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THE PROJECT TO END  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**Using Social Norms Approaches  
to Engage and Mobilize Men for  
Violence Prevention and the  
Advancement of Gender Equality,  
Diversity, Justice, and Inclusion:  
Rapid Evidence Review**

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**The views of the authors do not necessarily represent the views of Women and Gender Equality Canada or the Government of Canada.**

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## Author's Note

We, the authors, would like to take this opportunity to situate ourselves in relation to this research and flag some of the tensions that we continue to navigate as feminists working to advance gender and social justice. First, we are white settlers, trained in the Western scientific tradition, with extensive experience working with feminist issues from an intersectional perspective. Each of us has over a decade of experience working directly with men in the areas of violence prevention and gender equality. Based on our experience, we firmly believe that gender and social inequality is inextricably linked with rates of male violence against all genders and our interventions must focus on all forms of violence to stop violence before it starts.

We are also white feminists committed to advancing racial justice and are on an ongoing journey to understand and learn more about where and how we can be most useful in this work. At Shift, we have been integrating approaches that aim to call *in* rather than *out*, while also reflecting on our own practices and building creative and innovative skills, so that we can maximize our capacity to hold people accountable in ways that generate healing, recovery, repair, and prosocial change. We believe it is imperative to ask hard questions and think strategically about what is and is not working in efforts to achieve social change across anti-violence, gender equality, and justice, diversity, and inclusion fields so that we can build momentum for bigger and more impactful movements.

In conducting this review, our methods and analysis used an intersectional approach, which allowed us to clearly see the dearth of research on strategies to engage and mobilize men at the intersections of gender equality, violence prevention, and advancing equity, diversity, justice, and inclusion. We worked diligently to name and map the ways in which these gaps need to be addressed, but we recognize that our analysis may have shortcomings as we continue the process of learning and unlearning in relation to our own positionality and context in this work. We welcome those who want to call us *in* so that we may continue to make our work stronger, more relevant, and more impactful across a wider audience.

In solidarity,  
Laura, Lana, and Elena

## Executive Summary

*CallinMen: Mobilizing More Men for Violence Prevention and Gender Equality in Canada* is a knowledge synthesis research project led by Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence, a primary research hub with the goal to stop violence before it starts. Shift is based out of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary (Shift/UCalgary). As part of the *CallinMen* project, nine rapid evidence reviews were conducted on evidence-informed *primary prevention* approaches to engage and mobilize men to prevent and disrupt violence and inequalities, with the goal to share these findings with those funding and working with men and male-identified people to prevent violence and advance equity. To support and advance work to engage and mobilize men, both well-known and emergent approaches that show promise in engaging and mobilizing men were identified for review.

**Definition of social norms approaches:** Social norms are the implicit and explicit “rules or expectations for how to behave that are shared by a particular group of people and are maintained by social pressure (i.e., social punishment or rewards).”<sup>1</sup> A social norms approach recognizes that social norms are a powerful driver in people’s behaviour, that people often misperceive norms, and works to adapt norms in order to bring about positive change in the community or group.

This is done in two ways. The most common of social norms approaches corrects misperceptions about norms by making them visible and making clear the value in the actual healthier norm. In cases where people’s beliefs and the social norms *are* aligned, the second approach works with key influencers to disrupt harmful norms and promote more adaptive ones.<sup>2</sup> Both types of social norms approaches can be present within a single intervention.

**There are two key types of social norms targeted: descriptive (what you think others do), and injunctive (what you think others approve/disapprove of). For example:**

- *“Men shake hands instead of hugging, so I also expect a handshake when I meet another man.” (descriptive norm)*
- *“People will think I’m gay if I hug another man, so I offer my hand to other men when I meet them.” (injunctive norm)*

### What does the evidence say?

There is strong evidence to support a social norms approach for violence prevention. Specifically, social norms-focused interventions have been shown to:

- Decrease negative gender inequitable attitudes.
- Improve men’s perceptions of their peers’ attitudes and beliefs.
- Increase prosocial intervening behaviors and, in some cases, actually reduce and prevent violence.

Research also shows that a social norms approach for violence prevention can be gender transformative even when not explicitly situated within a gender transformative approach, as they “give men permission to act differently by revealing the true, healthy norms of their male peers,

which in turn can transform men’s attitudes and behaviors about masculinity, sexism, and men’s violence.”<sup>3</sup>

Six social norm interventions were included in this review, gathered primarily from three literature reviews that documented social norms-focused violence prevention interventions. There was no available evidence on using a social norms approach for gender equality, diversity, justice, or inclusion, and no research took place in Canada (all studies took place in U.S.).

### **Insights from research on social norms-focused interventions**

1. The length of the intervention matters: Interventions that are a minimum of three years are most promising for lasting impact.
2. Expect non-linear change. For example, the studies found there was change, then backlash, then change again.
3. Make new/revised norms sufficiently believable, relatable, and relevant so that shifting to this new norm feels reasonable to one’s target audience.
4. Target both types of norms within the intervention: Social norms change is most likely to occur when both *descriptive* (perception of what people actually *do*) and *injunctive* (perception of what people think, i.e., what people approve/disapprove of) norms are targeted.
5. The most successful norms interventions integrate different approaches from a variety of disciplines to reinforce desired change. For example,
  - Combine social marketing and peer to peer engagement and/or skills-building to reinforce the new/desired norm.
  - Integrate social norms, bystander, and risk reduction approaches as this combination shows promise for violence prevention.
  - Integrate other evidence-based approaches, such as a nudge approach, to undermine the biases and undesirable social norms in ways that make it easier for individuals to adopt the desired social norm (i.e., make the new/revised norm the preferred mental shortcut). For example, in an effort to increase equity and diversity in workplace opportunities, coach managers and directors to reverse the typical process for assigning opportunities (i.e., where we make a mental list of who would be qualified). Instead, create a list of *all* subordinates and then eliminate based on who is not qualified).<sup>4</sup>

## 1.0 Introduction

In 2020, Shift/UCalgary was awarded a research grant from Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) for a knowledge synthesis research project entitled *CallinMen: Mobilizing More Men for Violence Prevention and Gender Equality in Canada*. Little knowledge synthesis work has been done to date to increase understanding of what strategies and approaches meaningfully engage and mobilize men to prevent violence and advance gender equality, and even less on diversity, justice, and inclusion in Canada; this research fills that gap. Specifically, CallinMen advances the state of knowledge by identifying and reviewing the evidence base for key strategies and approaches that show promise in engaging and mobilizing men to prevent violence and advance gender equality, diversity, justice, and inclusion in Canada, and develops an evidence-informed “behaviour change toolbox” that consolidates these strategies and approaches.

Therefore, to identify and review promising approaches to engaging and mobilizing men to prevent violence and advance gender equality, diversity, justice, and inclusion, nine rapid evidence reviews<sup>i</sup> of the academic and grey literature were conducted<sup>ii</sup> in 2021 with the goal to share these findings with those funding and working with men and male-identified people to prevent violence and advance equity. This document reports on the findings for how social norms approaches have been used with men to prevent violence and advance gender equality, diversity, justice, and inclusion.

Social norms are the implicit and explicit “rules or expectations for how to behave that are shared by a particular group of people and are maintained by social pressure (i.e., social punishment or rewards).”<sup>5</sup> Social Norms Theory is based on the idea that social expectations (and the sanctions and rewards that accompany them) can be a powerful driver of behaviour: “As a result, a social norms intervention can be a catalytic addition to an existing programme focused on individual, structural, and/or material factors.”<sup>6</sup> There are two types of norms: descriptive (what we think other people *do*) and injunctive (what we think other people would approve or disapprove of). There are two main types of social norms interventions. The most common of social norms approaches aims to correct misperceptions about norms by bringing attention to and highlighting how “the actual, healthier norm will have a beneficial effect on most individuals, who will either reduce their participation in the problematic behaviour or be encouraged to engage in prosocial, healthy behaviours.”<sup>7</sup> In cases where people’s beliefs and the social norms *are* aligned, the second type works with key influencers to disrupt harmful norms and promote more adaptive ones.<sup>8</sup> Both types of social norms interventions can be present within a single intervention.

It is important to note that this research project is focused on advancing *primary prevention* approaches, meaning that we are focused on identifying strategies that change the root causes

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<sup>i</sup> A rapid evidence reviews is a process that synthesizes knowledge through the steps of a systematic review, but components of the process are simplified or excluded in order to shorten the length of time required to complete the review. The process includes identifying specific research questions, searching for, accessing the most applicable and relevant sources of evidence, and synthesizing the evidence.

<sup>ii</sup> Rapid evidence reviews were conducted on: bystander approach, social norms approach, nudge approach, virtual reality, gamification, data science, fatherhood, calling in, and community justice.



which drive violence, discrimination, and gender inequality in order to prevent initial perpetration and victimization of violence, harassment, discrimination, and inequities.<sup>9</sup> In line with this focus, our research seeks to understand strategies and approaches that incubate and catalyze male-identified prosocial behaviours and systems that prevent violence, harassment, discrimination, and inequality before they begin.

The specific research questions that guided the current rapid evidence review were:

1. How have social norms approaches been used to engage and mobilize men for violence prevention and/or to advance gender equality, justice, diversity, and/or inclusion?
2. Based on Question 1, what impacts do social norms approaches have on behaviours and/or social norms and/or culture and/or systems?
3. What are the key strengths, challenges, gaps, and lessons learned from using social norms approaches based on Questions 1 and 2, and how can this inform the use of social norms approaches to engage and mobilize men in male-oriented settings<sup>iii</sup> for the purposes of violence prevention and to advance gender equality, justice, diversity, and inclusion?

## 2.0 Methods

Shift produced a research review on social norms theory and social norms approaches in April 2019, entitled “Social Norms Theory: Research Review.”<sup>10</sup> As such, this rapid review for social norms approaches included review of this document, a review of the key studies referenced in this document, and then a search for literature on social norms approaches for 2019-2021. Therefore, a rapid evidence synthesis/review (RES) was conducted in May 2021. RES is “a form of knowledge synthesis that follows the systematic review process, but components of the process are simplified or omitted to produce information in a timely manner.”<sup>11</sup> The process includes identifying specific research questions, searching for and accessing most applicable and relevant sources of evidence, and synthesizing the evidence.

A systematic search strategy was performed using a combination of keywords. The first set was: (“social norms approach” or “norm entrepreneurship” or “collective norm” or “situational norms” or “social norms marketing” “social norms change” or “social norms theory” or “norms-based” or “group norm”) AND (“men or male or masculin\* or dad or father) AND (“gender-based violence” or “gender based violence” or GBV or “family violence” or “domestic violence” or “domestic abuse” or “intimate partner violence” or IPV or “violence against women” or VAW or rape or “sexual assault” or “sexual violence” or “sexual abuse” or “sexual harassment” or “workplace harassment” or “sexual misconduct” or “consent” or “gender equality” or “gender equity” or “gender justice” or “gender parity” or “gender transformative” or bullying or alcohol or empathy or belonging or addiction or “harm reduction” or discrimination or bias or prejudice or justice or diversity or equity

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<sup>iii</sup> **Settings are** environments (e.g., a sports setting like a hockey rink) and/or sociocultural environments (e.g., a peer network, a workplace), basically where people naturally congregate. We use the term “male-oriented” to specify the settings in which men often congregate, with or without folks of other genders (e.g., workplace, bars, sports venues, etc). Male-oriented means settings that are biased towards, dominated by, and/or designed for men (Male-oriented. *In Lexico powered by Oxford*. Retrieved from <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/male-oriented>).

or inclusion or “racism” or “anti-racis\*” or antiracis\* or Indigenous or “First Nations” or Inuit or Metis). Searches were conducted in the following academic databases: EBSCO (All databases, including Academic Search Complete, Academic Search Elite, and CINAHL Plus with Full Text), and PubMed.

In addition to Shift’s review on social norms theory published in 2019, the grey literature search focused on the following sources: Alan Berkowitz’s (social norms theory and approach expert) website, as well as the six-page section summarizing social norms research in Michael’s Flood’s 2019 book, *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention* book (2019). Finally, XY Online was searched for “social norms.”

**Inclusion criteria:**

*Time frame:* 2019-2021

*Publication language:* English.

*Availability:* Full text option only.

*Literature had to meet the following criteria:*

- *Intervention type and target population:* Describe how social norms approaches have been implemented to prevent violence and/or advance gender equality, justice, diversity, and/or inclusion with a population that includes at least 30% men, aged 18 and over.
- *Evidence of impact:* Provide evidence on impact of social norms approaches on behavioural and/or social norms and/or cultural and/or organizational and/or systems change.
- *Relevant literature:* Literature that provides any level of evidence around how social norms approaches are relevant/can be used but do not meet the above criteria (e.g., do not include men in target population, or do not describe details of a social norms intervention) will be reviewed, separately, to inform the analysis and recommendations of the rapid review.

Literature that did not describe social norms approaches, focused on areas outside of violence prevention and/or advancing gender equality, justice, diversity, and/or inclusion, and/or did not include at least 30% men in their target population were excluded. Due to the primary prevention focus of this research, literature describing the use of social norms approaches with offenders of violence were excluded.

As this review pulls primarily from literature reviews already completed on social norms approaches, the following information was extracted on social norm approaches: source, name of intervention, type of intervention, focus area, target population, setting, sector, location, intervention activities, length/duration of intervention, evidence of impact (including gender disaggregated, if available), evaluation measures, strengths/lessons learned, and limitations.

## 3.0 Results

### 3.1 Overview of reviews referenced

#### **Berkowitz et al. chapter**

A search of Alan Berkowitz's website identified a review of social norms interventions. This publication<sup>12</sup> is a comprehensive review of the literature on "violence prevention interventions grounded in the social norms approach collected from ERIC, Google Scholar, PsycArticles, PsycINFO, and PubMed." The authors were specifically interested in understanding "which normative beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors were targeted for misperception correction within a given study (i.e., gender role, rape myth acceptance, acceptability of violence, rate of perpetration, or injunctive versus descriptive norms)," what layer(s) of the social ecology interventions targeted, and any long-term effects on outcomes such as attitudes, perpetration, and/or victimization. They also discuss potential areas for improvement and future directions for social norms approaches. They do not specify the timespan covered, but articles reviewed span 2003-2020.

#### **Claussen's (Shift) review**

Claussen's review<sup>13</sup> for Shift was developed as part of the Engaging Men Learning Collaborative (EMC), which designed and tested "non-programmatic approaches for reducing violence against women and advancing gender equality by working with key influencers in settings where men naturally congregate"<sup>14</sup> (i.e., where men work, play, worship, and learn). As part of the Engaging Men Learning Collaborative, Shift developed research briefs, such as this one on social norms theory, "in order to provide the collaborative members with an overview of key theories, concepts, and strategies that may be useful in doing this work."<sup>15</sup> A search of academic and grey literature produced between 2000 and 2017 was conducted with the goal to "bring together a foundational base of what is known around social norms theory and its use in prevention interventions."<sup>16</sup>

#### **Flood's book**

Michael Flood does not provide specifications around what and how literature was searched or the timespan parameters for the literature reviewed for social norm marketing interventions. The goal of his book,<sup>17</sup> which was published in 2019, is to provide "a comprehensive guide to engaging men and boys in the prevention of violence against women and girls and other forms of violence and abuse"<sup>18</sup> and includes an examination of "the effectiveness of efforts among men and boys to change the attitudes and behaviours associated with violence against women."<sup>19</sup> In doing so, Flood argues, his book "highlights innovative, creative, and compelling examples of work engaging men and boys, both among particular groups (such as sports players, faith leaders, corporate men, blue collar men, young men in schools, and men in uniform) and in particular settings (such as workplaces and social movements)."<sup>20</sup>

### 3.2 Source characteristics

To supplement the above resources, the academic database search identified 55 search results; however following screening, removal of duplicates, and full text analysis, only one study met the inclusion criteria. Additional publications that did not match other criteria but were relevant for this review were also identified in the literature search and referenced where appropriate.

### 3.3 Overview of social norms interventions included

The only social norms intervention identified through the academic database search that was not already covered in the other key documents used for this review was a five-year social norms sexual violence prevention marketing campaign, as described by Mennicke and colleagues and published in 2021.<sup>21</sup> However, earlier findings from this intervention were referenced in one review.<sup>22</sup> Berkowitz and colleagues' publication is the most comprehensive and systematic review of the literature; therefore we use their publication here as a reference for what studies are covered by which review. Berkowitz et al.'s chapter includes a review of 25 research articles which includes articles examining the impact of norms misperceptions on risk for violence perpetration, the influence of norms misperceptions on bystander interventions, and then evaluations of social norms-correction interventions to prevent men's violence. Seven such interventions taking social norms approaches are included in their review,<sup>23 24 25 26 27 28 29</sup> although only five of these interventions have target populations aged 18 and over.<sup>30 31 32 33 34</sup> All of these interventions take place in the United States with university undergraduate students who are either all male or predominantly male. Flood mentions the study on reducing U.S. university men's sexism in his review,<sup>35</sup> and both Claussen's and Flood's include the intervention by Gidycz and colleagues<sup>36</sup> on preventing sexual aggression among U.S. university men in their reviews. The other three norms-correction interventions included in Berkowitz's review, two on sexual assault prevention<sup>37 38</sup> and the other on sexual violence prevention,<sup>39</sup> are not mentioned in Claussen or Flood's reviews of the literature. Additionally, a 2010 literature review of social norms marketing to address gender-based violence was heavily referenced in Flood's review, which includes case studies for three social marketing campaigns—Soul City in South Africa; We Are Different, We Are Equal in Nicaragua; and Program H in Brazil, Mexico, and India.<sup>40</sup> This review is useful as it specifies which norms the interventions target (e.g., injunctive or descriptive) but as it does not provide detail of how many men specifically are targeted, it is only referenced in the analysis and recommendation sections of this review.

Social norms interventions covered include social norms marketing campaigns,<sup>41 42</sup> small-group workshop-based programs,<sup>43 44 45</sup> and web-based interventions.<sup>46</sup> Social norms interventions covered by Berkowitz et al., Claussen, and Flood are primarily focused on violence prevention—specifically sexism, sexual assault, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and rape myths/proclivity—but also include interventions on alcohol and bullying. However, based on the inclusion criteria for this review of targeting men over age 18 and including evidence of impact, interventions on bullying are excluded from the main section of this review. Importantly, there were no social norms interventions identified that address racial justice, including diversity, equity, and/or inclusion.

As such, this review includes details on six social norm interventions (the new publication<sup>47</sup> identified through the academic search, and then the key social norm interventions discussed across Berkowitz et al., Claussen, and Flood’s reviews). In addition, this review pulls from the analysis and insights provided by the work already completed by Berkowitz et al., Claussen, and Flood. See the table below for a summary of the key social norms interventions discussed in this review.

### 3.4 Figure 1. Summary of studies reviewed

(In chronological order)

Name, type of intervention, and author(s)	Area of focus	Purpose/Aim	Participant profile	Setting	Results
A Real Time Social Norms Intervention to Reduce Male Sexism (social marketing)  Kilmartin et al., 2008 <sup>48</sup>  (included in Berkowitz et al. <sup>49</sup> and Flood's <sup>50</sup> reviews)	Sexism (among men)	To examine the efficacy of a norms correction intervention for reducing the prevalence of sexist beliefs among men.	N = 128, all male undergraduate students  Experiment 1: N = 65 (Baseline) N = 61 (Follow-up) Experiment 2: N = 63  White (86.2%)	U.S. university	"At follow-up, experimental groups saw a decreased ratings of others' hostile sexism and increased ratings of others' discomfort with sexism. Unacquainted groups also reported decreased benevolent sexism and adversarial sexual beliefs. No changes were observed in control group." <sup>51</sup>
<i>The men's project</i> , a social marketing campaign and bystander intervention  Gidycz et al., 2011 <sup>52</sup>  (included in Berkowitz et al. <sup>53</sup> , Claussen <sup>54</sup> , and Flood's <sup>55</sup> reviews)	Sexual assault prevention	To evaluate the effectiveness of a sexual assault prevention program for men, (alongside a risk-reduction program for women living in the same campus community).	N=1285 (635 in experimental condition), all first-year male students (there was a complimentary single-sex risk reduction component to this intervention focused on women, but not included in this publication)  18-19 years old (98%) Heterosexual (98.1%) White (91.8%)"	U.S. university	"Program group reported finding sexually aggressive behavior to be less reinforcing, decreased associations with sexually aggressive peers, decreased exposure to sexually explicit material, and increased perception in peers' likelihood to intervene when they witnessed inappropriate behaviors." <sup>56</sup>
RealConsent, a web-based bystander and social norms intervention  Salazar et al., 2014 <sup>57</sup>  (only included in Berkowitz's review <sup>58</sup> )	Sexual violence prevention	To evaluate efficacy of RealConsent, a web-based approach to sexual violence prevention, in enhancing prosocial intervening behaviors, and preventing sexual violence perpetration.	N = 743, all male undergraduate students (Intervention = 376; Control = 367) Ages: 18-24 White (44.1%) African American (22.3%) Asian American (19.6%) Hispanic (10.8%)	U.S. university	"At follow-up assessment, program participants reported increased rates of intervention and decreased rates of sexual violence perpetration. Additionally, program participants reported significant positive changes in secondary outcomes except for self-efficacy to intervene." <sup>59</sup>
Men's project (builds from but different from <i>The men's project</i> , as discussed by Gidycz et al., 2011)  Face-to-face education program  Stewart et al., 2014 <sup>60</sup>  (only included in Berkowitz's review <sup>61</sup> )	Sexual assault prevention	To evaluate a sexual assault prevention program that targets college men through an integration of social norms, empathy, and bystander education programs into one program.	N = 36, 35 of whom identified as men, and 1 identified as FTM transgender. Undergraduate student leaders who were nominated by peers.  Age: 18-22 Heterosexual (86%), 28% in a fraternity  No race/ethnicity data available	U.S. university	"From baseline to posttest, participants reported reductions in hostile and benevolent sexism, rape myth acceptance, and gender language use. Additionally, program participants reported increased rates in collective action willingness, feminist activity, and bystander efficacy." <sup>62</sup>
<i>Sexual Assault and Alcohol Feedback and Education (SAFE)</i> social norms intervention  Orchowski et al., 2018 <sup>63</sup>  (included in Berkowitz et al. <sup>64</sup> )	Sexual assault prevention	To pilot a sexual assault prevention program for college men who engage in heavy drinking, a high-risk group who may be particularly well positioned to intervene as proactive bystanders in drinking environments.	25 heavy drinking male undergraduate students	U.S. university	"At 2-month follow up, participants reported increased use of strategies to limit drinking, less endorsement of rape myths, lower perceptions of peer alcohol use, lower engagement in sexual coercion, greater likelihood of bystander intervention, and greater confidence in intervening in situations that indicate a risk for violence." <sup>65</sup>
Social marketing campaign  Mennicke et al., 2021 <sup>66</sup>  (New study identified through search)	Sexual violence prevention	5-year social norms sexual violence prevention marketing campaign to increase college men's positive and prosocial attitudes, beliefs, and behavior related to sexual aggression and bystander intervention by changing the perception of the norms on campus.	N = 4158, all male undergraduate students (These were the ones that completed the survey, although there was a sampling frame of 15,000 over the five years of the study.)	U.S. university	Intervention was considered successful. "Over 5 years of data collection, men's perception of their peer's attitudes and beliefs improved, the discrepancy between perceptions and self-report decreased, and their own beliefs (more so than attitudes) improved. That is to say, perception of the norm became closer to the actual norm, while at the same time, the actual norm improved." <sup>67</sup>

## 4.0 Findings: How have social norms approaches been used?

1. *How have social norms approaches been used to engage and mobilize men for violence prevention and/or to advance gender equality, justice, diversity, and/or inclusion?*

### 4.1 How are social norms approaches defined in the literature?

Berkowitz et al. refer to *the* social norms approach, whereas other literature instead refer to *a* social norms approach, or social norms approaches. For the purposes of consistency, we use “social norms approaches” in this review unless directing quoting Berkowitz and colleagues. Berkowitz et al. situate social norms approaches (SNA) or norms correction strategy (NCS) within the social ecological model as an effective approach to affect change across four levels (individual, relationship, community, society). Mennicke et al. also situate social norms approaches within the social ecological framework, noting that the “Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend grounding sexual violence prevention more concretely in the ecological model”<sup>68</sup> as part of the justification for implementing social norms interventions.

In defining social norms approaches, Berkowitz and colleagues note that social norms approaches are “driven by the recognition that individuals are prone to incorrectly perceive the attitudes and/or behaviors of others in their interpersonal environment to be different from their own when in fact they are not.”<sup>69</sup> They further explain that “‘misperceptions’ of normative social behaviors commonly occur in relation to problem behaviors, which may be overestimated, as well as in relation to healthy or prosocial behaviors, which tend to be underestimated.”<sup>70</sup> According to Claussen, “Social Norms Theory (SNT) suggests that people tend to adhere to peer group and community norms, looking to others in their group or community to help define a given situation and provide guidance on what behaviours are expected in a particular setting” but that issues arise “because individuals incorrectly perceive the norms they are trying to follow.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, people tend to act in line with what they perceive to be normal (even if this is inaccurate), rather than what they personally believe. This is why trying to focus only on changing the precursors to behaviour—i.e., attitudes and beliefs—has limited efficacy. People’s attitudes and beliefs also tend to be formed through personal experiences and linked with other belief/value systems, which can make them more challenging to change.<sup>72</sup>

Typically, there are two kinds of misperceptions of normative social behaviours. The first is called **pluralistic ignorance** and occurs “when the majority incorrectly perceives itself to be a minority”<sup>73</sup> and changes their behaviour to match what they perceive or believe is the social norm, even though their perception is incorrect (for example, no one in a group speaking up when observing a racist comment, despite the majority privately disagreeing with what was said). The second kind of misperception is caused by **false consensus**, which exacerbates the effects of pluralistic ignorance. False consensus means incorrectly believing that others share similar beliefs, values, or behaviors (when they do not)—for example, incorrectly believing that others agreed with the racist comment and that was the reason for everyone else’s silence. The false consensus effect “may lead a minority (i.e., those holding unhealthy attitudes and beliefs) to perceive themselves as the majority.”<sup>74</sup>

Critically, research has shown that “certain misperceptions (pluralistic ignorance and false consensus) apply specifically to men’s perceptions of other men,” but that encouragingly, “the strongest influence on men’s behavior with respect to violence are peer influences and perceptions of peers.”<sup>75</sup>

One of the main types of social norms approaches, then, takes as its point of departure that it is possible to correct misperceptions through sharing the actual, and healthier, norm, and that this in turn will have a “beneficial effect on group or community members, including the non-problematic majority (pluralistic ignorance) and the problematic minority (false consensus).”<sup>76</sup> As Berkowitz et al. further explain with regards to the role social norms approaches play in the social ecological model, “information correcting misperceived norms can be impactful when tailored towards an individual (‘personalized normative feedback’), a group (‘the group Norms Challenging Approach’) or to a community (‘Social Norms Marketing’), thus demonstrating its usefulness at various levels of the social ecology.”<sup>77</sup> Flood also defines social norms marketing as focused on perceived community norms, rather than on individual attitudes and/or beliefs.<sup>78</sup> Social norms approaches also seek to exacerbate cognitive dissonance, or the perception of contradictory information, actions, or ideas, which can cause psychological stress until consistency/harmonization is established. This means that, by providing accurate information to correct a misperception, those who misperceive a norm are alerted to the fact that their perceptions are in error and, if the new information is believable, this can motivate them to change their behaviour.

As Berkowitz et al. succinctly explain,

Social norms-based interventions serve to correct societal “norming of the negative,” which can foster a misperception of the amount and acceptability of violence, both by bystanders and offenders. Because individuals rely on the public behavior of others to determine what is “normal,” visible language and behavior—in this case pertaining to violence—is overestimated, and more hidden language and behavior—such as discomfort with violence—is underestimated.<sup>79</sup>

The literature primarily focuses on the above explanation for what social norms approaches are and how they work. But what about when people’s beliefs and attitudes are actually aligned with the norm, and there is no “misperception” to be corrected? For example, when people have become so accustomed to swimming in the water of a particular set of norms—for example, using corporal punishment to punish children—that they have internalized the norm into their own value system. In those cases, the focus is to leverage key influencers in order to change the harmful norms, both by weakening the harmful norm and developing a more adaptive and prosocial norm.<sup>80</sup>

## 4.2 Types of norms targeted

There are two key types of social norms, outlined below:

**Descriptive:** Flood describes descriptive norms as “identifying the typical attitudes and behaviours of the group.”<sup>81</sup> Descriptive norms are those that describe the perception of what people typically



do, or the actual prevalence of a particular attitude or behaviour. For example, how many men have used physical violence against a partner.

**Injunctive:** Injunctive norms are the desirable attitudes or behaviours of a group, which may be only perceived as desirable, or actually desirable.<sup>82</sup> As Claussen explains, “do what others think one should do.”<sup>83</sup> For example, how many men believe that using physical violence against a partner is wrong. Claussen states that “injunctive norms have an explicit approval or evaluative component, whereas descriptive norms do not.”<sup>84</sup> She further explains that “widely shared practices or behaviours (descriptive norms) and widely shared beliefs (injunctive norms) serve as the basis for social cues that not only direct individuals’ behaviour and attitudes, but also constrain their behaviour and attitudes.”<sup>85</sup>

Understanding which types of norms are most effective to focus on (and how) is complicated at best. According to Claussen’s review, “effective SNT interventions target both descriptive and injunctive norms,” while Berkowitz and colleagues argue that the verdict is still out, as “we do not yet know the causal mechanism of norms change with respect to the type of norm chosen for feedback, and if one might be primary or more influential.”<sup>86</sup> For example, presenting the target audience with only descriptive norms can “set a standard that acts as a magnet”<sup>87</sup>—for better or worse. That is, providing information on the prevalence of a behaviour can normalize it and, in doing so, “may actually *increase* the prevalence of problematic or risky attitudes and behaviours.”<sup>88</sup> If a social norms campaign advertises that seven out of 10 men in the target population use physical violence against their partners (descriptive norm), for example, it may result in the target audience feeling justified in perpetuating such attitudes and behaviours—if this is paired with an injunctive norm that the majority of men do not believe such behaviour is appropriate, however, the intervention is more likely to be effective at changing harmful norms.

In other situations, we are more likely to be compelled by what others do (descriptive norm), regardless of what they proclaim to approve/disapprove of (injunctive norm). For example, if a social norms campaign promotes the equity, diversity, and inclusion statements of prominent companies (what they “believe in” and what they approve/disapprove of, or injunctive norms) but in actual fact the organizations still foster cultures of silence, complicit and explicit racism/ageism/ableism/sexism etc., and have done nothing to bring their actions and practices (descriptive norms) in line with these statements, people will place more weight on the descriptive over the injunctive norm and act in alignment with it. In short, more research is needed but current evidence suggests that although targeting both descriptive and injunctive may well be most effective, depending on the harmful norms targeted for change, the context, and the audience, how they are targeted and leveraged may differ.

### 4.3 Settings

As noted in the source characteristics section, all six of the social norms interventions covered in more detail here occur at U.S. university settings. Social norms approaches have also been implemented internationally, as Berkowitz et al. note in their review<sup>89</sup>; however, it is important to note that none of the reviews<sup>90 91 92</sup> included specific mention of a social norms intervention in

settings other than school, sports, or community—for example, none in workplaces, military, or faith-based settings.

For the purposes of this review, details of social norms interventions are provided alongside the findings of the interventions in the following section.

## 5.0 Findings: What impacts do social norms approaches have?

2. *Based on Question 1, what impacts do social norms approaches have on behaviours and/or social norms and/or culture and/or systems?*

### 5.1 Details and findings of social norms-focused interventions

The social norms marketing intervention that sought to reduce male sexism, published in 2008 by Kilmartin and colleagues,<sup>93</sup> sought to examine the efficacy of a norms correction intervention for reducing the prevalence of sexist beliefs among university men. Taking place at a liberal arts college in the United States, this intervention included a sample of 128 men divided between an experimental condition whereby the men, a majority of whom were white (86%), were either unacquainted (experiment 1) or acquainted (experiment 2) with one another. Participants were then randomly assigned either to the intervention or control condition. Participants in the intervention group received a 20-minute presentation centered around a sexual violence scenario, based on the Small Group Model Norms Challenging Intervention which was developed by Far and Miller (2003),<sup>94</sup> originally designed to reduce high-risk drinking, and which included feedback on discrepancies between actual and perceived norms within groups.<sup>95</sup> Assessments occurred at baseline and at a three-week follow-up. The authors conclude that “in both studies, college males were found to overestimate the extent of others’ sexism and underestimate their comfort with sexism, whether or not they were judging men whom they knew or did not know” and that, based on their findings, the intervention was successful “at reducing this perceptual distortion in both experiments at 3-week follow up compared with control group participants, but the intervention was more successful with non-acquainted than with acquainted men.”<sup>96</sup>

*The men’s project*, the study published by Gidycz and colleagues,<sup>97</sup> sought to evaluate the effectiveness of a sexual assault prevention program for men that sought to address perpetrator’s attitudes, beliefs, socialization, and peer group relationships in order to reduce sexual aggression and encourage participants to behave in more prosocial ways, including intervening when observing inappropriate behavior by peers. A companion program on risk-reduction was implemented with first-year women in the same dormitories, but only the details of *the men’s project* are explained here. This social norms intervention took place at a medium-sized Midwestern university in the United States, with a sample of 635 first-year university men. The face-to-face education program consisted of a combination of social norms and bystander intervention education in the form of a 1.5-hour prevention program and one-hour booster session four months after the initial prevention program. The program incorporated “various elements including an empathy induction, a norms correction component, a discussion of consent, and a bystander intervention component.”<sup>98</sup> Similar to the social norms marketing intervention published by Kilmartin and colleagues,<sup>99</sup> the social norms

component included an adaptation of the Small Group Norms Correction Intervention to “correct men’s misperceptions of other men’s attitudes and behaviors with respect to sexual assault,” and campus-wide and participant data were presented “on men’s discomfort with the inappropriate behavior and language of other men.”<sup>100</sup> Assessments were completed at baseline, four-month follow-up, and seven-month follow up. According to a summary of findings for this study,

Program group reported finding sexually aggressive behavior to be less reinforcing, decreased associations with sexually aggressive peers, decreased exposure to sexually explicit material, and increased perception in peers’ likelihood to intervene when they witnessed inappropriate behaviors.<sup>101</sup>

RealConsent, a web-based bystander and social norms intervention published by Salazar et al. in 2014,<sup>102</sup> sought to evaluate the effectiveness of a sexual violence prevention intervention that enhanced prosocial intervening behaviors and prevented sexual violence perpetration. The intervention consisted of six 30-minute media-based and interactive modules that sought to increase knowledge and skills as well as correct misperceptions in normative beliefs. Specifically, RealConsent covered knowledge of informed consent, communication skills regarding sex, the role of alcohol and male socialization in sexual violence, empathy for rape victims, and bystander education. Assessments occurred at baseline and six months after the intervention, and self-reported findings showed increased rates of intervention and decreased rates of sexual violence perpetration. Additionally, program participants reported significant positive changes in secondary outcomes except for self-efficacy to intervene.<sup>103</sup>

The Men’s Project,<sup>104</sup> which builds from but is different from *the men’s project*,<sup>105</sup> was a sexual assault prevention program that targeted college men through an integration of social norms, empathy, and bystander education programs into one program. For the social norms component, the intervention sought to “correct misinformation and change personal attitudes toward sexual assault.”<sup>106</sup> A sample of 36 (35 identified as men, and one identified as female-to-male transgender) male student leaders were recruited to participate in an 11-week program for two hours per week. The content of this intervention was broken down into three sections:

(a) 3 weeks dedicated to understanding different masculinities, socialization, and male privilege; (b) 5 weeks exploring the breadth, depth, and emotional impact of sexual assault, and (c) 3 weeks developing bystander intervention strategies on an individual (e.g., confronting sexist jokes) and institutional (e.g., joining women’s rights organizations) basis.<sup>107</sup>

As reported in Berkowitz et al.’s summary of interventions they reviewed, the results of the Men’s Project were:

From baseline to posttest, participants reported reductions in hostile and benevolent sexism, rape myth acceptance, and gender language use. Additionally, program participants reported increased rates in collective action willingness, feminist activity, and bystander efficacy.<sup>108</sup>

The Sexual Assault and Alcohol Feedback Evaluation, or SAFE, sought to prevent sexual assault and increase proactive bystander behaviour among college-aged heavy drinking men through a social norms and bystander integrated approach. With a sample of 25 heavy drinking college men, the program consisted of five and a half hours of programming, split across three sessions, including two core sessions and a follow up booster session. The intervention included motivational interviewing (an evidence-based method of assessing the integrity of brief motivational interventions), personalized normative feedback, and a workshop targeting misperceived norms:

Session 1 was a 90-min review of personalized normative feedback regarding alcohol use, sexual activity, alcohol-related sexual consequences, understanding of consent, and engagement in bystander intervention, delivered individually in a motivational interviewing style. Session 2 was a 2-hr group-based sexual assault prevention workshop focusing on social norms, empathy, masculinity, consent, and bystander intervention. Session 3 was a 90-min booster group session that reviewed previous topics and included the active practice of bystander intervention skills.<sup>109</sup>

As SAFE was a pilot with only 19 men completing all study components, the authors note that this evidence suggests both feasibility and acceptability of this program for use among heavy drinking college men. Berkowitz et al. summarize the findings from this intervention in the following way:

At 2-month follow up, participants reported increased use of strategies to limit drinking, less endorsement of rape myths, lower perceptions of peer alcohol use, lower engagement in sexual coercion, greater likelihood of bystander intervention, and greater confidence in intervening in situations that indicate a risk for violence.<sup>110</sup>

The final social norms intervention included here, the most recently published intervention by Mennicke and colleagues, was a sexual violence prevention social norms marketing campaign that also targeted men at a U.S. university.<sup>111</sup> A five-year social norms marketing campaign implemented between 2010 and 2014 designed specifically to target men and change perceptions of norms on campus, it focused on correcting “misperceptions of attitudes and beliefs related to sexual aggression and bystander intervention behavior in accordance with social norms theory (Berkowitz et al., 2005).”<sup>112</sup> Two to three advertisements inclusive of a branded logo and catchy designs were developed each year, with posters, bus wraps, table tents, and billboards placed around campus with a branded logo and catchy designs. The authors describe the intervention in the following way, including examples of advertisements used:

Each year the social norms marketing campaign focused on four overarching themes: consent, bystander, rape myths, and sexual activity. The consent theme reinforced the message, “Most men understand the importance of getting consent before sexual intimacy.” The bystander theme reinforced the message, “Most men would intervene to prevent sexual harassment or sexual assault.” The rape myths theme used underscored the message, “Most men agree that blaming sexual assault victims is wrong.” Finally, the sexual activity theme reinforced the message that “Most men are not as sexually active as you might think.”<sup>113</sup>

Self-reported data from participants was gathered on perception of peers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. The data were collected through short (20-minute) surveys that were randomly distributed during the spring semester. The participants had three weeks to complete the survey, and were emailed up to three times if they had not yet completed it. Findings showed that the social marketing campaign intervention was successful. Specifically, the authors note that:

Over five years of data collection, men's perception of their peer's attitudes and beliefs improved, the discrepancy between perceptions and self-report decreased, and their own beliefs (more so than attitudes) improved. That is to say, perception of the norm became closer to the actual norm, while at the same time, the actual norm improved.<sup>114</sup>

Additionally, overall individuals reported engaging in behaviors related to sexual consent more frequently than behaviors related to bystander intervention. Furthermore, the authors note that, with only one exception, "self-reported behavior was more prosocial in later years."<sup>115</sup> This was a particularly important finding, they argue, because statistically significant changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours were not observed until year three (no significant differences detected in year 1 and 2), and yet "the majority of social norms intervention studies focus on immediate outcomes (pre–post) or examine outcomes at 1 year postintervention."<sup>116</sup> As such, the authors conclude, "the effects of social norms marketing campaign interventions are time-delayed and nonlinear."<sup>117</sup>

## **6.0 Findings: What are the key strengths, lessons learned, challenges, and gaps from using social norms approaches?**

### **6.1 Key strengths and lessons learned**

The evidence reviewed confirms that social norms approaches are effective in changing social norms for the purposes of engaging and mobilizing men for violence prevention. Findings from Berkowitz and colleagues, for example, show that interventions that took a social norms approach resulted in "reductions found for the experimental group in negative attitudes, sexism, and in some cases, actual violence, as well as increases in pro-social bystander behavior," and further that "positive outcomes were consistently associated with correction of the respective misperceptions, providing empirical support for the theory of social norms."<sup>118</sup> Berkowitz et al. note that the evidence from social norms-focused interventions help to show the "causal influence that perceived norms may have on men's violence perpetration."<sup>119</sup> Clausen writes that Coaching Men into Boys, Program H and M, and Mentors in Violence Prevention were all programs that took social norms approaches within "localized peer cultures using a range of strategies such as interactive workshops, social media and marketing campaigns, and community outreach strategies" and were shown to be effective in engaging and mobilizing men in order to prevent gender-based violence."<sup>120</sup>

In his book, Flood confirms that “several evaluations of interventions addressing violence or sexism and using a social norms approach have shown positive impacts,”<sup>121</sup> including two of the studies<sup>122</sup><sup>123</sup> reviewed in this report. He notes, however, that the positive impacts were only measured short-term. The five-year social norms marketing campaign reviewed here is a particularly strong study<sup>124</sup> in that regard, showing positive impacts over a five-year period as well as being able to show how this change took time to occur, making the case for the importance of multi-year social norms-focused interventions.

Social norms-focused interventions are particularly potent as a strategy to engage and mobilize men, the evidence shows, because men are greatly influenced by actual or perceived norms of other men, and social norms approaches have the “potential to change men’s behavior by leveraging the influence of existing structures of men’s relationships and the interconnectedness of male peer behaviors.”<sup>125</sup>

The goal in a social norms-focused intervention is to “to create a positive feedback loop, in which men can model for other men ways to explore authentic, pro-social masculinity which, over time, can serve to change actual male behaviors, reducing violence and supporting bystander intervention.”<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, it is important to consider the ways in which such interventions are gender transformative even when they are not explicitly grounded in a gender transformative approach, as they “give men permission to act differently by revealing the true, healthy norms of their male peers, which in turn can transform men’s attitudes and behaviors about masculinity, sexism, and men’s violence.”<sup>127</sup> However, it is important to note that there are some limitations to the way that a gender transformative approach is often taken in social norms-focused interventions that target men for violence prevention. (These limitations are discussed in the challenges and gaps section below.)

Berkowitz and colleagues succinctly conclude,

Collectively, the experiment-control design studies summarized here provide extremely strong support for the social norms approach as a violence prevention strategy for boys and men, establishing that it is possible to reduce negative attitudes and sexism, increase pro-social bystander intervention, and in some cases reduce actual violence as a result of providing normative feedback in small groups and/or through media campaigns. From a theoretical perspective, the changes documented in men’s sexism and men’s negative behaviors suggest that it is appropriate to consider the social norms approach as “gender transformational” as well.<sup>128</sup>

Social norms approaches may be particularly impactful when implemented within a multi-pronged approach, one that includes both social marketing as well as peer to peer engagement, workshops, and other experiential-focused learning to help cement the desired new/ revised norms. Social norms approaches are already being integrated with bystander interventions, for example, which is particularly powerful as it helps to reinforce a correction in social norms with the skilling up needed to take action in line with this revised norm. Social norm interventions could also be combined with nudge approaches (covered in another rapid review completed for this project<sup>129</sup>), which may also

help to reinforce the social norm change and also more quickly assist individuals in changing their mental shortcut away from bias and/or discrimination and towards more prosocial and equitable behaviour. Other research specifically focused on post-secondary campuses has highlighted the value and preventive capacity of combining social norms and bystander approaches with risk reduction approaches to address and prevent sexual violence in such contexts.<sup>130</sup>

An important lesson learned from the research on social-norms focused interventions is the need for baseline studies and periodic data collection throughout implementation of a social norms-focused intervention in order to be able to accurately track and understand the mechanisms driving changes.<sup>131</sup> Berkowitz notes that “collecting data to document misperceptions of norms, providing normative feedback to the target audience, and addressing concerns about the believability of the data is a complex and intensive process”<sup>132</sup> and that if elements of the intervention are not done carefully, the intervention can be ineffective.

### **6.1.1 Mechanisms of change – why are social norms approaches effective?**

Research highlights several mechanisms of change which help to illuminate why and how social norms approaches can be successful, and therefore are important to consider in implementing social norms-focused intervention. Flood says social norms interventions can be used “to mobilise a new norm or to weaken a negative norm,”<sup>133</sup> which is relevant both for social norms approaches that focus on correcting misperceptions around norms, as well as in cases where the focus is on changing correctly perceived norms. Berkowitz and colleagues note that “the social norms approach to violence prevention provides a strategy that is especially conducive to the social-scaffolding of male-perpetrated violence, one which is adaptable to multiple layers of the social ecology.”<sup>134</sup>

#### **Correcting misperceptions is a powerful tool for prevention**

Specifically for the use of a social norms approach to engage and mobilize men for violence prevention, Berkowitz and colleagues note that “correcting misperceptions of approval or use of violence can serve as a powerful tool for prevention” and that providing men “with accurate information about other same-gender peers” is an important element for the success of social norms-focused interventions to reduce male-perpetrated violence.<sup>135</sup>

Furthermore, the authors state that

Provision of feedback on misperceptions of peer norms is an intervention strategy widely applied in social norms interventions for drinking and other substance-use behaviors, which seek to reduce their frequency by presenting individuals with information on actual healthy norms to correct problematic misperceptions.<sup>136</sup>

However, it is important to note that, in a review that critically examined the use of social norms approaches as “behavior and attitude change intervention for a range of health-related behaviors” the authors question the primary assumption underlying the approach, namely that “misperceptions of social norms drive the engagement in negative health behaviors.”<sup>137</sup> Further, the

authors cite methodological issues with social norms-focused intervention research to problematize some of the promising results found, noting that “whilst some studies have indicated that challenging misperceptions of perceived norms is associated with positive health behavior and attitude change, there are many methodological issues with the assessment of normative misperceptions” as well as the presence of “poor design, reporting and evaluation of many studies.”<sup>138</sup>

## **Messenger is key**

Research on social norms approaches show that it is more effective to mobilize a peer to model a behaviour than it is to try to persuade someone that a behaviour is beneficial. As Claussen writes,

instead of focusing on persuading individuals that healthy and gender equal relationships are beneficial, it would be more effective to expose people to a popular peer who holds and engages in gender equal behaviours, provide people with information that most of their peers value healthy and gender equal relationships, and develop and share new gender equality regulations.<sup>139</sup>

This follows the same logic that is found in child development research on best ways to impart prosocial skills in young children. That is, it is more impactful to model a desirable behaviour (e.g., acting with kindness), particularly when modeled by older kids (i.e., peer-to-peer or near-peer) than try to teach such behaviour through didactic lecturing (e.g., “you must be kind”).

Indeed, we are greatly influenced by who communicates information to us, and recognizing the messenger as a key part of the success of a social norms intervention was also discussed in the rapid evidence review on nudges.<sup>140</sup> (“Messenger” is the “M” in the “MINDSPACE” acronym developed by the U.K. Behavioural Insights Team which provides guidance on using contexts to mobilize and influence human behaviour.<sup>141</sup>) Claussen notes that “feeling a sense of comfort, friendship, trust, or resemblance to the source [messenger] of normative information is a key component in the ability to shift norms and behaviours.”<sup>142</sup>

Moreover, research shows that key influencers, or social referents are “particularly influential over others’ perceptions of norms.”<sup>143</sup> Key influencers are defined more broadly as “someone who influences the norms, attitudes, and behaviours of others within a specific setting” and “can be formal or informal, and sometimes are both.”<sup>144</sup> Social referents refer more specifically to the outsized influence over social norms certain individuals have in their social groups, which is a result of “the personal connection they have to the perceiver, as well as the number of connections they have throughout the target group/community.”<sup>145</sup> Claussen argues that identifying the most influential individuals in a given setting/social group is key to the success of employing social norms approaches to engage and mobilize men,

because when you bring groups of men and boys together who are not known to each other, they may not be able to influence each other to change. Understanding who can influence



individuals' perceptions of collective norms can help in understanding how to change those norms, thus changing behavioural patterns in a community.<sup>146</sup>

Fictional social referents can also work well, particularly for social norms marketing campaigns. Claussen writes of social norms marketing efforts, such as using radio or TV edutainment soap operas or radio dramas that use fictional social referents to reach large audiences, noting that most of the evidence on such efforts comes from the global South.<sup>147</sup>

### **Use the FOMO effect**

As noted earlier, people are influenced by others and, in particular, men are heavily influenced by other men. As Berkowitz and colleagues explain, “male socialization emphasizes the importance of being accepted, respected and perceived positively by other men” and that, as a result, “men go to great lengths to avoid negative evaluations from other men.”<sup>148</sup> As such, FOMO, or the “fear of missing out,” can be usefully mobilized in implementing a norms-correction strategy. As Claussen writes, “knowing that others are receiving similar or the same information, can reinforce that the opinion or behaviour is recognized or endorsed by the group.”<sup>149</sup>

### **Make the gap between what is and what you want relevant and believable**

As research has shown, the new/revised norms must be sufficiently believable to the target audience, which means that the new/revised norm must be relatable and relevant enough that shifting to this new norm feels reasonable to one's target audience. Claussen describes this well:

For example, an organization may attempt to create a more safe and equitable workplace climate by over-exaggerating its efforts to create new policies and procedures. This new norm information (new policies and procedures) may be too distant from the reality (lack of implementation) to be believable and/or effective in influencing perceptions of the norm and subsequent behaviour. One way to present new norms as plausible is to suggest that “they are beginning to change” or frame them in a way that suggests that momentum for change is building (e.g., more and more employers are supporting transparent pay equity policies).<sup>150</sup>

## **6.2 Challenges and gaps**

It is well-established in the literature that social norms take time to sustainably change, and yet there were few social norms interventions identified through this review that measured change beyond six months. The only exception to this was the five-year social marketing campaign by Mennicke and colleagues<sup>151</sup> that collected data on self-reported attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours over a five-year period and, in doing so, noted that statistically significant change did not occur until the third year of the campaign. Despite the compelling evidence for the efficacy of social norms approaches, more research is needed, and Berkowitz and colleagues note that more research is needed overall to increase the efficacy and impact of using social norms approaches. This is further noted in the review that critically examined social norms approaches, with the authors calling for

“more robust evaluation of SNA-based interventions, greater methodological rigor, and improved clarity in the reporting of studies which test the assumptions of the approach.”<sup>152</sup>

### **6.2.1 What type of norms are targeted**

As defined earlier, there are two typical types of norms that may be addressed in social norms approaches: descriptive (what you think others *do*) or injunctive (what you think others *think you should* do) norms. Flood states that “there is some consensus that it is best to target injunctive norms (‘Men in this community see violence against women as unacceptable’) rather than descriptive norms (‘Most men in this community don’t use violence against women’)”<sup>153</sup> but more research is needed to understand how to most impactfully influence behaviour.” Berkowitz and colleagues acknowledge that “a clearer understanding of the types of perceived norms (descriptive or injunctive) most relevant to changing certain forms of violence-related behaviors, and the mechanisms through which they influence behavior may help to better inform and advance prevention programming.”<sup>154</sup> Berkowitz and colleagues also note that “only one study to date examines the relative influence of descriptive and injunctive norms on violence-related attitudes and bystander behaviors, which remains a topic in need of additional research.”<sup>155</sup>

Claussen describes this as the importance of contextualizing descriptive norms in order to help make them relevant and relatable to one’s target audience. Claussen explains:

For example, when sharing statistics that three out of five university men adhere to rape myths, it can make those engaging in the problem behaviour feel that what they are doing is normal and okay, because most others are doing it too. One way to combat this is to provide individuals with information on their own position/belief/behaviour in relation to the norm or social expectation. A simple example of this can be seen with the electronic signs on the side of the road indicating how fast you are driving in relation to the posted speed limit. Drivers will self-correct their behaviour to match or become closer to the posted speed limit.<sup>156</sup>

### **6.2.2 The boomerang effect and the importance of identifying the specific norm(s) to be addressed**

One of the challenges in using social norms approaches is that “the activity of presenting individuals with corrective information showing that what they think about their peers is in fact untrue creates cognitive dissonance which can cause recipients to reject the intervention by finding ways to question the data and its believability.”<sup>157</sup> This challenge speaks to the need for a carefully planned intervention that includes the ability and infrastructure to collect and analyze data and be able to adapt the intervention accordingly. It also speaks to the need to focus on changing the norm through key influencers, whether or not there are misperceptions around the norm. Berkowitz and colleagues also acknowledge that sometimes the process of identifying the specific norm that an intervention should seek to change is challenging, but that this is an essential step in implementing a successful social norms-focused intervention.<sup>158</sup>

### 6.2.3 Who is influenced by normative feedback

Research also indicates that the impact of normative feedback may vary based on individual characteristics, with Berkowitz et al. noting that “the relative impact of social norms interventions based on participant characteristics is an area that requires more research to determine whether participant differences have implications for practice and audience composition.”<sup>159</sup> For example, the authors explain, the data suggests that many violence-prone men are inhibited by normative feedback.<sup>160</sup> They go on to state that:

Emerging evidence also suggests that elevated perceptions of peer acceptance of violence may decrease prosocial bystander behavior by decreasing individual’s *[sic]* perceptions of the seriousness of abuse, as well as their ability to recognize the risk of it being perpetrated (Mulla et al., in press). The potential for misperceptions of peer attitudes to “norm the negative” and foster other attitudes and perceptions that may prevent individuals from taking action against sexual violence highlights the need for comprehensive prevention programming that simultaneously addresses normative misperceptions as well as other cognitions involved in the decisional process leading to bystander intervention.<sup>161</sup>

### 6.2.4 “Trouble in paradigm” and key points of consideration with a gender transformative approach

A publication<sup>162</sup> critically examining the WHO-endorsed gender transformative approach for engaging men, and particularly engaging men through social norms approaches, was identified during the literature search for this review (along with associated commentaries and responses<sup>163 164 165</sup>) and provides some key points for consideration. Examining the mixed findings of research evaluating social norms-focused and bystander interventions, the authors bring into question some of the core assumptions of both gender transformative and social norms approaches, namely that they assume that gender-inequitable beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are “modifiable risk factors for violence perpetration”<sup>166</sup> and that social norms approaches are able to change both attitudes *and* behaviours. Using study findings from evaluations of Coaching Boys into Men (primarily a bystander intervention, but also social norms-focused) implemented in both the U.S. and India (albeit slightly modified), the authors note that “whereas the U.S. study found changes in behaviors and not gender attitudes, in India, overall gender attitudes improved, with no changes in attitudes condoning violence against women and girls or in self-reported abuse perpetration.”<sup>167</sup> The authors go on to explicitly state that,

the mixed findings of research on gender transformative interventions suggest to us that engaging men and boys in transforming gender relations takes more than identifying and critiquing descriptive norms (as external societal “messages”) and exposing injunctive norms as baseless fears of sanctions that can be rejected voluntarily.<sup>168</sup>

Importantly, the authors hypothesize three shortcomings that explain the mixed results of social norms-focused interventions that take a gender transformative approach: 1) that, far too often, there is the assumption that men are “violence virgins” or, in other words, have not “perpetrated,

been victims of, or witnessed gendered violence”; 2) that the emphasis is on men’s violence against women, leaving little or no room to address men’s harassment and violence against one another including through homophobia bullying and sexual abuse; and 3) that providing an empirical correction to a social norm “will suffice to transform attitudes, behaviors, and the broader contexts in which they arise and thrive.”<sup>169</sup> The authors make the important observation that “gender transformative programming has focused primarily on the relationships of men to women, rather than how men might interact with one another in emotional, inclusive, and supportive ways.”<sup>170</sup>

Noting that these interventions are considered primary prevention and yet do not yet address previous trauma and violence experienced by so many men, the authors cite research on childhood maltreatment and violence exposure, both well-established risk factors for interpersonal violence perpetration and victimization, to show that helping men build key skills (e.g., relationship skills, empathy, “recognizing abusive behaviors, and promoting positive bystander behaviors,”<sup>171</sup>) promotes resilience and can decrease the chance of subsequent violence perpetration. As such, the authors make the key point that social norms approaches, and efforts to engage and mobilize men more broadly, must take care not to assume gender, or more specifically men’s gender attitudes towards women (and violence against women), should be the ubiquitous entry point for engaging and mobilizing men, but must also recognize and address the damage of harmful gender norms on men, including male-to-male violence and harassment such as homophobic bullying. Even interventions that do not explicitly address gender attitudes in their programming, however, should still measure gender equitable attitudes, in order to expand the knowledge base on the linkages between non-gender related attitudes and gender attitudes.

A commentary<sup>172</sup> published in response to Brush and Miller’s publication emphasized the importance of recognizing homophobia in gender transformative programming aimed at engaging men and boys, and also, importantly, that social norms do not operate in a vacuum, and this must be considered in efforts to implement social norms-focused interventions in small, localized peer groups. They state that,

Social norms theory appropriately directs attention to the social context to explain why people behave the way they do and, thus, how to change that behavior. In practice, however, these programs operationalize social context to mean local peer attitudes, and correcting individuals’ (presumably) mistaken perceptions of what their peers think about gendered violence is conceived as the motor for behavior change. But this approach fails to reckon with the fact that peer behaviors and beliefs do not exist in a vacuum; they are situated within, and intricately connected to, a larger culture and structure. Moreover, that culture and structure are held together not simply by attitudes but by social and material relations and the functioning of social institutions.<sup>173</sup>

### **6.2.5 Using social norms approaches at institutional/structural levels**

As so succinctly noted in the quote above, addressing culture and structures together is critical to advance change. Unfortunately, none of the literature provided examples of using social norms approaches to target both individuals and the setting or institution. Claussen mentions the power of

institutions such as schools, churches, workplaces in teaching self-management skills and norms (e.g., standing in line, raising hand to speak in class, washing hands, etc.), but there is a huge amount of untapped potential for utilizing social norms approaches to create social norms change at an institutional/structural level. Claussen notes, “the decisions an institution makes can signal which behaviours or opinions are important, desirable, and common in a group. Institutional norms are a key source of trust for individuals. This is because they define the commitments, obligations, and rights of individuals and groups.”<sup>174</sup> For example, Daniel Coyle’s book *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* offers some key strategies and examples of how to create concrete social norms change through institutions, including through incorporating nudges that help to send the right cues to people around the desired prosocial norms and behaviours, such as teamwork and putting clients first.<sup>175</sup>

### **6.2.6 More research needed in Canada, on other key entry points, and in equity, diversity, justice, and inclusion**

There were no research or interventions identified that took place in Canada, with the vast majority of interventions taking place in the United States. Excitingly, however, there is one social norms-focused intervention that is taking place in Canada that was identified through the research team, called #momentsmatter, which is discussed in the Recommendations section as it is still an ongoing intervention and thus no data are available on its efficacy.

And while the research shows a small but robust body of evidence on social norms approaches within school settings and some community settings in the global South, there remains key entry points and settings where men live, work, gather, and play that have not yet been explored for social norms-focused interventions, and more research is needed in these areas. For example, there is a dearth of research on social norms approaches implemented in workplaces, military settings, and faith-based communities/contexts.

Furthermore, there were no social norms-focused interventions found in the literature that seek to address racism and other issues relating to diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion beyond sexual violence, which is another key gap in the literature. There was also little specifically related to gender equality, and more could be done to utilize social norms approaches to advance gender equality as well, including explicitly adding more gender equitable attitude- and behaviour measurements to interventions seeking to prevent sexual violence and assault.

## **7.0 Recommendations**

*How can the findings from this review inform the use of social norms approaches to engage and mobilize men in male-oriented settings for the purposes of violence prevention and to advance gender equality, justice, diversity, and inclusion?*

There is much from this review that can help to inform the use of social norms approaches to engage and mobilize men in male-oriented settings for the purposes of violence prevention and to advance gender equality, justice, diversity, and inclusion. For one, social norms approaches are an

evidence-based strategy that have been shown to be effective in changing social norms for the purposes of engaging and mobilizing men for violence prevention. At the same time, more needs to be done to understand the ways in which social norms approaches can impact positive changes in both attitudes and behaviours, as well as ways to expand social norms-focused interventions to address harmful gender norms and their impact on men themselves. The next section provides a breakdown of key components and promising strategies to incorporate into social norms-focused interventions, and the final two sections touch on what areas related to social norms approaches demand further investment and attention.

## 7.1 Key components and successful strategies for social norms approaches

- Social norms interventions that aim to mobilize key social referents/key influencers (**strong**), work with pre-existing social groups (**long**), and groups that are “**closer**” together (local, tight-knit) are more influential in shaping behaviours. Additionally, in order to contextualize and substantiate the new/revised norms, such interventions should also be situated within a norms-correction strategy targeted at the larger group, community, or institution in which the main target audience is located.
- **Identify key themes** to address in a social norms-focused intervention and ensure that themes are **reinforced by the messaging around the other themes**. For example, the five-year social marketing campaign published by Mennicke and colleagues focused on four overarching themes: consent, bystander, rape myths, and sexual activity, each of which were reinforced by the messaging about the other:
  - The consent theme reinforced the message, “Most men understand the importance of getting consent before sexual intimacy.” The bystander theme reinforced the message, “Most men would intervene to prevent sexual harassment or sexual assault.” The rape myths theme underscored the message, “Most men agree that blaming sexual assault victims is wrong.” Finally, the sexual activity theme reinforced the message that “Most men are not as sexually active as you might think.”<sup>176</sup>
- **Baseline studies, data collection, and monitoring and evaluation** that supports the ability to adapt an intervention will help to identify what norms are changing and how, as well as ensuring that red flags (e.g., a boomerang effect) are caught and addressed in a timely manner. Quality study design and rigorous evaluation are also needed and valuable in order to advance the field of knowledge around how and why social norms approaches work.
- **Gender equitable attitudes** should be measured and tracked in all social norms-focused interventions that engage and mobilize men in order to expand the knowledge base around the linkages between gender equitable attitudes and men’s attitudes and behaviours towards violence prevention as well as diversity, justice, and inclusion.
- Because many social norms can be particularly sticky and take time to change, short term interventions should ideally plan to measure change both in the short and longer term in order to understand the impact, and **longer term interventions that can observe and seek to create change over a longer period of time** show the most promise in creating sustainable social norms change.

- While more research is needed, it appears that **social norms-focused interventions that address both descriptive and injunctive norms are most effective at creating social norms change**. This is at least in part because advertising a harmful norm without providing context or actively identifying ways to change the norm can result in a normalizing of behaviour associated with the harmful norm, and further, raising awareness is often insufficient to catalyze behaviour or norms change.
- **Integrate social norms approaches with other approaches, such as bystander, nudge, and virtual reality.** Nudge approaches help to disrupt biases and undesirable social norms in ways that make it easier for individuals to adopt the desired social norm (i.e., make the new/revised norm the preferred mental shortcut), while bystander and virtual reality (including bystander interventions employed through a virtual reality approach) can be useful because they build in hands-on, experiential elements that help substantiate what norms a social norms approach seeks to address. For example, a social norms marketing campaign could include a virtual reality component that helped to build empathy among men, as well as training and providing an opportunity to practice skills in taking action as bystanders.

## 7.2 #momentmatter: A Canadian-based social norms intervention

There is a research-based social norms-focused intervention (#momentmatter) currently being implemented in Alberta, Canada. Potentially also categorized as a nudge approach with its focus on utilizing *feel the need* nudges through storytelling, #momentmatter is a “three year, province-wide campaign that celebrates Alberta leaders who are taking a personal role in building positive and respectful workplace cultures that promote health and safety – and help stop sexual harassment.”<sup>177</sup> Seeking to change organizational and province-wide workplace cultural and social norms, the goal of this Canadian campaign is to “encourage people to use positive work stories as a vehicle for influencing workplace culture. Hearing or telling real life stories that demonstrate the power of simple, everyday, respectful and caring work relationships encourages people to continue to emulate these positive behaviours--leading to more of the same.”<sup>178</sup> In order to participate in the campaign, organizations/companies are invited to read and commit to the campaign’s values, access the campaign’s toolkits and instructions, begin meetings with a #momentmatter conversation, and collect and share stories both internally and through the #momentmatter media outreach platforms.

## 7.3 Social norms-focused interventions are needed in the following areas/levels

**Canada:** Apart from #momentmatter, there were no social norms-focused interventions identified in the literature that took place in Canada, with the vast majority taking place in the United States. Canada needs to urgently and seriously invest in work that employs social norms approaches to engage and mobilize men for violence prevention and as well as to advance gender equality, diversity, justice, and inclusion.

**Non-school settings where men live, play, gather, and work:** The vast majority of literature on social norms-focused interventions, particularly in the global North, are based on university

campuses in the United States. In addition to needing more work on implementing social norms approaches in Canada, there is a dire need for this work to expand beyond university campuses and include settings where men live, work, gather, and play, including military settings, workplaces, faith-based communities, and sports clubs.

**Equity, diversity, justice, and inclusion:** There was no literature identified that employed social norms approaches to address racism and other issues relating to diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion beyond sexual violence. This is a key gap in the literature, and more importantly in the field of engaging and mobilizing men, and more investment and attention is urgently needed in this area.

**Gender equality and men's relationships to other men:** Despite numerous interventions addressing male-perpetrated violence against women, there were no identified interventions that focused explicitly on addressing social norms for the purposes of advancing gender equality. Interventions that target men for violence prevention also do not appear to always measure gender equitable attitudes in relation to program implementation, which unnecessarily siloes research on violence prevention from research on gender equality. This is a key and promising area for implementing social norms approaches. And while there is some research on social norms interventions that focus on bullying amongst youth, it is rare that social norms interventions explicitly address the social norms that drive male-to-male violence and harassment, such as homophobic bullying. An exception to this is the Cure Violence or "Interrupters" model, which aims to reduce gang-driven gun violence at the community level by stopping the transmission of violent behaviour, including by changing group norms through leveraging key influencers.<sup>179</sup> Replications of the original version, Ceasefire in Chicago,<sup>180</sup> have been done across the U.S. and internationally. Unfortunately, evidence on these interventions is mixed and inconclusive.<sup>181 182</sup> More work in this area is urgently needed for truly "primary prevention" interventions to be implemented to prevent violence and the subsequent risks of future interpersonal violence perpetration and victimization. As the authors of one publication so poignantly remark in relation to social norms-focused interventions that take a gender transformative approach (to violence prevention) "gender transformative programming has focused primarily on the relationships of men to women, rather than how men might interact with one another in emotional, inclusive, and supportive ways."<sup>183</sup>

**Institutional/structural social norms-focused interventions:** There is little research that examines the use of a social norms approach implemented at an institutional or structural level, with most of the literature focused on face-to-face educational programming and social marketing campaigns. This is a huge area of untapped potential, and there is great need to mobilize the evidence around what works in a social norms approach and apply it to creating social and cultural norm change at institutional levels.



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