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# YOUNG COUPLES IN GOOD TIMES AND IN BAD

Social norms that perpetuate violence against women and girls among young Tunisians in peri-urban areas

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Around half of women in Tunisia have experienced some form of violence in their life. Over 90% of the population thinks women should be discreet to avoid violence in public spaces. Why are women expected to adapt their behaviour? Why are men excused? What legitimises violence? What is considered “normal” in the Tunisian context?

From the perspective of Oxfam and dozens of women’s rights organisations, social norms that legitimise gender inequality and violence are rooted in the deeply entrenched belief – found, to some extent, in every country – that men and boys are more valuable than women and girls. A husband might beat his wife, for example, because society has brought him up to believe that men must ‘discipline’ disobedient women.

ENOUGH, a worldwide Oxfam campaign, aims to replace harmful social norms with more positive ones that promote gender equality and non-violence. To better understand how social norms are constructed among young people in Tunisia and how they influence behaviour, Oxfam Tunisia conducted formative research by interviewing 40 young men and women and analysing the results with experts, NGOs and bloggers working on violence against women and girls (VAWG).

From the research and subsequent analysis in a workshop, three social norms were identified as drivers of violence:

- Women should not strive for equal decision-making status in their relationship;
- Women should prioritise home and family over public or professional life;
- Women should behave in public in a way that respects male domination.

Women who transgress these norms can be met with various forms of violence – physical, sexual, social, economic or psychological – which is not, however, always classified as violence by either male or female respondents. The inability to recognise behaviours as violent makes it harder to fight VAWG. This research will inform the development of the ENOUGH campaign in Tunisia, sharpening its focus on changing the norms that underlie VAWG.

# INTRODUCTION

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a serious worldwide human rights crisis (Garcia-Morena et al. 2015; Genari et al. 2014). Tunisia is no exception. Although the Tunisian governments in place after the revolution in 2011 has made some efforts to create a legal framework that is more protective of women and girls (see Box 1), laws alone will not change the complex social reality in which VAWG has existed for many years. Social norms underlying VAWG are based on gender roles which are deeply rooted in society, perpetuating the idea that power relationships and inequalities are natural and innate, and hampering the implementation of any new legislation (Haylock et al. 2016).

ENOUGH is a worldwide Oxfam campaign dedicated to ending VAWG by replacing social norms that perpetuate violence with positive norms that promote gender equality and non-violence. The campaign was launched in November 2016 with the participation of 30 countries, including Tunisia. Oxfam conducted formative research to inform the campaign strategy in Tunisia by identifying which norms on gender roles are related to VAWG. We chose to focus on social norms that influence the new relationships of young people, who are the campaign's target group as they are considered to have the greatest potential to break with the traditional social norms held by their parents' generation. In this research, we specifically looked at how these young people are influenced by their reference network, which includes the older generation as well. The research's aim was to unravel how social norms are constructed among young people in a relationship and to find out under what circumstances violence becomes acceptable.

## **Box 1: Women's rights in Tunisia and Oxfam's role**

The first president of Tunisia after the country gained independence in 1956, Habib Bourguiba, enacted reforms that improved women's position – such as abolishing polygamy and legalising divorce – but as women themselves were not given significant input into deciding on the reforms, they had limited effect on promoting women's inclusion in society. No significant investment was made, by Bourguiba or subsequent governments, in promoting an educational and cultural system sensitive to women's rights.

Women's rights featured prominently in public debates during and after the uprisings of 2011, with the need to establish a completely new government and drafting of the constitution bringing new energy to the feminist movement. The landmark new constitution, adopted in 2014, acknowledges women's rights and equality between all citizens (Article 21) and commits the State to do all in its power to eliminate violence against women (Article 46). Despite this, violence against women and girls remains prevalent and widely accepted.

Civil society organisations and women's rights movements have been working to harmonise Tunisian laws with the new constitution and international women's rights instruments such as CEDAW. Specifically, a coalition of feminist CSOs and NGOs coordinated by Oxfam jointly developed a strategy to advocate for a legal framework that is more supportive of women's rights. A bill on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls is currently under discussion by a parliamentary commission and will be submitted soon to the legislative assembly.

## Defining social norms in relation to VAWG

Social norms have been defined as rules of behaviour that people in a group adhere to because they believe the majority in the group act according to the rule, and that most other people in the group believe they ought to behave accordingly (Alexander-Scott, Bell and Holden 2016). We therefore focused this research on beliefs about what others in a group actually do (i.e. what is considered to be typical behaviour) and what others think others ought to do (i.e. what is considered to be appropriate behaviour) (Paluck et al. 2010). In the context of VAWG, social norms relate to gender roles between women and men and the acceptability of violence (Boyle *et al.* 2009; Haylock et al. 2016).

In research on social norms, the term ‘reference group’ or ‘reference persons’ is used to refer to the people whose opinions matter for a person and influence his or her attitudes, beliefs and eventually behaviour (Alexander-Scott, Bell and Holden 2016: 8). A person’s reference group can be people in their ordinary lives or public figures. When an individual transgresses a social norm, they risk sanctions – such as violence – from their reference group. In addition, if a social norm is challenged, individuals can also internalize potential social sanctions, which can affect their self-esteem and feeling of acceptability. These sanctions demonstrate the results of social norms in society – showing sanctions like violence becoming socially acceptable (Alexander-Scott, Bell and Holden 2016). However, there is a ‘tipping point’ beyond which sanctions become unacceptable. This is not a static point, but dynamic as social norms themselves are a product of constant negotiation in society (Mackie et al. 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on qualitative research involving 40 in-depth interviews with peri-urban young men and women in Tunis, Gafsa and Jendouba. They were asked to comment on a series of vignettes – for example, describing a neighbour slapping his wife, or a classmate losing her virginity before marriage. These vignettes presented hypothetical situations of social norms in practice, often resulting in a sanction, like violence. Rather than focusing on the respondents’ own attitudes and beliefs towards the vignette, researchers asked about the attitudes, beliefs, and responses of their reference group. Respondents were also asked which reference person they thought of as most important for each vignette.

### A participatory approach from design to analysis

The research is the product of an internal collaboration (and co-funding) between the Oxfam country office in Tunisia, the Impact Measurement and Knowledge (IMK) team at Oxfam Novib in the Netherlands, and the Gender Justice (GJ) team at Oxfam Novib in the Netherlands. It proceeded in four steps:

#### 1) Review of 2015 pilot

In 2015, a randomised controlled trial was conducted to evaluate the impact on VAWG of Oxfam’s edutainment work in Tunisia (World Citizens Panel 2016). It found clear positive changes in awareness and attitudes about violence, but no changes in perceptions of social norms. This was expected, as changing social norms is a long-term endeavour, but the project highlighted the potential for further direct focus further on social norms – and the need to first conduct formative research on which social norms to address.

## 2) General literature review

The researchers did a literature review on social norms research within academia, Oxfam, and studied survivors' stories extensively to develop the research design, including vignettes. The vignettes are stories of hypothetical situations (see Box 2, titles were for internal use, not read out to the respondents). The hypothetical situations showed gender roles, and possible sanctions of VAWG if gender roles were challenged. The researchers asked the respondents to give their first reaction to the story and then continued with asking about attitudes, beliefs, and responses of their reference group to the situation. Herein, we also focussed on finding out the tipping point for sanctions to be socially acceptable or not.

### Box 2: Vignette titles adopted in the research

- The start of a relationship
- Virginity before marriage
- The controlling husband
- Domestic tasks
- Responsibilities for raising children
- Financial exploitation
- Acceptability of physical violence
- Pressure for sex in married life
- A husband who rapes his wife
- Psychological violence

## 3) Research design workshop in Tunisia

The research was designed during a workshop in Tunisia organised by Oxfam with the participation of Tunisian partner organisations working on women rights, gender identities and youth, and experts in sociology. Participants reflected on the social norms that perpetuate VAWG in Tunisia through stories about gender roles and VAWG, and fine-tuned the vignettes that formed the basis for the interview guide. For a reality check after the workshop, Tunisian survivors of VAWG and social workers from the Survivor shelter of Sidi Thabet in Tunis were consulted, and the full interview guide was reviewed by Oxfam's knowledge hub on VAWG.

## 4) Collecting the data

Forty interviews were conducted with men and women aged 18 to 35 from peri-urban areas in Tunis, Gafsa and Jandouba. Those locations were selected in light of results from the national study on VAWG (ONFP, 2009) as representing different trends of violence, as well as to have representation from the north, centre and south of the country. The respondents were chosen to reflect equal gender representation and a balance of different education levels and marital statuses (see Table 1). Respondents had to be open to discussing relationships, social norms and gender roles. Activists against VAWG were excluded from the research.

The interviews were carried out by four enumerators – all women, some veiled, and aged between 26 and 55 years old – who were trained according to World Health Organization's ethical guidelines for formative research on VAWG (Ellsberg and Heise 2005), which Oxfam has adopted. Respondents' consent was requested at the beginning and end of the interview, and no questions were related to personal experiences. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and saved anonymously, following guidance from Ellsberg et al. (2001).

**Table 1: Characteristics of the respondents**

<b>Gender</b>		20 Women	20 Men
<b>Region</b>	Tunis	10	10
	Gafsa	5	5
	Jandouba	5	5
<b>Level of education</b>	No formal education	-	1
	Primary education	8	4
	Secondary education	2	7
	Higher education	10	8
<b>Marital status</b>	Married	16	9
	Engaged	2	2
	In a relationship	-	3
	Single	2	5
	Divorced	-	1

### **5) Analysing the data**

Data analysis was done jointly by Oxfam in Tunisia and the IMK in the Netherlands, and the findings were reflected on in a campaign design workshop with Tunisian experts, partners, journalists, and the campaign coordinator of the worldwide ENOUGH campaign. The discussions from this workshop are also included in the findings, since they are powerful means to understand the results. During the campaign design workshop a first start was made to develop the focus of the campaign on ending VAWG in Tunisia, which is presented in the conclusion.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Reference persons**

For every story respondents were asked to keep in mind a reference person they thought was most influential in their decision in that specific situation. When asked to indicate these reference persons, the respondents mostly mentioned:

1. Parents: mothers were mentioned more often, and mainly in relation to mediating family issues, while fathers' role centred on moral guidance and economic decisions.
2. Siblings and cousins: respondents mostly mentioned thinking about siblings and cousins of the same sex, but men also mentioned their sisters in contexts of imagining what they would think if their sister's boyfriend treated them in a certain way.
3. Best friends: they were cited especially for vignettes featuring the most sensitive issues.

### **General gender norms**

Asked what characteristics women are supposed to have in Tunisia, respondents mentioned words such as *loving, caring, sensitive, respectful, oppressed* and *obedient*. Women are seen

as vulnerable and falling under the protection of their family, to be “*cherished as a precious flower*”. At the same time however, women are also described as *strong, organised, multi-taskers*, and *expressive*. When women experience violence, many respondents thought it might be due to the fact that they break those gender related characteristics.

Men were characterised completely differently, with descriptions including *egocentric, economic providers, primitive*, and *protective*. They have much more independence to take their own decisions. They are excused for their mistakes because of their ‘nature’; men being violent – even extremely so – is thought of as ‘forgivable’. Nonetheless, men are appreciated when they are *caring, protective* and *respectful* towards women.

These characterisations were very recognisable for the experts participating in the campaign design workshop. They noted the widespread agreement that there is a ‘right’ way to be a man or woman, and concluded that concepts of femininity and masculinity in the traditional patriarchal system of Tunisia still have great influence on young women and men. They acknowledged that living up to social norms can be a burden for both men and women. Furthermore, breaking these norms is challenging for young people, but at the same time transformative. Transformative, since the experts see that the young generation is much more open and inclusive in their interpretation and application of gender identities. However, this was not a straightforward finding in our research, as most likely many respondents reflected from the perspective of their mother as their reference.

## **Three social norms related to gender identities**

From the analysis of the research and discussions in the campaign design workshop, we identified three gender norms that came out strongly as having a relationship with the social acceptability of violence. These norms are closely linked and interrelated:

- Women should not strive for equal decision-making status in their relationship;
- Women should prioritise home and family over public or professional life;
- Women should behave in public in a way that respects male domination.

The first two social norms emerged directly from the formative research. The third is more the product of discussions in the campaign design workshop, as participation in the public sphere was not the focus of our interview guide. However, it can also be considered to derive from the research as it emerged from discussion of the first two gender roles.

### **(i) Women should not strive for equal decision-making status in their relationship**

The first social norm relates to the notion that a husband can decide his wife’s actions. After marriage, respondents say, a new life for the couple emerges. The roles and responsibilities of the couple mature. One female respondent says: “*she should... realise that she is married and living with a husband is very different from living with her parents.*” The difference is related to the second norm: that for women, freedom after marriage is restricted to working for and caring for her family. In general, respondents ascribe control to the husband and say the wife needs to be accountable for her actions. For example, she should tell him where she goes, with whom she talks, and when she will return home, and should make sure “*she is not agitating him*”. A total of 13 men and five women declared that it is completely normal for men to control women and that jealousy is a part of being in love, while 11 women and two men think that a woman “*should act like her husband wants her to act*”. To illustrate the overarching norm around decision making in relationships we will present an example about decision making with regards to the sexual relationship of couples.



## Control over how women exercise their sexuality

There are different expectations regarding appropriate behaviour for men and women when it comes to deciding when, how and with whom to have sexual intercourse. Many respondents said their reference groups (including mothers, fathers, siblings, and close friends) believed that girls are responsible for protecting their virginity until marriage. As one female respondent said: *“Virginity at marriage is the most vulnerable part of being a woman; girls that lose it are ruined.”* (female respondent). Another said that a girl who loses her virginity before marriage will be sanctioned for it throughout her life: *“My sister would say ‘you are the one to blame, since you choose to do it with him’.”* (female respondent).

While respondents were fairly evenly split on whether a woman losing her virginity before marriage was entirely the woman’s fault (12 women and three men) or also the man’s (10 men and six women), for men the question of guilt is different: although a man who takes the virginity of an unmarried girl may be seen as not a ‘good’ man, it is also seen as his ‘nature’ to follow his urges. As a female respondent said: *“Family members would say you cannot blame a man for anything. Nothing can dishonour him, he is a man”* (female respondent). So, even though the social norm is that sex before marriage is not accepted for men and women, only the women are at risk of facing sanctions.

Sex during marriage was regarded as primarily about reproduction and the woman’s obligation to satisfy the man’s urges – *“it’s his right to sleep with his wife!”* (female respondent) – and not about women having sex for their own pleasure. Some respondents said that a man should take into consideration his wife’s feelings – *“he should respect his wife and appreciate her efforts”* (male respondent) – but this is mainly related to when and where to have sex, and not about women’s sexual enjoyment. In the opinion of the respondents, pressure in a sexual relationship is very common in Tunisian society. However, there is a difference in their perception of what is acceptable. Most respondents (18 men and 7 women) said that their reference group would consider a man to be unkind if he pressures his wife into having sex when she does not want to, while the others either did not recognise this scenario or did not want to talk about it. Still, only seven men and one woman recognized rape in a marital situation and said their reference group would think that a wife whose husband raped her should file a complaint.

In conclusion, the social norm on decision making in relationships prescribes that women cannot make their own decisions. This becomes especially clear in relation to sexual relationships. In contrast, they need to show obedience to their family in all circumstances. Sexuality of women is limited to their reproductive function during marriage, as for women having sex for pleasure is not an option. In other words, women do not have an equal status in decision making processes. This conclusion was also endorsed by the participants in the campaign design workshop.

## Breaking the norm and its sanctions

Sanctions for challenging the social norm that a woman should not seek decision-making power in a relationship range from the social – such as being rejected for marriage in the case of pre-marital sex – to the physical, such as beatings related to lack of obedience in marriage. As a female respondent said: *“If a man beats his wife, it means she did something wrong. He should have warned her though.”* Likewise, if a man is seen not to be following the norm of controlling his wife, he may face social sanctions such as being publicly shamed.

It appears from our research that a controlling husband is considered normal, it is considered acceptable for a husband to slap his wife, and for a woman to have sex with her husband on demand is considered either a ‘conjugal duty’ or something private that should not be discussed. Physical violence is, however, not expected to be meted out publicly. As a workshop

participant put it, “*violence is a private matter*” – an attitude exemplified recently by a Tunisian talk show host advising a husband to beat his wife in a hidden spot.<sup>1</sup>

## **(ii) Women should prioritise home and family over public or professional life**

The second social norm, closely related to the first, is on the division of roles within the household: that a woman’s primary role is in the domestic sphere is a commonly held opinion among the respondents’ reference groups. While men are seen as having an important role as the breadwinner for the family, a woman gets status from the accomplishments of her children. As one participant in the campaign design workshop put it, “*a woman only becomes a woman when she gets married. This is their purpose of existence.*”

In around half of the respondents’ reference groups there was some sign of a changing mentality: 12 men and seven women described it as unfair that women are responsible for all domestic work, while 10 men and 10 women stated that women should contribute financially. Still, it was seen as important that women must organise domestic tasks first before they consider working, and any money they earn is seen as a bonus for the family – especially for the children – not as an equal contribution to cover the family needs.

Overall, husbands are seen as holding the power to decide if, and to what extent, the wife working is acceptable and conjunctional to her caretaking tasks. For the participants of the workshop, this is regardless of the type of work and responsibility she has.

### **Men as breadwinners and for moral guidance**

According to the reference persons of 12 male respondents and six female respondents, it is considered shameful if a man cannot provide for his family. Men are widely considered unqualified to help with household chores – as one male respondent puts it, “*a man cannot take care of children, a woman can though*”. The extent to which men are expected to help with household chores differs: some find it ‘normal’ when men prepare their own breakfast, others consider it normal for men to do so only when their wife is ill. In either case, it is not considered the man’s responsibility to help, but something he can choose to do if he wants to.

Men’s role in children’s upbringing is regarded as mainly about moral guidance, although many respondents considered that these traditional roles are slowly changing, they are still deeply rooted in the respondents’ reference groups. The participants in the campaign design workshop detected an overall sense of “it’s unfair, but that’s the way it is”, which indicates the possibility for a new, more positive norm to emerge. The gender roles described above are experienced as neither supporting the emancipation of young women in Tunisia, nor being positive for men.

### **Breaking the norm and its sanctions**

Women breaking this norm can experience economic violence – such as a husband banning his wife from earning income – or physical violence, as well as psychological violence, such as beatings or public shaming if household chores are not adequately performed. If the man transgresses the norm by equally sharing the caretaker role, he faces public shaming by being called a ‘mraoui’, a word meaning ‘woman’ with negative connotations.

Although most respondents say physical violence is not a socially accepted sanction for breaking this gender role, their responses nonetheless tended to justify the violent attitudes of men in the vignettes and put the responsibility on women to avoid men’s violent behaviour: “*she provoked him*”, “*she is not obedient*”, “*she exceeded the limits*”, etc. As a campaign design

<sup>1</sup> Ala El-Shaby, host of the popular programme *Endi Ma Nquolek* (I Have Something to Tell You), also told a woman on his show who recounted her experience of domestic abuse: “it is okay, he can beat you gently, and it happens in every house”. Following complaints from women’s rights groups, the Tunisian Ministry of Women’s Affairs complained to the TV channel, which defended El-Shaby on the grounds of freedom of speech.

workshop participant said: “*Violence is considered part of the marriage contract, and this idea is strengthened by religious interpretation and lack in the law*”. Only when violence is severe, such as repeated beatings, is it recognised by some of the respondents as violence – in such cases, the man is described as *perverse, an animal and psychologically ill*, and the psychological impact is acknowledged: “*If a woman loses her self esteem she will be unable to talk in public, as if she’s handicapped, scared to intervene in any public discussion*” (female respondent).

Psychological abuse (also referred to as psychological violence, emotional abuse, or mental abuse) was the form of violence the respondents most condemned. The vignettes included men meting out verbal abuse and constant criticism, and implicitly refusing ever to be pleased. More than half of the respondents thought their reference person would condemn this behaviour and advise the woman to stand up for the right to express her opinions. The humiliation of a wife by her husband in public is not accepted: “*It is not good to have this kind of attitude in front of the family’s eyes. They will have a bad image of the man but also of the woman and say that she has a weak personality.*” This also relates to the point previously made, related to the first norm, that violence is a private matter in Tunisian families.

### **(iii) Women should behave in public in a way that respects male domination**

The campaign design workshop identified a third social norm: in public, women are expected to behave in ways that respect the male-dominated power balance in order not to dishonour their family or husband. Campaign design workshop participants discussed how the gender roles described above – women are expected to be passive, and to prioritise family over career – create an obstacle to women’s participation in the public sphere. Moreover, participation of women in the public sphere is qualified by society as masculine and indecent. The respondents of the research also hint towards this viewpoint when they state that women should always put the family first, before their own ambitions. In other words, women have a primary role as the caretaker of the family and the work they do is to serve the family, void of personal career objectives. Workshop participants discussed how this norm is upheld by men, women, religious, traditional, and community leaders, politicians, media and other public personalities. The norm is further illustrated by the finding of the 2009 national study on violence that most Tunisians think women should be discreet in how they behave to avoid experiencing violence in public spaces.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Breaking the norm and its sanctions**

Workshop participants agreed that women in public spaces might be tolerated if they are seen to be ‘playing by the rules’. Women who are perceived to be too vocal, however, may be called ‘hysterical’. If a woman enters the public sphere without the support of her family, she might be ‘disciplined’ by her husband – perhaps physically. Because a woman’s behaviour in public is seen as reflecting her family’s honour, disapproval might extend to the whole family. Even if a woman gains some respect for success in public life – in which case she may be called ‘rajela’, which denotes a woman with a man’s characteristics – this tends to be accompanied by derision for her husband, who is seen as less manly.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> CREDIF, 2015

<sup>3</sup> Hamma Hammemi and Mohamed Abbou are examples of male Tunisian politicians who have experienced ridicule or pity because they are married to women’s public leaders.

# CONCLUSION: THE TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN TO END VAWG

Having identified the three social norms explained above, the campaign will work to replace them with more positive norms in which men and women show solidarity and are equal partners for their mutual empowerment. There is currently a unique opportunity in Tunisia for such a campaign, with social space being created by a political transition period in which institutions are being revisited.

The research raised hope that there is fertile ground for the ENOUGH campaign: although it focused on reference groups more than respondents' own attitudes, some respondents nonetheless observed that norms are changing as society modernises. Experts in the campaign design workshop noted that living up to social norms can be a burden for young men and women, but that breaking these norms – while challenging – can at the same time be a transformative experience.

The campaign design workshop was inspiring for most participants, and reinforced for Oxfam in Tunisia the importance of continuing to work on the campaign with partners in a participatory way. We will continue to consult partners and stakeholders to explore potential campaign strategies and synergies with other work. Thereafter, Oxfam in Tunisia will organise another workshop to operationalise the campaign messages. The campaign is provisionally planned to coincide with the international 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, from 25 November to 10 December 2017.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the 20 men and 20 women from Tunis, Gafsa and Jandouba who were willing to share their thoughts about social norms, and the enumerators whose sensitivity and thorough interviewing skills contributed greatly to the success of this research: Hasna Safi, Hanen Mahjoubi, Hajer Ben Hamza and Menana Zitouni. We would also like to thank the Tunisian survivors of VAWG, the social workers from the Survivor shelter of Sidi Thabet in Tunis, the Women's Organization for Research and Development (AFTURD), Oxfam's knowledge hub on VAWG, and all Tunisian experts and organisations that participated in the workshops to design the research and analyse its findings. Finally, thanks are due to all reviewers of this paper: Dorrah Mahfoud, Ruben de Winne, Brigitte Obertop, Bethan Cansfield, Charikleia Poucha, Imed Zouari, Mohamed Bennour, Nynke Kuperus, Hela Gharbi, and Carmen Reinoso.

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