# MEASURING CHANGES IN SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS:
## PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS TO A COMPLEX PROBLEM

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the findings of a review of practices in measuring changes in social and gender norms in development.[1] The review was commissioned by Plan International to inform its own approach in measuring changes in social and gender norms. The findings are though relevant to other development organisations, many of whom are seeking simpler and most cost-effective ways to measure changes in social norms associated with their programming.

The review found that many current approaches to measuring changes in social and gender norms are both complex and resource intensive. Whilst these efforts are important for building the evidence base, they are not suitable for all interventions tackling social and gender norms, nor are they easily applied without specialist expertise. There is therefore a need to develop simpler approaches, which can be implemented by development organisation staff with limited resources and specialist norms measurement expertise.

This paper seeks to respond to this need. After reviewing current practices in the measurement of social norms, it sets out six recommendations to guide development organisations in their efforts to measure changes in social norms associated with their programming. The recommendations seek to focus on the essentials of social norms change measurement, which can easily be operationalised by most implementing agencies.

## 2.0 WHAT ARE SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS?

When embarking on social norms programming, it is important to have a clear and shared understanding of social and gender norms. Our review shows that experts define social norms in two main ways, with most adopting the first definition:

1. **Definitions that emphasise social expectations:** in this definition, a social norm is understood to be a pattern of behaviour that individuals conform to because they believe most people in their relevant network (their reference groups) conform to it and they believe that others important to them expect them to conform to it (Bicchieri, 2016; Mackie et al., 2015; Cislaghi & Heise, 2016). In this understanding of social norms, anticipation of rewards or sanctions associated with a particular behaviour often encourages people to conform to the expected behaviour.

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[1] The findings were generated through a review of the main available literature on measuring social norms change in the international development context and a series of key informants with experts and practitioners in the field, as well as with staff of Plan International.

2. **Definitions that understand social norms as a common behaviour or attitude**: in this definition, social norms are often used as a synonym for 'culture', or to mean widely shared beliefs and practices (Jewkes, 2017).

**Gender norms are a sub-set of social norms** in that they "express the expected behaviour of people of a particular gender, and often age, in a given social context" (Marcus, 2018).[2] As social norms are part of the structures which maintain gendered power inequalities, some theorists have argued that social norm theory and practice needs to give greater attention to power (Marcus & Harper, 2014).

## 3.0 WHAT ARE THE STAGES IN DEVELOPING AN APPROACH TO MEASURING CHANGES IN SOCIAL NORMS?

A good understanding of the social norms sustaining the behaviours of interest, as well as the strength of these social norms, is essential when developing one's approach to measuring social norms change (Institute for Reproductive Health, 2019). Recognising this, Cislaghi and Heise (2017) have developed a useful framework which sets out four stages in the design of programmes seeking to change social norms and their measurement approach (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The funnel of social norms exploration and measurement** (from Cislaghi and Heise, 2017)
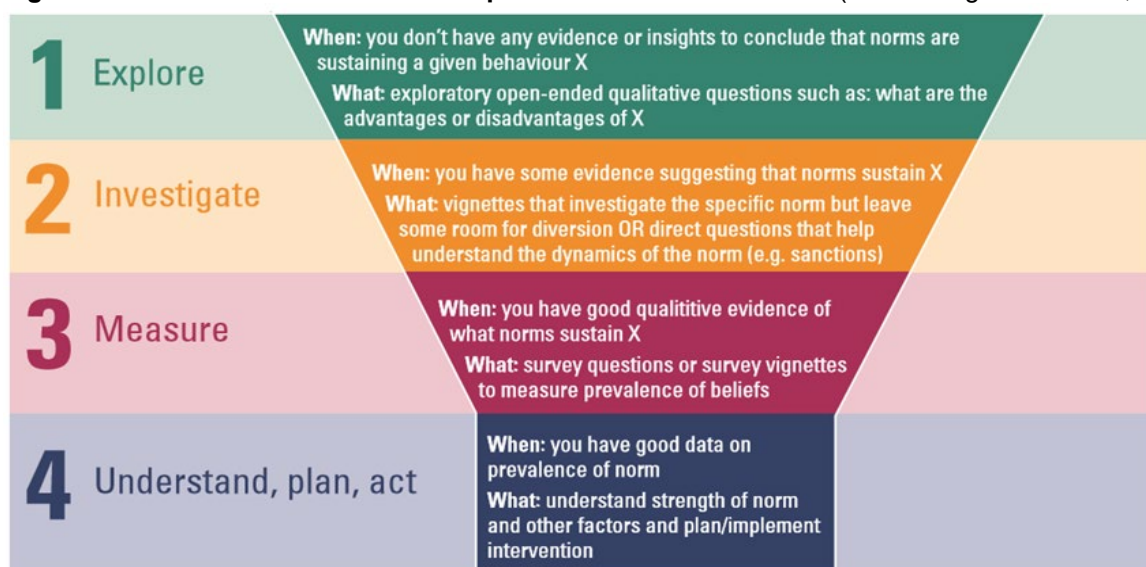


The first two stages, Explore and Investigate, are dedicated to diagnosing the social norms in play, something that specialists consider essential prior to developing a measurement strategy and conducting a baseline assessment. In these two stages, qualitative methods can be used in primary data collection to identify the norms that sustain a practice, their strength and influence, and to determine whether the normative influence is direct or indirect. This diagnostic phase is also used to identify other influences on the target behaviour, such as economic constraints, access to resources, and legal frameworks. Stages 3 and 4 are likely to be conducted in parallel so that the programme's implementation and measurement approach align. They are normally iterative, with measurement exercises happening at regular intervals and findings informing programme implementation.

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[2] In view of this, in this paper we use the term social norms to include gender norms.

# 4.0 WHAT ARE THE CORE MEASURES OF SOCIAL NORMS?

Unpacking the preferred definition of social norms (Definition 1 above), we begin to identify key social norms concepts, which must inform one's measurement approach. These include perceptions of what others do (empirical expectations), perceptions of what others expect me to do (normative expectations), and what individuals do in light of these perceived pressures (Figure 2).

These elements of social norms have led specialists to identify four measures, which can form the core of an approach to measuring change over time (Bicchieri, 2016):

**Figure 2: Diagnosing a social norm (Bicchieri, 2006)**



- What I do – individual behaviour;
- What I think I should do – individual attitude;
- What I think others do – empirical expectations;
- What I think others expect me to do – normative expectations.

These measures would be assessed amongst the primary target group, and, as far as possible, their key reference group(s).

Drawing on this thinking, CARE USA has developed a practical analytical framework, the Social Norms Analytical Plot (SNAP), to guide its own diagnosis and measurement of social norms change (Stefanik & Hwang, 2017). SNAP focuses on empirical and normative expectations, which provide insight into social expectations, but also gives considerable attention to different aspects of associated sanctions as a means of understanding the strength of any given social norm and the space for change (Figure 3).
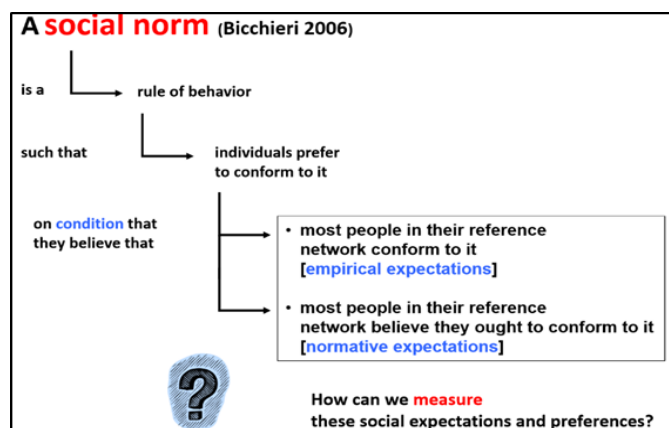
**Figure 3: CARE USA's Social Norms Analytical Plot (Stefanik & Hwang, 2017)**

| COMPONENTS OF A NORM | DEFINITION | EXAMPLE RESPONSE |
|---|---|---|
| Empirical Expectations (EE) | What I think others do | "Once you have got the chance, you have to marry. Your friends are getting married." |
| Normative Expectations (NE) | What I think others expect me to do (what I should do according to others) | "…everybody in the community expects adolescent girls…at the age of 13 to 15 years… to get married" |
| Sanctions | Anticipated opinion or reaction of others (to the behavior) – specifically others whose opinions matter to me | "If a girl is not married at age of 15 years, many adolescent girls in the community would insult her saying 'haftu', which mean the one who is not needed, or unattractive" |
| Sensitivity to sanctions | Do sanctions matter for behavior? If there is a negative reaction from others (negative sanction), would the main character change their behavior in the future? | Most girls would change their minds and marry after prolonged insults and isolation. |
| Exceptions | Under what circumstances would it be okay for the main character to break the norm (by acting positively)? | Girls can refuse marriage if they excel at school and their teachers convince their family to let them continue school. |

## 5.0 WHAT ARE THE METHODOLOGIES USED TO MEASURE CHANGES IN SOCIAL NORMS?

**A programme's approach to measuring changes in social norms depends on a range of factors**, including the scale of the programme itself, its duration, budget, predicted outcomes and the centrality of norm change to the programme goals. Large-scale programmes, with timescales around five years or more, and substantial budgets, may have comprehensive and complex measurement approaches while smaller programmes operating to shorter timescales, where norm change may not be a central outcome, will necessarily adopt a more modest approach. Whether a programme needs to demonstrate its contribution to change, or simply trace the changes occurring will also affect its approach to measuring changes in social norms.

### 5.1 QUANTITATIVE METHODS

Most of the approaches reviewed used quantitative methods.  For large-scale programmes, where changing social norms was a central objective, experimental and quasi-experimental designs with some form of comparison group were often used, offering the potential to robustly quantify the changes in social norms that a particular programme has contributed to.[3] Their design and implementation requires advanced statistical skills and the need for a comparison (non-treatment) group affects the programme implementation approach.  Amongst these, longitudinal surveys conducted at baseline, possibly midline, and endline, were the most common instruments. These could be panel surveys - as used on the Voices for Change programme in Nigeria (Denny & Hughes, 2017) - which return to the same respondents at each wave and are therefore well suited to measuring change over time amongst a specified group; or cross-sectional surveys - as used to evaluate the Saleema programme in Sudan (Evans et al., 2019) - which include new respondents in each wave and can be used to track change at the population level.  For programmes where social norms change is one among a number of objectives, adapting existing surveys to include questions about social norms was an alternative approach, as on the Oxfam WE-Care programme (Karimli et al., undated).

There is considerable variety in the design of survey questions to understand changing social norms.  Specialists have found that respondents can often struggle to understand questions about social norms.  Keeping them simple and clear is therefore important. Some of the options used include:

- Single item questions on empirical and normative expectations, e.g.
  - Empirical expectations: "Most people in my community get their daughters married before the age of 16 (agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly)."
  - Normative expectations: "Most people in my community would approve of a girl getting married before the age of 16 (agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly)."

- Single item questions on individual behaviours and attitudes, e.g. "I believe it is right to get my daughters married before the age of 16 (agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly)."

- Scales and indices developed from multiple question responses, such as the Gender Based Violence Scale created by Perrin et al (Perrin et al., 2019)

- Questions about actions taken and readiness to change, e.g. "What action did you take after viewing this commercial/ hearing this radio advert/ etc?"

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[3] Like, for example, those carried out on Change Starts at Home (Clarke, 2017), Communities Care (Perrin, Marsh, Clough & Desgroppes, 2019), Saleema (Evans et al., 2019) and Voices for Change (Denny & Hughes, 2017).

- Questions about diffusion of new norms among social networks, e.g. "Have you discussed the issues raised in this radio show with anyone in your local community?"

- Vignettes, or short stories created to explore the dynamics of social norms (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Vignettes to quantitatively measure changes in social norms**

The Oxfam WE-Care Survey used vignettes, including the one below. After hearing the vignette, the respondent is asked whether they personally approve (individual attitude), whether people in their community would approve (social norm), and how similar the situation described is to their own personal situation (personal behaviour).

*My husband Brian works as a carpenter, he leaves the house early and comes back in the evening. After preparing breakfast for my family, I work in the field in the mornings. I return to prepare lunch for my children. I fetch water and firewood, make sure the house and compound are clean. When my husband comes back from work, he is very tired. I bring him water to wash his hands and serve him food. I do the dishes and prepare the beds for all of us.*

## 5.2 QUALITATIVE METHODS

While **qualitative approaches** do not offer the same level of rigour in quantifying changes a programme is contributing to, they can be successfully used to explore changes in social norms over time, investigating the changes occurring, what has contributed to the changes observed, and whether beneficiaries are taking action to promote or "diffuse" the new positive norms.[4] Focus group discussions, using vignettes or semi-structured questions, and in-depth interviews are the most common qualitative data collection methods. These methods can be used in theory-based studies to explore changes occurring and the extent to which the programme's theory of change is working in practice, as was done on the Voices for Change programme in Nigeria (Figure 5). Such studies can be useful as they give rapid insights into the changes that are working well, as well as changes that are not working as anticipated. They also provide a means of exploring the contribution the programme is making to the reported changes, without necessarily having a comparison group.

**Figure 5: Understanding the programme contribution to change through a qualitative theory-based study, experience from Voices for Change**

*Voices for Change* used a theory-based approach to understand the contribution of a gender empowerment programme to gender norm change in Nigeria. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted among 144 young men and women, with varying levels of exposure to programme activities. Respondents were asked what changes had occurred in their own lives, what had contributed towards those changes, and whether they had influenced other people in their communities. This study identified the significant personal changes the programme was contributing to and how the level of personal change differed according to the individual's exposure to programme interventions, which confirmed the programme's theory of change.

## 5.3 ROUTINE MONITORING

Routine monitoring against specified indicators can help to regularly assess whether progress is being made towards intended programme outcomes. This regular insight can be helpful when social norms change is a long-term process and large-scale data collection to quantify changes against objectives is intermittent.

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[4] See for example, work done on the CARE USA supported programme Towards Improved Economic and Sexual Reproductive Health Outcomes for Adolescent Girls (Addis Continental Institute of Public Health, 2018) and the theory-based study of Voices for Change (Milward, 2017)

There is relatively limited literature on routine monitoring of social norms programming but two approaches were identified in the review:

- **Activity-based monitoring**, which involves monitoring programme activities to ensure they take place as intended and to observe beneficiary behaviours and attitudes, identifying examples which might indicate shifting social norms or resistance to change.

- **Identification of key performance indicators** along the programme's results chain and the development of monitoring tools to track these. Common interim indicators on social norm change programmes include:
  o Reach of programme interventions and communications activities;
  o People's engagement in programme activities;
  o People's retention of key messages;
  o Shifts in people's knowledge and attitudes;
  o Actions taken, either individually or at the community level;
  o Measures of diffusion, such as discussing the issue with family and friends.

## 6.0 CONCLUSIONS

Most practitioners agree that specific definitions are most useful for developing tailored approaches to measuring changes in social norms associated with programming. Social norms are best defined as patterns of behaviour which people prefer to conform to, based on the belief that others conform to the practice, and expect them to conform to it.

There is a broad consensus on what should be measured to track social norm change, with four measures covering individual attitudes and behaviours, empirical and normative expectations providing the core and exploration of sanctions and rewards often complementing these. Given the importance of reference groups in sustaining social norms, these measures might be tracked amongst key reference groups, as well as the main target group.

There is less consensus on the methodologies to track change. Experience to date is biased towards large-scale, resource intensive quantitative surveys, using experimental or quasi-experimental designs, which contribute to building the evidence base on what works, but are not suitable for smaller scale social norms programmes, or for programmes where changing social norms is a secondary and modest objective. For the latter, there is recognition that simpler approaches to measuring change are needed, but to date, experience and approaches are more limited.

## 7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following six recommendations respond to the review findings and provide simple guidance for development organisations in their efforts to measure changes in social norms associated with their programming.

*Recommendation 1: Adopt a clear definition of social norms, which captures the central concepts of social expectations as well as sanctions and rewards associated with behaviours:* Being explicit about these central social norms concepts will aid the development of a tailored approach to measure changes over time in social norms.

*Recommendation 2: Ensure appropriate in-house capacity to effectively manage and quality assure the measurement of changes in social norms associated with programming.* Although many organisations rely on external partners to design and undertake significant measurement exercises, adequate in-house capacity is needed to quality assure this process. In-house staff with this responsibility need to be familiar with key social norms and social norms measurement concepts, in addition to having experience of a

range of quantitative and qualitative measurement approaches. To build this capacity, bespoke practical skills building training may be needed.

***Recommendation 3: Design measurement strategies around a set of core social norms change measures:*** These core measures comprise:

A. What I do (individual behaviour)
B. What I think I should do (individual attitude)
C. What I think other people do (empirical expectations)
D. What I think other people expect me to do (normative expectations)
E. What are the associated sanctions and rewards of a particular behaviour?
F. What actions have individuals taken to promote desired new behaviours?

The first four measures logically fall out of a clear definition of social norms, whilst the last two have been found to be useful in generating an understanding of the extent to which social norms are changing, including in more institutional or structural terms. Ideally, these measures would be tracked over time amongst the main target group, as well as their key reference groups. Of the six, measures A, D and F should be prioritised if resources are insufficient to cover the full complement as they give an insight into social expectations (D), how individuals respond to those social expectations (A) and what individuals are doing to encourage a positive (and perhaps new) social norm (F).

***Recommendation 4: For programmes that are relatively small-scale or where changing social norms is one of several components, adopt a 'light touch' approach to measuring changes in social norms.*** This would ideally include all of the three following components although if resources are limited, it may be sufficient to simply rely on an adapting an existing survey. To keep data collection tools simple, the number of behaviours explored in any one data collection exercise should be kept small as questions need to be tailored to each behaviour of interest, as well as to the age and other social characteristics of respondents. In some cases, data collection tools may need to be adapted and simplified to be accessible for specific audiences e.g. to children.

A. **Adapting an existing survey to incorporate a small number of social norms questions**, which explore the core social norms measures.

B. **Focus group discussions using semi-structured questions or vignettes**, which explore the core social norms measures.

C. **In-depth interviews with key informants**, which can be useful in capturing the perspective of key stakeholders e.g. religious or traditional leaders, or service providers.

***Recommendation 5: For large-scale and longer-term programmes where changing social norms is a central focus, adopt a comprehensive approach to measuring changes in social norms.*** This would involve the design and implementation of an experimental or quasi-experimental survey which, through multiple rounds of data collection, captures changes in social norms and the contribution made by the programme to these changes. It might also involve qualitative data collection to triangulate and contextualise quantitative data. This kind of approach requires specialist expertise.

***Recommendation 6: Make use of routine monitoring to track progress towards the intended long-term changes in social norms.*** The programme's theory of change is used to identify key performance indicators across the results chain, especially at output to outcome levels, and bespoke monitoring tools are developed to collect the required data. Regular, planned use of these monitoring tools generates a flow of monitoring data which provides

insights into the changes happening and whether it is reasonable to expect the programme to achieve the intended changes.

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