

DECONSTRUCTING HARMFUL INTERPRETATIONS OF MALE HEADSHIP, RESPECT, AND SEXUAL CONSENT IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE PREVENTION CURRICULA

Group-based curricula designed to promote critical reflection and build healthy relationships are among the most widely used, evidence-based strategies to prevent intimate partner violence (IPV). Gender-inequitable attitudes and harmful social norms are key drivers of IPV, and prevention curricula have increasingly integrated

critical reflection on these issues. A Prevention Collaborative review of 55 curricula from 42 IPV prevention programmes across the Global South found that nearly all (94 percent) included content designed to challenge restrictive gender norms and roles.¹ Information-sharing and experiential activities helped participants understand gender as a social construct, explore how gender norms are learned, and examine the costs of rigid expectations for men and women.

Yet the same review found a critical gap. Far less content explicitly addresses male headship, the belief that men are the rightful heads of the household and hold authority over women, despite its consistent association with relationship violence. While curricula are more likely to cover respect and sexual consent within marriage, they rarely connect these ideas back to headship, even though headship can shape interpretations of both. Respect, for example, is often presented as a general feature of healthy relationships, without addressing how it can be used to maintain men's positions of unquestioned authority. Similarly, sexual consent is often discussed without acknowledging how headship can create a sense of sexual entitlement within marriage.

These concepts surface regularly in IPV prevention programmes and group-based discussions, yet curricula rarely deconstruct them explicitly. This gap matters: harmful interpretations of headship, respect, and sexual consent within marriage are influential drivers of IPV, and, when left unexamined, they continue to serve as common justifications for abuse. They also shape how participants receive programme content in ways that can undermine intended outcomes.



UNTANGLING ATTITUDES AND SOCIAL NORMS

This brief refers throughout to both *attitudes* and *norms*. These concepts are closely related but distinct, and effective prevention work requires being clear about which one is being addressed.

- ▶ **Attitudes are individual.** An attitude is what a person personally believes, approves of, or considers to be true. Attitudes can be changed through information, dialogue, reflection, and exposure to new perspectives.
- ▶ **Social norms are collective or institutional.** A social norm represents the informal, often unwritten rules embedded within social institutions, such as the family, community, market, and state, that shape behaviour within a group or society. At the interpersonal level, a social norm is what a person believes others approve of and do, reinforced by perceived rewards and sanctions.² Because these norms are embedded within institutions and maintained by wider structures of power, they can persist even when many individuals privately disagree with them.³
- ▶ **Both attitudes and norms shape behaviour, and they can change in either order.** Sometimes shifts in individual attitudes accumulate into norm change as more people behave differently and a new social consensus emerges. Sometimes norms shift first through visible community-level change, and individual attitudes follow.
- ▶ **Strategies for shifting attitudes and norms are different but linked.** Attitude change focuses on individuals through information, dialogue, and reflection. When people's individual attitudes already align with a harmful norm, however, providing information or correcting misperceptions is often insufficient.⁴ The norm itself must be surfaced, examined, and contested,⁵ and this work is most effective when it is led by community members over a sufficient period of time.⁶ Norm change requires engaging individuals, communities, and institutions together while supporting visible alternatives.
- ▶ **Gender norms are particularly resistant to change.** Gender norms define the accepted roles, behaviours, entitlements, and forms of gender expression for men, women, and people of diverse genders within a given social group or institution.⁷ They are often unexamined, deeply tied to identity, and reinforced across families, schools, workplaces, communities, and media from early in life.⁸ Making them visible by helping people recognise that they were created by people and therefore can be changed by people is a critical first step.



This brief examines why and how IPV prevention curricula could more explicitly address male headship, respect, and sexual consent within marriage, as well as the connections among them, as they manifest in heterosexual relationships across the Global South. These concepts appear consistently across diverse cultural, religious, and geographic settings, rooted in the ways gender and power operate within intimate relationships. The evidence this brief draws on reflects that global pattern, although the ways these attitudes and norms are expressed and enforced vary significantly across contexts. Curricula must therefore engage with their locally specific manifestations.

Table 1. Respect, Headship, and Sexual Consent in Marriage: Harmful Interpretations and Consequences

Concept	Harmful interpretations	Consequences
MALE HEADSHIP	Men hold divinely or culturally sanctioned authority over the household. Women's financial, social, and sexual autonomy is subordinate to this authority.	Physical and economic abuse; restrictions on women's mobility and decision-making; denial of women's right to refuse or negotiate sex.
RESPECT	Women's deference and submission to male authority are framed as moral virtues and tools of control. Expressing disagreement, asserting needs, or refusing to comply is perceived as disrespect, which can be used to justify violence or punishment.	Coercive control; silencing of women's voice and agency; normalisation of violence as a response to non-compliance.
SEXUAL CONSENT WITHIN MARRIAGE	Sexual consent is assumed within marriage and implied by the relationship itself rather than understood as an ongoing, negotiated practice. A wife's refusal is framed as a failure of duty.	Marital rape; normalisation of sexual coercion; denial of bodily autonomy.

These three concepts are closely linked: male headship lays the foundation, while respect and sexual consent are two of the main ways that authority is put into practice. Respect can be used to maintain headship through the deference a wife is expected to show the man as head of the home. Similarly, assumed sexual consent is treated as one of the entitlements that come with headship. This is why the three are best addressed together. Working on respect or consent on their own, without examining the foundational claim of headship, risks changing how relationships appear on the surface while leaving the underlying belief intact. The sections that follow examine each concept in turn, but curricula work best when they help participants appreciate these interconnections.

MALE HEADSHIP



The belief that men are the rightful heads of their households is among the most widely held and deeply rooted norms shaping intimate relationships globally. In many settings, male headship is a defining feature of masculinity. It is embedded in religious teaching, cultural tradition, and, in some contexts, legal frameworks,^{9,i} deriving its power from being understood as natural or divinely ordained. In some settings, men's authority is also understood to derive from bride wealth payments, reinforcing the idea that wives are under their husband's authority.¹⁰ Religious justifications for male headship are common across many faith traditions. Through research conducted in central Ghana, one man asserted: '*As Christ is the head of the church, so is a man to the house*', positioning male authority as divinely sanctioned and beyond challenge.¹¹ It is important to note, however, that many faith traditions also contain strong teachings on mutual love, shared responsibility, and the equal dignity of partners, which can be powerfully mobilised to discourage violence within intimate partnerships and promote gender equality.

Headship operates not only as an individual belief but also as something to be publicly performed. Qualitative research in Rwanda found that men who privately recognised that joint decision-making produced better outcomes for their households routinely refused to acknowledge their wives' contributions in public, because doing so would mark them as 'dominated men'.¹² Women, in turn, developed strategies for working within this structure by framing their own ideas as their husbands' decisions or channelling influence through male intermediaries. This means that male headship can appear intact even when private attitudes are shifting.

A key driver of partner conflict and violence globally is the perception that women are challenging their husband's authority, whether by making decisions without consultation or expressing disagreement. Research in Ghana found that perpetrators explicitly drew on concepts of male headship to rationalise IPV, framing violence as a legitimate response to women who transgressed appropriate gender roles.¹³ Headship norms can also legitimise coercive control and economic abuse, including restrictions on women's mobility, social connections, decision-making, and access to employment and resources, to the point where these behaviours are experienced as expressions of male authority rather than abuse.¹⁴ Because men's authority within the household has traditionally been justified by their role as the primary provider, their claim to power can be undermined when their ability to provide diminishes or when women achieve greater financial independence. This perceived threat to male headship can trigger backlash, including men's use of violence to forcibly reassert control.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

Efforts to measure these beliefs underscore how tightly authority and provision are intertwined. In developing the Gender Roles and Male Provision Expectations Scale with young women in Uganda, endorsement of the male provider role was closely associated with beliefs in male authority and men's control over sexual decision-making.¹⁷ This suggests that male headship, provision, and sexual entitlement are deeply interconnected, and reinforces the case for curricula to address them together rather than in isolation.

i. For example, until 2016, Article 206 'Equality of Spouses' of the Rwandan Civil Code defined men as the 'head of the household', in effect codifying men's authority in the family. Importantly, in October 2016, this article was amended to recognise both spouses as having the same rights and obligations in the household, with each owing the other mutual fidelity, help, and assistance.

What Group-Based Curricula Can Do

Curricula can support a shift away from norms of male headship, in which men hold power over household decisions, resources, and their partners, towards a model of shared power grounded in mutual responsibility and respect. Participatory approaches can help participants identify and reflect on the costs of male headship and how it harms both men and women, including by burdening men with exclusive responsibility for household economic survival and decision-making; denying women their agency, voice, and right to participate equally in decisions that affect their lives; and creating conditions for conflict and violence.

The global legal shift away from male headship provides facilitators a useful entry point for discussion. Most countries have reformed their family laws to move away from male authority: around 160 of the 190 economies tracked by the World Bank now legally recognise women as heads of household on the same terms as men, and many have replaced male headship with 'joint headship' and shared decision-making between spouses.¹⁸ Pointing out that national laws are moving toward shared authority gives participants a powerful way to question why rigid hierarchies continue to shape family life.

Curricula can also actively cultivate aspirational models of partnership by building men's respect for and appreciation of women's contributions, capabilities, and judgement, while supporting men to recognise and value their spouses as equal partners.¹⁹ Presenting models of shared decision-making, alongside the tangible benefits for men, women, and children, can create space for alternative expressions of masculinity that do not depend on headship.²⁰

Because letting go of headship requires dismantling a deeply ingrained public identity, practitioners should expect changes to be incremental. Shifts in authority often occur gradually, beginning with private consultation before progressing towards visible forms of shared decision-making. Because headship is so publicly performed, it may also be effective to complement curricula with opportunities for men to engage privately with these ideas without the pressure of performing for peers.

Where women's economic empowerment programming operates alongside or within curricula, it is important to name and address the risk of backlash by unpacking how women's economic independence can feel threatening in contexts where headship norms are strong. Women's economic participation can instead be reframed not as a challenge to men's authority but as a contribution to shared household wellbeing.

Engaging with religious frameworks is also essential, given how strongly headship norms are justified through selective interpretations of certain religious texts. Curricula can surface alternative interpretations within faith traditions that affirm partnership, mutual care, and women's dignity while challenging harmful interpretations of male headship. Programmes such as the *Masculinities, Faith and Peace* programme in Nigeria have shown that reinterpreting religious messages to highlight gender equity and condemn IPV can produce meaningful shifts in attitudes and behaviours, with participants valuing the grounding of this work within their own faith traditions.²¹⁻²² A separate randomised controlled trial in western Uganda of the *Becoming One* curriculum, involving 1,680 couples, found that training Christian religious leaders to offer more progressive interpretation of gender roles during a 12-session couples counselling course

produced significant reductions in IPV. Effects were strongest among leaders who already held more gender equitable views and delivered the curriculum faithfully.²³ The curriculum names the common belief that men should hold all decision-making power 'because he is the head of the family' and offers faith grounded counter framings: that decision-making should rest on gifts and character rather than gender, and that scripture calls for partners to submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21) rather than for wives to submit to husbands alone. By reinterpreting biblical texts, the curriculum demonstrates how faith can be mobilised to affirm partnership rather than male authority.

CURRICULUM EXAMPLE: INDASHYIKIRWA

The *Indashyikirwa* curriculum was implemented with heterosexual couples in rural Rwanda by CARE International Rwanda and the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC). It deconstructs male headship through the concepts of positive and negative forms of power, drawn from Raising Voices' SASA! model. The curriculum distinguishes three positive forms of power: *power within*, *power with*, and *power to*, from *power over*: the use of power to control another person, which it frames as negative and a form of violence. The curriculum teaches that unequal power between women and men is a root cause of IPV and goes unrecognised precisely because it is treated as normal. Balancing power is presented as both difficult and rewarding as it unsettles familiar gender roles while strengthening relationships and allowing both partners to fully enjoy their rights.

Headship is also addressed directly in the curriculum. In a session on triggers of GBV, facilitators pose 'Do we need a head of household?' as a core concept for discussion. In guidance on creating positive time together as couples, one of the 'dont's' is speaking as though one partner is the head and the other is not.

Qualitative evaluation of the programme found that some men initially resisted this content, struggling to see their power over women as a problem, or interpreting the sessions as encouraging women to dominate men. However, these responses often shifted as participants recognised the benefits of more balanced power and came to understand that both partners can use power positively or negatively. As one field officer explained:

*'Men were asking negatively "what is this? They want women to be above us." But after every single session, you see men start to be open and realise how they were using power over, they thought it was their right as men to give directions to their families, go out and drink, do whatever they want, and come home late.'*²⁴



RESPECT

Respect is a widely held value that encompasses dignity, consideration, and recognising another person's worth. The WHO and UN Women RESPECT framework uses it to organise seven violence prevention strategies, and many curricula are built around the idea of respectful relationships. But respect is also a deeply gendered concept that can operate as code for submitting to men's authority. Family members, faith leaders, and husbands regularly urge women to 'respect' their husbands. When prevention programmes use this language, especially in households organised around male headship, it can be interpreted as a call to accept men's authority without question.

Such interpretations of respect can place the responsibility for managing violence on women themselves. Qualitative research in Ghana found that women living in communities where IPV was common framed their own 'disobedience and disrespect regarding domestic and sexual roles' as the cause of the violence they experienced.²⁵ In rural Pakistan, women who had experienced IPV described how perceived deviation from expectations of submission and deference could trigger or escalate abuse.²⁶ Research with families in Kampala, Uganda found that women 'embraced subservient feminine roles' to de-escalate violence by pleading for forgiveness, remaining quiet, or changing their own behaviours.²⁷

Evaluations of the *What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls* programme in Ghana and Rwanda show how references to respect in curricula can be misinterpreted.²⁸ Both evaluations recorded significant reductions in IPV, but some female participants understood the programmes' focus on respect to mean they should prevent violence by managing their own responses and deferring to their husbands:

'I was disrespecting him, concerning the sexual intercourse I was not treating him as my husband. Even when he told me: "come here and I tell you" sometimes I would decide just to leave him but now it has changed. I humble myself and I respect him.'

— Indashyikirwa, Rwanda

'I learned that as a woman, you have to respect your husband because he is the head of the family, so you have to know how to talk to him even if you're angry with him.'

—COMBAT, Ghana

Respect can also operate as something men feel entitled to receive and enforce.²⁹ Research consistently finds that perceived disrespect is among the most common justifications men give for using violence against their partners.³⁰ Qualitative research in Ghana found that wives perceived as disagreeing with or disrespecting their husbands faced exclusion and violence, and men framed this violence as a legitimate assertion of their authority.³¹ Research with young men living in urban informal settlements in South Africa found that men who were unable to earn respect through work, education, or providing for a household instead sought it by asserting power and control over their partners.³²

In collectivist contexts, these dynamics are reinforced by broader cultural values that frame self-sacrifice and deference as forms of respect.³³ When femininity is associated with putting others first, women have even less space to claim or feel entitled to respect, dignity, and autonomy.

What Group-Based Curricula Can Do

Respect is widely valued across cultures and communities, and curricula can build on this. People are more likely to shift attitudes and behaviours when invited to live up to values they already hold than when they are told their existing beliefs are wrong. The aim is therefore to reframe respect by shifting it away from deference to male authority towards a mutual practice grounded in the absence of fear. The participatory format of group-based curricula can allow participants to examine what respect looks like when it flows in both directions, identify the difference between genuine respect and submission, and challenge the belief that disrespect justifies violence.

Structured reflection can help participants explore respect within their own relationships and identify any asymmetries, including who is expected to show respect, how it is shown, and what happens when it is withheld. Role plays and group discussions can help participants practise mutual respect in everyday situations, including through ordinary conversations, conflict resolution, and shared decision-making.

Training should also build facilitators' confidence to respond when participants defend the status quo, for example, by asserting that disrespect provokes violence or framing women's submission and deference as virtues. Crucially, this requires implementing organisations to recruit values aligned facilitators and invest in their ongoing self-reflection. Facilitators may themselves hold gender-inequitable attitudes and if they are not supported to examine their own biases, they may be unable or unwilling to recognise and navigate resistance in the group. In such cases, it is important to challenge the underlying attitudes and norms without lecturing, and to invite participants instead to examine these assumptions together.

Facilitators working with men should also be alert to the tendency to slip into 'protector' framings that position men as defenders or guardians of women rather than as advocates for equality. This framing rests on the assumption that women deserve respect because they need protection, rather than because they are people with equal standing and rights.³⁴ Similarly, approaches that ask men to 'man up' or protect women from violence can reinforce the very norms that underpin it.³⁵

CURRICULUM EXAMPLE: ENGAGING MEN THROUGH ACCOUNTABLE PRACTICE

The *Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP)* curriculum, developed by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), was implemented with men in conflict-affected communities of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) through male-only discussion groups that are informed by, and accountable to, women's groups in the community. Respect runs throughout the curriculum. The programme invites men to picture what life would look like for a woman in a community where violence, disrespect, and discrimination against women and girls no longer exist. Through ongoing coaching and reflection, it builds participants' skills to engage in respectful discussions and to be accountable for respectful behaviour. Facilitators are encouraged to introduce the concept of accountability using a locally meaningful word or phrase, which is often one associated with taking responsibility or showing respect.

In one activity, participants reflect on the characteristics of an 'ideal wife'. Observational data showed that this prompt sparked an active, ongoing debate about the traditional alignment of respect with female obedience and deference.³⁶ Some men began to recognise that defining a 'respectful' wife as someone who never challenges her husband or speaks in front of men was a way of keeping women subordinate. Others strongly resisted, arguing in later sessions that questioning male authority represented a 'revolt against men' that undermined men's respect. While some participants were willing to separate respect from obedience, others maintained a narrow definition of respect to defend the idea that men should hold all the power. The activity did not resolve the debate, but its participatory format generated critical discussion of how respect, obedience, and traditional gender roles are connected.

SEXUAL CONSENT WITHIN MARRIAGE

The assumption that a wife's consent to sex is not required, but is instead implied by marriage, is among the most widely held norms underlying sexual violence within intimate partnerships. In many parts of the world, marriage is interpreted by both men and women as granting men the right to unconditional sexual access to their wives and the power to enforce this access through force if necessary.³⁷ This norm has also been codified in laws across many contexts: marital rape remains outside criminal law in a significant number of countries, and even where it is technically illegal, laws against it are rarely enforced.³⁸

In contexts where norms of sexual entitlement are strong, a wife's refusal of sex is a key risk factor for conflict and violence, including accusations of infidelity, sexual coercion, and physical violence.³⁹ Across large-scale survey data from low- and middle-income countries, a wife's refusal to have sex is consistently included among the scenarios men and women use to justify wife beating. It also appears as a standard item in Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)

questionnaires across numerous countries because endorsement of this justification is so widespread.⁴⁰ In India, even as overall justification of wife-beating has declined over the past two decades, roughly 10 percent of both men and women continue to cite a wife's refusal of sex as a legitimate reason for violence, suggesting this attitude is among the most resistant to change.⁴¹

This assumption is a direct extension of headship: where the husband is understood as head of the household, sexual access becomes one of the entitlements of that authority, and a wife's refusal is perceived as a transgression against such authority. Research in Nepal found that three in five married women had experienced some form of sexual coercion by their husbands, with patriarchal male control strongly associated with this risk.⁴² Similarly, in Egypt, women in highly controlling relationships were three and a half times more likely to experience forced sex by their husbands over their lifetimes.⁴³

Norms of male sexual entitlement also influence how women understand and describe their own sexual experiences within marriage. Research with young married women in Gujarat and West Bengal, India, documented a high prevalence of unwanted sex, with women describing marital sex as a duty they felt obligated to fulfil.⁴⁴ Where these norms are strong, women often feel they can refuse sex only when they have a reason considered 'legitimate', such as illness or menstruation.⁴⁵ Qualitative research with married women in Mumbai, India, explored the strategies women developed to navigate this dynamic, including claiming poor health or taking advantage of moments when family members were present in the home, strategies that worked around, rather than challenged, the underlying norm of sexual entitlement.⁴⁶ In rural Cambodia, married women described refusal as relationship ending, with one woman explaining: *'If I don't allow him to have sex with me, our relationship will be broken.'* This captures how the entitlement norm operates not only through husbands' enforcement but also through women's internalised belief that refusal is a wrong committed against the marriage itself.⁴⁷

Underlying the norm of sexual entitlement is a broader sexual double standard that, while varying considerably across contexts, remains a dominant feature of gender norms globally. Men's sexual desire is commonly framed as natural and requiring an outlet, while women's desire is understood as passive or irrelevant. As a result, women are often expected not to initiate sex with their partners. This framing undermines women's sexual agency and reinforces the idea that sex within marriage is something men initiate and control. In a qualitative study in Mumbai, India, women's inability to initiate sex was identified as a defining feature of unsatisfying sexual relationships, highlighting the costs of these norms for women's own sexual experience.⁴⁸ Where this double standard is particularly strong, men may perceive their wives' refusal of sex as a form of deprivation or abuse committed against them.⁴⁹

What Group-Based Curricula Can Do

Sexual consent within marriage is among the most sensitive topics for group-based curricula to address, but it is also among the most important not to avoid, given how widely and deeply entrenched the assumption of marital sexual access is held. The inclusion of sexual consent in violence prevention curricula is increasingly common. Prevention Collaborative's review found that many IPV prevention curricula include content on sexual consent,⁵⁰ and programmes that include structured reflection on these topics report that participants frequently describe

them as among the most helpful components of the curriculum.⁵¹ However, consent is often treated primarily as a health or safety topic, introduced within broader sessions on condom use, reproductive health, or sexual violence. Curricula therefore tend to focus on a woman's right to refuse or negotiate safer sex, rather than unpacking how consent is deeply entangled with sexual double standards and the broader framework of male headship.

Curricula should encourage participants to examine whose interests are served by assumed marital consent, how this assumption is maintained, and the associated consequences. This should be grounded in an analysis of the broader headship framework from which sexual entitlement derives, helping participants recognise that assumed consent is an extension of a wider system of male authority. It is important to carefully consider how to implement this content safely and in culturally appropriate ways. In some settings, this may require activities that separate men and women before bringing them back together.

Curricula are well placed to challenge the assumption of husbands' automatic sexual access and to build towards a model of mutual desire, communication, and ongoing negotiation. Evidence from women's own descriptions offers guidance on what this looks like in practice. In the Mumbai study referenced earlier, women who reported satisfying sexual relationships described husbands who were willing to forgo sex when their partner did not want it, more loving and reciprocal approaches to intimacy, and the ability to initiate sex themselves. These are the kinds of features that curriculum content could build toward.⁵² A benefits-based approach that connects equitable sexual relationships to mutual pleasure, intimacy, and relational quality is likely to be more effective than framing consent primarily as a woman's right to refuse. In contexts where norms of entitlement are strong, the latter risks being interpreted simply as a loss for men.⁵³

Curricula should also engage with the sexual double standard that underlies these norms by using participatory exercises that surface how identical sexual behaviours are judged differently depending on gender. These activities can encourage participants to reflect on what such differences reveal about whose desire and autonomy are considered legitimate. Structured activities that help couples practice communicating openly about sex, including about when to have sex and supporting women's ability to initiate sex, can lay the foundation for relationships where both partners' desires are recognised and responded to equally.

It is also valuable for curricula to include content on how coerced sex harms both partners, making visible the costs not only to women but to the quality and intimacy of the relationship itself. Discussions of these norms may generate resistance, and facilitators should be prepared to respond when participants frame marital sex as a woman's duty or a husband's legitimate claim. Inviting the group to examine what these reactions reveal about the underlying norm, and the kind of sexual relationship that norm produces, can turn resistance into a productive entry point for discussion.

CURRICULUM EXAMPLE: UNITE FOR A BETTER LIFE

Unite for a Better Life (UBL) curriculum was implemented with heterosexual couples in the rural Gurague Zone of southern Ethiopia, and was developed by EngenderHealth with Addis Ababa University, the Ethiopian Public Health Association, and J-PAL. Couples' sessions are co-facilitated by one woman and one man across 14 sessions delivered over about seven weeks, set within the traditional coffee ceremony, a familiar community forum for discussion.

The curriculum includes dedicated content on sexual consent and explicitly challenges the assumption that sex within marriage is automatic. One woman described what she had learned:

*'If you want to have sex you can, if you don't, you don't have to. I am allowed to say I am tired or sick and he has to say yes, if he doesn't say yes, it's transgressing.'*¹⁵⁴

In a qualitative evaluation, about half the couples reported that the programme had reduced sexual violence in their relationship. Among those couples who reported change, all described it as complete cessation rather than decreased frequency. Participants attributed these changes mainly to talking openly about sex for the first time and to men learning that wives have the right to refuse sex. Yet, the same evaluation showed limitations of these shifts and the persistence of sexual entitlement norms. One man who reported that he had stopped forcing his wife to have sex still expected her to provide a valid reason before accepting her refusal, leaving the underlying norm of sexual entitlement intact despite a reported change in behaviour. Resistance was sharper for a minority of men, who saw their wives' new ability to refuse as a problem and blamed the programme for unsettling marriages, though the evaluation concluded that backlash was minimal overall. As one man put it, *'women started to refuse sex by saying the trainer said so. This is bad work.'*



SUMMARY

The concepts at the heart of this brief: respect, headship, and sexual consent within marriage, are widespread, significantly influence IPV, and yet receive too little explicit attention in group-based violence prevention curricula. When not carefully identified and deconstructed throughout programming, these concepts risk being misinterpreted or undermining curricula goals. At the same time, these concepts can be understood in ways that support gender equality and non-violence: respect reclaimed as mutual rather than owed upward, consent understood as ongoing and freely given, and the hierarchy of headship replaced by shared power and partnership.

The work of prevention is therefore not only to identify the harms associated with these concepts, but also to support movement towards alternatives, helping participants aspire to more equitable, respectful, and satisfying relationships. Table 2 outlines these aspirational reframings and how curricula can actively work toward them.

Table 2: Headship, Respect, and Sexual Consent in Marriage: Aspirational Reframings and What They Look Like in Practice

Concept	Aspirational Reframe	What this can look like in practice
MALE HEADSHIP	Authority and responsibility within the household are shared. Decisions are made jointly through discussion and mutual respect, rather than being vested in one partner by virtue of gender. Partnership replaces hierarchy.	Couples make decisions about money, children, and daily life together; men publicly acknowledge and value their partner's contributions and judgement; both partners' goals, interests, and autonomy carry equal weight.
RESPECT	Respect flows in both directions and is grounded in recognising each partner's equal worth and autonomy, rather than in deference owed upward to an authority figure. It coexists with disagreement: a partner can voice needs, disagree, or say no without it being treated as disrespect.	Both partners can express disagreement without fear; respect is shown through listening, consideration, and valuing the other's perspective; neither partner faces punishment or violence for non-compliance.
SEXUAL CONSENT WITHIN MARRIAGE	Consent is ongoing, freely given, and mutual. Sex is something both partners want, communicate about, and negotiate, rather than an entitlement of marriage or a duty owed. Either partner can decline sex without having to give a legitimate reason or fear conflict, violence, or harm to the relationship, and both can express and act on desire.	Partners talk openly about whether and when to have sex; a refusal is heard and respected without conflict; intimacy is reciprocal and pleasurable for both; women are able to initiate sex.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- ▶ **Include explicit content on male headship, respect, and sexual consent within IPV prevention curricula**, and support participants to understand how these concepts are connected.
- ▶ **Lead with and emphasise the benefits of reframing these concepts** (see Table 2), rather than focusing only on their harmful interpretations and consequences (see Table 1).
- ▶ **Anticipate resistance and backlash**, recognising that attitudes and norms related to these concepts are deeply and widely held. Resistance should be treated as a productive entry point.
- ▶ **Engage the institutions and authorities that give these concepts their weight**, including by working with religious and community leaders and drawing on interpretations within those same traditions that challenge harmful interpretations.
- ▶ **Match delivery approaches to the sensitivity of the material:** for sexual consent in particular, consider formats that allow women and men to reflect separately before coming together, and complement group sessions with opportunities to engage men privately, away from peer pressure to perform headship.
- ▶ **Invest in facilitators as much as in curriculum content:** facilitators' own views, as well as their skills in responding to resistance, strongly shape whether and how sessions contribute to shifts in entrenched attitudes and norms.

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