

# Behavioral Science in Sexual and Reproductive Health 2.0

## Dear Fellow Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) Advocates,

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* put us all on high alert—and made us fearful of what might come next. But one takeaway is crystal clear: to help women avoid unintended pregnancies worldwide, we must continue to work smarter

And we have a long way to go. Are we working as effectively as we could? Are our SRH programs delivering maximum value for money? Do we know why they're successful? At ideas42, we believe that behavioral science can answer these questions and more.

As scientists, we love asking questions. So that's what we did! We spoke with key stakeholders from ministries of health, the private sector, advocacy groups, product developers, researchers, funders, and standard setters. We selected individuals in global roles as well as those with deep lived and professional experience in specific countries, and asked about what's on their minds. Based on these conversations, we're beginning to build out several bold ideas for how behavioral science could advance SRH right now. We have some hypotheses we think you'll find interesting, and we'd love your feedback so that we can keep building out these ideas together.

*Sincerely,*

*Your friends and fellow SRH advocates at ideas42*

**PS: There are fewer than 42 bold ideas in this paper!**

## What is Behavioral Science?

Behavioral scientists study the **unexpected and often curious quirks of human behavior**. **By drawing insights and approaches from behavioral economics, social psychology, human centered design, and other disciplines, we can develop and test innovative solutions that reshape people's environment to positively influence their behavior.**

**Like all sciences, behavioral science is constantly evolving. As scientists, we question what we "know" and seek to build stronger evidence. We believe that cross-disciplinary collaboration leads to breakthroughs, and that behavioral science offers a unique lens, particularly when we stretch our methods, tools, and assumptions.**

# FIVE BOLD IDEAS of how behavioral science could accelerate progress in SRH

Our ideas range across the entire ecosystem—from systemic to individual level applications of behavioral science.

1

## **Embrace complexity in cross-cutting themes.**

*Measure, design, and evaluate bold approaches that break down silos to increase resiliency, community empowerment, client-centricity, and social accountability.*

2

## **Tackle upstream behavioral changes in health systems.**

*Apply behavioral science to address the human challenges underlying evidence-based policy decisions, investments, supply chain functioning, etc.*

3

## **Catalyze social movements and systemic change.**

- Strengthen the evidence base for advocacy efforts
- Target the individual behaviors needed for social change

4

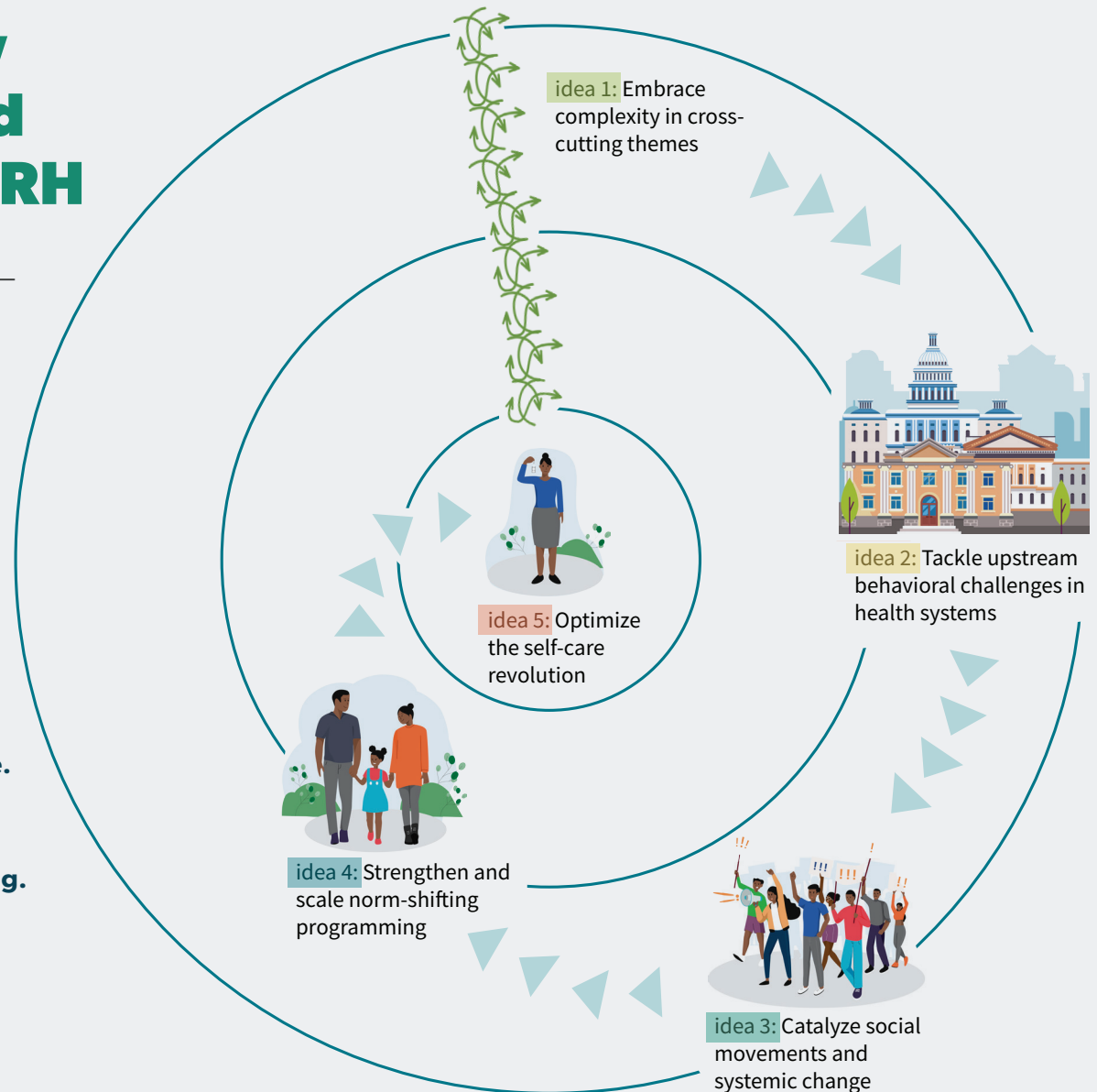
## **Strengthen and scale norm-shifting programming.**

- Home in on the most impactful program elements
- Boost program engagement

5

## **Optimize the self-care revolution.**

- Support customers to navigate new options
- Further expand the product choice set



# IDEA #1

## Embrace complexity in cross-cutting themes.

Global health has historically operated in silos, often divided by health areas. Many challenges, however, have drivers that cut across areas—such as resiliency, community empowerment, and social accountability. Although strong frameworks and theories about these concepts exist, they rarely drive funding and programming decisions. Funders may prefer simpler issues because the impact of cross-cutting initiatives are hard to measure.

Behavioral scientists can bring a unique lens to further **de-mystify complex, cross-cutting themes.**

At ideas42, we have behavioral science experts across various sectors and from many disciplines—from global health to environmental sustainability and from economics to anthropology. This enhances our ability to think innovatively and identify new opportunities to solve cross-cutting problems. We can distill the vast literature and practical experience on cross-cutting issues into actionable and measurable programmatic pathways tied to funder priorities. Data generated can clarify and refine these pathways and their impact on other outcomes. We can also use behavioral insights to develop new programs as we gain more evidence.

One example could be to explore the impact of poverty-related stigma on SRH from contraceptive stock-outs to respectful counseling. We might ask: what are the cultural and historical roots of poverty-related stigma? What factors contribute to discrimination against low-income people? How do these factors influence policymaker priorities and their assumptions about what clients need? We could collaboratively design solutions to tackle the underlying drivers, and then use responsive feedback and agile experiments to test our hunches and iteratively strengthen programming impact on SRH and other outcomes.



### **Behavioral science successes to build from**

**We have used behavioral insights to elucidate drivers, enablers, and solutions to tackle issues as complex as:**

- **Alcohol consumption and its tie to gender-based violence.**
- **Disrespectful care and its connection to maternal care-seeking.**
- **Early childhood development as it links to multi-faceted caregiver behaviors and social change.**

**It's now time to leverage the behavioral science toolkit to create clear pathways for investment in big, complex, and cross-cutting issues.**



## IDEA #2

# Tackle upstream behavioral changes in health systems.

Most behavior change work in SRH focuses on individual women and health workers, yet structural factors often inhibit contraceptive uptake. At the heart of every structural challenge are individuals who make (or fail to make) decisions—from powerful policymakers to mid-level managers who send administrative reports or place shipment orders—with significant consequences for those downstream.

What if we had more opportunities to apply behavioral science to understand the decisions of actors who ultimately shape the contraceptive options available to others? The same approach we use to tackle community-level behaviors can be applied to **shape “upstream” actors’ behavior to ensure consistent inventory of essential supplies, increased financial allocations to women’s health, utilization of evidence in policy decisions, and other priorities** of local communities and advocates.

The use of evidence by government stakeholders is one small example. We might ask, for instance, what does a government official consider when deciding whether to use evidence of a successful pilot of self-care solutions? What other issues compete for their attention and why are they perceived as higher urgency? What framing of the evidence would best motivate action? By working closely with government officials to understand how they make decisions, we can positively reshape what, when, and how information is shared to encourage SRH decisions that impact millions downstream.



### **Behavioral science successes to build from**

**We have used behavioral insights to improve evidence utilization by government officials, to strengthen global family planning supply chains, and have worked directly with governments to embed experts in their agencies.**

**It’s now time to explore further avenues to tackle “upstream” behavior change with behavioral science insights.**

## IDEA #3

# Catalyze social movements and systemic change.

Transformative change in SRH requires effective advocacy to shift public opinion and political will. Yet many advocates haven't accessed the full range of insights about human behavior to strengthen their work.

It is challenging to capture evidence about when and why advocacy efforts are successful. While case studies of advocacy campaigns illuminate the complex host of ingredients these efforts involve, they cannot identify which campaign elements were most effective and why. Experimental evaluation is a cornerstone of behavioral science, but experimental methodologies have in the past seemed out of reach for advocacy efforts. Behavioral scientists' evaluation strategies are becoming more creative, agile, and less expensive. This means that new opportunities emerge to **generate high quality evidence that advocates can use to improve their tactics.** Better-quality evidence of impact could also unlock additional funding sources for advocates.

Behavioral science also illuminates the nuances of peoples' beliefs and what shapes them. These insights could help advocates better frame campaign messages and inform strategies to shift policymakers' behavior, support communities to reflect and reconsider positions on policy issues, and mobilize individuals to sign petitions, contact local representatives, participate in protests, and more.

With recent reversals in women's rights, we recognize the urgency of working smarter, together. Behavioral science can strengthen advocacy work by generating stronger, richer, and faster evidence to accelerate impact.



### **Behavioral science successes to build from**

**We have used behavioral insights to:**

- Advocate for policy change,
- Shift harmful society-level narratives, and
- Boost civic engagement.

**In addition, behavioral scientists' evaluation methodologies are evolving through the increased use of data science, digital experiments, and rapid responsive feedback loops.**

**It's now time to unlock these tools that can fuel and inform reproductive rights advocacy efforts in real time and keep up with the pace of their needs.**

## IDEA #4

# Strengthen and scale norm-shifting programming.

Researchers and programmers have definitively established that gender and social norms strongly shape women's reproductive choices. They've also found ways to measure norms and support people to question and reshape norms that impact them. Yet the SRH sector hasn't maximized the reach and impact of these programs. Programs for which evidence is strongest are multi-level and require participants to opt into many time-intensive sessions, and resource demands make it challenging for them to be sustainably scaled.

To facilitate **scale-up of many norm-shifting programs**, we need clearer evidence on what program aspects are critical and what can be dropped to reduce cost and implementation complexity. A key component of applied behavioral science is the ability to test quickly through agile experiments or A/B tests. Behavioral science theory can be used to identify relevant intermediate outcomes, and rapid experiments can highlight the most critical program aspects that shift these outcomes and elucidate the most important pathways to change. In cases where community-based programming is critical to impact, we can also use behavioral science to understand participant decision-making around program engagement and design strategies to increase program adoption and retention.



### **Behavioral science successes to build from**

**We have used behavioral science insights to create norm-shifting programs and unpack behavioral mechanisms and relevant pathways for multi-prong programming that allows us to rapidly generate actionable evidence to inform these efforts. Behavioral science has also highlighted how to increase retention in time-intensive but valuable programs.**

**It's now time to use behavioral science to identify the most impactful norm-programming components and increase their adoption and scale.**

## IDEA #5

# Optimize the self-care revolution.

As self-care options become more widespread, we need to keep choice as the north star.

Self-care opens up new possibilities but also introduces complexity and risks of channeling women into options that aren't aligned with their priorities. Behavioral science brings insights about decision-making to design and introduces self-care options in a way that facilitates choices that are aligned with women's preferences and goals, whether that be self-care or traditional options. Thoughtful behavioral design of how women are introduced to options, what information is provided, how and when it is framed, and by whom it is shared can go a long way to ensure that expanded options lead to greater method satisfaction, rather than nudging women toward options that do not suit their needs.

Behavioral science could also **inform new self-care product development** that goes beyond contraceptive methods. For instance, newly married women often feel pressure to conceive immediately, before they are ready, to prove their fertility and demonstrate their "value" as wives. What if we developed new accurate, affordable fertility tests that allowed women to understand their own fertility and be able to use this information as they wished? This might make it more acceptable for couples to delay a first pregnancy, and could also counter myths by reassuring women that contraceptive methods do not cause infertility.



### **Behavioral science successes to build from**

**Insights from behavioral science have already been successfully used to guide informed choice and prompt consideration of method switching when methods do not meet a woman's needs.**

**It's now time to translate these insights and approaches to self-care.**

# Let's connect about behavioral science in SRH!

We believe that behavioral science has the power to catalyze outcomes across the SRH ecosystem. This paper intends to spark dialogue and conversation about the promise of behavioral science. Here are three simple ways you can take action today:

- **Share with others:** If the ideas in this piece excited you, share it with one other person!
- **Chat with us:** If you think we didn't hit the mark on one or more of our ideas, or just want to share your reactions, we'd love to hear from you. Please contact [gh@ideas42.org](mailto:gh@ideas42.org)
- **Partner with us:** If you want to work on bringing one of these ideas to life together, we'd love to explore with you. Please contact us at [gh@ideas42.org](mailto:gh@ideas42.org)

## About ideas42

At ideas42, our mission is to combat global inequality using behavioral science, which includes our work to reduce unintended pregnancies worldwide. We have worked with government agencies, communities, local and global non-profit organizations, and donors on more than 250 projects and have worked in more than 30 low- and middle-income countries. Our SRH solutions:

- **Reduce provider bias during contraceptive counselling,**
- **Encourage adolescent uptake of SRH services,**
- **Boost male engagement and joint decisions around contraceptive use,**

and tackle other barriers that inhibit women's choices and contribute to unintended pregnancies.

Despite these concrete successes, we're always striving to generate stronger impact with our work. Over the years, our innovative solutions have been inspired directly from the myriad of insights that we've gathered from the field, including through in-depth qualitative interviews with stakeholders such as postpartum women, married couples, adolescents, and health workers, among others. While these solutions directly address many of the challenges our work has identified, other challenges have remained more difficult to address within the status quo of our programming, funding, and activity streams. This prompted us to pause, question, and reflect on how we might do more in the SRH space. This paper is a result of that reflection.

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