What do we mean by social norms?

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a pervasive human rights violation and a social problem across the globe, but differs in prevalence and severity. The 2013 mapping of the Global Burden of Disease showed the prevalence of physical and sexual VAWG differed between countries, and between ethnic groups and social classes within countries. Two, central and overlapping sets of ideas and practices driving VAWG are those related to gender relations and those on the use of violence.1

The term social norms essentially refers to behavioural expectations or rules that pertain to gender roles, identities and relations including those related to the use of violence. Social norms are dynamic and changeable and are influenced by age and socio-economic status. They are a reference point for individual thought and action. Figure 1 illustrates how more specific social norms contribute to the broad social norms on gender and violence in mutually reinforcing relationships.

Figure 1: Social norms and violence against women and girls

Social norms are mostly socially learnt and taken for granted as ‘the way’ of behaving or thinking, rather than being deliberately followed. They are not the only way of thinking or behaving in a social group, and are sometimes contested or resisted, such as in activities to build gender equity. They may also be indirectly challenged, such as by a husband who chooses to have a loving, respectful relationship with his wife, rather than dominating her. Resistance to social norms may lead to shifts in what is seen as ‘normal’ if enough people are influenced to behave differently.

The higher value given to men versus women, and gender roles, restrictions and entitlements all stem from, and are expressions of, the broad social norms on gender in a social group and wider social system. The use of violence against women by men, whether emotional, economic, physical or sexual, is a manifestation of men’s power over women and an instrument through which men’s power is expressed and upheld.2

All social groups ‘know’ how men and women should be and behave. In low- and middle-income countries women are often expected to be submissive to men and not to challenge men’s power. Women who behave as ‘good wives’ may be rewarded, such as by being more respected, and those who do not may be punished. Fear of punishment influences behaviour even if that punishment has never been personally experienced. VAWG is often a punishment, for example, when a man beats his wife or girlfriend when she asks for money for food or rent, or questions his fidelity.

Whether using violence is normal in punishing children, defending one’s honour or just getting the upper hand or respect is coded in social norms. These norms usually include an understanding of what degree of severity or forms of violence are accepted. For example, beating a child may be socially accepted (or expected) but injuring a child may not be. In some settings fatal violence is accepted and in the case of honour killings, it may be expected.

Norms on gender and the use of violence overlap, and where violence is common, it is generally widely regarded as acceptable. Across settings, the acceptability of VAWG and men’s controlling behaviours towards their partners predicts (at a collective level) the prevalence of physical and sexual partner violence.3

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Social norms in conflict and crisis settings

In conflict and crisis settings, rules on accepted gendered behaviour are often set aside as women and girls are forced to take on roles previously reserved for men and boys. This can provide opportunities for advancing gender equality during the post-conflict or rebuilding period, as was seen in the adoption of the highly equitable Constitution in South Africa, but the very high prevalence of VAWG in South Africa shows that the relationship with social norm change can be uneven or incremental. Further conflict usually leads to an entrenchment of norms around the use of violence to resolve disputes, or otherwise assert power, and there may be backlash against women’s encroachment into the domains of men. An important task is to understand better how to use the opportunities of crises for more sustained changes in gender norms.

Lessons from What Works: Social norms on gender

Understanding social norms on gender and masculinity is vital for understanding VAWG. Some masculinities emphasise men’s entitlement, dominance and control over women and other men, and ready resort to violence: these are often referred to as hypermasculinities. They are common in the most deprived social settings, but also among elites including national leaders. Hypermasculinities are generally not most prevalent or well respected across most societies. Greater respect is usually given to less extreme forms of patriarchal masculinity, albeit ones that draw on the same set of ideas. Yet there are always some versions of masculinity that are different, these may be softer gay masculinities, or those that emphasise caring and respectful, non-violent relationships with women. These forms of masculinity, and their relationship with perpetration of VAWG, have been described quantitatively in recent publications.

The goal of interventions to shift social norms on gender, for example the Stepping Stones or Sonke Change interventions, is to change individual attitudes and behaviour, and ultimately social norms, to enhance the prevalence and value of more respectful and equitable masculinities, and thus create a more caring, less violent society.4

Social norms on femininity in the Global South generally valorise being married, under control of one’s husband and running the home, but their expression differs, especially the extent to which women can move freely in the community, complete their education and work outside the home. Although they oppress them, women also support social norms and often accept their subordinate position, and even the use of violence by their partner. Some women claim a more engaged position in society and connect with other women. Research conducted through What Works shows that those who assert themselves, and join with other women, often experience less violence, although this is not always the case. Research conducted by Tearfund and Heal Africa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo found that women who are more engaged in their religious institution experience less partner violence (Figure 2).

A culture of violence

The impact of social norms on violence is clear in research on the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Afghanistan. The Demographic and Health Survey shows that the proportion of ever married women who have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence from their husband in their lifetime ranges from over 90% in Herat and Ghor provinces to 7% in Badakhshan. In the baseline research for the Women for Women International intervention evaluation in Afghanistan, there was a marked difference in reports of violence by ethnic groups, which in this case is an indicator of social norms on the use of violence, and this was seen across different types of violence measured in the study (Figure 3).

In conflict settings one of the hypotheses about the increased rates of VAWG, where these are seen, is that it is driven by an overall normalisation of all forms of violence. It is also driven by the impact of conflict on other drivers of VAWG, in particular, poor mental health and the impact of conflict on education and economic opportunity.
Gender norms and norms on violence impact violence among children. The baseline data from the evaluation of Right to Play’s intervention in Pakistan indicates that witnessing their mother being beaten at home is strongly associated with perpetrating violence among peers in school and having more patriarchal gender attitudes. This acceptable use of violence and gender relations is socially learnt by children within households and unless challenged will impact more widely in their lives.

**Gender attitudes: Individual and perceived community views**

Social norms are most comprehensively studied through ethnographic research. Quantitative approaches to understanding social norms can be provided through questions on attitudes, especially those perceived to be held by the community, and behaviours. Questions about individual attitudes or perceptions of gender relations and roles do not measure social norms on their own, although they can serve as a proxy for social norms at an aggregate level. Social norms are better captured by questions that embrace some of the nuance in perspectives. For example, violence of specific types or degrees may be perceived as acceptable or ‘deserved’ but not unlimited violence (or that leaving a lasting injury). Violence may be perceived as deserved when a woman is ‘blame worthy’ but not if she is regarded as ‘blameless’. Perceptions of socially acceptable gender relations can be captured through questions that ask about community beliefs, e.g. ‘my community believes that a woman should always obey her husband.’ These questions need to be carefully developed as one dimension of gender relations (e.g. expected gender roles) does not capture the totality of gendered power relations, and in some highly patriarchal societies such as Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, it is acceptable for men to cook or care for children. Indicators of gender relations need to be carefully developed and attuned to local settings. To fully understand social norms, the prevalence of behaviour must also be measured. Social norms obviously influence behaviour, just as behaviour change will lead to changes in social norms.

Although caution is needed, attitudes are often measured as a proxy for social norms. Figure 4 shows the mean scores on gender attitudes at the personal level and perceived social norms. It shows that women in South Africa and Tajikistan perceived the community gender attitudes to be more conservative than their own views on gender. In Afghanistan, across the sample as a whole there was no difference between the two sets of attitudes. This suggests that in a country like Afghanistan there is little social and intellectual space for individual attitudes of women to differ from those perceived in the community and little exposure to different ideas. However, in analyses of factors associated with physical partner violence, perceived community views (social norms) were more strongly predictive than individual attitudes. In What Works research in Ghana, men’s perpetration of IPV was associated with more inequitable perceived community attitudes and individual attitudes on gender, as well as greater perceived acceptability of VAWG. These provide key pointers to required interventions and the need to address social norms on gender and violence.

Community norms on gender and violence impact the likelihood that a woman may be exposed to violence, but in some settings individual attitudes are often important as well as they may impact the likelihood of conflict in a relationship and the degree to which a woman is respected. It is important for women to believe they have the right to live without violence, especially in settings where women can choose partners and initiate divorce or separation, and to enable help seeking.
Interventions to change social norms: Evidence of effectiveness

Interventions to change social norms take multiple forms and evidence shows that they can be effective in preventing VAWG, but context is important. There are still significant gaps in the evidence base which we are working to address through What Works. Reviews of evidence on what works to prevent VAWG suggest that multi-component interventions work best. These interventions work with multiple groups of individuals in a setting, such as men and women, or parents and children, and combine several intervention approaches, such as gender norm change programming and economic empowerment. Such programmes demonstrate that an individual’s views on gender and violence are more effectively changed, and the change supported, when other dynamics in the environment support this change.

Community mobilisation interventions seek to empower women, engage men, and change gender norms at a community level. They can include community workshops, work with community or religious leaders and peer trainings aimed at shifting attitudes and behaviours by critically reflecting on prevalent social norms. The interventions often include localised campaigns with murals, community drama, neighbourhood discussions, and community mobilisation activities including radio discussions. There are examples of interventions that have been delivered over a few years having a significant impact on violent behaviour after rigorous evaluation. Both The Safe Homes and Respect for Everyone (SHARE) Project, and SASA!, evaluated in Uganda, were found to be effective.\(^5\,6\) SHARE used two main approaches: community-based mobilisation to change attitudes and social norms that contribute to IPV and HIV risk, and a screening and brief intervention to reduce HIV-disclosure related violence and sexual risk in women seeking HIV counselling and testing. SHARE reduced women’s past year experience of physical IPV by 21%. SASA! is an activist tool kit, which focused on provoking a critical analysis and discussion of power and power inequalities — how power can be misused in intimate relationships and communities, and how it can be used for good effect. The community wide evaluation showed that SASA! reduced past year experience of physical partner among women violence by 52%. However not all community-based interventions have impacted community-level attitudes and violence.\(^7\) The ones that are more effective usually include participatory workshops exploring gender and relationships and building skills.

Box 1 Sonke Gender Justice is working to change social norms on gender and violence in a large informal settlement in South Africa. They have a complex intervention that includes gender transformative (those focused on promoting gender equality and the equitable division of decision making and resources) workshops focused on men called the Change curriculum. They also have community action teams and activists undertaking a range of street and neighbourhood activities. These activities seek to provoke debate in the community as well as providing opportunities to explore social norms and build skills in groups. They will be ongoing over two years and evaluated in a randomised controlled trial under What Works.

All effective social norm change interventions are complex and many of them include an element of work with individuals, couples or families in workshops. The South Africa adaptation of Stepping Stones is an intervention of this type that has been the most thoroughly evaluated. This was effective in shifting ideas of masculinity and femininity among participants, and it achieved a 38% reduction in perpetration of severe partner violence sustained to two years post-intervention.\(^8\) Stepping Stones was developed for use with multiple generations within a community, but can be used with one generation and has been adapted for many other settings, including workplaces. Several very different interventions that partly draw on Stepping Stones are being evaluated under What Works in contexts from South Africa, Tajikistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and India.

Mass media interventions have a valuable role in breaking the silence around VAWG and introducing new ideas and ways of thinking about gender and gender relations. This is particularly effective in settings such as Afghanistan (see Figure S), where the diversity of ideas around gender is limited. Mass media interventions will not change social norms on their own, but they have an important contribution.


to make. Complex interventions such as television or radio programmes that combine education and entertainment have been shown to have a valuable role in getting people talking and exploring alternative ideas about gender and violence. They have also been shown to enhance support-giving and support-seeking behaviour for women exposed to VAWG. There is a lack of good research on the impact of mass media interventions in preventing violent behaviours.

Some mass media interventions under the What Works programme, such as the in Nepal Change Starts at Home intervention (Box 2), are currently being evaluated. Some other multi-component interventions, the Help The Afghan Children in Afghanistan and Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa, are also using community radio among other aspects of their intervention strategy, for example to have discussions about gender in Islam with religious leaders.

**Box 2:** Equal Access has developed a radio edutainment and workshop series to change social norms on gender and violence and strengthen relationships. Change Starts At Home is broadcast to listeners’ groups in Nepal and is accompanied by the BIG curriculum workshops which are used to critically reflect on the ideas introduced in the radio edutainment and introduce relationship skills. The intervention is carefully designed to ensure it is theoretically robust and based on best practice in violence prevention.

Important in supporting the intervention’s theory of change is the research finding that, after adjusting for other individual and community level factors, women living in more gender inequitable communities, where negative norms around male dominance and the acceptability of violence were more pronounced, had a higher risk of experiencing physical or sexual IPV in the previous 12 months.

**School-based interventions**

Some social norm change interventions use schools as a platform for delivery. These can reach a large number of students. Evidence shows that interventions have a limited impact unless a social norm change approach is taken. More recent innovations have taken a whole-of-school approach with combined training of teachers, curriculum for students and changes to the school environment. The Good Schools intervention in Uganda sought to address social norms related to violence in schools and achieved a 60% reduction in past week corporal punishment use and a reduction in peer violence.

**Box 3:** Tearfund and Heal Africa are working in north eastern DRC with faith leaders to change social norms related to VAWG and encourage and enable care seeking and social support after experiences of VAWG. Their intervention builds on the finding that faith leaders are reported to be highly influential in the community. Analysis of the baseline data showed substantial protection from past year IPV among women who are more engaged in religious institutions.

Social norm change is ultimately essential for sustained VAWG prevention. When community norms change, individual behaviour will change and fewer women will be exposed to violence. As individuals change their ideas and behaviours, so do social norms. Interventions can influence social norms on VAWG when they are targeted, theory-driven and drawn on proven methods. There are a variety of methods that have been used to generate discussion about VAWG, the position of women in society, how to build respectful relationships, and the general use of violence. The secret to enhancing their effectiveness often lies in combining them with, for example, economic empowerment opportunities, although some methods such as participatory workshop approaches are effective in their own right.

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