

SOCIAL NORMS LEXICON

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This Social Norms Lexicon provides a set of simple, clear definitions and examples for terms frequently used in social norms theory, research, and practice.

The Passages Project compiled this resource with the goal of fostering a common language around social norms. The Social Norms Lexicon facilitates shared understanding of social norms terms, thereby improving communication and collaboration among stakeholders from different regions and disciplines to advance social norms research and practice. Each term contains three sections in the following layout, including:

- A brief definition.
- An expanded definition with more detail about the term.
- Examples of the term.

Where relevant, the definitions include implications for program implementation and links to other related concepts within the Lexicon. While these terms may describe individual or collective phenomena, they are not necessarily individually or collectively determined. Rather, they are affected by social structures, belief systems, and broad macro influences such as political or economic systems.

NOTE: For readability, we have simplified many of the brief definitions to the individual (using “I statements”), although many concepts also apply to interpersonal relationships and groups (“we statements”), as explained in the expanded definitions and examples.

SOURCES: These definitions draw from a number of widely used resources such as [Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change materials](#), the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Gender Equality Lexicon](#), the [Interagency Gender Working Group Evidence-Based Measures of Empowerment for Research on Gender Equality \(EMERGE\)](#), and [others](#).

Ability

QUICK DEFINITION

What I can do.

How easy or difficult it is for one to do something. Ability is comprised of five elements including time, money, physical effort, mental effort, and routine effort (how a behavior fits or does not fit into an existing routine).^{1,2}

People with high levels of ability will be able to perform a given behavior while people with low levels of ability will find a behavior difficult or impossible to perform.

Ability applies to individuals and groups of individuals (i.e., individual ability and collective ability).

EXAMPLES

- **Low individual ability:** I am not able to use family planning because I do not have money to purchase it or time to travel to the clinic to get it.
- **High collective ability:** We are able to save money as a group. It is easier than saving money alone because we hold each other accountable.

Agency

QUICK DEFINITION

My capacity to take action toward my desired goal or intention.

Agency describes the capacity of individuals to make their own free choices and act independently on them. Agency requires both having the resources or physical ability necessary to perform the behavior and the power to do so.

Inherent in agency is freedom of choice to determine what behaviors are to be performed³ and the belief that one can perform them (i.e., self-efficacy).⁴ People who have high levels of agency are more free to behave in a manner of their choosing. People with low levels of agency are less free to behave in a manner of their choosing.³ Agency applies to individuals and groups of individuals (i.e., individual agency and collective agency). Degree of agency may determine whether an individual challenges or adheres to a social norm that is misaligned with their personal attitudes.^{3,5}

Agency is often used synonymously with self-efficacy⁵; however, self-efficacy refers to one's perceived ability to deal with a task or situation⁴, while agency refers to having physical ability, resources, self-efficacy, and the control necessary to deal with a task or situation. Self-efficacy is a primary requirement for agency: Even if the necessary resources and power are available to someone, if they do not perceive they are able to make changes in their life, they will not be inspired or motivated to act or deal with a task or situation.⁴

EXAMPLES

- **Low agency:** I want to use family planning, but my partner refuses to let me visit the clinic to obtain a method.
- **High agency:** I want to use family planning to prevent pregnancy, and I do so even when my partner opposes.

Alter

QUICK DEFINITION

An individual within an egocentric network who is identified by another focal person in the network.

Alter is a term used in egocentric social network analysis to describe an individual nominated by an ego, or focal person.⁶ All of the alters, or others, in an ego's network make up the ego's personal network. Alters in social network analysis are similar to reference groups for social norms. In social network analysis, researchers study how alters influence the attitudes and behaviors of the ego and vice versa.⁷

EXAMPLES

- Mariam (ego) reports that she thinks that her mother (alter) would disapprove if she engaged in premarital sex (injunctive norm).
- John (ego) reports that his three best friends and his two cousins (alters) frequently engage in premarital sex (descriptive norm).

Attitude

QUICK DEFINITION

Whether I evaluate a behavior, idea, object, person, or situation favorably or unfavorably.

Individual attitudes are personal evaluations about how the world should be.⁸ Attitudes may develop from different experiences, beliefs, behaviors, and family and social environments. Although individually held, attitudes are not formed in isolation; they are influenced by social context and experience, and they influence behavior.⁹ Personal attitudes may or may not align with prevailing social norms; they form and change over time.¹⁰

Attitudes are a distinct but overlapping construct to beliefs (which reflect a person's perspective of truth) and include a personal judgement about something. As such, beliefs inform attitudes.^{11,12}

EXAMPLES

- **Attitudes that do not align with norms:** I think it is good for girls who are not yet married to use contraception to prevent pregnancy but others in my community do not agree.
- **Attitudes that align with norms:** I think it is good for couples to use family planning to space births and so do my friends.

Behavior

QUICK DEFINITION

What I do.

Behaviors are the actions we perform.¹⁰ Behaviors take place in a specific context and are driven by individual [attitudes](#), motivations, and aspirations⁹, along with social and structural forces, facilitators, and barriers.⁵ Behaviors can be undertaken by individuals or by groups (i.e. individual behavior or collective behavior). In programming, we often aim to shift social norms to support individual and collective behavior; which leads to improved health and wellbeing.⁵

See also [Practice](#).

EXAMPLES

- I use family planning.
- We save money.

Behavioral Intentions

QUICK DEFINITION

What I plan to do.

Intentions are the plans or ideas that an individual or group aims to act upon. Social norms about a certain behavior are associated with individual plans to engage or not engage in a particular behavior:¹³

EXAMPLES

- My sister intended to go to school, but my parents couldn't afford the fees.
- I plan to use a family planning method to space my pregnancies, as I had my first child earlier this year.

Belief

QUICK DEFINITION

What (I believe) I know.

A belief is an opinion, assumption, or conviction that a person holds to be true. Beliefs are internal perspectives formed from personal experiences and preferences, the influence of [social norms](#), and learnings from others. Beliefs describe personal acceptance or rejection of whether a statement is true or whether something exists (regardless of its actual existence). If someone believes something, they think it is true.¹⁴

The difference between knowledge and beliefs is contested. Some philosophers, such as Kant, refer to beliefs as subjective information, neither correct nor incorrect, and knowledge as objective information, either correct or incorrect.¹⁴ A more recent definition conceives of knowledge as “encompassing all a person knows or believes to be true.”^{15,16} In either case, we often describe our own beliefs as “knowledge.”¹⁷

Beliefs are a distinct but overlapping construct to [attitudes](#) (which include a personal judgement about something) and reflect a person’s perspective of truth. As such, beliefs inform attitudes.^{11,12}

EXAMPLES

- I believe that only cowardly men hit their wives.
- I believe that girls or young women who become pregnant while in school will be unable to complete their studies.
- Even though experts and doctors say otherwise, I believe that face masks will not prevent disease.



Compliance

QUICK DEFINITION

My adherence to established social norms.

Compliance with a [social norm](#) is the act of adhering to that norm, such as doing what most people in a specific group do or expect you to do.⁵ Individuals and groups may comply with a norm because of perceived [social sanctions](#) (rewards or punishments enacted by a social group on individuals engaging in a behavior) and the extent to which they desire to conform to the particular social group enacting the norm (i.e. desiring not to be different than a social group). Compliance with a norm is not always a conscious choice.⁵

EXAMPLES

- **Compliance with a norm:** I vaccinate my children because most other parents at my children's school vaccinate their children and I feel pressured to do so.
- **Noncompliance with a norm:** I do not vaccinate my children even though there is a lot of pressure from other parents at my children's school to do so.
- **Group compliance with a norm:** Ninety-five percent of parents immunized their children at my school.

Context

QUICK DEFINITION

My geographic and social environment and circumstances.

Context describes the environment and circumstances—including political, economic, religious, social, and cultural attributes—that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea in a way that allows it to be fully understood and assessed. [Social norms](#) can be specific to a particular context or broad enough to span multiple contexts. Social norms shape context and context shapes social norms.¹⁸ Context has also been shown to influence [behavior](#).^{19,20}

EXAMPLES

- I want to get a high school diploma but there is no school nearby and my parents say it is too risky for me to walk such a long way every day.
- In the city where my aunt lives, newly married couples are expected to wait until they are well-established to have their first child.
- At college, many students incorrectly perceive drinking alcohol as [normative](#), which has a significant impact on increasing unsafe drinking behaviors.¹⁸

Descriptive Norm

QUICK DEFINITION

What I think or believe others do.

Descriptive norms are what individuals believe is typical behavior in a group, regardless of whether that behavior is actually common.^{5, 10, 21} Descriptive norms are also known as empirical expectations.

EXAMPLES

- I believe most women in my community only use family planning after they have had their first son.
- I think that most men in my community hit their wives because I have heard my friends and family talk about it, although I would never do so.

Diffusion

OR: DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS

QUICK DEFINITION

How ideas and behaviors spread across a group of people.

Diffusion is a social process describing how an innovation, in this case an idea or practice, spreads widely within a group of people or [social network](#).^{22,23} Diffusion of innovations theory states that innovations gain momentum and diffuse, or spread, along various communication channels among members of a social system (i.e., a geographic, religious, online, idea-based, or other form of community) to influence people's adoption of a new idea or [behavior](#).²⁴ People adopt innovations at different rates, and some are more likely to adopt an innovation than others. Adopters fall into one of five categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. To maximize their effectiveness, social norms-shifting programs may tailor interventions for individuals in each of these categories.²²

EXAMPLES

- I saw quite a few of my friends post on social media about their experiences with sexual assault and harassment using the hashtag #MeToo, so I shared my own story online as well. Now, almost all of my friends have shared their stories about sexual assault or harassment online.
- My husband was one of the first men in my town to get a vasectomy. He told his brothers about his experience, and they also had the surgery. They also found it very easy and are telling their friends about it too.

Ego

QUICK DEFINITION

The individual from whose perspective the social world or network is being reported or described.

In social network analysis, the term “ego” refers to the individual actor who is the focus of the analysis.⁶ In egocentric social network analysis, the social world is defined only from the ego's perspective. Egos are asked to nominate people with whom they are socially connected. These individuals are referred to as “alters” in social network analysis. The ego's alters are the ego's reference group or network. Studying social networks helps us understand how norms diffuse (or fail to diffuse) through and exert influence within bounded social groups.⁷

EXAMPLES

- Mariam (ego) reports that she thinks that her mother (alter) would disapprove if she engaged in premarital sex (injunctive norm).
- John (ego) reports that his three best friends and his two cousins (alters) frequently engage in premarital sex (descriptive norm).

Gatekeepers

QUICK DEFINITION

Individuals who hold social influence over my community or who control access to my community.

Gatekeepers are individuals or groups of individuals who hold power or visibility in a community or given setting.²¹ Gatekeepers may hold formal positions that grant them the power to determine what information reaches a community or what people are given access to communicate their messaging.²⁵ However, gatekeepers may also be informal leaders who are often unrecognized by outsiders. In either case, they are often critical allies in achieving behavior change through [social norms](#) programming due to their access to and power over communication channels within [social networks](#). Gatekeepers may also be [referents](#) (reference group), [key influencers](#), [role models](#), or [alters](#) (to a particular ego) within a social network.

EXAMPLES

- Because I live at home, my parents determine what information and community events I have access to.
- In my village, the group of elders must approve of any projects before researchers are allowed into the community and to interact with other community members.

Gender

QUICK DEFINITION

My socially constructed ideas of what it means to be a man or woman in a specific context.

“A culturally-defined set of economic, social, and political roles, responsibilities, rights, entitlements obligations, associated with being female and male, as well as the power relations between and among women and men, boys and girls. The definition and expectations of what it means to be a woman or girl and a man or boy, and [sanctions](#) for not adhering to those expectations, vary across cultures and over time, and often intersect with other factors such as race, class, age and sexual orientation. Transgender individuals, whether they identify as men or women, are subject to the same set of expectations and sanctions.”²⁶

EXAMPLES

- I call my teacher a woman because she wears a dress.
- Men in my community never cry. If they do, they will be considered weak.
- Many people in the United States believe that only a man can be president.

Gender Integration Continuum

QUICK DEFINITION

A framework that classifies intervention approaches based on their sensitivity to gender.

The gender integration continuum divides intervention approaches into two broad categories:

- **Gender aware:** Programs and policies that examine and address the gendered socioeconomic and political context in which they exist and the associated gender dynamics.
- **Gender blind:** Programs and policies that ignore the economic, social, and political roles, responsibilities, rights, entitlements, obligations, and power relations associated with each gender and also ignore the dynamics between men and women. They often assume that women have the same interests and needs as men.

The framework further articulates three gender-aware subcategories based on how gender norms and inequalities are treated in the planning, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of a program or policy. These sub-categories are gender exploitative, gender accommodating, and gender transformative.²⁶

EXAMPLES

- A **gender-aware** intervention to reduce smoking might have different strategies based on the different experiences of women and men.
- A **gender-blind** intervention to reduce smoking would apply the same strategies to smoking reduction to both men and women.

Gender Norm

QUICK DEFINITION

My community's expectations and the rules I perceive that dictate how I should behave based on my biological sex and social perceptions of my gender.

Communities and societies create collective beliefs about what behaviors are appropriate for men and women and about how the genders should relate; these beliefs are known as "gender norms."²⁷ Because gender norms are created by a given culture, they are referred to as "socially constructed." However; biological differences between men and women are often used, many times inappropriately, to justify social differences.

Individuals who adhere to gender norms may be rewarded with social acceptance and inclusion, while those who do not conform may face social exclusion, violence, or even death. Gender norms set standards for a range of important decisions individuals make throughout their lifespans. These norms often reflect and cement existing inequitable roles and relations between the genders.²⁷

Gender norms are shaped by (and in turn shape) power dynamics. They typically define the expected behavior of people who consider themselves men or women or who are considered by others to be either men or women. These norms do not typically accommodate transgendered, non-binary, or otherwise gender-fluid identities.^{5,28}

Gender norms collectively ascribed to men are referred to as "masculinities" while gender norms collectively ascribed to women are referred to as "femininities." Gender norms are a sub-set of social norms, but have some unique characteristics and considerations.²⁷

EXAMPLES

- Esther recently gave birth to her first baby girl. Childbirth is not a gender norm because only females can bear children (and males cannot).
- In her family, Esther is primarily responsible for child-rearing. Child-rearing is a gender norm usually ascribed to women because, although both men and women can rear children, in many societies this role is socially assigned to women.
- In her family, Esther's husband is primarily responsible for earning income. Income earning is a gender norm usually ascribed to men because, although both women and men can earn income, in many societies this role is socially assigned to men.

Gender Relations

QUICK DEFINITION

The socially constructed power relations between me and others based on their perception of my gender.

The relationships and interactions between people based on their perceptions of [gender](#), which are inevitably influenced by [gender norms](#), are known as gender relations.²⁹ [Power](#) underlies gender relations in that an individual's access to, responsibility for, and power over resources, opportunities, rights, decisionmaking, and labor are systematically and differentially distributed by gender.^{30,31} Men have more hierarchical privilege and power than women; individuals with gender identities or expressions in agreement with prevailing gender norms have more privilege and power than those whose identifies or expressions are in opposition to prevailing gender norms.^{30,31} Gender relations exist within and across all levels of the [socio-ecological model](#). Gender relations intersect with other social factors including class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and age and vary by time and place.

EXAMPLES

- In much of the world, on average, a woman will make less than a man, even one who has the same qualifications.³²
- Birth spacing among couples in my community is often not practiced as men and women do not typically communicate with each other about family planning and preferred family size.
- Transgender men may have more difficulty than cisgender men in accessing comprehensive and unbiased reproductive health services.³³

Gender-Transformative Approaches

QUICK DEFINITION

Policies and programs that seek to transform gender relations to promote equality.

A gender-transformative approach attempts to promote gender equality by: (1) fostering critical examination of inequalities and gender roles, norms, and dynamics; (2) recognizing and strengthening norms that support equality and an enabling environment; (3) promoting the position of women, girls, and marginalized groups; and (4) transforming the underlying social structures, policies, and broadly held social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities.²⁶

EXAMPLES

- A gender-transformative intervention might seek to reduce disparities between men and women by working to understand the social norms that underline men's and women's smoking habits and taking action to transform harmful norms that drive disproportionate smoking rates among men.
- Mawe Tatu is a gender-transformative program in Democratic Republic of Congo that seeks to increase women's economic empowerment by improving women's financial literacy, engaging with men to develop new "positive masculinity" norms, and promoting comprehensive family life education including gender and rights.³⁴
- Promundo's Program H encourages reflection on gender norms and encourages participants to reconsider stereotypically male roles through role play, community campaigns, and peer-group discussion. The program resulted in more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors among male participants, strengthened couple communication, and improved attitudes toward caregiving.³⁵

Injunctive Norm

QUICK DEFINITION

What (I believe) others think I should do.

Injunctive norms are individuals' perceptions of acceptable or unacceptable behavior within a group. Injunctive norms assess expectations about what people should do (or should not do) rather than how people actually behave.^{5, 10, 21, 36} Injunctive norms are also known as normative expectations.

EXAMPLES

- People in my community think girls must be circumcised to be considered for marriage.
- Most people in my village believe that a woman should be married before having a child.

Intersectionality

QUICK DEFINITION

The intersection of my social identities.

Intersectionality describes how individuals (or groups) have multiple, interdependent social identities. Important identities to consider typically include race, class, religion, age, disability, sexuality, and gender.³⁷ These identities create interconnected systems of discrimination, disadvantage, or relative privilege and affect each person's lived experience, health, and behavioral outcomes.³⁸

EXAMPLES

- Men from poor families can leverage their gender to overcome discrimination based on their socio-economic status while women from these same families are unable to do so due to the combination of discrimination based on gender and socio-economic status.³⁹
- Men who have sex with men and are HIV-positive may experience “dual stigma” and discrimination within healthcare and social settings that hampers their ability to receive health treatment and hold stable jobs in their communities.⁴⁰

Key Influencers

QUICK DEFINITION

People who influence me or others.

Key influencers sway the opinions, [beliefs](#), actions, or [behaviors](#) of other individuals or groups, both consciously and unconsciously.⁴¹ They are often, but not always, part of an individual's [reference group](#). Key influencers often drive [social norms](#) and can act as barriers to or facilitators of norm change. They may also hold official positions of [power](#) or otherwise function as community [gatekeepers](#). Often used synonymously with [role model](#).

EXAMPLES

- The actions of popular older students in high school may influence younger students' behaviors.
- A school principal needs to identify who among the teachers are key influencers if she wants to successfully implement a new policy about gender equity in the classroom.

Knowledge

QUICK DEFINITION

What (I believe) I know.

Knowledge is information about how the world works that an individual thinks is true. Philosophers typically divide knowledge into three categories: personal, procedural (i.e. “knowledge-how”), and propositional (i.e. “knowledge-that”).^{42,43} Personal knowledge comes from firsthand experience. Procedural knowledge refers to knowledge of how to do something. Propositional knowledge describes general facts—claims about the world and how we know those claims to be true. Knowledge is gained over time through experience, education, and research. Knowledge, therefore, changes based on new information, experiences, and cultural [contexts](#).¹⁵

The difference between knowledge and [beliefs](#) is contested. Some philosophers, such as Kant, refer to beliefs as subjective information, neither correct nor incorrect, and knowledge as objective information, either correct or incorrect.¹⁴ A more recent definition conceives of knowledge as “encompassing all a person knows or believes to be true.”^{15,16} In either case, we often describe our own beliefs as “knowledge.”¹⁷

EXAMPLES

- **Personal:** The teacher’s knowledge of how to effectively manage a classroom was gained through years of teaching experience.
- **Procedural:** Expanding someone’s knowledge of contraceptive methods may increase effective contraceptive use.
- **Propositional:** The doctor’s knowledge of treatment of postpartum hemorrhage came from coursework in medical school.

Meta-Norms

QUICK DEFINITION

Foundational norms that are broadly shared across settings and regions.

Meta-norms describe social expectations that are deeply rooted and closely tied with [beliefs](#), values, and [attitudes](#) and that are foundational to many other norms and [behaviors](#).^{36,44} Meta-norms exist across multiple levels of the socio-ecological model and interact across levels to influence behavior. Meta-norms have a role in both creating and maintaining many [social norms](#) and thus preserve social power differentials among groups.^{45, 46} Shifting meta-norms may require innovative and intensive strategies that take more time and effort than is needed to shift other types of social norms.

EXAMPLES

- Meta-norms that divide labor by [gender](#) exist across most societies, with men primarily responsible for income earning and women primarily responsible for childrearing and caring. This meta-norm underpins many contextually specific social norms such as those encouraging girls to stay home and do housework while boys go to school or those discouraging women from breastfeeding in the workplace.
- Meta-norms exist broadly that encourage individuals to perform actions to protect their community from harm. This meta-norm underpins many contextually specific social norms, such as those arising during the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraging others to stay home if sick, wash their hands frequently, and wear a mask.

Motive

OR: MOTIVATION

QUICK DEFINITION

Why I do what I do. How inclined I am to do something.

A motive is a person's reason(s) for behaving in a particular way.⁴⁷ Desire, need, pain, belonging, and force can all be powerful motivations. The term also describes how inclined someone is to engage in a behavior.² Social norms and related sanctions affect motivation to perform behaviors.

EXAMPLES

- The girls were motivated to attend school because they wanted profitable jobs.
- The teachers' motivation to see their students thrive inspired them to work extra days to ensure that the students were well prepared for their exams.

Normative

QUICK DEFINITION

What is standard or most commonly done or believed in my society.

A term used to describe widely accepted and common [behaviors](#) and [beliefs](#) that are understood by a group or a society to be standard, correct, or appropriate.⁴⁸ What is normative varies from place to place and often between groups in a given place.

EXAMPLES

- **Normative behavior:** When meeting someone for the first time in rural Senegal, it is a normative behavior to greet them and ask about the health and welfare of family members and friends.⁴⁹
- **Normative belief:** In Nepal, people believe it's acceptable for girls to express their emotions, but unacceptable for boys to do so.⁵⁰

Norms-Shifting Interventions

QUICK DEFINITION

Interventions that aim to facilitate shifts in harmful norms or foster new norms to promote health and well-being.

Norms-shifting interventions (NSI) employ activities intended to alter social expectations about a behavior or a set of [behaviors](#). Such interventions are often based on analysis of [social norms](#) and led by communities through a process of critical reflection, resulting in positive new norms rooted within the values of that group. A NSI may help individuals identify the norms related to a behavior, allow them to critically examine these norms and related behaviors, and consider new possibilities. A core group of actors can then engage with others to create new, shared beliefs at the community level. These activities often target multiple levels of the socio-ecological system to shift norms and promote the well-being of affected populations.⁵¹ Norms-shifting interventions often complement other strategies to change behavior, such as increasing [knowledge](#), transforming individual [attitudes](#), and addressing structural and material conditions (e.g. economic hardship).⁵¹ Techniques such as community dialogue, public testimony and role modeling, media campaigns, and structural interventions may lead to the creation and promotion of positive new norms or to the shifting of previously held harmful norms.⁵² Once a “tipping point” is reached, where new shared beliefs have spread widely and reach a sufficient level of [diffusion](#), norm shifting spontaneously diffuses to the rest of the community.^{53,54}

EXAMPLES

- Growing up GREAT! is based in the Democratic Republic of Congo and brings together boys and girls, teachers, parents, community leaders, and health providers in reflection, learning, and dialogue through community discussions, health center exchange visits, video testimonials, and reflective discussions and group learning sessions using stories and games to foster more equitable gender norms that support adolescent health and well-being.⁵⁵
- SASA! inspires and enables communities in Uganda to rethink and reshape social norms about power that are linked to violence against women.⁵⁶ The intervention is organized into four phases of change: 1) community members begin thinking about violence against women and HIV as interconnected issues; 2) communities look at how they may accept men’s use of power over women; 3) communities identify ways to support women who experience violence, men committed to change, and activists speaking out on these issues; 4) action to prevent violence.

Outcome Expectations

QUICK DEFINITION

My perception of the benefits of engaging in a certain behavior:

Outcome expectations describe an individual's belief that a certain behavior will lead to expected benefits, including social acceptance.⁵⁷ Outcome expectations influence the motivation of an individual or group to act on a behavior or not.^{58,59}

EXAMPLES

- Students who perceive that drinking alcohol will help them to be socially accepted by their friends group are more likely to drink.⁶⁰
- I am careful about washing my hands because I believe it could save my life and keep my family safe from diseases.

Power

QUICK DEFINITION

My ability to do something or influence another person to do something.

Power represents the ability to do something or act in a particular way or to influence the [beliefs](#), [norms](#), and [behaviors](#) of others or the course of events.

There are four types of power:^{61, 62}

- 1. Power over:** This type of power is built on force, coercion, domination, and control and the belief that power is held by some individuals in society but not all.
- 2. Power with:** This is shared power that grows out of collaboration and relationships built on respect, mutual support, and collaboration.
- 3. Power to:** The power to make a difference, to create something new, or to achieve goals. It is built on the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world.
- 4. Power within:** A person's sense of self-worth underlies their power within and involves people having a sense of their own capacity.

These types of power can be held and used by individuals, groups, or institutions. Power may manifest both subtly and overtly in many ways, for example, in access to or control over resources, [social networks](#), opportunities, and benefits from community structures and government policies. Power is woven through our social, political, and economic structures. It can be formal (such as an elected position) or informal (such as the elders of a village), explicit (the laws of country constitution) or implicit (male privilege). Power can be seen in the advantages accrued by one group over time and across generations. Power is rooted in social hierarchies that create and reinforce themselves. These hierarchies often create the impression that the current order is natural and inherent and thus immutable. Individuals and groups who consider their power inherent may feel threatened by efforts to shift norms that would lessen their "power over." As such, shifting norms may result in backlash against those trying to make change.⁵

EXAMPLES

- Men in my society hold more positions in elected office than women, which increases their power to dictate policies that affect women, such as contraceptive access.
- Social norms in many countries specify that men have power over their wives and children. These unequal power dynamics contribute to violence against women and child maltreatment.^{63, 64}

Practice

QUICK DEFINITION

What I do habitually or regularly.

The act of routinely carrying out or performing an activity, method, or custom.⁶⁵ Practices among individuals or communities are often driven by communities' normative [beliefs](#) and [attitudes](#). Three elements must converge for a behavior to occur: [motivation](#), [ability](#), and a [prompt](#).²

See also [Behavior](#).

EXAMPLES

- I started breastfeeding (practice) my daughter immediately after she was born (prompt). I had difficulties at first, but my mother helped me through them (ability). I was determined because I saw that my sister's baby was healthier than my cousin's baby who was formula fed (motivation). Plus, my friends gossiped terribly about someone we know who gave up on breastfeeding (motivation).
- Millions of girls and women in communities around the world are impacted by female genital mutilation/cutting (practice).⁶⁶ Most girls are cut before they reach puberty (prompt). Parents may cut their daughters to comply with social norms that encourage men to marry women who have been cut (motivation). Female genital mutilation is usually performed without the consent of the girl and, in many cases, where they have no ability to refuse.

Prompt

QUICK DEFINITION

A signal or alert that encourages me to take action.

Typically, prompts take the form of a message, signal, or cue that catalyzes a [behavior](#) or change.² The [social norms](#) of an individual or group can either encourage or deter these cues, leading to either action or inaction.⁶⁷

EXAMPLES

- The message from the public health department about the dangers of smoking prompted the community to take action and raise the tax on tobacco products.
- A community media campaign addressing the topic of corporal punishment prompted teachers to learn more about positive discipline techniques.

Reference Group

OR: REFERENTS

QUICK DEFINITION

People whose behaviors and beliefs shape my own behaviors and beliefs.

Social norms operate, in part, through individuals observing other people's behavior and hearing their opinions. Reference groups, or referents, are networks of people with whom a person identifies and to whom they compare themselves. These are the people whose opinion or behavior matters to an individual for a particular behavior, belief, or norm and within a certain context. Referents therefore serve to inform a person's ideas about what is socially acceptable.^{5, 10, 25} Depending on the behavior or norm, the most salient reference group(s) may be people to whom one is directly connected (friends), those to whom one is more broadly and indirectly connected (friends of friends), or community members in the village or town.⁶⁸ Reference groups can also include celebrities or characters in radio or television shows or on social media (i.e. role models). Referents may be the same individuals who enforce behaviors through rewards or punishment.

EXAMPLES

- I always complete my homework on time because my teachers (reference group) will call on me in class in front of my friends (reference group), and I will be embarrassed if I have nothing to show.
- When asking students who had most influenced their political views, many children said their parents (reference group).

Role Model

QUICK DEFINITION

A person I look to as an example to be imitated or emulated.

A role model is someone people look to for information about what [behaviors](#) are acceptable.⁶⁹ Role models may be someone an individual personally knows, a member of their [reference group](#), or a public figure or celebrity. Social norms interventions often use role modeling to shape perceptions about what is typical and expected behavior, for example through public testimony or mass media.⁷⁰ The intervention programs can point to role models who are demonstrating desired [attitudes](#) and behaviors.

EXAMPLES

- Community health workers serve as role models to promote vaccination by emphasizing that they have vaccinated their own children.
- *OTEKA*, a serial radio drama in Northern Uganda, purposefully used characters that community members would identify with to model the process of behavior change to shift norms related to [gender](#) roles, intimate partner violence, and voluntary family planning use.

Sanctions

(REWARDS/PUNISHMENTS)

QUICK DEFINITION

What I perceive as the social rewards or punishments for engaging in a behavior.

Sanctions are the rewards or punishments that an individual and community believe will follow a given [behavior](#).^{5,10,21} Sanctions, which can be both physical and social, therefore influence behavior within a community or society. Rewards encourage acceptable behaviors and punishments discourage unacceptable [behaviors](#).

EXAMPLES

- If I were to get pregnant before I were married, I believe that my friends would ridicule me.
- My parents encouraged me to get married by promising a large wedding and many presents.

Scale-Up

QUICK DEFINITION

Deliberate efforts to expand the reach of health innovations in order to increase their impact.

Scale-up describes intentional efforts to transition successful pilot health innovations from small, experimental programs to larger, institutionalized programs. Scale-up efforts are undertaken so that more people benefit from proven innovations and to foster lasting policy and program development.⁷¹ There are two types of scale-up. Horizontal scale-up refers to the expansion or replication of an innovation to include more people or more geographic contexts. Vertical scale-up refers to institutionalization of an innovation via policy, political, legal, regulatory, budgetary, or systemic change. During scale-up, interventions are often adapted for the new context, to adjust the approach, or to add new components.²⁵

EXAMPLES

- Pathfinder International created the PRACHAR Project to change [social norms](#) and prevent child marriage and early pregnancy in India. After a successful pilot in Bihar, Pathfinder scaled the intervention horizontally to two additional states. They also scaled it vertically, within Bihar, via policy change through the Department of Health and Family Welfare. During this process, new intervention modules were added to address the needs of new populations and the increased involvement of religious leaders.⁷²
- Growing-up GREAT! is an intervention designed to promote adolescent development, reproductive health, and well-being through community group reflection and dialogue and thus build more equitable [gender norms](#). The program's simple, easy-to-use materials were designed to scale up easily and a Stakeholder Reference Group consisting of governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, and donor representatives was established to guide the scale-up process.⁵⁵

Self-Efficacy

QUICK DEFINITION

My perception of my ability to perform behaviors and influence outcomes in my life.

Self-efficacy describes an individual's perception that they have the power to produce desired effects through their actions.^{58,73} People who have high levels of self-efficacy feel confident that they can perform a behavior and that their actions will lead to their desired outcome. Self-efficacy applies to individuals (individual self-efficacy) and groups of individuals (collective self-efficacy).

Agency is often used synonymously with self-efficacy;⁵ however, self-efficacy refers to one's *perceived* ability to deal with a task or situation, whereas agency describes having the physical ability, resources, and control necessary to deal with a task or situation.⁴ Self-efficacy is primary to agency; even if the necessary resources and power are available, individuals who do not perceive themselves as able to make changes in their lives will not be motivated to act.⁴ Individuals require high self-efficacy to challenge social norms.

EXAMPLES

- **Low self-efficacy:** Sometimes I have unprotected sex because I do not feel comfortable asking my partner to use a condom.
- **High self-efficacy:** If my partner wanted to have sexual intercourse but I did not, I feel confident that I could easily say no and ask them to stop.

Sensitivity to Social Sanctions

QUICK DEFINITION

How much the rewards and punishments for engaging in a behavior matter to or affect me.

How sensitive a group or individual is to social [sanctions](#)—the punishment or reward they expect will accompany a behavior—influences how willing they are to engage in by a given [behavior](#).⁶⁷ Someone who is sensitive to sanctions is very likely to change their future behavior in response to sanctions while someone who is not sensitive to sanctions is unlikely to be influenced by them.

EXAMPLES

- **Not sensitive to sanctions:** Other men in my community call me weak for letting my wife help decide about our family's financial decisions. Them calling me weak does not bother me though, and we continue to make decisions together.
- **Sensitive to sanctions:** Providers at my clinic who receive the highest client satisfaction scores are rewarded with a bonus every month. This has motivated me to be very patient and kind with my clients whereas before I would sometimes become frustrated with them.

Social Network

QUICK DEFINITION

Who I am connected to.

A social network describes the interconnected social interactions and relationships between individuals.⁷⁴ Social networks exist both in person and virtually and are often formed along similar interests or identities and for social, economic, business, and political purposes.¹⁸ Social norms are shaped, communicated, and enforced in part within social networks as members abide by normative behavior and apply sanctions for deviations from the norm.^{70,75}

EXAMPLES

- A social network study on mothers' breastfeeding behavior asks breastfeeding mothers to describe the attitudes about breastfeeding held by their five best friends.
- Adolescents' social networks often include friends from school, family members, and sports team members. These in-person social networks often overlap with members of their virtual social networks on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and other social media.
- The Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change is a social network of programmers, researchers, and professionals dedicated to addressing social norms to promote human health and well-being.

Social Norms

QUICK DEFINITION

What I think people do and should or should not do in my community.
My perceptions of typical and appropriate behavior within my social network.

Social norms are the perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable, appropriate, and obligatory actions within a given group or community. Social norms are learned, sometimes explicitly but often implicitly, and evolve over time. Social norms can encourage or discourage behavior and, as a result, influence individual and community well-being.

There are two primary types of social norms: (1) descriptive norms and (2) injunctive norms.

Importantly, people's perceptions of social norms within their community may or may not reflect actual realities. Social norms operate within and across multiple social levels, ranging from friend groups to schools or workplaces to state- and national-level communities.^{5,67}

EXAMPLES

- **Descriptive:** Most teachers in my school use corporal punishment to discipline children.
- **Injunctive:** Most teachers in my school believe that teachers should use corporal punishment to discipline children and control the classroom.

Social Norms Assessment

QUICK DEFINITION

Activities to map and understand social norms in a given context.

The purpose of norms assessment is to identify the social norms driving behavior in a given context, who enforces those norms (i.e. the reference group), the rewards and punishments (i.e. sanctions) for adhering (or not) to a specific norm, and how much people care about the sanctions (i.e. sensitivity to sanctions).^{76, 77} This information can inform intervention design by determining which norms should be addressed, who should be engaged, and how to address rewards and sanctions. The results of norms assessments can also be used to select evaluation indicators and phrase survey questions and response options. Assessment methods may encompass qualitative, participatory, and quantitative methods; secondary data analysis; and desk reviews of existing literature. Social norms assessments are also known as social norms diagnosis or social norms exploration.

EXAMPLES

- Before we designed our program to increase voluntary contraceptive use among newly married couples, we interviewed young women and men, their parents, and community elders to learn about norms influencing contraceptive use.
- We described different hypothetical scenarios during focus groups and learned that young men look to their pastors and young women to their husbands to learn how new couples should make decisions together.

Socio-Ecological Model

QUICK DEFINITION

A framework to explain how human health, behavior, and related norms are influenced by factors at multiple levels of society that interact with one another.

The socio-ecological model highlights how factors at different levels, including the social determinants of health, are interrelated and influence behavior and outcomes.^{78,79} The model posits that behavior, and related norms, are the result of individuals' knowledge, values, and attitudes as well as social and structural influences, such as interpersonal relationships, communities, institutions, and policy. Adopting a socio-ecological approach involves considering the various levels of society and power hierarchies therein—interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal—that shape norms, risk factors, and behaviors, and intervening across multiple levels to maximize the effect of interventions.⁸⁰

EXAMPLES

- The socio-ecological model has been applied to intimate partner violence (IPV) to understand the multiple and multi-level factors that influence a woman's risk for experiencing violence.⁸¹ For example, at the individual level, age, education, previous experience of violence, and growing up in a home with IPV influences risk. At a community level, norms that allow for IPV, limited access to resources to prevent and respond to IPV, and shame and stigma associated with experiencing IPV influence whether and how violence occurs. Institutionally, laws and policies affect whether and how legal services enforce or seek to respond to IPV.
- Growing up GREAT! is an intervention to prevent gender-based violence and improve reproductive health among 10- to 14-year-old boys and girls that purposefully addresses different levels of the ecological system with activities for parents, teachers, children, and health providers.⁵⁵

Stigma

QUICK DEFINITION

A label of social disgrace that I experience because I participate in socially undesirable behaviors, beliefs, identities, or traits.

Stigma describes a figurative label of disapproval or discrimination applied to a person by society based on undesirable behaviors, beliefs, identities, or traits. This label is a type of social sanction that controls individuals by discouraging those behaviors, beliefs, or identities deemed unacceptable within a community.⁸² Stigma can be inflicted by a society or community (i.e. public stigma) or, when internalized by the stigmatized individual themselves, inflicted unto oneself (i.e. self-stigma).^{83, 84, 85}

Several conditions are necessary for stigma to occur: First, a community must distinguish or label human differences (for example, by skin color, sexual behaviors, or religious identity). Second, social norms and stereotypes must dictate which differences are desirable and which are undesirable. Third, individuals must be socially categorized by these differences and treated inequitably due to the differences. As such, stigma cannot occur in the absence of social, economic, and political power structures that dictate aspects of human “differentness.” Individuals use these aspects of differentness to construct stereotypes and create categories of “us” versus “them.” These categories are used as a basis for disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination.^{86, 82}

EXAMPLES

- Mental illness is stigmatized in much of the world. Those who suffer from depression or anxiety in these areas are often unwilling to discuss their struggles openly given that those who do are considered “crazy” or “weird.” These individuals often internalize this public stigma into negative beliefs about themselves.⁸⁵
- Most girls in my community have babies after they are married. When I had my daughter at only 15 years old without being married, I experienced stigma from my peers who called me names, teachers who told me I should leave school, and my parents who told me repeatedly I had embarrassed them.

Socio-Structural Driver

QUICK DEFINITION

Aspects of my social and physical environment that act as barriers or facilitators to my behavior.

Socio-structural drivers are the physical, social, cultural, organizational, community, economic, legal, or policy aspects of people's lives that shape [behavior](#) and health outcomes. They may include poverty, migration, [social norms](#) and [power](#) inequities, built environment, access to affordable health care, and education, among many others. These factors influence individuals' risk of and vulnerability to morbidities and, therefore, act as barriers to or facilitators of prevention and treatment efforts.^{87,88} Socio-structural drivers are also known as socio-structural determinants of health.

EXAMPLES

- Poverty is considered a structural driver of violence against children as it increases vulnerability to exploitation in the workplace, at schools, and at home. For example, poverty has been linked to increased rates of child marriage.⁸⁹
- One study found that girls were being exposed to HIV through transactional sex, driven by their families' economic vulnerability. The study offered a cash transfer to girls' families for keeping them in school, which successfully reduced HIV prevalence. Girls were more likely to stay in school and less reliant on transactional sex for economic security.⁹⁰
- Obesity is associated with factors in the built environment including lack of availability of healthy and affordable food options (i.e. food deserts) and high prevalence of crime, disorder, and lack of a safe place to exercise outdoors.⁹¹

Women's and Girls' Empowerment

QUICK DEFINITION

Expanding women's and girls' control over their lives.

Empowerment describes both the process towards increasing choice, power, and control over one's life, future, and overall well-being, as well as the eventual outcome of that process. Women's and girls' empowerment, or empowerment for gender equity, requires transformation of the power relations between men, women, boys, and girls. Empowerment increases women's and girls' agency and access to and control over resources such as money, jobs, land, and voluntary family planning.²⁸ This type of power reallocation often involves shifting harmful gender norms and changing institutional structures that uphold these power imbalances.¹⁹

EXAMPLES

- CARE's program promoting women's participation in village savings and loan associations is designed to foster women's and girls' economic empowerment by increasing their ability to access credit, start their own businesses, and receive social support from other women and girls who believe in and have achieved economic independence and advocate dismantling patriarchal beliefs and power structures.^{92,93}
- ARCHES is an intervention to improve reproductive empowerment of women and girls by helping them to use voluntary family planning to control their pregnancy decisions and reach their fertility goals, even in the face of abusive or controlling partners who attempt to block their use of family planning.⁹⁴

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