



This quick-read guide provides guidance on designing strategic communications programming in conflict and stabilisation contexts aimed at changing harmful social norms such as attitudes and behaviours that condone gender-based violence (GBV), restrict women's participation in political life, discriminate against sexual and gender minorities (SGMs), or sanction men who depart from traditional gender roles. This type of work is highly sensitive and requires specialist support from experts who have an in-depth understanding of social norms programming and of the country context.

Box 18. What is a social norm?⁶⁵

A social norm is a rule of behaviour that people in a group conform to because they believe it is:

- a) typical behaviour (i.e. most other people in the group conform to it) and
- b) appropriate behaviour (i.e. most other people in the group believe they ought to conform to it).

Dos and don'ts on using strategic communications to change harmful social norms**Dos***Getting started*

1. **Do recognise that changing harmful social norms takes time.** When funding cycles are short (e.g. 1-2 years), **be realistic about what type of change can be achieved and decide whether programming on social norms is appropriate** in that context.
2. **Do conduct gender analysis** to understand how social norms affect women and men differently in that specific conflict or stabilisation context and how to change them (see **Tool 1** (page 31) for guidance).
3. **When changing social norms about GBV, do** design an integrated, multi-sectoral programme that **combines communications with non-communications activities⁶⁶** (e.g. support for GBV survivors, support to community activists, training police on handling GBV complaints). Since the causes of GBV are multi-faceted, an integrated and multi-sectoral programme is likely to be more effective in achieving long-term change.
4. **Do ensure that services for GBV survivors are available before undertaking any work to change social norms about GBV.** For instance, series 4 of the radio-drama 'Soul City' in South Africa focused on GBV and promoted a hotline that referred callers directly to service providers to encourage help-seeking behaviour. In many locations, services for GBV survivors are likely to be limited or dysfunctional. Assess availability before undertaking this type of social norms work.

Designing the approach

5. **Do combine media and other communications interventions with face-to-face engagement.** For example, the 'Change Starts at Home' programme, aimed at tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Nepal, consisted of a 9-month weekly radio drama. The programme combined online listener engagement (using IVR/SMS) with face-to-face engagement (e.g. listening and discussion groups), awareness-raising, street theatre and training with religious and community leaders.⁶⁷
6. **Do combine activities that empower women with activities that engage the whole community** in changing social norms, including leaders, men and boys. This increases buy-in to changing social norms and reduces the risk of a backlash against women and men who chose to reject harmful social norms.



7. **Do weaken support for existing harmful social norms by:**
 - a. Addressing incorrect factual beliefs (e.g. sex with a young girl can cure HIV).
 - b. Providing examples of the harm it causes (e.g. the harm caused by early marriage or pregnancy on the mother and child's health).
 - c. Raising awareness of contradictions with other norms (e.g. religious teachings regarding mutual respect and love between couples).
 - d. Reframing an issue so participants see it in a new way (e.g. framing gender inequality in terms of how power is distributed).
 - e. Highlighting how prevalent rejection of the harmful norm is within the target audience (e.g. 'Most Wolof men are against domestic abuse under any circumstances').
 - f. Highlighting the direction of change within the target audience (e.g. 'More and more Afghan men are encouraging their wives to vote – are you?').
8. **Do promote public debate and deliberation around harmful social norms.** This can be done through community workshops, group discussions, 'edutainment' (educational entertainment), radio call-in shows, social media and mobile technologies.
9. **Do promote a positive alternative gender norm** (e.g. non-violent conflict resolution, consensual sex, community intervention in domestic violence rather than silence). In fact, it may be easier to start a new norm than tackle an existing one.
10. **Do provide opportunities for public and collective change** (e.g. public pledges such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) abandonment ceremonies). But don't do this too soon! This works best when there is already private support to prevent VAWG and where sanctions to do so are not too high.
11. **Do publicise role models and the benefits of the new behaviour.** Role models may be community leaders, religious figures or celebrities such as music or sports stars, but they may also be other boys, girls or adults who challenge particular norms, or who have done so in the past and can be seen as living proof that new norms can lead to positive outcomes.
12. **Do provide opportunities for women and men to put new norms and behaviours into practice.** In countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is common for the male head of the household to select the candidate that the entire family will vote for, thus denying women the chance to express their own preferences (this is known as 'family voting'). In such contexts, civil society and other organisations often conduct voter education campaigns targeting men about women's rights to vote. These campaigns are timed to take place in the lead up to the elections, thereby giving men the opportunity to put new behaviours into practice straight after the campaign.
13. **Do create new rewards and social sanctions to sustain the change.** For instance, rewards could take the form of self-esteem and a sense of belonging to a group of early adopters of the new gender norm, endorsed by inspirational role models and influencers.

Mitigating risks

14. **Do protect the physical safety and emotional and psychological well-being of programme participants, the audience and your team when covering highly emotive or sensitive content on harmful social norms.** For example, protect the anonymity of participants in the programme, issue a warning to the audience before the start of the programme that it contains upsetting content, and keep information and data about the programme secure.



Don'ts

1. **Don't reinforce harmful social norms by highlighting or publicising the negative behaviour** (e.g. billboards with the message "Rape is a problem in Kinshasa" can perpetuate the notion that it is normal).
 2. **When challenging harmful social norms, don't inadvertently reinforce other harmful norms or reinforce sexist stereotypes** (e.g. messages which emphasise the need to protect women from violence can play into ideas about women as the 'weaker sex' and inadvertently shore up support for violence against women and girls who do not play the 'weaker' role).
-

Sources used for this quick read guide and suggested further reading:

- Alexander-Scott, M. Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016) [DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls \(VAWG\)](#). London: VAWG Helpdesk
- BBC Media Action (December 2016). [BBC Media Action Approach: preventing violence against women and girls](#)
- Dr Erika Fraser and Caroline Enye (31 January 2019). [VAWG Helpdesk Report 224: Effectiveness of Digital Platforms to Reduce VAW](#).

⁶⁵ Based on: Adapted from Bicchieri (2006) and Heise (2013), cited in Alexander-Scott, M. Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016) *DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)*. London: VAWG Helpdesk <https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Shifting-Social-Norms-tackle-Violence-against-Women-Girls3.pdf> [Accessed on 25/10/2019]

⁶⁶ Alexander-Scott, M. Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016) *DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)*. London: VAWG Helpdesk <https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Shifting-Social-Norms-tackle-Violence-against-Women-Girls3.pdf> [Accessed on 25/10/2019]

⁶⁷ Cited in: Alexander-Scott, M. Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016) *DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)*. London: VAWG Helpdesk <https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Shifting-Social-Norms-tackle-Violence-against-Women-Girls3.pdf> [Accessed on 25/10/2019]