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

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

> *"Beating is an acceptable means of instilling discipline and good manners in wives by most men, and therefore young fathers are expected to beat their wives to discipline them but also to show that they are the men in the home."*
>
> — ***Young father participating in REAL Fathers, Uganda (2025)***

Let's Imagine

This quote highlights the reality many women and girls face today, where violence is often seen as acceptable or even expected. Imagine a world in which harmful behaviors are challenged, violence is never tolerated, survivors are believed and supported, and men and fathers, together with their families and communities, stand united against violence. A world where accurate information replaces myths, and women and girls are safe in every space—at home, in schools, and in workplaces—free to pursue the futures they envision. **This is the promise of investing in social norms interventions: shifting social norms so that violence is never justified, and everyone can live free from fear.**



This vision is already within reach. In Rwanda, **Indashyikirwa** brought this promise to life, raising awareness of physical and sexual violence, shifting attitudes, and promoting behavior change through couples and community activism. In just two years, the results were clear: women who engaged in the program were **94% less likely to accept or justify intimate partner violence** (aRR: -0.94; 95% CI: -1.04, -0.84), and both men and women in the program **were 54% and 44%, respectively, less likely to report physical or sexual violence—either experienced or perpetrated** than those who did not engage in the program (men: aRR: 0.54; 95% CI: 0.38, 0.75; women: aRR: 0.44; 95% CI: 0.31, 0.59). Indashyikirwa also led to reduced interpersonal conflict, increased communication and trust among partners, and reduced violence against children.

Social norms programming is not an add-on to violence prevention and response—it is core to lasting progress. Decades of investment in advocacy, service delivery, and policy have achieved significant gains, but without addressing deeply-rooted beliefs and social expectations, progress risks of stalling. Programs that tackle harmful norms and shift underlying social norms amplify and sustain other investments, enabling women and girls to live freely and make choices without stigma, threat, or violence.

Meeting the Moment

Now is the time to invest in social norms change: a proven strategy to protect past gains and secure a future free from gender-based violence.

Decades of investment have improved outcomes related to gender-based violence. Yet today, this progress is under threat. Economic uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and shifting donor priorities are straining the ecosystem. Funding streams are sunsetting or shrinking; some partners are ceasing operations altogether. The result: reduced services, disrupted partnerships, and the closure of critical programs and research. Fragmented, short-term funding threatens progress and risks undoing hard-won gains in equity and rights, especially for adolescent girls and young women.

These challenges also present an opportunity. Now is the time to re-energize agenda-setting, forge new collaborations, and invest in innovative approaches that can sustain and accelerate progress. Centering the role of shifting social and gender norms can remove barriers necessary to support change. This is outlined in a recent global scoping review by the Center on Gender Equity and Health at UC San Diego.

Why invest in creating a supportive social environment to prevent and respond to gender-based violence?

Evidence shows investments in social norms interventions lead to meaningful improvements across multiple outcomes, including reduced acceptance and perpetration of various forms of violence, increased bystander intervention, and stronger community commitment to gender equity, safety, and anti-violence advocacy.

Social expectations matter. While violence prevention and response efforts have advanced significantly over recent decades, far less systematic attention has been paid to addressing the social norms embedded in communities, health systems, and policies that enable and perpetuate gender-based violence and limit adolescent girls' and young women's choices and rights. **Until recently, there was limited evidence on how to shift social norms—but effective models and tools have emerged and are ready to scale.**

Social norms, the unwritten rules that shape behavior, often reinforce gender inequities and normalize violence. Findings from the global scoping review reveal that these norms can undermine the safety, dignity, and agency of adolescent girls and young women, creating conditions that both excuse and perpetuate cycles of violence—even in contexts where laws and services exist to prevent or respond to it. The effects are tangible: deeply-rooted norms about male power, authority, and entitlement allow violence to go unchallenged, while stigma and fear of retaliation deter survivors from seeking support. As a result, these norms limit the reach and effectiveness of efforts to end gender-based violence. Although meaningful progress has been made in policy reform and service provision, sustained advancement toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals will remain out of reach until the social and behavioral drivers of violence and inequality are addressed.

In today's uncertain funding climate, **solutions that tackle root causes are more urgent than ever. Norm-shifting investments**—whether through community-based efforts, mass media, or edutainment—can transform harmful social expectations, reinforce positive ones, and **help ensure that violence prevention and response efforts are effective, sustained, and scaled.**

Scale and sustainability through social norms investments. Investing in social norm change, alongside services, policies, and systems strengthening, is an invaluable upstream solution with lasting, cross-cutting benefits. The impact of these investments spans the life course of girls and women, from infancy through adulthood, and extends to entire communities. *See page 4 for examples of successful programs*.

Change is possible and social norms programs can reduce and prevent gender-based violence in a program time frame.

Gender-based violence social norms programs can be rigorously measured and evaluated.

Social norms programs can be adapted, replicated, and scaled to meet gender-based violence outcomes at 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 social norms programs designed to enhance prevention and response to gender-based violence, funders can help build supportive environments where adolescent girls, young women, and their communities thrive. **Your investment in social norms change will not only reduce and prevent gender-based violence, but also drive progress in a wide array of health, well-being and livelihoods outcomes including education, gender equity, and economic participation.**

What should funders support?

Invest in effective social norms programs that **protect past gains, accelerate progress, and ensure lasting violence prevention and response outcomes** for girls, women, and their communities.

Invest in Research and Evidence. Fund mixed-methods research to design context-specific approaches, particularly in settings and populations where few proven models exist. Focus on generating evidence to unpack causal links between norm shifts and violence reduction, as well as cost effectiveness. Close evidence gaps by centering the lived experiences of adolescent girls and young women, engaging men and boys, and systematically reporting implementation lessons.

Prioritize Multi-Level, Integrated Programs. Fund programs that connect individual, community, and systems change. Effective interventions align with complementary efforts across education, health, economic participation, and legal frameworks.

Engage Trusted Champions and Platforms. Support programs that work with faith and cultural leaders, alongside mass and entertainment media. Involve communities in planning and design, spark reflection, make norms visible, and diffuse new ideas and norms.

Ensure Scale and Sustainability. Provide multi-year, flexible funding to adapt and scale proven interventions that use simplified delivery models, adaptable materials, and can be integrated into existing systems.

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 and social norms programs can reduce and prevent gender-based violence in a program time frame.

Change Starts at Home was a 40-week intervention designed to shift attitudes, norms, and behaviors contributing to intimate partner violence among couples in Nepal. The intervention used weekly radio broadcasts, guided discussions, and group and home-based activities, and was rigorously evaluated using a mixed-methods quasi-experimental study design.

For couples who engaged in *Change Starts at Home*, results from the mid-line evaluation indicated that relative to control sites…

- Intimate partner violence decreased overall by 39% (SE= 0.09, p-value < 0.05)
- Psychological intimate partner violence decreased by 35% (SE= 0.08, p-value < 0.05)
- Sexual intimate partner violence decreased by 27% (SE= 0.07, p-value < 0.05)
- Physical intimate partner violence decreased by 25% (SE= 0.07, p-value < 0.05)

Gender-based violence social norms programs can be rigorously measured and evaluated.

Communities Care, an initiative implemented in conflict-affected areas of Somalia, addressed norms related to gender roles and relations, intimate partner violence and conflict-related violence, sex and sexuality, while improving the quality, access, and coordination of care for girls and women who experienced sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence. This intervention was evaluated using the newly developed and validated *Social Norms and Beliefs about Gender-based Violence Scale.*

Evaluation results showed positive shifts away from norms that approved of…

Sexual violence
(Coeff : -0.214, p-value < 0.001)

Using violence for protection of family honor
(Coeff: -0.558, p-value < 0.001)

A husbands' right to use violence
(Coeff: -0.309, p-value = 0.003)

Social norms programs can be adapted, replicated and scaled to meet gender-based violence outcomes at scale.

Building on the ***Transforming Masculinities*** approach, Tearfund implemented *Masculinities, Faith and Peace* in Nigeria. Using a faith-based gender transformative model, the program successfully shifted social norms and achieved measurable improvements in violence reduction.

By the end of the program…

Congregations that participated in the program showed significantly greater reductions in emotional violence perpetrated by men and experiences reported by women compared to those in non-participating congregations (PP Diff: 22.2, p-value < 0.05)

The proportion of individuals in participating congregations who believed it was acceptable for a husband to use violence against his wife decreased significantly compared to those in non-participating congregations (PP Diff: 14.3, p-value < 0.01)