



## **Policy Brief: The Social Norms Factor**

How gendered social norms influence how we empower women in market systems development

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## 1. Introduction

Market systems and women's economic empowerment programs typically function with an incomplete understanding of how social factors influence human economic behaviors. Programming tends to focus on increasing women's access to economic opportunities, whether to markets, education, information, or land rights, etc. Less consideration is given to how the socio-cultural context in which women operate influences their ability to engage with and actually benefit from those opportunities. This research explores how social norms influence women's access and agency, and what practical lessons can be learned. It builds on the recognition that informal social "rules" within markets and households can dramatically affect the results of market systems programs aiming to empower women. The report documents how social norms are currently understood, assessed and navigated in market systems programs via two in-depth cases (described briefly below), and seven "mini-cases" that provide additional insight and examples.

An initial literature review provides background on the complex dynamics between social norms, roles and belief systems, as well as associated sanctions and supports within families and communities that affect how people behave. A gap in understanding exists between the important nuances captured in academic research and practice in the field. However, market systems programmes have been advancing their incorporation of social norms into research, analysis, design and assessment. Considering gender dynamics in market systems programming is itself relatively new and programs are making great strides in integrating it into practice. The intent of this paper is to provide initial perspective on where we are as a field in understanding and programming for social norms, and recommendations for furthering that work.

## 2. Summary Findings

### A. What are social norms and how are they defined in academic literature?

The concept of social norms is both complex and multidimensional, and interpretations vary between the disciplines. However, most definitions share consensus that social norms encompass 'rules' that govern social behavior and expectations. From a practitioner perspective and for the purposes of this report, this paper is defining social norms affecting women's market engagement as:

**The interaction between individual behaviors and collective behavioral "rules" that shape a) how people behave and b) how people expect others to behave in order to either maintain or change how women engage with markets.**

The following key characteristics underlie most definitions of social norms:

- Social norms are learned early in life, but can be dynamic and change over time.
- People are not always aware their behavior is governed by a social norm.
- Social norms are accompanied by surveillance and sanctioning practices to ensure compliance.
- Social norms and their sanctioning are linked to inequality.
- Social norms are different than personal beliefs, attitudes and interests.

## B. The influence of social norms on women’s engagement in market systems

Our analysis of the two in-depth and seven mini-cases revealed a set of social norms that commonly affect women’s economic empowerment that influence and play out in unique ways in different contexts.

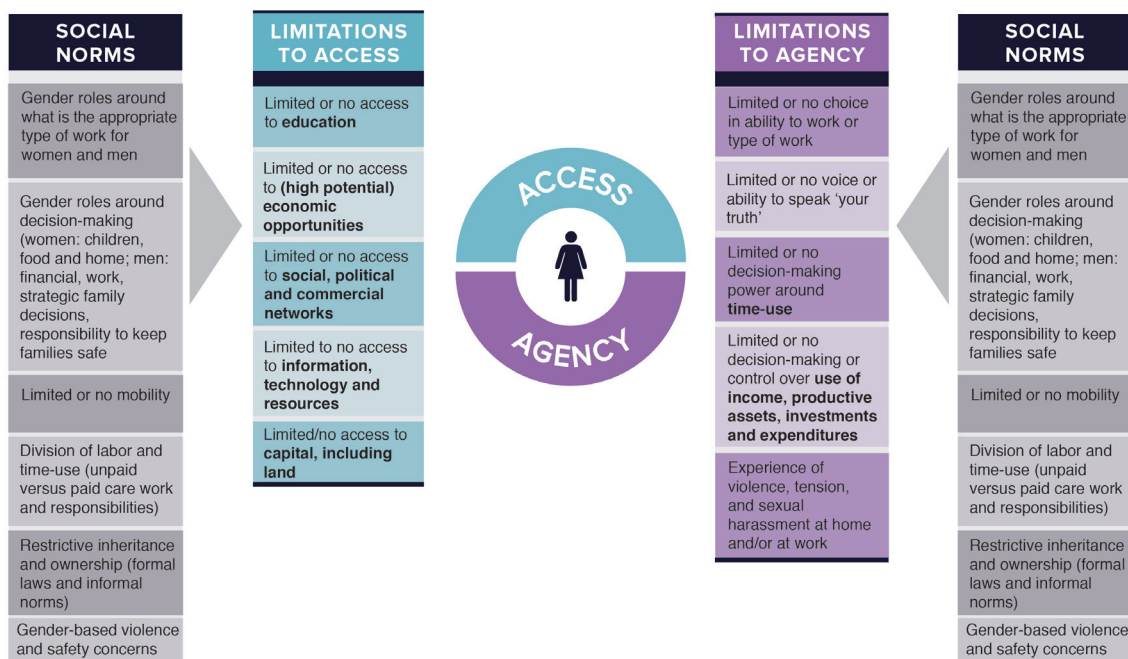
Common norms constraining women’s economic activity include

- gender segregation of sectors and tasks (both paid and unpaid)
- perceptions of appropriate types of work
- gendered division of decision-making,
- restrictions on mobility, inheritance and ownership norms, and
- acceptance of gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

These social norms often present barriers to economic activity, but it should not be assumed that they must be challenged directly in order to promote empowerment, or that women are automatically disempowered if they conform to social norms.

The following graphic presents common themes for how social norms can affect women’s access and agency.

### COMMON CONSTRAINTS TO WOMEN’S ACCESS AND AGENCY



**Social norms are accompanied by surveillance and sanctioning practices.** Transgressions can be met with self-sanctioning, such as shame or guilt, as well as the threat of external sanctions (carried out or not), such as gossip, ostracism, or violence, which serve to ensure compliance. Negative sanctions maintain social norms by reinforcing individual preferences for certain behaviors. In order to promote changes to social norms, we must either work around them to shift behavioral preferences indirectly over time, determine how to directly reduce potential sanctions or mitigate their impact on women, as well as identify positive sources of support for new behaviors. The following table presents common sanctions and supports identified in the research.

Sanctions	Examples of supports for new behaviours
Shame for the male head of household	Male household members taking on more unpaid care work
Teasing and criticism of men and women	Male household members supporting women in their household to hire unpaid care work
Sexual harassment for women being out alone	Communities and household members supporting women to work
Religious sanction (i.e. black magic)	Communities, male household members and mother-in-law's supporting women to be mobile and access markets
	Women supporting other women to take risks and defy social norms
	Women role models influencing other women to defy social norms

**C. Methods used by market systems programs to identify and assess social norms affecting women’s empowerment**

The practitioners interviewed were familiar with how social norms affect women’s empowerment. They noted that their programmes benefit from deeper understanding of these norms, and recommended the following tactics for achieving this:

- **Using mixed research methods to understand social norms:** Mixed methods approaches are necessary for understanding the interplay of factors that determine women’s access and agency within a given market system. Including qualitative research methods in particular, allows practitioners to gain insight into why individuals are making certain decisions, and where “sticky” social norms may present an insurmountable barrier to behavior change.
- **Conducting periodic community-level gender assessments:** In order to understand if and how gender norms are shifting, programmes described conducting periodic gender assessments designed to reveal positive and/or negative changes associated with shifts in how communities perceive women’s engagement in the market.
- **Capturing men and non-targeted women’s perspectives within your research efforts.** Often programmes speak only to women about women’s empowerment and social norms that affect women. Particularly when researching social norms this approach is very limiting. It is important to capture the perspectives of men and non-targeted women beneficiaries to corroborate the findings and see what differences arise.

- **Awareness of current situation bias.** The research points out that women's and men's perceptions of gendered roles are developed from their own current perspective. Women and men are less aware of how these gendered roles can change if their situation were to change, such as a change to their job or position at work. It is important to understand norms associated with the programme's vision of a more empowered situation for women (as well as their current situation).
- **Use indirect and culturally appropriate methods to investigate.** The findings show that group exercises and discussions for assessing the degree of gender role flexibility at the household and enterprise levels is important for understanding what kinds of shifts in norms and sanctions may be possible. The research tool (provided in the full SOBA case study) does not directly ask respondents about social norms, but gathers information on social norms indirectly by discussing flexibility in gender roles and specific tasks within a sub-sector. Asking people directly about what social norms exist in their community can be confusing and difficult for people to respond to. Finding a way to obtain this information in a less direct and culturally appropriate manner produces more reliable results.

#### **D. Strategies for addressing social norms to catalyse women's economic empowerment**

Research findings revealed a variety of ways that market systems programmes work within, around, or against social norms that present constraints to women's economic empowerment. Our research suggests that there are two main categories of strategies and tactics that programmes implement to address social norms: indirect and direct.

This report has defined these strategies and tactics in the following way:

- **Indirect strategy:** Strategies that work within existing social norms to address market constraints for women. These strategies do not attempt to address social norms constraining women's market engagement 'head-on', and instead design interventions that change systems and relationships, leading to shifts in key social norms over time. These programmes choose to work within existing social norms and assume that the impact of the resulting economic gains for women will change the social norms over time. Currently if market systems programmes are addressing social norms, they tend to do so by implementing indirect strategies.
- **Direct strategy:** Strategies that seek to intentionally shift social norms by calling out the norm with the target community and developing activities to change the social norm itself. For example, SDVC conducts an awareness intervention that promotes reflection and dialogue among male and female members of the same households and communities about gender issues and key social norms constraining women. Currently it is less common for market systems programmes do implement direct strategies.

The following section provides an explanation of these strategies and tactics, and in some cases the results of their implementation.

#### **Strategies for addressing social norms indirectly**

- **Using adaptive management practices** to create flexibility and reactivity, supporting programme teams to recognise and address social norms at different stages of program design and implementation. If leadership and management is able to form safe spaces for dialogue and exchange, as well as offer needed capacity building, programme team members are more likely to speak frankly and openly about gender norms and to navigate local contexts with sensitivity.



- **Selecting sub-sectors or market systems where women are already economically active**, to reduce the risk of pushing women into roles where they face backlash and sanctions due to existing social norms. The early programme design developed by SOBA (case study 1) explicitly included gender equity and social inclusion considerations in the selection of sub-sectors.
- **Encouraging new business models to reach women within existing social norms:** Local market actors with incentives to improve their services or outreach to marginalised women can prove effective in developing new business models that fit within existing social norms. For example, the Katalyst programme in Bangladesh supported large private seed companies to expand their input distribution channels by assisting with market research, developing a business model, and showing that women took leading roles in vegetable production and were an important clientele.
- **Supporting women to move into higher value activities:** Where women move into more profitable and respected roles, social norms can begin to shift. SDVC (case study 2) encouraged women to take on new roles as input providers and artificial inseminators. These women service providers reported that the project brought about changes in social norms, such that they are accepted for their new roles and respected for their competence and the value of the services that they provide. However, the lack of other women adopting these roles suggests that there are still norms restraining women, even if sanctions do not occur for those who have already adopted the new roles.
- **Tracking systemic and social norms changes that emerge from women's economic empowerment:** The Market Development Facility (MDF), for example, offers a unique framework for identifying whether partnerships with market actors are also leading to systemic change in norms over time<sup>2</sup>. By the mature stage, MDF expects to see sector-wide access for many women to a range of economic opportunities, as well as social norms changes related to women's financial control, productive decision-making and negotiation of their workloads.

### **Strategies for addressing social norms directly**

**Promoting dialogue and reflection within communities:** The SDVC case demonstrates that confronting gendered social norms head-on can be possible, for example by conducting gender awareness interventions at the community level. While this approach requires sophisticated contextual knowledge, activities that promote reflection and dialogue among male and female members of the same households and communities can create openings for women to take on new value chain roles, such as input providers and artificial inseminators.

**Bringing recognition and visibility to early adopters** for behaviours consistent with social norms that promote women's empowerment. These include early adopters who take advantage of new opportunities, as well as those who take on new roles out of financial necessity. Families living in more difficult financial situations are often willing to adopt new income earning activities for both women and men, while community members can be more sympathetic and support non-traditional roles and activities. These women can eventually be recognised as leaders in their families and communities, which women in more fortunate circumstances may decide to follow – particularly if there is economic benefit.

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<sup>2</sup> Market Development Facility Framework.<http://bit.ly/29Dn97c>

### 3. Case Study 1: Understanding Gendered Social Norms – Sierra Leone For Business Action (Soba)

SOBA seeks to improve the pro-poor performance of market systems in agriculture, light-manufacturing and sustainable energy to increase opportunities for better access and improved growth for poor and disadvantaged people. SOBA is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and implemented by Adam Smith International Ltd. SOBA provides a combination of targeted technical guidance matched with risk capital to encourage innovative, competitive practices that shake norms. Gender equity and social inclusion is a cross-cutting programme imperative, and informed the selection of target sub-market sectors, as well as further due diligence in the market systems analysis.

This in-depth analysis of social norms affect women's involvement in the vegetable subsector, as both farmers and vegetable traders, serves to illustrate how social norms in a market system work. It led to the following key findings (among others):

- **Strong social norms exist that define women's responsibility for unpaid household work.** Roles are generally perceived to be inflexible, and women are more heavily burdened than men. Men and women believe that social or spiritual sanctions are imminent for those who challenge these norms.
- **In-laws and other family members (beyond husbands) significantly influence women's roles and decision-making within the household.** Often in women's empowerment literature there is a focus on joint decision-making power between wife and husband. This research points out that there is significant influence of other family members on the decision-making power of women. For example, multiple women mentioned that their in-laws held power over their decisions. When conducting research it is not only important to engage women and their husbands, but also other influencing family members.
- **Expected sanctions influence the willingness to defy norms for both women and men.** In the SOBA targeted areas common sanctions include fear and shame on the family and husbands, as well as the threat of black magic, and harm to their children. Neither group of women was willing to risk these sanctions to improve their economic situations. This shows the importance of understanding the strength of the norm and how it affects women's behaviors.
- **Gendered social norms restrict men's roles as well.** In the SOBA target areas it is important for men to be publically recognised for work that fully aligns with commonly accepted masculine norms.
- **Differentiated empowerment and type of work.** The strength of social norms and how women experience them vary by the different sub-groups of women involved in the research (i.e. female farmers, traders and wholesalers). In this instance, the type of work that a woman undertakes strongly influences how she experiences different social norms and her levels of empowerment.
- **Women's and men's perceptions of whether gendered roles are inflexible or flexible is often informed only by their own current situation.** Women and men are often unaware of how gendered roles could change if their economic situation were to change.



- **The strength of social norms - for example, perceived flexibility around household roles – is closely associated with levels of (dis)empowerment.** Despite the perceived inflexibility of gendered roles, women traders demonstrated much higher levels of empowerment and consequently greater flexibility in roles than did women farmers.
- **Contextual nuances of decision-making.** The research showed that women may have decision-making power over household expenditures, but much less so over their mobility in this context. The converse could be true in a different culture or context. Many women’s economic empowerment programmes tend to only look at decision making around household expenditures. This research shows that understanding how women are able to make decisions in around a variety of factors / constraints could lead to a better understanding of a women’s agency.

#### 4. Case Study 2: Addressing Gendered Social Norms - Care Bangladesh

The Care Bangladesh case study focuses on the ‘Strengthening Dairy Value Chains’ (SDVC) programme funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. CARE programmes engage with the private sector and develop inclusive business models to confront development challenges for people at the bottom of the pyramid. Working with women is a key strategy of CARE, and the organisation targets the most socially, economically and politically marginalized women. This dual focus on private sector development and women’s economic empowerment is the foundation of CARE Bangladesh’ programming in the dairy sub-sector and in particular Phase II of SDVC project.

The CARE case illustrates that assessing and addressing social norms in market systems is possible, but that it can be a complex, ill-defined and unpredictable process. Despite this ‘messiness’ of understanding social norms and how to best effect change to promote women’s economic empowerment, the CARE case highlights the following key learnings (among others):

- **When working with women whose roles and opportunities are especially limited, social norms tend to be even more complex, requiring a highly nuanced understanding of the context.** What works in one context may not work in another – even in the same region of a country.
- **The context needs to be assessed from a systems perspective, to determine women’s roles in the system;** how they are viewed from both the household and community perspective; the attitudes of other actors in the systems; whether there are existing efforts to change attitudes and behaviours towards women in the sector; and whether there are strong networks of peer support.
- **Challenging social norms directly can be done, but requires knowledge of the context,** and demands careful consideration and monitoring of risks associated with this approach. For example, intentional activities to help shift social norms such as the CARE genderawareness intervention that promotes reflection and dialogue among male and female members of the same households and communities can be extremely helpful.

- **Track social norms that may be changing indirectly:** Market systems initiatives that offer enhanced economic opportunities and access without directly challenging social norms, quite often impact social norms. As women become more knowledgeable about a productive activity, they gain confidence, respect and even status. This can then carry on beyond the productive activity to other spheres such as household decision-making, voice within associations and general community attitudes.
- **Necessity can be a driver of social change:** One of the leading women service providers in the study was a divorced woman who had to provide for her family. Such women are often driven by necessity to step outside socially prescribed roles. And, due to their challenges, community members can be more sympathetic to her plight and support non-traditional roles and activities. However, this does not completely discount the leadership and role modelling that women in more fortunate circumstances may still follow – particularly if there is economic benefit.

## 5. Recommendations

This briefing provides insights into the ways in which programmes are seeking to influence social norms, directly or indirectly. However, more work is needed to deepen the understanding of gendered social norms and how they engage with market systems, and to implement this understanding within programmes. The section below highlights recommendations for practitioners, policy-makers and the research community.

**Integrate an exploration of social norms into gendered market analysis.** Understanding social norms and how they differ from individual attitudes, beliefs and values is critical. As noted above in the definitions section, social norms are defined by collective behaviors and expectations within a certain reference group. Unique tactics are needed if people's behaviors are linked to a norm instead of simply their individual attitudes, beliefs and values. Social norms have a high degree of influence on people's behaviors and are 'sticky' or difficult to change. Understanding whether or not a social norm is at the root cause of a market behavior can help programmes to deepen their understanding of women's market engagement and help programmes to design informed and context specific behavior change strategies and tactics.

**Document strategic planning processes to address gendered social norms.** Between the programmes interviewed there was significant variation between whether or not programmes directly and/or indirectly addressed social norms. Apart from some exceptions, which are documented in this paper, market systems programmes that address social norms currently tend to implement indirect strategies. It remains unclear the degree to which this a deliberate and strategic choice (e.g. because direct programming can negatively affect other aspects of their programmes) or simply because direct strategies are less familiar. We also lack clear lessons to help us decide whether a direct or indirect or multi-pronged strategy is better and in what instances. It would be helpful for programmes to document their strategic planning processes to better understand why choices were made and the impact at the end of the programme. This means being explicit about assumptions behind these choices, such as beliefs that economic gains will eventually affect social norms, or that directly tackling social norms will not lead to sanctions or a backlash.

**Understand differentiated empowerment and risks to unique subgroups of women.**

Different subsets and groups of women experience changes to their situation differently. Programmes should be as specific and informed as possible about what types of women specific interventions seek to engage and to target. For example, women who are less empowered at the start of an intervention are likely to face increased risks to changes in social norms. Social norms may also differ for women according to their life-stage, as noted in recent research MarketShare Associates conducted in the MENA region for GIZ<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, in order to reach or positively affect different subgroups, programmes may need to implement specific risk mitigation measures and monitoring. More generally, a better understanding of how market systems programmes can reflect and mitigate risks of changing gendered social norms for unique subgroups of women would be beneficial.

**Understand positive social norms for women.** The paper is mainly focused on gendered social norms that negatively impact women's ability to engage with markets. However, programmes may also identify positive social norms that can be supported to improve women's ability to engage with markets and create market opportunities. This is also a question for research - do these social norms exist, what are they and what are tactics for promoting them?

**Look at gendered social norms around masculinities and how norms affect men's ability to enhance women's economic empowerment.** This study focused on how gendered social norms affect women. Yet, unsurprisingly, the research showed that men, their gender identity and how men follow gendered social norms or not play a powerful role in either sanctioning or providing support to women to defy negative norms. In understanding social norms and developing strategies to address them, it is crucial that programmes consider how supports and sanctions affect men as well as women. More broadly, it would be helpful to better understand the gendered social norms that affect men and how to promote changes to these norms in a manner that best promotes women's economic empowerment in market systems programming.

**Track gendered social norms that may be changing indirectly.** We assume that market systems initiatives that offer enhanced economic opportunities and access without directly challenging social norms are still likely to impact social norms. For example, a common theory of change includes: as a woman gains more knowledge, she increases her confidence and skills, and eventually increases her income. We then assume that these changes carry on beyond her increased income to enhance her agency such as increases to household decision-making, voice and changes in general community attitudes and gendered social norms. More rigorous assessment of these assumptions could improve the impact of indirect approaches to changing gendered social norms. To support better programming, there is also a need for more impact and/or longitudinal studies publically available that identify the conditions under which this assumption holds true.

**Social norms as an indication of systemic change.** There is lots of current interest and exploration in the market systems development world about how to measure systemic change. Given that social norms are a collective and emergent behavior, and significantly impact market behaviors and power dynamics, the authors would suggest that changes to social norms are an important indication of systemic change<sup>3</sup>. Moving forward, changes to social norms should be included in systemic change frameworks, and measurement and evaluation plans. This study should act as a starting point to tailoring needed tools to assess (systemic) social norm change.

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## 6. Conclusion

The academic research revealed a complex world of social norms, roles and belief systems as well as controls, sanctions and supports that affect the way people behave, interact and even think. This academic literature demonstrates that we are on the right track as we – market systems practitioners - incorporate more social analysis and activities into our women's economic empowerment work, but that we have some way to go if our understanding is to be richer and our practice to be more informed and impactful.

Despite this gap, market systems programmes have been advancing in their incorporation of social norms. The two in-depth cases and the seven mini-cases provide insights into the current state of practice around addressing gendered social norms in market systems programming, and reveal significant lessons learned for closing the existing gap between practice and academic theory. As this paper points out, good practices already exist that can guide market systems programmes to better address social norms affecting women's engagement in markets. Yet, additional research and piloting, such as on the topics noted above, is needed in order to more fully incorporate gendered social norms into a market systems context, effectively distill existing knowledge, document practices and develop innovative ways for addressing social norms in market systems work.

As market systems development policymakers and practitioners place more emphasis on women's economic empowerment, and incorporate more social analysis and tools into their work, it is crucial for programmes to identify how social norms influence women's access and agency, and how this assessment can lead to more effective programming. Developing understandings of the relationship between normative and emergent social behavior and individual decisions will help to promote deeper and longer lasting systems change that actually empowers the people who need it most.