

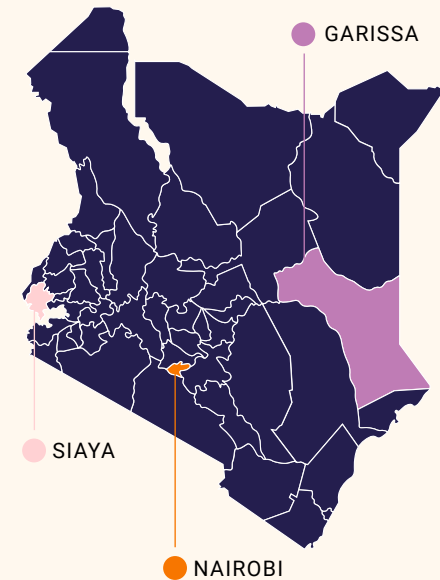
Gender Norms Learning Agenda

Fit for Purpose: Formative research for media-focused norms shifting interventions

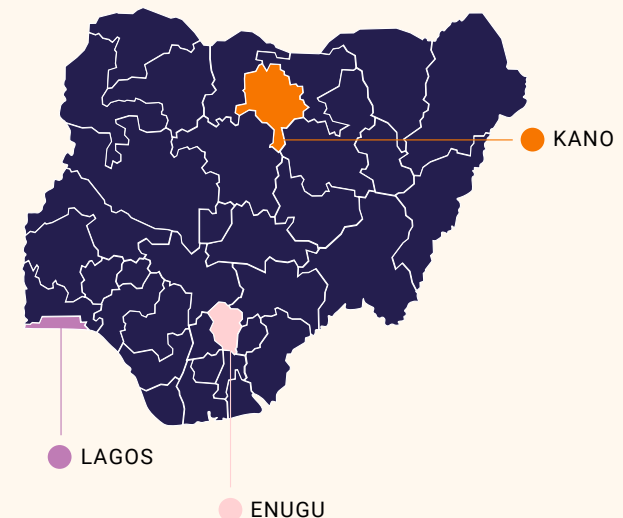
The Gates Foundation’s Gender Norms Learning Agenda (GNLA) funded research in three states in Nigeria and three counties in Kenya to identify which social norms influence key gender-based violence (GBV), sexual and reproductive health (SRH), economic empowerment (EE), and child early and forced marriage (CEFM) behaviors of adolescent girls and young women, how these norms influence girls’ behaviors, and who enforces and upholds these norms. CARE’s Gender Justice team, CARE Nigeria, CARE Kenya, and partner University of California, San Diego’s Center on Gender Equality and Health, collected qualitative data with married and unmarried girls and boys, and those influencing the norms that most impact their lives and wellbeing between March and June, 2024.

This brief provides lessons learned from conducting formative research with an intensive focus on gender norms and their impact on adolescents’ behaviors. It offers examples of how norms diagnosis tools and methods were used with diverse participants in varied contexts, and how findings were translated for media partners’ application in these countries. Finally, the brief offers recommendations for implementers, researchers, and mass media players looking to understand more about norms and facilitate impact at scale.

KENYA



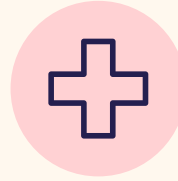
NIGERIA



**SECTORS
OF FOCUS**



**SEXUAL &
REPRODUCTION
HEALTH**



HIV



**ECONOMIC
EMPOWERMENT**

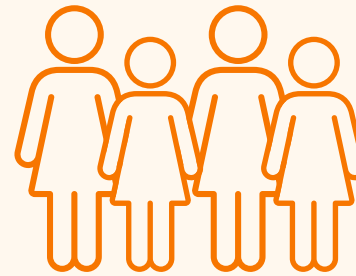


**GENDER-BASED
VIOLENCE**



**CHILD
MARRIAGE**

**TARGET
POPULATION**



ADOLESCENT GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN
AGED 15-24 YEARS

**ADDITIONAL
RESEARCH
PARTICIPANTS**

1

**ADOLESCENT BOYS
& YOUNG MEN**

2

PARENTS

3

FRIENDS

4

**COMMUNITY &
RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

Lessons Learned

1 | Choose data collection tools with the application in mind

This can be difficult for a number of reasons. Formative research often comes before or at the beginning of project implementation, and the formative research teams may be different than the teams designing or implementing the program, and therefore lack understanding of planned activities. However, planning formative research design and data collection for application is a common recommendation in technical guides and toolkits for a good reason. Making the data collection tools as applicable as possible to the project that will use the data is within reach when there is a common understanding amongst formative research and implementation teams of (1) what the research will explore and (2) how the findings will be used in specific interventions, if those are already set. Once research questions are finalized, the data collection methods and tools provide the clearest connection to what data you will get out of this process, so implementers can tell researchers if that information will be useful or not.

When implementers lack a fundamental understanding of factors that influence behaviors—including norms, a problem tree is helpful when facilitated well, because data from problem trees is particularly useful to understand communities' broad perspectives on a given issue. For instance, we used problem trees for focus group discussions with married and unmarried girls and their parents in Kenya to identify the root causes of CEFM. Their responses highlighted larger themes or problems that led to situations of CEFM as well as the consequences of early marriage. However, data collection teams found it challenging to bring forward discussion on the more “proximal” norms¹—such as parents' decision-making process to marry their daughter early, identifying a suitable partner, girls voicing their aspirations about marriage and other issues related to age of marriage. Therefore, this tool ended up not serving our implementing partners' needs as well because many times, projects choose to address norms closer to a behavior as they might be less entrenched than deeply-rooted norms or themes that come up in problem tree discussions. These broader themes on CEFM were therefore less applicable in the case of the GNLA Norms Diagnosis.

Data collection tools used by the GNLA Norms Diagnosis

Rapid Interviews

With married and unmarried girls and boys took about 15-20 minutes after consent and an ice breaker activity to ask a set of simple, direct questions that explored who influenced the participants' decisions and behaviors related to key outcomes, asked in a variety of ways to elicit any variances in responses.

Problem Trees

Questions ask participants to reflect on the cause and effect of a particular issue or problem, helping to identify its root causes—including norms.

Vignette

Uses a hypothetical story, typically showing a character taking a particular action, and respondents are asked for their perceptions of that behavior and/or how it would be perceived within their community.

Norm-by-Norm Guide

Questions ask participants about their perception about the 4 components of a norm, according to [CARE's Social Norms Analysis Plot \(SNAP\) Framework](#).

Alternatively, CARE's Norm-by-Norm Guide and the vignettes discussing EE behaviors were helpful in identifying girls' reference groups and exceptions to the norm. Those doing formative research can **focus in on this type of information about a norm as they are particularly helpful for media-focused partners who need to build characters around girls (their reference groups) and are able to demonstrate positive deviance**—or a girl going against a norm or displaying a positive new behavior—through TV, movies and social media. For instance, in Kenya, adolescent boys said it was not normal for girls to get tested for HIV and refuse sex without condoms, unless she is “focused”. This positive view of a girl practicing behaviors is the exception to these HIV norms and provides an opportunity for media interventions to broadcast this new norm of the “focused” girl.

2 | Narrow the scope—a necessity and a challenge

This study included five sectors and used a mixed-method behavior selection process to narrow the focus down to between 11-13 behaviors in each country. While some formative research is much more focused, many projects try to address even more behaviors than we did. Exploring more than five behaviors through formative research can result in the research team producing vague results or results that are too superficial to translate into actionable findings due to the complexity of each behavior and the norms associated with it. For instance, modern contraceptive use is a complex behavior—it is actually composed of multiple interim behaviors, like talking about contraception with your partner, going to a health facility, discussing contraceptives with a health provider, and using the chosen method. Each of these behaviors could be affected by the same norm or multiple different norms. Discussing contraception with your partner may be affected by norms that make it unacceptable for girls to ask questions about sex, getting to a health facility may be blocked by the norm that it is inappropriate for girls to leave home unaccompanied, and requesting a contraceptive method from a healthcare provider may be affected by expectations that women should have their first child soon after marriage. Given this complexity, it is important to **narrow down the set of behaviors of interest so that your study produces specific, in-depth information on norms that is useful to program design.**

3 | Identify both supportive and punitive reference groups

We used rapid interviews to identify girls' and boys' reference groups. The notes from those rapid interviews were rapidly tabulated the same day to identify the most commonly mentioned reference groups. This information was then used to mobilize participants for focus group discussions with reference group members in the coming days. We also used the results of the rapid interviews to triangulate the results of the focus group discussions later in the detailed analysis process. The rapid interviews were therefore helpful in two ways: for identifying research participants but also to identify more supportive reference groups, which turned out to be particularly helpful for media partners. Media interventions are particularly well-suited to highlight a new norm and/or combat situations where people perceive a behavior to be less normal than it really is. Since our rapid interviews asked more “positive” questions—like “Who do you trust on this issue?” and “Who gives you advice?”—before asking questions about sanctions and punitive consequences, **we got more information on supportive reference groups who might support girls in challenging a norm.**

This is not to say information on sanctions was unimportant, as data on punitive reference groups is quite helpful to understand why adolescents are not practicing healthy behaviors due to the consequences they face. Data on punitive reference groups and the tools they use to enforce norms led to a specific recommendation to mitigate backlash girls are likely to face and monitor for increased risk of violence to fulfill all actors' responsibility to Do No Harm².

¹ Proximal norms act directly or close to directly on a behavior or outcome. Meta norms, such as gender inequality, connect with deeply rooted determinants, operate at a more profound level of society, and influence multiple behaviors.

² The principle of “do no harm” in programming means that individuals or organizations conducting project activities should not intentionally or unintentionally cause harm to the project participants.

Translating formative research on norms for mass media interventions

Based on the Norms Diagnosis experience, the following information was most useful for those designing norms shifting media interventions:

1 | The importance of social networks and the influence of reference groups

It is common for media creators to focus on adolescent girls and young women, leaving out the social networks that influence their behavior. Our results highlighted the influence of girls' reference groups, as well as the ways that boys' and young men's reference groups affect girls' behavior. For instance, most media creators understand well that girls' husbands can affect girls' behaviors, such as working outside the home and participating in household decision-making processes. However, the Norms Diagnosis highlighted just how impactful girls' husbands' peers and parents were in how a husband reacts to girls' behavior. Norms that dictate men's role as the household head and final decision-maker are directly challenged by girls contributing financially and owning or controlling assets, and husbands' reference groups mock and gossip about men who allow this to happen. As a result of their fear of being sanctioned by their peers and mothers, husbands may prohibit their adolescent wives from economic engagement. This information **helped media partners expand their idea of which characters should appear in a story, and which audiences they might target beyond girls and young women.**



2 | Identifying and amplifying nascent, positive norms

Media creators many times seek to highlight positive changes that are already occurring and promote positive new norms, as opposed to reinforcing harmful norms. A social norms exploration can gather information to inform content design—for instance, which girls are able to go against a norm, and why? Or what circumstances allow girls to resist a norm, and why? **By showing these “exceptions” in the media and expanding them to more girls and more situations, the boundaries of a norm can become weaker and easier to change.** A norms diagnosis can also provide useful data on injunctive norms—what a community perceives is acceptable. For instance, our data revealed that some people disapprove of girls using modern contraceptives while others support it. When the data reveals this split, researchers could explore if this was due to pluralistic ignorance, i.e. something being more or less common than people perceive it to be. Respondents mentioned that many people do not approve of adolescents using modern contraceptives but some parents would support it, because mothers in Nigeria—particularly in Enugu and Lagos—were so concerned with unplanned pregnancy that they would take their daughters or sons to a health facility to access contraceptives. This translated directly into a programming recommendation for media partners: displaying mothers' behavior through media can make people more aware of what many adolescent girls, boys and their mothers are doing to access and use contraception, compared to simply focusing on the finding that most respondents do not perceive using modern contraceptives to be normal.

Recommendations

Norms shifting at scale through diverse and coordinated channels

1 | Invest in rapid, participatory formative research and analysis

The Norms Diagnosis demonstrated that participatory formative research and analysis is possible, even when project timelines or funding restrictions limit the options for more in-depth processes. In Kenya, the entire process took less than six months, including substantial time and effort dedicated to the Internal Review Board process. This extremely truncated timeline required hiring external data collection teams and relied heavily on CARE's institutional knowledge of norms and connection to communities to mobilize participants. However, a rapid analysis workshop helped communicate findings and subsequent detailed analysis was validated with communities, both providing initial and in-depth insights to media creators.

2 | Seek to understand non-normative factors and their relationship to norms

Even with an acute focus on norms within the Norms Diagnosis, we identified other factors influencing behavior such as laws, policies, and access to services and resources. Norms are never the only factor influencing behavior, and it is important to situate norms within the constellation of behavioral influencers. For example, new legislation mandating HIV testing before marriage in Kano helped normalize this behavior for unmarried adolescents. This is valuable information for implementers of all types as they seek to foster an enabling environment for behavior change.

While information on legislation can be identified through desk research as well as primary data collection, methodologies like those used in the

Norms Diagnosis also have the opportunity to map how these formal rules are related to informal rules, or norms. Stakeholders must go beyond simply identifying normative and non-normative factors to understanding the interplay between them and their systemic impact as well as the individual impact on adolescents' behaviors.

3 | Design interventions at scale to address the multiple realms of our lives where norms thrive

Media interventions have the benefit of being able to touch on norms in public and private realms, showing scenes and interactions at work and in the home. Mass media interventions are also consumed by many individuals at once, while being most effective when providing contextually nuanced information on norms, reference groups and sanctions. The Norms Diagnosis provided empirical material to content creators to work with that will resonate with their target audiences. However, media interventions can play a pivotal but not singular role in how norms shift at a population level. As we saw with HIV testing in Kano, law and policy were instrumental in normalizing this behavior, and the media can play a role in broadcasting that advancement in new and more inclusive ways that may help expand the behavior beyond premarital relationships. That is why it is essential to design interventions to promote behaviors and shift norms in the context of the multiple levers of change required at scale, including through collective empowerment—such as women's movements and alliances, and transformational diffusion—through social networks, storytelling, faith and cultural champions alongside media pathways.

For more information on how CARE understands how norms shift at scale, see [here](#).