MEASUREMENT BRIEF:
GENDER NORMS

WEDGE

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INTRODUCTION

This measurement brief is designed to assess how gender norms are a formative concept central to the process of effecting change in the communities of the Global South. Addressing gender norms is the key to a variety of programmatic interventions, social policies, and academic inquiries, and a familiar concept to journalists and the public. Yet their definition and role in women's empowerment is described in multiple and often conflicting ways. This brief aims to improve the measurement of gender norms by reviewing and synthesizing the various uses of gender norms as a concept and identifying useful approaches to incorporating them into the larger picture of measuring women's empowerment.

CONCEPTUALIZING SOCIAL NORMS AND GENDER NORMS

Social norms are often defined in terms of how they affect individuals' behavior in a society, but a survey of the literature shows how widely this central idea can be interpreted. For example, Pulerwitz, *et al.* (2019) define norms as shared understandings of how an individual and others should behave. Others specify norms as "conjoint and interdependent" (Horne, Dodoo and Dodoo, 2018), "descriptive", and "injunctive" (Interis, 2011), and "structures and constraints that are embedded in organizational bodies and practices, economic transactions and group identities." (Gammage, Kabeer, and Rodgers, 2015).

Norms are somewhat difficult to define because they are complex and multifaceted, and have become somewhat of a catchall category of explanatory cultural beliefs and expectations. But there is growing recognition of their importance as the link between individual choices, agency, and empowerment, on one hand, and structural and institutional forces, on the other (Malhotra, Amin and Nanda, 2019). For our purposes in this brief, we will use the following definition of norms: we define social norms as people's beliefs about what others do (descriptive norms) and/or approve of (injunctive norms), held in place, at least in part, by anticipation of positive and negative sanctions (Cislaghi and Heise, 2018). Sanctions generally come from

the 'reference group', which is "the group individuals turn to for guidance on the social rules for a given behavior. Norms are typically sustained by more than one reference group, and their influence may have different weight or even go in different directions" (GEH, 2020).

This brief will focus on a particular kind of norm, that related to gender. The most effective definitions of gender norms include their connections to social institutions and structures.

UNFPA and UNICEF, in their Technical Note on Gender Norms (2020), give a comprehensive definition:

- Gender norms are a subset of social norms that are informal, deeply entrenched and widely held beliefs about gender roles, power relations, standards or expectations that govern human behaviors and practices in a particular social context and at a particular time.

- They are ideas or 'rules' about how girls and boys and women and men are expected to be and to act. People internalize these 'rules' early in life.

- Gender norms sustain a hierarchy of power and privilege that typically favors what is considered male or masculine over that which is female or feminine, reinforcing a

systemic inequality that undermines the rights of women and girls, and restricts opportunity for women, men, and gender minorities to express their authentic selves.

It is important to note that gender norms do not act in isolation but intersect with many identities and structures within the social context to produce a wide range of influences and outcomes. This makes it difficult to measure them consistently and to develop measures that can be used cross-culturally. Costenbader et al. (2019) identify the following challenges in capturing gender norms quantitatively:

1. Gender norms are multifaceted—in order to measure one, a researcher must capture a general behavior, beliefs and attitudes about it, as well as assess members of the reference group who share the practice or attitude and the positive or negative sanctions involved.

2. Individuals in the same reference group may hold a variety of normative beliefs, even some contradictory ones. [This implies that attitudes about norms do not always correlate with behaviors—a norm can exist even when individuals do not comply with it.]

3. Gender norms are highly context-specific. [It is difficult to generalize cross-cultural rules about norms.]

The authors go on to describe how little is known about aggregating individual attitudes as a proxy for social norms and call for more research on data aggregation and separating out the various levels of measurement.

MEASUREMENT OF GENDER NORMS

This brief will look at how gender norms are measured at the following different levels of social interaction:

1. The micro level, where individual social interactions take place and are typically measured through attitude surveys and vignettes;

2. The meso level that takes into account community level measures; and

3. The macro level that examines the structural components of gender norms, typically at the country level.

In the Technical Note on Gender Norms from UNFPA and UNICEF, the authors point out that real change must "move beyond individual self-improvement among girls and women towards redressing the power dynamics and structures that serve to reinforce gendered inequalities." (p.1). There are multiple ways to effect change because

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BOX 1:
GENDER NORMS AT THREE LEVELS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Macro Level Contextual assessment of political economy for viability, sustainability self-scalability	Meso Level Prioritization of location, intervention, and partnerships for maximum catalytic potential	Micro Level Identification of linkages with and scale up of ongoing structural interventions
Institutional: Laws & policies, government structures, centralization, economic policies & growth, religious institutions **Resources:** Services, infrastructure, livelihood	**Resources:** Services, infrastructure, livelihood **Social:** Social networks, family systems, social capital, positive deviants	**Social:** Social networks, family systems, social capital, positive deviants **Individual:** Knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, self-efficacy, body, aspirations, skills, age, values

Source: Malhotra, Amin and Nanda, 2019
A. Malhotra et al./Journal of Adolescent Health 64 (2019) S13–S15

gender norms are operating at the micro, meso and macro levels of social organization (see Box 1). Malhotra, Amin and Nanda (2019) call for much greater attention at the macro-level, "...the learnings from a decade of programming to drive social norm change show the importance of integrating gender and power structures and for expanding programming focus beyond the individual, group or community to also address necessary shifts in institutions, systems and resources." (p. S15).

Micro-level Measures

Most commonly, gender norms are measured as attitudes and/or beliefs. For example, the Global Early Adolescence Study uses questions like those delineated in Box 2. These questions were derived from 30 qualitative interviews with adolescents and their parents across seven different countries that were coded and distilled into the questions used in the survey. See also Chart 1 and Table 2 with sample questions and data from the World Values Survey (1994-2014) that measure normative beliefs.

One of the main drawbacks of trying to capture gender norms via attitude surveys is that it becomes difficult to account for the power dynamics inherent in the enforcement of social norms. Sanctions, or the costs or benefits of following a norm, reflect the power dynamics that keep gender norms in place. "Norms exist within a complex web of culture, influenced by belief systems, embedded in formal and informal institutions" that uphold the status quo (GEH, 2020). Attitudinal measures apply strictly to an individual's own beliefs, but social norms are what an individual perceives that the community believes and does.

BOX 2:
SAMPLE GLOBAL EARLY ADOLESCENCE SURVEY GENDER NORM QUESTIONS:

Start of Block: Gender Norms 19-27

GN: The following questions are about adolescents or people your age, for each statement, we would like to know how much YOU agree or disagree with each statement.

GN19. Boys should be raised tough so they can overcome any difficulty in life. Do you agree or disagree?
Agree a lot
Agree a little
Neither agree, nor disagree
Disagree a little
Disagree a lot
Refuse to answer

GN20: Girls should avoid raising their voice to be lady like. Do you agree or disagree?
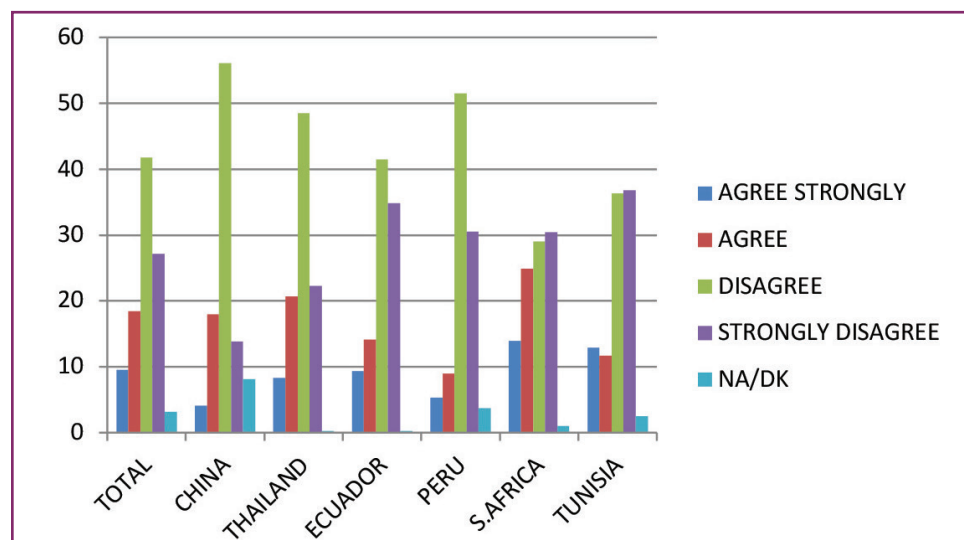Agree a lot
Agree a little
Neither agree, nor disagree
Disagree a little
Disagree a lot
Refuse to answer

Chart 1: WORLD VALUES SURVEY SAMPLE DATA:
"University is more important for a boy than a girl."

World Values Survey, Wave 6, 2010-2014

Table 1. Chile—Do Men Make Better Political Leaders than do Women? (% Respondents)				
Response	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014
Strongly Agree	13	16	17	8
Agree	26	21	30	19
Disagree	39	24	33	37
Strongly disagree	15	25	15	32
NA/DK	6	4	5	4

Source: World Values Survey, Waves 3, 4, 5, and 6, 1994-2014.

A second critique involves the social desirability effect of respondents answering a survey question about gender norms and telling researchers what they think the researchers want to hear, particularly in relation to sensitive information regarding sexual practices or domestic violence.

Costenbader *et al.* (2015) point out that more empirical work is needed to examine how well individual level attitudes capture the social component of norms given that the best level of aggregation has not yet been established. There is some ongoing research about the size of the group needed to capture gender norms (households, neighborhoods, villages, states or nations for example) but more work needs to be done with these methodological questions as the focus of the research. In addition, Costenbader *et al.* add, "Also unclear is whether boundaries other than geographical ones (e.g., ethnicity, group membership etc.) could be used for the aggregation of social norms proxies as well as their corresponding reference groups." There is a tendency to view women as homogenous, and avoid the complexity of women's experiences as members of a variety of social groups with different levels of privilege and access to resources such as in the case of social class, caste, or age.

Meso Level Measures

Vignettes are also a popular tool for measuring gender norms; and have the advantage of going beyond individual-level thoughts and beliefs to include a broader perspective that can represent the social context of a gender norm.[1] A vignette is a short story or scenario that provides the context for the norm being measured. For example, vignettes

were recently used by CARE in their newly developed Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) framework (Stefanik and Hwang, 2017). "CARE use[s] vignettes at project baseline to understand how norms were influencing behavior and to identify weaknesses or 'cracks' in the norms that could be addressed by program activities." The SNAP framework is a qualitative approach to measuring norms, and depends heavily on individual interviews by highly trained interviewers. One of SNAP's key insights is that "a focus on social norms seems particularly appropriate in cases where programs seek to change intractable behaviors held in place by gender norms and shielded from scrutiny by taboo," but strong partners are needed to put this type of research program in place as it requires a large investment in training and conducting interviews.

Quantitative approaches can also use vignettes to measure norms (Horne, Dodoo, and Dodoo, 2018). In order to measure how norms might constrain behavior, these authors asked participants about their expectations, and the expectations of other key individuals, regarding what would happen in particular circumstances. For example, given a scenario, a participant might be asked how "right" or "wrong" a particular behavior is and indicate that on a scale of 1 to 10 (1=very wrong to 10=very right). Then, the participant is asked about community members' reactions to gather what they term as 'metanorms.' Metanorms are norms that regulate the enforcement of norms (that is, what community members are expected to do if a norm is violated). For example, if a wife demands that her husband use a condom, the norm will regulate expectations about

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[1] This is not to say that all vignettes are conducted at the meso level, just that it is possible to design a study with vignettes that measure individual attitudes and community norms.

the community approval or disapproval of the wife's demand; the metanorm will regulate expectations regarding support for the husband punishing his wife for her request. Participants can be randomly assigned to a particular experimental condition. While this does not actually measure behavior, it does offer evidence of how people expect others to behave.

Sample vignette description from Horne, Dodoo and Dodoo 2018:

The field worker told the participant that she would be telling a story about a man and a woman who had been together for three years. The story stated,

The man has paid [none/some/all] of the bride wealth. They have one child. Before they lived together, the man had sex with lots of women. Since they started living together, the man has not had sex with other women. They recently found out that the woman is HIV negative [but/and] the man is HIV [positive/negative]. The woman is insisting that the man use a condom.

We then asked participants questions designed to assess norms. Then we continued the story.

Now I'm going to tell you the rest of the story. Remember that the man and woman have been living together for three years. The man has paid [none/some/all] of the bride wealth. The man is HIV [positive/negative]. Since they got married he has not had sex with any other women. The woman is demanding that the man use a condom. Even though the man is unhappy about it, the woman keeps on insisting that the man use a condom.

We then asked participants questions to assess metanorms.

Vignettes measure an individual's assessment of the community level response. They avoid emphasizing socially desirable responses because the questions do not focus on the individual's own beliefs, rather on what they believe that the community believes. In addition, they are culturally sensitive, and can be designed to fit a particular community or environment. In order to ensure that they are measuring the relevant norms, a substantial time investment can be made in designing the correct measure for any set of gender norms.

Macro Level Measures

The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) is a measure of both the legal infrastructure and the social norms that perpetuate inequality between women and men. It is one of the few cross-national tools of gender inequality that includes both attitudinal as well as structural measures. SIGI gives a country-wide indicator (180 countries) by developing individual in-depth country profiles across the following four dimensions of the gendered social structure: discrimination in the family; restricted physical integrity; restricted access to productive and financial resources; and restricted civil liberties.

International datasets like the Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS), the Demographic Health Survey (DHS), and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) all have questions that can be used to approximate measurement of gender norms. These questions tend to reflect the attitudes or practices held by respondents. The Overseas Development Institute has assembled a brief comparing the strengths of these studies and tracking changes in their questions over time; please see here. The strengths of these surveys are that researchers can study trends over time; explore links between attitudes, practices and household characteristics; measure the effect of policies and programs; and make comparisons across countries. The drawbacks of these surveys are that their coverage may miss smaller communities, especially those that are already marginalized. Few surveys ask questions of girls younger than 15 years and it is difficult to assess the reliability of the answers to sensitive questions. See Table 2 for information on the types of questions asked in the LSMS, DHS AND MICS.

Work on gender norms continues as research, projects and interventions continue to move forward. The challenge of creating a generally reliable and valid set of measures remains, with the further work of enlightening our understanding of how social norms both support and challenge women's empowerment in the Global South.

Table 2. Measurement of gender norms by major quantitative surveys				
Survey type	**Harmful traditional practices**	**Strategic life decisions**	**Use of resources**	**Time use**
MICS	• Early marriage/early childbirth • Female genital mutation/cutting (FGM/C) • Domestic violence (attitudes towards it) • Child discipline	• Educational attainment (by gender) • Family planning • Sexual behaviour • Health-seeking behaviour • Differences in age and education level of spouses	• Ownership of dwelling, agricultural land, livestock (disaggregated by gender)	
DHS	• FGM/C • Domestic violence (prevalence and attitudes towards it) • Early marriage/child birth	• Educational attainment • Employment and occupation • Family planning • Women's opinions on whether a woman can refuse sex with her husband • Hurdles faced by women in accessing health care • Freedom of movement	• Asset ownership • Control over own earnings • Differences in age and education level of spouses • Women's participation in household decisions	
LSMS		• Educational attainment (with a specific question on why a child is not attending school) • Who makes household decisions	• Decisions over use of resources received as "additional income"	• Time household members spend on domestic activities and work outside the home (paid/unpaid)

Source: ODI, 2015.

RESEARCH PROGRAMS ON GENDER NORMS

World Bank: Defining Gender in the 21st Century Talking with Women and Men around the World, A Multi-Country Qualitative Study of Gender and Economic Choice: Led by Caroline Turk, this is a 20-country rapid qualitative assessment of over 4000 women and men.

Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University: Theory Working Group of the Social Norms Learning Collaborative (Social Norms Theory-LC) : Made up of a network of experts committed to facilitating collaboration between organizations and individuals working on adolescent sexual and reproductive health norm change initiatives, the Learning Collaborative is working to enhance collective efforts, build knowledge and develop shared tools to promote and guide effective social norm theory, measurement and practice. The IRH has also developed the Social Norms Exploration Tools, which is a packet of materials to be used by a program for conducting a social norms exploration project.

The Gender Roles, Equality and Transformation (GREAT) Project: This project developed and tested the effectiveness, feasibility, and scalability of strategies to encourage gender-equitable attitudes, norms, and behaviors in Northern Uganda. The project was implemented by the Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown University, Save the Children, and Pathfinder International, together with local partners Straight Talk Foundation and the Concerned Parents Association.

Advancing Learning and Innovation in Gender Norms (ALIGN): This is a digital platform and program of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of discriminatory gender norms and what works to change them.

Men Engage Alliance: This is a global alliance made up of dozens of country networks spread across many regions of the world, hundreds of non-governmental organizations, as well as UN partners. Men Engage Alliance members work collectively and individually toward advancing gender justice, human rights, and social justice to achieve a world in which all can enjoy healthy, fulfilling, and equitable relationships and optimize their potential.

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