

Training participants working in small groups as part of the integrating gender into risk communication and community engagement workshop in Niger.



CASE STUDY

Integrating Gender for Effective and Inclusive Risk Communication and Community Engagement During Health Emergencies

Credit: Antonia Morzenti/Breakthrough ACTION.



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Acronyms

DHPSE	Department of Public Hygiene and Environmental Health
RCCE	Risk communication and community engagement
SBC	Social and behavior change
SMART	Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound
TOT	Training of Trainers
TWG	Technical Working Group
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Context

Gender plays a critical role in risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) activities, as health emergencies often affect individuals differently based on gender norms and roles. RCCE involves informing and engaging communities about health risks and preventive measures to foster trust, cooperation, and informed decision making. Built on a foundation of social and behavior change (SBC), which focuses on changing behaviors to improve health outcomes, RCCE supports essential behavior changes for controlling outbreaks. During emergencies, women and girls may face additional challenges such as limited access to health care services, information, and decision-making power, while men and boys may experience societal pressures around risk-taking behaviors. Recognizing and addressing these gender-specific needs can ensure RCCE programs are inclusive and equitable, helping mitigate disparities in access to information and services while also building community trust and collaboration.

Breakthrough ACTION, supported by USAID, works closely with countries to strengthen RCCE capacities to prepare for and respond to zoonotic diseases and other emerging health threats through a multi-sectoral One Health approach. The One Health concept recognizes the interdependence of animals, humans, and their shared environment, partnering stakeholders from multiple sectors to collaborate on emergency preparedness and response. Many countries have taken steps to operationalize this approach

One Health is an integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals, and ecosystems. It recognizes the intersection of animal, human, and environmental health and provides a roadmap to respond to public health outbreaks especially of a zoonotic nature. This approach relies on communication, collaboration, coordination, and effective governance at all levels.

by establishing and strengthening national One Health platforms and policies, providing coordination, skills strengthening, and guidance to support activities that enhance resilience against zoonotic and other infectious disease outbreaks.

Since 2018, Breakthrough ACTION has expanded from three Global Health Security country programs to 19, applying and building on the best practices from each implementation. A feature of this work is assessing and strengthening RCCE capacities of One Health and RCCE stakeholders through practical trainings at national and subnational level to strengthen skills and knowledge on a wide variety of content related to One Health, priority zoonotic diseases, and RCCE to address needs and gaps, including the need to provide more inclusive and effective prevention and response interventions by using gender integration approaches and tools in RCCE. This brief highlights key learnings and approaches to gender integration training from Breakthrough ACTION Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, and Liberia.

What was the situation like before Breakthrough ACTION started its gender integration training?

Before Breakthrough ACTION’s training, RCCE program staff often misunderstood gender or only considered it in a limited manner. Many RCCE practitioners equated gender solely with women, without recognizing the broader implications of societal gender norms and dynamics. This gap limited the effectiveness of RCCE interventions, as they did not adequately account for the specific needs of men, women, boys, girls, and other marginalized groups.

Country Examples

Guinea



Breakthrough ACTION piloted the Gender Integration into RCCE Training in Guinea, where the government had a strong demand for

integrating gender into RCCE activities. The five-day training included 54 participants, including representatives from all ministries implementing the One Health approach along with those working in gender.

- **Ministry of Health:** Delegates from the National Department of Health Promotion, gender focal points, the National Agency for Health Security, and members of the One Health Platform.



Credit: Antonia Morzenti/Breakthrough ACTION.

Participants from the workshop in Nzérékoré discuss what it means to be a “man” or a “woman” in their community, how one can step outside of that norm, and what the rewards and consequences might be.



Credit: Antonia Morzenti/Breakthrough ACTION.

Participants from Niger discuss what it means to be a “man” or a “woman” in their community, how one can step outside of that norm, and what the rewards and consequences might be.

- **Ministry of the Environment:** Representatives from the communication department and the gender focal point.
- **Ministry of Agriculture:** Representatives from the communication department and the gender focal point.
- **Ministry of the Promotion of Women, Children, and Vulnerable People:** Members from the Gender Equality and Equity Department and the communication department.

Breakthrough ACTION implemented a highly participatory training that applied a three-pronged approach: (1) addressing misunderstandings, (2) empowering through education, and (3) fostering collaboration—that used adult learning

methods, group work, and practical exercises. Participants used tools like the [Gender Integration Continuum](#) and the [Gender Equality Check-in Tool](#) to evaluate and improve gender integration in their RCCE activities. Adoma Konate, Focal Point for Communication and Health Promotion at the Dabola Prefectural Health Directorate shared how useful these tools are: “The gender integration continuum [... is] an instrument that will enable us, who are at the operational level, to see [where] the gender integration level is.”

The training culminated in actionable plans, with follow-up assessments at four and six months to ensure knowledge retention and application. Post-training evaluations revealed a significant increase in participants’ confidence in integrating

gender, rising from 23% before the training to 71% afterward. Mahawa Sylla, Head of the Information Technology and Database Department at the National Observatory for Social Protection and Gender-Based Violence shared:

“Before coming to the training, frankly, I thought I knew almost everything about gender, but this training showed me that there is another positive way of looking at gender, because before, I thought gender was men and women.”

Adoma Konate reinforced these sentiments, saying, “This gender integration training in RCCE gave me a great opening in terms of a deeper understanding of integrating gender. There were certain terminologies and approaches that I hadn’t quite mastered [before the training].”

Niger



In Niger, the project adjusted the training due to time constraints, resulting in the removal of one learning objective and the action planning component of



Participants engaged in gender-specific participatory activities in Nasarawa and Bauchi state as part of RCCE workshops.

the training. However, the training still maintained a participatory structure and participants engaged in discussions around gender integration in RCCE, recognizing its importance in addressing health disparities during emergency responses. The training laid the groundwork for future efforts to scale up gender integration and ensure the inclusion of key gender stakeholders in the planning process. Adamou Balkissa Elhadj Saidou, Hygiene Inspector with the Department of Public Hygiene and Environmental Health (DHPSE) at the Ministry of Public Health, Population and Social Affairs shared, “As a concrete next step after this training to change/influence people’s view of gender, I propose to include a gender integration training of all personnel in the DHPSE’s 2025 annual action plan.”

Nigeria



In Nigeria, the project intentionally embedded gender integration into all trainings, including addressing gender inequities during health emergencies such as COVID-19 and Lassa fever outbreaks. Training content emphasizes that gender norms influence



Credit: Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria.



Credit: Antonia Morzenti/Breakthrough ACTION.

Participants from Kindia discuss what it means to be a “man” or a “woman” in their community, how one can step outside of that norm, and what the rewards and consequences might be.

health behaviors and access to services, with women often facing disproportionate caregiving burdens and men being more likely to engage in high-risk activities. The training content outlines the importance of gender-responsive interventions to ensure both men and women can access accurate information, health care, and support services during health crises. As a result, participants have integrated gender considerations into public communication strategies, risk communication systems, and community engagement efforts. RCCE programs also explored the influence of restrictive gender norms, such as the perception that mask-wearing is not “masculine” and worked to overcome these barriers.

The training approach emphasizes linking gender to health indicators and RCCE benchmarks and ensuring that messaging is tailored to those most affected by health emergencies. Breakthrough ACTION has been proactive in using participatory methods, reflecting on biases, and adapting examples to their audiences, whether for media professionals or community volunteers.

In addition, Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria provided a training to representatives of the 15 member states of the West African Health Organization, following this approach.

Liberia



In Liberia, Breakthrough ACTION adapted its original plan for a national Training of Trainers (TOT) on gender integration due to political constraints, including a presidential election and subsequent political transition. Instead of halting progress, project staff delivered three regional gender integration trainings to reach 12 counties. This localized approach, developed in close partnership with the Ministry of Gender and subnational RCCE Technical Working Group (TWG) members, ensured the training remained relevant and impactful despite the political shifts. The training sessions spanned three days and included an overview and reflection

of Breakthrough ACTION's [Gender Analysis for Vaccine Response tool](#) and other key resources and concepts while sharing experiences and best practices.

The training emphasized the role gender plays in RCCE, highlighting how men's and women's needs, perspectives, and vulnerabilities differ and must be considered in effective communication strategies. Each session included moments of guided reflection and group discussion on how gender norms impact the spread of zoonotic diseases in Liberia. Facilitators tasked participants with developing county-level gender action plans that included SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound) objectives, key stakeholders, and gender-sensitive communication strategies. The

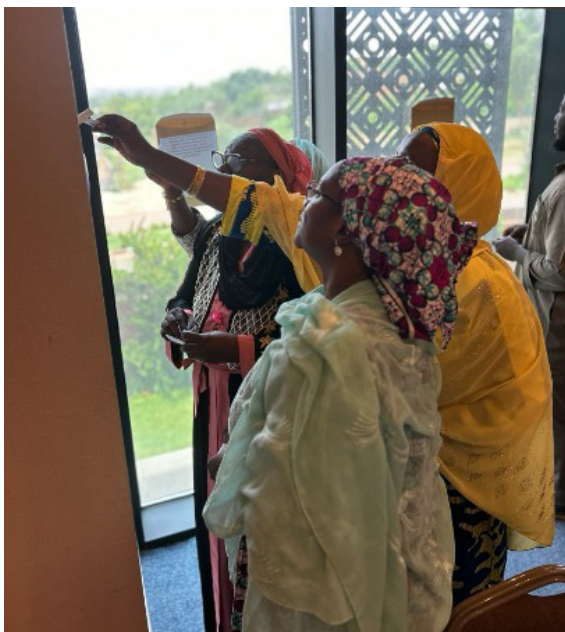


Credit: Breakthrough ACTION Liberia.

Participants engaged in RCCE and gender integration training workshop in Liberia.

involvement of national and county-level gender focal points ensured the content was culturally appropriate, avoiding perceptions of an external agenda, and fostering ownership at the local level.

Follow-up activities, including ongoing RCCE TWG monthly meetings and ad hoc meetings that include structured reflection sessions on progress and resource-sharing, were key to sustaining momentum and ensuring gender integration in RCCE activities across the counties. While commitment varied by county RCCE TWG, these regular forums allowed for reflection and ongoing support, reinforcing the training's lessons. One major success was the elevation of subnational gender coordinators as recognized leaders within their communities, strengthening connections between RCCE TWG members and gender focal points in various ministries.



Action planning exercise from the integrating gender into RCCE training workshop in Niger.

Credit: Antonia Morzenti/Breakthrough ACTION.

Through this adaptive approach, Breakthrough ACTION not only maintained its gender integration efforts during a politically turbulent time but also strengthened local capacity to address gender-related issues in RCCE activities. The county-level focus, combined with action planning and ongoing engagement, has laid the groundwork for more inclusive, gender-sensitive RCCE interventions across Liberia.

Factors Contributing to a Successful Gender Integration Training

Several factors contributed to the success of the gender integration trainings:

- **Comprehensive Approach:** The combination of addressing misconceptions, empowering participants through education, and fostering collaboration led to profound changes in how participants understood and applied gender integration. Practical tools like the [Gender Integration Continuum](#) and the [Gender Equality Check-in Tool](#) empowered participants to make concrete changes in their work.
- **Participatory Methods:** In all countries, participatory methods, including group work, discussions, and case studies, encouraged active engagement and critical reflection on gender biases. Participants in Guinea and Liberia especially appreciated this approach, where they noted the break from traditional PowerPoint lectures.

Lessons Learned

Across the four country contexts, Breakthrough ACTION learned the following lessons:

- **Involve Key Stakeholders Early:** Engaging gender equity focal points and relevant stakeholders—such as ministries of gender—from the beginning ensures a comprehensive approach to gender integration and maximizes the training’s impact.
- **Prepare Facilitators and Stakeholders:** Adequate preparation for facilitators is key to successful training delivery. Brief TOTs before the main training can ensure facilitators are comfortable with the material.
- **Tailor to Local Context:** Training materials should be adapted to reflect the local cultural and social context. In Liberia, for instance, involving the Ministry of Gender in content development helped avoid perceptions that gender integration was an external or Western concept.
- **Sustainability Through Follow-Up:** Follow-up activities, such as learning circles and monthly meetings, are essential for reinforcing the training’s impact. These activities provide opportunities to revisit gender concepts, track progress on action plans, and maintain engagement.
- **Collaborative Planning and Commitment:** The collaborative atmosphere fostered during the trainings was crucial. In Guinea, participants worked together to create actionable plans that they could immediately implement in their programs, fostering a sense of ownership and continuous improvement in gender integration.

- **Action Plans:** In Guinea and Liberia, participants developed action plans to ensure they could apply the knowledge gained in their workplace. These plans, supported by follow-up assessments and check-ins during regular RCCE TWG meetings, proved essential for maintaining momentum and accountability in gender integration efforts.

messages are gender-sensitive from the start, thus effectively integrating gender into health emergency responses. Beyond training, RCCE programs must incorporate gender-specific questions in research efforts, such as rapid formative research, social listening, or rumor tracking, to understand the unique impacts of health emergencies on women, men, girls, boys, and gender minorities. This can include tailoring questions to capture vaccination uptake and hesitancy. If firsthand data collection is difficult to conduct, practitioners should review existing literature on gender dynamics and health-seeking behaviors. Furthermore, sex and age disaggregation should be incorporated into all data collection and monitoring systems to analyze health

Recommendations for Integrating Gender into Health Emergencies

Providing gender training to all actors involved in RCCE ensures activities and



Credit: B reakthrough ACTION-Nigeria.

CA4SBC Training Modules Stepped Down to Ward Development Committee Members in Bauchi Local Government Areas.

disparities and socioeconomic factors that influence health behaviors. Addressing the gender-specific needs of frontline workers is also critical, recognizing the distinct caregiving responsibilities and workload pressures faced by male and female health care workers, particularly women. Understanding gender-based power dynamics can enhance the well-being of frontline workers and improve the overall response. Additionally, RCCE programs should tailor responses to meet the needs of vulnerable populations, such as orphans, refugees, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, ensuring interventions are inclusive and address barriers like stigma and mistrust. By implementing these recommendations, RCCE programs can more effectively address gender disparities and create equitable, inclusive, and responsive health interventions during emergencies.

Conclusion

Breakthrough ACTION’s gender integration trainings in Guinea, Nigeria, Niger, and Liberia have demonstrated the importance of incorporating gender into RCCE activities. The three-pronged approach used in Guinea—addressing misconceptions, providing education, and fostering collaboration—was particularly effective in helping participants integrate gender into their work. In Nigeria, the focus on how gender norms influence health behaviors, such as mask-wearing and access to services, provided critical insights into improving RCCE interventions during health crises.

Across all countries, participatory methods and tailored content supported RCCE actors to address gender-specific needs for their local context, facilitating more nuanced understanding of gender concepts and practical ways to integrate gender aware programming into RCCE plans and interventions for more inclusive and effective health interventions. These trainings serve as models for integrating gender into health emergency responses, offering valuable lessons on how to promote gender equity in RCCE programs. As Breakthrough ACTION expands its efforts, these training packages and experiences will facilitate other regions and countries to apply these gender integration strategies, further advancing global health equity.