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Article

Engaging men to promote resilient communities among Syrian refugees in Lebanon

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Abstract

Engaging Men programmes seek to challenge the social norms, attitudes and practices that increase the risk of gender-based violence against girls and women while also harnessing positive male power to prevent violence and promote safety. This paper examines the impact of an Engaging Men intervention that engaged 1028 Syrian refugee and 440 Lebanese men in a 12-week training course structure. There were four core objectives: promoting peaceful interactions with others, reducing violence and gender-based violence, child protection and caregiving, and increasing community safety and harmony through a community project. Focus group discussions were conducted with 130 men, 28 wives, and 17 children of male participants, 10 family visits and 20 individual interviews by peer researchers.The findings were that programmes facilitated a safe emotional space for men to meet collectively to talk about their problems, to become more attuned and reflective about their relationships with their wives and children, which resulted in improved patterns of interaction and communication, increased openness and greater tolerance by men of changing gender roles in families as a result of displacement. The discussion calls for greater integration of psychosocial programming with other forms of programming from livelihoods to political advocacy and that programmes incorporate clear guidance on perpetrator accountability.

Key implications for practice

- An intervention engaging with 1500 Syrian and Lebanese men reduced stress and improved family relations. Changes to gender-equitable attitudes were less clear.
- Interventions to engage refugee men should address refugee men's psychosocial needs in addition to viewing men's engagement as a means to protecting women and children.
- Findings highlight the importance of clearly defining the focus, aims and scope of interventions engaging with men, and that programmes incorporate clear guidance on perpetrator accountability.

Keywords: child protection, gender-based violence, Lebanon, men, Syrian refugees

Introduction

Engaging Men programmes seek to challenge the social norms, attitudes and practices that increase the risk of gender-based violence against girls and women while also harnessing positive male power to prevent violence and promote safety (Carlson, Casey, Edleson, Tolman, Walsh, & Kimball, 2015). Such programmes have emerged as a promising programme response in a number of development contexts (Barker, 2008; Casey, Carlson, Two Bulls, & Yager, 2018; Jamal, 2015; Jewkes, Flood, & Lang, 2015; Tolman, Casey, Allen, Carlson, Leek, & Storer, 2016). Many Engaging Men programmes have a specific focus on preventing and alleviating sexual exploitation and sexual violence (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenback, & Stark, 2003). They do this through dialogue on concepts of masculinity and the positive and negative use of male power (Hossain et al., 2014; Kaufman et al., 2014). Ricardo and Barker (2008) argue that it is more effective to promote men's empathy towards women and girls and build on positive strategies rather than simply telling men not to use aggression or sexual violence. As such, they are often conceptualised as primary prevention initiatives that aim to identify and address underlying causes of violence and to minimise the likelihood of violence occurring in contrast

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with secondary prevention that aims to support gender-based violence survivors (Storer, Casey, Carlson, Edleson, & Tolman, 2016). Gender transformative approaches aim to foster gender-equitable attitude and behaviour change for men and boys and also include community mobilisation and ongoing social action to reduce protection risks for women and girls (Casey et al., 2018).

A number of research studies have indicated that interventions to engage men to support women and children's health and wellbeing leads to changes in men's behaviour and attitude (Barker, Ricardo, & Nascimento, 2007). Across multiple contexts such as Uganda, India, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone, Engaging Men interventions have been found to result in more gender-equitable beliefs and practices, reduced intimate partner violence and greater communicative and supportive emotional relationships with partners and family members (Abramsky et al., 2014; 2016; Das, Mogford, Singh, Barbhuiya, Chandra, & Wahl, 2012; Pulerwitz, Hughes, Mehta, Kidanu, Verani, & Tewolde, 2015; Rancourt, 2015).

Fostering broader social change may be challenging. Stern, Pascoe, Shand, and Richmond (2015) examined engaging men in women's reproductive health as clients, partners and advocates of change in Uganda. The intervention provided sexual and reproductive health education to men through churches, football tournaments, drama and community outreach, radio programmes and bi-weekly community sensitisation meetings. It engaged men as advocates for change through peer education and mobilised community leaders to publically support men's engagement in sexual and reproductive health. Men supported their partners in accessing sexual health services and shared domestic duties, but it was less clear if men became advocates of change.

In Côte d'Ivoire, International Rescue Committee conducted a *Men and Women in Partnership* programme in the context of a multi-sectorial programme to address gender equality and gender-based violence by educating men about the impact of gender-based violence in their families and communities and by providing them with emotional management skills to avoid violence. Participation in groups helped men manage their emotions to avoid violence but failed to increase women's participation in key decision-making areas of household financial decisions, nor did it otherwise shift power within the couple's relationship.

Engaging Men programmes have been mainly implemented in development contexts. They encompass a theory of change that targets both face-to-face and grassroots level activities with ecological, multi-level programming that advocates for men as change agents at individual and relational as well as cultural and political levels (Ricardo & Barker, 2008). Some of the assumptions in this model may be problematic when applied to refugee and humanitarian crisis contexts. Refugee men occupy differential, usually lower status positions compared to host community men (Williams, 2011). They may face obstacles to employment, which impacts their capacity to fulfil culturally ascribed roles as heads of household, resulting in a sense of failure to live up to dominant ideals of masculinity (Jaji, 2009; Lwambo, 2013). Status loss combined with the cumulative impact of war and daily stressors may impact the refugee men's mental health (Hassan et al., 2015). These factors will likely interact in important ways with refugee men's capacities to act as transformative change agents. Therefore, the question arises as to how transferable are such models to refugee and humanitarian crisis contexts such as that of the situation facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon? This paper examines the impact of an intervention entitled *'Engaging men to promote resilient communities'* that engaged Syrian refugee and Lebanese men. Aims included addressing the main protection concerns for Syrian refugee women and children, those of gender-based violence, sexual harassment and exploitation, as well as early marriage and child labour. This was achieved by engaging Syrian refugee and host community men to promote safety within their communities, by increasing their capacity to use prosocial coping and to increase their capacity to mitigate conflicts peacefully.

Background and context

Protection concerns for over a million Syrian refugees in Lebanon continue to increase. At the time that this evaluation was undertaken in 2016, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (livelihoods) 2015–2016 noted that access to livelihoods and income drastically diminished for Syrian refugees, whereas in the north of Lebanon, the region where Concern Worldwides's Engaging Men programme was based, 70% to 80% of Syrian refuges did not have the necessary income to afford the survival minimum expenditure basket.[1] Lack of access to labour markets and livelihood opportunities was cited as a key reason for these extraordinary high levels of deprivation (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015). Policies issued by the Lebanese government in 2015 tightened regulations over Syrian refugees, significantly restricting their mobility and their access to work opportunities. Although Syrian nationals are allowed work permits in restricted labour markets (agriculture, construction and cleaning services), in practice, work opportunities are restricted for men due to fear of crossing checkpoints, roundups, detention and threat of deportation. Hassan et al. (2015), in a report on the mental health of Syrian refugees, noted there was an increasing sense of a loss of hope; Syrian men had limited opportunities to use positive coping strategies such as working, visiting family and friends and going for a walk. They found men's available ways of coping tended to be individually oriented (withdrawal, sleeping, getting angry), which had negative consequences, including intimate partner violence which had become more common as a result of the stresses of the conflict and post-conflict living conditions.

In 2013 to 2014, the implementing organisation conducted an assessment of the protection concerns and needs of Syrian refugees in Akkar District, Lebanon. This found that women and girls had reported an increased incidence of

intimate partner violence since arriving in Lebanon. Gender-based violence referral pathways and case management structures had been established for all areas in Lebanon hosting refugees; yet reporting of gender-based violence cases was low because it was a culturally sensitive topic. The assessment identified a gap in agencies working with men in protection programming. This led to the development of a community-based protection programme entitled *'Engaging men to promote resilience communities'* with the specific objective of addressing the protection needs of conflict-affected Syrian refugee and vulnerable Lebanese children, youth and women in Akkar. A Concern Worldwide & Irish Aid, programme handbook entitled *'Facilitator's Handbook: Engaging Men to Promote Resilient Communities'* (2014) was developed, which was based on a number of resources: *'Change-Maker Training Facilitator Handbook'* developed by Men's Resources International; Promundo's *'Programme H'*: Save the Children's *'Child Protection Sessions for Parents and Caregivers'* and The Centre for Inter Faith Action on Global Poverty's *'The Faith Effect.'* The Engaging Men programme utilised a 12-week training course structure with four core objectives: promoting peaceful interactions with others, reducing violence and gender-based violence, child protection and care giving and increasing community safety and harmony through a community project. Session topics as outlined in the handbook were as follows:

Session 1: Resilient families and communities and the importance of men

This session aimed to identify men's roles in developing protective families and communities and to introduce the development of a community protection project.

Session 2: Understanding gender roles

This session aimed to identify daily activities of men and of women based on gender, and to recognise the social pressure on boys and men to fit into a strict gender role.

Session 3: Gender relations

This session explored a gender analysis of who makes the important decisions in a relationship between a man and a woman.

Session 4: Gender roles in action

This session examined how gender roles affect relationships in your family and community and becoming an agent of change.

Session 5: The cycle of violence

This session aimed to identify the full spectrum of violence from extreme to overlooked, and to understand the impacts of violence on survivors, witnesses and perpetrators.

Session 6: Violence against women

This session examined different examples of men's violence against women, to understand what sexual violence is, conditions which foster sexual violence and the role men can play in reducing or preventing violence against women including sexual violence.

Session 7: Non-violence communication

This session taught a non-violence communication model to enhance the quality of interpersonal interactions and relationships, different communication styles, roadblocks to communication, non-violence communication and ways of resolving conflicts peacefully.

Session 8: Men as nurturers and group project decision

This session explored 'Change begins at home' – personal commitments to practising nurturing in participants' families and for the group to agree on a community protection project to implement.

Session 9: Stress and human development and planning for the community project

The aim of this session was to recognise stress symptoms in adults and children, identify options for stress reduction, understand how caregiver stress impacts children and develop a resource and implementation plan for a community protection project.

Session 10: The impact of care giving and preparing for the community project

This session explored the stages of child development and how adult nurturing can reduce stress and promote development of children.

Session 11: Protecting children and community project planning

The aim was to understand the risks of child labour and early marriage and make final preparations for implementing the community protection project.

Session 12: Men and women as agents of change and community project planning

This session sought to understand the ripple effects of personal change, identify next steps for community leaders and finalise the community projection project.

The programme logic was that men who have been trained on these topics would be less likely to engage in gender-based violence and other forms of violence. Thus, although the programme engaged men, the primary benefactors were expected to be women and children. Each men's group was expected to identify, design and implement a community project that increased the protective capacity of the community for vulnerable individuals and groups.

Over the three annual cycles of programme implementation, the male facilitators adapted the programme informally to best suit the cultural context. In approximately three quarters of sessions, they chose to sit in a circle with men discussing the topics and related issues that arose rather than use flip charts and formal teaching methods. This dialoguing method was also more culturally appropriate in facilitating groups that included elders, as it was not culturally appropriate to lead the group in a way that

might be understood as talking down to elders or not showing appropriate respect. The use of a flip chart was also not conducive to participation where there were varying levels of literacy.

The facilitators found it worked best for the first and second session to put a flip chart outlining the main training topics, and the group could choose what they wanted from this list. Syrian men wanted to talk about how life had changed for them and how they can adapt to this situation. One of the facilitators noted *'In our culture the men cannot speak what they feel,'* and so the dialoguing method was an important way of building trust and good relationships between facilitators and the group and between Syrian and Lebanese men where relevant. So, the order of the sessions often began with the men talking about the stresses of their daily lives.

Facilitators noted men started to speak after session five on the cycle of violence, a month into the programme: *'they start to trust us.'* In addition, facilitators covered all topics but moved around some sessions in the manual, covering non-violent communication prior to violence against women, for example, to reduce the potential for tension that often arose in sessions focused on gender-based violence. One of the facilitators saw this session on non-violent communication as being one of the most important sessions: It included a discussion of what men saw in Syria, in daily life now, how stress affects men and boys, before brainstorming ways of using listening, support and nonviolent communication. The inclusion of verses from the Koran and a short reflection at the end of each session was a further informal cultural adaptation.

A further significant change from the programme design was that most groups did not implement a community protection project. In many cases, the funds were used to buy household items that addressed protection needs of families such as heaters, cooking equipment and other household goods.

Multiple recruitment methods were used. Communities were informed about the course through radio announcements that broadcast a contact phone number for the lead facilitator. Facilitators met with focal community people such as the Mukhtar and municipality staff, spoke about the project as being about gender, violence and nonviolence with funding for a community project. These focal people recruited groups of men known to them; one facilitator explained how some of these focal people *'were leaders, old men, they talk about how in Syria they support each other and give to people from community, as part of a Muslim community.'* In these ways, groups formed organically in response to different public calls. In the one-year period of September 2015 to September 2016, participants were 1469 Syrian and Lebanese men (70% Syrian; 30% Lebanese) across 56 groups. An examination of group composition showed that groups were predominantly Syrian or predominantly Lebanese.

Recruitment did not screen for gender-based violence perpetrators and non-perpetrators. The issue of perpetrator accountability was not clear in the programme conceptual model or implementation.

Materials and methods

This was a mixed-method qualitative study, which sought to evaluate the impact of the intervention to engage men to promote resilient communities. The expected outcomes were men's improved coping strategies, improved gender-equitable attitudes, reduced gender-based violence, enhanced child protection and improved inter-community relations.

Focus group discussions were conducted with 10 Engaging Men groups selected randomly from a total of 56 groups. In total, 130 men participated in the focus group discussions, of whom 80% were Syrian refugees and 20% were Lebanese, which related to group composition. All participants had completed the 12-week Engaging Men training programme within the previous year. A semi-structured focus group discussion schedule explored men's motivation to join the group, a free-listing of the problems faced by men, their experience of participation in the group, changes in coping strategies, gender-equitable attitudes and attitudes with respect to gender-based violence, attitudes to early marriage and child labour and changes in inter-community relations. Focus group discussions were conducted in Arabic by the authors who were female, working with female independent translators.

Five focus group discussions were conducted with 28 wives of Syrian refugee men participants, and two separate focus group discussions with 11 adolescent sons and six adolescent daughters of male participants. These focus groups explored questions about who is the main breadwinner in the house, main difficulties, observed impact of being a member of the group had on male participants, on prosocial coping, on roles or relationships within the home, on community relationships and if items bought for the household instead of implementation of a community project made a difference in the life of the family.

In addition, 10 family visits were conducted, and the researchers met with male former participants and their wives separately and the questions were similar to those above. There was no stipend or reward provided for participation in the focus group discussions. Peer researchers (two males, two females) from Engaging Men intervention communities conducted 10 interviews with former participant Syrian refugee and Lebanese men. Peer research triangulated 'outsider' knowledge gained by researchers with 'insider' knowledge gathered by those who have relationships of trust, connectedness and empathy with study participants (Ryan, Kofman, & Aaron, 2011).

All participants completed a detailed informed consent sheet in Arabic. For children aged 13 to 17 years, written parental consent was obtained from parents and an informed consent process and written informed consent was implemented with children. Boys and girls were interviewed separately. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee, School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork. All data were taped and transcribed. Qualitative data were read and reread to identify if and how the Engaging Men intervention achieved the

expected outcomes listed above. This was a form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an inductive approach where the themes identified emerged from the data.

Results

Psychosocial problems experienced by male refugees and the perceived relationship with gender relations and gender-based violence

Men were invited to free list the psychosocial problems experienced by men in their community. Syrian male participants identified feeling helpless, weak, broken, being suffocated from bottling up their frustrations, low mood, feeling pressured, noting how they feel aged because of their burden and feeling that frequent worry would make a *'mountain collapse.'* They reported frequent worrying about the future, worrying about their health and ruminating about conflict-related experiences. Men explained that deprivation and poverty led men to fight with their wives and children. They gave specific examples of how after coming home, they were greeted by *'why didn't you bring food/bread today?'* and their inability to supply household needs compounded men's frustration. When asked about the causes of gender-based violence, one male participant explained:

'*The main problem behind the violence are[is] the situations we went through and how we left our country. This affected the women more – the changed financial situation caused stress on the family. There were several people who changed throughout the group because they were given quotes from the Quran which they are obliged to follow because of their religion, and how the Quran says not to abuse women. The religion protects women's rights. There were people who heard things for the first time in the sessions and they liked [it] because it was in their religion.*'

A frequent theme was that when participants came to Lebanon, their life changed, and a large part of the discussion in groups was to learn how to adapt to this new situation. Men talked about how the gender roles in their households have changed as a result of becoming refugees in an environment where they are unable to earn a living. They have experienced a loss of traditions, rank and community status. Their wives have lost the protective networks of living among relatives and neighbours long known to them. When asked what topics discussed in their group that touched them personally, it was their feelings about their wives and daughters leaving the house, in particular in cases where their wives had to work outside the home to support the family. Men talked about their loss of honour at losing their role as breadwinner and also as protector. They were worried about their inability to protect their wives should anyone insult or harass them, and an attack on the honour of a woman was perceived as an attack on the honour of the man:

'*A major thing for me is women's honour. Before when someone used to attack or abuse their woman [if she was in a public place because she had to work] they had to react straight away with violence but now we listen to know what happened.*'

But another participant responded, '*We are convinced theoretically because if anything happens, we might be rational, but we are going to react about it when it's our right to.*'

The loss of these protective networks for women and the loss of status and risks to honour for men created vulnerability for the whole family. In the focus group discussion with their wives, they said they reluctantly took on a breadwinner role; there was little choice given their extreme deprivation, and they would prefer if they didn't have to do so. They talked about how they could see that their husbands were ashamed, and as their wives, they could see their shame, but they keep it to themselves. They did not want their men to see that they saw their shame.

Gender-based violence including intimate partner violence was extremely difficult to assess in groups and interviews. The issue was not brought up spontaneously by participants. In some focus group discussions, when asked about this topic, many participants affirmed that they wouldn't beat their wives and would find it completely unacceptable. Women generally said their men were good men and did not do this. Women did not identify intimate partner violence as an issue for them, instead they noted their key concerns as how to pay the rent and put food on the table.

As the researchers were female and the group space a public space, it might be that men were unwilling to speak of issues such as these, which are perceived to be part of the private relationships' domain. However, our impression was that the groups were helpful for men as a safe space to share emotions and talk, there was also a resistance to this topic and a sensitivity to the men's groups being identified in any way as groups for *'men that beat their wives.'* One man indicated a tension in case there was a perception that only Syrians engaged in intimate partner violence and *'that violence against women and children is well known in our societies, even the Lebanese societies, so these sessions should be given to all groups, not just Syrian groups.'*

We propose a few possible explanations. It is possible that men who self-selected to participate in the intervention did not believe that using violence was appropriate behaviour and were not perpetrators of violence; or men benefited from learning about and internalising the message about the favourability of not using violence with women and that this is what was reflected in their responses disapproving of violence. Similarly, it is possible that the groups heightened the perception of the unacceptability of domestic violence, which then made it more difficult for the participants to discuss in the evaluation.

A number of groups mentioned the importance of explanations being culturally grounded in religion as influential in convincing them to accept the message being offered with respect to intimate partner violence. The intervention did not have a protocol for addressing perpetrator accountability where this may have arisen.

The topic of sexual exploitation or transactional or survival sex was discussed in only one focus group discussion. The group discussed a case study of a topic that touched them personally:

'*We kept stopping at a point in the meetings where we spoke about how women had to take a different direction to survive because they needed money and there were no job opportunities, so they had to work in prostitution. And because of that, they learnt a lot of bad things. At the meeting they explained to us that it was not solely our responsibility [to protect the honour of our women]. There are more peaceful ways to resolve these issues and we don't have to resort to violence*.'

With respect to gender roles such as helping with housework or increasing women's involvement in decision-making, there were few instances of change. Women also noted they did not want their men helping with housework. In a number of cases, women defended the role of their husband as the decision-maker and said it was important to them that he was the key decision-maker in their household and also that it was important to them that they followed his direction. One participant commented that some of the programme content seemed more suited to European gender relations.

Community resilience

The intervention model proposed a gender transformative approach that included mobilisation of men to undertake a community project for protection of women and girls, thus fostering community resilience. Funds were available to each men's group to develop a community project for this purpose. In practice, most groups were offered and chose to receive household items as items addressing household protection needs. Of 56 groups, eight developed a community project and the other groups received household items including gas canisters, batteries, fans, oven and other household items.

On further analysis, groups that developed a community project were predominantly or totally composed of Lebanese men who were likely to live in stable communities and have a vested interest in improving the quality of life for their communities. The eight projects that emerged in these groups included kindergarten equipment, the maintenance of a dentist's clinic, chairs and tables that could be used by the community for festivals and gatherings and an iron roof for the school.

Facilitators gave different guidelines to the predominantly Lebanese group and said that they had to choose a project that benefited the entire community and they argued that predominantly Syrian groups had enough day to day survival struggles without adding this expectation. They argued the concept of *community* as envisaged in a community project was problematic given the realities of Syrian refugee men's daily lives. Syrian men themselves argued that their refugee life stripped them of community as they knew it. One explained that refugee life means *'everything has changed.' 'We used to live in a big house when we were in Syria. Here we found ourselves obliged to live in a room with six families, with no privacy.'* Enforced living in close proximity to others was not motivating to engage in a collective project. Another explained that the five households in his building were in effect the remains of his pre-war community. A lack of residency papers and worries about being caught as a result were mentioned time and time again as a reason for non-participation in a community project. The economic situation, in addition to the precariousness of their residencies, made it very difficult for families to want to establish roots and develop relationships in a place that offered them no security:

'*I've sent my (male) children by boat to Europe, and they have thankfully arrived safely in Germany. They have no future here. We have no future here. We are always worried about our papers and our finances. Our only good option would be to travel to some European country*.'

Refugee life was liminal and characterised by ongoing uncertainty about the future, and this reality did not support the gender transformative intervention model. Additionally, the distribution of household goods did not meet the project goal of addressing protection and promoting community resilience as conceptualised in the project concept and design.

Men's groups as a source of psychosocial support for Syrian refugee men

The most significant impact of the intervention appears to have been the benefit for men in terms of their psychosocial wellbeing, stress management and emotional regulation. Results from qualitative focus group interviews with men and their wives and daughters suggest that the programme was valued as it targeted men. One man said it was the *'first time that something is done for men since there's always an organisation for women and children, but for the first time, it's special that it's for men'* and this view was expressed in a number of groups. One man said he wanted to participate because he heard the facilitator was a psychologist, and it was a way of getting help for psychological difficulties he was experiencing. Participation in the men's groups had a positive psychological impact on men. As discussed earlier, Syrian refugee men face very high rates of unemployment exacerbated by increasingly restricted mobility due to tightening security regulations by the Lebanese government. Therefore, many men spent large portions of their time sitting at home. One way the groups were helpful was through providing them with a reason and avenue to leave the house. For example, one wife explained that:

'*The man used to be sitting at home cranky and frowning, now he leaves the house and gets a chance to breathe, women in contrast will always have a space to breathe through doing housework or talking to neighbours*.'

One daughter noted that it was good for her father, who rarely left the house, to leave the house and *'to open up and see the world.'*

Similarly, it appeared that the groups provided men with a chance to socialise, feel some sense of belonging and expand their social network. For example, one man noted

that he appreciated that men would meet together to *'exchange new ideas.'* Another man expressed that *'there is now something that unites us together, and it feels like each of us found himself in a role specific to him [within the group].'* One wife similarly noted that previously, there was a sense of distance and aloofness between men, but now men sat and engaged with each other. Several men noted that these groups permitted them to increase the number of people they knew in the community and acquire new friends and acquaintances.

Perhaps due to the above two reasons of having an avenue to leave the house and to engage socially, it appears that the third way the programme had a positive impact on men was through offering some degree of relief from mounting psychological distress and pressure. For example, some men noted that the group calmed and soothed their fears and their spirits. Similarly, some of their wives explained that women are able to find release through crying and talking, but that men bottle up their feelings and do not talk, and the group offered a release. One male participant shared *'these groups allowed us to open up inside and empty what's been bottled in our hearts.'* In a number of groups, men adamantly explained, *'you do not tell a woman your secrets.'* By this, they meant that they did not discuss their worries and anxieties with their wives but were able to do so with other men. One man said, *'in the past four years, this was the first time we have gotten together – 20 men in a room to discuss our issues.'* This theme of *'men getting together to discuss their issues'* emerged as one of the most commonly reported benefits of the group by men and also as perceived by women.

'*These sessions helped us because usually no one helps us but it was great that there was someone to listing to what we had to say.*' (FGD, male participant)

'*We need some help, someone who listens to us because we are stressed because of the news, the media, our situation.*' (FGD, male participant)

A few men in two different groups expressed how the programme made them feel that they were valued and not forgotten. One man noted that *'we are neglected, and no one is born knowledgeable, when they care about us, we benefited, we felt that we are humans, with value, that they send people to us to teach us.'*

One peer researcher told us the stories of two Syrian participants, one of whom had suffered from a variety of fears and phobias after he fled the war in Syria. He had not left the house for two years before the training opportunity arose. According to his account, the training gave him the confidence to leave his room and look for work:

'*I have now found work and I understand that we cannot give in to difficult situations, but there are ways in which we can think about them and deal with them so that they do not destroy us. I have escaped the terrifying calm [الهدوء المرعب] that I was living in before.*' (Peer interview, male participant)

Gender relations and improved patterns of family interaction and communication

Another consistently endorsed outcome in the focus groups with men, women and adolescent children was how the programme improved the men's general interactions at home, particularly through reducing their anger and irritability. It appears that the groups reduced men's irritability through two ways: (1) the first relates to what was discussed above about the groups providing some emotional release and (2) through a very explicit focus by the group facilitators on teaching men to reduce irritable behaviour and engage in calmer communication. It appears that the latter has resulted in an attitude shift about the acceptability of irritability as a manner of communication with their wives.

For example, one man noted that he learned how *'a man shouldn't be irritable, better to sit 10 minutes until he calms down, and then his silence is what will help him overcome the crisis.'* Another noted that after *'one is used to being irritable, one now becomes much more patient and treats [the family] in a good manner.'* A third explained that *'I was quite irritable, and I would take it out on my wife, now I understand that I shouldn't treat her like that, not like before, where I would be really irritable with her.'* By this he meant that he empathised more with how his irritability affected her.

Many women similarly noted that things have become much calmer, and one woman noted that *'if his crazies come out [local idiom for angry outburst], he leaves the house so that we don't argue.'* Similarly, an adolescent boy provided the following anecdote of his father: *'My father used to scream at my mom and not explain what's the matter with him, but after the sessions he became more flexible and he explains to us. For example, he says to my mom, "my darling I have a headache, please can you bring to me some Panadol".'*

In addition to better communication through reduced irritability, it appears that the groups have improved men's manner of interactions at a broader more general level. For example, one woman explained that *'things have become calmer, there is more flexibility in interactions, and more good manners, the groups have released what's been bottled up, so now they treat us better.'* In addition, it seems that the groups have offered some couples an avenue of positive interaction through dialogue about the sessions. Several men and women reported that the men would come home and share what they learned in groups with their wives, and one man explained that this *'helps in bridging our views and bringing things closer.'* One woman said the men discussed that *'they should help, not hit, treat them well.'* Other women however said their husbands did not discuss with them topics discussed in the groups.

Peer researchers interviewed participants that had completed the training the previous year. They noted a theme of the challenge of sustaining change. For example, one woman reported, *'after the sessions, he was less angry – his temper improved. But after a while things went back to the way we were. Our children are sick and our life is too stressful.'* This raises a question of the sustainability of

emotional and behavioural change in such a highly deprived context.

A frequent spontaneously generated response in focus groups with some men, but more often with women and children, was how some men have learned to generally become more *'flexible', 'open minded', 'open to discussion', 'listen more', 'accept others' ideas', 'easy going'* and *'less intolerant'*. One man noted that the groups helped them become *'more understanding and tolerant and accommodating of my wife as she is subjected to the same [economic and social] pressures the men are.'* Another woman noted that now the man *'can feel more with the wife, and her labour and exhaustion, and encourages her to rest and take a break from work.'* Similarly, a male participant described being alerted and more sensitive to his wife's feelings and how his behaviour impacts them.

Men, women and children reported that the men used to be much more irritable with their children (for example, frequently yelling) prior to the groups and that their interactions with them have become calmer. One woman noted for example that prior to the groups, her children would ask her '*why is dad always irritable*?' Many men reported learning to reduce their use of physical punishment to discipline children, particularly because they learned that this could adversely impact the children psychologically and developmentally. Another man in the same group explained how *'one tells boys, don't cry, it's a shame, but now, one understands that a man can cry, because crying is an internal feeling, and a man may want to go out into the wilderness alone to cry, over war, need, and deprivation'* and in this way, softened his interactions with his sons. There was no evidence the intervention led to a reduction in child labour, given the economic status of households was often dependent on children's labour.

Discussion

The Engaging Men programme facilitated a safe emotional space for Syrian refugee and Lebanese men to meet collectively to talk about their problems, to become more attuned and reflective about their relationships with their wives and children and so to engage in better emotional regulation. Syrian refugee men integrated the discussion of gender integrally with their talk about their loss of income-generating capacity, changed gender and child roles in their families as a result of displacement, loss of social identity and status and loss of community networks of relatives, neighbours and friends that supported them and their families. The groups provided psychosocial support for men, which in turn improved the quality of life of women and children through improved family relationships. These relational and attitudinal changes may play a mediating role in reducing aggressive behaviour or emotional abuse within the home, as well as gender-based violence, but it was not possible to quantify if and the extent to which this may have been the case. Impacts on men related to gender norms, equitable gender attitudes and gender-based violence were less clear. There was evidence of blurred boundaries between primary prevention and engaging with perpetrators to reduce gender-based violence and the intervention lacked a mechanism for addressing perpetrator accountability. The research raised the importance of clearly defining the focus, aims and scope of interventions such as this.

The research did not find evidence of significant change in the capacity of Syrian refugee men for gender transformative change through implementing protection-oriented community projects. The key priority for Syrian refugee men was the deteriorating economic and security environment, which impacted their day-to-day experiences, in particular their ability to work, and resulted in feelings of frustration and constrained agency. The Engaging Men programme did not engage with the material realities of men's lives (their need for livelihoods), nor the structural conditions that shaped their lives due to the operational restrictions in the context at the time of project implementation, which makes it questionable the extent to which the programme can bring about sustained change. A key recommendation was for the organisation in future phases of the approach to integrate psychosocial and livelihood elements and for greater integration of psychosocial programming with other forms of programming including political advocacy.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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[1]The survival minimum expenditure basket refers to the minimum culturally- adjusted items for survival for a six-person household for a one-month period.