

SOCIAL NORMS LEARNING INITIATIVE

Snapshot Report 2024-25



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SOCIAL NORMS LEARNING BRIEF: PREVENTING GBV AND STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S VOICE AND LEADERSHIP

Social norms change is grounded in a simple but important understanding: lasting change for women and girls needs to happen at several levels at once, from individual lives and family relationships to communities, civil society, and institutions. Many of the barriers to this change are shaped by social norms, or the shared expectations and unwritten rules that influence how people think and behave. These social norms sustain violence against women and girls and limit women's decision making, voice and leadership. Over the last decade, Trócaire and women-centred organisation partners with expertise in the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and women's voice and leadership have developed a range of approaches to challenge harmful norms and support more positive alternatives. Together, these approaches help create more supportive and secure environments where women and girls are safer, can speak up, take on leadership roles, and claim their rights.



Faith leader from Machinga T/A Mposa, Malawi. Photo: Wishes Mumba/COWLHA.

The main strategies used by Trócaire and women-centred partner organisations¹ (WCOs) to challenge social norms that limit women's and adolescent girls' voices and leadership, and expose them to gender-based violence are:

1. **SASA! Faith:** A community-based, faith-focused methodology currently being implemented in Malawi and Zimbabwe. [SASA! Faith](#) was co-developed by [Raising Voices](#) and Trócaire. It works with religious leaders, members of faith communities, and the wider community to help prevent violence against women and girls. As faith communities play an important role in shaping social norms, the methodology uses that influence to support positive change. It is organised in four phases, Start, Awareness, Support, and Action, with each phase exploring a different aspect of power. Trained community activists lead discussions that help people recognise violence against women and girls as a serious issue, reflect on its causes, support one another, and take action to sustain change. Faith leaders speak out to their faith communities, reaching large numbers of the community to transform harmful social norms and promote non-violence and gender equality.

"Pastors are no longer just asking us to pray but now refer us to services and support."
Faith community member, Zimbabwe

¹. Trócaire defines women-centred organisations as civil society organisations with an overt women's and girls' rights, women's empowerment, gender equality and/or feminist purpose. Women-centred organisations are led by women, in that they are governed and directed by women, or their leadership is made up of women in the majority.

2. Masidama: Masidama is a women-centred, group-based methodology that strengthens women and older adolescent girls' leadership skills and confidence and creates an enabling environment for them to take on leadership roles in private and in public. Masidama works with women and girls, as well as with influential men through structured sessions in safe spaces, to encourage changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. By engaging men already in leadership spaces to support women's leadership, and by engaging men in women's household and communities to support them to take on new leadership roles, Masidama transforms the social norms which are holding back women's leadership potential. Masidama was designed by Trócaire and partners (Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD), Women's Forum for Human Rights And Democracy WOFHRAD), Justice and Peace Commission (Caritas/JPC) and Association for the Wellbeing of Rural Communities and Development (ABC-D) in Sierra Leone and strengthened through learning from implementation in Rwanda (Rwanda Women's Network), Lebanon (Lebanese Union for People with Disabilities LUPD, Women Now for Development and The Lebanese Women' Democratic gathering RDFL), Myanmar (Creative Home), and Ethiopia. However, this report shares learning from WCOs in Sierra Leone and Rwanda.

"Before Masidama, I could not speak in front of men. Now I chair our community committee and contribute to decisions that affect women and girls."

Masidama participant, Rwanda



MASIDAMA

WHAT WORKS TO TRANSFORM SOCIAL NORMS?



- As highlighted in Trócaire's and WCO partners' [social norms guidance](#), and Masidama Learning Brief, the reach and impact of Masidama continues to grow. The evidence base for [SASA! Faith](#), as well as global evidence², demonstrates that promoting gender equality and reducing GBV require multi component programming and systems change which are led by and accountable to women and girls.
- Social norms change is most effective when combined with women's movement building, GBV response, women's economic empowerment, literacy and skills development, engagement with formal institutions, and the involvement of women and men community leaders and decision-makers.
- Social norms change works across multiple levels of the ecological model at the same time by achieving shifts in individual knowledge and attitudes, changes in family and household dynamics, and wider changes in community and societal norms. While activities may begin by working with individuals, the aim is to build awareness, influence attitudes, and encourage changes in behaviour around social norms within households and the wider community and so reduce GBV and increase women's voice and leadership.

². The FCDO [What Works VAWG research and innovation programme and evidence hub](#) has produced a synthesis of the evidence on GBV prevention and response programming and concluded that multi element gender transformative programming is needed to effectively address GBV – this includes targeted GBV response services, women's voice and leadership, social norms change, women and men engagement, social and economic empowerment. This article is one of the most recent summaries of the evidence: <https://www.mdpi.com/1365378>

LEARNING IN PRACTICE

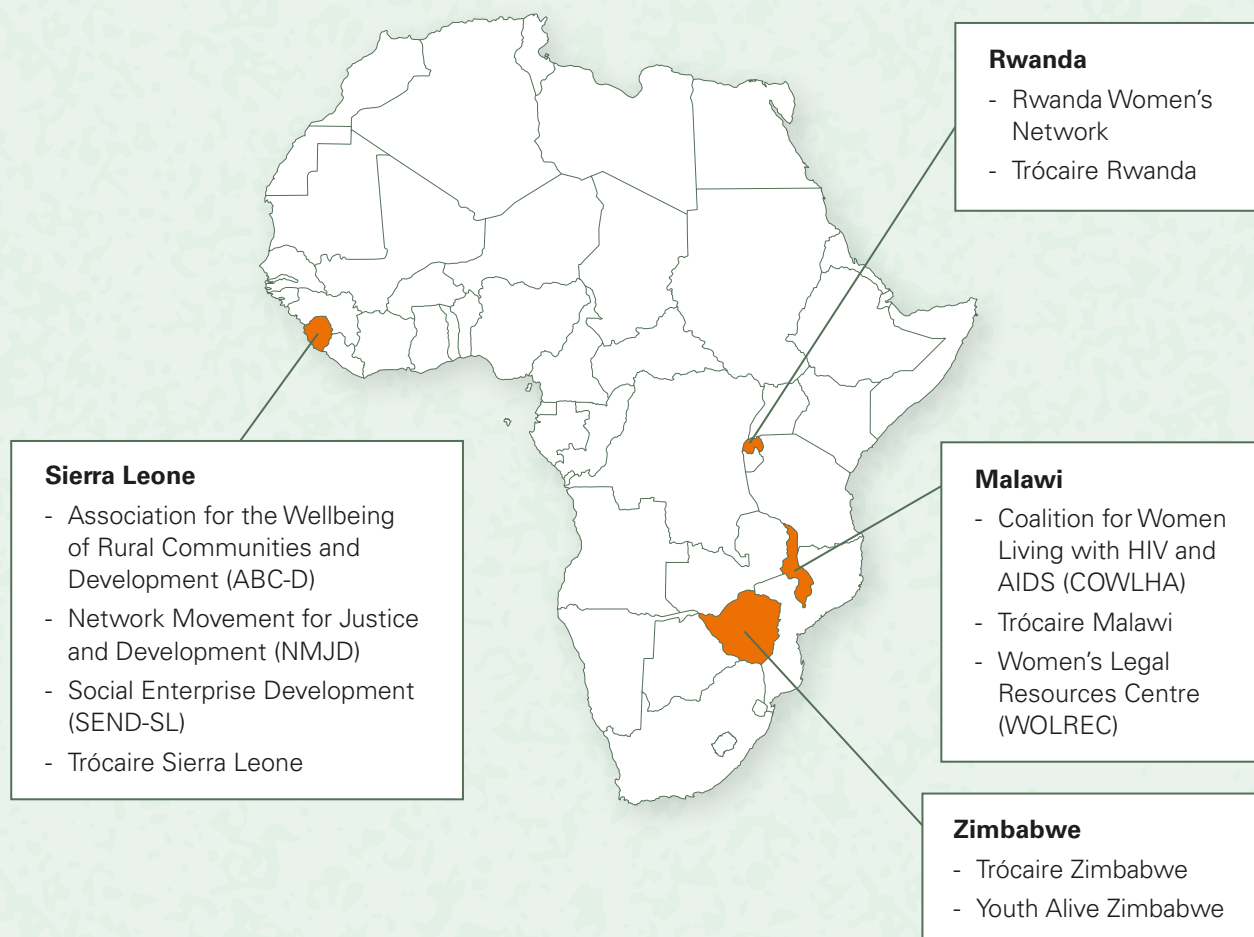
Any social norms methodology needs to be adapted to the specific context in which it is used so that it can respond to the different challenges that arise. Learning is therefore a core part of the work and Trócaire and women-centred partner organisations have carried out a range of learning activities over the years.

This document presents information on one learning initiative currently underway and explores the work undertaken to date, lessons learned and key challenges.

In 2024, Trócaire and women-centred partner organisations in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda launched a cross-country social norms learning initiative under Ireland's Civil Society Partnership (ICSP 2023-2027) fund. The aim was to deepen understanding of how the SASA! Faith and Masidama methodologies work in practice, test key assumptions behind them, and use what is learned to strengthen programmes that support women's voice, leadership, and the prevention of gender-based violence. To do this the participating organisations agreed on a methodology to facilitate shared learning and identified three key learning priorities to guide the initiative.

We are now in the third year of the initiative. As the work continues, we are building on what we have learned so far, trying out new ideas, making local adaptations, and deepening our understanding of what is most effective in different contexts.

LEARNING INITIATIVE PARTICIPANTS



HOW WE LEARN TOGETHER

A few simple ideas guide this learning process. First, we learn **with each other**, not through one-way instruction. Second, we make time to stop and reflect on what is working, what is changing, and what needs to be done differently. Third, we try to put learning into practice as we go, making changes based on experience and feedback. Finally, we build evidence in ways that help us understand the work more clearly and make better decisions over time.

The learning initiative uses several ways to support ongoing reflection and knowledge-sharing across the four countries. These include an online chat group for regular discussion, quarterly online meetings of our social norms Community of Practice, annual in-person workshops with community visits, and country-level testing and adaptation of tools and methods. All of these are supported by collaborative evidence building using monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools designed for both methodologies.

Learning Priorities

The learning priorities identified by participating organisations were:

- **Male engagement:** Both SASA! Faith and Masidama groups recognised the importance of engaging men as allies in challenging social norms. For SASA! Faith, this involves adapting the methodology to reach men in spaces beyond faith communities. For Masidama, the focus is on including male family members, such as husbands, brothers, and sons, in structured sessions rather than only men in positions of influence.
- **Livelihoods and adaptation in Masidama:** Exploring how livelihoods support can increase women's power and agency, and how it can be better integrated into social norms programming.
- **Adaptations in SASA! Faith:** Recording adaptations that have already been made to the SASA! Faith methodology and testing new approaches that keep its faith-based character.

These priorities were turned into a learning action plan with key questions, actions, timelines, and responsibilities. The plan was built into existing M&E activities rather than running as a separate workstream.

A Note on Male Engagement

A central principle of our male engagement work is to remain women centred. We must always be clear that the reason we engage men is to support gender equality and shift power to women and girls. We need to make sure that we are listening to, and accountable to, women and girls and that their leadership is central to gender transformative activities and messages directed at men.

“Change is not about fighting our culture and traditions, but about choosing what helps us all grow; If our mothers can raise leaders, why can't they be leaders too.”

Male ally, Karene, Sierra Leone

LEARNING PRIORITY 1: MALE ENGAGEMENT ACROSS SASA! FAITH AND MASIDAMA

Engaging Men as Allies

Engaging men as allies in social norms change was named as one of the priorities for both methodologies. The following activities show the different initiatives being used in each country to engage men.

New activities in SASA! Faith

Malawi

- Men have been involved as community activists and paralegals, so they can support and mentor their peers and show by example that behaviour can change.
- Public awareness activities, including roadshows at busy trading centres on market days, allows the project reach men in everyday settings.
- SASA! Faith sessions are integrated into livelihood structures such as farmer clubs and Village Savings and Loan (VSL) groups, where men are more likely to take part.
- Radio programmes are broadcast on a local community station, scheduled after popular sports programmes to reach as many male listeners as possible. Participants include community activists, religious leaders, traditional leaders, and GBV service providers.



Focus Group Discussion SASA! Faith team in Machinga district T/A, Mposa, Malawi. Photo: Edwin Nyoka/COWLHA.

Zimbabwe

- Dialogue sessions on gender are held at soccer matches, reaching men in relaxed, familiar settings.
- An organisation working on male psychosocial support contributed to sessions for men and also brought discussions of drug and alcohol use into conversations about GBV.
- A faith leader visited and spoke to men at their workplaces in the mining sector. Many of these men now attend couples' sessions regularly within the faith community, led by the local pastor.

"Faith leader outreach at mining sites and sports events created safe, informal spaces for men to discuss gender and GBV. This shows the value of going to where people already are."

Internal report, Zimbabwe

Adjustments to male engagement within the Masidama methodology

Rwanda and Sierra Leone

In the original design for Masidama, organisations targeted influential men in the community. The recent adaptation made in Rwanda and Sierra Leone was to include close male family members of the women taking part in the sessions, through a dedicated men's curriculum. This complements the efforts of previously trained male allies and builds a wider network of people who support gender equality.

"A group of male allies raised funds and campaigned publicly for a woman's leadership candidacy. She was elected as Mummy Queen. This is an example of men's public support helping to change community norms."

Internal report, Sierra Leone



Cyuzuzo Evelyn, a women safe spaces facilitator during a Masidama session. Rulindo district, Rukozo sector, Rwanda. Photo: Fred Hirwa/Trócaire.

LEARNING PRIORITY 2: ADAPTATIONS TO STRENGTHEN LIVELIHOODS WITHIN MASIDAMA

Rwanda

Women's empowerment has been strengthened by **coordination between organisations** working on livelihoods and those working on women's empowerment. This includes annual joint planning and shared targeting of programme participants, so that women's social, economic, and leadership needs are all addressed together.

Drama and the Tree of Life approach: Drama and storytelling have been used to share key messages about gender equality and social norms, particularly in settings where many participants have limited literacy. These methods help people understand important ideas through story and emotion.

Sierra Leone

Many Masidama members benefit from **agroecological training and livelihoods support**, including seedling support and VSL participation. Annual group grants support group businesses, livestock rearing, and revolving loan schemes. A credit union has been set up to give VSL groups access to larger amounts of capital and connections to formal financial systems.

Adapting sessions to emerging needs: Session content has been adapted to respond to issues that participants raise, such as GBV and land rights. Sessions are linked to ongoing women's empowerment activities, so the curriculum stays relevant to participants' real situations.



Session with male allies on decision-making in the home. Thallah community, Sierra Leone. Photo: Mohamed D Kamara.

LEARNING PRIORITY 3: ADAPTATIONS TO SASA! FAITH TOOLS AND PROCESSES

Malawi

- Messages in power posters were simplified and translated into local languages.
- Structured awareness messages were added to weekly sermons.
- Technical language was removed from community dramas.
- Discussion guides were prepared for informal conversations.



A group of men conversing over a power poster during a male engagement meeting at Chisuko Hall, Mutasa District, Zimbabwe. Photo: Moses Muponda.

Zimbabwe

- **Visual aids:** Teams adapted the resources used to focus discussions on one image at a time rather than several images, so participants could go deeper into each topic.
- **Theological reflections:** Reflections were introduced during quarterly meetings with religious leaders, connecting the values of the faith with gender justice and GBV prevention.
- **Training for community activists:** Training on psychosocial support, referral pathways, and legal education was provided to strengthen the quality of responses to GBV.
- **Female church leaders:** Female leaders were recognised as important first contacts and first responders, supporting participation across generations and genders.
- **SASA! Faith values:** Values such as justice and dignity were used to engage churches that do not use the Bible, allowing discussions about power and relationships in a way that respected local context.
- **Existing church structures:** Ecumenical networks were used to reach wider audiences through targeted sessions.

Strengthening Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

All the organisations agreed that collecting evidence and documenting the learning initiative was an important part of the process. This helps build an evidence base to support changes to the methodology and to inform decisions. We opted to adjust the tools already used for monitoring and evaluation rather than developing new ones. Strengthening M&E capacity is itself a learning priority, and the initiative has created space for teams, during our in-person workshops, to reflect on what data is collected, what it tells us, and how it is being used.

WHAT CHANGES ARE WE SEEING?

Where men have taken part consistently in Masidama, there are signs in Rwanda of reduced intimate partner violence, more sharing of household tasks, and greater support for women's leadership.

Male allies in Sierra Leone are now challenging harmful norms in public spaces and running VSLAs with a focus on raising funds for women leaders. This is creating clear opportunities for women to take on leadership roles.

"When men publicly support women, other men begin to see that leadership can be different."

Community activist, Sierra Leone

SASA! Faith tools have changed the way men engage in sessions in Zimbabwe and Malawi, moving from passive listening to active participation. Power posters and community conversation tools encourage men to think about power and relationships in ways that feel relevant to their own lives. Role plays and guided discussions build honest dialogue, trust, and a sense of ownership among participants.

"The most important factor for us is to emerge as a household filled with love, men should take the first step in living exemplary lives... because failing to do so will create a perpetual cycle of violence which will be passed down to our children."

Participant in men's symposium, Zimbabwe

Surveys on communities in Malawi and Zimbabwe show significant increases in knowledge and attitudes towards gender equality. In Malawi, knowledge on gender increased from 0% at baseline to 41% of people surveyed and positive attitudes towards gender equality increased from 0% to 31%. In Zimbabwe, knowledge scores show an increase from 26% of those surveyed to 65% and favourable attitudes towards gender equality increased from 23% to 57% of respondents.

Male participants in Masidama in Sierra Leone were surveyed after completing all sessions. 84% reported taking action to support more equal relationships in their household or family. 86% said they had tried to persuade other men to do the same and 84% of respondents reported taking action to support women's participation and influence in their communities.



Male allies discuss sharing roles in the home and the community. Rogbonkoh community, Sierra Leone. Photo: Mariama Alice Kamara.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THE CHANGES WE ARE MAKING?

Masidama

Involving male family members makes men's support more effective

Engaging men as allies works better when the focus goes beyond influential men in the community and includes husbands, brothers, fathers, and other close male relatives. These are the people who most directly shape women's daily lives. When they are involved, it creates a more supportive home environment for women's participation, voice, and decision-making. It also reduces resistance to women's empowerment efforts and encourages shared responsibility within households, which is often the starting point for changing social norms.

Interventions must reflect local context and culture

Social norms programmes work better when they are designed and carried out in ways that reflect the specific cultural, social, and community situation of the area. Being sensitive to local values, practices, and power structures makes the work more acceptable to communities and builds genuine ownership. No single methodology can deliver the results we want on its own. Complementary strategies must be layered to reach each group in the ecological model.

Livelihoods support should be part of social norms work

Livelihoods support is important for women's empowerment because it gives women greater confidence and more bargaining power in their households and communities. Economic empowerment also puts women in a stronger position to question and challenge norms that restrict them. The most effective programmes address economic and social dimensions together.

Community leaders and decision-makers add important value

Community leaders have an important role in shaping opinions, confirming change processes, and bringing wider community support. When they are involved, it increases the credibility of the programme's messages, helps address resistance, and encourages wider acceptance of more equal norms. It also supports sustainability by embedding change within existing local leadership and governance structures.

Literacy and additional skills increase women's confidence and agency

Literacy and vocational training increase women's confidence, their ability to access information, and their capacity to take part meaningfully in community processes. When women have literacy skills, they are better able to express their views, engage in community decisions, and make informed choices about their lives. Vocational training expands their economic opportunities and increases their visibility as active contributors to family and community life.

Safe spaces are central to women's confidence and leadership

Masidama safe spaces have been essential for building women's confidence and leadership. They often become places for economic and psychosocial support, which strengthens solidarity and keeps women engaged beyond the formal sessions. Women using these spaces have reported greater confidence in speaking publicly, advocating for themselves, and making collective requests.

"Before joining the group, I could not smile, I could not have joy inside me, I could not even cry... I started feeling listened to by my fellow women... now I can talk, smile. When people from my community noticed that I have changed, they decided to elect me and I am now member of our village structure, in charge of information."

Woman participant from Nyamagabe, Rwanda



Beata Nyabyenda, a woman leader in Nyaruguru district, Nyabimata sector, Rwanda addressing the community assembly. Photo: Fred Hirwa/Trócaire.

SASA! Faith

Programme Design and Delivery

Faith leaders are essential: Using trusted religious figures to introduce and lead sessions is essential for community acceptance. This is not optional.

“The project has empowered community leaders, faith leaders and community members with knowledge on GBV and has helped to address GBV”.

Faith Leader, Machinga district, Malawi

Use approaches that transform gender norms: The programme must focus on challenging unequal power and social norms. The goal is not simply to get male support but to work towards more equal sharing of power and resources.

Women must be involved in design: Women’s rights organisations must be part of designing and delivering the programme. This ensures it supports women’s rights objectives and does not shift focus to men’s needs at the expense of women.

Introduce sensitive topics carefully: Topics such as consent in marriage are difficult to discuss. They should only be introduced after trust has been built and after foundational ideas of partnership and respect have been established.

Entry Points in Communities and Institutions

Use spaces where men already gather: Workplaces, sports events, and leisure spaces are good entry points. The mining sites in Mutasa, Zimbabwe, are one example of how workplaces can be used effectively.

Support local male advocates: Identify and support local men who show changed behaviour to act as role models for others in their communities.

Connect dialogue to community activities: Link male engagement groups to community events to demonstrate changed behaviours and build wider male alliances.

Work towards institutionalisation: Aim to embed male engagement strategies within government health and education systems for change that lasts beyond the life of the project.

Challenges

As with any work to change social norms, this initiative has faced a number of challenges that require ongoing attention and adaptation.

- **Public support lags behind private change:** Men have taken meaningful actions in private to support women's participation and equality, but public support is slower. Strategies are needed to make public advocacy more visible and to reinforce it.
- **No clear pathway after programme completion:** There is a need to develop clearer pathways to support women after they complete SASA! Faith or Masidama sessions, to make sure the changes that begin during the programme are sustained and built upon. Trócaire and partners have developed a Pathways to women's voice and Leadership Resource package to support clearer pathways for women aspiring to take up leadership positions.
- **Literacy barriers:** Many women participants have limited literacy, which can reduce their confidence and their ability to challenge harmful norms or take full part in economic activities.
- **Men's expectations of personal benefit:** Some men engage with programmes expecting personal gain from their involvement. Strategies are needed to sustain engagement that is genuinely motivated by a commitment to equality.
- **Building evidence takes time and resources:** Collecting and analysing data increases the workload for organisations. Balancing evidence-building with programme delivery is an ongoing challenge that requires realistic planning and adequate resources.

What's next?

Trócaire and women-centred partners engaged in this learning initiative plan to continue to create learning together during 2026 and 2027 and will continue to advance effective and accountable social norms work led by women and adolescent girls.

To learn more about Masidama and SASA! Faith, watch these videos: [Sierra Leone - SEND-SL, NMJD and ABC-D](#), [YAZIM SASA! Faith - When Men Join](#), [Rwanda Women's Network - The Impact of the Masidama Curriculum](#).

More resources on social norms can be found on Trócaire's website [Women and Girls Protection, Voice and Leadership](#) or on the participating organisations websites:

In Sierra Leone [SEND-SL](#), [Network Movement for Justice and Development, NMJD](#), and [Association for the Wellbeing of Rural Communities and Development, ABC-D](#).

In Rwanda, [Rwanda Women's Network](#).

In Malawi, [WOLREC](#) and [COWLHA](#)

In Zimbabwe [Youth Alive Zimbabwe](#)

