

On the CUSP of Change: Effective scaling of social norms programming for gender equality

Overview

Over the past 10 years, the evidence base on the effectiveness of programs focused on changing social norms to achieve gender equality has grown. A number of approaches and methodologies demonstrate significant impact in preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) and in advancing women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Activists, organizations, governments, researchers, and donors now want to know how best to scale up these initiatives to reach more communities and increase sustainable impact. This is a critical moment, rich with opportunity. It also comes with risks and challenges.

In this brief, we provide practical insights and advice for programmers, funders, researchers, and policymakers as they take social norms programming to scale. Drawing on our broad and diverse experiences globally as practitioners and activists, we also highlight key challenges embedded in social norms change work and ways to overcome them. Most importantly, we suggest that effectively transforming harmful social norms at scale requires moving beyond the current thinking of scale as a numbers exercise to better reflect key principles from social norms change work. At this critical moment, we encourage the international development community to: 1) ensure that gendered, social justice principles and values are prioritized when programming at scale; and, 2) support innovation of new social norms change approaches that also reflect these principles. We believe that embracing this approach while prioritizing the agency, well-being and safety of communities is essential to achieving impact and ensuring sustainability.

Who we are

The Community for Understanding Scale Up (CUSP) working group was borne out of informal discussions between Raising Voices (author of *SASA!*) and Salamander Trust (author of *Stepping Stones*), about the opportunities and challenges that emerge when external groups scale up our respective methodologies. Recognizing our shared experiences, we invited seven other organizations from across three continents to join us, each of which has designed social norms change initiatives for preventing VAWG and improving SRHR. Most of us have, or will be, working with other stakeholders across the globe to scale up these approaches (see page 12 for organizational summaries of CUSP members).

Community for Understanding Scale up (CUSP)

 Raising Voices


Salamander Trust
ON THE RIGHT TRACK


CEDOVIP
Center for Domestic
Violence Prevention


I M G E
International Men's Group


Institute for
Reproductive Health
Georgetown University


Puntos
de Encuentro
para la transformación
de la vida cotidiana


SONKE
GENDER
JUSTICE


Tostan
Dignity for All


OXFAM


WE CAN
ON THE RIGHT TRACK



Initiatives developed by individual members of CUSP vary from intensive local community mobilization methodologies to multi-country mass media campaigns. While our programming may be diverse, our collective approaches to social norms change have a universal thread: they are grounded in a shared theory of change based on key principles, aspirations, and values. They prioritize the local agency of the communities with which we work. They reinforce positive social norms that contribute to a community's well-being. And they create space for questioning and dialogue on the social norms that contribute to inequality. In our approaches, we also recognize that transforming social norms is fundamentally about challenging the status quo. It is therefore “political” work that must not only increase reach but also involve scaling values and principles. It is complex, challenging work.



Defining social norms

Social norms are about an individual's relationships with others around them, also called their “reference network.” We have several types of norms that shape our lives simultaneously. They are anchored in an ecological system that connects us as individuals to our partners, families, community, government services, laws, and policies, as well as to international treaties and agreements. They also form part of our informal and formal, private and public, spheres of life. Frequently, social norms support a shared worldview, which gives meaning and order to our lives—and can even determine our survival. (See Mackie et al 2015, Cislighi et al 2016, Alexander-Scott et al 2016).

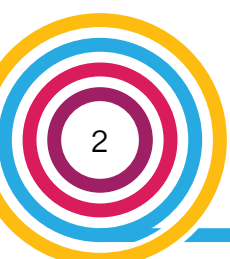
Persistent problems such as violence against women and girls or gender inequality are complex and deeply embedded in the societies where they exist. Simply rewriting or enforcing laws against such harmful practices will not remedy the problem. They must be preceded, or at least accompanied, by changes in the shared beliefs about what is both typical and socially appropriate behavior among a group of people.

In an ideal world, different types of norms converge for the good of all in society, such as when everyone rejects violence against women and girls on moral, social, and legal grounds. Social norms can be oppressive or freeing, confining or inclusive. At the core of many norms lies a question of power balances or imbalances between different individuals and/or groups of people. While not all forms of violent behavior are defined by specific social expectations about that behavior, all forms of VAWG are sustained by gender norms that embody gender inequality and unequal power relations. Shifting such norms rooted in power dynamics requires time and in-depth work to understand the social context—or the complex values, attitudes, and beliefs held by community members—and how they interact to form the social norms in the first place.



CUSP's approach to social norms change

Social norms change programming carried out by CUSP members is informed by a set of key evidence-informed principles and values. We strive to shift social norms through aspirational and strengths-oriented approaches, which focus on “what can be” rather than “what is the problem.” We believe that the more communities support people to





develop their own “critical literacy” around human rights and social justice, and analyze their own context and those of others around them, the more they can envision a collective future full of shared possibilities. Importantly, their sense of hope is based on their own lived and gendered experiences, rather than on an outsider’s idea of how their world should be. In this way, people are also equipped with lifelong skills to promote their own well-being, alongside that of those around them.

In our work, CUSP members aim to develop the capacities of all people in all their diversities. We promote universal human rights, meaning that we advocate for liberatory, inclusive social norms by building consensus between different interest groups. And we seek to challenge and change social norms that are confining, oppressive, or harmful. For instance, after participating in a *Stepping Stones* program in Uganda, young men explained that while they used to see young women as the enemy and responsible for “bringing AIDS to the community,” they now viewed them as allies and potential future partners. To achieve such a shift in perception, each CUSP member has developed training and communication materials that help facilitators act as *guides* to community members.

Collectively, our approaches allow facilitators to support communities to catalyze social norms change from within, by identifying and building on community members’ own inherent strengths, and by critically examining harmful behavior. We engage with all communities with care, respect, and with open minds, ears, and eyes. We listen first; then ask questions to explore and learn from local perspectives. This allows us to understand the complex interrelated factors that influence people’s beliefs and practices; to build on local agency; and to nurture the powerful potential of individual and collective actions. For instance, by combining economic empowerment, participatory gender curriculum and community action, IMAGE participants in South Africa established village-based counselling groups to support survivors of domestic violence and rape.

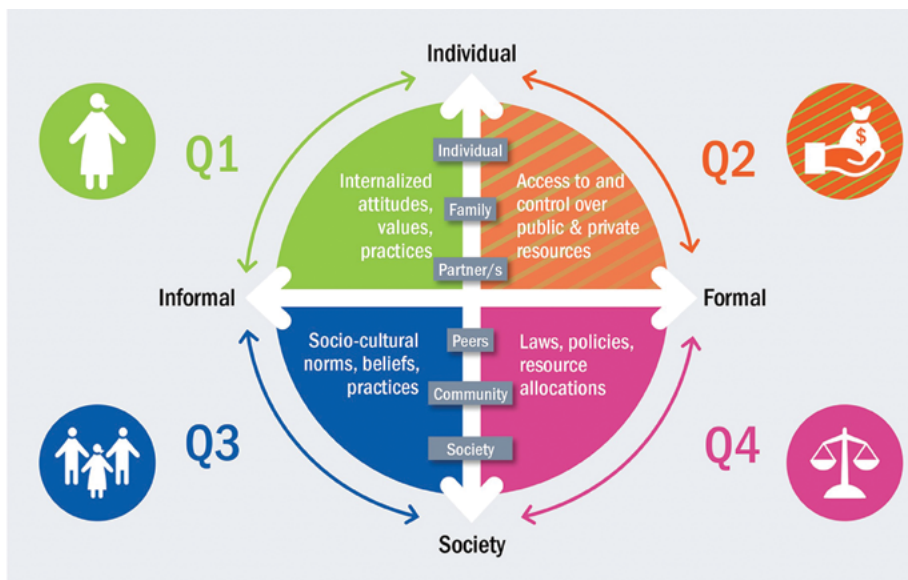
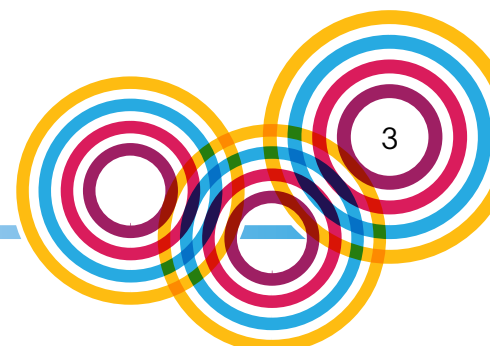


Figure 1: The Change Matrix from the UNAIDS ALIV[H]E Framework (2017) (adapted from Gender at Work)





Transforming attitudes and practices requires working across a range of groups, perspectives, and contexts. The Socio-Ecological Model illustrates the layers of influence of different reference networks on an individual across society (Heise 2011). The Change Matrix (Figure 1) builds on the ecological model by adding another axis—that of the informal through formal spheres of life (UNAIDS et al 2017). The models help us to understand that shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and practices have to happen individually and collectively, and in many different contexts, to reach critical mass or a “tipping point.” This is when social change can happen.

The most effective social norms change is led from within, by long-term sustained community-based activism. We maintain that the work of changing social norms is never static. It entails community members’ continued efforts over time and deep exploration, to address the root causes of inequitable attitudes and practices. This approach is critical to fostering positive, equitable social norms that are lasting.



CUSP’s experiences of scale up

The World Health Organization/Expand Net consortium defines scale up as “*deliberate efforts to increase the impact of ... innovations successfully tested in pilot or experimental projects so as to benefit more people and to foster policy and programme development on a lasting basis*” (WHO 2009). ExpandNet conceptualizes scale up as *horizontal*, meaning a geographic expansion or replication; *vertical*, or integration into policies and systems; *functional*, which is the practice of adding components to an existing package; or *spontaneous*, or a more passive type of scaling up (Simmons et al 2007). While these conceptual definitions are important, there are still multiple approaches and considerations when it comes to scaling efforts.

Among CUSP members, scale up of our programs and their planning and implementation are being approached in a myriad of ways. One key consideration is who leads the process; it may be the organization that created the initiative or the partner who piloted it. This approach offers control, but limits reach. In other scenarios, scale engages new partners. This strategy may expand coverage, but it requires intense efforts to develop skills and a shared vision. The process may be top-down, rapid, standardized and directive (often preferred by funders); or bottom up, gradual, flexible and participatory (preferred by the program developers).

For some CUSP members, the scale up process is organic, uses a combination of approaches, and seizes opportunities as they emerge. For others, scale up rolls out in a deliberate manner. For example, the GREAT Consortium designed a “lean” program, beginning with the end in mind and with the intention to help others integrate the program into their activities. In some cases, CUSP members trained the original implementation team and provided program materials to support scale up. In other situations, we helped partners build similar initiatives in their own settings. It is on this breadth of experience the following reflections are based.





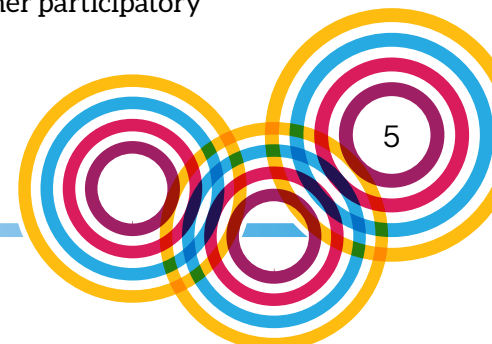
The current paradigm for social norms change at scale

It is encouraging to see so many organizations, agencies and institutions in the international development community formally recognizing and embracing the need for sustained, holistic, integrated and multisectoral approaches to address complex global problems. Some new funding guidelines and calls for proposals also encourage this kind of social norms change work. At the same time, many funding agencies are at a crossroads. They are stuck in a practical contradiction between their stated recognition of the need for these kinds of approaches and the limitations of their own funding model. Too often, the current model limits investment to time-bound interventions that fit neatly within specific issue-based portfolios that must be designed to demonstrate attributable impact in the time period of the funded project.

We believe these challenges affect the possibilities for both scale up of effective programs and innovation. In addition, the trending concepts of “evidence-based” and “cost-effectiveness” in relation to “scalability” have become double-edged swords. To gain maximum impact from minimum investment, donors are often tempted to replicate the most recent, well-publicized, “tried and tested” models. But social norms change programs are not silver bullets that can be simply replicated in multiple settings, and an over-reliance on existing programming means innovation is stunted. This has far reaching implications, particularly for a field as young as VAWG prevention, by, for example, limiting learning and much-needed experimentation.

A significant driver in the scale up of existing programs is the reliance on the existing evidence-base. Randomized control trials (RCTs) have become the gold standard for generating rigorous evidence of impact and only programs that can generate such evidence are considered scalable. However, most RCTs have clear limitations for measuring and understanding social norms change programming. These statistics-based quantitative assessments are ideal for laboratory-type testing, but in a real-world context, they have limited flexibility when dealing with the complexity of social problems. RCTs are conducted under rigorous control conditions and depend on a single, primary positive outcome, which is based on a linear, one-directional behavior change model. As such, they are unable to accommodate the multi-directional, multi-layered aspects of social norms change programming (Raab and Stuppert 2014), or respond to the pace of change in a particular community. Further, RCTs cannot predict what will happen when an initiative is applied in a different context with a different set of human and financial resources. Finally, some initiatives are not eligible for RCTs. In the case of Puntos de Encuentro, for example, the coverage of their multi-media initiative was so broad that it was impossible to have a control group; thus, a rigorous longitudinal study was done.

CUSP members believe that rigor is vital; thus practitioners, funders, and researchers need to work with activists to develop more suitable operations research and evaluation tools for social norms change work. We are encouraged that researchers using social norms theory are finding that quasi-experimental and other participatory





survey methods can contribute greatly to understanding not just *what* attitudes or behaviors may have changed, but rather *how and why* those changes have—or have not—happened (Siegfried et al 2017). More of this is encouraged.

In relation to cost, with social norms change a longer view is needed. Instead of thinking about cost-effectiveness as the “per beneficiary” financial cost of a single outcome during a particular funding cycle, we could think about it in terms of the overall cost-benefit of long term, sustainable social change impact. Funders would then find that investments in the longer-term processes that are key to shifting social norms and deeply embedded social structures that underpin violence, discrimination, and inequality, are more cost effective than “quick fixes.” Such an investment includes allowing practitioners, program designers, and researchers sufficient time and resources to analyze, expand on, and apply their understanding of the underlying conceptual and methodological principles of existing promising initiatives—both to develop ways to effectively scale those initiatives and innovate new ones.

We believe that the challenges within the current paradigm affect possibilities for both the scale up of existing effective strategies and for innovation. With that, CUSP members are eager to collaborate with stakeholders who rely on existing initiatives for scale up, so that together we can design relevant scale up guidelines for our programs, that not only reflect the principles underpinning the work—but that are also more effective.



Scaling existing programs: overcoming common pitfalls

Many funders believe they will have a stronger return on their investment and achieve greater impact by using “tried and tested” initiatives for scale up, such as those developed by CUSP members that are identified as “evidence-based practices.” But there are some drawbacks to this strategy. Below, we highlight how to overcome a few of the more common challenges.

Build in sufficient time for NGOs to internalize a program approach. NGOs are often pressured to implement specific programs, yet they may be resistant to implementing approaches that are not their own. Also, more political social justice work may fall outside of their experience or comfort zone. Raising questions about power dynamics in a community, which is common in all of our programs, may reveal uncomfortable questions about an organization’s own internal hierarchies and cultures. If the values of social norms change programming are not present within the organization, this can cause incompatibility at the outset and can lead to poor implementation. Therefore, organizations interested in using a specific approach need to understand all aspects of it, from the values, theory of change, and political analysis that underpin it, to the logistical, financial and personnel conditions that are necessary to effectively carry it out.





Maintain fidelity to core principles. Funders and programmers often suggest a mix-and-match approach of different evidence-based interventions when going to scale. While it is possible to adapt elements of interventions or methodologies as part of the innovative process, combining program approaches does not automatically strengthen or even assure desired impact, and can produce a watered-down assortment of activities with little connection to the integrity of the original approaches in terms of theory, values, strategies, and activities. For example, during Oxfam International's We Can campaign, many organizations wanted to replicate its idea of "change makers," without fully understanding the principles, the theory of change, or the scale involved. Effective social norms change programs are consciously developed with specific strategies and activities within a theoretical grounding. Since the holistic nature of our approaches is what makes them effective, implementers need to ensure this remains intact at scale.

Create a strong foundation. Strengthening capacity in content, concepts, and strategy are critical for successful scaling up of all of our programs and initiatives. Organizations often provide limited or no time to train staff and community facilitators, and adopt processes that emphasize numbers reached at the expense of depth and quality. To ensure effective implementation and outcomes, ensure sufficient training and ongoing mentoring of staff and community facilitators. It is also important to avoid reducing implementation timeframes. While the goal might be to expand in large geographic areas, depth and quality must be assured to achieve sustained change.

Engage program developers. Over the past few years, many CUSP members have seen their social norms change initiatives included in large funding mechanisms. However, funders often do not consult or involve program developers in the conceptualization of their strategy. Learning more from developers' experience and expertise can enhance programs and strengthen the potential for meaningful results.

Think beyond numbers. Scaling values and challenging injustice are intensely human endeavors. Achieving a critical mass is essential, and the level of human resources needed for scale up has to be considered. In *SASA!*, for example, one staff member is needed for every 30 community activists. But this ratio can change dramatically based on the operating context, such as whether it is a rural or urban setting and what languages are spoken. We encourage donors, practitioners, and researchers to carefully consider the context and capacities of those implementing and programming. These are essential in deciding how far the reach can extend without compromising the quality and core components of programs.

Get personal. Meaningful social norms change work must stimulate personal reflection and critical thinking among community members. This is essential for individuals to own, define and sustain their change. Community members need to see the benefits of non-violence, gender equality, and safety for all, recognize their own visions and their ability to achieve them. Our initiatives treat every person as someone with





voice and agency rather than as a bystander or “beneficiary.” It is important that each person’s voice, skills, and agency are strengthened and that their individual actions are harnessed for collective power and efficacy. For example, communities that have taken Tostan’s classes have organized thousands of inter-village meetings to discuss harmful social norms, such as child marriage and female genital cutting; over 8000 communities have publicly declared abandonment of these practices. Such efforts work because they are based on meaningful social connections where people are valued and we endeavor to be ethically accountable to them. By prioritizing this approach—instead of focusing on numbers reached and geographic spread—we have an opportunity to deepen the quality of programs.

Adapt and evolve. Every program needs to be tailored to the community where it will be used. However, if an organization uses an existing initiative, it is essential to take the time to understand the core principles and theory of change that embody and inform the approach, as well as the minimum effective “dosage” that is required. Without such insight, a program can become merely a collection of activities that are not held together by a theory of change. The initiative also needs to be grounded in communities, with close involvement and leadership of community members. This will ensure that the adaptation is culturally relevant and sensitive, and that it also builds on community strengths and structures. For example, Sonke’s One Man Can program was designed to involve and target men, but has been adapted in different settings to include women trainers and activists. Women now represent at least 50 percent of community members involved in the program. In light of this, Sonke is rethinking the name of the program to make it more inclusive.

Support innovation. Community-led initiatives in VAWG prevention, child protection, and SRHR remain in their infancy. The push toward funding only evidence-based approaches risks hampering the kind of further innovation that is needed. The existing initiatives by CUSP members—often cited as evidence-based promising practices—were actually created through organic innovation processes that grew out of deep connections with communities and social justice issues. None of our programs could have been created in the current funding context. We therefore encourage funders to provide more space for creative efforts, sensitive piloting, and careful honing of social norms change programming.

In summary, in resource-poor settings, researchers, practitioners, activists and donors need to work together to develop innovative tools that can strengthen the evidence-base. Bringing back a gendered, social justice narrative to our scale up of programs and creating new measurements of effectiveness means re-politicizing women’s rights, health, and violence prevention efforts. It also means a commitment from donors and governments to fund complementary strategies to guarantee the human right to equality and a life free of violence for women and girls. And, it means a commitment to avoid privatizing these efforts which promotes competition instead of cooperation among civil society organizations.





Opportunities for innovation: taking gendered, social justice principles to scale



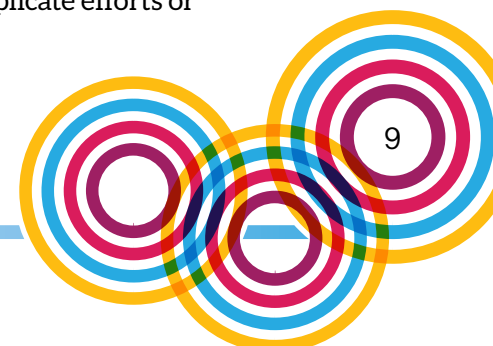
In addition to the adaptation and scale up of *existing* programs, it is also important to enable the development of *new*, innovative and transformational approaches to address these complex issues. In addition to our recommendations above, investment in new approaches and their scale up should also ensure that the evidence-informed *principles* of quality social norms programming and scale up, described below, are maintained (Michau et al 2014). Here we articulate our vision for conceptualizing and implementing scaling of both existing and new social norms change programming. Our vision is rooted in the following principles:

Do no harm. Opening a dialogue about previously unchallenged social norms has the potential to cause unintended harm, and there may be backlash against staff, community activists, and members. Violence prevention programming can also increase the demand for services, which may not be available or may be of poor quality. These risks only increase as we take programs to scale. Therefore, a specific focus on accountability is essential. The concept of doing no harm needs to be carefully explained; programs need to anticipate for and prepare to mitigate possible direct and indirect consequences for all stakeholders. This is not a one-off exercise at the outset of a program but a regular, systematic, and structured frame for analyzing implications of programming. It requires establishing tight feedback loops and practical mechanisms so all partners can minimize risk and act on negative consequences as soon as they happen.

Work across the ecological model and change matrix. Social norms change programming requires a holistic view of issues and individuals. Recognizing the multiple levels (individual, relational, community, and societal, across formal and informal spheres) at which people operate, while deliberately building critical mass, is essential for change to happen. Issues such as VAWG and SRHR are as complex as people's lives. Our programming must meet this complexity by exploring the various facets of an issue and understand how they interplay in people's lives.

Use an intersectional, gender-power analysis. Changing deeply held norms about women, power, and rights is political work. It requires a perspective of the world that seeks to right injustices and challenge power imbalances, at both the individual and structural levels, to create equality. Political work requires politicized organizations that operate based on related values and that are committed to working in ways that reflect these values. While this can pose a significant culture shift for many organizations, it also provides an opportunity to live by the human rights values they seek to promote.

Ensure sustained commitment. We must remember that communities are not testing grounds for social change research experiments. Programming that is deeply personal requires an unwavering commitment to being a thoughtfully aware partner with communities and standing in solidarity with them throughout the process. This includes being mindful of other efforts underway, especially locally-initiated ones, so as to not overburden or undermine existing community initiatives, or have duplicate efforts or contradictory messages.





Support theory- and evidence-informed innovations. Quality social norms change programming is carefully thought out, grounded in theory, and should be informed by evidence and practice-based learning. This ensures that our vision of how change will happen is considered and informed by learning in our own fields as well as others. Evidence-informed programming ensures that we learn from the experiences of others, build on and further strengthen what was impactful, and avoid what did not work.

Promote personal and collective critical reflection through aspirational programming. In our collective experience, the most successful approaches are those that provide a space for critical reflection and dialogue to help individuals and communities envision possibilities. This means that our programs use positive framing and language. We ask questions and initiate conversation about possibilities rather than give instruction and directives (e.g. Stop Violence against Women!), always recognizing people's agency and keeping them at the center of programming.

Support and invest in staff and community activists/facilitators. Going to scale requires substantial organizational capacity, including financial and human resources. We expect women and men to effect change of deeply held issues in a community, yet we may send them out without adequate preparation or an opportunity to question and process their own experiences. This shortsighted strategy can result in greater risk or backlash in communities. Poorly supported facilitators may either withdraw or become counterproductive by reinforcing negative stereotypes, attitudes or behaviors that the initiative set out to change. Well-supported facilitators (staff and/or community members) receive on-going training, mentoring and encouragement—and give their best in return.



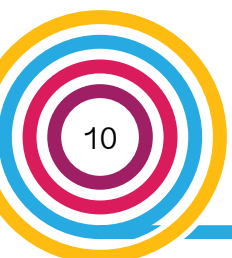
A call to action

We are on the cusp of change. Our work together, shared in this brief, demonstrates CUSP members' similar experiences in diverse communities around the world. We have all witnessed the great promise that lies in engaging with communities in participatory ways. In front of us—funders, policy makers, programmers, researchers, practitioners, and activists—there are unique opportunities to invest in scaling up innovative and transformational programming and principles.

We have the potential for long term, significant impact on injustices that have been with us for far too long. CUSP's vision is for the scale up of social norms change programming to remain grounded in gendered social justice principles, both when taking existing programs to scale and when boldly embarking on new innovations. We are indeed on the cusp of being able to affect wide, deep, and sustained change.

At this critical moment, rich with opportunity, the CUSP working group calls for longer-term funding and planning, a deeper investment in people, engagement with communities as equals, and an unwavering commitment to do no harm. Together, this is how we will scale up effective, lasting social norms change.

Join us on the cusp!





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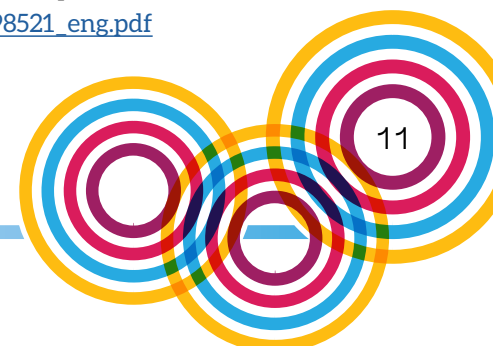
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[Center for Domestic Violence Prevention \(CEDOVIP\)](#) promotes the rights of women and girls to create safer, healthier, and happier relationships, homes, and communities. At the heart of its community mobilization work is the innovative *SASA!* model in Uganda.

[IMAGE programme](#) is a multisectoral partnership addressing poverty and gender inequality to reduce women's risk of gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

[The Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown University](#) has over 30 years' experience designing and implementing evidence-based programs that address critical needs in sexual and reproductive health, including the [GREAT Project](#) in Northern Uganda.

[Oxfam initiated 'We Can' campaign](#) aims to end all violence against women by undoing the shame and stigma attached to it and changing the social attitudes that support it.

[Puntos de Encuentro](#) is a Nicaragua-based feminist NGO that works throughout Central America, combining mass media with on-the-ground work with organizations and social movements to prevent violence and promote gender justice.

[Raising Voices](#), a Uganda-based NGO, works to prevent violence against women and children through activist-inspired practice, including the development of *SASA!*, rigorous learning and strategic influencing for quality violence prevention.

[Salamander Trust's](#) flagship training program, *Stepping Stones*, builds positive holistic, rights- and gender-based communications and relationships skills across genders and generations.

[Sonke Gender Justice One Man Can](#) (OMC) program engages men in confronting harmful aspects of masculinity and helps them become partners in addressing gender-based violence and HIV.

[Tostan](#) is an international NGO based in Dakar, Senegal, that provides participatory human rights-based education to adults and adolescents who have not attended formal schools through a holistic, three-year program that has helped over 3 million people.

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