



How we're engaging community leaders to expand access to reproductive choice

Key learnings

- Local community leaders can make or break the success of sexual and reproductive health and rights interventions. Local leaders, and in particular religious leaders, in many places are some of the most trusted public figures.
- When leaders have the right information and training, they can play a vital role in countering harmful beliefs, attitudes and norms in their communities.
- When leaders are engaged effectively as part of sexual and reproductive health and rights programming, this supports outreach in marginalised communities and can help build allies who cascade accurate information to their communities and shift social norms.
- MSI's programmes in West Africa work with and engage a wide array of community leaders, using tailored approaches and messaging, to expand access to contraception and support communities to live healthier lives.

The challenge

Engaging local leadership is a crucial component of creating lasting change

In many of the contexts where MSI works, cultural barriers — including social norms dictating acceptable sexual and reproductive health and rights behaviours — affect reproductive decision-making. For example, in northern Nigeria a man's status is often related to the number of children he has fathered, which can create barriers to male support for contraception and birth spacing. Engaging local leaders is a key tactic for addressing such barriers and changing behaviours. Establishing a foundation of trust and engagement with local leaders is a critical step in expanding access to services and reaching those facing the greatest barriers to realising reproductive choice.

What we did

Learnings from MSI teams in West Africa on effective leader engagement

Though community leader engagement is a key strategy for effective programming, detailed documentation of effective activities, strategies and evidence of its impact is lacking. This brief presents the findings of a recent MSI study on engagement with community leaders to expand access and uptake of modern contraception.

In 2023, we used qualitative interviews to collect insights from across seven MSI country teams, including a total of 27 participants (mainly frontline staff, community-based mobilisers and coordinators). Semi-structured discussions explored the following questions:

- What is the profile of community leaders MSI is engaging with?
- What strategies and activities are used to engage community leaders?
- What are the outcomes of the different strategies used to engage with community leaders?
- What external factors may influence or hinder success?

What we found

Local leaders are often the ‘front door’ to communities. They are also the gatekeepers of a range of social norms affecting sexual and reproductive health and rights.

While the exact position, title and responsibilities of leaders varies by context, our study indicated three key leader profiles and provided insights into how they can support reproductive health.

- 1** Chiefs and paramount chiefs are a key entry point for the community. They are mostly older men who carry influence across the community.
- 2** Leaders of local women’s groups, market women’s leaders, and youth group leads can convey messages and relay the information learned at meetings or from other sources back to their networks.
- 3** A range of other influential people can also be engaged to support interventions. These individuals have the standing to influence others.

To achieve long term impact, community engagement needs to be treated as an ongoing process and should involve local allies at every stage. Engaging the right leaders is a

multi-stage process and involves significant groundwork to ensure community entry and acceptance before leaders can be leveraged for greater impact: for example, to support the shifting of social norms. Effective community leader engagement also needs to be locally led, while securing national and sub-national government support early in the process.

Activities engaging community leaders need to be adapted to the profile of the leader and context. Our study suggests successful methods rely heavily on strong inter-personal approaches. MSI teams have found success by leveraging a range of different strategies and channels and ensuring leader engagement is tailored to the barriers most prevalent in the community.

It is critical that teams are ready for community backlash and the impact of external factors, such as political and leadership changes, and are supported to handle this.

“There’s a village where the Grand Imam was an ally, he died. The new religious leader automatically committed to accompany us. It is not only in the case of our activities that we are interested in them. We intervene in the daily life of community.”

Social Marketing Agent, MSI Burkina Faso



Examples of the roles of different chiefs

Gatekeepers of local customs

In Burkina Faso, local leaders perform ceremonies in favour of fertility and prosperity for the community. They are now providing information on the different contraceptive methods, which they can share with other men in the community.

Female leaders and role models

Female community leaders include the Mame Queens in Sierra Leone, who attend meetings and speak on behalf of women in the community; the Matrons Lumaïre or matrons in Niger who play the role of traditional midwives and help women during delivery; and the Badiene Gox in Senegal, an aunt of the bride-to-be who will instruct her on family and contraception methods. These female leaders communicate with community women and may refer them for services with MSI.

Community groups to cascade information

In Sierra Leone, leaders of community groups bring men together to discuss key issues. Representatives of these leaders act as intermediaries in male-only group discussions, facilitating discussions with a stronger positive effect on men’s buy-in. Tea Vendors and their wives in Northern Nigeria have been effectively engaged to champion contraception and birth spacing in their communities.



What this means

Community leader engagement provides opportunities for long-term change in social norms and community support for sexual and reproductive health and rights.

When leaders see benefits for their community, they can be powerful allies, from simply ensuring access to the community, to role-modelling positive behaviours, like birth spacing and shared reproductive decision-making.

The structure of local leadership varies considerably by context. Given the multiple leadership positions likely influencing any given community, time and resources are required to ensure interventions are involving the right leaders, in the right order. Activities need to be tailored to ensure buy-in.

Community leader engagement also needs to be treated as an ongoing process, particularly when the desired impact is long-term change in community support for sexual and reproductive

health and rights. Programmes should prioritise, plan, and budget for the involvement of community health workers and local health authority teams to facilitate introductions and provide support with engaging leaders.

This helps ensure that approaches to leader engagement are underpinned by an understanding of the context and help facilitate successful inter-personal communication and relationship-building. Further training on inter-personal communication techniques can also be beneficial.

While global tools and strategies can be deployed to positive effect, these need to be tailored to the leaders and communities with whom they are being used.

Community leader attitudes to sexual and reproductive health and rights will change over time. The influence of others, and broader political changes need to be monitored to capitalise on opportunities and address negative shifts.

MSI teams will continue to leverage and build on these learnings to ensure we are effectively engaging and empowering leaders to support reproductive choice in their communities.

“The chief is the front door of the community for us: he is there for everyone and can bring everyone to us.”

Social Marketing Agent, MSI Niger

More information

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