

# Refocusing power: Transforming harmful social norms to prevent violence against women and girls

## KEY POINTS

- ✓ **UNEQUAL POWER DYNAMICS ARE CENTRAL TO GENDER INEQUALITY AND THUS THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS**
- ✓ **A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW POWER INTERSECTS AT MULTIPLE LEVELS TO DRIVE VARIOUS TYPES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS NEEDED**
- ✓ **MEASUREMENT OF SOCIAL NORMS RELATED TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS SHOULD EXPAND BEYOND THE 'REFERENCE GROUP' TO THE WIDER SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC WORLD**
- ✓ **'TRADITIONAL' BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS CAN COME TO BE SEEN AS BOTH A CAUSE OF VIOLENCE AND A BARRIER TO ITS PREVENTION**



# What is violence against women and girls?

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a gendered act of violence that causes or could cause physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of harm or coercion, in public or private life.<sup>1</sup>

Violence against women and girls takes many different forms globally and is a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It occurs regardless of age, class, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and is prevalent around the world. Globally, an estimated one in three women will experience some form of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, or sexual violence by a non-partner, at least once in her lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

Violence against women and girls is fundamentally about power. The imbalance of power between men and women underpins gender inequality and drives men's use of violence against women. This power imbalance can be experienced at multiple levels. For example, in attitudes about gender roles that

assume women are responsible for domestic duties and men must be the primary breadwinners, rigid ideas about what defines masculinity and femininity, the lack of economic rights for women or discriminatory family law.

**POWER IS THEREFORE AT THE  
CENTRE OF GENDER INEQUALITY  
AND MUST BE THE CENTRAL FOCUS  
FOR PREVENTION ACTIVITIES.**

The political and economic dynamics of male power is crucial to our understanding of VAWG. The prevention of VAWG must therefore address the way power is exercised at all levels – individual; family/relationship; community; social; and global. This is often referred to as the socio-ecological model.

## The current approach to primary prevention and the absence of power

In recent years, social norms have become a key focus in the prevention of VAWG across the globe. The social norms approach aims to reshape the community beliefs, attitudes and values that drive VAWG. Changing gendered norms that inform and condone various forms of VAWG has become an important area for development policy and practice, and a key ingredient to reduce and prevent VAWG across a range of contexts.

Current social norms approaches have tended to focus primarily on data at the individual level to understand what is happening at the community level. That is, data collected from individuals about their own attitudes, behaviours, or perceptions of community expectations are aggregated to represent

community norms. However, these 'proxy' measures cannot fully account for the way in which vulnerability to VAWG is underpinned by relationships – be that between individuals, or between systems and structures. When social norms approaches do not examine the role of power relations and dynamics, they fail to address the structural and institutional processes that shape how VAWG plays out in different contexts.<sup>3</sup> This means we must **focus on power as a key consideration in the prevention of VAWG**. In particular, prevention approaches must consider how gendered power dynamics function at the *individual, community and political* levels, to drive gender inequality and violence against women.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly. 1993. *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*. Available online at <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). 2013. *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*. Geneva: WHO.

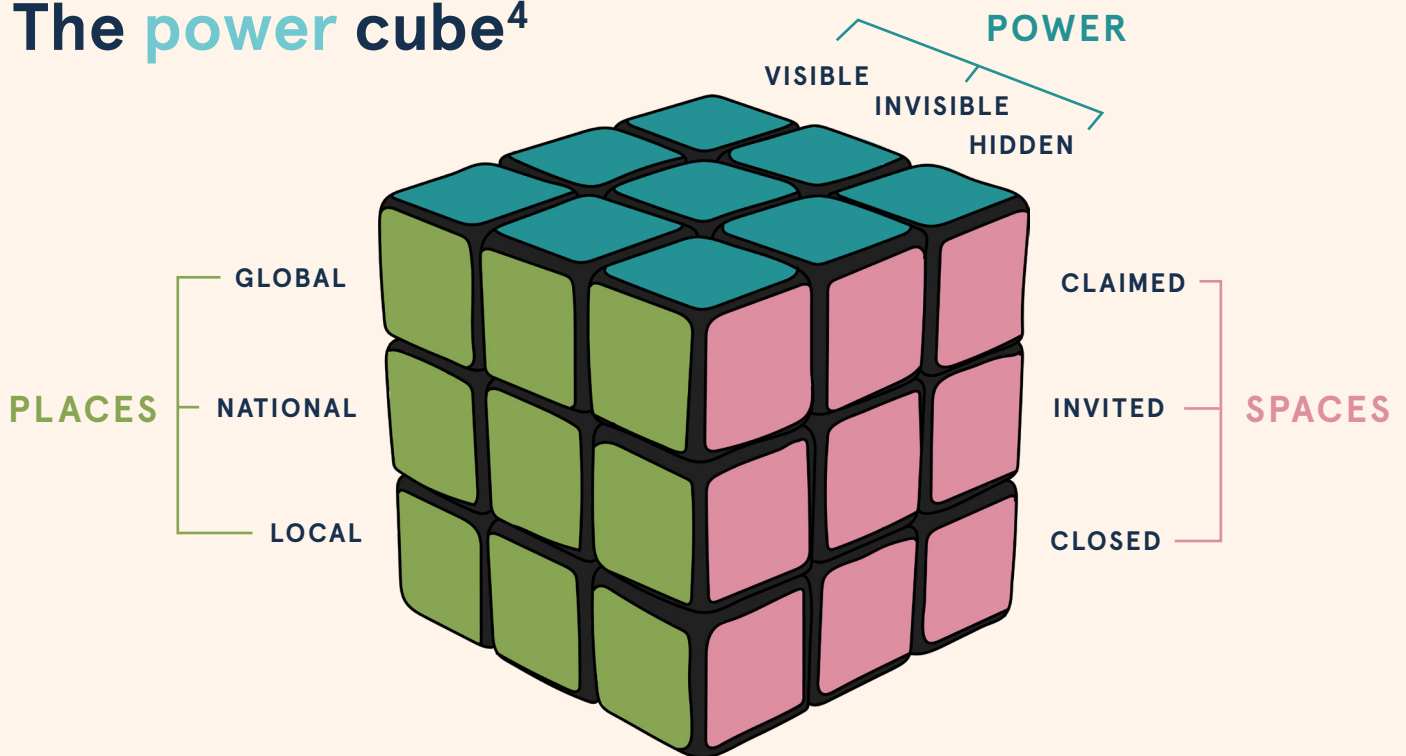
<sup>3</sup> The absence of power in social norms analyses has also been noted in Cislighi, B. & Heise, L. 2016. *Measuring Gender-related Social Norms. Report of a Meeting*, Baltimore Maryland, June 14–15, 2016: Learning Group on Social Norms and Gender-based Violence of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

## REFOCUSING POWER: TRANSFORMING HARMFUL SOCIAL NORMS TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

THE PREVENTION OF VAWG IS STILL AN EVOLVING FIELD, AND ADDRESSING SOCIAL NORMS IS ONLY ONE ASPECT OF PRIMARY PREVENTION.

Understanding and responding to women's lived experiences of complex, intersecting inequalities, and their structural foundation, is necessary to develop effective prevention initiatives that work to end VAWG. It is important to question how these approaches capture, and work across, the intersecting identities that shape women's everyday lives and experiences of violence.

### The power cube<sup>4</sup>



#### POWER

##### VISIBLE POWER

Contests over interests are assumed to be visible in public spaces, which are presumed to be relatively open.

##### HIDDEN POWER

Barriers preclude the entry of certain actors and issues.

##### INVISIBLE POWER

Visible conflict is hidden through internalisation of powerlessness or lack of awareness.

#### PLACES

Changing patterns of globalisation have changed the territorial or spatial relations of power.

#### SPACES

How the space is created affects the power within it.

##### CLOSED SPACES

Bureaucrats, experts elected representative make decisions with little broad consultation or involvement.

##### INVITED SPACES

People are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities.

##### CLAIMED/CREATED SPACES

Spaces claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power holders, or created more autonomously by them.

<sup>4</sup> This power cube graphic is based on a presentation by the Institute of Development Studies, and Eyben, R. Harris, C. and Pettit, J. (2006) Exploring Power for Change, Brighton: IDS.

## POWER MAY BE SEEN AS:

- ✓ **POWER 'OVER'**  
THE ABILITY OF THE POWERFUL TO AFFECT THE ACTIONS AND THOUGHT OF THE POWERLESS
- ✓ **POWER 'TO'**  
THE CAPACITY TO ACT; AGENCY
- ✓ **POWER 'WITH'**  
THE SYNERGY OF COLLECTIVE ACTION, SOCIAL MOBILISATION AND ALLIANCE BUILDING
- ✓ **POWER 'WITHIN'**  
A SENSE OF SELF-DIGNITY AND SELF-AWARENESS THAT ENABLES AGENCY

## Broadening current methods to measure VAWG

Measuring social norm change is a complicated process. Although social norm change programs have shown some success, current measurement approaches rely heavily on individual-level data, such as self-reported perceptions, beliefs and actions. This approach struggles to capture the structural, institutional and political processes that shape how VAWG is experienced in different settings.

Political, economic and cultural spheres rarely exist in isolation from one another. They are often entangled in the lived experiences of individuals and communities. The current focus on individual-level data can struggle to measure the broader social and structural causes of VAWG. It also risks returning the issue of VAWG – which has often been equated with issues of 'behaviour' alone – to a largely interpersonal problem, albeit one affected by 'normative community expectations.'

To truly understand what is happening beyond the community level, it is important to measure power dynamics at institutional levels (for example, in government, education systems, religious institutions, and the media). By measuring the operation of power across individual, collective and institutional scales, a more rigorous assessment of the cultural, political and economic influences on VAWG can be obtained.

**POWER AND GENDER NORMS HAVE BECOME SIMPLIFIED AND DEPOLITICISED. THEY HAVE BEEN REDUCED TO RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS AS OPPOSED TO STRUCTURAL FORMATIONS EMBEDDED IN INSTITUTIONS, WRAPPED UP IN THE EXPANSION OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM, THAT SYSTEMATICALLY SHAPE PRIVILEGE, ACCESS AND SO FORTH.**

For the measurement of social norm change to move beyond the individual, it must incorporate more qualitative methods. A holistic account of the possible factors influencing VAWG in any given setting requires more contextually attuned survey mechanisms and the addition of qualitative data collection throughout the life of a project. More robust measures are also needed to explain the correlation between certain sets of norms and particular harmful practices, for

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example between norms around masculinity and sexual entitlement and sexual violence perpetration.

Practitioners and researchers may want to consider a more rigorous, mixed methods model that places greater value on the insights made possible by qualitative methodologies such as: qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, life histories, photovoice projects, and ethnographic methods such as participant observation. Although these methods are more time-consuming, they are less reliant upon individual-level data and more attuned to the human interactions and wider social formations.

**“FEMINIST THEORIZATIONS OF MALE POWER CONSIDER NOT ONLY THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ‘SOCIETY’, ‘CULTURE’, AND ‘HUMAN BEHAVIOUR’, BUT ALSO THE GENDER BIASES OF STATE BUREAUCRACIES, INTERNATIONAL GOVERNANCE, MARKET LOGICS, AND MANY INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES UPON NORMS AND NORMATIVITY.”<sup>5</sup>**

## Reimagining the ‘reference group’

The popularity and mainstreaming of social norms globally has positively impacted discussions on VAWG by avoiding ostracising or blaming particular individuals or groups and instead making them partners in processes of social change. At the same time the distinction between culture and social norms risks becoming blurry. ‘Traditional’ beliefs and customs can come to be seen as both a cause of violence and a barrier to its prevention. As such there is a tendency to talk about ‘cultural practices, beliefs and norms’ as separate from the economic and political dynamics that crucially shape and inform cultural practices. A focus on culture, attitudes

and behaviours risks limiting discussions of power to interpersonal relationships and localised social networks, whilst overlooking wider, often global, political and economic structures.

The term ‘reference group’ is the most commonly used term to reflect more dynamic notions of culture in a social norms approach. Reference groups are based upon tangible interpersonal interactions – such as one’s fellow townspeople or villagers. The ‘community norms’ within these groups are targeted for prevention activities. However, in the context of VAWG, it is still unclear, even in well-defined measurements, how ‘community’ is interpreted or understood by respondents. More attention should be given to the economic and political dynamics of power beyond the ‘local’, immediate social environment, to ensure a more effective and holistic approach to prevention.

**CULTURE MEANS VERY DIFFERENT THINGS IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, SO FOR INSTANCE ‘RAPE CULTURE’ IN AUSTRALIA REFERS TO SPECIFIC GROUPS WITHIN A LARGER CULTURE, WHILE ETHIOPIAN CULTURE, FOR EXAMPLE, IS CONSIDERED MORE TRADITIONAL, HOMOGENOUS AND CULTURE-BOUND.**

<sup>5</sup> Kabeer, N. 2003. *Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication and the Millennium Development Goals: A handbook for policy-makers and other stakeholders*, Commonwealth Secretariat.

## PRACTICAL TIPS FOR DONORS, PRACTITIONERS, AND POLICY MAKERS

- 1 INTEGRATE MORE RIGOROUS, MIXED METHODS RESEARCH METHODS INTO SOCIAL NORMS APPROACHES SO THAT BROADER STRUCTURAL INFLUENCES AND INSTITUTIONS ARE MEASURED ALONGSIDE LOCALISED ENVIRONMENTS.
- 2 CONSIDER HOW REFERENCE GROUPS CAN BE RE-CONCEPTUALISED TO INCLUDE GLOBAL AND MACRO-LEVEL SYSTEMS.
- 3 AVOID CONFLATING SOCIAL NORMS AND CULTURE. INSTEAD OF TALKING ABOUT 'TRADITIONAL' BELIEFS, QUESTION THE POWER STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO EQUALITY THAT DRIVE VAWG.
- 4 PRIORITISE INVESTMENT IN LONG-TERM PROJECTS TO ALLOW FOR ADEQUATE AND HOLISTIC MEASUREMENT OF CHANGE (OR NO CHANGE) BEYOND THE COMMUNITY LEVEL THROUGHOUT THE LIFE OF A PROGRAM.
- 5 BRING 'POWER' BACK INTO DISCUSSIONS AS A MORE CENTRAL TENET OF VAWG.
- 6 RECOGNISE THE LIMITS OF CURRENT SOCIAL NORMS APPROACHES AND THE VARIOUS PROGRAMS THAT COME WITH THEM. THE PREVENTION OF VAWG IS AN EVOLVING FIELD AND WE MUST BE CAREFUL NOT TO USE SOCIAL NORMS AS A 'CURE' FOR ENDING VIOLENCE.

THIS PAPER IS A JOINT PUBLICATION OF THE EQUALITY INSTITUTE AND MELBOURNE RESEARCH ALLIANCE TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND THEIR CHILDREN, THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE. EMMA FULU AND SARAH GOSPER LED THE WRITING OF THIS PAPER. IT IS BASED ON RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY KALISSA ALEXEYEFF, AMANDA GILBERTSON, AMY PEIDALUE, ELISE KLEIN AND WITH RESEARCH ASSISTANCE FROM RACHEL HIRSCH, THE FINDINGS OF WHICH ARE PUBLISHED IN *FEMINIST REVIEW* ISSUE 126 (FORTHCOMING NOVEMBER 2020).