MODULE 2

How Social Norms Drive Outcomes

Effects of Social Norms on Health and Livelihood Outcomes for Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

UC San Diego
CENTER ON GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH

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Module 2 Introduction

What does evidence say about the relationship between the normative contexts of adolescent girls and young women and outcomes related to sexual and reproductive health, women's economic empowerment, gender-based violence, and child, early and forced marriage?

Module 2 examines how social norms influence the behaviors and outcomes of adolescent girls and young women, and boys and men, particularly in relation to sexual and reproductive health, women's economic empowerment, gender-based violence, and child, early and forced marriage. Through a range of program approaches and case studies, this module synthesizes evidence from diverse geographic contexts in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, exploring how normative expectations shape the choices and opportunities of adolescent girls and young women and how shifts in these norms contribute to changes in behaviors and practices.

The findings in this module offer rich insights on what factors strengthen or weaken the influence of social norms, and on the pathways through which social norms influence the health and well-being of adolescent girls and young women. In addition, this module discusses how attitudes fit into norm change, highlighting distinctions between internally held beliefs and external, socially reinforced expectations, and how shifts in attitudes contribute to broader normative change.

Beyond individual and community-level influences, the module examines macro-level factors that shape norm change for adolescent girls and young women, including policy environments, economic opportunities, education, and exposure to media and technology. These structural and systemic factors interact with social norms in complex ways, either accelerating or constraining shifts in gendered expectations and behaviors over time.

Module 2 concludes with a series of considerations for policymakers and practitioners. In sum, these insights not only increase understanding of the broad mechanisms through which social norms impact the lives of adolescent girls and young women, they are also critical for interpreting the evidence on effective norm-shifting interventions presented in later modules.

Rationale

There is compelling and growing evidence that – across the world (be it in low-, middle-, or high-income countries) – social norms shape what people in a community or society consider acceptable and appropriate behavior. Understanding how these norms influence adolescent girls and young women's choices, opportunities, and actions is essential for effective policymaking and intervention design. This understanding is also key to developing targeted programmatic strategies that foster meaningful and sustainable change. **This section presents Module 2's guiding research questions, along with their rationale and contribution to the field.**

Guiding Questions

Module 2 is organized around three guiding themes: 1) How social norms influence adolescent girls and young women's behaviors and outcomes across domains; 2) What evidence exists on the directionality, mediation, and moderation of norms on adolescent girls and young women's behaviors; and 3) What mechanisms drive normative change, and how do these mechanisms interact with psychological factors, such as attitudes, as well as broader structural and contextual factors.

How do social norms influence the behaviors and outcomes of adolescent girls and young women across domains?

This question explores how social norms affect adolescent girls and young women's behaviors and outcomes across multiple domains of well-being and development (such as health, education, economic participation, and safety from violence). Answering this question highlights the role that social norms play in either restricting or enabling their choices and actions.

This understanding is essential because effective grantmaking, along with successful program and policy design, must be grounded in a deep awareness of the social dynamics affecting access to opportunities, resources, freedoms, choices, and actions. A key part of that contextual understanding is recognizing how norms operate within specific settings. Funders and policymakers can support interventions targeting the root causes of unjust and harmful outcomes by identifying how norms contribute to sustaining an unjust and harmful status quo. Appreciating the dynamics that harmful social norms create can inform the design of programs that lead to long-term, sustainable change in people's lives.

We know that social norms are powerful drivers of adolescent girls and young women's behavior, often dictating, among other things, their access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Social norms also perpetuate harmful practices such as child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence. The evidence illustrates how various norms, ranging from those closely linked to behaviors to more deeply rooted ones, as well as different types of norms, such as descriptive norms (what people do) and injunctive norms (what people approve of), interact to either create barriers or promote progress for adolescent girls and young women.

What mechanisms drive changes in social norms, and how do they interact with psychological as well as broader structural and contextual factors?

This question examines the processes through which shifts in social norms occur, either naturally or because of an intervention. It seeks to understand the programmatic pathways and strategies that can be leveraged to shift norms sustainably. This is critical because the design of purposeful investments, policies, and interventions requires understanding which mechanisms and strategies are most successful in driving norm change. This knowledge also ensures resources are directed toward interventions with the greatest potential for impact. Furthermore, understanding the interaction between norms and structural factors, such as legal systems and economic conditions, allows for the design of comprehensive approaches that effectively foster social and behavioral change.

Social norms do not exist in isolation. Evidence indicates the relationship between social norms and personal attitudes can influence behavior at both individual and community levels, reinforcing detrimental practices or catalyzing positive change. At the same time, social norms are also embedded within and shaped by broader systems, including cultural traditions, governmental processes, health services, technology, infrastructure, and more. To accurately assess and measure social norm and behavior change, and to understand how and why the effectiveness of norms-shifting interventions may vary across contexts, it is useful to tease apart constructs like attitudes, self-efficacy and aspirations, in addition to considering these broader systems and structures.

What evidence exists on the directionality, mediation, and moderation of norms on adolescent girls and young women's behaviors?

Examining evidence on 'directionality' offers an improved understanding of whether behaviors change first and norms follow, or whether norms change first and behaviors change thereafter. This question also explores factors that mediate changes in norm-driven behaviors and conditions that moderate their impact. As such, the scope of this question includes analyzing demographic factors facilitating deviation from social norms, investigating why people comply, and whether certain groups can afford to deviate without any social consequence.

This is important because designing effective theory-informed interventions necessitates a clear understanding of the pathways that lead to change in behaviors sustained by social norms. By identifying directionality, mediators, and moderators, program designers are better equipped to tailor programs to specific contexts, enhancing their effectiveness, and funders are more favorably positioned to support programs with improved return on investment.

Based on existing literature and programmatic experience, three hypotheses related to directionality are discussed in this module: changes in social norms precede behavior changes; behavior changes result in shifts in social norms; and changes in behavior and social norms occur bidirectionally and iteratively. Programmatic implications for each of these hypotheses are presented thereafter, all of which underscore the importance of considering community values and norms while also supporting individuals who are early adopters of new behaviors. Findings on mediating and moderating mechanisms emphasize the need for integrated interventions, as well as for intersectional analyses in programmatic evaluations and studies.

Methodology Snapshot

Review and Analysis Approach

Spanning diverse disciplines including public health, sociology, behavioral economics, and gender studies, Module 2 draws on the full body of literature in the evidence review— including both peer-reviewed and programmatic (grey) literature. This module also supplements insights from these sources by selectively integrating empirical studies that offer additional depth on dynamics of norms change processes, mechanisms of change, and contextual moderators.

As described in Module 1, the methodology involved a rigorous search and screening process to identify relevant literature, guided by predefined inclusion criteria and key search terms. However, unlike other modules, which emphasize specific intervention strategies, Module 2 takes a conceptual approach—analyzing norms as forces shaping adolescent girls and young women's choices across domains. Studies were therefore selected based on their contribution to understanding normative influence, directionality, mediation, moderation, and more. The primary sources of literature included peer-reviewed articles and additional conceptual reports, supported by program documentation with examples beyond entertainment media and faith and cultural champion approaches. Key themes were identified across sources and categorized into the three guiding questions described above. In cases where programmatic information was unavailable, the research team complemented the identified literature with additional empirical evidence.



KEY TERMS: MODULE 2

Social norms, as defined by Cislaghi and Heise, are an individual's "beliefs about (i) what others do and (ii) what others approve and disapprove of" (1). These factors can be barriers to specific behaviors due to the potential for social sanctioning, or adverse, potentially severe reactions by community members toward adolescent girls and young women who behave in a way not in line with social expectations. Social norms go beyond the influence of one's immediate family and include partners, friends, and health providers – whoever an individual identifies as their reference group, or the people to whom they compare themselves (2-6).

Gender norms are a specific type of social norm that provide a set of rules for how men and women should act, often to the disadvantage of women and girls. These norms are learned early in the life course, and reinforced socially via school, the workplace, religion, media, and other institutions (7).

Reference groups create social norms and enforce them through positive and negative sanctions (2-6). Reference groups encompass anyone with whom an individual compares themselves.

An ***attitude*** is "what an individual thinks and feels about a behavior or practice, and whether they judge it favorably or unfavorably" (8). Attitudes are often influenced by an individual's beliefs, which distinguish them from social norms, which are extrinsically motivating.

How Social Norms Influence Key Outcomes

Social norms become more deeply ingrained during adolescence and increasingly dictate adolescents' behavior. As children transition through puberty, they enter a developmental stage of heightened sensitivity to social norms, actively defining their identities based on group belonging and mapping their position within their social network based on the expectations of other members, especially those who hold considerable power and influence (9). Thus, this phase of human development is marked by an increased reliance on peer groups and a strong need for social belonging, often resulting in an intensified commitment to comply with community and peer expectations and social pressure (10-12).

In addition to adolescents' need to seek connection and acceptance while constructing their identity, adolescence and young adulthood are periods marked by significant biological changes that, in many cultures, have a profound impact on their social lives. For example, as adolescents—especially girls—reach puberty, a web of norms surrounding the regulation of their sexual activity become more restrictive (13-15). This perceived sexual maturity leads to increased parental control and stricter community expectations (16-18). After puberty girls often face heightened restrictions to their mobility (including to school), designed to regulate their sexuality and meet expectations of sexual purity until marriage (12, 19, 20).

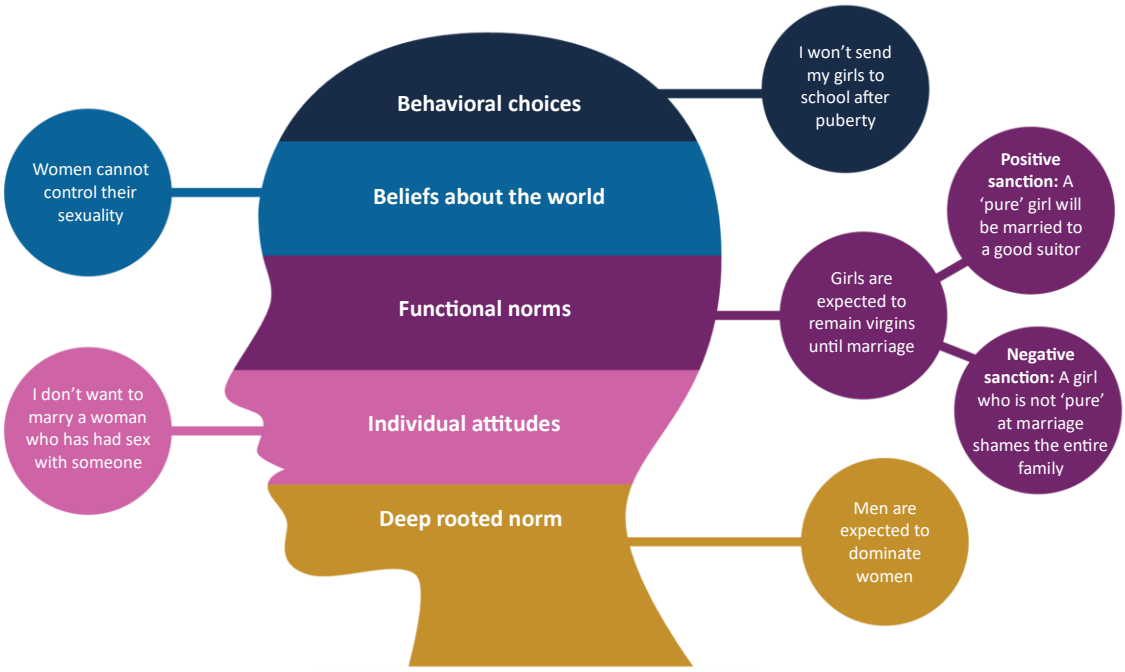


Figure 1. *Example: How Different Norms, Attitudes, and Beliefs Can Influence Conscious or Unconscious Choices on Whether to Send a Girl to School*

Figure 1 illustrates how cognitive considerations interact with interpersonal and social contexts to influence an individual's motivation to act. By examining beliefs about women's sexual behavior, this figure shows how different norms can lead to the decision to end a girl's education. Understanding these norms helps identify key leverage points for interventions that challenge harmful expectations and foster lasting positive change. This example underscores the importance of understanding how social norms shape the lives of adolescents and young women during this crucial stage of development.

KEY INSIGHT: LAYERS OF SOCIAL NORMS AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR NORM SHIFTING

Social norms terminology can get overly complex. As the field has evolved, new terms have emerged (and sometimes faded), reflecting shifts in thinking. Still, there's broad agreement that multiple types of norms often shape a single behavior or outcome. For programs and investments, this matters: understanding which norms are at play—and which ones can realistically be shifted—can help prioritize efforts, manage expectations, and design more effective interventions.

Social norms exist at different levels of depth. Some are deeply rooted, reflecting broader beliefs about gender roles and power, for example: "men should provide, and women should nurture." Others are more specific to behaviors or situations, such as: "women need permission to leave the house" or "young people shouldn't talk about sex." Evidence suggests that deeply rooted norms help sustain a broader system of functional norms that inform daily actions. While these more specific norms may appear easier to shift, many argue they are upheld by more entrenched, foundational beliefs, often tied to religious, cultural, or larger societal systems. Whether changing functional norms can lead to lasting impact without addressing these deeper drivers remains an open, and important, question. Few studies have examined how these layers interact, pointing to a need for more research in this area.

Table 1 further illustrates how a single behavior can be shaped by multiple norms. As described in the Social Norms Atlas (21), functional norms are immediate, situational rules that influence what people do day-to-day. These are often sustained by deeper, foundational norms (sometimes referred to as meta-norms[1]). These deeper norms may fall into broad categories like gender ideology, authority, or protection. While functional norms may be more feasible to shift in the short term, foundational norms often require longer-term efforts and may resist change without broader cultural or structural transformation.

***Table 1**. Examples of Behaviors, Functional Norms, and Deeply Rooted Norms*

Behavior	Functional Norm	Deeply Rooted Norm
Women do not work outside the home	Women should only work if their family's income is insufficient	Men are providers; women are caregivers (Gender Ideology)
Women seek their husband's permission to go to a clinic	Women should not make health decisions alone	Men are household decision-makers (Authority & Control)
Girls drop out of school after puberty	Girls should not be seen in public after puberty	Girls' value is linked to purity and marriage (Protection & Gender Ideology)
Women give their income to their husbands	Women should not control household finances	Men control family resources (Control & Violence; Social Status)
Adolescents avoid discussing contraception	Talking about sex is shameful for unmarried youth	Sex is a taboo topic; youth must be obedient (Privacy; Authority)

The following sections synthesize findings from the evidence review to further describe how norms impact adolescent girls and young women's health, education, and economic opportunities, often with lasting effects. We also deconstruct norms, recognizing that some are foundational or deeply rooted.

Health

Norms surrounding adolescent health, particularly sexual and reproductive health, significantly impact people's ability to make informed decisions about their bodies as well as their access to health services. Deeply rooted norms may be those that associate female virtue with sexual purity or that suggest adolescents should not communicate openly about sexual and reproductive health. These norms give rise to functional norms that shape specific behaviors—for instance, the expectation that adolescent girls should not discuss menstruation openly, may lead to inadequate menstrual health and hygiene management, ultimately impacting school attendance and overall well-being (22). Similarly, deeply rooted norms that equate female worth with chastity or childbearing often discourage adolescent girls and young women from seeking contraceptives or sexual and reproductive health services, which in turn exacerbates early pregnancies and maternal health risks (23). Other notable examples of norms impacting girls' health include those that prescribe female genital mutilation/cutting. Extensively studied in the literature, evidence has shown community values and norms contribute to the continuation of this harmful practice (24-27). Studies also reveal that immunization programs are highly affected by social

[1] We avoid using the term "meta-norms" because, in English, "meta" usually means something self-referential, like "meta-cognition" (thinking about thinking) or "meta-review" (a review of reviews). In social norms research, meta-norms often refer to norms about norms, which is of less relevance to this evidence review.

norms, as parents might follow social conventions in complying (or not) with vaccination schedules for their children (28-30). Interventions aimed at shifting health-related norms have demonstrated success. Programs like *Reaching Married Adolescents* in Niger leveraged interpersonal communication to challenge misconceptions about menstruation and reproductive health, leading to reduced stigma for adolescent girls using modern contraceptive methods before marriage (31). Addressing norms surrounding health is particularly critical in contexts where adolescent girls and young women face additional barriers, such as early marriage or female genital mutilation/cutting.

Education

Social norms also influence girls' access to formal education. This is a relevant outcome in adolescent girls and young women's lives and is closely linked to other domains of well-being and development, including health and economic participation. For example, in 2019, the Overseas Development Initiative's *Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms* effort reviewed existing evidence and identified 10 gender norms critical to reducing girls' access to education. Some of these norms, as examples, relate to: 1) perceptions of girls' education as inappropriate or irrelevant; 2) early marriage and pregnancy; 3) housework commitments; 4) working outside the home; 5) corporal punishment; and 6) teacher bias against girls (32, 33). Deeply rooted norms that position men as primary providers and women as dependents, reinforce the belief that a girl's primary role is within the household and emphasize obedience to male authority, creating the foundation for restrictive educational norms. These deeply rooted norms may shape functional norms, which in turn, contribute to specific behaviors, such as prioritizing boys' education over girls' and viewing investment in girls' schooling as unnecessary or even counterproductive to family interests (34-36). For example, in several countries across sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the norm that a girl's value is tied to her marital status often leads to early school dropout to prepare for marriage (34-40). Additionally, functional norms surrounding household labor place disproportionate domestic responsibilities on girls, further hindering their ability to attend school. In a review of the interventions addressing gender-related barriers to girls' school participation, findings suggested that interventions that challenge norms about the value of girls' education, shift perceptions around child marriage, and highlight examples of women's academic success are important to increasing girls' school access and retention (41).

Economic Participation

Economic participation for young women is often curtailed by gender norms that restrict women's roles to domestic spheres. In many contexts, these norms limit access to vocational training, employment opportunities, and financial independence (42, 43). The *Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW)* program, carried out in more than 50 countries, is contributing to the extensive evidence on the role that gender norms relegating women's space to the household have in reducing female labor force participation rates globally (44). Again, deeply rooted norms that define men as primary breadwinners and women as caretakers establish strong beliefs about who should earn income and who should remain in the home. These can give rise to functional norms that dictate acceptable jobs for women, discourage them from working outside the home, and limit their financial decision-making power. Country-specific examples also exist of how gender norms can limit women's economic participation; these examples are available from almost all countries around the world, including: Bangladesh (45), China (46), Ecuador (47), India (48), Mexico (49), Saudi Arabia (50), and Turkey (51). Programs aimed at changing these norms have employed strategies such as role modeling, mentorship, and advocacy. In India, *Plan-It Girls*

empowers adolescent girls by building self-efficacy and employment skills while challenging gender norms. Informed by the social-ecological model, the program engages not just girls in grades 9 and 11 in government schools in Delhi and rural Jharkhand, but also principals, teachers, parents, boys, community members, business leaders, and policymakers to create a supportive environment for girls to achieve their aspirations (52). The program effectively equipped adolescent girls with employability skills, preparing them for the transition from school to work. Evidence indicates the program was especially impactful for younger adolescents, suggesting that early exposure fostered empowerment during this critical period.

Gender-Based Violence

The field of violence prevention offers numerous examples of how social norms affect adolescent girls and young women's experience of violence. Many deeply rooted norms related to gender-based violence have been studied, such as the social acceptance or use of control and violence, the relative authority and power of individuals over others, as well as those informing gender roles and responsibilities. Functional norms may dictate when and under what circumstances violence should be used and would be acceptable, who and how others should intervene in conflict, communication around conflict, and how typical or acceptable it would be to seek support. Indeed, in many communities, norms that tolerate or normalize violence against women and girls perpetuate cycles of abuse and hinder efforts to ensure safety. For decades researchers and program implementers have invested significant amounts of time and resources to both understand how social norms can increase the risk of experiencing violence and design programs to address these risks (53). For instance, global researchers exposed how norms that blame victims or view intimate partner violence as a private matter contribute to underreporting and a lack of accountability for perpetrators (1, 54-62). The most explicit violence prevention and response initiatives – dubbed the social norms approach – provided feedback to communities about people's private disapproval of violence against women, aiming to correct community misperceptions (63, 64). Since then, interventions started to invest in shifting (not just correcting) social norms, and addressing other structural causes of violence against women (65-68). Effective interventions worked with men and boys (69-71), facilitated community conversations (66, 72), and promoted adolescent girls and young women's agency as divergent role models (73).

‘Directionality’ of Norms Change

‘Directionality’ refers to the dynamics of the causal relationship between social norms and behavior: do shifts in social norms lead to changes in behavior, or does a change in behavior result in a change in social norms? The existing literature offers few clear explanations of these dynamics, and findings are often limited or contradictory, suggesting that **no single, universal pattern exists. Instead, the direction of norms change is likely shaped by multiple contextual factors, including the strength of existing norms, the types of norms, social network structures, the roles of individuals and reference groups, and external drivers such as policies or media.** This applies as much to adolescent girls and young women as it does to other groups.

In this section, we present three hypotheses based on existing literature and programmatic experience: (1) changes in social norms precede behavior changes; (2) behavior changes result in shifts in social norms; and (3) changes in behavior and social norms occur bidirectionally and iteratively. We explore each hypothesis in turn, highlighting how broader evidence can help unpack the complex relationship between norms and behavior, and provide insights for adolescent and youth programming. From there, we present additional details related to mediation and moderation mechanisms, sharing considerations for program designers and researchers.



KEY INSIGHTS

While rigorous empirical studies on ‘directionality’ remain scarce, valuable insights can still be drawn from empirical evidence informed by the application of social norms theory and measurement frameworks (e.g., assessing the contribution of variables such as descriptive norms, injunctive norms, sanctions, sensitivity to sanctions). For example, *Family Health = Family Wealth* in Uganda used a validated measure called the Family Planning Approval Index (73), and the *Research Initiative to Support the Empowerment of Girls* in Zambia applied the theory of planned behavior (74). Theory mapping, looking to social and behavior change frameworks, and strong program theories of change provide useful tools for understanding these dynamics. Programs like *Growing Up GREAT!* and *Tékponon Jikuagou* illustrate how structured interventions can reveal the dynamic interplay between behavior and norm change over time.

Change in Social Norms Precedes Change in Behavior

This hypothesis suggests that **people will only change their behavior once it becomes socially acceptable**. The reasoning is straightforward: most people avoid actions that could lead to disapproval or punishment. For example, adolescents might choose not to use contraceptives if they fear judgment from parents, doctors, or peers. This idea is central to the ‘social norms approach,’ which focuses on correcting false beliefs about what others think. In some cases, people assume that most of their peers disapprove of a behavior when, in reality, many actually support it. This misunderstanding, known as ‘pluralistic ignorance’ (explained further below), can reinforce restrictive norms. When these misperceptions are corrected, norms may begin to shift, making it easier for individuals to adopt new behaviors.

Often, examples from studies exploring alcohol consumption among college students in the United States are shared to illustrate this point. Many students believe that their peers expect them to drink heavily during a night out, so they conform to that perceived norm. However, research shows that when students learn that most of their peers actually disapprove of excessive drinking, they feel less pressure to drink heavily and are more likely to moderate their behavior (76). Therefore, if a program were to recognize that shifting norms is a necessary first step before behavior change can occur, it would prioritize interventions that challenge misperceptions and create an environment that supports new attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, by addressing pluralistic ignorance and making supportive norms more visible, programs can reduce fear of judgment and social penalties, ultimately paving the way for behavior changes that enhance health, autonomy, and economic opportunities. This calls for a focus on reshaping community attitudes to reach a critical mass and making that change visible, so that community members have "social permission" to voice their attitudes and change their behavior as well.

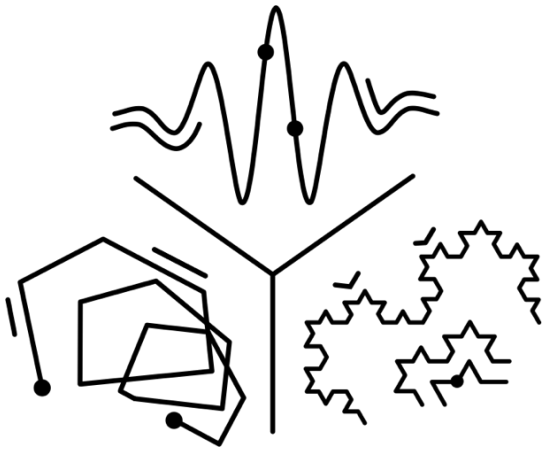
Change in Behavior Precedes Change in Social Norms

This perspective argues that for social norms to change, people first need to see others engaging in a new behavior. Without visible examples of norm-breaking, individuals may not recognize that change is possible or socially acceptable. In this view, **behavior change must come first, gradually shifting perceptions of what is normal and acceptable**. A prime example is how social etiquette surrounding shaking hands has evolved over time. Shaking hands in certain contexts was initially considered an expected greeting, signaling respect and formality. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, people began avoiding handshakes to reduce physical contact; and now, some individuals prefer other greetings, such as fist bumps or nods, in both casual and professional settings.

Research on social norms surrounding violence against women in Nigeria supports this idea. For example, women who worked outside the home faced a higher risk of violence, contributing to social resistance to women's shifting economic roles. Program staff raised the question of whether the intervention should encourage women to pursue nontraditional roles before these behaviors become more accepted (62). This points to the need for programs that take the position that behavior change must come first to not only focus on creating opportunities for individuals to act differently, but also on accounting for potential resistance. This means prioritizing access to education, employment, and reproductive healthcare, while also ensuring early adopters have protection and resources that help them maintain new behaviors. As more individuals break from restrictive norms, these behaviors can gain legitimacy, eventually leading to broader social acceptance.

Change in Behavior and Social Norms Is Bi-directional

Finally, the third hypothesis posits that behavior and social norms influence each other in a continuous, reinforcing cycle. Change is often gradual and moves in both directions—new behaviors can shift norms, and evolving norms can encourage more people to adopt new behaviors. When individuals behave differently, often due to factors like education, social status, or economic opportunities—others take notice. Over time, these behaviors can become more accepted; through diffusion of innovation principles (77, 78), where early adopters initiate change and as more people observe the benefits, new behaviors spread and eventually become the norm.



A growing body of evidence supports this concept. For instance, a UNICEF study (79) of Tostan's approach to address female genital mutilation/cutting found that when small groups in a community openly discussed and questioned harmful norms, they began to change their own behaviors. As others witnessed this shift, they followed suit, creating a ripple effect that led to broader norm change. This community-based approach has since been integrated into UNICEF's programming (see **Figure 2**). However, there are challenges. Encouraging people to break from norms must be done safely, and this is particularly important when working with adolescents, youth, and other at-risk groups. For example, if young women working outside the home face backlash or violence, programs need to provide protection and support (80). **Additionally, norm change requires long-term investment**. **If too few people challenge harmful norms and face negative consequences without adequate support, it can reinforce the status quo and make change more difficult.** If this approach is adopted, programs targeting adolescent girls and young women should use a dual strategy—**supporting individuals in adopting new behaviors while also shifting community attitudes**. **By ensuring visible examples of change, along with providing protection and sustained investment, programs can create the momentum needed for lasting transformation.**

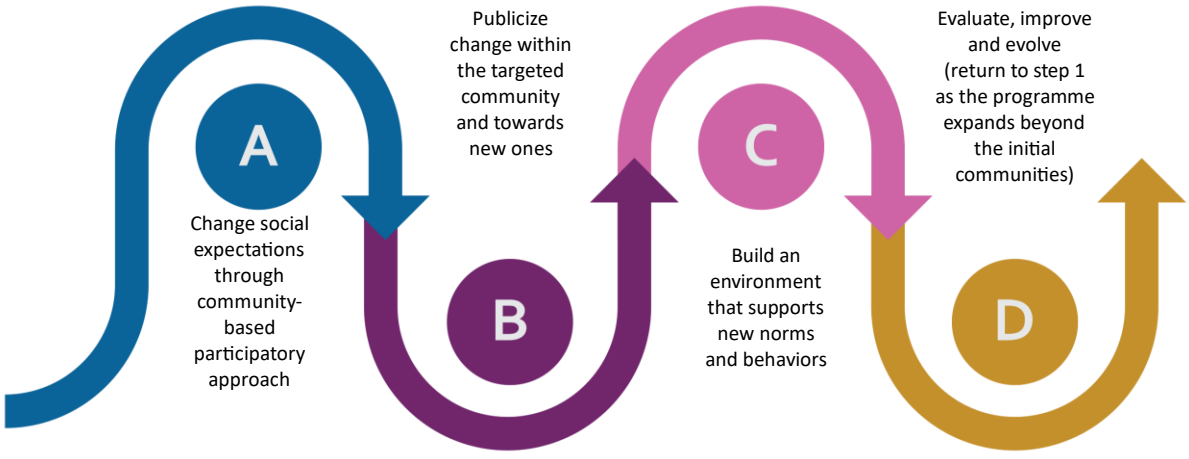


***Figure** 2. Adaptation of UNICEF's Four-Stage Approach to Changing Social Norms (81)*

Mediation and Moderation Mechanisms

Social norms do not exist in isolation—they are shaped by and embedded within broader systems of power and access to resources. While some norms, like saying "bless you" after a sneeze, operate independently of social hierarchies, others—such as norms around child marriage or women's participation in the workforce—are deeply tied to structures of power. These norms dictate access to opportunities and freedoms based on gender and other intersecting factors. Those who benefit from the status quo often have a vested interest in maintaining it, making norm change a complex and sometimes contested process. Importantly, simply shifting social norms is not a "silver bullet" for addressing structural inequalities. Instead, norm-change efforts must be part of intentional, multi-layered interventions that also address institutional policies, economic conditions, social networks, and material factors (see **Figure 3**).

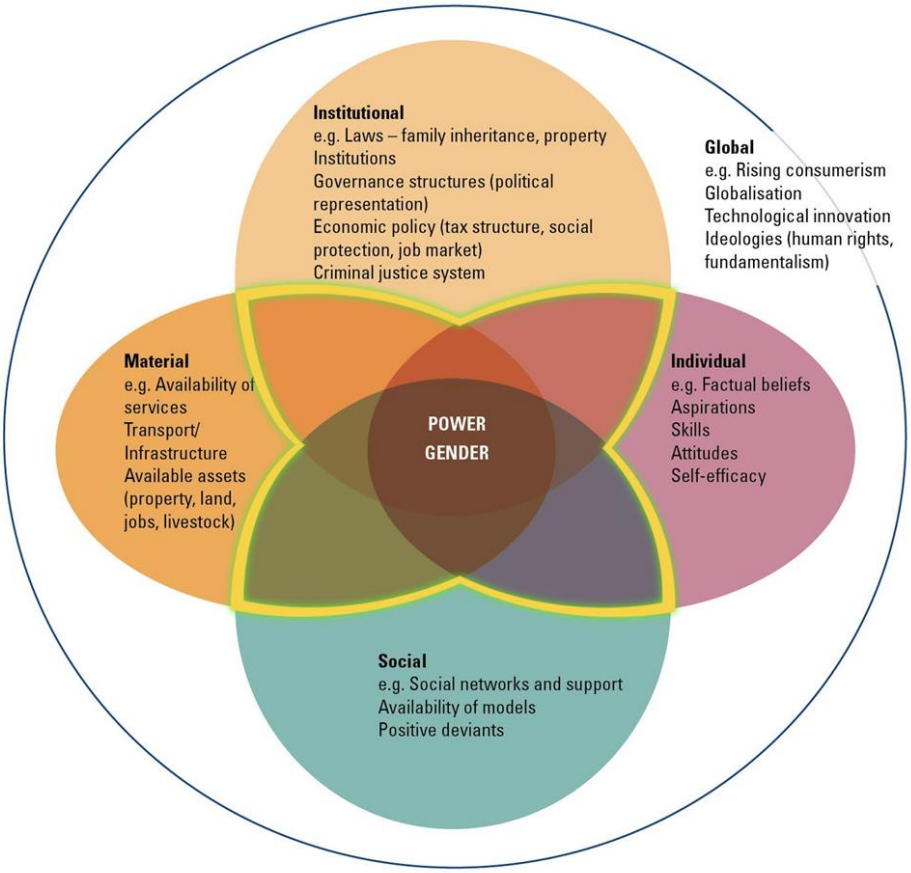


Figure 3. *The Interplay of Material, Institutional, Individual, and Social Factors Intersecting with Social Norms (1)*

Therefore, at the **macro level**, designing initiatives to address social norms with any group, but especially for those with lower social standing, such as adolescents and youth, requires an understanding of how they intersect with: 1) other forms of social discrimination; 2) other structural factors shaped by the existing normative system; and 3) vested interests in maintaining the normative status quo, particularly among those in positions of power. **Research shows that interventions addressing both social norms**

and mediating factors are more effective in driving behavioral change. For example, *Maisha Bora* in Tanzania, which paired skills-building with agency and empowerment themes and educational activities related to the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), showed considerable improvements in outcomes for adolescent girls and young women (82). These kinds of interventions that embody an intersectional lens, **promoting open discussions about gender roles and providing adolescent girls and young women with leadership opportunities**, help mitigate the effects of restrictive norms by fostering confidence and resilience.

Two studies met our inclusion criteria which shed some light on **micro level** moderating and mediating factors contributing to shifts in norms and behaviors of adolescent girls and young women. The first of which explored how social norms influenced intentions to use modern contraception in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The study analyzed data from a survey of 900 community members engaged in the *Masculinite, Famille et Foi* intervention. Through a mediation analysis, researchers explored how distinct social norms related to sexual and reproductive health and gender equity impact individuals' contraceptive intentions. Findings indicated both descriptive (perceptions of what others do) and injunctive (pressure to conform) social norms played a role in shaping contraceptive intentions, with a notable variation by gender. Peer-driven descriptive norms strongly influenced men's contraceptive behavior, whereas injunctive norms affected women's readiness to access contraceptive services. **These findings suggest that while shifting peer expectations can increase contraceptive use among men, for women, reducing stigma and the fear of social sanctions is equally important (83).**

The second was a study in Niger which explored how inequitable gender norms influenced both intimate partner violence and contraceptive use among those involved in the *Reaching Married Adolescents* program. The findings indicated that changes in husbands' expectations related to gender roles and responsibilities mediated the reduction of intimate partner violence, highlighting social norms as a key factor in behavior change for gender-based violence prevention. Conversely, it was found that gender norms negatively mediated contraceptive uptake, reducing the intervention's overall impact on sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Therefore, while shifting norms helped reduce intimate partner violence, other mechanisms influenced contraceptive use. **These findings emphasize the need for integrated approaches that target both behavior and norm change as iterative forces to improve gender-equitable health outcomes.**



KEY INSIGHTS

- Programs should develop theories of change to more accurately predict and guide social norms measurement, identifying where expected shifts may occur while considering a range of mediators and moderators.
- Qualitative learning studies, which assess change over time and capture contextual information to complement quantitative analyses, can enhance our understanding of directionality. They also document what works, where, and with whom, lending invaluable insights for strengthening monitoring and evaluation.
- Norms mediate behavioral outcomes, but the pathways differ depending on the outcome.
- Examining the types of norms, and the way they impact men and women in relation to specific outcomes, provides critical insights for program design.

The Role of Attitudes in Norms Change

Understanding the connection between personal attitudes and social norms is crucial for designing interventions that foster sustainable behavior change. While related, norms and attitudes are distinct constructs that operate at different levels. Social norms reflect individuals' beliefs about what others do and approve of, while attitudes relate to individuals' internal beliefs and preferences (84). The dynamic interaction between personal attitudes and social norms can either reinforce detrimental practices or catalyze positive change. Despite over a decade of social norms research and action, the distinction between norms and attitudes is still often misunderstood in the design and measurement of social and behavioral change interventions.

The distinction between norms and attitudes is essential for both accurate measurement and effective program design. Yet, many standardized multi-country datasets measure personal attitudes rather than social norms, with researchers aggregating attitude data at the cluster level to approximate social norms using these datasets. While this approach can provide insight, it risks conflating personal beliefs with perceived social expectations. Some researchers refer to these aggregated measures as collective attitudinal norms, but these data may not fully reflect the normative pressures that influence behavior. For accurate assessment, practitioners should use tools specifically designed to measure social norms, such as those documented by the Social Norms Learning Collaborative. These tools ensure that interventions measure and target the right mechanisms for behavior change—whether personal attitudes, social norms, or both. Misunderstanding or oversimplifying the relationship between norms and attitudes can lead to substantial measurement error, which can weaken the evidence base and reduce the effectiveness of social change interventions (85, 86). **In this section, we explore the different possible interactions between attitudes and norms and implications for effective practice.**

Harmful Misperceptions of Others' Attitudes

A common scenario in social norms theory arises when individuals disagree with a harmful practice but still comply because they believe they are alone in their views. This ***pluralistic ignorance*** (87) occurs when people misperceive the attitudes of those around them. For example, a person may support young women accessing contraceptive services but assume that most others in their community disapprove. As a result, individuals may behave in ways that contradict their true beliefs to avoid anticipated social sanctions. For instance, parents might discourage their daughters from using contraception—not because they personally disapprove, but because they fear judgment from others that could affect their family's reputation (see **Figure 4**).

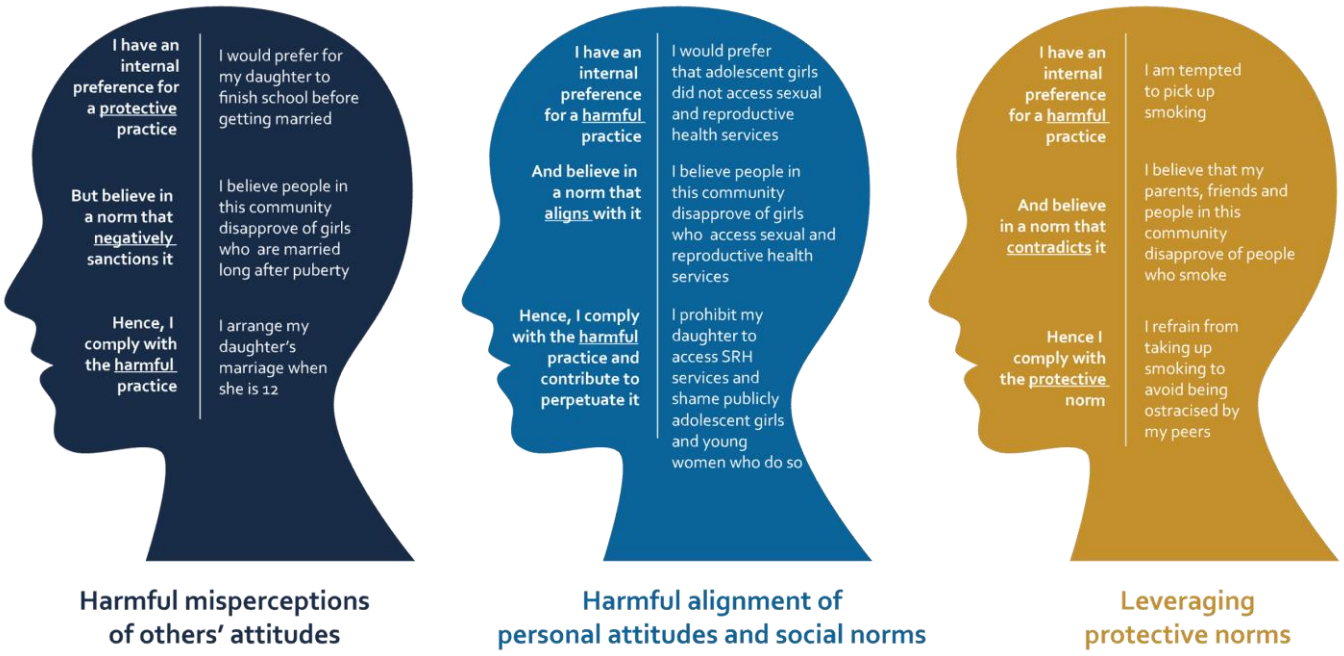


Figure 4. *Alignment and Misalignment of Attitudes and Norms, Adapted from Cislaghi and Heise (85)*

With thorough formative research during the program design phase, interventions can strategically address pluralistic ignorance by uncovering and highlighting hidden dissent. Programs can challenge the perception that harmful practices are universally accepted in their community by showing that others hold similar protective attitudes. **Additionally, media campaigns that provide evidence of community opposition to a particular practice can be powerful and cost-effective strategies for shifting norms and fostering a more supportive environment for positive behaviors** (68). Finally, group discussions or participatory workshops can help community members realize the extent to which others prefer alternative practices. The *Re(Solve) Family Planning Program* in Burkina Faso did just this. Implementers designed program components based on formative research that explored how and why young women decide to use or avoid contraceptive methods. Program components, like a board game that girls played during their lunch break or free period, were designed to challenge young women's assumptions about others' contraceptive decision-making. Change agents facilitated discussions on sensitive topics, helping to shift perceptions of pregnancy risk, correct misconceptions about fertility and contraception, and encourage girls to seek sexual and reproductive health services.

Harmful Alignment of Personal Attitudes and Social Norms

The example above illustrates one possible relationship between people's attitudes and social norms within a specific context. Another common scenario arises when attitudes align with harmful social norms. Through socialization processes, individuals internalize the social rules they experience as good and necessary. This applies to individuals worldwide. For example, in some professional sectors, there is an expectation that workers should prioritize their jobs over personal free time, often at the expense of their mental and physical well-being. However, many people do not question this norm, as they have been socialized to see it as fixed and unavoidable.

Interventions aimed at addressing harmful practices in contexts where individual attitudes align with detrimental norms should first provide knowledge and resources to help individuals question their underlying assumptions about what is beneficial for themselves and others. Approaches that create opportunities for people to learn about and reflect on social norms in ways that align with their lived experiences have successfully contributed to shifting societal norms. Instead of directly challenging social expectations, these interventions encourage reflection on how norms support values and goals, helping individuals consider which norms better align with their evolving attitudes and internal predispositions. For example, Tostan's *Community Empowerment Program* uses "values deliberation" to guide participants in reflecting on their beliefs, values, aspirations, and experiences. This process helps individuals recognize that fundamental human rights—such as freedom from violence and the rights to health, education, and choosing one's spouse—align with their moral frameworks. Tostan considers this reflective process a vital first step in transforming norms and eliminating harmful practices against women and children in the communities it serves.

Importantly, attitudes are not the only psychological constructs to consider. Aspirations and self-efficacy are also relevant to and critical for norm-shifting processes (88). The capacity to aspire (89) refers to an individual's ability to observe a given status quo, envision an alternative, and imagine the steps necessary to achieve a new reality. Self-efficacy (90) denotes a person's belief in their ability to effect change in various areas of life by following those steps. In addition to shifting norms related to women's workforce participation and involvement in financial decision-making, the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme* prioritized increasing women's economic autonomy as a key outcome. Evidence indicates that women who participated in the intervention were significantly more likely than their peers to visit the bank independently and make individual financial decisions compared to their peers who did not participate (91). This suggests that strengthening women's belief in their own agency, alongside economic opportunities, can contribute to sustained norm change.

Leveraging Protective Norms

Finally, it's important to emphasize that not all norms are harmful. Some norms can be protective and understanding them can create opportunities to strengthen their influence, leading to positive changes in other practices. For example, a norm might exist against smoking within a particular group of adolescents. This could discourage some group members from starting to smoke, as they may be concerned about how their peers would perceive them.

When considering the potential for protective norms to influence other practices, take the example of a context where parents are expected to secure the best possible future for their daughters. Interventions can leverage this expectation by promoting school completion as a means of safeguarding a girl's future—provided that structural conditions making education a better alternative to early marriage are also addressed. This strategy can utilize the existing system of protective norms to achieve favorable results. For example, the *Malkia Klabu* intervention in Tanzania identified shopkeepers as individuals who restrict access to contraceptives and HIV self-testing kits for adolescent girls and young women. However, the intervention leveraged social norms among shopkeepers that emphasized the importance of ensuring all people, including vulnerable populations, have access to essential health products. As such, data collected during program implementation revealed that shopkeepers involved in the intervention supplied more test kits to adolescent girls and young women than those who were not involved (92).

In summary, the interaction between social norms and personal attitudes is complex and dynamic, influencing behavior at both individual and community levels. Failing to understand or address the interaction between norms and attitudes can undermine even the most well-intentioned interventions. Whether addressing misperceptions or fostering attitudinal shifts when norms and beliefs align, having a nuanced understanding of this relationship is fundamental to designing effective programs that promote health, education, and empowerment and lead to sustainable change for adolescent girls and young women.

How External Factors Influence Norms Change

Norms persist because they serve essential functions for both individuals and society. On a personal level, knowing what is expected can reduce stress and improve mental health. Socially, norms help regulate behavior and address coordination issues, such as promoting cooperation and discouraging harmful actions—like stealing a neighbor's land, which may be uncommon in communities where it leads to social ostracism. Norms naturally emerge, evolve, and fade over time as they interact with broader structural factors (93).

As discussed above, social norms do not exist in isolation. They are shaped by **legal systems, economic conditions, politics, technology, and social change (1, 94).** While some of these factors create **opportunities for positive change**, others may **reinforce harmful gender norms** or lead to **unintended consequences** that must be considered in policy and program design. For example, a country's education system can reinforce norms—like if boys and girls are segregated in schools, it may reinforce beliefs about limiting interactions between adolescents of different genders.

Figure 5, a framework prepared by the Overseas Development Institute (94), helps illustrate how norms are influenced by broad drivers (such as legal reforms, economic development, and conflict and displacement) in ways that either result in tightening or loosening of norms and that ultimately affect adolescent girls and young women's health and livelihood outcomes.

These structural and macro-level influences can **reinforce or challenge norms**, resulting in either stagnation or transformation. This section explores key external drivers of social norms change, highlighting the role of legal reforms, economic shifts, urbanization, conflict, technology, and education in shaping outcomes.

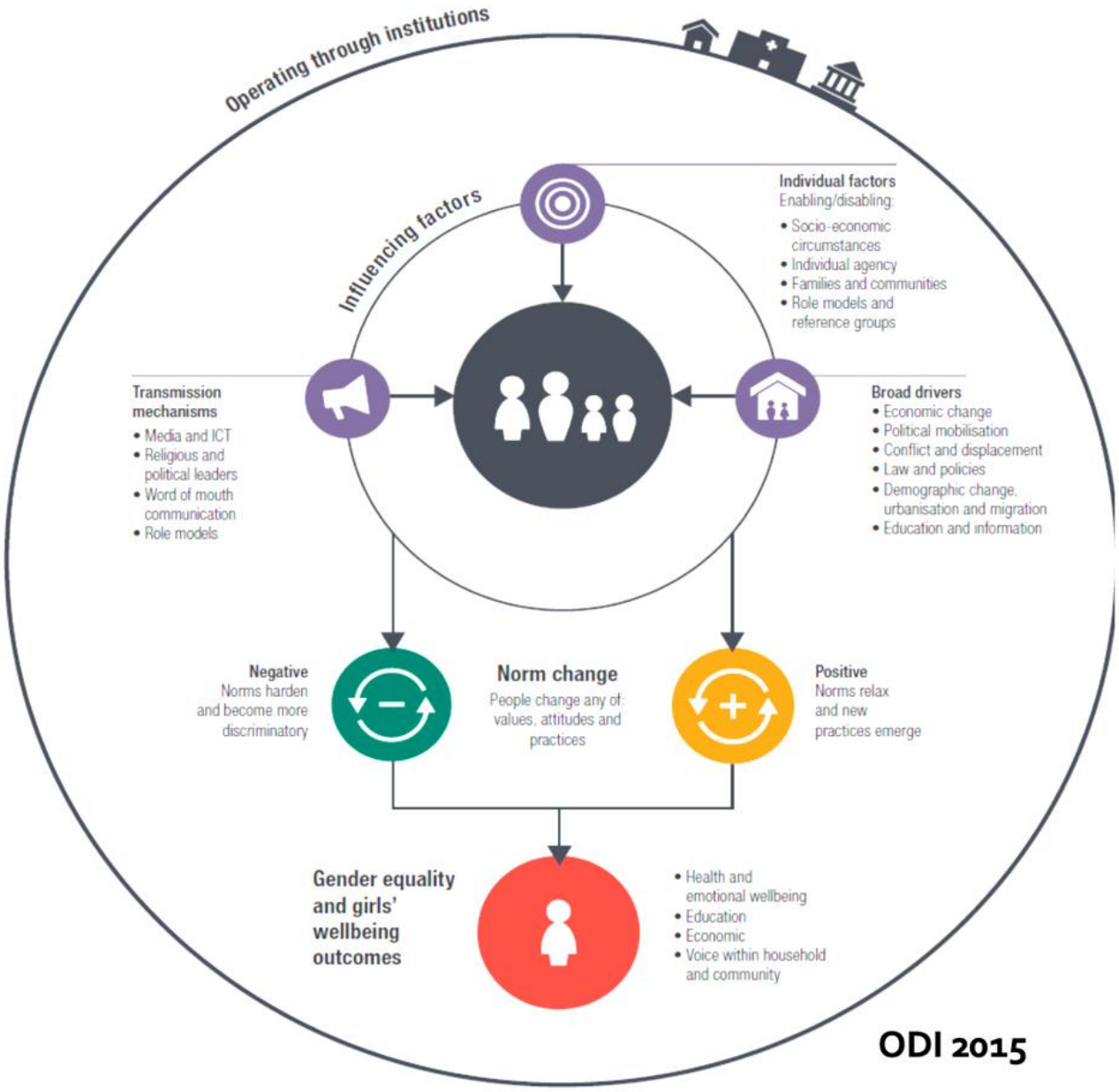


***Figure 5**. Overseas Development Initiative's Conceptual Framework: What Drives Change in Gender Norms*

Government Processes and Social Norms Change

Legal Reform and Social Norms Change

Legal frameworks are crucial resources for shifting practices and norms, particularly in areas such as child marriage, reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and labor force participation. Laws can encourage new social expectations, demonstrate government commitment, and offer legal recourse for rights violations (95). However, the success of legal reform relies on consistent enforcement, community acceptance, and the existence of complementary social and economic policies (96). On their own, laws do not automatically bring about norm change (and evidence presented below indicates they often do not). Nevertheless, the failure to implement legal reform can provide community members with justification to continue harmful practices. For example, while policy changes may not directly reduce child marriage, a law allowing the marriage of girls under 18 can serve as a justification for parents to marry their daughters at a young age.



KEY INSIGHT

In contexts where government control over the territory is limited, for example in rural areas, laws which conflict with deeply entrenched social norms are likely to be ignored or subverted. It is thus imperative that national strategies to improve the health and wellbeing of girls and young women include community-level activities that foster intrinsic motivation for change. This can be achieved, for example, by encouraging reflection on norms that may no longer align with or serve the community's evolving goals.

One of the most frequently recommended strategies to protect adolescent girls and young women is the establishment of legislative frameworks that safeguard them from harmful practices like child marriage and uphold their fundamental rights, including access to contraceptives, formal education, and employment. One might assume that criminalizing harmful practices (such as child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting, or selective abortion) would eventually lead to new social expectations—meaning that making something illegal would cause people to believe that most individuals in their country disapprove of it. However, evidence indicates that laws often have a selective impact on practices, with less direct relevance for changing social norms. For instance, in the case of child marriage, legal reform has proven effective in some urban and wealthier communities where enforcement is stronger and alternative life paths for girls, such as education and employment, are more readily available. In contrast, legal changes have been much less effective in rural and marginalized areas; in these regions, where child marriage rates are typically much higher, families often continue to arrange child marriages either through religious ceremonies or as informal unions that are later legalized when the girl turns 18 (97). Often these reforms come with poor implementation and oversight. Additional evidence from our review supports this conclusion. The results of the More Than Brides Alliance's *Marriage: No Child's Play* project varied across different contexts, highlighting the influence of local social norms and conditions on program outcomes. For example, Niger and India differ significantly in wealth, urbanization, and prior investments in reducing child marriage. As a result of the intervention, India saw a significant decrease in the proportion of married girls, along with increased awareness of the legal age of marriage. In Niger, while the intervention also improved knowledge of the legal age of marriage, it did not lead to a measurable reduction in child marriage.

There is substantial evidence that legal reform can sometimes drive normative change, while in other cases, have little impact. In Ethiopia, for example, child marriage rates declined when legal reforms were complemented with educational incentives (98). In this context, social norms shifted as young men began to prefer marrying educated women, leading to changes that extended beyond legal compliance. In contrast, a study exploring trends in child marriage across 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa found little correlation between protective legal frameworks and actual reductions of child marriage (99). Additionally, social norms and religious customs often take precedence over statutory laws—especially in rural areas—creating parallel social systems that exert greater influence than legal frameworks and allow harmful norms to persist. Furthermore, our review found that in Malawi, community bylaws aimed at reducing child marriage, pregnancy in adolescence, and sexual harassment had limited success in changing social norms related to sexual and reproductive health. While these bylaws were accepted, they also failed to challenge the deeply ingrained belief that pregnancy should lead to marriage.

Health Services

Health services influence gender norms both directly—through service provision and the behaviors of health care providers—and indirectly by shaping expectations around health-seeking behavior and bodily autonomy.

Evidence suggests that access to affordable, youth-friendly, and non-discriminatory services is a crucial government intervention that can drive changes in social norms related to a range of health-related outcomes for adolescent girls and young women, including perinatal care and family planning. For example, government-supported sexual and reproductive health programs, such as India's conditional cash transfers which provided financial incentives for delaying marriage and childbirth, have been shown to influence both behaviors and social norms (Nanda et al., 2016).



KEY INSIGHT

Access to health services is shaped by norms held by both communities and health providers. For example, both groups may disapprove of adolescent girls seeking sexual and reproductive health services. Effective interventions address these norms in both spaces, fostering positive feedback loops that promote non-discriminatory practices and create an environment where girls and young women feel safe accessing essential health services.

Our review also indicates that many health care providers uphold norms that stigmatize adolescent girls and young women and restrict their access to essential health services (100-102). Addressing these barriers can drive behavior change, improving access to critical services and prescriptions such as those essential for preventing and treating HIV (103).

Education

School is undoubtedly a powerful social institution where gender norms can be either challenged or reinforced, both through its formal curriculum and through the behaviors of students and teachers. Teachers, as role models, can play a critical role in shaping gender norms positively; however, their actions may also perpetuate discriminatory and harmful practices against children, particularly adolescent girls. In some cases, teachers have been known to exploit their authority to solicit sexual favors in exchange for grades or school fees (104). By maintaining a status quo where girls feel it is acceptable for teachers to behave this way, abusive teachers instill fear—or even create an expectation—of harassment in girls and their families, ultimately contributing to high school dropout rates among girls (15).

The educational system has significant potential to drive positive shifts in social norms, as higher education levels are linked to greater autonomy, delayed marriage, and increased economic participation. While gender norms often limit girls' access to formal education, there are effective interventions worldwide that have shown positive results. For example, in Ethiopia, an intervention aimed at shifting norms around marriage and education was strengthened by economic incentives that encouraged girls to delay marriage and stay in school, leading to positive changes in related behaviors (105). Paradoxically, despite recent improvements in girls' educational attainment in South Asia, these changes have not significantly influenced the age at marriage; in some cases, the improvements may have even had the opposite effect (106).

Infrastructure Changes

Infrastructure development—such as transportation, lighting, public spaces, and digital access—can play a crucial yet often overlooked role in shifting gender norms. Access to safe public spaces and transportation enables adolescent girls and young women to participate more actively in education, work, and social life, challenging restrictive norms that limit their mobility. Technology and mobile connectivity can offer adolescent girls and young women greater information and support; however, increased access to technological innovation can generate backlash. In Nepal and Somalia, the spread of mobile phones has led some parents to encourage marriage to prevent their daughters from eloping (107, 108).

Social, Political, Economic Process and Social Norms Change

Economic Development

Economic development plays a complex role in shaping social norms. The evidence presents a mixed and complex picture, as economic development often leads to greater gender equality and more relaxed gender norms, yet at times reinforces harmful gender-related practices. A growing body of research shows that rising income levels and increased labor market participation can transform gender norms and associated practices. This process takes place, for example, by improving women's access to education and employment, reducing financial incentives for harmful practices, and boosting women's bargaining power within households resulting in more equitable decision-making. At the same time, greater opportunities to generate income do not always lead to adolescent girls and young women taking advantage of them, nor do they guarantee enhanced autonomy within the household. Deeply rooted norms (see **Figure 1** above) dictate women's roles at home, and these norms may also continue to define women's work outside the household. Even when these norms relax due to financial hardship that necessitates reliance on women's income, limitations may persist that restrict how much money women are allowed to earn. In Rwanda, for example, Stern and colleagues (109) found that while women could work outside the household, they were expected to earn less than their husbands. This maintained the man's role as the primary breadwinner, a concept reinforced by masculinity norms that associate dominance with financial superiority. Similarly, the literature provides numerous examples of adolescent girls and young women having limited control over the financial resources they generate, which are often handed over to their male partners (44).

Conflict, Crisis, and Displacement

Major disruptions—such as armed conflict, climate disasters, and pandemics—can result in rapid shifts in social norms. For instance, some crises have sparked shifts in gender norms in progressive directions. In post-conflict Rwanda, gender norms affecting women's labor force participation have loosened, resulting in more equitable gender roles (110, 111). However, there is limited evidence on whether such shifts are durable; when the immediate shock subsides, norms can revert, especially if deeper structural and cultural drivers remain unaddressed. This highlights the importance of longitudinal research to assess whether normative gains during recovery periods dissolve, or continue (and how), to sustain long-term change.



KEY INSIGHT

Economic development can contribute to the relaxation of harmful gender norms. However, the extent of this shift depends on whether economic development enhances the opportunities of adolescent girls and young women to engage in the labor market in ways that ensure economic security, reduce gender disparities in the workplace, and increase their control over financial resources. Without targeted interventions to address these gender norms, economic development alone may not lead to direct benefits, especially for the most vulnerable.

Urbanization

Urbanization is often associated with more egalitarian gender norms, as it exposes individuals to new ideas, educational opportunities, and alternative gender roles. By expanding social networks and establishing role models who challenge traditional norms, urbanization can weaken the influence of social approval or disapproval and expand access to education, healthcare, and employment.

At the same time, urbanization can also reinforce gender-related inequalities, particularly in areas with significant disparities in resource distribution. In such contexts, despite overall economic growth, the most economically vulnerable women may experience exploitation and remain subject to strict gender norms that negatively impact their health and well-being (112, 113).

Key Takeaways

Social norms shape nearly every aspect of the lives of adolescent girls and young women, influencing their health, education, economic opportunities, and overall well-being. Some norms have direct impacts—such as those restricting mobility or decision-making—while others operate in more indirect, crosscutting ways, such as those which reinforce structural inequalities and impact multiple outcomes. Evidence also indicates that *deeply rooted norms* sustain a broader constellation of *functional norms* that dictate everyday behaviors. Understanding these dynamics is critical for designing effective interventions. Building on these insights from the existing literature, we share key considerations for policymakers, researchers and practitioners.



Shifting functional norms—such as those around contraceptive use or school attendance—is often insufficient if the underlying and deeply rooted norms remain intact. Interventions that focus solely on sector-specific behaviors may struggle to achieve lasting change unless they also address the deeper social structures that sustain gender inequities. Additionally, social norms rarely function in isolation; changes in one area, such as education, can influence economic participation, agency, and health outcomes. To be effective, programs should be designed with an integrated approach, ensuring they align with and reinforce other complementary efforts.



Norms and attitudes are interconnected but distinct, requiring targeted approaches and measurement to achieve meaningful change and to attribute the change accurately. Before designing interventions, it is important to determine whether a behavior is driven by social expectations, personal beliefs, or both. When misperceptions exist, uncovering the true diversity of community attitudes can weaken the belief that harmful practices are universally accepted. When norms and attitudes align, change often begins at the individual level; as such, equipping a core group with knowledge and confidence to challenge harmful practices can create ripple effects throughout communities. Precise measurement is essential—relying solely on attitude data can obscure the influence of normative pressure. Additionally, because norms are often enforced by those in power, engaging influential figures as allies can accelerate both attitudinal and normative shifts.



Understanding social norm and behavior change pathways requires a nuanced, context-driven approach. Establishing clear causal links between norm shifts and behavior change necessitates rigorous study designs, including longitudinal and quasi-experimental methods, to isolate intervention effects. Beyond causality, research should explore the mechanisms through which norm shifts drive behavioral change—measuring mediators such as belief and attitude shifts can yield invaluable insights. Additionally, the effects of norm-shifting interventions are not uniform; factors like gender, socioeconomic status, cultural context, and geographic setting significantly shape change pathways and outcomes. Intersectional analyses can reveal

how overlapping identities influence individuals' responses to interventions, and applying an intersectional approach to program design helps ensure that programs are both inclusive and effective. Long-term sustainability remains a critical gap—further research can reveal whether and how new behaviors persist, as well as what mechanisms solidify or disrupt changes once interventions end.



Norms are deeply embedded in legal, economic, and political structures, meaning their transformation requires multi-sectoral-and-pronged approaches. Legal reforms can set new expectations, but without enforcement and complementary measures—such as economic opportunities or education incentives—they may fail to drive meaningful change. Broader societal shifts, like urbanization and economic development, can trigger normative change while also introducing new challenges. Additionally, conflict and crises can either accelerate or stall progress toward gender equality, depending on how communities navigate disruption. Given these complexities, we must seek to understand the local context, anticipate unintended consequences, and leverage top-down policy shifts and bottom-up community engagement. Change is rarely linear or predictable, requiring adaptive strategies and funding mechanisms that accommodate realities with uneven progress and evolving social dynamics.



Finally, shifting social norms to improve diverse outcomes of adolescent girls and young women is complex, but achievable. Evidence shows that social norms can and do shift, but lasting change requires targeted, context-aware strategies. The most effective interventions extend beyond the individual to engage with the broader systems—social, economic, and legal—that shape and reinforce norms. Structural drivers like policy reforms, economic opportunities, and access to education play a crucial role in expanding the choices and agency of adolescent girls and young women. Without addressing these foundational influences, norms shifting efforts risk being short-lived or ineffective.

Module 3 and Module 4 will examine how program approaches have leveraged entertainment media and faith and cultural champions to drive normative change. These modules also offer practical lessons for designing and scaling impactful norm-shifting initiatives within the broader context of evolving values and social expectations in a dynamic world.

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