

PASSAGES PROJECT

# Understanding the Male Life Course: Opportunities for Gender Transformation

## Background Paper



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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND KEY PHRASES

AYC	African Youth Charter
E2A	Evidence to Action Project
GenDev	Office of Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment
IGWG	Interagency Gender Working Group
IRH	Institute for Reproductive Health
LCT	Life Course Theory
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
RH	Reproductive Health
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infections
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	Water Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization

# INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been a global recognition of the need to engage men in gender-transformative programming to promote gender equality, particularly in the areas of reproductive health (RH), violence against women, and Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). Men play a key role in reaching gender balance, for, in most societies that are patriarchal, they hold the positions of power in nearly every domain of life including political, domestic, and spiritual. Mobilizing men (and boys) as ‘partners’ to address power relations, therefore, represents a critical opportunity for gender-transformative interventions, because men can wield influence to change attitudes, norms, and behaviors regarding unequal gender norms. The challenge, however, is that, to this day, there is a lack of clear empirical evidence on *how* and *when* to best engage men and boys without the risk of instrumentalizing them as a pathway to women’s and girls’ empowerment (Glinski et al., 2018). Even less is known about whether and how gender-transformative programs may be able to change and redefine masculinities in ways that secure social norm change for greater gender equality (Gibbs et al., 2015).

To address this gap, the Passages project has developed a framework that conceptualizes men’s experiences, challenges, and opportunities across the life course, with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Gender Equality & Women’s Empowerment (GenDev). This approach builds on work done by USAID’s Evidence to Action Project (E2A), the Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG), the Male Engagement Task Force and others, in addition to efforts in applying a life course approach to women’s health needs. The goal is to provide a common framework for understanding the unique issues men face throughout their lives across a range of thematic areas, and to identify key opportunities for transforming gender-related norms that reinforce gender inequality and harm both men and women.

The concept paper begins with a brief overview of the core concepts of Life Course Theory (LCT) and discusses why the concept of masculinities matters for the life course approach. It then shows how the LCT as a framework applies to men and boys across five key thematic areas (which have been selected in consultation with USAID and other experts on programming with and for men and boys). Finally, it presents some of the programmatic implications to gender-transformative programming.

# LIFE COURSE THEORY: KEY CONCEPTS AND OVERVIEW

LCT views individuals as embedded in a multi-layered social context. In its most simple form, LCT conceptualizes the life course as a dynamic, nonlinear process involving a series of age-related patterns of behavior embedded in social institutions, personal experience, and social history in ways that give meaning to the passage of biological time (Elder et al., 2003; Roy, 2014). As such, individual change and human development are understood to be life-long processes, requiring a focus on *where individuals are* in their lives. The ongoing and interactive process of the life course suggests that programming integrate a temporal dimension to meet both people's immediate and future needs (Fine & Kotelchuck, 2010).

Elder et al. (2003) identify *five key principles* underpinning LCT and its application to better understand human lives and behaviors:

1. *Human development and change are lifelong processes* (Principle of Life-Span Development). People continue to change in biological, psychological and social terms throughout their lives, adapting to environmental changes and continuing a process of social learning well through adulthood.
2. *Individuals have a role in determining the direction their lives take* (Principle of Agency). People construct their life courses through their choices and actions, which link to broader patterns of institutions and institutional change. These choices, however, are constrained by the options that people feel they realistically have available to them. One example is in places where choices about fundamental aspects of life (e.g. desire and timing of marriage and childbearing) are limited, so people's agency in terms of shaping their life course will also be limited.
3. *Individuals are shaped by the context in which they live* (Principle of Time and Place). Agency and actions are dependent upon the social structures by which individuals live. The geographical, cultural, and social features of the places people live play a central role in shaping not only how their life course is structured,

## Box 1: Life span, life history, life cycle and the life course

A *life span perspective* extends across a substantial portion of life, linking behavior across two or more life stages. However, a life span perspective typically does not aim to cover the entirety of the lives of individuals, nor is linked to social and historical forces in the way that the life history approach is.

A *life history approach* typically indicates the chronology of activities or events across the life course in a similar way to those developed using retrospective life calendars. These are often designed to understand the timing of specific events and the duration of time spent in a specific 'state', but the approach is less suited to understanding how and why behaviors continue or change over time.

A *life cycle approach* views behaviors and life events as part of a cycle, with an implicit assumption of limited agency in how that process plays out. In population studies, for example, the term 'life cycle' refers to the continuity of human reproduction from one generation to the next, with limited examination of how the experience of having children changes people's lives or what the social meanings of childbearing may be.

*\*See Elder et al. (2003) for a further examination of how these concepts relate to Life Course Theory.*

but also how responsive they are to particular historical events that may influence behavior. For example, an urban context may offer many more opportunities for youth to engage in full-time employment, while countries with strict legal restrictions on child labor or mandatory education may limit full-time employment to those above a particular age.

4. *The effect of specific events that shape behavior depends on when they happen in people's life course* (Principle of Timing). The significance and meaning of a given event in people's lives depends on when it takes place in the life course. For example, having a child has different implications for people who are very early in their life course than for those at later stages. Furthermore, events that take place early in the life course have lifelong effects, with disadvantage or advantage accumulating over time. For example, experiences with poverty in childhood may have lifelong effects on health by limiting access to health services or stunting development through lack of sufficient resources at the household or community level.
5. *People's lives are lived interdependently* (Principle of Linked Lives). Events in the lives of other people can influence the life course of all those with whom they are socially linked. For example, economic hardship caused by unemployment has both immediate and long-lasting effects on the individual and family members.

These five key principles are critical to understanding the challenges and opportunities that both constrain and facilitate men's well-being over their life course and across generations, which is the focus of this concept paper. Applying these principles can guide gender-transformative programming efforts aimed at achieving greater gender equality results.

In order to address the unique issues that men face throughout their lives and identify key opportunities for gender-transformation, the paper raises the following four questions:

1. How do masculine norms interact with the life course? What are the experiences of men and boys across male groups and over their life course in terms of conforming or not to social expectations that define 'real manhood'?
2. How and at what point in time do gender roles related to masculine norms change over the life course?
3. What are the factors that create barriers or facilitators to men's capacity to achieve well-being and to foster and support gender equality?
4. What does this mean for gender-transformative programming?

LCT provides an analytical framework for answering these important questions.

- *Trajectories*: As people age, they are expected to move between a series of socially created, recognized and shared sequential *life course stages* that together represent life *trajectories*. In most societies, *life trajectories* feature similar life course stages— typically, a period of childhood, a period of transition between childhood and adulthood (often referred to as 'adolescence' or 'youth'), adulthood and, finally, old age.
- *Transition points*: The beginning and end of life course stages are marked by *transition points* that serve as markers for the end of one life course stage and the beginning of the next. In some cases, these are single events. For example, in certain societies, there are specific ceremonies to mark entry into

adulthood. More often, this transition is marked by a grouping of transition events, such as leaving the parental home and engaging in full-time paid employment.

- *Turning points*: When these transitions involve changes that are so significant that they alter the trajectories of individuals, these are referred to as *turning points*. Examples might include: receiving a scholarship that allows a person to attend university, divorce and remarriage at older ages, the loss of a job, or the birth of a child.
- *Social pathways*: Life trajectories take place within the boundaries of *social pathways*, unique patterns of events, transitions and trajectories that take place across the life course. They are shaped by historical forces and structured by social institutions. For example, while there is more variety in the type of families people form now than in the past, most follow the same pattern of entering into marriage, having children, and spending the majority of their lives working. Both marriage and employment are supported by social and political institutions, including religion, economic systems, and state policies. Simultaneously, social norms ensure that the majority of life trajectories take place within the boundaries of these *social pathways*.
- *Social timetable*: While life course stages are, in part, marked or defined by biological factors, such as the onset of puberty or physical changes associated with biological aging, they are defined primarily through the social meaning given to each stage, rather than chronological age alone. For example, the transition between childhood and adulthood has not been a feature of all cultures or historical timepoints. In fact, it is seen as lasting considerably longer in some societies than in others, as the varying definitions of what ages constitute ‘youth’ illustrate (see Box 2).

Chronological age also has an important role in the life course. Norms and expectations for behavior are often loosely linked to age, which acts as a marker that can be used to determine whether individuals are progressing through life course stages according to social expectations. These expectations structure the life course by providing a *social timetable* that specifies the appropriate age and conditions for transitions into and out of life course stages (Neugarten, 1996). For example, expectations for the transition to adulthood may include entering higher education, full-time employment, long-term union formation, or childbearing. In turn, the timing of transition to full-time employment is largely determined by the structure of the economy and the legislative environment. The normative *timetable* shapes whether transitions are considered to be ‘early’

## Box 2: Youth as a fluid category

While there is general agreement that the term ‘youth’ is best defined in terms other than chronological age, a number of age-based definitions are used internationally today (in part to ensure statistical consistency across regions). For example, the United Nations (UN) defines ‘youth’ as those persons aged between 15 and 24. However, other organizations and countries define youth differently – for example, the African Youth Charter (AYC) uses the ages of 15 and 35 as the lower and upper bounds for youth, while the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) uses the ages of 15 and 29 (OECD, 2018). Individual countries use different age ranges to capture ‘youth’ – for example, in Nigeria youth are those between the ages of 18 and 35 (Federal Ministry of Youth Development, 2009), while in Brazil the relevant ages are 15 and 29, in keeping with the definition used by the World Health Organization (WHO).

For related resources on youth and youth programming from USAID, please refer to: [Agency Youth Policy](#) and [Positive Youth Development](#) approach.



or 'late', either leading to formal or informal social sanctions and life-long consequences. For example, very early and partial transitions to adult statuses, such as entering marriage or a cohabiting relationship or becoming a parent prior to meeting other expectations for adolescence or childhood, such as completing school, may limit the ability of individuals to meet other expectations that mark the transition to subsequent life course stages. These 'off-time' transitions are also associated with a range of other outcomes, including poorer mental health (Harley & Mortimer, 2000, as cited in Elder et al., 2003).

Due to their socially defined nature, *timetables* can and do change over time, reflecting either large scale structural drivers of change, such as war or prolonged economic depressions, or a process through which enough people adopt behaviors that depart from the norm to shift the norm itself.

The variation and malleability of *social timetables* represent both an opportunity and a challenge for programmers seeking to work with men and boys. On the one hand, variations in social timetables across different groups in society serve as examples of alternatives to existing expectations, particularly if paired with favorable outcomes that programmers can highlight as potential benefits of shifting behavior. This is supported by the evidence that substantial changes in the social norms and expectations that shape *social timetables* are possible even within relatively short periods of time, providing programmers with a pathway to sustainable change. On the other hand, variability in *social timetables* pose a challenge for programmers; it requires careful analyses of social norms in each sub-group within structural contexts, making standardization of intervention approaches difficult.

### Box 3: Shifting Timetables

The median age at first marriage for men in the United States in 1960 was 22.8 years, suggesting that the *social timetable*, at least for much of the population, viewed this age as roughly 'on time.' By 2010, the equivalent age was 28.2 years, which would have likely been considered to be very late only fifty years before (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Furthermore, *social timetables* and the speed at which they change are likely to be different even within relatively homogenous societies, varying according to factors such as race, social class, geographic region, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or disability status.

# MASCULINITIES AND SOCIAL NORMS

In order to engage men in a meaningful way, it is essential to understand first how they are involved in *doing* gender (Flood & Howson, 2015). Gender-transformative programming generally acknowledges that gender is a relational construct that organizes people's behaviors, attitudes, practices, as well as interactions, with other individuals, social institutions (e.g. schools, family, work and military) and structural realities (e.g. class, race and education) (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2017). Gender is thus a fluid and ongoing process. Judith Butler (1990) furthered this evidence by highlighting the performativity of gender through recurring patterns and recreated acts anchored in interpersonal relationships, culture, social structures, and organizations (Bottorff et al., 2011; Butler, 1990, as cited in Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2017). Similarly, masculinities as a type of gender performance are constructed, fluid, and modifiable (Dworkin et al., 2015). While researchers and programmers recognize gender as an ongoing relational dynamism that is subject to change over time, few programs focus on how masculine norms interact with broader cultural, historical, and structural conditions (e.g. class, race, ethnicity, economics, migration, etc.) and personal relationships (Dworkin et al., 2015). This limitation makes it difficult for programmers to know at what point in time it is best to intervene, either to encourage positive elements of masculinity or transform harmful ones, in order to achieve sustainable gender equality change.

As research has steadily shown, men and boys perform and are expected to perform many of the same social roles across almost all cultures (Gilmore, 1990). In almost all settings, 'manhood' is also positioned within a patriarchal social and economic system in which men and boys occupy a privileged position relative to women and girls. Norms enforcing this social system of male dominance are defined as "hegemonic masculine norms" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which remain "the most honored way of being a man in most places" (Patton et al., 2018). These norms also enforce certain versions of masculinities in ways that allow some men, usually those who conform most closely to the stereotypical 'real man,' to exert dominance over other men. For example, cisgendered/heterosexual men often have greater social power than non-cisgendered or homosexual men, who are marginalized due to the perception that they exhibit 'feminine' traits, such as emotionality and sensitivity. As with all norms, social definitions of masculinities are enforced through a system of interlocking sanctions and rewards that act to constrain behavior within the bounds of what is deemed to be socially acceptable – together, these outline the boundaries of the pathways most men will follow in their life course. In some contexts, these boundaries are looser than others, allowing greater flexibility in the range of behaviors that are considered masculine. In others, expectations are rigidly held, particularly within particular life course stages.

It is well established that hegemonic masculine norms can have adverse effects on the lives of men and boys throughout the life course. For example, research has found that unstable employment for men, linked to expectations around their role as providers, increases the likelihood of intimate partner violence (Krishnan et al., 2010), possibly as a result of men seeking to reassert their masculinity (Heilman & Barker, 2018). Un/underemployment has also been shown to be closely linked with mental health concerns, including depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Stergiou-Kita et al., 2019). These few examples demonstrate that men are vulnerable to systemic changes, (e.g. economic recessions), or personal changes (e.g. sexual dysfunction) that threaten their ability to play these roles successfully.

To be sure, a focus on norms of masculinities is critical for developing successful gender-transformative programming, but it is not the only factor that must be addressed. As Dworkin et al. (2015) argue, intervening solely on the norms of masculinity limits the level of analysis to "problematic aspects" of men's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (Dworkin et al., 2015) without accounting for the fact that men's agency is entrenched in social, economic and cultural contexts that both constrain and enable their behavior and choices. Not

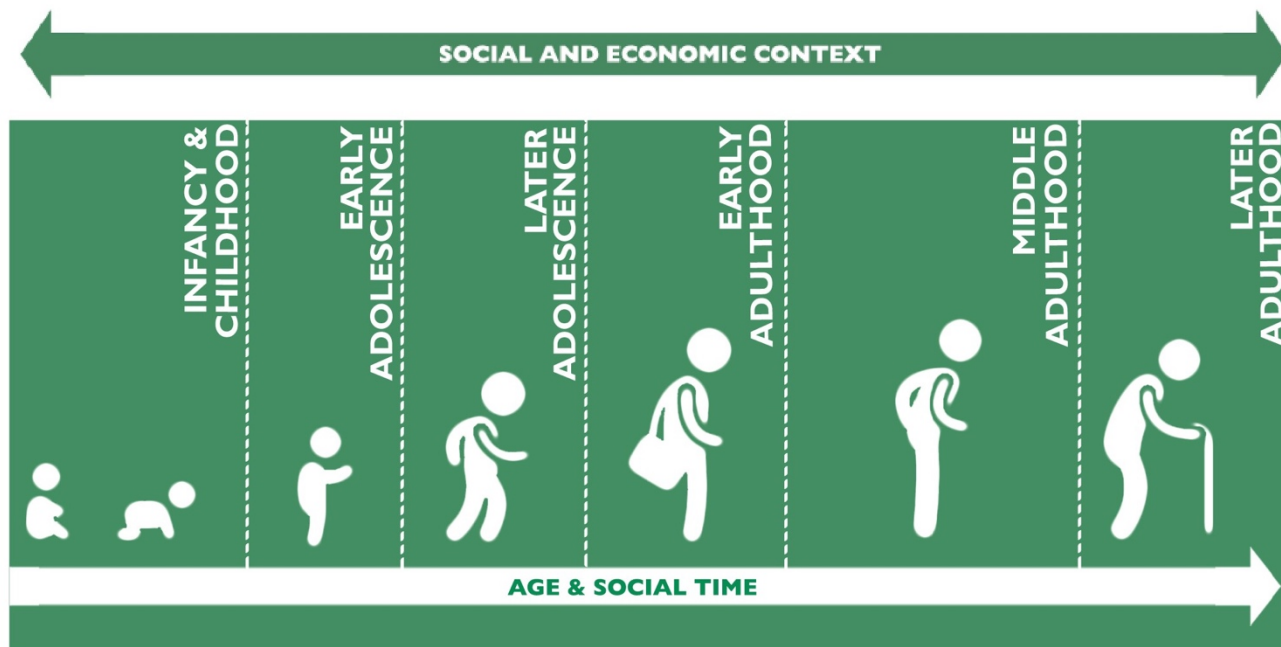
considering this fact, the authors caution, restricts the effectiveness of gender-transformation interventions. They note, “It can be expected that men across settings may feel that they are being asked to bear individual responsibility (e.g. changing gender norms) for massive social problems that influence masculinities and health outcomes (e.g. unemployment, poverty, violence)” (Dworkin et al., 2015). Worse, this drawback may unintentionally affect men’s willingness to engage in gender-transformative initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality.

A life course approach adds a framework for considering the above gap, and is particularly helpful to view behavior within the normative and broader structural contexts that interact to shape both masculinities and men’s programmatic challenges and opportunities. It recognizes that men and boys have agency and the capability to make choices, but that these choices are embedded within systems of opportunities and constraints. Because, at its core, a life course approach holds the idea that there are sensitive moments in an individual’s life, it has the potential to capture not only what behaviors men tend to exhibit at certain moments in their lives, but also how these change over time and why. In sum, a life course approach makes it possible to identify which norms of masculinity create barriers or facilitators throughout men’s life course, especially to their engagement in building and supporting gender equality.

**In what follows, a life course approach is applied to offer a concrete answer to the questions of how and when to work with men and boys to achieve greater gender equality results.** This framework is based firmly on theoretical insights from a variety of fields, including sociological, psychological, economic, and feminist approaches to social problems. While there are variations in the patterns identified in this paper across contexts and target groups for programming, this approach is useful in conceptualizing and designing interventions in all contexts.

# CONCEPTUALIZING THE MALE LIFE COURSE

As the previous discussion highlighted, the commonalities across settings in both the structure of the life course and in the social definitions of manhood allows for a general model that depicts key aspects of the male life course in most settings for most people. The model, presented in Figure 1, makes it conceptually feasible and useful to programmers.



**Figure 1:** Conceptualization of the male life course

While the standards for what defines a ‘real man’ vary across contexts and have changed over time, there is remarkable consistency in a number of core components of this definition. This consistency suggests that a general model of the experiences of men and boys over the life course is possible to be broadly relevant in most places.

The male life course is divided into three large segments: infancy and childhood; adolescence, including young and older adolescence as separate life course stages; and adulthood, which includes the life course stages of young, middle, and older adulthood.

**Infancy and childhood:** Beginning with birth and ending with the transition to adolescence, this life course stage is critical for the socialization of boys who are taught how social rules differentiate masculinity from femininity. This process is achieved through interactions with and observations of the behavior of others (mostly family, though also close friends and community members) at the same time as it is embodied through direct reinforcement of masculine norms.

**Adolescence:** Young adolescence is a critical period of human development with rapid psychological, physical and neurological changes, including the transition to and onset of puberty and, for some, sexual debut. During this life stage, attitudes and behaviors related to gender and RH begin to fully form, with lasting

effects through adulthood (Woog & Kägesten, 2017). Entry into adolescence is, in fact, a time during which gender norms begin to be more strictly enforced, through culturally sanctioned gender roles and identities (Priess et al., 2009; Busset & Bandura, 1999). This process is associated with what Hill and Lynch (1983) call gender intensification – an increased pressure to conform to gender-differentiated roles based on sex after the onset of puberty.<sup>1</sup> The implications of gender norms that are adopted and embodied in adolescence are reflected in the health and well-being trajectories of girls and boys (Green & Patton, 2020). For example, young men generally experience sharp increases in substance use disorders and use of alcohol and other drugs, in contrast to girls who tend to experience higher levels of health-related disability and lower self-reported well-being (Green & Patton, 2020). Some researchers associate risk-taking among young men with pressure to perform masculinity, particularly as boys transition into older adolescence (McCoy et al., 2019).

Adolescence is also a period during which boys and young men learn how to build relationships. In most societies, this period is a time when adolescents start engaging in romantic relationships, which are accompanied by additional expectations, including those related to sexual activity and how relationship dynamics should operate. This is also a time when boys and young men ‘try out’ or model behavior within relationships, setting the platform for later relationships and life course stages. In many settings, there are contradictory expectations for male behavior during this life course stage, with risky and otherwise antisocial behavior often tacitly accepted or encouraged while facing increased pressure to transition to the behavioral patterns associated with adulthood. Key transition markers between adolescence and adulthood typically include a combination of finalizing education, moving out of the family home, obtaining gainful employment, and entering into more stable romantic or intimate relationships where sexual activity takes place. In some settings, there is also a more formal socially sanctioned ceremony or marker indicating the end of adolescence/childhood and the start of adulthood.

**Adulthood:** The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is typically accompanied by a shift in expectations towards more permanent engagement with the work force and family formation, including childbearing and the establishment of more independent family units. Men generally face increased pressure at this point in life to perform the roles of protector and provider for both their more immediate familial units, and to their broader family, with the degree of social and financial obligation varying across contexts. Early adulthood is, however, often still marked by considerable engagement in risky behaviors, and, as such, remains something of a transitional life course stage.

As men meet the expectations of young adulthood, establishing families or long-term unions and stable employment, they enter middle adulthood, which, in most settings, is the life course stage of longest duration. During this life course stage, expectations revolve around the following axes: developing identifiable employment careers, raising children, remaining in unions, and generally improving their social and economic standing. In keeping with expectations of stability, this period is also generally one in which the social tolerance of risky behaviors on the part of men lessens, exchanged instead for expectations more oriented towards providing benefits to family and community. However, this period presents a number of challenges for men, described further below.

The final life stage transition is from middle to older adulthood, during which expectations for men’s behaviors move away from being oriented around the roles of provider and protector to other roles, including family or community leadership. There is considerable variation globally in the expected roles that men should play in older adulthood. While in many cultures, older men occupy important social positions with leadership responsibilities, in others this is seen as a life stage where men take a step back from public engagement. This

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<sup>1</sup> See Hill & Lynch (1983) for a detailed explanation of the gender intensification hypothesis.

transition can be challenging for men in many contexts, as it may involve moving away from roles that have been a core part of their identity for much of their lives, and is often accompanied by deterioration in physical health.

While the general model presented above demonstrates that all stages of a man's life are intricately linked with one another, it does not show *how* choices and opportunities from childhood to older age accumulate over a man's life course to create inequities for both men and women, boys and girls. **Developing strategies to “interrupt” unequal trajectories and capitalize on opportunities for gender transformation requires first to identify critical areas for intervention throughout these life stages, as well as to recognize where bottle necks occur.**

## IDENTIFYING MEN'S CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OVER THE LIFE COURSE TO ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY

The conceptualization of the male life course presented above in Figure 1 describes five key thematic areas of life over the life course: infancy and childhood, young adolescence, older adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, older adulthood.<sup>1</sup> The life course approach points to the particular challenges men and boys face in each of these five thematic areas. It also identifies where opportunities exist for gender-transformative interventions to address men's problems and advance gender equality for all.

### KEY THEMATIC AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

#### Livelihoods, Employment and Economic Activity

This thematic area includes a range of concerns, primarily related to economic sufficiency, that are broadly relevant across the life course. There are three interrelated 'sub-areas' that together shape the lives of men and women:

- Livelihoods and poverty: Having sufficient access to the necessities of life (such as food, water, and shelter).
- Employment and financial security: Paid employment (either for others or as a self-employed person) and the ability to provide financial security to both oneself and others.
- Other economic activity: All forms of engagement in labor that are not considered to be employment, such as unpaid labor, provided to the household or community.

In most societies, men are expected to perform or to be able to perform the social role of financial provider, family protector, and leader of family units, among others. Failure to meet expectations may have profound consequences for both men and boys and women and girls. For men, the inability to meet their basic needs means that they are either not able to perform the roles expected of them as men, or are unable to fully transition to subsequent the life course. The life stages of older adolescence and adulthood is where this is particularly salient. In older adolescence, boys are increasingly expected to show that they are able to perform the roles expected of young adults, including union formation, entry into employment, and/or further education towards employment and being able to support a family financially. These socially established gender roles shape the division of labor within a household with long-term effects in economic opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that these areas of life apply to both women and men, but each area is experienced differently according to one's gender.

and labor outcomes, such as labor participation, wages, and job type/quality over their life course (OECD, 2014). Across the globe, women and girls spend more time in unpaid work through caring responsibilities than men and boys (OECD, 2014). In many settings, for example, girls are expected to care for their siblings or their older relatives from a young age, having to privilege care responsibilities over school (GADN Thinkpieces, 2018). Caring roles continue as women become mothers and simultaneously take on new responsibilities. Gender inequalities in unpaid care work has important implications for women's access to market-related activities or investment in education and vocational skills. Every minute more that a woman devotes to unpaid care work means one minute less that she could spend in economic and/or educational activities and advancement (OECD, 2014). Gender inequalities in unpaid care responsibilities continue into older adulthood for multiple generations, with significant gender disparities between older women and men (Gammage & Stevanovic-Fenn, 2018; Overseas Development Institute, 2018). Furthermore, these expected social roles bear social penalties for both women and men in their adulthood, with impacts on older adulthood. For women, the “motherhood penalty” refers to the idea that women are perceived as less committed to work because of their role as caregivers and mothers. As a result, they are less likely to be promoted and earn financial rewards with long-term consequences on their social benefits (e.g. retirement) (Steffens et al., 2019). For men who choose to prioritize family care responsibilities, the social penalty varies from stigmatization to reduced career advancement (Stone & Hernandez, 2013).

Poverty is an obstacle to each of these transition markers, complicating and threatening the transition to adulthood and the social status of the individual, especially if combined with the other disadvantages associated with poverty, such as a lack of education and poorer health. Similarly, unstable livelihood threatens each of the key roles that men and women are typically expected to perform through adulthood, lessening their ability to provide for their families and others, purchase property or homes, and to play leadership roles in their community. Finally, for many, older adulthood is a time when poverty and challenges around providing livelihoods become particularly acute, as their ability to independently generate income declines. This is especially true for those who experienced poverty at earlier points in the life course.

## Experiences with Violence

This thematic area focuses on all experiences with violence, whether as a victim, perpetrator, or witness at any stage of the life course. This may include violence experienced as a child (including physical violence against children by parents or caregivers, often in the guise of corporal punishment, and child sexual abuse and exploitation), criminal activity that either is violent or implies the threat of violence, exposure to armed conflict and war (including as recruits into armed conflict situations), intimate partner violence, bullying, and physical and/or psychological violence against others. In many settings, fighting, bullying, and other types of violence allow men to perform various forms of masculinities that meet some definitions of “real manhood” – in cases where men are unable to perform other masculine roles, violence may become a way of recapturing or reconfirming manhood. Men are also disproportionately drawn into violence through armed conflict or criminal activity (Ormhaug, 2009; Heilman & Barker, 2018). Similar to interpersonal violence, crime or engagement with militant groups may be particularly attractive to men who feel they have few other ways than violent crime to “prove their manhood” (Crowther-Dowey & Silvestri, 2017). Because these types of violence are quite different in terms of their causes and consequences, overall experiences with violence are divided into two sub-areas:

- **Interpersonal violence:** This includes the majority of the types of violence mentioned above, taking place between individuals outside of the boundaries of either criminal activity or armed conflict.
- **Conflict and criminality:** This includes violence in the form of armed conflict and violent criminal activity, including participation in gangs.

Considerable research shows how dominant masculine ideals heighten the potential for men and boys to engage in violent behavior (Berke & Zeichner, 2016; Feder et al., 2010). The resulting stigma attached to being the victim of violence, particularly sexual violence, is a significant deterrent to boys and men seeking support or reporting violence (ECPAT International, 2013; University of California, Los Angeles, 2017). This often intensifies as boys enter adolescence, during which violence and physical dominance provide boys with an avenue for social advancement through consolidation of their masculine qualifications – here boys are more likely than girls to be both perpetrators and victims of violence. The consequences on men as well as women are significant, as deaths resulting from interpersonal violence rise markedly during adolescence and only begin to fall towards the end of early adulthood. Older adolescence and young adulthood are also often a point where intimate partner violence becomes more prevalent, as boys and men increasingly enter into intimate relationships. This form of violence remains an issue throughout adulthood for many men, affecting women’s and children’s physical, social and mental health in lasting ways. Adolescence and early adulthood are also the life course stages during which boys and men are most likely to be drawn into conflict or violent criminal activity, being drafted or enlisted into the military/militant groups or gangs. Finally, while there is less research on violence in later adulthood, the diminished social standing of some elderly individuals may make them more vulnerable to violence.

The effect of violence can have long-term effects on men and their relationships. Research from around world has shown that experience with violence, either as perpetrator or victim, increases the risk of perpetrating interpersonal violence in adulthood (Fulu et al., 2017; Fleming et al., 2015). Furthermore, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that men who witnessed interpersonal violence in their childhood are more likely to commit physical interpersonal violence themselves as adults (e.g. Fleming et al., 2015; El Feki et al., 2017; Fulu et al., 2017; Promundo & Sonke Justice, 2018). This pattern suggests that violent behavior has the potential to be transmitted across generations as the principle of linked lives implies.

## Relationships, Family, and Social Responsibilities

This thematic area refers broadly to how men and boys form relationships, both romantic and otherwise, and how they relate to their family and social responsibilities. As social beings, these relationships are a critical part of the lives of both men and women and are shaped by gender norms. These relationships can be positive, offering intimacy, support, and the freedom to explore sexuality and sexual pleasure, while also forming a core part of the lives of most boys and men. As with any social tie, these relationships are shaped by social obligations and responsibilities, including to their peers, the community as a whole, and their families. These include both social and economic ties and immediate and extended family obligations. Family is here broadly defined as the responsibilities that individuals have, ranging from contributing to their household through unpaid labor to how they form or dissolve relationships/unions, parent their children, and care/provide for other family members, including the elderly. Four sub-areas that compose this thematic area are defined in the following way:

- Peer and friendship relationship formation: Focuses on the dynamics of close friendships and social bonds that men and boys form over their lives, including how and when they are formed, the types of social support they offer, and what they imply in terms of social obligations.
- Romantic relationship formation and dissolution: Focuses on the dynamics of romantic/intimate relationships, including how and when they are formed, with whom, and when and how they dissolve.
- Fatherhood/parenting: Focuses on the dynamics of parenting, including social expectations of when men become fathers, and how they parent their children and engage in household tasks.



- Caregiving obligations: Focuses on the social, emotional, and financial obligations that men have towards family members, which we class broadly as caregiving.

Friendships and peer relationships are an important feature of the male experience throughout the life course. Men and boys are as capable of forming deeply meaningful relationships as women and girls, and rely on these for support in times of need. However, there are components of masculine norms that shape the nature of these relationships that, in many contexts, limit the degree to which men and boys are able to develop and benefit from them. In particular, norms around independence, emotional stoicism, toughness, and homophobia make establishing close relationships challenging for boys and men, particularly with other males. These norms are typically only loosely enforced during childhood but begin to fully form during adolescence as masculine norms become more clearly defined and enforced. During this period, boys and young men typically move away from friendships with girls and young women, gravitating towards other males. This is also a time when gendered norms of appropriate sexual conduct crystallize with the commonly held belief that sexual behavior is judged differently depending on one's gender – while girls and women who engage in sexual activity are perceived as promiscuous and immoral to the point of being stigmatized, men and boys are praised and even encouraged for engaging in multiple sexual conquests.

During adulthood, many men form close relationships with other men, though they typically do not form as extensive social networks as their female counterparts. Many of these friendships also take place in the context of men's lives outside of their households, such as in the workplace, and may, therefore, be more vulnerable to changes in those contexts (e.g. losing your job may break important social networks).

While many boys have significant caregiving responsibilities during childhood and young adolescence, including formal and informal employment, family responsibilities typically start to become more of a factor in older adolescence as boys and young men become more economically self-sufficient and begin to form family units of their own. Young adulthood is typically when these roles become an expected part of social definitions of manhood. Men increasingly face social pressure to prove fertility through producing children, maintaining marital or romantic relationships to meet the expectations around gender relationships, raising children, and providing financially for their family. In most contexts, masculine norms privilege the role of provider over that as caregiver for men, with men being universally less engaged with unpaid household labor than women. Globally, women spend on average three times more in caring activities for the home and children than men do (UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, 2016). In fact, women are more likely than men to occupy positions in the formal and informal economies, allowing them to balance unpaid care work with earning an income in the life stages of older adolescence and throughout adulthood (GADN Thinkpieces, 2018).

As men enter middle adulthood, maintaining employment in occupations that pay an adequate amount to support a family, as well as provide sufficient balance between work and home life, is an increasingly important factor, both in practical and normative terms. The need to support aging parents is often added to providing for a growing family, and the importance of maintaining social status is also reinforced. While this life course stage is characterized by stability, there are some challenges – these include the dissolution of marriages, an increasingly common event globally that is a clear challenge to men's manhood status.

## Health

In this section, both physical and mental health vulnerabilities are examined. Needs and challenges are separated as three individual sub-areas:

- Physical health: Includes physical illnesses/diseases, drug and alcohol abuse, and general factors that may increase morbidity or mortality for men.
- Mental health: Includes both mental and emotional well-being, like factors such as stress, depression, and the presence of mental health disorders.
- Reproductive Health: Includes needs for contraception, prevention and treatment of HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual dysfunction, infertility, and male cancers (IPPF & UNFPA, 2017).

Masculine norms, combined with other factors, are directly related to the major health-risk behaviors that account for most of men's ill health globally (Ragonese et al., 2019). On average, men die 5.5 years earlier than women and are over-represented in most major burden-of-disease categories (Evaluation, 2017). Each of the top six behaviors that contribute to the majority of death and illness for men as a group – poor diet, use of tobacco and alcohol, unsafe sex, drug use, and hazards associated with employment – are linked to specific lifestyles and behaviors that are strongly influenced by masculine norms (Ragonese et al., 2019). The link between masculinity and poor physical health is even clearer for older adolescent and young adult males, where social pressure to perform damaging versions of masculinity are especially high. Between the ages of 15 and 29, globally, the leading three causes of death are road injuries, interpersonal violence, and self-harm, in that order. In contrast, men whose ages correspond more closely with middle and older adulthood (30-65) are most likely to die as the result of heart disease, HIV, and cirrhosis of the liver (World Health Organization, 2018).

While less attention has been paid to mental health for men, global estimates suggest that men are almost twice as likely to die by suicide as women (World Health Organization, 2019). For those aged 15-29, or roughly equivalent to older adolescence and young adulthood, self-harm is the third leading cause of death (though mortality remains relatively rare for this age group). In their comprehensive examination of the links between masculinity and health outcomes, Ragonese et al. (2019) suggest that harmful gender norms that encourage men to repress emotions and not demonstrate weakness likely lie at the root of self-harm behaviors. Similarly, research on men and boys in the United States, United Kingdom and Mexico (Heilman et al., 2017) finds that men who subscribe to dominant and unequal gender norms had higher rates of suicidal ideation and depression. This observation may be linked to stigmatization of mental health issues among men, discouraging them to discuss mental health issues and seek help. Given the social pressures boys and men face during this life course stage to conform to relatively rigid social definitions of masculinity, it is also possible that some of this behavior reflects the stress associated with an inability to successfully perform masculinity in a way that is seen as socially acceptable. While self-harm is not a leading cause of death for older groups at the global level, it is likely that this stress may also be reflected in use of alcohol and drugs, which, in turn, contribute to chronic disease.

Challenges in men's RH remain a concern, particularly in terms of engaging them in supporting women's rights. Ample evidence shows that men face substantial RH challenges with respect to contraception, prevention and treatment of STIs, sexual dysfunction, infertility, and male cancers. A combination of structural and normative factors, including lack of services (e.g. male friendly spaces), policies, stigma, lack of knowledge, poor male health-seeking behavior – all contribute to this gender-specific gap (IPPF-UNFPA, 2017; Promundo, 2018). Yet, meeting men's RH needs, as well as those of adolescent boys, means that it can improve not only their own health, but that of their partners and children. For instance, in many settings, men

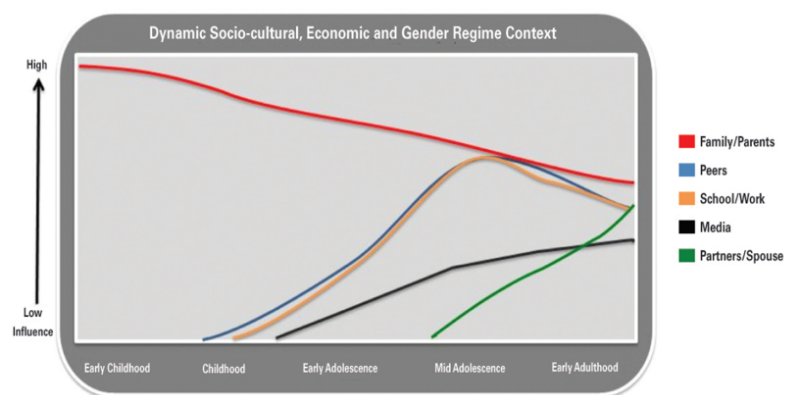
and adolescent boys are at higher risks of contracting HIV or other STIs than in other places, due to lack of adequate integration of RH care for them, and particularly for disadvantaged groups of men (e.g. poor, minorities, transgender, etc.). In some of these same settings, women and girls do not have the decision-making power and/or have little to no control over RH decision-making, with men taking over these decisions. And when men and boys are not aware that they are HIV positive or have another STI, they are more likely to transmit it to their partners. At the same time, men and women who are facing these conditions are less likely to seek care because of the issues mentioned above. Even in cases where women may be able to access a health service, they may not be able to do so without their male partners' approval or financial support (Levtov et al., 2015).

## Learning

In this thematic area, both the formal and informal learning that takes place across the life course is examined and treated as two sub-areas. In terms of formal learning, education, primarily within the setting of schools, is highlighted, while informal learning includes the socialization process during which norms are learned and internalized (including norms around masculinity) and social institutions such as class, hierarchy and social status are reinforced.

- Education (formal or informal): Refers to efforts to build the skills needed to thrive in the modern economy and society. This may take place within schools (formal education) or in other venues, such as religious settings (informal).
- Social learning: Refers to the process through which individuals learn and internalize social norms in their community or society through an ongoing socialization and social learning process. This includes an understanding of social hierarchies, class, gender norms, and expectations for behavior (including those related to specific life course stages).

In infancy and childhood, learning is primarily relational and social, with children learning through observation of their environment. Figure 2 (adapted from John et al., 2017) illustrates how the influence of different social actors on the process of gender socialization changes between childhood and young adulthood. During this life course stage, key influencers are primarily family members and others in close social proximity. This changes somewhat when children enter the education system and are exposed to new ideas from both teachers and a broader range of peers. As boys transition into young adolescence, the importance of peers, teachers/employers, and the media increases, while that of parents and other family members declines. This, in part, helps explain why adolescence is a period of increased risk-taking, as well as the intensification of pressure to conform to masculine norms. For many adolescents, the transition to adolescence also marks the end of their formal education. By the time boys transition into young adulthood, it is likely that their families have about the same level of influence as the other sources of information and guidance, with social learning increasingly coming from peers.



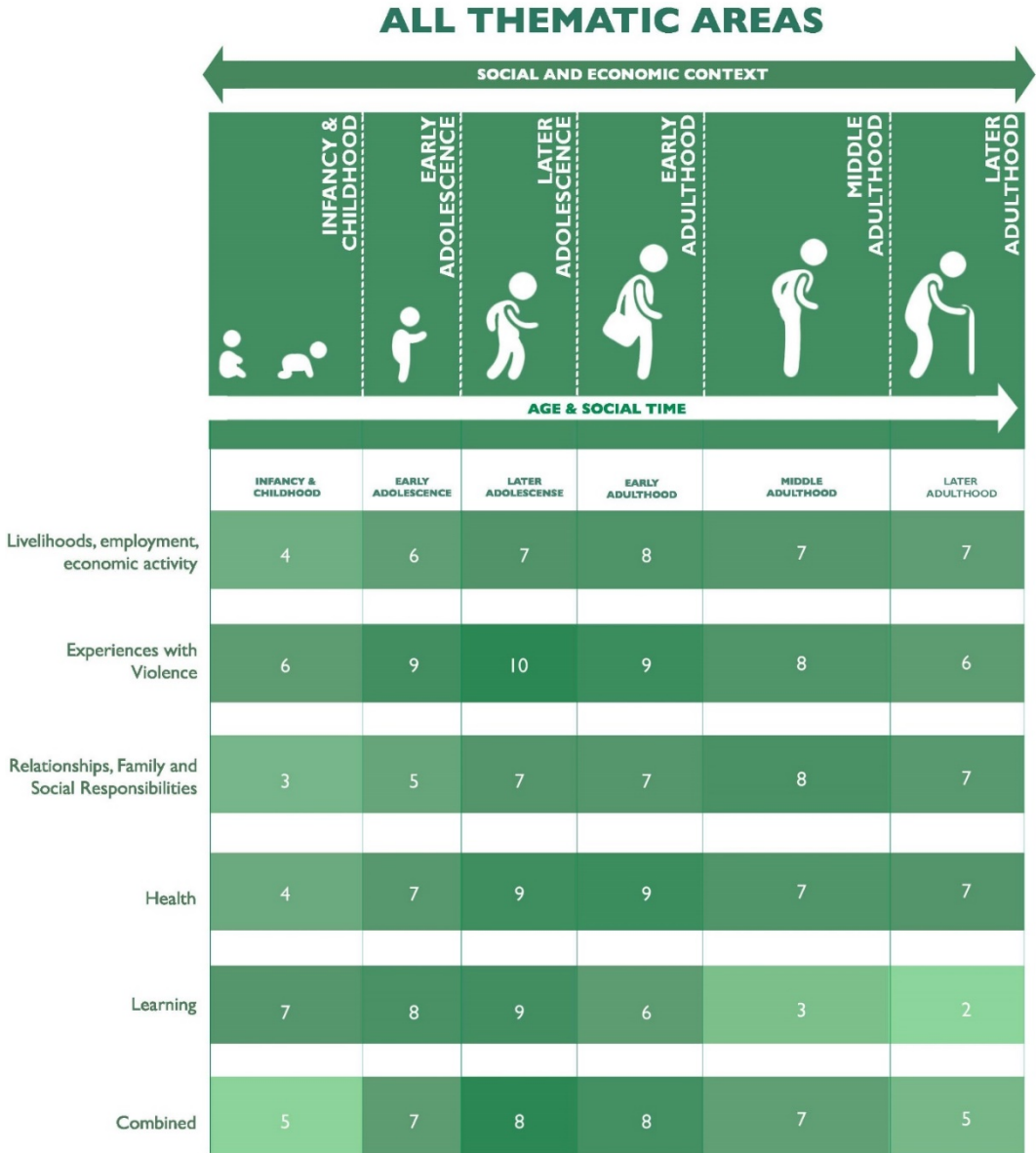
**Figure 2:** Main influences on socialization of gender norms between childhood and early adolescence (Source: John et al., 2017)

Young adulthood is also when formal education is largely completed for many, though in some cases this is revived later in life. Middle and older adulthood are stages where relatively little education or social learning takes place for most men, though individuals clearly do continue to absorb and internalize norms throughout this period. In these life course stages, much of social learning takes place in settings outside of the household, such as in the workplace or through social interactions with other men.

The following section highlights some of the programming implications for addressing the challenges of men and boys over a life course and identifying opportunities for gender-transformation. Based on the five key principles of the LCT, it then makes some programmatic suggestions.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMMING

Figure 3 (following) illustrates how programmatic intervention opportunities may be linked to the life course, based both on reviews of research in the relevant fields and expert consultation during a workshop held in Washington, DC, on June 10, 2019. For each thematic area, and the sub-areas that compose them, levels of potential vulnerability or need for men in each of the life course stages are identified and ranked between one and ten, with higher rankings indicating greater opportunities for gender-transformative interventions that can benefit both men and women. The information is then used to create a shaded bar for each thematic area that is divided into life course stages that correspond to the visual representation of the life course, with a darker shade indicating a higher level of opportunity in that life course stage.



**Figure 3:** Challenges and opportunities by thematic areas over the life course

The patterns in Figure 3 illustrate a number of critical points relevant to programmers and policy-makers. First, it suggests that **men and boys face greater challenges between adolescence through early adulthood, rising rapidly in adolescence and peaking in later adolescence and early adulthood. Second, these periods are also important opportunities to intervene, as reflected by the high levels of challenges evident across all of the thematic areas at key points in the life course.** These results indicate that later adolescence in particular is marked by a confluence of structural and societal factors that make boys and young men particularly vulnerable. During this life stage, expectations for their behavior shifts rapidly in an environment over which they have only limited control and influence. This further suggests that **intervening in the early adolescence life stage presents a programmatic opportunity for both young men and women.**

The same approach could be used to identify where in the life course current programming with men and boys is focused, using darker shades to represent where programmatic efforts are most concentrated. When combined, this would allow for the identification of areas where men's needs and programmatic emphasis overlap, and where they do not.

This section presents the principles mentioned in the section on LCT and key concepts – lifespan, agency, time/place, timing, linked lives. Together, these have implications for gender-transformative programming with and for men and boys, aimed at advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls. Aligning with LCT, these principles suggest that early intervention during early and later adolescence in a man's life course has the potential to reduce future challenges that affect their well-being, as well as that of women and children. One way of doing so is to focus on challenging dominant norms by capitalizing on positive features of masculinity (Dworkin et al., 2015). This approach would facilitate healthy social pathways for children during infancy and childhood to ensure healthy transitions to young adolescence and adulthood, as well as for the next generation (Fine & Kotelchuck, 2010). Table 1 below makes some programming suggestions to effectively engage men and boys through the lens of the life course.

**Table 1:** Programming suggestions for effectively engaging men and boys using a life course lens

	<b>Life Course Theory/Principle</b>	<b>Suggestions</b>
<b>Lifespan</b>	Life Course Theory: <i>Human development and change are lifelong processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Apply a lifelong perspective rather than focusing on only one life stage. Given your program focus, consider the cumulative effects of earlier life stages on the current life stage your program addresses, and how earlier events influence your outcomes. In addition, adding a temporal dimension by using, for example, an inter-generational approach should be prioritized (Fine &amp; Kotelchuck, 2010). Doing so could increase communication and strengthen relationships between caregivers and children, as well as grandparents around gender equitable norms (See the <a href="#">Grandmother Project</a> for a promising inter-generational strategy).</i></li> </ul>
<b>Agency</b>	Life Course Key Principle: <i>Individuals have a role in determining the direction their lives take</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Recognize that people have agency when you design your program, despite social determinants. For example, there are clear linkages between men’s inability to meet social expectations (e.g. unemployment impeding men’s role as provider) and increases in the perpetration of intimate partner violence. Consider what priority actions your program could take to address risk and protective factors to promote agency among men and boys (e.g. inability to meet social expectations).</i></li> </ul>
<b>Time/Place</b>	Life Course Key Principle: <i>Individuals are shaped by the context in which they live</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Go beyond a sole focus on individual-level change to one that includes structural and community-level change (Dworkin et al., 2015). An integrated multi-sectoral approach to gender-transformative programming should be prioritized to link men and women’s sectors (e.g. health, education, economic-generative activities) and engage them to work together. As evidence shows, when men are unable to meet social expectations, there are repercussions on the well-being of women and girls. As such, this necessitates alliances not only between men and women, but also with the community, so that communities can also trigger change (Fine &amp; Kotelchuck, 2010).</i></li> </ul>
<b>Timing</b>	Life Course Key Principle: <i>The effect of specific events that shape behavior depend on when they happen in people’s life course</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Prioritize your program focus on assisting and facilitating transition into and out of the life course stages, both in terms of meeting basic needs and alleviating role strain and conflict. The roots of the challenges faced in specific life courses often lie earlier in life. Consider intervening, not only when these vulnerabilities manifest themselves through</i></li> </ul>

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harmful behaviors and outcomes, but also to prepare youth and adults for transitions to future life course states and social statuses. Doing so should not, however, prevent programmers from continuing to seek to transform gender norms and attitudes for men in later stages of their life course. This can benefit men and those around them, including women, girls and boys within their households and communities.

### **Linked lives**

Life Course Key Principle: *People's lives are lived interdependently*

- *Take into account the importance of cumulative and longitudinal advantages and disadvantages both within your population of interest's life span and across generations. All stages of a person's life – men, women and children – are interlinked with each other, with the lives of other people, and with past and future generations of their families. Research shows, for example, that engaging both partners can improve couple communication in family planning, increase shared decision-making, and men's involvement in childcare (Stanback & Shattuck, 2015), while also improving voluntary family planning method correct use and continuation (Lavoie & Lundgren, 2009). Consider including activities that address relationships with partners (sexual and/or romantic and/or marital partners) in a gender synchronized way. For example, work with women and men in a mutually reinforcing way to promote dialogue aimed at increasing gender equality.*



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

Individual change and human development are understood to be life-long processes. LCT provides insights into how social structures and individual characteristics influence life trajectories from childhood to older adulthood and across generations. It demonstrates how challenges and opportunities accumulate over the life course and generate disparities between women and men, girls and boys. Development programs should leverage the potential of the life course framework to identify when to effectively intervene to address these disparities, and with what type of interventions. The life course framework suggests that programs with men and boys across sectors should pay particular emphasis on young adolescence, making this life stage an opportune period for interventions.

Integrating a life course approach into programming for men and boys has the potential for far-reaching effects. The WHO notes that not only are the returns of a life course approach up to 10 times the investment, but that a life course approach has evidence-based strategies to help “realize each person’s potential and rights for health and well-being at and across life phases, which contributes to reduced ill health and longer lives” (WHO, 2019: 3).

## Box 4: Takeaways for programming

- Apply a lifelong perspective to program design, instead of only focusing on the life stage your program addresses.
- Remember that people have agency despite social determinants.
- Recognize that both social norms and structural factors matter for sustained change.
- Consider the effect of the timing of specific life events and how these may affect your population of interest.
- Consider the importance of cumulative and longitudinal advantages and disadvantages within your population of interest’s life span and across generations.

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