



TIPPING POINT SOCIAL NORMS INNOVATIONS SERIES

Brief 8: Street Drama
NEPAL



TIPPING POINT SOCIAL NORMS INNOVATIONS SERIES

BANGLADESH

Amader Kotha

Adolescents use street drama and dialogue to challenge existing social norms and show positive alternatives.

Football for Girls

Read about how girls participation in sports is changing social norms in some parts of Bangladesh.

Amrao Korchi

Girls and boys switch roles to challenge gendered social norms, where boys do household work usually done by girls (cooking, doing laundry, etc).

Tea Stall Conversations

Men gather to drink tea and discuss gender roles, girls rights, and child, early, and forced marriage with each other.

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Cooking Competition

Boys compete in a cooking competition and girls judge their food.

Intergenerational Dialogue

Communication gap between adolescents and their parents is bridged in order to better understand adolescent's aspirations.

Raksha Bandhan

The traditional ritual of a sister tying a thread around a brother's wrist and asking him for protection is modified where brothers also tie a thread around their sisters' wrist and both vow to practice gender equality and pursue their dreams.

Street Drama

Girls and boys perform street dramas to challenge social norms around dowry and early marriage, and introduce the benefits of investing in girls.





BACKGROUND

Research and experience show that social change toward gender justice requires more than supportive attitudes and awareness among individuals.¹ People do not exist as islands; they make up a social system that is interdependent and built on tacit conventions of behavior. What people believe others do, what they think others expect from them, and what people believe the consequences of nonconformance to be—these are dimensions of social norms that play a tremendous part in determining people’s actions and choices, even when an individual has knowledge and attitudes that would suggest a different choice.

Change for gender justice requires more than sharing knowledge and promoting equitable attitudes of individuals. It also requires a society in which people’s support for gender justice becomes as normal and accepted as removing your shoes indoors or paying respect to your elders is in many parts of Asia. So then, how does one engage with social environments to shift what is considered ‘normal’?

The Tipping Point² initiative, which aims to promote positive alternatives to child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) for girls in Bangladesh and Nepal, has taken up this question as a core part of its work. From 2015 to 2017, the project built on findings from its **Community Participatory Analysis (CPA) Study** to identify ways to drive social norms change that transforms the root causes of CEFM. This brief is part of a series highlighting Tipping Point programming innovations based on key design principles for social norms work, which CARE developed based on the existing academic and gray literature.³ These innovations complement a broader suite of activities to facilitate the agency and options of adolescent girls, working with girls, boys, parents, key formal and informal influencers, and local decision makers.⁴

1 Heise, L. & Manji, K. (2016). Social Norms. GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack no. 31. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham

2 For more information on Tipping Point and partners, visit https://caringpoint.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/care_tipping-point_web.pdf

3 Bicchieri, C. (2006). *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.; Bicchieri, C., Lindemans, J., & Jiang, T. (2014). *A structured approach to a diagnostic of collective practices*. *Front. Psychol.* 5:1418;. Mackie, G., Moneti, F., Shakya, H. & Denny, E. (2015). *What are social norms? How are they measured?* California, USA: UNICEF/Centre on Global Justice, University of San Diego

4 See the full Theory of Change for the programming of Tipping Point here: <https://caringpoint.org/innovation/theory-of-change-2/>

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR SOCIAL NORMS PROGRAMMING

To guide and inform its work, Tipping Point distilled 8 design principles for engaging with social norms change, drawing from academic and gray literature on the topic. These include:

- 1. Find early adopters:** Often, people are already living their lives in positive ways that support girls' choices and opportunities. Find them.
- 2. Build support groups of early adopters:** It can be hard to embody positive, rights-based change alone. Groups help individuals support, encourage and trouble-shoot.
- 3. Use future-oriented positive messages:** Help people imagine positive alternatives. Change is possible.
- 4. Open space for dialogue:** Get people talking to each other about new ideas. Challenge the implicit assumptions that everyone holds the same views, experiences and preferences.
- 5. Facilitate public debate:** Engage publicly with community members to debate on what is OK in this context.
- 6. Expect by-stander action:** Move from envisioning possibilities of justice to action. This involves building community and accountability, so that people show up for girls' rights in their words and actions.
- 7. Show examples of positive behavior in public:** Demonstrate that the positive shift we hope for already exists. And it is totally normal.
- 8. Map allies and ask for their support:** Identify the resources and networks we need to support positive change for individuals, families and communities.



THE INNOVATION: STREET DRAMA

Community theatre has been a source of entertainment in rural Nepal for as long as people can remember. Drama troupes do not typically include both male and female actors. Instead, when a scene calls for it, a male actor wears female dress to play the part of a woman. This is to avoid the mingling of men and women, or girls and boys, who are not related. Platonic friendships between adolescent girls and boys are uncommon in most rural villages, and parents express great concern about any interactions between girls and boys. Our CPA study found fear amongst parents that familiarity between adolescent girls and boys would lead to elopement and even stronger fears that the elopement would be inter-caste, outcomes that they felt would bring great shame to their families.

Tipping Point's adolescent groups (both boys' and girls' groups) in Nepal became interested in street drama after some role plays they did within their groups. It was a powerful experience for them, and they felt it could be an effective way to raise sensitive topics in the community. The **adolescent meetings** provided a natural setting to develop scripts and scenes in the **safety of the group (Design Principle 2)**. Girls' groups and boys' groups usually met separately but came together for certain activities, which already made them **early adopters of a positive model** for platonic relationships between girls and boys (**Design Principle 1**), and they decided to accept the risk of criticism and perform drama together. In doing so, they **demonstrated to the public** that girls and boys could work together for a good cause; their interactions could be appropriate and meaningful rather than flirtatious (**Design Principle 7**).

After initially performing plays that featured the deaths of child brides through early pregnancy and dowry violence, the players realized that these sad tales were already familiar to everyone, because audience members had lived them or witnessed them in real life. The adolescents refocused the narratives of their plays to **highlight alternative outcomes** for girls and boys with positive messages about young people's autonomy and capabilities, helping the audience imagine possibilities outside the norm (**Design Principle 3**). Shows were followed by **adolescent-led discussions with the audience** about the show's content, what audience members would change in the story, and how the story related to their own lives (**Design Principle 5**).

Through **networking with potential allies** in theatre companies and agencies working for girls' rights, the drama groups drew support from a professional theatre group for training and a legal aid organization that offered a contract to perform shows (**Design Principle 8**). They traveled to outside villages and districts to share the knowledge they had gained with other adolescent groups and provoke community reflection on girls' rights, adolescent autonomy, and child marriage.

The implementation guide at the end of this brief provides more details about the street drama initiative and the many challenges the adolescents overcame on the path to a successful drama group.



CARE SOCIAL NORMS ANALYSIS PLOT (SNAP) FRAMEWORK

SNAP was developed to measure the nature of specific social norms and their influence, and offers a useful framework to examine the initial reactions to a social norms focused activity. Specifically, it examines any preliminary effects on:



What are the initial reactions of community members?

The drama shows were well attended throughout the villages where they took place. It helped that they usually occurred on a weekend, when people were less busy with school and work. The Tipping Point team wanted to know whether this form of social engagement with issues important to adolescents was changing perceptions of what was ‘normal’ in this context. There were many social norms being challenged by the street drama initiative, not only within the content of the dramas but also in their delivery: the visibility of girls performing and advocating for their rights, the travel of girls to places outside their village, and the collaboration of girls and boys.

Using inquiry questions based on **CARE’s Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) framework**¹ Tipping Point project staff interviewed twelve community members—nine women and three men. Most of the respondents knew someone involved in project activities, such as a relative or a neighbor, and, aside from two respondents, they knew of Tipping Point. All of them had seen at least part of a street drama performance and discussion. One respondent identified as Muslim, nine as Hindu, and two did not identify their religion. Their ages ranged from 24 to 60 years.

¹ Stefanik, L. & Hwang, T. (2017). *Applying theory to practice: CARE’s journey piloting social norms measures for gender programming*. <http://gender.care2share.wikispaces.net/file/view/care-social-norms-paper-web.pdf>.

UNLESS THE GIRL ELOPES AWAY...

Reactions to the street drama shows were overwhelmingly positive. People were particularly moved by the scenes that depicted the worst outcomes of child marriage and dowry violence. It is not clear if this is because the villages where interviews took place had not yet seen dramas entailing positive alternatives for young people or because the very dramatic stories are the ones that people found most memorable.

I felt good watching the drama; I got some knowledge and awareness. Some of the people watching the drama were getting emotional and crying. Everyone was worried seeing a girl murdered due to dowry

30-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

On girls' participation in the drama groups, respondents were by and large supportive:

Speaking publicly in rallies and in drama is good.

25-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

I find it quite good as it gave the message of the negative consequences of child marriage and bad dowry practices.... I felt good about girls speaking up. The drama that I saw was really showcasing the issue that prevails in our society.

45-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

However, girls' participation is not without risk. In the Community Participatory Analysis study, the fear of elopement was often given as a reason for early arranged marriages, and that concern was reflected in some of the interviewees' comments.

I find these activities good because they are learning from it, unless the girl elopes away.... When the adolescents go away and don't return in time, we don't know where they are going and for what purpose. As we are not aware, the parents get angry.

25-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

The street drama reflected the bad practices of child marriage and dowry in society. It was very heavy. I got very emotional seeing the drama.

60-YEAR-OLD WOMAN



CHANGE AROUND US

Empirical expectations are what we think others in our communities are doing or thinking. In social norms theory, empirical expectations influence our behaviors and are primarily formed by what we see or hear around us. Change becomes possible when we perceive changes in others. Did community members see any changes in others because of the street drama initiative?

Some respondents said that, yes, the dramas had influenced people by discouraging harmful practices, but that it was a limited effect. One person noted that a single drama show would not be enough to change people's mentalities.

After watching the drama, people have realized the risks that come with child marriage, and child marriage rates and dowry have reduced.... There are some instances where people have changed their mindsets regarding child marriage, but with dowry it hasn't been changed yet.

54-YEAR-OLD MAN

It is hard to change seeing this type of drama only once.

25-YEAR-OLD WOMAN



However, people were certain that adolescents were changing.

There are some changes that I can see in the community. Adolescents talk in the open; they talk about menstruation and drama.

32-YEAR-OLD MAN

They [girls] used to feel hesitant to speak in front of people. Now they speak about their rights and share their thoughts in front of people.... This has empowered the adolescent girls to speak about their rights on not marrying at an early age. It has changed the girls' capabilities.

54-YEAR-OLD MAN



One woman commented on changed perceptions of girls and boys talking to each other, or at least a new recognition that girls and boys might have good reasons to be talking.

Before, when boys and girls would sit together and talk, it was negatively perceived. Now, when a girl talks to a boy, the community thinks and says that they might be debating something.

24-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

But this perspective was not universal:

The community people think that young girls going along with the boys is bad.

30-YEAR-OLD WOMAN



SHIFTING EXPECTATIONS

Normative expectations are what we think others expect us to do. This is informed by the types of behaviors and individuals we see being sanctioned positively (celebrated or rewarded) versus those that are sanctioned negatively (publicly denounced, ostracized, or punished). Did community members suggest that they feel freer to make choices outside of the norm? And did they see girls being sanctioned because of the street drama initiative?

Tipping Point's Community Participatory Analysis study report discusses the important role dowry plays in determining the timing of marriage. Especially for the poorest, the requirement of giving dowry when a daughter is married is a direct cause of child marriage, because grooms' families tend to demand a lower dowry when a bride is very young. Many unmarried adolescent boys in the project area said they were happy to marry without receiving a dowry, but they were also afraid that communities would interpret the lack of a dowry as a sign that a boy or his family had hidden problems that made him a less desirable husband. For their part, a bride's family often feels compelled to give dowry as a symbol of the daughter's value and assurance of her future happiness.

Amid these pressures, many interview respondents said they themselves would not accept or had not accepted dowry when their sons married; yet all but one said they would give or had given dowry for their daughters' marriages.

Neither did I take dowry when I had my son married, but I gave dowry when I got my daughter married.

60-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

After watching the drama, I thought that I won't take dowry when I get my two sons married, but I would need to give dowry for my daughters.... I don't care what people say; my children would behave or do according to my will. It is my responsibility.

30-YEAR-OLD WOMAN



Whether this bears true or not, it suggests that refusing to take dowry is socially acceptable and perhaps even honorable. Failing to provide dowry for a daughter's marriage, however, is qualitatively different. The interviews did not give further insight into reasons for these distinctions, but they do provide some evidence that expectations for dowry exchange are shifting.

Respondents' comments about negative sanctioning of adolescents' participation in the street drama initiative were much clearer, but quite divided.

***Adolescents are not punished
by parents for their participation
in street drama.***

35-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

In fact, three of the girls who had attended the theatre training were taken out of the group by their parents after neighbors criticized them. It seems that this was tied to the girls' earning money from public performances, or at least that the paid contract the group received was the trigger point for gossip. The group trained new members to replace the girls who were pulled out. Although this enabled more girls to have the opportunity to participate, the drama group is not able to register themselves as an official entity with members changing frequently. Having the registration would allow them to draw more contracts and possibly earn their livelihoods as a professional drama troupe.

On the other hand, the team reports positive sanctions as well, such as the group being praised by community members and consulted by teachers on constructing a drama. Most of their parents are proud of their talents. Importantly, they have demonstrated that girls and boys can perform together platonically, even discussing sensitive issues, and the interviews did not elicit any negative comments about girls and boys acting together on stage, even as husband and wife.

**When adolescents go to the
program and streets, if the parents
see them talking, they scold them.**

25-YEAR-OLD WOMAN





Potential of the Street Drama Initiative as a Tactic for Social Norms Change

The varied reactions respondents reported to seeing girls on stage, with boys, advocating for their rights, point to social norms in flux. It is difficult to say how much the street drama initiative contributed to the loosening of strictures on girls' mobility, socializing with boys, and being vocal about their rights and perspectives. But if one considers the hurdles girls had to surpass in the process, it is hard not to conclude that the initiative is making a difference.

People suggested that the messages in the dramas were coming across and impacting people's thinking, to a degree. As the groups gain more experience, the adolescents will be able to tap into the full potential of theatre as a medium of social change. The fact that they write the shows themselves around issues of importance to them ensures that the initiative will remain adolescent-led. The Tipping Point team is adaptively managing the project and considering adjustments to increase the effectiveness of the street drama initiative that might include:

End shows with **promises from audience members** to adopt specific behaviors that support adolescent girls (**Design Principle 6**).

Further refine scripts and shows to **emphasize positive alternatives to child marriage and the capabilities of adolescents** in making significant life choices, rather than the negative outcomes of child marriage (**Design Principle 3**).

Invite selected fathers—ones that will let their daughters lead—to participate in drama publicly with their daughters to **model empowering parenting** and strengthen father-daughter relationships (**Design Principle 7**).

Pursue commitments from parents to keep their children involved in the drama group and enable the group to obtain registration (**Design Principle 6**).

Implementation Guide: Street Drama

NEPAL

There were three phases to the development of the street drama initiative:

1. Discovering drama
 2. Gaining experience and maturity
 3. Sharing skills and managing challenges
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Discovering drama

CARE Nepal used a life skills training package for adolescents called *Rupantaran* (which means ‘transformation’). One of the modules used role playing, which girls and boys did in their respective groups by preparing scripts and creatively presenting them in front of their peers. Topics included child marriage, gender discrimination, dowry, smoking, drinking, education, and other social issues. The participants would first show a story with a negative ending and then ask peers if they wished to change a character in the play. Another person would join as a new or changed character, the group would play it again unscripted, and the entire story line would be changed. This brought home the message that anyone can be the change that turns a negative story with a sad ending into a positive story with a happy ending.

After putting on these small skits within the safe spaces of their groups, the adolescents realized that this form of expression was a very powerful tool. The adolescent girls’ groups met with the boys’ groups in some of the villages, and together they decided to stage a play for the entire community. On the *Saraswati Puja* (a Hindu festival that celebrates the Goddess of learning), the groups worked with the school authority to set up a stage for a program that included prayer songs, dance, and drama. The parents were skeptical about girls and boys doing this together.

THE OBJECTIVES OF STREET DRAMA

1. Address social norms around early and forced marriage, dowry, investment in girls, and other important topics through drama.
2. Develop adolescents’ skills in negotiating for their mobility, rights, and dreams.
3. Create opportunities among adolescents to identify issues concerning them and create scripts to address the issues in public.
4. Support exposure of adolescents to new places and spreading key messages by bringing the drama group to other villages.

When there were husband and wife roles, the group members made sure that two girls or two boys played the couple so that the community members would not object to a boy and girl playing husband and wife on stage.

After this success, the adolescents initiated scripts on other themes, such as harassment on the way to school, restricted mobility of girls, early marriage, school dropout and workload issues for girls, pressure on boys to earn, and dowry. These issues affected adolescents directly, especially girls, and they put a lot of effort into writing plays on these themes. They also created key discussion points and questions for facilitating dialogue with audiences after a play. These included:

- What did you like about the show? Why did you like it? What does it remind you of?
- Which scene was the most touching for you? Why?

- Whose character do you think was most important for the story?
- Do you think there are such positive examples in our community? Are the people who practice those positive behaviors known to all in the community?
- Do you think there could be a different end to this play? What could be different?
- Do you think you could replace any one character in this play? Who would you replace, and what would happen if you replaced them?
- Do you have any questions for us?

Gaining experience and maturity

After their early shows, which featured a child bride dying due to pregnancy, boys and girls reflected on what went well and what did not. Through feedback and discussions with Tipping Point project staff, they agreed that dramas should be short and entertaining. They also reflected on the discussion with the community, that child marriage and its consequences were so normal that they could not think beyond it, for they could not imagine what an alternative might be. The whole community knows about child marriage and its risks, so what was new in showing them the same story? At this point, the groups felt that they needed to show alternative outcomes and positive behavior which was not so common. The adolescents were eager to make changes and started writing scripts with positive messages and positive images of people. Instead of children getting married, they started showing adult men and women getting married and including themes suggesting alternatives to early marriage.

As the group became more active and creative, a professional theatre organization, Shilpee Theatre, was contracted by the project to provide a residential formal theatre training to 15 members. The members selected included adolescent girls and boys, group facilitators (youth leaders), and social mobilisers (project staff). The adolescent girls who were shortlisted had to go outside their village for 10 days

to receive the training. The girls worked to convince their parents to allow them to attend, because they would be sleeping outside the village for 10 days during the training.

The training helped the drama group members refine their acting skills, incorporate more fun in the plays, and write better scripts. The drama group was now on the job with increased confidence and abilities. They could adjust themes to better communicate what they intended. They took more risks, including having a boy and a girl play a married couple.

Sharing skills and managing challenges

Those that attended the training became role models for others, especially as more adolescents in other villages wanted to start drama groups. The trained youth performed in many villages and shared their knowledge with local drama teams. Eventually, they were offered a contract to do drama shows for the District Legal Aid Committee supported by UNDP. The girls and boys were paid for these shows and shared the fees among themselves for school costs, stationery items, and other expenses for advancing their studies.

Overall the group has already experienced so much success. The adolescents had been given permission to travel to other villages and districts. They report immense happiness in being able to stage a show and feel confident facilitating a vibrant discussion about topics important to them.



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