

Evaluating the impact of the Men as Partners in Change (MPC) Program in Mazar-e-sharif Afghanistan

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Abstract

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Afghanistan

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The goal of this qualitative study was to identify the acceptability of the Men in Partners in Change (MPC) program and inform midstream improvements to the content and delivery of the program aimed at educating young men in Afghanistan on women's rights, gender awareness and prevention of domestic violence. This study includes data from three focus group discussions (FGDs) with 21 students and ten structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) with students completing the four-week MPC program and six IDIs among staff implementing the program in three schools in northern Afghanistan. Key themes were identified and patterns interpreted to identify similarities and differences in participant responses across transcripts from FGDs and IDIs. The Theory of Reasoned Action was used to explain how the program has influenced or changed behaviors based on attitudes, norms, and intentions. Overall, most students found the program to be acceptable and have a positive impact and indicated a change in attitude toward violence against women. Staff mentioned challenges in implementing the program including security concerns, lack of resources, and the need for further training in administering and evaluating the program. While these midstream results are part of a larger evaluation to be completed in late 2021, these data were used to inform midstream recommendations to improve the program. Both students and staff recommend supporting awareness and educational programs for young men to change

longstanding attitudes about women's rights and bring positive change through men and women working side by side.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is a patriarchal society in which men have primary control of the community and family structure as well as the ability to control a woman's life, both structurally and ideologically¹. The history of the war in Afghanistan has further embedded patriarchy in all aspects of culture and society². This macro-level of control within the family and patterned behaviors between intimate partners, in which men disproportionately hold power and value, has perpetuated the belief that women are responsible for a man's honor and dignity³.

The concept of honor is fundamental to Afghan culture, playing an important role in a man's decision-making and his behavior towards women⁴. Religion is also integral to Afghan society and together, underlying religious ideology and male dominance have redefined the meaning of honor to equate to man's physical power. To protect their honor, men in Afghanistan have become more likely to commit violence against women, and women are considered as the gatekeepers of a man's honor⁵.

Honor in a patriarchal society manifests in a variety of social psychological processes, including morality, male violence, sexuality and gender, in-group identification, responses to devaluation, and biculturalism⁶. In a society where masculinity and honor are the core cultural values, intimate partner violence can be more readily justified in the name of protecting a husband's honor⁷. In these situations, women become responsible for men's honor and are more likely to accept any type of violence⁸. In Afghanistan, this culture has been practiced for many years. Men have been taught, from a very young age, that they hold the power and must take responsibility for the family, putting themselves on the front lines. Men, consequently, become more violent when they are exposed to war and trauma⁹. Predictably, culture and religion also play a significant role in shaping men's attitudes toward women's rights. Discussions of gender equality are a threat for men because of the concept of *ghairat* (غیرت), which means "pride, esteem, virtue, and dignity" in Farsi¹⁰.

While conflicts are gendered and violence is often carried out by men and boys, men are not born violent, it is their circumstances and situations that shape them. It is necessary to understand that men are also victims of physical violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, and emotional abuse⁹. Men who experience war and or childhood abuse, and those who are dealing with a post-conflict situation are more likely to commit acts of violence and emotional abuse against their wife, sister, and mother⁹. Little attention has been paid to the male's experiences and the ways in which men have experienced violence and trauma and how this influences their interactions with their intimate partner and other women in their lives.

Including men in education and prevention programs may help to stop the cycle of domestic violence and emotional abuse. Understanding men's diverse experiences during the war and the underlying causes that lead to violent behavior are important to consider and critical to changing behaviors¹⁰. With decades of advocacy and humanitarian organizations promoting and supporting women's education, we miss focusing on a very important side of the equation—how to educate and support young men who are typically left out of the process.

Sahar is a nonprofit Seattle-based organization that has been involved in supporting education for girls in Afghanistan's Balkh province for the past 20 years. Sahar receives support from donors and has an annual budget of \$400,000 USD. While providing infrastructure and supplies for schools, the organization's leadership noticed that girls dropped out of school prior to graduation as a consequence of early or child marriage. Consequently, the Early Marriage

Prevention Program was initiated to strengthen the knowledge and skills of young women so that they can act as agents of change and empowerment for addressing gender-based violence in their communities. Realizing that men and boys were often overlooked in development programs and the mental and physical health of both men and women were affected by decades of war, Sahar collaborated with the Women Strong Organization to initiate the Men as Partners in Change (MPC) pilot program in 2019. The MPC program aims to achieve better health outcomes for girls and women by educating boys and men on women's rights. The first cohort enrolled in this two-year pilot included the fathers of young women from the Early Marriage Prevention Program. In 2020, the program expanded the cohort to include younger men attending high school. This MPC program was developed by me in Seattle and included a team of four staff in Afghanistan. The MPC program also includes a Seattle-based program manager, trainer, and two monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff.

Study Objective and Aims

The goal of the Men as Partners in Change (MPC) program is to provide specific training and seminar topics focused on changing male perceptions of girls' education and women's rights in Afghanistan. Activities include readings and discussions on the prevention of domestic violence, conflict resolution, and the importance of educating young women in Afghanistan. These sessions are designed to provide a safe space and opportunity for young men to tell their personal stories and work toward redefining the concept of male honor and masculinity in Afghan society by listening to similar cultural and life experiences of their peers. The MPC program aims to provide participants with the tools and resources to challenge their views and invites them to become ambassadors of women's rights and empowerment within their communities. This midstream qualitative study is one activity within a larger evaluation of the MPC program aimed at identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the MPC program to date through qualitative focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The larger evaluation will be completed in December 2021 and will include additional qualitative data and pre- and post-survey results. Results from this qualitative study will be used to inform midstream improvements to the content and delivery of the curriculum working with men as an ally with men and creating communities that recognize the value of both genders.

The specific aims of this program evaluation are to:

Aim 1. Describe the perceived acceptability of the Men as Partners in Change program by evaluating in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with participants in the program.

Aim 2. Identify and describe the barriers and challenges to implementing the Men as Partners in Change program through in-depth interviews with staff administering the program.

METHODS

This is a qualitative study using focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) from students and staff participating in the MPC program in three schools in northern Afghanistan. Qualitative data were used to identify the barriers and challenges to successfully administering the program and facilitators of response. Researchers identified themes and interpreted patterns

to identify similarities and differences in participant responses across transcripts from FGDs and IDIs. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)¹¹ was used to explain how the MPC program has influenced or changed behaviors based on attitudes, norms, and intentions. The construct of the TRA is based on behavioral beliefs and evaluations of behavioral outcomes which lead to attitudes, and normative beliefs of young men and their motivation to comply which lead to subjective norms (Figure 1). We sought to understand how the MPC program influences attitudes and subjective norms by changing attitudes and motivations to comply through training and discussion and how this in turn may lead to behavior change.

Figure 1. Adapted Model of the Theory of Reasoned Action¹²

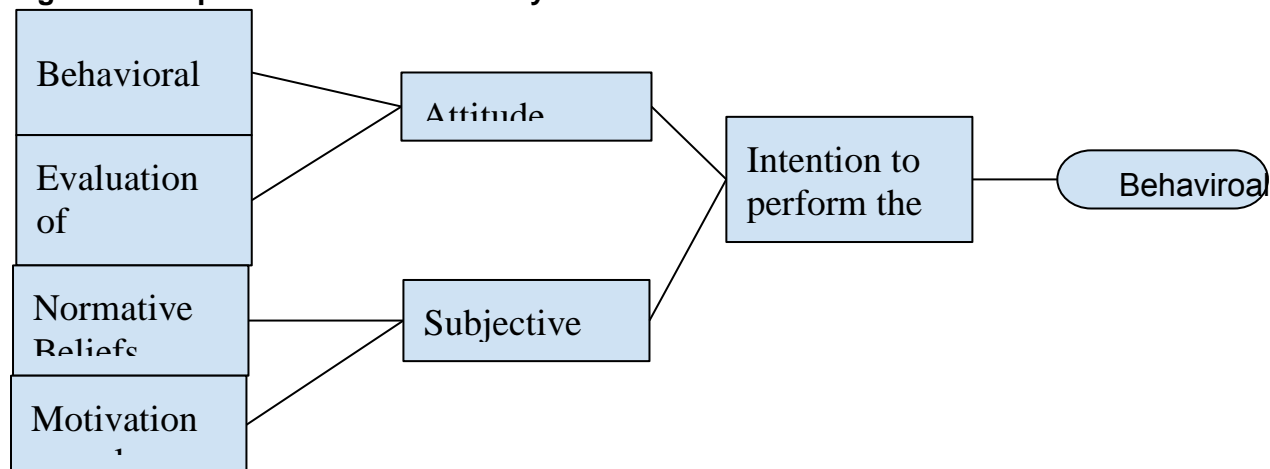


Table 1. A logical framework for MPC Program

Inputs >	Activities >	Direct Outputs >	Expected Outcomes >	Desired Impact >
-MPC Curriculum Classroom Recruitment -Ministry of Education approval - Guest speakers	- Dialogue - Discussion - Journaling - Training - Surveys - Interviews	- # of trainings administered - # of young men (16-21 years) completing the MPC program - # of schools participating	- Attitude change in young men toward domestic violence/ women’s rights and gender equality. - Young men will advocate for their sisters within their households	- Higher rates of class attendance for girls - Men more understanding of human rights and women’s rights - Higher rates of girls’ graduation - Lower rates of early marriage - Higher degree to which girls feel like they have control over decisions regarding marriage and education

Study Setting and Sampling

This project used qualitative data from students completing the four-week MPC education program and staff administering the program in three schools in northern Afghanistan between December 2020 and May 2021. The schools were located in urban or semi-urban communities in the Mazar-e-Sharif province of northern Afghanistan and the majority (>90%) of students were from the Tajik tribe. At the end of the four-week program, MPC staff conducted one focus group discussion (FGD) at each school with 7 students aged 18-21 years (21 students total) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 3-4 students aged 18-21 years at each school (10 students total). Students for the FGDs and IDIs were randomly selected by the MPC staff. Aim 2 included IDIs among all six staff involved in the administration of the MPC program (2 Seattle-based and 4 Afghan-based staff).

Eligibility Criteria

Eligible participants were male students in grades 11-12, aged 18-21 years, completing the MPC program in three schools in northern Afghanistan. FGDs and IDIs included students who volunteered to participate and provided oral consent. In addition, IDIs were conducted among all staff (aged >18 years) administering the MPC program in Afghanistan.

Data Sources and Collection Processes

This evaluation analyzed qualitative data from three FGDs and ten IDIs among students completing the MPC program and separately, six IDIs among MPC staff. The FGDs and IDIs among students were held at the end of each four-week education session, led by the MPC educational team in Afghanistan in the local language, Farsi. The FGDs used audio recordings and oral consent was obtained before starting the FGD. FGDs and IDIs were held in a classroom in the school to ensure privacy and were led by the MPC educational team. The duration of the FGD and IDI was one hour. I conducted each of the IDIs among MPC staff in Farsi or English as preferred by the staff member. Oral consent was received from staff prior to the IDI conducted by Zoom. The staff IDIs were approximately 30-40 minutes. I translated and transcribed the FGD and IDI recordings and conducted a thematic analysis using Atlas.ti software.

School Recruitment

The schools participating in the MPC program were selected by the Afghanistan Ministry of Education and the Sahar organization had a legal contract with the Ministry of Education to conduct the MPC program within the selected schools. The MPC curriculum was reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Education and additional permission was granted by the schools. This evaluation is one activity of a larger program evaluation designed to provide midstream recommendations to help the Sahar organization to improve the ongoing MPC program. This study received a non-research determination by the University of Washington Institutional Review Board.

Description of Men in Partners in Change (MPC) Program

The four-week MPC educational program included activities, discussions, and information on domestic violence, mental health and trauma, and conflict resolution. The curriculum was designed for male students in grades 10-12, ages 16-21 years, attending public schools in

Afghanistan. The program includes topics such as fatherhood and caregiving, human rights, gender stereotypes, conflict resolution, mental health, and trauma, physical health, leadership, leadership and equality, and community engagement.

Qualitative Analysis

Aim 1: To describe perceived acceptability of the MPC program by evaluating in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with participants in the program. FGDs and IDIs were conducted in Farsi and translated into English. Each transcript was coded using themes based on adaptations from the TRA model until saturation was reached. The TRA model was used to understand whether the students that participated in the MPC program had changed their attitude and behaviors towards domestic violence and learned more about women's rights and concepts related to redefining male honor, particularly whether the MPC curriculum provided an opportunity for young men to evaluate and change their personal definition of *honor*. Common themes were matched across IDIs and FGDs and differing or unique themes identified as they related to the evaluation questions.

Aim 2: To identify and describe the barriers and challenges to implementing the MPC program through in-depth interviews with staff administering the program. The IDIs focused on understanding the barriers and challenges for MPC staff in implementing collaborative teaching methods with students from diverse ethnic groups. The coding process used thematic methods reading the transcripts and highlighting the phrase that related to the research question and reviewing the codes to develop the themes from IDIs and FGDs.

RESULTS

Overall, the MPC program was highly acceptable by students and staff. Participants described how the program helped them to better understand topics such as mental health, gender stereotypes, women's rights, and leadership development. Key constructs from the TRA model raised in the FGDs and IDIs were related to attitude change, behaviors, and awareness. The three main themes fall under this category: Acceptability of the program, gender awareness, and the challenges and barriers of implementing the program.

Theme 1. Acceptability

Across FGDs and IDIs, almost all young men expressed that they perceived the MPC program positively and there was general acceptance of the program. Here are several examples of the statements.

“Man as Partner in change is one very good program and unique program. In today's society, we see how ideas have passed on from generation to generation or from grandfather or grandmother to follow based on those we make decisions. So, when we came to this program we have been guided and become more open-minded.” (Young man FGD)

“We need to bring some adjustments to the definition of masculinity and honor in Afghanistan...the real male honor is to support women in the family and community in order to

pave a way for them to be educated and work - not to lock them at home as we lock a bird in a cage.” (Young Man IDI)

In almost all FGDs and IDIs it was mentioned that the program was necessary and important. Participants mentioned that most students (young men) did not know about gender roles, women’s rights, and the prevention of domestic violence before. They stated that they had never participated in a program like this before and MPC gave them more information about topics including gender stereotypes, women’s rights, fatherhood and caregiving, and physical and mental health.

“I am graduating from high school, and I have a plan to enroll my little sister in school. The MPC program made me realize that I am a man if I have the right to study and pursue my dream. My sister also has a right to do the same. She also has the right to go to school and pursue her dream, and I feel we both have the same freedom and not better than her education is her fundamental right. If I take my sister to school, it's not only a women's right; it's her basic human right, and I will support that.” (Young man-FGD)

Participants also mentioned that male honor was misused in some parts of Afghanistan and the MPC program helped them to understand how a man can be honorable by supporting their family and wife and be supportive of women’s education. The exemplar quotes below highlight how students described their experience of honor and challenges for behavior change in response to the key interview question, “What does honor mean to you?”

“Afghan male honor is that it is able to allow women to go to school and support them to work outside. And if the man does not let his wife or sister go to school or let them work, those men are dishonorable men.” (Young Man -IDI)

“If a man wants to bring change in society, he should support women’s rights and work with women side by side to bring positive change. In our country, Afghanistan, a woman’s place is at home and a housewife, but if a man wants to bring change, he should work with women. God has given women the same ability as a man. Sadly, today in Afghanistan, women have no freedom even if they cannot choose their life partner. In villages, they don’t even ask a girl if she agrees to the marriage she gets forced to marry.” (FGD participant)

All participants stated that there is a high rate of domestic violence in their community and that domestic violence has a negative effect on women and children. Talking about this topic was difficult in the FGDs. One young man shared an experience he had witnessed at home.

“Since the program started it has helped me to understand myself and be aware of my rights as man and responsibilities in the community and in the family.” (Young Man-IDI)

Masculinity and male honor are important in Afghanistan. Talking about this topic with the young man was very sensitive. Women are considered to be responsible for a man’s honor and as such, one aspect is by covering themselves or staying at home. Participants in FGDs and IDIs shared

that they used to feel shame to be seen with their mother or sister outside of their house, but this program had changed their perspective about women and how they should treat women.

Shame

“Before MPC, I used to feel ashamed walking with my mother. I didn’t want my friends to see me with her, but now I feel proud walking by her side. I hold her hand. I do not care if people are watching me. This is because the MPC changed how I think about women’s rights.” (Young Man-FGD)

Redefining Masculinity

“But today’s men feel ashamed or dishonored when their sister or wife goes out or works outside. They think this is not an honorable thing to do. He is an honorable man from my point of view.” (Young Man- FGD)

“The main reason that girls go to school depends on the way of thinking of men and women they both are responsible for. If men think positively about their sister going to school that solves the problem and I think it depends on how you see the importance of education for both genders.” (Young Man-FGD)

Gender roles

In the Afghan community, men take more leadership roles, even in the family men are the decision-makers. Across both FGDs and IDIs, young men found it difficult to accept that a woman can be a leader. Four out of 21 students in FGDs agreed that women can be leaders and make decisions if they get the opportunity to work or attend school.

“Men are more capable of doing things if we look physically, I think men are more muscular and stronger than women. But when we talk about intellectually then men and women are equal.” (Young Man- IDI)

“Throughout history, we have witnessed that we had good men’s leadership and good women’s leadership. Still, some research shows that men are better at being leaders because women are more compassionate and kinder, which affects their leadership. Men are tougher to make a decision and stronger emotionally than women.” (Young Man -IDI)

Interviewees mentioned that this program helped to change their behavior at home. In all FGDs, participants mentioned that they have become more supportive of their sisters and wives and acknowledge that women in Afghanistan do not have rights and they have no right to speak up and how it’s important to speak up against injustice. This program helped young men to think about their roles as men and how they can support women’s rights and understand the value of women’s education.

“At home, as a man, I feel responsible for and try to understand what are the expectations from me, my mother, my sister, father, and my brother. I should be role models for my younger sister

and brother and I should not hurt their feelings and I should treat them with respect.”(Young Man -FGD)

Behavior change

“I learned that being a man is not only providing financial support, a man also can be a be a good partner to help his wife, his family and his community” (Young Man-FGD)

Theme 2: Gender awareness and women’s rights

A second major theme, with two subthemes, was identified in the interviews that centered on awareness of gender and women’s rights. Most young men said that the program helped change their attitude towards gender awareness and domestic violence. For example:

“Domestic violence happens in different ways in Afghanistan. For example, sometimes it happens from women to women through their sister-in-law or mothers-in-law. Or sometimes at home, when our mother asks us to do something and respond in an angry mood or act aggressively, this is also a type of violence. Mothers at home have their expectations like respect and understanding” (Young Man- FGD)

“This program had more positive influences on me than negative, and I can understand young men in our community. I have more sympathy for them now than before. I was very impatient with young men and had different ideas about them, but this program builds up my confidence.” (Young Man-IDI)

Power

The notion of power also emerged in the interviews in relation to gender awareness. For example:

“Honor is not about being powerful physically and showing power by hitting women or not letting his wife or sister go to school, unfortunately in Afghanistan, they mixed honor with power and being aggressive.” (Young man-IDI)

“ The topics on MPC and the lecture we participated in helped us understand Afghan male honor’s real meaning. I didn’t have much information about this before now. It’s clear to us that we have to respect human rights and understand our rights. We should not have a negative perspective about women’s rights.” (Young man-FGD)

The role of religion

Religion is an important element of Afghan culture and the role of men and women is anchored in Afghan religion. Throughout the FGDs and IDIs young men used religion as their main resource and related each situation to their religion when asked to discuss women’s rights or leadership.

“Male honor, I think it’s about being responsible in the community and helping people. As Prophet Mohamed mentioned that those who support the poor are closer to me. Even if we are poor or rich, we should make sure to help people, and I feel that males honor to have respect for men and women.” (Young man-FGD)

“As a man, I have given this opportunity to my sisters to go to school, learn about their rights, and get more educated. My responsibilities at home have been positive. My goal is to see my sisters successful. I have 4 sisters, two of them doing great of course that makes me so happy and proud. If we work as partners, they also work hard to make a difference in society.” (Young man-FGD)

Theme 3 Challenges and barriers

Staff were asked to identify and describe the challenges or barriers of implementing the MPC program. Some staff mentioned that there were challenges with security and some students and staff were not able to come to the program due to security concerns. There were also communication problems between the Ministry of Education while selecting the schools as some of the schools had received no information from the Ministry of Education. One respondent stated:

The challenge we face is security. For example, we can't go further far from the city like villages or other provinces to teach other students. (Staff-IDI)

“The other challenge was working with the Ministry of Education. Even the Ministry of Education decides which school we should go to and have our MPC program, but the ministry of education does not have clear communication with schools that we care about coming to the schools or with the principals. That is some school do not have information about our program when we go there that takes a lot of our time” (Staff-IDI)

Most of the staff mentioned that there was a lack of resources and they were not able to “train the trainer” to conduct the FGDs and IDIs. As this was the first time for the staff leading FGDs and IDIs, they needed more training to have better outcomes. One respondent stated:

“Then you run into big challenges in the program and that's what I've run into. The technical skills could be improved and you're helping improve those and then the other side when you go to the founder women's strong and you're explaining what's going on.” (Staff-IDI)

Staff expressed there were challenges getting young men to participate in the program because they feared that Sahar might teach something against their culture or religion.

"The students were afraid that we might teach them something against their culture or religion. Once, the principal told us not to come to our school to teach Christianity to our students. We had a hard time convincing them". (Staff-IDI)

“How do I cross that over and over again to bring resources to the team in Afghanistan, so that they're just not in survival mode they're not you know how you go in a conflict zone between. Real serious change when the Taliban is coming back like that is for me a set of vice grips and it's the most complicated and complex system as I've worked internationally my whole career.”
(Staff-IDI)

Discussion

Overall, the findings of this midstream qualitative evaluation suggest that the majority of respondents felt that the MPC program was a positive experience and had a positive impact. The results of three FGDs and ten IDIs indicate that there were some improvements in young men's behaviors toward women's rights and understanding that men should not use their masculinity as a source of power to oppress or abuse women. During the FGDs, some young men remained more conservative towards women's rights, possibly due to the rural location of the students within that particular school. The response pattern from FGDs and IDIs suggests that young men were supportive of women's rights and discussions on honor and masculinity were positive, indicating that the new generation may be open to new ideas and willing to move away from some former traditions. Through these behavioral changes, the MPC program may be able to help prevent domestic violence. Participants also requested more education about mental health disorders as they felt this was an important area that had not been included.

A key strength of the MPC program was that the curriculum was developed by Afghans with contextual knowledge and understanding of key topics to teach young men in Afghanistan. The Sahar organization should continue to involve local experts in curriculum development to further strengthen and facilitate discussions and include new topics such as mental health disorders. Another success was that the MPC program was implemented by an Afghan team with an Afghan trainer and as such, able to deliver the curriculum to the students very clearly in their local language. Having mixed staff that included two men and two women working together served as a positive example for the students to see the partnership and collaboration, particularly when discussing women's rights. Sahar should continue using FGDs and IDI to hear more directly from students about their experiences and allow for the curriculum to be adaptive. Weaknesses of the program included difficulty in evaluating the program remotely. In addition, some of the sessions were remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic which made it difficult to have open discussions with the students. Remote training was also challenging and there may have been bias in the in-depth interviews and FGDs because they were conducted by a staff member that knew the students and I also had a working relationship and knew the MPC staff when conducting the staff IDIs. This may have made it difficult for some students and staff to be honest and forthcoming in their responses. In the future, Sahar should have an independent individual conduct the interviews and focus group discussions. Very few students answer the weakness of the program because the interview was done by trainers and this is likely for the staff interviews as well.

Overall findings showed high acceptability, with remarks on the program and curriculum mainly positive and related to the perceived effectiveness in changing attitudes. Although this was the first time this program was implemented, based on these midstream results, it has had positive impact towards increasing awareness of women's rights, fatherhood, and domestic violence. It is

difficult to discuss these issues in a male-dominated society where religion plays an important role in people's daily lives. For future work, the Sahar organization should work closely with the Ministry of Education to integrate this curriculum as part of routine high school curriculum and learning.

Recommendations

This research suggests that the Sahar organization can strengthen and improve the MPC program in several ways. First, it is recommended that Sahar create a leadership program for the staff in Afghanistan so that they know how to motivate and recruit students in the program and train the staff on Monitoring and Evaluation which is one of the important aspect of the program. Second, the organization should consider including a member of the Ministry of Education in curriculum development to strengthen the relationship and enable the MPC program to reach more schools across the country. Third, for sustainability, Sahar should collaborate with a local organization in Mazar-e-Sharif and involve more students in the program as interns or peer educators. Based on the results from FGDs and IDIs, the curriculum needs to be revised to include more time for students to learn each topic including gender stereotypes, leadership development, and mental health for example.

Limitations:

There are a number of limitations of this analysis to be acknowledged. Although we conducted a literature review to understand the concept of masculinity in Afghan culture and how to approach curriculum development to educate young men on the prevention of domestic violence and women's rights, this program was the first of its kind to be implemented in Afghanistan and there were challenges. The FGDs and IDIs were conducted by staff in Afghanistan with limited experience in qualitative data collection, which was particularly difficult considering the sensitized topics such as male honor and masculinity. However, staff were trained and post-session discussions were held following each FGD and IDI. FGDs were translated from Farsi to English and some words and vocabulary did not directly translate to English. Further, the translation, transcription, and coding were conducted by one coder. Two coders are better in terms of knowledge sharing and reducing mistakes in coding. Lastly, these results only include midstream data from FGDs and IDIs at three schools and it will be important to include the remaining evaluation data to understand the quantitative results.

Conclusion:

MPC is the first educational program for young men in Maza-e-Sharfi, Afghanistan aimed at improving men's education about women's rights, gender equality, and domestic violence. This midstream qualitative evaluation identified key themes that pointed to the acceptance of the MPC program within the community and indicated that the curriculum helped the young men to redefine masculinity, Afghan male honor, and ways for a man to be a partner in change. While this is only one activity of the ongoing program evaluation, which will include additional qualitative and quantitative evaluations, these results demonstrate acceptability and identify changes to help improve programmatic outcomes. Both students and staff recommend supporting awareness and educational programs for young men to change longstanding attitudes about women's rights and bring positive change through men and women working side by side.

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