

CHANGING NORMS TO CHANGE LIVES

“It’s one of the most exciting times of my life,” says Cristina Bicchieri about her work as a social norms and human rights consultant to the United Nations Children’s Fund. Bicchieri, the Carol and Michael Lowenstein Professor of Philosophy and Legal Studies, is using the science behind social norms to help UNICEF workers around the world find more effective ways to end practices such as female genital cutting, child marriage, the denial of education to girls and violence against women and children.

If human rights workers hope to convince a group to embrace or abandon a certain practice, Bicchieri contends, they must understand the social norms supporting it. “People will follow a social norm on condition that certain expectations are met,” she explains. “Which expectations? First, the expectation that other people follow the norm.... Second, the belief that relevant others—others that belong to the community of reference of the individual—think the individual should follow the norm.”

To change a negative norm, she says, rights workers must change people’s expectations. Bicchieri gives the example of child marriage: a mother may not approve of giving her young daughter in marriage, but she may fear that if she refuses she’ll be seen as a bad mother and her daughter will be considered unfit for marriage. Her expectation is that they would both pay a high price for her resistance. The mother will decide to follow the norm unless those expectations can be changed. The same holds true for female genital cutting: parents may think it’s harmful, but their expectation is that their daughter won’t find a suitable husband otherwise, so they follow the norm.

The way to change these expectations, Bicchieri advises, is by doing it gradually, trying to convince people they can abandon these practices without sacrificing their values. For example, in a culture that doesn’t educate girls but values motherhood, the key is to demonstrate that schooling girls can help them become better mothers. The second step is to provide open conversations in which community members can make public commitments to stop the practice. This creates a new expectation that individuals won’t revert to the old ways. If the parents of boys pledge not to marry their sons to girls who have been cut and they learn that a prospective bride has been cut, they will know—and perhaps the entire community will know—that her parents broke their pledge. Female genital mutilation has been abandoned in many communities where members have made such pledges. Another important component has been to link being uncut with values that matter to the community, such as purity and body integrity. “When enough people abandon the practice, the norm will change,” Bicchieri asserts.

She believes top-down approaches to change that focus solely on creating laws are inadequate. “When laws exist but are in conflict with social norms, social norms win,” she says. If rights violations are the norm, such behaviors are considered acceptable, and the threat of punishment is not seen as a deterrent. Instead, she advocates a bottom-up approach that engages the people whose lives UNICEF is trying to improve. Rights workers must “improve them on their own terms,” she cautions. This means using the people’s language and cultural tools; respecting their



values even while condemning a practice; and working within the people’s social network.

This past July, 40 UNICEF employees came to Penn’s campus to take part in a training program that Bicchieri developed on how to use social norms to promote social change. By the end of the two-week program, the participants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and many African nations had developed papers on how they could use social norms to address issues like promoting the education of girls, encouraging the use of public sanitation and curbing female genital mutilation and were ready to take these ideas back to their colleagues for use in the field.

Bicchieri has been working with UNICEF for two years, ever since representatives of the organization became aware of her 2006 book, *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*. The book explores social norms like fairness, cooperation and reciprocity and discusses how these norms develop and why people follow them. Although her book didn’t specifically relate social norms to human rights issues, she was pleased UNICEF recognized the connection and asked for her assistance. She says, “It’s really the greatest satisfaction of my life that my theories can be tested and implemented and change the lives of people. What else could I want?”

—Tracey Quinlan Dougherty, G’03