

## ENGAGING FATHERS AND MALE GUARDIANS IN FAMILY-FOCUSED HIV PREVENTION: A REVIEW

Emmanuel Ifeanyi Obeagu<sup>1\*</sup> and Chukwuma J. Okafor<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biomedical and Laboratory Science, Africa University, Zimbabwe.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Pathology and Biochemistry, State University of Zanzibar, Tanzania.

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**\*Corresponding Author**

**Emmanuel Ifeanyi Obeagu**

Department of Biomedical  
and Laboratory Science,  
Africa University,  
Zimbabwe.

### ABSTRACT

Engaging fathers and male guardians in family-focused HIV prevention is a critical component of reducing HIV transmission and improving overall family health. This review explores the importance of involving men in HIV prevention efforts, emphasizing their role in influencing family health decisions, supporting sexual health education, and promoting healthy behaviors. While fathers and male guardians have significant influence in family health, traditional gender norms, stigma, and limited awareness often hinder their involvement in HIV prevention. This review examines these barriers, identifies successful strategies, and highlights interventions that have proven effective in encouraging male participation in HIV prevention programs. The role of fathers and male guardians is integral in shaping family health outcomes, particularly in HIV prevention. Their participation can directly impact HIV-related behaviors within the

household, including promoting safe sexual practices, supporting HIV testing and counseling, and reducing mother-to-child transmission. However, societal gender norms, cultural beliefs, and misconceptions about HIV create challenges in engaging men in these efforts. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that includes public health education, male-friendly health services, and community-based interventions that encourage men to become active participants in HIV prevention.

**KEYWORDS:** *Fathers, Male Guardians, Family-Focused HIV Prevention, Gender Norms, Health Interventions.*

## INTRODUCTION

HIV remains a significant global public health challenge, with millions of individuals and families affected by the epidemic. While efforts to reduce HIV transmission have primarily focused on high-risk populations such as women, adolescents, and key affected groups, there is increasing recognition of the need to engage fathers and male guardians in HIV prevention within the family context. Fathers play a crucial role in shaping the health and well-being of their families, including their sexual health, and their involvement can significantly contribute to reducing the transmission of HIV. Engaging men in HIV prevention efforts is essential not only for the health of the individuals involved but also for creating lasting changes in family health behaviors and attitudes toward HIV.<sup>[1-2]</sup> Historically, public health initiatives targeting HIV prevention have often overlooked the role of fathers and male guardians in family health decisions. Gender norms in many societies place responsibility for family health, especially sexual and reproductive health, on women. These norms often discourage men from being involved in discussions and decisions related to HIV prevention. This lack of male engagement can contribute to gender inequalities in health, with women and children bearing a disproportionate burden of HIV-related issues. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that engaging men, particularly fathers, is vital for promoting family-centered HIV prevention strategies that lead to better health outcomes for everyone involved.<sup>[3-4]</sup>

Fathers and male guardians hold significant influence within their households and communities. As decision-makers in family health matters, their support for HIV prevention strategies can have a profound impact on their children's health, the well-being of their partners, and the broader community. Research has shown that male involvement in HIV testing, counseling, and prevention programs can increase the likelihood of healthy behaviors, such as consistent condom use, safer sexual practices, and regular testing. Furthermore, fathers' participation in prenatal care can help reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Their involvement creates an environment where prevention measures are more likely to be adopted and sustained, ultimately leading to better health outcomes for their families.<sup>[5]</sup> Despite their potential to positively influence HIV prevention, fathers and male guardians often face barriers that hinder their engagement. Traditional gender norms, social stigmas, and misconceptions about HIV often contribute to men's reluctance to participate in health services. In many cultures, men may be reluctant to seek HIV testing or counseling, fearing that it may be seen as a sign of vulnerability or weakness. Additionally, men may feel

disconnected from family health discussions, especially if they are not actively involved in caregiving or decision-making. These barriers need to be addressed to foster greater male participation in HIV prevention and create an environment where men feel comfortable seeking care and supporting their families.<sup>[6]</sup>

Addressing the barriers to male engagement requires targeted efforts that acknowledge and challenge harmful gender norms. Public health campaigns and interventions should focus on educating men about the importance of their involvement in HIV prevention. This includes providing information about HIV transmission, prevention methods, and the role that men can play in safeguarding the health of their families. Additionally, health services must become more accessible and welcoming to men by providing male-friendly spaces, reducing stigma, and offering services that cater to their specific needs. This approach helps create a supportive environment where men are empowered to participate in HIV prevention programs and make informed decisions about their health.<sup>[7-8]</sup> The integration of male engagement into broader health initiatives, including maternal and child health programs, is also crucial for successful family-focused HIV prevention. For example, involving fathers in prenatal and postnatal care can reduce the risk of HIV transmission to infants and improve the health of mothers. Couple-based counseling and testing are effective strategies for increasing male involvement in HIV prevention, as they provide a platform for both partners to learn about HIV prevention together and make decisions as a team. Furthermore, by challenging societal gender norms and promoting the active participation of men in family health, these strategies help create an environment where both men and women have equal opportunities to take responsibility for their health.<sup>[9-10]</sup>

### **The Role of Fathers and Male Guardians in Family Health**

Fathers and male guardians play a pivotal role in family health, as they influence both the physical well-being of their children and partners and the overall family dynamics. Traditionally, men have often been seen as the primary breadwinners and decision-makers in many households, and their influence extends beyond financial support to shaping attitudes and behaviors concerning health. Fathers' involvement in family health decisions, especially regarding HIV prevention, has a profound impact on the family's well-being and the adoption of healthy behaviors. Their participation can create an environment that fosters open discussions about sexual health, prevention methods, and the importance of regular health checkups, including HIV testing and counseling.<sup>[11-12]</sup> In the context of HIV prevention,

fathers' involvement is particularly crucial. When fathers are engaged, families are more likely to adopt safe sexual practices, get tested for HIV, and seek early intervention and care. Fathers who actively participate in health-related decisions, such as supporting their partner during pregnancy or ensuring their children receive vaccines and regular health screenings, help reduce the risk of HIV transmission and other health issues. Male guardians also have a direct role in mitigating mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) of HIV, as their support can increase the likelihood that both parents will adhere to preventive measures, including the use of antiretroviral therapy during pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>[13]</sup> However, for many families, fathers and male guardians are often excluded from health discussions, particularly regarding HIV. Gender norms and cultural expectations can hinder men from participating in health matters, as societal beliefs may associate health care with women's roles, especially in reproductive and sexual health. This exclusion can lead to gaps in health education and missed opportunities for prevention. To address this, it is crucial to create an inclusive approach to health care that encourages the involvement of fathers and male guardians. By fostering a more supportive environment, health systems can ensure that men are equipped with the knowledge and resources necessary to make informed decisions about their family's health and well-being.<sup>[14]</sup>

### **Barriers to Engaging Fathers and Male Guardians**

Engaging fathers and male guardians in family health, particularly in HIV prevention, is critical for improving outcomes and reducing transmission, yet several barriers hinder their active involvement. These barriers are often multifaceted, stemming from cultural, social, and structural factors that can discourage or prevent men from participating in health care and HIV prevention efforts. One of the primary barriers is **traditional gender norms** and societal expectations. In many cultures, men are not typically viewed as active participants in caregiving or family health decisions, which are often seen as the responsibility of women. This gendered division of roles leads to the exclusion of men from discussions about sexual and reproductive health, including HIV prevention. In addition, some men may feel that their involvement in such discussions would challenge their masculinity or societal expectations of what it means to be a man, creating a sense of reluctance or discomfort in engaging with health services.<sup>[15-16]</sup> Stigma and misconceptions about HIV further complicate men's participation. In many communities, HIV is still associated with stigma, shame, and fear. Men may avoid HIV testing, counseling, or prevention services due to concerns about being perceived as at risk or being labeled as infected. This stigma often leads to a lack of

awareness and a hesitance to seek help, resulting in underutilization of available HIV prevention resources. Furthermore, misconceptions about HIV transmission and the perceived irrelevance of HIV prevention for men, especially in heterosexual relationships, can contribute to a general apathy toward HIV-related health services.<sup>[17]</sup>

Another significant barrier is limited access to male-friendly health services. Health care systems often fail to cater to the specific needs of men, resulting in a lack of services that are accessible or welcoming to them. Men may feel that health centers are more focused on women's and children's needs, leading to a reluctance to engage with these services. Additionally, the absence of male-friendly health outreach, such as male-targeted HIV prevention campaigns, can leave men feeling excluded from important health discussions.<sup>[18]</sup> Socioeconomic factors also play a role in limiting male participation. Men, particularly in lower-income communities, may prioritize work and financial responsibilities over their own health, feeling that seeking medical care or participating in health programs is a lower priority. This is especially true in families where fathers are expected to be the primary breadwinners. The pressure to provide for the family can limit men's time and resources for attending health appointments, including HIV prevention services. Economic stress and work-related mobility also contribute to inconsistent participation in health programs.<sup>[19]</sup> Finally, lack of education and awareness about the importance of male involvement in HIV prevention is a significant barrier. Without proper education, men may not understand their role in reducing HIV transmission or how their involvement can improve family health outcomes. Public health messaging often targets women and children, neglecting to emphasize the role of men in prevention efforts. As a result, men may be unaware of their potential to contribute to HIV prevention in their families, perpetuating their disengagement from such programs.<sup>[20]</sup>

### **Strategies for Engaging Fathers and Male Guardians**

Engaging fathers and male guardians in HIV prevention efforts is essential for promoting family health and reducing HIV transmission, but it requires targeted strategies that address the unique barriers they face. These strategies must be multifaceted, challenging traditional gender norms, increasing awareness, improving access to health services, and creating supportive environments that encourage male participation. Below are several strategies that can be effective in engaging fathers and male guardians in HIV prevention.<sup>[21]</sup>

### **1. Challenging Gender Norms and Promoting Positive Masculinity**

One of the primary obstacles to engaging fathers in HIV prevention is the rigid gender norms that dictate the roles of men and women in many societies. Public health programs can work to challenge these norms by promoting positive masculinity, which encourages men to take an active role in caregiving, family health, and HIV prevention. Campaigns that emphasize men's responsibility for family health, as well as their ability to protect the well-being of their children and partners, can shift perceptions about gender roles. By reframing fatherhood as a role that includes caring for the health of the family, men can be encouraged to see HIV prevention as a shared responsibility.<sup>[22]</sup>

### **2. Incorporating Fathers into Family-Centered Health Programs**

Integrating fathers into existing family health programs can be a powerful way to engage them in HIV prevention. Programs that focus on maternal and child health, reproductive health, and HIV prevention can include sessions that educate both parents on HIV transmission, prevention, and treatment. Couple-based HIV counseling and testing (CBCT), for example, provides a space for both parents to engage in HIV prevention together, making the process less stigmatizing and fostering shared responsibility. Fathers who are included in prenatal care, child immunization, and other family health activities are more likely to take an active role in ensuring that their families stay healthy and adhere to HIV prevention strategies.<sup>[23]</sup>

### **3. Providing Male-Friendly Health Services**

Health systems must be responsive to the needs of men, creating male-friendly services that encourage their participation. This includes offering accessible locations, flexible hours, and privacy during HIV testing and counseling, as well as providing services tailored to men's health needs. Community-based health programs and mobile clinics can bring HIV testing and prevention services directly to men, especially in rural or underserved areas. Additionally, ensuring that health providers are trained to address men's concerns and offer non-judgmental care is crucial to creating an environment where men feel comfortable seeking services.<sup>[24]</sup>

### **4. Engaging Men through Peer Support and Role Models**

Peer support is a powerful tool in encouraging men to engage in HIV prevention. Peer education programs, where men who have successfully navigated HIV prevention and care share their experiences with others, can normalize HIV testing and encourage fathers to take



a proactive role in their health. Role models, particularly male public figures or community leaders, can help reduce stigma and show other men the importance of being involved in HIV prevention. By seeing other men embrace HIV prevention, fathers and male guardians may be more likely to follow suit and participate in health programs.<sup>[25]</sup>

## **5. Targeted Education and Awareness Campaigns**

Many men are not aware of their potential to play a role in HIV prevention, particularly in family settings. Public health campaigns can target men with clear, accessible information about how they can protect their families from HIV. These campaigns should highlight the link between fatherhood and health, demonstrating how men's involvement in HIV prevention can reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission, increase family health outcomes, and encourage safer sexual practices. Information should also be provided on the benefits of HIV testing, safe sexual practices, and seeking treatment, making it clear that these actions are integral to safeguarding family health.<sup>[26]</sup>

## **6. Creating safe spaces for discussion**

Creating safe, open spaces for fathers and male guardians to discuss HIV-related topics is essential for overcoming stigma and fear. Support groups, workshops, and community forums can provide a platform where men feel comfortable asking questions and sharing concerns without judgment. These spaces allow for the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and strategies for HIV prevention. In addition, these forums can help men learn about the challenges women face in HIV prevention, fostering greater empathy and understanding, which ultimately benefits the entire family.<sup>[27]</sup>

## **7. Incentivizing participation**

Incentivizing participation in HIV prevention programs can help overcome some of the barriers related to time, work, and financial constraints that men face. Providing small incentives, such as transport subsidies, free health screenings, or family health packages, can make it easier for fathers and male guardians to attend HIV prevention programs and health services. Additionally, incorporating HIV prevention services into broader social services—such as food programs, child immunization clinics, or employment opportunities—can make HIV prevention a more integrated part of men's daily lives.<sup>[28]</sup>

## **Successful models of male engagement**

Successful models of male engagement in HIV prevention have demonstrated the importance of tailored, community-based approaches that consider the specific needs and barriers men face. These models go beyond simply encouraging men to seek HIV testing and prevention; they create comprehensive systems of support, education, and empowerment that lead to sustained participation and positive health outcomes. Here are some successful models that have been proven effective in engaging fathers and male guardians in HIV prevention:

### **1. Couple-Based HIV Counseling and Testing (CBCT)**

Couple-based HIV counseling and testing (CBCT) has emerged as a successful model for engaging men in HIV prevention, particularly in communities where men traditionally have limited involvement in health-related decisions. This approach encourages both partners to undergo HIV testing and counseling together, promoting mutual responsibility for family health. CBCT helps normalize HIV testing as a shared responsibility and reduces the stigma that often prevents men from seeking HIV-related services. This model has been particularly successful in sub-Saharan Africa, where it has been shown to increase HIV testing uptake among men and promote safer sexual practices within couples.<sup>[29]</sup>

### **2. Male Involvement in Maternal and Child Health Programs**

Integrating HIV prevention into broader maternal and child health programs has proven effective in engaging fathers and male guardians in HIV care and prevention. By involving men in prenatal care, child immunization, and family health visits, health systems can emphasize the role of fathers in protecting the health of both their partners and children. Programs such as “Dad’s Day” events, where fathers attend health clinics with their partners and children, have been successful in fostering men’s participation in family health decisions, including HIV prevention and testing. These programs help normalize the idea that men can and should be involved in HIV prevention for the well-being of the family.<sup>[30]</sup>

### **3. Peer Education and Community-Based Engagement**

Peer education programs, where men who are well-versed in HIV prevention educate other men in their communities, have proven effective in challenging gender norms and promoting positive behaviors. These programs leverage the influence of trusted male community leaders or peers to break down stigma and encourage HIV testing and prevention. Peer educators facilitate discussions, provide information, and share personal experiences, making HIV prevention more relatable and less stigmatizing for men. These programs often focus on the



importance of men's roles in family health and HIV prevention, which has been shown to increase their engagement in health care services.<sup>[31]</sup>

#### **4. Workplace-Based HIV Prevention Programs**

Workplace-based HIV prevention programs have been an innovative model for reaching men, particularly those in formal and informal employment sectors. These programs focus on providing education, HIV testing, and counseling directly in the workplace, where men spend a significant portion of their time. By integrating HIV prevention into workplace wellness programs, employers can encourage male employees to take part in HIV testing and prevention services. Additionally, providing on-site health services or collaborating with local health clinics to offer HIV testing at work has been shown to increase male participation in these programs. These models are particularly successful in industries with high male employment, such as mining, construction, and agriculture.<sup>[32]</sup>

#### **5. Mobile Health Clinics and Community Outreach**

Mobile health clinics and community outreach programs that bring HIV testing, counseling, and prevention services directly to men in remote or underserved areas have proven effective in reaching hard-to-access populations. These services address the issue of limited access to health facilities, especially in rural or impoverished communities, where fathers and male guardians may feel they lack the time or resources to seek care. By offering flexible hours and locations, mobile health clinics make HIV services more accessible and reduce the stigma associated with visiting health facilities. These programs are often combined with community-based outreach, where local leaders and community health workers engage men in HIV education and encourage them to utilize available services.<sup>[33]</sup>

#### **6. Involvement of Male Leaders and Champions**

Engaging male leaders and community champions to serve as advocates for HIV prevention can have a transformative impact on male participation. In many communities, influential male figures—such as religious leaders, community elders, or politicians—can help challenge harmful gender norms and promote positive health behaviors. When these leaders publicly endorse HIV prevention, it can help normalize the concept of men being involved in family health and HIV prevention. Male champions can lead by example, encouraging other men to get tested, seek treatment, and support their partners in HIV prevention efforts. This model has shown success in various settings, particularly where influential figures are respected and trusted by the community.<sup>[34]</sup>

## 7. Family-Focused HIV Prevention Campaigns

Family-focused HIV prevention campaigns that highlight the role of fathers in ensuring the health of their families have been successful in shifting the narrative around male involvement in HIV care. These campaigns often utilize media, community outreach, and health education to reach men with messages about their responsibility to protect the health of their children and partners. By framing HIV prevention as a family issue rather than an individual concern, these campaigns encourage men to see their participation as integral to the well-being of their loved ones. These models also promote open communication between fathers, mothers, and children about HIV and sexual health, helping to reduce stigma and increase testing and prevention efforts within the family unit.<sup>[35]</sup>

### Policy recommendations

Effective policy recommendations are crucial to ensuring that HIV prevention strategies targeting fathers and male guardians are sustainable and impactful. These recommendations should address structural, social, and cultural barriers while promoting men's active involvement in HIV prevention for the benefit of families and communities. Below are key policy recommendations aimed at engaging men in HIV prevention and overcoming the challenges they face:

#### 1. Integration of Male-Focused HIV Prevention into National Health Strategies

Governments should prioritize the integration of male-focused HIV prevention programs within national health strategies. Policies should emphasize the importance of including men in family-based HIV prevention and care, with a focus on increasing access to HIV testing, counseling, and education for men. National health programs must recognize the role of fathers and male guardians in preventing HIV transmission and reducing stigma, making male involvement a core component of HIV prevention campaigns. This will help ensure that HIV prevention efforts are comprehensive and inclusive, addressing the unique needs of men.<sup>[36]</sup>

#### 2. Gender-Sensitive Health Education and Outreach

Policymakers should promote gender-sensitive health education that challenges harmful gender norms and encourages positive masculinity. Public health campaigns must be tailored to men's needs and experiences, highlighting the importance of their involvement in HIV prevention and family health. These campaigns should be community-based and delivered through multiple channels, such as media, peer education, and public forums. Policy

frameworks should ensure that health systems implement programs that directly address the barriers men face in accessing HIV prevention services, such as stigma, misconceptions, and lack of information.<sup>[37]</sup>

### **3. Expansion of Male-Friendly Health Services**

There is a need for policies that advocate for the establishment of male-friendly health services, particularly in regions with low male health service utilization. This includes ensuring that HIV prevention and testing services are accessible, confidential, and tailored to male needs. Health facilities should be equipped with trained male health workers who can engage men in conversations about HIV prevention and care without judgment. Policymakers should also encourage the creation of dedicated male health spaces within clinics and integrate HIV testing and counseling into routine health services like family planning, maternal and child health, and reproductive health services.<sup>[38-39]</sup>

### **4. Incentives for Male Participation in HIV Prevention Programs**

Policymakers can create financial or social incentives to encourage men's participation in HIV prevention programs. Providing small incentives, such as transportation stipends, free health screenings, or family health packages, can help overcome economic barriers to accessing services. Furthermore, integrating HIV prevention services with other essential community services—such as agricultural extension services, employment programs, or social support services—can incentivize men to engage in HIV prevention while addressing broader socioeconomic needs. These incentives would make it more feasible for men to participate in HIV testing and prevention programs, particularly in resource-limited settings.<sup>[40-41]</sup>

### **5. Supporting Research on Male Engagement in HIV Prevention**

To ensure that policies are grounded in evidence, governments and international organizations should invest in research focused on male engagement in HIV prevention. This research should explore the most effective methods of reaching men, identify cultural barriers to engagement, and evaluate the success of male-inclusive HIV prevention programs. Policymakers should support research that examines gender dynamics and the specific challenges that fathers and male guardians face when accessing health services. The findings from these studies can help shape policies that are responsive to the needs of men and improve the effectiveness of HIV prevention efforts.<sup>[42-43]</sup>

## 6. Collaboration with Traditional and Religious Leaders

Policymakers should collaborate with traditional and religious leaders to address gender norms and promote male involvement in HIV prevention. These leaders play a crucial role in shaping cultural attitudes and behaviors, particularly in communities where traditional views on masculinity and gender roles are deeply entrenched. By engaging with these influential figures, policymakers can foster community-wide acceptance of HIV prevention strategies that involve men and encourage them to take a proactive role in their families' health. Support from religious and community leaders can also reduce stigma around HIV testing and treatment, making it easier for men to seek services.<sup>[44-45]</sup>

## 7. Strengthening Male-Engagement Policies in HIV Care and Treatment

Policies should also focus on strengthening male engagement in HIV care and treatment, not just prevention. Ensuring that men who test positive for HIV receive the support and treatment they need is critical for both their own health and the prevention of HIV transmission within families. Policymakers should focus on improving male retention in HIV care programs, addressing factors such as work-related barriers, stigma, and lack of social support. Additionally, policies should promote regular HIV testing for men, especially for those in high-risk groups, and ensure that men who are HIV-positive receive counseling to reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission and adhere to antiretroviral therapy.<sup>[46]</sup>

## 8. Promoting Male Involvement in Reproductive Health and Family Planning

Policies should promote male involvement in reproductive health and family planning services, recognizing that men play an integral role in ensuring healthy pregnancies and reducing the risk of HIV transmission. Including men in conversations about family planning, prenatal care, and HIV prevention during pregnancy can reduce the risk of HIV transmission to women and children. Policymakers should encourage the integration of HIV testing and prevention into routine family planning services and ensure that men are educated about the benefits of HIV prevention and the impact of their involvement on family health.<sup>[47]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Engaging fathers and male guardians in HIV prevention is essential for reducing transmission rates and improving the health and well-being of families and communities. To achieve this, it is critical to implement strategies that address the unique barriers men face, such as gender norms, stigma, and limited access to health services. Successful models of male engagement, such as couple-based HIV counseling and testing, community outreach programs, and

workplace-based interventions, have demonstrated that involving men in family-focused HIV prevention leads to positive outcomes for both men and their families. Moreover, creating supportive policies that promote gender-sensitive health education, increase access to male-friendly health services, and provide incentives for participation can help overcome these barriers. By engaging male leaders and community influencers, challenging traditional gender roles, and ensuring that men have the knowledge and resources they need, societies can foster a more inclusive and effective response to HIV prevention. The involvement of fathers and male guardians in HIV care and prevention ultimately contributes to healthier families and communities, with long-term benefits for reducing HIV transmission and improving public health outcomes.

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