

Understanding social norms is challenging. Using participatory research techniques can help uncover complex dynamics and influences. This is critical for designing social and behaviour change communication.

Using the Social Norms Exploration Tool (SNET) to explore social norms*

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Background

Social norms, including gender norms, are informal, mostly unwritten rules that govern the acceptable behaviours of individuals within a given group or community. They include what we do, what we believe others do, and what we believe others approve of and expect us to do. An example of a norm related to child marriage is that 'a girl should marry young'.

Norms can be positive, for instance, those that value and enable equal opportunities for all in education, health and employment. Negative norms on the other hand, can perpetuate harmful attitudes and behaviours, reinforce discriminatory practices and create strong resistance to adopting new more positive behaviours, making it difficult to achieve an equal and inclusive society.

Understanding norms is an important part of any behaviour change approach. It can however be challenging because they are deeply ingrained in individuals and societies and are often reproduced unconsciously. They can vary widely; therefore, it is important to understand how they play out within different groups in society. In each case, research needs to understand both the target group and their influencers (their reference groups).

Objective

BBC Media Action used the [Social Norms Exploration Tool \(SNET\)](#) to better understand social norms in relation to adolescent pregnancy and behaviours around contraception in Sierra Leone (2023) and women's political participation and leadership in Tanzania (2022). Results from these studies have shaped social and behaviour change communication interventions.

Method

In each country, SNET allowed for a participatory approach where male and female community members were involved in identifying key influencers and rules governing their behaviours. The iterative research process, enabled researchers to adapt the tools and sample as they gained a deeper understanding of the topics. In the first instance, BBC Media Action researchers were trained by George Town University, USA on the SNET tool, methods and steps for social norm exploration.

Sierra Leone
<p>My Social Networks – 90 rapid interviews to identify the reference groups (people who the target audiences speak to about contraception).</p> <p>Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)- 18 FGDs and Key Informant Interviews (KIs) - 26 KIs, which used various techniques:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Problem Tree Analysis to map out the cause-effect relationship of practices related to issues such as early marriage. The Five Whys Technique to deep dive into the root causes of issues and explore social norms around decision-making in relationships that influence the access to and use of contraceptives. Vignettes or short stories/scenarios provided a less personal way to explore decision-making, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours around sensitive topics such as the use of condoms and transactional sex.

Tanzania
<p>FGDs and KIs - 16 FGDs with male and female Tanzanians and 32 KIs including with female leaders and trailblazers exploring their reference groups (people whose opinions matter), norms around women's political participation and leadership.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vignettes were used as part of the FGDs and KIs and covered scenarios of young and older women standing for various political and leadership positions and asked the participants for their thoughts on them.

Learnings from the field

We found that vignettes are an enabling projective technique, which allow respondents to talk freely about sensitive issues. The problem tree is more challenging to implement where literacy levels are lower or materials like flip charts to document the tree are not available. Facilitators thought the Five Whys technique was challenging to use as asking "why" caused cognitive load and yielded limited information compared to vignettes.

Results

Findings from both countries include:

Sierra Leone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reference groups for young males and females (in relation to family planning and contraception) include parents (mainly mothers), friends and partners. Girls/women feel it is important, though not easy, to find a man who will provide and look after them. To this end, transactional sex, having more children, and early marriage are all acceptable. While girls/women are seen to be responsible for using contraceptives and for protecting themselves from getting pregnant, they have the least information about the use of contraceptives and face the biggest stigma to access them. Discussions on sex and contraception remain taboo in families and between couples. Healthcare workers (HCWs) can be allies but also hinder access as young people and adolescents worry about confidentiality and their reputation when speaking to them.
Tanzania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four reference groups with influence on women's participation in political leadership were identified: women's partners/husbands, other women in their communities, peers and friendship groups, and influential individuals in the community (those who are seen by others as leaders and whose judgment is trusted). A woman's primary role is to take care of her children, husband and extended family. Young women in Tanzania are generally not trusted to lead; and if they do, they can only lead in positions that require traits routinely associated with women, such as being humble, trustworthy and caring. Women feel they will lose face if they run for election; women standing for political office experience gossip about their character and intentions and face negative labelling.

Conclusion

Understanding social norms is critical in designing behaviour change projects that are meaningful and culturally sensitive. For example, in Tanzania, findings from this research on reference groups such as partners, peers, voices of influential individuals, stories of change and role models have been used to inform BBC Media Action's long running gender transformative project Niambie (Tell Me), demonstrating that women can be successful leaders in their communities.

With a clearer understanding of norms that exist in a community, who influences and maintains the norms and which/how norms influence the behaviours that the project is seeking to change - programme makers can successfully and efficiently design projects which aim to shift harmful social norms and promote positive ones. Academic tools such as the SNET provide a wealth of guidance and practical exercises to identify key reference groups and explore social norms driving behaviours of interest. Specifically, and perhaps most importantly, these tools allow the communities to participate in this exploration and identification with critical input and reflections on their lived experiences, attitudes, beliefs and practices.

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'This tool (SNET) was easy to apply to our work. Programme makers used the insights to create content which really resonated with our listeners and is helping to change behaviour.'

Sonia Whitehead. Head of Research.
BBC Media Action

BBC Media Actions researchers who took part in the training in Freetown, Sierra Leone



Example of a vignette used in Tanzania

Asha, aged 24 years old, lives in your village/street. She is unmarried and is a tailor. Apart from doing what she does for a living, she is contesting to become a leader at the street level i.e., the local government chairperson.

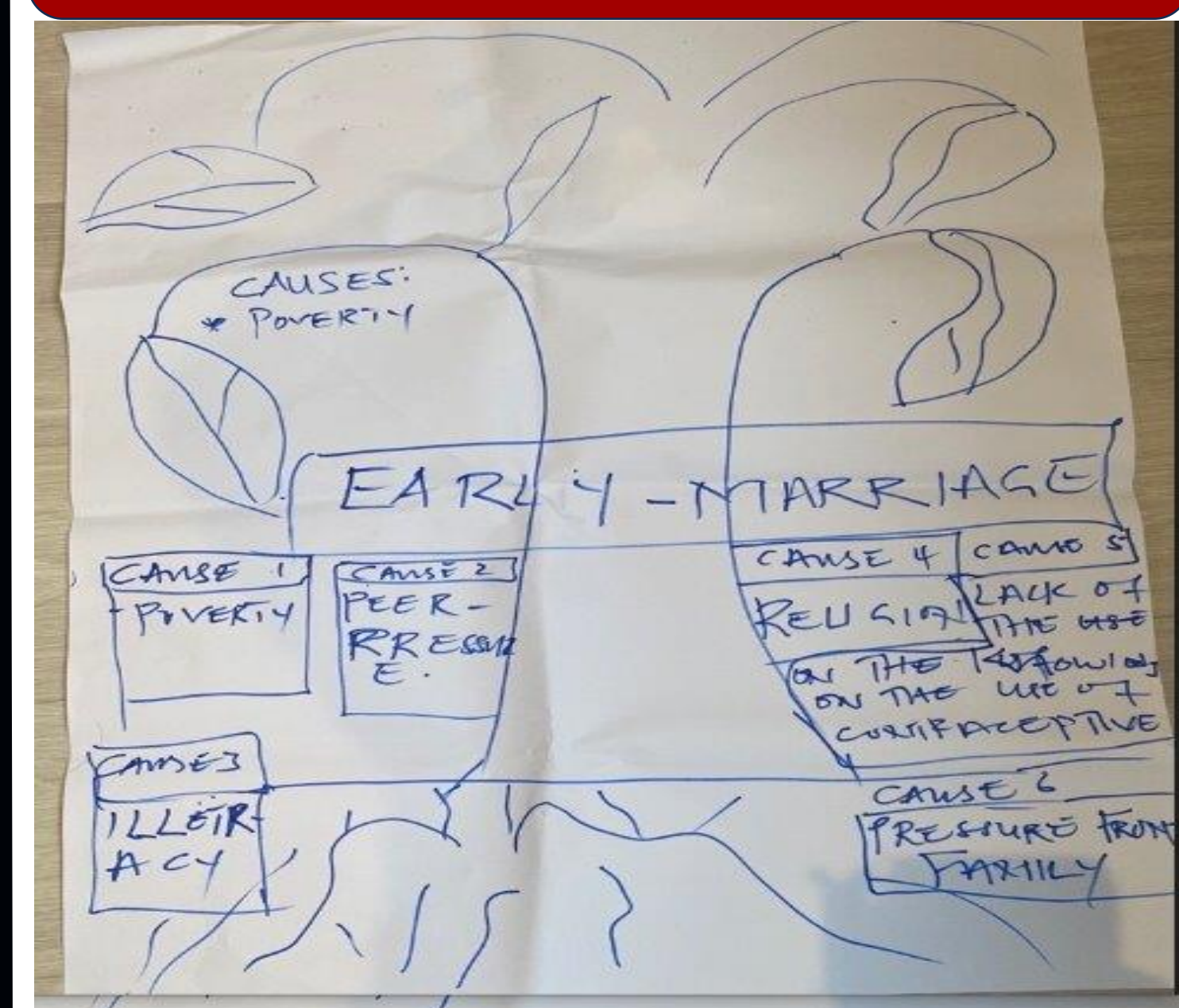
Questions we asked included:

- What will other women think of a woman contesting for a political position? How about men?
- Whom do you think will support her vision?
- Is she likely to face any sanctions for running to become the local government chairperson?
- What are groups in the community that influence women to take part in the political arena?

Now imagine Asha is 42 years old and married. She has two children. She is also contesting to become the local government chairperson.

- What will people in your community think now of Asha's ambitions of becoming a leader?
- Will she still face any consequences now that she is older and married?
- Now imagine in the same village where Asha lives, there's also Baraka, a man, who is contesting for the local government chairperson seat. What will people in your community expect Asha to do in this situation? Why do you think so?

Notes from the **Problem Tree Analysis** exercise in Freetown, Sierra Leone



References

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