

**ALiGN**

Advancing Learning and  
Innovation on Gender Norms



# **GENDER, POWER AND PROGRESS**

## **HOW NORMS CHANGE**

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## Credits

**Published by:** Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) and Overseas Development Institute (ODI), December 2020.

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Government of Canada (through Global Affairs Canada) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for their funding support for this publication.

Thanks to reviewers Nikki Van de Gaag, Suzanne Petroni, Arjan de Haan and Christina Kwauk.

## Suggested citation and permalink

Harper, C., Marcus, R., George, R., D'Angelo, S. and Samman, E. (2020) 'Gender, power and progress: How norms change'. London: ALIGN/ ODI ([www.alignplatform.org/gender-power-progress](http://www.alignplatform.org/gender-power-progress))

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# 1 Framing gender norm change: progress and patriarchy

## 1.1 Introduction

This report is about gender norms. It is about the ways in which gender equality, the rights linked to such equality and the norms that shape the ability to claim those rights, have progressed over time. It explores the pivotal role of gender norms – the implicit informal rules that most people accept and follow – in the progress, set-backs and stagnation of rights achievements. It examines how (and how far) gender norms have changed in the 25 years since the United Nations (UN) Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on women's rights was laid down in 1995.<sup>1</sup>

The report draws on four years of learning through ODI's Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) platform, a knowledge and learning hub on understanding the role of global gender norms in society and how these norms change. It also draws on insights from ALIGN's in-depth qualitative research with women in Nepal and Uganda, and their reflections on a lifetime of change (Harper et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2020). And it introduces new data analysis of progress on gender norm change over the past 25 years.

## 1.2 The timeframe and pattern of progress

We focus, in particular, on progress since the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women. This was a watershed moment for the global gender equality movement, bringing together advocates from all over the world to build a forward-looking agenda for women's rights.

Many dimensions of the global gender equality agenda have changed since 1995, including a much needed expansion beyond the explicit focus on 'women and girls' in Beijing to a wider view of 'gender equality', which spans the whole of society. Yet the 25th anniversary of Beijing is a welcome opportunity to reflect on the goals that were set there, and explore the extent to which norms have changed and lessons have been learned since the intention to accelerate action on women's rights were set down in Beijing. What we see is that, despite the progress made, discriminatory patriarchal norms still uphold power inequalities. They still limit the full realisation of human rights – understood as the rights that everyone possesses, on the basis of shared humanity, and regardless of gender.<sup>2</sup>

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1 See [www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing\\_Declaration\\_and\\_Platform\\_for\\_Action.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf)

2 Human rights, understood as the rights of all people by virtue of their humanity, and regardless of gender, have been at the heart of the philosophical traditions of many cultures and regions. Representatives from around the world participated in the drafting of many of the core human rights documents, including the foundational Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Women have played central roles in the development of the international human rights norms that formed the basis for the 1995 Beijing Conference. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was developed in collaboration with human rights advocates from around the world, a number of whom were also women (including Lebanon's Angela Jurdak, the Dominican Republic's Minerva Bernadino, and India's Hansa Mehta) (UN, 2020a). Their participation was important in ensuring more gender equal language and framings (Adami, 2019).

In his 2015 review of 20 years of progress since Beijing 1995, the UN Secretary-General commented: *‘Overall progress...has been unacceptably slow with stagnation and even regress in some contexts’*. Change towards gender equality *‘has not been deep enough; nor has it been irreversible’* (UN, 2015: 9). In 2019, UN Women’s Annual Report commented on critical gaps in progress towards the goals set in Beijing, noting that *‘around the world, over 2.5 billion women and girls suffer the consequences of discriminatory laws and gaps in legal protections’*, despite the lofty commitments made in Beijing and to UN human rights conventions. The Report also found that women’s lived experiences remain far from the goals set in Beijing for 12 critical areas (UN Women, 2019: 2).<sup>3</sup>

Gender norm change is an enigma in a world that applauds quick wins. Gender norms change, but the pace is often slow and is not always progressive: the influences on such change vary and the impact of specific actions is difficult to measure. Gender norms permeate society as Wilchins (2020) describes: *‘Norms are more like invisible “guard rails” that shape and narrow people’s thinking, behaviours, and opportunities. So, norms often show up as a kind of negative power, as absence rather than presence: doors that just didn’t open, choices that couldn’t be made, opportunities that just seemed out of reach’*.

In analysing norms, we may only be able to appreciate change when we look back over a long period of time. Those working for gender equality need patience and forbearance, as the change they want may not be achieved for their own generation or even over their lifetime.

In this report we explain why socially progressive change to advance gender equality is hard, and continues to be held back by patriarchal gender norms. But we also show that change happens nonetheless: moving slowly and erratically, with some backsliding, but often in the right direction over the long term.

We focus specifically on gender norms to clarify why and how these norms have become more central to the fight against inequality, poverty and injustice, and how we can steer new action for gender equality in a turbulent and crisis-ridden world. A new decade is under way as we write, bringing with it new commitments, ambitions and fears. Alongside hope, we see recent failures that threaten progress for gender equality and for women: among them, the ferocity of today’s backlash against hard-won gendered rights and the rise of populism worldwide, with its misogynist stance. We can add to these the failure to address a climate emergency that often hits women first and hardest, an apparent rise in violence against women and girls during the Covid-19 pandemic – as well as a greater burden of care responsibilities – and a number of stagnant or declining indicators on social progress and on gender equality.

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<sup>3</sup> The 12 critical areas of the 1995 Beijing Platform are: Women and poverty, education and training of women, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights of women, women and the media, women and the environment, and the girl child.

It is all too easy for the weight of these challenges to engender feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. But taking the long view reveals momentum. It is important to draw on this knowledge to push ahead with confidence. There are many things that can be done, collectively, to create the circumstances that make positive change possible. One professional woman in Uganda, for example, described Museveni's timely interventions as triggering political empowerment for herself and for her peers:<sup>4</sup> *'It was like opening a cage where the dog is caged all this time. When I got out I was unstoppable. I wanted to climb up a mountain and shout out to women... If not for Museveni in 1986 we would not have been able to move forward'* (Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 21). Working towards such moments underlies the ambition around action to change norms.

In this overview on progress we explain the 'patriarchal brake' (see conceptual framework) on norm change and progress, while illuminating what releases that brake to drive lasting change, aiming to support future work to recognise when and how to act.



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<sup>4</sup> There is continued debate about the extent and duration of such freedoms in Uganda, with some noting that it also required a tacit agreement about changed but continuing hegemonic masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Wyrod, 2008). Nevertheless, the freedoms women felt were real and pushed forward their capacity to organise and campaign for change.

### 1.3 Why an understanding of gender norms matters

Discriminatory gender norms are increasingly recognised by societies worldwide, with many engaged in work to address them. Gender norms and norm change now feature in the strategies and operational plans of many organisations and in the reporting requirements for donors. For example, when we examined a representative sample of 32 countries, we found that 24 addressed gender norms or related concepts in their most recent reports to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) (D'Angelo, 2020).

Understanding gender norms and how they operate is no longer an option – a ‘nice to have’. It is now recognised as vital to intensify and deepen both knowledge and action.

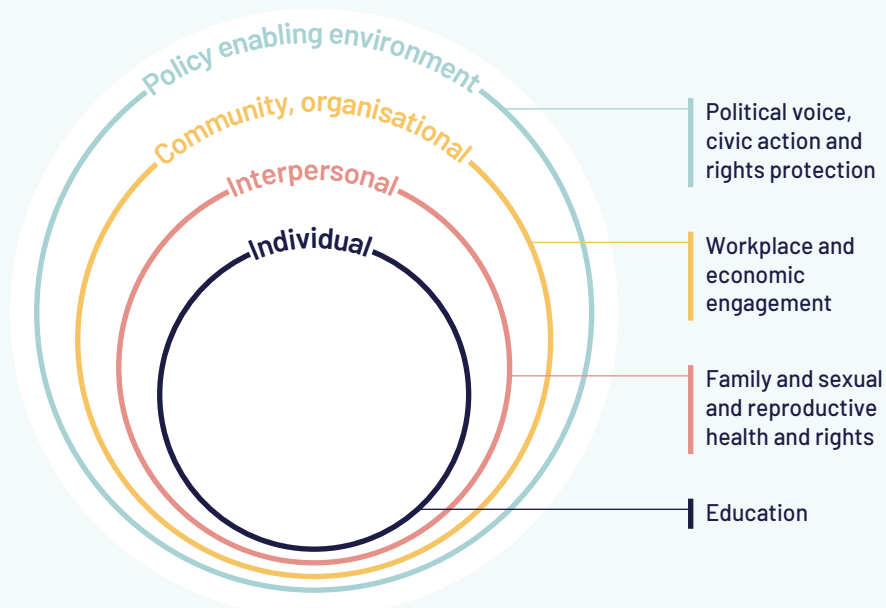
Our report identifies four key areas where it is crucial to shift norms if we are to achieve lasting change.

- First, *education*, which is critical for every other outcome, and has the potential to drive changes in norms across all other areas. This is the bedrock for development, supporting and continuously building human capacities and potential.
- Second, *sexual and reproductive health and rights*, an area where we are seeing the clearest push-back and where control over women's bodies has become a battleground for those who support and those who oppose the wider rights of women.<sup>5</sup> Sexual and reproductive health rights enable women in particular, and families as a whole, to make their own choices by controlling fertility and limiting family size, which further enables women to enter paid employment.
- Third, *women's paid and unpaid work*, which can be a stepping stone for their wider economic empowerment and helps to give them autonomy for their own life choices. The greater their economic autonomy, the more women are able to challenge other norms, leading step-by-step to progress on their political rights and their other rights as citizens.
- And finally, *women's political voice and representation*. Without these, women cannot vocalise their need for equality. They cannot fight for it, achieve it or sustain it.

There are many other factors that matter, but these four areas seem to be critical, as noted by many of those analysing progress on women's rights (including Goldin, 2006; Iregui-Bohórquez et al., 2020). These four factors also map onto the socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), a model that has been used across multiple sectors (Figure 1).

<sup>5</sup> As we have seen in 2020, control over women's bodily integrity is once again centre stage in global politics (for example, in Poland and the United States) (*New York Times*, 2020; Shotter and Majos, 2020).

Figure 1: Action on norms at different levels



Source: The authors, adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979).

### Box 1: A note on data sources

There are no comparative global trend data on gender and social norms. To draw out insights on changing norms from the early 1990s to the present day we use two main quantitative datasets: the World Values Survey<sup>6</sup> and the Demographic and Health Survey.<sup>7</sup> We examine changes in attitudes over time, as a proxy for changing injunctive norms.<sup>8</sup> Only the most recent wave of the World Value Survey, Wave 7, started to ask questions to probe norms directly by asking respondents about their perceptions of the behaviour expected in their communities. We present some data on perceived community perceptions of women working outside the home in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, the first two countries where such data was collected. We also draw on outcome data to provide a proxy for descriptive norms. The data are drawn from the World Development Indicators database and the database of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute of Statistics. Data on laws come from the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law.

These datasets allow analysts to disaggregate data by a number of variables, typically sex, age, rural/urban location, race and ethnicity,<sup>9</sup> and socio-economic status. However, none of the datasets collect data on sexual orientation or gender identity, and only Demographic and Health Surveys record data on disabilities in some countries. This limits our ability to present granular, disaggregated data. In addition, our analysis is constrained by a lack of data that goes back 25 years. The World Values Survey had data for some 50 countries in the mid 1990s and late 2010s at the time of writing, with higher income countries disproportionately represented.<sup>10</sup> DHS had data for at least two points in time for up to about 60 countries, depending on the variable – low- and lower middle-income countries predominate.

<sup>6</sup> [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp)

<sup>7</sup> [www.statcompiler.com/en](http://www.statcompiler.com/en)

<sup>8</sup> *Injunctive norms* are prescriptive (or *proscriptive*) rules specifying behaviour that persons ought (or ought not) to engage in. *Descriptive norms* are typical patterns of behaviour, generally accompanied by the expectation that people will behave according to the pattern.

<sup>9</sup> Because the data on race and ethnicity are country-specific, we opted not to use them in cross-national comparisons.

<sup>10</sup> The data for Wave 7 is not yet available for some countries as a result of the interruptions related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 1.4 Framing gender and norms

Before turning in more detail to gender norms, we need to outline a number of interlinked and important framing concepts. In this report we use patriarchy<sup>11</sup> – a structure of power relations – to explain a system of gendered oppression that does not benefit all men, but still favours the male grip on political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property and assets. Patriarchy shapes gender norms and supports the authority of gatekeepers who maintain norms. We recognise that patriarchy interacts with other systems to produce particular forms<sup>12</sup> of male domination and wider subjugation. Not all men uphold these power relations, support them or indeed benefit from them. At the same time, there are some women who do. We identify the presence of ‘patriarchal brakes’ on change that result from this system and hold back progress towards gender equality.

An understanding of intersectionality is critical to understanding the patriarchal system and gender norms in specific contexts, because there are multiple and overlapping systems of domination and oppression that are all working at the same time. The term ‘intersectional feminism’ was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to articulate what she described as ‘*a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other ... We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts*’ (Steinmetz, 2020: para. 2).

As Crenshaw explains, an intersectional approach shows how people’s social identities can overlap, creating experiences of discrimination that compound each other. Crenshaw also notes: ‘*We’ve got to be open to looking at all of the ways our systems reproduce these inequalities, and that includes the privileges as well as the harms*’ (UN Women, 2020: para. 18).

A focus on intersectionality, rather than dividing constituencies, has the potential to actually build coalitions among those who are most excluded from progress (Banerjee and Ghosh, 2018). It is important for the feminist and gender norm change communities to understand and contribute to this debate in the coming years, even though the debate itself is complex and culturally specific.

<sup>11</sup> From Millet’s *Sexual politics* (1970) to Manne’s *Down girl* (2018), the term ‘patriarchy’ has found favour, waned in usage and re-emerged. Debates have included questions about its universality, origins, links to capitalism, theoretical imperialism and importantly, its interaction with, and effect on, other forms of oppression. While moving in and out of favour, it has recently re-entered the lexicon, although critiqued for being ‘*a slogan and more of a rallying cry than an analytic tool*’ (Higgins, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Patriarchy is seen as one form of oppression and is, therefore, described as interacting in a unique way with other systems of domination to become part of a unique social order, with each context evolving its own different types of oppressive structures (Haslanger, 2020).

## 1.5 Bringing norms into focus

Social norms have been described as ‘the rules that determine behaviour and attitudes’, as ‘prejudices and values’, and as ‘codes of conduct and beliefs’. Most people agree that *social norms are the implicit and informal rules that the majority accept and follow*. Gender norms are a sub-set of these social norms and shape the way in which people of a particular gender are expected to behave, in a given social context (see Box 2 for a more detailed definition).

Gender norms that are shaped by patriarchy are reflected in behaviours and attitudes, such as ‘*women should stay at home and men should earn an income*’, ‘*men make better politicians than women*’, ‘*female genital cutting is required and is the way we do things here*’. They can put a brake on progress but, because they are invisible, that is not always obvious. They may, for example, be one reason why economies do not grow as fast as they could, why some women do not enter the workforce, why joining the labour force does not necessarily transform a woman’s social and economic status (Goldin and Katz, 2000), why women do not go to health clinics (even when health services improve), and why – despite all the proclamations that women can stand for public office – they often feel that they are not able to do so.

Even strong efforts to tackle the material manifestations of poverty and inequality may not bring the hoped-for returns if these efforts do not also focus on gender norms. Improved health services, for example, will only attract more women to clinics if the attitudes of health providers towards women also change. And quotas for women politicians will only change the face of parliaments if they go hand-in-hand with changes in attitudes towards the ability of women to lead, especially in finance and security. Providing greater incentives to encourage girls and boys to attend school (as many countries do) will only keep children there if they feel that their education is of good quality and improves their lives, and if gender-based violence within schools is addressed. Understanding these types of invisible brakes to progress illuminates where deeper engagement with more intractable issues may be needed.



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”

There was a growing focus on a more nuanced appreciation of social risks and vulnerabilities in the late 20th century, which also saw greater awareness and understanding of what Amartya Sen (2004: 37) termed '*comparative indifference*' to culture. This 'indifference' was found largely among more technocratic actors, who looked to free markets, science and technology to solve all of societies' problems, without necessarily appreciating the strong influence of social relations and power dynamics on social, political and economic transformation.

Often lumped under the heading of 'culture', these aspects of society were often seen as immutable and just 'the way we do things here'. Indeed, this attitude turns out to have far more influence on social progress and social justice than once thought. The rise of 'norms' within the agendas for social justice and economic transformation reflects an emerging understanding that 'culture matters', and that discriminatory and harmful norms hold back entire societies.

As we set out in this report, society as a whole suffers when, for example, children miss out on basic education and skills, when women do not enter the labour market, when they are unable to adequately control their fertility, and when their voice is absent from political debate and decision-making. The obvious question is: why don't we change? And the answer is we do, sometimes, but with great difficulty, often very slowly, and often with reversals and stagnation along the way.

## 1.6 Conceptualising and defining norms

Gender norms and social norms are conceptualised in different ways. In essence, one conceptualisation suggests that norms are found *at the societal level* – in rules, laws, conventions and institutions (such as in schools and religious codes) – and are then internalised and enacted by people through their behaviours, attitudes and expectations. This implies that approaches to norm change must work to change norms in these visible and invisible institutions and structures.

The other conceptualisation has tended to see norms as *existing in people's minds* (Cislaghi et al., 2018) and, therefore, as highly dependent for their survival on group approval or disapproval. Based on this understanding, action to change norms must work to change individual and group mindsets. The gender equality literature refers mainly to 'gender norms', while social psychology and behavioural economics refer mainly to 'social norms', although the terms often overlap as they can cover similar issues (given that so many social norms are gendered).

These two conceptualisations are starting to converge.<sup>13</sup> For example, approaches inspired by behavioural science once assumed, implicitly, that people were free to adopt new norms and behaviour, but they now have a growing focus on power dynamics and the institutions that constrain behaviour and norm change. People working on gender norms are also paying more attention to insights from behavioural science about how perceptions of what other people think and do influences what an individual thinks and does.

Norms are not habits: an important distinction. Unlike habits, such as public spitting, refusing to wear a seat belt or smoking, the ties that bind people to gender inequality rely on power, authority and control over others – factors that change, for the most part, only slowly. It is much more difficult to intervene to shift or 'nudge' gender-inequitable norms than to intervene to end a habit. Even if someone's personal attitudes to a norm do change, they may not necessarily be able to act on that change if they are still constrained by the views of other people and the institutions in their society.

Put simply, norm change strategies must work with individuals' hearts and minds and structures of society. Changing attitudes and behaviour requires people to not only *think* differently, but to genuinely *believe* in a change so that it commands action and long-term commitment. Similar changes in hearts and minds need to be embraced within societal structures and institutions to encourage and support both individual and society-wide change.

Throughout this report, we provide examples to demonstrate changes across a range of gender-related issues over the past 25 years. Before we do that, however, we examine how norms operate, and why they tend to change so slowly, to enhance understanding of the processes that drive change.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example: [www.alignplatform.org/about-norms](http://www.alignplatform.org/about-norms)

## Box 2: Norms, gender norms and gender systems

We draw on the definitions developed by Heise et al. (2019) in *The Lancet*, and as developed on the ALIGN Platform to describe our use of the following terms.

### Social norms

Social norms are the implicit and informal rules that most people accept and follow. They are influenced by our beliefs, economic circumstances and sometimes by the rewards and sanctions we might expect for either adhering to or disobeying them. Norms are embedded in formal and informal institutions and produced and reproduced through our social interactions. They only change when enough of us choose to act (or are compelled to act) in a different way, creating a new norm.

### Gender norms

Gender norms are a sub-set of social norms. They describe how we are expected to behave, in a given social context, as a result of our gender. Gender norms intersect with other norms related to our age, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity – among other factors – and the way in which we experience them. The best way to achieve norm change is, therefore, to recognise and address these intersections.

Gender norms often reflect and reinforce unequal gender relations, usually to the disadvantage of women and girls, but also to those men and boys who do not conform to the gender norms that prevail. They are generally understood as defining the expected behaviour of people who identify (or are identified by others) as male or female. They often erase non-binary or gender-fluid identities.<sup>14</sup>

### Gender

Gender refers to the culturally defined roles, responsibilities, attributes and entitlements associated with being male or female in a given setting, along with the power relations between

and among women and men, and boys and girls. The definitions and expectations of what it means to be a woman or girl, or a man or boy, and the sanctions for not adhering to those expectations, vary across cultures and over time, and often intersect with other factors, such as race, class, age and sexual orientation.

### Gender system

A gender system refers to the structures, social relations and processes that define males and females as different in ways that are socially significant and justify inequality on the basis of that difference. Each society creates and maintains a system where women and men are assigned different tasks, roles and social positions. Most existing gender systems consider things that are seen as male/masculine as superior to those deemed female/feminine.

### Gender equality

Gender equality is the concept that all human beings, regardless of their sex or gender identity, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices within the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles, or discrimination. Gender equality means that the different behaviour, aspirations and needs of males, females and people of other gender identities are considered, valued and favoured equally. It does not mean that women and men become 'the same', but that the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals do not depend on whether they were born male or female.

### Gender equity

Gender equity is the process of being fair to women and men, boys and girls. To ensure fairness, measures must be taken to compensate for the cumulative economic, social and political disadvantages that prevent women and men, and boys and girls, from enjoying a level playing field.

Source: Adapted from Heise et al. (2019).

<sup>14</sup> [www.alignplatform.org/about-norms](http://www.alignplatform.org/about-norms)

## 1.7 Norm change and norm maintenance

Where norms appear to change quickly it may be that we are simply witnessing one galvanising moment – a final trigger at the end of a very long process of change. The introduction of the contraceptive pill in Europe and North America, for example, seemed pivotal in effecting changes in long-held norms around female sexuality and control of fertility, and indeed this technology was a vital part of the change process. In fact, family size had been falling since the early 20th century, but ‘the pill’ enabled millions of women to enter the workforce and higher education, confident that they would not have to leave again at any moment if they became pregnant. The number of so-called ‘shotgun weddings’ as a result of unexpected pregnancy fell in the US and analysts suggest *‘the pill directly and immediately lowered the costs to women of engaging in long-term career investments by giving them almost complete certainty and safety regarding the pregnancy consequences of sexual activity’* (Goldin and Katz, 2000: 461). The pill allowed them to plan for careers at an early stage of their schooling as part of a normal educational process, and they were taken more seriously by institutions of education and employment (Birdsall and Chester, 1987).

Even so, access to the pill in many countries, mostly in Europe and North America, was part of a process that was already well underway. This was characterised by a whole array of actions and achievements, a resurgence of feminism, legal change on the age of consent, the civil rights movement, legalisation of abortion, and powerful social movements pushing for all kinds of reform. All of this provided an environment and policy context that was ripe for significant norm change around women’s expected roles and activities, including their right to control their own fertility.

In many countries, as we will see, the lack of access to contraception remains a huge problem, limiting women’s efficacy in many other areas. In general, falling fertility rates have gone hand-in-hand with a rise in access to and use of contraception. There have been similar trends for adolescents: statistics show a steady fall in adolescent fertility rates, and delays in sexual activity or child and early forced marriage. These trends have been accompanied by shifting norms around women’s roles as wives and mothers, and an increasing number of men taking on domestic responsibilities that go beyond that of being the family breadwinner (Van der Gaag et al., 2019).

General trends, however, mask significant differences by region, age, location and socio-economic level. Rates of fertility and unmet needs for contraceptive use, for example, remain high in sub-Saharan Africa, where progress has been slow (UN, 2020b). For older adolescents (those aged 15 to 18) childbearing has remained stagnant (UNICEF, 2019). Women and girls from rural and poorer households are still more likely to marry early, have unmet needs for family planning, give birth earlier, and have more children (Asif and Pervaiz, 2019; Solomon et al., 2019; Tadele et al., 2019).

## 1.8 Patriarchy and norm maintenance

Most norms take decades or generations to change. What's more, they do not always change in the way we expect, or at the same pace. Some norms are 'sticky', changing slowly, and only to be replaced by other norms that have similar outcomes. The manner in which change happens is, therefore, highly varied and the results can be better or mixed, especially in the short term.

Norms are maintained through what the sociologist Bourdieu called 'doxa' (1990): the gradual socialisation of people into gendered norms through everyday practice, until certain practices are beyond questioning and their outcomes – such as the domestic servitude of women and girls, the lack of voice for women in politics, or the importance of maintaining virginity – become the norm. The universality of doxa is a useful concept to grasp.

A patriarchal system that maintains gender norms through male privilege is so widely prevalent that this apparently 'natural' order is almost everyone's doxa to some extent. Alongside this wider social order, specific social expectations around marriage, motherhood and caring roles for women translate into key markers of adult femininity and are understood as 'normal'. The same holds for the social expectations that a man will be the 'provider' and the pressure on a man to 'be strong'. Over time, these assumed 'natural' roles create worldviews that guide the individual behaviour and attitudes that are seen as appropriate, a process described by Bourdieu (1984) as 'habitus': patterns of behaviour created and held in place by individuals and group structures.

These patterns may not be negative, but when a norm causes harm it needs to change. When women politicians are met with misogynistic violence, for example, or when girls or those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) are bullied or maligned for entering the perceived hyper-masculine space of the armed forces, or when boys are mocked for aspiring to perceived feminine roles or professions, it is because they are seen as being 'out of place' and operating outside the 'natural order'.

**Most norms take decades or generations to change. What's more, they do not always change in the way we expect, or at the same pace.**



When we understand that norms are embedded, normalised and enforced through the institutions and individuals holding power in society, we can see how this authority regarding appropriate attitudes and behaviours becomes embedded into religious or moral world views (Durkheim, 1912).

One effect in relation to women and girls is a world view that translates into ideas of purity and shame. These ideas operate as levers of control, with the fear of transgressing moral codes keeping women and girls out of the workplace and school and reducing the power of their voice through attitudes and actions that are controlling and critical. Douglas (1966) ascribes this to our strong human urge to construct patterns of order as a way to combat disorder and to explain and contain a world that is so complex. Where women's chastity comes to embody family honour itself, it promotes censure, gossip or even gender-based violence in response to any transgression. This sexual double standard has hugely damaging effects, rationalising gender-based violence and exposing hyper-masculine<sup>15</sup> men to risks as a result of risk-taking behaviours or preferences (Heise et al., 2019).

Both women and men uphold or even demand the maintenance of norms that are profoundly unequal. These norms are not, however, unalterable. Our efforts (often unsuccessful) to contain an unpredictable world help to explain the stop-start nature of change processes and the prevalence of sticky norms. However, they also explain the long-term changes and successes that are under way. As women push against the boundaries presented by norms, contradictions emerge, as the so-called 'guardians of morality' (the gatekeepers) try to hold back change. As the eminent anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote in 1966, *'perhaps all social systems are built on contradiction, in some sense "at war with themselves"'* (1966: 140).

As a result there are multiple ambiguities in the way people experience norms, identified by ALIGN research as the: *'sense of chaos, with which the leaders, the guardians of ethnic and religious values ..., are struggling, in the face of larger forces of socio-economic and cultural change, their authority challenged as cultural control and the power of sanctions are lost'* (Harper et al., 2018: 192).

As change happens, these changed norms may be incorporated into new frames of reference, and new cultural codes of what is permissible. We take two steps forward, and one (or occasionally two) steps back, but there is still forward momentum.

Patriarchal norms are, ultimately, a failing brake on progressive societal change. Sometimes the brake holds for a while, but eventually – and in most contexts – it gives way a little, allowing slow movement forward. As one Ugandan respondent noted in relation to her brideprice: *'I think it's "crap" because you can't put a price on someone when you get down to it'*, capturing very neatly a 'cultural unravelling' and a norm that is giving way (Harper et al., 2020: 14).

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<sup>15</sup> 'Hyper-masculinity' is a term for the exaggeration of male stereotypical behaviour, such as an emphasis on physical strength, aggression and sexuality.

## 1.9 Do gender norms explain the direction, drivers and pace of change?

The naturalisation of norms, as we have outlined, helps to explain why, for example, ‘care’ is seen as women’s work, and why some people find it unthinkable that a man would stay at home to look after children, or take responsibility for the home economy. It also helps to explain why some men do not allow their wives to take on paid work outside the household or community, or their daughters to board away from home to complete secondary education. The translation of these attitudes and practices into the realm of ideas, and conversely the translation of such ideas into everyday practice, shows that this is not about people choosing to comply. Rather, it is about norms that are, until questioned, seen as part of a natural order.

Heise and Manji (2016) point to sanctions that reinforce norms and that, in effect, punish those who dare to challenge them. Norms are maintained both by lack of awareness that they are norms and by fear of social disapproval, gossip, violence or ostracism or, conversely, by reward for compliance. However, much work to change norms has revealed that, when deeply questioned, identified norms are not actually as ‘normal’ as claimed. Sometimes people really want to change, as shown by work on female genital cutting (UNICEF, 2013). So-called ‘pluralistic ignorance’ has been identified by researchers exploring attitudes and behaviours towards this practice, to refer to a situation where people personally do not approve of a norm but adhere to it anyway because they believe – falsely – that others approve (Miller et al., 2000; Yanovitzky and Rimal, 2006).

Change causes fractures in social relations that take time to heal and be absorbed and can face strong resistance. Giving up power and privilege is a challenge, particularly where one party gains considerably from the status quo. However, changed norms – particularly at an individual level – can also benefit those who have tried to maintain the original norms. Men who are perceived as ‘less masculine’ in terms of avoiding risky behaviour (behaviour that is often seen as hyper-masculine) are less likely to die early and more likely to live healthier lives (Heise et al., 2019). Men who have felt compelled to exert violent control over their families will benefit from changes in their own behaviour, and men who take on care roles report huge benefits of doing so (Van der Gaag et. al, 2019).

## 1.10 Change the norm or change the system?

The patriarchal authority described in this report is part of the wider exercise of power<sup>16</sup> and control within society. The profound resistance of patriarchal systems to change is attributed to often millennia-long traditions of female exclusion.<sup>17</sup> While women endeavour to break into seats of power, some suggest that *'you cannot fit women into a structure that is already coded as male. You have to change the structure. That means thinking about power differently. It means decoupling it from public prestige. It means thinking collaboratively about the power of followers, not just the leaders. It means, above all, thinking about power as an attribute or a verb ("to power") not as a possession'* (Beard, 2017: 87).

Just as Beard notes that you cannot fit women into a *'structure coded as male'*, Crenshaw (1989: 140) also notes that problems of social exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. She suggests that *'the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating "women's experience" or "the Black experience" into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast'*. Elsewhere, actors use an historical and intersectional lens, recognising the contexts and long histories of violence and systematic discrimination in countries as diverse as Guatemala, Brazil, Peru, Samoa and Thailand, which have created *'deep inequities that disadvantage some from the outset and results in impacts that extend across generations. ... [F]ighting for equality means not only turning the tables on gender injustices, but rooting out all forms of oppression. It [intersectional feminism] serves as a framework through which to build inclusive, robust movements that work to solve overlapping forms of discrimination, simultaneously'* (UN Women, 2020: para. 7 and 12).

The maintenance of patriarchal power is not, therefore, the only faultline that explains why some norms persist and others change. A focus on norms as *'natural'* helps us to understand their stickiness and resistance to change but cannot obscure the other economic and institutional factors that also underpin gender inequalities. Patriarchal systems combine with other systems of control and oppression, and norms that give power and authority to particular individuals and groups generate an undeniable practical interest in favour of maintaining them. However, too strong a focus on the reluctance of these individuals and groups to change their worldviews and their determination to maintain the patriarchal status quo also risks overlooking some systemic barriers, such as grinding material poverty, lack of services and infrastructure, and shocks and crises, which are all critical factors that contribute to gendered inequalities.

Patriarchy, practical interests and other systems of oppression and discrimination work in combination to uphold norms and, when added to crisis, deprivation and geographic disadvantage, conspire to slow down progress towards social justice. These factors are interlinked, which makes it essential to work on all fronts at once. Supportive and transformative social, political, economic and legal environments are vital for any norm change, while norm change, in turn, enhances progress in the other areas to create a virtuous spiral of change (see conceptual framework).

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<sup>16</sup> Power in social relations has been subject to a mass of critique that spans multiple disciplines and goes well beyond the scope of this report to review (Foucault, 1980 and 1995; Giddens, 1984; Connell, 1987; Chowdhry and Nair, 2002; Lombardo and Meir, 2009). Within the so-called *'development'* and social justice space, a history of power analysis (Gaventa, 2009) and power ladders (Arnstein, 1969) have been adapted and modified to understand how power operates with different groups and individuals.

<sup>17</sup> Drawing on classical Greek and Roman antiquity, and therefore an acknowledged western view of women's positionality (Beard, 2017).

## 1.11 Removing the patriarchal brakes – a new conceptual framework

Context matters, and hugely. What drives change in gender norms is specific to each context, with, for example, specific action for economic justice varying from specific action for political voice. There are, however, broad instruments, services and enablers of norm change that are common across sectors and places that can, if they are sensitive to gender norms, have a real impact. We see them as follows: legal protections, improvements in services and infrastructure, the foundational role of education, community mobilisation, social movements, the use of mass and social media, programmes for sensitisation and behaviour change, and removing financial barriers or providing financial incentives.

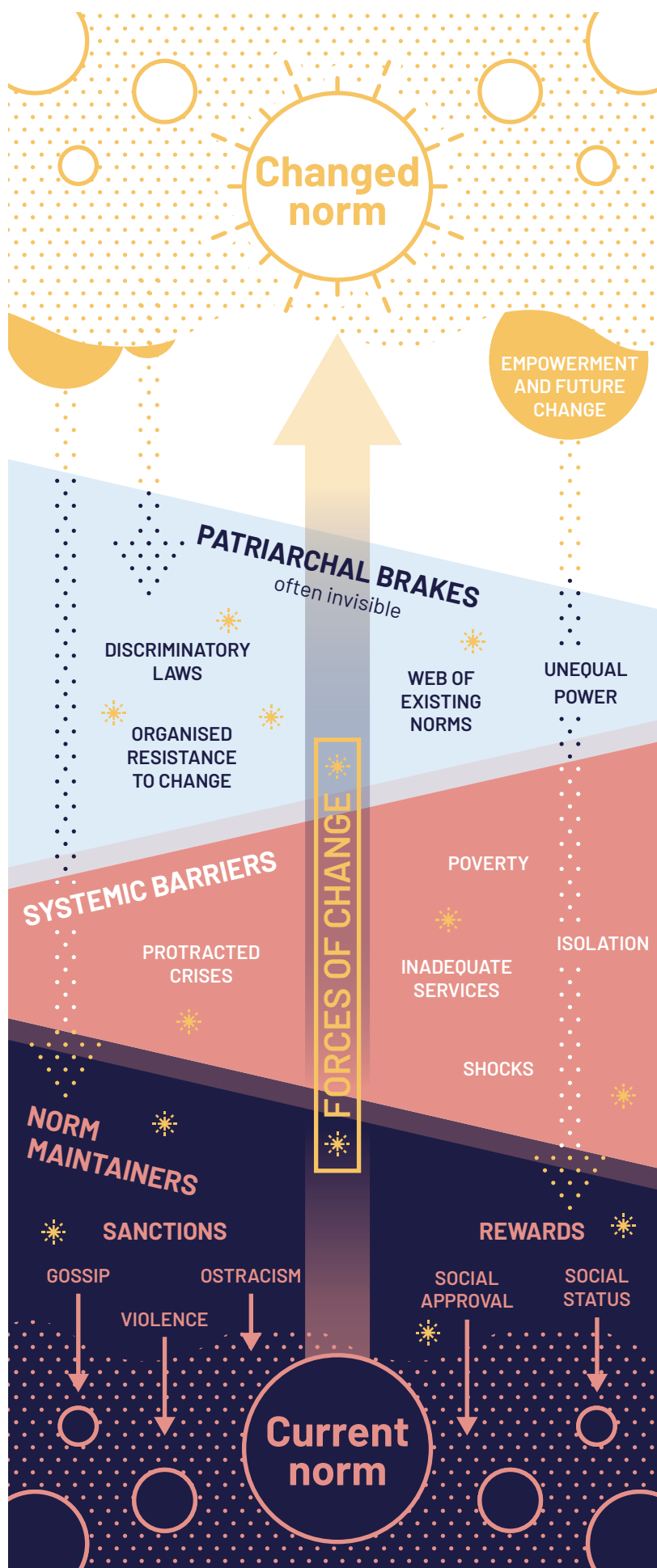
Legal protections can include, for example, advances in protecting women by law from physical and sexual violence at the hands of their partners; service improvements can include addressing the judgmental attitudes of health providers in order to allow women to feel comfortable in addressing their needs; educational advances can include the promotion of egalitarian gender norms among students in both textbooks and teaching; social movement activity can be hugely influential and includes pressure groups for change in women's employment status and pay, sexual and reproductive health rights and safety from violence; financial incentives can include, for example, cash payments for school attendance which have helped to normalise education for girls. These are just a few examples of effective drivers and forces of change.

A new conceptual framework emerges from our research, as shown in Figure 2. This maps out a path from a current norm to a changed norm – a path that recognises and overcomes the invisible, as well as visible, barriers to change.

Our conceptual framework recognises the resistance that must be overcome if norms are to change. This resistance includes the individual sanctions or rewards that encourage the maintenance of norms. Changing norms also means uprooting or defying unseen laws, codes of conduct, imposed moralities and resistance that is sometimes highly organised – all of which maintain patriarchal authority. These are not the only barriers, however. Norm change can also falter as a result of shocks and crises, physical isolation and grinding poverty.

Where norms start to change, this can act as a trigger for change in other areas, creating a virtuous cycle. A family, for example, may overcome attitudes that a girl should marry instead of going to secondary school. They defy what may be seen as normal, and either disregard or overcome the sanctions imposed locally, such as gossip or being ostracised. They may even have to overcome the active harassment of their daughter in school. But if they prevail in the face of these challenges, and if they also overcome barriers, such as income poverty or a crisis, then this can generate small shifts in attitudes about a girl's education, and coupled with the benefits to the educated girl herself, can eventually influence further norm change in her community.

Figure 2: A conceptual framework: a path from a current norm to a changed norm



■ **Patriarchal brakes:** often invisible gender-biased norms, values and stereotypes that uphold male power and privilege. They include norms allocating care work primarily to women or stereotypes that women are less capable than men. Gender norms often intersect with other forms of identity-based discrimination, creating additional obstacles for marginalised groups. Discriminatory laws and practices and organised resistance to change are among the forces maintaining these brakes.

■ **Systemic barriers:** aspects of a person's environment and particular context that limit norm change. These include: economic, environmental, security, service- and infrastructure-related factors.

□ **Forces of change:** includes enacting and enforcing stronger legal protections against violations of gender-based rights; enabling school attendance and enhancing the quality of education; improving services and infrastructure to address gender gaps in access and social support; removing financial barriers to empowerment (e.g. enabling women to engage in work, education, politics); supporting social movements and engaging powerful and widespread institutions (e.g. religious bodies, parliaments and workplaces) to support and act on change; the spread of new norms through mass and social media; and the implementation of behaviour change programmes. These actions help drive norm change across all types of brakes, maintainers and barriers.

■ **Norm maintainers:** the processes that maintain and reproduce a norm. These include sanctions for deviation from what is perceived as normal, as well as rewards for compliance. Violence and ostracism (shunning) individuals act as widespread sanctions against change. Social rewards include enhanced social status and inclusion.

Source: The authors.

Making the invisible visible allows us to understand that additional doors need to be opened, and that additional choices and opportunities must be made available to release the patriarchal brakes on progress. It is challenging to attempt to change something that is largely invisible, but when a norm is transformed it feeds back in a virtuous loop to reinforce changes in attitudes and behaviours across every area. A gender-sensitive politician, for example, will aim to provide gender-safe workplaces and educational spaces, recognising that embedded attitudes may allow unsafe spaces or discriminatory policies and practices to dominate in institutional settings. Changed attitudes to women's double workloads will lead to a prioritising of state-supported care services, recognising that the lack of attention for this area undermines women's progress, and will enable women to enter and remain in both the workplace and education. And an education system with gender-sensitive teachers and curricula will allow young people to grow up with gender-equitable values.

Each of the following sections discuss common drivers of change and context-specific change factors. Each area also examines change over time, but also the brakes that have slowed or even reversed progress. We hope that this report positions norms as an explanation for slow progress, alongside other factors and systems of exclusion, such as inequalities of class and race and ability, and systemic barriers such as material deprivation, crises and geographic disadvantages. But we also hope that it positions norm change as critical for lasting progress, by showing where specific drivers and forces of norm change have had a major impact.

**Making the invisible visible allows us to understand that additional doors need to be opened, and that additional choices and opportunities must be made available to release the patriarchal brakes on progress.**

**”**



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## 2 Education and gender norms: the bedrock of change

### KEY POINTS

- *Education drives progress* towards more equal gender norms through exposure to new knowledge and ideas and by fostering new skills such as critical thinking, communication and collaboration. Good quality, empowering education can transform the lives of individuals and help to build more gender-equitable societies.
- *The global gender gap in access to education* has narrowed over the past 25 years, with a more rapid increase in the proportion of girls than boys attending school at all levels. Though norms that prioritise the education of boys over that of girls have weakened, discriminatory gender norms continue to act as a ‘patriarchal brake’ that limits access and learning, particularly for girls in rural areas in low-income countries and households.
- There is evidence that *discriminatory norms reassert themselves in a crisis*. While reliable data are not yet available, the Covid-19 pandemic, like other pandemics and economic shocks, is expected to lead to a sharp increase in the number of girls who do not go back to schools when they re-open.
- At present, *education is not living up to its full potential* to drive change in gender norms. Even before Covid-related school closures, 258 million children of school age (with roughly equal numbers of girls and boys) were still out of school, and too few students have the chance to develop the key knowledge and skills that underpin norm change. Indeed, the ‘hidden curriculum’ of many schools reinforces rather than challenges discriminatory gender norms.
- For education to live up to its potential, *action is needed in the following four priority areas*:
  - continued investment in access to schools and elimination of cost barriers
  - major improvements in the quality of education and more attention to a wider range of knowledge and skills
  - institutionalising gender-equitable curricula, school environments, learning materials and teaching
  - eradicating violence and discrimination from all educational institutions.

## 2.1 Introduction

At its best, education can be transformative for individuals and for societies. For decades, study after study has shown that girls' education is one of the most critical investments any society can make: as a driver of economic growth, of improved child health and nutrition and of gender equality. For individual girls and women, secondary and higher education is linked to higher living standards, greater voice in household decision-making and higher levels of engagement in political leadership.<sup>18</sup> The evidence is clear that it is secondary and post-secondary education, in particular, that drive change, and that a primary education alone is rarely enough to do so (Marcus and Page, 2016; Wodon et al., 2018a).

Education also helps to change gender norms. In every part of the world, and among both men and women, support for inequitable norms dwindles as education levels rise.<sup>19</sup> The positive effects of education emerge as students develop new knowledge and skills, are exposed to a more diverse range of peers (particularly at secondary schools and in urban multi-ethnic contexts), and acquire a greater sense of empowerment and self-confidence. But this is not automatic, and education systems, individual schools and teachers can either contribute to, or slow down, these processes of change.

Given its potential to emancipate people, societal attitudes towards education, and in particular education for girls, have often been ambivalent. On the one hand, individuals and societies value education as a route to economic advancement, the status that comes with knowledge and skills learnt through school, and – for girls – often the perceived potential of education to make them better wives and mothers. Families often make huge sacrifices to enable children – both girls and boys – to obtain an education. On the other hand, in more overtly patriarchal societies, there is a concern that educated women will destabilise the social order by challenging accepted gender norms too profoundly. As one professional woman who took part in ALIGN's research in Uganda observed:

*'if there is instability in terms of social/family structures, women who have gone to school are seen as destabilising social norms. They call us educated women "marriage breakers" because we refuse to hand over our salaries to men'* (Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 36).



**In every part of the world, and among both men and women, support for inequitable norms dwindles as education levels rise.**

<sup>18</sup> Studies that discuss the relationship between girls' education and economic growth include Klasen (2002) and King and Hill (1993) to mention just a few. Recent studies that have documented the economic returns to education for women include: Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) and Wodon et al. (2018a). Mensch et al. (2019) summarise the evidence on girls' and women's education and child health, while Sperling and Winthrop (2016) do so for women's decision-making and political leadership.

<sup>19</sup> Studies that find a positive relationship between education and changing gender norms include: Barker et al. (2011), El Feki et al. (2017), Lusey et al. (2018) and Aktakke et al. (2019).

Opposition or ambivalence towards girls' education also reflects a web of other gendered norms. This web includes, for example, the importance of chastity and the fear of damage to girls' reputation if they become pregnant, a risk magnified by attending school by increasing their unsupervised mobility, their mixing with boys, and the risk of sexual assault while at, or travelling to and from school. These norms form 'patriarchal brakes' that intersect with the systemic barriers of the cost of and lack of access to schooling to limit educational opportunities and progress.

A far greater proportion of the world's boys and girls now gain at least some primary and secondary education than they did in 1995: no mean feat given simultaneous population growth. Combined enrolment rates across primary and secondary education have increased from 77% in 1995 to 89% in 2018, with girls' enrolment rates rising at almost double the rate for boys (17 and 9 percentage points for primary and secondary education respectively). Indeed, the most recent data show that there are now slightly more boys than girls out of school worldwide, at all levels other than primary education.<sup>20</sup> Today's disparities in school enrolment and completion are not generally based on gender alone, but they are fuelled by intersecting inequalities, such as country and household income level, geographical location and disability. And in the poorest countries and households, and particularly in rural areas, girls still account for three-quarters of children who never enrol (UNESCO, 2020). Box 3 summarises trends and the remaining inequalities in access to education.

As this cohort of young people moves into adulthood, we would expect increased education to be driving change in gender norms. But the evidence is mixed. In this chapter we explore how far education is contributing to change in gender norms, what is facilitating change, and what is preventing education living up to its promise. We focus on formal education, and on primary and secondary education, the two levels of education systems that reach the greatest numbers. And we outline what education that catalyses shifts to more equitable gender norms could look like.

<sup>20</sup> Calculations based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics 'Gross enrolment ratio, primary and secondary' indicator and 'Out-of-school rate for children, adolescents and youth of primary and secondary school age, female/male (%)'.

### Box 3: Progress and remaining gender gaps in access to formal education

While gender gaps in access to education have narrowed rapidly over the past 25 years (UNESCO, 2020), the patterns of progress are more complex than they were in 1995, when girls were disadvantaged at every level and across most regions. Today, poor girls are still more likely to be excluded from education in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, while poor boys are less likely to enrol in many countries in Latin American and the Caribbean and in Southeast Asia (UNESCO, 2018a).

In low-income countries, 35% of school-age girls and 30% of school-age boys are not enrolled, with levels particularly low in rural areas.<sup>21</sup> Only 2% of the poorest girls in low-income countries complete upper-secondary school (ibid.). By contrast, gender gaps in high- and middle-income countries frequently favour girls and women, particularly at upper-secondary and tertiary level (UNESCO, 2020).

For certain groups of children, additional barriers intersect with discriminatory gender norms and result in far lower participation rates. In Ethiopia, for example, only 4% of children with disabilities are enrolled in school, with boys outnumbering girls three to one in lower primary school (Plan International et al., 2020). Boys with disabilities have seen particularly slow growth in their primary and secondary completion rates (Wodon et al., 2018b). Meanwhile, adolescent refugee girls are only half as likely to enrol in secondary school as their male counterparts.<sup>22</sup>

Gender gaps in learning outcomes have also narrowed since the early 1990s (UNESCO, 2020). They are usually smaller than the gaps between countries,<sup>23</sup> and between socio-economic groups. Girls now outperform boys in literacy in many countries, though that gap is diminishing (OECD, 2019); gender gaps in maths and science have also narrowed; and the direction of the remaining gaps varies between regions.

One thing that has not changed, however, is that gendered learning gaps still tend to be largest among the most disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2020). And the absence of a substantial learning gap is no guarantee that the quality of education is high. By the age of 10, for example, 90% of children in low-income countries still cannot read with comprehension, compared with only 9% in high-income countries (Azevedo et al., 2020). In 2016 the Education Commission estimated that over 70% of all school-age children in low- and middle-income countries would reach adulthood without gaining basic secondary-level skills (Education Commission, 2016).

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<sup>21</sup> Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics most recent available data ‘Out-of-school rate for children, adolescents and youth of primary and secondary school age, female/male (%)’.

<sup>22</sup> [www.unhcr.org/herturn](http://www.unhcr.org/herturn)

<sup>23</sup> <https://education-progress.org>

## 2.2 How and why have gender norms around education changed over the past 25 years?

The international movement towards universal primary education and, more recently, secondary education, has spurred action to close gender gaps. In line with commitments to international laws and policy frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals, many countries have expanded the scope of mandatory education. Turkey, for example, extended compulsory education from five to eight years in 1997 and the resulting increases in enrolment were particularly high for rural girls in the provinces with the greatest gender disparities (World Bank, 2012).

As part of commitments to universal education, many countries have increased public expenditure on education substantially, increasing the supply of schools and teachers and abolishing fees or introducing targeted cash transfers (based on geography, gender or income).<sup>24</sup> Overall, these investments have helped to reduce the barriers presented by cost and distance. In Bangladesh, for example, the expansion of primary and secondary education has *‘tapped the latent demand among families of girls, which has existed despite what seem to be conservative norms and values. Once the impact of education on girls and communities became apparent, this fuelled further demand’* (Blunch and Bordia Bas, 2015: 191). Together these ‘supply-side measures’ have helped to normalise girls’ school attendance and close gender gaps (Schuler, 2007).

Specific laws and policies that promote gender equality in education – such as allowing girls to return to school after a pregnancy – or tackling barriers like child marriage, have also played a role. By 2020, 50% of countries had educational inclusion laws that covered gender equality explicitly, and 71% of countries had education policies targeted at gender equality (UNESCO, 2020). The introduction of such policies often reflects a combination of advocacy by feminist organisations and leadership by politicians with a strong commitment to girls’ education (Rose et al., 2020), both signalling a wider commitment to dismantle gender-based barriers to education.

As Chapter 4 discusses in more detail, the expansion of work opportunities for women with secondary education has combined with girls’ own desire to pursue education to change family perceptions about the value of girls’ education. This has contributed to a greater willingness to support daughters through secondary education, and increasingly into tertiary education (Jensen, 2012; Heath and Jayachandran, 2016). In a study of the drivers of girls’ increased school enrolment in Bangladesh, Heath and Mobarak (2014) estimate that the growth of jobs in the garment industry has been instrumental in encouraging girls of primary-school age to stay in school, though it has increased drop-out among those old enough to work in the sector.

<sup>24</sup> On average, between 2002 and 2016, ‘developing country partners’ of the Global Programme for Education (primarily low- and lower middle-income countries) increased domestic expenditure on education from 14.9% to 16.9% of total government expenditure, and from 2.8% to 3.5% of GDP (GPE, 2018).



Indeed, as we discuss in Chapter 2, norms around the value of education and work – for young people of any gender – respond quickly, and both positively and negatively – to local labour market conditions. Broader empowerment measures, such as legal guarantees of gender equality, have also helped to shift perceptions about future life paths for girls and the value of their education. In India, for example, legislation that grants land inheritance rights to women as well as men, and quotas that have increased female representation in elected positions, have been associated with girls staying in school for longer (Beaman et al., 2012; Deininger et al., 2013).

One window on shifting norms around girls' and boys' education comes from World Values Survey data. These show that attitudes towards university education for boys and girls have become more equitable since the mid-1990s in 40 of the 48 countries for which there are data.<sup>25</sup> In the mid-1990s, 26% of men and 23% of women said that they considered university more important for boys than girls. By the late 2010s, the figures had fallen to 21% and 16% respectively (Figure 3). The residual support for prioritising boys' education is surprising, given that women outnumber men at university in all except low-income countries.

*'The value of the girl child has changed and there are now more options for her than just marriage. Higher education is also possible – at university the student body is now 50% female'*

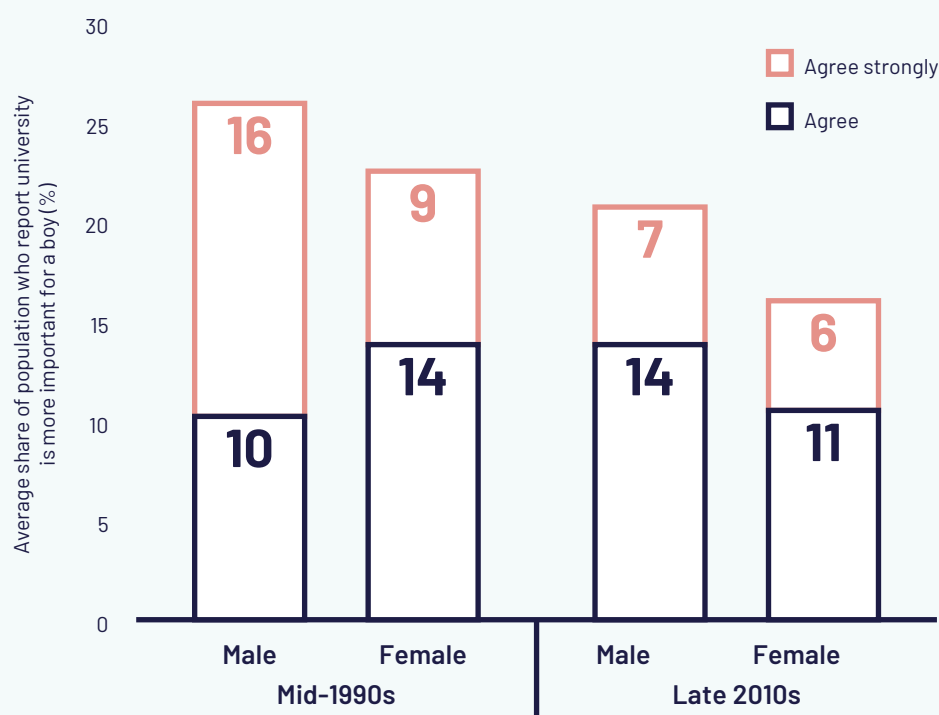
Professional woman in her 30s, Uganda, (Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 26).

<sup>25</sup> Attitudes became markedly more egalitarian (by 10 percentage points or more) in 24 of the 48 countries, and markedly less egalitarian in only 2 (Author analysis).

Although younger age groups tend to have more gender egalitarian attitudes towards university education than older cohorts (one-quarter of those aged 18–49 and one-third of over 50s agreed that university was more important for boys than girls), the two older age cohorts showed the greatest shift to egalitarian views between the two waves of the World Values Survey. That said, in countries where attitudes have become less egalitarian (e.g. Pakistan and South Africa), these shifts have been driven by younger cohorts. This unexpected finding may reflect a loss of faith in the power of education among younger people, or a reinvigorated perception that home-making is a viable life path for women, which does not require higher education.

Overall, our findings are consistent with the qualitative evidence from over 4,000 people in 20 countries presented in the World Bank’s study of changing gender norms. This concluded that *‘despite diverse barriers, both boys and girls are staying in school longer than previous generations, and the overwhelming embrace of education is causing deeply engrained norms to slowly relax and bend’* (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012: 97).

**Figure 3: Discriminatory attitudes towards girls' university education across 48 countries by gender**



Source: Author analysis based on World Values Survey Wave 3 (1995–1998) and Wave 7 (2017–2020), except for India, South Africa, Ukraine and Uruguay, for which ‘late 2010s’ refers to Wave 6 (2010–2014).

## 2.3 Education as a driver of change in gender norms

### Enabling factors

The significant increases in the proportion of young people in education outlined in the previous section could underpin a notable change in gender norms. Here we outline a framework that classifies the main ways in which education can underpin change in gender norms (Figure 4). This draws on and develops ideas presented in ALIGN’s *Guide to education and gender norms* (Marcus, 2018a) and the frameworks for empowering education outlined by Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016) and Kwauk and Braga (2017). It is intended as a model that shows the possible levers of change. We will discuss the systemic barriers and patriarchal brakes on education systems that can both reinforce and contribute to transformation in gender norms in the next sub-section.

### New knowledge and ideas

New knowledge and ideas that students encounter through the curriculum can challenge their ideas about gender differences, roles and stereotypes. For example, they may learn about menstruation, sex and reproduction and consent, challenging taboos and misconceptions through biology, health sciences or personal and social relationships education (Marcus, 2018a). Integrating gender equality into school curricula is a Sustainable Development Goal 4 target (UNESCO, 2016), and the limited evidence that exists indicates that this is having some positive impacts on attitudes and behaviour (Russell, 2016). By exposing students to wider horizons, education can raise students’ future aspirations, for example, to a job or a career, or to work in a field considered suitable only for people of a particular gender (Marcus and Page, 2016).

Figure 4: Routes to norm change through education



Source: The authors, drawing on Marcus (2018a), Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016) and Kwauk and Braga (2017).

Teachers who have examined their own gender biases critically and are making a conscious effort to challenge them are best placed to catalyse a similar change in their students (Sahni, 2018). As a university lecturer who took part in ALIGN's research in Uganda commented:

*'In my work as a professor, I see myself as a mentor/counsellor – also opening up the eyes of my students to the situation, breaking stereotypes, etc. I challenge them to re-examine things. And I then see them moving forward and see that I am having an influence'*  
(Gender studies professor, in Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 24).

## Critical thinking skills

When education helps students to think critically about the world around them, it gives them the tools to identify and start to challenge gender inequality. Initiatives such as the *Sistema de Aprendizaje* Tutorial in Honduras show that critical thinking about gender equality can be integrated across the curriculum: in mathematics and science as well as in social studies (Murphy-Graham, 2012). But regardless of the extent of the focus on gender equality, critical thinking skills help to drive shifts in norms.

## Qualifications and marketable skills

A school-leaving certificate or equivalent is an entry requirement for many jobs, and for more advanced study. By developing such skills, young people have a greater opportunity to enter the labour market and find relatively desirable jobs. Where large numbers of young women enter the labour market, in particular, this can contribute to shifts in norms about expected life trajectories for girls, catalysing wider changes in society (See Chapter 4).

## Socio-emotional skills

Education can help students develop the confidence to articulate their ideas and interests, and to pursue their goals individually or collectively despite obstacles, such as those posed by discriminatory gender norms (Nuamah, 2019). Learner-centred education is particularly effective at helping build these skills. Extra-curricular activities offered by many schools, such as sports and drama, are another way to develop self-confidence, communication and leadership skills.

## Wider social networks

Exposure to peers from varied ethnic or religious backgrounds, or even families who do things differently, can help students understand that gender roles and norms vary and can be challenged. Some studies have found that co-education can help to dismantle stereotypes about male superiority. Reflecting on his schooling, a young man in Zambia commented:

*‘through co-educational school ... I saw that girls can do what boys can do. It changed me in a way; I started looking at boys and girls as the same. I used to look at them as people who are unable but after knowing that they can compete with me, we are only different in sex, I started giving them respect (young male teacher, Zambia, in Evans, 2014: 85).*

There is also some evidence, however, that single-sex environments can help girls defy gender norms and stereotypes (Unterhalter et al., 2014; Marcus and Page, 2016). Education can also enable students to develop supportive friendship networks beyond their families. This can be particularly important for girls who are challenging discriminatory norms, such as pressures to leave school and get married.

## Enhanced status

Respect for education can lead to respect for educated women, their knowledge and opinions, even in contexts where women are normally expected to defer to men. As an ALIGN interviewee in Uganda commented:

*‘Back then, who would even look at a woman? No one would allow a woman to give him instruction on what to do.... But now, women have taken up positions. These things came in after the women had attained education. When they started acquiring an education, then the people in the community started listening to them without disrespect in any way’ (grandmother, Uganda, in Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 27).*

## Constraining factors

*‘The new aspirations and opportunities for those with more schooling are not always enough to overturn longstanding social and gender norms’ (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012: 89)*

Realistic expectations matter. Education systems are a product of their societies, with all their historical legacies and contemporary influences, and embody discriminatory norms as well as having the potential to challenge them. In this section we outline the common ways in which norms – both gender norms and wider social norms – interact with systemic barriers to limit the transformative impact of education on gender norms. We focus on two sets of barriers: those primarily related to access, and those primarily related to learning and the operation of education systems.



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## Barriers to access: patriarchal brakes and wider community norms

### *Gendered expectations of children's futures*

The literature on how gender norms affect access to education sometimes fails to unravel a complex web of intersecting norms. The simple view is that parents do not send their daughters to school, that they prioritise their daughters' household chores over homework, or stop their education in favour of their brothers if money is short – all because they believe that education is less important for girls, given that their future role is likely to be as a homemaker. This literature is often rooted in evidence from poor rural communities, but is sometimes generalised well beyond them.

ALIGN's interviews in Nepal and Uganda provide plenty of testimony of girls who have been treated unfairly when compared to their brothers, but also evidence of change in families' beliefs and behaviour, even in isolated rural areas, and their willingness to support girls who are gifted or diligent at their studies. Our interviews have also highlighted that the eldest girl in a family often faced stronger pressures from constraining norms than their sisters – and that once a family had weakened its norms for one girl, the education of the other daughters became an accepted practice (helped by financial support from their older, now employed, sisters).

Beliefs that value the education of girls and boys differently are often bound up with parents' expectations of support in old age. For example, in cultures where women become part of the husband's family on marriage, traditional norms often indicate that their marital families, rather than natal families, will reap the benefits of their education. However, there is also evidence of change. Naila Kabeer's research in rural Bangladesh, for example, has found a weakening of the norm that only sons support their parents in old age, and a virtuous cycle of educated daughters supporting their parents, leading to greater support for girls' education (Kabeer, 2012). Evidence from rural Thailand also provides evidence of parents spending more on the education of daughters than sons, in the expectation of future financial support (Wongmonta and Glewwe, 2017).

Marriage markets and systems of payments such as dowry also shape norms about how far to invest in girls' education. Research in rural Rajasthan, India, for example, suggests that parents see secondary education as key for attracting a good groom (Adams and Andrews, 2019). Research from Bangladesh found parents making complex trade-offs between the level of dowry they could afford to pay, the level of education seen as desirable by prospective in-laws, and their daughters' marriage prospects if they waited longer (Amin and Huq, 2008). These two examples – both of which also respond to complex, evolving situations in terms of dowry expectations, illustrate some of the nuance and complexity that is sometimes lacking in discussions of norm-based barriers to girls' education.

These examples focus on norms that parents take into account in decisions about schooling in different settings. However, education decisions are also affected by young people's own aspirations, as well as gendered norms within their peer groups. We have already noted that more work opportunities can weaken the gendered norms that limit access to schooling. But, conversely, where there are viable work opportunities for older adolescents, local norms

can encourage young people – both boys and girls, and particularly those from relatively poor households – to prioritise paid work over education (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012). Boys may feel the pressure of male breadwinner norms, which sometimes intersect with norms of masculinity among some groups of boys that consider school success ‘girly’ (Jha et al., 2012). Among girls, norm-based drivers may relate to a sense among one’s peer group that it is time to move on to the next stage of life, through marriage, and perceptions that work right now is a more reliable route to a better life than the gamble of a good job after more years of education (Arnot et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2014b; Tafere et al., 2020).

### *Purity, chastity and reputation*

Norms around purity and reputation are another key ‘patriarchal brake’ on girls’ education across a range of contexts. Families may be reluctant to send girls to mixed schools, or to schools where they will have to board away from home, without close adult supervision and where they fear girls may form intimate relationships or engage in sexual activity that damages their reputation. Concerns vary across cultural contexts and include: being seen alone in the company of an unrelated boy, gossip about being sexually active, or getting pregnant while at school and outside marriage. Any of these could curtail a girl’s education, but can also affect her, and by extension, her family’s reputation (See Chapter 3 for further discussion). The substantial risk, in some contexts, of sexual assault from fellow students, school staff, or while travelling to or from school, also limits girls’ school enrolment and completion (UNGEI, 2018).

Risks to girls’ reputations are not only linked to the potential violation of norms of purity, but also from potential exposure to ‘dangerous’ ideas that are not in line with traditional gender norms. In the context of rural Pakistan, studied by Purewal and Hashmi (2014), parents made decisions about girls’ education within the context of a broader web of social relationships, with marriage at its heart. Girls were expected to comply with the norms of socially accepted behaviour and forfeit opportunities for their individual advancement, in return for the approval of family and wider society.

**... once a family had weakened its norms for one girl, the education of the other daughters became an accepted practice.**

”

Our interviewees, particularly those from Nepal, noted that concerns around reputation continued to influence girls’ access to education, particularly if they wanted to move away from home to study, or continue to study once married (Watson et al., 2019). While young women with supportive parents or husbands have been able to pursue their studies, it is often these family members who have borne the brunt of pressure from others to stop deviating from social expectations.

## Barriers to learning: brakes within education systems

Education systems are often a battleground for competing agendas. What sort of society do we want to be? What values should our education system instil in young people? What kind of education system will enable us to take the place we want in the world? Battles around different visions – including on issues such as gender equality – are often fought on the terrain of school curricula. For example, Peru introduced a new national curriculum for schools in 2016 that included an emphasis on gender equality. This was interpreted by some as an attempt to educate children on diverse gender identities, and prompted a conservative backlash and nationwide protests (Wong Oviedo and Spurzem, 2019).

But it is not only curricula that embody values around gender. School systems and individual teachers often reflect the gender biases of their societies in terms of how schooling is organised and in their expectations of boys and girls. This often unconscious enactment of certain values and norms is known as the ‘hidden curriculum’.

Education systems also vary considerably in the extent to which they foster two key sets of skills that contribute to shifts in gender norms: critical thinking skills (vital for deconstructing received ideas about gender) and the socio-emotional skills that underpin personal and collective agency to pursue life goals and collaborate with others to achieve change.

### *Critical thinking skills, socio-emotional skills and gender equality in curricula*

Many countries have adopted school curricula over the past two decades that aim to develop students’ skills and competencies across a range of fields, producing knowledgeable citizens who can play a productive and engaged role in 21st century societies (Care et al., 2018). Three elements of these competency-based curricula are particularly relevant to education as a foundation for gender norm change: the development of cognitive skills such as critical thinking; socio-emotional skills such as communication, collaboration and leadership; and cross-cutting content, such as citizenship, peace, human rights or life-skills education.

Gender equality is increasingly included within these subjects, or within education on sexuality, family life and relationships. This bodes well for the potential of education to make a stronger contribution to changing discriminatory gender norms. However, teachers whose own learning has been based primarily on memorising content, may find it challenging to help students develop critical thinking skills, and/or to work collaboratively with others, particularly if their professional norms embed a more teacher-centred approach (Mastercard Foundation, 2020).

Foundational literacy and numeracy skills, and some cognitive skills, can be built successfully through both highly teacher-centred approaches and/or through approaches that are more learner-centred. But skills such as problem-solving, communication and collaboration demand more learner-centred approaches (Save Our Future World, 2020). In many countries, overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and poor quality or limited teacher training combine to hamper the capacity of teachers to help students develop knowledge or foundational skills. In addition, a combination of pressures on teachers to prepare students for high-stakes examinations (e.g. exams at the end of primary or lower-secondary school) and instil academic skills often drives teachers to ‘teach to the test’, which can undermine opportunities to foster broader cognitive and socio-emotional skills (Mastercard Foundation, 2020; Save Our Future World, 2020).

The movement towards more learner-centred approaches and the growing emphasis on ‘21st century skills’ have great potential to build a foundation for more critical approaches to gender norms. There is, therefore, a synergy between the broad direction of educational practice and an agenda that aims to reach its full gender transformative potential. However, there is still a large gap between broad policy direction and common classroom practice, particularly in low-income contexts (Mastercard Foundation, 2020).

### *Teaching materials and practices*

Reviews of gender stereotyping in learning materials have found that they usually contain fewer images of girls and women than boys and men, and that the roles and capacities of men and women are often portrayed in stereotypical ways: caring and domestic work for women; leadership roles for men; women seen as passive and self-sacrificing; men as strong and brave (UNESCO, 2019b). One participant in our research in Uganda reported that despite some movement towards greater gender-sensitivity and equality in the curriculum, children in pre-school or primary school are taught *‘as a matter of course that the man is the head of household – even those children who come from female-headed households and have never seen their fathers’* (Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 36). While many countries have tried to reduce overt stereotyping and sexism in learning materials, subtle biases often remain, particularly in materials for the higher grades (UNESCO, 2019b).

Studies dating back several decades also document gendered socialisation in schools that reproduces and reinforces existing gender norms (Stromquist, 2007). Most of these studies have focused on interactions within the classroom. However, the overall ethos of a school – the values it embodies and promotes – also have a profound impact in either reinforcing or challenging discriminatory gender norms (Marcus and Page, 2016; Nuamah, 2019).

The school's ethos affects how its leadership sees its role in, for example, promoting gender equality and other forms of social equality as part of its mandate. This ethos influences aspects of school organisation, as well as curriculum and teaching. It can determine whether all subjects and extra-curricular activities are available to all students, whether the school celebrates the achievements of boys and girls equally and both individually and collectively (is the success of the boys' football team celebrated over that of the girls' team?), whether responsibilities and chores are assigned along gender lines, and whether schools meet gender-specific needs, such as support for girls who are menstruating. A gender balance among schools' leadership is also important, and is far from universal (Education Commission, 2019).



**Overall, studies suggest that boys are often treated more harshly than girls, which can feed a vicious cycle of underachievement and school drop-out, but that the disparities between girls from more and less advantaged backgrounds are often profound.**

A related set of studies have documented the ways in which teachers' gendered expectations of students affect their school experience and learning outcomes. Stromquist's (2007) review found that despite variation by school and context, boys often had more challenging interactions with teachers, dominated classroom activities, and received more attention than girls through praise, constructive feedback and help, but also more criticism.

Gender stereotypes (among students and teachers) also affect who is seen as suitable for particular fields of study. There is evidence that gender and racial gaps in prestigious fields that can lead to well-paid jobs, such as science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) are narrowing, though male students still dominate globally in computer science and engineering. Women make up less than a quarter of university students in these fields (UNESCO, 2020).

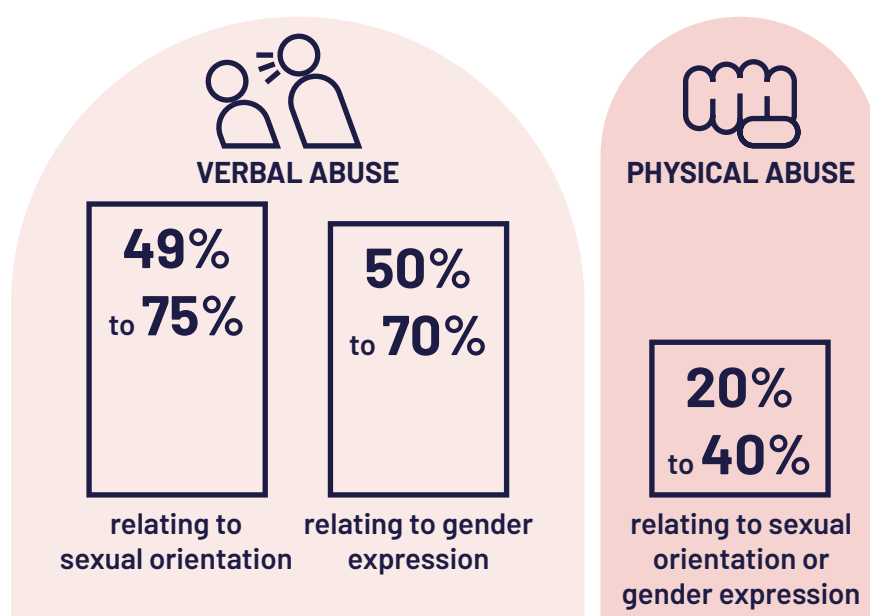
More recent studies have emphasised the intersectional nature of teachers' expectations of their students. Across a wide range of geographical contexts, for example, children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, from marginalised racial groups, or with disabilities are more likely to be seen as incapable or disruptive. Overall, studies suggest that boys are often treated more harshly than girls, which can feed a vicious cycle of underachievement and school drop-out (UNESCO, 2018a), but that the disparities between girls from more and less advantaged backgrounds are often profound. A study in the US, for example, found that Black girls are treated as needing less support and nurturing, and are seen as more adult-like than their White peers. This leads to very different educational experiences and shapes expectations of their behaviour, as well as far higher levels of punishment (Epstein et al., 2017).

## School-related violence

There are no reliable comparable global quantitative data on the scale of physical, sexual or emotional violence against children in (or related to) school, or on trends in such violence over time.<sup>26</sup> Some snapshots, however, indicate alarmingly high levels in some countries: in Malawi 32% of girls and 47% of boys reported physical or sexual violence from a teacher or classmate. In Nigeria the corresponding figures were 44% and 37%, and in Uganda they rose to 45% and 54%.<sup>27</sup> It is well-established that school-related violence – whether perpetrated by other students or school staff – is widespread and a key cause of poor attendance and drop-out (Know Violence in Childhood, 2017). Violence against children in schools is underpinned by deeply embedded social norms:

*‘violence against children is normalised and has become a way of relating to children. This normalisation has established an operational culture at schools in many parts of the world that is resistant to change and has gained currency as the default mode of operation’ (Naker, 2017: 9).*

### Reported levels of abuse experienced by LGBTQI+ students in seven South American countries



Source: Kociw and Zongrone (2019).

<sup>26</sup> The Together for Girls initiative, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is analysing data from Violence Against Children surveys to generate quantitative data on school-related gender-based violence.

<sup>27</sup> See country factsheets (Together for Girls, 2020a, 2020b and 2020c).

The norms around school violence are often gendered. There is, for example, some evidence of boys being more at risk of harsh physical punishment (reflecting norms of masculinity that include withstanding physical pain), and of girls being at greater risk of sexual exploitation and assault (reflecting norms of entitlement to girls' bodies among some teachers or students).<sup>28</sup> As one woman who took part in ALIGN's research in Uganda commented:

*'Only since the Constitution in 1995 and the growing awareness of women's rights has the idea of teachers having sex with girls stopped being seen as normal'* (professional woman in her 40s, in Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 15).

Violence among students, such as bullying, is also seen as normal in many settings. While many factors underpin bullying, it can be used to enforce prevailing gender norms. As a result, gender non-conforming students, including, but not exclusively, LGBTQI+ students, are at particular risk (UNGEI, 2016). To illustrate the scale of such violence, a study in seven South American countries found that between 49% and 75% of LGBTQI+ students had experienced verbal abuse based on their sexual orientation, and between 50% and 70% had experienced such abuse based on their gender expression. Between 20% and 40% of LGBTQI+ students in the survey had experienced physical abuse that was related directly to their sexual orientation or gender expression (Kociw and Zongrone, 2019).

There is a growing recognition of the serious impact of these norm-based barriers to a full and equitable experience of education. In section 2.5 we outline ways in which education could play a fuller role in helping to catalyse shifts in gender norms. But first we discuss the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the gendered norms that affect education.

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<sup>28</sup> There is, however, much regional variation. For example, Kidwai's (2017) review of violence against children in South Asia notes that both boys and girls face high levels of physical punishment at school and that reported levels of sexual abuse in school settings are higher for boys than for girls.

## 2.4 What impact have crises had on gender norms around education?

In times of crisis, increased economic pressures can lead to discriminatory gender norms being reasserted. Girls, for example, often face extra pressures to do unpaid care and domestic work while their parents earn a living (Kelbert and Hossain, 2014), or to generate income themselves (Szabo and Edwards, 2020). Even in contexts where the education of girls is highly valued in normal times, marriage and home-making are perceived as viable sole future life paths if every alternative is closed off. A widespread perception that female sexuality is a tradeable commodity can lead to increased overt and implicit pressure on adolescent girls to marry or form unions with older men, curtailing their schooling (Szabo and Edwards, 2020). Male breadwinner norms cut both ways in times of financial hardship: in some contexts, boys' education may be protected as an investment in future financial support, in others more adolescent boys from poor households drop out of school to work (Azevedo et al., 2020).

The effects of the economic pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are compounded by the impact of school closures. An estimated 463 million students from pre-primary to upper secondary school, three-quarters of them from the poorest households or rural areas, have not been able to access remote learning (UNICEF, 2020a). In some cases, the gender norms that already limit girls' access to technology have had a disproportionate impact on their learning opportunities during lockdowns (Amaro et al., 2020; Naylor et al., 2020). Studies to date have found varied impacts of Covid-19 and school closures on children's study time and access to learning opportunities by gender, rather than a clear picture of disadvantage across the board for one gender (Mendez Acosta and Evans, 2020).

Since the start of the pandemic, concerns have also been raised that girls may be at greater risk of not returning to school as a result of rising poverty, increased rates of early marriage or pregnancy, or increased household care responsibilities, as was the case following the Ebola pandemic in West Africa (Malala Fund, 2020). UNESCO suggests that 3.5% of adolescent girls of lower-secondary school age and 4.1% of young women of upper-secondary school age in sub-Saharan Africa are at risk of not returning to school (UNESCO, 2020). Mendez Acosta and Evans (2020) caution that there are not enough data to determine whether these predictions are likely to be accurate. But regardless of gender differences, effective remediation is essential as schools re-open to prevent the short-term loss of learning becoming a large and permanent loss, leaving children unable to ever catch up (Kaffenberger, 2020).

Education systems in much of the world are still occupied with responding to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and any radical transformation may be beyond reach at present. However, the pandemic, the global racial justice movement and the climate and environmental crises have laid bare the inadequacies of existing approaches to education. In the final part of this chapter, we focus on the elements of a more gender-transformative approach to education.

## 2.5 Looking ahead: how education can fulfil its potential to transform gender norms

*‘Through education at its best, empowered individuals come to recognize their inherent worth, the fundamental equality of all human beings and their ability to contribute to personal and social betterment. They develop the capacity to critically examine their lives and broader society and take action toward personal and social transformation’ (Murphy-Graham, 2012: 3)*

In this chapter we have argued that education has a unique potential to transform discriminatory gender norms, but that this potential is often blocked by multiple barriers. We now turn to ways in which these barriers can be overcome.

### Remove barriers to access

As we noted in the first part of this chapter, 258 million children were already out of school at the start of the Covid-19 epidemic (UNESCO, 2019a), and those numbers are likely to swell as a result of economic shocks and school closures. A mass of literature examines the most effective ways to enable access to education; we highlight a few key points here.

Broad actions – such as infrastructure investments, cash transfers to support attendance, and recruiting more teachers – that benefit both girls and boys are often more effective than measures that target girls alone (Evans and Yuan, 2019). That said, where mixing between boys and girls contravenes social norms, or where it is seen as inappropriate for male teachers to teach female students, gender-targeted measures such as recruiting more female teachers, or having single-sex classes and toilets play an important role (Marcus and Page, 2016). Where local norms consider education beyond a certain level unnecessary for girls, communication campaigns and community dialogues can encourage more supportive norms (Amili and Di Paolo, 2019). Radio and TV soap operas and cartoons have also boosted girls’ aspirations and increased community support for girls’ education (Marcus and Page, 2014). Outreach to re-enrol previously enrolled students encouraged girls to return to school in the wake of the Ebola pandemic (Save our Future World, 2020) and may prove effective for both girls and boys if Covid-19 does, as predicted, lead to increased drop-out.

When in-person education is not possible, special efforts are needed to ensure that marginalised children have access to educational materials. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, approaches have included educational radio broadcasts, safeguarding through mobile phone contact, and local distribution of printed self-study materials (Albright and Sengeh, 2020; Naylor et al., 2020). In some contexts with large gender gaps in access to learning materials, these gaps have been targeted, with examples including support to top-up data for girls in rural Morocco (Williams, 2020). In the longer term, institutionalising more effective blended in-person and remote learning, or modularising education to enable more flexible study, would have particular benefits for disadvantaged older adolescents and young people, who for a combination of reasons – both norm-based (care or income-earning responsibilities, or restricted mobility) and financial – are unable to study full-time (Mastercard Foundation, 2020).

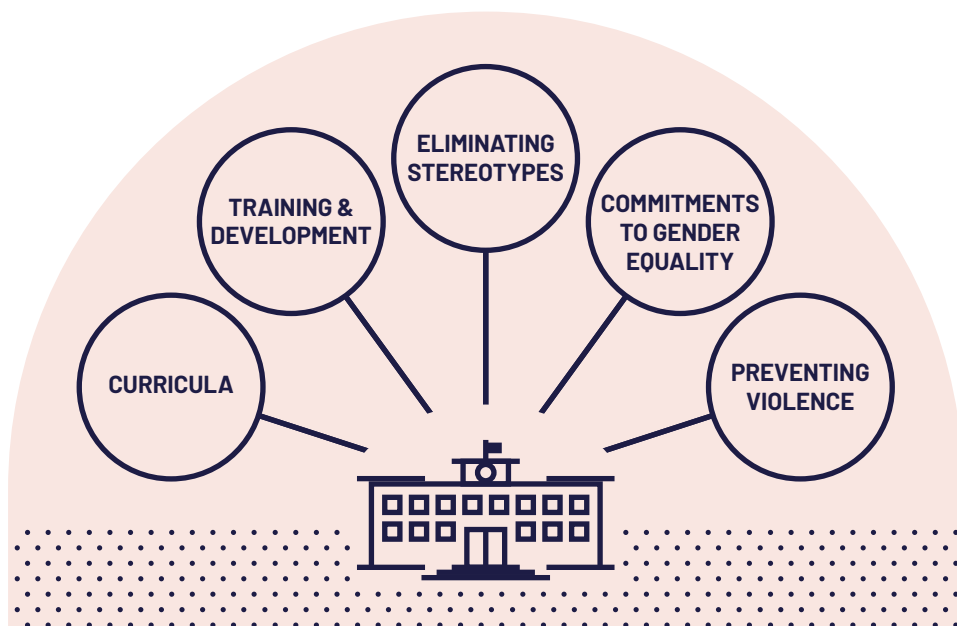
## Raise the quality of education

The most effective ways to raise the quality of education are context-specific and beyond the scope of this report. However, the critical elements include: strengthening teacher education, tailoring learning to students' levels, and strengthening school and local education leadership to institutionalise new approaches (Education Commission, 2019; Mastercard Foundation, 2020; Save Our Future World, 2020).

Raising the quality of education is a vital objective in its own right, but its potential to contribute to changing gender norms is under-recognised. In many low-income countries, both boys and girls are not developing essential foundational skills in numeracy and literacy, which hampers their progress to the more advanced levels of education (secondary and tertiary) that are associated with greater shifts in gender norms. In the immediate context of lost learning as a result of pandemic-related school closures, and limited access to remote learning for the most marginalised groups, effective remediation is critical. This could take the form of a condensed curriculum and catch-up sessions to build that all-important foundation of key literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills on which future learning can be built (Save our Future World, 2020).

But raising the quality of education in ways that help to shift gender norms goes beyond strengthening foundational skills. It involves fostering the critical thinking skills that can enable students to recognise and challenge discriminatory norms. It involves building key socio-emotional skills such as the self-confidence and resilience to contravene a norm, despite the social consequences of doing so, and communication skills to negotiate change. Strengthening such skills is of particular importance for girls who are often socialised to defer to adults and to boys (Kwauk and Braga, 2017).

### Increasing gender equity in education systems



Source: Author analysis

## **Institutionalise gender equity across education systems to challenge the ‘hidden’ curriculum**

As part of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, all governments have committed to putting in place gender-sensitive education policies, plans and learning environments (UNESCO, 2018a). Specifically:

### *Strengthen curricula to promote more egalitarian norms among students*

Curriculum reforms in many countries in recent years have strengthened content on gender equality, rights and the law. Lessons from these reforms could strengthen curricula in countries that have not yet mainstreamed content that focuses on gender equality and help to fine-tune the content in countries that have. Subjects like social studies and citizenship provide a space where students can learn about how institutions reproduce inequitable gender norms (Stromquist, 2020). In addition, integrating content on gender equity into sexuality education or ‘family life’ curricula, can help young people develop egalitarian intimate relationships, and improve their own health outcomes (Haberland and Rogow, 2015; UNESCO, 2020; see also Chapter 3 below).

There is much positive evidence from programmes piloted over the past decade to promote egalitarian gender norms among students. Evaluations of these curricula show shifts towards support for more egalitarian gender roles among boys and girls, and reduced acceptance of gender-based violence (Marcus et al., 2017; Marcus, 2018a). Institutionalising such approaches into core curricula is a promising approach for more transformative education on a large scale, and there are emerging lessons from initiatives that are doing so, such as the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (Achyut et al., 2015), Program H (Promundo, 2002), and Connect with Respect (UNGEI, 2016). Extra-curricular initiatives, such as *Taaron Ki Toli* in India, have also been effective in changing discriminatory attitudes and behaviour among adolescents (Menon, 2018).

### *Ensure that training for new teachers and professional development for experienced teachers includes gender sensitisation*

No matter how gender-egalitarian curricula and school environments are, it is teachers, through their positions of authority and their role as instructors and architects of learning, who are critically placed to reinforce or challenge inequitable gender norms. The past decade has seen increased efforts to help teachers identify their own gender biases and to promote ‘gender-responsive pedagogy’.

Recent research and thinking on transformative education for gender equality emphasises the importance of having teachers reflect on their own internalised notions of gender. This involves looking closely at the processes of gendering in homes, schools and wider society, and examining how their understanding of themselves and of the world has developed. They can build on this to develop capacities to lead their students in critical dialogues that will help them to understand and challenge gender norms (Sahni, 2018). When gender-sensitisation training for teachers skips or shortens this vital process of self-reflection, it is far less likely to lead to lasting change. Instead, it can become formulaic, with the risk that teachers do not really take the concepts on board, or change their practice as a result. Such sensitisation should be explicitly intersectional, and its impact is more likely to be sustained when it is supported by resources that teachers can refer to.

Qualitative evidence from ALIGN research in Indonesia and Peru highlights that supporting teachers to develop more gender-sensitive practice can be effective when embedded within broader programmes, for example, on sustainability and human rights or student-centred methods (EQUIC, 2019; Wong Oviedo and Spurzem, 2019). The nationwide T-TEL project in Ghana, for example, has integrated gender-responsiveness into training for new teachers, together with support for their development of skills in teaching mathematics, English and science. An evaluation found a significant increase in gender-sensitivity among new teachers participating in the project (T-TEL, 2018). Embedding gender-sensitisation in broader teacher professional development can be particularly important in contexts with gender parity in numbers or where girls' educational attainment levels are higher, and where teachers and education sector officials therefore do not see gender inequality as an issue (Miske, 2013; EQUIC, 2019).

### *Eliminate stereotypes from teaching and learning materials*

Removing gender stereotypes is often deprioritised on the grounds of cost, but learning materials can be updated with more gender-equitable content during regular curriculum revisions. Training in gender equality for textbook producers, and making gender equality an explicit requirement in terms of reference and contracts for developing teaching and learning materials have also proved effective (UNESCO, 2020).

The development of new distance learning materials for use during the Covid-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to strengthen female role models as presenters of remote learning materials (Naylor et al., 2020) and to increase gender-sensitive content for all students (Albright and Sengeh, 2020). Where stereotyped content has not yet been revised, teachers can be trained to use existing materials with gender and (other stereotypes) to stimulate critical thinking and discussion about gender and other inequalities.

### *Encourage ‘whole-school’ commitments to gender equality*

*‘feminist schools... should not act as microcosms of society but as models of equity’*  
(Nuamah, 2019: 13)

Gender-equitable school environments are associated with improved outcomes for students of all genders (Unterhalter and Heslop, 2012; Nuamah, 2019). ‘Whole school’ approaches to gender equality encourage staff and students to build a school community that promotes gender equality intentionally as a key value and equitable norms as key standards of behaviour. Engaged school leadership plays a critical role in promoting and sustaining equitable norms and values: without it, initiatives by individual teachers or students will have only a limited impact.

Supportive senior leadership is vital, for example, to bring all staff – not just teachers, but cooks, grounds staff, technicians, office staff, etc. – on board to support gender-equitable values. It is also essential to create space for student-led initiatives that can help to improve students’ overall experiences as well as building individual skills. Making sure that gender-sensitisation training reaches the senior leadership of schools as well as classroom teachers is vital to build gender-equitable school environments.

### *Prevent all forms of violence in schools*

There is growing evidence that preventing school violence requires a locally developed and critical understanding of why specific forms of violence occur and are tolerated in particular schools and contexts. Based on experience of the Good Schools Toolkit programme in Uganda, Naker (2017) suggests that it is often effective to frame change efforts around broad values and aspirations, such as creating good schools that respect and ensure the dignity of every member of the school community. This helps to shift the focus towards the creation of an environment where children can flourish, and avoids the backlash that ‘safer school campaigns’ can engender if they start by targeting practices that are upheld by social norms, such as corporal punishment.

With a commitment to these values, more specific initiatives, such as teacher codes of conduct or training in non-violent ways to maintain discipline, are more likely to be effective, as they are more clearly rooted in agreed values. An evaluation in Uganda found that schools that implemented the Good Schools Toolkit approach saw a 42% reduction in the number of students who reported experiencing violence from school staff (Gershoff, 2017). Similar initiatives that take a wider approach have also proved successful, and curricula that educate students about equality and respect for differences can help to reduce all forms of peer violence (UNGEI, 2016).

## 2.6 Conclusions

Evaluations of effective practice, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, have been skewed towards actions in non-formal education settings, although a stronger evidence base is slowly emerging from formal systems. That said, the evidence outlined in this chapter points to the following conclusions.

Education is, without doubt, an important route to changing gender norms. And as secondary education becomes increasingly established, there is a positive feedback loop, with demand rising and education becoming normalised for both girls and boys. This increased education is associated, in turn, with a shift towards more egalitarian gender norms. However, education is not a magic wand that, on its own, can shift the deep-seated discriminatory norms that other policies cannot reach. It can catalyse change up to a point but also mirrors wider society, and, without measures to address any biases, it can reinforce discriminatory norms.

Formal education systems are not capitalising on their full potential to catalyse change in gender norms for three key reasons: because of continued barriers to access; because of challenges to quality that limit the development of key skills and knowledge; and because of a hidden curriculum that often reinforces, rather than challenges, discriminatory gender norms.

What would it take to transform education systems as they are now, into quality education systems that can challenge discriminatory norms? This is, fundamentally, a political – rather than technical – challenge. It requires coalitions of individuals within government who are committed to driving gender equality forward in education, to change systems and policies to support new practices (Rose et al., 2020). It demands a substantial increase in education spending, which in low-income countries depends on support from richer countries.<sup>29</sup> But it also requires changes in the hearts and minds of teachers, parents, students and educational leaders.

**Education is not a magic wand that, on its own, can shift the deep-seated discriminatory norms that other policies cannot reach.**



This chapter has argued that such change is vital. It has shown that it is possible, and indeed, that it is happening. And it has outlined the measures needed to build systems that can catalyse lasting shifts towards egalitarian gender norms.

<sup>29</sup> In early 2020, the financing gap to reach Sustainable Development Goal 4 – quality education – in low- and lower middle-income countries was \$148 billion annually – a figure that may increase by as much as one-third as a result of the Covid-19 crisis (UN, 2020c).



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### 3 Gender norms and sexual and reproductive health and rights

#### KEY POINTS

- The global fertility rate fell from 2.9 to 2.4 births per woman between 1995 and 2018, with significant regional differences. Sub-Saharan Africa still has some of the highest fertility rates worldwide, and its fertility rate is falling more slowly than in other regions.
- Contraceptive use has risen in Asia and Latin America in particular, although it remains low in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Men's attitudes about their right to sex, and women's attitudes about sex within relationships, have changed in some countries but not all.
- Norms around sexual and physical intimate partner violence are hard to change. Out of 24 countries with data, the prevalence of sexual and physical intimate partner violence has fallen in 18 countries, stayed the same in 1, and risen in 5.
- Adolescent sexual activity has changed in some areas but not others. Adolescent fertility rates have fallen and while norms have shifted against child, early and forced marriage in many societies, the norms that restrict girls' sexuality and value their virginity have remained.
- The LGBTQI+ community has gained growing acceptance in many countries, but continued (and in some cases increased) discrimination, violence or abuse in others.
- The drivers and barriers of norm change in sexual and reproductive health and rights include access to health services, contraception and education (comprehensive sexuality education in particular), economic empowerment, legislation and community mobilisation and campaigning, as well as mass media, the internet, and popular culture.

#### Box 4: Definition: sexual and reproductive health and rights

The Lancet-Guttmacher Commission on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights conceptualises sexual and reproductive health rights as a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. According to their definition, *‘sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence’* (Starrs et al., 2018: 2645).

### 3.1 Introduction

There have been major changes in the gender norms and behaviours that affect women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights over the past 25 years. Fertility rates have fallen and the use of contraception has increased, shaped by the expansion of health services and access to contraception, as well as changing norms around motherhood, family dynamics and women’s decision-making power. Norms have also been influenced by greater opportunities for women to work and gain financial independence.

Alongside the rise of more gender-equitable attitudes, there have also been global changes around consent, men’s attitudes about their right to sex, and women’s attitudes about refusing sex. Access to contraception has, in turn, shaped adolescent sexual activity, resulting in reduced fertility rates, and delays in marriage, as well as first sexual activities. In many parts of the world, the LGBTQI+ community has also seen greater acceptance of their sexual identities.

There is still a great deal to be achieved, however, with improvements in some areas of sexual and reproductive health in certain countries and regions, but not in others. Legislation, policy and religion, as well as access to comprehensive sexuality education are among the multitude of factors that either hinder or drive changes in norms. And these levers of change operate at every level, from the individual through to the institutions that shape society, compounded by many issues that intersect, including poverty and other inequalities.

How are improvements in sexual and reproductive health connected to shifts in gender norms? In this chapter, we explore changes over time in this area and look at how gender norms have driven or blocked progress. First, we outline trends that influence norm change in certain areas, such as attitudes and behaviours related to fertility, contraception, consent, and the experiences and behaviours of adolescents and the LGBTQI+ community.<sup>30</sup> Then we look at other factors that shape norm change, including access to quality health services and education, and laws and policies at the system level.

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<sup>30</sup> This chapter cannot capture every area of sexual and reproductive health rights, and so does not cover HIV/AIDS, bodily manipulation, or transactional sex, among other topics.

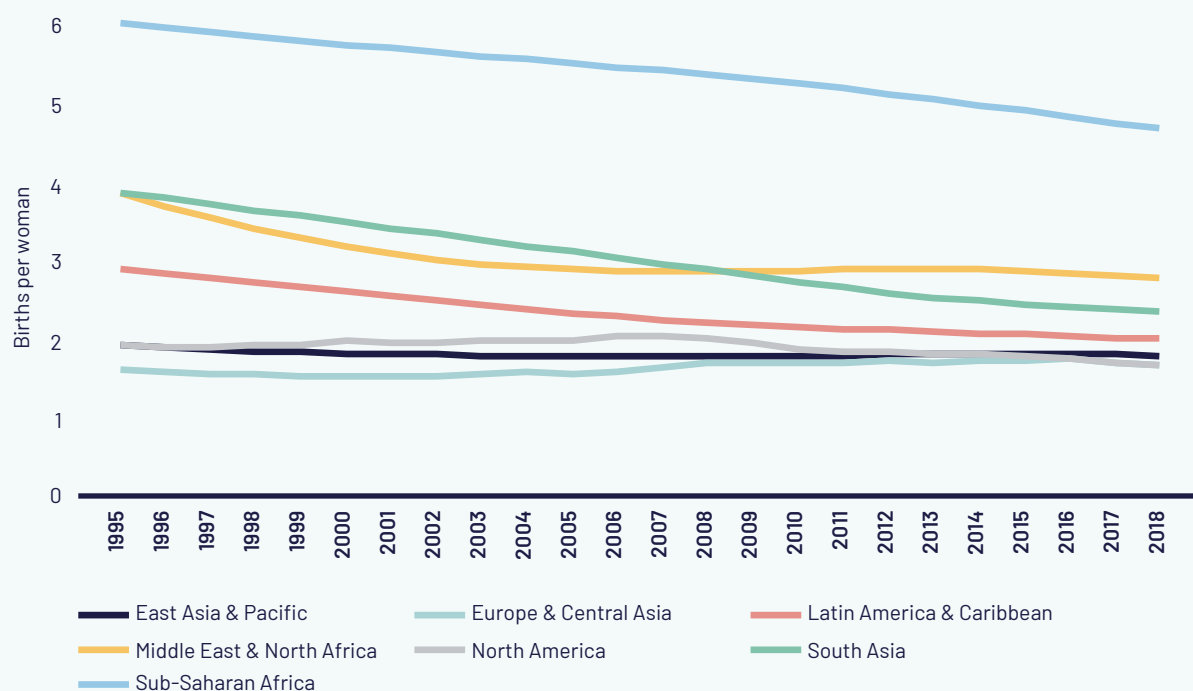
### 3.2 How have gender norms around sexual and reproductive health and rights changed over the past 25 years?

#### Fertility, contraception and consent

From 1995 to 2018, the total fertility rate fell from 2.9 to 2.4 births per woman worldwide.<sup>31</sup> As Figure 5 shows, however, there are major differences in trends across regions. The biggest fall was seen in South Asia, at a compound rate of -2.1% annually. More developed countries, such as those in Europe and Central Asia, have seen little change in rates that were already low. Although some countries in sub-Saharan Africa have seen major declines, the region as a whole has some of the highest fertility rates in the world, and some of the slowest rates of change. While every other region in Figure 5 had reached a fertility rate of fewer than four live births per woman by 2019, sub-Saharan Africa is not projected to achieve that rate for another decade (UN, 2020b).

Norms and fertility trends have a complex relationship. There are, for example, major differences within regions and countries, with socio-economic status, geography and other factors often playing a role. Cultural and economic changes tend to evolve alongside each other, which shapes people's decisions about their own reproduction (Colleran, 2016). Research in North Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, for example, shows that fertility falls first in cities, where people tend to have more education, higher incomes and better access to services (Lerch, 2018).

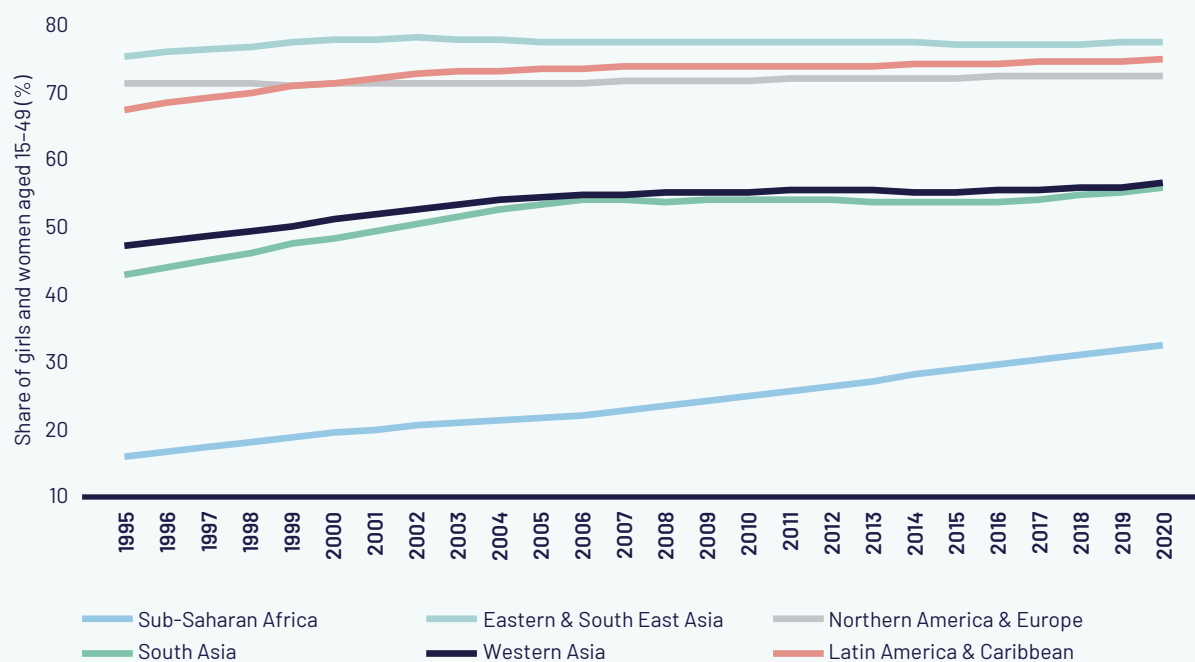
Figure 5: Regional fertility rates (1995–2018)



Source: World Development Indicators

<sup>31</sup> Data based on World Development Indicators.

Figure 6: Share of girls and women with access to any contraception (1995–2020)



Source: United Nations (2020).

Note: We draw on UN data (and regional categories) in this particular instance as the data available through World Development Indicators is much sparser and does not permit comparing all regions over time.

Goldin and Katz (2000) argue that better access to birth control pills has cut the costs for a woman who wants to invest in, and plan for, a long-term career. The economic impact of the pill has not, therefore, happened in isolation, but it has gone hand-in-hand with legal changes that have made it possible for women to access contraceptives and find jobs. As more women join the formal economy, the cost in terms of lost opportunities caused by having children falls (Roser, 2014). And this, in turn, supports changes in norms around traditional gender roles that see only men as the family breadwinners and only women as mothers and caregivers.

Oláh et al. (2018: 41) write: *‘new family trends and patterns have been paralleled by changes in gender roles, especially an expansion of the female role to an economic provider for a family, and lately also transformation of men’s role with more extensive involvement in family responsibilities, mainly care for children’*. A recent report on fatherhood indicates that, over the years, more men across the globe have shown a desire to be involved in child-rearing, although they may not always have a way to achieve that desire because of the need to work, or the absence of paternity leave (Van der Gaag et al., 2019). (See Chapter 4 for further discussion.)

Falling fertility rates are mirrored by rising trends in access to and use of modern contraception by women in every region worldwide over the past 25 years. In 2019, 49% of all women of reproductive age (15–49 years) were using some form of contraception, up from 42% in 1990 (UN, 2020b). Figure 6 shows regional trends in access to contraception from 1995 to 2020. Again, access to and use of contraception in sub-Saharan Africa continues to be low.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Due to the scope of this report, access to modern contraception has been excluded.

Despite this progress, an estimated 214 million women of reproductive age in ‘developing countries’ who want to avoid pregnancy are not using modern contraception (WHO, 2018). Research suggests that poverty and geography still determine whether the need for family planning is met or not, with major gaps between poorer, rural women and wealthier women in urban areas (Asif and Pervaiz, 2019; Tadele et al., 2019).

While other factors may play a role, such as access to quality health information and services or different attitudes and norms around the ideal family size, unmet need may also be influenced by norms that hold men in a dominant position in impoverished and rural households. In Ethiopia, for example, male disapproval of contraception is more prevalent in poorer households (Solomon et al., 2019). Drawing on decades of evidence, Heise et al. (2019) argue that sexism and patriarchy intersect with other forms of structural discrimination, such as classism and racism, resulting in poor sexual and reproductive health.

Evidence on the relationship between norms and contraceptive use paints a mixed picture. On the one hand, married women in some cultures may have to yield to strong pressure from their husbands and in-laws about how many children they should bear, or the importance of having sons to carry on the family name. A World Bank study drawing on conversations with women and men in 20 lower middle-income countries found that rural men, in particular, had a clear preference for male children and believed that motherhood is a core marker for adult femininity, and that *‘the normal outcome of marriage is the production of children’* (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012: 103).<sup>33</sup> Norms around gender roles and inheritance customs may, therefore, restrict contraceptive use by women who have never given birth.

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On the other hand, even where norms favour large families, more women are using contraception. Several studies have found women resorting to covert tactics (such as using contraception in secret) to control their fertility, despite their partners’ desire for more children (Baiden et al., 2016; Gasca and Becker, 2017; Challa et al., 2019; Kibira et al., 2020). It seems, therefore, that women push against the boundaries of patriarchal authority, and evade their gatekeepers, to use contraceptives. Over the years, and as more forms of contraception become available, more women are empowered to make their own decisions, despite deeply entrenched gender norms around motherhood.

<sup>33</sup> The 20 countries are Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Liberia, Moldova, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Poland, Serbia, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Viet Nam, West Bank and Gaza, and the Republic of Yemen.

In some societies, however, patriarchal norms still underpin male control over women's bodies and sexuality. The same World Bank study of 20 lower middle-income countries found that men and women had different beliefs about contraceptive use (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012). Young women said that they have more power to make decisions than older generations of women because of the greater availability of family planning services and diverse forms of contraception. However, while young men did not oppose women's use of contraception, they generally refused to use condoms, for example, because they preferred 'skin to skin' sexual relations. A condom is a particularly 'male-controlled' form of contraception and can only be used with a man's cooperation and consent. Women's empowerment does not always affect condom use, in the way that it affects contraceptive use more generally (Richards and Bass, 2018). Gender norms giving the ultimate decision-making power to men thus mean they may still control the types of contraception used by their partners, and whether any contraception is used at all.

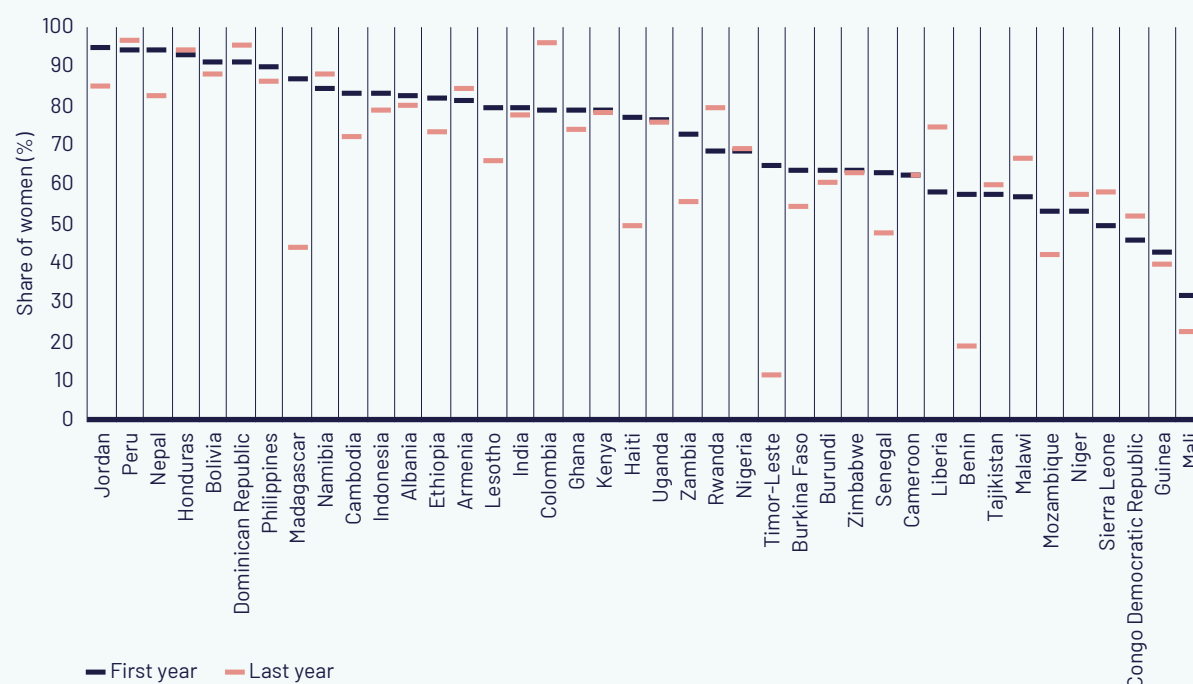
Low levels of contraceptive use may also relate to the stigma shaped by norms about who should be sexually active. In many societies, norms stigmatise particular women (e.g. unmarried women) and deter them from using family planning methods (see, for example, Grindlay et al., 2018). A review of the literature found that even healthcare providers in many lower middle-income countries (who should be aware of the health risks posed by unprotected sex) impose unjustified restrictions on the use of certain contraceptive methods based on a client's age, marital status, spousal consent, and whether or not the woman already has children (Solo and Festin, 2019). Using data from Demographic and Health Surveys, Blackstone and Iwelunmor (2017) found that women whose male partners link contraceptives with promiscuity are less likely to use contraception.

Norms have also changed around whether a woman should be able to choose whether or not to have sex with her husband. The Demographic and Health Surveys in many countries ask participants if a woman is justified in refusing to have sex with her husband if he has a sexually transmitted infection or has multiple sexual partners, if she has just given birth, or if she is tired or not in the mood. These answers are often grouped into 'justifying refusing sex for any reason'.

Figures 7 and 8 draw on data from these surveys to depict trends over time, signalling major country differences.<sup>34</sup> As Figure 7 shows, the share of women who felt justified in refusing sex if they knew their husband was having sex with other women fell over time in 26 of 40 countries (65%) and rose in the remainder. Similarly, in Figure 8, the share of women who felt justified in refusing sex if they were tired fell in 9 of 21 countries (43%), stayed the same in 1 country (Uganda) and rose in 11 countries (52%). The widespread lack of progress on women's attitudes to a wife's refusal of sex when she knows her husband is unfaithful is counterintuitive and merits further interrogation.

<sup>34</sup> The year and country sample of questions from the Demographic and Health Surveys on the perceived ability of a wife to refuse sex varies depending on the question, as questions are added and retired over time. The question on whether refusing sex is justified if a wife knows her husband has sex with other women is available for 40 countries for at least two points in time; and the question on whether it is justified if the woman is tired is available for just 21 countries for at least two points in time. Note too that the DHS StatCompiler, the source of this data, does not provide estimates of standard error; therefore small changes over time may not be statistically significant.

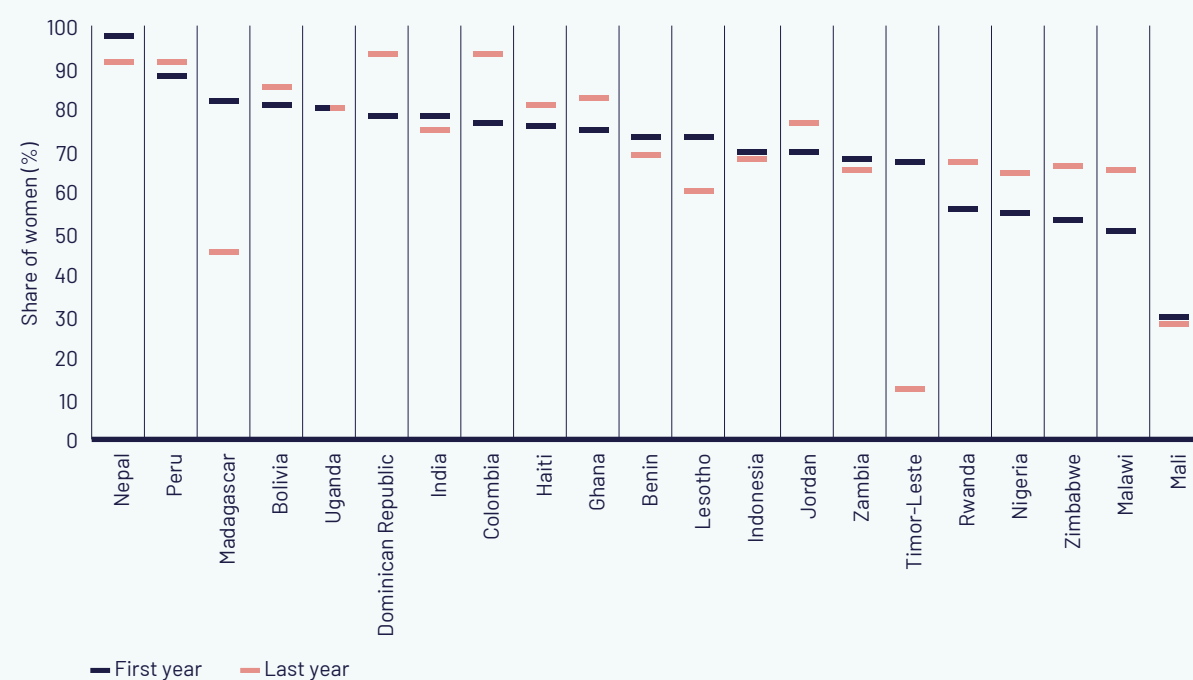
Figure 7: Share of women reporting that a wife is justified in refusing sex with her husband if she knows he has sex with other women



Source: The authors, drawing on Demographic and Health Surveys for each country.

Note: Calculated using first and last year of available data, for countries with two or more data points. Therefore country trends should not be compared.

Figure 8: Share of women reporting a wife is justified in refusing sex with her husband if tired or not in the mood



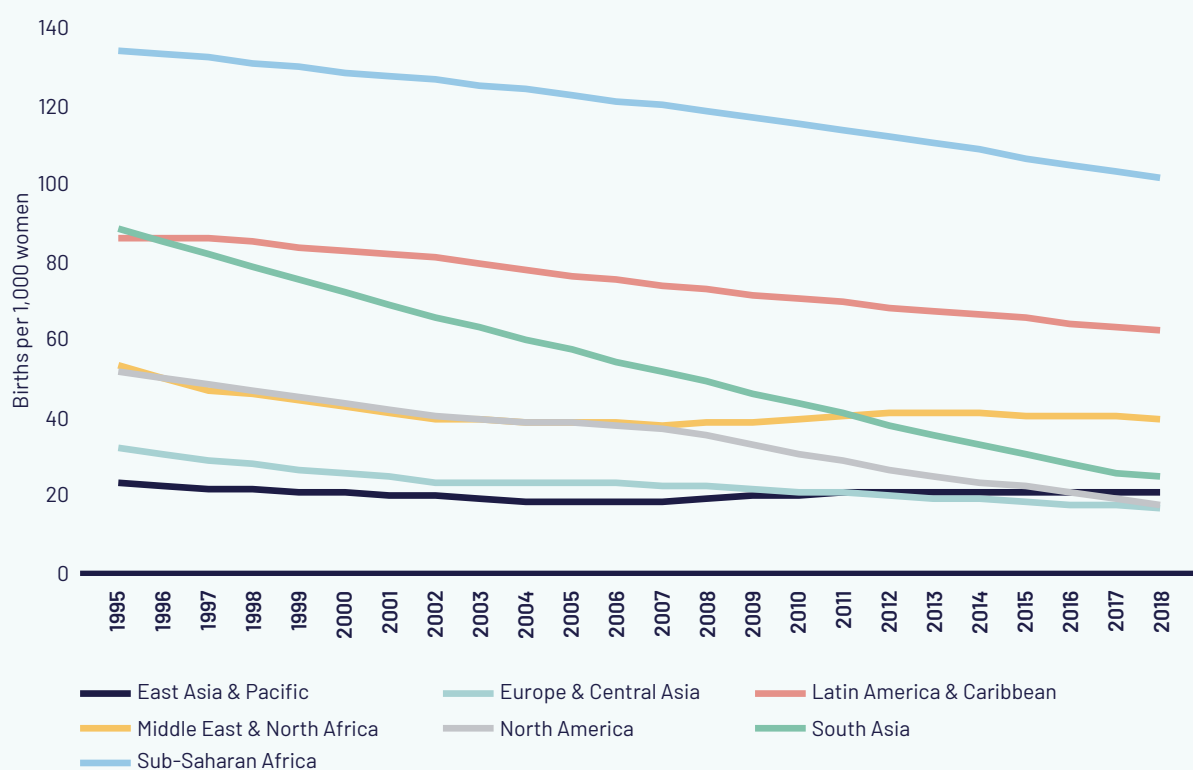
Source: The authors, drawing on Demographic and Health Surveys for each country.

Note: Calculated using first and last year of available data, for countries with two or more data points. Therefore country trends should not be compared.

## Adolescent sexual activity: norms about adolescent sexuality, marriage and childbearing

Adolescent pregnancy trends have fallen over the past 25 years, portraying a potential shift in norms around young women's sexuality and their role as mothers. Figure 9, which shows global and regional trends from 1995 to 2018, reveals major differences across regions, however. Fertility rates (measured in births for every 1,000 adolescent girls aged 15 to 19) fell anywhere from 2.41 births in East Asia and the Pacific (where rates remain low) to 63.8 births in South Asia.<sup>35</sup> The data also suggest that adolescent pregnancy remains high in sub-Saharan Africa, where the most recent fertility rate (101.2) is still five times higher than the regional averages for Europe and Central Asia (16.6), North America (17.6), and East Asia and the Pacific (20.69).

Figure 9: Adolescent fertility by region (1995– 2018, girls age 15–19)



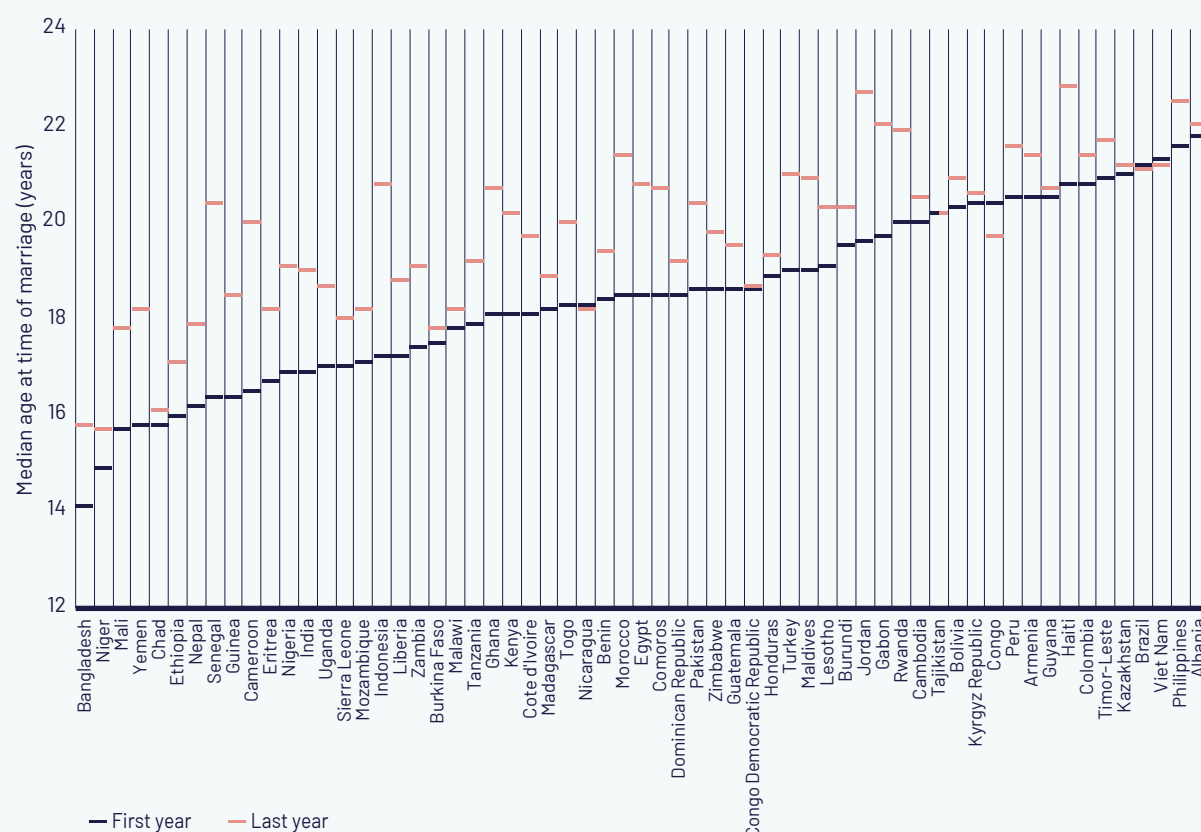
Source: World Development Indicators.

<sup>35</sup> Compound annual rates of change range from -.49% yearly in East Asia and Pacific to -5.4% yearly in South Asia.

As well as falling fertility, many countries have also seen falling rates of child, early and forced marriage over the past 25 years. Figure 10 shows trends in early marriage in 61 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean,<sup>36</sup> indicating that the median age of marriage rose in every country except Brazil, Congo, Nicaragua, Tajikistan and Viet Nam. The five countries that saw the largest rise were Cameroon, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco and Senegal. The rising age for marriage matters for the sexual and reproductive health of youth and adolescent girls, given that around 90% of births to teenage mothers in developing countries happen within marriages, where there is likely to be an imbalance of power and family pressure on girls to ‘prove’ their fertility (Plan, 2017).

Child marriage is sometimes the result of norms around the value of a woman – particularly in her role as a wife and mother. And sometimes child marriage is seen as a normative behaviour in itself. In many cultures, for example, there are norms about a family’s need to consolidate kinship ties, or religious duties that shape the desire of parents to marry off their daughters early because this is seen as a divine command.

Figure 10: Trends in median age at time of marriage (women age 25–49)



Source: The authors, drawing on Demographic and Health Surveys for each country.

Note: Calculated using first and last year of available data, for countries with two or more data points. Therefore country trends should not be compared.

<sup>36</sup> We present data on median age of marriage rather than the share of women who married at an early age, owing to limited trend data on the latter. The only data depicting trends we have identified is UNICEF (2018) which provides global and regional estimates over a ten-year period only (between 2000/2006 and 2010/2016).

Even in places where rates of child marriage are high, however, child marriage is not necessarily a norm, or seen as acceptable behaviour (see, for example, Steinhaus et al., 2019). A study of four countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya, Senegal, Uganda, Zambia), for example, found that young girls' sexual relations, unplanned pregnancy, and school drop-out often preceded child marriage (Petroni et al., 2017). The fact that child marriage was the end result points to norms around girls' purity: unintended pregnancy may indeed lead girls to marry young. Gender inequitable norms, therefore, contribute to child, early and forced marriage, even where such marriages are not the norm. For example, parents may choose to marry their daughters off early to avoid any harm they would endure for breaking norms around purity (Bicchieri et al., 2014).

Poverty also shapes trends around child marriage. A lack of economic or educational opportunities for girls often leads them to marry young (HRW, 2016). Arranged marriages and the financial payments that often go with them are customary in some cultures, such as a bride price or dowry (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012). Parents may, therefore, see early marriage as a way to escape poverty, feed their children and give them a more economically secure life (HRW, 2016). The irony, of course, is that child marriage leads many young girls to drop out of school, limiting their economic opportunities and perpetuating cycles of poverty (Parsons et al., 2015).

The evidence suggests that norm change around child and early marriage is complex. There may be a shift in some gender norms and not others, or in certain communities but not all (Cislaghi et al., 2019). Focus groups with adolescents in Ethiopia, for example, found that girls agreed, in general, that some marriage practices were shifting rapidly, but they felt that other practices were more deeply entrenched and unlikely to change (Jones et al., 2014a). In particular, they felt that early marriage was bad for the girl involved, yet illegal marriages were still common. Freely chosen marriages were seen as more likely to succeed, particularly by young people, and were increasingly preferred, although respect for such marriages is relatively new.

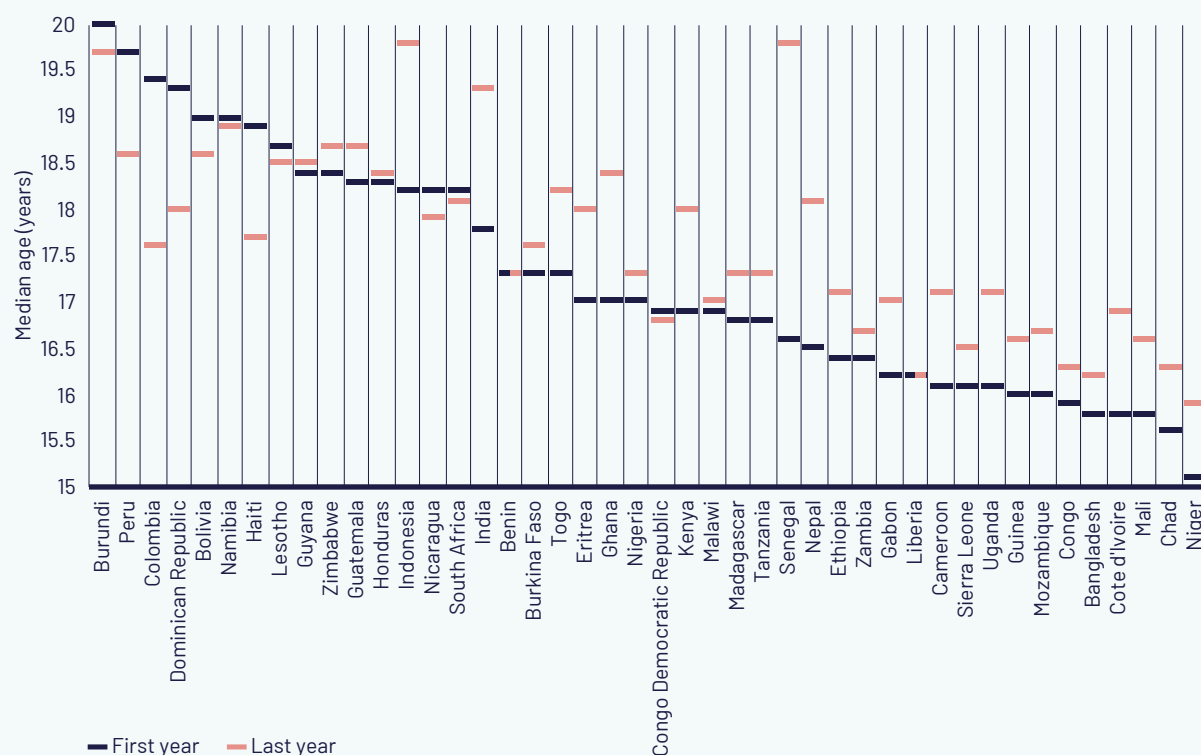
The evidence about changes in norms around adolescent sexual activity is also mixed. Quantitative data suggest that in many cultures, where pre-marital sex remains taboo, expectations of a girl's virginity upon marriage have not wavered. A study of trends in sexual activity based on data from Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys found only small reported changes over time in sexual activity among unmarried women worldwide (Ueffing et al., 2017). The proportion of unmarried women reporting recent sexual activity did not top 50% in any of the 94 countries with available data. There were, however, large regional differences. In most countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, sexual activity increased for adolescent girls.

Figure 11 shows trends in the median age for women (aged 20–49) during their first sexual intercourse in 44 countries. In 31 countries (70%) the age of first sexual intercourse rose, in 2 countries (5%) it stayed the same, and in 11 countries (25%) it fell. However, Figure 11 does not capture whether the women's first sexual intercourse took place within or outside of marriage.

The way in which adolescent girls and boys change their behaviour may also differ over time. For example, a study drawing on 20 years of Demographic and Health Survey data by Kothari et al. (2012) found that while the proportion of adolescent girls who reported having sex in the past 12 months rose in more than half of the countries surveyed, a higher proportion of adolescent boys than girls were having sex before marriage in most countries. This could be the result of reporting bias, given that survey data rely on self-reporting by respondents, and girls may be less likely to admit to any sexual activity because of the gender norms that stigmatise such behaviour. But gendered differences in adolescent sexual activity are also linked to entrenched norms that impose distinct expectations upon girls and boys.

This moral code includes a sexual double standard where men have sexual freedom and women are expected to show sexual restraint (Crawford and Popp, 2003). In addition, certain behaviour may not only flout the conventional norms and expectations for young people but also, in some places, break the law (Salam et al., 2016).

**Figure 11: Trends in median age at first sexual intercourse (women age 25–40)**



Source: The authors, drawing on Demographic and Health Surveys for each country.

Note: Calculated using first and last year of available data, for countries with two or more data points. Therefore country trends should not be compared.

Changes in behaviour do not always signal norm change, however. In Nepal, for example, Watson et al. (2020) found that female university students saw a woman's lack of rights over her own body as a major obstacle to gender equality. A civil society activist explained that this is because '*virginity is still a strong social norm*' and '*In Nepali cultures, morality and goodness are all linked up into sexual activities – for women, not for men*' (ibid: 39). Women's behaviour is still restricted by social norms, as reflected in the Nepali saying, 'A woman's reputation is like water in a yam's leaves – even a small slip and it will fall off'. Such views help to shape parental desires to see their daughters married off as early as possible – so that they are not 'spoiled' before their wedding day – and to control the behaviour of their daughters-in-law to ensure that they do not 'tarnish the family name'.

Norms around virginity have an impact on adolescents' access to and use of contraception. A study in Kenya, for example, found that healthcare providers believed that adolescents who use contraception become promiscuous, and that no form of contraception should be provided to young unmarried women (Håkansson et al., 2018). Adolescents who break with these norms and have sex before marriage put themselves at risk of family violence by dishonouring their parents (Verma et al., 2013). In short, norms around virginity remain strong, are upheld by patriarchal moral authority and embedded into belief systems and world views.

Overall, there have been clear changes over time and adolescents are increasingly breaking free of restrictions on their sexuality. However, qualitative cross-cultural research shows that norms around girls' virginity have remained very strong for generations. Many girls can now choose to delay marriage and continue their education, but their virginity still matters for their own honour and that of their families.

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**In short, norms around virginity remain strong, are upheld by patriarchal moral authority and embedded into belief systems and world views.**



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## The LGBTQI+ community and norms around queer sexuality

Attitudes towards the LGBTQI+ community are shaped by norms that promote heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual identity (heteronormativity) and the politics around the expression and embodiment of gender. Queer theorists have argued that heteronormativity is shaped by gender norms that reinforce women's dependency on men both for reproduction and economic support (Jackson, 2006). Because non-heterosexual people do not adhere to heteronormative relationships or gender identifications, they may be seen as transgressing gender norms.

In the 1960s and 1970s, compulsory heterosexuality imposed heteronormativity as a form of oppression (Seidman, 2009). In many countries, however, the LGBTQI+ community has experienced growing acceptance from the rest of society, signalling a shift in norms around gender and sexuality. Data from World Values Surveys show a rise in the share of the population reporting a 'high acceptance' of homosexuality from only 15% of the total world population in the mid-1990s to 26% in the late 2010s.<sup>37</sup> Across three decades, acceptance of homosexuality increased in 43 of 55 countries (78%). Yet attitudes towards homosexuality hardened in 12 countries and LGBTQI+ communities are still oppressed by discriminatory gender norms in many parts of the world.

The unique experiences of transgender and intersex communities are shaped by norms around gender, not sexual orientation. Just as heteronormativity is taken as the norm for sexual orientation, 'cisgenderedness' is taken as a norm for gender (da Silva et al., 2019). Transgender and gender non-binary people are individuals whose gender identity or expression differs from that of the sex they were assigned at birth (Nolan et al., 2019). But a person becomes intersex as a result of prenatal development that leaves them with atypical sex characteristics, such as chromosomes, genes, hormones, external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, or secondary characteristics, such as body hair (Jones, 2018).

Though there is little evidence about norm change relating to intersex and transgender people, some progress is implied in practices that make systems more inclusive for these marginalised communities (such as anti-discrimination laws or training interventions for law officials and health service providers) (Browne, 2019).

Gender norms around masculinity and femininity intersect with norms around heteronormativity and cisgenderedness to influence people's attitudes and their behaviour towards anyone who is not heterosexual or cisgender. However, these gender norms may affect people of the LGBTQI+ community in different ways, and attitudes and behaviours may vary across cultures and countries.

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<sup>37</sup> This indicator is a composite based on four survey questions about the acceptability of having homosexual neighbours, the ability of homosexual couples as parents, justifying homosexuality, and whether a homosexual man is a 'real man'. Data were taken from Waves 3 and Waves 7 in each country (except Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Viet Nam and Zimbabwe, for which the first wave of data are Wave 4, and India, South Africa, Ukraine and Uruguay, for which the second wave of data are Wave 6).

A study of 23 countries by Bettinsoli et al. (2020), which compared the relationships between gender, beliefs about gender, and attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women, found that gay men are disliked more than lesbian women in all countries, and that men in ‘non-Western countries’ were more likely than women to report negative attitudes towards homosexuality in general.<sup>38</sup> The authors suggest two possible reasons for this: first, that masculine norms see heterosexuality as part of ‘being a man’ and, second, that men’s attitudes are more affected by societal norms.

In Latin America, for example, strict gender norms influence people’s attitudes towards the LGBTQI+ community. A large-scale Oxfam study of norms in eight countries in the region found that 38% of young Latin Americans (aged 15–19) believe that lesbians should not show their sexuality in public and 6 out of 10 men agree with the statement that it is ‘not normal’ for people who are born with male genitalia to dress as women.<sup>39</sup> These beliefs point to a lesbophobic and transphobic culture in the region, shaped by gender norms and reinforced by conservative and religious ideology (Ruíz and Garrido, 2018).

Discrimination against LGBTQI+ communities also means that they must endure poor quality sexual and reproductive health services. There is still severe stigma, coupled with a lack of knowledge on the part of providers or programmes in many countries on how best to address their needs. A study in South Africa, for example, found that pervasive norms among sexual and reproductive health service providers resulted in rudeness, suspicion, ridicule, violations of privacy and the refusal of care for non-heterosexual patients. Other challenges included misinformation and ignorance about sexual minority health, as well as a lack of tailored information, treatment and supplies for these patients (Morison and Lynch, 2016). LGBTQI+ people may also experience unethical and harmful procedures to change their sexual orientation, forced or coercive sterilization, forced genital and anal examinations, or unnecessary surgery and treatment on intersex children without their consent (WHO, 2015a).

Extreme backlash also leads to violence and hate crimes against the LGBTQI+ community. Studies confirm that LGBTQI+ people are more likely than others to suffer physical or sexual violence because they do not conform to established norms around gender and sexuality (Blondeel et al., 2018).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The study defines ‘Western’ countries as Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the US. China, India, Japan, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and Turkey are defined as ‘non-Western’. The relationship between participant gender and sexual prejudice was inconsistent across ‘Western’ countries.

<sup>39</sup> The study employed 4,731 surveys in the eight participating countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic.

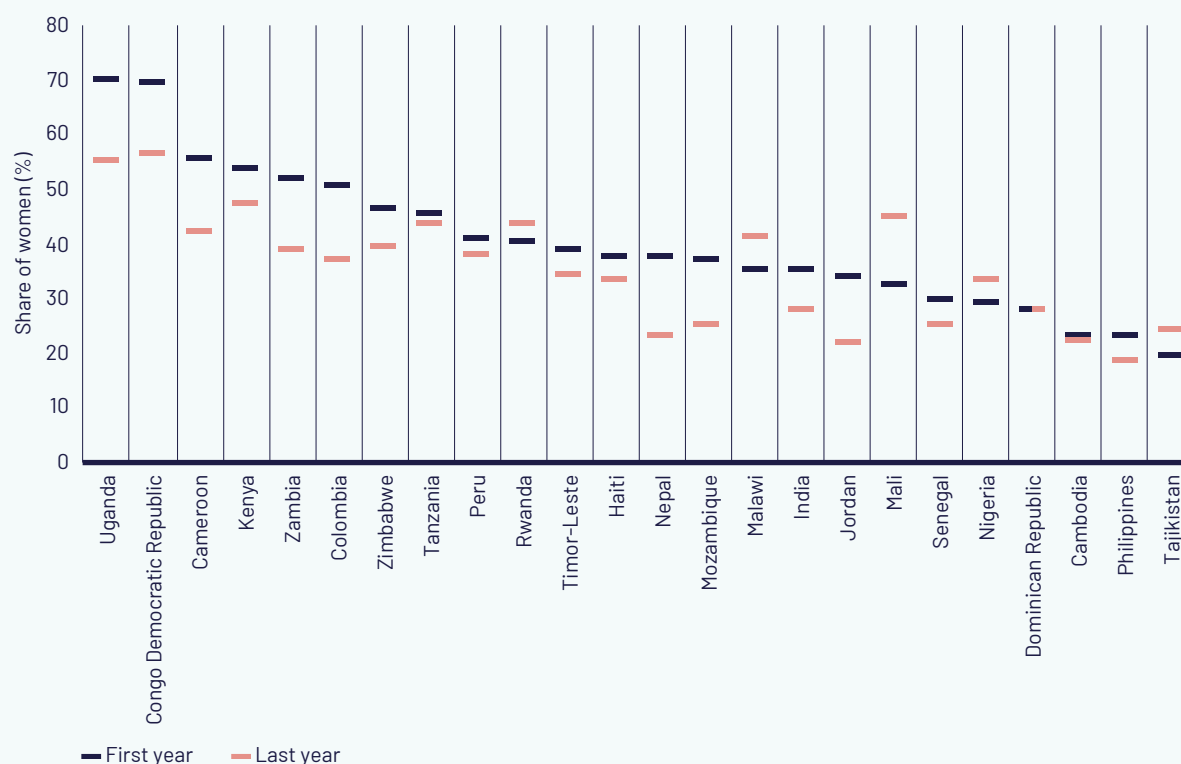
<sup>40</sup> This systematic review of 74 studies from 50 countries conducted between 1995 and 2014 found that the prevalence of physical and sexual violence against all sexual and gender minorities ranged from 6% (in a study of 240 people) to 25% (in a study of 196 people). For transgender people the prevalence ranged from 7% (in a study of 225 people) to 68% (in a study of 110 people).

## Sexual and gender-based violence

Reports of sexual and gender-based violence have fallen slightly over the past two decades, but there is still a long way to go. An estimated one in three women and girls worldwide report surviving physical and/or sexual abuse, most often at the hands of an intimate partner, making this form of violence, *‘one of the most widespread human rights violations’* (UNESCO, 2015: 13).<sup>41</sup>

Figure 12 shows that the share of women experiencing physical or sexual violence from 2000 to 2018 fell in three-quarters of the sample countries. It remained unchanged, however, in one country (the Dominican Republic) and increased in five (Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda and Tajikistan).

Figure 12: Share of women who reported experiencing physical or sexual violence



Source: The authors, drawing on Demographic and Health Surveys for each country.

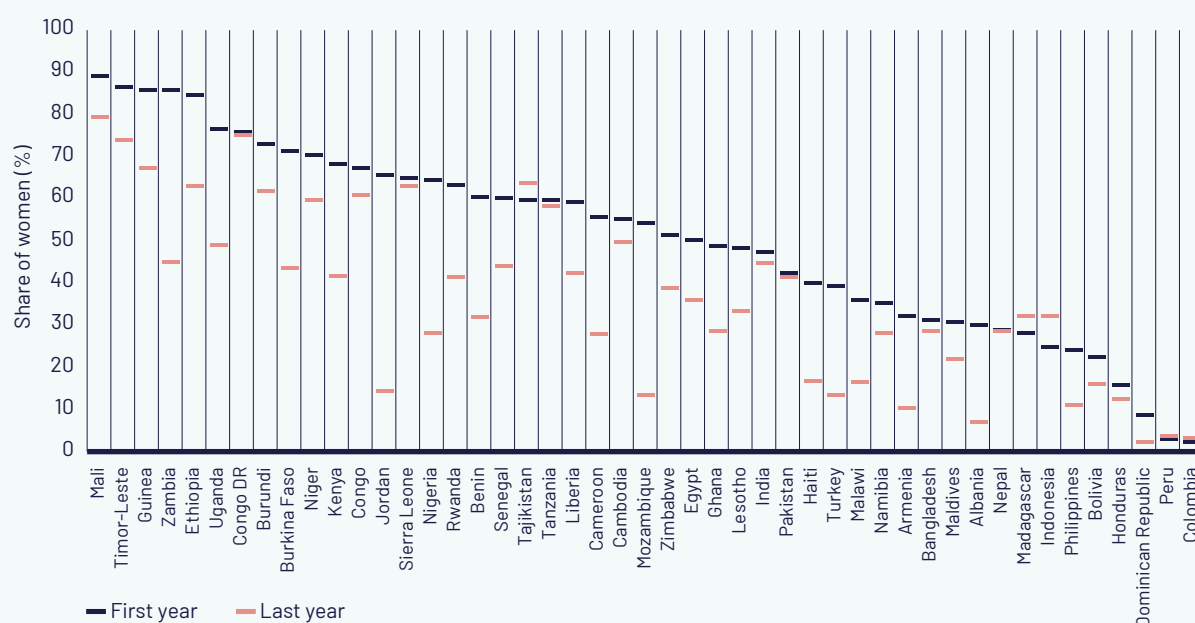
Note: Calculated using first and last year of available data, for countries with two or more data points. Therefore country trends should not be compared.

<sup>41</sup> It is very difficult to measure the true extent of violence against women as most incidents of domestic violence and sexual assault go unreported.

Studies have also confirmed that gender norms contribute to men's use of violence against their female partners. Rigid gender norms about masculinity, gender roles and marriage, for example, lead some men to resort to violence as a way to exert power and control over women (Heilman and Barker, 2018). Even women themselves may believe that men are justified in their use of violence. Demographic and Health surveys include questions that ask women and men whether or not a husband is justified in beating his wife for one of five reasons: burning food, arguing with their husband, going out without telling their husband, neglecting the children, and refusing to have sexual intercourse with their husband. Our analysis of the data suggests that women are more accepting of wife beating in countries where physical violence is more prevalent, which suggests that community norms are reflected in individual attitudes.<sup>42</sup>

Norms around gender-based violence can and have shifted, and rather remarkably in some contexts. Figures 13 and 14 illustrate major country differences in the attitudes of women and men towards wife beating in 47 countries between 2000 and 2018. There has been a fall in the share of women who report that wife beating is acceptable (for any reason) over time in 42 of 47 countries (89%), and the declines are often large. In 10 countries (22%) – 8 of them in sub-Saharan Africa – the share of women reporting the acceptability of such violence fell by more than 25 percentage points. In five countries, however, the share of women who found wife beating acceptable rose by between 0.7 and 7.2 percentage points: Colombia, Indonesia, Madagascar, Peru and Tajikistan.<sup>43</sup> It seems that attitudes towards gender-based violence may be slow to change because of 'sticky' norms that reflect patriarchy and power.

**Figure 13: Share of women reporting wife beating is acceptable**



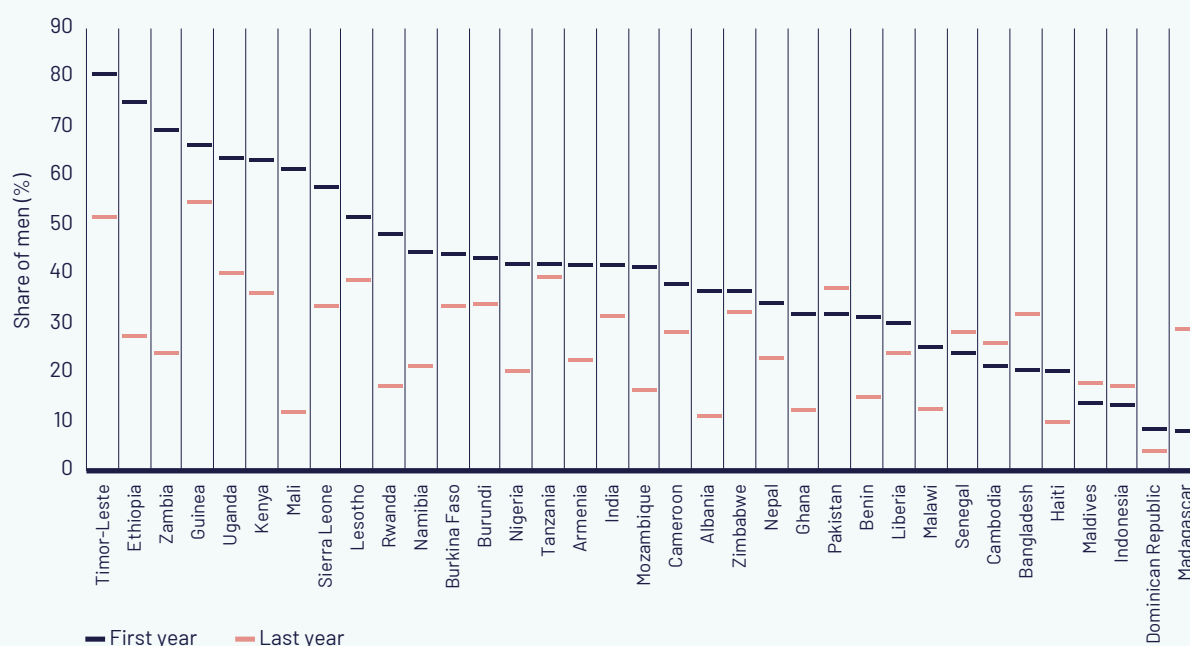
Source: The authors, drawing on Demographic and Health Surveys for each country.

Note: Calculated using first and last year of available data, for countries with two or more data points. Therefore country trends should not be compared.

<sup>42</sup> Analysis based on elaboration of data from most recent country data (2010+) from DHS Statcompiler.

<sup>43</sup> Countries are listed in alphabetical order.

Figure 14: Share of men reporting a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife



Source: The authors, drawing on Demographic and Health Surveys for each country.

Note: Calculated using first and last year of available data, for countries with two or more data points. Therefore country trends should not be compared.

A similar pattern emerges for men. Figure 14 shows that of the 35 countries with data, 8 recorded falls of more than 25 points, 6 of which were in sub-Saharan Africa; but the share of men who accepted wife beating rose in 7 countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Madagascar, Maldives, Pakistan and Senegal. In their analysis of 12 years of data from Demographic and Health Surveys, Sardinha and Nájera Catalán (2018) found that women were more likely than men to justify domestic violence in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. Societal acceptance of domestic violence was also more widespread in these regions than in Latin America, the Caribbean, Central/West Asia and Europe.

Qualitative evidence adds depth to these quantitative findings. Schuler et al. (2012) interviewed rural women and men in Bangladesh about attitudes towards wife beating, using a range of hypothetical circumstances. The responses suggest that the acceptability of violence spans a continuum, with women believing that violence is justified under certain circumstances, without ever accepting it completely. Their answers about the acceptability of intimate partner violence often changed during the conversations as they tried not to contradict community norms.

Women's attitudes to wife beating were often based on perceptions of what was 'normal' in their village, rather than whether they believed it was morally correct. They described, for example, how a man had the 'right' to beat his wife in certain circumstances, even though this was not the 'right' thing to do (ibid.). In other words, some women cited two sets of moral standards: the first related to their own sense of right and wrong, and the second to local patriarchal norms that they described as taking precedence in practice. The authors argued that this reflected *'their sense that their moral judgements are often irrelevant in the face of local norms that justify wife beating and the possible repercussions of challenging these norms'* (ibid: 7). When women did give their personal opinion, they seemed to recognise that community norms worked against their own interests but were ambivalent – and often pessimistic – about their power to change their circumstances.



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### 3.3 What has enabled and constrained change in gender norms around sexual and reproductive health and rights?

We have examined the role of norms around sexual and reproductive health and rights and how they have changed over time. Now we explore how other social, economic and political factors have helped or hindered the norm changes we have seen over the past 25 years. This section focuses on seven key drivers and barriers to change:

- the expansion of quality health services and access to contraception
- access to education and comprehensive sexuality education for all
- economic opportunity for women
- progressive legislation
- community mobilisation to advocate for more gender-equitable rights and services
- religious institutions and leaders
- mass media and the internet.

#### Expansion of quality health services and access to contraception

Effective health services and the provision of contraception are vital to meet women's demand for control over their own fertility. A 2015 report by the UN (2015: 14) on sexual and reproductive health states: *'as new norms about family planning and family size start to take hold, demand for family planning can outpace the availability and use of contraceptives, and thus unmet need for family planning can remain stable or even increase'*.

As the figures in the previous section showed, contraceptive use has increased and fertility rates have fallen, even though the needs of many women for contraception are still not being met. Progress has been driven, in part, by changes in norms around family planning, as well as greater access to contraception. In other words, the growing availability of contraceptives around the world shapes norms around the acceptability of their use.

But the expansion of sexual and reproductive health services alone is not enough unless those services are of high quality and sensitive to context-specific gender norms. The poor quality of available services and the biases of both providers and users are two key barriers to contraceptive use (Machiyama et al., 2017).

Health service providers tend to come from the same communities as their clients and are, therefore, prone to exactly the same beliefs, despite their clinical training (Solo and Festin, 2019). If they disapprove of a particular kind of client, such as an unmarried woman who asks for family planning, they may provide biased care, poor quality care, or indeed no care at all (Schwandt et al., 2017).

Service providers may also be poorly trained. A study in Brazil found that three out of four gynaecologists believed that women could become infertile if they used intrauterine contraceptives (da Silva et al., 2017). Untrained health-care providers may also be unable or unwilling to provide appropriate health care for transgender people (Luvuno et al., 2019; Krempasky et al., 2020).

## Access to education and comprehensive sexuality education for all

Chapter 2 of this report outlines the potential of education to foster egalitarian gender norms. In general, educated women and girls are more likely to be empowered and to display autonomy, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bernardo et al., 2018; van Egmond et al., 2020).

Research shows that women who have greater autonomy are more able to follow their own choices, such as delaying marriage and sexual activity, negotiating family planning decisions with their partners, or engaging effectively with healthcare providers (Taukobong et al., 2016). Educated or skilled women are more likely to delay childbearing to go to work. Indeed, child marriage declines as women become more educated, join the workforce and provide for their families (World Bank, 2017).

Education also leads to more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours in the home. When women (and their partners) are educated, women are more likely to make decisions about their sexual and reproductive health (Darteh et al., 2019) and less likely to experience physical and sexual violence from their partners (Ahinkorah et al., 2018). An analysis of Demographic and Health Survey data found that more schooling for women in rural and urban areas accounts for 30% and 54% (respectively) of the falls observed in global fertility rates.

More specifically, there is a growing recognition of the need for comprehensive sexuality education programmes that use an empowerment approach, with *‘teaching approaches that engage learners to question prevailing norms through critical thinking and analysis about their social context’* (Haberland and Rogow, 2015: S17). Evidence suggests that these are particularly effective in changing attitudes and behaviour around sexual and reproductive health. A review of 22 comprehensive sexuality education programmes found that they were five times more effective when they included teaching on gender and power to tackle the prevailing norms in this area (ibid.).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Of the programmes addressing gender and power, 80% were linked to a far lower rate of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies, compared to 17% of the programmes that did not address these issues.

## Economic opportunities for women

More education for girls and the greater availability of contraception worldwide have driven family sizes down and made paid work a possibility for more women (Bailey, 2013; Lee and Finlay, 2017). As we discuss in Chapter 4, the chance to join the labour market is critical for every area of women's equality, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Women who work outside the home are more likely to take part in household decisions and in local and national democratic processes, meaning that they can become agents of change in sexual and reproductive health and other areas (Percy and Svenson, 2016; Abraham et al., 2017). Analysis shows, for example, that their economic opportunities have a clear and positive link to their ability to negotiate condom use (Hanmer and Klugman, 2016). Analysis of the link between women's empowerment and maternal health care, using data from 31 countries, found that women with the highest levels of economic empowerment were 82% more likely to use modern contraception than women with little or no economic empowerment (Ahmed et al., 2010).<sup>45</sup> Robust evidence also suggests that women with more opportunities to take part in formal labour markets are more likely to delay having children and to have fewer children, which has an impact on fertility rates and on shifts in gender norms around family dynamics and motherhood (see, for example, Calder, 2018).

Having a job also influences norms in the home, which can lead to norm changes that are passed down to the next generation. Bertocchi and Bozzano (2019), for example, describe how the sons of working mothers are more likely to see working women as potential wives. This, in turn, makes employment more attractive for girls, leading to cultural change. Gender norms that are transmitted through the family are crucial for women's sexual and reproductive health, and changes in these norms within the family can create more gender-equitable households.

## Progressive legislation

Progressive legislation that supports the rights and empowerment of women can shift gender norms. Labour laws, for example, or more employment opportunities for women can drive norm change around adolescent marriage (UNICEF, 2020b). And laws that ban child marriage can also change norms and practices. A study of 12 countries in sub-Saharan Africa found that the prevalence of child marriage was 40% lower in countries with consistent laws against child marriage (Maswikwa et al., 2015). Robust evidence also points to how minimum-age-of-marriage laws in low- and middle-income countries drive falls in adolescent fertility (Kim et al., 2013; Maswikwa et al., 2015). Conversely, evidence from 29 countries shows that limited economic rights for women have been linked to higher levels of acceptance of domestic violence among both women and men (Sardinha and Nájera Catalán, 2018).

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<sup>45</sup> The authors use a composite score based on the set of women's autonomy questions asked in Demographic and Health Surveys: the sum of positive answers to five questions about women's involvement in decisions related to their own health care, household purchases, daily household needs purchases, visits to their family or relatives and daily meal preparation. This sum can range from 0 (least empowered) to 5 (most empowered).

Legislation that shapes access to contraception and family planning is crucial for sexual and reproductive health, as laws can help to shift norms around what is or is not socially acceptable. Not surprisingly, countries with more liberal contraceptive laws have higher rates of contraceptive use (Finlay and James, 2017).

At the same time, however, countries may also use contraceptive laws to control the use of certain contraceptives or the actions of particular groups of people. This is particularly true for adolescents, who still cannot, for example, obtain contraceptives or safe abortion services without parental approval in many countries (Berer, 2017; Engel et al., 2019).<sup>46</sup> A recent study of 69 countries found that while the vast majority (87%) had policies in place to provide intrauterine devices for women, 23 countries (33%) reported having policies in place to restrict their use for specific groups, such as adolescents or women who have never given birth (Ali et al., 2019). Again, this reflects norms around the gender roles that demand motherhood and child-rearing from women. And there are still legal barriers in some countries for migrants and asylum seekers, incarcerated people, people with disabilities and those living with HIV, the LGBTIQ+ community, and people engaged in sex work, which highlights the intersection of many kinds of marginalisation (WHO, 2015b).

Recent decades have seen international and local legislative and human rights bodies increasingly describe access to quality sexual and reproductive health information and services, including contraception, as a service that *‘should be delivered in a way that ensures fully informed decision-making, respects dignity, autonomy, privacy and confidentiality, and is sensitive to individuals’ needs and perspectives’* (WHO, 2014: 1). The Beijing Declaration called for countries to review laws that criminalise abortion, for example, and 52 countries have changed their laws to allow for greater access to abortion since 1995 (Singh et al., 2018a). However, only 3 countries from the list of 52 are from the Middle East and North Africa: the United Arab Emirates (in 2014), Morocco (in 2017), and Iran (in 2004) (WHO, 2014).

More laws have been put in place over the past 25 years to protect women from violence. In 1995, 177 of 190 countries (or 93%) had no legal prohibition on domestic violence. By 2020, this had fallen to 35 countries (or 18%) (World Bank, 2020a). This trend is, in part, the result of mobilisation at the local level. Countries in the Middle East and North Africa, for example, have seen an increase in laws that protect women and girls since the uprisings of the Arab Spring in the early 2010s. Following the uprisings, Lebanon issued its first law against domestic violence, followed by Algeria, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in 2015. Since 2017, four more countries in the region have followed suit – Djibouti, Morocco, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates – suggesting a ripple effect across national legislation. Laws shape values and norms and, in turn, influence individual attitudes and perceptions (Nadler, 2017.) Awareness of laws has, therefore, helped to drive norm change on physical violence against women (Jewkes et al., 2010).

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<sup>46</sup> For more on the shortcomings of legislation and policies that protect the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents see Kabiru (2019).

Legal punishment for sexual violence, regardless of a woman's relationship with the perpetrator, is essential to change the norms that shape sexual and reproductive health. According to Equality Now (2017: 27), *'In addition to making justice more accessible for all, it could be a force for change in public opinion by sending the signal that a woman always has a right to choose whether and with whom she has sexual relations'*. As of 2015, however, more than 1 billion women still lacked any legal protection against sexual violence by an intimate partner, and close to 1.4 billion lacked any legal protection against domestic economic violence, with little or no progress over time for either form of violence (Tavares and Wodon, 2018).

Legislation can, however, entrench social norms that are already pervasive and harmful. Laws in some countries permit rape within marriage or include conditions that let perpetrators get away with it. In Lesotho, Sri Lanka and Tanzania, for example, marital rape is only illegal if the couple have separated; and in India, Nigeria and Singapore marital rape is permitted if the wife has reached a certain age (13 and 15 in India and Singapore, respectively, and the 'age of puberty' in Nigeria) (Equality Now, 2017).

Clearly, laws alone are not enough. Despite all the legal progress that has been made, our review of physical and sexual intimate partner violence in the previous section has shown that support for wife beating has grown in some countries. When laws clash with prevailing norms, some people may prefer to break the law and act just as they did before, but more discreetly. Acemoglu and Jackson (2017) maintain that this results in less whistleblowing, which undermines the effectiveness of laws and encourages further law-breaking.

In many countries, advocacy for sexual and reproductive health and rights has faced a backlash from right-wing politicians, religious groups or anti-rights activists. Conservative US administrations, for example, have applied the Mexico City Policy that bars funding to foreign non-governmental organisations that provide or advocate abortion, even with non-US funds. This has had a ripple effect in many countries, with other governments also cutting back programmes for sexual and reproductive health (Starrs et al., 2018). Socially conservative policy makers and activists often believe that expanding access to services for sexual and reproductive health, or even sharing information about it through comprehensive sexuality education, increases sexual activity, despite all the scientific evidence that proves otherwise (Dreweke, 2019).

**When laws clash with prevailing norms, some people may prefer to break the law and act just as they did before, but more discreetly.**

**||**

## Social mobilisation

At least two types of social mobilisation contribute to change in gender norms: mobilisation to catalyse change within legal systems and mobilisation to change prevailing beliefs and behaviour. Feminist organisations and LGBTQI+ activists around the world have mobilised to protect and advance legal rights in response to political backlash from right-wing and conservative politicians. In their systematic review of studies from low- and middle-income countries, Hay et al. (2019: 2543) argue that community mobilisation *‘can change the way women interact with the health system, directly challenge restrictive gender norms and the health system hierarchy, and in turn bring positive changes and deeper accountability in the health system at the local level’*.

Mobilisation to change knowledge and belief systems often works directly with men to foster more gender-equitable attitudes and change harmful practices such as intimate partner violence, or women’s lack of decision-making in family planning (see Pettifor et al., 2018; Minckas et al., 2020). Mobilisation groups foster ‘critical consciousness’ in their communities to cultivate more gender equitable norms (MacPhail et al., 2019). In Nepal, for example, social mobilisation and communication campaigns by feminist groups have helped to change norms around the practice of *chapaudi*, in which girls who are menstruating must stay in a shed for four days without entering the house (Ghimire and Samuels, 2013). More broadly, feminist organisations have used creative arts and different communication tools in recent years to change the narrative about sexual and reproductive health and other topics linked to gender equality (Díaz Ezquerro, 2020) and play a critical role in shifting gender norms. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Oxfam found that the strategies of feminist groups and women’s organisations are key drivers of norm change, through mobilisation, political advocacy and networking that is sustainable in the long term (Ruíz and Garrido, 2018). Given that activism can build social movements and drive change in belief systems, the mobilisation of civil societies and feminist organisations offers great potential for lasting change.



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## Religious institutions and leaders

Norms are both reinforced and contested within religious institutions, and then translated into everyday perceptions and practices. Religion, therefore, plays a key role in either putting the brakes on progress or driving norm change.

Religious opposition can block legislation that upholds the rights of women and girls. For example, cultural or religious opposition is a key factor inhibiting women's contraceptive use (Machiyama et al., 2017). Likewise, activists in high- and lower middle-income countries have opposed the provision of comprehensive sexuality education in schools because they oppose any teaching about sexuality in general, and premarital sex or non-conforming gender identities and sexualities more specifically (Cense et al., 2018). Religious opposition may, therefore, conflict with public health advice and play into prevailing patriarchal belief systems.

**If the common values of a religious institution and its leaders accommodate and embed a changed or new norm, that norm is more likely to endure.**



Religious expressions of morality and purity shape women's sexual and reproductive health and their access to quality health services. Religious leaders, for example, often reinforce stigmas around abortion (Castle, 2011), while faith-based health providers have used conservative interpretations of Catholic and Islamic scriptures to deny access to family planning (Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Hamid et al., 2020).

A literature review on the relationship between family planning and different religions (including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese religious traditions) found that religious and cultural factors can influence the acceptance and use of contraception by couples from different religious backgrounds. This is particularly true for immigrants who, finding themselves in an unfamiliar culture, might latch on to traditional religious and cultural expectations around sexuality, fertility and family (Srikanthan and Reid, 2008).

At the same time, if the common values of a religious institution and its leaders accommodate and embed a changed or new norm, that norm is more likely to endure. A review of family planning initiatives in 12 countries where Islam is commonly practiced found that a sharper focus on advocating for family planning with imams and religious scholars is an effective way to improve the sexual and reproductive health of Muslim women (Shaikh et al., 2013).<sup>47</sup> As Singh et al. (2018b: 16) note, religious leaders, government officials and media personalities are key opinion makers and that *'working with them has been particularly important for ensuring the legitimacy of new information that goes against the current norm'*.

<sup>47</sup> The 12 countries in this study are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey.

## Mass media and the internet

Popular culture can shift norms by influencing behaviours and aspirations. TV and popular culture allow people to tap into knowledge and belief systems from different parts of the world, connecting them and challenging entrenched norms across ‘closed’ social groups (Colleran, 2016). As Hornik and McAnany (2001) argue, the mass media can shape people’s values around family size and age of marriage by glorifying cosmopolitan lifestyles that encourage women to pursue careers and earn a living. A study in Brazil, for example, found that women who watched soap operas that show small families were more likely to have fewer children than those who did not (Ferrara et al., 2008). This effect was even stronger for women who were poorer and who had less education. Their age also had an impact, with older women (those already with children) more likely to change their behaviour. This suggests that while soap operas may not delay first births, they may influence women’s overall aspirations about their preferred number of children.

Similarly, a review of people’s attitudes towards homosexuality found that in some Asian countries, including China, India and South Korea, men who believed in traditional gender norms were more accepting of homosexuality compared to most other countries and regions (Bettinsoli, 2020).<sup>48</sup> The authors speculate that this might reflect not only rapid economic and political modernisation in these Asian countries, but also the role of the mass media in transforming men’s attitudes towards gender and sex. Drawing on previous literature (Maliangkay, 2010; BBC, 2018), they suggest that the *khonminam*, or the ‘pretty boy’ ideal found in Korean (and many other Asian) popular cultures is now a global sensation shifting norms around masculinity. These findings suggest that television may play a huge role in circulating ideas around sexual and reproductive health, and particularly fertility, gender and sexuality.

TV and radio shows are key tools to shift gender norms because they can have a powerful effect on groups of people. ‘Edutainment’ (education-entertainment) weaves factual content into dramas and is often accompanied by interactive call-ins to provoke discussion of the topics presented (ODI, 2015). This interactive element is important because it shifts people’s perceptions about what other people in their social groups see as ‘normative’ behaviour. For example, a Mexican soap opera that was broadcast through one radio to an entire community proved to have a greater impact on the perceptions of those people listening together than on those listening at home (Arias, 2019).

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<sup>48</sup> In South Korea, endorsement of traditional gender norms was unrelated to attitudes toward sexual minorities; in China and India, endorsement of gender norms was positively related to pro-gay attitudes.

Successful long-running ‘edutainment’ programmes, including ‘Soul City’ in South Africa, ‘Puntos de Encuentro’ in Nicaragua, and ‘I, a woman, can do anything’ in India, have contributed to change around various norms related to sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence (ODI, 2015).<sup>49</sup> Feminist TV and radio programmes which operate at scale and are widely accessible in many low- and middle-income countries – have proved one of the most effective ways of influencing adolescents’ beliefs and behaviours, particularly when combined with community-level activities to expand their reach and mobilise action (Nguyen et al., 2019).

Finally, the dramatic global growth in access to the internet has the potential to either shift or reinforce pervasive gender norms. By connecting people from different parts of the world, the Internet can share more progressive ideas about human rights and gender equality, especially for people from communities that might never have been exposed to different belief systems (Watson Kakar et al., 2012). However, the Internet can also fuel the faster spread of retrograde ideas about sexual and reproductive health and gender. Mantilla (2013), for example, describes how *gender-trolling*, or the use of online misogyny, has been used to silence and hurt women through gender-based insults, vicious language and attacks. These tactics and online forums, such as that of the *incels* (involuntary celibates), form part of the ‘mansphere’, described as ‘*hard-line men’s rights and interest communities online*’ (Jane, 2017: 662).

**The dramatic global growth in access to the Internet has the potential to either shift or reinforce pervasive gender norms.**

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In short, many factors help to change gender norms and sexual and reproductive health and rights. More education for women, more paid employment, more exposure to the media, and better household economic status have all been found to drive progress on family planning and antenatal care (Wado, 2018). At the same time, cultural stigmas and taboos around gender and sexuality may be perpetuated by religious institutions, and by a lack of education (and particularly comprehensive sexuality education), and lack of quality health services and of laws that protect women’s sexual and reproductive rights.

<sup>49</sup> [www.soulcity.org.za](http://www.soulcity.org.za), [www.puntosdeencuentro.org](http://www.puntosdeencuentro.org), [mkbksh.org](http://mkbksh.org).



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### 3.4 What impact have crises had on gender norms around sexual and reproductive health and rights?

The previous sections have charted impressive progress in some areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights. But the fragility of this progress is often exposed during a crisis, raising questions about the extent to which norms have actually changed. Are there situations where changes in norms around sexual and reproductive health and rights are reversed? The answer, unfortunately, is yes.

While there is only limited evidence about attitude change during crises, this section draws on evidence of outcomes related to sexual and reproductive health and rights that show a glimpse of the patterns of norm change or maintenance. It focuses in particular on the recent Covid-19 pandemic, while making connections to earlier situations of stress or crisis.

Evidence from public health emergencies, including the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ebola and Zika epidemics, for example, suggest that sexual and reproductive health services are scaled-back during disease outbreaks because health system capacities are over-stretched (WHO, 2020). The consequences for women and adolescent girls include higher maternal mortality and morbidity, and increased rates of adolescent pregnancy, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (UN, 2020b). As a result of Covid-19, an estimated additional 49 million women in lower middle-income countries may also have unmet needs for modern contraception and there could be an additional 15 million unplanned pregnancies (Riley et al., 2020).

The sexual and reproductive health of certain groups of women may be even more neglected during crises, especially young women, those with disabilities, and those living in rural and marginalised communities. A review of literature on the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents in humanitarian contexts suggests that there is a lack of services designed to support them, especially adolescents from the LGBTQI+ community and those with disabilities (Jennings et al., 2019). In India, a report on the experiences of women with disabilities has described some of these challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic, including reduced access to sanitary products and less redress for acts of domestic violence (Rising Flame and Sight Savers, 2020).

Domestic violence has skyrocketed in many parts of the world since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting that people in crisis may revert to old behaviours and that new and temporary norms of acceptable behaviour may develop. Being confined and isolated during a lockdown, alongside the added stresses and financial problems created by the pandemic, can either exacerbate existing abuse or trigger it for the first time (UN Women, 2020). In the UK, calls, emails and website visits to Respect, the national domestic violence charity, have increased 97%, 185% and 581% respectively (UN DGC, 2020). Across various US cities, police calls related to domestic abuse have increased by up to 20% (Bullinger et al., 2020; Leslie and Wilson, 2020; Sanga and McCrary, 2020). And similar trends have been seen in Latin America and the Caribbean (EQUIS, 2020; Polo, 2020). The data suggest that the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls may be compromised in crisis situations because the underlying norms related to gender-based violence have, in fact, remained firmly in place.<sup>50</sup>

Stressful situations may have a wider impact on sexual and reproductive health, such as child, early and forced child marriage and rates of fertility or sexually transmitted infections. Financial problems at any time may lead people to sacrifice their daughter's education for their son's, or force their children into marriage in exchange for money, or some other form of sexual exploitation. But when a disaster or conflict throws a family into poverty and insecurity, they may also try to cope by marrying their daughters off early (Ahmed et al., 2019). This was noted after the 2004 tsunami, when the rates of early marriage and different forms of sexual violence increased in Indonesia (Girls Not Brides, 2020).

In addition, poor families living in shelters and refugee camps often consider early marriage as the only way to protect their daughters against rape or sexual harassment (SB Overseas, 2018). Parents may also believe that marriage will give their daughters a more comfortable and financially secure life (Ferdousi, 2014). It seems, therefore, that during times of stress, discriminatory gender norms may be reasserted.



**Being confined and isolated during a lockdown, alongside the added stresses and financial problems created by the pandemic, can either exacerbate existing abuse or trigger it for the first time.**

<sup>50</sup> Campbell (2020) cites research that found a 46% increase in reports of domestic violence reports during a volcanic eruption in the US state of Washington (Adams and Adams, 1984), a 35% increase in psychological abuse after Hurricane Katrina (Schumacher et al., 2010), and similar trends during natural disasters, such as earthquakes, Tsunamis and Australia's bushfires (Behrman and Weitzman, 2016; Parkinson, 2019).

### 3.5 Looking ahead: promising approaches to shift gender norms around sexual and reproductive health and rights

In the final section of this chapter, we set out recommendations to change the norms that affect the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls, noting that change is needed at every level: individual, community and structural (Malhotra et al., 2019). We start with health services and legal and policy frameworks – and then outline efforts to shape attitudes and consciousness more directly through education, and household or community sensitisation and mobilisation.

#### Ensure women have access to contraceptives and quality health services

As section 3.2 of this chapter notes, barriers to contraceptive use remain, as well as limited access to quality health services that support family planning. Greater access to contraception and quality health services could be ensured through legislation that supports free essential services for all. Universal health coverage schemes, for example, should include core sexual and reproductive health services in essential benefits packages, including contraception (IWHC, 2019). Cash transfer programmes could also address any financial barriers for family planning and contraception uptake. In their systematic review of cash transfer programmes, Khan et al. (2016) found that conditional cash transfers increased contraceptive use and birth spacing, and reduced unplanned pregnancies.

For women in rural areas, where their access to quality health services may be limited or they may have to travel long distances, e-tools and mobile devices may be an effective supplement to in-person services. Initiatives are under way at a global level to scale up successful digital health initiatives (see Labrique et al., 2018, for examples). As we note in section 3.2 of this chapter, women need family planning services that they can use in secret, as well as in the open, as many women are barred from seeking such services by their partners. It is critical, therefore, that client confidentiality is ensured to avoid male opposition (Castle and Askew, 2015). Digital tools are one way to achieve this, although it is important to note that, worldwide, women have less access to mobile devices than men – again, the result in large part of social norms.<sup>51</sup>

While the expansion of health services does not shift gender norms directly in itself, it provides a more enabling environment for all people to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights. By expanding access to health services and contraceptives, girls and women are better able to overcome challenges they may face as a result of restrictive gender norms (Malhotra et al., 2019). And an environment that is conducive to the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all is essential for shifting gender norms. The same can be said about legislation.

<sup>51</sup> Although the number of women who own mobile phones has increased by 250 million over the past six years alone (with 1.7 billion women in lower middle-income countries now accessing a mobile phone and over a million using the Internet), women in these countries are still 10% less likely than men to own a mobile phone (GSMA, 2019).

## Legislation and policies must be clear and comprehensive to tackle sexual and gender-based violence

Legislation that promotes gender equality and women's empowerment is one way to change institutional barriers that can shape gender norms. Comparing countries with and without laws against domestic violence, we see that average rates of violence are lower in countries with such legislation (10.8% vs 16.7%) (Klugman, 2017). Yet, as we have shown in this chapter, many countries have still not taken steps to protect women by law from physical or sexual violence at the hands of their partners.

Laws must, therefore, be clear and comprehensive. As Starrs et al. (2018: 2642) note, acceleration of progress in sexual and reproductive health and rights *'requires adoption of a more holistic view of [sexual and reproductive health and rights] and tackling of neglected issues, such as adolescent sexuality, gender-based violence, abortion, and diversity in sexual orientations and gender identities'*. A human rights approach to legislation may also support the greater recognition of the particular needs and capabilities of diverse adolescents, allowing them to make informed decisions about their health (Engel et al., 2019).

We have also noted, however, that laws and policies alone are not enough to change social norms and behaviour. Strategies to prevent gender-based violence also need to focus on structural and social risk factors, and on preventing rapes in the first place, rather than relying solely on laws that may protect victims after the violence has happened (Jewkes et al., 2013). Legal and policy change is more likely to have an impact where sanctions are fully implemented (Alexander-Scott et al., 2016). Law enforcement officers must, therefore, be informed of the law and equipped with the skills they need to hold perpetrators to account.

## Provide comprehensive sexuality education to all

Comprehensive sexuality education can shift norms by not only informing people of their sexual and reproductive rights, but also equipping them with skills that allow them to think more critically about gender roles, relations and power dynamics. There is significant evidence suggesting that comprehensive sexuality education enables both young people and adults to develop accurate and age-appropriate knowledge; positive values, including respect for human rights, gender equality and diversity; and attitudes and skills that contribute to safe, healthy and positive relationships (UNESCO, 2018b). UNESCO's *International technical guidance on sexuality education* is intended to help actors in education, health and other relevant sectors develop and implement formal and non-formal comprehensive sexuality education programmes and materials. The guidance emphasises the need for programmes *'that are informed by evidence, adapted to the local context, and logically designed to measure and address factors such as beliefs, values, attitudes and skills which, in turn, may affect health and wellbeing in relation to sexuality'* (ibid: 12).

## **Challenge gender norms that curtail women's decision-making power in intimate relationships**

Even when family planning services are available, the norms that constrain women's independent mobility or decision-making about the use of contraception may stop them from accessing these services. Significant and sustainable changes in the sexual and reproductive health of women and adolescents require greater efforts to shift gender norms that make it hard for women to say 'no' to sex with their partners, or to use contraception to prevent pregnancy. The literature suggests that, for this to happen, both women and men must be involved in family planning and empowerment programmes (Starbird et al., 2016) and programmes must address norms at the household level as well as within health services and legislation (WHO, 2006). Evidence suggests that multi-sectoral interventions have the greatest impact on women's autonomy, authority, and sexual and reproductive health (WHO, 2006; UNFPA, 2019).

## **Involve those with influence at community level in initiatives to change norms**

Beyond the household, it is vital to involve community members, religious leaders and others who may influence the norms that shape attitudes and behaviours. Women often get their information from social networks, but this can reinforce as well as combat the norms that determine their sexual and reproductive health. Family planning programmes should, therefore, view both clients and providers as members of informal but meaningful information networks, as well as individuals (Castle and Askew, 2015). The High Impact Practices brief on family planning (USAID, 2016) collates robust evidence that norms that present barriers to sexual and reproductive health can be shifted by community mobilisation to drive changes within the family, among individuals, and across the wider community.

## **Leverage mass media campaigns to promote gender-egalitarian attitudes and norms**

The use of the mass media to promote sexual and reproductive health is classified as a 'proven practice' (USAID, 2016) that has an impact and is cost-effective, although few studies measure outcomes in relation to young people (Castle and Silva, 2019). The advent of digital media and its widespread use by young people has driven a massive transformation in norms over the past 30 years. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, social media is the main source of information about sexual and reproductive health used by adolescents (Ruíz and Garrido, 2018). The use of digital media (including social media) is also seen as a 'promising practice' in terms of decision-making about contraception (USAID, 2018). However, social media is more likely to be used by those living in urban areas, who tend to be wealthier and more literate (Smith and Anderson, 2018). And, as we noted earlier, mobile phone ownership is highly gendered in many settings, particularly where it is relatively new.

### 3.6 Conclusions

The role played by norms in shaping women's sexual and reproductive health and rights is complex. It is clear that norms in this area are maintained by patriarchal moral authority and embedded in belief systems and world views that make them difficult to shift. Nevertheless, they are changing.

It is vital to support the many mechanisms that contribute to such change. While it not always easy to identify which changes come first, the evidence suggests that initiatives to catalyse change must be multi-faceted and address every layer of society where norms are formed, passed on, or challenged.

“

**Sexual and reproductive health remains a fierce battleground in the fight for the wider rights and empowerment of women.**

There is a clear relationship, for example, between women's economic empowerment and some aspects of sexual and reproductive health, such as fertility (Gammage et al., 2020). And in some cases, a combination of poverty and patriarchy makes certain norms exceptionally sticky, resulting in change that is, at best, slow.

Progress itself faces reversals and stagnation as power is contested and renegotiated. We see this most clearly in trends around the attitudes of women and men towards the justification of wife beating. However, progress has been clearer and more consistent in other areas of sexual and reproductive health, such as family planning, adolescent fertility, and child, early and forced marriage. Recognising the achievements and shortcomings of the past 25 years is crucial, as sexual and reproductive health remains a fierce battleground in the fight for the wider rights and empowerment of women.



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## 4 Gender norms around paid and unpaid work and care

### KEY POINTS

- There has been little global progress on the scale of women's participation in the labour force over the past 25 years. Global figures mask a rise in some regions, such as Latin America and a fall in others, such as South and East Asia.
- There has also been little change in the time women and men spend on paid work and on unpaid care and domestic work over this period, though the overall trend is towards greater gender equality in many countries.
- Attitudes have often changed much more than work patterns but there is huge variation: in most countries for which there are data, the proportion of people who agree that if jobs are scarce, men should have priority has fallen. In all 15 countries for which there are data, the proportion of people who fear that pre-schoolers suffer if their mothers work has also fallen – and by large margins in some countries – over the past 25 years.
- Rising education levels, shifts in economic structures that create more job opportunities, and gender-egalitarian changes in laws and policies can all interact in a virtuous cycle, leading to shifts in gender norms around paid and unpaid work.
- This cycle can, however, be blocked by a web of gendered norms that act as patriarchal brakes. These include norms around care responsibilities, the importance of maintaining respectability and chastity, and norms that tolerate gender-based violence.
- Promising approaches to shift the norms that limit women's economic opportunities include community-, school- and workplace-based education on gender equality, equal care roles and the prevention of violence; the use of mass and social media to build momentum for norm change; and the development of good quality, affordable childcare services. These approaches need to be backed up by policies that can normalise women's participation in the labour force, such as the expansion of decent work opportunities.

## 4.1 Introduction

Throughout history and across every society, the vast majority of women have always worked. Whether in or outside their homes, they have always grown food, produced goods, earned income, or taken care of their families. Many societies today, however, still assign unpaid care and domestic work to women, and still see earning an income as a primarily male responsibility. These roles are reflected in cultural ideals about productive and reproductive activities. But real life is messy, and these norms are not static. Gendered norms about paid and unpaid work vary across regions, socio-economic groups and the life cycle, and intersect with other norms and values around self-responsibility and diligence.

Processes of socialisation, in the family, schools and religious institutions, the mass media, and in prevailing laws and policies, all influence what different societies think of as male and female roles, or whether they see particular activities as gendered. What's more, they can often change what people actually do. Both economic pressures and increasing opportunities drive change in the kinds of work people do, their attitudes and their willingness to contravene prevailing norms. This chapter explores how gender norms around paid and unpaid work have changed in different contexts over the past 25 years.<sup>52</sup> We ask what has driven change, and where norms have not changed, why that is.

Why do gender norms matter so much for work roles? Paid work is not automatically empowering – particularly if someone is working in conditions that are oppressive and exploitative. And unpaid care and domestic work does not automatically disempower – it is a fundamental part of family life and relationships, and critical to social wellbeing. But paid work often underpins having greater autonomy and a greater influence in the family and in society, and widens horizons more than unpaid home-based work.

Increases in women's involvement in paid work and their control of economic resources can drive shifts in gender norms and expectations, including equality in the workplace and family life, and freedom from violence (Jayachandran, 2019). Similarly, sharing unpaid care and domestic work benefits men by building stronger relationships with their families and partners, and has a positive impact on children (Van der Gaag et al., 2019).



**real life is messy, and  
these norms are not  
static.**

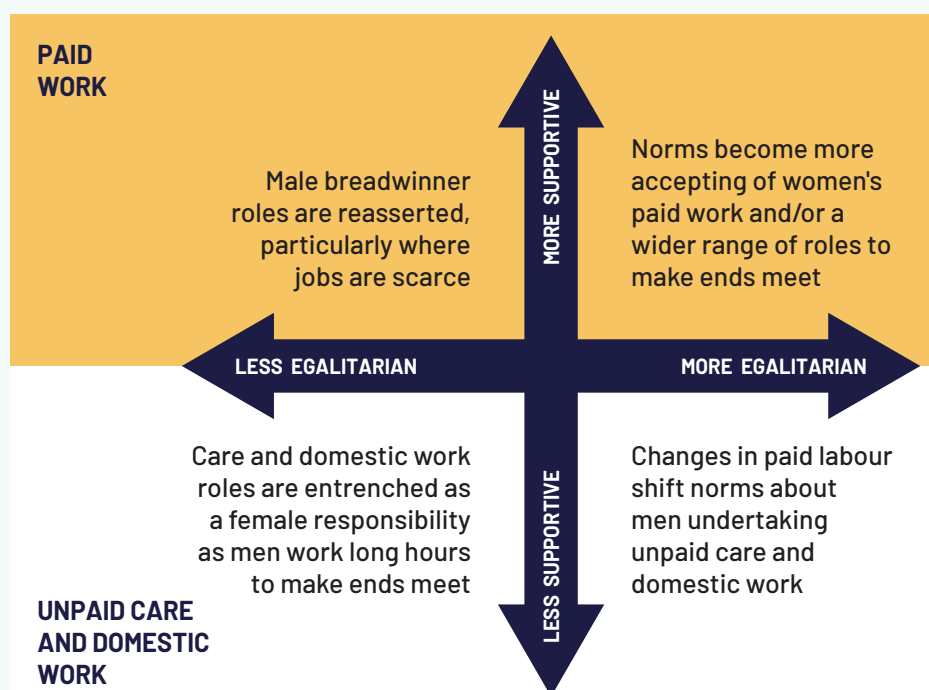
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<sup>52</sup> ALIGN's forthcoming guide to gender norms and women's economic empowerment looks in more detail at norms related to a wider range of issues that affect women's economic wellbeing, including gender pay gaps, entrepreneurship, inheritance and control of financial assets.

More so than the other chapters of this report, this chapter is constrained by a lack of intersectional data: we are able to report differences by age or geography (rural/urban location), but very rarely by other differences. The available data are based on a binary division between females and males, without attention to diverse gender identities, or how gender norms influence work and care patterns among same-sex couples.

Norms about paid and unpaid work are closely intertwined, and often move in step. When norms become more supportive of women working, for example, they often – with a time lag – increase support for men undertaking care and domestic work. They can, however, move in different directions. This is the case when norms stretch to encompass women doing paid work in a wider range of roles, without any corresponding shift in male responsibilities. Figure 15 summarises these different possibilities.

Figure 15: Potential shifts in gender norms about work



Source: The authors.

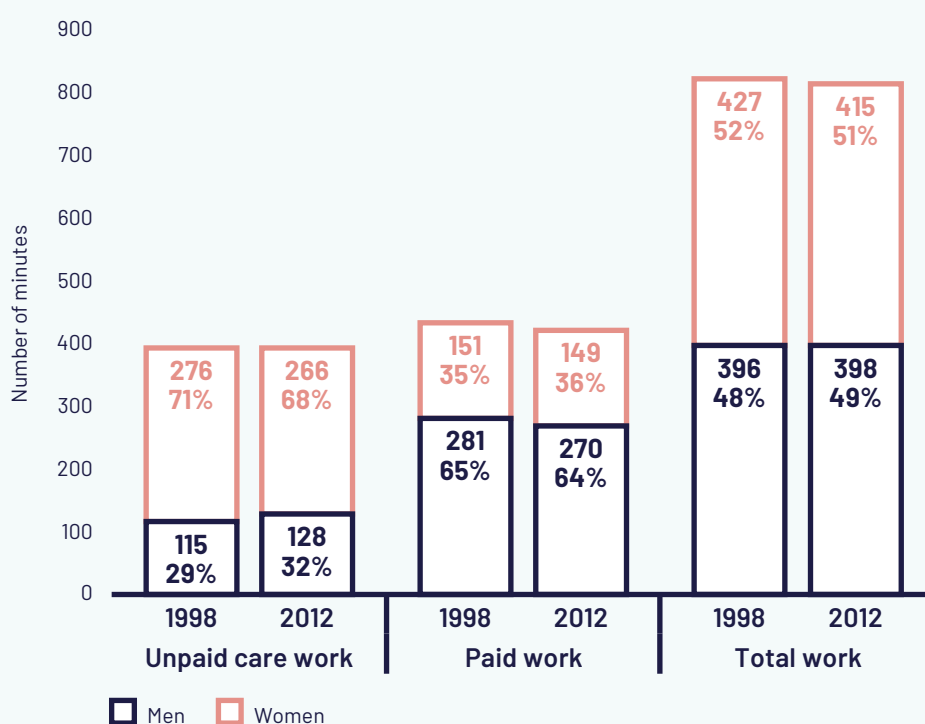
## 4.2 How have gender norms about paid and unpaid work changed over the past 25 years?

*‘With regional variations, the “male breadwinner” family model, overall, remains very much ingrained within the fabric of societies, and women’s caring role in the family continues to be central. But this is changing.’ (Addati et al., 2018: xxxi)*

Aggregated global data from time-use surveys in 25 countries<sup>53</sup> show very limited change in the total time women and men spent on work, or on the gender distribution of paid or unpaid care work between 1998 and 2012 (the latest figures available) (Figure 16). However, country-level data suggest some degree of shift towards more equitable divisions of labour:

- women’s unpaid work time increased in 9 countries and decreased in 16
- men’s unpaid work time increased in 12 countries, decreased in 10 and stayed the same in 3
- the time women spent in paid work increased in 18 countries, fell in 6, and stayed the same in 1 (Charmes, 2019).

**Figure 16: Changes in time use for women and men in 25 countries, 1998–2012 (average minutes per day and % of total)**



Source: Based on data reported in Charmes (2019).

<sup>53</sup> These countries were: Azerbaijan, Australia, Belgium, Benin, Canada, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Mongolia, New Zealand, Norway, Palestinian Territories, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Tanzania, Thailand, Turkey, UK and US.

These limited changes could indicate that norms around gendered responsibility for paid and unpaid work are relatively stable. Our analysis, however, suggests that there is considerable diversity, which reflects different economic and cultural contexts, different family configurations, and the availability or lack of affordable care services. Overall, to a varying degree, the norms that assign primary responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work to women tend to persist, but there are major differences in what families actually do and – importantly – what they perceive to be the ‘right’ thing to do. We now examine trends in attitudes and practices in more detail as a window on social norms.

‘Traditional’ gendered norms about paid work, care and domestic work are strongest when families have young children. Data from a wide range of cultural contexts, and countries at different income levels, show that having young children reduces the likelihood of women being part of the labour force substantially (Gallup and ILO, 2017; Addati et al., 2018; Mariara et al., 2018; Klasen et al., 2019).<sup>54</sup> This is no surprise: young children need care, fathers and other caregivers are not always available or willing to provide it, and affordable alternatives may not exist. Even where they do, mothers of young children may prefer to look after them if they can combine this with work or can afford to lose their income. The impact on women’s labour force participation is highest in high-income countries, and lowest in low-income countries, where a high proportion of women work in the informal sector – in agriculture and small-scale trade, for example – and where support from extended families is more likely.

#### Box 5: Gendered impact of care responsibilities on employment

In 2018, 606 million women and 41 million men of working age said they were unavailable for employment because of their care responsibilities (Addati et al., 2018: xxxi). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has calculated that, worldwide, a two-hour fall in the amount of time women spend each day on unpaid care work corresponds to a 10 percentage point increase in their labour force participation (Ferrant et al., 2014).

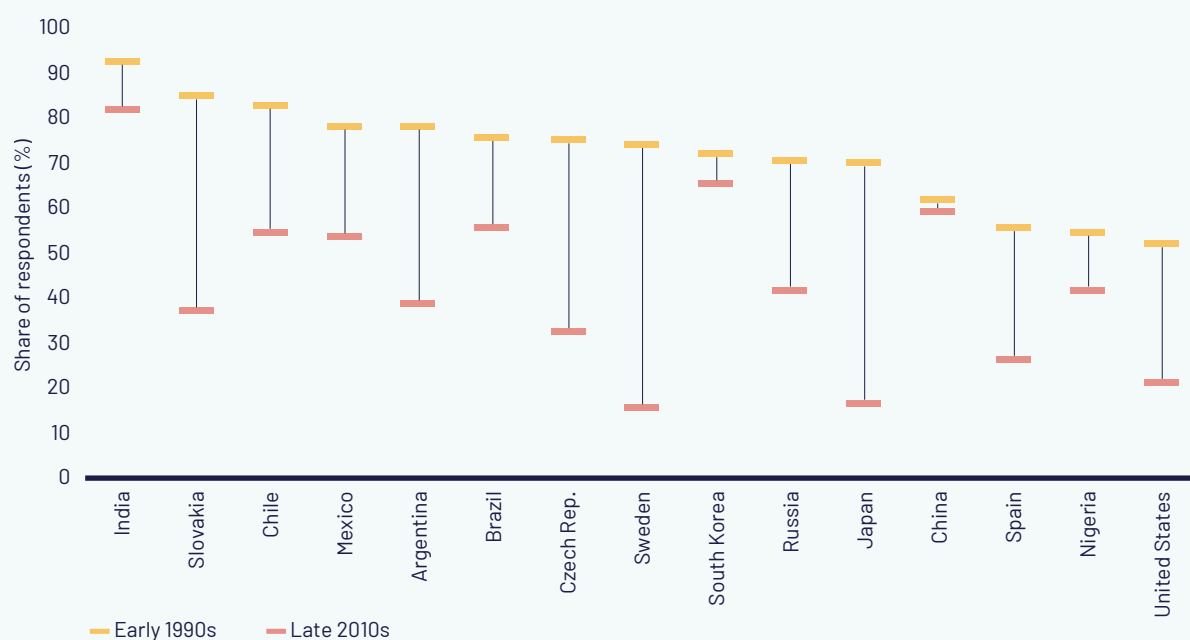
Norms that assign primary responsibility to women for the care of young children persist in many cultures. The International Men and Gender Equality Study (IMAGES) explored men’s attitudes to gender roles around the care of young children. In 18 of the 23 countries or locations studied, over half the men surveyed agreed that *‘Changing diapers, giving baths to children, and feeding children are the mother’s responsibility’* (Van der Gaag et al., 2019: 44). Attitudes tended to be more egalitarian in high- and upper middle-income countries and in urban areas, than in countries at lower income levels or in rural areas (ibid.).

<sup>54</sup> The global ‘parenthood employment gap’ (the difference between the employment-to-population ratio for fathers and for mothers of children aged 0–5 years) is 40.3%, rising to 45% in middle-income countries (Addati et al., 2018). Similarly, Klasen et al. (2019) found that the presence of children aged 5+ only influences women’s work in the upper middle-income countries they examined (Brazil and South Africa). The effect of having young children in the household is far greater than that of having older people in the household at all country income levels (ILO, 2018a).

Examining data from the World Values Survey for 15 middle- and high-income countries<sup>55</sup> between the mid-1990s and late 2010s, we found that attitudes to the mothers of young children working have become far more supportive in most countries (Figure 17). In Japan and Sweden, for example, the proportion of people who believe that children of pre-school age suffer if their mothers work plummeted, falling by over 50 percentage points. At the other extreme, this proportion fell by only 2.2 percentage points in China, a country where public childcare provision has been reduced in recent years (Yen, 2020), and in South Korea, where it fell by just 7 percentage points. Where concerns about the impact on young children of mothers working have fallen the most, attitudes have also changed across all age groups, pointing to a widespread shift in norms. The reasons for the extent of these changes may vary considerably between contexts – reflecting, for example, economic challenges that propel women into the labour force, growing economic opportunities in other contexts, and in some cases the public provision of childcare services.

A 2016 survey of men and women in 142 countries and territories worldwide found that most men and women support the idea of women taking on paid work, either as a sole responsibility or, more commonly, combining this work with caring for the home and family (70% of women and 66% of men supported women engaging in paid work). The only regional exception was North Africa, where most men (but not more women) preferred women to limit themselves to taking care of their families (Gallup and ILO, 2017).

**Figure 17: Share of population who agree that ‘a pre-school child suffers if their mother works’**



Source: World Values Survey data, Waves 2 and 7.

Note: with the exception of India, for which the 'late 2010s' value is 2012, from World Values Survey, Wave 6.

<sup>55</sup> These are the only countries with data over the 25-year period of study.

Families' attitudes were a strong influence: in households that did not think it acceptable for women to work outside the home, 61% of women said that they preferred to stay at home. People with university-level education or without children were the most supportive of women's paid work. Having children led to a greater (though still relatively small) drop in support among men than among women for the idea of women undertaking paid work (Gallup and ILO, 2017).<sup>56</sup>

Much research on unpaid care and domestic work also suggests that where divisions of labour have become more egalitarian, both men and women often see this as men 'helping' their wives, and boys 'helping' their sisters and mothers, rather than seeing this as a shared task.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the overarching norm that childcare and domestic work is a female responsibility remains firmly in place. Where families have adopted more egalitarian divisions of labour, or where men take primary responsibility for the household, this is often because of women having greater earning power, or because there is no woman in the household to take on that role. Other influential factors include the presence or absence of male role models in childhood, or an explicit commitment to reject traditional divisions of labour (Barker et al., 2012). Boys who see their fathers doing housework and childcare are more likely to do it themselves.

Our research in Uganda and Nepal also highlighted the expectation that women should do the bulk of domestic work as well as their paid work.

*'Even a woman in charge of running a business as the top head has to run home to attend to the household, with no help from the husband; when she hires help, she is criticised for relying on this help.'* (Watson et al., 2019: 52)

*'Our expectations these days [as women] are different – we are more career-oriented than family-minded, though still women are expected to do both ... Men's expectations of wives are not really changing – my husband does want me to be a career success but also to provide care in the family.'* (ibid.)

*'Professional women are now more stressed – they have made the transition to earning, but their partners have not made the parallel transition in the assumption of equal household roles. The man still expects to be waited upon ... The psyches of men have not changed with the changing realities – they cannot stop you from working /earning, but they can leave all of the household responsibilities and expenditures to you!'* (Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 36–37).

The most recent round of the World Values Survey delved into norms and attitudes to unpaid care and domestic work, and to paid work, in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe: one of the first attempts to measure gender norms on these areas through a large-scale multi-country survey. Although the responses reflect only one point in time (2020), there are some interesting similarities and differences between attitudes to different aspects of gendered work roles.

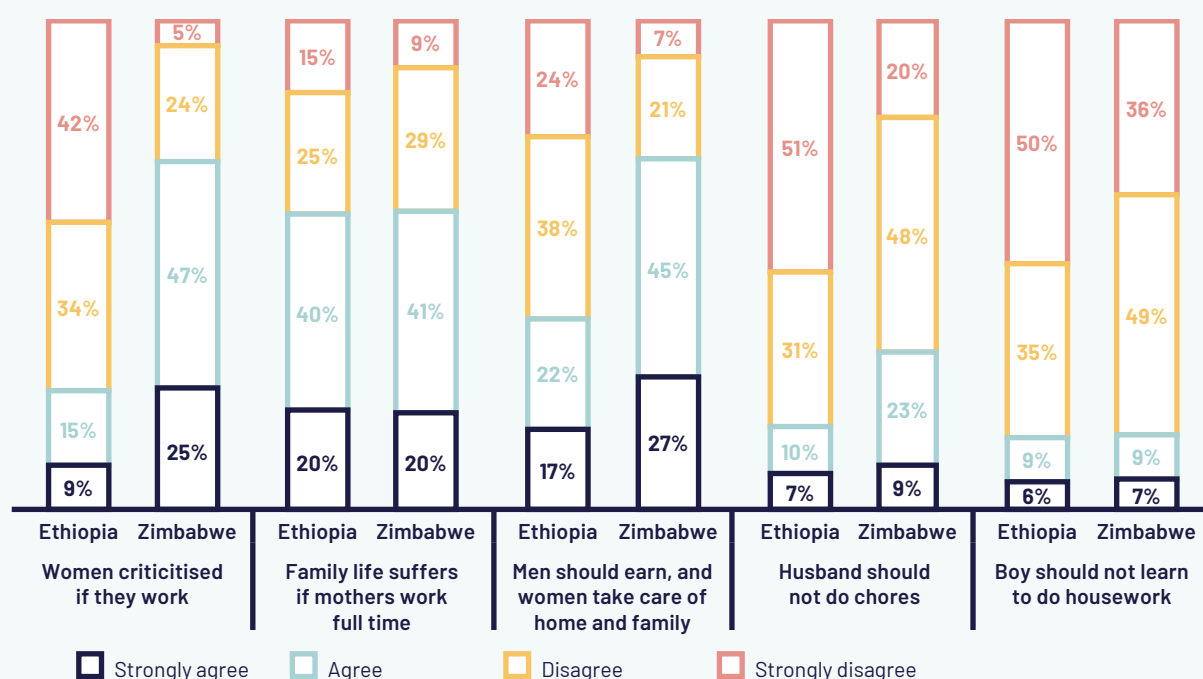
<sup>56</sup> Worldwide, men and women in households without children are equally likely to see it as acceptable for women in their families to work outside the home (81% and 85% respectively). In households with children, 73% of men and 81% of women found such work acceptable (Gallup and ILO, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Examples include: Ghosh et al. (2017); Zambelli, et al. (2017); Van der Gaag et al. (2019).

In both countries, 60% of respondents felt that family life suffers if women work full time, but attitudes to traditional gender roles, such as: *‘it is a man’s job to earn money and a women’s job to take care of home and family’* diverged, with much greater support for traditional roles in Zimbabwe than in Ethiopia (Figure 18). Respondents in Zimbabwe also identified much stronger disapproval of women working: 71% of respondents felt that *‘women face criticism if they work outside the home’*, compared with only 24% in Ethiopia. Men from any age group and people aged 50+ in Zimbabwe were slightly more likely to agree with this view than women and younger people, while differences by age group were negligible in Ethiopia.

These responses suggest that while levels of women’s labour force participation are similarly high in the two countries (76% in Ethiopia and 79% in Zimbabwe),<sup>58</sup> norms around gender and work roles may be in greater flux in Ethiopia than in Zimbabwe. There may also be stronger backlash in Zimbabwe, where respondents were more likely to report that most women work outside the home (43% vs 28%). The data also reveal an interesting contrast between such attitudes and views about the future roles of the next generation: in both countries only 15%–16% of respondents thought that boys should not learn housework skills, with limited gender differences in either country or age group in Ethiopia, and the strongest support for boys learning housework skills was among those aged 30–49 in Zimbabwe.

**Figure 18: Share of population holding different attitudes toward gender roles around paid work, care and domestic work, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, 2020**



Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 data.

Note: 1. Column totals may exceed 100% owing to rounding error. 2. The survey asked respondents how far they agreed with the following statements: A woman who works outside of her home for money will be criticised; On the whole, family life suffers when women works full time; It is a man's job to earn money and a women's job to take care of home and family; A husband shouldn't have to do household chores; and It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house, etc.

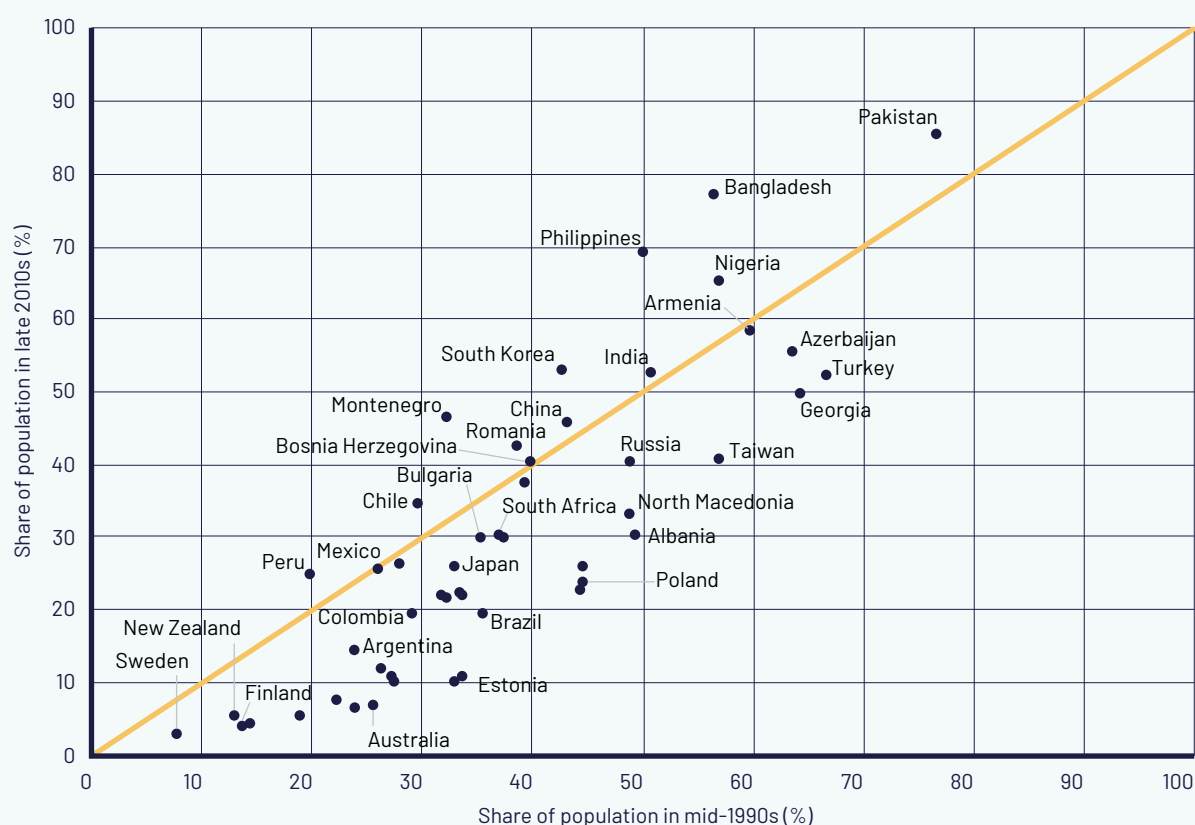
58 Source: [datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators](https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators).

## Gendered norms around paid work

No single survey tracks changes in gender norms around paid work over time, but the World Values Survey records attitudes to whether men have more right to a job than women do when jobs are scarce. Figure 19 shows changes in support for the view that men should be prioritised for scarce jobs in the mid-1990s and late 2010s. In the 38 countries below the line, the proportion of people who agreed with that view fell; in the 12 countries above the line it grew.

There were also many more countries (26) where support for this view fell substantially (by 10 percentage points or more) than where it rose substantially (only 4 countries). Figure 19 also shows a huge global variation: in the most recent survey, 86% of respondents in Pakistan believed that men should have priority for scarce jobs, compared to only 3% in Sweden.<sup>59</sup>

**Figure 19: Share of population who agree that men have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce (mid-1990s and late 2010s)**



Source: World Values Survey, Waves 3 (mid-1990s, 1995–1999) and Wave 7 (late 2010s, 2017–2020); except India, South Africa, Ukraine and Uruguay, which use Wave 6 data for late 2010s (2010–2014).

<sup>59</sup> Despite these notable declines, there was a strong correlation between levels of agreement in each country in Wave 3 (1990s) and Wave 7 (mid-2010s),  $r(s) = 0.854$ ,  $p = 0.000$ .

Underlining the complexity of norms around paid and unpaid work, and the challenges of identifying clear patterns, World Values Survey questions around whether *‘being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay’*, reveal far less change than questions about the impact on young children of mothers who work. In both Wave 3 (early 1990s) and Wave 6–7 (late 2010s), across 27 countries, two-thirds of young people under 30 agreed that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay, with minor differences between young women and young men.<sup>60</sup> In seven countries, the proportion agreeing fell by 10 percentage points or more, and in South Korea and Serbia, it fell by over 35 percentage points. In four countries, however, the proportion of young people agreeing increased by over 10 points – and in Bangladesh, by almost 40 percentage points.

Differences between age groups were small (6 percentage points at most) with people aged 30–49 reporting the most egalitarian views in both time periods. While thinking that being a housewife can be fulfilling is not the same as thinking that women should be housewives, generally positive attitudes to home-making across age groups may help to explain the only limited increases in women’s labour force participation, which we will now explore.

## Women’s labour force participation

*‘In villages, women are working very hard to earn income. They have moved out of the domestic sphere and are now earning income. Growing up, it was not so usual to see women in the markets.’* (professional woman in Uganda, in Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 28)

As we have seen, attitudes towards the mothers of young children working have become more accepting, and the proportion of people who believe men should have priority for jobs is falling in most countries. But the norms that assign responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work to women are tenacious and the gendered distribution of paid and unpaid work has changed little in recent years. Nor have changes in attitudes been matched by an increase in the proportion of women in the labour force, despite rising levels of girls in school and falling fertility rates (Klasen et al., 2019).

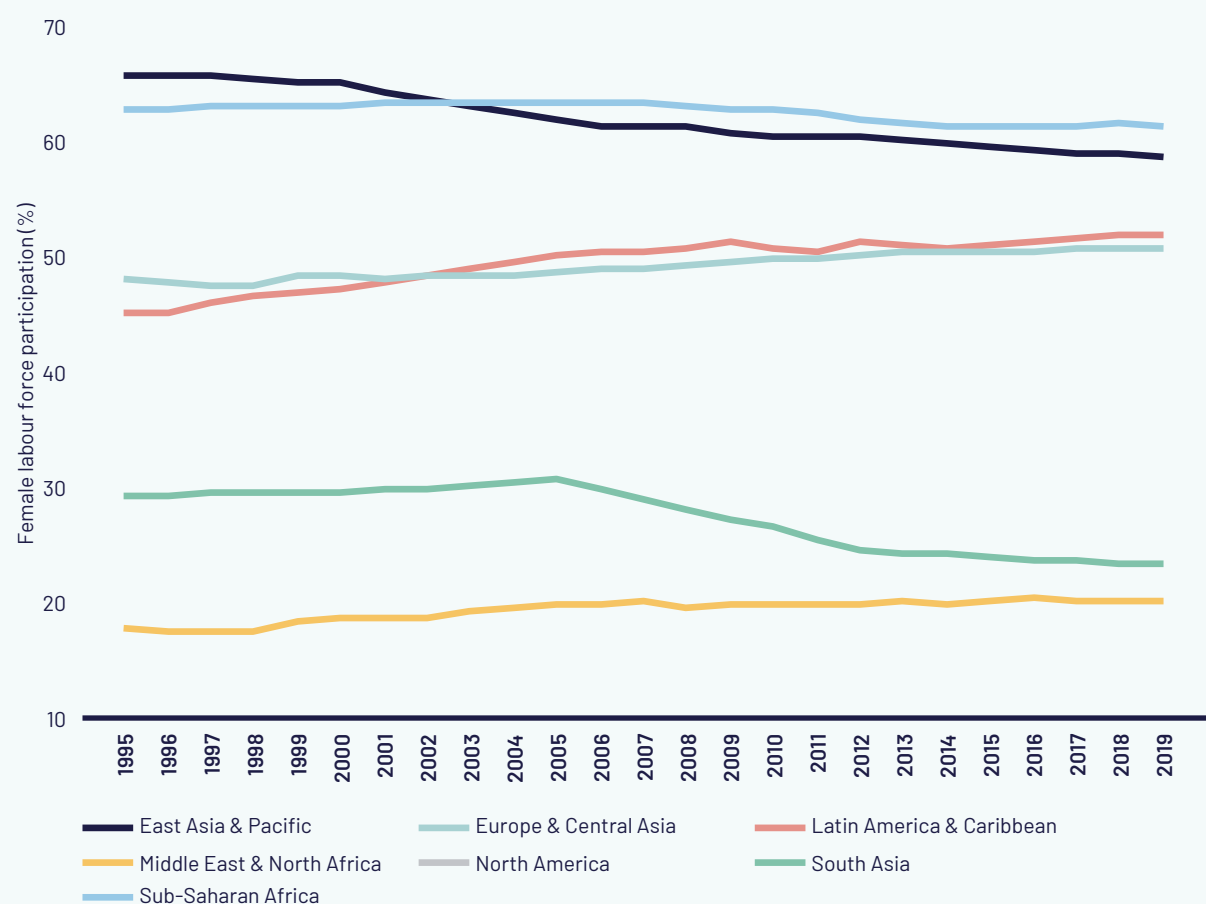
Between 1995 and 2019, the global rate of women’s labour force participation<sup>61</sup> fell slightly. In 1995, 51% of women aged 15 or over were engaged in labour force activity; by 2019, this figure had fallen to 47% compared with 74% for men (ILO, 2020).<sup>62</sup> One key reason is a decline in women’s participation in the labour forces of the world’s two most populous countries, China and India, by 13 and 11 percentage points, respectively. Leaving aside these two countries, women’s labour force participation increased very slightly, from 48% to 50%, with the greatest increase in Latin America (7 percentage points). Figure 20 show trends in various world regions.

<sup>60</sup> In the early 1990s, on average, 63.5% of young women and 65.3% of young men agreed that being a housewife was as fulfilling as paid work. By the late 2010s, 61.2% of young women and 61.3% of young men still agreed with this view.

<sup>61</sup> Women’s labour force participation refers to the proportion of the female population aged 15 or over who are economically active (employed, unemployed or first-time jobseekers). A recent change in definition excludes subsistence production, but this is not yet reflected in most cross-national global labour market statistics (Klasen et al., 2019; ILO, 2020).

<sup>62</sup> The data presented in this section are based on nationally representative labour force surveys, harmonised by ILO to ensure comparability across countries and over time by accounting for differences in data source, coverage, methodology, and other country-specific factors (World Development Indicators, 2020 metadata).

Figure 20: Regional trends in women's labour force participation rate (1995– 2019)



Source: Modelled ILO estimate obtained from World Development Indicators ([datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators](http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators))

What explains the gap between rising levels of girls' education and only limited increases in women's labour force participation? One explanation focuses on the ways that norms and expectations change, with the trade-offs between education and work varying for women with different levels of education and for the relative returns of paid work and unpaid and domestic work.

Many studies have identified a stylised U- or J-shaped pattern across countries and time, where women in the lowest and highest income groups are most likely to engage in the labour market (Klasen et al., 2019). For the poorest woman with the lowest levels of education, economic need outweighs any norms that idealise her role as a home-maker. For a woman with a high level of education, the returns to employment are often relatively high, and outweigh the costs of childcare and/or any family disapproval. Working conditions are generally more 'respectable' in these white-collar roles, and norms around the desirability of staying at home often relax.

Towards the middle of the curve, however, just as household incomes rise, a woman may not have the economic pressure to work outside the home, and the norms that idealise her domestic role often outweigh those that might encourage her to work. Some empirical evidence confirms this pattern (Box 6), though there are many exceptions.<sup>63</sup>

The U-curve suggests that in growing economies where employment is expanding, rising education levels and falling fertility should lead to greater participation in the labour force among women. While this is the case in some countries, there are many where – as Figure 20 shows – the rise has been so slow that other forces must be acting as brakes on change. We will now look at these drivers and brakes in more detail.

**Box 6: India – declining female labour force participation amid idealisation of women as home-makers**

Some studies of the steep decline in women's labour force participation in India (11 percentage points over the period 1995–2019) suggest that economic, political and cultural changes in recent years have led to a nationalist political discourse that places a higher value on female domesticity, motherhood and middle-class purity. In this context, in households that can afford it, the symbolic value in married women staying at home and managing children's education and other wider family and community activities outweighs the economic returns from paid work (Lahoti and Swaminathan, 2016; Luke, 2019). Indeed, as households become more affluent, they create new norms of women engaging in these domestic activities, rather than paid work.<sup>64</sup> This may explain the particularly steep decline in paid work among women aged 30–39 (Mehrotra and Sinha, 2017), who are the most likely to be engaged in child rearing.

World Values Survey data analysed for this report are consistent with this hypothesis. Over 25 years, the proportion of young people under 30 in India who consider being a housewife as fulfilling as working has declined by only 3.6 percentage points (from 64.6% to 61%). Similarly the proportion of people who feared that young children would suffer if mothers work fell by only 10 percentage points, as compared with 13% in Nigeria and 20% in Brazil, the other middle-income countries in the sample.

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<sup>63</sup> A great deal of literature on women's labour force participation globally has identified three main patterns: the U- or J-shaped pattern described above; a linear pattern where women's labour force participation rises as individuals and countries get richer (seen in Brazil and South Africa), and a hybrid pattern (Klasen et al., 2019). As stylised patterns, they cannot describe all contexts in full (Jayachandran, 2019; Klasen et al., 2019).

<sup>64</sup> Deshpande and Kabeer (2019 : 8) point out that the decline in women's labour force participation in rural areas reflects a '*massive decline in agricultural jobs*', with fewer opportunities in informal and casual jobs for women, while jobs emerging in more modern sectors have mostly accrued to men.

### 4.3 What has enabled and constrained change in gender norms around work?

Looking back further than the past 25 years, we see that demographic transition, the availability of contraception and growing urbanisation have all made significant contributions to shifts in gender norms around work and domestic responsibilities (Goldin and Katz, 2000; Iregui-Bohórquez et al., 2020). In the past quarter century, the key factors that stand out are increased economic opportunities linked to changing economic structures, rising levels of girls' education and progressive legal change to safeguard women's rights both within and beyond the workplace.

This section outlines the evidence on the role of these factors, focusing on economic and legal change (the role of education is discussed in Chapter 2). We then explore the 'patriarchal brakes' that have slowed change in women's labour force participation: a web of norms about respectability, the threat of sexual violence and the resulting stigma and shame. Norms around care are, of course, another key 'patriarchal brake' but have been discussed above.

#### Expanding economic opportunities and rising education

The most immediate factor that drives change is the availability of paid work, particularly in jobs that are either not particularly gendered or that are seen as suitable for women. Industries such as clothing and electronics have developed global supply chains over the past 40 years, creating factory jobs that are often filled by women who are seen as a source of docile, cheap labour (ILO, 2012 and 2016). A similar but more recent trend is the growth of business-process outsourcing, which has generated work in call centres, data processing, and sometimes software development. While conditions in these sectors vary, and can be extremely exploitative and dangerous, these jobs are often better-paid and seen as more desirable than working in agriculture or casual labour (Elmhirst, 2002; Hossain, 2011).

The most immediate factor that drives change is the availability of paid work, particularly in jobs that are either not particularly gendered or that are seen as suitable for women.

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Where young women have taken up these new jobs, it has contributed to shifts in gender norms around not only work, but also wider issues such as education and marriage. Studies of the garment industry in Bangladesh, for example, suggest that the sector has contributed to increased investment in girls' education and delays in the age of marriage among young women employees (Heath and Mobarak, 2014). An experimental study of India's business-process outsourcing had similar findings (Jensen, 2012).

While social unease persists about garment work as a suitable occupation for young women (Nazneen and Glennerster, 2017), there is consensus that the massive engagement<sup>65</sup> of young women in this sector in urban areas, coupled with growing opportunities in development-focused organisations in rural areas, has helped to normalise women working outside the home (Hossain, 2011). Elmhirst's (2002) study of the Lampung province of Indonesia found that in the space of just a few years, migration for factory work had become a desirable norm for 'modern' young women.

Structural economic shifts, with services becoming a more substantial part of the economy, have also helped drive greater labour force participation among women. In Colombia, for example, new knowledge-based industries and services have not been seen as particularly gendered and have contributed to a rapid increase in women's labour force participation, rising from 40% in 1985 to 60% in 2017 (Iregui-Bohórquez et al., 2020). Rising education levels for both girls and boys have also contributed to these structural economic changes, illustrating a virtuous cycle of greater investment in education, increased levels of women in the labour force and the normalisation of women in paid work.

Alongside the powerful influence of observing other young women in the labour force and their relative economic wellbeing, media depictions of more 'modern' lifestyles and education are likely to play a key role in changing the aspirations of girls (and boys) for their future work and family lives. As a young woman in a study in Tanzania put it:

*'Now like me who has gone to school, why did I go there? To stay at home and do what? ... Do you need to go to school to remain at home? Why don't you stay there from the word go?'* (Kamanzi et al., 2018: 15–16).

This said, there is a surprising lack of qualitative or quantitative evidence that explores the impact of these wider changes on norms around paid and unpaid work.

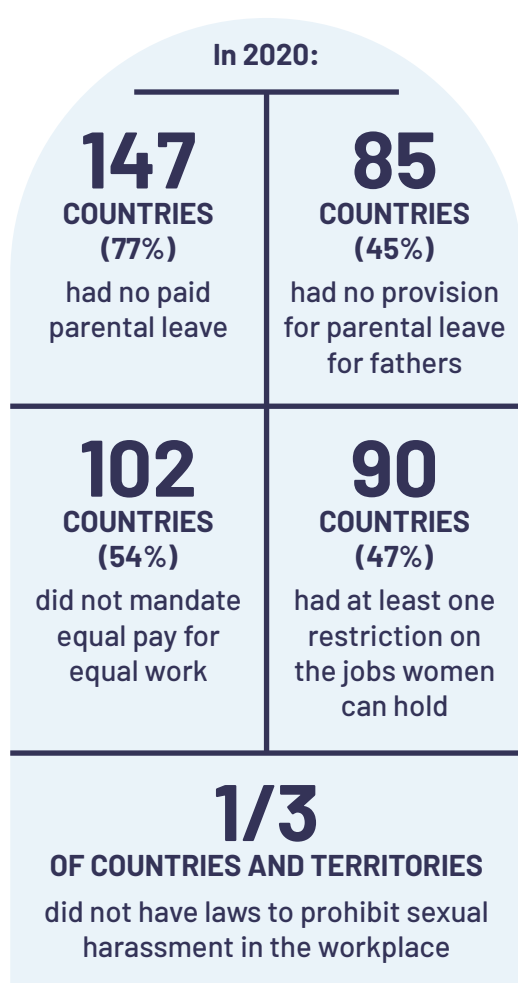
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<sup>65</sup> Heath and Mobarak (2014) estimate that around 15% of Bangladesh's female workforce aged 16–30 are engaged in the garment industry.

## The role of laws and policies in driving norm change

Gender-egalitarian laws can drive or respond to norm change (Van der Gaag et al., 2019). In their study of Latin America and the Caribbean, Novta and Cheng Wong (2017) found a positive link between women's legal rights – particularly constitutional protection against gender inequality, equal inheritance laws and independent property rights within marriage – and their participation in the labour market. A cross-regional study by Gonzales et al. (2015) found similar patterns in countries as diverse as Malawi, Namibia and Peru, where changes in the law were followed quickly by changes in women's labour market participation.

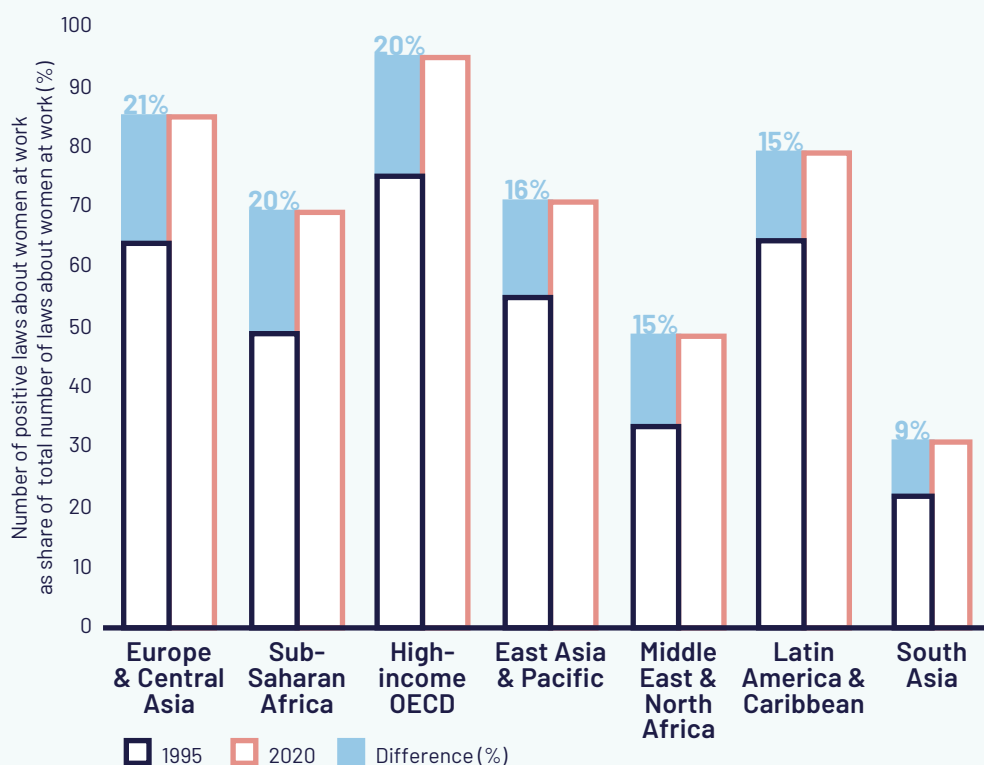
This suggests that publicised changes to the law that signal respect for gender equality can help to expand perceptions of roles and possibilities for women. Removing discriminatory laws can also drive change. One example is the 'marriage bar', whereby women in many countries, as recently as the mid-20th century, were required to give up their (white-collar) jobs when they married. Iregui-Bohórquez et al. (2020) identify the removal of this discriminatory law in Colombia as a key factor in increasing the proportion of women in the country's workforce in the 20th century.



Source: World Bank (2020a)

The laws that affect women at work (primarily in formal sector workplaces) have become more gender egalitarian across all regions and across various areas of law and rights over the past 25 years. Legislation related to the workplace itself – including laws that prevent gender discrimination and sexual harassment at work – stands out as an area of particular change, with the number of legal prohibitions on women's work worldwide falling by around two-thirds, from 523 to 164 between 1995 and 2020. These trends are summarised in Figure 21, which draws on the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law database. This shows that shifts towards more gender-equal legislation have been slowest in South Asia – one of the two regions with the greatest decline in women's labour force participation in recent years, but challenges remain in every region.

**Figure 21: Regional changes in share of positive laws in place that affect women at work**



Source: Women, Business and the Law database, World Bank.

Note: OECD = Member States of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Three forces appear to have driven the removal of discriminatory laws and promotion of gender-egalitarian laws: momentum from the international legal system; norm-based pressures among politicians who wish their country to ‘compete’ on the world stage and who want to avoid stigma for having outdated laws (Htun and Weldon, 2012); and trade union and feminist mobilisation for workplace and broader gender equality rights (Moghadam, 1999; Solotaroff and Pande, 2014; Brickner, 2006).

It is common to downplay the role of law in processes of norm change, implying that its impact is limited by lack of implementation. However, our analysis suggests the opposite – that legal change has played an important role in signaling greater protections and opportunities for women. That said, any change process will face resistance and challenges, and we will now examine these.



**Legal change has played an important role in signaling greater protections and opportunities for women.**

## Norms that undermine women in the workforce: ‘patriarchal brakes’

While education, economic change and legal change have helped to advance gender norms related to work, a web of norms continues to bar the way for women working outside the home, or in jobs and roles seen as unsuitable for women. As the previous section shows, norms around care responsibilities are critical. But a number of other norms-related factors also play a role.

### Norms about respectability

These norms are based on underlying values about the importance of chastity and can affect the type of jobs women take, or can deter them from working at all if the only jobs available are not seen as ‘respectable’ (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012; Marcus, 2018b). In cultures where safeguarding a woman’s honour and that of her family is a key consideration, the supply of educated women often outstrips demand for a narrow set of ‘acceptable’ roles. This may be one reason why global data show little change in occupational segregation by gender (the concentration of men and women in particular sectors) over the past 25 years (Klasen and Borrowman, 2017; ILO, 2017). It may also help to explain the stagnating rates of women’s labour force participation in the Middle East and North Africa and for declining rates in India (Klasen et al., 2019).

That said, while norms about suitable occupations for women and men may well be social expectations, they are not laws. ALIGN interviewees in Nepal and Uganda reported a gradual decline in gender stereotyping of occupations (Watson et al., 2019; Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019). As a young professional woman in Uganda commented:

*‘In the old days, it seemed that there were clear jobs for the women and others for the men, but now, it’s all a mix. Today, women are not afraid to get into jobs that are considered masculine – like taxi driving’.* (Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019: 27)

There is ample evidence of women blazing a trail to enter a certain profession, or to launch a business in a particular sector (Parker et al., 2014; World Bank, 2019). Women who do so are not necessarily the most advantaged – many of the professional women we interviewed in Nepal had grown up in very poor households – but a major factor seems to be supportive family members. Alongside mothers determined for their daughters to have a better life, supportive husbands, fathers, uncles and grandfathers have played a key role in providing financial or emotional support and mentoring, a similar finding to World Bank research on women entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors in Ethiopia (Alibhai et al., 2017). This, once again, highlights the importance of boys and men as partners for gender equality.

Nonetheless, women in paid work, and particularly women who work in male-dominated sectors, often face serious disapproval for violating unwritten norms. This can take the form of gossip or lurid stereotypes. For example, a study of women in mining – a male-dominated occupation – in three Central African countries found that young women working in mines in Rwanda were labelled as liable to take drugs, become pregnant outside marriage, and disobey their parents. Those who were married were portrayed as being in constant disputes with their husbands, and widows as being unable to ‘control themselves’. These women were compared to those working in respectable, but less lucrative, occupations, such as agriculture (Buss et al., 2017).

ALIGN’s study in Nepal found similar sentiments. As one young professional woman commented:

*‘Society is proud of male foreign employment... but doesn’t look highly on girls going abroad for domestic work – most people think they will be involved in sexual activities there.’* (Watson et al., 2019: 35)

Studies with working women across many countries and sectors have found that they face criticism for not performing their domestic roles ‘properly’ if they are also doing paid work (Buss et al., 2017; Lakshman, 2017). This emphasises the stickiness of norms that identify domestic duties as a core part of respectable womanhood. Safeguarding her reputation can mean that a woman working in a male-dominated sector has to conform with gendered social expectations. As a retired woman civil servant who took part in ALIGN’s study in Nepal observed:

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**Women in paid work, and particularly women who work in male-dominated sectors, often face serious disapproval for violating unwritten norms.**

*‘In your district functions, you are surrounded by men – a driver, guard, boy – all men, so you have to be careful. A woman has to guard her reputation’; and ‘colleagues will, for example, offer you a drink as a test and if you accept, as a woman, you are not respected. They will say you are cheap.’* (Watson et al., 2019: 35).

Norms of respectability do not only affect women. Where norms of masculinity mean that a man feels obliged to be the sole provider for his family, having wives, daughters or sisters who work risks a sense of emasculation. This is particularly true if the man himself cannot find paid work. Such feelings can be reinforced by relatives and peers who see him as failing to live up to ideals of manhood. In cultures where norms of respectability for women limit contact with unrelated men, having a female family member who works outside the home or for another man can undermine a man’s social prestige (Ahaibwe et al., 2017). This sense of damage to the reputations of men, as well as those of working women, feeds back into, and perpetuates, distinct gender roles around paid and unpaid work.

Even so, at local level, and in many individual workplaces, the presence of women in male-dominated areas can start to create a ‘new normal’. As a young woman welder in Ghana put it:

*‘I work alongside four men and I’m the only female welder. But I get on well with them, we socialize and I have found that if I assert myself and create boundaries, men and women can work well together in this trade and learn from each other’* (Boateng, 2020).

#### **Box 7: Age, life cycle and key challenges for women at work**

A study by the International Labour Organization and Gallup of attitudes around gender and work in 142 countries and territories found that women in different age groups emphasised different challenges. Young women between the ages of 15 and 29 are more likely than older women to mention unfair treatment, abuse or harassment at work. Those aged 30 to 44 are more likely than women in other age groups to cite a lack of affordable care for their children and families. And, as women get older, they become more likely to see unequal pay as a key challenge.

*Source: Gallup and ILO (2017).*

### **Gender-based violence**

Gender-based violence – both in the workplace and while travelling to work – is increasingly recognised as a deterrent to women working outside the home, and as a key challenge to gender equitable and decent working conditions. In this report we focus on the effects on women, but it is important to recognise that people who do not conform to prevailing gender norms, whether because of their gender identity, sexual orientation or gender expression, face a heightened risk of sexual harassment at work (ILO, 2018b).

Very few studies of gender-based violence in the workplace – which can include verbal, sexual and physical violence and may be perpetrated by peers or supervisors – have explored the role of gender norms. Nor are there any quantitative data that show trends in women’s experience of, or social attitudes to, workplace gender-based violence.

That said, snapshots show disturbingly high figures. Overall, 10% of women in the Gallup and ILO (2017) survey reported abuse or discrimination at work as significant barriers, rising to 25% of respondents in North Africa (Gallup and ILO, 2017). A study of horticultural workers in East Africa found that 89% of women interviewed in Tanzania had witnessed at least one incident of sexual harassment, and in Kenya, 90% per cent of interviewees described sexual harassment as the greatest problem facing women in the cut-flower sector (ILO 2018b). The most powerless workers – such as young female migrant workers – are often at greatest risk, as intersecting discriminatory norms increase the likelihood that supervisors feel they can act with impunity (ILO 2018a).

High levels of actual or perceived violence can lead women to choose work where the risk of such violence appears to be low, or to avoid work outside the home altogether. Two studies from India, for example, show that the higher the perceived risk of assault in public places, the lower the levels of female labour force participation (Chakraborty et al., 2017; Siddique, 2018). This reflects, in part, the stigma of sexual assault, given its impact on reputation and marriageability (Chakraborty et al., 2017). A qualitative study from the US reported that women in the construction sector in mid skill-level positions moved jobs many times to avoid sexual harassment (Cohen, 2020).

Perhaps more commonly, though, sexual violence at work adds another element of danger to working conditions that are already poor. Few studies have probed the norms that tacitly accept sexual harassment – however the 2018 review by Henry and Adams of sexual harassment in agriculture across various low- and middle-income countries highlights norms that uphold the practice. This study found that sexual harassment was often completely normalised, and either seen as just how men interact with women, or a problem of wider society and not, therefore, the employers' responsibility. The authors also highlight that discriminatory stereotypes across a range of contexts about certain groups of women (such as single mothers), considered by society to be sexually 'easy', led to them being considered 'fair game' by male co-workers and supervisors (Henry and Adams, 2018).

There is some evidence of sexual harassment at work being more common for women working in male-dominated roles and sectors (Buss et al., 2017; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018). This may be driven, in part, by discomfort at women breaking into what was once a 'male' space, where harassment constitutes a way to enforce norms that encourage gender segregation at work. In Chapter 5 we discuss some ways to shift norms to eliminate such tolerance of workplace sexual harassment. Before that, however, we discuss the impact of crises on gender norms about work.

### **The most powerless workers are often at greatest risk**



*Source: Author analysis*

## 4.4 What impact have crises had on gender norms about work?

*‘Economic crisis can entrench gender stereotypes in business and society. Where crisis leads to a contraction in women’s employment opportunities and austerity policies see social care devolved to the household, there is a strong risk that norms defining women as primary carers and men as primary breadwinners become entrenched during the recovery period.’ (Baird and Hill, 2020: 21)*

Shocks and protracted crises can push norms about work in different directions, depending on the causes and nature of any particular crisis. Whether and how they change norms around work is likely to reflect gendered work patterns that already exist and the gender distribution in the sectors most affected. If men’s employment is affected disproportionately, the urgent need for women to contribute to income can relax norms around women working, as shown by evidence from the global recession of 2008–2009 (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012; Kelbert and Hossain, 2014). However, while the range of work seen as acceptable for women often expands, there is little evidence of any shift in norms around care and domestic work. Indeed, most evidence suggests that these are still seen as a female responsibility, with girls or older women sometimes expected to take up the slack.

The impacts of Covid-19 on gender norms are still emerging but there is some evidence that the economic effects of the pandemic and vulnerability to the virus are affected by gendered patterns of economic activity, which reflect gender norms. First, some areas of (often poorly paid) work that cannot be done from home are female-dominated – such as food processing, health and social care services, retail and hospitality – putting workers at greater risk of exposure to the virus. These roles are often filled by women who already face multiple forms of marginalisation on the basis of their class, race and migrant status.

Second, many of the economic sectors most affected by Covid-19 restrictions are female-dominated. In July the McKinsey Global Institute (2020) estimated that women have already been laid off at 1.8 times the rate of men and that 4.5% of women’s employment is at risk worldwide in the pandemic, compared with 3.8% of men’s employment.<sup>66</sup>

**Many of the economic sectors most affected by Covid-19 restrictions are female-dominated.**

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<sup>66</sup> This analysis is based on employment data from India and the US.

Third, various studies have documented assumptions that men should have priority for jobs – because they are assumed to be breadwinners or more capable, or that women can take up care responsibilities on top of their paid work when schools, nurseries and other sources of support are closed (Ruxton and Burrell, 2020). The McKinsey Global Institute’s study estimates that three-quarters of the disproportionate effects on women’s employment are the result of these norms and stereotypes, and that one-quarter derives from gendered job segregation.

The combination of women’s job losses or work restrictions and their enhanced care responsibilities in households where children are not at school, as well as looking after sick family members, have often led to a major increase in the time women devote to care activities. This increase has been greater than for men, despite lockdowns where the shift of many formal sector workers to home working has contributed to some shifts in the gender divisions of labour (Ruxton and Burrell, 2020). If employers’ practices and government policies promote equitable divisions of labour, a more gender-equitable approach to paid work and unpaid care and domestic work could become a new norm in the recovery period (Alon et al., 2020).

Studies of previous economic crises have found that their impacts on women’s employment can last for at least seven years (Blanton et al., 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic has already led to a far more profound global economic shock than any event since the Second World War – a shock that is three times deeper than that caused by the 2009 global recession (World Bank, 2020b). It is likely, therefore, to have far more serious and long-lasting effects.

In previous crises, women have often expanded their informal sector activity (such as food sales or retail): the very sectors that have faced the greatest restrictions in the Covid-19 pandemic. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, over 70% of female employment is in the non-agricultural informal sector. Lockdowns, shrinking consumption, and falling demand in local and export markets are thought to have cut informal sector earnings by nearly 60% worldwide in the first month of the pandemic (Mukhtarova, 2020). At the same time, the depth of the economic crisis is likely to put more pressure on women to earn an income.

The medium-term impact on gendered norms about paid and unpaid work is hard to predict, and is likely to vary by geography, cultural context and socio-economic group. Norms are most likely to change in the medium term if the number of people taking on roles that defy gender stereotypes becomes large enough to be noticeable and to normalise those roles.

## 4.5 Looking ahead: promising approaches to shift gender norms around paid and unpaid work

As this chapter shows, rising education levels, increasing job opportunities, and gender-egalitarian changes in laws and policies can create a virtuous cycle that shifts gender norms around paid and unpaid work. However, a set of discriminatory norms acts as patriarchal brakes and continues to constrain change. Here we summarise some key areas of action that can help to loosen these brakes. These need to be accompanied by efforts to address more macro-level factors, such as the expansion of decent work opportunities, which can rapidly normalise women's participation in the labour force. This is more urgent than ever given the huge increases in poverty that are already resulting from Covid-19.

### Promote more egalitarian norms around gender roles

Where social norms contest whether women should work, media and non-formal education have shown promise in promoting more supportive norms. For example, support for women working outside the home increased by 53% among listeners to Population Media Center's '*Cesiri Tono*' radio drama broadcast in Mali.<sup>67</sup> Gender sensitisation through extra-curricula clubs, such as the *Taaron Ki Toli* programme in Haryana, India, has helped adolescents boys and girls develop more positive views about the acceptability of women working (Dhar et al., 2020; Menon, 2018).

### Encourage greater sharing of care and domestic responsibilities

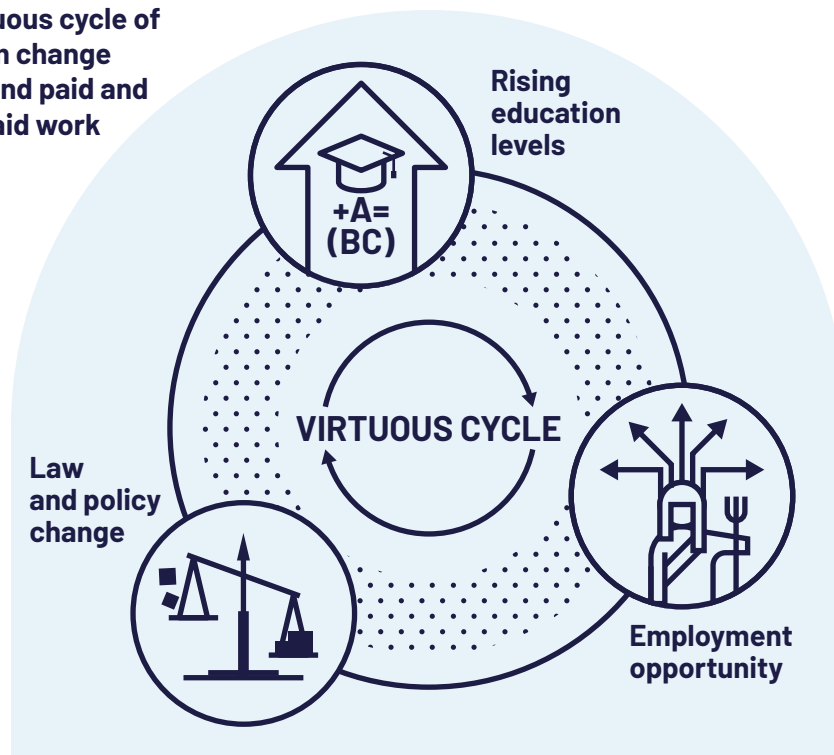
Promising approaches to achieve more gender-equitable norm change include legal frameworks and workplace policies that allow men and women to combine work and care responsibilities. Paid parental leave, particularly if it includes non-transferable elements, can encourage greater gender equality in the time spent by women and men on care and domestic activities, and can help to create new norms about their respective roles in the family (Addati et al., 2018). However, these laws apply primarily in the formal sector, are limited in reach, and must replace lost income if they are to be effective (Van der Gaag et al., 2019).

At the grassroots level, non-formal education, including many programmes based on Promundo's Program P curriculum, have started to encourage more egalitarian norms around work and care. Evaluations have not always measured the impacts on norms directly but do, at least, indicate the direction of change. For example, the *Bandebereho* initiative in Rwanda, which uses Program P materials, found that both men and women reported an increase in the time men spent on household care and domestic work, though this did not cut the time women spent on these activities (Doyle et al., 2018). Mass and social media initiatives showing ordinary men and celebrity role models engaging in care and domestic work also have the potential to help shift norms (Marcus and Page, 2014; Van der Gaag et al., 2019). None of these actions can do that alone, but together they can catalyse meaningful change.

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<sup>67</sup> [www.populationmedia.org/projects/cesiri-tono](http://www.populationmedia.org/projects/cesiri-tono).

### Virtuous cycle of norm change around paid and unpaid work



Source: Author analysis

### Support access to childcare services

More equitable divisions of care and domestic work, important as they are, need to be complemented by good quality, affordable care services. Many households need more than one income to stay afloat; and many parents, particularly women, are bringing up children alone. Research in both rural and urban contexts in diverse low- and middle-income countries suggests that good quality, affordable childcare can enable mothers to take up paid work, who would not be able to do so without it (Barros et al., 2011; Martinez et al., 2012; Jain, 2015; Harper et al., 2017). The fact that all of these studies found a reasonable level of uptake for childcare services, and an increase in work among mothers of pre-school age children, suggests that norms about care responsibilities are flexible enough to encompass the use of childcare services.

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More equitable divisions of care and domestic work, important as they are, need to be complemented by good quality, affordable care services.

## Challenge gender stereotypes about roles, occupations and capacities

A combination of actions can counter the gender stereotyping that underpins gendered job segregation. These include: skills training and youth employment initiatives that encourage young women and men to enter non-traditional occupations (Peters et al., 2019); and exposing young people to a wide range of work options through talks in schools, work experience and through the media. Providing information to young women and their parents about the returns to different work activities has shown promise in overcoming barriers related to gender norms and stereotypes about suitable jobs for men and women, and in encouraging young women to enter male-dominated and better-paid fields (IYF, 2018). Through their presence in these fields, these women, in turn, help to shift norms about women's capacities and 'appropriate' work for people of particular genders.

## Eliminate gender-based violence in workplaces

Non-formal education initiatives – in schools, workplaces and the wider community – have helped to shift attitudes to gender-based violence and reduce its perpetration (Kerr-Wilson et al., 2020). This broader action to shift norms around gender-based violence is important for reducing tolerance of violence in the workplace.

Workplace initiatives that combine education about sexual harassment for all staff with support for managers to develop and implement reporting and redress mechanisms have proved effective (ILO and IFC, 2016). For example, through a combination of workplace and community education sessions with staff and managers, Business for Social Responsibility's HerProject, reaching over 850,000 women in 800 workplaces across 14 countries, has both raised awareness and developed workplace systems to prevent and respond to violence. An evaluation of the work of HerProject in India found that acceptance of gender-based violence halved among participants, while the implementation of protection and support systems for women workers doubled in participating workplaces (Business for Social Responsibility, 2019). Initiatives like these help to enact legal protections against gender-based violence.

Measures to ensure women can travel safely to work also help increase the acceptability of women working: the ILO calculates that a lack of access to safe transport reduces women's probability of engaging in paid work by 16.5 percentage points in 'developing countries' (ILO, 2017).<sup>68</sup> Initiatives that have shown promise include women-only carriages or buses, training drivers and encouraging other passengers to respond if they witness harassment, and e-reporting initiatives that sound an alert to the driver or trigger a link to the police (Dominguez Gonzalez and Alves, 2016).

<sup>68</sup> The report does not define this group, but it is likely to refer to low- and lower middle-income countries, as distinct from 'emerging' (upper middle-income) and 'developed' (high-income) countries.

## 4.6 Conclusions

This chapter has argued that while cultural ideals around gender roles remain common and widespread, there is evidence of norms around paid and unpaid work relaxing in practice, as education and skill levels rise and more women enter the labour force. Although some countries have seen a rise in gender discriminatory attitudes around paid and unpaid work, attitudes in most countries have become more egalitarian. The varied pace of change from country to country reflects differences in the extent and nature of work opportunities, and the strength of ‘patriarchal brakes’, such as norms around respectability and purity, and the threat of gender-based violence. Overall, norms relax more quickly if financial incentives drive change, as can happen when better paid, and more respectable work becomes available. When a critical mass of women joins the labour force, this normalises paid work as a role for women as well as for men.

While there is evidence that norms around unpaid care roles are starting to shift, this has tended to mean that women end up doing both types of work, rather than leading to a more equitable distribution of paid and unpaid care and domestic work. This is evident both in ‘normal’ times and during crises, as made clear by global evidence of inequalities in care responsibilities during the Covid-19 pandemic. And now gendered patterns of job loss as a result of Covid-19 threaten to undermine progress towards change in the norms that affect paid and unpaid work.



**When a critical mass of women joins the labour force, this normalises paid work as a role for women as well as for men.**

A ‘norms lens’ on gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work is relatively new and there is still a great deal that we do not know about what catalyses changes in gendered norms around work in different social and economic settings. It is clear, however, that overall change is underpinned by education, a growing acceptance of women’s fundamental rights to equality, as well sexual and reproductive health rights and their rights to decent work. And it is also clear that action to lift constraining ‘patriarchal brakes’ can be effective. This includes community-level non-formal education processes to encourage more egalitarian sharing of care responsibilities, combined with high quality and affordable care services, workplace-based sensitisation and mechanisms to prevent gender-based violence in the workplace, as well as positive media representations of women in diverse types of work and in positions of leadership.

## 5 Gender norms and political voice and representation

### KEY POINTS

- Women's political representation and political voice – as reflected in parliamentary representation and participation in social movements – has increased, on the whole, since Beijing. Women's representation in the world's parliaments has, on average, doubled since 1997, rising from 12% to 25% – a reflection and driver of changes in norms around women in power. However, at local level, fewer than 5% of the world's mayors today are women and, on average, women account for only around 20% of local councillors worldwide. Women's participation in protests and social movements has also increased slightly overall since 1995.
- Gender norm change is part of the story of progress – though not the whole picture – and the pace of change remains slow. According to World Values Surveys, in the mid-1990s, 50% of people surveyed globally agreed that *'men make better political leaders'* – a share that has since fallen to 35%.
- A reduction in gender discriminatory attitudes is sometimes linked to more representation, but not always, and more representation itself does not guarantee changes in deeply embedded norms: it may simply reflect the greater empowerment of an elite class of women.
- Drivers of norm change around women's political voice and representation have included wider gains in gender equality, including in women's economic inclusion and empowerment, the influence of role models and the collective agency amplified by women's political movements. Quota systems have sometimes played a role – particularly voluntary quotas within political parties – but their impact has varied.
- Key barriers to progress in this area include unequal care responsibilities, violence against women in politics, online harassment, and gendered media coverage of female political candidates.
- Actions to support changing norms around women in politics include: mentoring and civic education initiatives – including those focused on supporting a diversity of women's involvement in civic life, skills training, capacity building initiatives, initiatives to prevent and protect women against politically motivated violence, and support for women's groups and movements.

## 5.1 Introduction

The political space is a critical context where power is contested, acted on and embedded in society. It is also a space where, for centuries, women were largely excluded, and where they remain heavily under-represented to this day.

While the formal rules that once impeded women's participation in politics were eliminated in most countries during the 20th century, informal rules and norms still mean that the routes to participation for women often differ markedly to those for men (Waylen, 2013). These gendered differences often intersect with other inequalities and discrimination, resulting in a lack of diversity among those women who are represented (Hughes and Dubrow, 2017). This chapter explores why it is critical to understand and address the role of gender norms in this area, including the ways in which they influence the political sphere by shaping the brakes and barriers that so often bar women from politics. We then suggest actions to tackle these norms.

The expression of political voice, seen broadly as *'the ability to express your views and interests and to influence policy and decision-making processes'* (Rocha Menocal, 2014 : 5), is reflected in individual and collective activities that are shaped in different ways by social and gender norms. And yet, despite the clear role played by norms in barring women from the political space, a social and gender norms lens is still relatively new in this area compared with the other sectors covered in this report.

We reflect on progress through two main areas of analysis: the representation of women in national politics in formal political roles; and women's political voice and influence through engagement in civic activity, such as protest movements. These two areas are not exhaustive, and other areas of political life merit further analysis, not least the experiences of women in local politics, but we focus on the national level as the area with the strongest historical and cross-national data and evidence for comparison.

Political voice and representation in different contexts often reflects wider societal and economic dynamics, though specific norm-based brakes and barriers can still operate in the political space even when wider gains for gender equality have been achieved across other parts of society. They include specific barriers around gendered expectations of family responsibilities, around women's mobility and appearance, and around the normalisation of some forms of violence and harassment against female authority, as well as the kinds of women – often from the elite – who are seen as acceptable leaders. The pathways to greater political voice and representation for women have been complex, and the cases explored in this chapter demonstrate diverse experiences, as well as a number of trends. Gains in gender equality in other areas have had a significant impact on political representation, while greater political mobilisation and representation by women has, in turn, helped to drive changes in other areas.

Overall, women's representation has been rising worldwide across all regions and across countries at every income level – an increase that has been linked to investment in key services, such as education, health and nutrition, and other areas (Kenny and Patel, 2017; UNDP, 2020). These dynamics have supported significant social changes in Latin America, where social protection has expanded, and where there is the highest regional rate of political representation for women worldwide, with women holding one-third of all parliamentary seats. Even in the Middle East and North Africa, where progress lags the most, the number of women in politics has increased substantially, elevating role models and supporting a new vision of what 'leadership' and 'power' look like – not only in politics, but also in business, media and other areas.

While data indicate a mutually supportive relationship between women's political representation and gains in health, education and economic empowerment (as well as reductions in support for gender-unequal attitudes), these changes are highly context-specific and are shifting constantly. Norm change is about more than boosting the number of women in parliament and the number who are leaders. It is about a change in perceptions around the roles that are perceived as suitable for women, who makes a good leader or decision-maker, and whether a woman can even be a good politician. Increasing women's voice and representation in this sphere is part of a wider challenge for gender equality – not least because women leaders are diverse in their perspectives and impact, and thus approaches which don't take this into account can risk replicating gendered stereotypes and assumptions.

It would be wrong to assume that having more women as leaders on its own is a certain route to ending harmful gender norms – our research indicates that greater representation of women does not guarantee changes in sexist attitudes, despite its impact on policy in other areas. Significant increases in women's parliamentary representation have not shown a consistent link to shifts in the prevailing attitude in many countries that men make better leaders (such as in Bangladesh, where women's parliamentary representation doubled from the mid-1990s to the late 2010s, but attitudes towards whether '*men make better leaders*' became less supportive by five percentage points over the same period).<sup>69</sup>

At the same time, shifts in gendered norms, as reflected in changing attitudes, can help to drive increases in women's representation, even though changes in attitudes are not always a precursor to women's gains in representation. This indicates that the harmful attitudes and norms that put the brakes on women's effective participation in politics can be loosened. Those that have persisted in this area (in some cases where women's representation has increased significantly), as well as common routes that have helped to drive change in the normalisation of female leadership and participation in politics, are explored in the sections that follow.

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<sup>69</sup> Data source: World Values Survey.

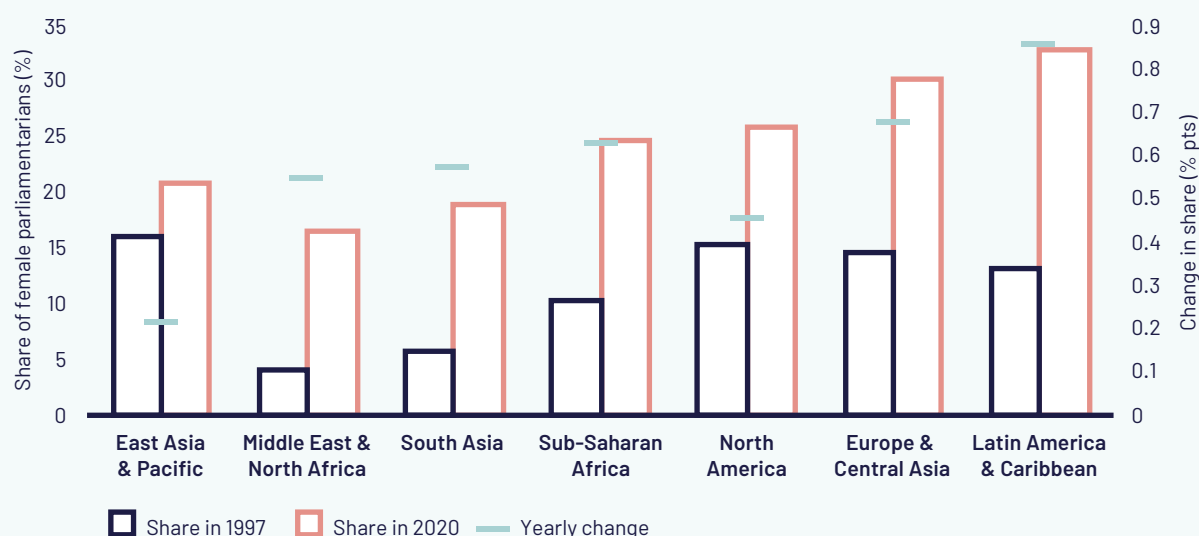
## 5.2 How have gender norms about women in politics changed over the past 25 years?

While there have always been women in politics including female leaders – Egyptian Queens ruled from as early as 3000 BC – many countries have been traditionally ruled by men, backed by political systems that mainly reflect their voices and interests. When Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) became the world’s first elected female prime minister in 1960, having a woman in a top political post was still rare, with prominent female leaders in the years before the Beijing Declaration, such as Eva Peron, Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher, being notable exceptions rather than the norm (Adler, 1996; Paxton et al., 2006).

On the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, there is much progress to celebrate. Women’s global parliamentary representation has nearly doubled since 1995 (IPU, 2020). What’s more, this change has been relatively fast, and has been visible in both parliaments and national leadership. By 2017, an estimated 70% of countries have ever had, at one time, a female head of state or government (elected, appointed, interim or other), including 6 of the 10 most populous countries in the world (Geiger and Kent, 2017). However, while this progress suggests a major transformation, current levels are still far from parity: women still account for just 25% of parliamentarians worldwide, and only 10% of national leaders (World Bank, 2020a).

Progress in women’s political voice and representation has taken various forms, and has been supported by widespread, often interconnected, trends that have unfolded in different countries across different social, economic and political dimensions. There have been improvements in women’s political representation in every world region (Figure 22). Even in the Middle East and North Africa region, where women’s representation is lowest, recent rates of change have been relatively rapid.

**Figure 22: Share of female parliamentarians by region (1997–2020)**

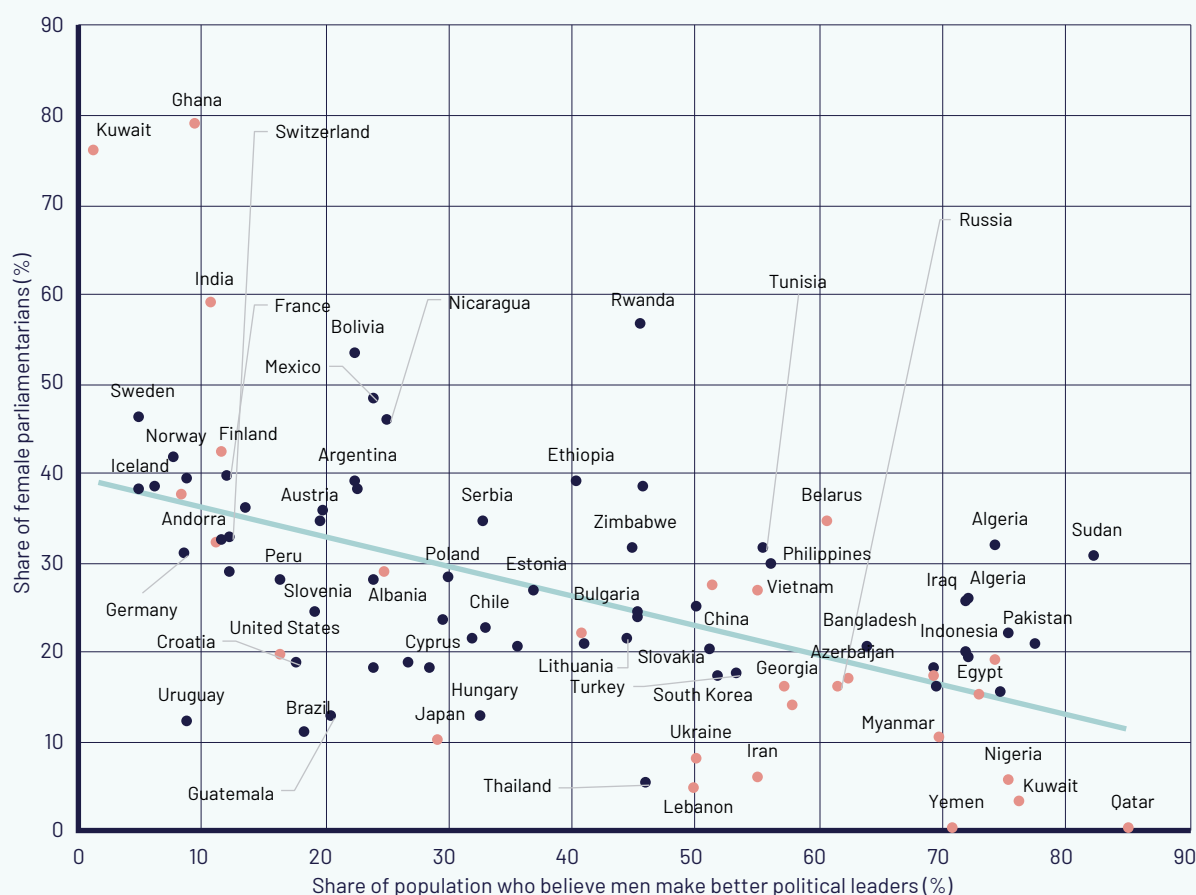


Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union data from World Bank (2020a) and author calculation of change.  
Note: Regional averages are weighted by each country’s respective population. East Asia Pacific ‘1997’ share is 1998.

In some countries, such as Rwanda, change has been particularly rapid since the early 1990s, at which time women had never held more than 18% of parliamentary seats. Today, women account for 61.3% of those sitting in its lower house (in this case supported by quotas in the post-genocide period that were exceeded) giving the country the world's highest rate of parliamentary representation for women (Powley, 2007; IPU, 2020).

Increases in women's national political representation have been linked to changes in attitudes towards women in politics on the part of both men and women, with a 15% overall decline in attitudes that '*men make better leaders*' between the mid-1990s and the late 2010s, according to World Values Survey data (Figure 23). However, while representation and attitudes tend to track one another closely and appear to be linked, the direction of causality is unknown.

**Figure 23: Share of population who report men make better political leaders than women and female parliamentary representation (late 2010s)**



Sources: Data on attitudes are from World Values Survey, Wave 7 (supplemented by data points from Wave 6) and Arab Barometer Survey (Wave 5). Data on female representation is for 2018 from Inter-Parliamentary Union in World Bank (2020a).

Note: Countries indicated by red dots did not have any quota in place at the time of the Wave 7 survey.

In addition, the attitudes that are reported and actual outcomes do not always align: the data indicate a range of cases in which attitudes and outcomes have differed in many ways. This resonates with findings in Uganda (SIGI, 2015: 16), for example, which indicate a *‘mismatch between positive attitudes towards equality and actual practices’*, where communities may well hold favourable views towards women’s land ownership or political participation, but these do not always translate into any actual progress for women in these areas.

As shown in Figures 24 and 25, attitudes towards women in politics are changing significantly in some cases, and in particular in many countries in Europe and Central Asia, with some variation in the details. In Japan, at one extreme, 60% of the population favoured male political leaders in the mid-1990s (when only around 5% of parliamentarians were women). This proportion had fallen to 30% by the late 2010s (when the proportion of women stood at around 10%), suggesting that changes in attitudes had outpaced changes in actual representation.

Experience is also mixed at the global level, with an overall shift away from sexist attitudes towards women in politics (with a change of around 15 percentage points between the mid-1990s and late 2010s). However, in three countries – Pakistan, India and Bangladesh – there was a notable hardening of attitudes (Figure 25). In the mid-1990s, 66% of the population in Pakistan believed that men made better leaders, a figure that had climbed to 78% by the late 2010s. In India, 49% believed men made better leaders in the mid-1990s, rising to 59% in the late 2010s, and in Bangladesh the proportion rose from 56% to 64%.<sup>70</sup>

This confirms that there can be a vast difference between the pace of change and its direction. It also shows that the story of attitude change about women in leadership at the global level since Beijing is both complex and mixed, requiring further national-level learning and action.

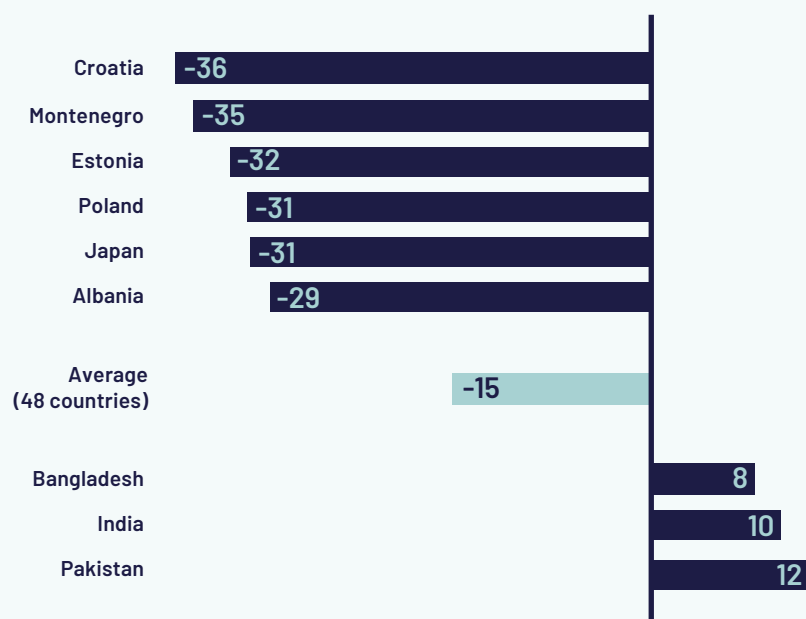
**Figure 24: Share of population reporting that men make better leaders across 48 countries (mid-1990s and late 2010s)**



Source: 48 countries with data in Waves 3 and 7 of World Values Survey (except India, South Africa, Ukraine, Uruguay, for which ‘late 2010s’ data are from Wave 6).

<sup>70</sup> Authors’ calculations based on World Values Survey data.

Figure 25: Percentage point average annual change in share of population who report men make better leaders than women (selected countries, mid-1990s and late 2010s)



Source: Countries registering the largest changes between Waves 3 and 7 of the World Values Survey or between Wave 3 and Wave 6 in the case of India (for which no Wave 7 data is yet available).

## Social movements and civic action

As a measure of women's wider participation in politics, an understanding of their engagement in social movements and civic action highlights another way in which women can exert their voice and influence on the political space. Women have always been involved in civic action, including protests – often at great cost to themselves. Social and protest movements have driven significant political and policy changes throughout history, including, critically, in the area of women's rights (see Simmons, 2009; Htun and Weldon, 2012; Horn, 2013; and others).

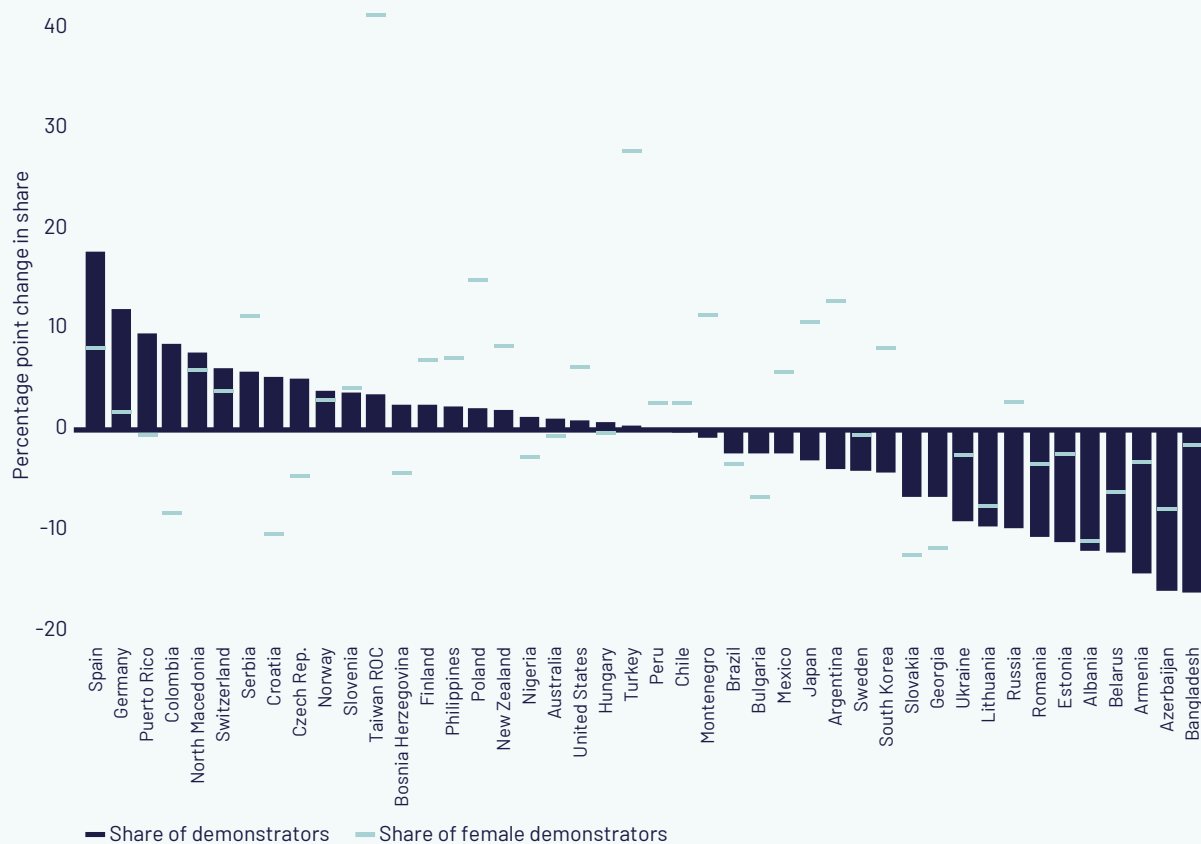
Women's growing participation in protest movements – including those focused specifically on women's rights as well as more general political activism – has also helped to normalise women's political representation by boosting their visibility in politics and public life.

Global data indicate some growth in women's participation in political activism since 1995, though there are some outliers. On average, the share of all people who had joined a peaceful demonstration across 44 countries stood at 15.5% in the mid-1990s, falling slightly to 14% by the late 2010s. The share of women who protested remained constant (at 13%), while the share of protesters who were female rose marginally (from 40% to 42%). In the mid-1990s, Sweden had the highest share of female participants in protests – 51% – while Taiwan had the lowest share at 16%. By the late 2010s, Taiwan had the highest share, at 57%, while Albania had the lowest share at 26%.

Some countries have seen a notable expansion in women's participation in protests (see Figure 26 for the percentage point change over time). Taiwan, as mentioned, is one extreme, where female participation rose by 41 percentage points; another example is Turkey at 28 points (from 22% to 50%). At the other extreme, the proportion of female protesters fell by more than five percentage points in nine countries: Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Colombia, Croatia, Georgia, Lithuania and Slovakia. This could reflect women's interests in the specific issues they face across different political contexts and in the foci of particular protests, rather than wider norm change.

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project conflict and crisis mapping by Kishi et al. (2019) found that the first quarter of 2019 had record or near-record levels of demonstrations that featured women. These included demonstrations consisting mostly or entirely of women (such as gatherings of mothers of prisoners in Canada); demonstrations led by women's advocacy groups (such as Women of Zimbabwe Arise), or demonstrations focused on specific areas of women's rights, including domestic violence (such as the *Ni Una Menos* campaign Latin America). There may be a link between having more women in political spaces (including protests), their growing interest in politics, and gender norm changes in the spaces where women feel accepted and empowered enough to have a presence.

**Figure 26: Percentage point change in share of population attending a lawful peaceful demonstration and in share of female demonstrators (between mid-1990s and late 2010s)**



Sources: Author calculations of data from World Values Survey Wave 3 and Wave 6.

## Patriarchal brakes and challenges

Despite considerable progress, women's global political representation is still far from that of men's, and the progress that has been made is not irreversible. In Malawi, the percentage of women parliamentarians fell from 22% to 16.7% in the 2014 elections, and in Iceland, it fell from 47% in 2016 to 38% in 2019 – its lowest level since 2007 (World Bank, 2020b). Voluntary Service Overseas suggests that, on current trends, women will not achieve equal representation in parliaments until 2065, and will not account for half of the world's leaders until 2134 (VSO, 2015).

There is a lack of trend data on sub-national representation. However, the main measure available from United Cities and Local Governments finds that fewer than 5% of the world's mayors are women, and that they account for just 20% of local councillors, on average, worldwide.<sup>71</sup> Of the world's 300 largest cities, only 25 are governed by women (City Mayors, 2020).

The barriers that hold women back can be diverse, intersecting and complex, making them difficult to combat. Norms about women's sexuality and mobility, for example, can put women at a disadvantage in the public space, where they are viewed differently from men. Norms that affect their health, education and financial wellbeing can, in turn, determine whether or not they can devote time and resources to political activity and leadership.

Gendered beliefs about an often masculine political space can shape gendered expectations about people's clothing, speech and family life – expectations that can lead to unequal voting behaviour, unequal treatment and perceptions of leaders based on their gender, and even stigmatisation and violence. Such beliefs do not only affect women: they can also affect the political participation of men who do not adhere to traditional gender stereotypes and of LGBTQI+ people (Binnie, 2014). In addition, such challenges are not experienced equally, and often present a greater barrier to the political participation of those from marginalised social groups.

Despite considerable progress, women's global political representation is still far from that of men's, and the progress that has been made is not irreversible.

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<sup>71</sup> [www.uclg.org/en/issues/gender-equality](https://www.uclg.org/en/issues/gender-equality)

Even where there has been a marked rise in the number of women in political posts, this may reflect ‘elite capture’ when only wealthy women tend to gain positions. This is particularly so when access to decision-making spaces requires money, connections and other privileges (O’Neil and Domingo, 2016). Where the gains made are enjoyed primarily by women from an elite social stratum, this can signal a lack of diversity among those women and mask continued gender disparities, with inequalities persisting across the rest of society, while only one class of women makes gains.<sup>72</sup>

As one ALIGN interviewee in Nepal pointed out:

*‘financial barriers were a central concern, despite holding an interest in running for office’ saying ‘We have no muscle, no money [no relations with big contributors] so it is difficult to compete in elections.’ (Woman in her 40s, Nepal, in Watson et al., 2019)*

Even when women are in the room, however, they may be denied key decision-making roles as a result of harmful norms. O’Neil and Domingo (2016: 9) note that *‘The gap between women’s formal and actual power is also about prejudice and sexism, often unconscious’*.

As one ALIGN interviewee in Uganda reflected, responding to these barriers often took personal bravery and perseverance.

*‘It was a real fight [on the Constituent Assembly]. When they refused to pass the things that I wanted, I would threaten to stand on the table until they were passed. One provision that we put in was removed when the women representatives were absent from the room – that was the time I insisted that I wouldn’t move forward without this.’ (Senior woman leader, Uganda, in Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019)*

As two interviewees explained, a woman who tries to become a leader often faces complex barriers in society, which sees her main role as being a mother and wife. She may face gossip, and may even be ostracised.

*“‘You were not born here to rule – you left us to marry” and in our husband’s village they would say “You came to marry, not to rule”.’ (Senior woman, Uganda, in Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019).*

*‘It is only the rebellious women who have excelled. They have had to rebel in some sense and know that they are seen as weird or as prostitutes – loose women.’ (Professional woman, Uganda, in Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019).*

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<sup>72</sup> Studies have sometimes classed ‘women’ as inherently non-elite in highly patriarchal contexts, which implies that gains for any women can indicate substantial transformation and progress (Musgrave and Wong, 2016). However, this is less relevant in many contexts today, where women’s engagement in politics has been increasing and distinctions of class can reveal important barriers to wider transformational change for gender equality.

## Violence

Looking beyond these already considerable constraints, another widespread challenge for women involved in politics has been the prevalence of violence against them (both online and in person). Just as women's leadership is growing globally, politically motivated attacks on women have been on the rise in nearly every region, reaching a record high in 2019, according to Kishi et al. (2019). This may be a sign of resistance to changes in norms that would accept women's leadership in decision-making. The murders of female candidates remain a global concern, with violence perpetrated not only by political opponents, but also by people close to the victims themselves, such as intimate partners or members of their own parties (Bardall, 2011).

The links between gender norms, women's movements and violence are still debated in the literature. Research by Chenoweth and Marks (forthcoming 2020) suggests that greater participation by women in protests is linked to a reduction in violence at these protests, finding that *'protests that feature women tend to be less violent, in part because demonstrations featuring a lot of women are more difficult to suppress with force, especially in patriarchal societies'*. There is also, however, evidence from Kishi et al. (2019) of excessive force being used more often against protesting women than men, particularly by police forces, and particularly in parts of Southeast Asia and Africa.

Harassment, rooted in harmful attitudes that can normalise the targeting and abuse of women who enter traditionally masculine political spaces, can damage women personally, prevent them from running for office, or even, once in office, hinder their ability to govern effectively and act freely in public.

Two countries, Mexico and Bolivia, have introduced specific legislation to address violence against women in elections, as noted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2016). The IPU's 2016 survey of female politicians from 39 countries found that 82% had experienced some form of psychological violence, with 44% reporting having received violent threats. Surveys by the National Democratic Institute in 2017 in Côte d'Ivoire, Honduras, Tanzania, and Tunisia found that 55% of female officials were subjected to violence while carrying out political party functions (NDI, 2018). And Kishi et al. (2019) also find that women face different forms of political violence, including attacks, abductions and forced disappearances, mob violence and explosions.

## Media coverage

The gender stereotyping of political candidates in media coverage and the sexualisation of female candidates is a major challenge, as well as a prime example of double standards. The media tend to treat female and male political candidates differently, which both reflects and contributes to the discriminatory norms that view female political aspirations and actions as ‘abnormal’ or ‘different’ to men’s expression of political voice.

An analysis of newspaper coverage of women candidates in Malaysia in 2008 by Kaur and Shaari (2012), for example, found that the language used to describe candidates was often based on gendered stereotypes. These shaped the words, tone and the slant of reporting on women candidates and tended to downplay their intellectual abilities. Not surprisingly, the use of stereotypical or demeaning images and photos to sexualise, emotionalise and trivialise women is a strong disincentive for those considering running for office, and may even pose a direct threat to their personal safety.

Media can promote biased coverage of female candidates, as seen during the 2011–2012 Egyptian elections when the media conceded to demands from conservative parties to prohibit the participation of unveiled women candidates and broadcasters in mixed-group debates. There are also reports of political parties limiting access for women candidates to party media resources, which undermines their public visibility. Tiessen (2008) found that women’s political participation in Malawi is shaped by gender norms that view women’s exposure to public activities as leading to immoral behaviour (where men fear their wives will cheat on them, engage in prostitution, or fail to grant them due respect if active in politics).

All of these challenges reinforce the need to enhance the voice, safety and diversity of women engaged in politics to drive transformative and sustainable progress in this area.



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the use of stereotypical or demeaning images and photos to sexualise, emotionalise and trivialise women is a strong disincentive for those considering running for office, and may even pose a direct threat to their personal safety.

### 5.3 What has enabled and constrained change in the gender norms that shape politics and civic life?

Targeted actions to enhance women's political representation have helped to change norms around women's political voice to some degree, and have reflected wider changes in society. Of course, political, social and economic contexts, party structures and regime types differ greatly, and global comparison is difficult. Research by Mulder et al. (2019: 6) in Cambodia, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste, for example, has found that, while there is '*widespread support for the general idea that women and men should have equal rights*' including to political leadership, there are sometimes conflicting views within the same group of people that men are better suited to political leadership than women. This highlights the complexity of the normative space, in that shifting one norm might not shift another. People can support gender equality in principle but still perpetuate sexist attitudes and beliefs about specific issues relating to gender in politics.

Many of the norms that can hold women back in politics are cross-cutting, so shifting them requires multi-sectoral action to tackle multiple constricting norms. As Milazzo and Goldstein (2017) have noted, changes in other areas can contribute to norm change, as advances in women's health, economic empowerment and education can help to drive processes of political inclusion while also being supported by more inclusive politics.

Changes across socio-ecological levels – systems and structural, policy, community, individual and household – can all play a role. Shifts in all of these areas towards more equitable outcomes have been enabled by changing norms, while having more women in leadership roles has started to normalise a more diverse view of leadership and this, in turn, contributes to further norm change in a virtuous cycle. This has been the combined result of women's increased voice, their contribution to more gender-equitable laws and policies, and their greater visibility in leadership, providing role models that have helped to normalise women's power and influence.

Many of the norms that can hold women back in politics are cross-cutting, so shifting them requires multi-sectoral action to tackle multiple constricting norms.

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## Role models

Women in leadership positions heighten women's aspirations, enhance respect for their political voice and can help to change norms through role modelling effects. Beaman et al. (2012), for example, found that the presence of women leaders in India had a positive influence on the career aspirations of adolescent girls, including their aspirations for careers in politics. As one interviewee noted, the simple enhancement of numbers of women seen in politics has helped drive change:

*'Women have come up to where decisions are being made. In my time, there were 40 women in Parliament – now there are 120. It has made a difference.'*  
(Senior woman leader, Uganda, in Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019).

Examining the World Values Survey, Liu and Banaszak (2017) found that the proportion of women ministers in cabinet positions has some effect on women's political participation (voting and party membership, petition signing, etc.), which suggests some kind of role-modelling effect through the greater visibility of women in politics. They also found, however, that the actual impact differs, depending on the form of political engagement, and does not have a strong effect on women's parliamentary representation or their participation in strikes or boycotts. Iyer et al. (2011) found that having a woman leader was associated with women reporting more crimes against them in the Panchayati Raj, India. Political leaders can support this role-modelling effect by voluntarily nominating gender-equal cabinets, for example, or by bringing in women as top advisors.

Role-modelling effects are sometimes strengthened by programmes that support mentorship and networking among established and aspiring women in politics. These programmes are sometimes coupled with skills, training and capacity building initiatives. One example is the Women Parliamentarians Project in Ethiopia, a training programme in which both male and female Members of Parliament shared examples of how their practice on gender mainstreaming had changed as a result of the training. They were asked, for example, to use gender checklists to ask appropriate questions of ministries and demand disaggregated data to assess gender impact. As a result of the training, women parliamentarians increased their knowledge of gender issues and increased their ability and confidence levels significantly when speaking in public. Reports from the 42 participants showed that the training also had an impact on women's ability to intervene and participate in the parliamentary process (British Council, 2017).

A similar programme, From Woman to Woman run by the Network of Young People for Gender Equality in Portugal from 2008–2010, helped young women, including those from ethnic minorities, to participate in politics through a mentoring programme complemented by wider education initiatives (including the publication of handbooks on women in politics). An internal evaluation found that the project improved mentees' confidence and skills, though further research is needed on the impact of such projects on the long-term engagement of young women in politics.

## Quotas

Quotas and other legislative guarantees have been popular policy tools for women's representation in different political bodies (most popularly in parliaments) and have been enacted in some 111 countries (SIGI, 2019). They have supported an increase in women's representation to some degree, and their use is growing, although their impact is mixed (Bratton and Ray, 2002; Devlin and Elgie, 2008; Beaman et al., 2009).

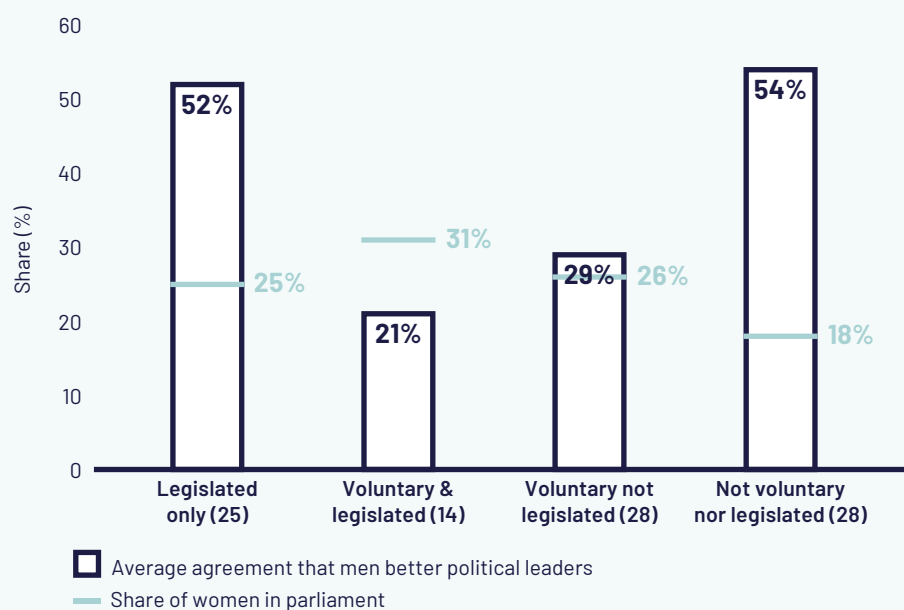
Overall, World Values Survey data suggest that political gender quotas may help to shift discriminatory gender norms, but this is not clear cut. Countries with more progressive attitudes may not see the need for quotas. In countries with voluntary political party gender quotas (where parties commit to gender representation), our analysis shows that attitudes toward women in leadership seem more progressive, on average, than in countries with only legislated quotas (mandatory quotas imposed at national level) or no quota at all (Figure 27). While the overall trends confirm the different impact of these quota types, there is still a wide variation in attitudes at the national level when we compare countries with similar forms of quota (Figure 28).

**Quotas may help to change attitudes, but it depends on the type of quota and the political context from which it is set.**

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In other words, quotas may help to change attitudes, but it depends on the type of quota and the political context from which it is set. It may be that political environments that are open to the spread of gender equality principles through the voluntary quotas of political parties, can both reflect and promote more gender-equal attitudes. However, they also risk provoking backlash or may have minimal impact. Where quotas do amplify women's voices, they are only part of the picture and are usually supported by a wider enabling environment (Htun and Jones, 2002; Barnes and Burchard, 2012; Besley et al., 2017). Overall, our analysis finds that quotas may be most effective in sustaining changes to attitudes when they are voluntary party measures (reflecting gender equality values internalised and promoted through the party system) rather than top-down quotas that are mandated across a system.

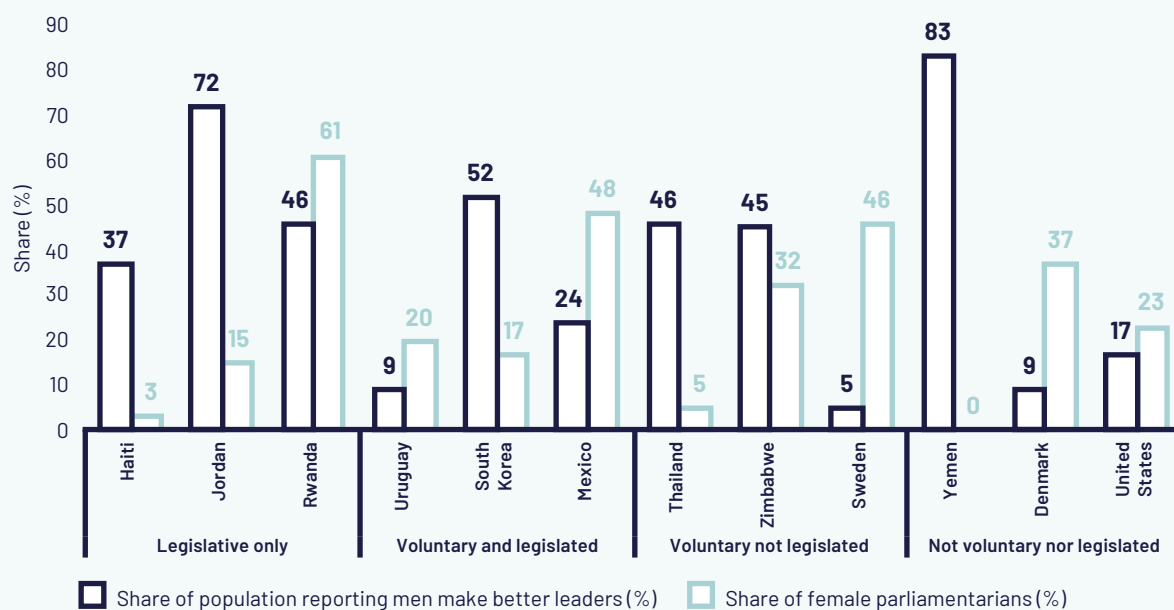
**Figure 27: Share of population reporting that men make better political leaders and share of female parliamentarians in 95 countries by quota type (late 2010s)**



Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (attitudes), Inter-Parliamentary Union data from World Bank 2020a on female parliamentary representation. IDEA gender quota database supplemented by academic papers and media for countries not in the quota database (and to identify when quotas were adopted, where this information is not in the dataset).

Note: The x-axis depicts quota types – namely whether they are legislated and/or voluntarily stipulated by political parties.

**Figure 28: Share of population reporting that men make better political leaders and share of female parliamentarians in selected countries by quota type (late 2010s)**



Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (attitudes), Inter-Parliamentary Union data from World Bank 2020a on female parliamentary representation. IDEA gender quota database supplemented by academic papers and media for countries not in the quota database (and to identify when quotas were adopted, where this information is not in the dataset).

## 5.4 What impact have crises had on gender norms around women in politics?

Evidence suggests that conflict can sometimes enable changes that enhance women's political engagement, partly as a result of the loss of men during war and the increase in female-headed households, and partly as a result of the widespread political and institutional changes caused by conflict (Plank, 2020). These changes can also be linked to the experiences of violence, loss and injustice that mobilise large numbers of women.

Experiences of war violence, for example, are correlated with greater levels of community and peaceful political engagement among women. This has been seen, for example, in Sierra Leone (Bellows and Miguel, 2009), northern Uganda (Blattman, 2009), and Haiti, Liberia, Nicaragua and Sierra Leone (World Bank, 2011). A growing agenda on 'women, peace and security' (cemented by UN Security Council Resolution 1325, see UN (2000)) aims to mainstream an understanding of the critical roles women can play in ending conflict and reconstructing society and politics.

In post-conflict Liberia, for example, one study found that gender roles 'relaxed' and gender norms changed as women began to take part in political, economic and civic life (Petesch, 2018).

Direct experiences of violence (such as abduction), or the indirect experiences of living in a conflict zone, are correlated with increases in the number of women voting and running for leadership – perhaps the result of their desire to contribute to change in the face of widespread violence. Comprehensive changes brought on by post-war reconstruction can also prompt policy changes, such as the introduction of gender quotas, as seen in Rwanda where pursuing more gender-equal representation was a high priority within the country's post-genocide rebuilding.

**While there have been fewer women in top political decision-making posts in the Covid-19 response, those women who have led in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway and Taiwan appear to have led arguably more successful responses**



More evidence is needed, however, on if and how these changes can be sustained. Cases of backsliding have also been linked to wider fragility and instability. In Malawi, for example, the substantial drop in the number of women in parliament in the 2014 elections, despite steady gains in women's representation in the preceding years, has been linked to rising uncertainty in the political environment (O'Neil et al., 2016).<sup>73</sup>

<sup>73</sup> It is important to note, in this case, studies identified that the drop in women's representation resulted from fewer women being nominated by political parties, rather than as a result of gender discriminatory voter behaviour (O'Neil et al., 2016).

Given the links identified in the literature between economic and financial resources and women's political participation, it is not surprising that economic shocks and crises can have a major impact on women's representation in governments. Some have argued that economic shocks can shake up the status quo and bring more women into politics (Salam, 2009), though few large-scale studies suggest that this effect is very strong. More recent evidence suggests the opposite. In their study of 68 countries between 1980 and 2010, Blanton et al. (2019) found that financial crises are linked to lower levels of female representation in elected office, an effect that can last for years after the start of an economic shock. This suggests that women's economic inclusion affects their political outcomes, and that specific targeted support for their political representation may be needed in times of particularly strong financial strain, such as recessions.

There is even less evidence on the impact of climate disasters and health crises on women's political representation and activity, although women and girls have been at the forefront in a number of climate movements, and countries with women leaders tend to pass more ambitious climate legislation (Mavisakalyan, 2019).

In terms of health crises, the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the importance of women's leadership and representation in pandemic response. Health crises have raised concerns in the past that women are often shut out of key decisions about the response to health crises. There is evidence, for example, that women played a central role in the Ebola epidemic response but were missing from the top decision-making functions of that response (Harman, 2016).

While there have been fewer women in top political decision-making posts in the Covid-19 response, those women who have led in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway and Taiwan appear to have led arguably more successful responses (Wittenberg-Cox, 2020).

The relative success of women leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic stands in stark contrast to the lack of women in global health leadership, despite a growing number of women in the sciences (including as public health experts). Today women make up 70% of the global health workforce, but less than 25% of health sector leaders.<sup>74</sup> Women's voices have also been reportedly 'drowned out' in Covid-19 expert task forces and media coverage. A study of India, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, the UK and the US found an *'incredible bias towards men in terms of experts, expertise and story protagonists'*. Only 19% of experts quoted in highly ranked Covid-19 stories were women, compared with 77% of men (Kassova, cited in McVeigh, 2020: para. 7).

When resources are limited during a crisis (including economic, health and conflict risks), the already limited time and resources of women and girls may be diverted to other activities and away from any political and leadership trajectories. Women's unequal care responsibilities in most settings, which are often exacerbated by crises, remain a practical barrier to women's engagement in political spaces and an area of particular concern.

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<sup>74</sup> [globalhealth5050.org/the-sex-gender-and-COVID-19-project/](https://globalhealth5050.org/the-sex-gender-and-COVID-19-project/)

## 5.5 What can be done to shift norms that affect women's political voice and representation?

The evidence suggests that advancing women's empowerment and driving more systemic shifts in gender norms across other sectors (education, work and health), combined with targeted action to promote women's engagement in political domains, can enable a more supportive environment for women in political life. This should include support for intersectional barriers reaching out to the specific needs of a diversity of women. Promoting more equitable norms in the family, including support for care work through family leave policies and more equitable parenting responsibilities among men and women, can lay the groundwork for women to work outside the home. Norm change can also be fostered through wider support for parenting professionals in political offices and spaces (e.g. not just childcare but also policies that enable politicians to bring children to work if needed, and supporting this with nursing and changing facilities in government buildings and office spaces).

The implementation of parliamentary gender quotas can support women's engagement in politics through the resulting role-modelling effects for young women, as well as the wider normalisation of women's political representation through female leadership. As discussed, however, the impact of such quotas on gender equality outcomes and particularly on norm change appears to be mixed, and more evidence is needed (George et. al., 2020).

A number of programmes support women's political representation and engagement, but few focus explicitly on gender norms. Some are part of wider civic education and activity programmes that have a gender component, while others focus specifically on training women to engage in politics. Evaluations of programmes to increase women's political participation are rare, but the evidence that does exist suggests that programming to support women's engagement in politics can expand the aspirations of women and girls, as well as their interpersonal networks and skills. This can help more women to engage and, ultimately, to contribute to the normalisation of women's political engagement. Some examples are as follows.

### Mentoring and education initiatives

School-based initiatives to build interest in civic life, politics and leadership skills, as well as programmes to mentor women leaders, can help empower girls and young women to participate in networking, convening and education to learn about their political rights and routes for their engagement. An example of this includes the Train, Run, Win and Lead initiative in Trinidad and Tobago, which helped women gain office for the first time in local elections (see discussion in George et al., 2020). Work in this area should include initiatives to support a diversity of women, including through networks to support those in groups that are under-represented on the basis of their socio-economic status, race, ethnicity or other specific vulnerabilities. They should also include programmes to educate men and boys around gender equality principles and women's experiences in politics and public life.

## Skills, training and capacity building initiatives

Some initiatives support women's skills development and networking focused on those already in power, and offer different models for doing so online and in-person, while considering diversity and access. A number of these programmes work directly with women who are already in office to enhance their impact, while others focus more on aspiring female politicians, with examples including the aforementioned Women Parliamentarians Project in Ethiopia and From a Woman to Woman initiative in Portugal. Evaluations of these programmes have identified skills-training initiatives as an effective way to change women's own aspirations to political office, and to enhance their political success, particularly in the area of legislation.

## Violence prevention and protection initiatives

Measures to end violence against women in politics can include legal work, social programmes and services, as well as support groups and community-based initiatives to raise awareness and respond to violence, whether online or in-person violence and harassment. A UN expert group on preventing violence against women has called for stronger election monitoring and oversight, training for police and security forces, more work with political parties to raise awareness, gender-sensitisation programmes in government and an exploration of the role of political finance in violence against women in politics (UN Women and OHCHR, 2018).

Support for women's groups and activists who are working to prevent violence against women and protect them against such violence in politics is also critical, as civic organisations can have an impact in identifying and addressing norm-based barriers. One example is the Women Fund in Tanzania and its 'Coalition Against Sextortion' which brings together civil society organisations to address the issue of women in political parties being asked for sexual favours – rather than money – in return for political nominations, a practice that had become normalised.<sup>75</sup> The group developed a campaign to raise awareness about this pervasive sexual extortion of women and the harassment they face in public life. The coalition also trained women candidates and politicians before the national elections to recognise sextortion and avoid it if they encountered it. As a result of these efforts, Tanzania's Ethics Secretariat issued guidelines in the spring of 2015 to crack down on sextortion, enhancing the visibility of the issue, as well as the government's commitment to support female politicians and hold those engaging in sexual violence and extortion to account.

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<sup>75</sup> [wft.or.tz/coalitions/](http://wft.or.tz/coalitions/)

## Support for women's groups and movements

Providing resources for spaces where women can network, engage across communities and mount wider social action can shape their individual trajectories, as well as their ability to act collectively. Funding and capacity building initiatives to support the creation of women's organisations and groups and sustain their work can help to provide such spaces, which can ultimately support shifts in norms around women's engagement in politics. They can also enable women's voices to be heard in areas that affect politics, such as media, law and cultural life.

Oxfam's Raising Her Voice programme, for example, which supported projects in 17 countries worldwide from 2008 to 2013 used '*a range of strategies to change the "rules of the game" where they exclude women (in politics and civic life)*' (Repila, 2013: 1). These included support for women in legal and community advocacy to amplify the voices of women on key issues such as gender-based violence. As a result of the programme, coalition members contributed to 10 new laws on gender-based violence (ibid.).

Support for women's groups, even those not directly linked to politics and public life, can also help. In India, women's self-help groups have been used increasingly as a vehicle for social, political and economic empowerment, as well as platforms for service delivery (Kumar et al., 2018). Self-help group membership is linked to political participation, awareness, and the use of government entitlement schemes, and some programmes focus on funding these groups to enhance women's political representation.

## 5.6 Conclusions

It is clear that gender norms shape the political space, and that global gains for women in politics may signal the erosion of discriminatory norms in many settings and as a result of varied drivers. The evidence to date in this area still suggests that hard-won gains for women in politics may stagnate or regress without a transformation of the harmful norms that limit their political action. This highlights the critical importance of norm change to ensure lasting, fundamental changes that support equal voice and representation in critical decision-making spaces. More research about the impact of programmes and initiatives in this area, as well as strategies to address the wider normative barriers, could inform approaches to achieve the goal of full and equal participation of women in public decision-making in the post Beijing+25 era.



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## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Gender, power and progress: how norms change

This flagship report is about gender norms. It is about the ways in which gender equality, the rights linked to such equality and the norms that shape the ability to claim those rights have progressed over time. It explores the pivotal role of gender norms – the implicit informal rules that most people accept and follow – in the progress, set-backs and stagnation of rights achievements. It examines how (and how far) gender norms have changed in the 25 years since the UN Platform for Action on women's rights was laid down in Beijing in 1995.

This report has analysed data looking back over a quarter of a century to understand the patterns of progress in gender equality, the contribution of norm change and nuances in the experience of change across different regions and countries. Our intention has been to highlight trajectories of change, to reflect on progress and challenges, and to understand what drives change in both gender norms and gender equality.

Looking back at direction over time helps to track progress towards gender equality at a global level, as well as in particular regions or countries, and to identify exceptions to the overall trends. Different paces and routes to change remind us that change is never linear and it never moves in one direction only. It often ebbs and flows.

We have identified patriarchal brakes to change, within and across sectors, and some common drivers of change that have been effective in multiple settings. These operate at sector level, such as employment or politics, but also at the levels of the community, state or global action. It is important to have some understanding of every level of struggle and experience if we are to understand how gender norms shift.

**Sustainable change requires both individual and society-wide change – change that transforms society at large and change that captures the hearts and minds of individuals.**



Our message in this report is that sustainable change requires both individual and society-wide change – change that transforms society at large and change that captures the hearts and minds of individuals. In other words, norm change means changing social expectations, attitudes and behaviours and the ways in which these are represented in wider society, across all the formal and informal institutions and associated rules and laws and practices that govern behaviour and attitudes.

Progress towards gender equality, even when it seems to be on track, can suffer major set-backs and can be both halted and reversed. There are also variations in terms of the severity of the reversal and how long the stagnation will last. While significant progress has been identified over time in many parts of the world (Goldin, 2006; Iregui-Bohórquez, 2020), we also note repeated concerns about backlash, stalling and sometimes reversals, such as recent falls in the political representation of women in Iceland and Malawi, very slow progress in access to contraception in some countries, and alarming reports of increases in violence as a result of Covid-19 lockdowns. All of these set-backs are different in nature and reflect various types of norm restrictions and brakes.

## 6.2 Patterns of progress and change

Analysts of historical progress towards gender equality see the relationship between falling female fertility and employment as pivotal to change (Goldin and Katz, 2002). They argue that as women take control of their own fertility (and are enabled to do so by a combination of technology, empowerment and legal changes), they plan for employment and gradually achieve some economic autonomy. This can challenge norms about women's place in the home, appropriate work for women, or women's control of economic resources.

Supporting this progression, when women can plan the timing of their pregnancies, they can also plan for their future employment in terms of their educational choices and progression, thereby achieving more in education (often challenging norms about suitable areas of study or the permissibility of girls and women going to school or college). This, in turn, can propel them into better employment, and, ultimately, challenge norms that create 'glass ceilings', and many other forms of discrimination in the workplace. In addition, but somewhat later, women's voice in politics increases, sometimes with the help of gender quotas, feminist leadership or other action.

Surrounding all these changes are small but incremental advances in civil and political rights, often driven or supported by social movements and citizen action, among other norm change mechanisms. This is well documented in the case of the US and Colombia (Goldin, 2006; Iregui-Bohórquez, 2020).

This pattern of progress sounds well and good. And it would be, were it not for three factors. First, this pattern takes a long time and involves much stalling and plateauing of progress before moving on, often with a new generation that has to build on past achievements. Second, this pattern is not a universal route for everyone: some parts of the population often advance while others are left behind. And third, progress often seems to stall, repeatedly, at the very point when women may be achieving significant change or power. This can throw women's rights into reverse and raises questions as to whether significant change to the invisible norms – so often at the root of such set-backs – is really permanent.

To ensure sustainable change, it is necessary, as said earlier, to make both individual and society-wide change. Change that captures hearts and minds and is embraced by society-wide institutions. It is not enough for people to change their opinions if they cannot then act on this change because of the social expectations that hold them back. At the same time, it is not enough for people to behave differently if, in their hearts, they still believe that the ‘old ways’ were better and if they slip back into those old ways over time. Sustainable norm change means that people expect other people to behave in these new ways – they comply with a new norm, partly because they agree with it, but also because others expect them to do so. Sustainable norm change means the wider institutions of society also embrace, uphold and support new norm expectations.

The trends over 25 years in each area we have examined show momentum and progress: greater gender equality in school attendance; more voluntary use of modern contraception; women’s increased labour force participation; and their greater political participation. This progress has been underpinned by shifts in the social expectations, attitudes and behaviours around gender norms over the past 25 years such as: more equitable attitudes towards university education for boys and girls; declining numbers of men and women who see wife beating as justifiable; more women having more control over consent for sex; fewer people believing that a man has more right to a job than a woman when jobs are scarce; and some shifts – though small – away from sexist attitudes towards women in politics.

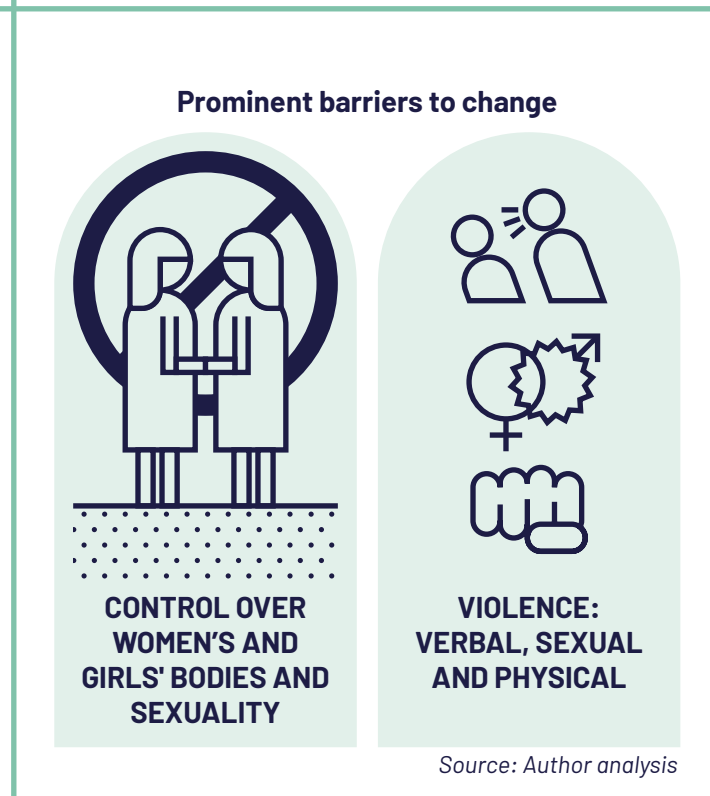
While there is momentum, however, it is hard to discern any clear and specific sequencing for these improvements in the short term. And the variation in the pace and scale of norm change across countries remains vast.

**The trends over 25 years in each area we have examined show momentum and progress: greater gender equality in school attendance; more voluntary use of modern contraception; women’s increased labour force participation; and their greater political participation.**



Some set-backs can be linked to surges in populism or specific crises and shocks, pushing girls out of school and into early marriage, or creating conditions that compel women to move out of workplaces or politics. However, both progress and pitfalls can be subtle and are part of changes that span entire societies, informed by important institutions such as religious bodies, and by a resurgence or weakening of patriarchal norms around, for example, sexual and reproductive rights. Changes can also be fuelled by increased connectivity and mass media and by deliberate policy and service interventions. Thus some overall trends and examples of what works have emerged from our analysis, which has also highlighted the importance of context and of society-wide systems and structures in enabling or inhibiting change.

Two common norm-based factors are evident in every sector explored in this report. First, a tight control over women's bodies and their sexuality still holds strong in many contexts. This control includes concerns about the exposure of teenage girls in school settings to boys; the enduring importance attached to girls' virginity; control over women's access to contraception; worries about women going to work and their exposure to men and potential sexual temptation in work settings; and controlling attitudes towards women in politics, from what they wear to shouting down their opinions and worse forms of verbal violence.



The second cross-cutting and prominent barrier to change is violence: verbal, sexual and physical violence in school settings, on public transport, harassment in workplaces, in public and political life and online. Violence acts as a sanction to maintain norms.

Both of these factors feature in the lives of women and girls everywhere and reduce their potential and efficacy in the world. And both are upheld by patriarchal norms around the social expectations of women and girls in society.

### 6.3 What can be done?

Change at two critical levels is needed: change that is society-wide and embraced by society's institutions and systems; and change within individual hearts and minds.

Our chapters suggest what works to change norms across these core areas, and what can contribute to such change. It is often difficult to distinguish where and how specific actions have an impact, given that society-wide and individual changes are interdependent.

There is, however, some strong evidence about what works to change norms. The type of actions include legal protections, improvements in services and infrastructure, the foundational role of education, community mobilisation, social movements, the use of mass and social media, programmes for sensitisation and behaviour change, and removing financial barriers or providing financial incentives.

## 6.4 Society wide actions

*Legal protections* operate both throughout society and its institutions and can also foster change in hearts and minds. Most states are now signatories to a growing area of international law on gender equality.<sup>76</sup> The enactment of legal protections to uphold gender equality can help to change norms by sending a clear signal – this is who we are, and how we want to live – with clear sanctions against actions that are gender discriminatory.

Increases in national laws on gender-based violence, for example, have helped to both reflect and support changes to erode the normalisation of violence against women and girls. And when we compare countries, we see that average rates of violence are lower in countries with such legislation than those without (Klugman, 2017). Legal protections can only shift norms if they are fully and fairly enforced and are accessible to everyone. Mechanisms and structures must be in place to ensure their full implementation, backed by services such as legal aid to ensure equal and fair access to justice and anti-corruption measures to ensure no one is above the law. Law enforcement officers must understand the law and have the skills they need to hold perpetrators to account. There is clearly much to be done to advance legal provisions and ensure their full implementation across all sectors.

*Service and infrastructure improvements* are also critical for norm change, even when their goal is not gender equality specifically (though services are rarely gender neutral). Improving the delivery of quality services (additionally with a focus on gender norms) is pivotal. In under-served contexts, simply building schools and recruiting teachers has helped to narrow gender gaps in enrolment.

The enactment of legal protections to uphold gender equality can help to change norms by sending a clear signal – this is who we are, and how we want to live.



Overall, there is evidence that *removing financial barriers* or providing *financial incentives* can speed up or drive change. For example, when better paid jobs are available and a critical mass of women joins the labour force, this helps to normalise paid work for women, as well as men. Similarly, cash transfers for school attendance can normalise girls' education, while childcare provision enables women to take up paid work.

<sup>76</sup> Such as in the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, see <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CEDAW/Pages/CEDAWIndex.aspx>), UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (UN, 1993) and UN Resolution 1325 (UN, 2000).

## 6.5 Changing hearts and minds

Changing norms requires individuals to change both what they think, what they want to do and what they actually do. They need to be supported by the changed social expectations of what is ‘normal’. In each chapter of this report we have provided examples of actions to change norms in people’s hearts and minds.

Educational services are the bedrock for such changes. Education, particularly secondary and tertiary, helps to shift attitudes among both boys and girls towards women’s place in society, promoting norm change and greater equality. Children can sometimes change the attitudes of their parents, and parents are increasingly fighting for the rights of daughters to be educated.



**Changing norms requires individuals to change both what they think, what they want to do and what they actually do.**

Education means more than formal schooling, and we have shown that non-formal education initiatives – in schools, workplaces and the wider community – have helped to shift attitudes to gender-based violence, reduce its perpetration and increase the reporting of incidents. As noted in our chapter on education, extra-curricular initiatives, such as *Taaron Ki Toli* in India, have proved effective in changing discriminatory attitudes and behaviour among adolescents (Menon, 2018).

Alongside growing efforts to sensitise teachers to gender biases and remove stereotypes from learning materials, content on gender equality is now being integrated into many school curricula. These have helped boys and girls question stereotypes and norms, and evaluations show shifts towards more egalitarian gender roles, and reduced acceptance of gender-based violence. And work with teachers in Uganda found that schools implementing the Good Schools Toolkit saw a 42% reduction in the number of students who reported experiencing violence from school staff (Gerschoff, 2017).

Individuals and the communities where they live can be reached with new ideas about what is acceptable through *networks, social movements, unions, mass and social media, self-help groups and training and mentoring schemes*. These share both information and new social expectations about what is – or is not – appropriate. For example, support for improved women’s voice and representation through such channels has enabled the negotiation of rights and legal changes, as well as enabling specific initiatives for norm change, from mentoring and skills provision to high-level campaigns. Examples include the Women Parliamentarians Project in Ethiopia, Running Start in the US, and The Parliament Project and Equal Power in the UK. In India, women’s self-help groups are used increasingly as a vehicle for social, political and economic empowerment, as well as a platform for service delivery (Kumar et al., 2018).

Working with individuals in the social and health service work force also helps. Health worker sensitisation (to enable non-judgemental access to family planning, particularly for unmarried and young women, for example), sensitisation of teachers to their own biases, and the training of textbook producers can all help to challenge and change harmful norms and stereotypes, as individuals seek services.

The importance of engaging with communities, with *leaders and with powerful institutions* on norm change, is clear across all sectors. Religious and community leaders and those holding strong social influence, both men and women, can play a vital role within social networks, influencing norms and behaviour on, for example, family planning (Shaikh et al., 2013), girls' education (Unterhalter et al., 2014), and men's involvement in the care of young children.<sup>77</sup>

The *mass media* also provides role models and information that can help to change norms (Marcus and Page, 2014). For example, women in Brazil who watched soap operas showing small families were more likely to have fewer children than those who did not (Ferrara et al., 2008), with the strongest effect seen among women who were poorer and who had less education. 'Edutainment' (education entertainment) often combines dramas with factual content and interactive call-ins to provoke debate (ODI, 2015). The collective outreach of these programmes matters because it shifts people's perceptions about what other people in their social groups see as 'normal' behaviour, on issues as diverse as girls' education, child marriage, family planning, and women in leadership roles in business and politics.

It is clear that a great deal of work is underway on all fronts, and that much of it is succeeding in shifting norms. But there is far more work to be done, given the *continuing and significant gaps* in legislation, the enforcement of laws, commitment from leaders, the provision of quality services and the financing of initiatives. And government action to maintain and uphold women's rights often falters when a crisis hits.

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<sup>77</sup> One example is the community-level non-formal education undertaken by MenCare, see [www.men-care.org](http://www.men-care.org).

## 6.6 Principles for norm change

Our analysis on progress and brakes underscores four core principles that should guide efforts to change gender norms in the coming years.

### 1. Work at speed and at scale

Norm change tends to be very slow, as shown in every chapter in this report. However, small, incremental and continuous improvements in gender equality are being made, and, despite backsliding, they amount to more substantial changes. And a combination of circumstances can trigger a bigger and faster leap towards gender equality – one example being the impact of the contraceptive pill as a technological trigger. Political leadership can also spark change. In Uganda, ALIGN research found that pressure for increased women’s rights gained momentum when Museveni became President in 1986, with women reporting enhanced freedoms and greater opportunities to organise and campaign for change (Watson and Bantebya Kyomuhendo, 2019).

Despite these examples of progress, the evidence suggests that if we continue with ‘business as usual’, significant norm change will take generations. There are signs, however, that we are learning how to speed up:

There is an *appetite among change actors* to understand and change gender norms. More norms language is being used by governmental, international and local organisations, and by the private sector. This hopefully represents an earnest intent to get to the heart of gender inequalities to sustainably address norm change.

There is sound evidence on the greater impact of initiatives that *work at scale* from government and the private sector. Education, for example, is one of the few large-scale institutional services that penetrate rural and disadvantaged areas, and alongside the media, offers massive potential to enhance and advance gender norm change.



**If we continue with ‘business as usual’, significant norm change will take generations.**

Educational settings provide many clear examples of how norm change can be encouraged at scale. Curricula promoting egalitarian gender norms result in more egalitarian gender roles among boys and girls, and reduced acceptance of gender-based violence (Marcus et al., 2018a). Institutionalising gender-equitable approaches into core curricula has huge potential for more transformative education on a vast scale. Integrating the sensitisation of teachers to gender equality into teacher training, and encouraging teachers to examine their own and society’s norms and biases, have proved effective in achieving more gender-equitable teaching. ‘Whole school’ approaches to gender equality encourage staff and students to build school communities that promote gender equality as a key value and equitable norms as key standards of behaviour (Unterhalter and Heslop, 2012; Nuamah, 2019).

There are examples of working at scale in many other areas, including gender-based violence, where Business for Social Responsibility's HerProject has reached over 850,000 women in 800 workplaces across 14 countries to raise awareness and develop workplace systems to prevent and respond to violence. An evaluation of the work of HerProject in India found that acceptance of gender-based violence halved among participants, while protection and support systems for women workers doubled in participating workplaces (Business for Social Responsibility, 2019). The potential to work at scale is clear.

There are also areas that we suggest *bold promise*. They include increased capacity to use social and mass media to promote gender-equitable norms (bearing in mind that these channels can also be forces for retrograde change). We found less analysis of these areas overall, and the impacts of social media, in particular, on norm change is under-researched (Marcus and Page, 2014; Mitra et al. 2019; Muttreja, 2019).

Finally, we suggest that *a changed norm further enhances change*; that success builds on success. While we have not fully analysed this phenomenon, we note, for example, that feminist politicians in power can drive change if they choose to prioritise gender equality. So, having more women in leadership positions holds the potential to spread norm change further and wider. Similarly, meeting contraception needs has changed employment patterns to further empower women. Participation in education continues to grow rapidly, and a more educated population is more likely to support norm change.

All of these factors are reasons to hope that the speed of change we have witnessed over the last 25 years and indeed the last century will gather momentum, building on earlier successes, and provide greater impetus for norm change.

## 2. Ensure inclusion

The speed and scale of change is one concern. A second and related issue is that of inclusivity. Just as societies' progress is hindered by a lack of gender equality, progress on all fronts is further hindered by a failure to *think and act intersectionally*.

Inequalities based on class, caste, race, ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, language, geography, refugee or migrant status and religious affiliations, among others, can have a profound impact on progress in gender norm change. This is particularly true when approaches to support gender equality fail to factor in marginalisation, with only some people benefiting from any changes.

It is remarkable how rarely the data we analysed aimed to understand intersectionality beyond gender, age, socio-economic status and geography. The data we drew on and the literature we reviewed provide only partial insights into intersectionality, particularly for people with disabilities and those of diverse gender identity or sexual orientation or issues of class. This indicates that the inclusivity of action on gender norm change is critical to a post-Beijing agenda that aims to progress gender equality for all.

### 3. Ensure depth

The third area of concern is the depth and, therefore, the *sustainability of norm change*. As described in the first chapter, sustainable norm change requires changes in both attitudes and behaviour that are reflected in the rules and expectations of society. All too often, changes are superficial. Assertions by male politicians about power-sharing with women politicians, for example, may be accompanied in reality by verbal abuse, controlling behaviour, talking over and harassing women, not listening to them, and criticising their physical appearance.

As another example, some men may say that they do not approve of domestic violence, but continue to abuse their wives in the privacy of their homes. As mentioned throughout the report, changed social expectations of what is appropriate behaviour can reinforce changed attitudes and behaviours, and individuals cannot make changes on their own. If changes are only superficial the potential for reversals are clear. Actions to drive both society-wide change and change hearts and minds need to establish real depth and sustainability by firstly always incorporating a norms perspective and secondly considering the successful approaches discussed in this report.

### 4. Build the evidence base

A fourth area for action is data and evidence on gender norms and norm change processes. This report draws on large-scale attitudinal data and other sources of data that reflect attitudes, behaviours and outcomes to shed light on how norms work in different global settings and how they have shifted. But these data sources are not enough.

First, understanding gender norms requires an *integrated norms approach that goes beyond attitudes and behaviour*, in the design of data collection tools. The most recent wave of the World Values Survey in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, for example, probed respondents' perceptions of the sanctions faced by women in paid work, rather than just the attitudes to women who work outside the home. Second, far more intersectional data are needed, as the diverse experiences and issues that face particular groups are often erased in aggregated data. Third, a full understanding of how norms are changing, why, and the barriers to change requires both qualitative and quantitative data. Fourth, existing data and evidence are too often snapshots. Greater investment in repeated rounds of surveys or qualitative studies over a long time period, and following up with participants years after the end of interventions, would enhance understanding of what works to sustain change, and which approaches are most effective in preventing reversals.

## 6.7 Finally...

If the challenge is to change millennia-long structures of power, it is no surprise that the speed of change appears slow. To attempt change on this scale seems a tall order, but that is exactly what is happening, little by little, to change patriarchal norms.

When a girl defies the early marriage choices of her parents, when a woman politician calls out misogyny in parliament or on social media, when a woman's legal rights over her own fertility choices are upheld, the changes are felt across societies and chip away at the structures of patriarchal power. The more challenges that are made, the faster change will happen, and the next 25 years will see the current models of power, leadership and moral authority contested and, it is hoped, transformed.

As Beard asserts, *'when it comes to silencing women, western culture has had thousands of years of practice'* (2017: xi). Most countries have long historical experiences of women's subjugation and systems of oppressive patriarchy. Given a timeframe of discrimination that goes back millennia, the changes we are seeing within a few generations – or even within one generation – are relatively swift.

A long view makes us hopeful that, despite set-backs and reversals, change in gender norms is progressing. While attitudes and behaviours can and do change in later life, the opinions, expectations and norm adherence set at a young age are critical. Given the views of one young Nepali woman who took part in ALIGN's research, we have good reason to expect the coming generations to make significant changes to gender norms:

*'Everything has changed in our time as compared to our grandparents' time. There are changes in culture and behaviour as well. There are men these days who do not feel any differences between a man and a woman.'* (Young woman, Nepal, in Watson et al., 2019: 44)

Our analysis has revealed areas where there is major potential to enhance change, such as educational services and mass and social media; and areas that wield significant influence but need more support or enforcement, such as social movements and legal protections. And then there are areas where we see significant data gaps, such as on intersectionality. This provides a guide as to where attention and resources should be devoted in the future. The need for gender norm change is not confined to specific countries or contexts but is a global and universal requirement for progress towards gender equality and, as such, should be integrated across sectors and contexts.

Future gains in gender equality rely on sustainable gender norm change. And that change depends on actors who understand how norms change, what actions they can support and embrace, and the alliances they need to build. We have shared evidence of progress in changing gender norms. Our aim has been to strengthen the commitment to the creation of sustainable gender norm change worldwide in this, the first half of the 21st century. Every action, and every change, counts. As one Nepali professor who took part in ALIGN research commented:

*‘This is about the little space that you create – the little change that you make and the new awareness you have built and then, as in a relay race, you pass the baton on to others.’ Harper et al., 2020)*

Our evidence shows that the baton is being passed on from one activist, one woman, one educator, one progressive leader, and one generation, to another. And as the baton passes forward, gender norms change.

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## Data annex

The cross-national analysis of changing norms from the mid-1990s until the present is based primarily on attitudinal data drawn from World Values Survey (WVS) and the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), accessed via the WVS online data analysis tool and DHS STATcompiler respectively.<sup>78</sup>

### World Values Survey

WVS are nationally representative surveys of ‘human values and beliefs’ that have been conducted in almost 100 countries to date in seven ‘waves’. The number of countries included has increased dramatically over time, and as the number has expanded, it has also become more representative geographically and of countries with lower income levels.

The WVS data trend analysis is based on those countries with datapoints in the mid-1990s (Wave 3 of the survey, 1995–1998) and the late 2010s (Wave 7 of the survey, 2017–2020). To boost coverage, this report has included four countries from Wave 6 in this latter category, where data were available: India, South Africa, Ukraine, Uruguay (and as mentioned in the text, Wave 3 coverage was occasionally boosted with data from Waves 2 or 4).

The collection and release of Wave 7 data has been delayed by Covid-19 – data was available for 82 countries at the time of completing this report (November 2020). Depending on the variable, comparable data was available for up to 50 countries between Waves 3 and 7 (including the four Wave 6 countries), with a bias toward high-income countries.<sup>79</sup> Because the online data compiler does not provide estimates of standard error, this report refers the reader to the conventional margins of error associated with different shares of respondents opting for a particular response at a 95% confidence level (Table 1).

For most countries in WVS, the sample size is approximately 1,000 respondents. This report analysis also relies on data disaggregated by sex (sub-samples of around 500 men and 500 women) and by age group (15–29 years, 30–49 years, 50+ years – the size of each of these sub-population varies depending on the country, so the reader is referred to the WVS website for country-level detail).

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<sup>78</sup> WVS data can be accessed at [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp), DHS data can be accessed at [www.statcompiler.com/en/](http://www.statcompiler.com/en/)

<sup>79</sup> Of the 50 countries that can be compared between the mid-1990s and late 2000s, 21 are in Eastern Europe, 7 are in Latin America, 5 are in East Asia, 3 are in South Asia, 2 are in sub-Saharan Africa, 1 is in Central Asia and 11 are other high-income countries.

Table 1: Benchmark data on error margins at a 95% confidence level

Sample size	Error margin (+-) for the resulting percentages				
N	10% or 90%	20% or 80%	30% or 70%	40% or 60%	50%
20	13.1%	17.5	20.1%	21.5%	21.9%
30	10.7%	14.3%	16.4%	17.5%	17.9%
40	9.3%	12.4%	14.2%	15.2%	15.5%
50	8.3%	11.1%	12.7%	13.6%	13.9%
75	6.8%	9.1%	10.4%	11.1%	11.3%
100	5.9%	7.8%	9.0%	9.6%	9.8%
250	3.7%	5.0%	5.7%	6.1%	6.2%
500	2.6%	3.5%	4.0%	4.3%	4.4%
1000	1.9%	2.5%	2.8%	3.0%	3.2%
2000	1.3%	1.8%	2.0%	2.1%	2.2%

Source: Appendix Table 2 in Tausch (2018).

## Demographic and Health Survey

DHS are nationally representative household surveys that provide data for a wide range of indicators focusing on population, women and children's health, and nutrition. It also contains an optional domestic violence module which is administered to a subset of women of reproductive age (15–49 years in most countries). The DHS sample consists primarily of low- and middle-income countries.<sup>80</sup>

The DHS data trend analysis is based on those countries with two or more datapoints from 1999 onward (with the date varying depending on the country). The number of countries with trend data varies dramatically depending on the indicator. For the indicators considered here, ranges were between 21 and 61. Because the survey dates vary across countries, and data are collected more frequently in some countries, the number of data points and the date range varies by country. Therefore, this report presents the data available for each country for their first survey and last survey – the aim is not to compare trends across countries but rather to illustrate trends over time within countries. The specific date ranges will vary depending on the variable (Table 2). DHS sample sizes are large (typically covering between 5,000 and 30,000 households depending on the country and year) and are typically conducted in a country every five years. The indicators we focus on in this report are from the individual questionnaires for women and men or from 'optional' modules (e.g. on domestic violence), for which sample sizes are smaller. As with WVS, the DHS online STATcompiler does not provide estimates of standard error so we are not able to analyse the statistical significance of observed trends.

Data on outcomes comes primarily from the World Bank's World Development Indicators and UNESCO Institute of Statistics. Regional and income group aggregates from these sources are population weighted unless otherwise stated. Data on laws is from World Bank's Women, Business and the Law.

Table 2: Illustrative example of years involved in DHS trend analysis for selected indicators

Indicator	Statistic	First year	Last year
Justified to refuse sex if knows husband has sex with other women	median	2003	2015
	min	1999 (Zimbabwe)	2008 (Bolivia)
	max	2012 (Tajikistan)	2018 (Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Zambia)
Justified to refuse sex if tired/not in mood	median	2002	2015
	min	1999 (Zimbabwe)	2008 (Bolivia)
	max	2010 (Colombia)	2018 (Mali, Nigeria, Zimbabwe)

<sup>80</sup> [dhsprogram.com/Countries/Country-List.cfm](https://dhsprogram.com/Countries/Country-List.cfm)



### About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality.

It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through all its work ALIGN seeks to promote gender justice.

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ALIGN is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Government of Canada (provided through Global Affairs Canada) and is led by the Overseas Development Institute.

