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COMMENT

Norms shifting and behavior change in uncertain times: Assessing the state of the evidence

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ABSTRACT

This commentary reflects on the current state of evidence on social norms interventions focused on improving health and economic outcomes for adolescent girls and young women in low- and middle-income countries. Drawing on a newly published global evidence review, it highlights how the field has evolved from narrow, individual-level strategies toward community-centered approaches. While conceptual clarity and implementation tools have improved, significant gaps persist in how interventions measure normative change, assess sustainability, and support communities to navigate push-back. Many programs adopt the language of norms without distinguishing them from individual attitudes, and without engaging reference groups or measuring shifts in collective expectations. Cost data and documentation of long-term impacts remain sparse. This commentary calls for a reimagined evidence agenda to build a stronger foundation for assessing implementation effectiveness and sustainability. It emphasizes the importance of understanding pushback not as failure but as a diagnostic of contested progress, and advocates for greater engagement of men and boys, whose roles in norm change remain underexplored. In the context of shrinking funding and rising resistance to gender equity, producing actionable evidence to support community-led change is imperative. This means building knowledge systems that are not only rigorous, but also community-centered, inclusive, resilient, and responsive.

A brief history of norms conceptualisation applied to global health

This commentary considers what we have learned about shifting the social norms that shape the lives of adolescent girls, what remains unresolved, and how the field can chart a more effective course ahead. An understanding of collective expectations as a force shaping human behaviour has been central to the social sciences. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and economists have all examined social norms, offering distinct and complementary perspectives grounded in their disciplinary theories and purposes—from psychologists' focus on cognitive and internal processes to anthropologists' holistic, culturally embedded analyses (Edberg & Krieger, 2020; Mackie et al., 2015). Feminist scholars foreground the intersections of norms and power, while economists, legal theorists, and others bring additional lenses to how social norms influence behaviour (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Nevatia et al., 2025). This commentary focuses on one branch of this broader scholarship; the influential stream of social norms work in global health and development, rooted in social psychology and convention theory, that has guided efforts to improve girls' health and wellbeing. It gained momentum in response to approaches focused mainly on increasing knowledge, awareness, and access to services.

The applied approach to social norms interventions traces its roots to 20th century social psychology. Festinger (1954) social comparison theory showed how individuals evaluate themselves relative to others,

while Asch (1951, 1955) conformity experiments revealed the powerful pressure to align with group expectations. Later on, Cialdini and colleagues distinguished between descriptive norms (what people do) and injunctive norms (what people approve of). Their experiments—including studies on littering in public places—demonstrated how different types of norms shape behaviour when they are made salient at the time of action (Cialdini et al., 1990, 1991).

Mackie (1996) extended this work by applying social convention theory to explain large-scale shifts in harmful practices such as foot binding in China and female genital cutting. His analysis highlighted how collective expectations (shared beliefs about what people usually do and what they consider appropriate) can sustain practices for generations and how coordinated change can lead to rapid abandonment once thresholds are crossed. Bicchieri (2006, 2017) further formalised a theory of conditional preferences through normative and empirical expectations, and applied it to social practices, including child marriage. Her contributions offered both conceptual clarity and diagnostic tools for identifying, measuring, and shifting social norms in applied settings.

Extending Cialdini's social psychology perspective into public health, Rimal and colleagues articulated the Theory of Normative Social Behaviour, which explained how descriptive and injunctive norms interact with other psychosocial factors to influence behaviour (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Rimal & Real, 2005). This framework has been highly influential in shaping health communication and social and behaviour change programming, providing an applied bridge between theory and intervention design.

More recently, contributions by Heise and Cislaghi have brought feminist perspectives into dialogue with social psychology. Heise's ecological models of violence (Heise, 1998, 2011) and Cislaghi and Heise's joint work (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019) underscore that social norms are not merely shared expectations but also embedded in unequal power relations. Their integration of feminist sociology and social psychology expanded the conceptual toolkit for addressing gendered norms and highlighted the importance of situating interventions within broader structures of power. This perspective laid the groundwork for large-scale programming such as UNICEF's gender transformative approaches (Rumble et al., 2024) or CARE's Tipping Point initiative (Yount et al., 2023; CARE, 2017; CARE, 2020), which sought to translate gender and power theory into practice.

While this theoretical work clarified what norms are and how they function, the challenge of translating their insights into global health interventions remained. From the early 2000s onward, programs began to experiment with community-led and large-scale efforts to operationalise norms-shifting in practice. Initiatives like Tostan's community-led work to reduce female genital cutting in the early 2000s is an example (Cislaghi, 2019). Its community-led approach demonstrated that durable shifts could be achieved by centreing collective dialogue and local leadership, even before formal frameworks for norms programming emerged.

Together, these theory-to-practice contributions established the conceptual base on which global health practitioners and researchers began testing and institutionalising norms-shifting approaches at scale.

It is important to acknowledge ongoing debates about this pragmatic approach, many of which stem from differing disciplinary and political perspectives. Recent critiques (Bell & Cox, 2015; Piedalue et al., 2020; Wazir, 2023) challenge the behavioural assumptions underpinning the 'Social Norms Approach', arguing that its focus on individual expectations and network effects risks depoliticising change and obscuring structural power. Others question whether what has been called a 'second-generation paradigm shift' represents true theoretical innovation or a technocratic refinement within the same epistemic frame. These debates underscore why integrating feminist and anthropological perspectives remains crucial to anchor norm change in broader processes of social transformation. Critics argue that social norms interventions can be overly simplistic and insufficiently attentive to power, emphasising that norms are culturally embedded and cannot be understood apart from systems of meaning and authority (Edberg & Krieger, 2020; Wazir, 2023; Gelfand, 2012). Others highlight Western biases and question the applicability of dominant frameworks across diverse contexts (Edberg and Krieger, 2020; Heise et al., 2019). Underlying these critiques is concern that such approaches divert attention from inequalities, particularly those rooted in economic and gender hierarchies (Malhotra et al., 2019).

While many disciplines have theorised social norms—from feminist economics and institutional theory to social practice and resistance studies—few of these frameworks have yet translated directly into operational guidance for programming in global health. The present commentary therefore focuses on

the strand of social norms theory that has proven most applicable to designing, diagnosing, and evaluating interventions at scale: the social-psychological and convention-theory lineage developed by Bicchieri, Mackie, Rimal, and others. This is not to dismiss alternative frameworks, but to recognise a pragmatic bridge between theoretical insight and implementation practice. Continued dialogue across these traditions-particularly with feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2010), social practice theory (Holland & Lave, 2019), and feminist economics (Agarwal, 1997; Pearse & Connell, 2016)will be vital to deepen the field's understanding of norms, power, and change.

Solidifying the move from concept to practice

A significant inflection point came around 2015 when several major investments reshaped how global public health prioritised and approached social norms programming and research. Investments from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Gates Foundation elevated systemic, community-led strategies within the social and behaviour change field, building on longstanding community mobilisation work by other actors.

These investments launched key initiatives, including the Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change (2016-present) and the multi-country Passages Project (2015-2022), which provided platforms for designing, testing, and scaling social norms interventions. Parallel efforts—such as UNICEF's gender-transformative approach and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development's What Works to Prevent Violence initiative—further positioned social norms as a critical lever for behaviour change to improve adolescent health, advance gender equity, and prevent violence.

Together, these initiatives broadened global understanding of how social norms shift, introduced practical tools and evidence, and strengthened the infrastructure for embedding norms-shifting approaches in health and development practice. At the same time, they highlighted the need for collective and community-driven approaches that align norm change with the aspirations of those most affected by those norms.

As Bingenheimer noted in his 2019 editorial in a journal issue dedicated to social norms, the field has shifted from narrow, individual-level strategies focused on altering peer perceptions toward a broader, more systemic 'second-generation' approach (Bingenheimer, 2019). This paradigm shift recognises social norms as collective, power-laden expectations embedded in institutions and upheld through formal and informal systems.

Scholars caution that this evolution may be more rhetorical than paradigmatic. Wazir (2023) argues that the so-called social norms paradigm often repackages behavioural logics under the banner of social transformation, displacing political analyses of gender and power with technocratic language. Similarly, Piedalue et al. (2020) contend that treating gender-based violence primarily as a 'social norm' misdiagnoses the issue by neglecting the structural and institutional dimensions of inequality. Together, these critiques highlight that the field's evolution may represent a shift in terminology more than in underlying theoretical shifts, unless future work more directly engages questions of power, politics, and meaning.

Yet, while theory has produced sophisticated tools for analysing the structure and function of norms, it has been slower to grapple with how norms preserve unequal power relations, particularly along gendered lines. In many different global contexts, programmes working to shift social norms often encounter pushback or resistance from some individuals or institutions. Embedding social norms analysis within gendered theories of power helps us understand not only what norms do, but whom they serve and how they are sustained or contested (Heise et al., 2019). Building on earlier scholarship and practice, emerging initiatives helped codify and communicate shared concepts around social norms that were feasible to apply in social and behaviour change initiatives. Shaped by funder priorities, partnerships, and constrained resources and timelines, these initiatives generally focused on localised community change rather than broader policy, advocacy, or legal strategies to address the structural foundations of social norms.

The emergence of the Social Norms and Agency Learning Collaboratives, along with other related initiatives such as the Prevention Collaborative, have driven a shift towards a more localised approach to social norms scholarship and practice across thematic lines. Bringing together practitioners across Anglophone and Francophone West Africa, Eastern Africa, and South Asia, this network has expanded

the reach and rigour of social norms practice and research in low- and middle-income countries, while promoting robust regional linkages and dynamic partnerships with scholars globally.

Importantly, this work is beginning to engage more directly with feminist and social practice perspectives that view norm change as part of broader transformations in power and agency (e.g. Nevatia et al., 2025; Holland & Lave, 2019). For example, the Learning Collaborative's guidance on formative research and measurement (IRH, 2020, 2021b) increasingly reflects gender-transformative frameworks that integrate attention to collective action, institutional context, and resistance dynamics.

While donor-funded initiatives clarified what constitutes a norms-shifting intervention and developed guidance on measurement and theory (IRH, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Learning Collaborative, 2019), their application has been inconsistent. Many interventions invoked the language of social norms without fostering community change, engaging reference groups, grounding their design in theory, or explicitly measuring norms. At the same time, community-based organisations had long carried out transformative work without labelling it 'norm change.' For these groups, aligning with formal frameworks could prove burdensome, sometimes obscuring the effectiveness of practice-based strategies or forcing retrofitted theories of change onto organic processes.

A growing body of evidence reviews has deepened the understanding of how norms influence outcomes across sectors. Examples include UNFPA's study of persistent norms in India (UNFPA, 2024), systematic reviews on violence prevention and edutainment approaches (Cookson et al., 2023), and syntheses of norms related to child, early, and forced marriage (Brown, 2022). Together, these reviews clarify how norms shape outcomes and where interventions continue to fall short.

Meanwhile, despite advances, the field has lacked a synthesis that bridges academic research with practical insights across contexts. Drawing on over 400 sources and several years of research, a 2025 evidence review uncovers where the field has successfully applied evidence, and where opportunities for impact are missed (Gender Equity and Health, 2025). This review arrives at a critical juncture: norms-shifting programming is scaling up just as funding is declining. The elimination of USAID support, alongside broader cuts to global health funding, risks stalling momentum as interventions begin to mature. In this moment of uncertainty, it provides an opportunity to take stock, consolidating what we know about second-generation, theory-informed, and community-driven approaches to shifting norms. It raises key questions, such as: How much progress has been made in aligning evidence with deeper understandings of norms and behaviour? What gaps remain, and where should new evidence be built? And are we generating the kinds of insights needed for informed, adaptive action in complex, resource-constrained, and changing environments?

Cross-cutting reflections on the state of evidence

First, norms interventions are maturing, but there is no (and there probably never will be) a one-size-fits-all model. Programmes increasingly rely on clearer strategies and typologies, often engage girls' and women's peers, family members, religious leaders, and community gatekeepers to influence social expectations. However, adolescent girls and young women are rarely involved in intervention design, implementation or monitoring. Many apply multi-level approaches that combine interpersonal engagement, community dialogue, and mass media, in line with established best practices. For instance, Growing Up GREAT! in the Democratic Republic of Congo paired school and community activities with caregiver sessions, video testimonials, and health service strengthening for youth-friendly services (Barker et al., 2022). The integration of health system strengthening alongside community engagement illustrates how multi-level approaches can simultaneously reinforce shifts in norms and service delivery. Shorter interventions were effective: Confiance Totale, a six-month radio campaign in Togo, reached wide audiences and was linked with more supportive family planning norms (Loll et al., 2023). Similarly, the six-year Nigerian Urban Reproductive Health Initiative used a layered multimedia strategy that strengthened perceived peer support (Krenn et al., 2014). The programme's design, combining mass media with interpersonal dialogue,underscores how exposure across multiple platforms can magnify normative shifts. While some interventions relied solely on mass media, others combined media with dialogue, both approaches showed promise. Ultimately, what mattered most was fit: alignment with local norms, reference groups, and pathways of influence.

Second, there is considerable variability in how interventions conceptualised and operationalized norms change. Many recognised that norms are embedded within structural conditions, such as economic insecurity, restrictions on girls' mobility, and entrenched gender hierarchies, but struggled to articulate how their strategies engaged with these conditions. This is especially critical for gender norms, which differ from norms like littering or recycling because they are deeply tied to unequal power relations. For adolescent girls and young women, whose lives are profoundly shaped by intersecting constraints, this integration is especially important, yet their perspectives remain underrepresented in intervention design.

Theories of change were often underdeveloped, lacking clarity on which norms were targeted, whose expectations mattered, and through which mechanisms change was expected (e.g. diffusion, collective action, institutional shifts). Programmes frequently emphasised 'functional' norms (e.g. whether contraception is discussed) while neglecting more entrenched ideologies (e.g. authority, control, agency). Most importantly, many interventions did not report on how context-sensitive adaptations were made, or how local power dynamics and structural realities were considered.

Third, media-based strategies show promise when embedded within community processes that help people contextualise media messages within their own lived experiences. Narrative-driven edutainment can spark self-reflection and catalyse dialogue, particularly when audiences identify with the characters and context. The most impactful interventions paired media with participatory forums that enabled communities to reinterpret and localise emerging norms. For example, Tchova Tchova Historias de Vida: Dialogos Comunitarios in Mozambique combined a radio programme with small-group community dialogues and interactive call-in features, creating opportunities for discussion and debate (Figueroa et al., 2016). These insights echo earlier guidance, such as the RESPECT framework, which stressed that effective norms change requires more than messaging (WHO, 2019). It must also be grounded in multi-layered strategies that engage adolescents, young women and community structures, address power dynamics, and foster collective action. Misconceptions that equate norm change with passive exposure to slogans or billboards persist and must be countered with grounded, evidence-informed approaches.

Further, evidence suggests that exposure to social media content is a major driver of normative beliefs in the current digital media environment (Evans et al., 2022, 2023). However, there is a dearth of such projects, especially as related to gender norms. Future studies should examine the role of digital platforms in shaping social and gender norms, and expand research on how to design digital interventions to change norms. Given the increasing reach of digital channels and content around the world, there is a significant opportunity to improve social and gender norms using these approaches (Hagg et al., 2018).

Fourth, while trusted actors, such as faith and cultural leaders, are widely cited as influential, their roles remain inconsistently understood and evaluated. They are often assumed to be powerful allies because of their moral authority and visibility. For example, the Girls Holistic Development project in Senegal engaged grandmothers as highly trusted elders, custodians of tradition, and family decision-making because their endorsement carries unique community authority and legitimacy, making them powerful influencers in shifting norms around girls' health, education, and wellbeing (Kohli et al., 2021). However, evidence on how best to involve such figures—and whether engagement reliably shifts deeply held norms—remains thin. In many interventions, faith leaders were positioned as messengers rather than co-designers or implementers, limiting ownership and depth of involvement. Few evaluations assessed the consequences of their participation, particularly regarding pushback or community resistance. There is also limited evidence on who acts as these value-based champions,whether formal or informal, institutions or individuals,and what characteristics make them catalytic. In contrast, Tearfund's Transforming Masculinities programme stands out for its strong documentation, particularly on adaptations and scaling through its Implementation Guide (Tearfund, 2021). Overall, while faith and cultural figures may be catalytic in some contexts, more systematic documentation and enquiry are needed to clarify the conditions under which they enable or constrain normative change.

Notable evidence gaps

While the evidence base on normative interventions has expanded, critical gaps constrain the field's ability to design adaptive, accountable, and contextually grounded strategies. Taking stock of the evidence base invites reflection on how broader social norms scholarship might strengthen efforts to foster more enabling

social environments. For example, by capturing the embedded nature of norms through more holistic measurement or by addressing structural drivers such as economic and legal frameworks.

First, measurement of social norms continues to lag behind conceptual advances. Although many programmes are framed as norms-shifting, few directly measure changes in norms, even among the most well-regarded and recognisable interventions. Their contributions are often inferred rather than demonstrated, limiting confidence in claims of impact. Evaluations frequently rely on proxies such as audience reach, knowledge change, or individual attitudes, which do not capture collective expectations or enforcement dynamics within reference groups. This makes it difficult to assess whether normative change has occurred, how it spreads, or which intervention components are most influential.

Measurement need not be overly complex. Simple survey items such as, 'How many of your peers approve of [for example, a behaviour or practice]?' can yield meaningful insights into shared perceptions. Still, methodological challenges remain: norms items placed after attitudinal questions can bias responses; the unit of analysis often needs to be at the group or community level rather than the individual or population; and researchers must decide whether to measure descriptive and injunctive norms separately, together, or selectively (Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change, 2019). Each of these choices may affect conclusions about how norms influence behaviour.

Second, sparse reporting on programme implementation further limits learning. Critical details on activities, sequencing, and local adaptations are often omitted, constraining comparability and replication. Even promising interventions rarely trace the mechanisms linking activities to shifts in collective expectations or enforcement dynamics. Recognising journal space limitations, one way forward is to encourage publication of protocol or companion papers that document strategies, contextual adaptations, and costs. Greater openness to diverse knowledge products including reports, briefs, and experiential accounts would also enrich the evidence base.

Third, gaps remain in monitoring community reactions and resistance. Interventions that engage with gender and power often provoke resistance from leaders, families, or peer groups. In the evidence base, few programmes systematically tracked these dynamics, missing opportunities to interpret them. Resistance should not be seen only as failure: it can signal contested progress, unmet expectations, or even co-optation, each with distinct implications for programming. Monitoring and documenting backlash in this more differentiated way can inform more responsive, resilient approaches and help protect local champions.

Fourth, men's perspectives remain underrepresented, especially in the study of gender-related practices and norms. While men and boys often act as enforcers or challengers of norms, their views are seldom captured systematically (Greig & Flood, 2020). Programme experiences suggest that resistance may sometimes reflect men's fears of marginalisation in gender equity efforts (Kedia & Verma, 2019). Better understanding of how men respond to shifting gender dynamics is essential for designing inclusive and sustainable interventions.

Finally, the field lacks systems to capture the long-term dynamics of social change. Few programmes assess whether shifts are durable, scalable, or able to reach enough people to alter population-level outcomes. Costs, cost-effectiveness, and investment requirements are also rarely reported, limiting evidence on scalability. This is particularly concerning in fragile or contested contexts, where progress can provoke backlash, co-optation, or regression. Without systematic long-term data, promising approaches risk remaining at the pilot stage. Addressing this requires moving beyond short-term, output-focused evaluations toward more iterative, participatory, and contextually attuned approaches that reflect the contested nature of social norm change (Lundgren et al., 2019; Rost, 2021).

Pathway forward—a new evidence agenda for a new era

The dual pressures of shrinking donor commitments and rising regressive forces that limit women's participation in political, economic, and social life demand a new approach to building and using evidence. Resource-intensive, isolated experimental studies are no longer sufficient to guide normative interventions. What is needed are evidence systems grounded in local voices and social systems, robust yet adaptable, and capable of guiding real-world decisions with room for local adaptation and validation.

While experimental methods remain valuable for testing specific mechanisms, they must be complemented by mixed-methods research that reveals *how* norm change unfolds, not just *whether* it occurs (Kohli et al., 2021). This aligns with long-standing insights from participatory action research, which emphasise that participants are not passive, but active interpreters and co-designers of knowledge (Baum et al., 2006; Chambers, 1994). Participatory approaches should be centred in research efforts drawing on the lived experiences of communities, the long-term knowledge of local researchers, and the perspectives of those often excluded from formal evidence generation (IRH, 2021). More recently, social norms researchers are drawing on participatory rural appraisal methods, including the Social Norms Exploration Tool, to identify priority norms, understand the reference groups that enforce them, and pinpoint opportunities to elevate local voices in efforts to shift norms (Aloysious et al., 2025). Addressing persistent blind spots is also essential. Chief among these is the near-total absence of data on pushback and resistance. Without this information, programmes are ill-equipped to anticipate risks, support local champions, or ensure durability. Understanding resistance is not about risk avoidance; it is a prerequisite for designing resilient, effective programming. Key questions include: What forms does resistance take? Who drives it? Which counterstrategies have worked, and under what conditions?

Men's roles also require deeper examination. Few studies explore how men interpret shifting gender dynamics or respond to women's economic empowerment. Formative research that engages men across age, class, and cultural contexts is critical to identify who supports change, who resists, and why. Equally important is the meaningful involvement of adolescent girls and young women. Their participation is vital in defining, contesting, and reshaping the norms that affect them. They must be engaged not merely as beneficiaries but as co-creators of change, ensuring relevance, accountability, and impact.

Finally, building a sustainable evidence-based system will depend on cost-efficient, enduring collaborations between Northern and Southern researchers. Ultimately, what is needed is not simply more evidence, but better evidence that is inclusive, contextually grounded, and responsive to the realities of social change.

Sustaining momentum will require aligning theory, evidence, and practice within locally led partnerships that foreground equity and power. As the field enters its third decade, the task is not only to shift norms, but to strengthen the collective capacity to understand, measure, and sustain social transformation.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data were created or analysed in this study.

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