

THE POWER OF

SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE APPROACHES FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF GENDER EQUALITY

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JOHNS HOPKINS
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*“Gender parity is not just good for women
- it’s good for societies”*

ANGELA FUENTES

President
Angela Fuentes Foundation

Introduction

In 2015, the international community set forth an ambitious agenda for global development through the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its accompanying Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 5: “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, recognizes that “gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful and prosperous and sustainable world,” (United Nations, n.d.).

Though some progress has been made in the past decade, such as increased representation of women in politics and reduced rates of female genital cutting and child marriage, gender equality remains a distant goal. Globally, almost half of women lack the power to make decisions about their own sexual and reproductive health and rights; one in five young women today were married before the age of 18, women continue to experience discriminatory laws and insufficient legal protections, and data suggests rates of intimate partner violence increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations, 2023). Increased time, attention, and investment is needed between now and 2030 to accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 5.

Over the last few decades, the number of programmes using social and behaviour change (SBC) to advance gender equality in low- and middle-income countries has increased, leading to more insights on what is effective. The [Global Alliance for Social and Behaviour Change](#) maintains a database of impact assessments for SBC interventions across all thematic sectors, which includes 62 assessments that measured successful advancement of gender equality outcomes. In 2023-2024, a team reviewed these and selected those to highlight in this brief.

This brief provides an overview of key intervention approaches and best practices, current evidence gaps and challenges. Recommendations are then provided for different stakeholders to improve the current state of SBC programming for gender equality outcomes.

Overview of Evidence

The evidence shows that the most effective intervention approaches are those that foster dialogue through social participation and community engagement, address the relational nature of gender by going beyond the individual, and adopt a multi-sectoral, multi-level approach.

1. Foster dialogue through social participation and community engagement



Many SBC interventions that have successfully addressed gender-related outcomes have created spaces for people to critically reflect on gender roles, norms and expectations. In these spaces, people discuss what these norms and roles mean and how they impact the health and well-being of themselves, their families, and their communities.

One such programme is Gender Equity Movement

in Schools (GEMS), a school-based primary violence prevention intervention for young adolescents aged 12-14 years in Jharkhand, India. As a collaborative effort of the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Child in Need Institute and Life Education and Development Support, Jharkhand, the programme adapted an approach used at other sites both within and outside of India to create spaces for group reflection and discussion among boys and girls about gender equality. This was combined with school-level campaigns and teacher and staff workshops that fostered institutional-level dialogue around the individual, normative, and institutional roles perpetuating patriarchy. The programme purposefully considered the role of dissonance as a central element to the journey and a necessary step in shifting deeply ingrained social and cultural norms and inequities.

GEMS was evaluated using a cluster randomized control trial with longitudinal, mixed method data collection across 40 intervention schools and 40 control schools. Over the course of two years, the GEMS programme led to significant shifts in attitudes toward gender equality and egalitarian behaviour among youth and teachers. It also fostered greater recognition of violence and an increase in interventions by boys and girls when witnessing different forms of violence among students (Achyut et al. 2016).

Another successful intervention is African Transformation™, implemented by the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, which creates a venue for men and women, including couples, to engage in group dialogue and critically reflect on gender norms. Central to this approach is the use of role models through video testimonials of ordinary people and couples who have overcome gender-based obstacles to better their lives. This approach has been implemented in nearly a dozen African and Asian countries and includes models that address HIV, conflict resolution, and managing a home and business together. Evaluation of this approach in Uganda showed that participation was significantly and positively associated with inter-personal communication, self-efficacy, and agency (Underwood et al., 2011).

However, studies have shown that group-based education and community engagement approaches may be limited in achieving lasting community-level change unless a ‘tipping point’ is reached in terms of depth and breadth of intervention coverage (IRH/Pathfinder International/Save the Children, 2013). Emerging evidence from programmes that have intentionally integrated “organized diffusion” – the encouragement of participants to share knowledge and learnings with their social networks— has shown that this approach can increase the reach of community dialogue and group-based approaches that may otherwise find it difficult to scale up (Cislaghi et al., 2019).



One such programme example is SASA!, a community mobilization intervention to prevent violence and reduce HIV-risk behaviours. SASA! was designed by Raising Voices and was implemented in Kampala, Uganda by the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP). SASA! sought to change community attitudes, norms, and behaviours that result in

gender inequality, violence, and increased HIV vulnerability for women by promoting critical analysis and discussion of power and power inequalities. The intervention trained community activists to carry out activities within their own social networks using an organic approach tailored to community priorities. As the intervention progressed, the number of engaged individuals and groups increased and eventually reached a tipping point of community-level normative change. Evaluation data showed that SASA! reduced the social acceptance of gender inequality and intimate partner violence and led to fewer experiences of physical and sexual violence. The intervention effects were not limited to those with high reported levels of intervention exposure, demonstrating the impact of the intentional community diffusion process (Abramsky, 2014).

Best Practice: Social engagement and group-based dialogue are critical components of transforming unequal gender relations in communities but can be difficult to scale up. Building in participant-led organized diffusion approaches can extend the reach of gender-focused interventions, allowing for community-level normative change.

2. Address the relational nature of gender by going beyond the individual

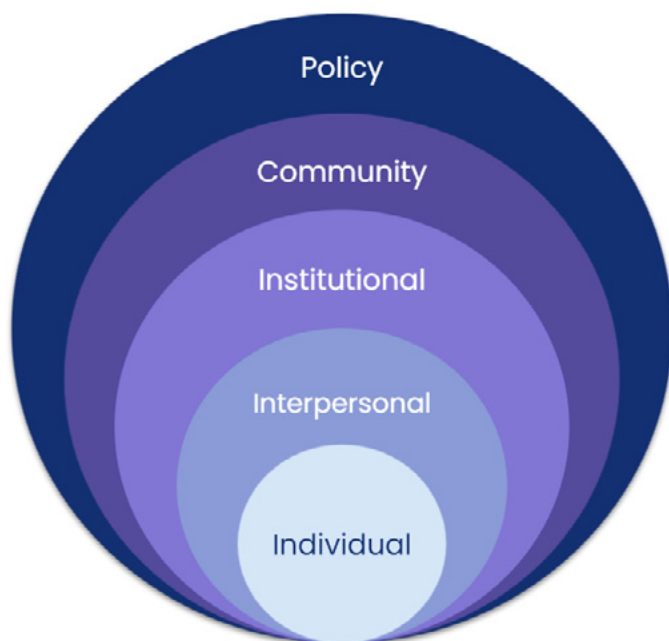
Gender norms are inherently relational – they are constructed and reinforced constantly through daily interactions with family members, friends, teachers, religious leaders, colleagues, and casual contacts. When programmes do not take the relational nature of gender inequality into account, they may face backlash, such as parents' resistance to gender equality programmes for youth in schools, or men and boys expressing hostility, fear, and/or resentment when the status quo is challenged (Guthridge et al., 2022). As such, programmes that move beyond a focus on individual-level change have shown positive impacts on gender-related outcomes.

Save the Children's Very Young Adolescent Gender Norms Package implemented in Nepal recognized the need to address the interpersonal relationships that influence gender attitudes among very young adolescents aged 10-14. The programme included three components: encouraging boys and girls to challenge views on restrictive gender norms ("Choices"), increasing dialogue between parents and youth to reduce intergenerational transfer of inequitable gender norms and improve equality in the household ("Voices"), and promoting community-based facilitated dialogue ("Promises"). The evaluation showed promising results on the value of adding these additional relational-based components to the Choices curriculum (Institute for Reproductive Health and Save the Children, 2017).

A community campaign focused on the promotion of gender equity as part of the larger RISHTA project in Mumbai, India, as part of a collaboration between ICRW, the Population Council, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), the University of Connecticut School of Medicine, the Institute for Community Research and Tulane University. The campaign involved a series of separate workshops with staff from six NGOs, 20 Imams (religious leaders), and mosque committee members. Workshop participants were tasked with developing and disseminating gender-oriented messages through outreach activities to women and special community-wide events. Imams actively incorporated the messages through lectures for men attending Friday prayers, and posters and banners with gender-equitable messages were displayed at each mosque to promote discussions among prayer attendees. Evaluation results showed that, over time, workshop participants, particularly Imams, held more gender equitable views. Additionally, the intervention community demonstrated significantly more gender-equitable attitudes, with a dramatic positive change in gender-equitable attitudes over time among men (Schensul, 2015).

Best Practice: The relational nature of gender norms and the central role of power in upholding patriarchal norms should be accounted for in programme design by going beyond a focus on one group, such as women or girls, and instead engaging men and other family or community members in exploring, discussing and reframing existing gender norms, roles, and expectations. Overall, studies demonstrate the benefit of creating spaces for girls, boys, women, and men to engage in facilitated dialogue together, at least in settings where this approach is socially acceptable. Mixed discussions also provide women with safe spaces in which to evaluate men's reactions to potential shifts in gender norms and roles (Guthridge et al., 2022; Levy et al., 2020).

3. Take a multi-sectoral, multi-level approach



Inequitable gender norms are not only relational; they are also embedded in the institutions and systems that perpetuate inequality over time and are reinforced across the different public and private spheres of people's lives. For example, inequities in land ownership rights impact women's economic stability, which in turn impacts their and their children's health and well-being. Addressing gender inequality requires a holistic approach that goes beyond a single sector and works across the socio-ecological model – tackling drivers of inequity not only at the individual, relational, and community levels, but also those within systems, laws, and policies (Heymann et al., 2019).

The Intervention with Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity (IMAGE) intervention, implemented by the Small Enterprise Foundation in rural South Africa, combined a microfinance poverty alleviation intervention with participatory training on HIV risk, gender norms, intimate partner violence (IPV), and sexuality. The programme included a group-based loan model for women as well as a participatory learning model called “Sisters for Life” covering topics such as gender roles, relationships, communication, and domestic violence. In phase 2, the project also conducted wider community mobilization to reach men and young people in the community. The IMAGE Project was rigorously evaluated from 2001 to 2005 as a cluster randomised trial. Evaluation of the intervention found positive benefits for economic well-being, more positive attitudes toward gender-equal norms, better relationships with partners, and decreased IPV (Kim et al., 2007). The study concluded that building partnerships and creating synergy across sectors can help to achieve health and development goals concurrently.



The Reduction of Gender-Based Violence Against Women in Côte d'Ivoire study tested a similar approach in a conflict-affected setting. A collaboration between the Yale School of Public Health, Innovations for Poverty Action, and the International Rescue Committee, the study evaluated the impact on IPV for two intervention models aimed at shifting gender norms:

1) an economic empowerment group savings programme for women, and 2) the group savings programme plus an eight-session group-based dialogue intervention. Gender dialogues included activities to engage male partners and used a financial lens when talking with couples about gendered power dynamics in the home. This two-armed pilot randomized control trial found that, for women who participated in more than 75% of the programme with their male partners, the addition of the gender dialogue to the economic empowerment programme reduced acceptance of wife beating as well as reports of past year physical IPV. This study supported the findings from the IMAGE evaluation to show that addressing household gender inequities alongside economic programming has the potential to reduce levels of IPV (Gupta et al., 2013).

Best Practice: To address gender disparities effectively, it is crucial to implement gender-specific interventions that integrate various sectors, such as economic empowerment, education, and health. This holistic approach not only addresses the multifaceted nature of gender inequality but also enhances the overall impact of these interventions.

Project Spotlight: Voices for Change

Using a multi-level approach powered by a branded communications campaign to strengthen the enabling environment for young women's empowerment in Nigeria.

Voices 4 Change (V4C) sought to strengthen the enabling environment for young women's empowerment in Nigeria with a focus on women in leadership, women's role in decision-making, and ending violence against girls and women. Led by Palladium, this programme is an example of a gender equality initiative that sought both individual and community-level change by creating spaces for dialogue that included men and boys and being intentional about diffusion in order to reach scale. It also addressed the macro-level by strengthening mechanisms that supported gender responsive legislation.



The programme used "Purple," a branded communication campaign that created a supportive social environment, which complemented intensive in-person and online learning opportunities designed to prompt personal reflection and community dialogue about gender equality. Participants were selected for intensive learning based on their potential to amplify and promote change within their social networks, thus introducing diffusion into the strategy.

The programme also sought legal and policy change and supported the revival of the Gender Technical Unit within the National Assembly, which was set up to influence national legislative processes related to gender. With V4C's support, the Unit played a critical role in V4C, succeeding in creating widespread discussion and reflection on gender inequities, particularly among men, which led to significant positive changes in attitudes and behaviours related to gender equality in leadership and decision-making and gender-based violence (Voices for Change, 2017).

VOICES4CHANGE RESULTS

2.4 million people (89%)
Improved attitude and/or behaviors on gender equality – in more than 1 behavioural area
1.46 million people
Young people whose attitudes have positively changed know Purple programme identity
72% young people
Understand that the purple logo represents gender equality

Gaps in Evidence

- 1 There is a lack of evidence on the long-term effects of gender transformative interventions implemented during childhood and adolescence.
- 2 There are limited examples of SBC interventions that address structural elements through a systems-level approach alongside individual, interpersonal, and community interventions.
- 3 There is a need for more evidence that examines SBC interventions focused on improving gender-related outcomes through an intersectional lens, as well as those that measure outcomes around masculinity and gender norms that impact health among gender-diverse people.



Challenges

- Limited funding for implementing interventions that reach a high enough scale and are conducted over a long-enough period of time to be able to measure macro-level effects on gender inequities.
- Siloed projects with different objectives and approaches do not support the synergies necessary to foster wider-scale social change.
- Research systems operate with their own gender biases and inequities related to study design, data collection, and analysis (Gupta et al., 2019).



Recommendations

A significant body of literature supports the role of SBC in shifting discriminatory gender norms and achieving gender equality. Greater investment and political will is needed to reach change at scale.

For governments:

- Identify and promote existing policies and legislation that are designed to create a supportive environment for gender equality.
- Integrate high-quality SBC approaches into national strategies to promote gender equality.



For donors:

- Increase investment in longer-term financing for gender equality initiatives, particularly among adolescents and youth, including measurement and evaluation studies.
- Foster partnerships with governments and other donors with shared priorities to improve long-term collective efforts.



For implementers:

- Work in tandem with local social movements and gender equality organizations.
- Design and implement the programmatic strategies described in this brief that utilize best practices for SBC.



For maximum impact, SBC interventions need to:

- Conduct gender analyses to inform programme design.
- Work across sectors and at multiple levels, either directly or through partnerships and collaborations.
- Go beyond a focus on individual-level change and awareness-raising activities.
- Foster dialogue through social participation and community engagement.
- Leverage the power of media to present alternative examples of gender roles and norms and catalyse community-level reflection and dialogue.
- Include men, boys, and gender-diverse people to avoid placing the burden of social change on girls and women alone, establish allyship amongst men and boys, and address how oppressive gender norms negatively impact all people.
- Consider and plan for the emotional reactions of men and boys as power dynamics are challenged and new gender norms are reimagined.
- Take an intersectional approach to gender transformative programmes and research that considers different vulnerabilities and forms of oppression.
- Extend programme reach by conducting multiple reinforcing activities over longer time frames.
- Integrate purposeful organized diffusion into programmatic strategies.
- Anticipate, monitor, and address unintended consequences, including violence.

Resources and tools

- Gender and Social and Behavior Change Communication Implementation Kit <https://sbccimplementationkits.org/gender/courses/gender-and-social-and-behavior-change-communication/>
- Gender Equality Check-In Tool for Social and Behavior Change Programs <https://breakthroughactionandresearch.org/gender-equality-check-in-tool/>
- Social Analysis and Action Global Implementation Manual <https://www.care.org/news-and-stories/resources/social-analysis-and-action-global-implementation-manual/>
- Rapid Gender Analysis <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/in-practice/rapid-gender-analysis>
- Everybody wants to belong: a practical guide to tackling and leveraging social norms in behaviour change programming <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/everybody-wants-belong>

Authors

- Joanna Skinner, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Lead - Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs
- Olivia Carlson, Program Officer - Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs

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