

How Changing Social Norms is Crucial in Achieving Gender Equality



Acknowledgements

The compendium draws on a social norms perspective. It uses the social norms definition articulated by the social scientist Cristina Bicchieri and applies the concepts of social expectations, empirical and normative, to determine whether female genital mutilation or any other maladaptive practice is a social norm in a specific context. The compendium also uses and adapts some of the outcomes of the UNICEF-Penn course on Advances on Social Norms, 2010–2016, co-chaired by Cristina Bicchieri and Gerry Mackie at the University of Pennsylvania and some of the outcomes of the UNFPA expert meeting on “Gender-Biased Harmful Practices: A Long Term Coordinated Strategy To Accelerate Abandonment And Achieve Measurable Results By 2030”, 2016, in Brussels.

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Executive summary

Human behaviour is not always a choice. Often it is automatic and unintentional, and rooted in the belief that others expect us to behave in a certain way, particularly when upholding traditions and culture.

This document is a compendium of key articles and writings that examines the social dynamics of normative human behaviours not only through experimental academic routes, but also through the complementary vision and extraordinary insights of entire community and population groups. This is an attempt to contribute to the change of maladaptive human normative behaviours. Applying certain game theory principles has helped enormously in gaining an understanding of how change can be leveraged through reflection on the "games" of reciprocal human interactions. The social expectations surrounding normative behaviour are a major obstacle for those who might otherwise wish to abandon a discriminatory norm. The main challenge is hidden gender and power dynamics, the socially constructed gender roles that uphold related behaviours, and the obstacles that present for girls' and women's acquisition or not of capabilities that lead to the exercise of agency.

First the report considers briefly the difficulty of separating "social norms" from "gender ideologies and rules". This is because (i) gender ideologies and rules are social norms per se, (ii) gender norms affect all other social norms and (iii) almost all other social norms have an impact on the balance of power between males and females. This makes it difficult to apply "gender" to "social norms theory" as though they are separate. Even in situations where gender does not appear to be an issue, it has the potential to be so and has to be taken into account. (This is one of the reasons why almost all development agencies have a policy that stipulates that

gender should be taken into account in all aspects of their work). Taking this as its point of departure, this document presents some of the most promising strategies for changing social norms and achieving gender equality. A greater understanding of the conceptual background of social norms and norms change provides a schematic – a skeleton outline – for social transformation.

Two possible overlapping processes for change may be identified: (i) the abandonment of a maladaptive norm, first through value deliberations and the further creation of a new norm (often contrary to the original norm, for example cutting or not cutting); and (ii) conversely, the creation of a new positive norm at first, and further or concurrent destabilisation of the original discriminatory norm. For each of these two options, diverse stages of change can be considered.

The theory of change and the resonance and amplification movement expand the process of change. They derive from the principles of social norm theory and can use and support existing positive social forces to influence the shifting of norms and behaviour through a global institutional response.

On 25 September 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations unanimously adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 17 goals to transform the world over the next 15 years. For the first time, a gender equality goal specifically sets out the intention to end violence and discrimination against women and girls:

Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities.

This goal includes Target 5.3, "Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation", with the corresponding indicator "Percentage of girls and women aged 15–49 years who have undergone FGM [female genital mutilation], by age group". This is a pivotal moment to further increase global action and recognize that female genital mutilation is a worldwide issue.

It is evident that, when a holistic, respectful approach, engaging communities and wider society, is taken to end problematic social norms, progress is also made in weakening unequal social systems, bolstering women's agency and increasing gender equality.



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