

Engaging Fathers and Changing Norms: Perspectives on Developing, Scaling and Sustaining Gender Transformative Programming in Brazil

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December 17, 2021

Program Overview

Founded in Brasilia in 1997, Promundo works to advance gender equality, promote healthy masculinity, reduce gender-based violence, and improve family wellbeing. Promundo conducts research on gender equality and masculine norms and develops and carries out gender transformative programs that “engage men and boys in partnership with women, girls, and individuals of all gender identities.”¹

A specific example of Promundo’s work is “Program P,” named after *pai* and *padre*, the words for father in Portuguese and Spanish respectively. Program P aims to engage men in active fatherhood during their partners’ pregnancies and their children’s early years. With fatherhood as an entry point for exploring gender norms, Program P works with fathers and their partners to promote men’s involvement in maternal and child health, to support active, responsive caregiving, and to prevent domestic violence. The program comprises eight weeks of group sessions for fathers and their partners with guided discussion, role playing, and hands-on activities (e.g., changing diapers). Together, men and their partners challenge traditional masculinity while learning positive and equitable

About this Brief: This case brief is part of a series exploring practical lessons from ongoing innovations for early childhood development, made possible by the support of Grand Challenges Canada (funded by the Government of Canada), Porticus, and the Saving Brains Partnership.



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¹ <https://promundointernational.org.br/about-o-promundo/>

parenting practices. Promundo has reported Program P benefits for participating fathers including improved relationships with their partners and children and greater participation in household work and childcare.²

The Program P manual³ provides strategies, exercises, and group activities for organizations to actively engage fathers and couples. Promundo also provides materials to support communities in launching their own campaigns. The campaigns are designed to involve men in child development, in part by providing clinicians with tools to engage men around maternal, child and family health. Using the manual as a starting point, partner organizations in 18 countries have implemented or adapted Program P: Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ghana, Indonesia, Rwanda, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Russia, Guatemala, India, Haiti, Nigeria, Armenia, Bangladesh, and Mozambique.⁴

This case profile begins with some historical background on Promundo and Program P, then focuses on Promundo's successful experience partnering with government agencies in Brazil on initiatives that have scaled up men's engagement and gender equality programming across the country. We conclude with a brief look at new plans to work with Indigenous communities in Brazil, and at responses to the COVID-19 emergency. The application of Program P in Rwanda is the subject of a parallel case profile in this series.⁵

From Children's Rights to Men's Engagement: Promundo's Founding and Early Development

Following a period of military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985, Brazil established a new Constitution in 1988 with a commitment to human rights, anti-discrimination, and inclusivity. The Constitution gave explicit priority to children's and adolescents' rights. However, in the early 1990's Brazil had high rates of infant mortality, and large numbers of children were orphaned by HIV/AIDS or displaced by natural disasters. Recognizing the potential for civil society organizations to help secure children's and adolescents' rights, Miguel Fontes

² <https://promundo.org.br/programas/programa-p/>

³ Programa P: manual para o exercício da paternidade e do cuidado / Instituto Promundo; Cultura Salud/EME; REDMAS; Instituto Noos. - Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Instituto Promundo, 2014.

⁴ <https://promundo.org.br/programas/programa-p/>

⁵ Case profile on the application of Program P in Rwanda: <https://www.savingbrainslearning.com/scaling-gender-transformative>

founded Promundo in 1997 in partnership with UNICEF and other organizations in Brazil and the United States. Promundo's early work supported over 183,000 children orphaned by HIV/AIDS and advocated for the government to make HIV/AIDS medication more accessible. As part of this effort, Promundo conducted a study that demonstrated the high cost of leaving pregnant women with HIV/AIDS untreated when medications could prevent vertical transmission of the virus.⁶ This study was widely distributed by the Brazilian media and helped lead to a 1997 policy change whereby maternal clinics began providing free HIV/AIDS medications throughout the country. While this was a major success, as Miguel Fontes put it, it "left us without a cause."

After contributing to Brazil's dramatic achievements against HIV/AIDS, Promundo expanded its focus, seeking other ways to support children and empower communities. Miguel Fontes recounted that in 1998, as he and his wife prepared for the birth of their first child, the path forward became clear to him. He wanted to be an involved father and a caregiver for his children, but recognized he had to first unpack his own masculinity and his relationship to the *machista* culture in which he lived. For him, fatherhood became a "window of opportunity to provide new meaning to my masculinity." He concluded that "the greatest benefit we can give to children, to women and to men especially, is to rethink masculinity."

"When I looked at my child in that monitor at a prenatal appointment, I realized that love had arms, love had legs, love had a head. For the first time I saw love as being concrete. From that time on I said, 'Whoa I want to get involved in this, I want to be engaged, to participate in everything. I want to be a caregiver. I want to care for my child.'"

- Miguel Fontes, Founder and Executive Director, Promundo

With the idea of rethinking masculinity as a new direction, Promundo reached out to three regional organizations (ECOS, Instituto PAPAI, and Salud y Genero) to help create gender equality programming for men. In 2001 Promundo rolled out Program H, for *homens* and *hombres*, the words for men in Portuguese and Spanish respectively. Program H began by providing safe spaces for low-income men in Rio de Janeiro to challenge *machista* culture while exploring and discussing their feelings. As they implemented Program H, Promundo began to realize the ways women and mothers can reinforce rigid masculinity through their

⁶ Miguel Fontes, Janette Hillis, & Glenn Wasek, "Crianças Vítimas da AIDS no Brasil," Massachusetts: Instituto Projeto Mundial para órfãos; Brasília: John Snow do Brasil, 1996.

own internalized misogyny, so they created Program M, for *mulheres* and *mujeres*, meaning women in Portuguese and Spanish. Program M helps women unpack their internalized misogyny and promotes young women’s health and empowerment through reflections on health, rights, and gender. Promundo has since developed other methodologies to address gender inequality and gender norms through different lenses. An example is Program P, based in part on Miguel Fontes’s experience as a father and caregiver.

For Miguel Fontes, gender equality programs generally, as well as social protection, health, and education policies, too often fail to involve men, and do not help them challenge traditional norms. Having men understand that gender equality benefits them – that it is not “only for women” – is fundamental to Promundo’s work. Program P fits this picture, as it engages fathers as caregivers for “their own sake and benefit,” as Miguel Fontes puts it.



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“The greatest benefit that we could give to children is to have men engaged in early childhood development.”

- *Miguel Fontes, Founder and Executive Director, Promundo*

Impact at Scale in Brazil through Government Partnerships

Promundo developed Program P with a community approach, working with local groups and municipal governments to pilot programs and build an evidence-based understanding of how to support vulnerable populations. While Promundo consistently collaborates with the communities they serve, Promundo also focuses on developing partnerships with national and state governments to embed principles of gender equality and men’s engagement in a wide range of programming across Brazil. As gender dynamics affect families in various ways, Promundo’s government partnerships are correspondingly diverse, including government agencies in Brazil’s health, social protection, and education systems. Promundo takes a flexible approach to the detailed content of each partnership activity, tailoring the

programming to the circumstances of each partner while adhering to Promundo's overall principles. In each case, Promundo uses a general, four-step approach to program implementation: sensitization, community engagement, program participation, impact evaluation (see box). This flexible model, where the government partner has the leading role, is the foundation of Promundo's scaling strategy in Brazil.

Promundo programming includes four core steps:

1. **Sensitization:** Initial connections with people around the importance of changing perceptions of gender equality and gender norms
2. **Community Engagement:** Embedding the work in context and getting the target population to enroll in Promundo's programming
3. **Program Participation:** Carrying out the program itself
4. **Impact Evaluation:** Assessing what worked and creating an evidence base

Promundo has seen its core emphasis on the value of fathers' engagement and gender equality spread in Brazil as different government agencies become involved and then influence others in the same direction. This has led to a favourable environment for scaling Program P; it has also yielded important direct benefits through the work of the agencies involved. The support of diverse agencies at federal, state, and municipal levels has helped sustain gender transformative programming across changes in government and administration. Understanding how the government works and the different levers available has been key to Promundo's ability to make progress even as the complexions of governments change. As Miguel Fontes put it, "We understand the complexity of the [government] system, but we don't make it confusing. It's complex but at the same time, this complexity is good, because you can find ways to work through it, if you understand that complexity and make it simple to people to understand what we're trying to reach."

Partnering with the Ministry of Health

When looking at Brazil's unified health care system, Promundo noticed that men were not included or acknowledged as an important component of maternal, infant, or early childhood health. However, as Promundo was developing an evidence base for engaging men and unpacking *machista* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's Ministry of Health was creating its Men's Health Department to nationally coordinate work on men's health. This led to a natural partnership in 2009, when Promundo began supporting the Ministry's men's health initiatives. They

worked together continuously within the framework of the national Men's Health Policy; in 2014, building on this relationship, Promundo – together with EME (Chile), and Redmas (Nicaragua) – partnered with Brazil's Ministry of Health to create and publish the Program P manual.

Through this partnership Promundo also developed a course for health care practitioners throughout Brazil called “Promoting Engagement of Men in Fatherhood and Caregiving”. The course now reaches clinicians in all of Brazil's 27 states with material on the importance of engaging men as caregivers and guidance on best practices, including approaches to reducing *machista*, unpacking rigid masculinity, and promoting gender equality and



PHOTO CREDIT: PROMUNDO

shared caregiving. Over twelve thousand clinicians throughout Brazil have completed this course, creating an environment that supports the uptake of Program P's principles and practices for families throughout Brazil. Building on the course's success, the Ministry of Health, in consultation with Promundo, developed a similar course that directly targets men. As an incentive, men who successfully complete the course and are employed by companies that receive federal tax credits under Brazil's Legal Framework for Early Childhood are granted 15 additional days of paternity leave, beyond the five days normally provided by the legal framework.

Early learning from this partnership also led Promundo to enhance their overall approach when partnering with the government. Promundo recognized that for health sector programming to succeed there would first need to be a dialogue with public servants to reach a shared understanding of the program's goals and its approach to gender norms. Promundo therefore adapted their four-step approach by expanding the first “sensitization” step to include an initial round of sensitization work with government officials. Once that initial work was complete, Promundo and government officials could together approach

families for the originally designed sensitization step to recruit participants to Program P. The sensitization work with government officials is now part of Promundo's standard approach to working with government partners, at the heart of Promundo's national scaling strategy in Brazil.

Scale Achieved through Partnering with the Ministry of Health

- 12,275 health professionals trained
- 800,000 families affected
- All 27 of Brazil's states engaged
- Partnerships with the federal Ministry of Health and all 27 state-level Men's Health Coordinators

Social Protection Partnerships

Since 2016 Promundo has been working with the social protection system as a key partner.⁷ The Promundo team observed that Brazil's unified social protection system has been shifting from the traditionally reaction-based system to a more prevention-oriented approach. An important example of this new approach is the *Programa Criança Feliz* (Happy Child Program). *Programa Criança Feliz* provides federal funding for local social protection workers to visit homes of families with pregnant mothers or young children. The visits provide support for parents and encourage healthy pregnancy and early childhood development. Promundo is currently working on a pilot with the social protection agencies in the states of Pernambuco, Ceará, Amapá, and Rio Grande do Sul to help home visitors identify men who can become more engaged with their child. These men can then enroll in Program P to further develop their caregiving skills and unpack their thinking about masculinity. Early results from this pilot effort have been promising despite the disruption of COVID-19 to the home visiting program and in-person delivery of Program P (see the "Adapting to COVID-19" section below for information about Program P Online).

The Promundo team saw the shift from a reactive to a preventive approach reflected in programs like *Programa Criança Feliz* as an opportunity for the social protection system to

⁷ See, for example, this material, launched with the social protection system in 2016: <https://promundo.org.br/recursos/caderno-de-ferramentas-promocao-da-equidade-de-genero-em-programas-de-transferencia-de-renda/>.

reshape its relationship with men. In a reactive social protection system men are often the aggressor to be managed and punished, but in a preventive system men are also victims of patriarchal and *machista* values. Helping boys and men deconstruct their rigid masculinity is expected to provide a greater benefit to families than the traditional reactive, punitive approach. To support this shift, Promundo is working with the federal Ministry of Citizenship, which houses the social protection system, to help educate social protection workers across Brazil.

In 2021 Promundo developed a special webinar for the social protection system, on themes of masculinity and men's engagement. Promundo presented the webinar to 1,500 social protection workers in April 2021 at a session called *Webinário Internacional - Todos Pela Primeira Infância*. The webinar was supported and well-received by the federal Minister of Citizenship. Following the success of the webinar, municipal social protection agencies requested that Promundo develop guidelines on how to address questions of masculinity, fatherhood, and caregiving in the unified social protection system. These were published in August 2021 and are quickly becoming an important reference for social protection workers.⁸

Scale Achieved through Social Protection Partnerships

- 150 collaborative interventions completed with social protection workers
- 250 social protection workers trained
- 3,750 families received services from trained workers
- 1,500 social protection workers participated in the *Webinário Internacional - Todos Pela Primeira Infância*
- 22,500 families received direct services from social protection workers who completed the webinar
- 5 of Brazil's 27 states engaged

Education Partnerships

The health and social protection sectors in Brazil operate through a unified federal system, which includes decentralized participation at the state and local levels. Education is still more

⁸ <https://promundo.org.br/recursos/cartilha-fortalecer-as-paternidades-responsaveis-e-participativas-a-partir-do-programa-primeira-infancia-no-sistema-unico-de-assistencia-social-suas-programa-crianca-feliz-pcf/?lang=portugues>

decentralized, and states and municipalities have considerable leeway in educational programming, especially for primary and secondary schooling. Promundo recently partnered with the state Secretariat of Education in Rio de Janeiro and the state Secretary of Education in Tocantins in two World Bank funded projects. The project in Rio de Janeiro, *Projetando Futuros* (Thinking About the Future), aims to help high school students to learn and talk about gender equality and to discuss perspectives on their future roles as parents and caregivers. The project in Tocantins trains teachers to identify cases of abuse of young children. These projects, and the associated collaborations with the World Bank, are helping Promundo earn the federal Ministry of Education's trust and could serve as a basis for future work at the federal level. The World Bank and Promundo are currently planning a presentation on the pilot projects' results for education-focused stakeholders, including the federal Ministry of Education and state counterparts.

While these efforts represent a promising start, building gender transformative programming into the education system is proving to be more challenging than the work with the health and social protection sectors. In part, this is due to the high degree of decentralization in education. Promundo is also encountering more disagreement among educators about the core approach; this suggests that the education sector requires more sensitization work than the health and social protection sectors. Though this work is in its early stages, Promundo is dedicated to making progress on gender equality and men's engagement in caregiving through building partnerships and developing a growing evidence base in education.



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General Reflections on Promundo's Government Partnership Strategy

In sum, Promundo seeks to achieve broad impact in Brazil by embedding gender equality and men's engagement principles in government agencies and government programs via a partnership strategy. Rather than replicating specific program curricula, Promundo scales a

more general approach that builds flexible, project-based engagements with government agencies and tailors the work to the characteristics of the specific government system involved. Promundo's approach begins with a "sensitization" phase with government officials, to create an environment that is receptive to Promundo's programs and to enable the spread of key principles. Promundo then draws on its experience to deliver its core content through courses, webinars, discussion sessions, written resources, and other tailored programs. Overall, Promundo builds on personal relationships, a willingness to "stay backstage" behind government officials, and an evidence base from past and ongoing projects to develop trust with government partners and extend the reach of its programming.

Promundo is willing to be flexible about details, to accommodate the perspectives of its partners. For example, the Ministry of Health recently asked for the word "gender" to be removed from Promundo's training for clinicians. Resisting this might have led to conflict in Promundo's relationship with the Ministry, so Promundo instead agreed to replace "gender" with "*machista*." While this wording was not Promundo's first choice, Promundo felt it would still be effective in the training. This flexible approach has limits; it does not extend to "non-negotiable" concepts or terms that lack a viable alternative (i.e., race, diversity).

"We work in the backstage of government structures, understanding how the system works in a way that we are able to spread good seeds. The greatest thing is really how we learned using the democratic system to our benefit."

- *Miguel Fontes, Founder and Executive Director of Promundo*

Developing Programming with Indigenous and Riverside Communities

To expand further within Brazil, Promundo has begun to engage with *ribeirinho* (riverside) and Indigenous communities in the Amazon. The intent is to co-create a culturally appropriate, decolonized program harmonious with the goals of Program P. Riverside and Indigenous communities have a nuanced understanding of gender equality but often face external pressures and threats to their culture. In working with these populations Promundo is taking a specially tailored approach, to develop programming in a way that fully respects Indigenous values and culture. As a "step zero" for this approach, Promundo is starting with an anthropological assessment, which has been named as the "listening" stage of Program P.

Promundo is collaborating with educators at the State University of Amapá and anthropologists to engage Indigenous and riverside community members in discussions

about how they view positive paternal involvement. This assessment will help Promundo understand these communities' perspectives on masculinity, gender equality, and child rearing. The roles are reversed from Promundo's usual engagement with families, since in this case the riverside and Indigenous communities are the teachers, providing "sensitization" for the Promundo team, who are listeners and learners. Once this phase is complete, Promundo and local organizations and leaders will collaborate to co-create a new version of Program P, based on riverside and Indigenous cultures, languages, practices, and needs.

Adapting to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked adaptations in the content and delivery of Promundo's programs. Facing a humanitarian crisis in communities they served, Promundo diverted resources to purchase and distribute food baskets, masks, and hand sanitizer. Promundo also observed that the pandemic led to increased domestic violence, and Promundo could not respond with its normal programming - with in-person activities like Program P. So Promundo adapted Program P to create "Program P Online."⁹ Program P Online is delivered via instant messaging on the WhatsApp platform, which is widely accessible to Brazilian families at low cost.



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Promundo conducted a quasi-experimental study of Program P Online, finding increased participation compared to in-person delivery, due in part to the flexibility of the 48-hour online response window for assigned tasks and activities. Even after the end of the sequence of eight weekly sessions, participating fathers often remained in the WhatsApp groups to share experiences and continue the work they began in Program P. On the other hand, in some territories in northern Brazil, Promundo was unable to make Program P accessible online.

Amidst the devastation of the pandemic, Promundo's experience with Program P Online has informed their thinking about ways to scale sustainably through low-cost, easily accessible

⁹ Programa P online [livro eletrônico] / Instituto Promundo, 2021, Brasília, DF. Available at <https://promundo.org.br/recursos/manual-programa-p-online/>.

tools like WhatsApp. Miguel Fontes reflected, "It was a great opportunity; we realized how important the use of very basic technology could be. We realized that WhatsApp was being used for the worst things of all, especially for the political dissemination of fake news and all of that. But what if we use WhatsApp for good?"



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The work of the Saving Brains Learning Platform Team to engage with this innovation and prepare this profile was made possible by the support of Grand Challenges Canada (funded by the Government of Canada), Porticus, and the Saving Brains Partnership.



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We extend a thank you to Promundo for their work and for sharing their story with us.

For more information about **Promundo**, please visit their website: <https://promundo.org.br/>

