UC San Diego
CENTER ON GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH

REPORT BRIEF

Shaping Narratives, Shifting Norms:

Evidence on Social Norms for Adolescent Girls' and Young Women's Well-Being

Over the past decade, social and gender norms have gained recognition as key drivers of global development outcomes. For adolescent girls and young women, these norms govern critical decisions shaping their education, relationships, health, and livelihoods, often with lifelong consequences. While many interventions now aim to shift harmful norms or strengthen those that are protective, evidence on how they work and what they achieve remains fragmented.

This brief synthesizes crosscutting insights and a snapshot of program-specific findings from a set of 2024 **scoping reviews** led by the Center on Gender Equity and Health at the University of California San Diego. Drawing on 300+ studies in peer-reviewed and grey literature published between 2014-2024 from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the brief highlights emerging insights on social norms and norms-shifting interventions related to four core outcomes: sexual and reproductive health; child, early, and forced marriage; gender-based violence; and women's economic empowerment.

Cross-Cutting Insights for Advancing Norms-Shifting Efforts

The following insights reflect key patterns that emerged across diverse geographies, intervention types, and outcomes in the scoping review. While not intended as prescriptive recommendations, they highlight recurring themes and programmatic considerations to inform future efforts.

Design interventions with the complexity of norms in mind

Social norms influence behavior in powerful and often invisible ways. Their influence can be protective or harmful. Because they are embedded in systems of power, institutional structures, and material conditions, shifting harmful norms can be challenging. Evidence from the scoping reviews suggests that interventions grounded in formative research and attuned to the interaction between norms and other behavioral drivers are more likely to deliver and measure meaningful change. They also shared key program characteristics, such as:



Pairing norms-shifting components with expanded agency and opportunity. Interventions that combined norm change efforts with investments in girls' leadership, economic access, and peer support achieved more durable impacts than those focused on norms alone.



Distinguishing norms from attitudes is critical. Many interventions mistook personal attitudes for social norms, obscuring the social regulation of behavior. In contrast, those that identified hidden disagreement with harmful practices effectively reduced normative pressure without triggering backlash.



Understanding that norms-shifting interventions were not one-size-fits-all. Evidence suggests that norms operate differently by gender and context; men were more influenced by what peers do (descriptive norms), while women responded more to anticipated approval or disapproval (injunctive norms). Effective intervention design requires knowing *who* is influenced, *how*, and in *what areas of health and well-being*.

Determine which norms need addressing: deeply-rooted, functional, or both

Not all norms are created equal. **Some are deeply embedded** in gender and power structures, like the belief that men should lead and women should follow. **Others are more visible in daily life**, such as norms that restrict girls' mobility or silence conversations about sex. For program design, understanding this layering matters. Functional norms or the immediate rules shaping behavior can sometimes be shifted in the short term. But without engaging the deeper, foundational norms that sustain them, change may not last.

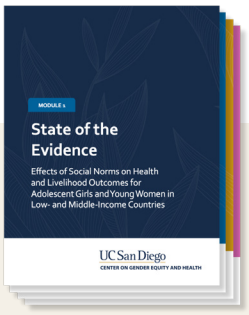
Across the evidence, most interventions focused on norms related to gender roles (e.g., men's and women's responsibilities, roles, and decision-making power), sexual and reproductive health (e.g., fertility, family size), and gender-based violence (e.g., acceptability of violence). Far fewer addressed more sensitive or less visible norms—such as those tied to menstruation, bodily autonomy, or adolescent sexuality. Even fewer tackled intersectional norms shaped by disability, class, or ethnicity.

Programs that recognized these different layers, and matched their strategies accordingly, were better able to generate meaningful shifts. The takeaway? Being precise about which norms are at play, and how deeply they're held, can help programs focus their efforts, engage the right influencers, and plan for both immediate gains and longer-term transformation.

Build the evidence base through better measurement and evaluation

The evidence base on social norms is growing but remains uneven. Variation in study design and inconsistent measurement limit comparability across interventions. The scoping reviews covered studies from 43 countries, particularly East Africa, India, and West Africa, and identified promising shifts in behaviors and attitudes. However, few interventions directly measured changes in social norms. Many failed to distinguish between injunctive norms (what people believe others think should be done) and descriptive norms (what people believe others do), a distinction that has proven useful for effective intervention design and measurement. Instead, many interventions relied on **attitudes as proxies**, and only a small proportion used **validated norms measures**. Rigorous evaluations were limited: with fewer than a quarter using randomized designs or robust counterfactuals. Still, the diversity of approaches and outcomes offers a solid foundation for progress.

Learn more about the *"Effects of Social Norms on Adolescent Health and Livelihood Outcomes in Low- and Middle-Income Countries"* project or **download full report here**.





Interventions Leveraging Entertainment Media

Entertainment media is a powerful tool for shifting norms that shape the health and wellbeing of adolescent girls and young women. By harnessing the persuasive power of storytelling across radio, television, social media, and print, it introduces new role models, sparks dialogue and reinforces positive behaviors. With broad reach and low per-person cost, entertainment media is a compelling strategy for large-scale impact, especially when combined with approaches that engage reference groups and encourage interaction.

The scoping review identified **49 entertainment media interventions**, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, addressing diverse outcomes. Most used multimedia formats such as TV, radio, social media, and many included interactive elements like call-in shows, youth clubs, and community discussions. In-person, interactive components were more consistently associated with shifts in norms, attitudes, and behaviors. While both short- and long-term interventions showed promise, longer-term initiatives generally achieved greater impact. Interventions that actively engaged reference group members, such as health workers and community leaders, also tended to be more successful.

What Did the Evidence Reveal?

- **Multimedia approaches show promise, but strategy is key.** Using multiple media channels increased the likelihood of shifting norms and attitudes, particularly on sensitive topics like gender-based violence and child marriage. However, success depended more on how media was used and the depth of engagement, than on the format alone.
- **Format and interaction matter.** In-person engagement consistently outperformed media-only strategies for shifting behaviors. Dialogue-based activities, like listening groups, community discussions, and call-in shows, fostered deeper reflection and engagement.
- **Reference groups amplify change.** Involving influential figures, such as health workers and respected leaders, led to better results, particularly in areas such as family planning and HIV-prevention.
- **Narrative power is most effective when grounded.** Emotionally resonant stories had the greatest impact when they were based on formative research and connected to familiar, relatable everyday experiences.

What Needs Exploration and Improvement?

- **Short-term efforts yield mixed results.** Some interventions under one year were effective, others were not. With no clear link between duration and success, factors like intensity, dosage, and context appear to matter more.
- **Gaps in documentation limit learning.** Nearly a quarter of interventions did not report their duration, making it hard to assess how timing and intensity affect outcomes.
- **Scalability, replication, and cost remain gaps.** Few entertainment media interventions have been scaled or adapted across contexts, missing key opportunities to expand the impact of proven models.



Interventions Engaging Faith and Cultural Champions

Faith and cultural champions are trusted leaders who shape and reinforce social norms in many communities, particularly those related to family, gender roles, and adolescent girls' and young women's health and well-being. Engaging these influential leaders can leverage their moral authority to shift perceptions, foster dialogue, and create space for change. Strategies that align equity messages with religious or cultural values, through storytelling, theological framing, or community reflection, have shown promise in transforming deeply entrenched norms.

Our scoping review identified **41 interventions** that engaged faith and/or cultural leaders to influence norms related to key health and livelihood outcomes. Most were implemented in sub-Saharan Africa, often addressing multiple outcomes simultaneously. Cultural champions such as community leaders and elders were more commonly involved than faith leaders. Interventions that incorporated structured dialogue, peer engagement, and multi-level strategies generally reported more positive results. While duration of interventions varied, the most promising efforts lasted **two years or longer** and combined trusted messengers with intentional approaches to diffuse new norms through community networks.

What Did the Evidence Reveal?

- **Trusted leaders can shift norms when strategically engaged.** Interventions that equipped faith and cultural champions with equity-based messages and peer support structures were more effective in shifting harmful norms and behaviors.
- **Layered strategies enhance impact.** Interventions that combined group dialogue, participatory reflection, and community diffusion activities showed stronger results across outcome areas, regardless of duration.
- **Alignment with community values matters more than leader type.** Intervention success depended less on whether the champion was a faith or cultural leader, and more on how well the intervention aligned with local norms and engaged those champions as co-creators of change.
- **Champions succeed when supported.** Ongoing training, peer learning, and two-way communication with implementers helped leaders navigate sensitive topics more confidently and effectively over time.

What Needs Exploration and Improvement?

- **Involvement of adolescents and communities in intervention design.** Faith and cultural champions were seldom engaged in the early stages of intervention design, and adolescents even less so, reducing the relevance, responsiveness, and ownership of interventions.
- **Articulation of pathways and measurement.** Many interventions did not articulate a clear theory of change or include robust norms measurement, making it difficult to understand how specific strategies contributed to observed outcomes.
- **Strategic use of media to reinforce key messages.** Despite their influence, champions' messages were rarely amplified via radio, social media, or print, missing opportunities to scale impact and reach harder-to-engage groups.
- **Attention to scale and sustainability.** Few interventions included cost data, scale-up strategies, or sustainability plans, undermining their long-term impact and potential for replication.