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Key research insights

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Busara

How can behavior change framework and co-design improve social norms curricula?

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Project facts

Key words
Behavioral science, change agents, co-design, curriculum development, social norms

Behavioral themes
Social norms transformation themes related to: intimate partner violence (IPV), child marriage, and violent discipline for children

Research design
Co-design

Scope
Start date: June 18, 2025
End date: December 8, 2025
n=103

Location
Kisumu, Kenya and Shinyanga, Tanzania

Partner
Investing in Children and Societies - Strengthening Families and Protecting Children (ICS-SP)

Ethics approval
N/A

Behavioral frameworks and co-design drive impactful social norms curriculum development. Behavioral science provides a theoretical anchor, while co-designing with community members ensures ground-level relevance. By diagnosing past failures through validation workshops, CSOs can create accessible tools that directly address implementation barriers and social norms.

Background: Transforming social norms

Harmful social and gender norms expose women and children to exploitation, abuse, gender-based violence, and early marriage, limiting positive life outcomes. Investing in Children and their Societies (ICS-SP) works to create safer, more empowering environments. Busara supported ICS-SP by developing a social norms transformation curriculum and a monitoring and evaluation framework across Kenya and Tanzania to track changes in behaviors related to intimate partner violence, early marriage, and violent discipline.

Conducting the research

The project applied the COM-B model to assess behavior through capability, opportunity, and motivation, identifying barriers and drivers of change. It guided delivery of the social norms transformation curriculum by diagnosing implementation gaps and informing design improvements. A co-design approach, validation workshops, and field testing in Kenya and Tanzania were also used, engaging community members and change agents to ensure materials were practical, relevant, and effective for field implementation.

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Key research insights

- Co-design proved most effective when community members and ICS staff were treated as owners of the process rather than only feedback providers. Strong engagement from Change Agents during validation and testing improved contextual relevance and delivery.
- The COM-B framework guided curriculum design from the outset, ensuring materials were behaviorally grounded, practical, and responsive to local contexts in Kenya and Tanzania.
- Validation workshops identified implementation gaps, strengthened redesign efforts through local feedback, and helped the team balance content density in facilitation guides.
- Field testing in Tanzania revealed withdrawal of male Change Agents, highlighting gender-specific barriers to participation that require further investigation.

Implications

For CSOs:
Applied behavioral science is necessary for creating and implementing accessible and effective project tools, like curriculums. By ensuring program design is rooted in behavioral frameworks CSOs can address complex social norms through a structure that is logically sound. The success of a project often depends on diagnosing the errors that have been made before, rather than starting from scratch.

This project shows that the Change Agents or community facilitators who support CSOs to implement projects at the community level must be viewed as active co-designers rather than just passive participants. Their direct engagement ensures the project is contextually relevant and culturally appropriate.

Recommendations for future research

To understand whether behavior change frameworks really work in curriculum development or project design over the long term, we need more evidence showing that people's behaviors actually change and stay changed. Whether locally designed approaches can be adapted to work in different regions and contexts, is a key question that remains.

Further reading

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Study team

This research was a collaboration between Busara and ICS. Busara led the redesign of the Social Norms Transformation Curriculum, Facilitation Guide and M&E tools using the COM-B model, while ICS facilitated field coordination and community engagement in Kenya and Tanzania.

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