



**SOCIAL NORMS & AGENCY
LEARNING COLLABORATIVE**

Social Norms and Agency

RESOURCE GUIDEBOOK

March 2025

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WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL NORMS & AGENCY LEARNING COLLABORATIVES?

The Social Norms and Agency Learning Collaboratives (LCs) are a network of practitioners, researchers, advocates, and evaluators working independently and together, advancing a shared agenda that promotes research and practice related to the role of agency and social norms in global health and development. The LC network is composed of four regionally-focused and one globally-focused learning collaborative.

Where are we located?

The four regional LCs are located in — South Asia, Eastern Africa, Francophone West Africa and Anglophone West Africa, and the Global LC includes individuals and organizations who reside and/or work outside the other regions. Collectively, these five LCs make up the LC Network.

What do we do together?

Improve practice through partnerships. The LCs forge new networks and partnerships and bridge the gap between researchers, funders, and implementing organizations through regular networking events and new membership drives.

Strengthen capacity. Each LC hosts virtual and in-person events, webinars, and training sessions throughout the year to discuss and learn about social norms and agency in their context and globally.

Co-create tools and resources. The LCs work together to create new tools and resources on social and gender norms and agency key concepts, and to share this thought leadership widely.

Document and share experiences. Through webinars, blog articles, case studies, and social media, each LC shares the reflections and experiences of their members.

Our Vision: We envision a world where partnerships, knowledge sharing, and thought leadership converge to ensure sustained equity, social justice, and health for all people.

Our Mission: Our mission is to strengthen research and practice on social norms, gender, and agency by building a network of practitioners, researchers, evaluators, and advocates who share knowledge, generate evidence, and develop resources to support social and behavior change programming.

Our Diverse Membership: The LCs' extensive network is composed of both organizational and individual members. Members have diverse professional backgrounds and work across multiple health and development sectors including, most notably -sexual and reproductive health, HIV, maternal and child health and nutrition, violence prevention, and women's economic empowerment.

Learn More:
socialnormsandagencylcs.org

WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT?

This document was developed to help new LC members establish a foundational understanding of social norms and agency as well as to orient new and existing LC members to some of the many useful resources created across the LC networks. Neither social norms nor agency are new concepts in the social sciences, but it has only been more recently that significant progress has been made in moving these concepts into practice.

What should I do with all of this information?

We encourage you to **read through this manual and peruse some of the suggested resources before attending your next LC meeting.** Please feel free to reach out to your LC leadership with any questions and to learn more about how to engage further in your LC.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS?

Social norms are the perceived, mostly unwritten, informal rules that define acceptable, appropriate and obligatory actions within a given group or community.

Social norms matter because they influence people’s behavior, can perpetuate harmful practices and reinforce gender discrimination and other inequities. In the LCs, we believe that social norms have the following attributes:

- 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.
- People's perception of social norms within their community may or may not reflect actual realities.
- Social norms operate within and across groups of people at many social levels, from groups of friends, peers or colleagues within schools or workplaces to groups based on membership or shared culture or identity within communities or at the state and national level.

Descriptive Norms

Perceptions of what others do.



Descriptive norms are perceptions of what people typically do. If you asked someone the question ‘Why do you wash your hands?’ and the person responds, ‘I wash my hands because other people do it,’ they are expressing the influence of a descriptive social norm.

Injunctive Norms
Perceptions of what
others expect me to do.



Injunctive norms are perceptions of what people should do. If you asked someone the question ‘Why do you do wash your hands?’ and the person responds, ‘I wash my hands because other people expect me to do it,’ they are expressing the influence of an injunctive social norm.

Norms are upheld by a combination of rewards and sanctions, which could be individual, social or structural, and often times individual actors known as reference groups are the key influencers in shifting or changing norms. It is important to remember that an individual’s perception of social norms within their community may or may not reflect reality (Social Norms Atlas, 2021).

Gender norms are informal rules that govern behaviors and practices based on gender identities. They are a subset of social norms that are part of the gender system. Consistent with social science theory, the LCs think of social norms as either descriptive and/or injunctive.

Attitudes and behaviors

Social norms are often confused with, but connected to, attitudes and behaviors. Behaviors are actions that people take, such as washing hands, marrying a daughter at a young age, or using contraception. Social norms often influence behaviors, which is why shifting norms can also change behavior. To understand how norms influence behavior, it is important to first identify which norms are at play, and how they differ from personal attitudes. Attitudes are often confused with norms, but they are distinct. Attitudes are individually motivated beliefs or feelings, such as "I think it is clean to wash my hands." In contrast, social norms are socially motivated expectations, like "others in my community think it’s clean to wash one’s hands." While attitudes are socially constructed, they reflect an individual's perspective rather than a collective understanding. Social norms, however, represent the shared beliefs or behaviors of a group or community (Social Norms Atlas, 2021).

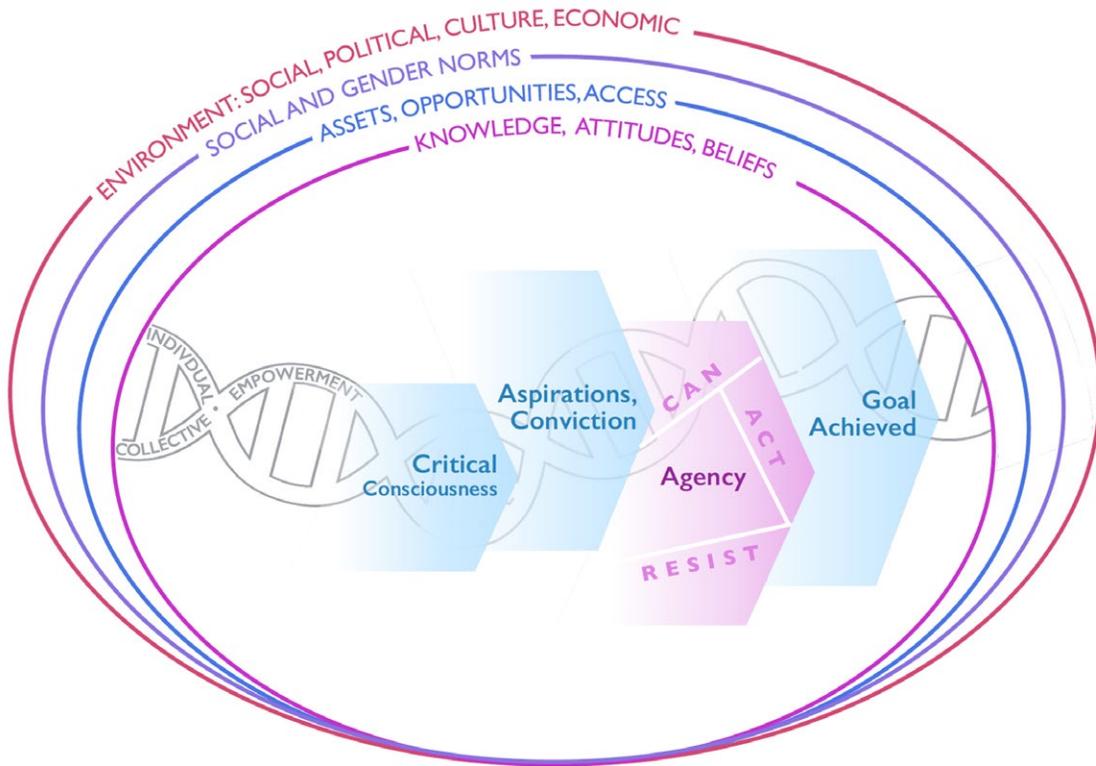
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY AGENCY AND HOW IS IT RELATED TO SOCIAL NORMS?

Agency involves individuals or groups being aware of their ability to make choices, setting individual or collective goals, and taking action to reach those goals (Agency for All Project, 2025).

Agency is a key element of women’s empowerment. Empowerment is both a process and an outcome, involving the development of critical consciousness, the identification of a self-determined goal, the exercise of agency (including belief that one can take action, taking action, and deciding how to respond to potential resistance to that action), and achievement—or not—one’s goal. Engagement in this cycle creates opportunities for individuals to influence their life trajectories and work to achieve their goals.¹

¹ Raj A, Dey A, Rao N, Yore J, McDougal L, Bhan N, et al. The EMERGE framework to measure empowerment for health and development. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2024;351:116879. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.116879>.

Social norms and agency share many commonalities. Both phenomena are affected by social context and often rooted in community. They are both dynamic and change over time and over the life course. And both can be critical limiting and enabling factors to achievement of health and well-being. In fact, social norms and agency are inextricably linked to the extent that to understand or modify one necessitates consideration of the other. As an example, repressive or harmful social norms in a given context impede *the choices available to individuals and groups and the ability of individuals and groups to take action*. On the flip side, social norms exist and are perpetuated because individuals have insufficient *ability to take action* to resist them even if they disagree with them.



Agency Model ▲

As developed by the Agency for All project, the model above serves as one example of how the concept of agency can be framed within empowerment models. The Agency empowerment process is embedded within the larger environment, social and gender norms, access and opportunities, and knowledge, attitudes and beliefs. Key concepts such as aspirations, critical consciousness, and empowerment all impact how an individual or collective group, may be able to set and achieve their goals.

Agency Word Cloud ▶

Agency means many things to many people — this word cloud provides examples of ways different groups have conceptualized agency.



WHAT RESOURCES CAN I CONSULT TO LEARN MORE?

A number of useful resources exist, many of which the LCs and their members helped develop. We have selected four types of resources to help you build a solid understanding of the theory, evidence, and practice of social norms and agency. For each resource, we provide a brief description and a link to access the full resource. For more information, we encourage you to reach out to your LC leads and explore our website:

Foundational Resources

These resources will introduce you to what social norms are, why they matter, and how programs can address them.

Resource Title	Developed By	Description	Type	Link
How and why norms matter for sustainable development	Global LC	This brief describes how and why social norms matter for sustainable development, including how social norms influence behavior, how we can measure normative change and how programs can address social norms.	Brief	View Resource <i>(English and French)</i>
The Learning Collaborative Essential Resources brief	Global LC	This brief was one of the LCs first co-developed products and it includes a list of internally and externally-developed resources deemed most useful to help practitioners identify and understand the influence of social norms. These resources address four phases in which to consider norms in your programs: orientation, formative, design and implementation.	Brief	View Resource
The Social Norms Atlas	Global LC	The Atlas provides a broad introduction to social norms concepts, 10 sector-specific sections on illustrative social norms, behaviors and attitudes, and a cross-sector analysis highlighting meta-norms that cut across different sectors. This resource is meant to be used as a starting point for program planners, implementers, evaluators and researchers interested in building their social norms vocabulary and knowledge to strengthen their understanding of sector-specific social norms.	Brief & Video <i>(1 hour)</i>	View Resource
From Theory to Practice	South Asia LC	This webinar addressed the issues of moving from theory to practice in social norms programming. The panelists used case studies of their research in the areas of nutrition, gender, and health, highlighting the underlying theoretical frameworks, ToCs, their interventions, and results, to demonstrate best practices associated with social norms programming.	Webinar/ Video	View Resource

Foundational Resources (continued)

Resource Title	Developed By	Description	Type	Link
Social Norms Background Reader	Global LC	This reader contains three sections, providing a broad overview of social norm theory, measurement, and scale-up and costing. Each section provides information on what we know, identifies gaps in our knowledge, and poses questions to be considered to move the field forward.	Manuscript	View Resource
Community-based, norms-shifting interventions: definitions and attributes	Global LC	This brief outlines the key attributes of a norms-focused approach and offering an operational definition of what constitutes a normative change approach for AYSRH practitioners. It is based on a desk review and analysis of over thirty documents on social norms theory and programming.	Brief	View Resource
Shifting social norms; What works? A Sub-Saharan Perspective	Anglophone West Africa LC & Eastern Africa LC	The webinar “Shifting social norms; What works? A Sub-Saharan Perspective” aimed at providing practical knowledge and examples to aid norms-shifting interventions	Webinar/ Video	View Resource
Social norms and AYSRH: Building a bridge from theory to program design	Global LC	The present document, Social Norms and AYSRH: Building a Bridge from Theory to Program Design, is written for program managers and designers and acts as a bridge between recent advances in social norms theory and evidence and effective program design.	Working Paper	View Resource
Social Norms Curriculum	Global LC	This curriculum was developed to assist with training individuals on social norms. It includes information on norms explorations and assessments, including sample activities, slide-decks, and materials for facilitation of a norms 101 course.	Curriculum	View Resource

Social Norms Measurement

These resources will orient readers to approaches and tools for measuring social norms and agency.

Resource Title	Developed By	Description	Type	Link
Compendium of Scales and Tools for measuring Social Norms	South Asia LC	The purpose of this compendium is to provide a comprehensive and accessible resource that catalogs and analyzes existing scales and tools used to measure social norms.	Compendium	View Resource
Social norms: What really are they?	South Asia LC	The webinar explores methods for measuring social norms, focusing on gender. Experts discuss the importance of reliable metrics in understanding shifts in norms. The session highlights key measurement challenges, offering insights on designing culturally relevant tools for more accurate assessments in gender and social norms research.	Webinar/ Video <i>(1 hour)</i>	View Resource
Resources for measuring social norms: a practical guide for program implementers	Global	This guide aims to provide guidance on how to approach measuring social norms. It covers when different approaches may be most useful, provides examples of how to collect these data based on accepted measurement approaches and provides insight into how to use the information gathered about social norms to inform programming.	Report and Video <i>(1.5 hours)</i>	Report: View Resource Video: View Resource <i>(If you can't measure it, you can't improve it!)</i>
Monitoring shifts in social norms: a guidance note for program implementers?	Global	This guidance note provides insights and recommendations on how to monitor social norms shifts in community-based programs, drawing on a review of literature, experiences and learning. It is intended for practitioners across sectors, who are responsible for designing, implementing, and monitoring social and behavior change programs.	Guidance Note	View Resource
The Social Norms Exploration Tool (SNET)	Global	The SNET is a participatory guide and set of tools to translate theory into practical guidance to inform a social norms exploration	Tool and Guidance	View Resource

Social Norms and Agency Resources

These resources are useful to gain a better understanding of the links between social norms and agency.

Resource Title	Developed By	Description	Type	Link
The Role of Agency in Challenging Social and Gender Norms	Anglophone West Africa LC	This webinar aims to provide participants with a comprehensive understanding of the concept of agency, underscoring its profound significance in individual empowerment and contributing to broader societal change.	Webinar/ Video <i>(1 hour)</i>	View Resource
Linkages between Social Norms & Agency to Promote Children's Rights and Justice	South Asia LC	This webinar features expert speakers discussing the role of and linkages between social norms and agency in work to promote and shape children's rights and justice	Blog & Webinar/ Video <i>(1 hour)</i>	Video: View Resource Blog: View Resource <i>(CC1 Navigating the Intersection of Social Norms and Agency in Children and Adolescents' Rights)</i>
Advancing women's agency to shift negative social and gender norms	Anglophone West Africa LC	This podcast features a discussion of the transformative power of advancing women's agency in shifting negative social and gender norms.	Podcast	View Resource

Regional Overviews of social norms and agency research and programming

These resources will help you to become familiar with what social norms and agency research and programming has taken place to date in each of the regions in which the LCs operate.

Resource Title	Developed By	Description	Type	Link
Harnessing the SA-SNLC community's wisdom: Norm-shifting initiatives from South Asia	South Asia LC	This session brought together academics and practitioners from reputed organisations in South Asia to discuss their work on norm-shifting initiatives	Webinar	View Resource
Eastern Africa Learning Collaborative baseline assessment report	Eastern Africa LC	The baseline assessment sought to document social and gender norms work currently being implemented in the Eastern Africa sub-region and understand how organisations are working together on social and gender norms practice, both in the region and globally	Report	View Resource
Landscape report and Inventory of Social Norms Research and Programming in Nigeria	Anglophone West Africa LC	The Landscape of Social Norms Research and Programming in Nigeria is a compilation of programmes and research by organisations in Nigeria working on four key thematic areas: sexual and reproductive health, family planning, gender-based violence, nutrition, and women's economic empowerment. The report offers a deep dive into the impact of social norms on these areas and the reviewed interventions. The webinar showcased the development process, key findings, and relevant application of the landscape report.	Report and Video	Report: View Resource Video: View Resource

Social Norms Across Sectors

These resources will help you to understand how social norms and agency are being incorporated into work focused on different health and development outcomes. This list both provides you with a sense of some of the many areas in which understanding and intervening around social norms and agency is useful but also will be useful to those who want to know specifically about social norms and agency work happening within their sectoral focus.

Resource Title	Developed By	Description	Type	Link
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Family Planning and Sexual & Reproductive Health

Understanding Social Norms in Family Planning: Dynamics & Measurement	South Asia LC	The report highlights how social norms, including gender roles and son preference, shape family planning behaviors. It discusses measurement methods and recommends SBCC strategies—like radio, apps, and community outreach—to promote positive family planning practices. Success depends on engaging community influencers and using culturally tailored messages.	Report	View Resource
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Maternal and Child Health, WASH and Nutrition

Social norms and maternal healthcare	Anglophone West Africa LC	In this episode, the presenters discussed how social norms affect maternal healthcare and contribute to the high maternal mortality rate in Nigeria	Podcast	View Resource
From Theory to Practice in SN programming in nutrition & health	South Asia LC	The document provides an overview of thematic areas related to social norms programming in South Asia, focusing on WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), health, nutrition, and gender. It outlines the objectives, methodology, and landscape analysis, including theories, case studies, and measurement approaches. The findings highlight gaps and challenges in programming and implementation, emphasizing the importance of social norms in driving behavior change and improving health outcomes in the region.	Report	View Resource <i>(Social Norms Programming in South Asia Report)</i>
Let's talk norms: Social norms and Children	South Asia LC	This webinar encouraged participants to think about social norms that influence children in their first 1000 days. Our panellists, experts in norm change programming in the areas of nutrition and health shared their knowledge on social norms that influence child's developmental milestones with examples from successful on-ground interventions and existing evidence. The experts also explored the role of men and social and behaviour change communication including media in influencing norms that affect child development with a special focus on complementary breastfeeding and dietary diversity.	Webinar	View Resource

Resource Title	Developed By	Description	Type	Link
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Gender-based violence

Social norms and intimate partner violence	Anglophone West Africa LC	<p>This episode spotlighted the persistent and pressing issue of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Social norms in Nigeria, examining the various faces it wears and the silent accomplice it often finds in prevailing social norms.</p> <p>The discussion ventured into the territory of solutions - exploring innovative, norm-shifting approaches that have the potential to build safe havens for women, enabling them to break their silence</p>	Podcast	View Resource
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Health care and vaccines

Social norms and healthcare-seeking behaviour in low and middle-income countries (LMICs)	South Asia LC & Anglophone West Africa LC	This episode highlights the social norms that influence the demand and supply of healthcare services and products in India and Nigeria	Podcast	View Resource
From intent to access: Gender barriers to HPV vaccination uptake in Nigeria	Anglophone West Africa LC	This episode provided profound insights into the norms that affect the uptake of vaccination especially the HPV vaccine while also highlighting the role HPV vaccination plays in the prevention of cervical cancer	Podcast	View Resource

Resource Title	Developed By	Description	Type	Link
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Women's empowerment

Self-help groups shifting gender norms for women's political empowerment in India	South Asia LC	This blog explores how Self-Help Groups (SHGs) empower Indian women politically by challenging gender norms. Through SHGs, women gain mobility, social networks, and skills that encourage participation in local governance. Although domestic roles remain a challenge, many women experience increased agency and community support. SHGs enable women to engage in public spaces and build confidence, gradually reshaping traditional gender expectations.	Blog	View Resource
Empowering women entrepreneurs: Overcoming social norms and bias in innovation	Anglophone West Africa LC	This episode explored deeply ingrained norms that often erode confidence, limit decision-making autonomy, and curtail opportunities for women within the entrepreneurial landscape	Podcast	View Resource
Social norms and women's participation in leadership	Anglophone West Africa LC	This episode talks about the social norms that underlie the inequities that women experience as a result of their underrepresentation in fields that require their opinions, skills, and actions	Podcast	View Resource
Nigeria State Snapshots on Social Norms and Women's Economic Empowerment	WALC-Anglophone	The State Briefs are part of a larger review of social norms, women's economic empowerment, and policy across six states – Abia, Borno, Edo, Kaduna, Lagos, and Niger – from varied geo-political zones in Nigeria. The full report consisted of a desk review, 36 in-depth interviews (IDIs), and two focus group discussions (FGD) with key stakeholders across the selected states and at the national level.	Briefing Papers	<p>Niger: View Resource</p> <p>Lagos: View Resource</p> <p>Kaduna: View Resource</p> <p>Edo: View Resource</p> <p>Borno: View Resource</p> <p>Abia: View Resource</p>

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