

Good Communication Practices to Transform Social Norms around VAWG

Social marketing campaigns and other communication initiatives play a vital role in changing social norms by informing, educating, influencing, and mobilizing people to adopt new attitudes and behaviours. This Co-Praxis synthesizes good practices of communication initiatives designed to transform discriminatory social norms that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and harmful practices, including violence against women and girls (VAWG).

JGG EXPERIENCE

JGG consultants have been tasked by clients, especially United Nations (UN) agencies and national human rights institutions, to evaluate or advise on communication initiatives designed for the purpose of changing discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, especially those related to gender inequality and VAWG. We have noted that results-based planning and evaluation is often missing in communication initiatives designed to address social norms that perpetuate VAWG.

Key concepts and definitions

SOCIAL NORM. A social construct that exists as a collectively shared belief about what others do (what is typical) and what is expected among members of the group (what is appropriate). Social norms are generally maintained by social approval and/or disapproval. In this Co-Praxis, JGG focuses on social norms that have discriminatory effects or perpetuate harmful practices against women and girls.

DISCRIMINATION. United Nations human rights treaties define discrimination as any “distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex, gender, ethnic origin, colour, disability (or other grounds) which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal basis with others, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”

HARMFUL PRACTICES. CEDAW and the CRC Committees define harmful practices as “forms of behaviour that are grounded in discrimination on the basis of, among other things, sex, gender and age, in addition to multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination that often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering.”

COMMUNICATION INITIATIVE. Processes by which communication methods (e.g. print media, radio, television, social media, and interpersonal) are used to change knowledge, attitudes, behaviour or practice in an intended audience.

MOST SALIENT GOOD PRACTICES

Messages should be context specific, targeted and simple. Messages should be based on a deep understanding of social norms, stigmas, and misconceptions prevalent in target communities. Messages should also be tailored for different audiences. Moreover, one simple message that calls for a clear action has a better chance of being understood than complex and multiple messages. Participatory formative research can be used to understand the context and target groups for effective message design and baseline data. Oxfam’s *We Can* campaign in South Asia identified issues in each country through community-based consultations. The *Meena Communication Initiative* by UNICEF in South Asia used a multimedia entertainment-education campaign to portray the dangers of early marriage and advantages of girls finishing school. The development of communication content involved extensive focus group and field testing among children and parents within the project regions. Evaluation results showed that the campaign positively influenced perceptions and attitudes towards girls’ rights, including viewers’ self-reported attitudinal change regarding dowry and girls’ education.

KEY DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

[Findings from the SASA! Study in Uganda](#). BCB Medicine, 2014.

[DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls \(VAWG\)](#). 2016.

[Case Study: Breakthrough campaign Bell Bajao!](#)

[Communication, Participation, & Social Change: A Review of Communication Initiatives Addressing Gender-Based Violence, Gender Norms, and Harmful Traditional Practices in Crisis-Affected Settings](#). American Refugee Committee and Communication for Change, 2010.

[The Big Conversation: Handbook to Address Violence Against Women in and through the Media](#). UNESCO and UN Women, 2019.

[VicHealth Review of Communication Components of Social Marketing/Public Education Campaigns Focusing on Violence Against Women](#). State Government of Victoria, 2005.

[The 'We Can' Campaign in South Asia](#). Oxfam International, 2015.

[Violence Against Women: It's Against All the Rules](#). Australia, NSW Attorney General's Department, 2002.

[Communications to Change Discriminatory Gender Norms Affecting Adolescent Girls](#). Overseas Development Institute, 2015.

[The Campaign for Action on Family Violence. Effective Social Marketing: Complex Issues and Innovative Practice](#). New Zealand, Ministry of Social Development, 2009.

[Promoting Gender Equality to Prevent Violence against Women](#). World Health Organization, 2009.

[Campaigns to End Violence against Women and Girls](#). UN Women, 2011.

[A Life of its Own: An Assessment of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence Campaign](#). Center for Women's Global Leadership, 2017.

[Addressing the Social and Cultural Norms That Underlie the Acceptance of Violence](#). National Academies of Sciences, 2018.

[How communications can change social norms around adolescent girls](#). Overseas Development Institute, 2016.

Use various communication channels. In addition to using the most appropriate communication channel for the targeted audience, communication initiatives use additional mass communication media to reinforce the message and increase the audience size. The use of the internet, social media networks (e.g. Facebook, Flickr, Tumblr, WordPress, Twitter, YouTube), text messaging, skype and other technologies are useful to convey messages rapidly to mass audiences. The *Soul City 4* campaign in South Africa addressed violence against women through a prime-time TV drama, radio programming, nationwide booklet distribution and community events. The campaign reached 82% of South Africa's population. Post exposure surveys showed that communication recipients were more likely to perceive that: abused women should not tolerate abuse; social norms that perpetuate VAWG are a serious problem; and domestic violence should not be a private matter.

Address multiple levels of society. Communication initiatives should be designed to reach various levels of society. This includes targeting individuals, families, schools, communities, institutions and the broader society to transform not only individual attitudes and behaviours in the private sphere but to create an enabling environment through reform of policies, laws and institutional practices. The Raising Voices' *Sasa!* campaign, initially implemented in Uganda and currently active in more than 20 countries, uses local activism to engage individuals, families and neighbours through community dramas, quick chats, community conversations, and soap opera discussion groups to prevent intimate partner violence. Its media advocacy strategy seeks to engage local leaders, policy makers and journalists to effect wider change through audio soap opera drama for radio broadcasts. Evaluation data showed that the initiative significantly reduced social acceptance of intimate partner violence, increased understanding that women can refuse sex with their partners and reduced physical intimate partner violence.

Combine media campaigns with face-to-face engagement. Mass media interventions should be combined with open dialogue group discussions or individual peer-to-peer conversations where individuals identify local harmful practices and the norms that sustain them. In addition to reinforcing the media campaign's message, these direct engagements create safe spaces for individuals to question their own beliefs, attitudes and practices. Discussing taboos or sensitive topics also helps demystify perceptions about social norms. Oxfam's *We Can* campaign in South Asia combined

mass media methods with *Change Makers*, a peer-to-peer model to discuss VAWG and intervention. Results from India showed that 39% of people exposed to *Change Makers* demonstrated significant attitudinal change: increased sensitivity to women in their families, willingness to share housework and decreased acceptance of habitual forms of discrimination and VAWG.

Engage men and boys. To change social norms related to gender inequality and VAWG men and boys need to be involved. Given that evidence shows that perpetrators of violence are overwhelmingly men, communication initiatives should target actual and potential perpetrators. The UN's global *He for She* campaign provides toolkits to help individuals, universities, workplaces and others engage men and boys. The first non-punitive *Freedom from Fear* government campaign in Western Australia encouraged male perpetrators of domestic violence to voluntarily seek help and change violent behaviour while alleviating fear among women partners and their children. Evaluation data revealed that the proportion of men who claimed to be emotional abusive reduced during the campaign and women also reported a decrease in emotional abuse. Promundo's *Program H* initiative implemented in 22 countries across 5 continents encourages critical reflection about rigid norms related to masculinity and transformation of stereotypical roles associated with gender. *Program H* combines group education activities such as role-playing and discussion with youth-led campaigns that encourage peer support groups. Evaluation outcomes systematically found that, after a campaign, there was increased support for gender-equitable attitudes among participants.

Involve gatekeepers and influencers. The engagement of gatekeepers and influencers of social norms (e.g. community and religious leaders, teachers, sporting coaches) helps shift community values and power relations based on gender at the community level. The Mauritanian Association for Mother and Child Health engaged imams to overcome resistance to sexual violence responses, in an initiative supported by UNFPA. The imams shared Koran-based interpretation of the issue in sensitization workshops with police, magistrates, and government officials to garner support for survivors' programs. The initiative has reduced the incidence of rape and changed attitudes towards rape victims who were often regarded as responsible for inciting the violence, accused of adultery, and imprisoned. In addition, sports, TV or film celebrities can capture people's attention and help reinforce the messages. The *It's All Against the Rules* campaign in South Wales

used high-profile athletes to deliver the message that violent behaviours against women are unacceptable. The state-wide campaign resulted in 75% of men knowing about the campaign and an increase in knowledge of the consequences of VAWG.

Use a human rights framework and a gender perspective. A human rights framework allows communities to understand how social norms discriminate and allow women and girls to claim their rights. A recent assessment of the international campaign *16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence* found that it has successfully incorporated a human rights-based approach. The It's not OK community driven nation-wide campaign to prevent family violence in New Zealand worked with journalists so that media covered the issue of family violence from a rights-based perspective. Evaluation data found that the campaign increased accurate media coverage of all forms of family violence, increased the number of people seeking support services, and news reports were 20% less likely to contain a myth.

Establish a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system. Communication initiatives that aim to change social norms around VAWG must rely on a comprehensive MEL system in order to provide evidence of the initiative's impact. Baseline data is an important element of a MEL system given that it provides pre-project information on the target groups awareness, beliefs and behaviours related to VAWG and gender equality and it can also be used to inform the design of communication campaigns/initiatives. Breakthrough launched its *Bell Bajao!/Ring the Bell!* campaign in 2008 to call on men and boys across India to take a stand against domestic violence by ringing the doorbell when they witnessed such violence taking place. Breakthrough conducted a baseline survey to gather state-specific information on gender-based violence, domestic violence, and related legal provisions. The campaign also used rapid assessments surveys, most significant change stories and a quasi-experimental design to monitor and evaluate its impact. The MEL system provide evidence that surveyed participants had high levels of awareness of domestic violence (97%), a significantly higher level of awareness of legal protection measures compared to the baseline (an increase from 3% to 21%), and higher understanding that emotional abuse, threats, economic deprivation and sexual abuse are also forms of domestic violence. Finally, the MEL system revealed that TV was the most effective and far-reaching dissemination channel.

JGG Reflections

JGG network consultants, including communication professionals, from Bolivia, Canada, Colombia, Paraguay, Turkey and the United Kingdom provided their reflections on communication initiatives to address social norms that underpin VAWG based on their professional experience.

Resources for sustained initiatives and evidence-based design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

Too often communication initiatives are allocated insufficient funds. This limits the research required for a baseline study, evidence-based design, the number of communication channels used, the duration of the initiative and impact evaluation.

Opportunities exist across sectors and partnerships, including economic development and private-public partnerships.

Communication initiatives to address social norms that perpetuate VAWG are often incorporated into projects expressly designed to prevent and respond to intimate partner violence within the family. Opportunities to address VAWG in the world of work can be overlooked by development agencies. Economic development, women's economic empowerment, and public – private initiatives can integrate communication on VAWG in specific economic sectors, in the workplace, and in relation to customer or client relations. JGG consultants have observed an increase in studies measuring the economic impact of VAWG in a country, but key impacts are not always disseminated through a communication strategy.

Transmit positive messages that model new social norms and behaviours rather than negative “shock” messages.

While messages that shock the public may generate visibility and discussion of VAWG they do not generate the desired change in social norms and behaviours. Messages that include examples of positive behaviours should be

prioritized, for example: desired behaviours of perpetrators, examples of survivors who defend their rights, successful resolution of types of different types of VAWG, and examples of law enforcement or compliance.

Context specific and culturally relevant communication methods.

As mentioned in the good practices above, messages and communication methods will be effective if they are designed with locally communities based on their own communication preferences. In Latin America, indigenous communities generally prioritize oral communication, therefore messages that critique traditional social norms related to gender and VAWG are better received with the participation of local leaders and when traditional methods of storytelling, songs or dramatizations are used. In regions where internet access is limited, radio and cell phone channels will enhance accessibility of messages.

Communication initiatives coordinated with local response mechanisms (inter-agency coordination teams) including local government enhance results.

JGG consultants across regions have observed that communication campaigns to address discriminatory social norms targeted at perpetrators and survivors of VAWG are more effective when local governments are involved, especially the agencies participating in coordinated response or referral mechanisms. The engagement of local service and enforcement agencies ensures a consistent message and readiness among service providers to manage the increase of reporting of VAWG that occurs during and after communication initiatives.


CONTRIBUTORS: JGG would like to thank University of Ottawa interns Sara Ageorlo and Nkem Amaku for their literature review on communication advocacy related to VAWG. JGG network associates and collaborators provided examples and reflections: Zeynep Baser, Carmen Colazo, Anamaria Golemac Powell, Kimberly Inksater, Paola Jiménez, and Carmen Beatriz Ruiz. José Miguel López coordinated the Co-Praxis research and writing process.



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