COMMUNITY-BASED, NORMS-SHIFTING INTERVENTIONS:
# DEFINITION & ATTRIBUTES

Social norms play a powerful role in shaping the behavior of young people and can have an enormous impact on their sexual and reproductive health. Underpinned by values such as honor, respect, conceptions of masculinity and femininity, harmful norms such as beliefs related to gender-based violence, early marriage and early parenthood are receiving increased attention and have been the focus of efforts to support healthy behaviors among youth and adolescents. Yet even as interest has surged, there is no consensus about what constitutes a norms-shifting intervention and how this differs from other types of community-based programs. A lack of definitional clarity can create confusion when designing programs and poses a challenge to scaling up efforts to shift social norms within the field of adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health (AYSRH).

This brief addresses this challenge by outlining the key attributes of norms-shifting interventions and offers an operational definition of what constitutes a norms-shifting intervention for AYSRH practitioners. It is based on a desk review and analysis of over thirty documents on social norms theory and programming.

DEFINING SOCIAL NORMS

SOCIAL NORMS INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR

Beliefs about what others think one <u>should</u> do (what is appropriate)

Beliefs about what others <u>actually</u> do (what is typical)

My father and uncles think I should have many children and contribute to our family legacy and society.

All my friends have many children, and even if I want only two, I may have more, because everyone else does.

Social norms can be broadly defined as the "beliefs about which behaviors are appropriate or typical within a given group[i]." What an individual believes others do, and what an individual believes others expect of him/her, can strongly influence how s/he acts.

While what constitutes a social norm varies by behavior, there is general agreement that norms play an important role in shaping behavior, that they are meaningful in the context of groups/group identity, and that whether a person complies with a norm depends on multiple internal and external factors. Social norms refer to the unwritten and socially-shared rules governing a behavior, and not the behavior itself. **Therefore, norms-shifting programs differ from individual behavior change programs in their emphasis on influencing social expectations around *rules* and *shared beliefs*.**
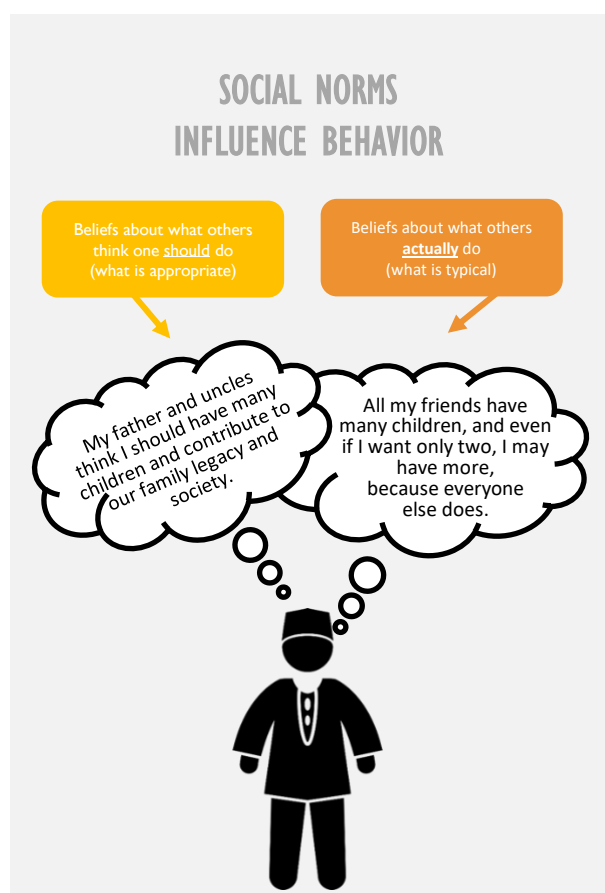
NOT ALL COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS USE A NORMS-SHIFTING APPROACH

Many community-based programs work to influence behaviors but do not do so by shifting social norms. For example:

- Programs that target individuals' attitudes and behaviors but do not address community-held social norms that shape that behavior. *Example: A program may engage families in discussions of the harmful effects of female genital cutting (FGC) on girls but not tackle social norms that promote FGC as a prerequisite for marriage. In such instances, a family's personal attitudes about FGC may change while their behavior continues to be influenced by the prevailing community norm.*

- Programs that have a high level of community participation but do not engage communities in critical reflection or generate critical mass. *Example: A workshop or training may raise knowledge of HIV transmission and prevention, but does not include time for debate and reflection on why the situation exists, which would allow communities to establish new norms around sexual behavior.*

- Programs that focus on other contributing factors of normative change such as policy reform or macro/environmental realities (e.g. poverty): *Example: A program may advocate for strengthened legislation around intimate partner violence but does not address norms that condone-wife beating as a private or family matter, thereby undermining enforcement of the law.*

While it is important to understand what makes norms-shifting interventions distinct, practitioners should keep in mind that many types of community-based programs are needed to facilitate social change. The aim is not to turn every community-based program into a social norms program, but to see how social norms influence behavior and to incorporate a norms-shifting approach as needed.

MOVING TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF A NORMS-SHIFTING INTERVENTION WITHIN AYSRH

The **Learning Collaborative suggests a definition of a community-based, norms-shifting intervention** as: "An intervention that seeks to improve the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls and men and boys, at least in part by transforming the social norms that prop up harmful health-related behaviors. Such interventions utilize an analysis of social norms and are led by communities through a process of critical reflection, resulting in positive new norms rooted within the values of that group. Norms-shifting interventions complement other strategies to change behavior, such as transforming individual attitudes and addressing structural and material conditions (e.g. economic hardship)."

COMMON ATTRIBUTES OF NORMS-SHIFTING INTERVENTIONS

While no consensus exists on what defines a norms-shifting intervention, a review of the literature reveals a set of key attributes that are commonly associated with effective norms-shifting interventions, including those designed to promote AYSRH and well-being. A caveat: We imagine that a norms-shifting intervention will include some of these attributes, but not all! The list is also unweighted: we do not know if some attributes among the nine absolutely must be in place for normative shifts to occur.

COMMON ATTRIBUTES OF NORMS-SHIFTING INTERVENTIONS

NB: The list is merely a list. An intervention will likely include multiple attributes but not necessarily _all_ attributes.

SEEKS COMMUNITY-LEVEL CHANGE

Shifts social expectations, not just individual attitudes and behaviors, and clearly articulates normative shift outcomes at the community-level.

ENGAGES PEOPLE AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

(Ecological Model)
Uses multiple strategies to engage people at different levels: individual, family, community, and policy/legal

CORRECTS MISPERCEPTIONS AROUND HARMFUL BEHAVIORS

Sometimes individuals engage in a harmful behavior because they mistakenly think these behaviors are more common than they are.[ii] For example, if binge drinking is driven by a belief that "everyone does it," a norms-shifting intervention might reveal that most people in fact drink in moderation.

CONFRONTS POWER IMBALANCES

Within sexual and reproductive health and within programs focused on adolescent and youth development, confronting power imbalances is an important attribute of norms-shifting programming

CREATES SAFE SPACES FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Deliberately promotes sustained, critical reflection that goes beyond trainings, one-off campaigns or ad-hoc outreach, often in small group settings.

ROOTS THE ISSUE WITHIN COMMUNITY'S OWN VALUE SYSTEMS

Identifies how a norm serves or contradicts a community's own values, rather than labeling a practice within a given community as bad.

ACCURATELY ASSESSES NORMS

Identifies which norms shape a given behavior and which groups uphold the norm. Social norms exist within _reference groups_ – the group of people that are important to an individual when s/he is making a decision.

USES "ORGANIZED DIFFUSION"

Sparks critical reflection to shift norms first within a core group who then engage others to have community-level impact. This is a technique to generate and diffuse normative shifts that has successfully been used by Tostan around FGC and others with SASA!

CREATES POSITIVE NEW NORMS

Creates new, shared beliefs when harmful norms have strong support within groups. While it is common for programs to focus on negative consequences of a behavior, this can unintentionally reinforce that behavior by making it seem widespread.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO ADVANCE LEARNING ABOUT NORMS-SHIFTING INTERVENTIONS

Norms-shifting interventions hold tremendous potential to influence health-related behaviors. This brief can help programmers to better articulate norms-shifting interventions aiming to improve AYSRH, but on a practical level programmers can:

- Conduct formative research to clarify which norms influence the behaviors the intervention seeks to shift. Such social norms diagnoses seek to understand: what norms influence specific AYSRH behaviors (e.g., delaying sexual initiation, having consensual sexual relationships, using contraceptives) and what strength these norms have in different contexts as they combine with other individual, structural and economic factors.

- When designing norms-shifting interventions, be sure to articulate *how* (through what mechanisms) the norms-focused intervention should change behaviors. Draw from the experience of effective interventions that have found positive changes.

- When norms-shifting interventions are new, or have been part of multi-component programs but never explicitly addressed, bring together technical and field staff to reach collective agreement, grounded in social and cultural realities, on a program change theory and implementation principles.

- Advocate with donors to fund longer inception periods for designing new interventions. Inception periods should bring together practitioners and specialists in norm change to review the evidence, theory and experience that can then inform new programming and measurement of normative shifts.

- Advocate with donors to invest in collaborations with research groups to measure whether shifting social norms actually translates into improved sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

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[i] People form expectations in relation to a "reference group" – a group to which one compares oneself and sets the standard for an individual in terms of expected behavior.
[ii] This is referred to as "pluralistic ignorance" refers to inconsistency between the actual behavior norm and what one perceives others to do or believe.