

Inside the FP Story Podcast

Listener Questions - Episode 1

[Intro to Q&A Episodes]

I'm Sarah Harlan, Partnerships Team Lead with the Knowledge SUCCESS Project.

Welcome to our first question and answer episode for *Inside the FP Story*. While we work to launch Season 4 of the podcast in September, we are responding to some questions from our listeners.

Do you have your own story to share about good practices and lessons learned working in family planning? There is still time to be featured in our question and answer episodes, so write to us at info@knowledgesuccess.org with your questions, comments, or stories—and your entry may be featured in a future episode of the podcast.

[First Question: Gender Season Summary]

Sarah:

Our first question relates to Season 3 of the podcast, on the topic of gender integration in family planning. This most recent season featured three episodes—all with a *lot* of rich information. And we were asked the following by several individuals: What are some of the key lessons learned from Season 3? Is there a summary available?

Thanks to those of you who asked this question. We published a [summary blog post](#) on June 16th on the Knowledge SUCCESS website, and we will highlight these lessons here as well.

I have invited Danette Wilkins from Breakthrough ACTION, one of the partners we worked with for Season 3, to join me in responding to this question. Welcome, Danette.

Danette:

Thank you so much for inviting me to join you, Sarah. It is very exciting to know that there is so much interest in learning more.

In Season 3, we explored how to approach gender integration in family planning programs. The season covered the topics of reproductive empowerment, gender-based violence prevention and response, and male engagement. One reason this season was so dense is that we wanted to ensure that we were all on the same page in terms of key

concepts and terminology. So we really took the time to name and define terms like gender, social norms, gender transformative programming, and many others. And we also introduced a range of approaches, strategies, models, and tools for designing and implementing family planning programs that are better suited to shifting unequal power relations and gender dynamics to achieve gender equality.

Sarah:

Over the three episodes, our guests offered practical examples and specific guidance on strengthening gender integration and supporting gender equality within their family planning programs. I definitely recommend listening to all three episodes, but let's also go through the key insights shared by our guests. Note that these are in no particular order.

1. **Understand and address gender and social norms.** Nearly every guest mentioned the importance of conducting a thorough examination of gender and social norms in the context in which one is working. These norms shape attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding family planning use and access. And they affect women and girls *and* men and boys and other gender-diverse people in different ways. Several guests strongly recommended conducting a formal gender analysis. This provides a holistic and systematic way to identify and understand power differentials regarding family planning access and use. Understanding differences in power, access, and control is critical to be able to challenge and shift gender-inequitable norms, institutions, and structures.

Danette:

2. **Partner with a range of sectors and go *beyond* the health system.** The real-life examples of gender-transformative family planning programs *all* included some form of cross-sectoral partnership. Several guests stressed the importance of working with the community *beyond* the health system—across institutions like education, religion/faith, and government and across technical areas like agriculture and commerce. This ensures that gender issues are identified and addressed in a more holistic way. As several of our guests explained, we cannot rely on the health system *alone* to increase reproductive empowerment for all. Multi-level, multi-component strategies and approaches are needed to foster and sustain an enabling environment for reproductive empowerment and gender equality more broadly.

Sarah:

3. **Meet people where they are.** Our guests pointed out a common denominator among successful gender-transformative programs. Whether it comes to integrating gender-based violence prevention and response into family planning services, or engaging men and boys in family planning, successful gender-transformative programs *meet people where they are*. This can be in terms of experiences, needs, priorities, or preferences—and ideally all of them. So service integration is one way to do this—by reducing logistical and other barriers to accessing family planning information, services, and methods. In our second episode, guests discussed how integrating services for family planning and gender-based violence acknowledges the existing intersection of

these two health issues. It allows individuals, couples, and families to receive timely information and support in a single location. Other guests talked about reaching men in and around the spaces they frequent the most—like at taxi parks or sporting events. And other guests talked about the importance of reaching young people where they are *developmentally*—for example, very young adolescents may not use the same vocabulary to describe sexual and reproductive health topics that older adolescents and young people may have—so that is important to consider as well.

Danette:

4. **Use a life course approach.** Several guests mentioned this as being important for addressing gender and social norms across genders and as a way to better understand and engage men and boys in particular. This approach involves:
 - Understanding experiences, needs, priorities, and preferences across the lifespan;
 - Identifying strategic turning points at which interventions can be implemented; and
 - Designing and Implementing tailored interventions to promote gender-equitable norms and healthy behaviors in support of improved health outcomes and gender equality.

When programs actively engage all genders in family planning from an early age *and* across life stages, they contribute to an enabling environment that supports gender-equitable norms and behaviors, including mutual respect for individual agency and bodily autonomy and shared responsibility for family planning decisions and outcomes.

Sarah:

5. **Promote and strengthen couple communication.** Gender-equitable couple communication and joint decision making are critical to gender transformative family planning programs. To positively shift inequitable gender and social norms, evidence shows that more couple communication and joint decision making can contribute to improved family planning outcomes. Couple communication and joint decision making can and should be practiced *throughout* a relationship. These are important skills that support couples as they navigate different life stages and events, such as the birth of a child. If supported throughout our family planning programs, they can also contribute to systemic changes on a broader scale.

Danette:

6. A final consideration from our Season 3 guests is to thoughtfully and intentionally **measure and monitor** gender integration in family planning programming. They mentioned the need for stronger monitoring systems at *all* levels—from the individual level to the community and regional and national levels. They also shared specific ways to measure reproductive empowerment in episode 1, quality of care around

gender-based violence and family planning services in episode 2, and male engagement in episode 3.

Specifically, the strong lack of indicators around men and boys as family planning users, partners, *and* agents of change may be preventing us from gathering more nuanced information that can help us to improve family planning programming. These indicators are important. As the saying goes, you cannot improve what you do not measure. Our guests made suggestions for specific indicators that can be useful for measuring how men and boys engage as *partners*, such as the percentage of men who actively participate in shared decision making about family planning with their intimate partner. And to measure men's and boys' engagement as *agents of change*, programs could assess their attitudes and perceptions of specific gender and social norms or national gender equality advocacy campaigns. In general, guests agreed that we need stronger data and data collection systems—and that what we measure is critical to improving family planning programming.

Sarah:

Thank you so much, Danette, for joining me.

Overall, these considerations can help us be more gender-aware, be more consistent in applying a gender lens to the design and implementation of family planning programming, and be more intentional in striving for and achieving gender-transformative policies and programming. For more information about this topic, you can read our Season 3 summary blog post on knowledgesuccess.org. And you can also see our [FP insight collection](#) on FPinsight.org for all the resources featured in Season 3.

[Credits]

Inside the FP Story is produced by Knowledge SUCCESS. This episode was written by Sarah Harlan and Danette Wilkins and edited and mixed by Elizabeth Tully. Special thanks to Danette for joining me to answer this question.

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If you have any questions or suggestions for future episodes, feel free to reach out to us at info@knowledgesuccess.org.

Thank you for listening.

Resources Shared in Episode

- [*Inside the FP Story Season 3 Summary Blog Post*](#)
- [FP insight collection on gender integration and family planning](#)