# How Changing Social Norms is Crucial in **Achieving Gender Equality**

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## Technical Brief Based on a Compendium to Support Programming on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

# Social norm change is key to advancing gender equality and SRHR

- Social norms influence human behaviours that determine the well-being, health and opportunities of vast numbers of people worldwide. Transformation of social norms can be massive and have a profound positive impact on the lives of women, men, girls and boys (Figure 1).

- Social norm change and gender equality are key for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and for the mandate of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). For example, the 2030 Agenda recognizes that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls make crucial contributions to progress across all the Sustainable Development Goals and their targets.[1] UNFPA, as the UN's sexual and reproductive health agency ensuring rights and choices for all, not only mainstreams gender but also applies a social norms perspective.[2]

- In June 2020, UNFPA released a compendium on social norm change to achieve gender equality, providing a framework for programmatic approaches to norm change at scale (Figure 2).[4] The compendium builds on previous work by UN agencies, civil society, academia and others. It presents promising strategies, tested approaches and practical examples of social norm change. Importantly, the compendium describes a program design framework, as applied to programming to end female genital mutilation, and demonstrates its relevance for different aspects of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in various contexts.

**Figure 1.** Changes in the sex ratio at birth in the Republic of Korea, 1980 to 2014[3]
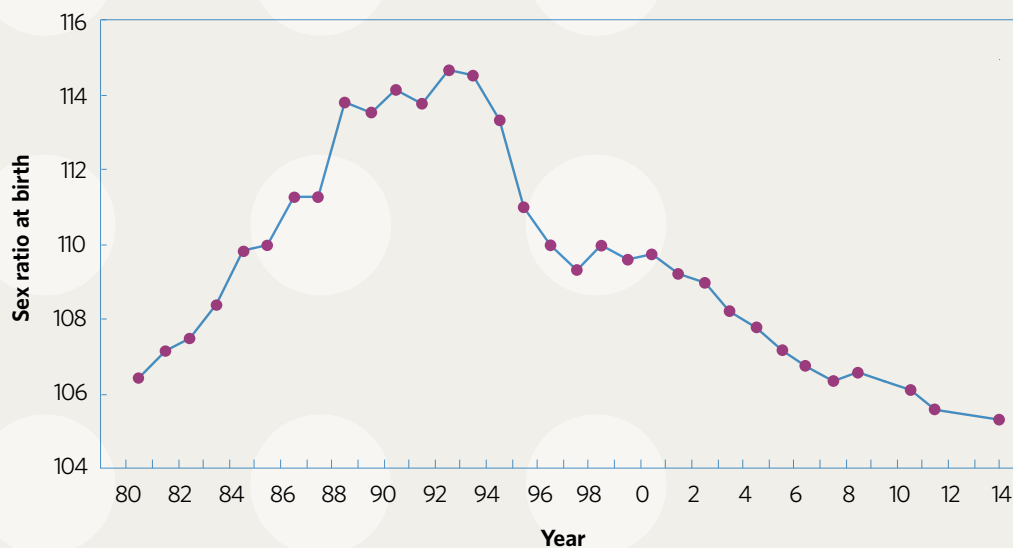


The sex ratio at birth is the number of male births per female births. The Republic of Korea appears to have shifted to daughter preference, away from a son preference culture, in one generation. The causes are yet to be fully understood but may include rapid economic growth, achievements of the women's movement, and communication and education efforts against son preference.

1   UN website on the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda: https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/
2   UNFPA (2017). Strategic Plan 2018–2021. Available from: https://www.unfpa.org/strategic-plan-2018-2021
3   UNFPA (2020). Adapted from Ass. Prof. Heeran Chun, Jungwon University, Republic of Korea.
4   UNFPA (2020). How Changing Social Norms is Crucial in Achieving Gender Equality. Available from: https://www.unfpa.org/social-norms-change

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Human behaviour is not always a choice. Human behaviour is often automatic and unintentional, and rooted in the belief that others expect us to behave in a certain way, particularly when upholding traditions and culture.
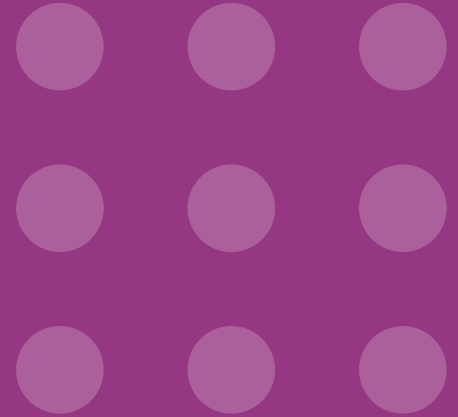
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Even in situations where gender does not appear to be an issue, it has the potential to be so and must be considered.

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# What are social norms?

- Social norms are unwritten rules governing behaviour shared by members of a given group or society. They are informal, often implicit, rules that most people accept and abide by.

- Social norms are shaped by mutual (or reciprocal) expectations within a social network (or reference group). These expectations can be shaped by observations of what other people do (empirical expectations) or by what a person believes other people think should be done (normative expectations).

- Gender norms are social norms. Furthermore, gender norms may affect other social norms, while other social norms may in turn influence the balance of power between men and women. There are central clusters of gender ideologies that underpin gender-biased social norms, such as son preference, daughter aversion and ideologies about femininity and masculinity.

- Social norms are distinct from attitudes and behaviours (Figure 3). Attitudes are individually held beliefs or judgements and, unlike social norms, attitudes are not primarily socially constructed. In contrast to social norms, behaviours are what an individual actually does.

**Figure 2. Compendium on social norm change to achieve gender equality (UNFPA, 2020)[5]**



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**Figure 3. Example of interdependence between knowledge, attitudes and practices[6]**



Months

■ Knowledge   ■ Attitude   ■ Practice
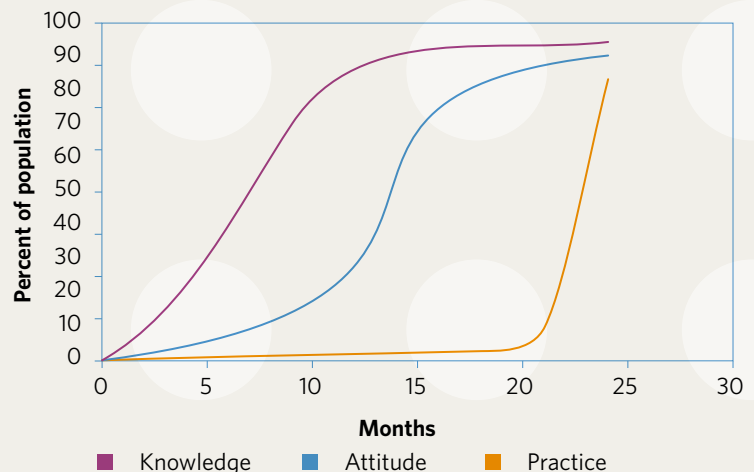
**The correlation between people's knowledge, attitudes and practices is not necessarily straightforward. Individuals may positively judge behaviours that they do not engage in and vice versa. The realization of actual change in practice may take time while progress is being made in changing knowledge and attitudes at an earlier stage in the change process.**

5    UNFPA (2020). How Changing Social Norms is Crucial in Achieving Gender Equality. Available from: https://www.unfpa.org/social-norms-change

6    UNFPA (2020). Adapted from Gerry Mackie, University of Pennsylvania, USA.

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Social norms can lead to a collective behaviour that may appear irrational being perpetuated over generations without challenge. An example of this is that loving mothers and fathers submit to the female genital mutilation of their beloved daughters.

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For social norm change to happen, there is a need to get enough people to coordinate on making the change. Social norms can be quite stable because they are locked in by interdependence, but for the same reason social norm change may happen rather quickly at the local level.



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# Barriers
# to social norm change

- Many people may have a vested interest in upholding discriminatory norms because they maintain inequalities in access to resources and power.

- The social reaction to non-conformity to a social norm is generally negative. The reaction may range from slight displeasure to active and even extreme punishment.

- The power of social expectations and the drive to belong can be strong. There is often limited incentive for a single person to deviate unilaterally. People may comply with norms even when these contradict their personal beliefs.

- In the light of possible negative consequences of change, there may be unwillingness to change unless there is a benefit that is equal to or more than the status quo.

- Social norms can be upheld not only through behaviour rules in everyday life but also by wider social institutions such as organized religion, traditional social structures, education systems and media.

- Individuals may incorrectly believe that most members of their social group support a given behaviour because they see others conforming to it ("pluralistic ignorance") (Figure 4). Also, people may not be able to imagine other ways of doing things.

**Figure 4. Prevalence of versus support for female genital mutilation among women aged 15 to 49 years in different countries, 2004 to 2018[7]**



Legend:
- Prevalence of FGM
- Think FGM should continue
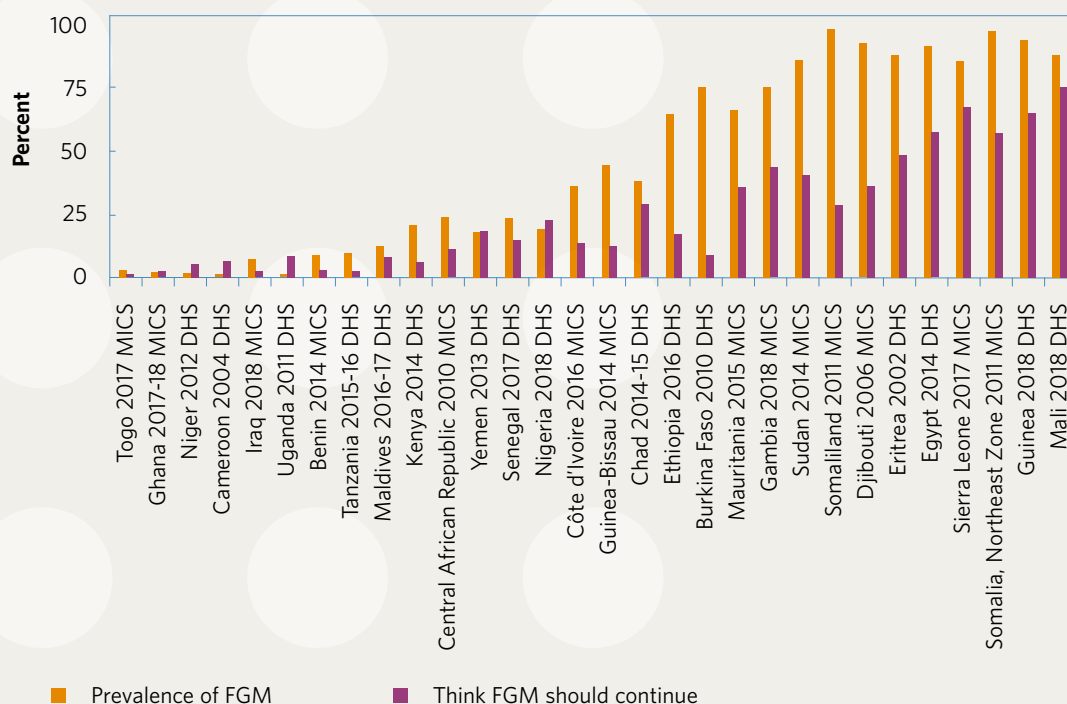
> Individuals may incorrectly believe that most in their social group support a given behaviour because they see others conforming to it. Known as pluralistic ignorance, this may perpetuate social norms.

7   UNFPA (2020). Adapted from UNICEF (2013), Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, A Statistical Overview and Exploration of the Dynamics of Change. Available from: https://data.unicef.org/resources/fgm-statistical-overview-and-dynamics-of-change/
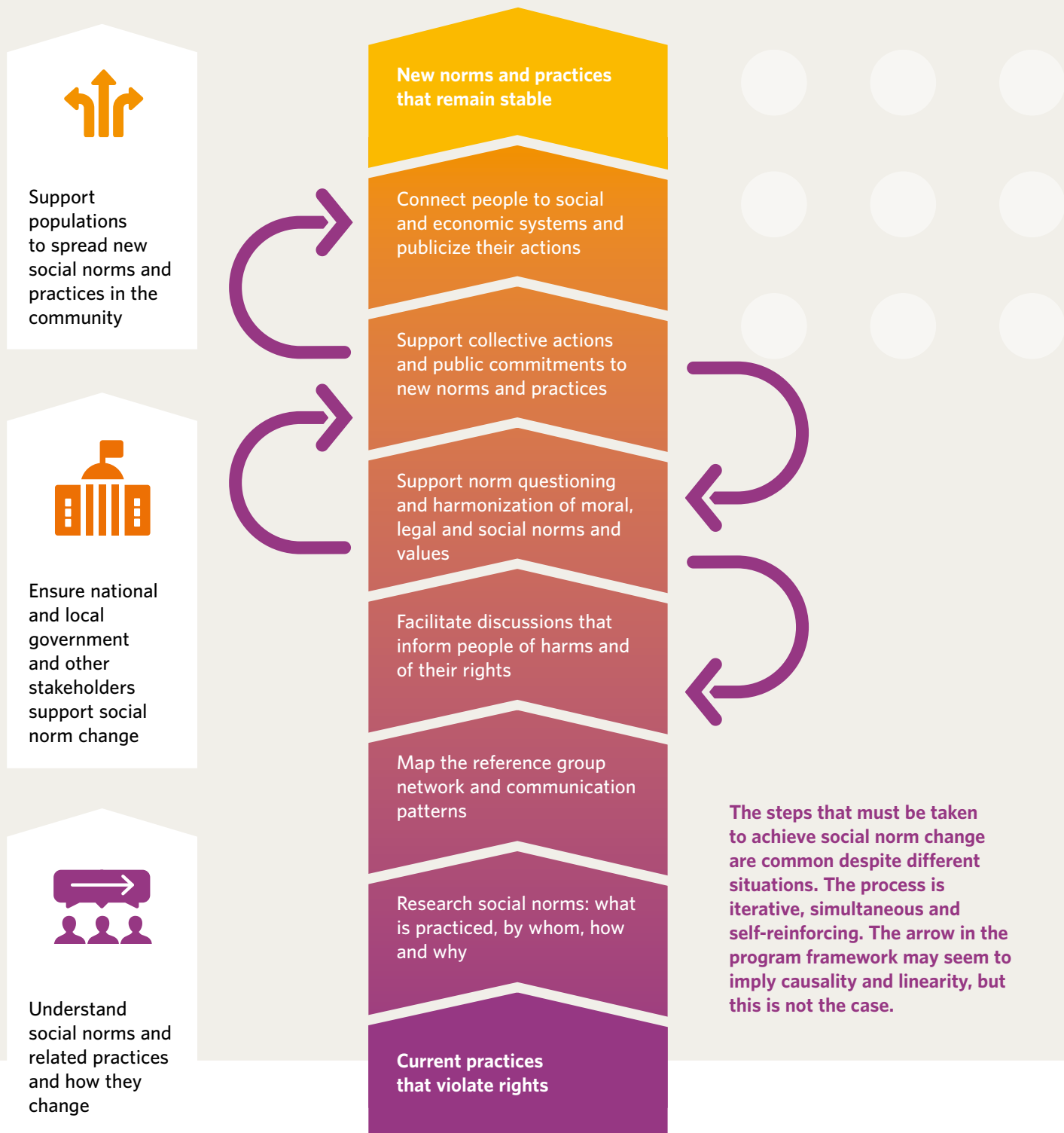
# Approaches
## to social norm change

- Social norm change is possible, albeit generally complex and iterative. It calls for multisectoral, holistic and culturally sensitive approaches.

- The social context where the social norm change unfolds is crucial. The community should be acting as the agent driving the change. It is often helpful to leverage, support and give visibility to existing positive social forces.

- It is typically necessary to get enough people to coordinate on making the change—to reach "critical mass" or a "tipping point".

- Social norm change can benefit from reinforcing actions at different levels, such as (sub)national, regional and global levels. Addressing legal, moral and social norms and how they interact is crucial.

- It is pertinent to measure and sustain the results of the social norm change process. Measurement of results usually relies on quantitative and qualitative methods and depends on the context and issue at hand. The impact on the actual behaviour may take time, but alternative measures may be used to demonstrate changes earlier in the process towards behaviour change.

- There are generally two possible processes for change: (i) the abandonment of the original norm at first, and thereafter creation of a new norm; and (ii) the creation of a new norm at first, and thereafter abandonment of the original norm. The abandonment of the original norm and the creation of a new norm may overlap in time.

- The steps that must be taken to achieve social norm change are common despite different situations. The steps have been summarized in a program design framework for social norm change (Figure 5).
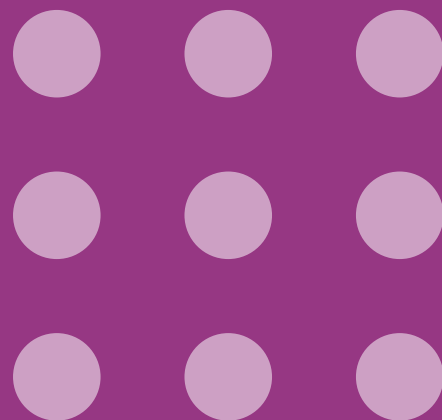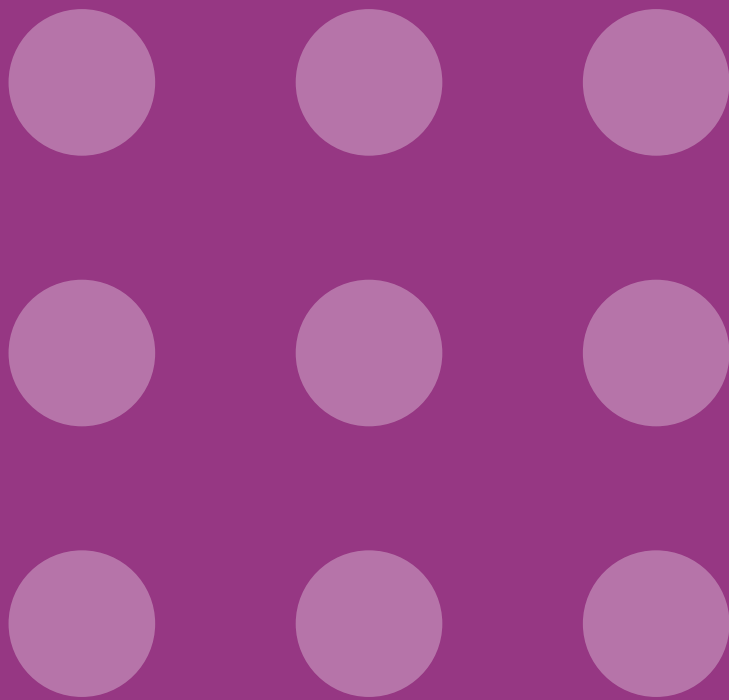
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**Figure 5. Program design framework for social norm change[8]**

Support populations to spread new social norms and practices in the community

New norms and practices that remain stable

Connect people to social and economic systems and publicize their actions

Support collective actions and public commitments to new norms and practices

Ensure national and local government and other stakeholders support social norm change

Support norm questioning and harmonization of moral, legal and social norms and values

Facilitate discussions that inform people of harms and of their rights

Map the reference group network and communication patterns

Understand social norms and related practices and how they change

Research social norms: what is practiced, by whom, how and why

Current practices that violate rights

**The steps that must be taken to achieve social norm change are common despite different situations. The process is iterative, simultaneous and self-reinforcing. The arrow in the program framework may seem to imply causality and linearity, but this is not the case.**

8    UNFPA (2020). Adapted from Cody Donahue, UNICEF (2012).