



Using social network
theory in the context
of social change

V4C Stories of Learning

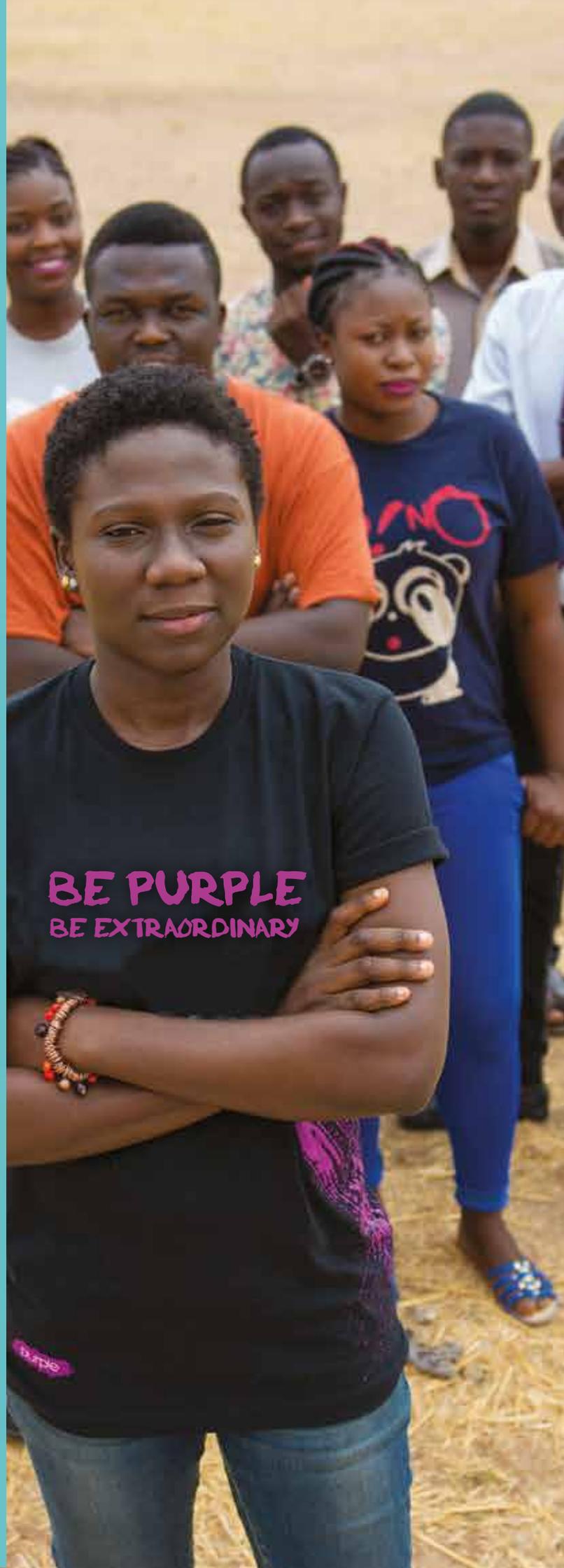
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Understanding the social networks and key influencers of people at the heart of any issue is critical to the work of those seeking social change. Yet while the idea of social network theory may have been explored in other areas of development, little is known about how its adoption can work in the context of women and girls' empowerment.

As a programme designed to create an enabling environment for empowerment of adolescent girls and young women in Nigeria, Voices for Change (V4C) knows that it has its work cut out. How can the programme tackle deep-rooted and traditional ideas and behaviours concerning gender? What are the best strategies and how can V4C be confident that its message will spread?

Among the many theoretical frameworks that underpin V4C's work, social network theory allows the programme to explore how people are connected and how these connections influence behaviours and attitude. This brief describes how V4C is using social network theory to identify and engage those with the power and influence to champion and spread ideas, and work with others to transform social norms concerning gender in Nigeria.



Social Network theory: How it works

Social network theory has been used to explore voting patterns, health, financial decision-making, sexual behaviour and relationships. In his book, 'Connected: The Surprising Power of our Social Networks' James Fowler reinforces a common finding by social scientists that we are influenced by the people around us, and that people with similar attitudes or behaviours are more closely connected.

- ▶ We can be influenced by our friends' friends' friends, i.e., attitudes, feelings and behaviours are transmitted across three layers of connections;
- ▶ We can be influenced by people we do not know and have never met;
- ▶ Targeting individuals at the centre of a social network can be more effective than targeting everyone.

Social networks are the structures within which attitudes and behaviours are maintained and transmitted. So, we can use social networks to spread new ideas and behaviours, if we understand the nature of the network and how information flows within it.

Types of social network

Social networks can be structured in different ways, but there are two broad types:

1. A dense network is one where most of the members know each other. Information flows quickly within such a network, because one member can spread new ideas to the

whole network. However, dense networks may be less open to ideas from outside the network. An example is the V4C Purple Spaces where young men and women can discuss and learn about gender issue. In these spaces the participants all know each other because they all take part in the same activity.

2. Loose social networks are those where each person knows a few other people in the network. These networks are more open to new ideas, but ideas take more time to spread within the group. Members of a Motorcycle taxi Riders Association might be a loose social network where each member knows a few others but no one knows every member.

Who is influential in a network?

Some people are positioned at the centre of networks whilst others are peripheral. There are two factors which determine how important an individual is within a network:

1. How many connections they have;
2. How influential and relevant they are within the network.

If we target our messages at individuals who have a lot of connections and are highly influential, this is a more cost effective way to influence the whole network. In many social networks, there is a small core of individuals who are the most influential and connected: these are termed 'social referents.' Social referents can be real people or fictional characters in dramas: both can influence behaviour.

How social networks influence behaviour

Social networks can influence attitudes and behaviours in three ways:

- **Conscious imitation:** individuals in the network may imitate those who are more influential. If the most popular student in college starts a campaign to get more women in the student union, others may follow their example;
- **Unconscious influence:** where we are influenced by the behaviours of others without knowing it. If the leader at mosque speaks out against domestic violence, members of the congregation may criticise representations of violence in Nollywood movies, and their friends may be influenced unconsciously;
- **Creating social norms:** Social networks create norms of acceptable behaviour against which individuals can measure themselves. If the majority of a young man's friends hit their girlfriends, that young man will assume that this is normal. But if the young man joins a new social circle whose members speak out about violence, then he may notice his own behaviour and change it accordingly.

Social network theory within the context of V4C

While social network theory was not a new idea for many of the team, there was scope to use the approach in a more structured, rigorous and consistent way. The programme identified three areas where this would be most relevant:

- Selecting participants who are most influential and able to spread new ideas;
- Supporting and encouraging participants to use social networks to campaign and advocate for gender equality;
- Checking that the people selected actually do have an influence over our target groups.

Since then, social network theory has helped V4C list and analyse the key social networks it is working with; understand their size and structure and identify the most influential members. It has enabled the programme to support partners to spread V4C ideas within their networks and to make connections to others. Using the theory has also helped V4C to adjust and adapt these strategies and ensure it has the right social referents and understands the characteristics of specific networks.

Understanding the power of 'connectedness'

Part of V4C's strategy involves outreach work among young men and women, both in and out of education. Purple Spaces have been established in colleges and universities, where young men and women can discuss and learn about gender issues. Radio Listening Clubs have been set up within communities, to listen to and discuss the Purple Tinz Radio show.

Following a review of the effectiveness of these spaces, V4C introduced selection criteria to ensure that a proportion of participants are more 'connected', through



membership of religious bodies, student unions, or community groups. V4C is also partnering with other networks, such as the Girls' Guild and National Youth Corps, to use elements of V4C's training materials in their work.

Identifying influencers

V4C also works with existing men's organisations to encourage them to support and campaign on gender equality issues using their own networks. This strategy has recently been reviewed, as a result of which V4C has moved away from commercial networks (such as Trade Unions), towards social groups such as football clubs. V4C's analysis showed that the structure of these social networks enables time and space to reflect on gender issues, and that their leaders do influence their members.

In V4C's work with religious leaders, participants were selected on the basis of being respected, influential and interested in gender issues. They were provided with training on gender and masculinity issues and developed individual action plans to promote gender equality among their

followers. V4C has recently reviewed this work and found that these leaders are indeed promoting gender equality messages, and using their own networks to recruit other leaders to the programme. Indeed, those who are already partnering with V4C have mostly recommended the current group of religious leaders being trained. This makes recruitment more effective and means they are more likely to act upon V4C's training, as they have support from their peers.

Increasing the impact of research and evidence

A major piece of research on masculinity was completed by V4C in 2015 and launched nationally and in the four V4C target states. Key representatives from academia, the media, business, policy-making, religious groups and civil society were invited to attend and to suggest what action they could take based on the evidence. These individuals, selected on the basis of their influence in their respective networks, were recently reconvened and worked together to create specific action plans. They are now using their own professional networks to promote the evidence and specific action plans.



Key lessons from the experience

Social network theory offers a practical and useful body of ideas which can help challenge harmful social norms. V4C has found that by identifying and working with existing networks, it can increase the impact of local activities and spread the messages more widely. The programme believes that in the long term, this will be a more sustainable approach to social norm change.

This approach also allows influential individuals to take the lead on promoting gender equality in their communities, rather than relying on V4C to push the message. Between 2014 and 2016, 61 female and 238 male religious and traditional leaders were supported by V4C to advocate for positive change in four Nigerian states. Of these, 23 female and 113 male RTLs have undertaken various activities to promote positive attitudes towards women and girls in their communities – reaching over 200,000 people.

The evidence also suggests social networks can offer great value for money. Influential individuals can access a large number of contacts in a cost effective manner, more so than trying to contact each person individually. Social networks also complement more mass-market communications approaches, where each individual is assumed to have the same importance. And information which comes from a trusted and respected source is more likely to be credible, than that which comes from an unknown organisation or government body. We can identify the following general lessons from our use of social networks:

- ▶ Programmes should analyse the social networks of the groups they are working with, to identify who is most influential and connected;
- ▶ Different people may be influential for different issues, so it is important to conduct this analysis in the context of a specific intervention;
- ▶ Programming needs to consider that not all social networks are equally able to take issues forward independently;
- ▶ Introducing simple selection criteria for participation can ensure that a proportion of beneficiaries are ‘connected’ and so in a good position to spread the message;
- ▶ Influential individuals need to be supported and encouraged to spread the new information or behaviour among their contacts, and this may require training or guidance;
- ▶ It is important to check that these individuals are indeed spreading the word as intended, and be prepared to shift tactics and identify new partners if necessary.



This initiative contributed to the following results:

V4C has been successful in targeting and reaching young women and men with positive messaging on gender equality – on track for over two million in the four intervention states – through a combination of different media, campaign work and promotion of new ways of behaving. Compared to other young people those exposed to V4C programming in Kaduna and Enugu States are overall 40 per cent more likely to say their opinions on gender equality have changed while 270 per cent more likely to be thinking about gender issues now, compared to two years ago.

These young people have responded whole-heartedly with evidence of young women's increased self-esteem, unwillingness to accept discrimination and violence and taking up opportunities for leadership. Since 2014, V4C has observed a significant increase in young people in Kaduna and Enugu States practicing positive behaviours around these issues – a figure which has increased steadily each year by about six per cent.

Young men have responded positively with evidence of personal attitude and behaviour change, speaking out against violence and discrimination against women and supporting young women to seek office and to be heard. For example, Kano and Kaduna States have witnessed an increase in numbers of young women winning local leadership elections within their institutions (20 each in both states). Positions contested range from high-level departmental positions to faculty executives and institution senate representatives.

V4C has instigated transformational change on gender amongst key influencers such as religious and traditional leaders, media personalities and high profile public speakers. For example, more than half of the 403 trained religious and traditional leaders are taking action against discriminatory beliefs and sharing their message with more than 300,000 people.



About V4C

Voices for Change (V4C) is a £29 million programme funded by UK Aid, working to strengthen the enabling environment for gender equality in Nigeria. The programme targets young women and men aged 16-25 years old. It operates in four states in Nigeria: Enugu, Kaduna, Kano and Lagos and for some activities, at Federal level. V4C is a unique example of a programme applying social norms theory at scale and is addressing the structural barriers to gender equality, in particular, discriminatory and harmful attitudes, behaviours and social norms. The three normative areas that V4C seeks to change are women's voice and leadership, women's role in decision making and violence against women and girls.

V4C recognises that for young women to be better supported, change needs to happen at scale – not only at the individual level but also within wider society.

- At the individual level, V4C works with adolescent women and girls to provide them with the skills, knowledge and confidence to challenge, together with men, boys, religious leaders, traditional leaders and networks of men and women, discriminatory social norms to create change in their colleges, homes, workplaces and communities;
- At the community level, V4C works with those men and boys, religious and traditional leaders, and networks of women and girls to create a critical mass of support for gender equality, accelerating change and shifting negative norms;
- At the social-structural level, V4C works to change discriminatory laws, create better policies, and direct assets towards women and girls, sending a message about changed social norms through political and legal structures.
Conceived as the pilot stage of a twenty-year vision, V4C began implementation in October 2013 and will end in September 2017.

This paper is one in a series of V4C Stories of Learning that have been written to share knowledge and learning on the range of strategies used by the programme.

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