UC San Diego
CENTER ON GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH

Resourcing the Drivers of Change:

Making the Case for Investing in Social Norms to Improve Adolescent Girls and Young Women's Health and Well-Being

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

> *"I buy chickens and sell them after they multiply. In the same way, I rear goats. Only today, I have bought a new goat. There's surplus grain in the house that I sell. Those are the things that I have been doing. These have been quite successful. We have been able to buy what we want. And we have been able to promptly sell what we want to sell. We have been making enough money to meet our needs."*
>
> — ***Young mother participating in Sammanit Jeevan, Nepal (2017)***

Let's Imagine

Imagine a world where the social norms that prevent women's economic opportunities are openly questioned, where women's choices are respected, and where communities fully recognize the unpaid value of care work and the many benefits of women's participation in the workforce. A world where facts replace myths, and women and girls are free to pursue the futures they choose. **This is the promise of investing in social norms interventions: shifting social norms so girls and women can choose whether and how to participate in the workforce and decide how to use their earnings.**

This vision is already within reach. In Nepal, **Sammanit Jeevan** helped catalyze conversations about social norms and improve married women's economic conditions. Over six months, the program offered 20 three-hour sessions for married women and their husbands, focusing on norms around joint decision-making and gendered roles, economic empowerment, and supporting women-led income-generating activities. The results were striking: from baseline (pre-intervention) to 18 months post-baseline, **there was a threefold increase in the proportion of women who reported having had earnings in the past month** ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$), and significantly **more women reported having savings in the past month** ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$).



Social norms programming is not an add-on to efforts to improve women's economic empowerment—it is essential for lasting progress. Decades of investment in policy reform and empowerment programs have led to important gains, but when deeply held beliefs and social norms don't shift, progress stalls. When norms change and supportive social environments take hold, other investments become more effective and sustainable.

Meeting the Moment

Now is the time to invest in social norms change: a proven strategy to safeguard progress and build a future where women and girls can thrive.

Decades of investment have strengthened women's economic empowerment, yet today this progress is at risk. Economic uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and shifting donor priorities are straining the field. Funding streams are shrinking or ending, and some implementors are closing their doors. The result: reduced services and trainings, disrupted partnerships, and the loss of critical programs and research. Short-term and fragmented funding threatens to undo hard-won gains in equity and rights, especially for adolescent girls and young women.

But these challenges also present an opportunity. Now is the time to re-energize agenda-setting, forge new collaborations, and invest in approaches that can sustain and accelerate progress. Putting social and gender norms at the center of this effort can help remove persistent barriers to change. A recent global scoping review by the Center on Gender Equity and Health at UC San Diego highlights why this focus is essential.

Why invest in creating a supportive social environment to enhance women's economic empowerment?

Evidence shows that investing in social norms interventions leads to real, measurable progress. These efforts can increase workforce participation, productivity, and wages, and also strengthen communication, decision-making and agency within households.

Social norms matter. Policy reforms, social protection programs, and investments in education, economic opportunity, and public care infrastructure have strengthened women's economic empowerment, but far less attention has been paid to the social norms within communities that limit girls' and young women's choices and rights. Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia shows that expanding girls' access to education and employment alone does not always lead to meaningful gains in gender equity or agency. Lasting, large-scale change requires investments in programs that transform harmful social norms and foster environments where girls and women can thrive. **While evidence on how to shift social norms was once limited, effective models and tools are now emerging and ready to be scaled.**

Social norms, unwritten rules that shape behavior, often reinforce gender inequality and limit women's economic empowerment. These norms shape whether women can work, how much they earn, and the degree of control they have over their income. For example, even when women engage in paid work outside the household, they are often expected to earn less than their husbands or have little decision-making power over how their earnings are used. Rooted in beliefs that elevate men's authority and status as primary providers, these norms continue to restrict women's economic participation and empowerment. The global scoping review shows that such harmful social norms undermine the economic security, dignity, and agency of adolescent girls and young women. While some economic development efforts have produced important gains, progress towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals will continue to fall short until we directly address the social and behavioral forces driving gendered inequities in the workforce, economic security, and control over resources.

In today's uncertain funding climate, **addressing root causes is more urgent than ever. Investments that shift norms**—through community champions, mass media, or edutainment—can change harmful social norms, reinforce positive ones, and help ensure **efforts to strengthen the economic empowerment of adolescent girls and young women are effective, lasting, and scaled.**

Scale and sustainability through social norms investments. Investing in social norm change, alongside complementary policy reforms, infrastructure, and programs, is a powerful upstream solution with lasting, wide-ranging benefits. The effects of these investments span the life course of girls and women, from infancy to adulthood, and extends to entire communities. *See page 4 for examples of successful programs*.

Change is possible. Social norms programs can produce measurable improvements in women's economic empowerment within a program's time frame.

Social norms programs for women's economic empowerment can be rigorously measured and evaluated.

Social norms programs can be adapted, replicated and scaled to achieve women's economic empowerment outcomes on a large scale.

The Opportunity

Now is the time to invest in social norms change—cost-effective, scalable solutions that empower girls, advance equity, and create lasting impact across generations. By supporting proven programs that strengthen women's economic empowerment, funders can help build environments where adolescent girls, young women, and their communities thrive. **Your investment in social norms change will not only boost women's economic participation but also advance broader outcomes including reductions in gender-based violence, improvements in education, and greater gender equity.**

What should funders support?

Invest in effective social norms programs that **protect past gains, accelerate progress, and deliver lasting benefits** for girls, women, and their communities.

Invest in Research and Evidence. Support mixed-methods research to design and test context-specific approaches that inform the field on scalable, effective interventions. Contribute to the evidence base on how shifts in norms lead to improved outcomes and cost-effective results. Close evidence gaps by centering the experiences of adolescent girls and young women, engaging men and boys, and systematically documenting implementation lessons.

Prioritize Multi-Level, Integrated Programs. Fund programs that address change at the individual, community, and systems levels. The most effective interventions align with complementary efforts in education, health, economic participation, and legal frameworks.

Engage Trusted Champions and Platforms. Support programs that work with faith and cultural leaders, as well mass and entertainment media. Involve communities in planning and design, encourage reflection, make norms visible, and help spread new ideas and practices.

Ensure Scale and Sustainability. Provide multi-year, flexible funding and encourage partners to plan for scalability from project inception, by engaging stakeholders and designing, adapting and testing approaches that can be implemented and sustained with available resources.

Strengthen Monitoring and Learning. Invest in high-quality, consistent monitoring and evaluation across projects to enable adaptive management, compare results across contexts, and build evidence. of long-term cost-effectiveness.

Amplify and Coordinate. Support the publication and sharing of results, elevate grantee achievements, and align funding priorities and research agendas to strengthen the global evidence base and prevent fragmentation.

Programs in Action

Change is possible – social norms programs can achieve measurable improvements in women's economic empowerment within a program's time frame.

Do Kadam BarabariKi Ore (Two Steps Towards Equality), implemented in Bihar, India, aimed to promote women's economic empowerment and improve outcomes related to intimate partner violence and gender equity among married women 18-49 years participating in self-help empowerment groups. The program was delivered in 12 months, and included activities focused on financial literacy, links to livelihood training opportunities, and sessions on gender discrimination and the acceptability of violence against women and girls.

Evaluation results at the end of the program showed that…

More self-help empowerment group members from intervention than control sites reported being informed about livelihood training (69–72% versus 11%), employment (38–46% versus 6%), and loan opportunities (59–65% versus 27%) (p-value ≤ .05)

Control over economic resources increased significantly among women in intervention compared to control sites (p-value ≤ .05)

Women's economic empowerment social norms programs can be rigorously measured and evaluated.

The ***Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents*** program aimed to reduce child marriage among girls 12-18 years in three districts in southern Bangladesh. Over 18 months, girls received educational support, gender-rights awareness and livelihoods training. A randomized controlled trial showed the program led to delayed marriage and improvements in education, health, and social outcomes later in life.

Evaluation results at the end of the program showed that relative to control communities…

Girls who received gender-rights awareness or livelihoods-skills training were one-third more likely to earn an income (p-value ≤ 0.05)

Girls who received educational support or gender rights training were 31% less likely to marry as children (p-value ≤ 0.001)

Social norms programs can be adapted, replicated and scaled to achieve women's economic empowerment outcomes on a large scale.

Sammanit Jeevan was a six-month program implemented in Nepal, adapted from the Zindagii Shoista model developed in Tajikistan, which itself drew on the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures interventions. The program successfully shifted social norms and achieved measurable improvements in women's economic empowerment.

Results from a modified interrupted time series and qualitative research study showed that among women participating in the program…

The percentage of women who reported earnings in the past month increased from 21% at baseline to 65% at endline (p-value < 0.001)

The percentage of young women who borrowed food or money decreased by 25% from baseline to endline (p-value < 0.001)

Women's efforts to find work significantly increased over time (p-value < 0.001), and they reported feeling less shame about unemployment (p-value < 0.001)