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KC NWAKALOR

SHIFTING SOCIAL NORMS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

Resource Brief

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INTRODUCTION

Social and gender norms shape economic opportunities and obstacles for all individuals. The expectations of acceptable and appropriate behavior for women and girls contribute to barriers—related to access to services, resources, and markets, care responsibilities, and control over assets and incomes—that impede their economic empowerment. Implementing norm shift strategies is critical for addressing gender inequalities and bolstering women’s economic empowerment (WEE). This resource brief was developed for USAID/Nigeria staff and implementing partners to better understand the significance of gender norms and evidence-based approaches to transform them. The brief provides examples of applying these approaches to enhance WEE in Nigeria.¹

WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

Social norms can be understood as unwritten rules regarding what is acceptable and appropriate within a particular society or group.² These rules shape people’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.³ Understanding social norms requires analyzing what people feel is acceptable or not, their behaviors, and the benefit to following (or consequences for breaking) these norms. As people comply, the norms are strengthened and become increasingly entrenched in society, transmitted through formal and informal institutions across generations. This can influence people’s access to resources and opportunities.

Many social norms are essentially gender norms that define appropriate actions and behaviors for girls, women, boys, men, and gender-diverse individuals.⁴ However, not all social norms are gender norms. For example, covering one’s mouth when coughing is a social norm that is expected, regardless of a person’s gender identity. A gender norm is a *type* of social norm that dictates how a person expects others to behave based on their gender identity. **Table 1** defines two types of social norms and provides an example based on gendered expectations.

TABLE 1: SOCIAL NORMS TERMS

TERMINOLOGY	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Empirical Expectations (also called Descriptive Norms)	What I believe others do	“I think that in families within my community, mothers only work if it is an economic necessity.”
Normative Expectations (also called Injunctive Norms)	What I believe others approve or disapprove of people doing	“I think most people in my community consider that it is better for mothers to not work outside the house.”

Adapted from: [A Landscape Review: Addressing Social Norms in Six USAID Sectors](#)

HOW DO NORMS AFFECT WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT?

WEE exists when women can equitably participate in, contribute to, and benefit from economic opportunities as workers, consumers, entrepreneurs, and investors.⁵ However, gender norms influence a person’s ability to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from

To learn more about WEE and gender equality, check out the [USAID Women’s Economic Empowerment and Gender Equality Wiki](#).

these economic opportunities. A United Nations report identified harmful social norms as a primary constraint to WEE in addition to upholding discriminatory laws, failing to recognize and redistribute household work and care, and limiting women's access to assets and resources.⁶

Stereotypes that women are less capable in business or should not work in certain sectors perpetuate gender inequities in the economy. For example, Nigeria's construction industry significantly contributes to GDP (3 percent) and employs over three million people, however, one study found that women make up only 16.3 percent of the construction workforce. This underrepresentation is due to societal beliefs that construction jobs are solely for men and that women prefer jobs with administrative and other soft skills.⁷ Furthermore, norms around masculinity tend to justify violence and support restricting women's mobility, agency, and ability to own property or access resources, as well as their ability to pursue employment opportunities.⁸ See **Box 1** for common gender norms that affect WEE in Nigeria.

Box 1: Common Gender Norms Related to WEE in Nigeria

Women are expected to handle most domestic and care-related chores within the household.

Women's wages are often considered as 'pocket money' rather than essential household income.

Women are not expected to control their own assets and property.

Husbands and fathers control women's and girls' mobility, access to financial services, and what/how they engage in income-generating activities.

Source: [Social Norms & Women's Economic Empowerment](#) (Nigeria brief series)

WEE has broad positive outcomes for women, families, and societies. Evidence indicates that when more women and girls work, this can lead to exponential growth in national economies. In Nigeria, closing gender gaps in key economic sectors could result in gains between \$9.3 billion (2.3 percent of overall GDP) and \$22.9 billion (5.8 percent of overall GDP).⁹ Recognizing the importance of WEE, the Government of Nigeria launched the five-year [National Women's Economic Empowerment \(WEE\) Policy and Action Plan](#) in May 2023. The Plan acknowledges the prevailing male dominance in Nigeria's business environment, which perpetuates the belief that women cannot thrive. However, the Plan aims to address barriers faced by Nigerian women in the economy, including through specific goals to change norms related to women's participation in high-value chains.

HOW ARE NORMS ANALYZED AND MEASURED?

Implementing partners seeking to design effective norms shift interventions should analyze the norms that underlie behaviors aligned with their project objectives and within their project's specific communities. A strong gender and social norms analysis helps design interventions that directly target the most critical norms and utilize pathways to promote positive shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Effective analyses unpack the pervasiveness of a norm, how it changes over time, and who is involved in its enforcement.¹⁰ The analysis can also serve as a baseline for measuring norms change and the effectiveness of interventions.

Analyzing gender and social norms through a participatory process, with target communities and affected groups who help to analyze the norms, is best practice. **Table 2** provides examples of tools with facilitated dialogues and exercises to guide the process. Practitioners can work with community members to unpack these core behavior-related questions as relevant to a project's goals:

- What are **gender norms** that influence the specific behavior(s) related to the project objective? Are they changing? If they are changing, how?

- Who are the **social reference groups** that influence the norms? What are the consequences of not adhering to a norm, and the benefits for following? Which groups are likely opposed to the norm?
- What other **social norms influence behavior the most**? What strategies can the project use to affect these norms?¹¹
- What **contextual dynamics** may cause shifts in dominant norms? (e.g. war, conflict, displacement, economic hardship, digital or technological influence such as social media)

TABLE 2: TOOLS FOR DIAGNOSING AND MEASURING SHIFTS IN SOCIAL NORMS

TOOL	DESCRIPTION
Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) Framework (Adaptable to all norms)	CARE’s tool analyzes what behaviors are considered typical, levels of approval and disapproval, and how consequences for norms violations deter norms change. Using short stories featuring a particular norm, this approach engages different participant groups in discussions about their perceptions and expectations of peer and community member behaviors.
Social Norms Exploration Tool (SNET) (Adaptable to all norms)	Developed for the USAID Passages Project, this toolkit helps implementers engage community members in participatory learning exercises to identify reference groups and explore social norms influencing behaviors of interest. It includes sample templates and guidance for analyzing and applying findings.
Participatory Research Toolkit for Social Norms Measurement (Adaptable to all norms)	Developed by Drexel University in collaboration with UNICEF and UNFPA, this toolkit includes a variety of tested participatory research tools to identify social norm issues and track changes over time. The tools can be used for a broad range of topics, including nutrition, parenting, gender socialization and protection, and are particularly relevant for social norms change around harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and child, early, or forced marriage and unions (CEFMU). Tools are broken down by when to use a particular method, practical examples, how to conduct the activity, and how to analyze and interpret the data.
Social Norms Diagnostic Tool: Young Women’s Economic Justice (Adapted to norms related to young women’s economic empowerment)	This OXFAM tool offers a series of participatory exercises for project teams to work with young people and community members to identify and discuss social norms that shape, constrain, or promote young women’s economic empowerment. The exercises examine norms around care and market-oriented work, gender-based violence (GBV), and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Source: Adapted and updated from [Advancing Women’s Economic Empowerment: Social Norms Landscaping Study](#)

 **NIGERIA EXAMPLE**

The USAID **MOMENTUM** project conducted a diagnosis to explore the influence of norms in Ebonyi State. The [social norm exploration report](#) focuses on child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM), as well as intimate partner violence, and it also discusses the intersection between CEFM and WEE. The report highlights that common gender norms suggests that girls have less economic value than boys and, as a result, families place less focus on the economic power and participation of girls. MOMENTUM utilized the findings to work with trusted local partners to shift harmful norms and advance GBV prevention and response services, which could positively impact a girl or woman’s future economic well-being.

If resources cannot support a community-specific participatory analysis, projects can conduct a desk review and hold discussions with staff to tap into their knowledge. Review the following resources for data on gender norms in Nigeria—[Nigeria Men and Gender Equality Survey \(NiMAGES\)](#), [Attitudes, Practice, and Social Norms: Key Gender Equality Issues in Selected Nigerian States](#), and

the Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (AliGN) platform’s [Learning Collaborative to Advance Social Norm Change in Nigeria](#) page.

HOW TO IDENTIFY RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH NORM CHANGE AND MITIGATE BACKLASH?

Because norms are deeply entrenched and relate to power, norm shifting interventions can cause unintended consequences.¹² Resistance and backlash to shifting gender norms can manifest in many forms, including exacerbating time burdens associated with women’s unpaid care responsibilities, GBV, and other consequences.

An effective norms diagnosis is the first step in helping development practitioners prioritize the principle of “do no harm” by identifying the wide range of consequences different persons may experience for breaking a social norm. Consider that the consequences may vary depending on a person’s gender identity, socioeconomic background, marital status, and other factors. Use this understanding to assess the risk of your planned intervention and develop mitigation strategies. Risk assessments should be periodic, especially in crisis settings that can shift quickly (see **Box 2**).

Box 2: Social Norms in Conflict Settings

Norms are context specific and may change during extraordinary times like in conflict. For example, some norms may become more rigid—such as restricting movement of women and girls because of safety concerns. Other norms may become more flexible—such as women making more household decisions if men are away or becoming economic providers as resources become scarcer. In these settings, GBV could increase and signal backlash against norm change.

It is important for development practitioners to monitor conflict settings and model principles of “do not harm” to mitigate risks—when there are increased tensions, conditions change frequently, and the risk of not adhering to some norms may be heightened.

Furthermore, the risks associated with norm shifting interventions are significantly influenced by who is engaged and how. Working with women in an isolated way can increase risks. For example, providing opportunities to women entrepreneurs, without engaging other family members (such as husbands, fathers, brothers, and mothers-in-law), can increase risk of harm. The meaningful engagement of men and other family members can help mitigate risk and avoid negative impact or potential backlash of interventions.

WHAT TYPE OF NORM SHIFTING INTERVENTIONS HAVE THE STRONGEST EVIDENCE BASE?

Transformative and relationship-level interventions that do not engage women alone have the strongest evidence base for shifting social norms and effecting changes in women’s economic power and gender equality. This section presents three proven approaches for shifting social norms to support WEE.¹³ While research identified these interventions in the context of advancing WEE, they may also be used to transform social and gender norms more broadly.

APPROACH: MEANINGFULLY ENGAGE MEN AND BOYS

WHAT IS MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF MEN AND BOYS? Engaging men and boys is a cross-cutting approach that can be applied to a variety of intervention types, including those working with households, organizations and workplaces, and communities. Engagement should extend beyond considering men as gatekeepers of power, but also as essential stakeholders, co-beneficiaries, allies, and advocates for gender equity.¹⁴

WHY ENGAGE MEN AND BOYS? Men and boys have a crucial role in transforming the norms that reinforce patriarchy and gender inequality, harming persons of all gender identities. Their partnership is necessary for increasing cooperation in productive activities and shared care responsibilities. Evidence shows that meaningfully engaging men and boys can promote positive masculinities with healthy behaviors that benefit families and communities.¹⁵

TIPS FOR ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS:

- Promote positive masculinities¹⁶ by facilitating dialogue that contrasts “toxic” conceptions with supportive conceptions based on mutual cooperation in productive and economic activities, as well as equitable distribution of household tasks, caregiving, and decision-making.¹⁷
- Appeal to self-interest by showing how embracing positive masculinities provides personal benefits, such as increased earnings and improved relationships. However, avoid focusing only on what men stand to gain without addressing how power imbalances disproportionately benefit men.¹⁸
- Create a supportive environment and trust before engaging in dialogue. Utilize peers, role models, and influential figures to endorse and demonstrate the advantages of positive masculinities.¹⁹
- Provide a safe and healthy space for men and boys to show and express their vulnerability and emotions. This may contribute to more effective GBV prevention programming.

Check out this resource!
[Engaging Men for Women's Economic Empowerment: Overview of the Evidence.](#)



NIGERIA EXAMPLE

In Bauchi and Plateau States, **Women for Women International** implements the [Men's Engagement Programme \(MEP\)](#) to tackle discriminatory norms and promote behavior change that enhances women's empowerment and rights. MEP works with men who are religious, traditional, military, and civil society leaders. These men receive tailored training on gender equality and how to lead discussions on women's rights in community. MEP creates open dialogue among women participants, their family members, and community leaders to discuss critical community issues. [MEP results](#) indicate personal changes in the behavior and communication of participants with their spouses. *For example*, only 19 percent of men sampled at MEP enrollment disagreed that men should have the final say in household decisions, compared to 44 percent three months after graduation. Additionally, after graduation, 88 percent of women reported being involved in household purchase decisions compared to 66 percent at the time of enrollment.



NIGERIA EXAMPLE

The **International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)**, in partnership with the College of Medicine at the University of Ibadan, implemented the [Women Working with Partners project](#) in Oyo State's capital Ibadan. The project recognized that women's disempowerment often occurs within households and therefore targeted couples through open dialogues aimed at strengthening women's decision-making, including over economic decisions. More than 1,200 couples participated in sessions on financial literacy, effective communication, reproductive health, and reflecting on attitudes and beliefs. The approach resulted in positive shifts in gender-related outcomes such as division of labor (including household chores), joint decision-making, and in men's attitudes. Women also reported feeling more empowered, noting that engaging men in couple-based activities contributed to their increased participation in household decisions around purchases and use of income.

APPROACH: HOUSEHOLD METHODOLOGIES

WHAT ARE HHMs? Household methodologies (HHMs) are effective in improving gender relations within households, including shifting norms that promote equitable workloads and economic opportunities. HHM approaches are often combined with sector-based activities like agriculture and global health. HHMs involve family members in dialogues and reflections to create a shared vision and plan for the family's future. During the dialogues, gender-specific needs and inequalities are discussed and addressed, with facilitators promoting cooperation, communication, and understanding. The Gender Action Learning System (GALS)²⁰ is one example of an HHM.

WHY USE HHMs? Working through households is critical because family members have different needs, access to and control over resources, and goals. WEE requires empowerment at a household level as well.²¹ HHMs have demonstrated effectiveness in shifting social norms that lead to improved intrahousehold cooperation, more equitable workload distribution, reduced domestic violence, and increased confidence for women.²²

TIPS FOR HHMs:

- Ensure the active involvement of all family members, not just women.
- Foster ownership and sustainability by selecting facilitators from the community, preferably individuals in a civil society organization or extension service that is active and credible in the community.
- Invest time and resources in training and supporting facilitators. Leverage support from community leaders and promote peer-sharing across households to stimulate participation and behavior change.²³



NIGERIA EXAMPLE

In Bauchi State, **Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA)**'s Nigeria WAY project aims to increase the economic contributions of entrepreneurs and small-scale businesses (SSBs), particularly those led by women and youth. Using GALS with over 120 families, Nigeria WAY addresses gender relations within the household by encouraging families to have honest and open conversations, discussing critical issues such as equitable workloads and joint decision-making. Nigeria WAY trained 30 individuals to become "GALS Champions" who shared their experiences and trained at least ten family or community members in the tools. Through GALS Champions and Savings and Loan Groups, this messaging on intrahousehold gender dynamics is anticipated to reach 900 men, women, and youth. Positive outcomes include changes in men's attitudes around decision-making and workload sharing after GALS training, as well as women's increased capital and business growth linked to the GALS visioning exercises.

APPROACH: COLLECTIVE ACTION AND LEARNING

WHAT IS COLLECTIVE ACTION AND LEARNING? Collective learning groups come in various forms and can be applied across different sectors to facilitate skills development, cooperation, and action. Examples of groups include Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), producer organizations or cooperatives, and self-help groups who meet regularly. These groups can be used to deliver skills training, share information, collaborate to reduce costs, and pool savings for loans and investments, ultimately enhancing the social and economic capital of members.²⁴

WHY USE COLLECTIVE ACTION AND LEARNING? Group-based collective action and learning has proven to lead to increased women's productivity and financial inclusion. These groups can drive lasting changes in gender norms, such as postponing marriage, embracing women's involvement in markets and production, and encouraging shared childcare responsibilities. They have resulted in sustained improvements in income, self-efficacy, knowledge, and sexual and reproductive health outcomes.²⁵

TIPS FOR USING COLLECTIVE ACTION AND LEARNING:

- Combine technical skills training with empowerment-based life skills.²⁶
- Pair learning and action opportunities with explicit gender-sensitivity programming. Foster critical thinking and discussion within groups about gender and power inequalities.²⁷
- When working with women-only groups, design strategies to support their engagement with spouses, other groups, and networks. When working with mixed groups, design strategies to effectively support the voice and leadership of women.



NIGERIA EXAMPLE

CARE Nigeria, has established VSLA groups in four states. The VSLAs, primarily comprised of women, regularly meet to save their money securely, access small loans, and obtain emergency insurance. CARE Nigeria trains members with tools to engage men, community members, and market actors. Results show that women VSLA members experienced increased income and more equitable distribution of household responsibilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, VLSA groups increased coordination; they supported children in their communities with school fees and materials and coordinated support and referrals for GBV survivors.



NIGERIA EXAMPLE

The **Spotlight Initiative**, a United Nations effort to eliminate violence against women, is implemented in six states in Nigeria. The 2022 Annual Narrative Programme Report highlights how group-based learning, such as vocational training activities for women, helped to increase women's income-generating activities, their self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Group-based learning also fostered collective support among women, empowering them to build individual agency and to discuss social norms that have traditionally held them back.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ The Nigeria examples included in this brief are based on publicly available documentation. While the effectiveness of these approaches could not be independently verified, they illustrate the application of evidence-based strategies for shifting gender norm.
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- ¹⁵ Britt, Charla. 2022. “Advancing Women’s Economic Empowerment: Social Norms Landscaping Study.” Prepared by Banyan Global. ([Link](#))
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- ²⁰ “The Gender Action Learning System (GALS) is a tool to address women’s rights and gender equality. It is a community-led and household methodology that aims to give women and men more control over their personal, household, and community development. GALS tools guide participants through a series of visual activities to imagine the futures they want and actions to take against norms that drive gender inequality.” Britt, Charla. 2022. “Advancing Women’s Economic Empowerment: Social Norms Landscaping Study.” Prepared by Banyan Global. ([Link](#))
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