GAGE on:
Adolescence and gender norms

Over the course of the second decade of life, adolescents undergo significant physical, cognitive and emotional changes. As girls enter and progress through adolescence, the gendered norms of their socio-cultural environments also begin to play a heightened role in shaping their trajectories, with the years of early adolescence found to be especially important because of the ways in which gender- and age-related social norms start to become both more rigidly enforced and more personally salient (Kågesten et al., 2016). Indeed, emerging research suggests that the years between 10 and 14 may be a 'sensitive period' for socio-cultural processing (Blakemore and Mills, 2014). Critically, for girls in the global South, the years of early adolescence, rather than expanding their worlds, often see them shrink as girls have to leave comparatively free childhoods and are forced down the gendered adult pathways of their local environments (GAGE consortium, 2017; Harper et al., 2018) (also see Box 1).
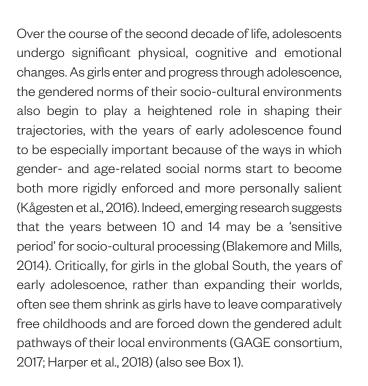
Change strategies to support gender norm change

Helping girls flourish and achieve their full human capabilities requires diverse, multi-faceted change strategies. Building on a growing body of evidence from the global South, the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) conceptual framework posits that change strategies must facilitate other actors coming together to challenge harmful social norms and construct an environment that enables and supports girls to become purposive actors in their own right. To achieve this, GAGE's conceptual model envisions assessing the efficacy of inter-linked interventions that focus on the following key areas.

Empowering girls

Our rigorous review of 63 studies on the empowerment impacts of 44 girls' or youth development clubs found substantial evidence of the positive impact of girl club programmes that provide safe spaces, awareness raising, skills training and peer support on girls' self-confidence and self-efficacy (Marcus et al., 2017). Almost three-quarters of the programmes included within our review led to changes in attitudes to gender equality, while more than half helped reduce gender-discriminatory practices such as child marriage or limits on girls' mobility outside the home.

Engaging with boys and men

Our rigorous review of 36 impact studies and evaluations of 34 programmes working with adolescent boys and young men to change norms of masculinity and promote more gender-equitable attitudes highlights a range of promising efforts to engage men and boys so as to improve sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes, tackle and prevent

Box 1. The barriers norms present for adolescent girls and how they are manifested across capability domains

Education and learning
The prevailing pattern in the global South is for adolescence to flatten girls' educational trajectories more than those of boys – especially for those from the most disadvantaged households (UNESCO, 2016). With girls more at risk of sexual and gender-based violence as their bodies mature, many families keep them home to not only protect them from violence but also ensure they remain the sexually pure signifiers of family honour that traditional gender norms require (Jones et al., 2016). Furthermore, even where adolescent girls are permitted to enrol in secondary school, their attendance can suffer because of their care-related burdens and norms that associate girls' futures with marriage and child-bearing rather than educational and economic achievement.

Bodily integrity
One-third of girls in developing countries are married before the age of 18 and nearly 10% are married before the age of 15, with girls from the poorest and least-educated families especially at risk (ICRW, 2016). Child marriage remains a significant threat for adolescent girls in many Southern countries due to social norms that place value on adolescent girls' ability to produce children (Harper et al., 2018). Where female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and other harmful traditional practices are associated with rites of passage, including child marriage, adolescent girls are at further risk (UNICEF, 2016). Research has found that adolescent girls are also especially vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, sustained by gender norms that embody gender inequality and unequal power relations. Indeed, of women who have been sexually assaulted, most were victimised the first time during adolescence (Harper et al., 2018).

Physical and reproductive health and nutrition
Outside of countries with a strong son preference, where girls' nutrition and physical health can be compromised from birth, threats to girls' physical capabilities emerge and intensify in adolescence. Girls' nutritional disadvantages can be exacerbated during adolescence – especially where they lack access to protein and micronutrients due to norms that see them being fed last and least (Thurnham, 2013). How girls experience puberty and menarche is shaped by the socio-cultural norms of their environments. Girls often face restrictions on their day-to-day activities while they are menstruating. Social norms can also preclude girls being able to negotiate about sex and contraception, and gaining control over their own health care.

Psychosocial wellbeing challenges facing adolescent girls
By late adolescence (age 15–19) suicide is the number one cause of death for girls (WHO, 2014). Social norms play a large role in girls' greater susceptibility to mental health problems. Due to chores, they are less likely than boys to have the unstructured time to play and 'be' that is critical to the development of identity, self-esteem and broader wellbeing (Harper et al., 2018). Adolescence all too often deepens this isolation, particularly in cultures where girls see their mobility restricted and especially where girls marry as children and are deprived of the daily support of their natal families (Ibid.).

Voice and agency
Adolescent girls have access to fewer physical spaces than boys of the same age, which in turn deprives them of opportunities to express their opinions and practise leadership skills (Harper et al., 2018). Critically, however, even when they have relatively equitable access to physical spaces, because social norms that equate femininity and docility become more rigidly enforced during adolescence, girls are often forced to cede voice and agency – in the family, in schools and the wider community.

Economic empowerment
In many Southern countries, driven by expectations that daughters will eventually become members of their marital families, the aspirations that parents hold for their daughters are markedly lower than those they hold for their sons. In early adolescence, girls begin to internalise these differences and lower their own economic aspirations to match those of their parents (Nanda et al., 2014). Girls' access to eventual economic empowerment is further restricted by the reality that in most low-income countries they have fewer options than their male peers for decently paid employment; where adolescent girls do find work, they are disproportionately likely to be confined to agriculture, the informal labour market and domestic work.

violence against women and girls, improve male caregiving and fatherhood, combat child marriage, improve education outcomes and prevent conflict (Marcus et al., 2018). Although the programmes examined were very diverse, reducing their comparability, the following factors appear to have contributed to positive change: critical group-based reflection in safe spaces and good facilitators, who have vital roles modelling gender-equitable behaviour and attitudes, communicating messages and information clearly and ensuring that sessions are enjoyable. Furthermore, intensive programmes generally led to greater change; residential components and programmes with opportunities for informal socialising between participants and mentors had particularly positive impacts.

Supporting families

To help families see all children through a more gender-equitable lens that recognises them as individuals with their own unique abilities and aspirations, there are a range of emerging interventions. These include parents' groups (e.g. guided mothers' support groups or parent-teacher associations), home-based curricula (e.g. via health extension workers) and positive masculinities programming. In addition to supporting such norm change within families, there is a robust evidence base which suggests that, where parents' ability to practically support their daughters is constrained by a lack of resources, financial and in-kind transfers can be powerful levers to help incentivise girls' education. Our own evidence suggests that programmes which contributed to reducing child marriage rates were all community-based and engaged parents and other family members in activities, as well as empowering girls to speak out (Marcus et al., 2017).

Promoting community social norm change

Given that social norms are held in place by expectations – and that community environments become increasingly important to shaping girls' capabilities as they progress through adolescence – targeting broader communities is crucial to building the support girls need to optimally progress through the second decade of life. While there are a range of approaches, emerging evaluation evidence suggests that more effective community-level interventions encourage dialogue between a range of community norms-holders (including religious and traditional leaders) and foster ownership of change based on local realities and positive outliers (Harper et al., 2018). Media campaigns designed to boost the social value of girls have also been found to be helpful, particularly when they are paired with face-to-face discussion groups that give community members an opportunity to discuss the new ideas introduced by programming (Jones et al., 2016).

Strengthening school systems

Emerging evidence suggests promising change strategies working through schools might include, depending on context, programming that helps girls develop the soft skills they can use to optimise academic skill sets; helping schools develop school councils that foster adolescent engagement on more political issues or improve parent–school communication; linking teachers and schools into reporting chains that can help girls address immediate threats of child marriage; instituting enforcement mechanisms to ensure teachers' absenteeism is reduced, etc (Harper et al., 2018).

Strengthening adolescent-focused services and systems

While there is considerable focus on demand-level change in current programming for adolescent girls, it is also key to work on strengthening the services and systems on which the development of girls' capabilities depends. This includes (in addition to schools) health care and SRH services, child protection, social work, gender-based violence services and legal aid – all of which typically have very limited institutional, financial and human resources and struggle to meet existent need. It is therefore critical to balance a focus on individual, family and community-level interventions with systems-strengthening efforts, including child- and gender-budget monitoring, capacity strengthening for the public sector professionals who interact on a daily basis with adolescents (from teachers and counsellors to health extension workers, social workers and justice sector officials).

Measuring gender norm change

How best to measure gender norms to track progress on efforts to change and challenge harmful gender norms is a methodological challenge that researchers have increasingly been exploring in recent years. Data on attitudes, intentions, practices or behaviours, as well as data on people's perceptions about prevailing norms, can help shed light on the patterning of gender norms. Capturing what people think about specific practices and social roles (e.g. age at marriage, dowry payments or FGM/C), what their intentions are with regard to these practices, what they actually do in reality and the perceived prevailing norms of the day can together provide a holistic picture on the status of gender norms. Comparing responses over time among the same population or undertaking research with different generations can provide some insights into how gender norms are changing over time (see Box 2).

How GAGE is exploring what works to transform gender norms

While our understanding of the risks and vulnerabilities that adolescent girls face due to gender norms has grown exponentially over the past decade, our understanding of what works to transform discriminatory gender norms in specific contexts remains nascent. GAGE mixed-methods longitudinal research programming is following the lives of 18,000 adolescent girls and boys in six focal countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East throughout adolescence (10-19 years) to explore what types of policies and programmes are most effective in shifting harmful gender norms and why – not just in the short term but more sustainably.

Box 2: Gender norms and measurement

There are a growing number of data collection efforts that can be leveraged to help understand gender norms and related change processes, including the following:

Standardised national surveys which generate empirical data at regular intervals on attitudes as well as practices, such as the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS), can support a deeper understanding of how widespread certain gender norms affecting adolescent girls might be. They provide, for example, self-reported data on norms and behaviours relating to domestic violence, harmful traditional practices, educational achievement for girls compared to boys, family planning, and how different members of the household use their time.

Perception or opinion surveys focusing on people's attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of prevailing norms also have the potential to provide insights into changing gender norms. The World Values Survey (WVS) and the Afrobarometer, for example, shed light on broader social and gender norms that affect adolescent girls, including political and civic engagement.

Gender indices – combined measures of a number of indicators of different gender-related attitudes and practices – provide data on the legal and policy frameworks that govern and sanction specific gender discriminatory practices (Pereznieto, 2015). The OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) focuses on discriminatory social institutions including, the presence of unequal inheritance rights, early marriage, violence against women, and unequal land and property rights between men and women.

Qualitative data collection, which allows people's own perspectives and voices to come through on how they perceive and negotiate the norms that pattern adolescent girls' lives, including the voices of adolescent girls themselves, can provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in studying gender norm (Samuels et al., 2015). Qualitative data collection is also useful to explore experiences and perceptions that are not easy to quantify due to social desirability bias, to shed light on the experiences of the most marginalised groups and communities (for whom survey or administrative data may not be available), and to explore the reasons why norm changes have (or have not) occurred.

Qualitative research may also provide insights into the dynamics whereby there are reversals or stalling in gender norm change processes, and the ways in which norms may remain sticky and evolve into new but also discriminatory ways. To pick up subtler changes at the local level, locally generated indicators, developed through participatory processes, may also be useful.

Select references

Blakemore, S.J. and Mills, K.L. (2014) 'Is adolescence a sensitive period for sociocultural processing?' *Annual Review of Psychology 65(1): 187–207.*

GAGE Consortium (2017) 'Conceptual Framework'. London: GAGE.

Harper, C., Jones, N., Ghimire, A., Marcus, R., and Kyomuhendo Bantebya, G. (eds) (2018) *Empowering adolescent girls in developing countries: gender justice and norm change.* Oxford: Routledge.

International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) (2016) 'Child marriage facts and figures'. www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures

Jones, N., Tefera, B., Presler-Marshall, E. et al. (2016) *What works to tackle child marriage in Ethiopia. A review of good practice.* London: ODI and UNICEF.

Kågesten, A., Gibbs, S., Blum, R.W. et al. (2016) 'Understanding factors that shape gender attitudes in early adolescence globally: a mixed-methods systematic review', *PLoS ONE 11(6): e0157805.*

Marcus, R., Gupta-Archer, N., Darcy, M. and Page, E. (2017) *Girls' clubs and life skills programmes and girls' wellbeing outcomes: a rigorous review.* London: GAGE.

Marcus, R., Stavropoulou, M. and Gupta-Archer, N. (2018) *Programming with adolescent boys to promote gender equitable masculinities: a rigorous review.* London: GAGE.

Nanda, P., Datta, N. and Das, P. (2014) *Impact of conditional cash transfers on girls' education.* New Delhi: ICRW.

Pereznieto, P. (2015) *What can internationally comparable quantitative data tell us about how gender norms are changing?* London: ODI.

Samuels, F., Jones, N. and Watson., C (2015) *Doing qualitative field research on gender norms with adolescent girls and their families.* London: ODI.

Thurnham, D. (2013) 'Nutrition of adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries', *Sight and Life 27(3): 26–37.*

UNESCO (2016) *Percentage of female teachers by teaching level of education.* Paris: UNESCO.

UNICEF (2016) *Female genital mutilation/cutting: a global concern.* New York: UNICEF.

Vaughan, R.P. (2016) *Gender equality and education in the Sustainable Development Goals.* Background Paper prepared for the 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report *Education for people and planet: creating sustainable futures for all.* Paris: UNESCO.

World Health Organization (WHO) (2014) Health for the world's adolescents: a second chance in the second decade of life. Geneva: WHO.

ukaid
from the British people