

# HOW AND WHY NORMS MATTER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change

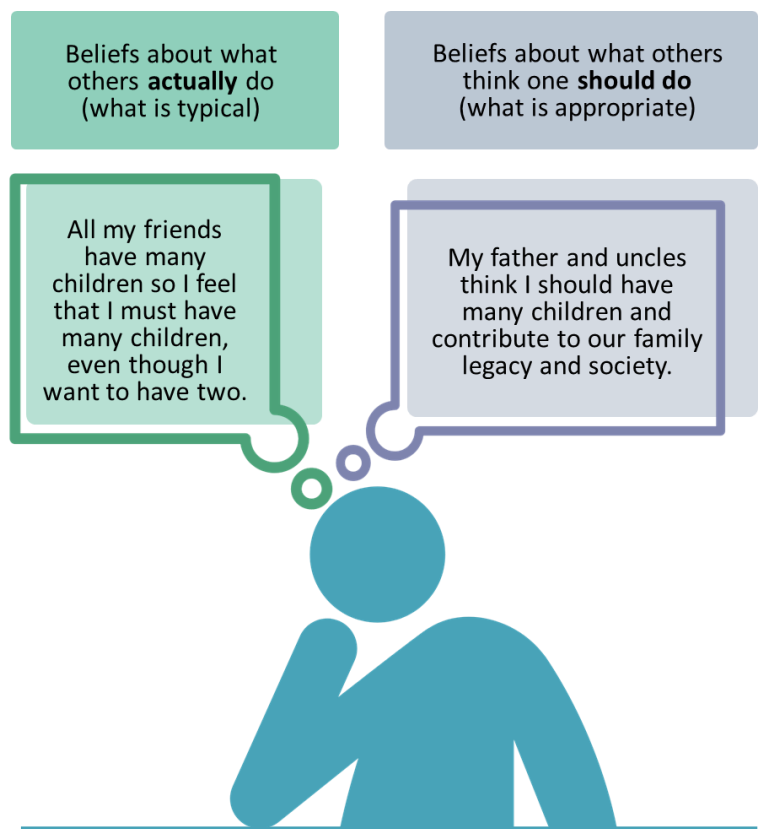
*If our goal is to achieve systemic and sustainable change, rather than affecting change at the individual or small group level, then the ability to shift the social norms that often play a strong role in driving targeted behaviors and practices, is critical.<sup>i</sup>*

### WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS?

Social norms are unwritten “rules” governing behavior shared by members of a given group or society. They are informal, often implicit, rules that most people accept and abide by. In contrast to individually held attitudes or beliefs, a social norm is defined by beliefs that are shared about a behavior or practice. A common social norm that looks different across contexts and cultures is how close people stand and sit next to friends and strangers. In some places, standing close to each other is the norm and in others keeping space between people, even when they are known to you, is the norm. People might do those things, even when it is not their personal preference, because they are guided by these unwritten societal rules.

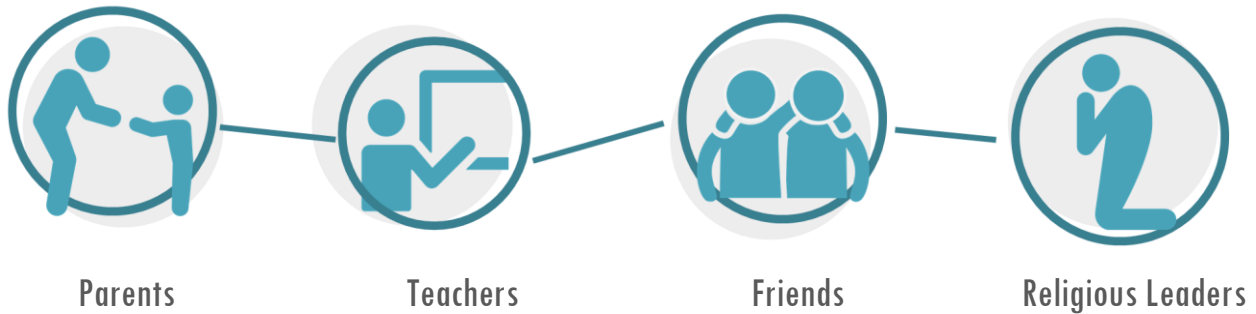
As such, social norms can dictate what people in a group believe is typical (normal) and appropriate (approved) behavior. These ideas represent two types of social norms: 1) descriptive norms are expectations about what people do, and 2) injunctive norms are expectations about what people should do what, as well as perceived consequences of adhering to a norm or not.<sup>ii</sup>

For example, a newly married young man may perceive that all married couples in his community have more than three children (descriptive norm). He also believes that he would not receive as much respect from other men in the community if he had less than three children (injunctive norm). In this example, even if, for personal reasons, he would like to have a smaller family, he may conform to the social norm of fathering many children. Moreover, not conforming may lead to negative reactions from people who matter to him, and conforming is likely to be rewarded by making him feel welcomed and respected.



## HOW DO SOCIAL NORMS INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR?

Social norms matter because they govern and uphold behavior and reinforce social inequalities and inequities, including gender inequities. When sustaining or changing behavior is a program goal, practitioners need to understand how, when, and under what conditions behavior is governed by social norms. *Who is influencing/upholding the norms?* Social norms are generally held in place through the people who wield influence, either within or over a group, referred to as reference groups. *To what extent is a person rewarded or punished for behaving in a particular way?* People may behave based on perceived rewards for conforming and sanctions for not conforming with norms.



To better understand how social norms influence behavior, the following questions can be asked:

- What are the specific social norms that influence specific behaviors?
- Who are the people influencing the behaviors (reference groups)? How do members of a reference group for a behavior believe people should behave?
- To what extent is a person rewarded or sanctioned for engaging in a particular behavior?
- Are some social norms more common than others?
- What other factors are important in shaping the targeted behavior – i.e. what are structural, policy, knowledge, or other factors? How do they interact with the norms?

## PROGRAMMING CAN RESULT IN SHIFTING NORMS.

### NORMS-SHIFTING PROGRAMS IN ACTION

The Saleema Initiative uses communication strategies to create new positive social norms about the value of girls/women who are not subject to female genital mutilation/cutting. Saleema is meant to impart concepts, including those of “intact,” “complete,” “perfect,” “flawless,” and “the way God made her.”

While female genital mutilation/cutting remains a strong normative expectation in many communities in Sudan, results of the Saleema Initiative demonstrate that by promoting ideas that not everyone cuts their daughters (replacing negative descriptive norms with positive ones) and that keeping your daughter “intact” is an “expected” practice, normative change can be achieved.

There are many examples of programs that have been effective in shifting social norms, for example, community-based initiatives or mass media initiatives. Many programs correct misperceptions via interpersonal communication, using, for example, mass media, informational campaigns, small group interventions, observation, online platforms and video games. An example of this are alcohol programs in the U.S. Other mechanisms for norm change include legal reform, role modeling and efforts to change power dynamics. Effective norms-shifting programs may not look the same, but are often multi-level, informed by protective norms and rooted in contextual information.

One powerful example of what has been learned from programming to identify and shift social norms relates to the role of descriptive norms. The Saleema Initiative in Sudan, a government initiative supported by UNICEF, replaces normative expectations about female genital mutilation/cutting with protective social norms relating to girls being left “complete” and “intact.”<sup>iii</sup> The box opposite provides more details.

## HOW DO WE MEASURE NORMATIVE CHANGE?

One of the reasons the evidence-base on norms-shifting programs remains thin is that measurement of social norms has developed at a slower pace than programming. Nonetheless, many measurement approaches that show promise for program evaluation are currently being developed and tested in many settings. While social norms measurement is nascent, consensus is building around standards of practice and terminology for measuring social norms, most notably: 1) distinguish between descriptive (behavioral) and injunctive (attitudinal) norms; 2) specify reference groups pertaining to each norm of interest; 3) ask about the sanctions or rewards associated with following a norm as evidence of a norm's strength; and 4) develop vignettes to convey the complexity of social norms to program participants in a relatable way.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Work to understand and shift social norms for positive outcomes is growing rapidly. In order to support norms-shifting programs, we need to collectively document, reflect upon and share implementation experience and results in real time to support efforts globally.

## WHERE TO GO FOR RESOURCES?

The **Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change**, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by a steering committee of organizations and donors, is a network of experts who have been collaborating since 2016 to generate knowledge and develop shared tools to promote and guide effective social norm theory, measurement and practice. Resources can be found here: <https://www.alignplatform.org/learning-collaborative>.

The **Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) Community of Practice**, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by the Overseas Development Institute, provides information and a resource hub on social norms related to eight themes: Education; Health; Gender-based Violence; Men, Boys and Masculinities; Child Marriage; Data, Tools and Measurement; and Understanding Norms and Norms Change. Resources can be found here: <https://www.alignplatform.org/>.

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<sup>i</sup> Mackie, Gerry, Francesca Moneti, Holly Shakya, and Elaine Denny. (2015). *What Are Social Norms? How Are They Measured?* New York, NY: UNICEF. [https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/4\\_09\\_30\\_Whole\\_What\\_are\\_Social\\_Norms.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/4_09_30_Whole_What_are_Social_Norms.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Evans WD, Donahue C, Snider J, Bedri N, Elhussein TA, Elamin SA (2019) The *Saleema* initiative in Sudan to abandon female genital mutilation: Outcomes and dose response effects. *PLoS ONE* 14(3): e0213380. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0213380