Addressing Social Norms in the Context of SPJ Operations

KEY MESSAGES

✓ Most social protection and jobs (SPJ) interventions have a behavior change dimension. As such, understanding social norms, and to what extent they drive the behaviors of interest is key to good project design. SPJ interventions can shift social norms towards greater gender equality or reinforce potentially harmful norms.

✓ Designing or implementing interventions to deliberately change social norms is an emerging area for SPJ projects that requires specialized expertise.

✓ Social and gender norms may influence the effective implementation or enforcement of laws and policies critical to advancing gender equality and improving women’s economic empowerment. Addressing inequitable social norms must go hand in hand with implementation and enforcement of the law. Formative research can identify and unpack prevalent social norms that influence the behaviors of interest. This is particularly important when beginning a program in a new context or where a program seeks to change behaviors held in place by social norms.

✓ A range of approaches are used to identify and measure social norms. This brief offers some key questions and methods for formative research to inform project design or monitoring and evaluation.

Definitions

Social norms are constructed by social expectations and maintained by social influence. They are beliefs about what others do (descriptive norms), and beliefs about what others think one should do (injunctive norms). Social norms are held in place by approval, including rewards or recognition, or disapproval, including negative sanctions. They may also be maintained by beliefs about the legitimacy of others’ expectations among enough members of a reference group.

Gender norms are collectively held expectations and beliefs about how people should behave based on their gender identity. These rules represent beliefs and values about what it means to be male or female in a particular community. Gender norms are learned through socialization beginning in childhood, reinforced by family and community, and embedded in institutions, policies, and regulations. Inequitable gender norms reflect inequitable power relations. The reward for adhering to these norms can be acceptance and social inclusion, while the consequences for not conforming can range from subtle forms of exclusion to violent backlash.

Descriptive norms (also called empirical expectations): Shared beliefs about behaviors considered typical/common in a particular social group (what I think others do).

Injunctive norms (also called normative expectations): Beliefs about behaviors considered appropriate within a particular social group (what I think others expect me to do).

Reference group: A reference group includes those people whose expectations matter to a given individual in a specific situation. A social norm is held in place by the reciprocal expectations of the people within a reference group.

* The RSR Gender Window Briefing Note Series provides insights into the approaches, lessons, and challenges of projects implemented under the RSR Gender Window. This brief is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of the overall SPJ portfolio, but rather an illustration of the different approaches that selected projects are taking. This learning brief was written by Dristy Shrestha. The author is grateful for insights and feedback provided by Syud Amer Ahmed, Ana Maria Munoz Boudet, Sanika Gupta, Natalie Jackson, Mousson Estelle Jamel Koussoube, Lindsay Mossman, Rachel Susan Pierotti, Laura Rawlings, Solene Rougeaux, and Sara Trolano. Many thanks also to Alessandra Heinemann, Mattias Lundberg, and Loli Arribas-Banos for their guidance.
WHY AND HOW DO SOCIAL NORMS MATTER TO SPJ?

Project outcomes are shaped by social norms. Social norms influence people’s behavior, and most social protection schemes aim to change behavior, even if this is not stated as an explicit aim. For example, a cash transfer aiming to reduce malnutrition could be affected by norms whereby food is served last to women and children.

Where behavior change is a project objective, it is important to understand existing social norms in a specific community as well as how, when, and under what conditions behavior is influenced by these norms. This understanding may enable more effective project design, as social norms can act as either a ‘brake’ in the process of behavior change, or as an accelerator. For instance, the norm of men being the power holders and breadwinners in a family might result in women not having their own bank accounts. Recognizing and addressing social and gender norms around financial decision-making and control over resources may be required in order to achieve desired changes in behavior. The project may aim to shift these norms by engaging those who have influence in the community (reference group), and men and women in targeted households about the importance of women having bank accounts, how this benefits the household, and what others in the community are doing (descriptive norms). As part of this process, it will be important to monitor behavior closely and adjust interventions as needed to ensure there are no sanctions for women and men who transgress norms.

SPJ interventions can shift social norms for good or reinforce negative or inequitable norms. Even if not explicitly stated, social protection projects usually aim to change behavior. Projects that do not understand how existing social norms constrain behavior change may inadvertently reinforce harmful behavior or simply be less effective. Having a clear understanding of how norms influence the behaviors that the project is seeking to change—i.e. the behavior of interest—can help practitioners to:

- Identify the most relevant social norm(s) that influence specific behavior(s),
- Design projects to tackle harmful social norms and associated behavior(s), and promote positive norms,
- Develop instruments that measure the change in social norms, and
- Minimize the risk of unintended consequences or reinforcing harmful norms.

WHAT ARE SPJ PROJECTS DOING TO SHIFT SOCIAL NORMS?

Deliberately challenging or shifting social norms is an emerging area for SPJ projects. A small but growing number of projects are seeking to identify existing norms and design interventions that aim to shift these norms. The section below provides examples of different social norms-shifting approaches adopted by SPJ projects, many of which are also recipients of the Rapid Social Response (RSR) grants under the Gender Window.

Example 1. Creating a new norm

Establishing a new norm can be costly in terms of time and resources because it entails creating new social expectations and personal attitudes. For the new norm to spread, enough members of a group need to be convinced to adopt it. Then, the desired behavior needs to be easily observable so that other members of the group are aware of its adoption. This process of changing group members’ beliefs requires systematic and sustained engagement.

The Husbands and Future Husbands Schools, a component of the Sahel Women’s Empowerment and Demographic Dividend project (SWEDD) is an example of such an approach. Implemented in Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, with technical support from UNFPA, it aims to empower women and adolescent girls, and increase their access to quality education and reproductive, child and maternal health services. The program addresses stereotypes around unpaid care work and men as power holders in order to reduce violence and improve women’s economic activity. By engaging men in group settings to discuss these norms and practices, the program aims to create new norms and champions for these norms.

The Husbands and Future Husbands Schools help men overcome gender stereotypes, enlisting them to end violence and empower their wives, sisters, and daughters. The schools meet once a week for a maximum of three hours. A local facilitator leads a group of five to 15 men to discuss topics such as maternal health, family planning and women’s rights. Testimonies from beneficiaries during community consultations suggest that this approach has helped build a better understanding of the obstacles facing women, a greater acceptance of women’s right to refuse sex, increased sharing of household tasks, and ultimately a decrease in violence.
Approaches to create new norms usually combine individual and community level interventions. For example, the Adaptive Social Safety Nets Project in Niger aims to address social norms which limit women’s engagement in economic activity and uphold men’s control over household finances. The project includes a psychosocial component that combines life skills training with community sensitization. Life skills training focuses on building women’s decision-making, problem-solving, goal setting, and interpersonal communication skills, while also building self-worth, self-efficacy, and aspirations. This aims to shift individual attitudes and perceptions about women’s engagement in productive activities and their roles as household earners. In addition, the project addresses community level norms around women’s decision-making and economic engagement through community sensitization interventions. Elders, traditional leaders, program beneficiaries, and their family members (influencers and reference groups for the targeted households) attend community dialogues which included the screening of a short video depicting the benefits of women’s participation in savings groups and productive activities. After the screening, a facilitator engages the community in a discussion about social norms, aspirations, and community values. By engaging systematically at the individual and community levels, such approaches help align individual behavior and goals with those of their community (the reference group) over time, creating a new norm.

Example 2. Nudging to shift social norms
Nudges rely on choice architecture to encourage people to pick options that produce better outcomes in the long run, without limiting their choices. They are based on the assumption that individuals often make sub-optimal decisions and that mild nudges can lead them to behave in beneficial ways. Nudges can leverage social norms to encourage a certain behavior by informing individuals about the actions of others in their reference group. This can prompt people to act the way others are acting (descriptive norms), or how they believe others expect them to act (injunctive norms). While norm-nudges can be subtle and affordable to implement, and less prone to resistance, they do not always work. For example, if a behavior is driven by social expectations, and there’s a sufficiently large group engaging in the behavior, a norm-nudge is more likely to work than if the behavior is driven by individual attitudes or beliefs. In this case, knowing what others are doing may not be sufficient to alter behavior.

In Madagascar, a RSR grant is supporting the use of behavioral nudges to implement a cash-for-work scheme under the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP). The project has identified a need to change savings and investment behavior, dispelling a belief that saving is not the norm and something “only rich people do.”

Behavioral nudges such as visual aids and posters prompt participants to set realistic savings goals (such as buying agricultural tools, or paying for children’s education) and save part of their cash transfers for productive investments to diversify their livelihoods. For instance, messaging about saving habits of others in the reference group (neighbors or other women in the PSNP) can help to shift perceptions about descriptive norms and result in behavior change.

Example 3. Shifting perceptions of sanctions for transgressing norms
Social norms are held in place by beliefs about the reactions of individuals in one’s reference group. It could be approval for conforming, or negative sanctions for noncompliance. In fact, even anticipation of disapproval for transgressing a norm can motivate compliance. Therefore, shifting perceptions around the strength of negative sanctions and highlighting examples of individuals who have transgressed the norm and succeeded can be effective to change behavior. For instance, highlighting examples of successful women entrepreneurs engaged in male-dominated sectors can shift perceptions about ‘appropriate’ sectors for women, enabling women to cross over into what are often more profitable opportunities.
Occupational segregation—low shares of women in male-dominated trades, which are often higher skilled and more profitable—exacerbates gender inequality in the labor market. Social norms around occupations, as well as discriminatory policies, fear or experience of discrimination, intimidation, harassment, and judgment perpetuate occupational patterns. In order to address such barriers, the Benin Youth Inclusion Project is deliberately incentivizing young women to pursue male-dominated trades. The project provides technical training in the identified trade, a monthly cash transfer of US$55 for three years, mentorship and coaching services, and networking support. It also leverages mass media to highlight role models of successful female entrepreneurs in male-dominated trades.

By promoting female participation in male-dominated trades and showcasing successful female entrepreneurs in non-traditional occupations, the project aims to alleviate the fear of negative sanctions and ultimately shift beliefs about women’s work. This approach builds on the idea that if individuals perceive that a shared belief about the prevalence or acceptability of a behavior is changing, norms about that behavior can be changed.

Example 4. Circumventing an existing norm
Access to quality and affordable childcare services presents a significant barrier to women’s labor force participation in many countries. Unequal care burdens contribute to occupational segregation—with women concentrated in lower paid, informal jobs that offer more flexibility but are often precarious. Care burdens also exacerbate the gender wage gap. In order to promote uptake of training and job opportunities, SPJ projects are beginning to incorporate childcare services to reduce care burdens and circumvent norms around childcare being primarily women’s responsibility.

In Bangladesh, the RSR is supporting a childcare preference and needs assessment to develop an affordable childcare service model for low-income women in urban areas. The assessment seeks to understand how social norms around women’s responsibility for childcare are changing with demographic shifts. Similarly, in Benin, in order to facilitate women’s access to training facilities, on-site childcare services are provided during training activities. The Benin project builds on lessons from the Youth Employment project (Projet Emploi des Jeunes—PEJ) that was initiated in 2013 to boost income-generating activities for poor and vulnerable youth. To facilitate the participation of women in training sessions, PEJ invited trainees needing childcare to bring a second person to look after the children and offered transportation and midday meals to both. Similar approaches have been tried in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Ghana through the provision of mobile crèches offering safe shelter and stimulation for children of women participating in public works. Since interventions to shift norms around gender equality in care work can be costly and lengthy, these approaches help to circumvent the norm by providing alternative childcare services and reducing barriers to their uptake.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO UNDERSTAND SOCIAL NORMS?

Understanding and taking into account prevailing social norms in the design of interventions is necessary, particularly for projects aiming to change behavior. Social norms interventions are critical for successful implementation and enforcement of gender equality related laws and policies in practice. When seeking to change behavior, it is critical to understand if a behavior is driven by social norms and to what extent these norms influence the behaviors that the project is seeking to change.

Formative research can identify and understand prevalent social norms that influence the behaviors of interest. The table below provides four critical questions to ask during project preparation.

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Critical Questions to ask | Why does this matter for the success of a project?
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1. Is the behavior socially driven *(influenced by social norms)*? | Determining whether a behavior is influenced by social norms (beliefs about what others do, or what others believe one should do) or rather personal preferences, is important to identify the motivation for the behavior.22
2. What are the social norms that influence this behavior? | Identifying the root causes of an issue—including social norms—ensures that the program articulates and addresses the range of determinants of behaviors.
3. What are the social norms that influence this behavior the most? | Discussing, analyzing, and prioritizing normative factors (and taking into account other factors) allows more effective and efficient use of resources.
4. Who is most affected by these norms? Which groups are most influential regarding the behavior of interest? | Understanding who is most affected by the norms and how helps to determine key objectives for change, as well as who needs to be engaged in driving that change. Identifying reference groups that do or do not support a behavior helps programs include the right people in interventions and evaluations.
5. Why do people comply with the identified social norms? Why not? | Identifying reasons why people comply or not will help unpack how norms operate. Maybe people comply because they have a strong desire to conform, or because they gain benefits from adherence or fear sanctions for behaving against a norm.
6. Do the norms truly reflect existing behaviors and attitudes in the community? | It is important to understand any misperceptions (pluralistic ignorance)23 that need correction. This may require a different kind of intervention, particularly if individual attitudes are changing but there is a fear of possible social sanctions. Facilitating recognition that the norm is or has changed within the reference group can improve uptake of new behavior.

Adapted from: Social Norms Exploration Tool24

How can SPJ projects take social norms into account?
While it is important for all projects to consider the influence that prevalent social norms can have when seeking to change behavior (such as women’s care burdens), some projects may require a deeper dive into understanding particular social norms and resulting behaviors. **There are three contexts where more in-depth research to identify, understand, and measure social norms is recommended:**

1. When beginning a program in a new context or adding a new activity that may cause backlash (e.g. paying cash transfers to women when this has not been the norm).
2. Where social norms present a barrier to program uptake, particularly for women and girls (e.g. women’s participation in training alongside men when this is considered unacceptable).
3. Where the program seeks to change behaviors held in place by social norms and not abiding by them is taboo (e.g. discouraging early marriage, engaging fathers in child care). This may be particularly the case where legal and policy frameworks are in place to address the behavior of interest, but it continues to persist, to the detriment of gender equality and other development outcomes.

Where a project aims to shift or challenge existing norms, it is critical to include actions to mitigate potential backlash and ensure the availability of relevant support services if participants experience violent backlash. Understanding the key social norms related to project objectives and activities is essential to ensuring impact and preventing backlash. It can also be helpful to measure norms, although this can be challenging as the process of change cannot be inferred from behavioral observations alone. Rather, other methods are required to tease out information around social norms and behaviors. The table below outlines the purpose, methods, and key questions for each stage of measurement during the project cycle:
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| Formative research    | Identify possible social norms, sanctions, reference groups            | Literature review, community consultations, structured interviews, or group discussions | 1. Is the specific behavior in question socially driven (influenced by social norms)?
2. What social norms are at play for the specific behavior in question? To what extent do these social factors influence behavior?
3. Who is most affected by these norms?
4. Who are the most influential reference groups for the specific norm?
5. What social sanctions are anticipated for deviating from the norm? |
| Baseline              | Verify social norms, assess norm strengths, identify “cracks” in norms and opportunities for interventions | Quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, vignettes and other participatory exercises | 1. What do you typically do regarding the specific behavior in question (descriptive norms)?
2. What do you think others should do regarding the specific behavior in question (injunctive norms)?
3. What do people in the community typically do regarding the specific behavior in question? (descriptive norms)
   a. How often do people do the behavior in this community (frequency)?
   b. How many people do the behavior in this community (prevalence)?
4. What do people in the community think others should do (injunctive norms)
   a. Quantitative e.g.: Provide a series of statements about community members’ perceptions to which respondents may agree/disagree (Likert scale)
   b. Qualitative e.g.: Consider use of vignettes or scenarios to describe a behavior and understand social expectations (as well as reference groups and possible sanctions)
5. What are the possible outcomes if an individual complies with or fails to comply with the norms identified? (social sanctions)
   a. How likely are these outcomes to actually take place in this community?
   b. How much do the expected social sanctions for breaking the norm influence how people behave?
6. Is it acceptable for some people (or all people at some times) to behave in a way that is not typical or not approved in the group?
   a. Which people and in which situations?
7. Are there any individuals or groups who are transgressing the specific norm, or demonstrating the targeted perception or behavior? (potential champions of change) |
| Endline               | Identify changes in social norms, correlate with changes in behavior and attitudes, perceived behaviors, and beliefs of others | Activity monitoring, observation                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Monitoring            | Observe signs of norm change; monitor any backlash or resistance       | Activity monitoring, observation                                        | 1. In response to ideas or opinions that challenge the norm, do most participants voice resistance or agreement?
2. If and when participants voice resistance or agreement to ideas that challenge the norm, how do (most) other participants react? Are there risks of serious backlash?
3. Are there any examples of positive shifts in behavior that could be leveraged through project interventions? |

Notes for Practitioners

• It is important to create a space for project staff who design and implement projects to reflect on their own perceptions, beliefs, and values related to social norms as there may be a need for mindset and behavior change among them. This can be done through staff capacity building and training, which require additional resources and time.

• The hypothetical nature of certain survey questions that ask about what others “generally” do or theoretically would do can be difficult as people may not be used to answering questions about others or about hypothetical events. Therefore, having additional methods, such as vignettes and focus group discussions (FGDs) can be useful. Note that with FGDs or activities in which participants may be with others from their ‘reference group’, care should be taken to reduce social desirability bias. Participatory activities or vignettes may be more useful to help respondents more accurately identify social expectations.

• Questions about sanctions may also provide a more concrete and straightforward way to ask about norms by asking respondents how someone else would react or respond to a norm violation.

Adapted from: Applying Theory to Practice: CARE’s Journey Piloting Social Norms Measures for Gender Programming; Measuring Gender-related Social Norms; and Resources for Measuring Social Norms: A Practical Guide for Program Implementers.

Community-level social norm interventions

Shifting norms at the community level is important to ensure sustained changes in behavior, as changes at the individual or household level may still result in sanctions due to persisting norms in the wider community. While most SPJ projects include behavior change interventions focusing on the individual and household, community-level interventions are less common. Community-level interventions tend to occur at the outreach phase and include communication campaigns, especially mass media messaging.

The list below provides ten common attributes of norm-shifting interventions at community level:

1. Seeks community-level change (clearly articulates social change outcomes beyond just individual)
2. Accurately assesses norms (identifies which norms shape a given behavior and which groups uphold the norm)
3. Emphasizes creation of positive new norms
4. Engages a wide range of people at multiple levels
5. Creates safe space for critical reflection by community members
6. Corrects misperceptions around harmful behaviors
7. Identifies and leverages influential people in the community who can act as drivers of change, due to their high visibility, level of respect, and relatability
8. Uses “organized diffusion” (begins with critical reflection to change norms within a core group, who then engage others to have community-level impact)
9. Addresses power imbalances/inequalities
10. Roots the issue within a 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 or wrong)

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Challenging or shifting social norms requires diagnostics to understand the underlying factors contributing to the norm and the strength of the norm itself, as well as to identify effective interventions and monitoring mechanisms. It also requires implementation expertise and capacity. Efforts to shift norms may require a combination of individual, household, and community-level interventions, to reach a ‘tipping point’ that can sustain the desired changes.

Work on social norms is critical to the adoption, implementation, and enforcement of legal and policy reforms towards greater gender equality, and the effectiveness of formal and institutional tools and mechanisms. Unpacking the factors influencing uptake and implementation in practice requires a deeper engagement with and understanding of the social and gender norms at play, and how shifts in these norms can improve the effectiveness of laws and policies.

Currently, a small but growing number of SPJ projects are engaging systematically in understanding and shifting social norms. Measurement of social norms and behavior changes is challenging and requires significant effort to determine what works and why within a particular context, and to what extent the approach or its elements may be replicable and scalable. Partner organizations have developed resources to help development practitioners understand, measure, and shift social norms. This presents an opportunity for SPJ teams to leverage these resources and contribute to the body of knowledge.
RESOURCES

Knowledge/Resource Hub

**ALIGN (Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms) Platform**: Specializes in research and knowledge sharing on gender and social norms, looking at the impact of discriminatory and harmful norms and how they change. The [Resource Hub](#) includes toolkits, literature, case studies, and webinar recordings.

**The Social Norms Learning Collaborative**: Network of experts working to build knowledge and develop shared tools to promote and guide effective social norms theory, measurement, and practice.

**Center for Social Norms and Behavioral Dynamics**: Research center focused on linking social norms theory to practical applications, with expertise in measuring and analyzing behavioral data.

Tools

**Getting Practical: Integrating Social Norms into Social and Behavior Change Programs** (Breakthrough ACTION and Learning Collaborative): A hands-on tool for program design, and monitoring on social and behavior change.

**Social Norms Exploration Tool** (SNET) (Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University): A tool for conducting social norms exploration in five phases following the project cycle.

**Social Norms Data Use Tool** (CARE): A guide to identify data for social norms (where to look); help review data to identify cracks in social norms that lead to behavior change (what to look for); and show design implications for behavior change where possible (why identifying the cracks matter).

**Social Norms Design Checklist** (CARE): A checklist providing examples of questions to ask while designing activities, examples of how to fill in gaps identified, and what norms-shifting interventions look like in action. The checklist should be used after the program has identified harmful social norms.

**Participatory Research Toolkit for Social Norms Measurement** (UNICEF): A toolkit providing detailed information on participatory research activities to measure social norms, including their methodology, examples of use, data analysis and interpretation.

**Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Equality and Health** (Promundo): A toolkit with strategies and lessons for engaging men and boys on themes such as sexual and reproductive health, fatherhood and GBV.

Reports

**Applying Theory to Practice: CARE’s Journey Piloting Social Norms Measures for Gender Programming** (CARE, 2017): Social norms measures and tools piloted by CARE to enhance gender programming.

**Social Norms Atlas: Understanding global social norms and related concepts** (Learning Collaborative): Provides an illustration of social norms in specific sectors and contexts.
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