

Level The Field Working Paper - No. 3, version 3

TACKLING THE TOUGHEST BARRIER FOR GIRLS: SOCIAL NORMS

A work in progress aiming to stimulate dialogue and new ways of thinking around the tensions, debates and challenges facing girls' education.



Multiple barriers for girls underpinned by one cause: social norms

There are a number of well-known factors that work to constrain a girl's ability to meaningfully attend, participate in and complete school. These include:

1. Excessive chores like cooking, cleaning, collecting water for the family
2. Caring for younger siblings or sick relatives
3. Having brothers' educations prioritised, particularly if funds are limited
4. Missing school due to shame around menstrual bleeding
5. Being forced to marry at a young age to offset family poverty
6. Undergoing female genital mutilation to prepare for marriage and womanhood
7. Sexual harassment, abuse or transaction, which can involve rape and subsequent pregnancy

Although the occurrence and degree of these and other factors varies by context, they are all underpinned by one thing: social norms. Social norms are “the implicit and informal rules that most people accept and follow. They are...embedded in formal and informal institutions and produced and reproduced through our social interactions. They only change when enough of us choose to act (or are compelled to act) in a different way, creating a new norm” (Harper et al., 2020:14).

Given the power and ubiquity of these informal rules, the study of social norms spans a number of different disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, economics, political science, anthropology, gender studies, health, communication studies, marketing and behavioural insights. As such, the literature on social norms is wide and entails a variety of terms, concepts and theories – some conflicting (Legros and Cislighi 2020).

That said, this working paper is not aligned with one particular discipline, but instead builds on a range of concepts and ideas that are most relevant to norms affecting girls' education. It will explore and unpack the following:

1. **The structure of social/gender norms** and how individual attitudes and behaviour sit within these
2. **Reward and sanctioning mechanisms** that give power to norms and affect behaviour
3. **A 'spectrum of entrenchment'** that illustrates the degree of structural embeddedness of different norms
4. **A 'spectrum of acceptance'** that illustrates the degree that individuals accept/reject norms and the factors that influence this
5. **Entry points and pathways for shifting attitudes and behaviour** that are located within the broader structure of norms
6. **Lessons learned from programming**, particularly regarding principles and strategies that worked, didn't work and why

Overall, this piece was born from a dissatisfaction with interventions that rely on the implicit assumption that 'raising awareness' is enough to prompt meaningful changes in behaviour. Although awareness and critical thinking around a norm is important, given the structures that entrench norms, the spectrum of norm acceptance amongst individuals, and the powerful reward/sanctioning mechanisms that affect behaviour, a more nuanced and holistic approach is required. It is hoped that this working paper contributes to this end.

How norms affect action – the nested nature of gender norms

Social norms have been described as the invisible ‘guard rails’ that shape and narrow people's thinking, actions and opportunities. Gender norms are a sub-set of social norms that “describe how we are expected to behave, in a given social context, as a result of our gender” (Harper et al., 2020:14).

These gendered guard rails shape individuals’ attitudes and behaviour and are often mediated through peer groups throughout childhood and adolescence, and into adulthood (John et al., 2017). These peer groups are commonly referred to as ‘reference groups’ (Legros and Cislighi 2020), and an individual can belong to a number of these groups based on their varying identities. Each group can also entail different attitudes and behaviours as, “variations of gender norms across social class, ethnicity, religious affiliation, rural/urban location, and other social divisions are frequent” (Connell and Pearce, 2014: 39).

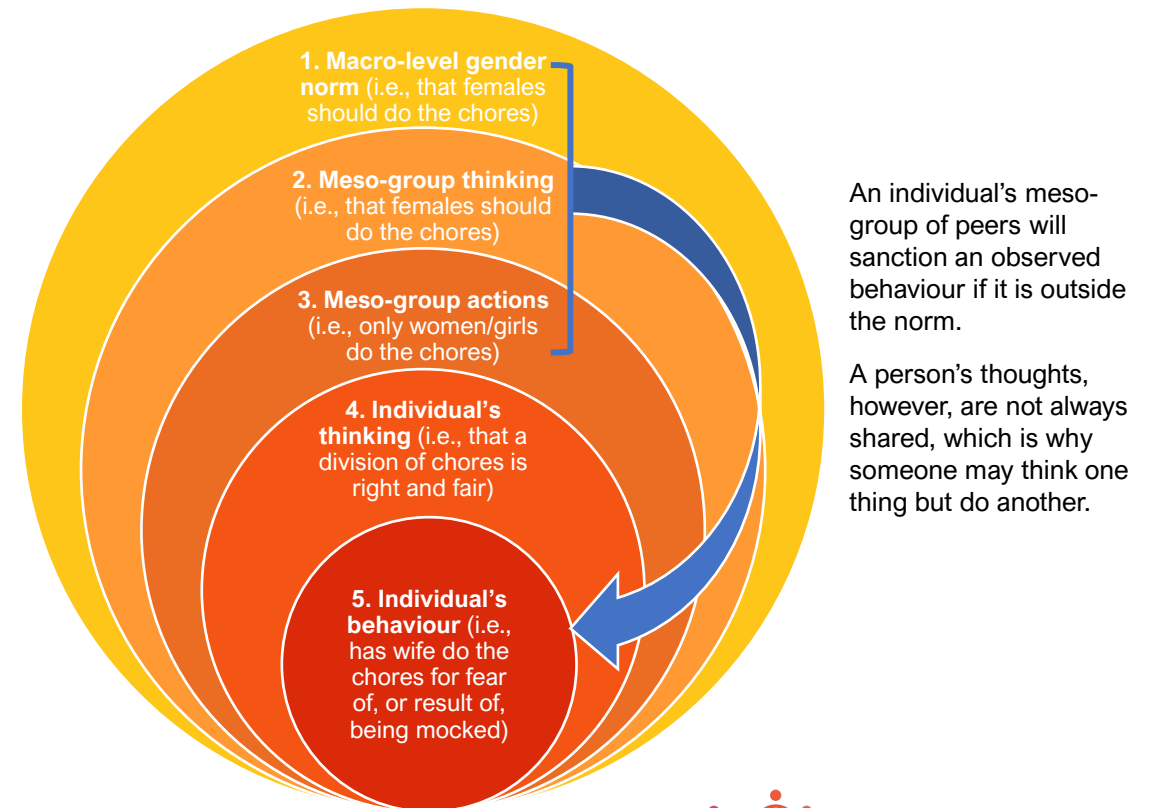
Figure 1 illustrates how macro-level gender norms provide the guard rails for how a meso-level reference group thinks (as seen through their attitudes/beliefs) and acts. Bell and Cox (2015) note that this meso-group mediation of norms can then affect an individual’s thinking and behaviour in four broad ways:

1. **Convention** - individuals look to what others do when unsure about the best course of action regarding customs, manners, what is appropriate, etc.
2. **Expectation** – individual behaviour is based on what the rest of the group is doing or is expected to do. An example of this is how one speaks when they are amongst family, as opposed to when they are amongst friends.
3. **Reward for compliance with a norm** - meso-groups can reinforce an

individual’s behaviour through social acceptance and approval of conformity.

4. **Sanctions for resistance** - similarly, a meso-group can sanction an individual’s behaviour through disapproval, gossip, ostracism, guilt, shame, fear.

Figure 1. The nested nature of gender norms



The complex nature of norms that affect girls' education

As noted in the previous figure 1, an individual's attitudes and beliefs are not always a predictor of their behaviour – people can think one thing yet do another. For example, Barker et al., (2011: 60) note that men generally "...support gender equality in the abstract while resisting it in practice." This is because a man might believe that a division of domestic labour is fair, yet not cook or clean due to the disapproval or mocking by peers. That said, such sanctions are only dispensed when behaviour is observed, which is why individual thoughts and beliefs may avoid sanction, particularly if these are not shared.

With regard to behaviour that affects girls' ability to attend, participate and complete education, the processes of reward and sanction are most applicable to the actions of gatekeepers such as parents, communities and teachers. These actors could be viewed as 'operators' or implementers of gender norms, as their direct actions affect the degree to which girls can engage in education. In some cases, girls themselves can also be operators of gender norms that may not be in their best interests. For example, a girl may sanction herself, as well as her peers, if she does not comply with the norms of doing domestic chores, prioritising brothers, or even undergoing female genital mutilation (FGM), which is often viewed as a right of passage and preparation for womanhood. Table 1 delineates these and other gender norms that affect girls' engagement in education, as well as the actors who have significant roles in rewarding, sanctioning and implementing these norms.

It should be noted that some of these gender norms also encompass a number of other norms (Cislaghi and Lori Heise, 2018). For example, early marriage is an overarching norm that not only entails the norm of girls being married at a young

age, but also the norm of father figures making decisions on behalf of women and girls, as well as the norm of dowry payment for the girl's hand in marriage. It is important to recognise the constellation of norms that are involved in an overarching norm, as all will require strategies and pathways for change.

Table 1. The main 'operators' of gender norms that affect girls' education

Gender norms that affect girls' engagement in education	Main operators/implementers of the norms			
	Parents	Community members	Teachers/ students	Girls themselves
1. Domestic chores like cooking, cleaning, collecting water for the family	x			x
2. Caring for younger siblings or sick relatives	x			x
3. Having brothers'/boys' educations prioritised	x		x	
4. Missing school due to shame around menstrual bleeding			x	x
5. Being forced to marry at a young age to offset family poverty	x			
6. Undergoing FGM to prepare for marriage/womanhood	x	x		x
7. Sexual predation/abuse/transaction involving rape and pregnancy		x	x	

It should also be noted that the way in which a gender norm is embedded and actioned is not necessarily a linear process. Connell and Pearce (2014: 39) note that "...norms are frequently contested, under debate and negotiation, in many sites. It is not the case that a smooth, irresistible process of socialisation embeds gender norms in every head and guarantees transmission between generations. That may happen, and sometimes does; but often social authorities' attempts at regulation of gender relations meet resistance, avoidance, apparent compliance or occasional conformity." The following sections unpack the structures and individual characteristics that affect the degree to which a norm is embedded, pointing towards ways in which resistance and contestation may be facilitated.

What makes gender norms so powerful?

There are a number of macro-level structures that can affect the degree to which a gender norm is embedded within a context (Mackie et al., 2015). These include:

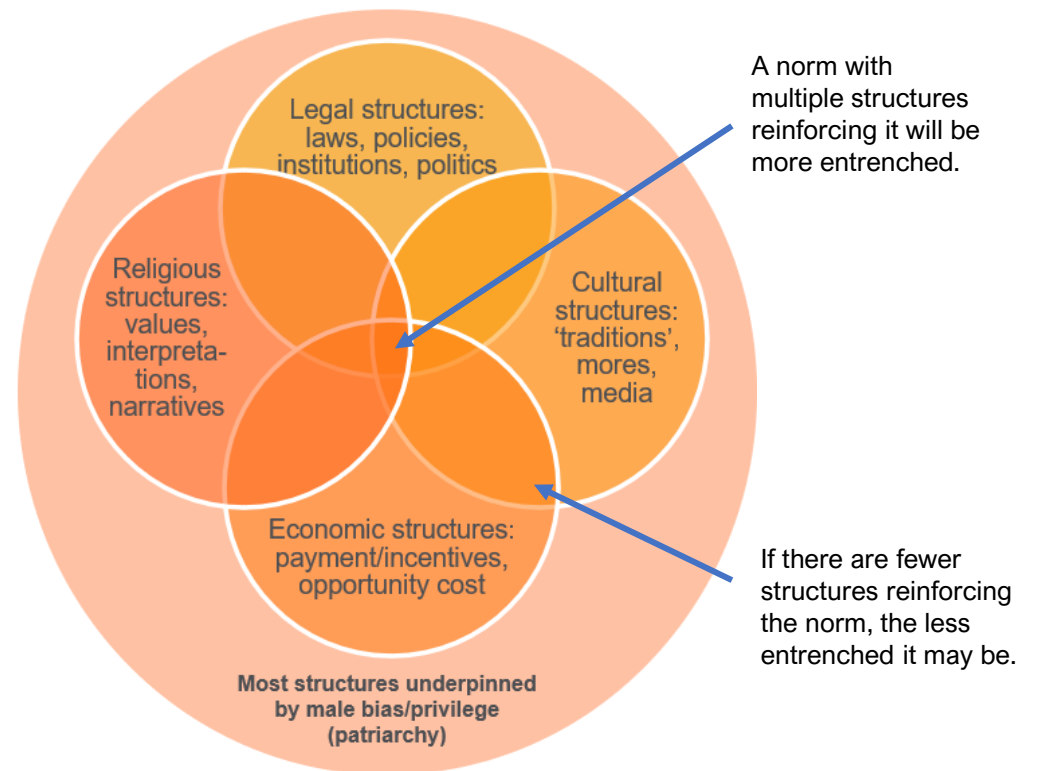
1. **Legal arrangements** – such as laws, policies, institutions and the politics which underpin these. However, if a law or policy is not enforced, this undermines its rewarding/sanctioning ability to affect behaviour.
2. **Cultural customs** – such as traditions, taboos and trends, which can be reflected in or amplified by the media. These customs can also gain traction if they are passed down from generation to generation.
3. **Religious doctrine** – including values, morals, narratives and interpretations purported and repeated by powerful influencers, such as religious leaders.
4. **Economic incentives** – which include payments or opportunity costs for certain actions (such as a dowry payment in exchange for a daughter, or the perceived 'cost' of caring for the daughter if she is not married off).

The significance of these structures is highly contextual, but it has been argued that all are generally underpinned by patriarchal systems of male bias and privilege irrespective of context. Connell and Pearce (2014: 28) note how gender norms are entrenched by "...religious, professional or corporate authority, where institutions controlled by gender-conservative men promulgate norms of inequality as part of their routine functioning."

Figure 2 illustrates how the above structures can intersect and overlap and as a result, make certain norms more difficult to contest, negotiate and change. For example, early marriage in many contexts is deeply entrenched as there are cultural, religious and economic structures that reinforce it, as well as a lack of

enforced legal sanction against it. Another example of a norm that entails intersecting legal, cultural and religious macro-level structures, is the exclusion of girls from education in Afghanistan.

Figure 2. Structures that entrench gender norms

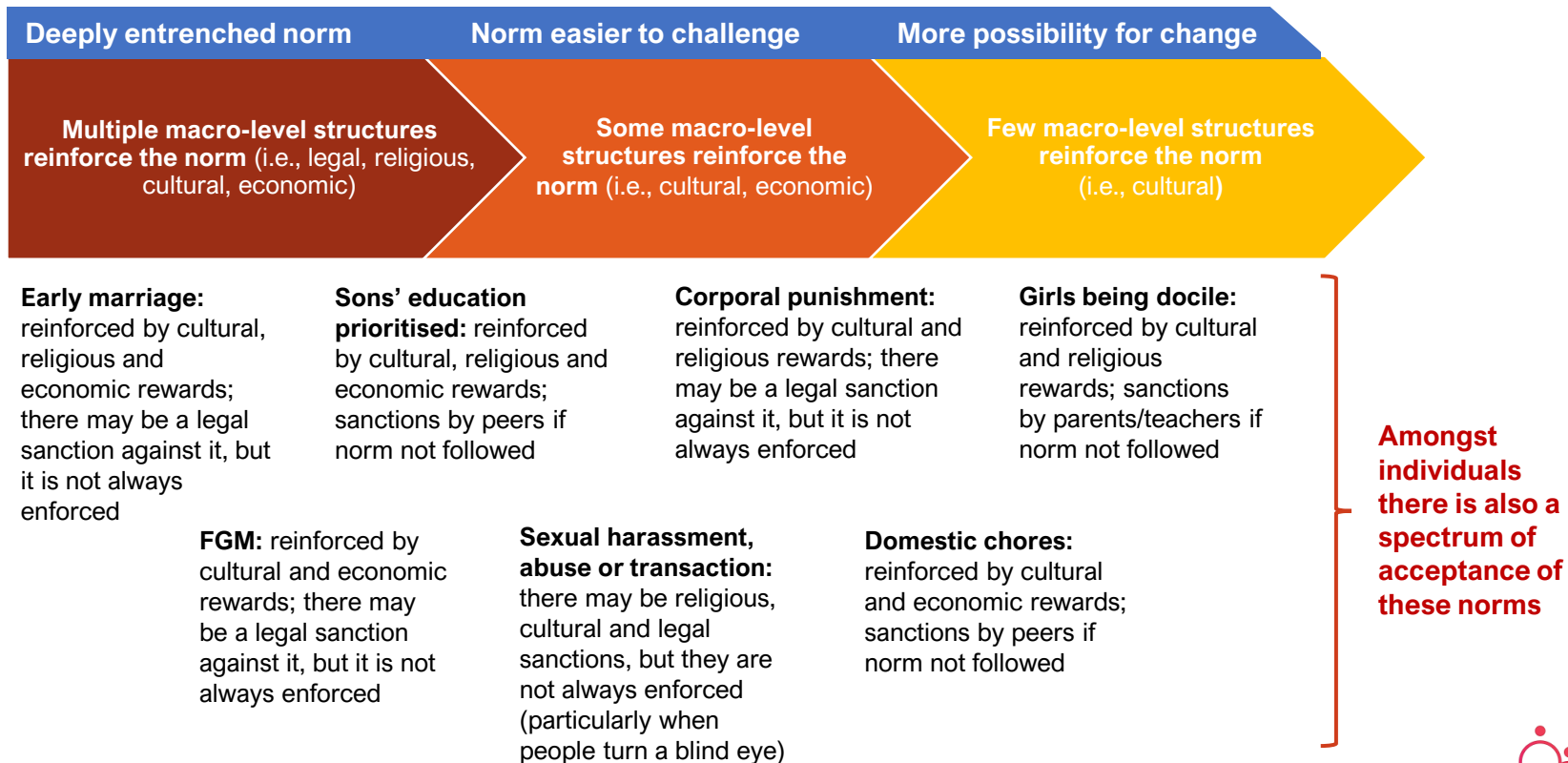


Unpacking the spectrum of norm entrenchment

Figure 3 below illustrates an indicative spectrum of norms that range from deeply entrenched to those that are easier to shift. A number of common norms are mapped across this spectrum, along with the macro-level structures related to them. It should be noted that this is an illustrative exercise only and is not based on

any particular context; rather, it aims to illustrate how and why not all norms are created equal. In a similar vein, there is also a spectrum regarding the degree to which individuals are willing to accept or contest these norms, which is discussed in the following section.

Figure 3. A mapping of gender norms based on their degree of macro-level structures and associated rewards/sanctions



Unpacking the spectrum of norm acceptance

As discussed previously, an individual's attitudes and beliefs are not always a predictor of their behaviour – people can think one thing yet do another. This ability to be conscious of a norm and the degree to which a person may accept or reject it, may be affected by their:

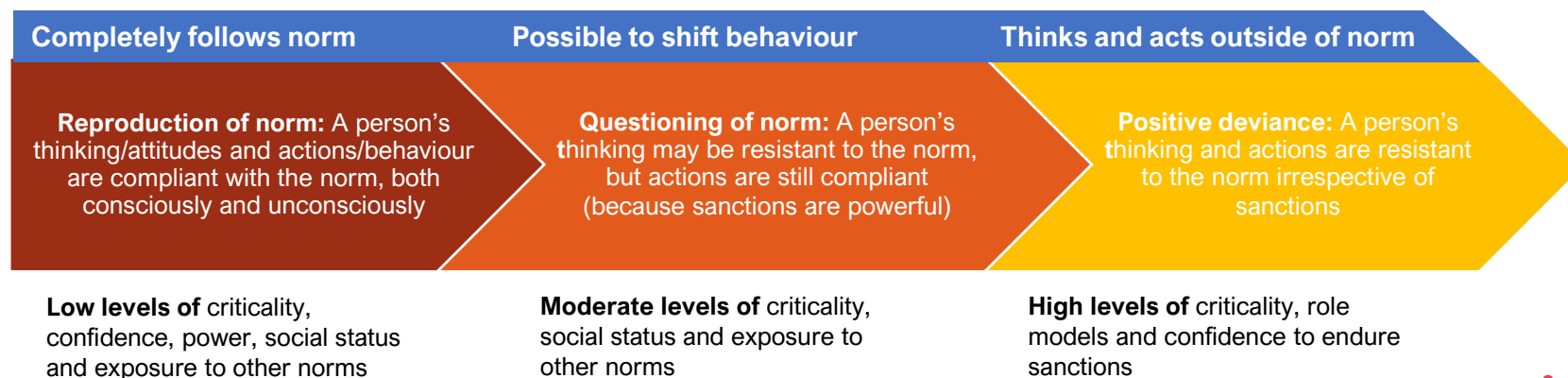
1. **Level of criticality, confidence and self-efficacy**, which can be facilitated or limited by education
2. **Exposure to different norms, ideas, role models**, which can also be facilitated by education intervention
3. **Social status, power and/or economic circumstance**, all of which affect the person's ability to negotiate sanctions and thus resist a norm

To illustrate how these characteristics affect norm acceptance, a study in Sierra Leone showed that gender roles regarding household chores were less rigid in

urban communities compared to rural communities, with parents splitting the tasks between boys and girls, as compared to rural areas where the domestic chore norm for girls remained firmly entrenched. The report noted that, “This change can be attributed to a variety of factors, such as increased exposure to diverse perspectives, higher levels of education, and the influence of progressive social movements” (UNGEI and Dalberg Design, 2020: 22). This example also demonstrates that the economic and cultural structures that entrench norms can vary a great deal between urban, rural and peri-urban contexts within a country.

Figure 4 illustrates a spectrum that spans an individual's complete acceptance of a gender norm to their rejection of it, and the characteristics that support these outcomes. These characteristics point towards areas of intervention that could be used to prompt a change in people's attitudes and actions, which is discussed in the following sections.

Figure 4. Spectrum of 'norm acceptance' by individuals and the factors that affect it



Entry points and pathways for shifting gender norms

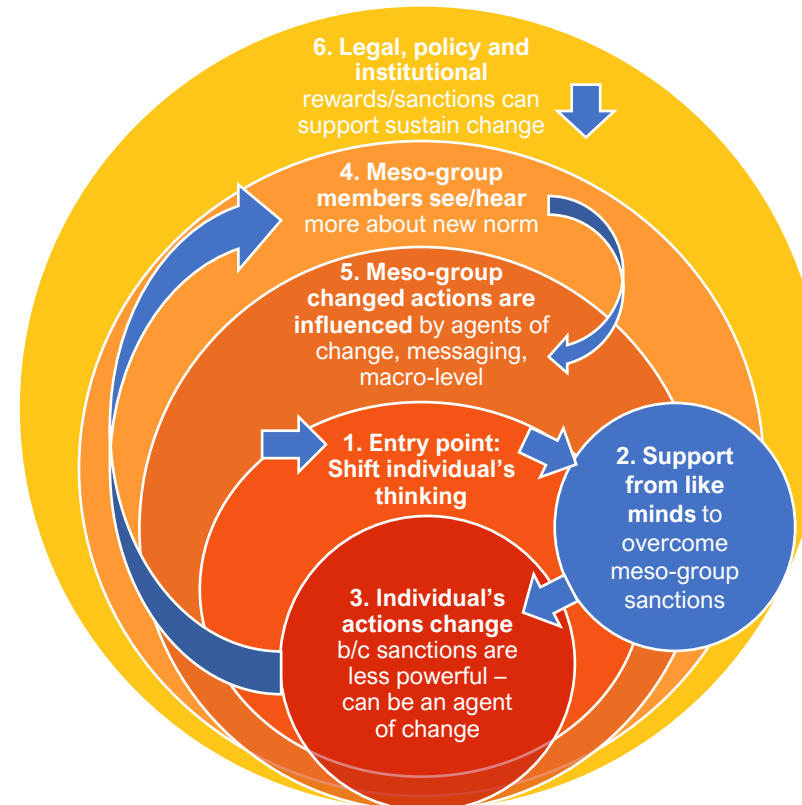
In a systematic review of interventions designed to shift behaviour, Stewart et al. (2021: 2) found that there is a problematic and implicit "... theory of change around shifting participants' attitudes by increasing their knowledge/awareness of gendered stereotypes or norms, and the assumption that this will then lead to behaviour change." Although knowledge and awareness are important, given the structures that entrench norms, the spectrum of acceptance amongst individuals, and the powerful reward/sanctioning mechanisms that abound, a more nuanced approach to behaviour change is required.

Figure 5 illustrates a potential pathway for change that draws on how norms operate and affect behaviour. **Entry point 1** draws on the idea that a person's beliefs and thinking can be shielded from meso-group sanctions because these do not need to be shared. Thus, if it is possible to get a person thinking critically about a norm (via strategies discussed in the next sections), such as a father questioning early marriage, this can be the starting point for changing his subsequent actions. If successful, a 'micro-group' of like minds may be necessary to help the father endure and not succumb to the sanctions that would be meted out if he acts outside the norm (**point 2**).

Eventually, when meso-group peers start to see more individuals (like the father and his micro-group) acting outside of the norm, these individuals start to take on a role modelling position, particularly if they are relatable. These individuals can also become agents of change, by actively influencing their peers with the logic or reframing that supported them to think critically in the first instance (**point 3 and 4**). Cislighi et al. (2019: 41) note that, "...interventions have been tested in low- and middle-income countries, where they first change attitudes of a core group of people, then help them become agents of change in their communities."

Once more meso-group members start to reinforce rather than sanction the new behaviour, it starts to become the new norm (**point 5**). And if macro-level structures (such as laws against early marriage) are also present and enforced, this can work towards supporting and sustaining change (**point 6**).

Figure 5. A potential entry point and pathway for change



This figure theorises one potential pathway towards changing an individual's thinking and behaviour; however, there are pathways from the meso- and macro- level as well.

Irrespective of entry point, the concept of providing support to individuals to overcome sanctions remains, as well as the need for a systematic analysis of all operators of the norm, which is discussed in the next section.

A robust analysis of a gender norm should underpin any intervention

Below are a set of first principles, drawn from a variety of projects including those within the [Girls' Education Challenge](#), which facilitate the rigorous analyses needed for planning sensitive, thoughtful and effective interventions to change thinking, behavior and ultimately, norms. These include:

1. **A deep contextual understanding** of how power, norms and gender relations work at macro and micro levels within the context. Who are the main operators of the norm? Who are the influencers of these operators?
2. **A thorough understanding of the norm**, particularly the constellation of norms that may be involved. Where are each of the norms on the entrenchment spectrum and why? Which structures are involved? Plan for each associated norm.
3. **Work at multiple levels.** This includes the individual, micro-group, meso-group and macro-structural levels in order to sustain/speed change.
4. **Analyse operators and subjects of the norm** – where do they sit on the spectrum of acceptance? Engagement should be planned for all those involved, including operators (i.e., teachers, parents, men, boys) and subjects (i.e., girls who can also be operators themselves) of the norm.
5. **Plan for subsequent tensions when behaviour shifts.** There are often unintended consequences (i.e., sanctions) that can occur when your target group starts to challenge/act outside of the norm - this is particularly the case for girls, but can also include teachers, parents, etc. Be sure to provide micro-group support to the target group and analyse all those who may sanction them. If possible, plan for shifting meso-group thinking/attitudes in order to pre-empt sanctions/backlash.
6. **It's not about imposing Global North values or norms** - it's about helping people scrutinise norms that they may have never questioned and facilitating supportive pathways to make change if they choose.

Case study: Working with Religious Leaders in Somalia

The Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia (AGES) programme, implemented by CARE and funded by FCDO and USAID, aimed to reduce early marriage amongst 75,230 marginalised girls through: 1) equipping girls with education and workforce readiness skills for future independence; 2) mitigating harmful effects of early marriage through access to health, legal, and economic support; and 3) engaging men, boys, women and girls to challenge the norms that perpetuate early marriage. In order to achieve this third objective, the project partnered with grassroots organisation NAGAT, who had a deep knowledge of how power and norms operated within the context, and who had worked with religious leaders and the Ministry of Religious Affairs – both of whom were significant influencers within meso-level communities.

The project team identified religious leaders who did not represent 'complete acceptance' of early marriage, in that they had the potential to be moved along the spectrum of acceptance and start thinking more critically about the norm. The project also selected facilitators who the leaders could relate to, and these facilitators slowly engaged in conversation, carefully building trust and respect, particularly with leaders who were mindful of hidden Western agendas.

Over a period of time, facilitators were able to re-frame the norm through a number of techniques (see next section) and eventually convince the leaders that not marrying girls early, and thus keeping them in school, was a benefit to everyone. The group of religious leaders not only supported each other's shift in behaviour within their own families, but also became role models and agents of change to the wider public, particularly given their influence in their communities.

Strategies to effectively shift normative thinking and actions

After conducting a systematic analysis of a norm and its operators, there are a number of techniques that can support these operators to think differently. Stewart et al, (2021: 2) note strategies such as, “peer engagement, addressing multiple levels of the ecological framework, developing agents of change, modelling/role models and co-design of interventions with participants”. In addition, CARE (2021) has a [Social Norms Design Checklist](#) that details how to implement strategies such as finding early adopters, mapping allies, providing a safe space for dialogue, using positive messaging and managing/ supporting bystander action.

Below is a summary of these and other strategies identified within the literature, particularly regarding education, health, violence reduction and challenging masculinities. When implemented together, these strategies also pre-empt ‘what doesn’t work’, which includes assuming that advocacy campaigns on their own, will change behaviour. This is not an exhaustive list, but implementing such strategies can start to shift thinking/behaviour in a robust, effective and sustainable way.

- 1. Start discussion with relatable facilitators from a peer group** – to establish credibility and build trust, facilitators should be people the target group can relate to and respect. A greater number of identity markers (i.e., ethnicity, tribe, gender, class/caste, etc.) generally increases relatability.
- 2. Use positive deviant role modelling** – positive deviants are people who “tend to show low sensitivity to sanctions when going against a norm” (CARE, 2021:2) and who the target group can relate to, such as other villagers, characters in the media, diaspora, characters in scripture, etc. These positive deviants provide example thinking and behaviour that the target group can potentially model.
- 3. Do not be confrontational and welcome contestation** - people will resist change if they feel forced or pressured. They also need space/time to overcome the cognitive dissonance associated with thinking/acting differently. Gauge where the target group is on the spectrum of acceptance and plan the pace of

conversation and reframing strategies (below) accordingly.

- 4. Reframe the norm through creating empathy** - having the target group walk in other people’s shoes will help to win hearts and minds. For example, have teachers reflect on their experience of caning from childhood; or relate the feeling of injustice from racial discrimination to the injustice of gender discrimination.
- 5. Reframe the new behaviour through relatable analogies** – for example, during the COVID pandemic in the UK, medical officers related lockdown measures to scoring an equaliser at the end of a football game, to great effect.
- 6. Reframe the norm through viewing it in a different context** - is there a ‘positive deviant village’, school or country *with similar circumstances*, that can provide an example of different thinking/behaviour that can be modelled?
- 7. Provide practical alternatives to the norm** – for example, provide alternative strategies to the dowries used to offset family poverty, or provide classroom management strategies for teachers who use caning to manage large classes.
- 8. Show that the new norm is acceptable** – show how new thinking/behaviour is still consistent with cultural/religious values. [Musawa.org does this with Islam.](#)
- 9. Only use data if it is valued and relatable** – evidence and data, particularly generated in the Global North, may be abstract or not seen as relevant. Frame data so that it is contextual, relatable, valued and elicits a visceral response.
- 10. Ensure consistent messaging and discussion over time** – one-off training or ‘after thought’ messaging is superficial. Continuous messaging and/or sessions are needed for reframing norms in multiple ways, multiple times.
- 11. Embed a new norm via multiple sources** – messaging and role modelling of a new norm/behaviour should ideally come from multiple sources: peers, leaders, the media, celebrities, the government, etc
- 12. Provide a group of ‘like minds’ to support new behaviour** – as discussed, ensure there is a micro-group to help the target group overcome sanctions, particularly financial or religious ones.

Next steps for tackling the social norms that affect girls' education

Although the majority of factors that affect girls' engagement in education are underpinned by unequal gender norms, there is a dearth of theorising, research and implementation regarding shifting these norms. This is due to the diffuse disciplinary/sectoral nature of social norms, the long-term and comprehensive effort that is required for change, and the difficulty of measuring change, particularly if it is attitudinal and has not yet manifested itself in observable action.

That said, this working paper has aimed to provide further theorisation, and a collation of principles and strategies based on this theorising, in order to stimulate discussion, future research and improved interventions to shift norms, primarily with regard to girls' education. However, much more work needs to be done, including:

1. Collecting feedback and critique on the theorising in this piece from a variety of actors who focus on social norms across differing disciplines and sectors.
2. Building on this piece with a collection of examples that concretely demonstrate successful reframing strategies that work at the individual, meso- and macro-levels. This should include ways in which certain norms can be reframed to create empathy, relatable analogies, etc. It may also be worth exploring the reframing strategies used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to facilitate awareness and criticality of unquestioned norms and their related thoughts/actions.
3. Sense checking this paper's theory of change with organisations that have

implemented a significant number of norm interventions, including those working in health, violence reduction and challenging masculinities.

4. Incorporating the theory of change and strategies within education interventions, particularly teacher training programmes. It is imperative to have teachers critically question the gender norms they've been conditioned to, in order for them to facilitate any meaningful gender responsive/transformative actions in their classrooms.
5. Ensuring that all implementation is robustly monitored and evaluated so as to contribute further to evidence of what works, doesn't work and why.
6. Collating and further developing work on measuring impact and scaling social/gender norm interventions.
7. Exploring the degree to which the theorisation, principles and strategies in this piece apply to norms that operate outside of girls' education, such as corruption and climate action.

Despite the work that still needs to be done, it is hoped that this working paper has contributed a nuanced and concrete understanding of how norms operate in order to support efforts to systematically, effectively and sustainably shift the often impenetrable norms that hinder marginalised girls and their ability to realise their full potential.

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