

A photograph of three women sitting on a patterned rug in a room with textured walls. One woman in the center is reading a document, while the others look on. The image is overlaid with a blue tint.

Integrating a Gender-Transformative Approach into the Husbands Schools Program in Niger

An Equimundo Case Study from the Agency for All (A4A) Project

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Team of trained trainers, WADATA staff members and Equimundo consultants

About This Brief

This brief shares practical experiences of the process of redesigning the Husbands' Schools Program in Zinder, Niger to be more effective in shifting restrictive gender norms limiting women's ability to make choices about their reproductive health. The work was carried out under the Agency for All project, coordinated by a consortium of partners—including the University of California San Diego's Center on Gender Equity and Health (UCSD-GEH), GRADE Africa, EVIHDAF, Matchboxology, Femmes Actions Développement (FAD), Save the Children, and Equimundo—and funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Project Overview

The Husbands' Schools intervention (known as “École des Maris”) was first piloted in 2007 in Zinder, Niger by UNFPA. The program engaged men as “model husbands” to promote women’s use of maternal and reproductive health services and encourage healthier behaviors within couples. While the program demonstrated success in improving health outcomes and has since been scaled within and beyond Niger, evidence suggests that the Husbands' Schools have had limited impact on transforming deeply entrenched gender norms and unequal power dynamics between men and women.¹ There is a growing need for interventions that engage men in maternal, newborn, and child health that are designed with care to avoid reinforcing unequal decision-making, strengthen women’s agency to seek care, promote joint decision-making, and foster more equitable gender relationships.

Agency for All was a USAID-funded project (2022-2025) that aimed to generate evidence on effective social and behavior change strategies to convert intention into action and improve health by developing culturally relevant concept of agency². The initiative intended to strengthen evidence on approaches to foster empowerment and increase the agency of local partners to generate and utilize evidence. In Niger, the project partnered with Wadata, another USAID-funded project, to design, implement, and evaluate a gender-transformative adaptation of the Husband’s Schools in Zinder to transform the underlying gender inequities and promote agency in health and beyond.

1 USAID. (2024). Designing and Implementing a Gender Transformative Adaptation of the Husband’s Schools in Niger.

2 Agency (a tripartite construct comprising can, act and do) is the most visible catalyst within the empowerment process in which individuals and groups build consciousness of choice and self-efficacy to create change, enabling them to achieve their self-determined goals within the opportunities and constraints of social and institutional structures.

Part 1:
**Key Findings From the
Formative Research**

The purpose of the formative research was to explore contextual realities specific to gender equity and agency to ensure that the adaptation of the Husband's Schools model aligned with the needs and priorities of the local population. The research began in 2023 in two Departments in Zinder, Niger: Magaria and Damagaram Takaya. It was led by team members from EVIHDAF, Equimundo, GRADE Africa, Matchboxology, Save the Children, and UCSD's Center for Gender Equity and Health (GEH).

Key Findings

The research study consisted of focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews (IDI) to explore perceptions of gender equity, gender roles and social norms in southeastern Niger and how they influence agency, decision-making, and aspirations in relation to reproductive, maternal, neonatal and child health (RMNCH) and nutrition. In addition, human-centered-design (HCD)³-informed activities were also carried out to document and understand Husband's Schools participant experiences and explore opportunities and challenges for a gender transformative adaptation of the intervention.

Gender Norms & Household Roles

Socio-cultural, religious, and economic norms strongly shape men's and women's roles within households, influencing decision-making, division of labor, and family well-being. Understanding these dynamics are crucial to inform the design of an intervention that is realistic and culturally sensitive.

Women's Roles

Women shoulder most domestic and caregiving responsibilities, including household work, petty trading, or animal husbandry. Their social value is tied to supporting their husbands, caring for children, and maintaining household stability. Women who deviate from these expectations risk social disapproval as illustrated in the quote below.

“They’ll say it’s all over for the husband, he’s become ‘mijin hadjia’, a husband dominated by his wife. She’s shirked her duties, so she’s a bad wife.”

– Woman, 25, FGD, Magaria (a department in Zinder)

Harmony

A harmonious household is one in which women and men perform their roles per societal expectations. Questioning or deviating from those roles threatens harmony, which is a key attribute of Nigerien social order. Women's life aspirations and health-related goals were conceptualized as those that contribute to the collective health, well-being and harmony of the family and community.

³ Human-Centered Design (HCD) is a problem-solving approach that puts people (users, beneficiaries) at the core of creating solutions, focusing on their needs, behaviors, and contexts to develop effective, empathetic products, services, or systems that truly improve lives, often involving stages like Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. It goes beyond assumptions to understand why and how people interact with challenges, ensuring solutions are useful, usable, and desirable.

“Her aim is to have an arranged life in which the self of her life will be taken, that she will have a peaceful life with her husband in the household, and that her life will blossom in total and absolute secrecy.”

– Woman, 26-35 Years, FGD, Magaria

Constraints on Women’s Agency

Women’s ability to pursue goals is often constrained by the authority of their husbands or mothers-in-law, especially when husbands migrate for work. Non-compliance or disagreement may result in social sanctions or divorce.

Men’s Roles and Authority

Men are regarded as the primary providers and decision-makers. They are responsible for household income, children’s education, religious guidance, and family protection. Men who do not meet these expectations may be seen as weak, and their wives may also be stigmatized. Household tasks are highly gendered, and men engaging in domestic work are often perceived as “dominated” or “bewitched” by their wives.

Exceptions to Traditional Gender Norms and Fluid Dynamics of Power

Some women, particularly those who are educated, hold leadership positions, or have prior pregnancy experience, exercise greater influence in household decisions. Older men or more experienced couples often practice joint decision-making, considering women’s advice while retaining ultimate authority.



Women facilitators practicing the use of the recorded stories to facilitate sessions

“To answer this question, my wives play a decisive role. I do not decide anything without consulting my family. We consult each other every time.”

– Man, 90 Years, FGD, Damagaram Takaya

Another exception to the rigid division of labour is during pregnancy. Most study participants emphasized that pregnancy is a special and vulnerable period for women, specifying that the additional support needed is supposed to come from other female relatives, not men. At the same time, there was strong consensus that couples should follow healthcare providers’ advice and attend recommended consultations together. This illustrates how RMNCH health-focused interventions are opportunities to reinforce existing gender-equitable dynamics.

“Here at home in the village... if the husband’s family does not support her, it is considered a shame in the village. It’s a shame in terms of safeguarding the health of children and women... it has become a habit for the entire community.”

– Man, 25-35 Years, FGD, Magaria

In addition, the formative research included recommendations for the design and delivery of the new Husbands’ Schools intervention such as:

- **Curriculum content:** Sequence sessions focused on couple relationships, shared family health goals, harmony, and well-being. Consider very low literacy levels, inclusion of interactive activities, and integrate references to the Quran.
- **Facilitator Profile:** Facilitators of this new intervention should come from existing Husbands Schools leaders to enhance trust and credibility of the intervention in the community.
- **Interactive and Practical Sessions:** Incorporate adult-learning approaches such as role-playing, storytelling, and including real-life examples.
- **Involving Women:** Even though this is a male-focused intervention, women are eager to participate and gain knowledge independently rather than second-hand from husbands.
- **Polygamous Households:** Rotational participation ensures equitable engagement across co-wives.
- **Be low-literacy friendly and easy to implement for those without experience on gender:** The content has to be structured enough to provide guidance for facilitators with little experience on gender dynamics and participatory facilitation yet not text heavy and usable by participants with very low literacy levels.

Part 2:

Developing and Integrating a Gender- Transformative Approach to the Husband's Schools

Based on these findings, Equimundo led the development of new gender-transformative programmatic content, with support from Save the Children, the WADATA project team in Niger, and UCSD-GEH.

To begin, the formative research findings from Niger were reviewed to identify patterns in attitudes about gender and power, find opportunities to reinforce existing positive practices and beliefs about gender roles, identify barriers to engaging fathers in caregiving, better understand the dynamics of women's agency in RMNCH decision-making, and promote gender equality more broadly in the community.

Pre-existing Husband School materials were also thoroughly reviewed. The original Husbands School materials consisted of a training manual for facilitators and a set of visual aids containing images and simple language on what "model husbands" can do to support their partner during and after pregnancy, as well as how to support the health of their children up to the first few years of life.

After this review, a detailed "curriculum map" was developed that outlined the three main learning objectives that the revised gender-transformative Husband School program would address:

- 1. Expand Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (RMNCH) knowledge:** Men and women understand the importance of men's engagement in RMNCH to improve women and children's health outcomes, couples have more knowledge about RMNCH, and women feel greater agency to make decisions affecting their health
- 2. Increase Shared Household Decision-Making.** Men and women know how shared decision-making in caregiving, household responsibilities, and financial issues can enable more resilient and productive families; women feel they can better act upon household decisions that affect their lives.
- 3. Improve Couple Communication.** Men and women gain new skills in how to communicate more effectively with one another with an emphasis on men's effective listening and increasing women's confidence to communicate openly.

Once the learning objectives were agreed upon, a detailed outline was created proposing the design of 10 group sessions for couples. Each session description included a session title, session objectives and their contribution to overall learning objectives, proposed experiential learning methodology based on audio recorded activities and visual aids (e.g. role-play, vignette), key domain of women's agency that would be addressed, and a short summary of the proposed session content and structure.

Key questions and observations that emerged from the team's review of the curriculum map, included:

- How do we frame this new content as strengthening what facilitators are already doing (by integrating a greater focus on women's agency, shared decision-making, etc.), rather than as duplicative of the existing Husband Schools program?
- The team decided to present the gender-transformative approach to the Husband Schools as a new intervention necessitating new training and testing. This was because it would eliminate programmatic confusion - the revised intervention was couples-based and would require more structured engagement rather than open-ended sessions. In addition, many existing Husband School facilitators had moved or were in need of training so it made sense to engage new male caregivers as well.
- Polygamy should be explored through the content, but carefully tested to determine how best to address it in terms of equal relationship dynamics, healthy and unhealthy relationships, emphasizing respect, and open communication.
- The team decided to shape the new gender-transformative sessions around a set of stories (vignettes) about a polygamous family facing common challenges and striving to create a happier and more gender-equitable home. These stories were closely reviewed and vetted by local experts in Niger and validated during testing (more on this further below).
- Content must be closely linked with important Islamic values about mutual respect and treating others with dignity.
- The team took care to integrate references to Islam throughout the stories, as relevant, to emphasize how gender equality, health, and harmony in the home are closely tied with religious and spiritual values.

Creation of Gender-Transformative Husband Schools Content

Using the curriculum map as a guide, Equimundo designed each session around a vignette that would later be translated and audio-recorded into three widely spoken languages in Zinder (French, Hausa, and Kanuri). The sessions were written to be low-literacy friendly with reliance on images and simple language, as strongly recommended by the Save the Children and Wadata project staff, and the formative research.

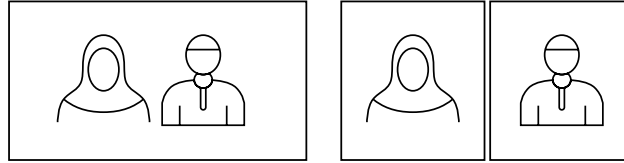
Below is a table which summarizes the major differences between the original Husband Schools model and the gender-transformative adaptation.

	Gender-Transformative Adaptation	Original Husbands School
Topics/focus of intervention	RMNCH information + gender roles and norms, promotion of more gender-equitable masculinities, healthy relationships, women's agency in household decision-making	RMNCH information, with some gender elements mostly focused on promoting men's knowledge and roles in health, and other timely health topics (i.e. malaria, outbreaks, etc.)
Participants	Men and women, sometimes together and sometimes apart.	Men only
Facilitators	Community facilitators identified from outside of Husband School members.	Husband School members
Implementation format	10 structured sessions using audio recorded stories, with accompanying discussion and experiential learning activities, homework and community outreach components, plus a community celebration	Ongoing dialogue-based sessions
Meeting frequency	Bi-weekly	Bi-weekly
Planning	<p>Each session follows a similar structured format, which is described in visual session guides and pre-recorded audio recordings describing the key steps of each session.</p> <p>Facilitators also receive reminder calls with information about the topic, format (men/women together or separate) and key messages before each session.</p>	<p>Typically, Husbands Schools develop quarterly plans for their activities. They coordinate with health agents to identify pertinent topics based on data from their health zones or seasonal issues. This sometimes varies depending on the availability of the members.</p> <p>Husbands Schools also coordinate with the Comité "villageois de Développement." They submit their quarterly plans, which are inputted into the overall Community Action Plan, developed with support from Wadata project.</p>

Interactive storytelling was at the core of each session

Séance 2 Nos Rôles à La Maison

Hommes et Femmes Ensemble et Séparés



Objet :

1. Les hommes et les femmes débattent ouvertement et apprennent de nouvelles perspectives sur la répartition des responsabilités domestiques entre les sexes.
2. Les hommes et les femmes commencent à explorer les avantages d'un partage plus équilibré des responsabilités.

Temps Nécessaire : 2 heures

Suivez les instructions ci-dessous :

	<p>(Hommes et femmes ensemble)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Souhaitez la bienvenue aux participants dans le group. Confère guide facilitateur. (10 minutes) 2. Salutation et la fatia (5min)
	<p>(Hommes et femmes ensemble)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Révisez les devoirs. Confère guide facilitateur. (10 minutes)
	<p>(Hommes et femmes ensemble)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Écoutez l'audio de la famille de Usman. Dans un premier temps, faire une écoute intégrale pour capter le message essentiel. (30 minutes) 5. Résumez les points clés de l'histoire. <p>Résumé de l'histoire:</p>

Sample of a Facilitator Guide from the Gender-Transformative Husbands Schools

Interactive storytelling was at the core of each session. The vignettes—each approximately five minutes long when audio-recorded—revolved around a set of recurring characters: Usman, the husband; his two wives, Amina and Khadija; and their young children. Few interventions have directly addressed women's agency, gender equality, and RMNCH within the context of polygamous couples. Given this gap and the social acceptability of polygamy in Niger, the vignettes were designed around the everyday experiences of a polygamous family. Each story depicted a specific challenge faced by Usman and his family, such as the challenges and benefits of shared decision-making, couple communication, how men can support a healthy pregnancy, and strengthening women's agency so that they are better able to make decisions that improve their well-being. The creation of these vignettes was a departure from usual gender-transformative approaches that center on an experiential learning activity and group discussion.

Content Revisions

Following review of draft materials by the WADATA team and others, several improvements were made to strengthen the relevance and approach of the materials. These included:

- **Better integration of original Husband Schools materials** such as the visual aid materials (called “pagivolts”) into the more health-focused sessions: Both original Husband School materials as well as new visual aids were integrated to reinforce key messages on MNCH and gender equality.
- **Included more information on child health and nutrition:** More specific information on nutrition, prenatal care and men’s specific roles in pregnancy was integrated into the sessions, and a new session on child spacing and family planning was added. For example, one of the vignettes was revised so that the main male character, Usman, gives advice to neighbors on the danger signs of pregnancy.
- **Integrated more attention on the challenges men may experience in taking on more household and caregiving tasks,** the benefits of doing so, and how women also play a role in perpetuating unequal roles and responsibilities: The vignettes were shortened and revised to have a more balanced focus on the gender-specific ways men *and* women are impacted - both physically and mentally - by unequal gender roles.
- **Revised specific content to better integrate teachings from Islam:** Where appropriate, more specific quotes and passages from the Quran were added to further reinforce messages about shared decision-making, child spacing, and loving relationships.
- **Included the roles of other members in the community like family members, leaders, neighbors:** In the vignettes, the stories were revised to include Usman’s interactions with other community members and leaders of the community, and extended family members. Session guidance was also revised so that facilitators encouraged group members to share what they learned with friends, neighbors, and other individuals close to them at the end of every session.

Final Session Structure

Session 1: The Ideal Husband & Wife

Participants understand the purpose of the Husband's Schools and explore the qualities of supportive husbands and wives, including the benefits for family health and well-being.

Session 2: Roles at Home

Men and women openly discuss and learn new perspectives on how household responsibilities are divided between genders. They also begin exploring the benefits of sharing these responsibilities more equally.

Session 3: Communicating at Home

Men and women learn better ways to communicate and resolve conflicts without violence. Women gain more confidence to express themselves openly with their husbands, and men learn the importance of listening and showing empathy toward others' needs.

Session 4: A More Equal Home

Men and women gain a better understanding of how an unequal workload affects all family members.

Session 5 and 6: Healthy Pregnancy (Two Sessions)

Men and women learn the different ways men can support a healthy pregnancy. Men also explore why it is important for women to have greater mobility, especially to access health services.

Session 7: Healthy Nutrition

Men and women understand the importance of women's role in family nutrition. They also become more confident in challenging unequal roles in decision-making around family nutrition.

Session 8: Planning a Family Together

Men and women understand what they can do to space births, they discuss actions they can take to better plan their family, reflect on and understand the importance of women's choice in family planning and accept it and they recognize that family planning contributes to the health and well-being of the whole family.

Session 9: Women's Economic Agency

Men and women are able to appreciate and articulate the tangible benefits of women's economic empowerment and discuss ways to support it.

Session 10: Family Celebration

Men and women reflect on and appreciate all the changes they have experienced through participating in the groups and commit to supporting and sustaining these changes.

Validation, Pilot-Testing, and Training of Facilitators

Following the content revision and all adjustments were made, the next step was to validate and pilot test. In 2024, Equipundo trained Husbands Schools facilitators and practiced facilitating the sessions with WADATA staff. WADATA staff then tested select sessions with both sex-segregated groups and couples from communities in Zinder.

Overall, participants who participated in these pilot tests highly appreciated the methodology and found the session engaging and relevant to their daily lives. Key strengths included:

1. **Strong appreciation of the overall approach:** Participants liked the combination of storytelling, audio recordings, discussions, and role plays, noting that these methods made the content easy to understand and engaging.
2. **Content felt realistic and aligned with community life:** Most participants felt the stories accurately reflected their realities, although some noted that men cooking was less culturally common. References to Usman cooking were later removed from the vignettes and replaced with him doing other tasks such as gathering firewood.
3. **High levels of participation and good group dynamics:** It was noted by the Equipundo and WADATA teams that participants engaged actively throughout the session, including women speaking comfortably even in the presence of men.
4. **Effective facilitation and use of local languages:** The team’s facilitation approach helped participants understand the messages clearly. The use of both Hausa and Kanuri was especially appreciated by Kanuri participants.
5. **Supportive community environment:** It was decided beforehand that community leaders would also participate in the pilot test. It was agreed by community members that their presence encouraged their own participation and trust.
6. **Adequate session length:** Participants felt the duration of the session was appropriate and manageable.

The main challenges were literacy barriers, community sensitivity of some themes, such as stories that included men cooking and women’s economic independence, and variability in facilitation quality. Some participants struggled to apply the lessons of the different vignettes to their own lives even though they understood the story’s message. This was made even more complex or sensitive when it came to specific topics such as sharing financial decision-making, the role of in-laws in family decision-making, and dealing with couple conflict. In addition, stories touching on family planning, marital communication, or shared decision-making sometimes triggered discomfort among men who felt the content questioned traditional roles. Full participation was also a challenge. Certain participants needed more time and open discussion before fully engaging in the group discussions. It was also clear that the methodology works best when facilitators are well-trained. In some sessions, weak facilitation led to superficial discussions, missed key messages, and difficulty in guiding participants from thinking about “what happened in the story” to “how this applies to us.”

Training of Facilitators

Between late 2024 and early 2025, WADATA recruited mixed-gender facilitator pairs in 25 villages, ensuring equal representation of men and women. Preparations also began to engage religious leaders

and introduce them to the program. In Zinder, Equimundo led a two-phase training: a 3-day training with WADATA field officers and project staff focused on ensuring implementation quality through monitoring and observation, and then a 10-day training for 96 community facilitators (four in each village), who learned how to lead the facilitation of the gender-transformative interventions.

Cuts to US Foreign Assistance and Steps Forward

Before the roll out of the implementation could begin in late January 2025, Agency for All, like many other US government funded projects, received notification from USAID that all activities should stop immediately due to a pause in (and eventually a complete elimination of) U.S. foreign development assistance funding. Due to this, the implementation and testing of the Gender-Transformative Husband Schools program (as well as other country program funded under this contract) was prematurely terminated.

We are grateful for the opportunity to have developed a new and innovative approach to promoting women's agency in ` as well as gender equality in homes. Though developed and tested with a specific population in Zinder, Niger, the approach and content may resonate with many communities in Francophone Africa and beyond. This innovative program and resources offer a concrete model to address recurrent challenges of delivering relevant contextualized gender transformative programs designed to shift norms and behaviors through locally grounded, interactive modalities intended for low literacy participants. We encourage those who are interested in this material to reach out to Equimundo for access to the materials and potential partnership to continue testing and evaluating this work.

Contact: contact@equimundo.org

