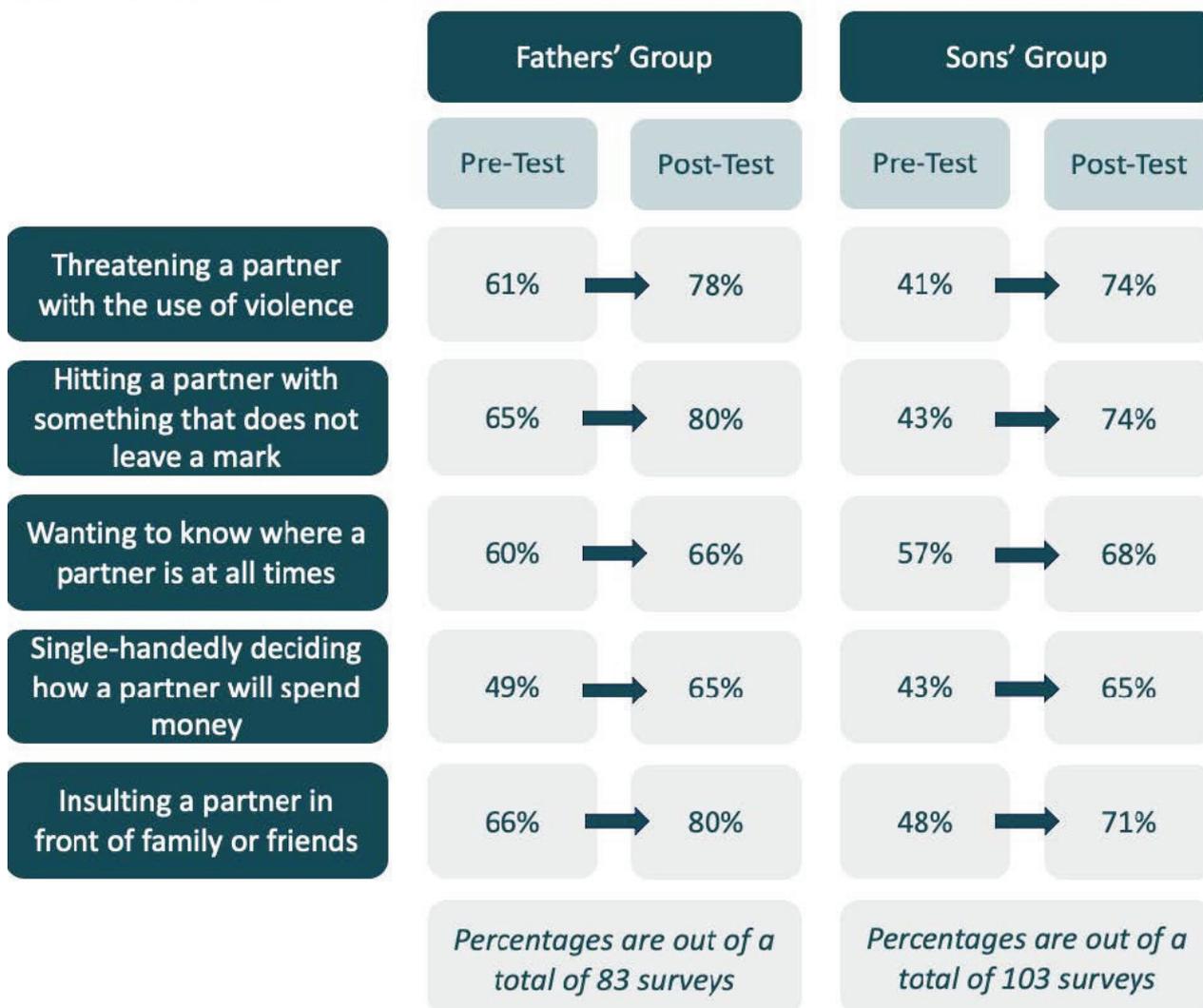
Generational differences in the responses highlight the need to work with boys and younger men on masculinities focused violence prevention programming. Sons were far more regressive in their responses during the pre-test, with 26% (27/103) strongly agreeing with the statement, compared to 13% of fathers. Yet, the intervention’s messaging convinced all but one of those 27 son respondents to switch their answers during the post-test.

When asked whether fathers and sons agreed with the statement “There are times when a woman deserves to be beaten”, 40% agreed or strongly agreed in pre-test, whereas only 13% did so in the post-test. This data demonstrates deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs that enhance women’s and girl’s risk of experiencing GBV. Relatedly, one father from Erbil said, “There are still people in the camp using force against their partners. We believe that the use of power is not justified because other alternatives are available instead of force. Indeed, this program changed our minds to think about other ways to treat our partners.”

Knowledge is the foundation to a successful violence prevention program. In this program, there were significant gains in participants being able to identify forms of violence. As shown in the figure, both fathers and sons were better able to identify forms of violence when asked whether the actions listed were considered violence.



**The figures below represent the % of respondents who correctly answered “yes” when asked if the action as a form of violence.**



The survey measures intentionally assessed forms of violence that the formative research had highlighted as lesser-known, including threatening, economic violence, and stalking. The results still show a lot of room for improvement, particularly with the sons group, where even after the intervention, none of these knowledge measures were higher than 75%, revealing that many still did not identify the actions as violence. This further supports the previous finding that show boys and young men tend to be more regressive and less aware on topics related to violence.

In addition to the positive shifts in knowledge and attitudes about violence, the program participants demonstrated a gain in their skills and self efficacy to resolve conflict nonviolently. Linked to sessions related to emotional regulation, bystander intervention, and conflict resolution, the fathers and sons walked away with specific strategies and began practicing them in their lives. This was reflected in the women’s focus group when one wife said,

“

*“Prior to joining these sessions, my husband seemed to be constantly angry and distant from our family. This behavior created an emotional rift between us, and it was challenging for both myself and our children. However, I am pleased to inform you that since attending the sessions, my husband has undergone a remarkable transformation. The sessions have provided him with valuable insights and tools to address and manage his anger. As a result, he has become a better person, both emotionally and mentally.”*

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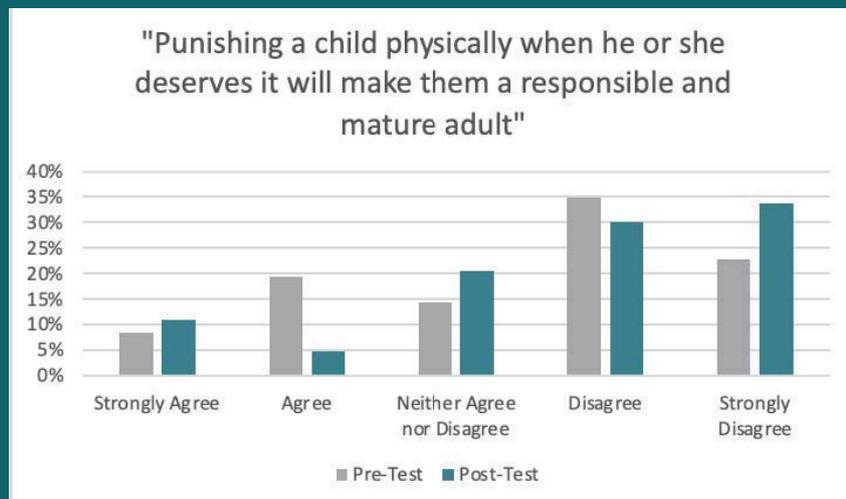
Examples of these tools and coping strategies were integrated into each of the sessions as mindfulness activities and during the post-test, the majority of men and boys reported using the strategies they'd learned in the sessions; for example, 90% of fathers and 80% of sons reported that in the past two weeks, they had “Counted to 10 before speaking or acting” when they experienced anger or difficult emotions. Skills around emotional regulation were highlighted as other strategies that fathers and sons found useful throughout the sessions. One young man in Erbil had mentioned during an FGD that “I did not know about violence and now I don't use violence. Especially in school, I don't hit anyone now; even if someone hits me I don't hit him back because the facilitator told me whenever I feel anger, take a deep breath to calm down and it's working for me.” And a mother reported a ‘remarkable difference’ in her son's ability to effectively cope, saying “I wanted to share how our son has been positively affected by the sessions. Being in his early teenage years, he often struggles with maintaining a sense of calmness and composure. However, since participating in these sessions, we have noticed a remarkable difference in his behavior. He appears to be more composed and is better equipped to handle challenging situations”.

Empathy and communication were also spoken about during the FGDs as a useful technique to de-escalate conflict, with one son in Duhok stating that “I've learned a great deal about violence, particularly physical violence, and I've also gained a deeper understanding of the emotions experienced by individuals who endure violence”. Reported behavior regarding communication revealed that 84% of fathers, and 76% of sons, had “used words to describe what they were feeling” in the two weeks preceding the post-test.

Lastly, youth reported a higher self-efficacy to actively intervene as a bystander to violent situations – this is reflected in an increase of boys reporting that they would use at least one of the active bystander options covered in the sessions (creating a distraction, asking a friend for help, confronting the person, or searching for the authorities) instead of “doing nothing,” from 43% in the pre-test to 70% in the post-test selecting.

## Positive Parenting

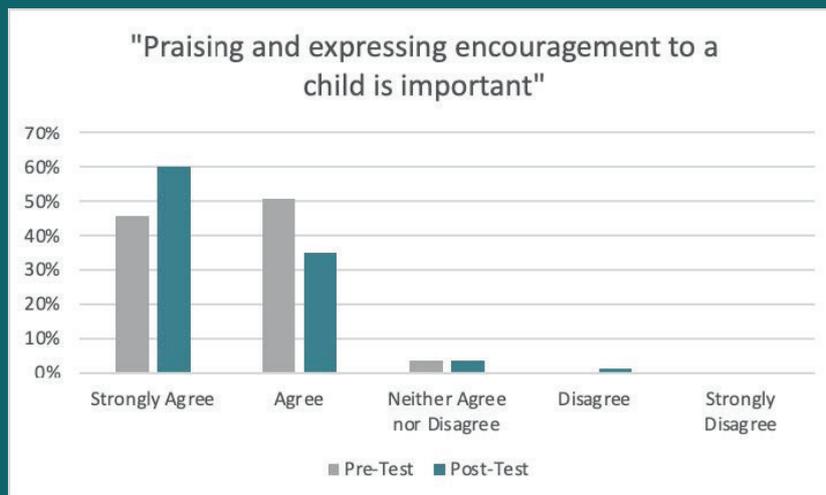
As this program has an explicit focus on fathering, the evaluation tools measured the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to positive parenting and non-violent discipline. The pre-/post-test data showed a minor shift in attitudes related to positive discipline and praising children. Graph 5 shows the responses to the statement “Punishing a child physically when he or she deserves it will make them a responsible and mature adult”. Even though there is movement towards disagreement and a decrease in the justification of this belief, it would be beneficial to further explore the nuances of this norm and the beliefs of fathers, including which behaviors of children they would identify as justifying violence.



Graph 5. Justification of Violence Against Children

Relatedly, in the pre-test, fathers were asked to identify positive parenting techniques. More than 1 in 4 fathers identified “Yelling at a child” as one of these in the pre-test. After the intervention, 98% of the same respondents correctly said it was not a positive parenting technique.

Pre-/post-test results show gains in father’s knowledge in identifying “Praising a child’s good behavior” (from 78% at pre-test to 89% at post-test), and “Leaving the room for a few minutes to cool down” (from 70% at pre-test to 98% at post-test) as positive parenting techniques as well. In Graph 6, father respondents show a high degree of alignment that praising and expressing encouragement to a child is important. As a pillar of positive parenting and reinforcement of good behavior, this is a hopeful indication that fathers acknowledge the power of supporting their children.



Graph 6: Attitudes concerning Praising Children

This data shows a confluence of a general dearth of knowledge about non-violent alternatives to harmful punishment, coupled with beliefs that justify harm and encourage verbal and physical violence inflicted to children. Based on pre-/post-test data, the program had supported fathers with the skills to respond to their children's behavior without violence. Before the program, only 30% of fathers strongly agreed that they have the capacity, energy, and knowledge necessary to respond nonviolently. That level of agreement increased to 58% after the program. Further supporting this finding, the vast majority (over 95%) of fathers had reported practicing at least four positive parenting techniques in the two weeks preceding the post-test. One father in Duhok commented that "I'm making an effort to be patient and listen to what my children want. After understanding their perspective, I do my best to meet their needs. This approach has led my children to not take actions without my consent. I've learned all these techniques from this program."





## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, RESEARCH

- 1.** There is a need to invest in gender transformative engagement of men and boys across multiple sectors. This would include embedding this intergenerational program throughout a diverse set of institutions – prioritizing high school education systems, colleges and universities (especially social work programs), police and military, humanitarian response agencies, and other relevant government agencies providing family services and support. Scaling up Healthy Families Strong Communities or similar programs will require the explicit support, strong alignment, partnership, and capacity strengthening of such institutions. Even in complex conservative contexts, it's imperative to leverage allies who share a more equitable and non-violent vision for the future.
- 2.** Given some trends indicating a higher proportion of boys and young men continued to hold more harmful norms and attitudes even after finishing the program, future work should intentionally focus on youth, particularly younger boys, in masculinity-focused age-appropriate programming. This is especially relevant in conflict and post-conflict settings where boys are vulnerable to instability and possible recruitment into extremist groups. Intergenerational family approaches hold a significant promise to address restrictive gender notions, construct more equitable and healthy notions of masculinity and reduce GBV, accompanied with complementary programming for the women and girls in the household, though further integration of women and girls within the Healthy Families Strong Communities program is encouraged. Engaging parents as role models and creating an enabling environment for youth to be caring and non-violent is a key to success.
- 3.** Further research, exploration, and adaptation is needed to accommodate for the variations in beliefs, knowledge, and behaviors among different demographic groups. Given the diversity of the region, facilitators and implementers must further modify and contextualize the standard activities to ensure they resonate with the audiences. This could include further exploration of the impact and efficacy of delivering the program with groups which intentionally include men and boys from different demographic backgrounds to promote social cohesion as opposed to more homogenous groups.



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