Social Norms
Introduction to basic concepts

Adapted and expanded by Lori Heise from presentations by Gerry Mackie, Francesca Moneti and Cristina Bicchieri as part of the U Penn social norms course
All problems have interlocking causes

- Structural factors define people’s choice set
- They are fundamentally about **POWER**
  - Institutions
  - Economic structures
  - Ideologies
  - Gender regimes
Primary Prevention – Going upstream

Addressing structural factors:

- Lack of livelihood options
- Structural inequalities between men and women (inheritance law, property rights, access to jobs)
- Rising consumer culture coexisting with stark inequalities between elites and the poor
- Unfettered alcohol availability
- Criminal syndicates
Need to unpack the “social” cog

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Some Definitions

**Attitude**

- An *individual’s* psychological tendency to evaluate something (a person, symbol, belief, object) with some degree of favour or disfavour
  - “11 year olds shouldn’t be allowed to ride the bus alone”
  - “Smart phones are cool”
  - “It is ok for a husband to hit his wife but only if she has done something wrong”

**Behaviour**

- What a person actually does
What motivates/shapes behaviour?

- Material/structural factors
  - Poverty
  - Opportunity structures
  - Incentives
- Intrinsic/cognitive motivations
  - Aspirations
  - Risk benefit assessments
  - Non-social beliefs
- Social motivations
  - Sense of belonging
  - Building trust
So what is a Norm?

Norms are essentially social
Common usages of the word “norm”

• A statistical regularity
  – Average number of rooms per household in Dakar

• Social norm
  – What people in a group believe to be
    • Typical, and
    • Appropriate

• Moral norm
  – One is morally obliged to follow a moral norm, whether or not others believe it is typical and appropriate

Gerry Mackie, UCSD
Social Norm Basics

• **A norm** is a set of social expectations shared within a valued reference group

• **Reference Group**: Relevant others who hold these social expectations of one another
  – A single individual can be influenced by norms held by different reference groups

• **Maintained by Social Influence**:  
  – Approval, including anticipation of positive sanctions and  
  – Disapproval, including anticipation of negative sanctions
Two Types of norms

- **Descriptive** norms (what one thinks others do)
- **Injunctive** Norms (what one thinks others believe *should* be done)

- Injunctive Norms are crucial as they distinguish social norms from other social practices

- Descriptive and injunctive expectations usually align, but not always
Is it a norm? (diagnosis)

Behaviors not driven by norms

- Wearing a coat when it's cold outside
- Use of children in pornography
- Open defecation

Key questions:
- Is the behavior driven by beliefs about what others do and what they expect you to do?
- Would you still act the same way even if others disagreed?
- Are there consequences of departing from the behavior?

Behaviors driven by norms

- Gift giving and reciprocity
- Rituals of respect at funerals
- Expectations of what it means to be a man
- Exchange of lobola prior to marriage
- Corporal punishment
Problem diagnosis

Is the behavior driven by norms?

- Child marriage in Afghanistan?
- Men watching child pornography?
- Open defecation?
- Corporal punishment in schools?
- Silence around rape?

If norms are operative, behavior is unlikely to change without addressing relevant norms

But not all behavior is driven by norms
Norms do not stand alone

- Norms are embedded in webs of inter-connected beliefs, values, and other norms and expectations.
- Also behaviors can have a material basis (e.g. poverty).
Example: partner violence is supported by:

- **Factual beliefs**: women will not obey unless beaten; women need discipline to be good wives
- **Positive attitudes** toward the practice -- hitting is an acceptable form of discipline
- **Normative expectations**: other men will look down upon a man who cannot keep his wife in line
- **Other norms**: keeping a family together is more important than a woman’s well-being; disclosing violence will bring shame upon the family
- **Scripts**: ideals of what a “good wife” is/does (gender roles/scripts)
Deeply embedded cognitive structures

- **Examples driving violence**
  - **Gender**: gender-related roles and hierarchies are frequently so ingrained as to be “invisible” to participants
  - **Ownership**: ownership schema are applied to women and children
  - **Purity**: violated women are “impure”
  - **Honour**: male honour is linked to female sexuality
Implications of norm theory for prevention programming
Implications for programming

• To abandon a social norm, it is necessary to change people’s social expectations within the relevant reference network.

• To create a social norm, it is necessary to induce the right kind of social expectations (empirical and injunctive) within the relevant reference network.

• Often it is easier to create a new positive norm, than dismantle an existing problematic one.
Shifting norms requires addressing 3 key elements

1) Descriptive expectations
   - What people think others do

2) Normative (injunctive) expectations
   - What people think others believe they should do

3) Reference Group
   - Whose esteem does a person want?
   - Whose disapproval or ostracism does one fear?
   - Whose advice is taken most seriously?
To change a Norm, Focus on the Reference Network, not the Population at Risk

• Example: Social norm of child marriage
  – Population at risk: adolescent girls
  – Population whose beliefs (normative and empirical) perpetuate norm: parents, bridegroom’s families, caste, village

• Adolescent girls could be highly motivated agents of change, but changing their aspirations is not enough for change
  – Beliefs of reference group; availability of economic alternatives to marriage, norms of sexual purity, patriarchal marriage system
Implications for Programming

Reinforcing a descriptive norm can backfire
Implications for Programming

Reinforcing a descriptive norm can backfire
Implications for Programming

Emphasize positive descriptive norms
Implications for programming

Re-shape definitions and expectations
Community norm change around FGC

The example of Tostan
Community=reference group

- Formative work to understand local beliefs, values, norms
- Creation of critical reflection groups
- Sustained values deliberations within them
- Organized diffusion of deliberations out from an expanding core
  - Within a community
  - From community to community
- Till enough people are ready to change, then
- Coordinated shift among them
  - By positive and future-oriented celebration

Gerry Mackie, Univ of Calif. San Diego
Core Group, 1% of Population
Tostan Community Empowerment Program

(Near Labé, Guinea: Courtesy of Gerry Mackie and Tostan HQ Volunteer)
Values Deliberations

Gerry Mackie, Univ of Calif. San Diego
Content of Engagement, from Negative Messages Directed at Individuals...
To Positive Messages promoted to Communities, Sudan, 2005-2010
images from Sudan UNICEF, Samira Ahmed

Saleema is an Arabic word meaning, *whole, healthy in mind and body, intact*. It is also a girl’s name.
Diffusion: From Core to Community

Community Outreach

Participants share information with others in the village through use of theater, role play, song, illustrations, games, poetry, and flip charts.

Tostan 2007

Gerry Mackie, Univ of Calif. San Diego
Participants organize other specific meetings (involving only religious and traditional leaders, only youth, only women, etc.) to share new information, gain support and consensus, and make decisions.
Organized Diffusion of Deliberations

Within Tostan Communities
and between Tostan communities
and intermarrying villages

Adapted from Gerry Mackie, Univ of Calif. San Diego
Enough People Ready to Change:
Delegates Arriving to Intervillage Meeting for Organizing a Public
Declaration of Abandonment, Ziguinchor, Senegal, 2004
Public Declaration: A collective pledge to promote human rights and the health of girls and women
Medina Sambe Kandé, Senegal, 2004
Photo: Tostan

Gerry Mackie, Univ of Calif. San Diego
Moment of Shift From Old Norm to New Norm
Thank you