

## **Title**

A qualitative study of changing gender norms in the prevention of violence against women and girls in an urban informal settlement in India

## **Contact**

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## **Abstract**

### *Background*

The contribution of structural inequalities and societal legitimisation to violence against women, which 30% of women in India survived in the last year, is widely accepted. There is a consensus that interventions should aim to change gender norms, particularly through community mobilisation. How this should be done is less clear.

### *Methods*

We did a qualitative study in a large informal settlement in Mumbai, an environment in which 41% of the population live. After reviewing the anonymised records of consultations with 1653 survivors of violence, we conducted 5 focus group discussions and 13 individual interviews with 71 women and men representing a range of age groups and communities. We based the interviews on fictitious biographical vignettes to elicit responses and develop an understanding of social norms. We hypothesised that, in trying to change norms, we might exploit the disjunction between descriptive norms (beliefs about what others actually do) and injunctive norms (beliefs about what others think one ought to do), focusing program activities on evidence that descriptive norms are changing.

### *Results*

We found that descriptive and injunctive norms were relatively similar with regard to femininity, masculinity, the need for marriage and childbearing, resistance to separation and divorce, and disapproval of friendships between women and men. Some constraints on women's dress and mobility were relaxing, but there were more substantial differences between descriptive and injunctive norms around women's education, control of income and finances, and premarital sexual relationships.

## *Discussion*

Programmatically, we hope to exploit these areas of mismatch in the context of injunctive norms generally inimical to violence against women. We propose that an under-appreciated strategy is expansion of the reference group: induction of relatively isolated women and men into broader social groups whose descriptive and injunctive norms do not tolerate violence.

## **Methods**

Before data collection, we convened a group of fieldworkers and counsellors to develop a provisional set of examples of social norms, using anonymised existing records from 1653 clients registered at our crisis and counselling centre in 2012-2015. Counsellors then selected cases purposefully to reflect a range of presenting problems (for example, natal family violence, intimate partner or domestic violence). This preliminary exercise reached saturation after detailed discussion of 25 cases (**table 1**). Having identified problems presented by age, religion, caste, employment, and wealth, we developed a fictional vignette for discussion, covering premarital life, getting married, and marital life.

Responses to survey questions on gender norms – such as those used in Demographic and Health Surveys – may differ from responses to more contextualised questions based on illustrative vignettes.<sup>1</sup> Over three months in 2016, we held a series of focus group discussions and individual interviews. A purposive sample of female and male participants represented two age groups (18-30 and 30-55 years) and four localities. A team of ten went door-to-door to recruit participants from pre-selected regional, religious, or cultural communities, mobilising women by age group as participants for focus group discussions. Simultaneously, counsellors referred clients by age group and community. Three postgraduate female researchers, already working with the program and with experience of qualitative research, conducted focus group discussions and interviews with women. Men were interviewed by a graduate male community worker. Because we wanted to minimise social desirability bias as a result of previous exposure to program activities, we invited people unfamiliar with our work to participate. Participants and researchers generally met for the first time at discussions and interviews. The researchers talked about their professional backgrounds, experience, and the reasons for the study. They described violence as potentially affecting all women, including themselves, and urged participants to speak candidly so that their opinions could be used to design interventions that would help others. They assured participants that they could contact a supervisor if they had concerns. Participant information sheets and written consent forms (in English and Hindi, read aloud when appropriate) were given to participants before interviews and focus group discussions.

Focus group discussions were held in community spaces familiar to participants: a program community centre, the homes of community volunteers or participants, and a temple. Interviews with women were conducted at a municipal Urban Health Centre. Women often brought children and grandchildren to discussions and the researchers provided drawing materials to occupy them. Women who did not fit the focus group age bracket were often present.

The vignette used in focus group discussions followed a hypothetical biography as a means of eliciting opinions,<sup>2</sup> and was piloted with a mixed group of male and female staff. It traced a woman's life from later schooldays until about ten years into her marriage. Example scenarios included having a boyfriend whom her parents did not know about, her parents checking her mobile phone, not wanting to have children soon after her wedding (when her in-laws wanted her to), wanting in-laws to take care of her first child so that she could complete her education, her husband realising she had male friends at college, her desire to give some of her salary to her parents, being delayed at work and not preparing food for her husband and children, her husband suspecting that she was communicating with another man by smartphone, and discovering that her husband was having an affair.

Interviews followed a semi-structured topic guide in which participants were asked to give a biographical account of their lives. Discussions and interviews were audio-recorded and researchers took notes to triangulate transcription and translation. Transcripts were translated from Hindi and Marathi to English, with review for accuracy. The average duration of focus group discussions was 53 minutes, and of interviews 44 minutes. Data saturation was discussed when designing the study and during the course of data collection. Participants were given the option of reviewing the recordings or transcripts of their interviews, but none requested to do so.

## **Keywords**

India; Mumbai; poverty areas; violence; social norms; gender role

## **Data description**

Transcripts of 10 interviews and 8 focus group discussions with residents of an informal settlement in Mumbai. Interviews were framed around hypothetical vignettes describing the lifecourse of a local woman.