

# ALiGN

**Advancing Learning and  
Innovation on Gender Norms**



## **The potential of a community-led approach to change harmful gender norms in low- and middle-income countries**

Beniamino Cislighi

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Many of the programmes that achieve gender norms transformation in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are conducted at 'community' level. These programmes help people address existing relations of gender and power in their family and broader social networks. There are several programmatic strategies for community-level interventions that transform gender relations. This think piece looks at how community-led approaches can help transform harmful gender norms.

### Key messages

1. Community-led gender norm change requires compassionate practitioners who facilitate honest, values-based dialogues, within and across cultures.
2. Community-led approaches to development should not be culturally imperialistic (imposing external agendas and values); however, they are rarely value-neutral, as they tend to embody the values of the practitioners and/or organisations funding the activities.
3. Achieving change in harmful gender norms is likely to be a slow process. While some gender norms might change quickly, more often, it will take time for new norms to spread across entire communities.
4. Working with men and boys is key to changing harmful gender norms: not only do men typically hold power over others in their community, but men can also be constrained (albeit in different ways from women) by strict patriarchal gender norms that dictate which forms of masculinity are acceptable.
5. It is essential to work with existing leaders, including traditional and religious leaders, to achieve and sustain positive intervention results.



### What is a community, anyway?

Many people might be familiar with the following questions, which often arise when discussing community-based work (especially when talking with those who are either unconvinced of its potential or not familiar with it). What is a community? What are its exact borders? Is it homogeneous or heterogeneous? And, if those borders and homogeneity cannot be defined, how can an organisation undertake work at community level that benefits all people in that community?

These are good questions, as they encourage us to be aware of the possible biases hidden in a community-based approach to development work. One such bias, for instance, is that we might be unwittingly romanticising the people we reach, thinking of them as living in isolated areas of the world in small, traditional, culturally homogeneous 'communities'.

#### Box 1: Orientalism in postcolonial development practice

Postcolonialism, as a field of research and practice, invites development practitioners in the global North (who engage in cross-cultural conversations and interventions) to be mindful of the material and discursive legacies of colonialism that continue to shape their power and positioning today (Ashcroft et al., 1995; Ling, 2002; Radcliffe, 2005; Kapoor, 2008).

As part of these postcolonial reflections on the balance of power between practitioners in the global North and 'beneficiaries' in the global South, it has been suggested that international development workers should be aware of how they think and talk about the people they intend to reach with their interventions, as they might be essentialising them (e.g. 'they're poor'; 'they're in need'; 'they are uneducated'; 'they're violent'), in an oversimplification that serves only the practitioners' purposes but does not help the people participating in their interventions (Hout, 2015).

Said's (2003) book on *Orientalism* (which also inspired others' later work on Africanism) brought to the fore the risks that come with distorting and oversimplifying the 'other' in the global South, as though they were in need of liberation and emancipation provided by international agencies based in the global North. Before Said, Escobar (1984) had argued that romantic (or 'orientalist') development practices intertwine with and justify the Western enterprise to penetrate and control Third World countries. This enterprise, he argued, is a three-step process: it starts with the West calling out 'abnormalities' (problems) in these countries. Then, development practitioners find justifications in acting on those problems as if they were technical, not political, issues, bringing them into the politically neutral realm of science. Scared of cultural relativism, the development enterprise presents problems as technical, rather than moral. Interventions thus become the 'right thing to do' because they help people achieve (so called) value-neutral goals of health and economic development. But these goals bury a political and moral project under the camouflage of a technical one. An intervention to reduce child marriage is carried out for girls' health, diverting attention from its cultural and moral challenges. Finally, international development institutionalises those actions: orientalism becomes bureaucracy, so that it gets buried and hidden in the disciplinary mechanisms of the international development juggernaut, where it cannot be seen or called out anymore.

Similar approaches to international development have been criticised as being new forms of colonisation and Westernisation. They posit the struggle for global *modernity* as their ultimate goal: helping the global South catch up to speed with the global North, both culturally and economically. In this model of development, some countries are (sometimes unconsciously) considered more advanced – more modern – than others. ‘Underdeveloped’ countries are behind and below developed countries, in a ‘pre-modern’ state waiting to be promoted to modern countries, which will happen when they finally evolve from the status of naïve savage to that of civilised business partner (Ellerman, 2006; Ferguson, 2006).

Opinions diverge on whether it is possible to engage in honest cross-cultural international development practices at all. Bond (2006) inspired a generation of development scholars and practitioners, suggesting that giving voice to the poor to lead their own development agenda and participate in global decisions that affect their lives is the only ethical approach to international development. Putting people in charge of their own development has the potential to unlock new positive life trajectories for these people, reorienting the development agenda of their community (Cislaghi, 2017). Community-led development, thus, is not merely a tool for achieving the practitioners’ or the donors’ agenda; it is an opportunity to engage in value-informed cross-cultural conversations where practitioners and the people reached by the intervention engage in a mutually beneficial dialogue on their hopes and desires for the future, helping each other achieve them.

In practice though, most people reached by community-based interventions – including those living in the most economically disadvantaged regions – have myriad interactions with people who are both geographically and culturally distant from them. They are members of multiple social networks, of varying locations and sizes. They often have access to global information and communication technologies (ICTs) or they might know someone who does (e.g. friends or family who live abroad) (Porter et al., 2018).

What, then, are the borders of their community? Who is in and who is out? The fluid boundaries of people’s social groups make it difficult to agree a universal definition of ‘community’, and attempts to do so end up coming to terms with its blurry edges. Not only are the borders of a community difficult to define, but its internal consistency is also problematic. A ‘community’ includes *communities* (families, friends, colleagues, neighbours) that intersect and interact as political entities with different agendas, hopes, assets and resources (see Box 4). Some might be tempted to think of communities as groups of people having roughly equal power, while all communities have one or even several power elites. People who are often marginalised may be absent from decision-making processes, or they might be unable to speak up. As we discuss later in greater detail, gender norms can play a major role in shaping those relations of power and processes of public decision-making.

**Community members  
share membership,  
interactions and a  
physical context.**

Some practitioners involved in community-based work to transform gender norms in LMICs use the term ‘communities’ as a synonym for small, bounded geographical areas, because much (although not all) of their work takes place in relatively small rural villages or towns. Even though this ‘common sense’ approximation might be helpful at times, it also oversimplifies reality. Thinking of communities as static,

homogenous and self-contained geographical entities is unhelpful, as it might lead us to overlook the important in-group contradictions, power relations and socioeconomic differences – as well as

the historical and social dynamics of change in all of these – that play a critical role in maintaining a harmful or unjust status quo.

On the other hand, a definition of ‘community’ in which its members share nothing but an imagined sense of belonging seems equally unhelpful. This definition limits the understanding of how physical assets, places of interaction, infrastructures and (more generally) geo-spatial configurations can contribute to sustaining unequal gender norms. The communities participating in development interventions are often groups of people that share access to common material resources and that are anchored, for one reason or another, to a given geographical setting. This might be because they were born there, currently live there, or have family members still living there.

Here, I use the term ‘community’ to refer to similar groups of people. More specifically, I discuss projects that facilitate change in harmful practices in LMICs and that work with groups of people who share three characteristics: (1) imagined membership (people can see themselves as belonging to the community in ways that influence their sense of self); (2) social interactions (people know and meet each other, have a governance system in place – or another decision-making modality such as collective meetings – to which they can contribute, and share social ties); and (3) a shared physical context (people’s lives are anchored to and influenced by a given physical space).

### Community-based development and community-led approaches

Community-based approaches include any interventions that work with a whole community (or a representative subset) to achieve a given goal or foster a given agenda. The [Oxford Bibliography](#) provides an overview of literature on community development work conducted in high-income countries, where it was first applied.

Today, the term ‘community-based’ appears commonly in the practice of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) implementing interventions in the global South. The term covers a wide range of intervention strategies, each with a varying degree of community participation. While all these approaches are ‘community-based’, not all are ‘community-led’. A top-down child vaccination intervention, for instance, often includes intensive practitioner-led community-level vaccination days. Some practitioners would call this component of the intervention ‘community-based’ just to differentiate it from, say, the training of health professionals or the lobbying of local politicians.

**Community-based approaches (also called community-placed) are not necessarily led by community members.**

What is the difference between community-based and community-led interventions then? Arnstein’s [ladder of participation](#) (1969) offers a good framework to navigate the many possible community-based approaches. Arnstein’s ladder ranks these approaches, with the rungs ranging from manipulation of community members to align their behaviours with practitioners’ views of what they should do (the bottom rung), to giving them full control of the intervention (the top rung). Community-led approaches, specifically, are at the top of the ladder. Here, community members themselves identify socio-political problems that matter to them, and develop and implement relevant, culturally sound solutions. In other words, in community-led approaches, transformative power is in the hands of community members, who make key decisions on aims and strategies of their collective development efforts.

In an insightful and practical piece of work, Wessells (2018) looked at characteristics and limits of top-down approaches to community-based child protection mechanisms and compared them to community-led approaches. While sometimes helpful (as, for instance, in certain types of emergencies, or in the provision of some public services), top-down approaches tend to result in low

community ownership and do not foster community voice. This risks increasing people's dependency on implementing organisations and, over the long term, reduces the sustainability of results (Ellerman, 2006).

Community-led approaches, on the other hand, have greater potential to increase people's self-help capacity, building on their traditional values and offering opportunities to draw from traditional, culturally grounded forms of mutual protection and assistance. Here, the role of the practitioner is to facilitate constructive, inclusive dialogue and reflection to inform community members' decisions and actions. Community-led interventions bring two key advantages. The first is that they can be very effective: community members know the socio-cultural setting where their actions will be implemented and can devise strategies that are both culturally appropriate and can leverage it as a source of solutions. The second advantage is that they help people achieve goals that matter to them, drawing on their individual and collective aspirations. They generate internal motivations to action, which are generally more sustained than external ones. As Ellerman (2006) noted, people might do what is asked of them if they are offered an external incentive, but the solutions on offer may not always be the most appropriate for inducing self-motivated, long-term social change (Sen and Grown, 1987; Kumar et al., 2015).

**Community-led approaches hold that practitioners should not try to do things 'to' people or on their behalf. Rather, they should help people sort out their problems themselves.**

### Community-led approaches to transform gender norms

Community-led interventions have been found to be effective in achieving greater gender equality, with two notable examples being the [SASA!](#) programme in East Africa and [Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme](#) (CEP) in West Africa. SASA! facilitates discussions around power as a way to help community members achieve more gender-just relationships (particularly reducing domestic violence). Tostan's CEP is a three-year community-led programme that aims to help community members achieve their own goals. It invites participants to reflect on the challenges they are facing and equips them with knowledge and skills to act on those challenges. Abramsky et al. (2014) conducted a five-year, mixed-method randomised control trial (RCT) to measure how SASA! contributed to transforming gender norms and reducing domestic violence. Four treatment and four control communities participated in the study. After the programme, male participants reported increased equitable decision-making in the family, as well as greater appreciation of their partners' work inside the household, among other outcomes. Similar outcomes were observed for women, although not all achieved statistical significance. Among those that were statistically significant, women in participating communities were more likely to report joint decision-making. The CEP changed the gender norms that had sustained child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) (UNICEF, 2008; Cislighi et al., 2016), and increased access to health and education services for women and girls (see Box 2).

#### Box 2: Some results from the Tostan Community Empowerment Programme

Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme (CEP) has been implemented mostly in Senegal, but also in other countries in West and East Africa (Djibouti, Somalia, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Mauritania). The NGO project has been the subject of several independent studies and evaluations. These include: (1) Diop et al. (2004) – mixed-methods, quasi-experimental; (2) Diop et al. (2008) – qualitative; (3) UNICEF (2008) – quantitative; (4) CRDH (2010) – mixed-methods, quasi-experimental; and (5) Cislighi et al. (2016) – qualitative.

In 2004, Diop and colleagues interviewed participants at baseline, endline, and two years after the end of the project. They interviewed CEP participants and people in non-participating villages. They found that gender-based violence had decreased more among participating communities (86% to 27%;  $P \leq 0.05$ ). Attitudes toward girls' education, discrimination, intimate partner violence, and female genital cutting (FGC) also improved dramatically. Qualitative evidence supported the quantitative data. For instance, an 18-year-old participant explained that, 'No man now dares to lift his hand against a woman'. In a qualitative study, Diop et al. (2008) found that: 'After delivery of the education program, numerous changes took place in the villages... particularly with respect to the place and role of women in the community'. Participants reported improved relations and changed gender norms. One participant said: 'Now we are convinced that women can do anything men can do, sometimes better, because we have abilities and aptitudes that should be taken advantage of. Why not a woman village chief?' (Diop et al., 2008: 12).

UNICEF (2008) collected survey data six years after the end of the CEP. They interviewed people in: (1) villages where Tostan implemented CEP; (2) villages that were reached by the organised diffusion process; and (3) control villages. They were specifically interested in FGC. Their study found that 15% of girls were cut in villages with CEP, 8% in 'organised diffusion' villages, and 47% in control villages, indicating a strong treatment effect of the Tostan programme. CRDH (2010) conducted a random sample mixed-method study, using the same three categories (villages that participated in CEP, villages reached by organised diffusion, and control villages). The study found evidence that CEP had contributed to a change in the norms sustaining FGC and child marriage.

Cislaghi et al. (2016) collected qualitative data before, during, and at the end of the CEP in three rural communities in central Senegal. Participants reported changes across several outcomes, including gender norms. The authors found that: 'Many [participants] said that the quality of relationships between women and men, both in the village and in households, improved. Women talked about the importance of the right to work outside the household... Gender role references became what people chose to do rather than what they are socially obliged to do'. Tostan's internal evaluations are also quite rigorous, mixed-methods and quasi-experimental. The most recent (Tostan, 2018) is a multi-country evaluation in Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia. The evaluation highlights several gender-related outcomes. For instance, it presents evidence of increased women's participation in decision-making in both the family and community meetings.

Both these interventions contributed to greater gender equality by facilitating change in gender norms. [Gender norms](#) can be harmful or protective, and can be accelerators of or barriers to social change (see Box 3). Practitioners working at community level help people identify harmful norms, and facilitate reflections about the extent to which those norms and practices are affecting people's health, happiness and wellbeing. There are several models of how community-led development can help achieve (gender-related) social change. I focus on one in detail (drawing on the work of Tostan, which I studied), but review a few others as well that practitioners might find useful in their work.

[Ibrahim](#) (2017) offers a framework specifically for NGO-facilitated community-led development. She identified three critical steps in people-led interventions: conscientisation (awareness-raising), conciliation (alignment of community members' aspirations and desires), and collaboration (partnership between community members and other key stakeholders to achieve change). Ibrahim argued that effective community development work must involve change at three levels: individual



**Box 3. Gender norms may serve many purposes**

There are reasons why people do what they do. Communities face many challenges in their daily life. There are several possible responses to those challenges, each contributing to a social equilibrium of some sort. Each possible social equilibrium might offer an effective solution to people's problems, and yet assign people unequal freedoms and power.

For instance, because women face the risk of sexual assault, a community might, over time, have adopted the practice that women do not leave the household without a man. I am not, of course, suggesting that this practice is right, but it is one (albeit imperfect) practical response to mitigate this risk. With time, these practices become gender norms, such that, in the case mentioned above, women who do leave the household without a man might not be considered respectable members of the community.

behaviour change, development of collective agency, and local institutional reform. Work by Wessells (2018) echoes Ibrahim's framework. Their process for community-led development included three key phases: (1) learning (where the implementing agency learns from the community about their local needs); (2) community planning (where community members decide what they want to work on and how); and (3) community-led action (where community members implement their strategy, reflect on its effectiveness, and make any necessary adjustments).

In [Values deliberation and collective action](#), Gerry Mackie, Diane Gillespie and I have grounded a theory of community-led interventions for norm change in a five-year, large-scale, qualitative research study, focusing on the importance of community discussions about shared values and related practices as motivators for collective

actions. In [Human rights and community-led development](#), I then compared the Tostan model with other community-led development initiatives. Drawing on these two pieces of work (that were in turn inspired by Ibrahim's and Wessells' work), I suggest here a three-step process of effective community-led programmes for transforming gender norms: (1) motivation, (2) deliberation, and (3) action/diffusion. These are somewhat concurrent and conceptual steps, rather than strictly chronological. I describe them in more detail below.

**Motivation.** As part of this first step, practitioners create a safe space where a community facilitator can help a relatively small group of participants (50 or so) discuss what they like and do not like about their local reality (a 1:10 ratio between participants and residents seems to be the golden ratio; that is, creating one group of 50 for every 500 community residents has the greatest potential to achieve community-led transformation). These groups are generally homogeneous in terms of age (with two separate sessions, one for youths and one for adults) but are of mixed gender and ethnicity. In the Tostan programme, participants met three times a week for three years. The first sessions start by asking participants to draw an image of how they would like their community to be in 20 years' time. That drawing is motivational and, throughout the sessions, becomes the anchor to which the community facilitators refer when participants discuss change: is this change in line with your existing values and vision?

As a strategy to facilitate the discussion on existing practices, organisations can design or make use of curricula that include a critical framework for participants to uncover and name problems that matter to them. I have a preference for the language of human rights and *responsibilities* (see Box 4), having witnessed its power in the Tostan programme, in which facilitators presented key human rights in around 25 sessions (during the six months of the programme). They did so by asking participants what these rights meant to them, and their views about these rights and responsibilities.

**Box 4. Why the language of human rights and responsibilities?**

The language of human rights emerged from legalistic discussions on which citizens' entitlements states can be reasonably expected and asked to protect. But, given that human rights have a strong individualistic watermark, to what extent can each citizen demand to have their rights satisfied without impinging on other citizens' reasonable requests? Clearly, states need to make sure that each citizen has (for instance) access to basic health services, but what should citizens themselves expect to do to make sure they help each other in case of illness or disease? That is, what about citizens' collective responsibilities to treat each other with dignity and protect each other from violence and abuse?

Tostan employs the language of responsibilities because, in its view, this is more appropriate in collectivist society – but certainly its approach includes an important lesson for people in the global North as well: that human rights are not exclusively granted to individuals by states, but that people themselves have a responsibility to mutually protect and promote these rights.

It is important to make sure that participants do not 'learn' about human rights uncritically, parroting the Western language of human rights (a criticism on which Spring (2000) has written extensively). Rather, human rights are to be used as a critical framework to help participants look at life in their community, translating the language and meaning of these rights in their context, and deliberating how they can promote them. As these conversations take place, participants contextualise the principles of human rights and responsibilities into shared values and cultural world views.

They can, for instance, engage in dialogues about distribution of labour in the family, women's and men's access to health services, or violence in the household. These discussions, facilitated by the human rights curriculum, are grounded in participants' lived experiences; potential tensions can (and frequently will) emerge, as past abuses or episodes of violence are often referred to in the collective dialogues.

As these discussions increase in depth and

meaningfulness, they shape a space of mutual trust (protected by the facilitator) where, through time, participants begin to identify and share the lived challenges and obstacles to their health and wellbeing that they experience living in their community. Very often, these challenges intersect with gender norms and roles; since people's lived experiences (in any context) are profoundly linked to the roles ascribed to them as men and women, these discussions end up looking critically at expectations for women and men, and at how they can become a source of harm (or protection). These conversations can be difficult, as they can reveal patterns of oppression that could lead to more violence. As Freire (1970) mentioned, when oppressors are revealed, they might feel guilty and react with anger. Facilitators must thus ensure a safe and conciliatory environment, where emotions and vulnerabilities of all participants are welcomed, valued and respected.

At the same time, to break through existing issues of power that affect participants' familiarity with or capacity for public speaking, facilitators must ensure and encourage everyone's participation. This can take time, as marginalised groups might still delegate voice and decision-making authority to power-holders. [Participative strategies](#) (e.g. open forum theatre, small group discussions, games and drawings) can be very powerful in increasing, over time, the voice of those who are not used to participating in collective discussions. For instance, research on Tostan's CEP found that while a few men dominated conversations for more than a month, around the time of the 15<sup>th</sup> session, women's voices had become stronger: by then, these women felt confident to interrupt and disagree with men, taking more speaking space and time than the men (Cislaghi et al., 2016).

**Deliberation.** In this second step, participants deliberate together on what course of action can best help them achieve the change (or changes) they want. For example: ‘what can we do to stop child marriage or domestic violence in this community?’ During this phase, which can take several sessions, practitioners help participants develop and use important skills needed for effective democratic deliberation, such as public speaking and project management. Public speaking is important because it helps participants contribute to the local discussions and envision collective improvement strategies. Project management skills help people implement those strategies effectively. It is at this point that norms among participants begin to shift: norms regarding who speaks and leads, who takes decisions, or participates in public discussions, for instance. Elsewhere (Cislaghi, 2017; 2018), I have reported that in villages participating in Tostan’s CEP, over time, it became increasingly acceptable for women and younger people to speak out during meetings. Practitioners should help participants deliberate outside of the programme, both privately and publicly, with other non-participating community members as well. As they do so – applying the public speaking skills they have rehearsed in the sessions – more people become motivated to do what is needed to achieve positive change.

**Action/diffusion.** In this third and final step, participants develop individual and collective motivations to change. They begin to act in ways that are new to themselves and others: they speak differently and initiate new actions (e.g. women speaking in public, men participating in village clean-ups). Some of these changes (for instance, better communication within spousal relationships, or increasing women’s voice during village meetings) might require motivating non-participating members of the community to join in the movement for change. Participants themselves reach out to others in their community, using the words and concepts that motivated them during the programme in the first place, and eventually expanding the group of motivated agents of change (see Box 5). This larger group begins to carry out new actions, individually and collectively: for instance, they might change the way they take care of their children or spouse, or the way they talk in public. As these agents of change recognise the positive outcomes of their work, their motivation (and the motivation of others who see them behaving differently) grows to the point that other people might join.

#### Box 5. The value of organised diffusion

‘Organised diffusion’ is the process through which participants share new knowledge and understanding with others in their social networks, to motivate these others and join with them in a movement of social change. Organised diffusion has the potential to multiply the effects of community-led interventions and is a valuable cost-effective strategy to maximise impact.

The process was first theorised by [Mackie and LeJeune \(2009\)](#), and has six phases. Phase 1 includes discussions that happen before the programme is implemented, as the arrival of the intervention generates people’s interest. Phase 2 refers to the small group discussions described earlier. In phase 3, participants share new knowledge and understanding with another selected person in their community (often a family member). Then, in phases 4–6, information spreads out from the intervention community to new communities, reaching people across the larger social network.

Cislaghi and colleagues (forthcoming) looked at three programmes (Tostan in Senegal, Voices for Change in Nigeria, and Change Starts at Home in Nepal) and found that effective organised diffusion significantly increased change in harmful gender norms. The effectiveness of the strategy lies in the fact that it allows for community-led expansion of culturally compatible new understandings and strategies to generate motivation and action across social networks.

New positive gender norms finally emerge in the larger community and are sealed by public events, some formal (e.g. a public declaration of abandonment of child marriage) and others informal (e.g. women speaking in public and nobody telling them to be quiet). These new norms will not necessarily be universally shared or agreed upon; however, as new norms become established, they promote changes in behaviour even though some people's attitudes might still be resistant.

### **Tensions in transforming gender norms through community-led development**

Community-led approaches present some important challenges. Besides the three mentioned below, there are a wide range of pitfalls that might reduce their effectiveness. Wessells (2018) offers a good overview. Community-led approaches, for instance, take time and require sustained funding that several donors are not prepared to commit to. These approaches also depend greatly on the quality of facilitation. Freire (1970) mentioned that facilitators can be seduced by the power that participants will try to hand over to them. It is up to facilitators to refuse that power and put it back in participants' hands, but that is not always easy. Even the most culturally sensitive programmes, carefully designed to avoid cultural imperialism, fail if their facilitators are mindless of the seductive power that comes with being in charge of facilitating a transformative discussion. Many facilitators might have their own idea of 'how people should be and what they should do' in that locality, whether they themselves are from that community or from elsewhere. Others might not ask questions that help participants engage critically with life in their community, because they are party to the same system of norms.

I mention here two key challenges more specifically related to community-led approaches for transforming gender norms. I also look at potential opportunities for how to overcome these challenges as a way to help practitioners in their transformative work. These are related to: (1) the potentially invisible nature of harmful gender norms; and (2) the role of power-holders in maintaining a certain system of gender roles and responsibilities.

#### **Challenge 1: The potentially invisible nature of harmful gender norms**

Power and gender relations can be almost invisible. It is difficult for people to look at the social and political reality in which they are immersed, to recognise what is unique about it, and to imagine how it could be different. Doing so requires a great amount of collective work to envision social, political, cultural (and even scientific) alternatives to the status quo. We are so busy dealing with the world as it is that we often lack the cognitive (and, to a certain extent, emotional) space to imagine a different social reality or how we could achieve it. [Nussbaum](#) (2000) famously told the story of a group of malnourished Indian women whose village lacked a clean water supply but who showed no desire to protest to the government for not providing basic services, since they knew no other way that the 'world' could be. They did not see their home as a village without water; it was just 'the village'. It is difficult to imagine both how the world could be different and the steps needed to make that imagined world a reality. The capacity to know how to achieve certain individual or collective goals is something that is developed, and only partially acquired (as it needs to be contextualised within existing social and political structures that can facilitate or obstruct change). [Appadurai](#) (2004) termed this 'navigational' capacity to envision the steps required to achieve an individual or collective goal as the 'capacity to aspire'. This capacity is usually more developed in people who have experienced different ways of doing things or of being – for instance, because they travel or have access to education or other means of information.



***The capacity to aspire is the capacity to envision the steps necessary to achieve an individual or collective goal.***

***(Appadurai, 2004)***

Gender norms can be part of this invisible social status quo. Recall that norms are not necessarily harmful; they can facilitate social interactions and help people be confident in their capacity to act as a culturally competent member of their group. However, some gender norms can be a serious barrier to people's happiness and wellbeing, and prevent them realising their rights. When harmful norms are invisible, it may be very difficult for people to realise the extent to which certain social expectations are negatively affecting their health and wellbeing. Obviously, to change something harmful, people first need to be aware of it: how can people bring about change if they are

not aware of what needs to be changed in the first place, or cannot see how change can be achieved?

### ***Opportunity 1a: Protecting time to explore limit-situations with kindness***

The influential educator [Paulo Freire](#) argued that, reflecting on their existence and the historical characteristics of this existence, people can together envision a map of social possibilities; that is, they can collectively come up with potential alternatives to their status quo. Freire (1970) argued that similar collective exercises challenge people's 'limit-situations' – obstacles to people's collective liberation that are at the limit of people's zone of conversational comfort. Limit-situations are frustrating and potentially invisible experiences that people do not usually discuss, particularly not with the intent of overcoming them. Community discussions can help participants identify limit-situations and become aware of experiences and feelings that emerge when experiencing them. As community practitioners help participants investigate those limit-situations in their own lived reality, the abstract knowledge presented by the practitioners (be it about human rights, power or gender) becomes meaningful and concrete, grounded in participants' lives.

By reflecting on their daily struggles, participants might identify certain gender norms as particularly problematic or constraining, while others may be sources of satisfaction or happiness. In a study I conducted recently with Solava Ibrahim, we interviewed a woman who participated in Tostan's CEP (Cislaghi and Ibrahim, in preparation). She was regularly beaten by her husband. During the session on non-discrimination, she and others mentioned 'beating women' as a form of discrimination. This started a lively discussion in the session; some men talked about the frustration they felt with not finding a job and how they could not tolerate it when their wives complained about them not bringing enough money home. This woman went back home and opened up to her husband, saying the beatings made her suffer. Her husband responded as the men in the class had done – describing his frustration at not being able to be the family breadwinner. She expected this and said: 'there is nothing we can do about you not finding a job, but in the house, we can be in peace'. Other men who participated in the CEP approached her husband and talked to him about their commitment to stop hitting their wives, and other participants also visited the house regularly, to say the community does not like domestic violence and will not tolerate it. The woman we interviewed reported that her husband stopped beating her and they were now communicating in new ways that made her feel happy.

Ideally, this process is a kind (i.e. not apportioning blame), conciliatory (i.e. avoiding accusations or recriminations) and liberating one, which cannot happen in a short series of concise workshops. Conflict can arise, but the role of facilitators is to mediate and help participants recognise their common interest in collaborating for the goals the community set at the beginning of the programme (recall the drawing exercise mentioned in the Tostan programme). In effective community-led dialogues, practitioners will not tell participants about the 'ideal' gender norms they should have in their locality. Rather, they will help participants share how their lived experiences affect the wellbeing of different individuals and groups within their community. These discussions will most likely repeat themselves and be contradictory; but, most of all, it will take time for participants to recognise shared beliefs that align with their individual experience of life in their community. Participants may not be ready to share their feelings and lived experiences from the beginning. If they are not given the time to build a community of trust and to experience its safety, the intervention will most likely fail, in spite of what participants might report.

**Invisible gender norms are 'limit-situations' that require time to uncover with authenticity and to build commitment to change.**

### **Opportunity 1b: Helping people to listen and speak to each other**

When limit-situations are perceived as insuperable, participants might lose hope for achieving change. As marginalised groups participate in collective discussions, the first obstacles they encounter might be in believing that they have something valid to say, and that others will listen to them. For instance, as [Belenky and colleagues](#) (1986) suggested, women who experience oppressive patriarchal authority as all-powerful learn not to trust their ability to choose for themselves and instead rely on the presence of an authority to guide their actions: 'What do I have to say that these people might want to listen to?' Yet, for the compassionate practitioner, each person's experience is to be treasured because, among other reasons, it can help others understand the shared reality of the problems they are investigating and aiming to change.

Participative strategies (which make use of open theatre, games, songs, and any interactive technique as long as it is adapted to suit the local cultural context) can be effective in helping participants realise their public speaking potential and experience a series of successes that would prove their prejudices towards themselves and others wrong. People's awareness about their own capabilities – and other people's capabilities – can change when they realise their potential as public speakers and empathic listeners. The renewed awareness of what people can do (and, in particular, of what they can do for each other) has the potential to spark changes in relations between men and women, stretching the horizon of future possible ways of being.

### **Challenge 2: Harmful gender norms can be sustained by culturally embedded power dynamics**

The concept of power is complex and [multi-faceted](#). The communities that could participate in community-led programmes have formal and informal structures that assign power to selected groups of people: elders, chiefs, or spiritual leaders, for instance, who might have an interest in maintaining the gender status quo (see Box 6). The biases created by gender norms can be mobilised by power-holders to their own advantage or even by those who are disadvantaged by that norm, because they have internalised it. Often, the discriminatory gender norms that are addressed in community development work are seen as harmful to women and beneficial to men. However, as discussed below, men often suffer from and contest patriarchal norms too. In the past 30 years, gender

transformative interventions have challenged the dichotomy of male power vs female powerlessness as inadequate, given the intersecting inequalities related to people's membership of

**Social categorisations such as gender, race, age, and class intersect in each person, creating overlapping systems of social advantage or disadvantage.**

multiple social categories. They have, in other words, explored the mechanisms through which men and women sustain or challenge a patriarchal gender system.

#### Box 6. Multiple communities and harmful agency

With respect to gender norms, there are at least two intersecting risks in community-led development. The first is that practitioners might not acknowledge how different community sub-groups push forward contrasting gender-related agendas. One sub-group might favour a change that contravenes a social norm, thereby causing a backlash from those with conservative views. Managing such conflicts can be important for the success of community-led action. The second risk is that practitioners might focus on increasing agency among community members without increasing their potential to make informed choices about their lives.

The case of child marriage is helpful in explaining this intersection further. In a qualitative study in Cameroon, Shakya and colleagues (2018) found that, while parents were against child marriage, girls' agency was expanding to the point that they could choose to get married against their parents' will. They were doing so to comply with gender norms which afforded a higher social status to married adolescent girls. [Promundo \(Taylor et al., 2015\) has witnessed similar trends in Brazil](#), and others have uncovered similar trends in Somalia (Kenny et al., under review), Honduras (Murphy-Graham and Leal, 2015) and Guatemala (Taylor et al., in press). Programmes that invest in expanding women's or girls' agency should consider the norms that might shape what girls and women will do when they acquire greater agency.

Not all men hold patriarchal world views. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) offered a useful framework when they distinguished between 'hegemonic' and 'subordinated' masculinities. Patriarchal forms of masculinities are hegemonic in that they are normative and demand compliance. Men and boys are often policed into those forms of masculinities to the extent that they might enact those gender-normative masculinities even when they are uneasy with them. Other men and boys might instead enjoy and embrace unequal norms as they benefit from the greater status and privilege afforded to them. At the same time, as Kandiyoti (1988) observed, not all women hold anti-patriarchal attitudes. Some women and girls might consciously or unconsciously wish to protect a patriarchal gender system that they identify with, or decide to accept a system of oppression in return for the promise of status and power that will accrue to them as mothers and grandmothers of sons. As a result, they may uphold discriminatory norms and support harmful practices such as FGM/C. Breaking the dichotomy that describes all men as power-holders who benefit from patriarchy, and women as its constantly resisting victims, has a key implication for gender transformative interventions: that is, the social struggle for gender equality is everyone's concern, not just women's.

***Beyond toxic masculinity, several different forms of masculinities exist (including 'protest' and 'subordinated' masculinities). Different forms of masculinities (and femininities) are the result of historical processes. They are not written in stone, and they can (and very often are) reformed in the very process of enacting***

[Toxic masculinities](#) (a common term in current gender norms language) are harmful for men and women alike, as they both suffer (albeit possibly to different extents) from having to comply with harmful (to self or others) gender expectations. It is important here to note that there are many masculinities and that toxic (or hegemonic) masculinity is normative, but not necessarily statistically embodied by the majority of men in a group. Community development work will need to address both normative versions of masculinities and actual lived masculinities (probably different), and a vision of how different masculinities could be better for everyone.

It is important to stress that [harmful gender norms are subject to change](#). The NGO [Promundo](#) is a global leader on working with men and boys to transform masculinities for gender equality, by

engaging them in group conversations and community mobilisation activities. It has produced [several open-source educational resources](#) to engage adult and young men in conversations on gender expectations that might be harmful to themselves and others, and on why they comply with these expectations (including when they do so against their own personal attitudes). Other examples include work by the [Sonke Gender Justice Network](#) (South Africa) and [Blue Veins](#) (Pakistan).

### **Opportunity 2a: Working with men and boys**

The literature on the importance of working with men and boys for gender transformative change is well established. Jewkes et al. (2015) have published a comprehensive review that looks at the effectiveness of interventions that work with men to reduce gender inequalities. Another useful review (Edström et al., 2015) looked at interventions that engage men to achieve greater gender equality across a wide spectrum of health and development outcomes. Working with men and boys to question existing gender norms is increasingly recognised to be of paramount importance to

**Working with men is both the smart and right thing to do to help people thrive in a gender-just world.**

achieve community wellbeing; Michau et al. (2015), for instance, have included working with men as one of the key lessons emerging from transformative gender programmes. Yet, as Jewkes and colleagues highlight, 'Prioritisation of, and resource allocation for, work with men on violence prevention has often been contested' by concerned 'female gender activists' (Jewkes et al., 2015: 1580). Granted, there are good reasons for 'gender-transformative' interventions to include some gender-segregated spaces for men and women, where they can discuss taboo issues and build up confidence to voice their problem to people of the

opposite gender. However, these spaces need to be followed by gender-mixed work that encourages shared understanding, values and commitment to change.

Women-only approaches present several challenges, of which I mention two. First, if practitioners help women devise strategies to resist social expectations but do not do anything to change the expectations around them, these women will be exposed to greater harm. Take, for instance, a woman who participates in an empowerment programme and tries to argue with her husband that he does not have a right to beat her. In a similar situation, some husbands reportedly felt threatened and responded with more violence, while others saw their wife's actions as a transgression of traditional gender roles and something that would best be corrected through beating. A [recent report by Oxfam](#), for instance, found that women's economic empowerment programmes that did not work with participants' husbands actually increased these women's exposure to their husbands' retaliation (Bolis and Hughes, 2015). The second challenge is that women-only programmes miss the opportunity to achieve conciliatory solutions that help all community members. Interventions that help men and women discuss the social practices in place in their communities have the potential to uncover unbalanced relations of power in the household and in broader society, and help women and men strategise together for change.

Practitioners have three leverage points they can use to help people recognise gender equality as a collective goal. The first, mentioned earlier, is value-based: a transformative series of discussions can elevate gender equality as an important point on community members' moral agenda. The second point speaks to liberating men who embody non-patriarchal masculinities: patriarchy can oppress men too. Hegemonic gender norms can ostracise men who do not embody them, affecting their health and wellbeing. Think of men who must prove they are 'real' men by fighting, taking unnecessary risks, being harsh with each other, or avoiding asking for help. [Ely and Meyerson](#) (2008), for instance, looked at how harmful gender norms of masculinity (such as 'men should not ask for help', 'men should not say: "I don't know how to do this"', and 'men should not be scared') were increasing death and injury rates among men working on oil rigs. The third, less conventional point is



that oppressors also suffer from the system of oppression. Freire (1970) argued that sometimes oppressors might be stuck in their patterns of oppression, even when they generate suffering both for themselves and those whom they are oppressing.

Interventions that aim to transform gender norms can empower the community as a whole, inviting participants of both genders to make sense together of human rights in local terms and to challenge power dynamics that oppress men and women with rigid, harmful gender norms. The [Interagency Gender Working Group](#) has written [an extensive report of 'gender-synchronised'](#) strategies, with examples of effective programmes that worked with men to achieve gender equality. The [2007 World Health Organization \(WHO\) report on engaging men and boys in changing gender-based inequity in health](#) and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) report, [It only works when everyone plays](#), are a good place to start for those interested in learning more.

### **Opportunity 2b: Working with traditional and religious leaders**

Gender norms often assign power to some community members and not to others. If women cannot leave the household, for instance – because of norms around mobility or domestic care responsibilities – they will not be able to participate in community meetings, or represent a community with the local political leader. Norms around power are particularly resistant to spontaneous change, as they are self-protecting: if a norm exists that a certain person should not access the places where decisions are made, how can that person contribute to decisions about changing the norm?

Existing power-holders might also want to protect norms that grant them power. Facilitating transformation in gender norms thus requires working with traditional leaders who influence (or sometimes own) the decision-making process, to help them work with other community members to bring about desired changes, which may include improving people's living conditions. Strategically, when they see that community members appreciate improvements in the community's living conditions, traditional authorities may have a greater interest in owning (and potentially furthering) the change process. These improvements might be physical (a new school, more job opportunities, greater economic wealth) or intangible (e.g. the abandonment of child marriage). In the latter case, community leaders might see themselves as gatekeepers of cultural or religious tradition, and working with them might be more challenging, though not impossible (see, for instance, [Walker's](#) (2015) reflections on engaging religious leaders to abandon child marriage in Nigeria and [Girls not Brides' \(2017\) pack of resources](#) to work with religious leaders). While this area of work is still in its early phases, some resources do exist for practitioners. For instance, Voices for Change (V4C) has written [a useful learning report](#) on how the organisation worked with traditional leaders in Nigeria, and the Sonke Gender Justice Network has published [a paper on the importance of involving traditional leaders in gender transformation work](#).

**Working with decision-makers can help achieve greater reach and sustainability of change.**

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting back on community-led development as presented in this think piece, one last key challenge stands out – one that speaks more to the relations of power within the development business machine than it does to the difficulties in its implementation. Community-led approaches require development agencies to give up control of intervention outcomes (or, rather, the illusion of control). These approaches help people take that control, as they participate in the local and global

discussions over their future. Thus, sometimes people could ‘disappoint’ donors and practitioners, wanting something different from what donors and practitioners had in mind for them.

For instance, they could decide that, right now, they do not need to tackle intimate partner violence as much as they need to work on perinatal health care. Or (one might say even more problematically), they could discuss gender equality for months, and eventually agree (freely and democratically) that women should not go to work, and that their place is in the household.

What should we do, then, as practitioners believing in and working towards gender equality? If we are not to impose, but to facilitate transformation of gender norms, what is left for us is to hold a space, for as long as we can, where community members can make sense of the challenges they face and identify possible solutions – learning ourselves from that process. This requires coming to terms with the humbling awareness that practitioners cannot do anything to people; it is only people themselves who can develop both inner motivations and practical strategies to act for gender equality in their social and cultural setting. As I was drafting this piece, Professor Mike Wessells (a colleague and a world-leading expert on community-led child protection work) shared with me a useful anecdote in this regard:

***“Teenage pregnancy was a big problem in Sierra Leone, and a third of the pregnancies stemmed from sexual abuse. If the girls and ‘progressive’ community members had tried to take on sexual abuse, the powerful men in the community would likely have undermined or limited the effort. By focusing on preventing teenage pregnancy, the community found a common ground of concern to most community members. As work to prevent it continued, the community became more watchful and took steps to prevent sexual abuse. I felt in this case that the community was much smarter than I was in regard to addressing the issue of sexual abuse. As a child protection worker, a good part of me wanted the community to address sexual abuse head-on.”***

I mentioned that community-led development practitioners do not aim to engineer people’s social context. This does not, however, conflict with the fact that these practitioners should still embody the values that motivate their actions – gender equality being one of these. Honest community-led work for gender equality should then allow values-based conversations and dialogues (both between people living in a given community, as well as between those people and the practitioners) that are respectful of the local context while embodying practitioners’ own values, with kindness and compassion. If women in a given community do not want to leave the household to work, practitioners should sustain the dialogue: what does gender equality mean to them? While community-led development practitioners should trust people to have control over the outcomes of the intervention, they should also engage, through their projects, in power-aware and value-informed conversations. These conversations, if truly honest and open-minded, will require time but will be potentially transformative for both the practitioners and the people reached by their interventions.

Community-led development is difficult to implement well and to receive funding for. Yet it is well worth the struggle; it helps development agencies partner with people normally excluded from the global conversations on how to improve wellbeing for all. We certainly can become better at understanding, caring for and learning from each other, across countries and cultures. Community-led development offers an avenue for those who think that is a worthy endeavour.

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## About the author

Dr Ben Cislighi is Assistant Professor in Social Norms at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) (Centre for Gender, Health and Violence). Before joining the academia, he worked with NGOs, research institutions, and UN Organisations. In the period 2013–2016 he worked as the Director of Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation of the NGO Tostan.

At the LSHTM, Ben is working on a study on Honour and Child Care, and he's gathering a community of experts on social norms and gender-related harmful practices. He is collaborating with various NGOs (Oxfam, Save the Children, World Education) and he's contributing to the Lancet special series on gender norms and health, the LINEA project on sexual exploitation, and several other international initiatives on social norms.

He is interested in how community-based responses can achieve change in gender norms and reduction in gender-based violence. His second book on this topic, *Human Rights and Community-led development*, was published with EUP in January 2018.

Beniamino Cislighi can be contacted at [ben.cislighi@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:ben.cislighi@lshtm.ac.uk).

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