

## Wikigender online discussion: synthesis report

“Shifting social norms and achieving gender equality: What role can communicators play?”

14-21 April 2020

### Context

Communication is a powerful tool to shift attitudes and behaviours. Digital communications open up new possibilities for dialogue and interaction. In light of these developments, the [OECD DevCom Network](#) has proposed [7 Principles in Communicating for Gender Equality](#), drawing on a [Workshop](#) and exchanges between leading campaigners, researchers and policy makers since 2018.

Women everywhere are held back by discriminatory social norms. Changing social norms requires not just new legal frameworks, but also new attitudes and behaviours. As the OECD Development Centre’s [Social Institutions and Gender Index \(SIGI\) shows](#), more than 1 in 4 women around the world still believe that spousal violence is sometimes justified. Almost half of all people think that men make better political leaders than women.

The current coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis is exacerbating gender inequality and some of these harmful social norms. Confined at home with schools closed, women are under pressure to conduct unpaid care work and schooling, and many are suffering from increased domestic violence. Moreover, women represent the majority of the healthcare workforce and are therefore on the frontlines of battling the pandemic.

### Objectives of the discussion

This online discussion aimed to promote dialogue and generate advice on communication and behavioural change for gender equality. The discussion was organised in partnership with the French Government’s Secretariat for the [Generation Equality Forum](#), the [Agence Française de Développement](#), and the [Overseas Development Institute](#) and its [ALIGN Platform](#).

### Outcomes

In a rich week-long discussion, encompassing 51 comments, participants:

- **Identified general communication principles**, and discussed which were the most important during the current coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.
- **Shared lessons and experiences** from communication strategies and empowering campaigns to raise awareness on gender equality and elicit social norms change.
- **Discussed actions to promote the uptake of good communications principles**, particularly in the context of the Generation Equality Forum.



## General principles in communicating for gender equality

All 7 principles were deemed important and interconnected by the participants:

**Principle 1: "Do no harm!":** we need to be gender-mindful and sensitive in communicating to prevent reproduction of stereotypes. ALIGN drew our attention to a recent blog which indicates a real life example of harmful communication: The Malaysian government produced a poster, asking women not to 'nag' their husbands and authorised only the 'head of the family' to leave the household. Following criticism, the government apologised and removed the campaign. This shows the need for additional vigilance when communicating, especially in times of crisis.

**Principle 2: "Engagement > Likes":** inviting reflection and commitment to change is key to shift mind-sets and behaviours, especially as gender norms are internalised from an early age. The [Social and Behaviour Change Communication \(SSBC\)](#) community deploys a large set of communication means to trigger discussions and engagement at the community level in order to deconstruct stigma, misconceptions, and harmful gender norms through radio programs, participatory theatres, active group dialogue, etc. ODI has shared a robust review of communication campaigns for gender norm change, which confirms that deeper reflection and personal commitment are crucial for sustained change in attitudes and behaviours.

**Principle 3: "Empower and enable":** listening to stories and testimonies of women and men, especially in the current coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis is essential to acknowledge the diversity of experiences and realities, and identify different needs. It is crucial to raise awareness about challenges and share solutions to benefit from each other's best practices. This includes drawing attention to distinctive impact of the crisis on men and women and action to leave no one behind.

**Principle 4: "Don't do it alone":** partnership is important to create synergies and build on wider networks with different skillsets and approaches. Diverse actors are likely to generate greater momentum for change. In crisis contexts such as coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, partnerships are essential to reach the right audience, keep important issues on the agenda – such as the rise of violence against women resulting from confinement and economic hardship. This principle lies at heart of the Generation Equality Forum - a civil society-centred, multi-stakeholder, global gathering for gender equality, and a clear opportunity for inclusive and effective communication, which aims for transformative change and the realisation of gender equality.

**Principle 5: "Know your audience":** we need to know who we are addressing (e.g. children or adults), what their attitudes or behaviours are before we start communicating with them. Research shows that children internalise social norms very early on, but discussions on gender discrimination tends to arrive late in children's education. Communication campaigns and programmes need to provide children with the right tools at the right time to challenge discriminatory social beliefs and practices. Furthermore, communication needs to target different audiences that children interact with, including parents, teachers and childcare minders.

In the current coronavirus (Covid-19) context, it was highlighted that the high volume of information can be overwhelming, demanding for more agility in our communications. This could mean for instance trying to reach policy makers who are in 'crisis mode' at moments when they are more receptive.

**Principle 6: "Win hearts and minds":** there was consensus that communicators must provide evidence-based arguments to challenge patriarchal social norms, beliefs and expectation. Participants acknowledged that it could be a difficult endeavour to challenge norms that people grew up with and considered to be the "truth". Furthermore, we must ensure that those directly targeted by campaigns will spread the word and convince others to shift their mind-sets. For this, we need evidence-driven narratives to question strong beliefs. Combining facts with emotions helps triggering behavioural change, and is key to provide appropriate policy options to decision-makers.

**Principle 7: "Go multi-channel"**: despite our highly digitalised world, communicators should use both online and offline communication means – especially in a development context – to reach the most marginalised populations.

Participants also highlighted that timing is crucial for effective communication: mentioned that a Lancet article on the gendered impacts of coronavirus (Covid-19) showed adverse effects of the crisis on women at a time when the mainstream media was only focusing on higher death rates among men.

#### **Participants also proposed new standalone principles:**

**"Mind your language"**: while currently linked to the "Do no harm" principle, participants agreed that mindful language should constitute a separate principle. Communicators need to be conscious about the language they use, to prevent reproduction of gender stereotypes and harmful practices. This includes awareness about phenomena such as unconscious bias and a careful choice of words, images or voices. To emphasise that language can represent a powerful tool to shift attitudes and behaviours, a participant showed that changing just one word, e.g. using "chair" instead of "chairmen", can make a big difference. Likewise, using words such as "victim of violence" rather than "survivor" can be disempowering as it reinforces the vulnerability of those who suffered violence.

**"Identify your hobbyhorse"**: with the flood of information, especially during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, participants agreed that communication needs to stay targeted to foster social norm change. Along with health-related risks, new challenges have emerged in the current coronavirus (Covid-19) context that should not be neglected, such as intimate-partner violence. While this issue has been widely covered, it is important to think how communicators can ensure it reaches the targeted audience and leads to actual change.

#### **Shared lessons and experiences**

The online discussion brought together a large set of communication campaigns that contribute to shifting mind-sets and attitudes towards gender equality. Posts from participants included references about robust programme evaluations, articles and videos about ideas to catch the audiences' attention, and other sources of inspiration. Examples of successful communications programmes comprise entertainment services such as TV shows or theatre plays, community projects that invite critical dialogue, powerful online campaigns, and artistic initiatives. Below are some examples that were shared during the discussion:

#### **Communications in the current context of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic:**

- UN Women produced a [short 1-min video](#) that presents four key actions to address women's needs in the coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis.
- A [powerful Dove advert](#) with the motto "Courage is beautiful" portrays healthcare workers to praise their hard work and dedication in battling the pandemic.
- A social media campaign titled [#LockdownNotLockup](#), organised by ABAAD in Lebanon, raises awareness and calls for action on domestic violence. The campaign informs about a helpline number to report cases of domestic violence, and encourages the community to show solidarity with women who experience intimate partner violence by writing the helpline number on a sheet and hanging it outside on their balconies.

#### **Campaigns to raise awareness on violence against women:**

- To draw public attention to domestic violence, Women's Aid organised a campaign in 2015 using experimental marketing. The charity set up an [interactive billboard](#) at a public site showing a woman with a bruised face: the more people looked at the screen, the faster her wounds disappeared. To

reach a broad audience, the campaign was set up in a busy location and organised around International Women's Day to ensure wide media coverage.

- The Milan campaign [Just Because I am a Woman](#) shows posters of female political leaders with bruised faces to stress that every woman can become a victim of violence.
- In 2016, the Palestinian activist Rand Jarallah published a video with UNFPA called [Reversing the trend](#), in which she uses her face as a 'canvas' to depict the horrors of violence and advocate for action.

### **Challenging gender stereotypes through entertainment and community involvement:**

- ALIGN provides information about the use of "edutainment" and interactive media in a webinar called [Tackling gender norms through media](#) and presents several programmes that use entertainment and community activities to tackle restrictive social norms. Among these, a national soap opera in India is [using popular genres and storylines](#) to bring new perspectives on persistent social norms to different demographic groups. Another approach implemented in a number of countries is the [Interactive Theatre for Justice \(ITJ\)](#), which shows dramas and invites the audience on stage to change the storyline in ways that improve the protagonists' lives. The main topics discussed in these interactive theatres are reproductive health and restricted women's rights. Furthermore, ALIGN points to a school-based program that sets up [student clubs](#) to provide adolescents with the skills to question restrictive gender norms and stereotypes.
- AFD has expressed its support for the TV series "[C'est la vie](#)", a project financed by the French Muskoka Fund and implemented by UN Women and RAES NGO to change discriminatory social norms concerning women's reproductive autonomy, early marriage, violence against women or female genital mutilation (FGM). The series reaches a wide audience, as it is broadcasted in 44 African countries, and available in French, English and several local languages. The programme was also disseminated via radio, TV and social media channels.
- The NGO HOPEM has developed a weekly TV programme in Mozambique called "[Homem que é Homem](#)" ("A man who is a man"), which challenges harmful notions of masculinity. A UN evaluation shows that the show increased knowledge about gender equality, encouraged critical reflection on masculinity, and improved individuals' attitudes towards their partners. The show has been broadcasted in over 150 countries.
- The Population Foundation of India has launched [a Bollywood-directed soap opera](#) "I, A Woman, Can Achieve Anything" in 2014, broadcasted on national television. The programme seeks to promote women's empowerment by challenging harmful social norms that prevail in India's health sector, communities and families. A pre-post survey evaluation showed that the programme successfully raised awareness about the consequences of early marriage, the need to fight domestic violence, family planning, and the benefits of women's economic and political empowerment.
- Tostan, a non-formal education NGO, developed a [Community Empowerment Programme \(CEP\)](#) that helps villages reflect on persistent harmful practices and establish public village declarations to end FGM. The programme enables community members to challenge widespread discriminatory norms and to lead their own movements for change. Since 1991, 9 000 communities across Africa have publicly abandoned FGM in this context, affecting over 5.5 million people.
- In 2016, the City Hall of Madrid implemented the project [Men with care](#), which highlights the importance of including men's voices to achieve gender equality and societal well-being. The programme aims to challenge traditional gender roles among men who suffer under the male breadwinner ideal. Pressure to conform to that ideal has caused depression, apathy and low self-esteem. The project invites men to join group discussions to question harmful gender norms and develop emotional stability.

- The [Men's Story Project](#) (MSP) uses storytelling and community dialogue to encourage men to critically reflect on gender norms and masculinities. The initiative invites men to tell their stories through poetry, music, or prose at events in their local community in the US, Gaza, Chile and the West Bank. The performances are filmed and then shared on social media or used to produce documentaries.
- [Videos by ICRW](#) published on the ALIGN Platform share experiences of men and boys who have participated in programmes that seek to change norms of masculinity.

### Looking ahead

This online discussion has shown that communicators around the world can use a wide range of communication means to challenge discriminatory social norms, shift mind-sets and behaviours and end harmful practices. DevCom's 7 principles constitute a first attempt to establish common rules of thumb for successful communication for gender equality.

At the [OECD Development Centre](#), the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) measures discriminatory social institutions (formal and informal laws, norms, and practices) to provide the data necessary for transformative policy change. To elicit sustained change, we also need to rely on effective communications of our findings. In the lead up to the Generation Equality Forum, the Wikigender platform will multiply its efforts to update and disseminate information about gender equality issues, building on current and new partnerships. It will also organise new online discussions on gender-related themes.

As we look forward to the Generation Equality Forum in 2021, **the Secretariat of the French Government for the Generation Equality Forum** will focus on digital tools to keep gender equality at the heart of the international political and media agenda. This will include partnerships with gender equality-friendly media, and influential voices in civil society mobilisation of the French diplomatic network and global youth engagement through social media. A series of virtual engagements will be organized in collaboration with partners to foster continued momentum, participation and commitment of all stakeholders. The first digital event will be organized by the French ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French Ministry of State for Gender Equality on 7 June 2020, the initial launch of the GEF in Paris before its postponement because of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Furthermore, they will adopt DevCom's 7 communication principles and share them with their partners to ensure gender-sensitive communication.

**AFD** is part of the French organising team of the Generation Equality Forum. It contributes to initiatives on sexual and reproductive rights and supports feminist movements from the Global South to enhance francophone feminists' visibility. To give an example, AFD collaborated with the French media development agency, CFI, to support the [MédiaSahel project](#) since January 2019. The project promotes communication and information as vectors of rights, democracy and public debate, contributing to women's and youth empowerment. It aims to foster dialogue and exchange about challenges and solutions in the Sahel region among the younger cohorts (under 30 year olds), which represent almost 65% of the population.

**ODI and its ALIGN Platform** emphasised the importance of using creativity in the use of communication technologies to connect diverse gender equality actors, disseminate learning and enhance messaging in the lead up to the Gender Equality Forum and in light of the coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis. They also stress that communicators need to be mindful about the negative effects that communications may have, e.g. reinforcing and perpetuating gender stereotypes. Some of these themes are currently explored in their series on coronavirus (Covid-19) on the ALIGN Platform. A recent blog post, for instance, analyses how different countries have perpetuated or addressed gendered issues in the crisis response. Furthermore, ALIGN considers it crucial to use online channels such as Twitter and hosting timely events such as this online discussion, to counter negative campaigns trending online, and encourage the sustained use of DevCom's 7 communication principles.



## Key resources

### Research and information

- ALIGN (2019, June 10). [Event recording: Tackling gender norms through media](#).
- EIGE (2019, February 25). [Toolkit on gender-sensitive communication](#).
- HCE (2016). [Pour une communication publique sans stéréotype de sexe](#). Guide pratique.
- Marcus, R. and Page, E. (2014, June). [Changing discriminatory norms affecting adolescent girls through communication activities: A review of evidence](#). Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
- Morgan, M. and Davies, S. E. (2020, April 16). [How gender norms play out in the COVID-19 response](#). ALIGN.
- OECD (2020). [Women at the core of the fight against COVID-19 crisis](#).
- SBCC (n. d.). [International SSBC Summit](#). Social and Behaviour Change Communication.
- The American Refugee Committee (ARC) and Communication for Change (C4C). (2010). [Communication, Participation & Social Change: a review of communication initiatives addressing gender-based violence, gender norms, and harmful traditional practices in crisis-affected settings](#). Written by Cooper, C., Goodsmith, L., Lotter, E. and Molony, T.
- UNICEF South Asia (2018, May). [Gender responsive communication for development: Guidance, tools and resources](#).
- Wenham, C., Smith, J. and Morgan, R. (2020, March 14). [COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak](#). The Lancet, Volume 395, Issue 10227, P846-848.

### Examples of campaigns

- Ayuntamiento de Madrid (2016, January 15). [Arranca el proyecto “Hombres con cuidado”](#).
- BBC News (2020, January 16). [Violence against women: 'Battered faces' poster campaign appears in Milan](#). (Campaign: Just because I am a women).
- Borcharding, R. (2018, October 9). [Building support for women's and girls' rights through interactive theatre](#). ALIGN.
- Calabretta, D. (2020, April 6). [Dove shows the 'beautiful' courage of frontline workers](#). Strategy.
- CFI (n. d.) [MédiaSahel project](#). CFI Media Development.
- HOPEM (2014, March 1). Men engage in gender equality: A case study from Mozambique. Publisher: Oxfam Novib, Rede HOPEM. (Information on the TV programme Homem que é Homem).
- ICRW (2019, June 10). [Changing norms of masculinity that uphold male privilege](#). ALIGN.
- Jurallah, R. (Randistic) and UNFPA (2016). [Reversing the Trend | UNFPA x Randistic](#). YouTube.
- Khalife, L. (2020, April 15). [#LockdownNotLockup: Lebanese NGO launches campaign to fight domestic violence](#). Step FEED.
- Menon, S. (2018, November 5). [Gender equality in schools – a look at the Taaron Ki Toli programme in India the Taaron Ki Toli programme](#). ALIGN case study.
- Mitra, R., Parisha, R. and Whitehead, S. (2019, May 29). [AdhaFull: Using the media to boost self-efficacy and challenge harmful gender norms amongst adolescents](#). ALIGN case study.
- Spotlight Initiative (2019, November 11). [Challenging gender norms through art](#).
- The Men's Story project (n.d.) [The Men's Story Project: building strength, creating peace](#).
- The population foundation India (n. d.) [Social and behaviour change communication. Soap operas in India](#).
- Tostan (2013, June 13). [Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme \(CEP\): The Path to a Public Declaration](#). Tostan - Dignity for All.
- Women's Aid (2015). [Look At Me: Women's Aid interactive billboard](#). YouTube.
- TV Monde Afrique (n.d.). [C'est la vie](#). TV series.