

# TECHNICAL NOTE ON GENDER NORMS

## BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The purpose of this technical note is:

- 1 To facilitate the exchange of knowledge and good practices to promote change in gender norms
- 2 To provide practical guidance on the application of key concepts and effective programming approaches

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Global Programme to End Child Marriage (the 'Global Programme') works with many partners to advocate for and support practical actions to end child marriage and promote gender equality and the empowerment of adolescent girls.

This technical note builds on the technical note on gender-transformative approaches,<sup>1</sup> promotes a common understanding of key concepts, and provides practical guidance on how to promote change in gender norms. The technical note is written in simple and succinct language. However, further reading of references in the endnote and the technical note on gender-transformative approaches is highly recommended for a better understanding of concepts and programming strategies. This note is evidence based and informed by promising practices from the Global Programme and its partners and collaborators.

## DEFINING CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES

### What are gender norms?

Gender norms are a subset of social norms that relate specifically to gender differences.<sup>2</sup> They are informal, deeply entrenched and widely held beliefs about gender roles, power relations, standards or expectations that govern human behaviours and practices in a particular social context and at a particular time. They are ideas or 'rules' about how girls and boys and women and men are expected to be and to act. People internalize and learn these 'rules' early in life.<sup>3</sup> "Gender norms sustain a hierarchy of power and privilege that typically favours what is considered male or masculine over that which is female or feminine, reinforcing a systemic inequality that undermines the rights of women and girls and restricts opportunity for women, men, and gender minorities to express their authentic selves."<sup>4</sup>

### Changing restrictive gender norms

Like with all social norms, it requires sustained effort and time to change gender norms. Gender norms are resistant

to change because they are pervasive and largely invisible, considered 'normal', and are held in place by a web of behaviours, beliefs and institutions.<sup>5</sup> The technical note on gender-transformative approaches<sup>6</sup> considers how these approaches examine, question and change rigid gender norms. Gender transformation aspires to tackle the root causes of gender inequality. It moves beyond individual self-improvement among girls and women towards redressing the power dynamics and structures that serve to reinforce gendered inequalities.<sup>7</sup>

### Gender norms and child marriage

Child marriage is perpetuated by gender norms that prescribe when and why adolescent girls and boys should marry. Child marriage is not a norm itself but a practice that is embedded in a web of gender norms, beliefs and other factors. Many of these gender norms are reflected in social institutions such as labour markets and legal systems.<sup>8</sup> Figure 1 presents examples of the kinds of gender norms, beliefs and factors that may influence child marriage, demonstrating how complex it is to identify and address the norms, beliefs and factors supporting child marriage.

## HOW TO TRANSFORM GENDER NORMS IN CHILD MARRIAGE PROGRAMMING

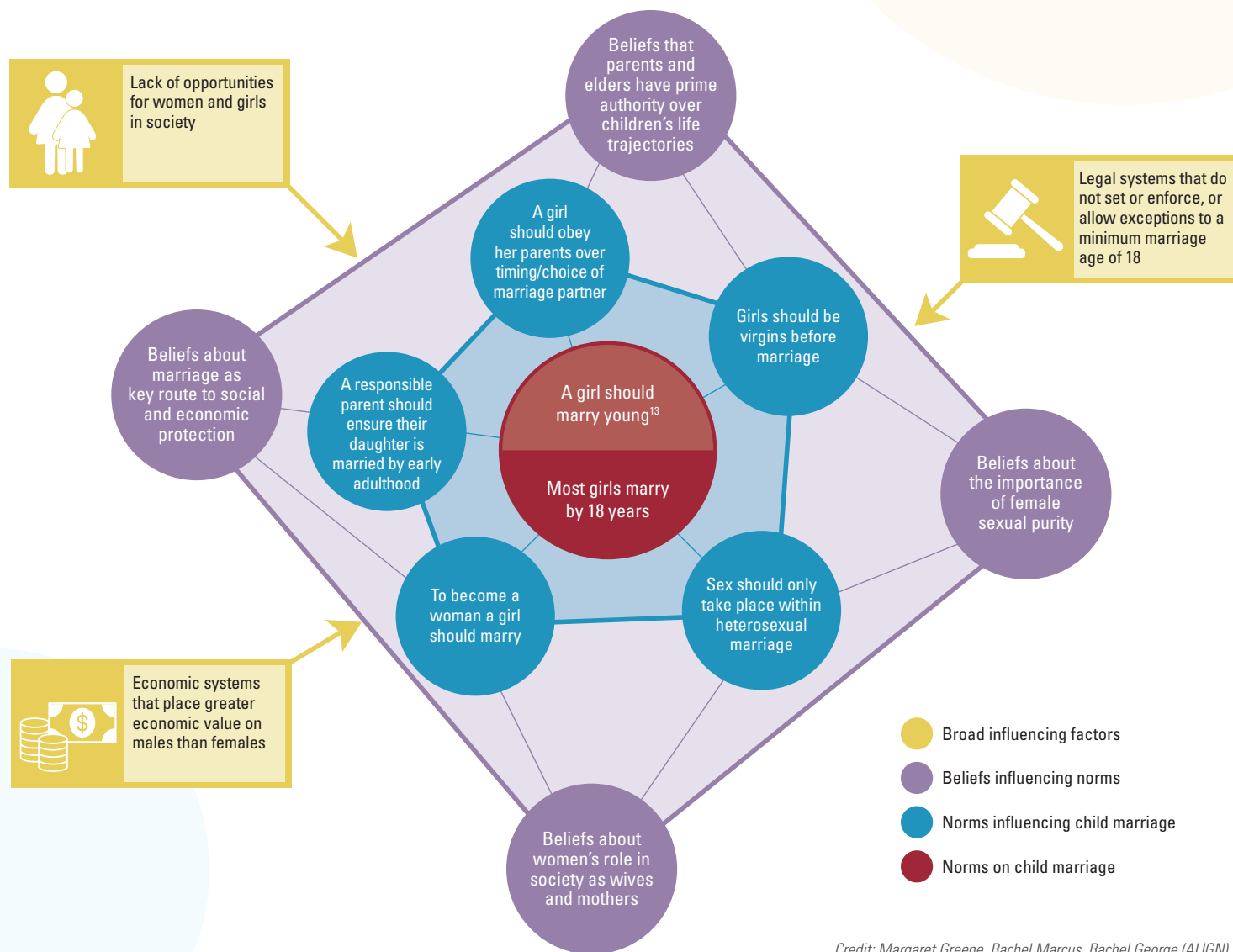
Gender-transformative approaches are central to the design and delivery of Phase II of the Global Programme.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, most other child marriage programmes focus narrowly on preventing child marriage rather than (more ambitiously) aiming to change underlying gender norms.<sup>11</sup>

### Process of developing programmes to promote the change of gender norms<sup>12</sup>

Involve and consult community groups and other stakeholders in all steps of the following process:

- 1 Map and assess the gender norms, beliefs and factors surrounding child marriage in a country or location. Start with existing studies.
- 2 Based on the mapping, select a package of context-appropriate interventions that address the most important gender norms, beliefs and factors related to child marriage.
- 3 Use the socio-ecological model to situate the interventions.
- 4 Continuously monitor changes and adapt programming accordingly with the view of making sustained changes.

FIGURE 1: Child marriage is held in place by a web of gender norms, beliefs and factors (indicative)<sup>9</sup>



Credit: Margaret Greene, Rachel Marcus, Rachel George (ALIGN)

## KEY POINTS:<sup>14</sup>

- Transforming gender norms is complex and requires multi-sectoral approaches across the socio-ecological model.
- Changing gender norms may take generations and cannot be achieved by a single programme.
- An adolescent sexual reproductive health gender norms approach explores three levels of structural interventions at the macro, meso and micro levels. Macro-level structural changes in institutions and resources are in fact primary drivers bringing about sustained norm change.<sup>15</sup>  
*Example: In South Korea, reforms in labor laws and employment opportunities for women throughout the 1990s were a key driver in eventually shifting norms around son preference.*
- Meso level interventions such as working with the district education system to increase female teachers in upper

grades can concurrently improve the quality of learning, expand comprehensive sexuality education, and provide positive role models for girls.<sup>16</sup>

- Concerted and complementary efforts at the micro level such as integrating life skills or parental education programs within the school system or fine-tuning of cash transfer programs to maximize access by intended beneficiaries can raise the scale and sustainability of such interventions.<sup>17</sup>
- Efforts to change gender norms and power relations can have unexpected consequences. New ideas and practices are often contested and can lead to resistance or a backlash. Engaging respectfully with all community groups can reduce resistance to change.
- Gender norms can change as a result of deliberate efforts to encourage change, including new laws, policies or programmes, and social and political activism.<sup>18</sup>

## EVIDENCE-BASED EXAMPLES OF GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE INTERVENTIONS

This section provides examples of how gender transformation can be promoted across the socio-ecological model.<sup>19</sup> It is important that interventions at different levels complement and reinforce each other with the aim of implementing them jointly.

### 1 Policies and legislation

#### Key messages:

- Identify the laws and policies that have to change to promote positive gender norms and beliefs.<sup>20</sup>
- Support women in leadership positions to bring about gender-transformative policy change at all levels.<sup>21</sup>
- Consult and engage sensitively with all stakeholders and develop context-specific strategies for legislative reform processes to pre-empt backlash.<sup>22</sup>
- Mitigate unintended consequences of law enforcement.<sup>23</sup>

#### Policy & Legal Mechanisms

- In Amhara, Ethiopia, some girls use legal mechanisms to refuse child marriage.<sup>24</sup>
- The attempt to reform family law in Mali is an example of what not to do: a conservative backlash forced the Government to withdraw the law reform.<sup>25</sup>

### 2 Economic incentives and education

#### Key messages:

- Girls' education backed by economic incentives has had positive outcomes in delaying child marriage.<sup>26</sup>
  - Cash transfers can be an effective tool for postponing the marriage of adolescent girls, but are not sufficient to change gender norms around child marriage.<sup>27</sup>
- Complementary programming should offer vocational and financial skills training for adolescents. Cash alone may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing a norm of compulsory marriage at age 18.

#### Economic Incentives

- In Ethiopia, a randomized controlled trial by the Population Council improved school enrolment and reduced child marriage by offering younger adolescent girls school supplies and older adolescent girls other forms of conditional in-kind support.<sup>28</sup>

### 3 Social and behavioural change communication with communities and through mass media

#### Key messages:

- Social and behavioural change communication can play an important role when implemented with other interventions, but will not change behaviours and gender norms on its own. They need to be linked to systems and services.
- Edutainment via television series, films, radio dramas and interactive theatre is a promising strategy to challenge norms relating to child marriage.

#### Lessons from social and behavioural change communication aimed at changing gender norms in Ethiopia:<sup>29</sup>

- Participatory and reflective community-based dialogues using mixed methods are effective.
- Uptake of messages has been highest where girls and their families have actionable options.
- Top-down messaging is not effective.
- Parents do not want to be told how to raise their children or to feel that their cultural traditions are considered to be backward.
- Where risks are exaggerated and emphasise worst-case scenarios, communities are less likely to listen.

#### Social and Behavioural Change Communication

- SASA! is a rigorously evaluated programme in Kampala, Uganda, that tackles restrictive gender norms and aims to create a critical mass of individuals and groups committed to change.<sup>30</sup>

### 4 Partner with men and boys<sup>31</sup>

#### Key messages:

- Working with men and boys is key to changing harmful gender norms.<sup>32</sup>
- Address men and boys in their specific roles as child or adult grooms and fathers of child brides.<sup>33</sup>
- Interventions must be aligned with and support interventions with women and girls.<sup>34</sup>

## Partnering with Men and Boys

- Act with Her has an educational component aimed at boys, covering the same topics offered to girls.<sup>35</sup>
- Schools in Jordan are gender segregated. UNICEF's Social Innovation Labs for children above age 15 are one of the few spaces where boys can see girls as people rather than as marriage targets.

## 5 Empower adolescent girls<sup>36</sup>

### Key messages:

- Empowering girls to become active agents in their own lives is central to shifting norms that constrain girls.<sup>37</sup>
- Amplify the voices of girls and support them to express their opinions, while ensuring they are supported by their families and communities.
- Empowerment programmes through girls' clubs, life skills groups and economic skills training help girls develop the skills to avoid child marriage and know their rights and where to get help.
- Work with women's rights organizations to support the engagement of adolescent girls.<sup>38</sup>

## Adolescent Girl Empowerment

- In Ethiopia, girls' clubs focus messages on gender and provide girls with skills and support to resist child marriage.<sup>39</sup>
- Act with Her and TESFA (Towards Economic and Sexual/Reproductive Health Outcomes for Adolescent Girls) offer girls time with peers, provide access to mentors and role models, teach life skills, and offer girls opportunities to practise agency. Some programmes also offer vocational skills, financial literacy and savings programmes.<sup>40</sup>

## Measure gender norm change

### Key messages:<sup>41, 42</sup>

- To successfully change discriminatory gender behaviours and practices, programmes have to take into account factors other than social norms.
- Existing strategies for measuring social norms are unnecessarily complex; quick and simple ways to measure norms do exist.
- Qualitative diagnosis of norms is crucial to designing successful interventions. Use vignette methods<sup>43</sup> to identify the norms, attitudes and beliefs that help sustain a practice in a particular setting.

- Analysing social norms data requires disaggregation at the level of the reference group (group of people who share social expectations of each other<sup>44</sup>). Inappropriate aggregation of data can result in meaningless findings. Practitioners do not always have the resources to collect statistically representative data across smaller clusters of a larger population.
- Invest in ongoing monitoring of the resonance of messaging and emerging sources of backlash, and adapt programming accordingly.
- Invest in mixed-methods monitoring and evaluation of interventions and share positive and negative and intended and unintended consequences of programming to promote maximum learning.
- Develop innovative community-based feedback mechanisms to capture ideas and recommendations about programme effectiveness from girls, boys, parents and communities directly.
- Incorporate monitoring mechanisms in the programme design, rather than as an afterthought.

## Measuring changes in gender norms:

*Current measurement approaches in gender norms track the following key indicators across the socio-ecological model*

- Changes in girls' individual agency: monitor changes in girls' self-esteem, aspirations, decision-making and self-efficacy.
- Interventions to change gender relations: track community perceptions and beliefs around the acceptability of gender-based violence.<sup>45</sup>
- Interventions that transform structures: identify gender-transformative legislative and institutional change.

## Six dimensions to track change in gender norms:<sup>46</sup>

1. Women and girls exercise choice over their sexual and reproductive integrity.
2. Women and girls enjoy freedom from violence.
3. Women and girls enjoy enhanced decision-making ability over land and assets.
4. Women attain enhanced participation in political and civic life.
5. Equal value is given to girls and boys.
6. Unpaid care is equally distributed between women and men, girls and boys.

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# ENDNOTES

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