What Works Evidence Review:
Social norms and violence against women and girls

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What do we mean by social norms?

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a pervasive social problem across the globe, but varies in prevalence and severity. The 2013 mapping of the Global Burden of Disease showed the prevalence of physical and sexual VAWG differed between countries, and between ethnic groups and social classes within countries. Two central, and overlapping, sets of ideas and practices driving VAWG are those related to gender relations and those on the use of violence.[1]

The term social norms essentially captures how a community or social group normally 'does' gender or uses violence. Social norms are dynamic and changeable and are influenced by age and socio-economic status. They are a reference point for individual thought and action. The large categories of social norms such as on violence, are built from norms related to more narrow ideas and behaviours such as those on punishing children. Figure 1 illustrates how more focused social norms contribute to the broad social norms on gender and violence.

Figure 1: Social norms and violence against women and girls
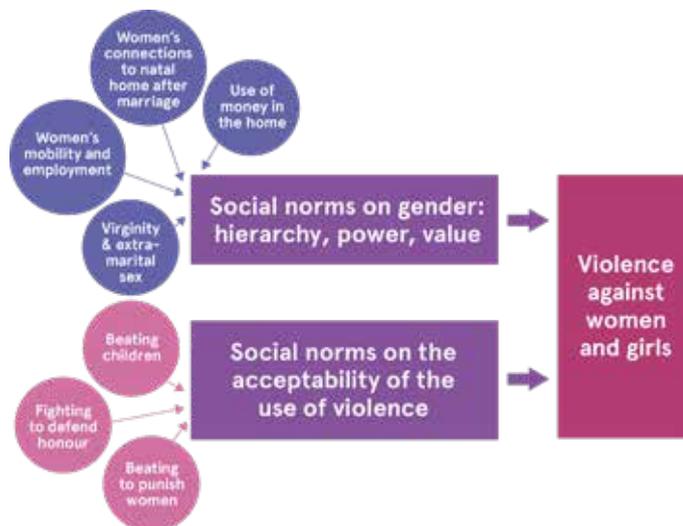
Social norms are mostly socially learnt and taken for granted as 'the way' of behaving or thinking, rather than being deliberately followed. They are not the only way of thinking or behaving in a social group, and are sometimes contested or resisted such as in activities to build gender equity. They may also be indirectly challenged, as by a husband who chooses to have a loving, respectful relationship with his wife, rather than dominating her. Resistance to social norms may lead to shifts in what is seen as 'normal' if enough people are influenced to behave differently.

The higher value given to men versus women, and gender roles, restrictions and entitlements all stem from broad social norms on gender in a social group. The use of violence against women by men, whether emotional, economic, physical or sexual, is a manifestation of men's power over women and an instrument through which men's power is expressed and upheld.[2]

All social groups 'know' how men and women should be and behave. In low- and middle-income countries women are often expected to be submissive to men and not to challenge men's power. Women who behave as 'good wives' may be rewarded, such as by being more respected, and those who do not may be punished. Fear of punishment influences behaviour even if that punishment has never been personally experienced. VAWG is often a punishment, as when a man beats his girlfriend when she challenges him by demanding money for food or rent.

Whether using violence is normal in punishing children, defending one's honour or just getting the upper hand or respect is coded in social norms. These norms usually include an understanding of what degree of severity or forms of violence are accepted, e.g. beating a child may be socially accepted (or expected) but injuring a child may not be. In some settings fatal violence is accepted and in the case of honour killings, it may be expected.

Norms on gender and the use of violence overlap in the case of VAWG. Where violence is a common gendered behaviour, it is generally widely regarded as acceptable. Across settings, the acceptability of VAWG and men's controlling behaviours towards their partners predict (at a collective level) the prevalence of physical and sexual partner violence.[3]

[1] Jewkes R. Intimate partner violence: causes and prevention. Lancet 2002; 359(9315): 1423-9.
[2] Jewkes R, Flood M, Lang J. From working with men and boys to changing social norms and reducing inequities in gender relations: a paradigm shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. The Lancet 2015; 385(9977): 1580-9.
[3] Heise L, Kotsadam A. Cross-national and multilevel correlates of partner violence: an analysis of data from population-based surveys. The Lancet Global Health 2015; 3: e343–51.

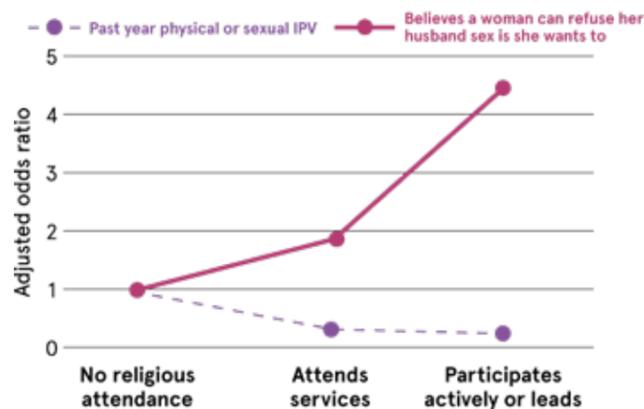## Lessons from What Works: Social norms on gender

Social norms on gender and masculinity are vital for understanding VAWG. There are different ways of behaving as a man and they differ in relation to men's violence. Some masculinities emphasise men's entitlement, dominance and control over women. These often also expect a ready resort to violence among men. These masculinities are often common in the most deprived social settings. Such violent masculinities are not well respected across most societies. Those masculinities that hold respect are often based on many of the same ideas, but in milder forms and some forms of VAWG are accepted. Yet there are always some versions of masculinity that are different, these may not be based on heterosexuality, or else may emphasise caring and more equitable, non-violent relationships with women. The presence of different types of masculinities opens the possibility of engagement through interventions to shift masculinities and thus create a more caring, less violent society.

Societies also have different ways of being a woman, some of which are more accepted than others. In the Global South, being married, is highly valued and married women are expected to be controlled by their husbands and run the home. The extent to which women can move freely in the community, complete their education, work outside the home and hold political positions varies greatly between settings. Some women accept their subordinate position,

**Figure 2:** Association between women in the DRC's religious engagement, gender attitudes

usually assuming or feeling that to do otherwise would be futile or impossible. Others find spaces in which to claim a more engaged position in society and connect with other women. Research conducted through What Works shows that those who assert themselves, and join with other women, often experience less violence, although this is not always the case. The spaces in which women can and cannot actively participate in society are generally circumscribed. This was shown in research conducted by TearFund and Heal Africa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where women who were more engaged in their religious institution experienced less partner violence (Figure 2).

A culture of violence

The impact of social norms on violence is clear in research on the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Afghanistan. The Demographic and Health Survey shows that the proportion of ever married women who have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence from their husband in their lifetime ranges from over 90% in Herat and Ghor provinces to 7% in Badakhshan. In the baseline research for the Women For Women International (WfWI) intervention evaluation in Afghanistan, there was a marked difference in reports of violence by ethnic groups and this was seen across different types

of violence measured in the study (Figure 3).

Gender norms and norms on violence impact violence among children. The baseline data from the evaluation of Right To Play's intervention in Pakistan indicates that witnessing their mother being beaten at home is strongly associated with perpetrating violence among peers in school and having more patriarchal gender attitudes. This acceptable use of violence and gender relations is socially learnt by children within households and unless challenged will impact more widely in their lives.
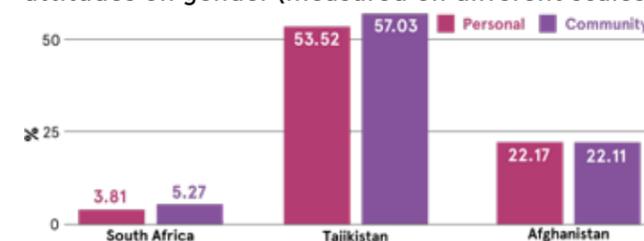
Figure 3: Prevalence of different forms of violence by ethic group, WfWI evaluation Afghanistan
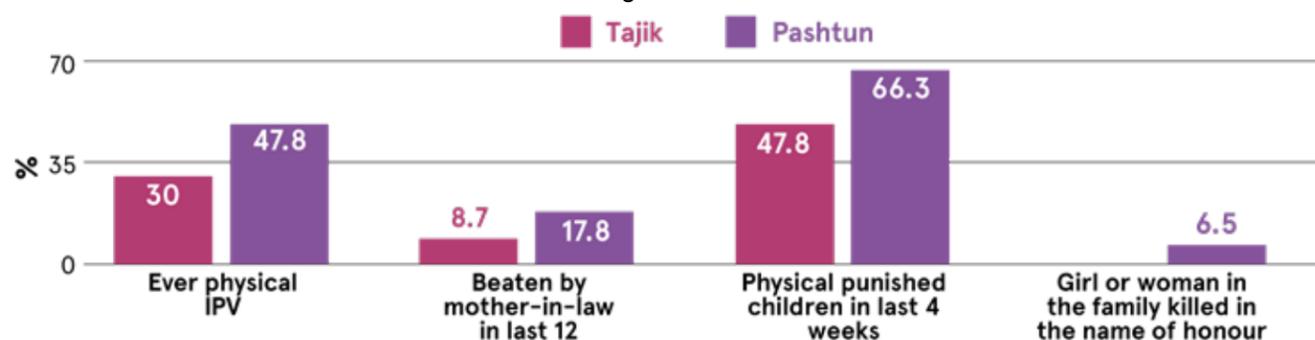
Gender attitudes: individual and perceived community views

Social norms are quite difficult to measure and best studied through ethnographic research. Questions about individual attitudes or perceptions of gender relations and roles do not measure social norms on their own, although they can serve as a proxy for social norms at an aggregate level. Researchers should be cautious of misinterpretation as often social norms are more complicated than the questions used to assess them. For example violence of specific types or degrees may be acceptable or 'deserved' but not unlimited violence. Violence may be perceived as deserved when a woman is 'blame worthy' but not if regarded as 'blameless'. Perceptions of socially acceptable gender relations can be captured through questions that ask about community beliefs, e.g. 'my community believes that a woman should always obey her husband.' These questions need to be carefully

Figure 4: Individual and perceived community attitudes on gender (measured on different scales)

developed as one dimension of gender relations (e.g. expected gender roles) does not capture the totality of gendered power relations. Gender relations are complex and indicators need to be carefully developed. To fully understand social norms, the prevalence of behaviour must also be measured. Social norms obviously influence behaviour, just as behaviour change will lead to changes in social norms.

Although caution is needed, attitudes are often measured. Figure 4 shows the mean scores on gender attitudes at the personal level and perceived social norms. It shows that women in South Africa and Tajikistan perceived the community gender attitudes to be more conservative than their own views on gender. In Afghanistan, there was no difference between the two sets of attitudes. This suggests that in a country like Afghanistan there is little social and intellectual space for individual attitudes of women to differ from those perceived in the community and little exposure to different ideas. This provides a key pointer to required interventions.

Community norms on gender and violence impact the likelihood that a woman may be exposed to violence. Individual attitudes are often important as well, as they may impact the likelihood of conflict in a relationship and the degree to which a woman is respected.

Interventions to change social norms: evidence of effectiveness

Interventions to change social norms take multiple forms and evidence shows that they can be effective in preventing VAWG, but context is important. There are still significant gaps in the evidence base which we are working to address through What Works. Reviews of evidence on what works to prevent VAWG suggest that multi-component interventions work best. These interventions work with multiple

groups of individuals in a setting, such as men and women, or parents and children, and combine several intervention approaches, such as gender norm change programming and economic empowerment. Such programmes demonstrate that an individual's views on gender and violence are more effectively changed, and the change supported, when other dynamics in the environment support this change.

COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Community mobilisation interventions seek to empower women, engage men, and change gender norms at a community level. They can include community workshops and peer trainings aimed at shifting attitudes and behaviours by critically reflecting on prevalent social norms. The interventions often include localised campaigns with murals, community drama, neighbourhood discussions, and community mobilisation activities including video, radio broadcasts or dramas. There are examples of interventions that have been delivered over a few

years having a significant impact on violent behaviour after rigorous evaluation. Both The Safe Homes and Respect for Everyone (SHARE) Project, and SASA!, evaluated in Uganda, were found to be effective.[4,5] SHARE reduced women's past year experience of physical IPV by 21% and SASA reduced it by 52%. However not all community-based interventions have impacted community-level attitudes and violence[6]. The ones that are more effective include participatory workshops exploring gender and relationships and building skills.

[4] Wagman J, Gray RH, Campbell JC, et al. Effectiveness of an integrated intimate partner violence and HIV prevention intervention in Rakai, Uganda: analysis of an intervention in an existing cluster randomised cohort. Lancet Global Health 2015; 3(1): e23-33.
[5] Abramsky T, Devries K, Kiss L, et al. Findings from the SASA! Study: a cluster randomized controlled trial to assess the impact of a community mobilization intervention to prevent violence against women and reduce HIV risk in Kampala, Uganda. BMC Medicine 2014; 12: 122.
[6] Fulu E, Kerr-Wilson A, Lang J. What works to prevent violence against women and girls? Evidence Review of interventions to prevent violence against women and girls Pretoria: Medical Research Council, 2014.

INTERVENTIONS WITH INDIVIDUALS, COUPLES AND FAMILIES

All effective social norm change interventions are complex and many of them include an element of work with individuals, couples or families in workshops. The South Africa adaptation of Stepping Stones is an intervention of this type that has been the most thoroughly evaluated. This was effective in shifting ideas of masculinity and femininity among participants, and it achieved a 38% reduction in perpetration of severe partner violence sustained to two years post-intervention.[7] Stepping Stones was developed for use with multiple generations within a community, but can be used with one generation and has been adapted for many other settings, including workplaces. Several very different interventions that partly draw on Stepping Stones are being evaluated under What Works in contexts from South African, Tajikistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and India.

MASS MEDIA INTERVENTIONS

Mass media interventions have a valuable role in breaking the silence around VAWG and introducing new ideas and ways of thinking about gender and gender relations. This is particularly effective in settings such as Afghanistan (see Figure 5), where the diversity of ideas around gender is limited. Mass media interventions will not change social norms on their own, but they have an important contribution to make. Complex interventions such as television or radio dramas that combine education and entertainment have been shown to have a valuable role in getting people talking and exploring alternative ideas about gender and violence, and have been shown to enhance support-giving and support-seeking behaviour for women exposed to VAWG. There is a lack of good research on the impact of mass media interventions in preventing violent behaviours. Some mass media interventions under the What Works programme, such as the in Nepal Change Starts at Home intervention (Box 2), are currently being evaluated. Some other interventions, the Help The Afghan Children in Afghanistan and Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa, also use community radio.

> **Box 2:** Equal Access has developed a radio drama to change social norms on gender and violence and strengthen relationships. Change Starts At Home is broadcast to listeners' groups in Nepal and is accompanied by the BIG curriculum workshops. The intervention is carefully designed to ensure it is theoretically robust and based on best practice in violence prevention.

SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Some social norm change interventions use schools as a platform for delivery. These can reach a large number of students. Evidence shows that interventions have a limited impact unless a social norm change approach is taken. More recent innovations have taken a whole-of-school approach with combined training of teachers, curriculum for students and changes to the school environment. The Good Schools intervention in Uganda sought to address social norms related to violence in schools and achieved a 60% reduction in past week corporal punishment use and a reduction in peer violence.[8]

> **Box 3:** TearFund and Heal Africa are working in north eastern DRC with faith leaders to change social norms related to VAWG and encourage and enable care seeking and social support after experiences of VAWG. Their intervention builds on the finding that faith leaders are reported to be highly influential in the community. Analysis of the baseline data showed substantial protection from past year IPV among women who are more engaged in religious institutions.

Social norm change is ultimately essential for sustained VAWG prevention. When community norms change, individual behaviour will change and fewer women will be exposed to violence. As individuals change their ideas and behaviours, so do social norms. Interventions can influence social norms on VAWG when they are targeted, theory-driven and draw on proven methods. There are a variety of methods that have been used to generate discussion about VAWG, the position of women in society, how to build respectful relationships, and the general use of violence and build relationship skills. The secret to enhancing their effectiveness often lies in combining them with, for example, economic empowerment opportunities, although some methods such as participatory workshop approaches are effective in their own right.

7 Jewkes R, Nduna M, Levin J, et al. Impact of Stepping Stones on incidence of HIV, HSV-2 and sexual behaviour in rural South Africa: cluster randomised controlled trial. British Medical Journal 2008; 337: a506.

8 Devries KM, Knight L, Child JC, et al. The Good School Toolkit for reducing physical violence from school staff to primary school students: a cluster-randomised controlled trial in Uganda. The Lancet Global Health 2015; 385: e78-86