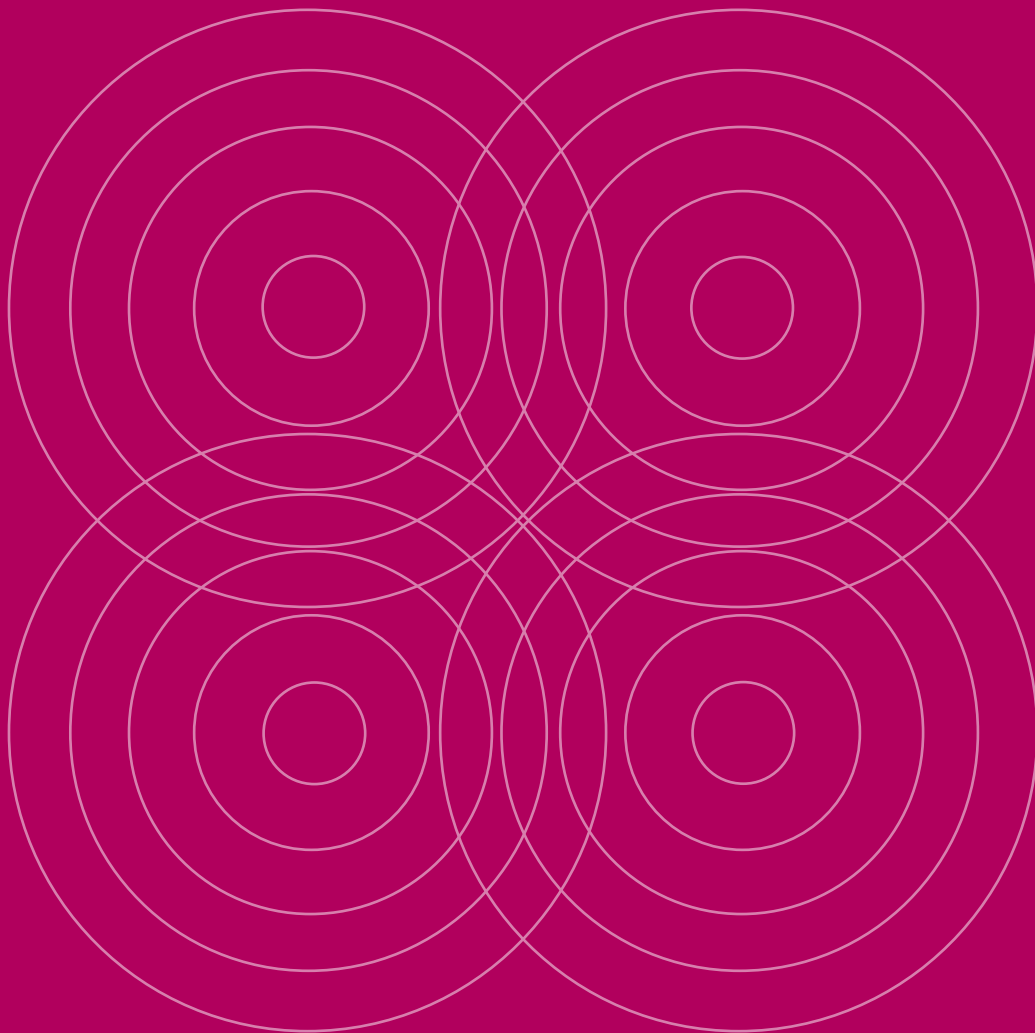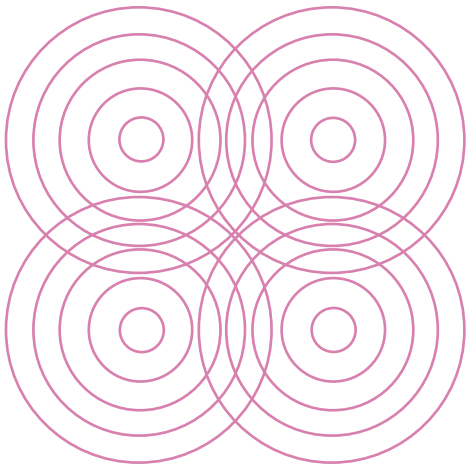STRIVE
Tackling the structural drivers of HIV

HONOUR AND PRESTIGE: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NORMS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN KARNATAKA, SOUTH INDIA

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Abstract

This qualitative paper reports on the role that social norms play in affecting child marriage and intimate partner violence (IPV) in Karnataka, South India. Participants (n=76) in focus group discussions were both project staff members and project participants. We found two different patterns of normative influence contributing to sustaining child marriage and IPV. Conclusions suggest that social norms do not seem to be exclusive drivers of violence, but could be an obstacle to social change. The main implication for programme implementation is the importance of publicising change as part of programme activities in order to shift norms, while addressing other factors contributing to violence.

INTRODUCTION

The influence of social norms on behaviours has been known for a considerable period (Durkheim 1951, Gibbs 1965, Schwartz 1977). Evidence suggests that social norms – the unwritten rules governing acceptable behaviour in a group – exert influence on health-related actions such as drinking (Prentice and Miller 1993, Prestwich et al. 2016), smoking (Eisenberg and Forster 2003), eating (Vartanian et al. 2015) and handwashing (Curtis, Danquah, and Aunger 2009), to cite a few examples. Social norms are held in place by individuals' beliefs about 1) what others in their group do (that is, what is typical in the group), and 2) what others in the group approve and disapprove of (what is appropriate). Importantly, the anticipation of social sanctions (gossiping, for instance) plays a strong role in enforcing compliant behaviour, even with harmful norms (Cialdini and Trost 1998, Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008, Miller and Prentice 2016, Young 2015, Gelfand and Jackson 2016, Mackie et al. 2015). There is now increasing interest in understanding how social norms affect violence, and particularly violence against women and girls (VAWG) in low- and mid-income countries (Linos and Kawachi 2012, Beyer, Wallis, and Hamberger 2015, Heise and Kotsadam in press, Jewkes, Flood, and Lang 2015, Linos et al. 2013, Arango et al. 2014, Heise and Cislaghi under review, Cislaghi and Heise 2017). This interest emerged initially in relation to research into what drives female genital cutting (FGC) (UNICEF 2008, Mackie and LeJeune 2009), where findings highlighted the need to address local social norms to achieve effective abandonment of FGC in certain areas of the world. These findings convinced practitioners of the need to understand the social drivers of violence – and particularly social norms – in order to design effective VAWG interventions (Read-Hamilton and Marsh 2016, Haylock et al. 2016, Scott, Bell, and Holden 2016). However, the ways in which social norms influence violent practices vary greatly. Cislaghi and Heise (under review) argue that FGC constitutes a particular case with respect to a direct relation between the norm and the practice, and that more evidence is needed to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which social norms can influence violent behaviour. Understanding the role that social norms play in driving VAWG will help design better interventions and ultimately reduce violent practices that seriously affect the health and human rights of hundreds of millions of women and girls globally (Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottmoeller 2002, Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottemoeller 1999).

As part of this effort to generate evidence on norms and VAWG, a joint research team from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT) is conducting evaluation studies of two norms interventions implemented by KHPT and aiming to reduce VAWG in Karnataka (South India): the Samata and Samvedana Plus projects (Doddamane et al. 2015, Raghavendra and Brooks 2013). These projects aim to reduce rates of girl school drop-out and child marriage (Samata) and to decrease female sex workers' experience of IPV (Samvedana Plus). Following recent field observations of these two projects, this paper shares important preliminary insights into how social norms influence child marriage (especially as it intersects with school drop-out) and IPV that might inform the work of other practitioners and researchers. While findings from the larger evaluation will draw on a broader base of mixed-methods data and will help understand the role of several structural drivers of violence, this paper uncovers preliminary patterns of normative influence that have heuristic value, as researchers explore further the social norms/violence nexus.

BACKGROUND

Child marriage (CM) and intimate partner violence (IPV) are two forms of VAWG found globally (Arango et al. 2014). CM is defined as any marriage in which one of the two persons getting married is under 18 years of age (Nour 2009). It disproportionately affects girls over boys, as it takes place primarily between girls and older men (Svanemyr et al. 2015, UNICEF 2015). Globally, 700 millions of the women alive in 2015 were married in childhood, a number that will likely grow to 950 million in 2030 (UNICEF 2015). CM is a human rights violation that has serious consequences for girls' health and wellbeing (Godha, Hotchkiss, and Gage 2013, Gage 2013, Chandra-Mouli, Camacho, and Michaud 2013, Neal et al. 2012, Santhya 2011, Raj et al. 2010, Raj 2010, Nour 2009).

Intimate partner violence includes physical and sexual violence perpetrated by intimate partners. Victims are mainly women: 30% of the female population in the world are estimated to have experienced IPV in their lifetime (Devries et al. 2013). IPV can have very serious consequences on women and girls' physical and mental health, ranging from injury, chronic pain and sexually-transmitted infections, to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and death (Campbell 2002). In India, more than 40% of women aged between 22 and 25 were married during childhood (Raj et al. 2009, Raj et al. 2010), and 30% to 40 % of women have experienced violence from their spouse at least once in their lifetime (Priya et al. 2014).

Samata

The Samata project has been designed to reduce child marriage in Karnataka by promoting access to and retention in secondary education of lower caste girls. The project has multiple components, working with girls, boys, families, village members in general and school staff (KHPT 2013, Raghavendra and Brooks 2013). Activities for girls and boys include: games, participatory trainings and discussions (some gender-segregated and some mixed); community outreach to ensure girls' participation at school; and tuition classes for girls. Family members and other people in the villages receive information on social entitlements, participate in parents' meetings and join street theatre events and discussion forums. School systems are strengthened through: teacher training on gender issues; creation of a safety committee to guarantee girls' protection; and the drafting and implementation of a gender-sensitive school plan to improve school facilities. The project is currently being evaluated through a randomised control trial that also includes longitudinal mixed-methods data (Raghavendra and Brooks 2013).

Samvedana Plus

The Samvedana Plus project was designed to respond to the high rates of violence experienced by female sex workers (FSWs) living in Karnataka (Shajy et al. 2013). Samvedana Plus is implemented by KHPT in partnership with a local community-based organisation led by FSWs (Chaitanya Tadegattwa AIDS Mahila Sangha) and includes activities with FSWs, their intimate partners (IPs) and other members of the FSWs' villages (STRIVE, KHPT and STRIVE 2015, Doddamane et al. 2015). Activities with FSWs include: training on IPV; community outreach; participatory group meetings (12 sessions over 3 months); and the creation of a Crisis Management Committee. IPs also participate in specific training and group discussions. Other community members are reached through street plays and forums. Samvedana Plus is also being evaluated through a randomised control trial that includes mixed-methods data (Doddamane et al. 2015).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In August 2016, we visited four different implementation sites (two for Samata and two for Samvedana Plus) in Northern Karnataka as part of KHPT's annual review and reflection. Research protocols were part of KHPT's monitoring and evaluation activities; these received ethical approval from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (United Kingdom) and from St. John's Medical College, Bangalore (India). In each site we conducted semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) with project participants and KHPT staff for a total of 8 FGDs and 76 informants. We conducted 6 FGDs with Samata participants and staff members: 2 FGDs with girls and boys from intervention villages (n=15 and 12, respectively), 1 FGD with parents (n=10), 1 FGD with school teachers (n=8), 1 FGD with community outreach workers (n=10), 1 FGD with members of the School Development and Management Committee (n=6) and 2 FGDs with members of the 'vigilance committee' (n=7), a group created as part of Samata to look after girls' participation at school. We also conducted 4 FGDs with Samvedana Plus staff and participants: 1 FGD with outreach workers (n=12), 1 FGD with FSWs (n=16), 1 FGD with IPs (n=12) and 1 FGD with the board members of the partnering community-based organisation (n=13). We asked informants about their experience in the project, the changes they had witnessed (if any at all) in participants' lives and what obstacles they believed worked against the sustainability of the project. Researchers took notes of informants' answers and then discussed their notes and understandings of the FGDs. Researcher Cislaghi coded notes and gathered codes into themes. The two themes of honour and prestige emerged as important for the literature on social norms and violence, and are the object of this paper.

RESULTS

When asked to reflect on their experience in the Samata and Samvedana Plus programmes, and how they were helping participants achieve greater wellbeing for girls (Samata) or FSWs (Samvedana Plus), informants mentioned various positive outcomes of the two projects. For Samata informants these included: more positive parental attitudes toward delaying their girls' marriage, less girls' drop-out from school, parents trusting their girls more, less boys harassing girls, more girl-friendly school facilities and more girls re-taking the 10th grade exams after failing. Samvedana Plus informants recalled: less violence perpetrated by IPs; increased FSW capacity to seek help in case of violence crisis; and more support received by FSW from their families and other FSWs in case of IPV. Informants were also asked to discuss the challenges they witnessed during the project's implementation and the obstacles to the sustainability of the positive changes they had seen. They answered by frequently referring to participants' fear of what other people in their villages would say if 1) girls received sexual attention from boys as they were going to school (either as sexual harassment or genuine romantic interest) (Samata) or 2) FSWs reported violence and/or their relationship with the IP ended (Samvedana Plus). In particular, Samata informants said that the honour of their families would be threatened if their girls received boys' sexual and/or romantic attentions, while Samvedana Plus informants said that an IP's prestige would be compromised if others knew that he wouldn't beat his wife or lover to discipline her.

Family honour in Samata

Samata informants overwhelmingly mentioned threats to family honour as parents' biggest fear in deciding whether they should send their girls to school or marry them off instead. They said that parents were much less concerned with economic consequences of sending girls to school, and that their decision was much more influenced by their fear of what others would say if their daughter received attention from boys on her way to or at school.

Informants said that both boys' and girls' behaviour can compromise family honour, but that there are some differences in how that can happen. Boys mostly harm family honour when they tease girls or disrespect elders. Girls, however, threaten family honour if their sexual purity is seen as questionable as a result of boys' sexual attention or harassment, including if girls joined a genuine romantic relationship with boys. Consequences for boys and girls would be very different: boys would be scolded or beaten, while girls would no longer be allowed to leave the household alone, which in turn would result in their dropping out of school. Informants said that, in these villages, respectable girls did not attract boys' attention, and that people disapproved of girls who did attract boys' attentions and were much more likely to blame the girls if that happened. According to informants, the honour of a family whose girl has received a boy's attention would be seriously compromised, and parents would be ashamed of what others in their village thought and said of them. Parent informants had serious doubts about sending their girls to school for this reason and outreach workers confirmed the difficulties of convincing them and other parents with anxieties about the impact on family honour of sending their girls to school. One outreach worker, for instance, said that when one set of parents suspected that their daughter was having a relationship with a boy they stopped sending her to school and she eventually dropped out for good. These parents were not an exception in the community: sexual harassment or sexual attacks resulted in the suspension of many girls' schooling or in their definitive drop-out. When someone was raped in one of the two sites we visited, one outreach worker told us, only four girls continued to go to school while all the others (about 30) were kept at home by their parents for weeks.

Friends mattered less than acquaintances in influencing parents' decisions. When we asked parent informants whose opinion might threaten the honour of their family, parent informants said it would be the opinion of neighbours and acquaintances. They would not worry about what their closest friends would say, as they trusted them and knew they wouldn't judge them. They were much more concerned with what acquaintances and neighbours would think and say. Finally, not all parents were worried about others' opinions. Two said that they didn't care as neighbours always find something to gossip about anyway, and that they would send the girls to school until college no matter what; one of these two proudly showed the receipt for payment of his daughters' college fees to other parents in the room.

Prestige in Samvedana Plus

When we asked about the main obstacles to reducing IPV against FSWs, Samvedana Plus informants mentioned the "prestige" of FSW and IPs. They went on to explain that they believed 1) that IPs would be ridiculed by their friends if they knew they did not beat their lover, and 2) that FSWs would be rebuked by their families and by other FSWs if the relationship with their IPs ended.

We began our FGDs with Samvedana Plus informants by interviewing IPs. At the beginning of the FGD, the discussion was fairly calm, but the pace of the conversation changed when one informant mentioned that when he refrained from beating his

lover, he lied to his friends and told him that he beat her. We requested further explanation and all IPs excitedly joined in. They explained that they were convinced that all their friends and "90% of men in India" (as one put it) beat their female lovers or wives. Also, they believed that their friends would disapprove of them if they told them that they did not beat their lover if she did something to deserve it (such as cheating on him). One said that his friends would say, "Are you not a man? If you are not brave enough, go to the bar, drink a couple of beers and go back home and beat her." Generally, all wholeheartedly agreed that their friends would think they were not real men if they told them they did not beat their lovers when "necessary". A few said, however, that their friends' opinions alone would not be a reason to beat their wives or lovers but that they did see the practice as less of a problem because everyone did it.

We were interested to explore this further, and asked outreach workers if they thought that a man who does not beat his lover would lie to his friends. They all agreed: he would lie to avoid being called less of a man by his friends. However, they also said that FSWs would also be rebuked by other FSWs and friends if they left their IPs. They would ridicule the FSW, saying that she wasn't capable of managing her relationship and that all women cope with similar acts. FSWs would be ashamed, outreach workers said; for this reason, often they decided not to report acts of violence. FSWs also said that people would blame them if their IP left them, because "as a woman, you should know when to shut up". One, however, disagreed and said she would not want her family to know because they would ask her to leave her IP and that would be impossible for her.

Both FSWs and IPs said, however, that they would not care what their close friends thought about violence or the end of the relationship between the two. FSWs in particular said close friends would probably be supportive as a woman would most likely fall into depression after the end of the relationship. Like the Samata informants, Samvedana Plus informants were more worried by the opinion of their acquaintances and neighbours. Alternative views were expressed in the Samvedana Plus sample: one IP, for instance, said he didn't care what others thought. Many FSWs reported that things were changing since the programme began and they were feeling increasingly confident to seek help from other FSWs if they were experiencing IPV.

DISCUSSION

Social norms as obstacles to programme results

Two norms emerged from Samvedana Plus informants' narrative. The first included the belief that 'real men' hit their partners or wives (typical) and that other men disapprove of those who do not hit their wives or lovers (appropriate). The second norm includes the belief that women generally tolerate violence from their IP (typical) and that people disapprove of women who do not accept violence and are left by the IPs (appropriate). The strength of these norms in influencing IPs' decisions to engage in a violent act is unclear. Cislaghi and Heise (under review) hypothesise that norms around IPV do not prescribe or proscribe violent behaviour but rather make perpetrators feel justified to engage in violence. Samvedana Plus informants believed that most men they know hit their wives. One said, "I don't care what surveys say, 90% of men hit their wives in India." However, a few reported that they would not hit their partners because of what their friends said, but would somehow be less concerned with it, which seems to confirm Cislaghi and Heise's

hypothesis that perpetrators' beliefs about what others do can make them feel justified in committing violence.

Participants in the other project, Samata, also discussed the influence of others on their decisions. One social norm in particular emerged from their accounts, that influenced parents' choices to marry off their daughters instead of sending them to school. This norm includes the belief that respectable unmarried girls do not receive boys' attention (typical) and that people disapprove of girls who receive such attention (appropriate). Strong sanctions are anticipated for girls and their families: loss of the reputation of purity for the girl and loss of honour for their families. Norms related to a girl's purity seem to have a powerful influence on parents' decision to keep their girls from school. Genuine concerns about the girl's safety might, however, also play a key role in parents' decision to keep their girls at home or marry them off. For instance, parents probably do not only care about what others would say if their daughter is abused or enters a relationship with a boy when they believe she is too young for that, but they might also care about their daughter's physical and mental health.

For these reasons, it seems unrealistic to think that the presence of social norms alone explains why girls' parents, FSWs and their IPs engage in the actions that KHPT is trying to influence. Interventions should therefore integrate the norms perspective within a wider strategy, addressing many material, structural, social and individual factors. Take for instance the case of IPV in Samvedana Plus. Focussing on changing IPs' normative beliefs alone would not achieve significant and sustainable change in IPs' actions as their aggression towards FSWs is influenced by the complex interaction of multiple factors and motivators: the stress of not being able to support their lover economically, IPs' fear that the partner might be cheating on them or the FSW refusing to have sex with the IP, to mention a few examples that participants gave. On the other hand, however, change cannot be achieved without addressing norms that contribute both to IPs feeling justified to beat their wives and lovers, and to FSWs not reporting violence. The lack of a programmatic component addressing social norms could be an obstacle to sustainable change even in the face of positive changes across other contributing factors – a red light in a series of green lights that alone might stop the programme from achieving sustainable results. Similarly, in the case of the Samata project, changing parents' beliefs about how people judge girls who receive boys' attentions would be sufficient on its own to convince parents to send their girls to unsafe schools, as they might be worried for the girls' safety. But parents' normative beliefs need to be taken into account to achieve sustainable, positive change.

These observations suggest that social norms can emerge as important obstacles to the success of a GBV prevention programme. Thus, practitioners in Karnataka (but possibly elsewhere in the world too) should understand and address social norms as co-driving factors of IPV and CM, not as exclusive reasons why people engage in them.

The reinforcement of descriptive and injunctive norms of violence

An important lesson from these field observations is the way in which descriptive and injunctive norms (beliefs of what is typical and appropriate, respectively) about men's violence reinforce each other. When we asked IPs how many men in India they thought hit their partners, they said they believed 90% did. But, how could they really know? If a practice is not detectable, as in the case of IPV, descriptive norms (the belief that everyone hits their partner) are mostly shaped by what people say they do to others. These IPs might have witnessed their fathers or a few friends when they were children, but most likely their ideas were shaped by what other men told them or let them believe. But, if men generally believe that they would encounter

disapproval for not hitting their partners, they will be more likely to say that they do. In other words, IPV seems to be an important case to deepen our understanding of how descriptive and injunctive norms reinforce each other, and of how normative beliefs of undetectable practices are created and can be changed.

Implications for KHPT interventions

As a result of these observations, KHPT practitioners have decided to increase the publicity around the positive changes they have witnessed in project participants. In the case of Samata, for instance, boys were changing and committing to stop harassing girls during the discussions with Samata's outreach workers, but others in their community didn't know that. If parents' motivation to keep their girls at home is the fear that boys would harass them, then they should be informed publicly of boys' coordinated commitment to stop. Similarly, other boys in the villages need to know that many boys do not tease girls and disapprove of those who do.

Public events or news coverage of the positive changes happening in the villages would also inform parents that other parents are being exposed to the same information that they are. If parents are afraid of what other parents might say if they send their girls to school, exposing them to the risk of being approached by boys, knowing that other parents too are aware that schools are safer might reduce the fear of being sanctioned for sending girls to school. It would probably be difficult within the time frame of an intervention to strip sexual harassment away from the shared concept of 'family honour'. KHPT (as well as other practitioners working in similar contexts) will then need to choose what strategy to follow: change norms around what influences family honour or help parents manage concerns for their girls' safety by improving girls' access to school as well as the school environment. This decision could possibly be taken together with project participants, reflecting with boys, girls and parents on what can be done to reduce fears around loss of honour.

In the case of Samvedana Plus, to offer another example of potential revisions to KHPT implementation, some FSWs were changing their attitude towards speaking out about instances of violence, but they didn't share these new attitudes with non-participating FSWs. It might be important to make sure that FSW who are not participating in the programme witness this change and have the opportunity to be exposed to FSWs' new collective attitudes towards seeking help when they experience violence. That way, participating FSWs will know that they don't risk shame for quitting their IPs should they decide that the relationship is abusive and unacceptable. Also, KHPT could invite IPs who have changed their behaviour to make a public commitment of abandoning violence. This would contribute to shattering people's strong normative belief that "all men in India beat their wives and lovers" and would offer new models for other men who might not engage in IPV or might be contemplating stopping it.

Limitations

Limitations to this study are related to sample selection, possible social bias and language translation. We did not sample participants randomly, as they were selected by KHPT for the purpose of contributing to an informal annual review of their programme. This study followed this sampling in order to be consistent with the monitoring and evaluation protocols presented for ethical approval. Participants knew that we represented KHPT, so KHPT field staff might have tried to impress us and project participants might have hoped that their answers would increase the NGO's efforts in their communities. Researchers triangulated participants' answers and nothing in their responses seems to suggest that similar biases might have played a strong role, but the possibility cannot be excluded. Finally, one of the two researchers spoke Kannada, the informants' language, while the other relied on live translations to English by a member of KHPT staff. After each FGD, researchers

shared notes and observations to align their understandings of participants' answers, but misunderstandings could have taken place.

This paper intends to offer ideas for discussion rather than the results of a structured field investigation. Even with these limitations, it offers important preliminary contributions to the literature on social norms and violence that will be confirmed or dismissed by future research, including the joint evaluation of which this investigation was a minor part.

CONCLUSIONS

Social norms can influence VAWG in multiple ways. This paper contributes to current understandings of how norms influence IPV and child marriage by reporting on some field observations in Karnataka, South India. We reported on field observations of two projects, Samata (targeting child marriage and girls' education) and Samvedana Plus (addressing IPV against FSWs). Observations from Samvedana Plus suggest that norms about IPV are not prescriptive, as the practice is difficult to detect, but that beliefs about what others do and approve of might contribute to the phenomenon by making men feel justified in engaging in violent behaviours. Parents' concerns for family honour observed in Samata seem to exercise a stronger influence (on the decisions whether to send girls to school or not) than did social norms in the case of Samvedana Plus. The power of this normative influence on parental decision-making might be linked to the fact that others would easily know if a girl has been sexually harassed or abused.

Norms thus do not play the role of exclusive drivers, but can emerge as obstacles when other factors influencing VAWG (for instance) begin to shift. Implications for programme implementation include discussing and publicising changes that are taking place within programme activities, to ensure that the programme not only achieves changes in participants' individual attitudes, but also creates opportunities for others to witness these changes and begin a process of renegotiation of existing norms.

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ABOUT STRIVE

An eight-year research consortium, STRIVE generates rigorous evidence on the social and economic forces that create vulnerability to HIV and hinder the effectiveness of well-proven forms of prevention and treatment.

Despite substantial progress in addressing AIDS over more than 30 years, the number of people newly HIV-infected continues to outstrip the number entering treatment. The field is aware of the importance of integrating structural measures into comprehensive prevention, but there is limited evidence on how best to intervene.

STRIVE research focuses on key upstream determinants of HIV risk – gender inequality and partner violence, social and gender norms, poor livelihood options, alcohol availability and drinking norms, stigma. Overall, STRIVE synthesises evidence to inform:

- more effective prevention by the HIV field
- effective multi-sectoral programming that serves to reduce HIV along with achieving other health and development outcomes

The consortium seeks to understand how these forces drive the epidemic; what programmes are effective in tackling them; how such interventions can, affordably, be taken to scale; and how best to translate this research into policy and practice. Underpinning STRIVE's work are methodological rigour and innovation, with a commitment to supporting collaborative, multi-disciplinary research and multi-sectoral programming.

Led from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, STRIVE is a collaboration with:

- International Center for Research on Women (Asia Regional Office, India and Washington, DC, USA)
- Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (Bangalore, India)
- Tanzania's National Institute for Medical Research and the Mwanza Intervention Trials Unit (Mwanza, Tanzania)
- Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (Johannesburg, South Africa)

STRIVE affiliates are:

- HIV/AIDS Group of the United Nations Development Programme (New York, USA)
- Soul City Institute for Health & Development Communication (South Africa)

http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk