

# Gender Equality through shifting norms: How social norms approaches are improving the lives of women and girls



## Overview

Social norms are rules to govern behavior that are made and shared by a group. Distinct from personal beliefs and attitudes, social norms are shaped by an individual's observations of what others do, as well as their perceptions of what is expected of them. Social norms include gender norms which specifically restrict women and girls from exercising their rights.

CARE's Vision 2030 learning review identifies that **programming seeking to change social norms can amplify impact** by contributing to greater impact overall and making this more sustainable. This brief highlights collective learning as part of CARE's Go Deeper initiative. It illustrates the ways in which **programs addressing harmful social norms create positive changes for diverse women and girls**, looking in particular at small-scale producers and underbanked and unbanked women and girls. It highlights how social norms approaches have led to positive changes relating to the gender equality they experience, their access to food, water and nutrition, and their economic empowerment, to name just a few.

CARE's **Go Deeper initiative** looks at what it takes to center gender equality in all our work. This led a learning exercise to explore the ways in which programs integrated **social norms approaches**, distill key impact and surface cross-cutting learning on how projects successfully employed these approaches to achieve gender transformative impact. 17 projects were reviewed from across four countries with strong social norms program portfolios which volunteered to participate — Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda.

## What specific norms are women & girls facing?

Each community and society is shaped by specific norms which present what is expected and believed. Deviation from these can result in negative consequences for women and girls. CARE's program experience highlights how individuals face barriers relating to many aspects of their lives, from their ability to make decisions within families and communities to control over their own bodies.



*Holding women and girls back*

Figure 1: Types of social norms affecting women and girls in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda.

## Social norms faced by women and girls in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda include:<sup>1</sup>

- ⇒ People with sons are given higher social status than those with only a daughter(s).
- ⇒ Men and boys are prioritized for food and nutrition intake; women and girls eat last.
- ⇒ Girls are expected to seek permission and have a male companion when going to most places that are not close to their home and school.
- ⇒ Communities expect girls to avoid any romantic relationship before marriage.
- ⇒ Communities believe girls' physical appearance degrades after the 18th birthday.
- ⇒ Girls who are believed to have any relationship with boys before marriage are shamed for compromising their own dignity and their families' honor.
- ⇒ Couples are expected to have children straight after marriage.
- ⇒ Girls found or believed to use contraceptives are called out for being promiscuous.
- ⇒ Women and girls are expected to carry out all household tasks, including childcare.
- ⇒ Women are expected to accept decisions made for them by men, and in some cases older women, about their reproductive health, nutrition, household finances and business.
- ⇒ Women and girls are expected to stay silent about gender-based violence.
- ⇒ Communities believe assets should be owned by men, not women.
- ⇒ Communities expect economic opportunities should be led and accessed by men, not women.

## Projects which addressed harmful social norms holding women and girls back saw impact across many different sectors.



### Women leading in agriculture

% women making agriculture decisions **tripled** among participants in Uganda.



### Less child marriage

**63% reduction** in risk of child marriage among participants in Bangladesh.



### Men challenging gender roles

% men doing housework increased from **39%** ⇒ **62%** among participants in Uganda.



### Women leading in emergencies

**>5x increase** in proportion of women reporting they are able to participate in humanitarian decision-making among participants in Uganda.



### Men preventing harmful practices

% men refraining from enforcing female genital mutilation/cutting **doubled** among participants in Ethiopia.

Learn more about the specific norms identified in each country in the learning briefs for [Bangladesh](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Malawi](#), and [Uganda](#).

## Which approaches are proving successful in shifting harmful social norms?

### COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

**Create space for community members to come together to identify and reflect on the social norms present in their community.** This may be through female or male-only groups, or mixed sex groups. Groups may be encouraged to organize action in support of more positive norms. Successful models for engaging in community dialogue include SASA!, Social Analysis & Action and Community Support Groups.

<sup>1</sup> This list is based on the evidence reviewed across specific programs in these countries. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but to represent the range of norms faced by diverse women and girls.

## HOUSEHOLD DIALOGUE

**Create space for reflection on the power dynamics within households.** This may focus on couples but can also include intergenerational dialogues where other family members, such as mother-in-laws or older women within the family, may have a strong influence over expected norms. Successful models for engaging in household dialogue include Couples' Counselling and Intergenerational dialogue.

## MALE ENGAGEMENT

**Provide opportunities for men to champion and lead change** through campaigns, testimonies, mobilization, and collaboration with women. Beyond fostering men's involvement in reflecting on norms, engaging men and boys to challenge norms and actively practice behaviors contrary to societal norms can support norms shifts. Successful models for engaging men & boys include Role Model Men.

## WOMEN- AND GIRL-LED ACTIVISM

**Provide opportunities for women and girls to drive the changes they want to see in ways which work for them.** This ensures activities focus on the social norms which matter most to them while centering their experience and insight to find the most appropriate solutions. The process of women and girls taking action together can also in itself start to shift norms. Successful models for promoting women- and girl- led activism include Girls in Action, the girl-led activism model developed under the Tipping Point initiative, and Women Lead in Emergencies.

*Across any approach, it may be appropriate to engage specifically with reference groups and [local leaders](#), including religious leaders, to ensure support, mitigate backlash, avoid harm, and ensure sustainability.*

	Bangladesh	Ethiopia	Malawi	Uganda
Community dialogue	Social Analysis & Action (SAA) <a href="#">Tipping Point group dialogues</a> Gender Equality Movement in Schools (GEMS)	<a href="#">Social Analysis &amp; Action (SAA)</a> Community dialogues	Gender dialogue with local leaders	<a href="#">Social Analysis &amp; Action (SAA)</a> <a href="#">SASA!</a>
Household dialogues	<a href="#">Couples' Counselling</a> <a href="#">Inter-generational dialogues</a>	Household dialogues	Gender dialogue with spouses	Inter-generational dialogues Household dialogues
Male engagement	Activity training for boys and fathers	Male engagement activities	Male champions Father-to-Father initiative	Role Model Men & Boys Male Action Group
Women- and girl-led activism	Girls in Action (LCOM model) Business meetings between women entrepreneurs and private sector supply chains			Women Lead in Emergencies

*Figure 2: Social norms approaches used in different countries to shift social norms.*

**NOTE:** Ways to implement these social norms approaches are not limited to the specific models identified through this analysis. These models have proven successful in these four countries and should be considered for replication and adaptation elsewhere. However, the most appropriate way to approach community or household dialogue, male engagement and women-led activism should always be guided by the local context.

## Insights & reflections

- ⇒ In Malawi and Uganda, women and girls experienced the **greatest changes as a result of gender dialogues**, which involved open discussion, heightened awareness, and participation of women and members of their households. In Uganda, such dialogues greatly impacted how men and women viewed gender-based violence and sexual reproductive health, and had a positive impact on division of household labor.
- ⇒ Projects in Ethiopia and Bangladesh found involving teachers and schools meant social norm change was focused on within classrooms, meaning **students were encouraged to challenge harmful social norms at a young age**.
- ⇒ Economic empowerment activities such as VSLA groups were identified as an important entry point for social norms approaches. Implementing savings or **income-generating activities in conjunction with social norm approaches proved particularly effective** in lessening poverty while shifting social norms in ways that supported women and girls to realize their new potential without backlash.
- ⇒ **Inclusion of all influential community and family members** in social norms approaches was seen as important for creating change which will last.

## What impacts are we seeing?

Addressing the underlying social norms which lead to gender inequality has benefits across all aspects of women and girls' lives, and the lives of those around them. Evidence from projects across all four countries analyzed shows how shifting social norms leads to positive changes in women's agency, the power relations they must navigate and the structures they operate within in their communities and wider society. These impacts span diverse sectors including health, agriculture, education and livelihoods.

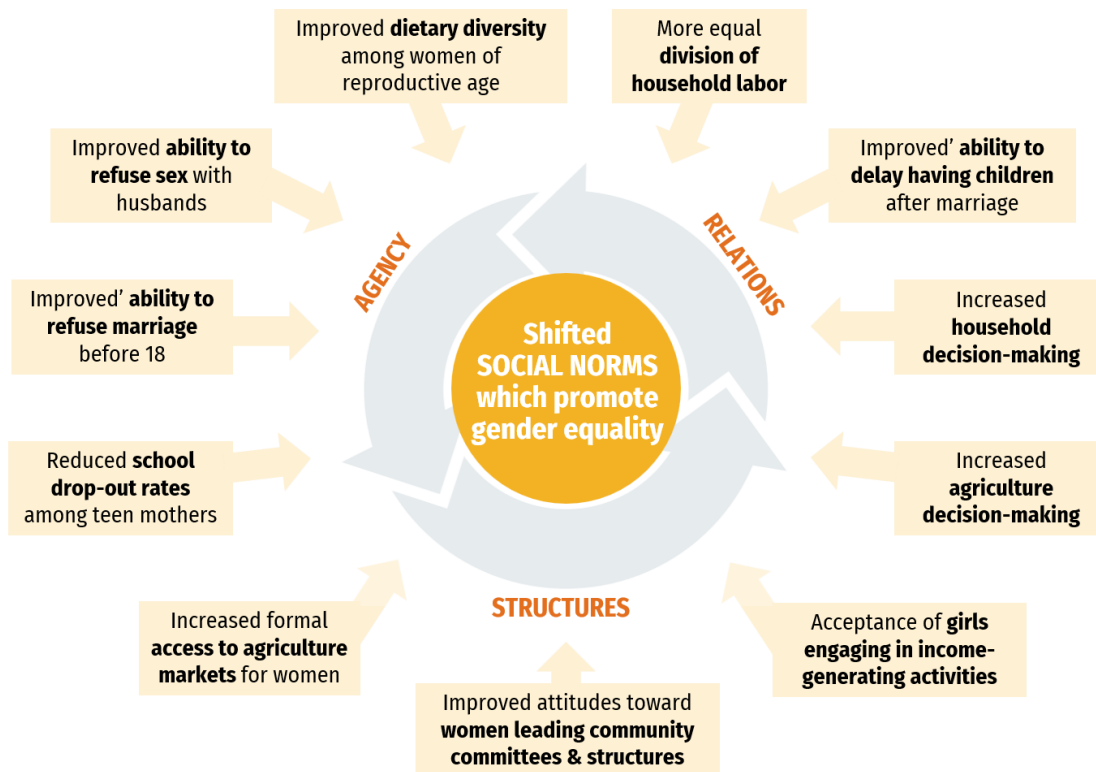


Figure 3: Impacts experienced by women and girls as a result of social norms approaches, shown against the three domains of CARE's [Gender Equality Framework](#).

## What next?

It is clear the inclusion of **specific activities targeting the harmful social norms which hold back women and girls is having an impact**. Individually, these represent tangible changes in women and girls' everyday lives. Collectively, these changes are addressing the root causes of the poverty and inequality faced by millions worldwide and represent a shift towards a more equal world for all.

As we continue to scale impact across all our programs by including social norms approaches, it is important to focus on the process of norm diagnosis — **naming the specific norms holding women and girls back**. For programs, this is key for ensuring appropriate **approaches are included to address the underlying issues** hindering women and girls from accessing their rights and contributing to greater impact any sector.

Naming norms also supports our ability to track shifts which are positively benefiting women and girls — including how we are seeing **shifts in norms occur at scale** across communities, countries and regions.

At CARE, we continue to build the evidence for how a focus on shifting social norms contributes to diverse and far-reaching positive impacts across all programs areas, as we strive for our goal of greater gender equality for people of all genders.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ⇒ **Conduct norm diagnosis to identify and name specific norms at the start of a project.**
- ⇒ **Select appropriate approaches for shifting norms in the context.**
- ⇒ **Ensure MEAL plans include strategies to track norms changes over time.**

---

### Sarah Eckhoff

Director, Gender Program Quality & Impact | Gender Justice | CARE USA  
email: [sarah.eckhoff@care.org](mailto:sarah.eckhoff@care.org)

### Hilawit Gebrehanna

Senior Technical Advisor, Social Norms | Gender Justice | CARE USA  
email: [Hilawit.gebrehanna@care.org](mailto:Hilawit.gebrehanna@care.org)

### Esther Watts

Senior Gender Director | Gender Justice | CARE USA  
email: [esther.watts@care.org](mailto:esther.watts@care.org)



## A NOTE ON THE PROCESS BEHIND THIS BRIEF

### Methodology

Country offices in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda with strong social norms program portfolios volunteered to participate in this learning exercise, selected the programs to be included and formulated key learning questions in alignment with CARE's Vision 2030 Learning Agenda. This included a particular focus on the priority impact groups of small-scale producers and underbanked and unbanked women and girls. CARE partnered with George Washington University's Global Capstone Program to analyze program data from the 17 projects identified. The team used a harvesting tool which helped capture impact, evidence and learning. The gathered inputs were then consolidated into a sensemaking tool, and the insights distilled into learning briefs and presentations for each Country Office and impact population.

Learn more in the specific learning briefs for Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda, and for small-scale producers and underbanked and unbanked women and girls.

### Challenges & limitations

Explicit naming of social norms in program documents was inconsistent across programs. This hindered analysis as the team had to go through multiple rounds of review to identify and extract specific norms, and validation with the program team was necessary to ensure accuracy. This experience underscored the importance of promoting standardized norm identification practices across programs to streamline future analyses and enhance the overall understanding of impact.

Timeline constraints also posed challenges. Originally envisioned as a multi-year endeavor, the exercise had to adapt to a compressed timeline due to internal factors. This adjustment significantly influenced the project selection process and posed potential limitations on the depth of analysis and overall outcomes (for example, projects identified for inclusion, had not completed implementation or measured impact at the time of harvesting and analysis).