ENCOURAGING GIVING TO WOMEN'S & GIRLS' CAUSES:
The Role of Social Norms

IUPUI WOMEN'S PHILANTHROPY INSTITUTE
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RESEARCH THAT GROWS WOMEN'S PHILANTHROPY

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Women's Philanthropy Institute

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HIGHLIGHTS

From giving circles to #GivingTuesday to the Giving Pledge, social movements are inspiring people to give.[1] Donors are increasingly making their voices heard—and urging others to join their causes.

Previous research and anecdotal evidence have shown that knowing about other people's giving can inspire a person to give. For example, individuals are more likely donate to a cause after they see many other people donating.[2] Social influence can be a highly powerful force, and can increase donations for charities that are able to utilize it.

But what about charitable causes that are less popular or visible? How might these causes leverage social information to inspire support from donors? This report presents psychological research that reveals how *social norms*—or the giving behaviors of other people—influence giving to these important causes.

This research has a special focus on women's and girls' causes. Nonprofits in this area face unique social challenges to obtaining donor support. For example, how can charities that serve women and girls encourage greater giving from men, who typically give to them at lower levels than women?[3]

The findings provide new insights into how potential donors respond to others' giving behaviors. Using an experimental methodology, the study investigates how social norms can directly influence giving to women's and girls' causes. It also examines whether social norms may have differing impacts for men and women. These findings can help nonprofits and fundraising professionals apply a social norms approach to encourage giving.

KEY FINDINGS

1. *Social norms* and *charitable giving* are strongly linked.
   When people believe that others are interested in giving to women's and girls' causes, they have greater intentions to donate to these causes themselves.

2. There is a gender difference in the link between social norms and charitable giving.
   Men's giving to women's and girls' causes is strongly tied to how they think *men and women* give. Women's giving to women's and girls' causes is strongly tied only to how they think other *women* give.

3. People's donation intentions are higher when they receive social norms messages about *rising levels of giving*.
   Focusing on the rising popularity of women's and girls' causes increases people's intentions to donate to those causes, compared to focusing on current levels of giving.

4. Social norms messages about rising levels of giving are equally effective for men, who traditionally give less than women to women's and girls' causes.

BACKGROUND

Social Norms

Aristotle wrote: "Man is, by nature, a social animal." Indeed, research from psychology and neuroscience suggests that humans have an innate ability to socially connect with others. For example, infants learn to read facial expressions and imitate adults' behaviors within their first year of life.[4] This capacity for social connection can also be seen when people give to charity or help others. People are emotionally moved by seeing others in need, feel a "warm glow" from helping others, and in some cases, will even risk their lives to help strangers.[5]

Previous research has also found that people are shaped and influenced by *social norms*, or behaviors that are common, valued, and accepted by others. From an early age, individuals pay close attention to their social environment and tend to align their behaviors with those of others.[6] Social norms exist for nearly all situations and can be used to influence a wide range of behaviors. Many energy companies now provide customers with information about neighbors' energy consumption on their bills, in an effort to decrease energy use.[7] Across a variety of behaviors, such as conserving energy, abusing alcohol, littering, and even deciding to donate one's organs, the link between social norms and behavior is clear: people are likely to act similarly to others.[8]

WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS?

Social norms are defined as behaviors that are common, valued, and accepted by others. They can vary widely across institutions, groups, and cultures, and can change over time. There are different types of social norms. *Descriptive norms* describe how people *actually* behave; *injunctive norms* describe how people think they and others *should* behave. Hotels' attempts to increase towel reuse is a common example of social norms in action; when hotels provide cards indicating that the majority of guests reuse their towels, they are using social norms to encourage this environmentally friendly behavior.[9] Psychologists have explored a variety of topics on social norms, such as which individual factors increase the influence of social norms; whether perceptions of social norms accurately reflect societal beliefs or values; and, whether individuals are consciously aware of the influence of social norms.[10]

Social Norms and Charitable Giving

Do social norms affect charitable giving? Research has answered this question with a resounding yes. One study found that changing the type of money that was visible in a donation box affected charitable giving; donation boxes that displayed higher denomination bills had larger average donation amounts.[11] Another study found that reminding people of large donations made by past donors increased their giving amounts.[12] More recently, researchers found that even children are sensitive to social norms, and alter their giving amounts based on how much other children gave.[13]

As with social norms concerning other kinds of behaviors, people pay attention to others' charitable giving to understand what types of behaviors (such as where or how much to give) are accepted, valued, and appropriate. In essence, potential donors use social norms as a guide for how to give more intentionally and effectively. Seeing people donate to a specific charity or cause, regardless of its actual characteristics, can provide an important social signal that it is worthy of donations.

Giving to Women's and Girls' Causes: A Social Norms Approach

This report explores how social norms influence *giving to women and girls*, a diverse and broadly defined area of philanthropy. Women's and girls' causes include (but are not limited to): domestic violence prevention; reproductive health or rights; human trafficking and sexual abuse prevention; research on cancers primarily affecting women (such as breast or ovarian cancer); maternal or other woman-focused health causes; and economic opportunities for women and girls. Women's and girls' causes have a long and storied history: the first women's fund (Ms. Foundation for Women) was founded in 1973.[14] Several decades later, growing numbers of donors recognize the value in giving to benefit women and girls. A number of high-profile initiatives have been organized around this effort, such as Women Moving Millions, which has raised more than $600 million for women and girls since it began in 2007.[15]

Similar to many other causes, charities that benefit women and girls can face difficulties cultivating new donors. While many potential donors have seen or heard about the impacts of women's and girls' causes in their daily lives, others may lack exposure to them. From a social norms perspective, the absence of social information—such as seeing others donate to women's and girls' causes—could have a negative influence on giving to these causes. This may be especially true for certain donor demographics. For example, men are less likely than women to give to women's and girls' causes.[16] While this gender difference could exist for a number of reasons, social norms could be one of them; men might be less likely to donate because they do not see many others (such as other men) giving to women's and girls' causes.

Understanding social norms and their effect on charitable giving is important for both researchers and practitioners. This is the first study to specifically investigate how social norms influence giving to women's and girls' causes. However, previous research offers important clues. New research has shown that emphasizing certain types of social norms—such as the *rising popularity* of a less common behavior—can help overcome a current lack of social support.[17] In one example, people who learned that vegetarians are a minority of the population, but a minority that was rapidly growing, were less likely to eat meat.[18] This study examines whether similar techniques might increase donor interest in charitable causes that currently lack broad awareness or support.

Other research has shown that social norms can influence people differently. For example, men tend to be more influenced than women by the charitable giving of others. Further, people who have less personal experience or involvement with a particular issue tend to be more influenced by social norms.[20] These findings provide separate evidence that *men*—who tend to have less personal involvement and experience with women's and girls' causes—may be more influenced by social norms than women.

The present study asks the following research questions:

- What role do social norms play in charitable giving to women's and girls' causes?

- Does the role of social norms in giving to these causes differ by gender?

- What types of social norms information can encourage giving to these causes?

- Can social norms messages increase giving from donor groups that typically give less often to these causes, such as men?

By answering these questions, this study generates new insights that have implications for fundraisers and other nonprofit professionals. This report allows fundraising professionals to better understand how the social environment affects giving, and provides practical strategies to encourage potential donors to give.

DATA AND METHODS

Findings in this report come from a study of more than 2,500 respondents on Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online survey platform. Respondents all live or lived in the United States. The average age of respondents was 35. Fifty-six percent of respondents were men, and 44 percent were women.

Because this study uses a convenience sample of respondents who received a small payment for their participation, certain demographic groups may be under- or over-sampled. As a result, the sample may not accurately reflect the general U.S. population.

Survey respondents answered questions about their personal characteristics; their interest in and intentions to give to women's and girls' causes; and their perceptions of social norms about giving to these causes. Respondents were also randomly selected to view one of three types of social norms messages about giving to women's and girls' causes. See the Methodology section at the end of this report for additional detail.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: SOCIAL NORMS ABOUT CHARITABLE GIVING TO WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' CAUSES

As a first step, this study examined people's *perceptions of others' charitable giving* to women's and girls' causes. Survey respondents were asked two questions about this subject:

"How interested do you think others are in giving to women's and girls' causes?"

Half of respondents (52 percent) believed that others were either moderately or highly interested in giving to women and girls. However, people perceived men and women to have different levels of interest. A large majority of respondents (84 percent) believed women would be moderately or highly interested in giving to women's and girls' causes; in contrast, only 20 percent of respondents believed that men would be similarly interested.

"How interested do you think people will be in women's and girls' causes, in the future?"

Around two-thirds of respondents (65 percent) believed that interest in women's and girls' causes would increase in the future.

These descriptive statistics set the stage for this research by identifying people's perceptions of how others see giving to women's and girls' causes. The next section begins by exploring how these social norms are linked to giving behavior.

KEY FINDINGS

Finding 1: *Social norms* and *charitable giving* are strongly linked.

As discussed above, respondents indicated how interested they thought others are in giving to women and girls (*social norms*). In order to understand the relationship between social norms and giving behavior, this information was compared to respondents' own intentions to donate to women's and girls' causes ("How likely are you to donate to women's and girls' causes over the next year?"). Previous research shows that asking about *intent to donate* in this way is an accurate method for predicting a person's future giving.[21]

Figure 1: Likelihood of giving to women's and girls' causes, by perception of social norms
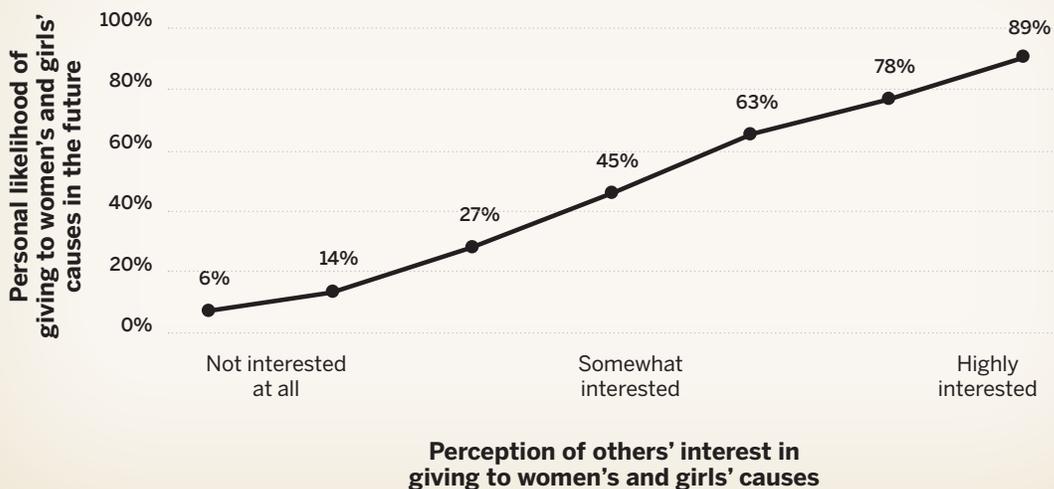
Notes: Percentages are predicted values based on Probit analysis; additional controls are used and listed in Methodology. The effect of perception of others' interests in women's and girls' causes on donation intentions is statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level.

Figure 1 illustrates the significant, positive relationship between social norms and intentions to donate to women's and girls' causes.[i] Nearly nine out of ten (89 percent) respondents who believed others were highly interested in women's and girls' causes said they were likely to donate to these causes over the next year themselves. In contrast, less than half (45 percent) of respondents who thought others were just somewhat interested in donating said they intended to donate themselves. Among respondents who believed that others had little or no interest in these causes, few reported they intended to personally donate.

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[i] Statistical significance means that a particular result is not likely due to chance. See Methodology for further detail.

Finding 2: There is a gender difference in the link between social norms and charitable giving.

As a next step, this report focuses on *gender differences* in charitable giving to women's and girls' causes. Previous research has shown that women are more likely than men to give to women's and girls' causes.[22] This study affirms those results: women were more likely than men to say they intended to donate to these causes (64 percent of women compared to 47 percent of men; this difference is statistically significant).

Finding 1 established a relationship between social norms and charitable giving. This study now examines whether gender differences emerge in this relationship. Figure 2 shows that **the relationship between social norms and giving to women's and girls' causes is stronger for men than for women.** As men's perceptions of others' interest in giving increased, so did their intentions to donate. For women, this relationship existed but was weaker; this is illustrated in Figure 2 by the shallower slope in the line for women respondents.

Figure 2: Relationship between perception of social norms and likelihood of giving, for men and women respondents
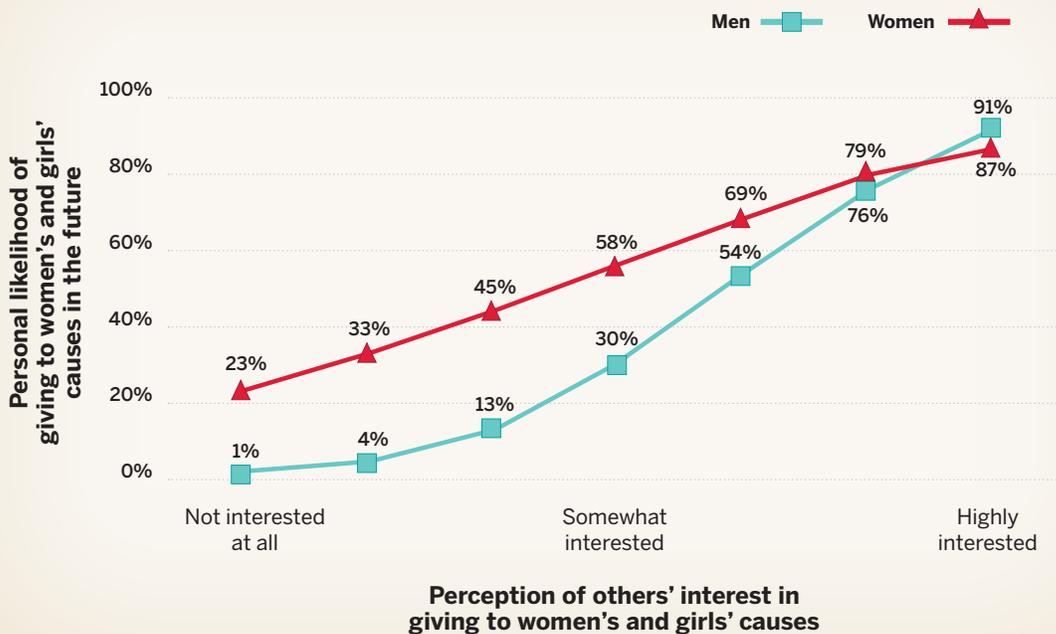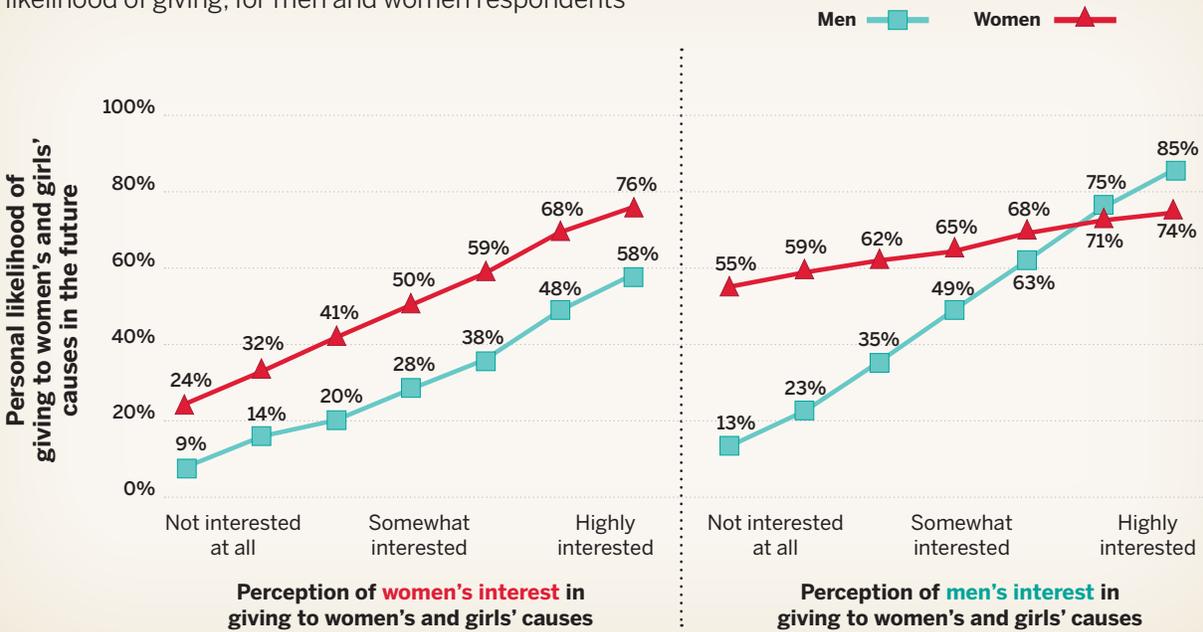

Notes: See notes under Figure 1. The difference in the effect of perception of others' interest in women's and girls' causes on donation intentions, by respondent gender, is statistically significant at the p < 0.01 level.

Figure 2 reveals another important effect: as men's perceptions of others' interest increased, the gender gap in donation intentions decreased, even disappearing at the highest points of the interest scale. For example, there is a significant gender gap in donation intentions for men and women who believe others are only *somewhat* interested in giving to women's and girls' causes; 58 percent of these women said they will donate to women and girls, compared to 30 percent of men. However, that gender gap fully closes for men and women who believe others are *highly* interested in giving to women's and girls' causes; 87 percent of these women said they will donate to women and girls, compared to 91 percent of men. This may have implications for fundraisers who hope to attract more donors to women's and girls' causes: changing perceptions of social norms may have an outsized impact for men.

Respondent gender plays a role in the relationship between social norms and likelihood of giving. An additional gender dimension is whether people think *other men or women* have varying levels of interest in women's and girls' causes. By asking about social norms for men and women separately ("How interested do you think [**men** or **women**] are in giving to women's and girls' causes?"), the study provides a more detailed understanding of whether perceptions of social norms about *one's own gender* are more strongly linked to giving.

Figure 3: Relationship between perception of men's and women's social norms and likelihood of giving, for men and women respondents

Men ▢——▢ Women ▲——▲

Personal likelihood of giving to women's and girls' causes in the future

Left panel — **Perception of women's interest in giving to women's and girls' causes**

Women (red): 24%, 32%, 41%, 50%, 59%, 68%, 76%
Men (teal): 9%, 14%, 20%, 28%, 38%, 48%, 58%

x-axis: Not interested at all — Somewhat interested — Highly interested

Right panel — **Perception of men's interest in giving to women's and girls' causes**

Women (red): 55%, 59%, 62%, 65%, 68%, 71%, 74%
Men (teal): 13%, 23%, 35%, 49%, 63%, 75%, 85%

x-axis: Not interested at all — Somewhat interested — Highly interested

Notes: See notes under Figure 1. The difference in the effects of perception of men's interest in women's and girls' causes on donation intentions, by respondent gender, is statistically significant at the p < 0.01 level. The difference in the effects of perception of women's interest in women's and girls' causes on donation intentions, by respondent gender, is not statistically significant.

Figure 3 illustrates the nuanced relationship between social norms, charitable giving, and gender. The left side of the figure shows that both men's and women's personal giving is strongly tied to how they view women's interest in women's and girls' causes. The right side of the figure shows that men's (but not women's) giving closely aligns with their views of men's interest in these causes. Specifically, while there is a highly positive relationship between men's intentions to give to women's and girls' causes and their perceptions of other men's interest in these causes, the relationship between women's intentions to give and their perceptions of men's interest is significantly weaker.

Finding 3: People's donation intentions are higher when they receive social norms messages about rising levels of giving.

Findings 1 and 2 explored the relationship between social norms and charitable giving—in other words, the link between how interested people think others are in giving to women's and girls' causes, and how likely they are to give to those causes themselves. The study now examines whether other types of social norms could also influence giving.

New research in social psychology suggests that people are not only influenced by *current* social norms, but also by what they expect social norms will be in the *future*. When people learn that a behavior has been increasing in popularity or is expected to become more popular in the future, they are more likely to adopt that behavior—regardless of the current social norm.[23] In the example described earlier in this report, a minority of people are vegetarian, but that minority is growing rapidly. When people focus on the idea that vegetarianism is *growing in popularity*, they are more likely to eat vegetarian meals themselves.[24] Could this phenomenon extend to charitable giving behavior?

To answer this question, this study compares *current* social norms ("How interested do you think **others are** in giving to women's and girls' causes?") and *future* social norms ("How interested do you think people **will be** in women's and girls' causes, **in the future**?") concerning giving to women's and girls' causes.

Which type of social norm—current or future—influences whether people intend to donate to women and girls? Analyses reveal the influence is split between the two types of norms; both current and future norms have a significant, positive relationship with people's intentions to donate.[ii] In other words, people are more likely to give if they think others are interested in giving right now (current norm), and if they think others will be more interested in giving in the future (future norm).

The idea that future norms influence giving has implications for fundraising messaging. This study tested the potential for such messages by randomly showing respondents one of three messages. Excerpts of these messages are shown below:

- **Current norm message:** "Less than half of donors give to women's and girls' charities."
- **Future norm message:** "Less than half of donors give to women's and girls' charities, *but the number of donors is getting bigger and bigger each year.*"
- **Control group message (no norms):** Respondents read about women's and girls' causes, but no information about others' donation behaviors was shown.

By using this experimental design, this study was able to measure whether having people focus on others' rising interest in a charitable cause could directly increase their intentions to donate to it.

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ii The main effects of current norms and future norms on intentions to donate are both statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level.

Figure 4: Effects of social norms messages on likelihood of giving
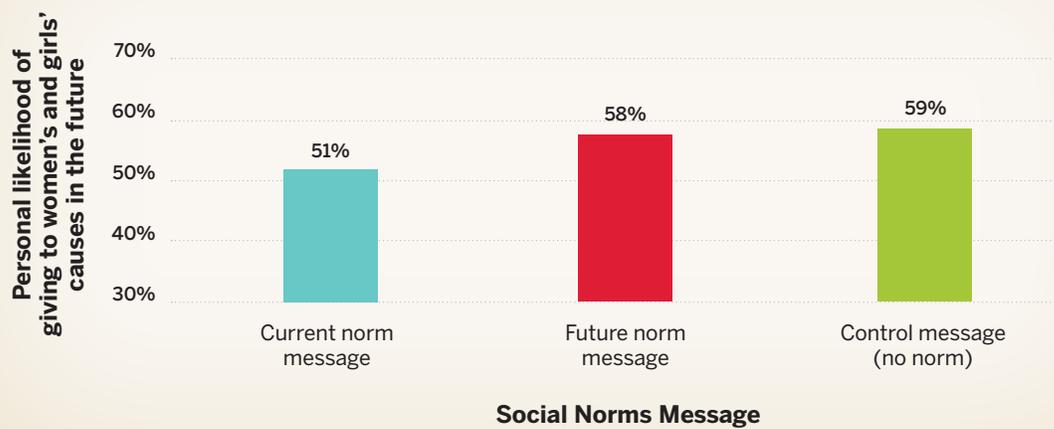
Notes: See notes under Figure 1. The differences in effects of future norm message and control message condition on donation intentions, compared to current norm message, are both statistically significant at the p < 0.01 level. There is no statistically significant difference in donation intentions between future norm message and control message condition.

Figure 4 shows that the future norm message—emphasizing rising levels of giving to women's and girls' causes—significantly increased peoples' intentions to donate compared to the current norm message (which emphasized others' current interest in women's and girls' causes). After reading the future norm message about the growing popularity of these causes, 58 percent of respondents indicated they would give to women and girls. After reading the current norm message about the interest level of others in giving to these causes right now, 51 percent of respondents said they would also give to women and girls. This 7 percentage point difference is statistically significant.[iii] This is a notable difference given that the intervention—a simple change to a short message about women's and girls' causes—is low-cost.

Surprisingly, the group who were shown no message about the giving behavior of other people (and just received a description of women's and girls' causes) indicated they would give to women and girls at a similar level (59 percent) as the group who read about rising levels of giving (58 percent). One possible explanation is that most people (65 percent) already thought giving to women's and girls' causes would increase in the future, prior to reading the norms messages. Since most respondents had this belief coming into the study, the message that focused on rising levels of giving to these causes may not have had a strong additional effect.

[iii] *A percentage point* is the difference between two percentages; this is different from a *percentage increase*. For example, moving from 20 percent to 30 percent is a 10 percentage point increase, but a 50 percent increase in what is being measured.

Finding 4: Social norms messages about rising levels of giving are equally effective for men, who traditionally give less to women's and girls' causes than women.

Finding 3 showed that individuals who read about rising levels of giving to women's and girls' causes were more likely to intend to donate to those causes themselves, compared to those who read about current levels of giving. But does this effect of *future norms* messaging differ by gender? This question is particularly important for women's and girls' causes, since men are less likely than women to give to these causes.[25]

Figure 5: Effects of social norms messages on likelihood of giving, for men and women respondents
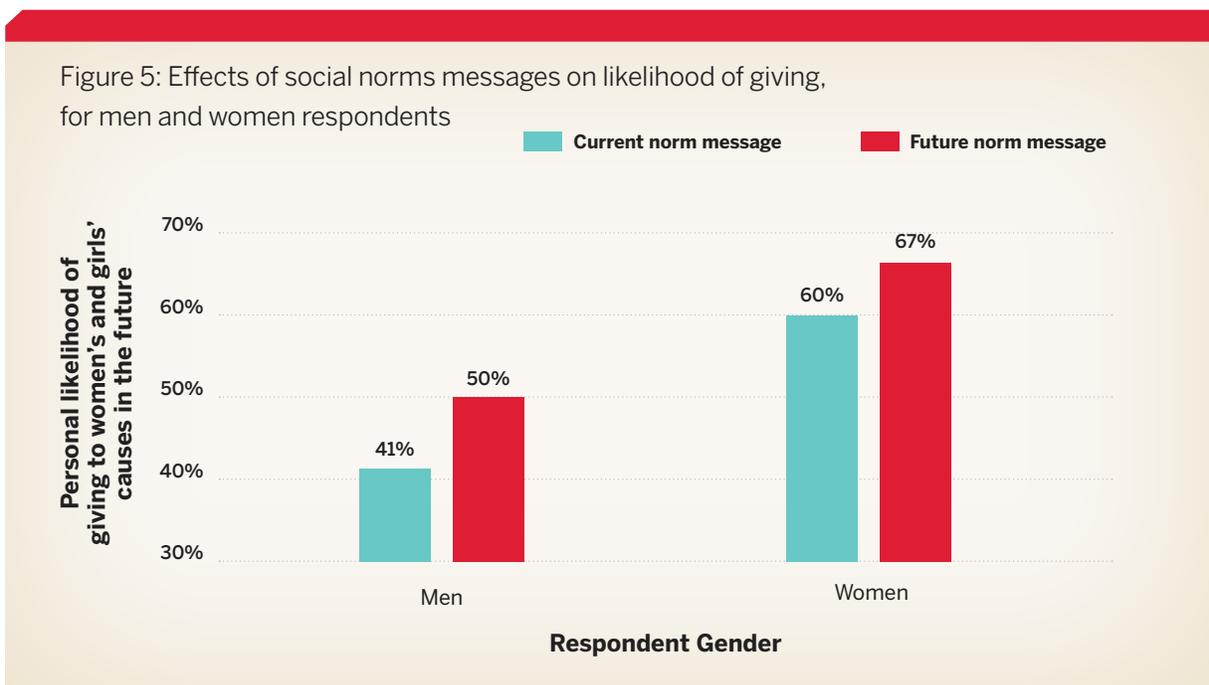
Notes: See notes under Figure 1. The effects of social norm message on donation intentions does not significantly differ by respondent gender.

Figure 5 shows that messages focusing on the rising popularity of women's and girls' causes (future norm), compared to messages about their current popularity (current norm), significantly increased *both men's and women's* likelihood of donating to these causes. The likelihood of giving rose 9 percentage points for men and 7 for women; these are both significant increases in giving. Interestingly, there is no significant gender difference—the 9 and 7 percentage point increases are similar in size, suggesting the future norms messages are equally influential for both men and women.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the link between giving and social norms. Finding 1 showed that overall, social norms influence giving; people are more likely to give to women's and girls' causes when they think other people are interested in giving to that area.

Why does this relationship between social norms and giving to women and girls exist? Social psychology research suggests people rely on social norms to help make accurate or correct decisions.[26] When people are deciding where to donate, they may pay attention to others' giving to help decide which charitable organizations or causes are most worthy of support. Donors who see others giving to women's and girls' causes may become more likely to view them as an especially valid choice for their own charitable gifts.

However, gender differences do exist in this relationship between social norms and giving, as seen in Finding 2. Both women's and men's giving were tied to social norms, but this relationship was weaker for women. This gender difference has been found in previous studies investigating giving to other causes.[27]

One explanation of the gender gap is based on *social identity theory*, which proposes that people desire to help others with whom they personally identify.[28] Social norms may play a weaker role in giving among women who strongly identify with women's and girls' issues. That being said, this study did find that social norms messages influenced women's intentions to donate to women's and girls' causes (Finding 4). Social norms appear to affect women's giving to these causes, though perhaps to a lesser degree than for men.

Another gender difference appeared in Finding 2: men's giving to women's and girls' causes is strongly tied to their perceptions of both *men's and women's* giving to these causes. Women's giving closely aligns with their perceptions of *other women's, but not men's* giving to these causes. In other words, men's intentions to give to women's and girls' causes were closely tied to their perceptions of how women gave, but not vice versa.

Typically, individuals' behaviors are more strongly linked to social norms regarding their own gender.[29] Why, then, are *men's* giving behaviors closely aligned with social norms regarding *women's* giving? One possible explanation is that men believe women have greater knowledge and understanding of women's and girls' issues; as a result, they may view women's giving behaviors as a particularly important social signal of the value of these causes.

Finally, giving intentions differ when different types of norms are activated. Finding 3 showed that both current norms (considering if others are *currently* giving to women and girls) and future norms (considering if others will give to women and girls *in the future*) are linked to giving. Additionally, Finding 4 showed messages that focus on future norms—emphasizing the rising popularity of women's and girls' causes— significantly increase both men's and women's intentions to donate, compared to the messaging about current norms. This research is the first to show that messages focusing on the positive future of charitable causes can increase people's desire to give.

IMPLICATIONS

Practitioners and fundraising professionals can utilize a social norms approach to catalyze giving in several different ways. For organizations or causes that currently lack high social awareness or support, like women's and girls' causes, fundraising professionals can emphasize *positive trends* in giving. Describing potential donor contributions as part of a "growing movement," a "rising tide," or as an effort that is "gaining momentum" may have the potential to increase giving, even in cases where a particular charitable organization or cause is not yet highly popular.

To encourage giving from donor populations that tend to give less frequently than others, fundraising professionals can focus on raising the social visibility of these groups, such as through direct testimonials or endorsements. Charitable organizations able to highlight that a diverse range of people are interested in giving may be well positioned to broaden their reach to new donor groups. Including testimonials from men on websites or in various communications may encourage more giving by men to causes that support women and girls.

Charitable organizations can also benefit from experimenting with different social norms messages, tailoring them to specific types of donors, issues, or causes. As an example, potential donors who show an interest in new or emerging types of philanthropy (such as impact investing) may respond positively to social information about *rising* levels of interest, versus *current* levels of interest. Additionally, while some donors may be highly motivated to be among the first to donate to a cause, others may be more likely to donate after seeing others give.

Finally, fundraising professionals can consider how social norms affect new forms of charitable giving. For instance, on crowdfunding platforms, donors' behaviors are often quite visible, which can lead to "snowballing" or "bandwagon" effects in giving.[30] Fundraising professionals can also focus on new or creative ways to inform potential donors about others' giving behaviors, such as through social media campaigns.

Social norms affect many aspects of people's lives. This study affirms that social norms influence charitable giving and that gender differences exist in the level of influence that social norms have. While charitable giving is often perceived as a very personal experience, others' giving behavior does impact men and women, and it affects them in different ways and to different degrees.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses data from Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online platform that recruits participants who fit specified criteria. Participants who were from outside the United States or failed any attention checks during the study were excluded from the analysis.

In the study, respondents were randomly assigned to receive one of three main social norms messages: current norms, future norms, and control (no norms information shown). Social norms messages also varied according to the *reference group* they focused on (general, men, or women). Exploratory analyses revealed that there were no significant differences in the effects of social norms messages across norms reference groups; thus, they are not discussed in this report. A sample norms message is provided below.

- *Future norms:* "[People's/men's/women's] charitable giving patterns are changing, specifically for charities that focus on helping women and girls reach their full potential. According to a recent report by the Pew Research Center, less than half of [donors/male donors/female donors] give to these charities, but the number of [people/men/women] who give to them is getting bigger and bigger each year. These kinds of charities deal with a variety of areas and needs, including women's and girls' education; domestic violence; women's centers; lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights; cancer research, diagnosis, and support (breast, ovarian, etc.); and economic opportunities for women and girls. And according to the latest research, a growing number of [people/men/women] now support them through their donations."

To estimate the effect of social norms on intentions to donate (e.g., Figure 1), Probit analyses were used. For these analyses, the following control variables were included:

- Gender
- Education
- Socioeconomic status
- Age and age-squared
- Social norms message (for Findings 1 and 2)

Intention to donate to women's and girls' causes was measured by a single item: "In the next year, how likely are you to give to a cause that benefits women and girls?" (1-to-7 scale; 1= extremely unlikely; 4 = somewhat likely; 7 = extremely likely). Scores were dichotomized, with responses higher than 4 classified as "likely to donate."

To increase the robustness of statistical conclusions, a number of alternative analyses were conducted, including analyzing intentions to donate on a 1-to-7 scale (rather than binary), and modifying the binary cutoff point for intentions to donate. Results were highly compatible with the main analyses, and not included in the report (additional data are available upon request).

This report refers to some results as being statistically significant. Statistical significance is a term used to describe results that are unlikely to have occurred by chance; it states the level of certainty that a difference or relationship exists. In this report, results are described as statistically significant if there was less than a one percent probability that the result obtained was due to chance.

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