SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS TIP SHEETS

Changing Norms to Address Gender-based Violence and Harmful Practices

Tip Sheet 2: Norm Diagnosis

UNFPA

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UNFPA's Asia Pacific Regional Office has developed a series of Social and Gender Norms Tip Sheets. These resources are designed to support UNFPA country offices and partners in the region to implement social and gender norm change programmes to address gender-based violence and harmful practices, including child marriage and female genital mutilation. The Tip Sheets are designed to complement UNFPA's forthcoming global **Toolkit on Transforming Gender and Social Norms.**

Not all harmful practices are social norms or gender norms, and norm change is not always necessary to shift harmful behaviours and practices. Increased access to opportunities, services and infrastructure, and legislative and policy reforms can also help shift harmful behaviours. Even where social and gender norms are driving behaviour, they do not operate in isolation: they are not separate from structural inequalities and material realities. Norm change interventions should be included as part of a comprehensive, multisectoral approach to address gender-based violence and harmful practices across the socioecological model. Social and gender norm change requires contextual analysis, including an understanding of intersectional gender and power dynamics, informed by formative research on the specific behaviour in the setting where it occurs. Even if a specific harmful practice is not a norm (see definitions below), other harmful social and gender norms may still influence the behaviour. ***Norm diagnosis*** *can help to determine whether a harmful practice is a norm, or if norms are a significant driver of the practice.*

What's included here:

Figures and tables:

Table 1: Definitions[1]

Attitudes	What I think. My personal opinions.
Behaviour	What I do. Individual or collective actions and practices.
Personal normative beliefs	What I think I should do, and what I think others should do as well. • **Prudential**[2] **normative beliefs**: What I think is in my own and others' best interests. • **Non-prudential normative beliefs**: What I think is the right thing to do, based on ethical or moral convictions and values.
Social norms	**Patterns of behaviour** that are motivated by a desire to conform to the shared social expectations of a community or group. The **"rules of action"** shared by communities or groups that define what is considered normal and acceptable behaviour. Social norms include **beliefs** about what most other people do (what is common) and approve of (what is expected): • **Descriptive norm:** What I think most others do. What is considered typical or common. Sometimes called empirical expectations. • **Injunctive norm:** What I think most others approve of and expect me to do/what I should do according to other people. What is considered appropriate and "normal." Sometimes called normative expectations.
Direct norm	When a practice is itself a social and/or gender norm and directly determines people's behaviour. Social expectations are one of the main reasons people practice the behaviour. I conform to the practice because I think most others do (descriptive norm) and they expect me to as well (injunctive norm).[3]
Indirect norm	Norms[4] that help keep a practice in place as part of a wider system of social expectations. These include closely related norms–such as proximal norms, which strongly influence behaviour and create a favourable environment for it, and deeply rooted "meta-norms" that contribute to and uphold gender inequality.
Gender norms	Social norms defining **acceptable and appropriate actions** for women and men as well as girls and boys in a given group or society.
Reference group	The specific community or group of people whose opinions, expectations and behaviours influence an individual's attitudes and actions around a particular practice. Reference groups can differ for specific norms. Reference groups may also be virtual and online communities.
Sanctions/ benefits	**Outcome expectations**: a person's beliefs or expectations about how others will respond if they comply with or resist the norm. These anticipated reactions help enforce compliance to the norm. They include: • **Sanctions/consequences** of non-compliance with the norm. Social pressure or other forms of punishment. A negative outcome expectation. • **Benefits and rewards** for complying with the norm. Social approval or other rewards. A positive outcome expectation. **Power dynamics**: those with the power to impose sanctions have greater (relative) power.
Positive deviance	When individuals in a community act in ways that significantly differ from prevailing social norms but achieve more positive outcomes, despite the risk of sanctions for challenging social expectations.

1 Definitions are drawn from the UNFPA's forthcoming global Toolkit on Transforming Gender and Social Norms, as well as other sources cited in this Tip Sheet.[i-vii]

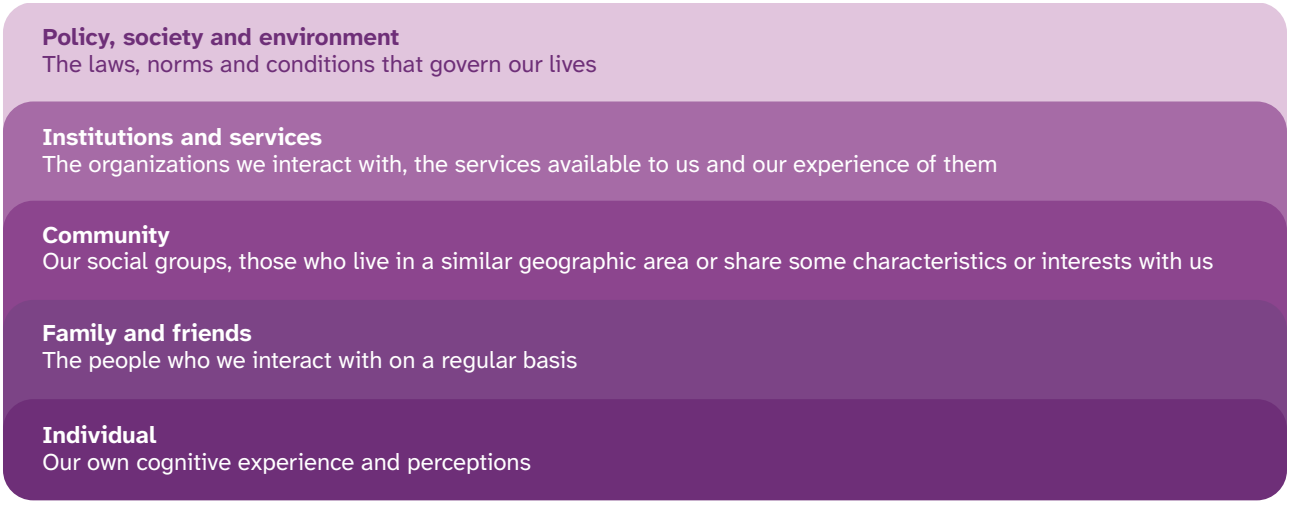
2 In this context, "prudential" refers to beliefs concerned with protecting the wellbeing of oneself, others or the wider community.

3 This is known as "conditional preference," where people choose to act based on what they think most others in their reference group do and expect of them.[xix] The concept is important for norm diagnosis as it helps distinguish socially motivated behaviours from those driven by other factors, such as moral convictions or material realities. Conditional preference can be measured in both quantitative and qualitative studies through hypothetical scenarios or vignettes (see Tip Sheet #6: **Measurement**).

4 Throughout the Tip Sheets, "norms" is used as shorthand for social and gender norms, per the definitions in this table.

Is it a norm?

Figure 1: The Socioecological Model. Source UNFPA 2025.



A range of factors drive gender-based violence and harmful practices, of which social and gender norms are only one. The socioecological model (Figure 1) is often used to show the different forces that influence behaviour. Social norms and gender norms operate at all levels of the model: individual, our immediate household and friends, community, institutions and services, and laws and policies.

Not all forms of violence or harmful practices are norms, although harmful social and gender norms may still influence these behaviours. A "one size fits all" approach to social and gender norm change is unlikely to be effective. **Determining whether specific behaviours function as, or are influenced by, social and gender norms is an essential first step before deciding whether to implement norm change programming.**

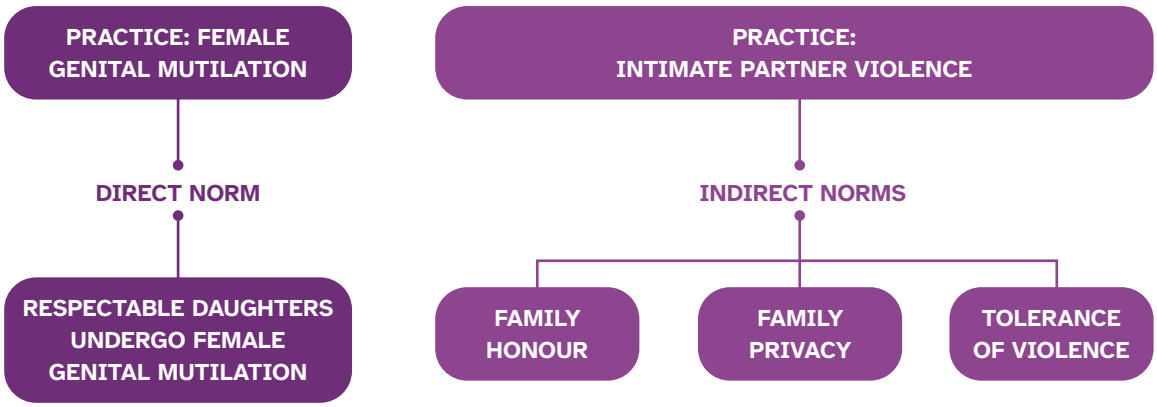
A behaviour is **more likely** to be a norm if:

- People do it because they think others are doing it (it is perceived to be typical).
- People do it because they think others think they should do it (it is seen as appropriate and expected).
- People do it even if they themselves don't think it's acceptable or morally right (individual attitudes and personal normative beliefs may conflict with the norm).
- There are benefits (rewards) for doing it.
- There are sanctions (consequences) for not doing it.

And a behaviour is **less likely** to be a norm if:

- It is a hidden or secret behaviour that others don't know about (it is not visible).
- People do it because they prefer to or think it is the right thing to do (based on personal preference or moral/religious beliefs).
- There are no benefits for doing it or sanctions (consequences) for not doing it.
- Other factors, such as material, structural or individual factors, are the primary drivers of the practice.
- People do not see it as normal or acceptable, but do it because they feel they have no choice *(for example in a disaster or crisis).*

Figure 2: Direct and Indirect Norms. Source: Adapted from Cislaghi and Heise 2018.



As shown in Figure 2, a specific form of gender-based violence or a harmful practice may be a **direct norm** when the practice and the norm coincide: *for example, the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and the norm that all respectable and marriageable girls undergo the practice may directly coincide*. However, even if a harmful behaviour or practice isn't a direct norm, it may be held in place by **indirect norms**. The practice may be influenced and sustained by related (proximal) norms even when the norm and practice do not directly coincide.[i–v] *For example, intimate partner violence (IPV) may not be a direct norm in very low-prevalence settings–it may not be common or expected–but this violence is strongly influenced by social and gender norms. Norms around family honour and privacy help sustain IPV, including by preventing families, communities and authorities from intervening even when violence is disapproved of, and by discouraging survivors from seeking help.*

Not all forms of gender-based violence and harmful practices are norms.

While FGM is usually a norm, child marriage and gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, may not be.[ii,v–vii] In high-prevalence settings, child marriage and IPV may function as **direct norms**, while in low-prevalence settings, these practices and behaviours may not be considered normal or acceptable but may still be sustained by **indirect norms**. This has implications for the design of norm change interventions, as norm change approaches that work for FGM may not work for other harmful practices such as child marriage, or for different forms of gender-based violence. Understanding which norms are most salient (powerful) can support more effective norm change interventions. **Norm diagnosis** can help to determine whether a harmful practice is a direct norm, or whether it is held in place by indirect norms, in the specific setting where the behaviour takes place (the community or other reference group(s) or wider society). For more on why and how to undertake norm diagnosis, see Module 4 of the UNFPA's forthcoming global **Toolkit on Transforming Gender and Social Norms.**

Table 2 outlines questions to explore when considering social and gender norm programming, with selected examples to help illustrate concepts. These examples are not universally applicable; context- and behaviour-specific formative research is needed to help identify the relevant norms, rewards and sanctions, and other influencing factors. *Direct descriptive and injunctive **social and gender norms** are highlighted in italics.*

Table 2: Norm Diagnosis – Questions and Examples

Behaviour	Direct norms	Indirect norms	Rewards and sanctions	Other factors and drivers
What is the **specific behaviour** or practice we want to change?	In the specific context, **why do people do it** (what are the drivers of the practice)? Is it a **direct norm** (considered normal, acceptable and expected)?	Are there **indirect norms** that influence the practice, holding the behaviour in place?	Are there **rewards** for compliance or **sanctions** for non-compliance? How strong are sanctions?	What are the **other factors** across the socioecological model that drive the practice?
FGM in high-prevalence settings (likely to be a norm)	*Other people are doing it to their daughters. (descriptive norm)* *Other people expect me to do it to my daughter. (injunctive norm)*	Women's sexuality must be controlled. Women are "unclean," and FGM is required for purity.	Women/girls who do not undergo FGM may not be able to get married. Mothers who do not cut their daughters may be socially excluded.	It is a religious or cultural requirement.
Child marriage in high-prevalence settings (likely to be a norm)	*Other people are marrying off their daughters. (descriptive norm)* *Other people expect me to marry off my daughters. (injunctive norm)*	Control of adolescent girls' sexuality. To "manage" risks of sexual violence and dishonour to the family. Girls will marry away from the family, so it is not worth investing in their education. Women and girls' value rests in their reproductive role.	Younger girls are more marriageable. Older girls may not be able to be married. Costs of marriage may be higher for older girls (bride price or dowry).	To reduce the economic burden of girls. Economic insecurity and poverty. Conflict and disasters. Lack of education and employment opportunities for women and girls.

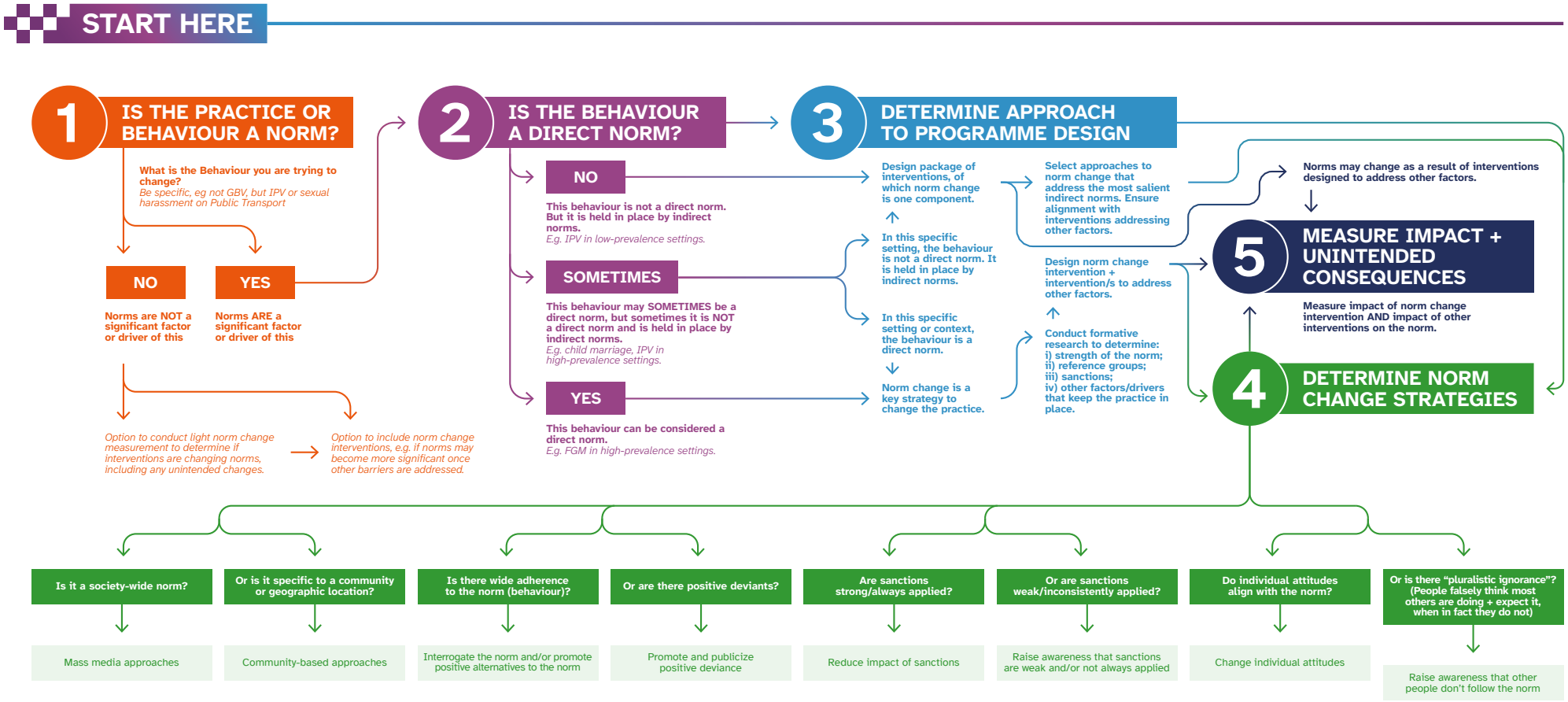
Behaviour	Direct norms	Indirect norms	Rewards and sanctions	Other factors and drivers
IPV in low-prevalence settings (may not be a norm)		Men should be dominant in the family. People should not interfere in family problems. Women should stay with their partner and not seek help.	There may be sanctions (social disapproval) AGAINST using violence in low-prevalence settings, especially physical violence.	Individual perpetrator history and experience (such as witnessing or experiencing violence as a child). It can be kept hidden/secret (and may not be seen as common or expected). Perpetrator has greater economic or social power (survivor is dependent, isolated from family).
IPV in high-prevalence settings (likely to be a norm)	*Other men are violent towards their families. (descriptive norm)* *Men are expected to use physical violence to control women and/or children. (injunctive norm)*	Men should be dominant in the family. Women and children should be obedient. Violence is an acceptable way of dealing with conflict/ asserting control.	Men who do not use violence to control their families are considered weak. Men's use of violence increases their status with other men.	High levels of other forms of violence, such as gang violence, or armed conflict.

Behaviour	Direct norms	Indirect norms	Rewards and sanctions	Other factors and drivers
Sexual harassment on public transport (may be a norm in some settings)	*Male peer groups do it. (descriptive norm)* *Men are expected by other men to do it. (injunctive norm)*	Men are entitled to sexual contact regardless of consent. Public space belongs to men, women in public spaces are "asking for it." Other people do not interfere to stop it (bystanders do not intervene).	Benefits: in some contexts, may reinforce men's "standing" with other men. Sanctions: there may be sanctions for NOT participating if groups of men are doing it (such as being harassed or victimized by perpetrators).	Perpetrators can get away with it (confined setting). Design of transport infrastructure enables it. Weak or no sanctions or consequences for perpetration (including legal consequences).
Honour killing (likely to be a norm)	*Other men and boys commit honour killing. (descriptive norm)* *Male family members are expected to punish women and girls who have sex outside marriage. (injunctive norm)* *Other people think that women and girls' sexual behaviour should be controlled. (injunctive norm)*	Women and girls' sexual behaviour impacts on the reputation of the family. A girl who has sex before marriage is ruined. Men should be dominant in the family. Women and girls must be sexually chaste/pure.	People will gossip about the family when women and girls have sex outside marriage. A girl who has sex before marriage is unmarriageable. Families whose girls "fall" may be excluded/ostracised. Men who do not commit honour killing are weak/not in control of their families.	

Figure 3: Decision Tree: Changing Norms to Address Gender-based Violence and Harmful Practices

DECISION TREE

Changing Norms to Address Gender-based Violence and Harmful Practices



Decision Tree: Changing Norms to Address Gender-based Violence and Harmful Practices

"[G]lobal development organizations, including donors, should consider ***targeting their social norms*** *work. .... There should not be an imperative to 'do social norms work' for the sake of it. .... social norms interventions should not be the primary line of action to address issues of inequality for which* ***interventions to improve the material conditions of people's lives*** *are more urgently needed and better suited."* [viii]

The *Decision Tree: Changing Norms to Address Gender-based Violence and Harmful Practices* outlines a process for norm diagnosis and for determining whether or not to undertake norm change interventions. Key steps are set out below.

Table 3: Decision Tree Explained

1. Is the practice or behaviour a norm?	*This step helps programme designers determine if a social and gender norm change approach is appropriate or needed.* Identify the practice of focus. Be specific! *For example: IPV, sexual harassment on public transport, child marriage in emergency settings, or FGM that is practiced in specific ethnic or religious communities or population groups.* Identify the main drivers of this behaviour across the socio-ecological model. Assess whether social and/or gender norms are a key factor or driver of the behaviour. A review of available studies and research in the specific setting, along with community consultations, can help determine whether social and gender norms are important determinants of the behaviour. If social and gender norms are not a key driver or factor in the specific behaviour, norm change programming may not be needed or may play a smaller role. Programming should instead prioritize other drivers, such as through legislative or policy reform, increasing access to services or justice, or opportunities for education and employment. *For example, if child marriage is not considered common or expected but occurs in some families due to conflict or economic stress, norm change would not be the main priority.* Optionally, a social and gender norm change component could still be included in programming if, *for example, assessments suggest that gender norms around marriage may remain influential even if other barriers or drivers are addressed, or to support other interventions. For example shifting norms around women and girls' mobility may help to support initiatives to keep girls in secondary school.*

2. Is the practice a direct norm or sustained by indirect norms?

This step helps programme designers identify whether the practice is driven by direct (descriptive and injunctive) social and gender norms or by indirect norms, guiding programme design and tactical choices.

If norms are a key driver of the behaviour of focus, consider whether: i) the practice is a direct norm; or ii) the practice is sustained by indirect norms. This will depend on the specific practice and the setting and communities where it takes place.

Formative research can help to identify whether a practice is a **direct norm** or is influenced by **indirect (proximal) norms**, as well as the **strength of norms** versus other drivers of the behaviour. *For example, indirect (proximal) norms around marriageability and female sexuality may help uphold direct norms that drive FGM or child marriage.* Where resources are limited or where extensive existing research and data are available to support norm diagnosis, community dialogues can be used to identify relevant norms in target communities.

An intersectional approach to **gender and power analysis** is helpful to understand whether norms are influential across the population or are particularly salient (important) for specific communities and population groups. *For example, norms around child marriage may be strong in more affluent communities even though they can afford to keep their daughters in school because associated (proximal) norms about the desirability of chastity and obedience support marrying younger brides.*

3. Determine approach to programme design

This step helps programme designers devise a high-level approach to social and gender norm change, including aligning the programme design with broader interventions across the socio-ecological model.

If the behaviour is a **direct norm**, dedicated norm change programming is likely to be effective in helping to change the practice alongside initiatives to address other drivers and factors across the socio-ecological model. Formative research can help to determine: i) the **strength of the norm**; ii) key **reference groups** to engage; iii) **sanctions and benefits** associated with noncompliance or compliance; and iv) **positive deviance**, as well as which communities to target, and what other initiatives are already in place.

If the behaviour is **not** a direct norm but is held in place by indirect (proximal) norms, norm change programming should be part of a package of initiatives that addresses the key drivers across the socio-ecological framework. It is important to ensure social and gender norm change programming is aligned with and supports these other interventions. *For example, norm change programming to reduce acceptability of child marriage (social/gender norm) can support cash transfers to support girls' educational (material driver).*

When selecting approaches to indirect (proximal) norm change, address the **most salient** ones: the social and gender norms that have the greatest influence in sustaining the practice and the strongest sanctions for non-compliance. *For example, while social and gender norms around masculinity and femininity (sometimes called "meta-norms") are important in sustaining intimate partner violence, indirect proximal norms around family privacy, help-seeking, men's dominance in the family, and tolerance of violence may be more salient. For child marriage, proximal norms around adolescent sexuality, the value of girls' education, and women and girls' mobility may be especially salient.*

4. Determine norm change strategies

This step helps programme designers tailor interventions to the specific context, selecting tactical strategies to address the norms and other factors prioritized in earlier steps.

Tailoring norm change programming to specific settings and participant communities requires a robust understanding of how norms function, including i) whether the practice and its associated norms are found society-wide or concentrated in specific communities or population groups; ii) the **strength and prevalence of these norms**, and presence of **positive deviance**; iii) the strength and consistency of **sanctions**; iv) whether individual **attitudes** and social and gender norms converge (people accept the norm) or individuals don't personally believe in the norm but comply anyway; and v) whether "pluralistic ignorance" exists, where people falsely believe others practice and accept the behaviour when in fact they do not. This can be determined through formative research, including consultations with target communities to explore these questions.

For further guidance, see Module 4 of the UNFPA's forthcoming global **Toolkit on Transforming Gender and Social Norms**. Tools for exploring norms with communities, particularly around FGM, can be found in the UNFPA-UNICEF ACT Framework.

When selecting norm change strategies, consider the following:

- If the direct norm or most salient indirect norms are held by specific communities or population groups, norm change programming should prioritize **community-led, community-based** approaches including community engagement and dialogues. *For example, when FGM or child marriage is accepted and widely practiced in specific ethnic or religious communities but not in the overall population.*

- If norms are held more widely across society, **mass media** approaches can complement other interventions. *For example, when surveys show that norms around family privacy and not intervening in domestic violence are widely held across different population groups.*

- If there is wide **adherence** to the norm–there is high prevalence of the behaviour and the norm is widely accepted–work within communities to interrogate the norm and promote protective norms and positive alternatives. *For example, if there is high prevalence of child marriage and most people think it is normal and acceptable, norm change programming can aim to strengthen protective norms around the importance of education and challenge norms around restricting girls' mobility, while also raising awareness of the harms caused by child marriage.*

- If some people don't follow or accept the norm, promote and publicize **positive deviance** and early adopters of change. *For example, this could include storytelling about parents who don't marry their girls or practice FGM, or messaging around declining prevalence of violence and an increase in the proportion of men who don't use violence in their relationships.*

- If **sanctions** are strong and consistently/always applied, aim to weaken these sanctions and their impact. *For example, if unmarried, pregnant adolescent girls are pulled out of school to protect their reputation, promote the value of ongoing education and employment opportunities for young mothers and work to increase acceptance of their mobility.*

- If sanctions are weak or inconsistently/not always applied, raising awareness about this can help shift the norm. *For example, highlighting that some adolescent girls have been able to return to school after marriage or childbearing, or some families have supported women to leave violent relationships*. Because sanctions are often imposed by those with greater power, it is important to engage key stakeholders in the community, including those with decision-making power, in norm change interventions.

- If the norm and individual attitudes **converge**, programming should target individual attitude change to help shift the norm. *For example, if most people personally see violence as acceptable and think it is common and accepted in their community, mass and social media awareness-raising to shift attitudes can complement community-based interventions.*

- If individual attitudes don't converge with the norm and/or there is **"pluralistic ignorance,"** where most people believe others practice and expect the behaviour when in fact they do not, raise awareness of the divergence. F*or example, if most people falsely think most men use violence in their relationships, awareness raising about actual prevalence can help shift perceptions about what is common behaviour.*

5. Measure impact and unintended consequences

This step discusses the importance of, and considerations for, monitoring and evaluating norm change interventions and broader programming that may influence norm change.

If the behaviour is a **direct norm** and norm change is a significant focus of programming to change the practice, it is important to measure the intervention's impact. This includes measuring changes in **attitudes, personal normative beliefs, behaviours, descriptive and injunctive norms, and sanctions and rewards**. It is also essential to take an intersectional approach to measurement to assess differential impacts on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

If the behaviour is not a direct norm but is held in place or influenced by **indirect** norms, norm change will often be part of a broader programme of initiatives to address the practice. These complementary interventions–such as legislative and policy reform, increased access to opportunities and services, or economic incentives–may also shift social and gender norms that support harmful behaviours. Measuring changes in norms due to these interventions, as well as any unintended consequences, can help to design more effective programming. *For example, economic incentives such as cash transfers to delay marriage or keep girls in school may weaken norms that support child marriage; or they may instead reinforce the marriage norm if used to cover marriage expenses or dowry.*

See **Tip Sheet #6: Measurement** for further detail.

Selected resources

To understand social norm theory and application	Everybody Wants to Belong – **UNICEF** (2019)
To understand norms within the socioecological framework; direct and indirect norms	Theory and practice of social norms interventions: Eight common pitfalls – **Cislaghi and Heise** (2018) Social Norms and Gender-related harmful practices: Theory in Support of Better Practice – **Learning Group on Social Norms** (2018)
CARE's experience in translating social norm theory into practice	Applying Theory to Practice: CARE's Journey Piloting Social Norms Measures for Gender Programming – **CARE** (2017)
For formative analysis and measurement	Resources for Measuring Social Norms – **Social Norms Learning Collaborative** (2019) The ACT Framework – **UNICEF and UNFPA** (2020)

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