

DISCUSSION PAPER

SOCIAL NORMS, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT: A Review of Research and Practice



No. 42, September 2023

**TARA PATRICIA COOKSON, AND LORENA FUENTES,
MARIA KLARA KUSS, AND JENNIFER BITTERLY OF LADYSMITH**

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ALIGN	Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CR	consciousness raising
CSE	comprehensive sexuality education
CSO	civil society organization
CPA	community participatory analysis
FGC	female genital cutting
FGM	female genital mutilation
GAL	Gender Action Learning
GBV	gender-based violence
IPV	intimate partner violence
MHM	menstrual hygiene management
NGO	non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RCT	randomized control trial
SIGI	Social Institutions and Gender Index
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VAW	violence against women
WASH	water, sanitation and health

SUMMARY

Global development organizations are increasingly turning to social norms, including gender norms, as a new area of investment in contexts where progress on gender equality is slow, has stalled or is backsliding. Yet, for many actors new to this area of work, questions about where and how to intervene remain open. Meanwhile, feminist scholars and practitioners have expressed concern about how some development organizations are defining social norms and establishing theories of change around them. This tension points to a problem of approach. The social norms approaches rising in prominence tend to reflect a particular understanding of social change, one that did not originate in feminist thought or action. The grounded work undertaken for decades by feminist and women's movements to shift discriminatory social norms in communities around the world – often as part of broader initiatives to improve women's material conditions – is rarely reflected in these new organizational efforts and the theories of change undergirding them.

This paper provides a 'state of the evidence' on social norms change. It draws on findings from a scoping review of studies and evaluations of programmatic interventions to shift social norms, as well as insights from a broader and more heterogeneous body of evidence tracing how social change happens. In doing so, it aims to answer four questions: *What are social norms?*, *How do social norms change?*, *How are social norms measured?* and *What role (if any) should global development organizations play in shifting social norms?*

The answer to the question *What are social norms?* largely depends on who is being asked. Social norms theory and research provide multiple, conflicting and confusing definitions. Some of these are anchored in behaviour economics and social psychology perspectives that view social norms as existing in individual hearts and minds. Others view social norms as diffused throughout society, embedded in all its components from the law to the economy and from religions to

corporations, a view grounded in political, anthropological and sociological theory. In recent years, the proliferation of attempts to achieve ever more precise definitions and typographies is increasingly removed from fields of practice and the ways in which feminist and women's movements and civil society organizations (CSOs) have been talking about social norms for decades.

In exploring the question *How do social norms change?*, the paper traverses a divided scientific evidence base that, on the one hand, does not adequately reflect the varied social, political and economic drivers behind historical changes in social norms, including the role of women's and feminist movements and, on the other, grasps the complexity of social norms but does not lend itself to clearly defined theories of action. There are, however, some overarching lessons to be drawn. The first is that gender norms are *one of* the significant factors shaping progress, stasis and backsliding on gender equality, meaning that they are one lever among many others that also require attention. The second is that social norms change is bi-directional: Shifts in gender norms can lead to changes in the tangible matter of society, and changes in the tangible matter of society can lead to shifts in gender norms. The third is that different levers are required to change different social norms: No single 'magic bullet' approach exists. The fourth is that women's and feminist movements and CSOs are historically proven agents of change. The fifth is that shifts in social norms – and work to catalyse those shifts – can provoke backlash. Finally, the sixth is that social norms (usually) change slowly.

Within a data-driven development paradigm, a great deal of interest exists in the question *How are social norms measured?* The answer to this question is shaped by methodological and philosophical tensions. In terms of a methodological approach, there is currently no global standard for identifying and measuring social norms change, despite the significant investments in getting this right among academics

and development and global health practitioners. Many evaluations use attitudes, beliefs, perceptions or behaviours (or some combination of these), though these are widely recognized as poor proxies. Experimental and quasi-experimental approaches, while attractive for their orientation to rigour, do not appear to be well suited for the subject matter, which involves high levels of complexity and requires consideration of multiple, confounding factors. The second tension concerns whether ‘getting measurement right’ is a worthwhile goal in and of itself – and, if so, to what extent. There are legitimate concerns about the involved, complicated nature of some approaches to measuring social norms, particularly with regard to their reliance on ‘outside’ technical expertise, spotty track record of effectiveness, and cost. Simpler, mixed methods and participatory approaches to measuring social norms change may be more appropriate.

These insights inform our answer to the final question: *What role (if any) should global development*

RÉSUMÉ

Les organisations internationales de développement investissent de plus en plus dans le domaine des normes sociales, notamment les normes de genre, dans les contextes où les progrès en matière d'égalité des genres sont lents, stagnent, voire reculent. Cependant, de nombreux acteurs novices dans ce domaine ont encore du mal à déterminer où et comment il convient d'intervenir. Parallèlement, plusieurs universitaires et spécialistes travaillant sur les questions féministes ont exprimé leur inquiétude quant aux définitions que donnent certaines organisations de développement des normes sociales et aux théories du changement qu'elles élaborent autour de ces normes. Cette situation met en évidence un problème d'approche. En effet, les approches fondées sur les normes sociales les plus courantes tendent à refléter une compréhension singulière du changement social — une compréhension qui ne tire pas son origine de la pensée ou de l'action féministe. Par conséquent, le travail de fond entrepris depuis plusieurs dizaines d'années par les mouvements féministes et les

organizations play in shifting social norms? Many global development organizations already do work that shifts social norms by supporting feminist and women's movements and CSOs with funding, research and data, technical expertise and capacity and network building. Work that shifts social norms in these cases is implicit and often secondary to broader agendas to change the material conditions of women's lives. Further support to these groups could deepen their impact, but changes are required to the social norms, practices and processes within development itself if the slow and non-linear work of shifting social norms is to be adequately supported. A cumulative and significant lesson that emerges from the various bodies of thought and action on how feminist change happens is that social norms change is not the next 'silver bullet'. Targeted and thoughtful engagement with this area of intervention is required, as is a bigger picture that includes the myriad of other levers in the political, economic and social arenas that need to be pulled.

mouvements de femmes pour faire évoluer les normes sociales discriminatoires en vigueur dans les communautés du monde entier (souvent dans le cadre d'initiatives plus larges visant à améliorer les conditions matérielles des femmes) n'est que rarement pris en compte dans les récents efforts des organisations comme dans les théories du changement qui les sous-tendent.

Le présent document dresse un « état des lieux » de l'évolution des normes sociales. Pour ce faire, il s'appuie sur les résultats d'un examen approfondi des études et des évaluations portant sur les interventions programmatiques visant à faire évoluer les normes sociales, ainsi que sur les conclusions tirées d'un ensemble plus large et plus hétérogène de données permettant de décrire l'évolution du changement social. Il entend ainsi répondre aux quatre questions ci-après : *À quoi correspondent les normes sociales ? Comment les normes sociales évoluent-elles ? Comment les normes sociales sont-elles évaluées ?* Et enfin,

quel rôle (le cas échéant) les organisations internationales de développement doivent-elles jouer dans l'évolution des normes sociales ?

La réponse à la question « À quoi correspondent les normes sociales ? » dépend dans une large mesure de la personne interrogée. De fait, les normes sociales font l'objet de multiples définitions, contradictoires et parfois déroutantes, tant dans la théorie que dans la pratique. Certaines se fondent sur des notions d'économie comportementale et de psychologie sociale et considèrent que les normes sociales résident dans le cœur et l'esprit des individus. D'autres soutiennent que les normes sociales sont diffusées dans l'ensemble de la société à travers toutes ses composantes, du droit à l'économie en passant par la religion et les entreprises — un concept inspiré des théories politiques, anthropologiques et sociologiques. Or, les efforts déployés ces dernières années en vue d'établir des définitions et des nomenclatures toujours plus précises s'éloignent de plus en plus de la pratique et du discours que tiennent les mouvements féministes, les mouvements de femmes et les organisations de la société civile sur les normes sociales depuis des décennies.

Pour répondre à la question « Comment les normes sociales évoluent-elles ? », le présent document analyse une base de données scientifiques hétérogène qui, d'une part, ne reflète pas suffisamment les divers facteurs sociaux, politiques et économiques à l'origine des évolutions qui ont marqué les normes sociales au cours de l'histoire, notamment le rôle des mouvements féministes et des mouvements de femmes, et qui d'autre part, tient compte de la complexité que présentent ces normes, sans toutefois parvenir à élaborer des théories d'action clairement définies. Il est toutefois possible d'en tirer quelques enseignements généraux. Tout d'abord, les normes de genre constituent l'un des principaux facteurs de progrès, de stagnation ou de recul en matière d'égalité des genres, ce qui signifie qu'elles comptent parmi les nombreux moyens d'action auxquels il convient de prêter attention. Deuxièmement, l'évolution des normes sociales se produit dans les deux sens : l'évolution des normes de genre peut entraîner des changements tangibles dans la société,

tout comme les changements tangibles dans la société peuvent entraîner une évolution des normes de genre. Troisièmement, l'évolution des normes sociales requiert plusieurs moyens d'action : aucune solution miracle ne peut garantir cette évolution. Quatrièmement, les mouvements féministes, les mouvements de femmes et les organisations de la société civile ont démontré par le passé qu'ils étaient des agents de changement. Cinquièmement, l'évolution des normes sociales et les efforts déployés pour favoriser celle-ci peuvent susciter des réactions négatives. Enfin, l'évolution des normes sociales se produit (le plus souvent) avec lenteur.

Étant donné que le modèle actuel de développement est axé sur les données, la question « Comment les normes sociales sont-elles évaluées ? » suscite un grand intérêt. La réponse à cette question comporte un certain nombre de difficultés d'ordre méthodologique et philosophique. Sur le plan méthodologique, il n'existe actuellement aucune norme mondiale permettant de définir et d'évaluer l'évolution des normes sociales, malgré les efforts considérables déployés par les universitaires et les spécialistes du développement et de la santé mondiale pour y parvenir. En outre, de nombreuses évaluations se basent sur les attitudes, les croyances, les perceptions ou les comportements (ou une combinaison de ces éléments), bien qu'il soit largement reconnu que ces indicateurs fournissent de piètres résultats. De même, les approches expérimentales et quasi expérimentales, malgré l'intérêt qu'elles présentent eu égard à leur souci de rigueur, ne semblent pas bien adaptées au sujet, qui revêt un haut degré de complexité et nécessite la prise en compte de facteurs multiples et contradictoires. Une autre difficulté réside dans la question de savoir si le fait de « bien évaluer » est un objectif valable en soi — et, si oui, dans quelle mesure. En effet, on peut légitimement s'inquiéter de la nature complexe de certaines approches visant à évaluer les normes sociales, notamment en ce qui concerne leur dépendance à l'égard d'une expertise technique « extérieure », leurs résultats mitigés en termes d'efficacité et leur coût. Des méthodes plus simples, hybrides et participatives pourraient s'avérer plus appropriées pour évaluer l'évolution des normes sociales.

Toutes ces informations éclairent la réponse que l'on peut apporter à la dernière question : « *Quel rôle (le cas échéant) les organisations internationales de développement doivent-elles jouer dans l'évolution des normes sociales ?* ». De nombreuses organisations internationales de développement œuvrent déjà en faveur de l'évolution des normes sociales en apportant leur aide aux mouvements féministes, aux mouvements de femmes et aux organisations de la société civile par des financements, des recherches et des données, une expertise technique, un renforcement des capacités et l'établissement de réseaux. Néanmoins, les efforts consentis par ces organisations pour faire évoluer les normes sociales se limitent à des activités implicites et souvent secondaires au regard de programmes plus vastes ayant pour objectif d'améliorer les conditions

matérielles de la vie des femmes. Apporter davantage de soutien à ces organisations permettrait de renforcer leur impact. Pour autant, il est également nécessaire de faire évoluer les normes sociales, les pratiques et les processus au sein même des activités de développement si l'on veut soutenir comme il se doit les efforts lents et non linéaires déployés en faveur de cette évolution. L'un des enseignements majeurs qui se dégagent des différents groupes de réflexion et d'action sur la manière dont le changement féministe se produit consiste à dire que l'évolution des normes sociales n'est pas la panacée. En revanche, un engagement ciblé et réfléchi dans ce domaine d'intervention est nécessaire, de même qu'une vision globale incluant l'ensemble des moyens d'action disponibles dans les domaines politique, économique et social.

RESUMEN

Las organizaciones mundiales para el desarrollo se están volcando de forma creciente en las normas sociales, incluidas las de género, como una nueva esfera de inversión en contextos en los que el progreso hacia la igualdad de género es lento o se ha detenido o deteriorado. Sin embargo, para numerosos actores que se adentran en este campo de trabajo, las preguntas de dónde y cómo intervenir siguen sin respuesta. Mientras tanto, el mundo académico y profesionales feministas han expresado sus inquietudes acerca de la definición que algunas organizaciones para el desarrollo dan a las normas sociales y de cómo establecen las teorías del cambio en torno a ellas. Esta tensión indica un problema de enfoque. Los enfoques que están adquiriendo más preeminencia en materia de normas sociales tienden a reflejar una noción particular del cambio social, noción que no proviene del pensamiento ni de la acción feministas. El trabajo fundamental que los movimientos feministas y de mujeres han llevado a cabo durante decenios para transformar las normas sociales discriminatorias en comunidades de todo el mundo —a menudo como parte de iniciativas más generales orientadas a mejorar las condiciones materiales de las mujeres— casi nunca se ve reflejado en las actividades que

ponen en marcha esas organizaciones ni en las teorías del cambio que las sostienen.

En este documento se ofrece un “estado actual del conocimiento” sobre la transformación de las normas sociales. Se basa en los resultados de una revisión de alcance de los estudios y las evaluaciones de intervenciones programáticas encaminadas a modificar las normas sociales, así como en la información recabada a partir de un conjunto de datos más amplio y heterogéneo que analiza cómo se produce el cambio social. Así, su finalidad es la de responder cuatro preguntas: *¿qué son las normas sociales?, ¿cómo cambian las normas sociales?, ¿cómo se miden las normas sociales? y ¿qué función (de tenerla) deberían desempeñar las organizaciones mundiales para el desarrollo en la transformación de las normas sociales?*

La respuesta a la pregunta *¿qué son las normas sociales?* depende en gran medida de a quién vaya dirigida. En la teoría y la investigación sobre las normas sociales coexisten múltiples definiciones contradictorias y confusas. Algunas se fundan en perspectivas de la economía del comportamiento y la psicología social que consideran que las normas sociales existen en

el corazón y la mente del individuo. Según otras posturas, las normas sociales se extienden a toda la sociedad, permean todos sus componentes —desde el derecho a la economía, pasando por la religión y las empresas—, una visión asentada en la teoría política, antropológica y sociológica. En los últimos años, la proliferación de intentos de elaborar definiciones y conceptos más precisos ha ido quedando cada vez más de lado en los campos de práctica y la forma en que los movimientos feministas y de mujeres y las organizaciones de la sociedad civil (OSC) vienen hablando sobre las normas sociales durante decenios.

Al analizar la pregunta *¿cómo cambian las normas sociales?*, en el documento se recorre una base de datos científicos dividida que, por un lado, no refleja adecuadamente la diversidad de factores sociales, políticos y económicos que subyacen a los cambios históricos en las normas sociales —incluida la función de los movimientos feministas y de mujeres— y que, por el otro, si bien recoge la complejidad de las normas sociales, no alcanza a elaborar teorías de acción claramente definidas. No obstante, se pueden extraer algunas conclusiones generales. La primera es que las normas de género son *uno* de los factores determinantes del progreso, el estancamiento y el retroceso en materia de igualdad de género; es decir, son un mecanismo más entre muchos otros que también es necesario atender. La segunda es el carácter bidireccional del cambio en las normas sociales: la transformación de las normas de género puede dar pie a cambios en la materia tangible de la sociedad, y los cambios en la materia tangible de la sociedad pueden transformar las normas de género. La tercera es que se requieren distintos mecanismos para modificar diferentes normas sociales: ningún enfoque puede considerarse la “fórmula mágica”. La cuarta es que los movimientos feministas y de mujeres y las OSC son agentes de cambio históricos ya probados. La quinta es que los cambios en las normas sociales —y la labor para acelerar su transformación— pueden provocar reacciones adversas. La sexta y última conclusión es que las normas sociales (por lo general) cambian con lentitud.

En un paradigma de desarrollo que se rige por los datos, hay gran interés en la pregunta *¿cómo se miden las normas sociales?* La respuesta viene dada por

tensiones metodológicas y filosóficas. En cuanto a un enfoque metodológico, no existe en la actualidad una norma global para determinar y medir los cambios en las normas sociales, pese a la considerable inversión al respecto en el mundo profesional académico, del desarrollo y de la salud mundial. Numerosas evaluaciones se basan en actitudes, convicciones, percepciones o conductas (o alguna combinación de estas), pese a que, en general, se consideran indicadores indirectos de escasa eficacia. Los enfoques experimentales y cuasiexperimentales, si bien resultan atractivos por su apego al rigor, no son idóneos en este ámbito, que involucra altos niveles de complejidad y exige tener en cuenta una multiplicidad de variables de confusión. La segunda tensión concierne a si “lograr una buena medición” es un objetivo valioso en sí mismo y, de ser así, en qué medida. Existe una preocupación legítima acerca de la complicada naturaleza de algunos enfoques para medir las normas sociales y lo que ello implica, sobre todo con respecto a su dependencia del conocimiento técnico experto “externo”, su historial irregular de eficacia y sus costos. Los enfoques más simples, participativos y con métodos combinados para medir los cambios en las normas sociales pueden resultar más apropiados.

De estas consideraciones se nutre la respuesta a la última pregunta: *¿qué función (de tenerla) deberían desempeñar las organizaciones mundiales para el desarrollo en la transformación de las normas sociales?* El trabajo de numerosas organizaciones mundiales para el desarrollo genera de por sí cambios en las normas sociales al facilitar a los movimientos feministas y de mujeres y las OSC financiamiento, investigación y datos, conocimiento técnico experto y desarrollo de capacidades y redes. La labor transformadora de las normas sociales en estos casos está implícita y es, a menudo, secundaria a los programas más generales para cambiar las condiciones materiales de la vida de las mujeres. Si bien un mayor apoyo a estos grupos podría aumentar su efecto, se hace necesario también cambiar las normas sociales, las prácticas y los procesos en el propio seno del ámbito para el desarrollo si lo que se intenta es apoyar de manera adecuada el trabajo lento y no lineal de modificar las normas sociales. Una importante enseñanza acumulativa y trascendental que surge de los diversos campos de

pensamiento y acción acerca de cómo se produce el cambio feminista es que la transformación de las normas sociales no es la próxima “fórmula mágica”. Se requiere un compromiso específico y reflexivo con esta esfera de intervención, así como un panorama más amplio que incluya el sinnúmero de mecanismos políticos, económicos y sociales que deben activarse.

INTRODUCTION

Major progress towards gender equality and the realization of women’s rights has occurred in the past century, from women’s participation in paid work and access to their own income, to the codification of violence against women as a human rights abuse in international and national laws, to more women in political office and increased access to sexual and reproductive health care. These gains are the result of many factors, including women’s mobilization, labour movements and changes in the economy, among others.¹

Meanwhile, in the past decade, backlash against the progress women have made has been on the rise in countries around the world, threatening to undo hard-won gains.² In these spheres of life and others, social norms are widely accepted as influencing – and being influenced by – progress and pushback on gender equality.³

Global development actors across a variety of fields are increasingly turning to social norms as a new programmatic area of investment because they recognize them as a lever for change in contexts where progress on gender equality is slow, has stalled or is backsliding. Yet, for many actors new to this area of work, questions about where and how best to intervene remain open. Moreover, this heightened interest, particularly on the part of development donors and large multilateral organizations, has been subject to some criticism. Feminist scholars and practitioners have expressed concern with how some development organizations are defining social norms and establishing theories of change around them. Charges levied include that many attempts “fail to adequately engage with power and inequalities”, including politics and the economy, and represent “yet another instance of ideological colonization of the field of development through the exercise of hegemonic institutional control over the process of knowledge creation”.⁴

These critiques are not only empirical; they also problematize a difference in ontological perspective – what

we might consider a problem of approach.⁵ Many of the approaches to social norms becoming prominent in development financing and practice tend to reflect a particular understanding of social change, one that did not originate in feminist thought or action. At the same time, the grounded work undertaken for decades by feminist and women’s movements to shift discriminatory social norms in communities around the world – often as part of broader initiatives to improve women’s material conditions – is rarely reflected in these new organizational efforts and the theories of change undergirding them. The critiques, however, are almost never accompanied by constructive and clear advice about what development actors might do otherwise.

This discussion paper intervenes at this point of tension. Its aim is twofold. The first is to provide a “state of the evidence” on what works to change discriminatory social norms, and specifically gender norms. It draws on academic and grey publications produced by independent researchers, development organizations including United Nations entities and other multilateral organizations, and civil society organizations (CSOs) working on social norms around the world. We began with a scoping review of published evaluations of interventions explicitly seeking to address gender-related social norms (see Annex),⁶ which revealed the predominance of a relatively narrow conceptualization of social and gender norms.

1 Htun and Weldon 2018.

2 OHCHR 2020.

3 Harper et al. 2020; Pearse and Connell 2016.

4 Piedalue et al. 2020, p. 91; Wazir 2022, p. 4.

5 Cislighi and Heise 2020.

6 Scoping reviews are well-suited to mapping research when the evidence base is nascent or scattered across various disciplines. The review was conducted following the method laid out by Arksey and O’Malley 2005.

We knew from our prior research and collaborations with feminist organizations, however, that this body of research was an incomplete reflection of existing efforts to theorize and shift social norms. In response, we incorporated insights from the wider literature on social norms, social change and gender equality, ultimately presenting a more diverse and heterogeneous set of perspectives regarding what social norms are and how they change.

The “state of the evidence” identified four issues in particular, all of which need to be addressed in order for global development organizations new to social norms work to develop theories of change and action that are effective, appropriate and sustainable: (1) a lack of consensus on what social norms are and how to change them; (2) a divided scientific evidence base that, on the one hand, does not adequately reflect the varied social, political and economic drivers behind historical changes in social norms, including the role of women’s and feminist movements and, on the other, grasps the complexity of social norms but stops short of proposing ways forward; (3) funding mechanisms that preclude the long-term investments required to do social norms change work; and (4) a mis-fit between the imperative to measure progress within development practice and the fact that social norms are diffuse, held in place and shifted by multiple factors and change slowly.

Bearing these tensions in mind, the second aim of the paper is to identify pragmatic pathways forward for development organizations committed to making progress on the realization of women’s rights and gender equality. To be clear, this paper is not targeted to those grassroots women’s movements and feminist organizations that have been working to shift discriminatory social norms as part of their advocacy and service provision work over the course of many decades; rather, it is aimed primarily at the global development donors and implementation agencies pursuing opportunities for new areas of work. Ultimately, it suggests that enduring social norms change requires attention to the attitudes and beliefs of individuals, in concert with attention to the economic markets, legal and political systems, workplaces, social services and built environment within which those

individuals operate. Development organizations that understand that social norms shape all of these, and are shaped by them, are more likely to land on an approach that brings about enduring change. The paper also proposes that one of the clearest pathways for development organizations to effect such enduring change is to support feminist movements and women’s CSOs. Implementing these proposals entails norms change within development practice itself, including around the duration of funding cycles and the demand for easily measurable results.

The paper is organized into four sections, each of which answers a question. The first section, *What are social norms?*, summarizes the bodies of thought and action that inform different approaches to social norms work. The second section, *How do social norms change?*, reviews various bodies of evidence that attempt to explain why and how social norms change and distills lessons from these. The third section, *How is social norms change measured?*, provides an overview of existing measurement approaches and discusses the opportunities and shortcomings inherent to these. And finally the concluding section, *What role (if any) should development organizations play in shifting discriminatory social norms?*, reflects on whether and how organizations such as donors, UN entities and other multilateral institutions are best placed to contribute.

1. WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS?

Social norms are broadly understood as a set of shared beliefs or unwritten rules about what is right and wrong, acceptable or “normal” within a social group. They differ across societies and communities because they are rooted in culture, religion and tradition.⁷ While social norms are somewhat imposed on individuals, they can also provide them with a sense of belonging and social identity.

This broad understanding of social norms, however, masks a tension that has practical implications for development organizations seeking to address them through a defined area of work. Namely, that the answer to the question *What are social norms?* largely depends on who is being asked. In the grounded work of feminist activism and service delivery in communities around the world, understandings of what social norms are and how they operate have been refined through everyday work to improve women’s material realities by means of education programming, access to justice and economic empowerment, among other avenues.⁸ Meanwhile, theorizations of, and experiments with, social norms have been proposed by sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, social psychologists, behavioural economists and scholars of women’s and gender studies and public health – sometimes in conversation with activists and practitioners. These bodies of thought and practice provide different and often contradictory definitions of social norms as well as the subset of these known as gender norms, also confusing the two. A recent review found that “initiatives at the intersection between these two streams of work include mentions of ‘gender norms’, ‘gendered social norms’ and ‘gender-related social norms’”.⁹ Moreover, what may be termed ‘gender norms’ in English may not translate precisely to other

languages.¹⁰ Our own work with a variety of development organizations in different regional contexts confirms this dynamic among as well as within organizations. How this question is answered, moreover, has implications for how social norms are understood to change – a topic pursued in section 2.

Understanding the origins of social norms thought is important for appreciating why conflicting approaches to social norms exist today in development practice, often even within the same organization. The people who make decisions about development efforts – including whether and how they are funded, focused and implemented – draw on theory, evidence and lived experience to make those decisions. Moreover, within a data-driven development paradigm, theories and evidence from some disciplines have greater purchase over decision-making than others, for a variety of reasons. Clarity about the theories of change underlying these decisions better enables conversations to be had about what works and what does not, as well as about appropriate roles and courses of action for different actors.

This current section of the paper attempts to sort out these various understandings of social norms and gender norms. It is organized as follows: First, it summarizes different disciplinary approaches to social norms within the social sciences, recognizing that these approaches, to varying degrees, are informing the strategies and financing priorities of large

7 Shaheed 2013.

8 See, for example, Wazir 2022 on the MV Foundation (education); Crosby and Lykes 2011 on *Mujeres Transformando el Mundo* (gender-based and sexual violence); Voinea 2019 on SEWA (economic empowerment).

9 Cislighi and Heise 2020.

10 Cookson et al. 2021.

development organizations. Second, it discusses a tension between these disciplines, with some tending to understand social norms as existing in people's minds while others view them as largely more diffused throughout society.¹¹ Third, it introduces gender norms as a subset of social norms. Finally, the section suggests that the tension in the literature (and subsequently practice) does not adequately reflect what women's movements and feminist organizations have observed and addressed over centuries: that social norms, including gender norms, exist in the hearts and minds of individuals as well as in the wider society. The section concludes with a working definition of gender norms that comes closer to reflecting this reality.

1.1

From psychology to sociology: What are social norms?

The concept of social norms has a rich and long-standing history in the social sciences that dates back to the work of philosophers such as Aristotle, Locke and Hume.¹² Sociology, anthropology, political science, social psychology and economics have been particularly influential in shaping contemporary approaches to understanding social norms.¹³ We will review each of these in turn. As noted above, the understanding of social norms emerging from these disciplines tends to align (albeit imperfectly) with one of two views: that social norms largely exist in the hearts and minds of individuals or that social norms are diffused throughout the systems and structures of society. Each of these views lends itself to different approaches to shifting social norms in practice.

'In the mind': Social psychology and behavioural economics

Two of the disciplines with increasing influence on development efforts to shift social norms are social psychology and economics. Social psychologists

have grappled with social norms since the early 19th century.¹⁴ They tend to understand social norms as collective constructs that influence an individual's beliefs about how to behave and what others approve of. In other words, they are "standard[s] from which people do not want to deviate".¹⁵ Contemporary work in this field distinguishes between descriptive norms, which are shared ideas about typical behaviour (expectations about what is commonly done), and injunctive norms, which are beliefs about desired behaviour (how a person should behave).¹⁶ Much of the debate within social psychology has focused on understanding how social norms are internalized. The literature has pointed to three main pathways: (1) deliberative instruction and learning, (2) sanctioning of inappropriate behaviour (e.g., through ridicule, gossip and even violence) and (3) observations of acceptable behaviour and inferring associated norms. Perhaps the most prominent contemporary social norms theorist drawing on this tradition is Cristina Bicchieri, whose work to develop a precise theory of social norms that disentangles them from other drivers of collective human behaviour has been hugely influential in social norms programming at the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).¹⁷ We shall return to Bicchieri's work later.

Economists – and, in particular, behavioural economists – began to take a strong interest in social norms much more recently, in the late 1980s.¹⁸ Behavioural economists identify social norms as a key explanation

11 Cislighi and Heise 2020.

12 For more extensive reviews, see Chung and Rimal, 2016; Mackie et al. 2015; Bicchieri et al. 2011.

13 For further analysis of disciplinary thought in regard to social norms, see Harper and Marcus 2018.

14 Allport 1935; Deutsch and Gerard 1955; Kahneman and Miller 1986; Cialdini et al. 1991.

15 Schultz et al. 2007, p. 430.

16 Hewstone et al. 2012.

17 Bicchieri 2017.

18 Behavioural science, broadly speaking, is the study of human actions or behaviour through systematic observation and experimentation. Behavioural economics is considered a subcategory of behavioural science and sits at the intersection of economics and psychology. Behavioural economists focus on exploring human decision-making. According to the UN Behavioural Science Group, "Behaviourally informed interventions leverage what is known about human behaviour and decision-making: They invest in better diagnosing what specific behavioural barriers prevent people from adopting a certain behaviour, explore enablers that help people achieve their aims, and design interventions on the basis of these diagnoses" (UN Innovation Network n.d.). A sub-group of behavioural science interventions focus on changing behaviour by shifting social norms perceptions, especially in public health.

for human economic behaviour.¹⁹ Influenced by rational choice theory and game theory, they define social norms as mechanisms that affect the incentives and constraints of self-interested individuals in attaining their desired goals.²⁰ This understanding strongly emphasizes the decisions, choices and actions of individuals rather than their perceptions or beliefs. Research and evaluations in this tradition often use individual behaviours as proxies for social norms.²¹ This methodological choice has been criticized by scholars from other disciplines on the grounds that while social norms enable or constrain certain behaviours, they are not the same thing.

These ways of thinking about social norms have several features that make them attractive to development organizations. One is that social psychology and behavioural economics tend to share a focus on individuals, specifically, on “the cognitive processes that give origin to social norms”.²² Crudely speaking, we can say that these traditions understand social norms as existing and operating in an individual’s mind. In a practical sense, this individual-level focus lends itself well to experimental interventions and evaluations, which align with a data-driven development paradigm. Another attractive feature is the level of definitional clarity sought by scholars anchored in these traditions, particularly social psychologists. Bicchieri, for instance, proposes a meticulous definition of social norms that was originally developed in a lab and then refined through a practitioner partnership with UNICEF.²³ She distinguishes between various drivers of collective behaviour that many other theorists (see below) gloss over simply as ‘norms.’ This includes customs (i.e., independently motivated actions that happen to be similar to each other, like people using umbrellas in the rain), moral rules (e.g., resting on the Sabbath, a collective behaviour driven by moral conviction), descriptive norms including conventions

(people conform to a behaviour out of mutual expectation and rationality, e.g., driving on the correct side of the road), and social (injunctive) norms. For Bicchieri, “a social norm is a rule of behaviour such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their reference network conform to it (empirical expectation), and (b) that most people in their reference network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation)”.

The work of Bicchieri and others who attempt to untangle vague and overlapping understandings of social norms (notably proposing different categorizations), sits on one end of a spectrum of social norms theory. Much other work informed by social psychology and economics seeks considerably less precision in its conceptualization of social norms, conflating and expanding the various categories that Bicchieri untangles. A reasonable critique of Bicchieri’s approach is that the real world is much messier than the lab (a contention she agrees with). In reality, there are very many more slippages between these various drivers of collective behaviour, which prevents researchers and practitioners from categorizing them neatly in boxes. This contention notwithstanding, Bicchieri’s recognition that not everything is a social norm is in fact much more aligned with the appeals of feminist scholars and activists for greater attention to power relations and complex systems – as outlined below – than the critiques would suggest.

‘In wider society’: Sociology, anthropology and political science

Another view of social norms recognizes individuals but emphasizes the embeddedness of social norms in the systems and structures of wider society. This view, which has been developed over an even longer period of time, is rooted in sociology, anthropology and political science.

Within the field of sociology, social norms have been a topic of vivid intellectual debate since the late 18th century.²⁴ Sociologists tend to define them as rules or standards that individuals internalize as they are socially integrated into society. This view holds that

19 Akerlof 1976; Elster 1989; Eggertsson 1999.

20 Rational choice theory suggests that individuals use rational calculations to make choices and achieve outcomes that are aligned with their own personal interests, given all the options available. Game theory seeks to predict the strategic decision-making of rational actors in relation to one another.

21 Akerlof 1976; Arrow 1971.

22 Cislighi and Heise 2020.

23 Bicchieri 2017.

24 Durkheim 1985 [1982], 1950 [1957]; Parsons 1937; Parsons and Shils 1951.

social norms are “considered desirable by individuals as socialized actors”, which means that starting from childhood, individuals not only learn to behave in a manner that is approved by the group or groups they belong to but also take on the beliefs of the group(s), such that they will conform to the norm even when no one is around to sanction or reward them for doing so (a process often referred to as “socialization”).²⁵ These processes also lead to social stratification – the categorization of groups along lines such as class, ethnicity, caste and sexual identity, among others – by defining the informal rules of different social groups and classes as well as the ways that they interact (or do not interact) with one another.²⁶

In anthropology, social norm theory and research emerged in the 19th century.²⁷ Anthropologists emphasize the relationship between social norms and culture, conceptualizing social norms as “socially negotiated and contextually dependent”.²⁸ This understanding views social norms as enacted and reproduced through social practices, interactions, customs and rituals and, relatedly, explains why social norms differ across contexts – regional, country, local and otherwise. Because they are anchored in culture and context, social norms can give individuals a sense of identity and belonging. Anthropologists have also emphasized the relationship between social norms and power, viewing them “as ideological tools (a la Gramsci 1971), where conformance to a norm, and beliefs associated with conformance, are social control mechanisms that serve to impose and maintain cultural hegemony”.²⁹ This conception of social norms helps explain why they endure and can be hard to change.

Political scientists have likewise been interested in social norms since the 19th century. More recently, they have conceptualized them as shared ideas or values that shape actors’ preferences and actions, underscoring the “power of ideas” similarly to anthropologists.³⁰

25 Edberg and Krieger, 2020, p. 2.

26 Durkheim 1985.

27 Geertz 1973; Goffman 1974; Cancian 1975; Boyd and Richerson 1994.

28 Rimal and Lapinski 2015, p. 394.

29 Edberg and Krieger 2020, p. 2.

30 Blyth 2016; Hay 2006.

In this view, social norms have hegemonic power in that they “dominate expectations of what should happen, as well as interpretations of what has happened”.³¹ This perspective emphasizes the disciplinary power of social norms to train behaviour through two mechanisms in particular: (1) processes of ‘normalization’ that create distinctions between what is considered normal and abnormal, for example, or respectful and disrespectful; and (2) rewarding adherence and punishing deviation through symbolic and material incentives and disincentives. This is not to say that individuals have no agency; some political scientists emphasize that “even if people are necessarily influenced by their [normative] contexts, they may still be agents who can adopt beliefs and perform actions for reasons of their own and in ways that transform the contexts that influence them”.³²

Sociology, anthropology and political science tend to take a much broader view of social norms than do social psychologists and behavioural economists, understanding that while social norms may “reside in the consciousness of an individual ... they are more fundamentally properties of a community, society or organization”.³³ In this perspective, social norms are forces existing in the wider society, shaping everything from legal, welfare and religious institutions to education and health systems, economic systems from capitalism to communism, labour and financial markets, and the governance of cities, nations and global political bodies – as well as the individuals that operate within these. At the heart of this approach is a dialectical understanding of the relationship between social norms and the everyday practices that take place everywhere from households to schools to halls of government: Everyday practices reproduce social norms and social norms shape everyday practices.

This conceptualization of social norms has at least three defining features that distinguish it from the understanding advanced by social psychologists and behavioural economists. First, sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists view social norms as fundamentally social. This differentiation

31 Cox 2004, p. 206.

32 Bevir and Rhodes 2016, p. 15; Hay, 2002.

33 Pearse and Connell 2016, p. 34.

is significant, as it emphasizes that while an individual will internalize social norms, they are always produced and reproduced through social interaction and relationships.³⁴ Second, social norms reproduce power relations between individuals and between groups by shaping what is and is not considered acceptable.³⁵ These power relations, while largely invisible, are present in and reproduced by governance and religious institutions, the media, education and health-care systems, community groups and intimate partnerships, where they afford some individuals and groups more agency, more voice and greater access to material resources (money, credit, real estate, etc.) than others. Javier Auyero provides an illustrative example of this power in his ethnography of a welfare office in Argentina.³⁶ Here, poor people wait ‘patiently’ for the attention of state bureaucrats and for their welfare benefits, despite the significant discomforts of the room, the unreasonable wait times and the lack of clarity around administrative processes. Auyero suggests that in conditioning the poor to wait without complaint, the state exercises power (control) over them. The expectation that the poor should wait patiently is ‘normalized’; through the mundane act of waiting, poor people internalize strong social messages about their subordinate position in society relative to all the others around them, including the state bureaucrats inside the building and the non-poor outside. Such manifestations of invisible power are important to many theorists of social norms.

The third feature of sociological, anthropological and political science understandings of social norms is attention to complexity. Patterns of collective human behaviour are shaped by many factors all at once: the built and natural environment, the economy, politics, labour markets, religious doctrine and shocks and crises, among others. All these factors may have a

³⁴ Piedalue et al. 2020.

³⁵ The kind of power discussed here is what philosopher-historian Michel Foucault would theorize as disciplinary, invisible power: power that shapes and constrains the behaviours of individuals and groups in all realms of society, as well as the relations between them. This type of power may not be at all obvious, even to those whose behaviour it trains. This is distinct from the type of overt power wielded by a state when it wages war or mandates a lockdown to prevent a public health emergency.

³⁶ Auyero 2008.

bearing on the emergence, characteristics, consistency, strength and duration of a social norm. In other words, humans act within the context of multiple systems that on their own are complex and together even more so. The social expectation that the poor should wait patiently may be embedded not only in the physical space and administrative practices of the welfare office but also in the health-care system that offers tiered attention, in the transit system that has infrequent and slow service to the peripheral neighbourhoods and in the behaviour of politicians who repeatedly make promises they do not keep all the while expecting poor people to vote for them. The expectation that poor people should wait patiently may be embedded in multiple systems all at once. Complexity has implications for programmatic endeavours to change norms, a matter that we will turn to in section 2.

It is worth noting here that while social psychology and behavioural economics approaches to social norms are subject to critiques of over-simplification, the inverse is true of sociology, anthropology and political science, from which emanate definitions of social norms that are sweeping, complex and abstract. Descriptions of social norms as underpinning, influencing and being influenced by systems, structures and institutions is difficult to fully comprehend and appreciate, let alone operationalize in practical terms.

In sum, these bodies of thought can be distinguished between those that view social norms as primarily existing ‘in an individual’s mind’ and those that view social norms as ‘forces in the wider society’.³⁷ They could alternatively be understood as psychological perspectives and social perspectives. To be sure, there does exist overlap: “both approaches include the understanding that the mind and the world influence each other, but each tends to privilege one perspective over the other in their study of norms”.³⁸ Even acknowledging this, such a conceptual distinction is not without its problems.³⁹ Yet, given the convoluted character of the aggregated social norms literatures,

³⁷ We adapt this distinction from Cislage and Heise 2020, who delineate between norms in the ‘mind’ and ‘world’.

³⁸ Cislage and Heise 2020, p. 411.

³⁹ Wazir 2022.

we contend that the distinction is useful enough to accept its shortcomings. Outside of the academy where such theories influence development practice, the circulation of overlapping and conflictual definitions feeds into what is widely acknowledged as a mess of confusing terminology and inconsistent theories of change, both across development organizations and within them. It is hard to have a conversation when those conversing cannot untangle one thing from another.

1.2

Gender norms: A subset of social norms

Gender norms are a subset of social norms. A simple definition of gender norms is “the informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviour on the basis of gender”.⁴⁰ Gender norms vary across and within societies because they are influenced by other factors of social differentiation, such as religion, culture, class, race, sexuality and age, among others. For example, the informal rules and shared expectations about what is acceptable behaviour for women or men in one caste may be different from that in another caste; they may differ for wealthy gay men and poor straight men; between women of one religion and another; and by age group – what is considered socially acceptable for young women may not be acceptable for elderly women.

The ways that gender norms intersect with other axes of social differentiation can have material consequences. Research from Guatemala, for example, has shown that what is considered “acceptable and appropriate” behaviour for a white, middle- or upper-class woman can differ sharply from that for an Indigenous domestic worker living in the same household. For instance, it is common and expected that the domestic worker in this scenario would take the bus or travel by foot across the bustling urban streets of Guatemala City to run errands for her employer, where she may be exposed to various forms of structural violence (the buses are notorious for armed robberies) as well as the ‘everyday’

harassment and abuse faced by Indigenous women. In contrast, the woman with the relative power afforded to her because of her race and class position would be veering far outside social expectations if she were to occupy similar public spaces and could face violent repercussions from her husband for so doing. Both women’s lives are shaped and constrained by intersections of harmful gender and other social norms, but in qualitatively different ways.⁴¹

Gender norms, like other social norms, are not inherently good or bad. The rich body of practice-oriented research carried out by Harper and Marcus, among others, as part of the ALIGN (Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms) platform, shows that gender norms can impede progress on gender equality or they can catalyse it.⁴² To this point, Harper and Marcus note that “many norms surrounding girls’ lives exist for good reason and [development researchers and practitioners] would do well to acknowledge this alongside seeking change where norms are harmful to girls”, a point made of norms that shape adulthood too.⁴³ On this basis a distinction is sometimes made between harmful, discriminatory or inequitable gender (or social) norms and positive norms that foster gender equality.

The ontological tension that exists within the social norms literature also exists within the gender norms literature – with similarly significant implications for development practice. A search for scientific evidence on gender norms would suggest that it is a relatively new area of research. Cislage and Heise note that it was only “...by 2000, [that] the language of gender norms was on the ascendancy in academia, with mentions on google scholar rising from 300 between 1985 and 1990 to 16,700 in the decade between 2000 and 2010”. The recent swell in gender norms literature is largely indicative of a marked increase in research from a social psychology (and, to a lesser extent, behavioural economics) perspective. As with social norms, this approach tends to focus narrowly on individuals, studying and measuring gender norms as attitudes, beliefs

40 Marcus and Harper 2015.

41 Fuentes 2020; see also Menjívar 2011. For an analysis of these dynamics in Mexico, see Wright 2011.

42 Harper and Marcus 2018; see also Pearse and Connell 2016.

43 Harper and Marcus 2018 p. 36.

and stereotypes regarding what is and is not acceptable for women and men and boys and girls.

This more recent rise of the term ‘gender norms’ in social scientific research, however, gives a false impression of the extent to which they have historically been studied, theorized and acted upon. In reality, feminist and other scholars have been writing about the invisible forces shaping women’s and men’s lives for as long as they have been permitted to publish, often referring to gender roles, gender divisions, gendered power imbalances and the like.⁴⁴ Outside of the academy, moreover, women’s movements and feminist organizations have been mobilizing to shift the informal and formal rules that have subordinated women to men (and some women to other women) for centuries, as section 2 of this paper elaborates. Indeed, decades of transnational dialogue between activists, practitioners and academics on the nature and features of women’s oppression has refined a broader and significantly more nuanced understanding of gender norms than the one proposed by social psychologists.

Key elements of this broader understanding are that gender norms are socially constructed rather than ‘god given’, they are integral to the reproduction of unequal power relations in all spheres of life and they have tangible consequences. While gender norms operate at the individual level, they are also “political and embedded”, existing “in all domains of social life, shaped by and shaping the material and institutional”.⁴⁵ This includes the built environment, household objects, money, machines, art, etc. (“the material”). It also includes formal institutions such as the law, religions, the family, the state and the economy as well as the informal institutions that exist within and alongside the formal ones – the often unwritten “processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors

of social life”.⁴⁶ Diane Elson’s edited volume *Male Bias in the Development Process* was one of the first to show how gender norms shape policy formulation and implementation in development contexts around the world.⁴⁷ Case studies illustrated how they function “as social relations, a set of interactions between more powerful and less powerful social agents, buttressed by social institutions imbued with male bias”.⁴⁸ In Mexico’s maquiladora industry, for example, everything from the organization of the production process to management decisions, wages and skills training are “riddled with male bias, due to unthinking acceptance of female stereotypes or to ‘commonsense’ about the ways in which men and women behave”.⁴⁹

Gender norms: Towards a working definition

The circulation of these different understandings of social and gender norms as operating primarily ‘in the mind’ or ‘in wider society’, and the tensions inherent to them, is a source of confusion and inconsistency in research and in practice not only in development but also in related fields such as global health.⁵⁰ Lack of conceptual clarity has practical implications that go beyond definitional confusion, impeding the “cross-disciplinary understanding and collaboration”

46 See Acker 1992. It is worth noting here that the tensions in social norms research and practice – imprecise and competing definitions within theoretical work, as well as between theory and practice – also exist with regard to the term ‘institutions’. Theorists are having their own conversations, parsing out formal, informal and social institutions (with slippage between these, as in the case of schools/education and religion) as well as organizations, which are broadly defined as groups of individuals. Meanwhile, practitioners, including those within CSOs, women’s movements and development agencies, often use the term “institution” as synonymous with organization (e.g., a national military, a development agency), refer to policies as policies and laws as laws (rather than formal institutions) and refer to customs as customs and traditional practices as traditional practices (rather than informal institutions). Pragmatically, work with policies, laws, militaries, corporations and the like might be referred to as “higher level change”.

47 Elson 1991.

48 Elson 1994, p. vii.

49 Ibid.

50 Cislighi and Heise 2020; Bell and Cox 2015. For a contemporary genealogy of the uptake of social norms/social psychology/game theory approaches within global health and GBV practitioner work, described through a series of programmatic interventions with UNICEF and national organizations in Senegal and Uganda (SASA!), see Piedalue et al. 2020.

44 See, for example, Klein 1971; Beauvoir 1949; Mohanty 1984; Butler 1993.

45 Piedalue et al. 2020.

that is required to tackle what research has shown is the cross-cutting nature of gender norms across education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, paid work, unpaid care work and political participation, among other areas.⁵¹ Within development organizations specifically, this has implications for the theories of change – and attendant theories of action – applied in the contexts of inequality within which such organizations work: “if norms are embedded in the mind, changing beliefs will be sufficient for norms to change too. If norms are embedded in laws, policies and institutions, changing gender norms will require a larger project.”⁵²

Social psychology and behavioural economics are holding sway over the strategic approaches being formulated by some of the world’s most influential development organizations – donors and implementing agencies alike. Yet, the definitions of social and gender norms that locate them ‘in the mind’ largely eclipse the insights of feminist scholars, practitioners and activists refined through decades of grounded work.⁵³ Meanwhile, the definitions emanating from much of the sociological, anthropological and political science literature (including women’s and gender studies) are often so sweeping and complex that they risk provoking paralysis when it comes to operationalization. Pragmatically, how does one begin to craft a theory of change and action around “structural formations embedded in institutions, wrapped up in the expansion of global capitalism and racialised hegemonies and systematically shaping privilege, access, opportunity and vulnerability”?⁵⁴ In practice, feminist movements and women’s organizations are operationalizing understandings of social norms that are indeed more nuanced than what is proposed by the siloed bodies of literature reviewed here. As the examples in section 2 will show, much grounded feminist work is anchored in an understanding of social and gender norms as both in the wider society and in individual minds.

51 Cislaghi and Heise 2020, p. 408.

52 Ibid., p. 412.

53 Wazir 2022.

54 Piedalue et al. 2020 p. 101.

The respective bodies of thought informing these views both have contributions to offer, as well as shortcomings, as we have outlined here. Some efforts have been taken to reconcile the two perspectives, in a move that “acknowledges the cognitive nature of norms as beliefs, while, at the same time, suggesting that those beliefs are the result of (and shape) very concrete and material realities in which people live and learn”.⁵⁵ For others, the tensions inherent to these perspectives are irreconcilable: “theories of gender norms and of social norms are more opposed than complementary, particularly in their conceptualisation of political economy and wider structures of power that give rise to inequalities”.⁵⁶ This position emphasizes that positivist, technical approaches to development are antithetical to feminist visions of progress and the much bigger and more complex project of societal transformation this entails.⁵⁷ These risks are not small: Adopting an individual-scale understanding of norms could lead to the conflation of behaviour and norms where, for example, individual men’s perpetration of GBV is addressed in isolation from the more far-reaching social norms and political and economic factors that drive it as well as violence in other spheres.⁵⁸

We agree that these concerns have merit. Yet we also propose that working through this tension – and considering and assembling what is useful from the various perspectives – is a worthwhile endeavour. Short of this, the ideological chasm that already exists around what social and gender norms are, and what to do about them, may well result in the mainstreaming of an approach that entirely obscures the broader social, political and economic transformations required to achieve gender equality. Building on a definition proposed by Cislaghi and Heise (with some tweaks to clarify meaning, bolded), we propose the following definition as a reasonable starting place:

Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men as well as girls and boys in a given group or society. They

55 Cislaghi and Heise 2020, p. 416.

56 Piedalue 2020, p. 126.

57 Wazir 2022.

58 Piedalue 2020, p. 97.

are embedded in formal and informal institutions, including social, political and economic systems and the built environment, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction in private and public life. They play a role in shaping women's and men's access to resources and freedoms, thus affecting their voice, power and sense of self.⁵⁹

Thus far, we have suggested that definitions matter in the practice of development because theories of change and action are built on them. The next section of this paper asks the question *How do social norms (including gender norms) change?*

59 Adapted from Cislage and Heise, p. 416.

2.

HOW DO SOCIAL NORMS CHANGE?

History shows that social norms can and do change. Researchers, practitioners and activists studying and participating in the struggle for gender equality are in agreement that social norms, and gender norms specifically, are a key factor in the changes to women's status that have occurred in societies around the world over the past 200 years.⁶⁰

Not all of this change has been straightforward, however. For example, women's entrance into the paid workforce in many areas of the world reflects more permissive gender norms regarding the acceptability of women in public spaces and women having more access to and control over money and credit. Yet, shifts in gender norms that assign responsibility for care work to women rather than men or the state or private sector have been slower to change, with the result that while more men than before assume some responsibility for care, women still shoulder the majority of it – often on top of paid work.⁶¹ The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the shaky ground on which progressive shifts rest: Public health policies were based on the assumption that 'someone' would assume care of children and ill persons while countries were under lockdown, and indeed women left the workforce at a rate greater than men.⁶²

A question relevant to development practice is how to shift discriminatory social norms in service of realizing the rights of women and girls. As we shall see, there are various approaches to this based on the different understandings of social norms. For those strongly anchored in the view that social norms exist in individual's minds, the theories of change that underlie many interventions focus on individual-level change, while those influenced by the idea that social norms

are diffused throughout wider society seek to change institutions and the organizations within which individuals operate. Yet others bridge these views.

While the existing evidence base is dispersed across various disciplines and issue areas, there are some overarching lessons to be drawn. The first is that gender norms are *one of* the significant factors shaping progress, stasis and backsliding on gender equality, meaning that they are one lever among many others that also require attention. The second is that social norms change is bi-directional: Shifts in gender norms can lead to changes in the tangible matter of society, and changes in the tangible matter of society can lead to shifts in gender norms.⁶³ The third is that different levers are required to change different social norms: No single 'magic bullet' approach exists. The fourth is that women's and feminist movements and CSOs are historically proven agents of change. The fifth is that shifts in social norms – and work to catalyse those shifts – can provoke backlash. Finally, the sixth is that social norms (usually) change slowly.⁶⁴

These points make for a muddled start to designing programmatic interventions. The fact that progress on women's rights is never only a question of gender norms themselves, and that social norms change is almost always non-linear, has implications for theories of change and attendant theories of action (how does change happen? what steps are required to achieve it?),

60 Htun and Jensenius 2022; Harper et al. 2020; Pearse and Connell 2016.

61 UN-Women 2019.

62 Htun and Weldon 2018; Green 2016.

63 Harper et al. 2020.

64 Ogando et al. 2022; Seck et al. 2021.

the design of methodologies to capture and track progress over time (is it working?) and, more broadly, the role that development organizations should take in this kind of work. We will attend to the question of how change happens in this section, the issue of measurement in the next section (3), and appropriate roles for development organizations in the conclusion (section 4).

This section on how social norms change is organized as follows. It begins with a review of the published evidence on what we are calling the ‘programmatically evidence base’ – recent published studies and evaluations of programmatic interventions to change social norms within development contexts. The view that social norms exist in individuals’ minds, and therefore require interventions at the individual level, is influential in this literature. Next, it zooms out to a broader and more dispersed set of evidence influenced by the view that social norms are diffused throughout society. We draw lessons from across global and historical contexts where social norms change has occurred. The section concludes with takeaways from across these approaches.

2.1

Evidence on programmatic interventions: Media, group communication and incentives

The rise in interest in social norms – and gender norms in particular – in global development discussed in section 1 is reflected in a growing body of published studies and evaluations of programmatic interventions to change discriminatory social norms. In order to identify existing evidence on ‘what works’ to change discriminatory social norms, we began by conducting a scoping review of published studies and evaluations of interventions that explicitly sought to address gender-related social norms.⁶⁵ This included research carried out by academics, as well as research and evaluations commissioned or produced by development agencies such as UN entities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as donor organizations.

⁶⁵ See Annex for details on the study.

Most of the 83 academic and grey (policy) publications that met our search criteria focused on individual and community level interventions. These largely approached social norms as ‘in an individual’s mind’, even when study authors recognized the need for a broader view (i.e., social norms exist throughout wider society). In practice, this meant a focus on changing attitudes, beliefs, perceptions or behaviours, often measured at the individual level and aggregated for a collective (community) perspective. Some gender equality issues receive more attention than others in the programmatic evidence base, with the greatest share focused on GBV, followed by health-focused interventions including HIV, hygiene, family planning and teenage pregnancy. A much smaller share relates to women’s economic empowerment and very few to women’s political participation, peace and security or humanitarian action. The three most commonly studied issues in the programmatic evidence base are media-based interventions, group communication and, to a lesser extent, economic incentives. Working with men and boys is largely recognized as critical to transformational change.

Media and ‘edutainment’

Some evidence suggests that the media can be an effective lever for shifting discriminatory social norms. Studies arrive at this conclusion by measuring changes in attitudes and (sometimes separately) collective behaviour. In India, for example, exposure to cable television seemed to favourably shift attitudes on the acceptability of intimate partner violence (IPV).⁶⁶ In the United States of America, the broadcasting of a popular reality show about teenage pregnancy and motherhood coincided with a decline in both of these in the broader population, and fertility rates in Brazil dropped as people were exposed to soap operas depicting smaller households with fewer children.⁶⁷ Research in Bangladesh, meanwhile, suggests that television narratives are shifting young women’s expectations regarding their own day-to-day lives.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Jensen and Oster 2009

⁶⁷ On the United States, see Kearney and Levine 2015; on Brazil, see La Ferrara et al. 2012.

⁶⁸ Priyadarshani and Rahim 2010.

Such findings have catalysed the development of television and radio “edutainment” interventions in various contexts around the world. Edutainment that is impactful, at least in the short term, shares a few features in common. This includes use of drama and humour, cultural alignment with the target population such that viewers are able to identify with the story’s characters, depiction of the problems of everyday life, and storylines and characters who find happiness and success by doing things differently (‘trendsetters’).⁶⁹ Some evidence suggests that edutainment is most effective when it seeks indirect change by, for instance, promoting a new social norm rather than directly criticizing an old one.⁷⁰ The evidence is thin, however, as to the durability of edutainment’s impacts over time, as well as whether these go beyond changing individuals’ attitudes to actually change social norms.⁷¹

In addition to television and radio, gender and other social norms are reproduced through social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok) and through advertising campaigns.⁷² In turn, media and advertising campaigns can also be harnessed to help shift discriminatory social norms.⁷³ For example, ALIGN’s work on social media and social norms indicates how activists shift gender norms through social media by sharing knowledge and reframing perceptions, amplifying messages, building and expanding like-minded communities and mobilizing campaigns.⁷⁴ However, while various organizations pursue these strategies, more research is needed to evaluate their effectiveness, including among different audiences, their impact on material conditions (e.g., reduction in violence) and on policies and laws, and their use as a long-term strategy.

Economic incentives

Economic incentives have also been studied as a means to shift discriminatory social norms, reflecting the influence of behavioural economics and

specifically Thaler and Sunstein’s “nudge theory”.⁷⁵ In reality, the majority of this programmatic evaluation literature measures changes in behaviour, rather than shifts in social norms per se, though large-scale changes in behaviour or practices can be an effective lever of social norms change (and may well suffice to improve lived realities). Overall, the evidence on the effectiveness of economic incentives on shifting social norms is mixed.

For example, where cash transfers have been effective at changing discriminatory patterns of collective behaviour, it is not always clear what the pathway of causation truly is: For example, did the messaging that accompanied the cash (girls should be in school rather than married off) provoke the change, or was it that the cash itself softened economic hardship? Or did a combination of both lead to changes in the discriminatory norms that had resulted in parents making the decision to invest in boys’ rather than girls’ education? Research on the link between cash incentives and intimate partner violence (IPV) shows that while the injection of cash into the household may decrease IPV by softening economic hardship and increasing women’s economic empowerment, discriminatory gender norms permitting violence against women do not change.⁷⁶ The pragmatic implication of this is that once the cash transfer programme ends, pre-intervention patterns of IPV may return.⁷⁷ These findings indicate that behaviour can change even while a social norm prevails.⁷⁸

Group communication and critical reflection groups

Group communication, or ‘community deliberation’ has been the subject of a fair share of studies and evaluations in the programmatic evidence base. These interventions attempt to change collective perceptions – and ultimately behaviours – through dialogue among members of a social group (sometimes called a reference group). They typically involve creating space

69 La Ferrara 2015; Bicchieri 2017.

70 Evans et al. 2019; Marcus and Harper 2015.

71 La Ferrara 2015; Arias 2019.

72 Diepeveen 2022.

73 Evans et al. 2019; Donati et al. 2022; Francis et al. 2021.

74 Washington and Marcus 2022.

75 Thaler and Sunstein 2008. See also Bicchieri 2017 on economic incentives to change social norms.

76 Barrington et al. 2022er

77 Buller et al. 2018; Aitken et al. 2015; Spencer et al. 2022.

78 Lilleston et al. 2017.

to collectively discuss ‘taboo’ issues and to (1) learn new information about why a belief and related behaviour may be harmful, (2) come to the realization that others may share similar attitudes and beliefs that go against the social norm and (3) collectively decide on a superior alternative.⁷⁹ Some of these evaluations are grounded in critical reflection and are best understood as critical reflection groups. This approach

to shifting discriminatory social norms is not new: Powerful examples of social change achieved through group discussions exist throughout the last century, including feminist consciousness raising (CR) and Freirean *conscientização* (see Box). Indeed, Freirian notions of CR and human rights feature substantially in the theories that inform critical reflection groups on gender equality and violence prevention.

BOX

Group communication through history

Feminist consciousness raising

Consciousness raising (CR) groups in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States (and elsewhere) in the late 1960s to the early 1980s sought to promote non-judgmental group discussion among women about their personal experiences with topics that had broad relevance, such as “sexism, anger, roles and role models, body image, rape, sexuality, relationships with men, women and children, economic disadvantage, career opportunities, and legislation”.⁸⁰ These groups were discussing gender norms, even if this was not the term used. The theory of change underlying the groups was that “By becoming more aware of the reasons behind their behaviour, women are freer to explore alternatives in making decisions about their lifestyles”.⁸¹ CR groups led by Black feminists brought race to bear on the discussions otherwise focused on gender or gender and class, thus building social awareness and solidarity around the specific issues Black women faced.⁸²

CR groups understood that “psychology mattered” insofar as “overcoming psychological obstacles to liberation was a necessary precondition for social change”.⁸³ In other words, change in individual hearts and minds was not the end in itself but was a means to (or a precondition for) a broader end, which was radical changes in the social, political and economic systems that upheld unequal power relations between women and men. Studies of CR groups have found that while not all were successful, many were effective at bridging the tension between “the personal and the political, between psychological liberation and social liberation ... between theory and practice, and between the women’s movement and other spheres of women’s lives, including their private and professional activities”.⁸⁴ The changes that CR achieved occurred slowly but were enduring. Key to their success is that the groups were always community led, their agendas and structures were collectively decided (and contested) and women joined and left at will. CR groups were not tied to donor funding or externally imposed issue agendas.

Conscientização

In the 1970s, groups of ordinary citizens in Brazil drew on Paulo Freire’s work on *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, as a pathway for social transformation and liberation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire envisioned that if men and women assumed roles as active ‘co-investigators’ in exploring their reality, they would build a critical consciousness that would enable them to claim ownership of that reality.⁸⁵ In this way, he saw CR as a precondition for community mobilization.⁸⁶ According to Freirian theory, liberation from oppression requires expressing “view[s] that resist societal norms”, and community participation builds ownership of

79 Bicchieri 2017.

80 Randolph and Ross-Valliere 1979, p. 922–923.

81 Ibid., p. 922.

82 The Combahee River Collective 2014.

83 Ruck 2015, p. 297.

84 Ibid., p. 299; Bruley 2013.

85 Freire 1970.

86 Freire 1973.

both problems and proposed solutions.⁸⁷ Freirian ideas about CR and human rights influenced the development of community deliberation groups, which focused on community-level solutions yet often also called for governmental accountability. Participatory methods included artistic approaches, such as photography and drawing, to facilitate reflection. For example, Freire would ask community members to respond to questions such as “What is exploitation?” with photographs, which provoked deep discussion.⁸⁸

Several organizations throughout Latin America and across the globe have incorporated these methods into their social mobilization and critical reflection efforts. For example, the NGO Minga Perú, which promotes gender equality and reproductive health in the Peruvian Amazon through radio broadcasts and community-based interventions, asked participants to draw themselves now and five years earlier to assess how their views and identities had evolved. The practice forged bonds between participants and helped shape “a collective voice in dialogue and interactions” by building ownership and leadership among community participants.⁸⁹ In Mozambique, a community dialogue programme called Tchova Tchova built on Freire’s *conscientização* to change harmful social norms surrounding HIV prevention. The development of critical consciousness via face-to-face dialogue and questioning one’s beliefs was considered an important part of public health efforts, of which new “knowledge, beliefs and values (attitudes), emotions, self-efficacy, self-concept, and interpersonal communication” could then evolve into new social norms.⁹⁰

87 Rattine-Flaherty and Singhal 2009.

88 Glassman and Erdem 2014.

89 Rattine-Flaherty and Singhal 2009.

90 Figueroa et al. 2016.

Community-level critical reflection and deliberative discussion has been facilitated through approaches like community-based mentoring, community-based engagement and action, locally facilitated class sessions and ‘community discussion centres’, a peer-to-peer learning initiative.⁹¹ Programmes such as UNICEF’s Communities Care, Oxfam’s Creating Spaces Project and Tostan’s Community Empowerment Program leverage deliberation as a key tactic to shift social norms over time. These initiatives seek to prevent violence against women and/or children, dismantle taboos about menstruation and change harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. For example, the Creating Spaces Project in Nepal sought to end violence against women and girls by focusing on women-led collective action as the heart of social change and moving beyond community deliberation to bolster women’s leadership skills through community discussion centres.

Critical reflection groups have been particularly influential in shifting social norms regarding FGM in West

91 Adhikari 2019; Miller et al. 2020; Vaitla et al 2017.

and East Africa. For example, researchers studying the NGO Tostan’s Community Empowerment Program in Senegal found that this approach had lasting effects: In 2008, nearly a decade after the programme’s completion, “the prevalence of [FGM] had fallen by more than half”.⁹² Rather than correct misperceptions, the programme sought to change community members’ attitudes, behaviours and, eventually, social norms. It also went beyond social norms change to “address a variety of intersecting institutional, material, individual and social factors that sustained” these norms.⁹³ To ensure sustainability and maximize impact, the programme used the coordinated approach of ‘organized diffusion’ over a three-year period.⁹⁴ Its activities included the democratic selection of Community Management Committees to lead further development projects related to their community’s needs after the programme ended.

92 UNICEF 2008.

93 Cislighi and Berkowitz 2021.

94 ‘Organized diffusion’ describes a participant-led method through which knowledge to change social norms is shared with specific members of communities and then spreads across levels into the larger social system. See Cislighi et al. 2019.

Engaging men and boys

With respect to shifting discriminatory gender norms, a growing body of evidence supports engaging with men and boys as necessary for change to be sustainable.⁹⁵ Many examples exist of efforts to reach men and boys through media campaigns and edutainment initiatives (e.g., UN-Women’s HeforShe) and group communication efforts (e.g., Real Fathers). Yet engaging them in these ways is not enough. In a review of contemporary work to involve men and boys in shifting discriminatory gender norms, Greig and Flood find that “most interventions are focused only on micro- and meso-level change, their evidence is uneven, and few evaluations examine wider shifts in gender relations or structures of power”.⁹⁶ In other words, such interventions align with a narrow ‘in the mind’ approach to social norms that focuses on men’s social identities and eclipses the ways in which their realities are also shaped by laws, policies and the economy, among other factors. They suggest that what is needed is a political economy approach that emphasizes “broader political struggles for redistribution and social transformation” rather than “privileg[ing] concerns about masculine identities and cultures” via a “politics of recognition”.⁹⁷

Nijera Kori, a Bangladeshi NGO committed to social mobilization, provides an illustrative example of the multifaceted nature of work of the type called for by Greig and Flood. It works to strengthen the collective capabilities of poor or landless women and men to claim their rights and protest discrimination. Kabeer and Sulaiman call this NGO’s strategy for change a “radical capability approach” that builds the critical consciousness of members and, in so doing, can strengthen their ability to challenge discriminatory social norms.⁹⁸ Changes with respect to social norms around masculinities in particular were found to result from processes of social mobilization that started with consciousness raising, utilized an intersectional approach by situating patriarchal norms in the context of other forms of power and inequality,

and engaged both men and women.⁹⁹ In other words, building relationships between women and men and raising critical consciousness led to social mobilization in demand of a more equitable redistribution of resources (e.g., tackling corruption in public service provision, claiming land rights) and other women’s rights issues (e.g., community collective agreements on dowry and early marriage). These processes exemplify what future engagement with the ‘men for gender equality’ field can look like: focusing on “gendered operations of power and injustice”, advocating for both political and policy change, increasing attention toward “anti-patriarchal social action” and recognizing the “extended timeline and complex processes of social change”.¹⁰⁰

Key takeaways from the programmatic evaluation literature

Within the admittedly narrow scope of the programmatic evaluation literature, the evidence is strongest with regard to interventions that involve group reflection and problem-solving on an issue the group’s members have themselves identified. There is little evidence supporting interventions that rely on one-way messaging, such as social marketing or social media blasts. It is also clear that men and boys need to be involved in dialogue and the construction of new norms, rather than simply lectured to. Whether the intervention is media-related, or involves group communication, the involvement of influential actors, such as faith leaders and community leaders, can be important. The literature also points to increased effectiveness when complementary interventions are deployed simultaneously and over a sustained period. This includes, for example, well-designed edutainment programmes combined with group discussions that foster engagement and debate over the course of several years.¹⁰¹

The approaches to social norms change that predominate in the programmatic evaluation literature also have some significant limitations. First, there are slip-pages in the indicators used: Attitudes and behaviours

95 Abebe et al. 2018; Edström et al. 2015; Haylock et al. 2016; Stewart et al. 2021.

96 Greig and Flood 2020, p. i.

97 Ibid., p. 24.

98 Kabeer and Sulaiman 2014.

99 Greig et al. 2015.

100 Greig and Flood 2020.

101 WHO 2019.

are imperfect proxies for social norms, and nearly all of the studies we reviewed identified a need to better understand the long-term effects of the interventions in question. These measurement issues are discussed further in section 3. Second, the approaches reviewed here also tend to focus on achieving change at the individual, interpersonal and community levels. This focus largely reflects a perspective anchored in social psychology and behavioural economics that does not require consideration of factors beyond the perceptions and observed behaviours of individuals or groups.¹⁰² Because these approaches tend to eclipse questions of political economy, they run the risk of reinforcing the notion that gender inequality and discrimination are rooted in personal characteristics or ‘culture’.¹⁰³ Theories of change resting in this perspective tend to place the onus of change on individuals rather than (also) tackling the variety of other factors that influence people’s lives and how they understand and interact with the world around them.

The predominance of a focus on individuals and communities does not necessarily mean the interventions lack a political or power analysis, however. Many such interventions are anchored in a socio-ecological framework that recognizes the importance of working across scale, from working with individuals and communities to also targeting organizations and formal institutions such as law, policy and religion, to create an “enabling environment” for sustainable change. Rather, the narrow focus may reflect the programmatic constraints inherent to much development work, including constrained financial and human resources, externally imposed issue agendas (from donors, for example), results-based management requirements and short funding cycle timelines. In practice, an arbitrary division between ‘grassroots work’ and ‘policy work’ creates a situation in which interventions tend to address social norms either as ‘in an individual’s mind’ or ‘in the wider society’.

102 Piedalue et al. 2020; Greig and Flood 2020.
103 Ibid.

2.2

Shifting social norms in wider society

The question *How do social norms change?* is not comprehensively answered by the existing programmatic evidence base, which generally reflects a theory of change rooted in social psychology and behavioural economics perspectives and focused on individuals. The question has, however, also been answered by sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists – as well as by feminist movements and women’s organizations mobilizing for change in households, in workplaces, in government and in the streets – many of whom approach social norms as diffused throughout society.

It is worth recognizing that an understanding of social norms as “political and embedded”, existing “in all domains of social life, shaped by and shaping the material and institutional”, does not lend itself automatically to a straightforward theory of change and a clear set of steps of the sort most development donors and implementing agencies are searching for.¹⁰⁴ This includes a vast body of critical social science that documents the ways in which gender and other social norms constrain the agency and opportunities of women and girls, and to a lesser extent men and boys, in a variety of different contexts and how these norms interact with other social, economic, political and environmental factors that themselves influence access to and exercise of power.¹⁰⁵ It also includes research in which the treatment of gender norms is more implicit, such as in Auyero’s ethnography of waiting discussed above, or in work documenting how mothers in conditional cash transfer programmes race to comply with conditionalities even when they are sick, or have competing responsibilities, because gender norms about what it means to be a ‘good mother’ interact with a rural economy unfavourable to women.¹⁰⁶

104 Quote from Piedalue et al 2020; commentary authors’ own.
105 Dancer 2018; Wright 2011.
106 Cookson 2018; Molyneux 2006.

Such critical work is valuable in its own right: It documents how power operates in society; it paints accurate pictures of the messiness of the real world; it connects the perceptions and behaviours of individuals to specific features of the broader social, political and economic environment in which they live; and it trains the attention of development professionals away from “technocratic fixes” that too often only provide a Band-Aid. Clear theories of change, though, can be harder to draw from this work.

Social science research asking the broader question of ‘how does social change happen?’ is useful in this regard. Rather than designing, implementing and evaluating an intervention to test for shifts in social norms (the approach typically taken in the programmatic literature), much of this research investigates the drivers of large-scale shifts in social norms over time, often at the societal level. Research to answer this question has deployed a mix of methods, from quantitative analysis of large databases to ethnographic and participatory approaches. This section presents insights from these wider bodies of literature on social norms, social change and gender equality, which offer a more heterogeneous set of perspectives on how social norms change.

This literature points to political, social and economic arenas of ‘wider society’ that are both shaped by social norms, including gender norms, and in turn shape them. In this view, making changes in these arenas can lead to shifts in social norms. The academic literature might refer to these as changes in formal and informal institutions, organizations and ‘the material’ – the built and natural environment and resources.¹⁰⁷ In practice – in the spaces where feminists are doing the work of advocacy, organizing and service provision – such distinctions may be less rigid and also less necessary; understanding that ‘higher level change’ (e.g., in the law, social and economic

¹⁰⁷As noted earlier, while gender norms operate at the individual level, they are also embedded across all domains of social life, shaped by and shaping the material and institutional. This includes the built environment, household objects, money, machines, art, etc. (“the material”). It also includes formal institutions such as the law, religions, the family, the state and the economy as well as the informal institutions that exist within and alongside the formal ones.

policy and regulations, the private sector and global governance organizations) is important may suffice. This section also considers the role of shocks – abrupt, large-scale changes to political, social and economic life – that can shift social norms. It provides examples of how change happens in these arenas, and as a result of shocks, and then discusses lessons derived from them about social norms.

The constitution, rights, laws and policies

The written rules governing a society can communicate strong social messages about what is and is not acceptable. Throughout history and across contexts, women’s right activists have spearheaded the adoption of new laws and policies, and even the new formal recognition of rights, in an effort to change discriminatory social norms around issues as diverse as GBV and unpaid care.¹⁰⁸ Household survey data from Mexico, for example, indicate that social norms have shifted dramatically towards less acceptability of intimate partner violence (IPV) and that rates of IPV declined following the adoption of anti-violence legislation.¹⁰⁹ There is also compelling evidence from Brazil showing how, over time, domestic violence and femicide laws led to increases in reporting by women as well as substantive improvements in state and criminal justice responses to victims.¹¹⁰ The continued existence of violence in these and other contexts, however, indicates that laws alone are not enough – though they are an important tool in the mix.¹¹¹ In Nepal, for example, legislation that bans child marriage and calls for sanctions, such not providing birth certificates or registering households from early marriages, has dissuaded some parents from continuing the practice. Additional measures, including interventions from community discussion centres in coordination with local government, have complemented legislative efforts to reduce child marriage.¹¹²

Similar effects can be found with policy. For example, a study using difference-in-difference models to

¹⁰⁸On GBV, see Htun and Jensius 2022; on care, see Esquivel 2014.

¹⁰⁹Htun and Jensenius 2022.

¹¹⁰Macaulay 2021.

¹¹¹Fuentes 2014.

¹¹²Adhikari 2019.

analyse data from Demographic Health Surveys and World Values Surveys in 31 low- and middle-income countries found that “[a] longer paid maternity leave policy was associated with women’s increased role in economic decision making in the household and improved attitudes toward women’s right to work” among both women *and* men.¹¹³ Providing men with paid paternity leave, in theory, can change norms around care work by fostering more equitable parenting practices and shifting the care work dynamic within households.¹¹⁴ For example, in Canada, more fathers have begun to take paternity leaves in the past two decades: Between 2001 and 2006, only 34 per cent of fathers used a paternity or parental leave, while between 2012 and 2017 that number increased to 46 per cent.¹¹⁵ In practice, evidence of social norms change via paternal leaves may take time to manifest or require that additional factors and conditions are in place. Researchers have suggested that creating non-transferable paternity leaves or implementing “daddy quotas” can help ensure that more men use paternity leaves.¹¹⁶

More recently, feminist efforts to make care more equitable, including through shifting social norms that devalue it and assign it to women, have included action to get care recognized as a right in the law and even the constitution.¹¹⁷ For example, the law establishing the Uruguayan National System of Care, the first in Latin America, was passed thanks to the advocacy of feminist movements as well as feminist academics and NGOs. Care is asserted as a universal right in the system, defining “new rights for persons who are in dependent situations broadly” and “identif[ying] all caregivers, both paid and unpaid, as rights holders”.¹¹⁸ Similar efforts to spearhead the social reorganization of care exist elsewhere. Cabo Verde, for example, passed a policy in 2017 to create its first National Care Plan, which had three primary objectives: professional training for caregivers, the creation of a national care service network and the promotion of policies

to encourage the redistribution of care tasks within households and society. Some feminist movements, such as in Chile and Mexico, have even advocated for ‘feminist constitutions’.¹¹⁹ Evidence is yet to emerge on the extent to which these efforts will change social norms and create material improvements for care providers and those who need care, as well as the extent to which these legal and policy changes have been backed by adequate fiscal resourcing. Yet, given data on singular care policies like maternity and paternity leave, there is at least some indication that this ‘big bet’ on the part of feminist and women’s movements and organizations will generate positive change over time.

Rules and regulations governing the labour market and economic activity

Changes in the economy and the labour market can also shift social norms. A well-studied context for this phenomenon is the garment industry in Bangladesh, where the search for cheap labour by transnational corporations opened the doors for thousands of women to enter the (often poorly) paid workforce. In doing so, they transgressed social norms that constrained women’s place in society to the household. Qualitative research among women workers shows that while women were motivated to seek employment in the factories by a combination of labour market opportunity and economic necessity, they justified their decisions to “break with convention” by redefining and renegotiating social norms around purdah, morality and motherhood in their families and communities.¹²⁰ The broader changes to economic and labour market conditions had other spill-over effects on gender norms among young women and girls: According to one study, girls living in villages near garment factories were more likely to be in school, less likely to get married and less likely to give birth compared to girls living elsewhere. These jobs provided girls with some freedom from their natal home and sheltered them from child marriage, even if the jobs were poor quality. In fact, younger girls aged 12–14 saw the greatest benefit in terms of delaying marriage, which may be due in part to

113 Chai et al 2022.

114 Edström et al. 2015.

115 Statistics Canada 2021.

116 UN-Women 2019.

117 Esquivel 2014.

118 Ibid.

119 CEPAL 2021; Martinez and Maya 2016.

120 Kabeer 1991.

continuing their education in order to obtain jobs in the garment factories.¹²¹

It is worth emphasizing that “the factories did not head for Dhaka intent on liberating Bangladesh”’s women. As is often the case in a complex system such as the global garment trade, the evolution of gender norms was an accidental by-product of structural changes in the economy.¹²² Indeed, various studies show that other discriminatory gender norms were reproduced within the garment factories. For example, unequal power dynamics between the male union leaders and the women workers were upheld by the organizational hierarchy and paternalistic social norms that women should not challenge men’s authority.¹²³ This example illustrates how social norms change is complex and multi-directional and, for it to lead to aggregate improvements in women’s lives, requires multiple, complementary interventions.

Religious systems, practices and teaching

Religion has a significant influence in shaping and maintaining cultural norms that impact on gender equality, such as gender norms pertaining to moral purity, bodily autonomy and gender roles.¹²⁴ At the same time, engaging with religion has also been a key strategy for women’s movements to mitigate backlash and ensure that change is sustainable. Engaging with religion occurs through multiple means, though a couple stand out: (1) leveraging religious texts in favour of gender equality, which may entail the reinterpretation of religious documents; and (2) securing the support of prominent religious leaders who act as gatekeepers to religious communities.¹²⁵

Of note are women’s organizations and movements that are situated within traditional or conservative environments and seek to challenge harmful gender norms and to advocate for women’s rights by reinterpreting religious texts and customs. One significant

example is the work of Musawah, a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family made up of NGOs, activists, scholars, legal practitioners, policymakers and women and men across the globe.¹²⁶ Through capacity-building and partnerships with women’s organizations that are rooted in the local context, Musawah works to (re)align feminist and Islamic discourses and practices – such as those related to family law – in ways that help mitigate against backlash and encourage shifts in social norms that promote progress on gender equality. For example, Musawah developed a course to build the knowledge of women leaders working in Muslim contexts so that they “critically speak out on the impacts of laws, policies, and practices justified in the name of Islam” in their specific environment.¹²⁷ It also created a feminist reader’s guide on rethinking authority in Muslim legal tradition, which they have made publicly available to build bonds between scholarship and activism on the subject.¹²⁸

Women’s organizations within Catholicism have also built connections with faith leaders, such as bishops and priests, to advance gender-equitable practices within both the church and their broader societies. In Latin America, increased dialogues between Catholic theologians and women’s movements over the past half century have shaped a “Latin American community of liberation theologians” that puts forward an “inclusive” interpretation of religious texts.¹²⁹ In the 1990s, Latin American Christian feminists advanced international exchange and dialogue through the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians and Theology in the Americas.¹³⁰ More recently, in Ireland, the landslide vote in the 2018 referendum to repeal the constitutional ban on abortion occurred in part due to the advocacy of NGOs such as Catholics for Choice and “helping people reconcile their religion with a desire for reproductive rights”.¹³¹ The Catholic church has recently built new leadership positions for women, with express

121 Kabeer 2007, as cited in UN-Women 2019.

122 Green 2016, p. 51.

123 Dannecker 2000.

124 UN-Women 2019.

125 Working with actors who might themselves be viewed as “excluders” of women and resistant to gender equality is a strategy referred to in the governance literature as “working with the grain”. See Barnes et al. 2021.

126 See Musawah n.d.a.

127 See Musawah n.d.b.

128 Rehman 2022.

129 Aquino 1998.

130 Peña 1995.

131 UN-Women 2019.

calls for more women leaders from the Pope and recent modifications to their canon law.¹³²

Organizational change

In some cases, changes to the ways in which organizations – from businesses to political parties, government ministries, labour unions, sports teams and CSOs, among others – are structured and run (i.e., their leadership, processes, practices and rules) can also lead to shifts in social norms and thus change the impact those organizations have on gender equality internally as well as externally. There are a variety of approaches to organizational change, although these vary in effectiveness.

One theory of change is that increasing women’s representation in organizations, particularly at the highest levels of decision-making, can provoke positive shifts in gender norms. The evidence supporting this theory of change is mixed, however, and comes with several caveats. On the one hand, studies show that having a greater number of women in government is positively associated with factors such as the availability of maternity and paternity leave and gender equality in work. On the other hand, greater representation of women does not seem to have a bearing on poverty, unemployment and poor health. These findings lead researchers to conclude that for “some dimensions of gender equality, the driving forces of change have more to do with general transformations of society than the equal distribution of women and men in elected assemblies”.¹³³ One explanation points to the interaction of gender norms with other social norms around class, caste, ethnicity and race, among other factors. Women who are able to enter elite organizations may not share the same “class concerns” as other women and thus may not represent and take action on the interests of poor women.¹³⁴ The recognition of this dynamic underlies calls for feminist leadership of important national and global organizations, beyond just female leadership – in other words, support for leaders who are aligned with transformative policy platforms.¹³⁵

132 Daniels 2021.

133 Wängnerud and Sundell 2011, p. 99. See also Franceschet and Piscopo 2008.

134 Htun and Weldon 2018; Goetz 1998.

135 Sandler and Goetz 2020; Cornwall and Goetz 2005.

Another explanation for why women’s representation in organizations is not always sufficient relates to the gendered ways in which organizations are structured. This view emphasizes that, from the outset, gender norms inform decisions about the roles, requirements, processes and practices of an organization – leading to organizations ‘built by men, for men’ (and their biological characteristics and socially-prescribed responsibilities). This is the sort of ‘male bias’ that Diane Elson and others talked about in *Male Bias in the Development Process*, as discussed in section 1. Organizational structure can impact on women’s ability to meaningfully participate in and thus shape the outcomes of organizations. Research on Panchayati Raj institutions in India, for example, shows that even when gender and caste quotas are in place, women’s participation is stymied by barriers including lack of childcare and social norms restricting their mobility such that they rely on the willingness and availability of husbands to drive them to meetings.¹³⁶ Changing gender norms within organizations may also require more significant transformations that create the conditions for women and men to share care responsibilities and for organizations to recognize that people have caring lives and require time and adequate compensation.

Part of changing institutions is working with influential actors within those institutions – for example, those who shape how the organization is governed. Gender at Work is an example of an organization that provides “peer support” to organizations such as unions, university science labs, CSOs and development institutions to help strengthen their contributions to gender equality and the advancement of feminist leadership. Their Gender Action Learning (GAL) framework, in particular, leverages adult learning principles and long-term engagement to transform social norms from within organizations. The GAL approach is grounded in a theory of change and action that social norms change requires working with a diversity of individuals across an organizational hierarchy. More specifically, it recommends that key institutional actors who enjoy a sphere of influence and/or decision-making power be involved in the “change” projects (e.g., the director of the university science lab,

136 Domingo et al 2015.

rather than “just” a junior technician working in it). UN-Women and other partners (e.g., the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – UNODC) take a similar approach in their work with police to catalyse more gender-responsive police services for victims of violence against women (VAW).¹³⁷ In this case, the approach centres on working with “police middle managers” who can inspire change from subordinates that improves the services on offer.¹³⁸

Infrastructure and resources

Changes to the physical environment, including infrastructure such as buildings, transportation and communication networks, power and water and sanitation systems can also contribute to shifting social norms.¹³⁹ A well-evaluated example of this is water, sanitation and health (WASH) and menstrual hygiene management (MHM) programming that has sought to change discriminatory social norms impeding girls’ education by changing school buildings to include appropriate washrooms.¹⁴⁰ While ensuring that girls have access to facilities does not entirely resolve the problem, it is an important part of the solution. Similarly, organizations working to increase access to MHM products and infrastructure in humanitarian contexts have found that lack of adequate MHM infrastructure is both driven by discriminatory social norms and drives them.¹⁴¹ On this basis the provision of MHM supplies in humanitarian crises is a key component of how frontline organizations respond to gender inequality and its material effects in crisis situations.¹⁴²

Studies on transportation infrastructure further illustrate the relationship between infrastructure and social norms. In Tehran, for example, the construction of a subway line and the inclusion of women-only cars created opportunities for women to access education, employment and recreation in parts of the city that otherwise would have been inaccessible. The subway also offered them a space to be anonymous and, through acts like changing their hijab

styles and makeup, challenge restrictive social norms about “proper” Muslim women upheld by the state. In doing so, the visibility of women in public spaces increased, as did opportunities for women to “explore new gendered roles and identities”.¹⁴³ Similar findings have emerged in Mexico City, where the combination of public investment in women-only transportation options and political action have shifted social norms around women’s mobility.¹⁴⁴ A mixed-methods study drawing on national statistics, informal interviews and media coverage found that “women-only buses, subway cars, and taxis have not only been used as places to publicize a historically ignored problem of GBV in transportation, but also to legitimize women’s claims to equal rights to mobility”.¹⁴⁵

What made the initiative in Mexico City successful was a multi-pronged approach: In addition to public investment in fleets of women-only vehicles, the National Institute for Women (INMUJERES) ran a campaign that included “converting women-only transportation into a symbolic place for a women’s movement” by painting the vehicles pink, naming the buses ‘Athena’ (goddess of war, courage and independence) and adorning them with pictures of historical women, reframing violence on public transit as an issue of gender discrimination and connecting a new law against GBV with the establishment of new safe spaces for women to report violence in transit.¹⁴⁶ The pink buses and women-operated taxis prompted a public discussion about men’s role in women’s experiences of violence and, like in Iran, broke down restrictive stereotypes about the appropriateness of women’s mobility. Moreover, the evident success of the initiative prompted transit companies to hire more women drivers, shifting gender norms that previously excluded women from that industry.

Social norms can enable or constrain access to resources, such as land, money, tools and technology. For example, discriminatory gender norms can pose a barrier to women’s ownership of land and other

137 Fernandez and Townsley 2021

138 Ibid.

139 Khanna and Das 2016; Ames and Yon 2022

140 See for example Sahin 2015.

141 Fuentes. and Cookson 2019

142 Patel et al. 2022.

143 Bagheri 2017, p. 313.

144 Dunckel-Graglia 2016.

145 Ibid., p. 628.

146 Ibid., p. 62.

resources in many parts of the world.¹⁴⁷ Some customary systems in Africa only grant women indirect access to land and produce through male relatives.¹⁴⁸ Researchers have pointed to unfavourable court rulings that uphold customary systems as influenced by social norms on land ownership.¹⁴⁹ Access to these resources, in turn, can shift discriminatory social norms regarding ownership and decision-making capacities and has been positioned as a key strategy by some women’s rights organizations. In Uganda, for example, local women’s rights organizations have advanced a rights-based discourse to build solidarity with rural women, promote legislative change and increase women’s land ownership. Women have leveraged strategies including “purchase of land, obtaining titles to land, taking claims to courts, and organized collective protest around legislation, together with daily acts of resistance” to advance their aims.¹⁵⁰ Research among resettled Syrian refugees in Turkey and the United States found that access to resources such as cars and training opened up new possibilities for young women and broadened the remit of what was possible in the eyes not only of the young women but of their mothers and fathers as well.¹⁵¹

There are other arenas, such as health and education systems, in which action has been taken to shift discriminatory social norms and improve gender outcomes. One such example is the development of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in school curricula. Long-term work at the level of crafting new curricula, new manuals, new institutional tools and new teams of activists to train educators exemplifies how education systems, and gender advocates within them, can be leveraged to slowly reduce discriminatory norms and practices. For example, a systematic review of evidence from three decades found that outcomes of CSE include “appreciation of sexual diversity, dating and intimate partner violence prevention, development of healthy relationships, prevention of child

sex abuse, improved social/emotional learning, and increased media literacy”.¹⁵²

Shocks and crises

Scholars of social change have long observed that “international economic and political crises destabilize entrenched institutions, including institutions of gender, thus opening up opportunities for emancipatory politics”.¹⁵³ “Critical junctures” – major events such as large scale economic and political shocks as well as natural disasters and crises – can quickly reorder what people do, which can in turn lead to shifts in gender and other social norms.¹⁵⁴ An example of a critical juncture in Western history is the shift in social norms around female labour during and after World War II.¹⁵⁵ Because women’s labour was needed to sustain national economies as well as to support the military operations, conventional expectations about women’s role in social life changed. Women were elevated out of domesticity into the public, economic realm of society, and policies and campaigns for the formation of alternative arrangements of domestic work were launched in order to increase women’s employment.¹⁵⁶ Similar shifts have been observed during other wars and conflict contexts, with women taking up new jobs, joining armies, acting as peace-makers and contributing to the reconstruction of communities.¹⁵⁷ Once the war ends, however, societal pressures and post-conflict processes tend to limit the capacity of women to participate fully and take advantage of new opportunities.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, a few years after World War II, women were encouraged to go back into the home and make space for men who were seeking employment.¹⁵⁹

Humanitarian crises can also provoke the renegotiation of gender norms.¹⁶⁰ During the Ebola crisis in West Africa, for example, men assumed new caregiving

147 Van den Bold et al. 2015.

148 Gray and Kevane 1999, as cited in van del Bold et al. 2015.

149 Tripp 2004.

150 Ibid.

151 Yalim and Critelli 2023.

152 Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021.

153 Meyer and Prugel 1999, cited in Naples and Desai 2002, p. 4.

154 Green 2016.

155 Hancock 1994; Summerfield 2013.

156 Ibid.

157 Justino et al. 2012.

158 Ibid, p. 6.

159 Colman 1995.

160 Dietrich Ortega et al. 2020.

roles to contribute to the welfare of their families.¹⁶¹ Humanitarian response programming and resettlement policies commonly create opportunities to shift gender norms by positioning women as income-earners in social protection and employment schemes.¹⁶² Yet attention also needs to be paid to changes in men's roles and the intersection of gender norms with other social norms related to class, ethnicity and race. Indigenous women affected by protracted crisis in Colombia, for example, emphasize that gender norms shifted alongside other social norms: "The armed conflict has affected everything in our way of living. Ancestrally, we used to live in harmony with nature, in equilibrium with nature and with our spirits. Then a series of displacements came about with a series of human rights violations that led to a total disequilibrium. Obviously, the impact is both for men as well as for women and total chaos came about in our territory."¹⁶³

The previously mentioned research among Syrian refugees in Turkey and the United States describes that while gender norms at home in Syria positioned men as breadwinners and protectors of their families, some resettlement policies and humanitarian programming constructed Syrian men as dangerous to women and as security threats, offering them fewer opportunities to thrive.¹⁶⁴ Research on refugee resettlement contexts also illustrates that gender norms are "revisited and revised" depending on challenges encountered as well as the larger policy context and support on offer in the host country.¹⁶⁵ For example, women's integration into the paid workforce may be prompted by necessity rather than by an underlying change in views regarding social acceptability. If the work is considered indecent or undignified, or women are discriminated against on the basis of class or ethnicity, it is not accurate to equate the shift in roles to empowerment.

Shocks and crises can also reinforce unequal gender norms. This was illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a reversion to social norms assigning

women majority responsibility for unpaid caregiving, with significant negative implications for their labour force participation and access to income.¹⁶⁶ This shift was catalysed at least in part by lockdown measures and public policies grounded in the assumption that 'someone' would pick up the slack. The "shadow pandemic" of violence against women also points to the heightening of discriminatory gender norms that condone male violence, a dynamic evidenced in the increase of sexual and gender-based violence that often occurs in crisis contexts.¹⁶⁷ Research on economic shocks showed that as the 2008 financial crisis worsened in Europe, "more people came to agree with the sentiment that men had more rights to jobs than women", a view that was more pervasive in countries with welfare systems based on conventional male-breadwinner models.¹⁶⁸ This is perhaps not surprising if we accept that unequal gender norms are baked into economic systems that assign greater value to paid "productive" work, and lesser or no value to the "reproductive" work that sustains society – and economic production.¹⁶⁹

Even where positive changes follow critical junctures, little evidence exists about whether shifts in gender norms and roles during crises endure after the crisis is resolved.

Key takeaways from the 'how change happens' literature

The varied bodies of research examining how social change happens provide several lessons that are relevant for understanding what causes social norms, including gender norms, to shift and the characteristics of these shifts. The first is that the relationship between social norms change and change in women's lived realities is messy and multi-directional.¹⁷⁰ It is challenging to measure the effect of any one action or event as shifts in social norms often occur as a result of multiple, unrelated factors.¹⁷¹ Reflecting on Oxfam's work in women's rights, for example, Green writes:

161 McLean and Paxton 2019.

162 Blackwell et al. 2019.

163 Dietrich Ortega et al. 2020, p. 31.

164 Yalim and Critelli 2023.

165 Ibid., p. 7.

166 UN-Women 2021a.

167 Stark et al. 2021; Raftery et al. 2022; Stark et al. 2020.

168 Kushi and McManus 2018.

169 Fraser 2022.

170 Inglehart and Norris 2003.

171 Green 2016.

Women’s expected roles [and thus norms about women’s roles] have undergone extraordinary change over the last century. Was the main factor behind this shift the right to vote, employment outside the home, the invention of the washing machine, girls’ education, new forms of contraception, access to information, or the women’s movement? The answer of course is all of the above and more. In a complex system full of feedback loops and surprises, each of these factors has both shaped and been shaped by evolving norms on women’s roles.¹⁷²

The research generated from four years of investigation through ODI’s ALIGN platform confirms these dynamics. For example, changes to policies, laws and material conditions have been observed to shift social norms; in other cases, changes in social norms have been observed to shift material conditions, policies and laws. This ‘problem of attribution’ poses some pragmatic hurdles for results-based development practice that requires clear theories of change.

The second lesson is that shifts in social norms (usually) occur slowly. If we accept that rules about appropriate and inappropriate roles for women and men are deeply embedded in the social, political and economic institutions of society, as well as in the built environment, then it stands to reason that changing them will not happen quickly. Most of the literature on how social change happens confirms that norms change is slow. Indeed, the principal researcher of the ALIGN platform noted that “gender norm change is an enigma in a world that applauds quick wins ... Gender norms change, but the pace is often slow and not always progressive.”¹⁷³ When an apparent shift does occur quickly – for example, in the context of a crisis – it may not be the case that what is observed is really a change in the prevailing social norm. It may just be behaviours changing as a result of necessity. As discussed earlier, however, shifts in collective behaviour

can eventually lead to shifts in social norms. In any case, the material effects of a collective behaviour change – e.g., women earning their own income or men engaging in more care work – may actually be the thing that matters most.

A third lesson is that gender equality issues are shaped by a diverse range of discriminatory social and gender norms, and the extent to which these vary across issues implies that different levers for change will be required. What has worked to shift social norms – and practices – around FGM, for instance, is different from what has worked to shift social norms – and practices – around women’s mobility in public spaces. This lesson aligns with the broader research on the drivers of progress on realizing women’s rights, which indicates that “the logic of gender justice on one issue is not the same as the logic on another issue”.¹⁷⁴

In a landmark statistical study of the drivers of state action on women’s rights, Htun and Weldon find distinct differences in the nature of gender equality issues, which in turn demands the use of different tactics to address them.¹⁷⁵ ‘Status issues’ such as VAW and equality at work are anchored in the privileging of masculinity over femininity and the casting of men as dominant and women as subordinate. Behind the legal and policy wins that have changed women’s material realities in these areas were local women’s and feminist movements that hooked into similar movements elsewhere in the world and leveraged international tools such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to pressure for needed changes. ‘Class issues’, such as family leave policies and childcare, arise from unjust economic arrangements between state, market and family that manifest in inequality among women. Levers of policy change included strong political coalitions and the support of Leftist parties in the case of leave policies and autonomous women’s movements in the case of childcare. ‘Doctrinal issues’ are

172 Ibid., p. 50.

173 Harper et al. 2020, p. 6.

174 Htun and Weldon 2018, p. 4.

175 Htun and Weldon compiled and analysed a dataset of laws and policies across seven domains of women’s rights issues in 70 countries (representing 85 per cent of the world’s population), pooling single-year cross-sections at four points in time between 1975 and 2005.

those influenced by religious and codified cultural traditions. Progress on reproductive freedom, which is a doctrinal, status and class issue, requires multiple levers to be pulled, including working with Leftist parties and drawing on international tools such as CEDAW, especially in more religious societies and in countries where religious institutions have a strong relationship with state governance. In order to ground social norms work in the legal and policy changes that lay the foundation for large-scale material improvements, this research suggests that women's rights advocates will need to assume different approaches depending on the issue at hand.

The fourth, and perhaps most important lesson, is that autonomous women's and feminist movements and CSOs are fundamental actors in achieving enduring shifts in social norms *and* the material conditions of women's lives.¹⁷⁶ It is often groups of women and feminists who have collectively identified discriminatory gender norms, practices, policies and laws and catalysed the action to address them through collective organizing and advocacy in their communities, workplaces and halls of government. On issues such as GBV, which is deeply rooted in harmful gender norms, a study on what works in Latin America found that "strategies put in place by feminist and women's organizations in the region are the main drivers for change, through mobilization, political advocacy and networking that is sustainable in the long term".¹⁷⁷ Indeed, women's mobilizations are behind many of the key legislative changes that enshrine women's rights and communicate what is and is not acceptable. Women's machineries, lobbyists and CSOs have propelled policy issues such as affordable childcare into the public view. By reinterpreting millennia-old religious texts, women's and gender equality CSOs are forging new roles for women and men in religious institutions.

Part of the power of women's and feminist organizations is that they function to bridge legal and policy changes with changes in the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in organizations and communities. Writing

176 Htun and Weldon 2018; Ruiz et al. 2018; Green 2016; Molyneux and Razavi 2002.

177 Ruiz et al. 2018, p. 20.

in the context of legal reform to address GBV and the harmful gender norms that give rise to it, Htun and Jensenius write:

Feminist activists and other civic groups help to close this law-practice gap, often in alliance with progressive state actors. Activist networks bring the law to bear on society through education, provision of resources and other supports, training of police, judges, and health care practitioners, and by calling attention to enforcement failures, among other work. In these ways, societal mobilization often helps to "vernacularize" legal rights, or convert formal law into meanings and practices that are salient and appropriate in local communities.¹⁷⁸

Women's organizing has catalysed shifts in discriminatory social norms in a variety of contexts and by operating at a variety of scales, from the consciousness-raising groups in communities discussed above, to the #NiUnaMenos and #MeToo movements that occupied both online and public physical spaces, to the transnational feminist movements organizing against the devaluation of women's paid and unpaid work through women's strikes. Feminist movements use a variety of tactics, including spreading awareness and fostering social learning, creating social networks, demanding institutional reforms and engaging in lobbying as well as protesting, social disruption and disobedience actions.¹⁷⁹ In the words of Htun and Weldon: "they [feminist movements] articulate social group perspectives, disseminate new ideas and frames to the broader public, and demand institutional changes that recognize these meanings".¹⁸⁰ It is worth noting that sometimes what feminist movements and organizations are trying to change are social norms – but even more often they are struggling for material changes

178 Htun and Jensenius 2022, p. 9.

179 On spreading awareness and fostering social learning, see Rochon 1998; on creating social networks, see Weldon 2004; on demanding institutional reforms, see Rochon and Mazmanian 1993; on engaging in lobbying, see Gelb and Palley 1996; on protesting, social disruption and disobedience actions, see McAdam and Su 2002.

180 Htun and Weldon 2012, p. 552.

(e.g., women living free from violence or enjoying decent work), and shifting social norms is a means to that end or a by-product of it.

A fifth lesson on how gender norms can change is worth emphasizing: that changes can provoke backlash. This is because “norms ... act like a complex system: the way they evolve is seldom linear or imposed. They are fiercely debated, compromises are struck, modifications are made” and even “the prospect of norm shifts can provoke a violent backlash”.¹⁸¹ The risk of backlash may be highest when the social and gender norms in question are those related to women and “status issues”.¹⁸² The evidence on women’s economic empowerment in contexts of strong social norms sanctioning women’s visibility in public spaces bears this out: Evaluations of some public works programmes and humanitarian cash transfers targeting women have found an increase in intimate partner violence, for example, and the work of Islamic feminists has encountered backlash when their propositions have been perceived as ‘outside’ Western or donor-led impositions.¹⁸³

This is where the analysis of power is inseparable from conceptualizations of social norms and appropriate theories of change and action that evolve from them. Writing about the horrific violence against women in the context of global trade and export processing zones in northern Mexico, Staudt writes:

In Juárez, since the birth of maquiladoras, hundreds of thousands of women have worked formally for wages. Although wages are meager and many women work out of need rather than choice, they do earn and control money. Women’s work outside the home has no doubt changed women workers and perceptions of workers. Evidence shows that women in Juárez overwhelmingly denounce violence rather than accept it in self-resignation. Men’s relationships with women have changed as

well, evoking a wide range of responses: threat, support, hostility. Men exhibit diversity as a group, just as do women, with at least a quarter physically violent and far more, verbally abusive. For some men, perhaps male rage against cheapened wages under the global economic regime produces backlash and revenge, but they exercise that rage against an easier target than the global political-economic octopus: their partners. Work, money, and new relationships make women less likely to accept the naturalized ideology of female subservience.¹⁸⁴

Staudt contends that “some men, for whom power and authority have slipped in absolute terms and in relation to women and their growing power, adopt violence against women as a control strategy”.¹⁸⁵ In addition to underscoring how perceived shifts in gender norms can provoke backlash, this example also illustrates the range of contributing factors: global trade rules, changes in labour market opportunities and cheapened labour. It underscores the importance of accounting for and engaging men and boys, whose lives – like those of women and girls – are shaped by the political economy.¹⁸⁶

The risk of backlash has important implications for international development organizations seeking to do social norms change work. A great deal of evidence supports the contention that intentional work to shift social norms needs to be community-driven and thus community-owned.¹⁸⁷ Should international organizations wish to undertake work to shift social norms, they need to understand their responsibility towards the women they work with and be prepared to stick it out with them if backlash should occur. This point is expanded in the conclusion to this paper.

181 Green 2016, p. 61.

182 Htun and Weldon 2018; Cislage and Heise 2020.

183 Blackwell et al. 2019; Merry 2006.

184 Staudt 2008 p. 46.

185 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

186 Greig and Flood 2020.

187 OECD 2019; Cookson et al. 2021; Institute for Reproductive Health, n.d.

2.3

Discussion: Changing hearts and minds, changing society

In practice, there exist many ways to shift discriminatory norms. Some of these are intentional and direct, such as group communication or edutainment interventions; others, such as passing laws or adopting policies, seek to alter the formal and material conditions of society and, in so doing, indirectly shape social norms in the right direction. While the programmatic evidence base focuses on the more direct approaches, this is not because they are the only options or the most effective or sustainable ones in every case. The shifts in social norms wrought through the sustained efforts of women's and feminist movements and CSOs, and their allies in government, the public and private sectors and religious organizations, illustrate that sometimes the shifts that endure are not the result of 'quick wins'. In many cases, the most enduring shifts are those accompanying significant material improvements in people's lives – women's as well as men's.

The evidence across the bodies of literature we review here also suggests the salience of participation when it comes to shifting discriminatory social norms.¹⁸⁸ Consciousness-raising activities throughout contemporary history have involved the participation of ordinary people in the critical examination of why things are the way they are and collective visioning about how things might be different. At its heart, engaging men and boys is about recognizing their participation in maintaining the status quo and fostering their participation in the construction of new, more gender egalitarian social norms.¹⁸⁹ Women's and feminist movements, CSOs, unions and caucuses are often anchored in the participation of people who realized that the prevailing social norms were problematic, and who come together to resist those norms and mobilize others to join their resistance.

Effective efforts to shift discriminatory social norms, and thus improve the material conditions of people's

188 For more on participatory approaches to social norms change, see: Chambers 1994; Gaventa and Martorano 2016.

189 Greig and Flood 2020.

lives, exist at individual and community levels as well as within the broader arenas of "wider society". Theories of change that are more likely to have enduring effects are going to be those that recognize the complexity of social life and connect what happens in households and neighbourhoods, for example, to decisions taken in government offices, corporate headquarters and multilateral economic institutions. Indeed, many of the "higher level" approaches to shifting social norms are at least implicitly grounded in the view that social norms are dialectically (re)constituted in both individual hearts and minds as well as in the systems and structures of wider society. Approaches that recognize this dynamic include, for example, those that work through strategically situated actors in powerful organizations, from police units to religious bodies, to help address gaps between *de jure* frameworks for gender equality and *de facto* realities that fall short of this or indeed that are rampant with inequalities.¹⁹⁰

Thinking about social norms change in terms of systems – and, moreover, complex systems – also drives home the point that social norms change does not occur in a vacuum: As one social norm shifts, we should expect that many other things of a normative and material nature do too. A case in point are the changes in social norms around women's economic roles that occurred as a result of World War II or the establishment of garment industries and export processing zones. New economic opportunities prompted changes in collective behaviour that, over time, became normalized. The story does not end there, however: Modern "crises of care" are a result of shifts in gender norms that permitted women to work for pay but were not accompanied by normative changes that (sufficiently) permitted men to take on more care work or assigned greater responsibility for socialized care to the public and private sectors. The result is the normalization of women's double burden and the reorganization of care work among

190 There is also an important literature coming from the international development perspective that, in reflecting critically on the possibilities and limitations of gender mainstreaming, considers how organizational change in favour of gender equality might be catalysed by feminists within, but also at the margins of, mainstream organizations (see Eyben and Turquet 2013).

women – from elite women to poorly-paid, working class and often migrant women.

Socio-ecological models are one practical tool that can help development organizations consider how individual hearts and minds are shaped by very real forces in the wider world, and vice-versa. Initially developed by psychologist Bronfenbrenner to conceptualize how individuals are influenced by multi-level factors, the model was later adapted by Heise to understand the complex nature of violence against women.¹⁹¹ It presents a shift away from single-factor theories, offering a framework for a ‘systems approach’ that emphasizes that social norms change programmes need to work across different levels in a coordinated way in order to develop a “critical mass” for change.¹⁹² Various iterations of the model exist. Ultimately, their purpose is “not to determine precisely in which domain a particular factor should fall” but to prompt thoughtful consideration of the variety of factors at play that work to sustain harmful practices and to identify how a shift in norms in one sphere may impact on life in another.¹⁹³

This section of the paper has sought to answer the question *How do social norms change?* A related question, and one that is also the subject of a fair share of debate, is *How are social norms measured?* We will answer this question in the next section.

191 Bronfenbrenner 1977; Heise 1998.

192 Eaton 2021; Cislighi et al. 2019.

193 Cislighi and Heise 2018, p. 620.

3.

HOW ARE SOCIAL NORMS MEASURED?

When it comes to the topic of measurement, at least two tensions are relevant to this paper. One of these is methodological and the other is philosophical, both of which have ethical dynamics. The methodological tension is about how best to measure social norms. There is currently no global standard for identifying and measuring social norms change, despite the great deal of effort invested in getting this right among development and global health practitioners (and academic researchers, for that matter). The second tension concerns whether ‘getting measurement right’ is a worthwhile goal in and of itself – and, if so, to what extent. There are legitimate concerns about the intentions behind, and efforts towards, such a project. This section will address both these issues.

The section is organized by data collection steps that would typically accompany a development project within a results-based framework: (1) contextual discovery to identify relevant factors contributing to a problem; (2) establishment of a priori indicators, which will enable measurement of change; (3) iterative measurement of ongoing changes during project implementation; (4) final data collection and (5) dissemination of results. In working through each of these data collection steps, we discuss the approaches that are currently used to measure social norms and their strengths and limitations. In light of these strengths and limitations, as well as the broader context within which gender equality work in development is currently taking place, we conclude with reflections on ‘getting measurement right’.

3.1

Contextual discovery

This initial phase of a project involves data collection about the context in which the problem is occurring as well as features of the problem. Quantitative methods and sources of data, for example, might include household surveys and demographic data sourced from national statistical offices that help paint a picture

of the social and economic features of a community, e.g., age, household composition, religious and ethnic makeup, employment rates and income levels, among other characteristics. Qualitative methods such as interviewing, focus groups and observation might be used to describe in detail local customs and practices and, importantly, local perspectives on the issue at hand. This is the phase of a project within which qualitative methods – deployed rigorously, and by those with deep understanding of social dynamics and local context – are useful to identify social norms as well as the various other social, political, economic and environmental factors shaped by and shaping social norms and influencing material outcomes.

For example, the first phase of CARE’s Tipping Point Initiative to address child marriage in Bangladesh and Nepal included a “community participatory analysis” (CPA) designed “to deepen understanding of the contextual factors and root causes driving the prevalence of child marriage” in specific regions of the countries.¹⁹⁴ Focus groups with women and girls, and men and boys, were used to identify factors that shape gender norms, such as the strength of religious institutions, as

194 CARE USA 2017.

well as practices informed by gender and other social norms, such as *purdah*. Importantly, focus groups were also used to map the services, built environment and material resources of the community, such as the presence of NGOs, the location of households, schools and other organizations and services of significance to the community, distribution of agricultural land and access to productive infrastructure and markets. Focus groups also identified environmental factors, such as rainfall, and political economy factors, such as food security, labour market and migration patterns, as well as relationships between these. Interviews were used to document and understand the life stories of women, men, girls and boys, the major events within them (e.g., puberty, education, marriage) and their own interpretations of these, as well as their personal aspirations.

This participatory discovery phase of the project identified the five strongest social norms around acceptable behaviour for girls. In Nepal, for example, these included social norms around girls' mobility, their participation in decision-making around marriage and education, their sexuality and their voice and participation in their communities. The exploratory nature of this measurement phase, and the view beyond individual attitudes, beliefs and perceptions, facilitated a recognition of complexity and the influence of economic factors on human behaviour: "[K]ey findings from the CPA study around the drivers of child marriage show that it is embedded in a complex dynamic of economic insecurity and prevailing social norms around family honor, control of girl's sexuality, and the low social status of girls."¹⁹⁵

If we accept the view that social norms shape and are shaped by social, political and economic arenas that extend well beyond communities (e.g., laws, religious doctrine, trade and labour regulations), it is worth emphasizing here that a contextual discovery phase should include consideration of how these impact on the social norms, practices and material realities (e.g., environment, access to resources) of the communities where the social norms in question are evidenced. Socio-ecological models can be helpful in this regard.

195 CARE 2017 p. 2.

3.2

Establish baseline indicators

Many different approaches exist for establishing the indicators that will be monitored throughout a programmatic intervention to measure social norms change. Variation in approaches is attributable to lack of consensus on the definition of social norms, as discussed in section 1. It is also a reflection of methodological challenges, particularly regarding understandings of social norms that seek ever more precision. Indicators that capture individuals' attitudes, beliefs and sometimes behaviours are common in scholarly and practitioner social norms research as well as programmatic evaluations. This approach is typically informed by social psychology and behavioural economics perspectives and methods. Attitudes and beliefs, and sometimes behaviours, are used as proxies for social norms because these data are relatively straightforward to collect.

A common critique of this approach, however, is that individual attitudes and beliefs are poor proxies for social norms because they can actually be at odds with the prevailing social norms.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, changes in individual attitudes and beliefs are not a sufficient condition for social norms change. They may 'indicate' deeper-rooted social norms change, but they can also be driven by other factors (e.g., policy changes), leaving the prevailing social norms intact. Recent experiences in some countries around childcare are a case in point. Introducing access to quality, affordable childcare may change the attitudes, beliefs and practices of mothers and fathers with regard to women's socially assigned responsibility for children's care. Yet, when public officials remove access to childcare, as they did during the COVID-19 pandemic, it may fall back onto women (not men), illustrating that the social norm assigning responsibility for children's care is still around. This suggests a dynamic we might think of as different levels of social norms: A new social norm in one context (where quality childcare is publicly provided) rests on top of an old social norm in another context (where access to quality childcare does not exist or is taken away). This also, of course,

196 Bicchieri 2017.

indicates the influence of the political economy on social norms. We will return to this point of alternative explanations and inadequate assumptions of causation further below.

There is some consensus that “the emphasis on measuring not only individual attitudes but also individuals’ perceptions of others’ expectations is a significant move towards locating social norms in the interactions between individuals and their social world”.¹⁹⁷ On this basis, many scholarly studies of social norms draw on the World Values Survey, which conventionally asked questions about attitudes and beliefs until its most recent version (Wave 7), which incorporated questions about community perceptions.¹⁹⁸ These and other studies attempt to capture what individuals think or believe is acceptable/unacceptable behaviour, as well as individuals’ perceptions of social dynamics in their communities, e.g., what they think their neighbours think is or is not acceptable behaviour. Programmatic interventions are also moving beyond attitudes and beliefs and adopting increasingly sophisticated methods to incorporate perceptions.¹⁹⁹ Such approaches seek to capture an individual’s expectation of how others would react if a certain thing happened (empirical expectations) and what an individual believes others would expect them to do in a certain scenario (normative expectation). Attempts at capturing community perceptions often involve the use of hypothetical vignettes and incentives to induce participants to answer questions sincerely.²⁰⁰ In some cases, incentives are justified as a technique for (at least partly) overcoming the subjective nature of the answers elicited and their susceptibility to bias. Yet, these attempts to establish baseline indicators typically remain anchored in the individual level: The “aggregation of *individual perceptions* to create

a collective category continues to rely upon behavioural sciences’ understanding of norms as located within individuals’ minds”.²⁰¹

Some approaches to measuring social norms change incorporate collective patterns of behaviour in their baseline indicators. Harper et al., for instance, look at attitudes, beliefs and behaviours together, thus attempting to get a closer approximation of norms in practice.²⁰² An example of baseline indicators worth highlighting is the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), a cross-country measure developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Centre of gender-based discrimination in formal and informal laws, social norms and practices. The index draws together outcome indicators (e.g., prevalence of early marriage, polygamy), attitudes (e.g., towards domestic violence) and the existence of certain laws (e.g., on workplace rights).²⁰³ For example, SIGI triangulates data on women’s representation in politics, the presence of gender quotas and country-level attitudes on whether men make better leaders than women to explore whether quotas can “change the status quo where rigid gender norms restrict women’s ability to become political leaders”.²⁰⁴ While it does not measure social norms directly, or capture community perceptions, it seeks to leverage “sex-disaggregated data on social attitudes and behaviours, as well as existing formal and informal laws” to help measure gender discrimination in social norms.²⁰⁵ SIGI is a research and advocacy tool rather than a programmatic intervention per se, but it is useful in highlighting an effort that seeks to draw connections between what exists ‘in hearts and minds’ (attitudes), ‘within wider society’ (e.g., laws) and in practices (e.g., early marriage).

Randomized control trials

The establishment of baseline indicators is an important step in randomized control trials (RCTs), which are

197 Piedalue et al. 2020, p. 98.

198 The World Values Survey is the largest non-commercial, cross-national, time series investigation of human beliefs and values ever executed, currently including interviews with almost 400,000 respondents. It is conducted by a global network of social scientists studying changing values and their impact on social and political life, led by an international team of scholars, with the WVS association and secretariat headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden. See: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>.

199 Bicchieri 2017; CARE 2017; Perrin et al. 2019.

200 Bicchieri 2017.

201 Piedalue et al. 2020, p. 98, original emphasis.

202 Harper et al. 2020.

203 The SIGI predominantly relies on quantitative methods and draws on qualitative data in the form of a standardized questionnaire in order to gather supplementary data on the legal landscape.

204 OECD 2023a.

205 Ibid.

increasingly used to measure social norms change in development and global health interventions.²⁰⁶ Yet, their faithful reliance on a set of baseline indicators, and their inability to adapt interventions to changing circumstances, is also a significant weakness with regard to social norms. Where they are used, RCTs use individual attitudes, beliefs and behaviours as baseline indicators for social norms, all of which are imperfect proxies. To be clear, RCTs are a useful tool in many measurement scenarios. They were designed for biological interventions (i.e., those in medical research) with little complexity and few confounding factors, most of which are amenable to control. This ‘control’ is key to the claims of rigour that led to RCTs being crowned the “gold standard” for establishing causal relationships between interventions and outcomes. They are, however, a significantly less feasible approach in scenarios of high complexity and low control of confounding factors. For development programmes that take place outside of a lab and “in the wild” (to use Bicchieri’s term), it is impossible to control for the multitude of factors that may influence outcomes.

More noteworthy, however, is that the rigidity of the RCT model does not allow for consideration of the communities in which people exist, the institutions with which they interact and the actual experiences they have with these in their everyday lives – it does not locate them in the social, political, economic and environmental ecosystems in which they live.²⁰⁷ The result is that RCT methods render programmes of intervention less capable of adapting to unintended consequences, some of which may involve grave harm. An RCT carried out in Somalia by researchers at Harvard University provides an example.²⁰⁸ It involved an experiment that used social messaging to shift social norms perceived to be driving widespread practices of a severe form of female genital cutting (FGC; type III); the aim of the project was to ‘downgrade’ the type of FGC practiced to other types (I and II) that the World Health Organization considers less severe on the grounds that it involves removing less of the

genitalia. Yet, while the RCT did indeed provoke a shift in this practice, it also had the effect of *increasing* the practice of types I and II FGC among households that never would have otherwise practiced FGC at all. Shockingly, the researchers interpreted the harm caused as little more than a deviation.

This case emphasizes an important and oft-overlooked point: While some contexts related to social norms may present circumstances that are relatively safe for RCTs, in other cases the RCT method may not only be unsuitable but entirely unethical. Whether an RCT is an ethical method needs to be seriously considered at the contextual discovery phase of a project – and, to be clear, a handful of consultations conducted by ‘parachuted in’ researchers will not suffice. The significance of this shortcoming will be further expanded on below (section 3.7).

Big data

Recent years have seen a rise in attempts to measure gender norms using ‘big data’: the “digital information passively generated by human social and economic behaviour, and often available at high resolution in both time and space”.²⁰⁹ The attempts use data from sources such as Twitter, Facebook and cell-phone towers to extract insights about attitudes, beliefs and behaviour on a large scale and often in real-time. Such initiatives to “unlock the potential of digital data to inform real-world interventions” are interesting in part because of the unprecedented scale at which they can operate.²¹⁰ Some may also provide important insights into online culture that could – in theory – inform interventions to improve the toxic culture of many online spaces, though in practice this would require productive coalitions between technology companies and human rights groups.

Data that are generated passively in the course of people’s social and economic activity can speak to their actual behaviour in a substantively different manner than subjective responses to interviews or surveys. For example, a smartphone’s GPS log does not report where individuals say they spend their time – the data trace where they actually were. However,

206 Randomized control trials were the most commonly deployed measurement approach in the programmatic evaluation literature captured by our scoping review. See Markel et al. 2016; Clark et al. 2017; Glass et al. 2018.

207 Piedalue 2020, p. 98.

208 La Ferrara 2023.

209 Vaitla n.d.

210 Ibid.

a significant limitation of such research has to do with the difficulty in using trace data to make inferences about complex social dynamics related to such issues as power differences, access to resources and changes in the environment. For example, GPS logs might show that female smartphone users spend more time outside the home than male smartphone users, but it could be difficult to ascertain whether this reflects a gendered social norm about presence at home rather than gender and class-based differences in smartphone ownership, or differences in use of privacy and battery-saving settings that limit logging of GPS data. Such limitations have been recognized by big data researchers themselves.²¹¹ Furthermore, in the context of no gold standard regarding digital data rights, some researchers have suggested that “using big data poses a minefield of conceptual, practical, ethical, epistemological and political issues, leading to ‘bigger dilemmas’ than it solves”.²¹²

3.3

Iterative measurement of ongoing changes

Ongoing evaluation throughout the life course of a development programme is critical not only for tracking the effectiveness of an intervention but also for identifying unintended consequences early on. Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and observation are useful for this type of data collection, as are the complaint and grievance mechanisms used in some interventions. If properly designed and deployed, they can shed light on the anticipated and unanticipated experiences of those involved in or impacted by the programme or intervention and empower practitioners to redesign a programme (or stop a harmful intervention). Approaches should thus have the flexibility to enable researchers and evaluators to discover and explain unexpected phenomena.²¹³

This is particularly important when we consider the risk of backlash to social norms programming and the usefulness of being able to diagnose potentially

antagonistic reactions early on.²¹⁴ The importance of opportunities for iteration are illustrated in research on UPWARD, a programme implemented in the United Republic of Tanzania, which sought to increase women’s participation and role in decisions around water and sanitation.²¹⁵ By providing iterative monitoring accompanied by ongoing mentoring, the initiative pivoted mid-way to address backlash from men and adjust the pace to approach shifting social norms more gradually instead of pushing for rapid change that isolated community members. In the case of RCTs and other similarly structured scientific approaches, the practice of establishing rigid indicators a priori comes with the weakness of not being able to adapt them to ongoing learning about how people are responding to an intervention. In the context of social norms, which are produced and reproduced in relation to a complex set of factors, methods that enable practitioners, programme evaluators and researchers to account for complexity are critical.

Of course, opportunities to identify and understand how an intervention is interplaying with the variety of social norms that exist in any given society, as well as with the other economic, political and environmental factors, also enables practitioners, programme evaluators and researchers to identify and explain the ‘bright spots’ – what is working, and why.²¹⁶ Measurement of ongoing changes can also open opportunities to refine the baseline indicators themselves and improve the quality and usefulness of data generated.

3.4

Final data collection

The data collected at the end of a project provide an overall picture of the successes, challenges and failures in meeting its stated aims and objectives. In most cases, data will be collected against the baseline indicators established at the start of the project, analysed, and conclusions will be drawn about any changes that occurred. A critique worth taking seriously is that many efforts to measure and understand social norms change are plagued by

211 Vaitla et al. 2020.

212 Wazir 2022, p. 17, citing Ekbia et al. 2015.

213 Holeman and Kane 2020.

214 Pittman and Haylock 2016.

215 Institute for Reproductive Health, n.d.

216 Pearse and Connell 2016.

issues of “conflation of correlation with causation”.²¹⁷ This issue is widespread within research on social norms: “Norms researchers have proposed many different social mechanisms by which norms are said to affect action... Unfortunately, despite the large number of proposed explanations and the large number of studies collecting data on norms and action, very few of these explanations have actually been tested.”²¹⁸ It also comes up in the experimental and quasi-experimental methods deployed to measure the effectiveness of development interventions to shift social norms, a dynamic that by all accounts would seem to undercut the point of collecting action-oriented data in the first place.

Those development interventions that intervene at the individual or community level at least recognize that social norms are shaped by a variety of political, economic and environmental factors originating in the ‘wider society’ and that collective human behaviour is also driven by contextual factors that are not social norms.²¹⁹ Nevertheless, in practice, most studies tend to overlook these other possible factors, focusing narrowly on the baseline social norm (or proxy) indicators.²²⁰ Even when other contextual factors are taken into account – for example, as control variables in RCTs – the complex interactions between those factors are inadequately reduced to fairly linear processes. Piedalue et al. summarize this dynamic as follows:

Without testing causation, the simple regularity of a behaviour may be falsely assumed to result from social norms – I do x because everyone else does x – when other factors (possibly material and institutional) in fact drive the regularity of the behaviour – I and everyone else do x because of y. For example, in the case of GBV, an individual man’s use of violence may not be caused by his belief that such behaviour is common and sanctioned in his community (i.e. a social norm).

217 Piedalue et al. 2020, p. 98.

218 Bell and Cox 2015, p. 29.

219 Bicchieri 2017; Cislighi and Heise 2020; Harper et al. 2020.

220 Piedalue et al. 2020. This contention was also confirmed by our scoping review.

Rather, both the action and social norm result from institutional reinforcement of men’s power (for example, in government institutions). In order to measure causation, social norms proponents need to document *social* mechanisms that affect individual action, which cannot be achieved when a study only measures *individual* perceptions and actions.²²¹

Whereas one part of the problem is that the dominant experimental approaches to measuring social norms change focus rigidly on a narrow set of individual-level indicators, the other part of the problem is in the aggregation of those indicators to approximate community dynamics. This practice continues despite the fact that:

...interdisciplinary research demonstrates quite clearly that a community cannot be understood simply as the aggregated formation of its individual members. Through their interactions, processes of intersubjective meaning-making, shared experiences, power struggles and situational contexts, collective groups become something more than the sum of their individual parts... Institutional settings and practices also influence these collective social relations.²²²

Getting closer to understanding causation in complex systems will require some of the tools that have enabled interdisciplinary research to make such observations.²²³ This includes mixed-methods approaches incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods that together can capture perceptions and reality, intensity and scope, and complexity and nuance. Plenty of evidence exists that combining quantitative and qualitative methods gets us much closer to rigour, and to action-oriented information, in the evaluation of global health and

221 Piedalue et al. 2020, pp. 98-99, original emphasis by authors.

222 Ibid., p. 98, citing Delanty 2018.

223 Piedalue et al. 2020.

development programming.²²⁴ Indeed, “amplifying the knowledge of local actors from their own points of view can provide a rich and nuanced picture of the development context” in which social norms change takes place.²²⁵

Yet, qualitative approaches are under-used in the approaches to social norms work recently rising in prominence. Even experts in social psychology, behavioural economics and game theory contend that qualitative methods are required to understand the nature of a collective behaviour and its drivers (e.g., whether it is a true social norm or motivated by some material constraint).²²⁶ Such social norms researchers, who moreover adopt a view of norms that accounts for power relations, note that “adopting such a definition also requires accepting that quantitative measures might only partially grasp changes in gender norms ... while a part of gender norms might be uncovered by measuring people’s expectations of appropriate behaviour for men and women, the institutional aspects or the related power relations might not be captured by these same measures”.²²⁷ Qualitative, exploratory and descriptive methods are useful to explain changes, or lack thereof, against a baseline because they allow for in-depth investigation of how people perceive and experience social norms (and other factors) in specific contexts.²²⁸

Another shortcoming of the dominant approaches to measuring social norms is temporal, particularly

with regard to evaluations of programmatic interventions. The examples of large-scale societal change in section 2 illustrated that social norms shift slowly, except sometimes in cases of large-scale shocks. Within development practice, however, the time period between the establishment of baseline indicators and final data collection is often relatively short. Short timeframes preclude opportunities to measure the sustainability of observed changes over time. Timeframes are not a feature of development programming over which practitioners typically have much control, however, as they are embedded in funding cycles set by development donors. This is a dynamic of social norms work that donors will need to be willing to adapt if the sustainability of an intervention is a priority.

3.5

Dissemination of results

Dissemination of results is a critical component of development programming from an accountability and transparency perspective – not only to development funders but also to the public and those directly involved in the intervention. It is also critical for mutual learning and for iteration on approaches. Unfortunately, there exists a “glaring lack of systematic and long-term evaluations of field interventions” in much high-profile social norms work.²²⁹ In a detailed accounting of evidence on the Social Norms Approach and the refined Social Norms Approach 2, Rekha Wazir, whose extensive research and practitioner expertise includes work on discriminatory social norms, lists examples of evaluations conducted in egregiously short time frames and accompanied by boastful claims of success.²³⁰ In one such example, a World Bank project in India conducted an evaluation just one week after the project closed.²³¹ Other examples of high-profile projects that were widely publicized as successful, despite the fact that no final evaluations are publicly available, include those carried out by

224 E.g. Jones et al. 2012. See, for example, the set of studies emanating from an evaluation of an mHealth intervention in a malaria endemic region of Kenya. The 2011 RCT showed promising results: Text-message reminders sent to health workers’ personal mobile phones improved the quality of malaria treatment in both the short and long term. The RCT established a casual link between the intervention (text messages) and its outputs (improved malaria treatment). A follow-up qualitative study in 2012 provided important evidence as to why the text-messaging intervention was successful. Through in-depth interviewing, the researchers learned that the health-care workers appreciated receiving timely information ‘on the job’, having ready access to old/stored text messages and feeling ‘up to date’. The former study showed that an intervention worked and the latter showed why. For more information, see Zurovac et al. 2011 or Jones et al. 2012.

225 MacArthur et al. 2022, p. 9.

226 Bicchieri 2017; Dempsey et al. 2018.

227 Cislighi and Heise 2020, p. 416.

228 Singh and Mukherjee 2018.

229 Wazir 2022, p.12. See also the critique from within the field of social psychology: Dempsey et al. 2018.

230 Wazir 2022. Wazir refers to the Social Norms Approach as “the new entrant from the behavioural sciences into the field of development practice”, p. 2.

231 Wazir 2022, p. 8.

UNICEF, CARE, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Bank.²³²

Issues with dissemination of results seems to plague other fields with more longstanding, explicit programmes of evaluated work on social norms, such as public health. In a review of published evidence of social norms change interventions, including systematic reviews, health psychologists Dempsey, McAlaney and Bewik point to serious flaws in the interpretation and presentation of findings.²³³ They find that the systematic reviews, for example, make implicit assumptions about the homogenous nature of the interventions reviewed and the mechanisms driving change, which in reality included a wide-ranging and complex set of public policy, health risk and economic factors. Even those that acknowledged the heterogeneity among interventions “stopped short of exploring the implications of this heterogeneity and implications for quality assurance and intervention fidelity”.²³⁴

To be sure, the lack of publicly available final evaluations does not necessarily indicate that the projects were not successful. Given the public claims of success, however, transparency in this regard would illuminate what data are being interpreted as evidence of successful outcomes. The withholding of such data impedes cross-organization and cross-sectoral learning and opportunities to build on past successes (or failures). As it stands, the lack of published programme evaluations in general, and the dearth of those that monitor changes over time in particular, fuels the reasonable perspective that it is “impossible to construct a reasoned argument or provide a comprehensive assessment about the effectiveness of [the Social Norms Approach] in bringing about large-scale and enduring shifts in social norms”.²³⁵

232 Ibid.

233 Dempsey et al. 2018.

234 Ibid.

235 Wazir 2022, p. 12.

3.6

Towards improved programmatic research and evaluations

For all the critiques of dominant social norms approaches – and there are many – little guidance is given in the way of pragmatic alternatives. It is utterly reasonable to suggest that “measurement of social norms should also attend to the spaces and relationships that constitute ‘community,’ and to the social, political and economic institutions that structure community life”.²³⁶ It is also reasonable to suggest that approaches are needed that “examine the larger gender order and the relations of power between women and men”.²³⁷ But what does it look like, in practical terms, to take action on these contentions? We’ve provided some suggestions above, including the incorporation of qualitative methods, the accounting for factors that are not social norms and the imperative of iterative measurement throughout a project.

That said, this is an area of work where further development may be merited, including in terms of understanding how social norms shape and are shaped by “higher level” arenas of society that are relevant to development concerns. The notion in much critical social science research that ‘power is everywhere’ can be paralyzing, but it need not be. Institutional ethnography, developed by sociologist Dorothy Smith, is one practical approach to documenting how power operates through the practices, processes and social interactions of school systems, development programmes and corporate social responsibility efforts, among others.²³⁸ This and other similar approaches are informed by the bottom-up approaches that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s that were largely concerned with understanding the perspectives and power of actors at various

236 Piedalue et al. 2020, p. 98.

237 Cislighi et al. 2018, cited in Piedalue et al. 2020.

238 On school systems, see Nichols and Griffith 2009; on development programmes, see Cookson 2018; on corporate social responsibility efforts, see Billo 2015.

levels of policy and programme implementation and governance.²³⁹

In accounting for the beliefs and interpretations of multiple actors, as well as their goals, agency, strategies and actions, these approaches can help to disentangle power relations and identify competing beliefs and interests as well as relevant practices and material constraints, thus providing a comprehensive picture of what is needed to provoke and sustain shifts in discriminatory social norms. Importantly, they also give voice and value to a plurality of perspectives and understandings.²⁴⁰ The adaptation of such approaches may be a worthwhile endeavour towards understanding social norms and their material effects (e.g., how they influence the adoption of a law or the implementation of a policy, etc.) in arenas beyond households and communities.

Another avenue for improved programme evaluations and monitoring entails partnerships with women's organizations, particularly at the grassroots level. The baseline context of social norms – as well as women's and men's material realities, the institutions they interact with and potential high risk or high opportunity moments, e.g., 'critical junctures' – should not be approached as something that requires 'discovery' by outside actors. Such partnerships can establish grounded understandings of context and complexity and also foster community ownership of the project.

3.7

Should we worry about 'getting measurement right'?

There is, however, a related and important question that is both pragmatic and ethical in nature: *to what extent should we worry about getting measurement right?* It is clear that many of the contemporary attempts to measure social norms fall short of their

intended aims, not least because of a narrow, rather than systemic, focus. There currently exists a great deal of interest in perfecting approaches to social norms measurement, and even in establishing a "gold standard", among donors and global development agencies. However, the extent to which this is a worthwhile goal, what 'right' needs to consist of and at which point the returns are diminishing or even counterproductive merits consideration. Principally, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which the imperative to measure social norms is serving, or will serve, the feminist and women's movements, CSOs and implementing agencies doing grassroots and policy advocacy and delivering services.

One consideration is whether there should be a gold standard approach that perhaps even fosters comparability across contexts. Over the past few years, a great deal of attention, effort and funding has been allocated towards developing ever more precise approaches to identify and measure the intensity of social norms, including gender norms specifically (e.g., CUSP – the Community for Understanding Scale Up, ALIGN, etc.). These attempts, which aim to make the broad field of gender and development more effective, have been subject to reasonable questions and critiques from within the field, including from individuals and groups doing work that is shifting discriminatory social norms.²⁴¹ For example, there is a tendency among dominant measurement approaches to utilize global paradigms about what problematic social norms are, what the correct model of change is, what the relevant control variables should be and how to collect, analyse and report the data. These paradigms come with an array of assumptions, motivations and conceptualizations that are often uncritically accepted or simply not reflected upon.²⁴² Such approaches tend to disregard the plurality of values, local insights and knowledge at the grassroots level and prevent a deeper understanding of social norms change and adjunct power dynamics as they play out in reality. The premise of a global paradigm is probably faulty if we accept that social norms are issue- and context-specific.

239 Lipsky 1980; Hjern and Porter 1981.

240 Such approaches have much in common with more recent debates around "decolonizing approaches" to research that aim at "bringing to the centre and privileging indigenous values, attitudes and practices". See Smith 2012, p. 41, cited in MacArthur et al. 2022, p. 9.

241 Wazir 2022.

242 Smith 2012; Fischer 2018.

Critics also draw attention to the involved, complicated nature of dominant approaches to measuring social norms and the incompatibility of these approaches with the nature of social change work. In particular, the attempts at achieving ever more precise definitions and categorizations of social (and other) norms, as well as drivers of behaviour that appear to be social norms but are not, results in “an over-mystification and over-classification of norms which is both confusing and unnecessary from the point of view of development practitioners”,²⁴³ The recourse to “overcomplicated methods and technical jargon ... disempowers both local expertise and the subjects of the intervention, whilst rendering the presence and explanatory power of the expert or consultant indispensable and imperative”.²⁴⁴ This is a well-founded concern: Even the authors of this discussion paper had repeated, lengthy and circular conversations attempting to sort out the contradictory and confusing attempts to make social norms readable in a technical and replicable way. The relationship between methods and empowerment of local expertise is worth underscoring also in relation to increasingly prominent debates around the politics of representation in evidence or knowledge production for global development and gender equality.²⁴⁵

A reasonable provocation, therefore, is whether the end goal is perfecting a measurement technique or diagnosing a problem with sufficient precision to address it in a way that changes people’s material realities. Reflecting on the proliferation of categories of norms within social norms research, the social norms theorists Bell and Cox underscore an obsessive tendency within social norms research – one that may also be eclipsing the very many other important drivers of human behaviour:

We seem to love the idea of social norms too much. The plethora of normative theoretical orientations is symptomatic of our love of norms. Love makes us creative in finding ways to talk about norms (“How do I love thee? Let me count the

ways...”). Yet we do not seem to be willing to subject these loved ideas to the potential embarrassment of detailed test, perhaps because it would suggest that, for all our love, we are not satisfied with our beloved. This paragraph is intended to be metaphorical, and yet it appears to describe an uncomfortable pattern in research on norms.²⁴⁶

While Bell and Cox were speaking about academic research, these tendencies seem to have bled into development practice. This slippage has material consequences that are more serious within development than in the academy, however. Gender equality work is grossly underfunded relative to the scope of the issues and share of the population it encompasses, with post-pandemic funding projections plateauing after a decade of incremental increase.²⁴⁷ Within this context, the current direction of social norms measurement efforts within development practice – towards RCTs, and a dependency on highly specialized technical consultants – should give pause. RCTs are incredibly costly. Given their low utility in contexts of high complexity and confounding factors, they should not be pursued as a standard measurement approach for policy and practitioner organizations implementing social norms-related work. They may well be an appropriate tool for fundamental learning in certain contexts, e.g., in plentifully resourced academic lab research, but evidence does not currently support their use in underfunded gender equality work where domestic violence shelters are closed due to funding shortfalls and women toil for meagre wages in garment factories.²⁴⁸

This is not to say, of course, that all measurement is superfluous. It may be crucial, for instance, to understand whether the driver of a discriminatory or harmful behaviour is the threat of social sanction (e.g., ridicule) or whether it is of a material nature

243 Wazir 2022, p. 12. See also Bell and Cox 2015.

244 Wazir 2022, p 12.

245 Kabeer 1999; Fischer 2018; Roche et al. 2015; Fuentes and Cookson 2018.

246 Bell and Cox 2015, p. 40.

247 OECD 2023b.

248 Both these issues, incidentally, are informed by discriminatory social and gender norms and, perhaps just as or more importantly, by discriminatory policy and regulatory choices that have material consequences.

(e.g., poverty) and may be addressed through other means (e.g., policy or regulatory change). But deciphering this information does not necessarily require a detailed and arbitrarily complex methodology; the drivers may already be known to organizations embedded in those communities (e.g., local women's organizations, as suggested above) or swiftly ascertainable through qualitative research.

4.

CONCLUSION: WHAT ROLE (IF ANY) SHOULD DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES PLAY IN SHIFTING SOCIAL NORMS?

Social norms, including gender norms, are one of the many factors that shape gender equality outcomes. This discussion paper has intervened in debates about what social and gender norms are, how they change and how that change can be measured. It has done so from the recognition that development donors and global development organizations are expressing a great deal of interest in carving out new areas of work to shift discriminatory social norms as a pathway to catalysing progress on gender equality. Given this orientation of the paper, there is a final question that merits consideration: *What role (if any) should global development organizations take in shifting social norms?*

This question has recently surfaced in the academic literature on social norms, where researchers and practitioners have both weighed in. At the heart of it is an ethical concern just as much as a practical one: Who should decide what a good norm is – and a bad one?²⁴⁹ Even more specifically:

Whose voices and values, and at which levels, should programmers take into account when designing interventions? Who should decide which norms to promote and which strategies to employ? Who should be accountable for managing resistance and backlash that often arise? As implementation occurs, should an organization implement [a

norms change intervention] knowing that there exists a risk of participants perceiving change as externally driven, moving too fast or too soon, resulting in change agents or early adopters suffering?²⁵⁰

Such questions are underwritten by concerns that “outsider” interventions to shift social norms too often impose Western values, with a significant risk of “social engineering” and producing unintended harm, and thus may not be aligned with social justice approaches. On the basis of such concerns, some research-practitioners have proposed a set of guidelines to introduce ‘ethical thinking’ into social norms change interventions. Most of these involve

249 Piedalue et al. 2020.

250 Igras et al. 2021, p. 883.

adding new technical elements to a project, such as integrating qualitative methods to adequately map community-level power relations; there are also calls for the development of new technical tools to elucidate how power operates.²⁵¹

Yet, others suggest that these ethical concerns and their proposed solutions are misguided. Using the practice of child marriage as an example, Wazir argues against a reversion to tired debates that falsely pit human rights against ‘culture’ and largely overlook the “initiatives and interventions driven by local actors”:

Characterizing efforts to protect girls from early marriage as ‘social engineering’ misses the point by a rather wide margin, in its understanding both of social engineering as well as of emancipatory social movements which also claim to use an ethical, rights-based lens. While there should always be room for additional research and conceptual frameworks, this should not become a means for reinventing the wheel and strengthening a particular policy and intervention agenda which is backed by powerful global donors and governments in the North while ignoring the long history, experience and analysis of researchers and activists who are united by other social imaginaries and understandings of social realities.²⁵²

This debate in the academic literature reflects the tension that we referred to as a ‘problem of approach’ at the outset of this paper: namely, that the perspectives on social norms and their associated theories of change that are rising in prominence in global development financing and practice tend to reflect an understanding of social change that did not originate in feminist thought or action.

On the other hand, many global development organizations already do work that shifts social norms by supporting feminist and women’s CSOs, government

ministries for women and gender equality and national statistical offices with funding, research and data, technical expertise and capacity and network building. Work that shifts social norms in these cases is implicit and often secondary to broader agendas to change the material conditions of women’s lives. Global development actors considering new, explicit areas of work around social norms need to engage in serious reflection on the pathway they will choose to pursue – particularly those organizations mandated to achieve gender equality. The research and practice reviewed for this paper point to a few ways forward, each of which are outlined below.

4.1

‘Targeting’ social norms work

Not every gender inequality issue is an issue of discriminatory gender norms – or, at the very least, discriminatory gender norms are not always the most insidious factor. At the root of many of the world’s most intractable problems – poverty, violence, poor health – are legal, policy, regulatory and fiscal decisions that prioritize profit and power over people and their human rights and daily needs.

For the women (and men) who work for low wages in indecent conditions in garment factories, the change that would have the biggest impact on their enjoyment of human rights would occur in the global agreements and regulatory mechanisms that enable corporations to search for the cheapest labour possible. For time-poor women stretched thin by the double burden of a paid workday in the factory, office or field plus unpaid care at home, a sharing of home-based care with a more compliant male (or female) partner is insufficient to resolve a ‘crisis of care’; the biggest levers are policy and regulatory mechanisms that would increase the availability of quality, affordable child and elder care and force wealthy private sector companies to pay their share for the social reproductive labour that feeds them with a steady stream of productive workers.²⁵³ For the women experiencing GBV in humanitarian crises, changing the patriarchal attitudes of their male partners may be part of the

251 Ibid.; Cislighi and Berkowitz 2021.

252 Wazir 2022, p. 20.

253 See Fraser 2022.

solution, but the most impactful lever would almost certainly be the achievement of agreements that put an end to protracted conflict and state and non-state violence and that foster conditions of social, economic and political equality in the aftermath of conflict (e.g., through equitable redistributions of land).

There are, of course, issues for which explicit interventions to shift discriminatory social norms may be a primary (though likely not exclusive) line of action. Evidence shows that issues such as FGM and child and early marriage can improve when local organizations engage in intentional efforts to raise critical consciousness, engage women and men and boys and girls and achieve the buy-in of key religious and other community leaders.

On this basis, global development organizations, including donors, should consider targeting their social norms work. By this we mean that the full range of drivers and levers for a given problem should always be considered – and should be considered first. There should not be an imperative to ‘do social norms work’ for the sake of it. Rather, social norms interventions should be targeted to problems that first and foremost require changes in ‘informal rules and shared expectations’ and where there is thus a compelling case for (first) channelling energy and resources into social norms work. Conversely, they should not be the primary line of action to address issues of inequality for which interventions to improve the material conditions of people’s lives (e.g., consistent and adequate incomes, healthy working conditions, safe neighbourhoods) are more urgently needed and better suited. ‘Targeting social norms work’ suggests that if discriminatory social norms are identified as part of the problem, they might form part of the associated theories of change and action – but not the only part.

Development donors and global organizations should resist becoming distracted by the latest promise of a ‘silver bullet’. The straightforward appeal of work to ‘change individual hearts and minds’ should not eclipse the imperative to do the more difficult, patient or politically charged work of changing how legal, economic and political systems are set-up, governed and allocate resources. This is not to say that social norms will not change in the course of these other efforts

– but ‘invisible rules’ having shifted will not be the most important change achieved.

4.2

Making social norms work make sense

To make informed, participatory decisions about how to target social norms work, development organizations will need to establish a way of talking about social and gender norms that is grounded in reality and accessible to everyone in the organization as well as the communities they serve. The contradictory and obfuscatory character of the scientific and technical attempts to define social norms, not to mention the mushrooming levels of jargon, are out of control and totally at odds with how social norms are discussed and acted on by feminist and women’s movements and CSOs in communities around the world. This is not to say that the development and refinement of theory is separate from how local organizations mobilize and affect change (indeed, local organizations themselves use and refine theory!); rather, it is to say that there is a point at which theoretical and scientific efforts have diminishing returns. Social norms work needs to be anchored in how practitioner communities are understanding and grappling with social change. Not only will this avoid the costly use of highly specialized technical experts, but it is also a precondition for participation and community-ownership of change.

Relatedly, reflection is required regarding the appropriateness of pursuing a universal gold standard of social norms measurement. There exist many ways of doing relatively low-cost research, monitoring and evaluation of social change. Provided that a mix of methods are used that enable an understanding of context and relevant perspectives, and sufficient time is allotted to monitor change and the sustainability of the intervention, these existing approaches will likely suffice. Pursuing costly experimental approaches with limited feasibility given the subject matter does not seem to make sense – particularly in a global context in which funding for women’s rights is urgently needed on issues that are far more pressing than ‘getting measurement right’.

4.3

Supporting women’s and feminist organizations as key agents of change

Supporting women’s and feminist movements and CSOs is one of the most important ways that global development organizations can consider doing targeted social norms work in an effective and sustainable manner.²⁵⁴ There is no need to reinvent the wheel on this; many examples exist of productive partnerships between development organizations, researchers and feminist and women’s CSOs.²⁵⁵

Given the slow and non-linear nature of social norms change, however, and its propensity for backlash, providing such support requires shifts in the social norms, practices and processes within development financing and practice itself. As it stands, women’s organizations are frequently expected to meet timelines that are unrealistic given typical human resources and the nature of most gender equality work. Adoption of flexible funding models is needed, including those with timelines long enough to accommodate change that happens slowly.²⁵⁶ Under current models, grantees are often expected to modify their agendas to respond to current donor trends, and they end up living ‘project to project’ rather than being enabled to work towards a long-term goal in a sustained manner. These dynamics increase risk of “waste, missed opportunities, and

unintended harm”.²⁵⁷ To do effective social norms work, and to reduce the risk of backlash and harm, donors may need to relinquish some control over the agenda, recognize women’s movements and CSOs as experts in the problems they have identified and grant them greater autonomy over their theories of change and action.²⁵⁸

This paper has traversed a great deal of different bodies of thought and action on addressing discriminatory social norms, including gender norms. It has been guided by the prompt that global development organizations are increasingly interested in social norms as a lever for change but are unclear where or how to start. Meanwhile, the quite narrow and technocratic form that some of this interest has taken to date is the subject of criticism within research and practitioner communities. A cumulative lesson that emerges from the various bodies of thought and action on how gender norms change happens is that change is complex and that acknowledging complexity does not preclude taking action. It should, however, train the attention of development actors away from simple solutions. Social norms change is not the next ‘silver bullet’. Targeted and thoughtful engagement with this area of intervention is required, as is a bigger picture that includes the myriad of other levers in the political, economic and social arenas that need to be pulled.

254 Girard 2019.

255 The UN Trust Fund to End VAWG, managed by UN-Women on behalf of the UN system, is one such example of a productive collaboration between international development organizations and grassroots actors, in which sustained funding to CSOs and women’s rights organizations has supported their efforts to provide vital services for survivors of GBV as well as identify current and future barriers and solutions to end VAWG (see UN-Women 2021b). The Prevention Collaborative curates a knowledge hub of hundreds of local CSOs and researchers’ insights, making these accessible to frontline implementers (see Prevention Collaborative n.d.). Relatedly, the What Works to Prevent Violence Consortium promotes evidence and innovation on solutions to prevent and respond to GBV, including through partnering with and funding women’s rights organizations that are familiar with the local context (see What Works to Prevent Violence 2019).

256 León-Himmelstine et al. 2022.

257 Prevention Collaborative n.d.

258 Purposeful’s With and For Girls and the Prevention Collaborative’s Investing Wisely are two examples of organizations and global funds working towards funding models that are more supportive of feminist work.

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ANNEX.

METHODOLOGY OF THE EVIDENCE REVIEW

We conducted a literature review that included a phased scoping review²⁵⁸ of the academic and grey literature on interventions to change gender discriminatory social norms and efforts to measure these processes of change, as well as a broader literature review on social change. The scoping methodology is useful for mapping key concepts underpinning a research area and the main sources and types of evidence available. It can also help identify relevant literature on topics studied using different analytical lenses and research approaches. This annex provides a detailed description of the methodological steps of the literature review process, which included the initial search, data charting and analysis.

The initial search proceeded following three steps: the identification of research questions, the development of a search strategy and the definition of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The overall research questions of this study were: What is the state of the evidence on work to change gender discriminatory social norms? What works? How do you measure it? We operationalized these research questions by breaking them down into the following sub-questions:

1. What are academics and policy organizations saying about how to do effective social norms change work for gender equality?
2. What works in terms of social norms change in UN-Women's focus areas?
3. What are promising ways to measure social norms change?

After defining the research questions, we developed a strategy for systematically searching articles. This was to consider articles published in English during the period 2012–2022 via Google Scholar and Google search engines, reviewing the first 10 pages of results. Searches included combinations of the

following terms: (1) “*Social norms change*” + *gender equality*; (2) “*Social norms change*” + *gender relations*; (3) “*Social norms change*” + *measurement*; (4) “*Gender norms change*” + *measurement*; (5) “*Gender norms*” + *measurement*.

We set the following inclusion / exclusion criteria for Google Scholar:

1. The abstract for the article includes both the exact search phrases or a component of social norms (include)
2. The abstract for the article includes only one of the exact phrases (exclude)
3. The abstract is not available (exclude)

The inclusion / exclusion criteria for Google searches included the following:

1. The article studies or evaluates a specific social norms change programme or intervention (include)
2. The article is a review of the evidence of a social norms change programme or intervention (include)

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3. The article does not include any empirical study of a social norms change programme or intervention (exclude)
4. The article is focused on describing social norms problems but not a programmatic solution or intervention (exclude)
5. The article puts forward a theoretical, conceptual or methodological approach for understanding social norms change for gender equality (theoretical framework) (include)

We also identified relevant articles through snowballing. The aim of snowballing was to include relevant articles on approaches that have featured relatively little in the systematic literature review. This includes particular areas of intervention that are relevant to UN-Women as well as approaches to measure social norms. In order to identify additional literature in these fields, we conducted internal consultations and reviewed the reference lists of the most relevant studies.

Overall, our search yielded 106 results. Of these, 21 articles were subsequently cut: 12 because they were duplicates, 2 because they were outside the defined time period and 7 that were found to be less relevant to the parameters of the study/research questions. This resulted in a final database of 85 articles.

Beyond the scoping review of programmatic literature, we conducted a broader literature review to incorporate further insights on social norms, social change and gender equality. This wider body of literature presented a more diverse and heterogeneous set of perspectives on what social norms are and how they change, providing helpful guidance on innovative ways forward.

UN-WOMEN IS THE UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, UN-WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

UN-Women supports United Nations Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN-Women also coordinates and promotes the United Nations system's work in advancing gender equality.

This discussion paper provides a ‘state of the evidence’ on social norms change within the field of gender and development. The paper presents findings from a scoping review of studies and evaluations of programmatic interventions to shift social norms, as well as insights from a broader body of evidence tracing how social change happens. It answers four questions: *What are social norms?, How do social norms change?, How are social norms measured? and What role (if any) should global development organizations play in shifting social norms?* In doing so, the paper traverses a divided scientific evidence base that, on the one hand, does not adequately reflect the varied social, political and economic drivers behind historical changes in social norms, including the role of women’s and feminist movements, and on the other, grasps the complexity of social norms but does not lend itself to clearly defined theories of action. Key lessons include that social norms should be approached as one lever in a broader toolbox of programmatic options; that feminist and women’s rights movements are key agents of social norms change, and that sustainable investments in social norms programming requires shifts within development practice itself, including how change is measured.



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