DISCUSSION PAPER

MEASURING SOCIAL NORMS FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT: Lessons and Priorities



No. 43, November 2024

KATE BEDFORD AND MAGALÍ BROSIO

UN WOMEN

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CBO	community-based organization
EGM	Expert Group Meeting
FGM	female genital mutilation
FMI	Feminist Mobilization Index
GDP	gross domestic product
GEAS	Global Early Adolescent Study
GEH	Center on Gender Equity and Health
GSNI	Gender Social Norms Index
GUG!	Growing Up GREAT!
ILO	International Labour Organization
IRH	Institute for Reproductive Health
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SIGI	Social Institutions and Gender Index
SNAP	Social Norms, Attitudes and Practices
SRH	sexual and reproductive health
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WVS	World Values Survey

SUMMARY

The linkages between social norms and gender (in)equality have generated considerable interest within many international development organizations, leading to a proliferation of research initiatives focused on measuring social norms on gender. This is partly driven by a belief that improved data are necessary to understand the impact of social norms on gender equality, identify priority domains and evaluate interventions. In this scenario, there is an urgent need to take stock of current initiatives, assess their strengths, gaps and limitations and recommend improvements. This paper contributes to these timely conversations.

By analysing seven key examples of how social norms are being measured to achieve gender equality, this paper identifies four cross-cutting shortcomings: (i) inconsistencies in definitions and measures of social norms; (ii) unclear causal pathways; (iii) poorly evidenced or conceptually under-justified recommendations; and (iv) failure to consider collective agency and contentious politics. These limitations hinder the potential of norms-based work to effectively improve gender equality outcomes.

The paper concludes with preliminary insights into what should be measured, why, how and by whom, aiming to outline components of a future framework for measuring social norms and gender equality. We identify two clusters of priorities: (i) improving the internal consistency of measures; and (ii) incorporating emerging best practices through long-term, participatory norms measures that encompass gender equality outcomes and address institutional dimensions of social norm change. This exploration aims to set the stage for a more nuanced and effective approach to measuring and addressing social norms in the pursuit of gender equality.

RÉSUMÉ

Les liens entre normes sociales et (in)égalités entre les sexes ont suscité un intérêt considérable au sein de nombreuses organisations de développement international, ce qui a conduit à la création de multiples initiatives de recherche axées sur la mesure des normes sociales relatives au genre. Ce phénomène est en partie animé par la croyance selon laquelle il est nécessaire de disposer de données de meilleure qualité pour comprendre l'impact des normes sociales sur l'égalité entre les sexes, identifier les domaines prioritaires et évaluer les interventions. Dans ce scénario, nous devons de toute urgence faire le point sur les initiatives actuelles, en évaluer les forces, les lacunes et les limites, et recommander des améliorations. Ce document d'analyse contribue à ces discussions qui arrivent à point nommé.

En analysant sept exemples qui illustrent la manière dont les normes sociales sont mesurées pour atteindre l'égalité entre les sexes, ce document a repéré quatre manquements transversaux : i) incohérences des définitions et des mesures des normes sociales ; ii) manque de clarté des voies de causalité ; iii) recommandations peu convaincantes ou insuffisamment justifiées sur le plan conceptuel ; iv) absence de prise en compte de la capacité d'action collective et de la politique contestataire. Ces faiblesses limitent le potentiel des travaux normatifs qui visent à améliorer les résultats en matière d'égalité entre les sexes.

Cette publication conclut en proposant des réflexions préliminaires sur ce qui doit être mesuré, pourquoi, comment et par qui, dans le but de définir les éléments d'un cadre futur destiné à mesurer les normes sociales et l'égalité entre les sexes. Nous distinguons deux groupes de priorités : i) l'amélioration de la cohérence interne des mesures ; ii) l'intégration des meilleures pratiques émergentes par l'adoption de mesures participatives et à long terme des normes, qui englobent les résultats en matière d'égalité entre les sexes

et tiennent compte des dimensions institutionnelles de l'évolution des normes sociales. Cette enquête vise à préparer le terrain pour l'adoption d'une approche plus nuancée et efficace de la mesure et de la prise en compte des normes sociales dans la poursuite de l'égalité entre les sexes.

RESUMEN

La relación entre las normas sociales y la (des)igualdad de género ha despertado un importante interés en numerosas organizaciones internacionales para el desarrollo, lo que ha originado una multiplicación de las iniciativas de investigación enfocadas en medir las normas sociales asociadas a las cuestiones de género. Esto obedece en parte a la convicción de que es necesario mejorar la calidad de los datos para comprender el efecto de las normas sociales en la igualdad de género, determinar las esferas prioritarias y evaluar las intervenciones. Ante este panorama, existe una necesidad urgente de hacer balance de las iniciativas en curso, evaluar sus fortalezas, dificultades y limitaciones, y recomendar mejoras. Con este trabajo se busca contribuir a estas conversaciones tan oportunas.

Al analizar siete ejemplos clave acerca de cómo se miden las normas sociales para lograr la igualdad de género, en este documento se identifican cuatro dificultades transversales: i) la incoherencia en las definiciones y mediciones de las normas sociales, ii) la ausencia de claridad en las vías causales, iii) la existencia de recomendaciones infundadas o con una justificación insuficiente desde el punto de vista conceptual y iv) la falta de consideración de la capacidad de acción colectiva y de la política contestaria. Estas limitaciones frustran el potencial de las labores normativas encaminadas a mejorar los resultados en materia de igualdad de género de manera efectiva.

Esta publicación concluye con una serie de reflexiones preliminares acerca de lo que debe medirse, por qué, cómo y por quién, a fin de definir los componentes de un marco futuro para medir las normas sociales y la igualdad de género. Hemos establecido dos grupos de prioridades: i) mejorar la coherencia interna de las mediciones e ii) incorporar las mejores prácticas incipientes a través de mediciones a largo plazo y participativas de las normas, que abarquen los resultados en materia de igualdad de género y las dimensiones institucionales del cambio en las normas sociales. Con este análisis se apunta a establecer las bases para un planteamiento más eficaz y rico en matices para medir y abordar las normas sociales en favor de la igualdad de género.

INTRODUCTION

The linkages between social norms and gender (in)equality have generated considerable interest within many international development organizations.[1] Relatedly, there has been a proliferation of research initiatives focused on *measuring* social norms on gender. The latter has been driven, in part, by a belief that improved data are required to understand how social norms impact gender equality outcomes; to identify which social norms domains should be prioritized by funders, governments, women's movements and other civil society actors; and to robustly evaluate the impacts of interventions designed to shift social norms in more equitable directions. In this context, there is an urgent need to take stock of current initiatives, to assess their strengths, gaps and limitations and to recommend some improvements. This paper aims to contribute to these timely conversations.

As a point of departure, we note the diversity of academic approaches to, and literatures on, social norms in development.[2] We also observe the vast range of international development programming oriented to norm change.[3] In this paper, we have deliberatively decided not to provide our own, bespoke definition of the concept of social norms or to select between definitions being used by others. Rather, we attend to the different ways in which norms have been defined and measured across organizations, initiatives and studies. Our focus is on influential measures of norms currently used by major international development organizations as part of their efforts to improve gender equality. Given the extensive, decades-long critiques of the individually focused nature of some norms-based approaches to social change,[4] we are especially interested in efforts to measure norms that go beyond individual beliefs or attitudes and that propose supra-individual strategies for change. This interest in the institutional dimension of social norms measures underpins our focus on which institutional levers of norm change are currently prioritized and how improved measures may in turn inform a more targeted use of these levers in the future.

Our paper is also grounded in an understanding that measurement is not a neutral or power-free process and that getting the measures of social norms right is far from a shared priority within development.[5] As discussed in a recent UN-Women's Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on social norms (October 2023), "universal" measures that reflect donor priorities, and that predominantly utilize Global North literatures and frameworks, are widely regarded as highly partial and confining – as a "straightjacket", according to one observer. Robust consideration of what constitutes a good measure requires inclusion of a range of voices, stretching beyond the most influential

1 See accounts in, inter alia, Cookson et al. 2023. This notes "a mess of confusing terminology and inconsistent theories of change, both across development organizations and within them" (p. 16).

2 For useful overviews see, e.g., Mackie et al. 2015; Bicchieri 2017; Cislaghi and Heise 2018; Dempsey et al. 2018; Gupta et al. 2019; Piedalue et al. 2020; Legros and Cislaghi 2020. See also the wider gender and development and post-colonial literature addressing assumptions about cultural backwardness inhibiting development progress, especially as manifest in efforts to empower women via liberating them from culture (e.g., Mohanty 1984 and further discussion in Piedalue et al. 2020).

3 Examples include efforts to increase latrine use, reduce gender-based violence and reduce sexually transmitted disease. Interventions range from small-scale, short-term, community-based project initiatives to large-scale, multi-year programmes involving state actors, corporations and large development donors. See Cookson et al. 2023 for an overview.

4 See especially critiques of the World Values Survey, discussed below.

5 On wider critical debates about the proliferation of measures and rankings within development, including about gender equality, see, e.g., Liebowitz and Zwingel 2014; Buss 2015; Engle Merry 2016; Powell 2016; Gilleri 2020; Cookson et al. 2023.

international organizations, academics and development funders. Hence in this paper we have included some insights about social norms measures gathered from experts, organizations and movements that have worked on social norm change on the ground for many decades and whose measurement priorities offer useful lessons for the future.

Our paper analyses seven key examples of how social norms are being measured in efforts to achieve gender equality. It aims to take stock, identify emerging lessons and assess gaps and limitations that may assist in the production of improved measures. With this goal in mind, section 1 provides an overview of the key examples, unpacking their approach and research design, the findings that emerge from the analyses, their recommendations and their main limitations. Section 2 identifies four cross-cutting shortcomings from these seven examples: (i) inconsistencies in definitions and measures of social norms; (ii) unclear causal pathways, including about the role of tradition and institutional levers in social norm change; (iii) poorly evidenced or conceptually under-justified recommendations, including in relation to the role of legal reform and private sector actors; and (iv) the failure to consistently consider (and measure) the role of collective agency and contentious politics in social norm change.

Lastly, section 3 attempts to distill these lessons into priorities for the future by providing some preliminary insights into what should be measured, why, how and by whom. Here we outline some preliminary components of a future framework for measuring social norms and gender equality. Building on the analysis in section 2, and complementing it with insights from consultation in the UN-Women EGM on social norms, we identify two clusters of priorities: (i) Improving the internal consistency of measures; and (ii) Incorporating emerging best practices via the development of long-term, participatory norms measures that encompass gender equality outcomes and comprehensively address institutional dimensions of social norm change, going beyond law reform to also consider care infrastructure. We also recommend measuring the role of collective action and contentious politics in norm change and critically examining the role of private sector actors in harmful gender norms.

1.

SOCIAL NORMS MEASURES: SOME LEADING EXAMPLES

In this section, we examine seven initiatives focused on measuring social norms related to gender, identifying their technical (e.g., methodology, data sources) and conceptual (e.g., definition of social norms, theory of change) dimensions. We also summarize key findings of the measures, their recommended intervention priorities and their key limitations. The chosen examples are:

- the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) (2023) – the fifth wave of one of the best-known efforts to measure "gender-based discrimination in social institutions" at a global level, with a strong focus on the law;
- the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) (2023) – the second iteration of an indicator that captures "biased gender social norms" at the global level using secondary data from the World Values Survey (WVS);[6]
- the World Bank Reshaping Norms about Gender report (2022a) – a study that attempts to explain why female labour force participation rates in South Asia remain low, using the WVS and the Facebook 2020 Survey on Gender Equality at Home[7] to examine gender norms in the region;
- the UN-Women Gender Equality Attitudes Survey (2020) – the second iteration of a survey covering 20 countries, developed in partnership with several private actors. The study collects primary data across areas such as education, health, access to physical property and control over personal finances;
- the Investing in Women Social Norms, Attitudes and Practices (SNAP) Survey (2022) – the third wave of this survey evaluates gender norms among urban millennials in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam, focusing on four main areas: childcare and housework, breadwinning and earning family income, job segregation and leadership at work;
- the UN-Women (Nepal) Measuring Social Norm Change through Storytelling initiative (2021) – a study using mass storytelling as a mechanism for measuring social norm change and identifying what contributed to this process; and
- the Global Early Adolescent Study and Growing Up GREAT! (GEAS/GUG!) programme (2022) – a multilevel intervention for adolescents, their parents/caregivers and other influential community members (e.g., teachers) in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. The initiative focuses on identifying the social norms that underlie and drive health behaviours and supporting the diffusion of new ideas that will encourage norm change.

The examples were selected following a review of existing measures. We compiled a long list of key development initiatives measuring norms as part of gender equality efforts, utilizing internet searches, citations from existing studies of social norms and gender in development, and consultation with colleagues working in the field. The final list was agreed with UN-Women with the aim to strike a balance between covering the most influential examples and including different regions and approaches to norms.

6 WVS 2020.
7 Cookson et al. 2020.

We summarize these examples in Table 1, while Annexes 1 and 2 provide a detailed overview of, respectively, key methodological and conceptual features and key recommendations. As shown in these tables, the examples range across global surveys (e.g., OECD's SIGI or UNDP's GSNI), regional measures (e.g., the World Bank's work on gender norms in South Asia or the SNAP survey) and single-country studies (e.g., UN-Women's storytelling initiative in Nepal or the GUG! research in the Democratic Republic of Congo). Some examples involve repeated rounds of research over decades; others measure social norm change over a shorter time frame or provide a snapshot across multiple countries. The seven examples also vary in thematic scope. Some encompass a wide range of gender-related topics, including political participation, economic empowerment and education (e.g., UN-Women's Gender Equality Attitudes Survey), while others concentrate on specific areas such as health (e.g., the GEAS/GUG!). Likewise, different sources of data are utilized. Some studies (e.g., from the World Bank and UNDP) use existing surveys (e.g., the World Values Survey), but most produce their own data. Furthermore, while much of the evidence gathered is quantitative, some organizations are making efforts to capture other types of information, with the UN-Women's storytelling initiative in Nepal being the most notable example. Lastly, we have also chosen as one of our examples a combination of a survey (GEAS) with an intervention evaluation (GUG!). While this example does not follow the same structure as the other measures,[8] there is value in including it as an important health-related case study. Overall, we believe that the diversity of the seven examples highlights the richness of the approaches used to measure social norms about gender while also enabling us to identify common gaps.

TABLE 1

Summary of the examples' key dimensions

	Type of data and sources	Method	Explicit definition of social norms?	Explicit theory of change?	Dimensions included in the measurement	Level of inquiry	Number of waves to date
Global – standalone							
Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) (2023)	Quantitative – SIGI 2023 Legal Survey and secondary sources	Aggregation – 16 indicators, 4 dimensions and a SIGI score	Yes	Yes	Legislation, attitudes and practices	Institutional (law); individual (attitudes and practice)	5 (2009, 2012, 2014, 2019, 2023)
Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) (2023)	Quantitative – secondary source (WVS)	Aggregation – 7 indicators, 4 dimensions and 2 GSNI scores	Yes	Yes (but levers of change not developed as a direct result of this study)	Beliefs and attitudes	Individual	2 (2019 and 2023)
Gender Equality Attitudes Survey (2020)	Quantitative – primary	Likert scales	No	No	Attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of discrimination	Individual	2 (a pilot study in 2018 and 2020)

8 The SNAP 2022 example includes a survey and an intervention, although Investing in Women was involved to some extent in both components.

Continued

	Type of data and sources	Method	Explicit definition of social norms?	Explicit theory of change?	Dimensions included in the measurement	Level of inquiry	Number of waves to date
Regional – standalone							
Social Norms, Attitudes and Practices (SNAP) 2022 Survey – Indonesia, the Philippines, and Viet Nam	Quantitative – primary	Regression and segmentation analyses	Yes	Yes	Personal attitudes, societal norms (others think / I see others), personal behaviours	Individual and social	3 (2018, 2020 and 2022)
Reshaping Norms about Gender (2022) – South Asia	Quantitative – secondary sources (WVS and Facebook 2020 Survey on Gender Equality at Home)	Regression analysis	Yes	Yes	Personal attitudes and social expectations	Individual and social	N/A
Local/national – integrated with programme							
Measuring Social Norm Change through Storytelling (2021) – Nepal	Qualitative – primary	Mass storytelling – sensemaking	Yes	Yes	Individual and social beliefs, experiences and expectations	Individual and social	1 (2 more planned)
Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS) and Growing Up GREAT! (GUG!) programme (2022) – Democratic Republic of Congo	Quantitative and qualitative – primary	Observational cohort research and a longitudinal quasi-experimental study with an intervention and a control arm	Yes	Yes	Individual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and experiences; some vignettes about social expectations	Individual and social	5

1.1

OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index Global Report: Gender Equality in Times of Crisis (2023)

> "Discrimination in social institutions – the established set of formal and/or informal laws, norms and practices that govern behaviour in society – is at the heart of inequalities and inequities that women face (...) Focusing on social institutions and strengthening efforts to transform discriminatory social norms are therefore paramount to achieving gender equality, as it often constitutes the crucial bottleneck that prevents change from happening."[9]

Approach and study design

Unlike previous attempts to quantify gender inequalities, such as UNDP's Gender-Related Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure or the World Economic Forum's Gender Inequality Index, the SIGI distinguishes itself as one of the first systematic efforts to shift the focus away from measuring outcomes towards investigating "root causes".[10] Underpinning the index is the claim that gender inequalities are the consequence of discriminatory social norms – understood as "the established set of formal and/or informal laws, norms and practices that govern behaviour in society".[11] These norms "dictate what women and men are allowed to do, what they are expected to do and what they do". Although this report does not delve more deeply into theoretical and conceptual foundations, its glossary references the definition of social norms used by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF),[12] according to which social norms are:

> "[the] informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable and appropriate actions within a given group or community, thus guiding human behaviour. They consist of what we do, what we believe others do, and what we believe others approve of and expect us to do. Social norms are therefore situated at the interplay between behaviour, beliefs and expectations."

With this approach in mind, the OECD attempts to provide a composite index that can account for the level of gender-based discrimination in social institutions by examining "the gaps that legislation, attitudes and practices create between women and men in terms of rights, justice and empowerment opportunities"[13] in 180 countries. To do this, it focuses on four dimensions of inequality: discrimination in the family, restricted physical integrity, restricted access to productive and financial resources and restricted civil liberties. In turn, each dimension has four indicators (see Table 2).

In theory, every indicator should be measured via three variables: one focused on measuring the level of discrimination in formal and informal laws (legal variables), one quantifying the level of discrimination in social norms (attitudinal variables) and one measuring the extent of gender disparity (outcome or practice variables). However, due to limited data availability, important gaps exist between the conceptual framework and the actual calculation of the SIGI. For instance, in its 2023 edition data are available for only 25 of the 48 variables that constitute the SIGI. Consequently, most indicators rely on information from a single variable (see Table 2).

Furthermore, as can be clearly seen in Table 2, the majority of the variables used to construct the 2023 SIGI (15 out of 25) are legal in nature. Attitudes (and/or norms, as the terms are used interchangeably) only play a very minor role in the calculation of the index. Evidence of this is the fact that there is only one "attitudinal variable" (i.e., percentage of women aged 15 to 49 years

9 OECD 2023.
10 Branisa et al. 2014.
11 OECD 2023
12 UNICEF 2021, p. 1.
13 OECD 2023.

who consider a husband to be justified in hitting or beating his wife). Hence, while the law is an important component of the conceptualization of the indicator, it becomes even more significant in its empirical version. Consequently, there is a slippage between what the indicator claims to be measuring (social institutions) and what the indicator actually measures (the law). The prominent role played by the law in the index is not explicitly communicated to its users; reaching this conclusion requires a review of the methodology section. However it is recognized to some extent by those who produce the index: The instrument's designers consider that it is precisely in the collection of legal data where "[t]he SIGI's main value-added lies".[14]

TABLE 2
SIGI's dimensions, indicators and variables

Dimension	Indicators	Variables
Discrimination in the family	Child marriage	Laws on marriage; prevalence of girl child marriage
	Household responsibilities	Laws on household responsibilities
	Divorce	Laws on divorce
	Inheritance	Laws on inheritance
Restricted physical integrity	Violence against women	Laws on violence against women; attitudes justifying intimate-partner violence; lifetime intimate-partner violence
	Female genital mutilation (FGM)	Laws protecting girls and women from FGM
	Missing women	Missing women: measurement whether the population has a preference for sons over daughters
	Reproductive autonomy	Laws on women's right to safe and legal abortion; prevalence of unmet family planning needs
Restricted access to productive and financial resources	Access to land assets	Laws on access to land assets
	Access to non-land assets	Laws on access to non-land assets
	Access to financial services	Gender-based discrimination in the legal framework on financial assets and services; gender gap in bank account ownership
	Workplace rights	Laws on workplace rights; gender gap in management positions (SDG Indicator 5.2.2)
Restricted civil liberties	Citizenship rights	Laws on citizenship rights
	Freedom of movement	Laws on freedom of movement; gender gap in safety feeling
	Political voice	Laws on political voice; gender gap in political representation
	Access to justice	Laws on access to justice; gender gap in population's confidence in the judicial system and courts

Source: Based on OECD 2023.

14 Ferrant et al., p. 23.

For its last edition, information about each country's legal framework was gathered through the SIGI Legal Survey 2023, a questionnaire completed by local lawyers and legal experts, checked by the OECD gender team and validated by governments. Information across countries is standardized through a coding manual with a five-level classification that considers formal and informal laws and their coverage (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
SIGI Legal Survey scoring methodology

The legal framework provides women with the same rights as men, with no exceptions, and applies to all groups of women. There are no customary, religious or traditional practices or laws that discriminate against women.	0
The legal framework provides women with the same rights as men, with no exceptions, and applies to all groups of women. However, some customary, religious or traditional practices or laws do discriminate against women.	25
The legal framework provides women with the same rights as men. However, it foresees exceptions or does not apply to all groups of women.	50
The legal framework restricts some women's rights.	75
The legal framework fully discriminates against women's rights.	100

Source: OECD 2023.

Key results

The 2023 report concludes that an increasing number of countries have tackled discriminatory social institutions, particularly through legal reforms focused on protecting women's rights and granting them equal opportunities. Nonetheless, it also highlights that 40 per cent of women and girls still live in countries with high or very high gender-based discrimination embedded in social institutions. Moreover, it emphasizes that "discrimination in the family remains the most challenging dimension of the SIGI framework" and that deep-rooted unequal power relations within the household translate into an unequal distribution of unpaid care work, access to inheritance and practices such as early or forced marriage.

Key recommendations

The main recommendation is to "reform and amend laws to guarantee equal rights and opportunities, and support existing legislation with a comprehensive policy framework". Further, to "transform discriminatory social norms into gender-equitable ones," the report recommends "mobilis(ing) community leaders and gatekeepers" and using local celebrities and influencers.[15]

15 OECD 2023.

Key limitations

While the 2023 edition of the SIGI offers significant improvements when compared with previous iterations,[16] there are also important limitations to consider. In particular, the index measures social institutions in a very law-centric way. Indeed, given the variables actually included in the 2023 version, the focus on laws is even more extreme in practice than the approach laid out in the report would suggest. The aim to provide data on gender bias in *social institutions* narrows considerably to measure bias in state *legal frameworks*. As we outline in section 2, this narrow focus – shared by some other examples – risks inflating the role of state law as a norm change instrument while missing other key influences (such as social movements). Moreover, customary, religious and traditional laws are only presented as potential sources of discrimination against women but never as possible positive or progressive influences.

In addition to this, it is worth noting that some of the key recommendations that emerge from the 2023 SIGI report are disconnected from the findings.

16 See, for instance, Liebowitz and Zwingel 2014, who note that early versions of the index measured gender norms in very narrow and Eurocentric ways, such as prevalence of veiling.

For example, there is no theoretical or conceptual focus on local celebrities and influencers as key actors in social norm change, and no data are collected on them. Yet, as noted above, they are singled out in the recommendations.

Key takeaways

- The SIGI aims to provide information on "gender-based discrimination in social institutions" as a way to understand and shift discriminatory social norms.
- There is little interest in data on individual attitudes to gender or people's perceptions of social norms about gender.
- The measure is skewed towards data on state law, and its recommendations focus heavily on state law reform as key to norm change. Other institutional dimensions of unequal social norms related to gender are sidelined.
- Several key recommendations appear poorly connected to the index and the findings.

1.2
UNDP's Gender Social Norms Index (2023)

> "Biased gender social norms — the undervaluation of women's capabilities and rights in society — constrain women's choices and opportunities by regulating behaviour and setting the boundaries of what women are expected to do and be."[17]

Approach and study design

UNPD launched its Gender Social Norm Index (GSNI) in 2019. The current GSNI remains faithful to Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, a conceptual framework that de-centres economic growth and focuses on the question of what people are able to do and be instead.[18] Biased gender social norms are understood to hinder women's capabilities: they are "a major impediment to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls".[19]

Underpinned by this dual interest in capabilities and norms, the GSNI consists of four dimensions – political, education, economic and physical integrity – and seven indicators, mostly focused on people's opinions (see Table 4). The data are gathered through the World Values Survey (WVS), a well-known secondary source aimed at analysing "people's values, beliefs and norms in a comparative cross-national and over-time perspective".[20] Data for the 2023 GSNI derive from waves 6 (2010-2014) and 7 (2017-2022) of the WVS, which cover 60 and 80 countries respectively.[21] In this survey, respondents are asked to identify in a 5-point scale whether they agree or disagree with a series of given statements. These data are then used to compute the core GSNI, which measures the percentage of people with at least one bias, and an additional indicator (GSNI2), which quantifies the share of the population with at least two biases.

Key findings

Concerning the main findings, the data suggest that gender-biased social norms are pervasive, with 9 in 10 people having at least one bias against women. These biases are prevalent in both women and men and widespread in countries regardless of their Human Development Index level. The report also recognizes that 27 countries show improvements, with an increasing number of people with no biases.

Key recommendations

In terms of next steps, UNDP proposes to implement "a comprehensive framework for transformative change, comprising two key blocks of action"[22] and

17 UNDP 2023, p. 3.
18 Sen 1979a, 1979b; Nussbaum 2000.
19 UNDP 2023, p. 3.
20 WVS 2020.
21 Samples must be representative of the population, and the minimum sample size in most cases is 1,200 interviewees. Questionnaires are translated into all languages that serve as the first language for at least 15 per cent of the population. The main method of data collection is face-to-face interviews at the respondent's place of residence, although additional methods have been employed, including, postal survey, self-administered online survey and telephone interview (WVS n.d.).
22 UNDP 2023, p. 16.

TABLE 4
GSNI dimensions and indicators

Dimension	Indicator (whether people think that)
Political	Women having the same rights as men is essential for democracy
	Men make better political leaders than women do
Educational	University is more important for men than for women
Economic	Men should have more right to a job than women
	Men make better business executives than women do
Physical integrity	Proxy for intimate partner violence (it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife)
	Proxy for reproductive rights (abortion is never justifiable)

Source: UNDP 2023.

six levers of change. The first block aims to shape gender-sensitive policy interventions and institutional reforms through focusing on investment, insurance and innovation. Proposed recommendations include investing in gender-responsive institutions in public administration, strengthening social protection and care systems, regulating gender misinformation and disinformation and addressing hate speech and online violence.

The second block of action addresses the significant role that social context plays in shaping attitudes and behaviours and suggests steering change through education, recognition and representation. Concrete examples touch on correcting gender biases in education materials and curricula and challenging the media representation of women and men; leveraging recognition through legal change and mass media campaigns focused on changing narratives; and increasing women's representation in leadership in both public and private domains.[23]

Key limitations

While the examples given in the report to illustrate the recommendations noted above are linked to gender norms, the overarching theory of change (including the levers of change and the two-pronged approach) was not developed as a direct result of this study but for the 2021/2022 Human Development Report.[24] As a result, the recommendations appear disconnected from the rest of the study. Furthermore, as Wazir (2023) notes, the policies highlighted are hardly "game changers": they have long been part of standard gender and development approaches.[25]

At the same time, while there is an attempt to connect the index with gender unequal outcomes (for instance, through measuring the correlation between the GSNI and the Gender Inequality Index), the analysis fails to specify the concrete mechanisms that connect biased social norms and concrete outcomes. Likewise, there is no discussion of what underpinned change in the countries that registered the largest recent declines in gender bias (Chile, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, the Republic of Korea and Russian Federation).[26] These gaps in analysis potentially diminish the utility of the findings in generating actionable recommendations.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the GSNI is that, while it claims to be measuring gender social norms, it is quantifying individual beliefs, which are not the same thing. Moreover, scholars have repeatedly warned about the shortcoming of using opinion polls

23 UNDP 2023.

24 UNDP 2022.
25 Wazir 2023, p. 8.
26 UNDP 2023, p. 13.

(like the WVS) as proxies for studying norms. Connel and Pearce, for instance, have noted that questions phrased in such a generic and abstract manner are very disconnected from the way in which value-based choices are made in real life and as such provide little information on actual social practices.[27] Likewise, they note that the responses are subject to "social desirability" biases, and that people often answer in ways influenced by what they think is the "right" response (according to their community, or the researcher or the wider political context).[28]

Lastly, it is worth noting some specific critiques of the wording of the statements used in the WVS and how these may themselves reinforce unequal social norms. Statements such as "[w]hen a mother works for pay, the children suffer" assume that working fathers are not confronted with 'work/life' or 'family/work' tensions; individual attitudes about this are not even sought out. Moreover, these statements reflect a nuclear family model that may be radically out of step with how family life and childcare are organized in many parts of the world. The statement itself contributes to the invisibility of other family structures, including extended units and single-mother households.[29]

Key takeaways

- Underpinned by a capabilities and social norms approach, the GSNI attempts to capture how "biased gender social norms (...) constrain women's choices and opportunities by regulating behaviour and setting the boundaries of what women are expected to do and be".
- However, while the GSNI is labelled as a measure of *social norms*, it only covers beliefs or opinions and does not provide insights on outcomes or institutions.
- As in the SIGI case, there is a disconnection between what is measured and the recommendations that emerge in the report. More specifically, the identified levers of change are decoupled from the findings of the study as they do not emerge directly from the analysis of the data gathered.

27 Connel and Pearce 2014.

28 Ibid. For more extensive discussion of the limits of gender role attitude surveys, including those using Likert scales, see inter alia Gibbons et al. 1997 and, more recently, Halimi et al. 2018.

29 Thank you to one of the peer reviewers for pointing out and unpacking this important limitation of the WVS.

1.3

The World Bank's Reshaping Norms: A New Way Forward report (2022)

> "Normative social expectations, more strongly than personal beliefs, exert an influence on gender inequality. That influence is comparable to the level of development (proxied by GDP per capita) and provides strong descriptive evidence that regressive social norms in South Asia are holding back gender equality well beyond what would be expected, given the region's level of development."[30]

Approach and study design

The World Bank has also developed an interest in social norms in recent years.[31] We focused on a 2022 study that attempts to explain why increases in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and female enrolment in education, together with a decrease in fertility – basic determinants of women's engagement in the labour market according to neoclassical economics – have not led to substantial improvements in female labour force participation rates in South Asia. The experts behind this research project – most of whom are economists – argue that outdated and harmful social norms are holding South Asian women back.[32]

30 World Bank 2022a, p. 112.

31 See, e.g., Muñoz Boudet et al. 2013. This was based on 20 countries and around 500 focus group discussions involving 4,000 people. See also Connell and Pearce 2014, p. 45 for a methodological critique.

32 World Bank 2022a.

Compared with the studies discussed above, the World Bank's report offers the most thorough explanation of the theory that connects change in existing social norms with actual outcomes in the area of gender equality. Drawing from the work of Cristina Bicchieri on the one hand, and Beniamino Cislaghi and Lori Heise on the other, they assert that "social norms are informal rules of behavior that dictate what is acceptable or appropriate to do in a given situation within a given social context".[33] Social norms "reflect individuals' expectations of what they think their reference group believes is acceptable or appropriate".[34] Furthermore, unlike the previous examples, which often conflated social norms with beliefs and attitudes, the Bank's report explains at some length the differences between these concepts, claiming that "the motivating factor with attitudes and beliefs is internal"[35] whereas with social norms the influence is external in nature. Concretely, social norms are made up of two components (see Table 5): perceptions about how frequent a certain behaviour is in a given reference group; and perceptions about how a member of this group ought to behave. Assuming that personal attitudes are proxy for social expectations "may potentially lead to an underestimation of the strength of social norms and their link with gender inequality",[36] because the "external" pressure may matter more for an individual's behaviour than their own personal beliefs.

TABLE 5
Differences between non-social and social beliefs

	Non-social beliefs	Social beliefs/expectations
Non-normative beliefs	**Factual beliefs**	**Empirical expectations**
Definition	*Beliefs about reality (excluding beliefs about people's behaviour and thought)*	*Beliefs about what people (in a reference group) do*
Example	An older girl will not find a good husband.	All my neighbors marry off their daughters as soon as they reach puberty
Normative beliefs	**Personal normative beliefs**	**Normative expectations**
Definition	*Beliefs about what one should do*	*Beliefs about what other people (in a reference group) think one should do*
Example	I should marry off my daughter as soon as she reached puberty.	My neighbours think that one should marry off one's daughter as soon as she reaches puberty.

Source: Bicchieri 2012.

The Bank's social norms analysis has two distinct parts, building on two different data sources (see Table 6). First, the report analyses personal beliefs and attitudes in the region based on successive waves of the WVS and the data gathered for Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Then it takes an additional step in analysing social norms, utilizing a survey conducted by Facebook[37] in partnership with CARE, Ladysmith, the World Bank and UNICEF. The most innovative aspect

33 Ibid., p. 112.
34 Ibid., p. xviii.
35 Ibid., p. 120.
36 Ibid., p. 112.
37 Facebook is not the only private actor involved in the comparative measurement of norms and attitudes; there is a long history of this. One of the first scales designed to measure culture across countries was done by an IBM employee, Geert Hofstede, interested in workers' attitudes in different countries where IBM subsidiaries were based. More recently, the UN-Women's Gender Equality Attitude Study (discussed in section 1.4) was conducted in partnership with AT&T, Johnson and Johnson, Kantar, Procter & Gamble and Unilever.

of this survey is that, in addition to covering personal beliefs, it also provides information about social ones (e.g., what we think others think). The 2020 Facebook Survey on Gender Equality at Home survey was rolled out through Facebook's online platform, receiving over 461,000 responses from 126 countries, islands and territories. The questionnaire was developed by economists and gender experts from the World Bank, UN-Women, Equal Measures 2030 and Ladysmith. Its 2020 version included 75 questions on gender norms, unpaid care and decision-making and resource allocation in the household, among others.

TABLE 6

Data sources used in the World Bank's "Reshaping Norms" study

Type of beliefs	Source	Area	Statements/questions
Personal attitudes	World Values Survey	Political participation	Men make better political leaders
		Education	University education is more important for boys than for girls
		Employment	When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women
		Intrahousehold power relationships	It is a problem if women have more income than their husbands
Personal attitudes and social expectations	Facebook (2020) Survey on Gender Equality at Home	Equal opportunity	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: *"Men and women should have equal opportunities (e.g., in education, jobs, household decision-making)"*?
			Out of 10 of your neighbours, how many do you think believe that men and women should have equal opportunities (e.g., in education, jobs, household decision-making)?
		Female homemaker	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: *"Woman's most important role is to take care of her home and children"*?
			Out of 10 of your neighbours, how many do you think believe that a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and children?
		Male breadwinner	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: *"Household expenses are the responsibility of the man, even if his wife can help him"*?
			Out of 10 of your neighbours, how many do you think believe that household expenses are the responsibility of the man, even if his wife can help him?
		Time use	On a typical day, how many hours per day do you spend working for pay (work for pay can be any kind of business, farming, or other activity to generate income)?
			On a typical day, how many hours per day do you spend on household chores?

Source: Based on World Bank 2022a.

Key findings

The report concludes that South Asian attitudes toward gender are on average more conservative than in other regions and that they have become more conservative over time. Furthermore, attitudes towards gender "are strongly connected to women's participation in economic activities" with a bi-directional influence likely.[38] Overall, it concludes that "there seems to be a link between these prevalent conservative views around women's role in the labor force and the low economic participation of women in the region".[39]

The Facebook survey allows additional comparison between personal and social beliefs. It shows that in all regions in the world, including South Asia, social expectations of gender roles are more conservative than individual's personal beliefs: that is, people tend to believe that their own views are more progressive than those surrounding them. This gap, known as "pluralistic ignorance", has relevant policy implications as there is a problem of coordination insofar as individuals often act against their own beliefs and values because they think they are conforming to misperceived social norms.[40] Lastly, the report uses regression analysis to connect data on gender outcomes, economic development and normative beliefs about the gender division of labour within the household.[41]

The report concludes that normative beliefs explain an important part of the gender gaps in economic participation (conditional on the level of GDP per capita), and that social normative expectations have greater explanatory power over these gaps than personal beliefs. For the specific case of South Asia, it suggests that "[c]losing the gap between the social expectations of men as breadwinners (65 percent) and the actual personal beliefs (47 percent) (...) would be associated with an increase of 14 percentage points in female labor force participation and a reduction of about an hour of female labor spend (sic) on household chores".[42]

Key recommendations

In terms of recommendations, the report asserts that policies must be norm-sensitive to succeed, and it then identifies possible pathways for changing norm-conforming behaviours. A first group of suggested strategies revolve around shifting incentives, including the use of economic tools (such as transfers, subsidies and access to financial instruments) as well as legal instruments (e.g., sanctions). A second group of strategies aim to address information gaps to correct misperceptions about what others do or think about a norm and to increase the exposure of success stories involving "norm-deviants".[43]

Key limitations

One of the most interesting elements of this study is the use of data from the Facebook survey. While this survey reached 14,158 individuals in South Asia, it is worth noting that in 2017, only 30 per cent of the population had access to the internet and that this segment of the population tends to be younger, more urban and better educated. Thus, this partial coverage should be factored into any assessment of the study's generalizability.[44] Likewise, the survey was inconsistently administered to respondents: although it had 75 questions in total, each respondent saw a maximum of 30 each to avoid "survey fatigue".

In addition to the limitations in the data, it is worth noting some issues related to the methodology. More concretely, many of the main findings of this report are sustained merely by regression analyses. These techniques, while widely used in these types of studies (see, for example, the SNAP example below), have important limitations. In particular, regression models cannot prove by themselves a causal relationship. These limitations are not explicitly discussed in the World Bank report itself.

Lastly, and similarly to the examples discussed above, several of the recommendations are poorly connected

38 World Bank 2022a, p. 116.
39 Ibid., p. 117
40 Ibid.
41 This section of the report is based on a World Bank paper (Bussolo and Warrinnier forthcoming) that should have been published in 2022, but that we have so far been unable to locate.
42 World Bank 2022a, p. 126.
43 Ibid.
44 Cookson et al. 2020.

with the findings that emerge from the survey data. In particular, the idea of shifting (economic) incentives as a strategy to change norm-conforming behaviours is introduced for the first time in the last section of the report.

Key takeaways

- The World Bank study offers a more comprehensive definition of social norms, supported by theory and reflected in the methodology of the report.
- Building on data from a Facebook survey, it is able to identify gaps between individual beliefs (what I think) and social ones (what I think others think).
- Nonetheless, the analysis has important limitations in terms of data representativeness (as internet users represent a small segment of the population that is on average younger, more urban and better educated) and the methodology used (e.g., regression analysis), which are not acknowledged or discussed.
- Some recommendations (e.g., on shifting economic incentives) are disconnected from the data analysis.

1.4
UN-Women's Gender Equality Attitude Study (2020)

> "Gender stereotyping has been identified by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as a persistent hidden barrier to gender equality and the empowerment of women. Discriminatory social norms are equally threatening to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Furthermore, they have a negative impact on the social, economic and sustainable development of countries around the world."[45]

45 UN-Women 2022, p. 3.

Approach and study design

Since its establishment, UN-Women has consistently recognized "discriminatory social norms and attitudes as an underlying condition that continues to perpetuate historical and structural patterns of gender inequality".[46] Engagement with discriminatory norms can be traced as an institutional priority throughout strategic plans, with the most recent iteration (2022–2025) elevating attention to norms to be a cross-cutting domain of change.[47] The Gender Equality Attitude Study falls within the scope of this thematic priority.

The 2020 study covers 20 countries in different regions and with different income levels. Among these, eight were also surveyed in 2018 and are therefore used to assess change over time.[48] The thematic scope of the study is wide, covering 14 areas that include: education, health, access to physical property and control over personal finances, marriage and family life, domestic violence, work and employment, dress and appearance and barriers to safety at home and in public spaces.

The questionnaire encompasses different types of items (see Table 7). First, interviewees are asked to respond, using a 11-point scale, to questions such as "In general, how easy it is for [most women/most men/you] to get quality education in your country?" or "In general, how would you rate the quality of basic health care for [most women/most men/you] in your country?" Then, respondents use a 5-point agreement scale (strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, strongly disagree) to assess a series of claims related to gender stereotypes and roles in society (e.g., "when a mother works for pay, the children suffer"). Last, interviewees apply a 5-point importance scale

46 Ibid., p. 5.
47 UN-Women 2021a.
48 A pilot study in 2018 included 10 countries: Colombia, India, Japan, Kenya, Nigeria, the Philippines, Sweden, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and the United States of America. The second iteration of the study in 2020 expanded its reach to include 10 additional countries: Austria, Brazil, Denmark, France, Mexico, Poland, Senegal, South Africa, Spain and Viet Nam. However, data from the Philippines and the United Arab Emirates were not used for comparison due to changes in methodology related to COVID-19 restrictions during fieldwork.

TABLE 7
Differences between non-social and social beliefs

Dimension	Example	Scoring system
Screener	Age, gender and urbanicity	N/A
Access + control	In general, how easy it is for [most women/most men/you] to get quality education in your country?	11-point scale
Gender stereotypes	When a mother works for pay, the children suffer	5-point agreement scale
Roles in society	In a time of shortage of food, priority should be given to men	5-point agreement scale
Future ideals	More opportunities for women in politics	5-point importance scale
Demographics	Household income, education and children in household	N/A

Source: Based on UN-Women 2021b.

(not at all important, somewhat unimportant, no opinion, somewhat important, completely important) to a group of future ideals, such as "more opportunities for women in politics".

Key findings

The findings of the attitude study suggest that, overall, men do not feel as strongly about the significance of gender equality as women do: 74 per cent of the women interviewed believe that more respect for women's rights is "completely important" for the future of their country, while only 60 per cent of men agreed. This trend is particularly alarming in younger generations: While young women (16-19) are strong advocates for change, young men are lagging. Interestingly, especially given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study also reveals that in times of hardship, hard-won gains in the area of gender equality are threatened. For instance, one quarter of the respondents considered that "in times of food shortages, priority should be given to men" whereas almost a third (31 per cent) believed that "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women".[49]

Key limitations

Notably, while the study claims to provide "localized and insightful guidance to decision-makers in their efforts to effectively address harmful gender stereotypes and the threats they pose to their societies",[50] the findings are presented as a series of numbers capable of speaking for themselves without a narrative that connects them. The study does not provide a concrete definition of social norms, an explicit theory of change or any further explanation on how shifting social norms will ultimately contribute to change or improve gender outcomes. Likewise, it is not possible to identify concrete recommendations emerging from this study.

In addition to these important limitations, it is worth noting that the lack of conceptual clarity also occurs in the methodology. By looking at the examples in Table 7, it is possible to conclude that the study clusters together beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of discrimination. In addition, the phrasing of the questions is in many cases extremely broad (e.g., "more respect for women's rights in all areas") or too abstract (e.g., "in general, how much control do [most women/most men/you] in your country have over their lives?") to yield meaningful results for further analysis. Control over one's life includes control over personal finances, ease of buying property and influence over the decision about who to marry, but it is unclear whether, and how, this control is related to social norms about money, property or relationships.

49 UN-Women 2022.

50 Ibid., p. 6.

Key takeaways

- The UN-Women's Gender Equality Attitudes Study provides information about individual beliefs, values and perceptions of discrimination, offering a relatively wider scope than some of the examples discussed above.
- However, these elements are clustered together, limiting the value of the findings.
- The study presents data without tools for understanding them (e.g., through definitions and a theory of change).
- There are no specified recommendations.

1.5

Investing in Women's Gender Equality Matters: Social Norms, Attitudes and Practices (SNAP) survey of urban millennials in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam (2022)

> "There were rarely links found between what 'I think' leading to what 'I do'. The strongest links to what 'I do' were what 'Others do'. What was seen in the media was also a strong influencer on what 'I do'. If urban millennials in Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam are going to embrace gender equality, they will need to see others – from their social circles and in the media – embracing gender equality too."[51]

Approach and study design

In November 2022, Investing in Women (an initiative of the Australian Government) commissioned YouGov (a British market research and data analytics firm) to conduct an online survey on Social Norms, Attitudes and Practices (SNAP) covering 6,000 urban, millennial women and men (ages 18–40) in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam. Thus, unlike the other examples, the SNAP survey is more explicit and narrower in terms of the target group whose views it claims to expose. The study builds on two previous projects: SNAP 2018 and SNAP 2020.[52]

The conceptual framework that underpins the SNAP survey distinguishes between individual and collective beliefs and behaviours. Nonetheless, it acknowledges that these dimensions are interconnected. Individual beliefs, for instance, together with normative expectations ("what everyone else thinks should be done"), shape empirical expectations ("what I see everyone doing"). According to this perspective, and similarly to the World Bank study, individual behaviour ("what I personally do") is not determined by individual beliefs directly but by normative expectations and empirical expectations, particularly through "sanctions" (social acceptance or criticism of me and my actions) as well as by structural influences such as legislation and media, among others.[53]

With this conceptual framework in place, the SNAP survey aimed at capturing social norms in four main areas: childcare and housework, breadwinning and earning family income, job segregation and leadership at work. The questions attempted to measure the respondents' own individual beliefs and behaviours as well as their perceptions of the beliefs and behaviours of other (see Table 8).

To analyse the survey data, the research team employed both regression and segmentation analyses. The "regression tested for correlations between collective and individual attitudes and behaviours" whereas the segmentation "identified groups with distinct attitudes on gender roles".[54]

51 Investing in Women 2023b, p. 8.

52 Ibid.
53 Investing in Women 2020b.
54 Investing in Women 2020a, p. 4.

TABLE 8

SNAP (2022) SURVEY question wording

Area / social norm	Question wording
Childcare and housework	In your opinion, in the home, who in society generally: (1) is better at housework; (2) is better at looking after children; (3) is better at dependent adult care? *Women, Equally good, Men*
	Would you like your partner to handle more or less childcare? *More, The same amount as now, Less*
	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Childcare should be more of a woman's responsibility than a man's"? *Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree*
Breadwinning and earning family income	In my home, between my partner and I (not including the income we get from other family members) *I earn most of the income for the family, My partner and I earn similar income for the family, My partner earns most of the income for the family*
	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Earning the family income should be more of a man's responsibility than a woman's"? *Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree*
Job segregation	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "There are some work roles better suited to men and some better suited to women"? *Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree*
Leadership at work	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Men are better suited to leadership positions than women"? *Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree*
	If I worked in a leadership position, I would be disapproved of as a man/woman. *Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree*
	Has disapproval ever stopped you from applying for or taking a leadership position at work? *Never, Sometimes, Often, Not applicable*

Source: Based on Investing in Women 2023a.
Note: Questions related to COVID-19 or to the respondent job situations were omitted as they did not relate directly to measuring the four areas/social norms.

Key findings

In terms of findings, the 2022 SNAP survey shows a mixed landscape, exposing more progressive attitudes and behaviours in relation to care and leadership, but less progressive ones related to breadwinning and job segregation. In line with the World Bank's conclusions concerning "pluralistic ignorance" (discussed above), it found that while traditional behaviours are becoming less common (when compared to the previous waves), many urban millennials continue to think that most households are still practicing them. Lastly, the analysis of the data identified that "what you see" matters in influencing change in individual practices.[55] These findings are similar to those of the 2020 SNAP survey.[56]

Interestingly, the 2022 SNAP report was published at the same time as another study that offers a quantitative analysis of the impact of a gender norms campaign carried out by the Investing in Women Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning team. This study

55 Investing in Women 2023b.
56 Investing in Women 2020b.

uses SNAP values as the benchmark and attempts to measure whether targeted campaigns had any positive effects on individual attitudes and behaviours in urban millennials. The report finds that the social and online media campaigns had an overall positive effect, with the strongest impact in job segregation and breadwinning norms, suggesting that general campaigns (i.e., campaigns targeting a broader audience) are more successful in contexts in which there is a relatively large group holding less-progressive views. As a next step, the report concludes that more research is needed to further understand how different target groups might be influenced and how the change in their perceptions should be measured.[57]

Key recommendations

Recommendations in the 2022 report are for the most part linked to the use of media campaigns to produce new narratives on gender. However, the authors recognize that the "[e]ffectiveness of progressive media messages in changing behaviour varies by country"[58] and argue that the findings from the study can contribute to fine-tuning the messaging and the target audiences. For instance, in the area of caregiving, the SNAP survey found that social pressure, including through media, could encourage more men to adopt more equal caregiving arrangements in Indonesia and the Philippines, but this channel is not as effective in Viet Nam. In this scenario, media campaigns encouraging women to be more vocal in pushing for a more equal distribution of unpaid care work might be most successful.

Key limitations

The full questionnaires are not available to the public, and our requests for access were unsuccessful.[59] Examination of the 2022 annexes raises some initial concerns in terms of the inconsistencies between the information collected and the recommendations. As it is possible to see in Table 8 above, From the available questions (in table 8 above), it is unclear how the social components of the norms (what others think and do) were measured as the majority of the questions focus on personal attitudes. As a result, it is not clear from reviewing the reports or the detailed annexes how conclusions about the power of media campaigns and their potential in each case were reached.

The 2020 Survey's detailed annexes also expose some interesting discrepancies. For instance, according to Annex 5, questions on childcare and housework appear to focus on who the respondent believes in general *prefers* to take on this type of task. Annex 4 of the same methodological document, in which the wording of the 2018 and 2020 questionnaire is compared in detail, suggests that questions on child and adult care are focused on who the respondent thinks is *better* at the task.[60] Without further information on the questionnaires that were used in the subsequent SNAP surveys, it is not possible to tell what dimensions of gender norms the questions are designed to address.

In addition, regression plays a very important role in the study. As noted above in the World Bank example, regression as a methodology has important limitations, as correlation does not necessarily mean there is a causal relation. In addition, omitted variables may affect outcomes in unknown ways. Nonetheless, unlike the World Bank case, it is worth noting that the SNAP report is explicit about these particular limitations.

Key takeaways

- The SNAP survey focuses on the respondents' own individual beliefs and behaviours, as well as their perceptions of the beliefs and behaviours of others in four main areas: childcare and housework, breadwinning and earning family income, job segregation and leadership at work.
- The study is explicit about its scope (i.e., urban millennials in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam) and the limitations of its methodology (i.e., regression analysis).

57 Investing in Women, Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) team 2023.

58 Investing in Women 2023b, p. 31.

59 We emailed the Investing in Women team in October 2023 requesting the detailed annexes for the 2022 report and the questionnaires used. While the team kindly shared a link with the former, we did not receive any response concerning the questionnaires.

60 Investing in Women 2020a.

- The recommendations focus mostly on the use of media campaigns to support the development of new narratives on gender. Notably, these do not follow a one-size-fits-all logic and recognize that the potential of possible interventions varies from country to country.
- Nonetheless, some of the conclusions and findings cannot be derived directly from the available questionnaires. In particular, it is unclear how the social components of the norms (what others think and do) were measured for most norms.

1.6

UN-Women Nepal's Measuring Social Norm Change through Storytelling initiative (2021)

> "In Nepal, human development outcomes continue to be hampered by gender, caste, ethnic, social and geographical inequalities and exclusion. Gender equality and women's empowerment in turn are intimately linked to social norms, behaviours and practices (...) Specific to Nepal, there is evidence to demonstrate that women and other excluded groups continue to be subjected to structural challenges in exercising their rights as equal citizens. Structural discrimination emanating from socio-cultural traditions, norms and practices continue to be a root cause of exclusion."[61]

Approach and study design

In June 2021, UN-Women Nepal and the Government of Finland launched a five-year research project to improve understanding of pathways of social norm change that can contribute to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. In this context, Gender and Work, with the support of the Story Kitchen team, conducted a baseline study using an innovative methodology that has storytelling as a key component.[62]

The study follows Mackie et al's (2015) approach to gender social norms, which frames them as underpinning "those forms of institutionalised behaviours that are defined by gender roles and relations and 'which reflect an entire community's beliefs and actions'".[63] Social norms are understood to be both built and perpetuated by social expectations, which tend to be embedded but can still be shifted through appropriate interventions. According to the Gender at Work analytical framework (see Figure 1), pathways to social norm change can be identified and mapped along two continuums: one that focuses on the informal or formal nature of the institutions that shape behaviours and relations, and another that connects interior and exterior capabilities of both individuals and social groups.

Underpinned by this analytical framework, the methodology centres on mass storytelling as an appropriate mechanism for measuring social norm change. Individuals were invited to tell stories about significant changes (either positive or negative) in traditional practices, beliefs and social norms affecting women and girls in their communities that they have experienced in the last five years.[64] As a second step, storytellers were encouraged to "signify" their own stories, linking them with emotions, behaviours and shifts in power relations.

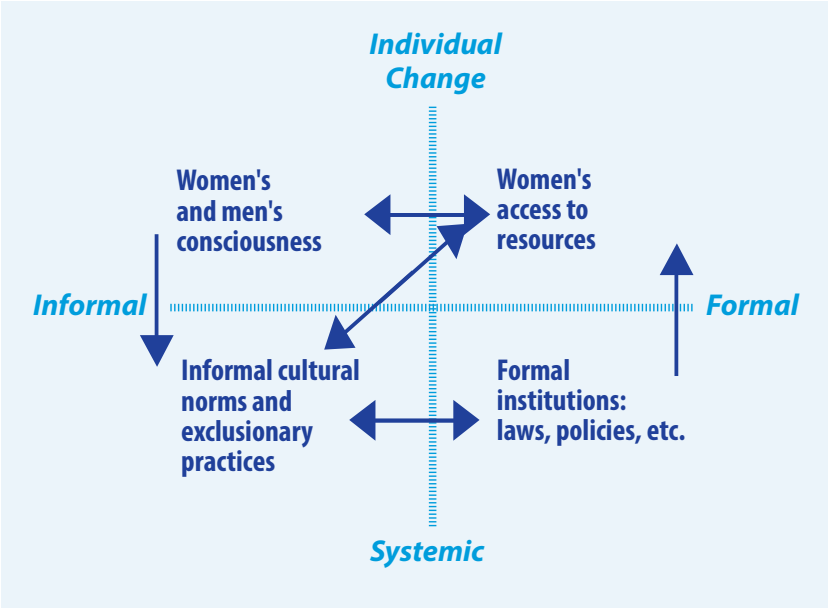
61 UN-Women 2023., p. 2.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., p. 5.

64 Over 1,000 stories were collected across five districts in four provinces of Nepal, with storytellers representing a wide range of social and ethnic groups. Women made up 85 per cent of the storytellers. Stories were analysed through a survey instrument called SenseMaker that "combines the interpretive depth of qualitative methods alongside the statistical power of aggregated data" (UN-Women 2023, p. 5). Research rigour was further enhanced by the triangulation of data (stories, researchers and perspectives), including some collective moments of "sense making" at community, district and national levels. Likewise, the process of data collection and analysis followed a strong commitment to a feminist ethic of research. For example, researchers ensured participants' protection, including through conducting the interviews in environments that were physically safe and providing referral pathways to counselling and support services for those who had faced traumatic experiences (UN-Women 2023).

FIGURE 1
Gender at Work Framework



Source: UN-Women 2023.
Note: The arrows represent potential relationships between areas of change.

As the report notes, this study departs significantly from traditional methods of evaluating social norm change (including the examples discussed above), which often rely on quantitative indicators. Quantitative analyses can be limited in assessing changes that are not immediately "visible". On the other hand, in-depth case studies or other qualitative approaches may lack sufficient population coverage to make broad claims about social norm change. The mass storytelling methodology is proposed as a way to bridge these gaps. However, it is important to acknowledge that this approach, while valuable, also has its trade-offs and limitations. For example, it takes an open-ended approach, which "sacrificed a more focussed and narrow exploration of specific social norms in any given context".[65]

Key findings

Findings emerged about a series of social norms on menstrual isolation, caste-based discrimination, child marriage, witchcraft superstition, disability discrimination, domestic violence and dowry. While all these harmful practices emerged as relatively common, the mass storytelling method allowed researchers to ascertain whether they were more prevalent in certain regions or social and ethnic groups. For instance, the research exposed that despite being illegal, menstrual isolation is a widespread practice in Nepal and particularly prevalent in the provinces of Karnali and Sudurpashchim.

Key recommendations

The study also took a key additional step to try and identify levers of change. Importantly, these varied depending on the practice at issue. For example, stories revealed that awareness-raising campaigns led to some positive shifts in the area of menstrual isolation and child marriage, while education, and the school as an institution, supported progressive changes in caste-base discrimination and witchcraft superstition.

Key limitations

Despite the many interesting features of the UN-Women storytelling initiative, it is also important to recognize some of its limitations. First, while

65 UN-Women 2023, p. 51.

the Gender at Work theoretical framework that underpins this initiative identifies "interrelated clusters of changes that need to be made" and draws potential relationships across them (see Figure 1), there is limited reflection on the nature of these relationships and an insufficient assessment of their strength. These dimensions only emerge later, at the implementation stage, but at that point the questions centre around *what* levers of change work for changing a given norm rather than engaging in an exploration of *why* they work.

Additionally, while the active participation of the storytellers in the analysis of their own experiences is an important step forward in subverting traditional power imbalances in knowledge production processes, the theoretical framework and theory of change (Figure 1) was externally developed.

Likewise, while the study makes substantial improvements in drilling down into the specific ways in which different social norms on gender manifest (and how they change), at times it fails to properly distinguish practices from norms. This is most prominent in the case of domestic violence (which is described as both a harmful norm and a harmful practice influenced by norms). This conflation can be problematic insofar as it can complicate the process of selecting which policy interventions to prioritize.

Key takeaways

- Unlike most existing studies of gender norms, the UN-Women storytelling initiative offers a novel methodology that draws on qualitative data and allows women to make sense of their own experiences and use these to identify levers of change. As a result, the findings are much more nuanced and the recommendations more targeted.
- Nonetheless, there are limitations in the participatory approach. Most notably, the theory of change was developed outside of the study.
- The study sometimes conflates practices and norms, leading to a slippage that complicates the prioritization of potential interventions.

1.7

The Global Early Adolescent Study and the Growing Up GREAT! Wave 5 Report (2022)

> "Gender-transformative interventions can effectively shift gender inequitable attitudes with sustained gains over time, but these shifts are targeted and cannot challenge the multitudes of unequal gender expectations on their own. Normative and attitudinal shifts can take some time to emerge based on when they become salient in people's lives."[66]

Approach and study design

The Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS) "is a worldwide investigation into how gender norms evolve and inform a spectrum of health outcomes in adolescence",[67] funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This longitudinal study compiles the experiences of over 15,000 young girls and boys (10–14 years) over five continents.

While data for the GEAS are collected through a quantitative questionnaire, its development was informed by "findings from formative qualitative research, including narrative interviews, focus groups and contextual exercises".[68] The questionnaire is comprised of three areas: a 10-module health instrument, a vignettes-based measure of gender equality and a measure of gender norms.[69] The vignettes were developed to assess adolescents' perceptions about pregnancy and puberty (see Table 9). More specifically, these "were designed to investigate how adolescents would perceive relationships and adolescent experiences differently if the protagonist was a boy or a girl and how they assessed their own attitudes or behaviors relative to what they perceived as being typical in their peer groups and with other social influencers".[70]

66 GEH et al. 2022, p. 44.
67 Ibid., p. 1.
68 Johns Hopkins University et al. 2018, p. 1.
69 GEAS n.d.a.
70 Johns Hopkins University et al. 2018, p. 12.

TABLE 9

Selected vignettes and questions for girls on teenage pregnancy

R is 15 years old and in 3rd secondary. Her boyfriend, H, is also 15 years old. Recently, R realized that she is pregnant and told H that he had made her pregnant. The next day, R's best friend notices that she is not herself and asks her what the problem is.
How do you think R is feeling? Pick the best option from the following: • Confused • Scared • Happy • Proud • Angry • Sad • Refuse to answer
R's younger sister finds out from R that R is pregnant and tells their parents.
How will R's parents react when they find out that their daughter is pregnant? Pick the best option from the following: • Kick R out of the house • Say that they will find the money for R to have an abortion • Say they will force R to marry H as soon as possible • Say they will take care of the baby no matter what R decides to do with H • Refuse to answer

Source: Based on GEAS n.d.b.

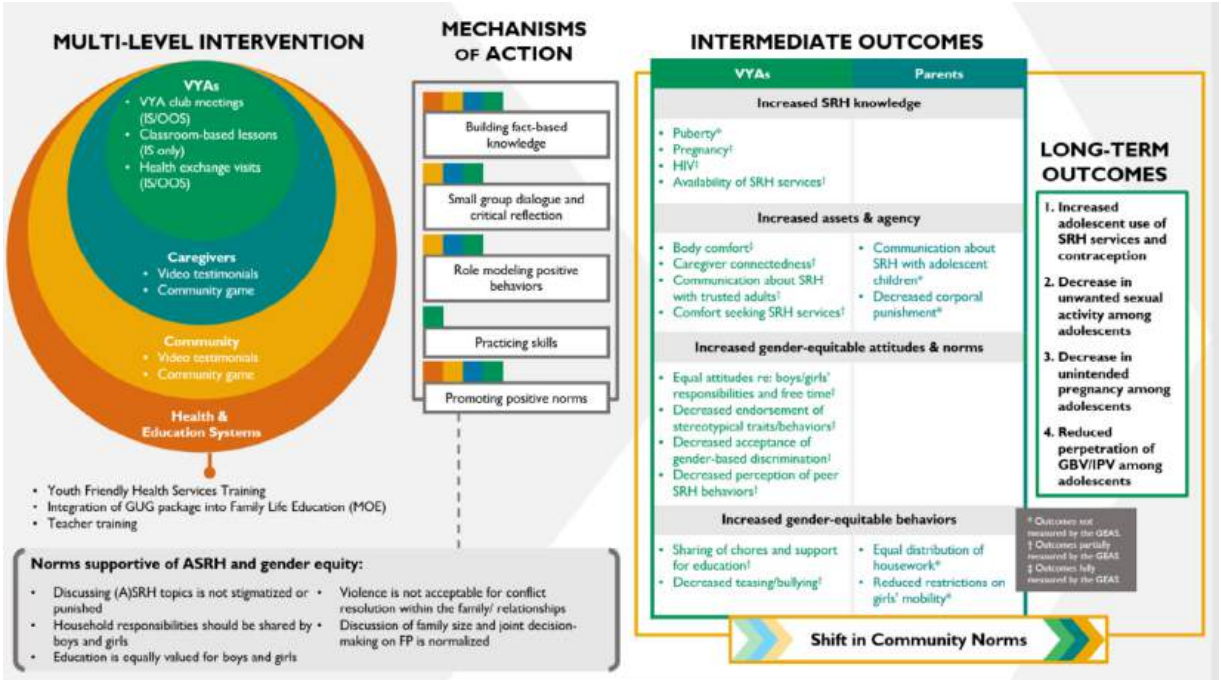
The GEAS has been used to evaluate health-related gender interventions in several countries across the world.[71] Among these is the Growing Up GREAT! (GUG!) programme, a multi-level intervention for very young adolescents, their parents/caregivers and other influential community members (e.g., teachers) in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. In the context of the programme, social norms are defined generally as "intangible" but "powerful influence[s] on both identity and behaviour" whereas gender norms refer specifically to "the expected behaviour, attitudes, responsibilities and opportunities that a society allocates to its members based on their male or female sex".[72] The programme examines the role of gender norms for young adolescents (its target population) because they "are still dependent upon parents and caregivers for decisions and actions linked to norms that structure behavior related to sexual debut, intimate partner and sexual violence, and early marriage, even as their own attitudes shift" insofar as "[t]hese norms shape access to education and the services and information that young people need to protect their health".[73] It focuses on identifying the social norms that are understood to underlie and drive health behaviours and supporting the diffusion of new ideas that will encourage norm change.[74]

GUG! is underpinned by a theory of change that articulates how "multiple reinforcing change mechanisms contribute to outcomes while simultaneously fostering supportive social norms" (see Figure 2).[75] The programme uses "an ecological approach to provide information and address social and gender norms related to reproductive health and wellbeing at each of these levels, with the goal of improving (...) sexual and reproductive health outcomes in later adolescence".[76] The intervention materials were developed and vetted by local stakeholders in a similar way to UN-Women's storytelling study.[77]

71 GEAS n.d.a.
72 IRH et al. 2021, p. 2.
73 Ibid.
74 Johns Hopkins University et al. 2018, p. 3.
75 GEH et al. 2022, p. 2.
76 Johns Hopkins University et al. 2018, pp. 2–3.
77 For more information on this process, see: https://www.growingupgreat.org/adaptation.

FIGURE 2

Growing Up GREAT! programme theory of change



Source: GEH et al. 2022.

Note: VYAs (very young adolescents); IS (in-school); OOS (out of school); SRH (sexual and reproductive health); ASRH (adolescent sexual and reproductive health); FP (family planning).

A total of 2,842 adolescents completed the baseline study (June–November 2017). Almost two thirds of these baseline participants (n=1,856; 65%) were followed-up in Wave 5 of the GEAS (June–August 2022). Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with an interviewer, with sensitive questions administered using Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interview (ACASI) for privacy reasons.

Key findings

The findings of the multiple waves of the GEAS offer interesting insights into the potentials and limitations of initiatives such as GUG! For instance, its fifth wave report concludes that targeted interventions improved pregnancy-related knowledge, but knowledge on contraception is still suboptimal and influenced by the stigmatization of girl's sexuality. Likewise, while young people's ability to communicate about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) increases as they age, some topics – such as sexual relations and pregnancy prevention – remained largely taboo. One of the most interesting findings of this study is that it might take time for interventions focused on younger generations to shift norms and attitudes. For example, positive results in relation to more egalitarian outlooks on sexual relationships only emerged four years after the intervention took place, when most of the young people targeted started to actually experience being in a relationship. Lastly, the study emphasizes that shifts in young people's beliefs do not translate directly to a change in behaviours unless further supported at a broader social level.

Key recommendations

Directly connected with these findings, the report reflects on the "programmatic implications". In particular, it recognizes that while it is important to engage young adolescents in SRH interventions (through, for instance, incorporating sexual education, including contraception, earlier in school curricula),

further efforts are needed to create an enabling environment (i.e., via involvement of family, teachers and community) if one wishes to see improvements in knowledge translating into long-lasting behavioural changes. Likewise, the study points out that interventions need to better integrate boys' perspectives and social norms about masculinity. Lastly, it also adds an interesting reflection on time periods, acknowledging that it is important to understand both the short- and long-term effects of interventions.

Key limitations

Despite the promising point of departure that a socio-ecological model approach to health represents, it is worth noting that the measures included in the survey fall short of capturing how some relevant social dimensions operate. More precisely, when the study attempts to capture institutional-level dynamics (e.g., the school) it falls into a pattern of simplifying them into the aggregation of individual perspectives (e.g., views of the teachers).

This drawback is also present across the GEAS questionnaire. For instance, the section on gender norms asks respondents to identify their level of agreement with a series of statements focused on them and their peers (e.g., "Adolescent boys lose interest in a girl after they have sex with her. Do you agree or disagree"), but none of the questions address beliefs or expectations about the family, the school or the community. While some of these issues are picked up in the vignettes (see, for example, Table 9), it is worth noting that the use of this method for collecting information on social norms has raised concerns.[78] That said, the study notes that social desirability bias may affect results and that sensitive or stigmatized behaviour is likely to be underreported.

Key takeaways

- GUG! promotes a socio-ecological approach to reproductive health, encouraging interventions beyond the individual level and focusing on the family, the school and the community, among other dimensions.
- Nonetheless, changes are measured through the GEAS survey, which focuses on young adolescents; thus, it is only possible to account for shifts at the individual level.
- The survey uses vignettes to collect information, a methodology that has been criticized for its inaccuracy.

78 For example, people may not actually do what they claim that they would do when confronted with a given vignette situation (Wazir 2023, p. 11).

2.

KEY CROSS-CUTTING LESSONS

Having provided seven examples of how social norms are being defined and measured in efforts to achieve gender equality and given an overview of key recommendations from those studies, in this section of the paper we identify four cross-cutting lessons. Our conclusion is that although the intense interest in social norms within gender and development circles is generating considerable activity, there is a need to address four key shortcomings:

(i) inconsistencies in definitions and measures of social norms
(ii) unclear causal pathways, including about the role of tradition and institutional levers
(iii) poorly evidenced or conceptually under-justified recommendations, including in relation to the role of legal reform and private sector actors
(iv) failure to consistently consider or measure the role of collective agency and contentious politics in social norm change.

We highlight these gaps, inconsistencies and failures in an attempt to support mutual learning about more robust, evidence-based measures. Having outlined the lessons from the examples here, in section 3 we use them to inform some key priorities for next steps.

2.1
Inconsistencies in definitions and measures

We would expect that social norms would be understood differently *across* development institutions, in line with their diverging approaches to development more generally and their different definitions and conceptual frameworks for understanding social norms (i.e., as largely synonymous with individual beliefs and attitudes or as very distinct). However, social norms are often defined and measured inconsistently *within* the examples we have studied.

In one case (UN-Women's Gender Equality Attitude Survey), there is no definition of social norms, and the indicators chosen conflate social norms and other concepts (i.e., beliefs or attitudes). More commonly, social norms are defined, but the measures used do not consistently match that definition. For example, UNDP's GSNI defines biased social norms as involving the undervaluation of women's capabilities and rights in society, but the measure relies on aggregating individuals' attitudes about gender equality within a country. The SIGI focuses on norms as "the established set of formal and/or informal laws, norms and practices that govern behaviour in society",[79] but in reality the index uses formal laws as proxies for social institutions. In turn, UN-Women's storytelling initiative defines social norms as "the informal rules that govern behaviour in groups and societies".[80] Such rules are understood to underpin "ongoing manifestations of gender inequalities" as evident in discriminatory and harmful practices such as dowry, domestic violence and witchcraft superstitions.[81] However, these practices or socially sanctioned, institutionalized behaviours are simultaneously positioned as norms. Hence domestic violence is identified as "a widely prevalent social norm across all districts" and dowry is "a widely prevalent and insidious social norm".[82] This results in a slippage between the practice and the underpinning gender-unequal rules (understood to be informal) that underlie it.

79 OECD 2023.
80 UN-Women 2023, p. 2.
81 See also "Gender social norms underpin those forms of institutionalised behaviours that are defined by gender roles and relations and which reflect an 'entire community's beliefs and actions'" (ibid., p. 5, citing Mackie et al. 2015).
82 Ibid., p. vii.

Such inconsistencies matter in part because they can lead to organizational confusion about what needs to be measured and changed, what the most important target of an intervention is and which interventions should be prioritized. If norms are defined as more extensive than individual attitudes but are only measured via attitudes, it is hard to identify levers of change in a comprehensive way.

For example, UN-Women's storytelling initiative showed that child marriage was seen to be on the rise in Nepal due to the growing number of elopements involving young people who had met online.[83] This finding challenges conventional understandings of child marriage as a traditional practice, where social norms of parents or communities, religious institutions or economic necessity are key drivers. Yet, because of the conceptual slippage noted above between child marriage as harmful practice versus as a socially sanctioned, institutionalized behaviour or norm, there is a risk that programming will fail to target the key causes identified by participants: social media and young people's desire for online relationships. In this regard, it is important to distinguish consistently between harmful practices overall and socially sanctioned, institutionalized behaviours.

2.2
Unclear causal pathways

Relatedly, several of the studies considered above involve unclear, poorly defined causal pathways and directions.

Confused traditions: The difficulty in accounting for norms as dynamic over time

Social norms are generally framed as traditional and as persisting across time, such that they lag behind changes in society.[84] This framing persists notwithstanding evidence in some of the studies themselves showing that conservative gender social norms may be newly insurgent or that distinctive practices harming women may be emerging. For example, the World Bank's research confirms that South Asian gender attitudes have become more conservative over time and that in some countries the "shares of people agreeing with conservative attitudes have ... even increased in younger cohorts".[85] The study has no longitudinal data on norms, but the implication here is clearly that norms are more conservative than they used to be. Yet the Bank posits the origins of gender norms about work in "long ago economic relationships", including women's traditional specialization in home production and men's advantage in physically demanding tasks.[86] The key problem is thus framed as a time lag: the persistence of norms that were once rational but that now relate to "concerns that have become irrelevant with income growth and technological progress".[87] There is an unresolved tension evident here between framing conservative gender norms as fixed in outdated traditions and data showing that they may be newly emerging or strengthening in some countries. The framing of conservative norms as fixed in tradition makes it very hard to account for the thoroughly contemporary and dynamic growth of such norms, including in the recent context of the COVID-19 pandemic.[88]

The Bank's conceptual framing of discriminatory gender norms as traditional, and now irrational, is in line with some key academic work that identifies economic growth and labour force participation as liberating to women and as shifting traditional gender norms[89]. However, that approach is contested by a range of scholars, including some of those cited in the Bank's own study.[90] The approach also overlooks work elaborating how social and family traditions can be positively mobilized for gender equality and may in some regards

83 Ibid., p. 2.
84 E.g., World Bank 2022a; UN-Women 2023.
85 World Bank 2022a, p. 115.
86 Ibid., p. 127.
87 Ibid., p. xviii.
88 For example, Saxler et al. 2024 found that COVID-19 caused a shift in students' gender norms around responsibility for childcare and housework related to mothers doing greater shares of that work in the pandemic. Barlow et al. 2024 found that gender norms prevented regional organizations in Africa from effectively mitigating the unequal socio-economic and health impacts of the pandemic on women and girls.
89 E.g., Inglehart and Norris 2003.
90 The Bank's study cites Esther Boserup (who contested the assumption that modernization empowered women) and Diane Elson (who has long contested claims that female labour force participation is a proxy for empowerment). The core problem, from both perspectives, is not that social norms block the delivery of the gender-equitable promise of development but that the promise is simplistic.

offer more leverage than development interventions associated with modernization and progress.[91]

Relatedly, there is a common tendency – across several studies – to position social norms as explaining why the promise of mainstream gender and development models has not been fulfilled. In this regard, traditional social norms are a residual used to account for broader development failures rather than a prompt to deeper thinking about the gendered assumptions and inequalities embedded in contemporary development.[92] UNDP's GSNI, which uses WVS data on personal beliefs and biased attitudes as a proxy for norms, points to correlations between aggregated gender bias scores and gender unequal outcomes in a country as evidence that changing attitudes and behaviours will improve equality outcomes in that country. More precisely, it used a correlation between these beliefs and attitudes and gender income gaps to help explain the "broken link" between women's growing access to education and their economic empowerment.[93] In other words, women's improved education has not translated into smaller gender income gaps as it should have done according to mainstream theories of gender and development, and social norms (measured via attitudinal surveys) are identified as the explanation.

In the World Bank's work on reshaping social norms, the puzzle is why increases in GDP have not translated smoothly into increased female labour force participation or led to as much progress on gender equality outcomes as neo-classical theories predicted. Social norms rooted in traditional divisions of labour are the key explanation: with those corrected, mainstream development-as-growth will deliver as promised. By positioning social norms as the causal factor behind "stubbornly high gender gaps"[94] in unpaid care work, for example, mainstream development approaches that rely on women to pick up social reproduction labour emerge relatively unchallenged.

The identification of social norms as the key barrier to the potential of development to improve equality and empower women is not – in itself – a very useful guide for interventions, unless social norms are carefully and consistently defined and we have a robust understanding of which ones appear to be causing the most serious problems for particular groups of people, or particular policy areas, in particular places. Common assumptions held by governments and development institutions about which manifestations of traditional social norms are the priorities need to be empirically tested lest they distract from more significant norms. Deshpande and Kabeer's recent study of women's likelihood of working in West Bengal shows that Muslim women's veiling did not have a significant impact, whereas strong cross-cultural norms about domestic labour being women's responsibility did.[95] Yet, the Indian Government tends to focus on the former as the key barrier. If social norms are defined poorly or inconsistently, or if the dynamic nature of conservative gender norms is misunderstood or the causal mechanisms that lead them to shift are over-simplified, there is a risk that inappropriate norms-focused interventions proliferate, including via targeting of stigmatized minority groups whose cultures may not actually be driving the negative outcomes of interest

Uneven recognition of institutional levers of norm change

To the extent that the examples examined in section 1 provide recommendations for interventions, many continue to target individual attitudinal change or correcting outdated beliefs via the provision of information (see Annex 2).

91 Connell and Pearce 2014, p. 8; Sharafeldin forthcoming; Deshpande and Kabeer 2024. As Connell and Pearce note, land privatization interventions (championed by the Bank and other institutions) often harmed women, by allocating land over which they had control, or formerly communal land of immense value to their subsistence work, to men. Here "a normative regime introduced by government has displaced older local norms, to women's disadvantage" (p. 22). Similar observations have been made about how traditional understandings of expertise and knowledge-keeping are being displaced by privatized intellectual property regimes, again often to the detriment of women. See also Kopano Ratele 2013 on traditions of non-patriarchal masculinities, again discussed in Connell and Pearce 2014, p. 31, and Deshpande and Kabeer 2024 on how families with traditions of women in paid work create 'virtuous cycles' that increase the likelihood of paid work among subsequent generations of women.

92 See also Cookson et al. 2023, p. 5 on how social norm change is framed as a 'silver bullet' that will deliver development success.

93 UNDP 2023, p. 3.

94 World Bank 2022a, p. 97.

95 Deshpande and Kabeer 2024.

The limits of these sorts of attitudes-focused interventions have been widely documented, including by many of the scholars who have developed more recent social norms measures.[96] In particular, such interventions have tended to misunderstand a short-term reported shift in participants' expressed beliefs (heavily influenced by the likelihood of social desirability bias) after a talk or workshop designed to correct misinformation as a sign of having successfully shifted social norms in a way that will improve outcomes. They have also side-stepped the crucial question of how gender norms relate to supra-individual factors, such as access to resources as influenced by macroeconomic policy and state provision of infrastructure that reduces the burden of domestic labour on women (e.g., running water or elder care/childcare).

That said, the limits of these sorts of attitudes-focused interventions are being discussed in some of these same studies, and there is increasing acknowledgment of the need to address institutional levers for norm change. For instance, UNDP positions policy interventions and institutional reforms as one of two sets of levers in changing norms.[97] Examples include policy measures to increase women's labour force participation; initiatives to correct gender biases in educational materials; investment to strengthen social protection and care systems and reduce women's social reproduction labour burden; and improving women's access to finance. The report asserts that "major breakthroughs" in gender social norms can be achieved if a number of such interventions coincide to reach "tipping points".[98] This generalized recognition of the importance of institutional levers is common in the studies we examined.

The remaining problem, however, is that development organizations typically fail to drill down into the specifics, explaining why certain policy levers are most appropriate or effective for shifting gender norms in ways that align with their definition of the concept and their underpinning theory of how norms change. This means that a wide range of policy and programme recommendations are endorsed, but it is hard to ascertain priorities.

For example, GEAS/GUG!'s framing of the institutional dimension of norms related to reproductive health and well-being draws on the socio-ecological model of health (see section 1.7). This focuses on multiple reinforcing change mechanisms required to transform social norms at scale, including at the level of school and the wider community. The baseline study also mentioned supra-individual problems such as lack of enforcement of laws protecting women from violence.[99] However, there appear to be no norms measures that correspond to the broader socio-ecological approach to health and that could inform institutional-level recommendations focused on community, state, etc. In its measures of "how perceptions of gender norms are co-constructed",[100] the study looks at people (peers/parents/teachers) rather than institutional influences per se. For example, it collects data on the teasing of gender non-normative children but offers no account of the role of churches in such teasing (despite a significant portion of respondents being from evangelical Christian backgrounds). Norms are interpreted as "normative perceptions", able to be shifted, in part, with information provision about SRH. While the study also notes the need to create an enabling environment for lasting behaviour change, involving caregivers, health providers and communities, it does not offer any specific institutional recommendations.[101]

96 See, e.g., Heise 1998; Keleher and Franklin 2008; Bicchieri 2017; Cislaghi and Heise 2018; Legros and Cislaghi 2020 and a summary of how most academic and policy publications on social norms focus on individual attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and behaviours in Cookson et al. 2023. See also several papers in UN-Women's 2023 EGM on gender and social norms, including Sinha and Wazir's claim that the dominant approach to social norms in development "effectively shifts attention away from structural inequalities, constraints and power imbalances in society and locates the problem in the behaviour, choices and actions of individuals" (2023, p. 7).

97 UNDP 2023, p. 13.

98 Ibid., p. 16.

99 Johns Hopkins University et al. 2018, p. 2.

100 GEH et al. 2022, p. 6.

101 Likewise, the study measures gender equitable attitudes and norms, and whether interventions have shifted those attitudes and norms, via questions on perceptions of whether adolescent romantic relationships are normative/whether unequal gender stereotypical traits are endorsed/the level of acceptance of the teasing of gender atypical adolescents/attitudes towards sharing household chores (GEH et al. 2022, p. 35). Aside from whether vignettes are a robust measure of attitudes and norms, and whether changing attitudes results in changed behaviour, these norms measures do not fully align with a broader socio-ecological approach to health.

Two studies (the World Bank's and the UN-Women's storytelling initiative) offer more specificity in their accounts of institutional measures to shift norms. It is worth outlining these briefly since they offer important lessons. The Bank's social norms research notes that information interventions on norms and gender attitudes for adults has "often not worked to address deep-seated gender attitudes" and that, even when positive shifts in beliefs are observed, "there is limited evidence of whether the effects are permanent, and whether behaviour changes in turn also shift attitudes".[102] Hence, drawing on the work of gender norms scholars who have consistently emphasized the need for wider institutional interventions, the Bank argues that:

> "Changing systematic structures that prevent women from accessing the labor force, such as a lack of job opportunities or safe transport, may be necessary to ensure the success of norms interventions. Interventions that target social norms without a wider framing on the institutional, social, and political factors that perpetrate a harmful practice may have little positive impact (Cislaghi and Heise 2019)".[103]

In this light, suggested interventions for overcoming "norms-related barriers to economic opportunities for women"[104] include infrastructural improvements (e.g., investments in electrification and transport), transfers and subsidies (e.g., to encourage girls into education) and law reform (discussed in depth below). In particular, the research notes that efforts to increase women's labour force participation need to address women's existing unpaid care work, such as by providing childcare. This aligns with other studies showing how the unequal sharing of unpaid domestic work negatively impacts women's labour force participation.[105]

There is undoubtedly some "historical amnesia"[106] implicit in such advice, reliant on forgetting the Bank's own role in promoting adjustment policies that under-invested in care infrastructure and thereby reinforced the social norm that women were exclusively responsible for this vital work.[107] That said, it is important to note that the institution is now echoing long-standing feminist demands[108] that multilateral agencies and governments "tak[e] gender norms into account when designing policies",[109] especially in relation to childcare. Again, however, the measures of gender norms used by the Bank in its study do not themselves explain which institutional levers should be prioritized or why.

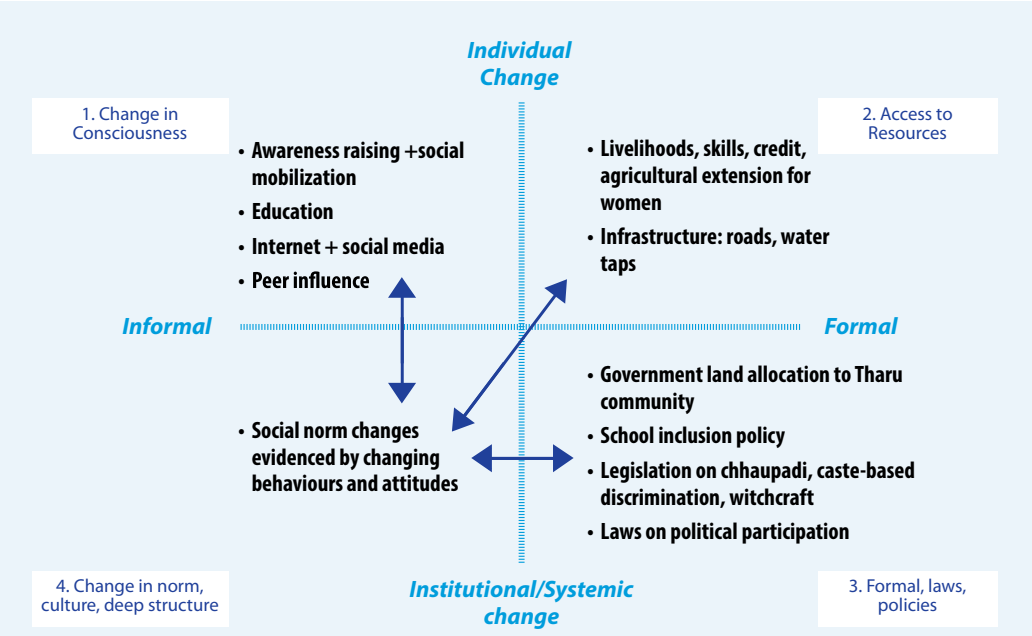
From the studies we examined, UN-Women's storytelling initiative offers the most robust approach to identifying institutional levers of norm change, in part because it was designed with this in mind. It explicitly aims "to understand the pathways of social norm change that can support country strategy and adaptive programming", and it uses "an expressly holistic approach to social norms involving tackling structural inequality".[110] The intention is to provide a better understanding of social changes underpinning gender transformation to identify "change pathways for influencing discriminatory social norms".[111]

To this end, the research identified the key role of external interventions (such as health services) in counteracting harmful practices, and it noted how access to resources shifts gendered power relations within households and communities. From the stories,

102 World Bank 2022a, p. 133.
103 Ibid. (emphasis added).
104 Ibid., p. xix.
105 For example, Deshpande and Kabeer 2024 argue that the social norm about women being primarily responsible for domestic chores is the key one influencing women's low labour force participation rate in West Bengal. Its influence can be reduced by, inter alia, provision of utilities and technologies that reduce the time required for domestic chores and that signal a wider state and community role in meeting household needs.
106 Razavi 2011, p. 8.
107 For wider discussions of the Bank's tendency to ignore its own role as a causal agent in development ills see, inter alia, Rappleye and Un 2018, Dewan 2022; and Bedford 2023.
108 E.g., Kabeer and Subrahmanian 1996; Manji 2010.
109 World Bank 2022a, p. 126.
110 UN-Women 2023., pp. v and 2. This approach follows on from UN-Women's Nepal's Strategic Note (2018-22), which prioritized work on transformative change in social norms across its programming, including gender-responsive and inclusive governance initiatives (to strengthen women's leadership and participation in governance) and programmes of women's economic empowerment "to promote women's economic security and rights, with a focus on increasing women's access to decent work and sustainable livelihoods" (Ibid., pp. 2–3).
111 Ibid., p. 3.

and the collective analysis of them, it also identified signposts for social norm change processes that appear to interrupt embedded or resistant social norms in ways showing a progressive change in a community or wider society. Its resulting model of how norms appear to shift, identifying four quadrants of action (see Figure 3), shows the very wide approach to change that underpins this study.

FIGURE 3
Signposts for social norm change



Source: UN-Women 2023.

For example, the research highlights that outreach programmes providing resources and extension support to women and investments in community infrastructure help shift resources to support norm change about women's paid work. Its discussion of how "policies that shift entitlements can reposition and empower socially excluded groups"[112] focuses on land reform (specifically, land entitlements for an indigenous community that was subject to bonded labour). Entitlement to land increased security and gave the community more resources with which to resist exploitation from more powerful groups. While this breadth of interventions in not unusual in itself (since other studies also mention access to resources), the storytelling approach enables far deeper, more specific consideration of which institutional levers appear to have worked best in shifting which norms and practices. Land reform – not a priority recommendation in the other studies we examined – emerged as central using this methodology.

112 Ibid., p. 41.

2.3
Poorly evidenced or conceptually under-justified recommendations

As identified above (section 2.2), there are a wide range of institutional levers for shifting social norms mentioned in these reports, often without clear justification. In this section we narrow our focus to two levers mentioned by several studies: legal reform and private sector actors. The evidence supporting various recommended interventions in these areas is, in our view, especially weak. Improving the evidence base and conceptual understanding of how laws

and private sector firms shift social norms that limit gender equality emerges as a clear priority.

Law reform

Laws are positioned as a key lever of social norm change for almost all the examples we studied. This in part reflects the growing centrality of law reform, and legal experts, within international development – and gender and development in particular.[113] For the purposes of this paper, we narrow our focus to how legal interventions are understood to support gender equitable social norm change and to the research gaps and broader questions it may be helpful to ask. Our aim here is not to suggest that development institutions should jettison law reform but rather that they need to improve understanding of when this is likely to be effective as an intervention tool, including by ascertaining *which* laws actually govern social life in different countries.

In the studies we examined, law is understood – often implicitly – as both a reflection or outcome of social norms (e.g., discriminatory laws are a sign that a society has discriminatory norms) and as a tool for norm change (e.g., reforming laws to guarantee equal rights will help bring about such rights; introducing stronger criminal law penalties for gendered rights violations will shift attitudes and practices in more gender equitable directions).[114] Even indexes that do not include law position it as central to intervention recommendations and use examples of legal change as proxies for success. For example, UNDP's GSNI claims that:

> "Legal and policy actions need to be taken to prevent, respond to and raise awareness of the increased violence against women in politics. Bolivia criminalized political violence and harassment against women in 2012; this inspired similar legislation in Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico and Peru."[115]

The legal framework operative in a country is typically understood in a formalistic, state-centric way: laws are recognized by states and lawyers as such, and legal experts are best placed to ascertain whether discriminatory laws exist (see especially the SIGI study). Discriminatory laws are also understood as part of the broader time lag problem (see section 2.2 above) explaining why regressive social norms persist; the World Bank posits that these traditional norms were codified into laws that have never been reformed, for example.[116]

To the extent that other forms of law are acknowledged as existing, they are understood as posing a threat to women's equality. For example, the SIGI legal survey methodology involves examining whether "customary, religious or traditional practices *or laws*" discriminate against women,[117] including in countries where "the legal framework" (understood as separate from customary or religious law) provides for equal rights. SIGI's coding manual for scoring legal equality (Table 3) has no scope for scenarios in which state laws discriminate but customary, religious or traditional laws do not: that cannot be measured. There is a recognition of legal pluralism here, but it is limited and positions state law as the key to norm change.

These assumptions are so common as to require little justification, and there is no engagement with counterexamples. Hence the framing of customary law

113 See discussion in, inter alia, Engle Merry 2005; Manji 2010; Buss 2011; Ní Aoláin 2014; Bedford 2020; Tapia Tapia and Bedford 2020; Htun and Jensenius 2022; Brosio 2023.

114 The underpinning assumption here, drawing on theories that laws have an expressive function with regard to norms, is articulated well by Htun and Jensenius: "By sharing information about norms/standards of desirable and appropriate conduct, laws help to motivate people to act in some ways and not others. People's desire to conform to norms induces them voluntarily to comply with the law" (2022, p. 2). See also Sharafeldin on the "dialectic relationship between laws and social norms", claiming that laws provide "some of the most concrete manifestations of how gender relations are to be shaped and regulated in any given context using the powerful arms of the state" (forthcoming, p. 4). Some authors suggest that even poorly enforced equality law has value in shifting norms, including by symbolically re-casting certain discriminatory behaviours as unacceptable (e.g., Htun and Jensenius 2022). Others focus on the processes by which international human rights law is "vernacularised" (e.g., Engle Merry 2006) and/or on the unequal power involved in such processes (e.g., Kotiswaran 2014).

115 UNDP 2023, p. 18.

116 World Bank 2022a, p. xviii.

117 OECD 2023 (emphasis added).

as a barrier to the otherwise progressive potential of state law persists notwithstanding research into the gendered complexities of "living" customary law[118] and evidence that customary law may be effectively mobilized to support women's rights in some jurisdictions.[119] Likewise, we know that state legal reform lagged behind social norm change and social practice in examples ranging from contraception in Ireland to abortion in Mexico and sodomy in the United States of America.[120] While restrictive laws related to these practices were eventually overturned, this occurred in part because social movements had worked to render them unenforceable,[121] including by decades long "social decriminalization" strategies that sometimes involved law-breaking as a social change strategy. None of the studies we examined as part of this review asked about the perceived social acceptability of law-breaking in situations where laws "lagged" norms or when state law was widely understood to be morally unjust and illegitimate. In a similar vein, there is ample research on the vast gaps between formal, "on the books" legal entitlements and actual, "on the ground" practices, including in relation to gender equality. [122] Such studies require us to ask difficult but vital questions about whether formal state legal change is a good proxy for social norm change, especially on its own (e.g., without studies of implementation level or wider effects) and whether and when law can be used to nudge norms in a more gender equitable direction. Currently, however, law reform is often used simplistically as an indicator of social norm change and/or recommended as an intervention that will improve progress towards equality, without such deeper thinking.

That said, again two studies – from the World Bank and UN-Women's storytelling initiative – offer a more reflective analysis of law that may be fruitful for our future conversations. The Bank's recent work on social norms and gender argues that legal interventions can help shift norms, using the key example of amendments to India's Hindu Succession Act (2005), which granted daughters the same rights to ancestral property inheritance as sons. Yet the study notes that such interventions, alone, are rarely enough to shift bargaining power within households, and they may provoke resistance or simply be unenforced.[123] High rates of intimate partner violence exist across South Asia notwithstanding legal provision in all countries (except Afghanistan) addressing domestic violence. The Bank posits that this is in part due to the failure to reform other parts of the legal system to enable women to leave abusive men (such as ensuring that women have rights to divorce and that their non-monetary contribution to the household is recognized on dissolution of marriage). This less piecemeal, more inter-connected approach to state legal reform offers an important step forward for debates about social norm measurement. It is less likely to result in rankings that overstate the significance of isolated pieces of legislation (such as criminalization of harassment) because it is less likely to use such laws as proxies for norm change. In addition, acknowledgement of the gap between the law and women's experiences opens space for further conversations, including about whether state laws govern behaviour for all groups in the countries being studied, whether non-state laws may provide leverage for social norm change,[124] whether men's fear of criminal punishment for violence against women shifts their beliefs[125] and

118 See, e.g., Himonga and Diallo 2017.

119 See, e.g., Musembi 2013. On religious law, see inter alia, Sharafeldin forthcoming.

120 See, e.g., Cloatre and Enright 2017; Sutton and Luz Vacarezza 2023.

121 See especially Sutton and Luz Vacarezza 2023.

122 To give just two examples, Benería and Roldan's landmark study of women workers in Mexico City found that almost 90 per cent of the women they interviewed earned an income lower than the legal minimum wage (1987, p. 97), while more recently the World Bank gave Ecuador a 100/100 score for protecting women from violence on the grounds that it has legislation specifically addressing domestic violence and sexual harassment (including criminal law penalties for harassment at work) (World Bank 2018). When that score was presented to a room full of gender equality experts in Ecuador, they laughed; see Tapia Tapia and Bedford 2020.

123 World Bank 2022a, p. 128.

124 There is a similar opening in the most recent versions of the *Women, Business and the Law* measures, which are beginning to study implementation and enforcement. See: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl.

125 See, for example, an OXFAM evaluation of a norm-transformation intervention aiming at reducing violence against women in the Solomon Islands, which found that "The adoption of the Family Protection Act 2014 had some impact on community attitudes and behaviors. Anecdotally, men now think twice before beating a woman, however this appears to be due to a fear of punishment rather than a shift in understanding that violence is wrong" (Homan et al. 2019, p. 6).

what else is required to connect new legislation to positive outcomes.[126]

Of the measures we studied for this paper, UN-Women's storytelling initiative provides the richest understanding of law and its relationship to social norm change. Overall, the research confirmed that "legislative change can prompt behaviour change, if enforced", but "the legal route to challenging discriminatory social norms (is) both challenging and risk-filled for these vulnerable individuals".[127] Legal reform emerges as "an increasingly important tool in disrupting embedded social norms" here, rather than a 'silver bullet' that can be measured as a proxy for norm change.

In particular, the study notes that all the harmful practices identified in the stories were illegal but it was rare for storytellers to report use of legal routes when contesting those practices. Regarding menstrual isolation, for example, "there were no cases of storytellers using legal routes to challenge the practice".[128] Participants who experienced domestic violence did not report it to the police due to fears of reprisals and the belief that they had no viable means of escape, although some noted that educated women might be more able to use the legal route to contest male violence. Women and men who experienced caste-based discrimination and violence were similarly reluctant to report it to the local police, in part because of fears of reprisal and in part because of fears of the police themselves. Where authorities did act to enforce the law against child marriage, it was in a story involving a cross-caste elopement, such that "caste-based discrimination trumped the acceptance of child marriage".[129] Moreover, there was wide discrepancy in awareness about the legal status of the practices discussed in the report. While dowry and caste-based discrimination were generally publicly acknowledged as illegal, this was not the case with witchcraft accusations – legal experts knew the law, but it was not widely embedded in public consciousness. Moreover, there were significant differences in perceptions about the prevalence of some harmful practices. Local officials insisted that dowry did not exist, but the research provided "overwhelming evidence" of its widespread prevalence.[130] If officials are more likely to be aware of laws, and – as in this case – more likely to deny the existence of the harmful practices that the laws target, they may also then be more likely to overstate the effectiveness of legal instruments as levers of norm change. The report also notes that Dalit storytellers described taking legal action against caste-based discrimination "in a few isolated cases",[131] persisting to higher courts despite the failures of the police and lower courts to take the discrimination seriously. Again, members of marginalized groups who *do* use legal tools proactively as part of their efforts to shift discriminatory practices face enforcement hurdles that would not necessarily be apparent to state or legal officials.

These findings underline the importance of deeper understanding, reliant on a range of expertise, of how state law relates to social practice. State officials and legal experts may have limited understanding of law's impact in different parts of a country, and/or on marginalized groups, and awareness of state law may be uneven across different groups, depending on the norm or practice in question. A nuanced and grounded approach to law as a mechanism of norm change is key, attentive to the expertise and experiences of those suffering from the discrimination in question.

The private sector

In line with the wider trend towards greater involvement of the private sector in gender and development interventions,[132] corporations are explicitly positioned as norm-changing actors in some studies. For example, UNDP's GSNI considers (in one conjoined discussion) how firms and civil society organizations shift norms. To this end, it notes both the Grameen Bank's work in providing access to finance that may empower women and the initiatives of top companies to increase the number of women in leadership

126 For example, Htun and Jensenius 2022 argue that the positive impact of anti-violence legislation on women's attitudes about the acceptability of interpersonal violence in Mexico, and their exposure to such violence, relied on a 'bundle' of legal change, feminist activism and supportive media coverage raising awareness of domestic violence as a rights violation.
127 UN-Women 2023, p. 42.
128 Ibid., p. 17.
129 Ibid., p. 25.
130 Ibid., p. 36.
131 Ibid., p. 20.
132 See, e.g., Prügl and True 2014; Roberts 2016; Calkin 2018; Moeller 2019; Bedford 2023.

positions.[133] The report claims that such company initiatives can have "a catalytic effect, driving more women to have higher professional and education aspirations",[134] although the index itself does not measure the efficacy of any such interventions.

While corporations are positioned as allies in efforts to instill more progressive gender norms, they tend to not be identified as agents with a causal role in instilling, incentivizing or institutionalizing discriminatory norms. For example, the World Bank argues that "antiegalitarian views have a strong negative association with FLFP [female labour force participation] rates and *are associated with higher gender pay gaps*".[135] This arguably posits social norms as playing the key causal role in unequal pay while sidestepping the role of firms themselves – the actors most directly responsible for paying women less. Relatedly, many studies recommend communication and mass/social media campaigns to address discriminatory gender norms without discussing poorly regulated corporate control of those media or the resulting prominence of discriminatory content, including in forms that glamorize or trivialize violence against women or offer a very limited, stereotypical vision of appropriate sexuality to young people. For example, the GUG! study found that most adolescents identified television and radio as their primary sources of SRH information, but the "programmatic implications" of the project did not address the companies running TV or radio. Participants in UN-Women's storytelling initiative also noted the ambivalent role of social media in norm change, but this did not result in recommendations that targeted social media firms.[136]

In contrast, the SNAP study prioritized media campaigns that expose and positively model non-traditional practices but without considering the deeply conflicted role of media companies as gender equality allies. This social marketing approach to norm change is disconnected from urgent debates about how globalized media conglomerates are crucial actors in the spread of misinformation and moral panic about gender and sexuality. Platforms that profit from the proliferation of avowedly anti-feminist content are perhaps curious allies for norm change.

The key exception to this common failure to address the negative influence of private sector actors on gender norms is UNDP's GSNI, which recommends regulating gender misinformation and disinformation and addressing hate speech and online violence as part of efforts to achieve transformative change in gender norms.[137] But again the recommendation itself – however welcome – is not actually grounded in the index. The GSNI does not capture information about how gender attitudes (as expressed in the WVS) are influenced by the media/social media. Moreover, the report also recommends taking advantage of social media to amplify feminist social movement messages, notwithstanding the role of these platforms in amplifying violent and misogynist content.

In short, there is an urgent need for measures of social norms to more thoroughly consider the role of private sector actors. Claims made about the society-wide norm-changing impact of corporate equality initiatives need to be robustly evaluated and their causal mechanisms explained, including so that confounding factors – such as improved state provision of childcare or feminist campaigning – can be accounted for. Research into the negative role of companies in bolstering norms that hinder gender equality must also be prioritized. In particular, any recommendations for intervention that suggest information provision via media or social media need to include consideration of tighter content rules for such providers.

133 UNDP 2023, p. 14. For feminist critiques on the expansion of microcredit and its use as an economic empowerment intervention, see Kabeer 2005; Federici 2014; Federici et al. 2021.

134 UNDP 2023, p. 15.

135 World Bank 2022a, p. 116 (emphasis added).

136 Social media could "expose communities to competing attitudes, behaviours and worldviews beyond those that were deeply rooted locally and carefully policed by community gatekeepers, such as elders and religious leaders", but there was also a backlash against its use by husbands and parents, including because young people were using it to conduct relationships that sometimes ended in elopement (UN-Women 2023, p. vii). Addressing sexist and sexualized content on social media could have been identified as a lever for norm change on this basis.

137 UNDP 2023.

2.4

The absence of collective action and contentious politics in norms measures

The final cross-cutting lesson we draw from these seven examples relates to the common failure to adequately measure or analyse the role of collective action and social movement mobilization in fostering social norm change. In many cases, indexes or measures attribute success in changing norms to what has been achieved by feminist social movements while empirically decentering the movements themselves as causal agents. Hence new laws against gender discrimination, or people's expressed attitudes about sexual violence, may be considered key evidence about norm change, but the decades-long campaigning that explains why those laws exist, or why views about the acceptability of violence have changed, slides from view.

This matters because we know from decades of research that social norms around gender may change, in part, as a result of long-term collective and sometimes contentious forms of politics.[138] Campaigns to secure suffrage and formal rights to equal pay, to contest impunity for gender violence and to realize sexual and reproductive rights have often involved disruptive action and non-compliance with the law. Measures of norm change must capture this dimension of gender politics – the protests, strikes, campaigning work and networks of activists helping provide services and information, sometimes in defiance of written and unwritten rules. Indexes or studies that capture a growth in movement activism in support of a change in gender norms would therefore be extremely useful because they would provide an early indication of significant norm contestation.[139]

The resistance encountered as a result of such activism is also measurable: protests may result in arrests (or worse); non-compliance with unjust laws may result in prosecutions (or worse); and gender activists may be targeted with violence or threats from those defending the status quo.

Currently, however, the ongoing and multi-pronged advocacy efforts of feminist social movements and rights defenders are not registering empirically as causal factors in the social norms measures we have explored for this project. That is not to say that there are no references to feminist movements. For example, OECD's SIGI recommends improved support for civil society organizations and activists, UNDP's GSNI suggests amplifying feminist movement messages and UN-Women's storytelling initiative states that changes in consciousness are often underpinned by "transformative social mobilisation programming in triggering critical reflection and behaviour change".[140] What is missing, however, is a concerted interest in collecting and collating data about activism that should logically follow from consensus about the centrality of women's movements to norm change.

138 Tarrow defines contentious politics as collective action relying in part on non-institutional forms of interaction with elites, opponents or the state, including demonstrations, direct action, etc. (1996, p. 874). For studies of women's movements and contentious politics see, inter alia, Alvarez 1999; Molyneux 2000; Moghadam 2020; Eschle 2001; Weldon and Htun 2013; Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al. 2021; Emejulu and Bassel 2021.

139 Barbara Sutton and Nayla Luz Vacarezza, personal communication, October 2023.

140 UN-Women 2023, p. vii.

3.

TOWARDS A NEW MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK: FOUNDATIONAL PRIORITIES

As Cookson et al. (2023) note in their recent commissioned review of social norms research and practice, critiquing the limits and inconsistencies of influential measures necessarily raises the question of what, if anything, should replace them. This section offers some preliminary answers to that question, aiming to providing insights into what should be measured, how, by whom and why. We identify some foundational components for a future measurement framework for social norms and gender equality. More specifically, using the analysis above and insights from preliminary consultation in UN-Women's Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on social norms (held online in October 2023 – see Box 1), we identify two clusters of priorities:

(i) Improving the internal consistency of measures, so the indicators used follow from how social norms are defined and conceptualized by that institution, and there is a clear theory of change which explains which norms need to be prioritized, how such norms change and why particular interventions should be supported.

(ii) Drawing on emerging best practices (identified in this review and in the EGM), involving long-term, participatory norms measures that encompass gender equality outcomes, not just attitudes, beliefs or formal laws, and that comprehensively address institutional dimensions of social norm change, the role of private actors (including media and social media actors) and the role of collective action and contentious politics in norm change.

3.1

Improving the internal consistency of norms measures

The choice of a particular definition of social norms and its related measures can (indeed, should) have important implications for the recommendations that follow, such that improving methodological and conceptual consistency *within* studies may facilitate the design of more effective interventions to shift norms. If social norms are defined by a development agency as distinct from aggregated individual attitudes and/or as involving multiple formal and informal social institutions, they need to be measured accordingly. Subsequent norms measures in that agency should not rely only on attitudinal surveys or formal laws, for example. Likewise, if norms are conceptualized

as dynamic, shifting over time, evaluation of norm change interventions requires longitudinal tracking.

All the studies we explored above need to be more internally consistent in their approach. A necessary first step is offering clear definitions of key concepts (in particular, gender norms, social norms and gender social norms) and a clear explanation of the relevant theory of change underpinning their chosen measures.

Relatedly, the recommendations that emerge from measures of social norms need to be in line with both the theory of change used in that development agency and the actual empirical findings. In this paper, we have identified multiple examples of poorly evidenced recommendations, sometimes leading to intervention priorities that are in line with pre-existing organizational priorities (e.g., around law reform) rather than appearing to stem from the measure or framework itself. If improved social norms measures are to offer an evidence-based way of designing more effective interventions, recommendations need to relate tightly to the measures used. A more robust theory of change can also help bridge this gap.

Purportedly global reports and indices also need to be more transparent about their limitations, including their data gaps and uneven coverage of different groups in society. While ideally survey sampling would be representative of the target population, and different waves of a study would ask the same questions, at the very least studies should include discussion of scope conditions and limitations. In this sense, the SNAP report offers a good example insofar as it explicitly focuses on urban millennials in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam and does not attempt to offer conclusions beyond this target population. Were this approach to be followed in the case of the SIGI, the index would make explicit its focus on formal legal frameworks instead of using them as a proxy measure to encompass "social institutions".

BOX 1

Key takeaways from UN-Women's Expert Group Meeting on social norms (2023)

1. *Measures of social norms change have to include an assessment of whether changes have occurred in key gender inequality outcomes*. As one expert put it when discussing efforts to shift gender norms about intimate partner violence in Egypt: "the ultimate signifier of change is going to be the rates of domestic violence that women are experiencing in their day to day lives. We can organize behavioural change interventions and ask people about their 'opinions' on domestic violence after any social intervention, (but) the fact remains that unless rates of domestic violence are decreasing then something is amiss in the framework of intervention".[a]

2. *Women's movements were key to progress*, even if states or donors subsequently claimed credit.[b] While some movements worked in close alignment with states and donors, we also heard examples of protest actions including sit-ins (as part of a campaign for children's education in India), mass demonstrations, and campaigns involving non-compliance with unjust laws (as part of efforts to legalize abortion in Argentina).

3. *Social norms measures need to serve a clear purpose for the beneficiary group in terms of reflecting their priorities and their chosen metrics of success and using methodologies that will contribute to their own empowerment*. Use of pre-determined indicators and toolkits or the parachuting in of technical experts who deployed standardized methodologies for measuring norm change were criticized. Instead, participants offered examples of measures informed by community participation and relevant local gender expertise. These included:

    - The approach to norms taken by the MV Foundation, which works to eradicate child labour and early marriage.[c] Over three decades, it has gradually developed a conceptual framework to understand how social norms (and other factors such as state policy) contribute to inequalities in children's access

Continued

to education and how those norms can be shifted. This has relied on the expertise of local field mobilizers (first generation learners from poor, marginalized communities) and children themselves. For example, to identify social norms about gendered spaces in villages, adolescent girls mapped the villages themselves.

- The use of agroecological logbooks by women farmers to identify and shift social norms as part of agricultural interventions in Brazil.[d] These interventions relied on a popular education approach grounded in respect for existing knowledge, collective dialogue, exchange and reflection-action. The gathering and analysis of data about women's agroecological practices was done by women farmers themselves, leading to a change "on the concrete, empirical level, in attitudes and belief systems of individuals and collective bodies, thereby influencing social/gender norms".[e] For example, women developed skills in recording information and in systematic and collective data analysis, in turn raising wider awareness of women's contribution to sustainable agriculture. Women using the logbooks reported that family members had begun to see their work in food processing more positively and that they had connected with other women to expand the range of products they grew, collected or processed or to collectively market their produce, charging prices that more fairly reflected their labour time and expertise. In turn, technical professionals working in rural development were forced to confront their own gendered assumptions about whose farming matters most.

In both these examples, and others,[f] social norms were identified using horizontal, participatory methodologies informed by relevant contextual expertise about gender inequality. In turn, use of these methodologies prompted collective reflection on social norms: adolescent girls visited parts of villages that they had previously avoided to map them, and women farmers used the information in their logbooks to reflect on their invisibilization in wider debates about agriculture. The key indicators used to measure intervention impact were responsive to context, and the *process* of measurement itself empowered the beneficiary group.

Notes: [a] Sharafeldin 2024, p. 31; [b] Sharafeldin 2024, see also analysis of the role of women's movements in securing policy attention to violence against women in Weldon and Htun 2013; [c] Shantha and Wazir 2024; [d] Weitzman 2024; [e] ibid., p. 7; [f] see, for example, Aziz-Suleyman and Gasibirege 2024 on a community-based psychosocial approach to changing social norms in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

3.2 Drawing on emerging best practices

As we have made clear above, in many respects the global understanding of how social norms influence gender equality, and which intervention domains should be prioritized by actors seeking to shift those norms, is at a very early stage. While there is an urgent need for development agencies to ensure that their measurement approaches and recommendations cohere with their chosen approaches to norm change, we also wish to highlight some emerging lessons about norms measurement that have cross-agency implications. These involve the value of long-term, participatory norms measures that encompass gender equality outcomes, not just attitudes, beliefs or formal laws, and that comprehensively address institutional dimensions of social norm change, including the positive role of collective action and contentious politics and the negative role of private actors (including media and social media actors).

Notwithstanding common assumptions that social norms harming gender equality reflect long-standing traditions (section 2.2), we lack robust understanding of how or why shifts in social norms happen over time. However, much cutting-edge work in this area emphasizes the importance of a long-term measurement and intervention perspective (see, for example, GEAS/GUG! and UN-Women's storytelling initiative). Shorter-term interventions are unlikely

to change norms overnight, and in turn a shift in norms might take time to impact gender equality outcomes. Whatever measures are prioritized, they need to have longitudinal dimensions and funding for repeat waves in order to track change over extended timeframes.

Another feature of innovative social norms measures is their participatory and context-specific nature. Norms measures must be tangibly useful for organizations undertaking interventions: if the primary benefit of a new measurement fad is to academics, or to donors imposing new ways to measure accountability, it will be experienced as, at best, a distraction.

In short, accurately identifying which social norms are most important for improving particular outcomes for particular group in particular places requires a contextual approach to measurement.[141] More specifically, efforts need to be made to capture the experiences and views of those most negatively impacted by dominant social norms, since those at the margins will offer very different testimonies to those in more privileged positions. As UN-Women's storytelling initiative in Nepal showed, although state officials insisted that dowry no longer existed as a harmful practice, local storytellers had a very different experience. Such examples confirm the value of participatory approaches to social norms measurement informed by relevant, context-specific gender expertise. The need for norms measures to reflect the priorities of organizations working closely with, or drawn from, the communities in question also emerged as a priority at UN-Women's EGM (see Box 1).

Resourcing research into which norms measures are most helpful to local gender experts, and which criteria should be used to evaluate interventions seeking to shift norms, over which period of time, is in part a matter of epistemic justice.[142] It is also about pragmatic and effective targeting of scarce research resources. Understanding which social norms matter most for gender inequality, how they manifest in practice, how they should be measured and how they can be overcome requires the deep knowledge of local experts. Global metrics, usually designed in Global North contexts and using standardized measures across all countries, are highly unlikely to deliver the context-specific findings required to help policymakers at local and national level select effective interventions.

Robust norms measures also include attention to gender equality outcomes. Just as individuals' expressed beliefs about the illegitimacy of gender violence need to translate into reduced rates of violence against women (see Box 1), improved attitudes about women working for pay need to be examined alongside evidence on improved access to decent work and reductions in gender pay gaps. Organizations need to be explicit in their understanding of the causal relations that explain how existing social norms lead to specific gender unequal outcomes and how changing the former would impact on the latter. Statistical correlation between attitudes and outcomes is no replacement for this deeper thinking about which social norms are the priorities for improving particular outcomes and why.

While we – and many before us – have suggested that measures of social norms need to go beyond using attitudinal surveys as proxies, they also need to go beyond using formal laws as proxies for social institutions (SIGI) or as a sign of a change in discriminatory social norms (UNDP). The institutional dimension of norm change extends beyond law reform. While some approaches to social norms explicitly acknowledge this, referencing comprehensive policy frameworks, strengthening social protection and care systems or investing in gender-responsive institutions (see Annex 2), such institutionally focused causal mechanisms are generally poorly integrated into the measures. Partly as a result, the role of care infrastructure in overcoming norms-related barriers to gender equality is poorly understood in the studies we examined, notwithstanding the on-going vibrancy of research into such infrastructures and the resonance of that research within development

141 See also Cookson et al. 2023 on the need for a compelling case for social norms work on a particular issue and the corresponding need to avoid assuming that social norms are automatically "the primary line of action to address issues of inequality" (p. 53).

142 See, e.g., Fricker 2007. An important aspect of epistemic justice in relation to the measurement of social norms is recognizing the role of local experts as knowledge producers, including of theory.

debates.[143] Connecting such research to norms-focused initiatives, conceptually and empirically, could be an important step forward.

This is not to dismiss legal reform as an institutional priority. Rather, we suggest expanding the horizon of norms research beyond law to better reflect pressing debates in other areas. We also recommend robust research into how state law, international law and other legal orders (such as customary law and religious law) relate to norm change and outcome improvement, both conceptually and empirically. In particular, given the relatively common use of Bicchieri's understanding of social norms as influencing behaviour through "unwritten rules of social conduct",[144] there is a need to robustly interrogate how publicly promulgated and codified state laws interact with other written rules (such as religious laws), as well as unwritten rules, in changing norms. Currently, however, as noted above law reform is often used simplistically as an indicator of social norm change and/or recommended as an intervention that will improve progress towards equality, without such deeper thinking.[145]

143 See especially Razavi 2007 on the care diamond and further debates about care infrastructures in development in, inter alia, Esquivel 2014 and Mahon 2018. More recently, the ILO has focused on care (paid and unpaid) in the context of decent work (see especially ILO 2018a and King-Dejardin 2019), while FEMNET has launched *The Africa Care Economy Index* (Valiani 2022). This measures social recognition and state support for care across a variety of dimensions, including child and eldercare, food production and health care.

144 E.g., World Bank 2022a, p. 112, quoting Bicchieri 2017.

145 For exceptions, see the literature discussed in section 2.3 above, including Htun and Jensenius' (2022) claim that anti-violence legislation impacts outcomes when 'bundled' with feminist activism and supportive media coverage raising awareness of domestic violence as a rights violation. See also recent efforts by the World Bank's *Women Business and the Law* index to assess implementation of gender equality laws. The index relies heavily on the formal existence, on paper, of laws or policies (e.g., it measures the presence or absence of criminal law sanctions for harassment and the existence of maternity leave rights). In 2022, the Bank piloted the use of expert opinions about whether there is more or less gender equality *in practice* than legal gender equality scores for a jurisdiction suggest. Expert opinions for the Middle East and North Africa region suggested that there was *more* gender equality in practice than the legal index scores implied. For example, Oman's average expert opinion score on gender equality was more than 30 points higher than the legal index score (World Bank 2022b, p. 87).

Relatedly, we have noted that law reform is often measured as a sign of shifting social norms about gender, while the work of women's movements that made that legal change possible remains invisible. This is a very large gap in existing metrics, with consequences for policy intervention: The potential of social movements as a lever of change is potentially under-utilized, while the power and promise of law is potentially exaggerated. Fortunately, there are some indexes that have attempted to capture both the magnitude and strength of feminist movements, including the Feminist Mobilization Index (FMI).[146] UNDP's *Human Development Report 2021/2022* linked this measure of movement activism to norm-shifting: The average GSNI value for countries with different FMI scores was compared and an inverse relation was identified (in other words, countries with lower aggregated bias scores have higher scores for feminist movements).[147] However, these attempts to link measures of movement density to norm change, including around particular topics, have been inconsistent. For instance, UNDP connected the level of the FMI with the GSNI, but it did not consider feminist mobilization as a variable or dimension of the GSNI itself. In the light of this gap, there is an urgent need for more robust indicators that can provide better information on how contentious politics relates to norm change on gender issues.

Relatedly, women's movements often collect their own data as part of their campaigning work and their efforts to assess needs and provide services. These data may be more reliable than official statistics, especially on issues that carry social stigma or fear of state prosecution (such as abortion, rape or child marriage). Long-term resourcing of research by, and with, women's movements would provide longitudinal data on key dimensions of gender inequality while also supporting participatory analysis led by local gender experts of the role that social norms play within such inequality. Indeed, as noted by several experts in the EGM (see Box 1), the methods used for measuring social norms can themselves support norm change by empowering those whose experiences of,

146 The FMI goes from 0 to 3; countries with 0 have no movements while countries with 3 have strong movements.

147 UNDP 2022.

and expertise on, discrimination have often been discounted. Most concretely, this should translate into the co-production of the measures, with a central role given to the communities most impacted by the norms in question.

While the long-term significance of women's movements to norm change is often under-emphasized in the measures we examined, the private sector is sometimes uncritically celebrated, even in face of compelling counterevidence. Companies are frequently positioned as progressive partners for achieving gender equality goals, notwithstanding significant concern about their conflicted interests. For example, the discussion documents related to the recently adopted ILO Convention 190 (C190) on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work (which explicitly includes gender-based violence and harassment) expose how the employers' group consistently attempted to weaken the instrument.[148] More precisely, the employers' representative tried to reduce the scope of the convention by insisting that it not extend to all workers – only those accepted by employers to be their employees[149] – and to limit the meaning of "world of work" to places with a direct connection to the workplace.[150] This narrowing would have excluded gig workers and sub-contracted workers along with the arenas in which many employees experience violence and harassment (such as transport to work or company housing). In contrast, workers' representatives consistently argued for stronger coverage so that sub-contracted workers (including home-based workers) and informal workers crucial to the supply chains of major global firms) would receive greater protection. Yet the indexes and studies we examined for this paper frequently praise corporations while paying almost no attention to unions as potentially crucial allies in securing institutional changes to overcome norms about the acceptability of gender-based violence and harassment.

Recommendations in those indexes and studies also typically consider media and social media companies to be crucial partners in information-provision, and in some cases they are research partners in gender and development efforts. There is very little attention to their negative role in harmful social norms and even less to recommendations that might tackle this problem via stronger regulation. Again, however, considerable research has explored the negative effects of media – including social media platforms – on women and girls. These include new forms of sexual violence, such as the sending of unsolicited sexualized images, the non-consensual sharing of private pictures and the creation of AI-generated pornography using images of real women. Feminist movement leaders, activists and women politicians are also subjected to violence on social media platforms, including threats of rape and murder.[151] In order that these realities feed into social norms research, a more balanced approach to the role of media companies and social media platforms in harmful gender norms is required.

In short, any future measurement framework for gender equality and social norms should contain an explicit theory of change for why designated institutional actors, including employers in specific sectors, and media/social media companies, are considered crucial levers. This in turn requires a contextual approach reliant on a wide range of expertise about the positive and negative influence of those actors on gender norms. By definition, this must stretch beyond institutional actors themselves.

148 ILO 2018b.
149 Ibid., para. 16.
150 Ibid., para. 80.

151 See, e.g., Park et al. 2023; Suarez Estrada et al. 2022.

CONCLUSION

Social norms have become a pivotal concern within several development organizations working on gender equality. While understandings of the role played by social norms in upholding, or reducing, gendered disadvantage have evolved significantly over time, metrics aiming to measure social norms and quantify changes are relatively new. Recognizing this intricate landscape, this paper has aimed to provide an initial critical assessment of some key measures of social norms. It also draws on lessons emerging from feminist scholarship and activism to propose some priorities for future measurement.

Through a thorough examination of seven examples, including both widely recognized metrics and smaller-scale, more experimental efforts, we highlight the range and diversity of approaches being used. That said, we identify four common shortcomings from these seven examples: (i) inconsistencies in definitions and measures of social norms within studies; (ii) unclear causal pathways, including about the role of tradition and institutional levers; (iii) poorly evidenced or conceptually under-justified recommendations, including in relation to the role of legal reform and private sector actors; and (iv) the failure to consistently consider (and measure) the role of collective agency and contentious politics. These shortcomings undercut the potential of norms work to contribute to gender equality efforts, in part because they impede the ability to offer clear, well-evidenced guidance on priority interventions. Accordingly, we emphasize the need for development institutions to engage more deeply with social norms, moving beyond treating them as a silver bullet for achieving gender equality or a cultural residual that can explain development failures. This engagement should be coupled with a rigorous effort to measure social norms in ways that do not default to what is easiest to capture.

In particular, measures of individual attitudes remain common and reflections on how institutional mechanisms interact with gender norms remain relatively general, lacking specifications that could lead to more targeted interventions or clearer prioritization. While the law is identified as a key lever of social norm change in several of the examples we encountered, only a few (from the World Bank and UN-Women) clearly identify how and under which conditions law reform is likely to play a major role in norm shifts. Given that formal legal change is not always an effective route for addressing unequal outcomes, we need further research to understand the potential and limitations of using the law in different contexts. In a similar vein, corporations are positioned as positive norm-changing actors in some key studies, yet they are rarely identified as agents with a causal role in instilling, incentivizing or institutionalizing discriminatory norms. This offers a partial and incomplete picture of these actors.

Finally, this paper aimed to identify key priorities to bear in mind when trying to improve the measurement of social norms, including as guided by expertise and scholarship emerging from those leading change initiatives (see Box 1). Acknowledging that measurement is not a neutral process, we emphasize the importance of transparency in choices made during concept formation, data gathering and interpretation as well as careful attention to ensuring that measures are internally consistent and robust. Hence indicators should follow from how norms are defined and conceptualized by that particular development organization and how change in those norms is understood to manifest vis-a-vis gender equality outcomes. Recommendations should be underpinned by evidence, and that evidence needs to be made available to other researchers. Transparency about the limitations of specific measures is also required.

Our final set of priorities goes beyond these standard principles of robust social science to encompass the need for diverse voices and perspectives to inform the definition of good measures. We suggest that social

norms measures should better reflect the priorities of beneficiary groups, empowering them with methodologies aligned with their chosen metrics of success. We urge investment in longitudinal studies, given evidence that interventions may shift norms gradually. We highlight the necessity of assessing actual changes in key gender inequality outcomes if social norms measures are to be linked to tangible impacts on the ground. We suggest that norms measures show a deeper curiosity about the role of legal reform, and simultaneously that they expand their gaze beyond the law. Better consideration of lessons from work on care infrastructures might be fruitful, for example. We also underscore the role of collective and contentious politics in changing social norms around gender and the need for measures to better track this form of politics. While far from complete, we hope that this exploration sets the stage for a more nuanced and effective approach to measuring and addressing social norms in the pursuit of gender equality in future.

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ANNEX 1. SUMMARY TABLE OF KEY EXAMPLES

1. Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) – OECD			
Approach to social norms and gender equality	**Methodology**	**Data sources**	**Key claims/findings**
Gender inequalities are the consequence of discriminatory social norms, understood as "the established set of formal and/or informal laws, norms and practices that govern behaviour in society" (OECD 2023). Achieving gender equality demands transforming discriminatory social norms into gender-equitable ones The SIGI attempts measure "the gaps that legislation, attitudes and practices create between women and men in terms of rights, justice and empowerment opportunities" (OECD 2023).	The SIGI has four dimen sions: discrimination in the family, restricted physical integrity, restricted access to productive and financial resources and restricted civil liberties. Each dimension should be measured through three variables: one measures the level of discrimination in formal and informal laws (legal variable), while the others aim to quantify the level of discrimination in social norms and practices (attitudinal and practice variables, respectively).	The fifth edition (2023) is based on 25 variables – including 15 legal variables, 9 practice variables and 1 attitudinal variable. Legal data is collected through the SIGI Legal Survey 2023. The questionnaire is completed in each country by local lawyers and legal experts, and the information is quality-checked by the OECD gender team and validated by governments.	An increasing number of countries have tackled discriminatory social institutions, particularly through legal reforms focused on protecting women's rights and granting them equal opportunities. Nonetheless, 40 per cent of women and girls still live in countries with high or very high (gender-based) discrimination embedded in social institutions. Discrimination in the family "remains the most challenging dimension of the SIGI framework"

2. Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) – UNDP			
Approach to social norms and gender equality	**Methodology**	**Data sources**	**Key claims/findings**
The GSNI is underpinned by the reconciliation of two frameworks: Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach and the Social Norms Approach. It concludes that "biased gender social norms—the undervaluation of women's capabilities and rights in society—constrain women's choices and opportunities" (UNDP 2023, p. 3) and as such, are a major impediment for gender equality. Personal attitudes are good proxies for measuring social norms.	The GSNI consists of four dimensions – political, education, economic and physical integrity – and 7 indicators. Two GSNI values are computed using different methods of aggregation. The first measures the percentage of people with at least one bias. The second measures the percentage of people with at least two biases. Both indexes range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating higher bias against gender equality and women's empowerment.	The data is gathered through a secondary source: the World Values Survey (WVS). In this survey, respondents are asked to identify in a 5-point agreement scale whether they agree or disagree with a series of given statements. Data for the 2023 GSNI comes for waves 6 (2010–2014) and 7 (2017–2022) of the WVS, which cover 60 and 80 countries, respectively. Samples must be representative of the population, and the minimum sample size in most cases is 1,200 interviewees.	Close to 9 out of 10 men and women hold biases against women. These biases are prevalent in both women and men and widespread in countries regardless of their HDI. 27 countries show improvements, with an increasing number of people with no biases.

3. Reshaping Norms: A New Way Forward – World Bank			
Approach to social norms and gender equality	**Methodology**	**Data sources**	**Key claims/findings**
Drawing from the work of Cristina Bicchieri, and Beniamino Cislaghi and Lori Heise, the World Bank team asserts that "social norms are informal rules of behavior that dictate what is acceptable or appropriate to do in a given situation within a given social context" (World Bank 2022a, p. 112). Social norms thus "reflect individuals' expectations of what they think their reference group believes is acceptable or appropriate" (ibid., p. xviii). Social norms hinder the path towards gender equality. Countries with more restrictive gender norms tend to have worse gender outcomes. Policies can contribute to changes in norms.	First part (gender outcomes and personal attitudes): They constructed an (almost) balanced panel of 39 countries for four key questions on gender attitudes using successive waves of the WVS to estimate the annual change of the share of people with conservative views towards gender. They also ran multiple regressions to estimate correlation coefficients between attitude variables and personal characteristics (gender, age, education, income) and gender outcomes (e.g., share of women working). Second part (social norms and personal attitudes): The team used regression analysis to explore the relationship between gender outcomes (i.e., female labour force participation), GDP per capita and normative beliefs about the gender division of labour in the household.	World Values Survey, four questions: (a) men make better political leaders, (b) university education is more important for boys than for girls, (c) when jobs are scarce men have more right to a job than women, and (d) it is a problem if women have more income than their husbands. Data are collected in only three countries in the region (Bangladesh, India and Pakistan). The Facebook (2020) Survey on Gender Equality at Home, conducted in partnership with, CARE, Ladysmith, the World Bank and UNICEF. This survey was rolled out through Facebook's online platform in which Facebook users across 208 countries, islands and territories were invited to participate. In South Asia, this survey covered 14,158 individuals.	Normative beliefs explain an important part of the gender gaps in economic participation (conditional on the level of GDP per capita), and social normative expectations have greater explanatory power over these gaps than personal beliefs.

4. Gender Equality Attitude Study (UN-Women)			
Approach to social norms and gender equality	**Methodology**	**Data sources**	**Key claims/findings**
Social norms are not defined. Discriminatory social norms threaten gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Furthermore, they have a negative impact on the social, economic and sustainable development of countries.	The percentage of respondents who agreed or disagreed with a given statement (or who considered it important or unimportant). In some areas, there is a comparison between 2018 and 2020 results, sometimes disaggregated by cohorts. In those cases, a significance test (with 99 per cent confidence) was carried out.	Survey involving 20,295 interviews in 20 countries in 2020 (approximately 1,000 interviews per country). The questionnaire included six parts: - Screener (age, gender, urbanicity) - Access + control (11-point scale) - Gender stereotypes (5-points agreement scale) - Roles in society (5-point agreement scale) - Future ideals (5-point importance scale) - Demographics (socio-economic classification/ household income, education and children in household)	Among the 20 surveyed countries, despite areas of improvement and some promising indicators, the findings demonstrate that discriminatory social norms and attitudes continue to hinder progress for women and girls everywhere. When asked about how to secure their countries' future success, most respondents agree that gender equality in all areas is essential (91 per cent), yet gender stereotypes and antiquated attitudes prevail.

5. Gender Equality Matters: Social Norms, Attitudes and Practices (SNAP) of urban millennials in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam – Investing in Women			
Approach to social norms and gender equality	**Methodology**	**Data sources**	**Key claims/findings**
The conceptual framework that underpins the SNAP survey distinguishes between individual and collective beliefs and behaviours. Nonetheless, it also acknowledges that these dimensions are interconnected. According to this perspective, individual behaviour ('what I personally do') is not determined by individual beliefs directly but by normative expectations and empirical expectations, particularly through 'sanctions' (social acceptance or criticism of me and my actions) as well as by structural influences, such as legislation and media, among others (Investing in Women 2020). Efforts should be focused on changing perceptions about what others do, including through media. Exposure to more progressive narratives and depictions of gender roles, can lead to positive changes in personal behaviour.	The SNAP survey aimed at capturing social norms in four main areas: childcare and housework, breadwinning and earning family income, job segregation and leadership at work. To analyse the survey data, Investing in Women employed both a regression analysis and a segmentation analysis. The regression tested for correlations between collective and individual attitudes and behaviours while the segmentation identified groups with distinct attitudes on gender roles. Both analyses looked for significant differences across age, education, religion, marital, parental status and childhood experiences.	The questionnaires focused on respondents' own individual beliefs and behaviours as well as their perceptions of the beliefs and behaviours of others. In each country, Investing in Women gathered data from a sample of 1,000 women and 1,000 men. It matched and weighted survey starts to a population frame representative of that country's 18–40-year-old population. The respondents were matched to the sampling frame on gender and age.	There were rarely links found between what 'I think' leading to what 'I do'. The strongest links to what 'I do' were what 'others do'. What was seen in the media was also a strong influencer on what 'I do'.

6. Measuring Social Norm Change through Storytelling – UN-Women Nepal			
Approach to social norms and gender equality	**Methodology**	**Data sources**	**Key claims/findings**
The study follows Mackie et al.'s (2015) approach to gender social norms, which sees them as underpinning 'those forms of institutionalized behaviours that are defined by gender roles and relations and that reflect an "entire community's beliefs and actions." Social norms are understood to be both built and perpetuated by social expectations, which tend to be embedded but can still be shifted through appropriate interventions. In Nepal, women and other excluded groups continue to be subjected to structural challenges in exercising their rights as equal citizens. Structural discrimination emanating from socio-cultural traditions, norms and practices continue to be a root cause of exclusion. Whilst these norms are deeply embedded in socio-cultural dynamics, power relations and hierarchical social structures, they can nonetheless be shifted through development interventions across a range of sectors and programmes.	Mass storytelling. Individuals were invited to tell stories about significant changes (either positive or negative) in traditional practices, beliefs and social norms affecting women and girls in their communities that they have experienced in the last five years. As a second step, storytellers were encouraged to "signify" their own stories, linking them with emotions, behaviours and shifts in power relations (UN-Women 2023). Stories were analysed through a survey instrument called SenseMaker, which "combines the interpretive depth of qualitative methods alongside the statistical power of aggregated data" (UN-Women 2023, p. 5). Research rigour was further enhanced by the triangulation of data (stories, researchers and perspectives), including some collective moments of 'sensemaking' at community, district and national levels (ibid.).	Over 1,000 stories were collected across five districts in four provinces of Nepal, with storytellers representing a wide range of social and ethnic groups. 85 per cent of the storytellers were women.	Findings emerge among a series of social norms on menstrual isolation, caste-based discrimination, child marriage, witchcraft superstition, disability discrimination, domestic violence and dowry. While all these harmful practices emerged as relatively common, the mass storytelling method allows researchers to ascertain whether they are more prevalent in certain regions or social and ethnic groups.

7. The Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS) and Growing Up GREAT! (GUG!)			
Approach to social norms and gender equality	**Methodology**	**Data sources**	**Key claims/findings**
GUG!'s theory of change is based on the socio-ecological model, which acknowledges the many actors who influence very young adolescents. Efforts to create normative change must include parents, caregivers and communities responsible for engendering a supportive normative environment for adolescents as they mature into adults. Multiple reinforcing change mechanisms contribute to outcomes while simultaneously fostering supportive social norms. While shifts in knowledge and attitudes are essential in paving the way to gender equality and healthy sexuality development, the lack of an enabling environment (family, teachers and community) is a serious obstacle to translating knowledge and attitudinal shifts into lasting behavioural change. A socio-ecological approach is needed to foster better SRH communication with young people.	The GEAS study in Masina and Kimbanseke, Kinshasa, combines (1) an observational cohort research study that explores how perceptions of gender norms are co-constructed in early adolescence and how they predict a spectrum of outcomes, and (2) an impact evaluation to assess the effects of the GUG! intervention among early adolescents in Kinshasa. The impact evaluation component is included in a single GEAS design in Kinshasa defined as a longitudinal quasi-experimental study with an intervention and a control arm, each divided into two subgroups based on school status: In-school and out-of-school adolescents (GEH et al. 2022, p. 6).	Data comes from the GEAS. 2,842 adolescents completed the baseline study between June and November 2017. Nearly 65 per cent of these baseline participants (n=1,856) were followed-up at Wave 5.	Targeted interventions improve pregnancy-related knowledge, but knowledge on contraception is still suboptimal and influenced by the stigmatization of girls' sexuality. Young people's ability to communicate about SRH increases as they age, but some topics – such as sexual relations and pregnancy prevention –remained largely taboo. It might take time for interventions focused on younger generations to expose a shift in norms and attitudes. Shifts in young people beliefs do not translate directly into a change in behaviours unless they are further supported at a broader social level.

Source: Based on OECD 2023; UNDP 2023; UN-Women 2023; World Bank 2022a; Investing in Women 2020, 2023; GEH et al. 2022.

ANNEX 2. SUMMARY TABLE OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) – OECD, 2023			
By type of intervention			
Legal	**Information, dissemination and education**	**Policy**	**Funding**
Reform and amend laws that contain discriminatory provisions and ensure that the legislation is enforced. Awareness-raising campaigns will assist with enforcement of new laws.	Improve data collection Communicate on the benefits of gender equality for all (including men and boys)	Develop a comprehensive policy framework that systematically applies a gender lens and an intersectional approach to a broad range of areas (including economic affairs, health, etc.)	Invest in gender equality, including via new sources of funding Support the public sector in financing gender equality measures (e.g., through a blended finance fund)
By actors targeted			
Specific individuals and groups	**Private sector**	**Media**	**Social movements**
Mobilize community leaders and gatekeepers Involve men and boys	Tech and big data companies can contribute to improved data collection	Programmes and policies seeking to transform discriminatory social norms should engage with influencers and the media (including edutainment, e.g., soap operas, radio and television shows) to shift the public discourse and promote more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours.	Provide (technical and financial) support to civil society organizations and activists

2. Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) – UNDP, 20233			
By type of intervention			
Legal	**Information, dissemination and education**	**Policy**	**Funding**
Need for legal changes that uphold equal rights for women in all spheres of life Regulate gender misinformation and disinformation and addressing hate speech and online violence	Education that develops reasoning and critical thinking can play a central role in value and belief formation and provide understanding of the existence of social norms and how they manifest. Regulate gender misinformation and disinformation and addressing hate speech and online violence	Strengthening social protection and care systems that reach women can increase women's bargaining power within the household.	Invest in gender-responsive institutions in public administration at the national and local levels
By actors targeted			
Specific individuals and groups	**Private sector**	**Media**	**Social movements**
When women are CEOs and represented in boardrooms, there have been positive changes in the use of language in companies. Women leaders have been strong and capable while responding to and accommodating employees' needs.	When women are CEOs and represented in boardrooms, there have been positive changes in the use of language in companies. Women leaders have been strong and capable while responding to and accommodating employees' needs.	Communication and mass media campaigns that change narratives on gender social norms, acknowledging how they impede progress. Media could focus on women as potential leaders and key decision-makers in societies. Take advantage of social media to amplify the messages of Feminist movements	Take advantage of social media to amplify the messages of Feminist movements

3. Reshaping Norms: A New Way Forward – World Bank			
By type of intervention			
Legal	**Information, dissemination and education**	**Policy**	**Funding**
Legal reform can contribute to a shift in incentives, but is rarely sufficient on its own.	Information interventions combined with information that corrects misperceptions of what others do or think about a norm	The use of economic incentives, in the form of transfers, subsidies and access to finance instruments Infrastructure changes (e.g., electrification and transport) can generate direct benefits for women.	
By actors targeted			
Specific individuals and groups	**Private sector**	**Media**	**Social movements**
The visibility of women that have deviated from the main norm (and faced lower than expected or no sanctions) can influence women's aspiration as well as the views of their reference groups.			

4. Gender Equality Matters: Social Norms, Attitudes and Practices (SNAP) of urban millennials in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam – Investing in Women			
By type of intervention			
Legal	**Information, dissemination and education**	**Policy**	**Funding**
		The promotion of flexible work arrangements could result in greater equality in both breadwinning and caregiving norms.	
By actors targeted			
Specific individuals and groups	**Private sector**	**Media**	**Social movements**
		Social pressure can be applied to men through the media and through their own social circles to encourage more equal caregiving arrangements. Media campaigns targeting women to advocate for more equal caregiving may be effective. Media is a possible lever for changing behaviour in relation to job segregation.	

5. Measuring Social Norm Change through Storytelling – UN-Women Nepal			
By type of intervention			
Legal	**Information, dissemination and education**	**Policy**	**Funding**
Legislative change can prompt behaviour change, if enforced.	Socialization and mixing at school challenged widely held social prejudices (particularly in relation to caste-based discrimination). Education for girls was widely valued for social mobility and expanded life chances.		Increasing access to resources can economically empower women in a context of social change.
By actors targeted			
Specific individuals and groups	**Private sector**	**Media**	**Social movements**
		Interconnectedness through the Internet and social media emerged as both an opportunity (through exposure to competing attitudes, practices, etc.) and a risk (e.g., backlash).	The instrumental role of transformative social mobilization programming was flagged in a small but significant number of cases for its impact on triggering critical reflection and behaviour change.

6. The Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS) and Growing Up GREAT! (GUG!)			
By type of intervention			
Legal	**Information, dissemination and education**	**Policy**	**Funding**
	Use an ecological approach to information provision Include sexual education, including contraception, earlier in school curricula		
By actors targeted			
Specific individuals and groups	**Private sector**	**Media**	**Social movements**
Stronger efforts are needed to engage families, health providers and communities to create a supportive environment for adolescents of all ages to seek SRH knowledge and services. Special emphasis needs to be placed on adults and boys.		The study notes that most adolescents indicated that television and radio were their primary sources of SRH information. However, there are no recommendations on how to use media to support interventions.	

Source: Based on OECD 2023; UNDP 2023; UN-Women 2023; World Bank 2022a; Investing in Women 2020, 2023; GEH et al. 2022.
Note: UN-Women's Gender Equality Attitude Study has been excluded from this table because it does not provide concrete recommendations.

UN-WOMEN IS THE UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, UN-WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

UN-Women supports United Nations Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN-Women also coordinates and promotes the United Nations system's work in advancing gender equality.

Beginning with the premise that measurement is not a neutral or power-free process, this paper reviews seven key examples of how social norms are being measured in efforts to achieve gender equality. The examples include studies by the OECD, UNDP, World Bank and UN-Women. The aim is to take stock of these approaches, identify emerging lessons and assess gaps and limitations in order to produce improved social norms measures.

The authors identify four cross-cutting shortcomings from the examples: (i) inconsistencies in definitions and measures of social norms; (ii) unclear causal pathways; (iii) poorly evidenced or conceptually under-justified recommendations, especially about legal reform and the positive role of private sector actors within interventions to shift social norms; and (iv) failure to consider collective agency and contentious politics. These all limit the effectiveness of norms-based work in improving gender equality outcomes. The paper concludes by outlining components of a future framework for measuring social norms and gender equality, suggesting what should be measured, why, how and by whom. The authors put forward two clusters of priorities: (i) improving the internal consistency of measures; and (ii) incorporating emerging best practices through long-term, participatory norms measures that encompass gender equality outcomes and address institutional dimensions of social norm change. A focus on these should result in a more nuanced and effective approach to measuring and addressing social norms towards the achievement of gender equality.

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