

# SOCIAL NORMS MARKETING TO REDUCE GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

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IRC Policy Briefcase  
May 2010



## What is social norms marketing?

Social norms marketing refers to traditional marketing techniques, including mass media and face to face campaigns, that are designed to alter individuals' perceptions about which attitudes and behaviors are typical or desirable in their community. These perceptions—that certain attitudes and behaviors are considered typical or desirable—are called descriptive and injunctive social norms, respectively. Norms are properties of a group—they describe the typical or desirable behavior of a certain social group, rather than “humankind.”

## How do social norms affect behavior?

Social norms influence individual behavior by informing members of a social group which behaviors the group expects and desires from them. Social norms are powerful guides for behavior because they are enforced informally and socially (e.g., through shaming or ostracizing norm violators). Thus, social norms have far-reaching influence that is less resource intensive, than, for example, a legal or incentive-based system for preventing or punishing unwanted behaviors.

Norms guide behavior when they are perceived to belong to a social group that is meaningful to the individual. For example, where a man perceives that his local community accepts domestic violence even if his wider national community does not, he may not question his decision to beat his wife. However, where he perceives that his community does not accept domestic violence, he may choose not to beat his wife in order to conform to local norms. Individuals often comply with social norms even when they privately disagree with the behaviors promoted by the norms. For example, a mother who believes FGM is wrong may not act on that private belief if she believes that the vast majority of her community believes FGM is acceptable and appropriate. Where the same mother believes that there is disagreement within her community as to the appropriateness of FGM, she may act on her privately held belief that FGM is wrong and choose not to have her daughter cut.

Norms guide behavior when they are salient in the situation in which behavior is enacted. Norms do not necessarily “follow” individuals into situations—norms are also properties of a situation itself. Therefore, social norms regarding consensual sex that are salient in the context of dating are more likely to influence men's behavior regarding date rape than norms regarding sexual harassment in the workplace, despite the fact that both norms are related to gender based violence.

## How does social norms marketing work?

Social norms interventions attempt to change group members' *perception* of the social norm. Social norms marketing uses several different media for the transmission of its messages. A central feature of social norms marketing campaigns is the promotion of messages about norms using mass media, including print media (newspapers, billboards, flyers, flags and pins), radio and television public service announcements, music and soap opera dramas ("edutainment"), internet campaigns (email, Facebook), and cellular texting campaigns. Many successful social norms marketing campaigns strategically use entertainment to target norms.

Shifting perceptions of which attitudes and behaviors are typical or desirable can influence actual behaviors and, down the line, the *actual* descriptive norm.

## When does social norms marketing work best?

The current academic consensus is that interventions are wisest to target injunctive norms. Interventions that target injunctive norms and the perceived uniformity of the status quo norms have the most theory and evidence amassed to show that they can work. Social norms marketing that targets injunctive norms should seek to replace an old norm with a new norm. Regardless of what types of norms are targeted, social norms marketing campaigns should focus on achieving salience in the moment of decision, such as when a man decides whether to force sex on his wife or beat his girlfriend. By using multiple strategies of communication, or reinforcement using prominent community members, social norms marketing campaigns can achieve greater salience and create the impression of a groundswell supporting the positive norm. Norm change is easiest in communities that are homogenous and tightly knit, and where there is currently private dissent against the current norm. Social norms campaigns can be effective where they recommend specific actions to take, and where they channel individuals into easily available opportunities to act on the new norm – for example, through a domestic violence hotline strategically advertised at a market attended by women unaccompanied by their husbands or fathers.

## Where has social norms marketing been used to combat gender based violence (GBV)?

Social norms marketing has been used to combat gender based violence (GBV) across the globe – from Brazil and Nicaragua to India and South Africa. The most well-studied and longest-running "edutainment" programs combating GBV are "We are Different, We are Equal" in Nicaragua and "Soul City" in South Africa. Both programs have aired for multiples seasons over a period of years and both have been rigorously evaluated. Although their evaluations are imperfect, they are informative. In particular, Soul City's evaluation provides a nuanced glimpse into one social norms marketing experience. In addition, a community intervention in Brazil, "Program H" included a social norms marketing campaign, primarily relying on billboards and posters to portray its message, as part of a larger effort to change norms and attitudes surrounding masculinity and GBV. Program H was noteworthy in its use of a campaign slogan designed by local young men – likely to achieve salience among the target audience of young men in the community because of the participatory design.

## **What do we know about social norms marketing's effectiveness in reducing GBV?**

Unfortunately, we know relatively little about social norms marketing's effectiveness in reducing gender based violence because most studies are inadequate. First, most studies suffer from the weakness of relying on self-reported behavior, which is an unreliable measure. Some studies have attempted to triangulate self-reported behavior with interviews with steady partners, service providers, and others with information about behavior patterns in a community and such efforts show promise.

In addition, most studies do not have randomized samples, comparing a group exposed to the campaign with a group not exposed to the campaign based on random assignment. Some studies have attempted to compare exposed and non-exposed audiences, but they suffer from selection bias that renders them inconclusive. At least one program has sought to create a randomized sample, however, it did not adequately triangulate self-reported behaviors or measure social norms, as compared to personal attitudes.

Taken together, the available evaluations do highlight the importance of baseline studies, careful interventions targeting injunctive norms and the perceived uniformity of descriptive norms, and the importance of evaluating programs in terms of not only personal attitudes but also social norms.

Despite the weaknesses of empirical studies, programs can be evaluated based on how well they are poised to affect social norms based on what is known about social norms marketing generally. For example, Soul City in South Africa is notable for its specific behavioral recommendations for how to respond to GBV, and for its use of channel factors to guide people into services to address the effects of GBV. The evidence for the success of this channel factor, measured by rate of calls to the hotline Soul City promoted, is relatively strong and positive.

Program H's attention to specific local groups and to that group's norms is a tactic recommended by social norms theory, as are its campaign spokespeople who weaken negative norms and its promotion of new descriptive norms as a replacement for old ones. As a counter example, "We are Different, We Are Equal" (SDSI by its Spanish acronym) focused its message on changing social norms regarding the silence with which GBV is met: attempting to diminish the taboo of GBV through a "We Need to Talk" campaign. This is an example of the potentially destructive effects of raising the salience of negative descriptive norms for the purpose of promoting discussion – the SDSI approach likely created the impression of a descriptive norm of frequent gender based violence within the communities.

## What are the key components of a social norms marketing campaign to reduce GBV?

There are three general components that most likely contribute to a social norms marketing campaign's success in reducing gender based violence, including:

- Use of a background study and contextual knowledge to: identify target social norms and target audiences, test messages through pilot projects, identify potential avenues for channel factors, and establish a baseline for future evaluations.
- Use of specific behavioral recommendations and channel factors to facilitate action on new social norms.
- Attention to the potentially perverse effects of social norms marketing in general and to discussion groups in particular.

## What should one think about before using social norms marketing to target GBV?

### *Questions to Ask When Considering a Social Norms Marketing Campaign to reduce GBV*

- What is the community (or communities) with and within which we are working?
- What are the types of gender based violence that are prevalent in these communities? How prevalent is that violence in fact? Who are the primary victims, perpetrators, and enablers?
- What are the exact behaviors you wish to change? Where do they occur?
- What are the predominant privately held attitudes within the community, and among community subgroups?
- How prevalent do group members believe this behavior to be? (*Outline the descriptive norms*)
- What do members of the community think about the community's general attitudes toward this behavior? Who in the community believes that the behavior is desirable? Is their opinion shared by other subgroups in the community? Who are the powerful members of the community who support this idea? (*Outline the injunctive norms*)
- How mobile is this community? How concentrated or dispersed is the community across a geographical location?

If the answers to these questions reveal that privately held attitudes are more positive than perceptions of community norms, one opportunity for change would be to target the perceived uniformity of community norms. If, however, privately held attitudes are generally negative, then social norms marketing should be combined with other interventions that have as their goal achieving changes in personal attitudes. Keep in mind that the community's starting point affects the credibility of any intervention: where GBV is prevalent, attack injunctive norms and the uniformity of descriptive norms rather than attacking the descriptive norms directly.

### *Questions to Ask When Devising Social Norms Marketing Messages*

- What are the potential messages of this social norms campaign? How are those messages perceived among community members?
- What behaviors do you recommend in place of the behaviors that you are seeking to change?
- How could you make it very easy for your audience to adopt these changed behaviors, i.e., how can you *channel* them into new behaviors?
  - Are there other organizations (service providers, etc.) with whom you can partner to ensure the new behavior is safe and rewarding for individuals who adopt it?
  - Is it currently safe and feasible to recommend these behaviors? (*protect against channeling people into dead end or even destructive services*)
- Who could write these messages in a language that resonates with the community? Are there members of the community who can devise the specific language of these messages – songwriters, entertainers, community or religious leaders?
- Who could deliver these messages in a manner that is persuasive to this community and salient in the context of the behavior the campaign ultimately hopes to change? Singers, entertainers, community leaders, representative community members?
- What kinds of popular programming already exist in the community? Is there an opportunity to work with an existing soap opera, music program, or other popular media outlet to insert messages about GBV? Would characters or personalities on existing programs be well suited naturally to communicate messages about seeking help after, or preventing GBV?
- What are the potential perverse outcomes of the program? Look for tensions between awareness raising and promoting negative descriptive norms—are all descriptive norms accompanied by an injunctive norm against them? Is your program encouraging discussions in a place where people will feel free to speak out against the messages?

### *Considerations for Evaluating a Social Norms Marketing Campaign*

- Set up a control group—can the campaign be randomly allocated to different areas of the region or country? Can materials be randomly distributed, or invitations to television screenings randomly distributed?
- Find ways to measure exposure to the campaign that do not rely on simple self-report (e.g. “I listen occasionally...I watch regularly...I rarely saw a billboard...”). For example, ask informational questions that people could only answer if they have been exposed to your campaign. Ask them to identify (when played for them on a hand recorder) the jingle of your radio spot, show them a picture from a billboard and ask them to tell you what the billboard says.
- Measure both social norms and personal attitudes, and, where possible, actual behavior.
  - When measuring behavior, be cognizant of the ways in which social norms marketing will create pressures for self-reported behavior change where none has occurred. Where possible, triangulate self-reported behavior through private interviews with steady partners and figures from service providers about help-seeking behavior. Keep in mind that a reported increase in gender based violence may be indicative of the success of a campaign encouraging help-seeking behavior or of the perverse consequence of a misaligned social norms marketing campaign that perpetuates perceptions that GBV is common within the community.
- Maintain adaptability: Remain open to the possibility that you may have to modify your message as the community response becomes clear through pilot projects and even throughout the campaign.

#### Further Reading:

Paluck, Elizabeth Levy, and Laurie Ball, *Social norms marketing aimed at gender based violence: A literature review and critical assessment*. 2010.

Prentice, Deborah. The psychology of social norms and the promotion of human rights, in Goodman, Ryan, Jinks, Derek and Woods, Andrew K., editors, *Understanding social action, promoting human rights*. New York: Oxford. In press (available from author, [predebb@princeton.edu](mailto:predebb@princeton.edu) )

Singhal, Arvind and Everett M. Rogers. *Entertainment-education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 1999.