Report

Adolescent girls and gender justice: Understanding key capability domains across a variety of socio-cultural settings

Lessons learned and emerging issues from year 1

Carol Watson (Independant Consultant) with Caroline Harper (ODI Research Fellow)

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Acknowledgements

Table of contents

1 Context and background

Poised at the intersection between childhood and the world of adults, adolescent girls face unique challenges to the full development and exercise of their capabilities. And yet they may also hold the key to effecting positive development outcomes that could reverberate across future generations. Investments in the empowerment of adolescent girls are increasingly recognised to be critical in breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty. For such investments to have maximum impact, more evidence is needed to make adolescent girls more visible in policy and planning processes and to identify more precisely the multiple social and cultural forces that shape their experiences and conditions of life.
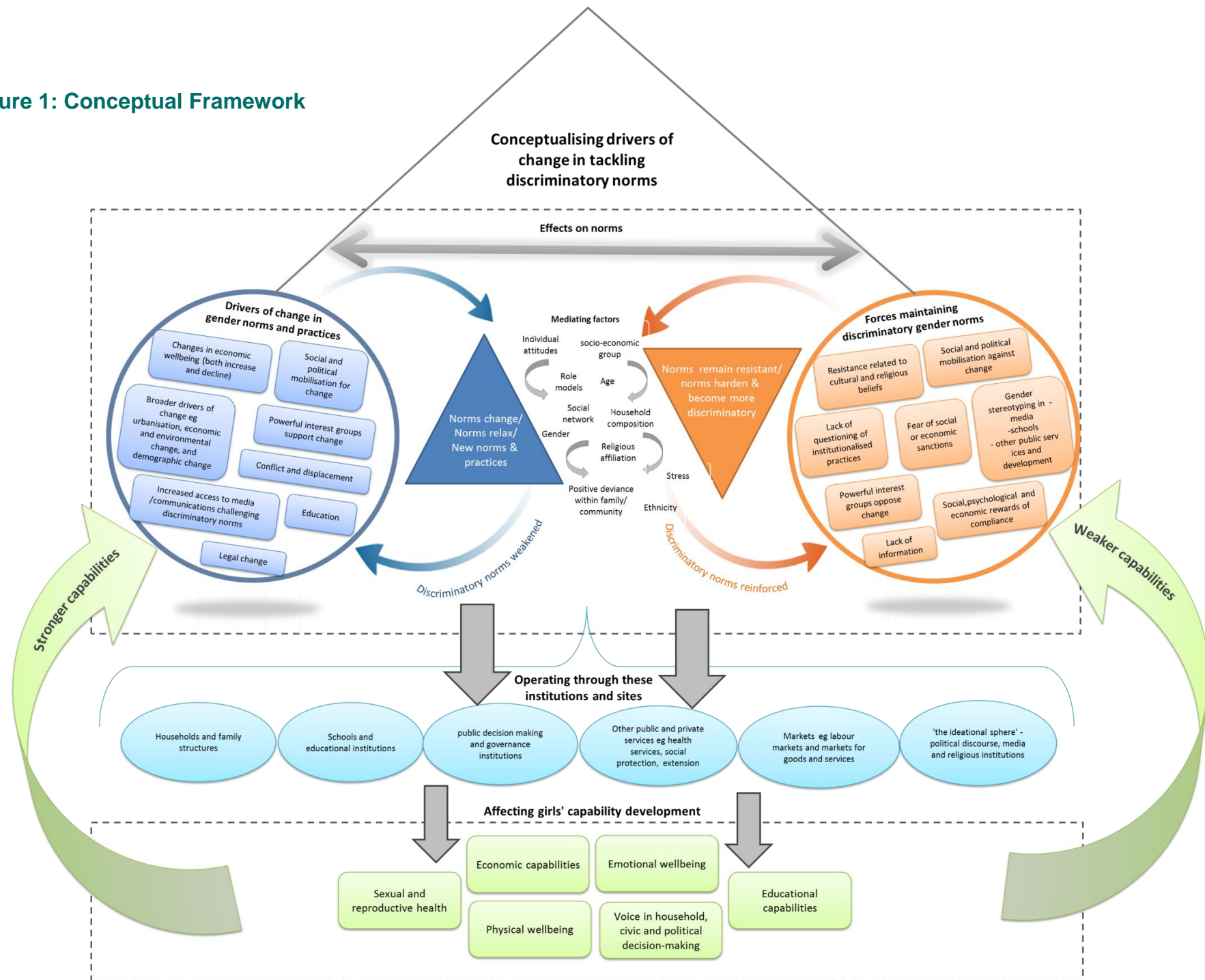
A multi-year, multi-country study is exploring the complex ways in which adolescent girls' capabilities are shaped and/or constrained by gender discriminatory social norms, attitudes and practices, and how other overlapping and intersecting experiences of poverty, deprivation and exclusion serve to intensify and perpetuate vulnerabilities. The study is being conducted by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in partnership with national research teams and has been commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) as part of a flagship programme on Transforming the Lives of Girls and Young Women.

The intended outcomes of the work programme are: (1) to provide guidance on how to generate and use a broad evidence base to better inform national and international policies and programmes for vulnerable adolescent girls and young women; and (2) to contribute to an improved evidence base on understanding and tackling discriminatory social norms in order to support more effective policies and programmes for vulnerable adolescent girls and young women. This aims to promote the realisation of girls' full capabilities and, eventually, gender justice.

The conceptual framework for year 1 research was informed by the capabilities approach to development and underpinned by current thinking around gender justice and entitlements. The study investigated key capabilities in the following domains: education, household and family relations; economic empowerment/access to resources; physical safety and health; psychosocial well-being; and political/civic participation. As reflections on the findings of year 1 research have progressed, the conceptual framework has also evolved. The current framework (see Figure 1) illustrates how both the drivers of positive change in social norms and forces maintaining discriminatory gender norms may be mediated by a variety of factors, operating through a variety of institutions and sites to affect adolescent girls' capability domains.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Conceptualising drivers of change in tackling discriminatory norms

Effects on norms

Drivers of change in gender norms and practices

- Changes in economic wellbeing (both increase and decline)
- Social and political mobilisation for change
- Broader drivers of change eg urbanisation, economic and environmental change, and demographic change
- Powerful interest groups support change
- Conflict and displacement
- Increased access to media /communications challenging discriminatory norms
- Education
- Legal change

Norms change/ Norms relax/ New norms & practices

Discriminatory norms weakened

Mediating factors

Individual attitudes — socio-economic group
Role models — Age
Social network — Household composition
Gender — Religious affiliation
Positive deviance within family/ community — Stress — Ethnicity

Norms remain resistant/ norms harden & become more discriminatory

Discriminatory norms reinforced

Forces maintaining discriminatory gender norms

- Resistance related to cultural and religious beliefs
- Social and political mobilisation against change
- Lack of questioning of institutionalised practices
- Fear of social or economic sanctions
- Gender stereotyping in - media -schools - other public services and development
- Powerful interest groups oppose change
- Social, psychological and economic rewards of compliance
- Lack of information

Stronger capabilities

Weaker capabilities

Operating through these institutions and sites

- Households and family structures
- Schools and educational institutions
- public decision making and governance institutions
- Other public and private services eg health services, social protection, extension
- Markets eg labour markets and markets for goods and services
- 'the ideational sphere' - political discourse, media and religious institutions

Affecting girls' capability development

- Sexual and reproductive health
- Economic capabilities
- Emotional wellbeing
- Educational capabilities
- Physical wellbeing
- Voice in household, civic and political decision-making

2

The first year of field research was carried out between 2012 and 2013 in Viet Nam, Uganda, Nepal, and Ethiopia – countries selected for the scope and variety of their socio-cultural, geographic and development contexts. The specific field study sites in each country are shown below.

1.1 Country study field research sites and focus

- **Viet Nam**: Adolescent girls in two ethnic minority groups of Hmong and Khmer, for which the poverty rates are estimated to be more than 80% and 50% respectively (2011). Research among the Hmong took place in Ta Lung commune in Meo Vac district in Ha Giang, one of the poorest northern mountain provinces, while research among the Khmer was conducted in the moderately poor Dinh Hoa commune of Go Quau district in Kien Gioang, a middle-income delta province in the south of the country.

- **Uganda**: Adolescent girls in hard-to-reach rural communities in the two districts of Mayuge (East Central Region) and Sembabule (Central 1 Region) where poverty levels are high and social indicators are poor. Livelihoods in Mayuge are based on agricultural and fishing, while Sembabule combines agro-pastoralism with other rural livelihoods. Both districts are multi-ethnic and multi-religious, with a variety of Christian groups as well as a large Muslim population.

- **Nepal:** Adolescent girls in the two districts of Doti in Far-West Nepal and Ilam in Eastern Nepal; field research was conducted in one rural and one urban area of each district. Ilam, with a mixed ethnic, religious and caste group composition, is classed as high in terms of human development indicators, infrastructure and services, compared with Doti – predominately Hindu, with mostly Brahmin, Chhetri and Dalits – which is among the least developed districts of Nepal.

- **Ethiopia:** Adolescent girls in the two *woredas* (districts) of Kelela and Kobo in the North East Amhara Regional State. Sites were selected to offer contrasting geographic features, livelihoods, religions and cultures as well as different degrees of infrastructural development and access to non-governmental programmes.

Fieldwork in all four countries used qualitative methods to elicit information, perspectives and experiences from adolescent girls and boys, family and community members, district officials, and national stakeholders on critical domains of adolescent girls' capability development. Research tools included: focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and key informant interviews, as well as intergenerational pairings and historical timelines to capture changes over time; community mapping to provide contextual background; and case studies to provide more in-depth information. Participatory exercises such as 'body mapping' and drawing were also used as complementary techniques to further stimulate and elicit girls' thoughts on different aspects of their experiences. Field research findings were enriched through analysis of available written documentation at both national and district levels.

This paper draws on information contained in the individual country study reports and briefing papers as well as the key findings and lessons learned from field research, which were presented and discussed at a partners' meeting at ODI in London in September 2013. The meeting brought together all country research teams as well as ODI researchers reviewing literature on drivers of change and social norms as a backdrop to preparation for phase two of the country-level research.

2 Empirical lessons learned

2.1 The interconnectedness of capability domains

Fieldwork in each country highlights the depth of interconnectedness between and among the different capability domains, which is of vital importance for policy considerations. Hence, for example, exploring the reasons why adolescent girls drop out of school often confronts issues of early marriage and household roles and expectations, while early marriage not only restricts girls' educational and economic opportunities but also has a negative impact on their physical integrity and reproductive health. Similarly, girls' lack of inheritance rights affects not only their opportunities to pursue education but also their time poverty and, ultimately, their psychosocial well-being. In a number of countries, factors inhibiting adolescent girls' psychosocial well-being were often inextricably linked to concerns about their ability to continue schooling, fears about their physical integrity (including sexual and gender-based violence) or uneasy relations with family and extended family members. Illustrative examples of such interconnected findings are presented below.

2.1.1 Girls' lived realities

- In *Uganda*, study respondents clearly identify early marriage linked to parental desire to obtain bride wealth as a key factor leading to girls' withdrawal from school: *'Most parents don't think girls are meant to go to school – they are meant to marry.'*
- In *Viet Nam*, educational deficits are seen to have spillover effects on other domains, as among Hmong communities in particular, girls who drop out of school early face economic and income-earning limitations, risk early marriage, remain socially isolated, and miss out on the **School girls in Nepal** broader participation opportunities that higher education could offer. By contrast, in the Khmer community, there is a stronger historical legacy of valuing girls' education, and thus adolescents look forward to significantly expanded opportunities, economically and socially.
- In *Ethiopia*, child marriage undermines girls' schooling, reproductive health, voice, mobility and psychosocial well-being; domestic violence is exacerbated by limited access to justice services; and economic dependency and concerns for family 'honour' constrain girls' ability to negotiate bodily integrity.
- In *Nepal*, restrictions on girls' mobility underpinned by fear of sexual violence and assaults on physical integrity contribute to parents' reluctance to send daughters to faraway schools.

Analytically, the fluid and seamless ways in which girls experience the intersections of different aspects of their lives calls for a holistic approach. This should be underpinned by a conceptual framework that is not only robust but also subtle enough to help in developing a deeper understanding of such connections and in identifying the multiple causal factors promoting or inhibiting capabilities at different levels.

Programmatically, an understanding of the systemic nature of girls' experiences points to the need for integrated interventions. These should be guided by broad-based policies that acknowledge inter-linkages and help support positive synergies (such as girls' education initiatives that explicitly encourage delayed marriage).

2.2 The foundational nature of the household and family

Our field studies found the household/family to be 'foundational' as a pivotal site where socialisation takes place and gendered processes and limitations are embedded for a lifetime. Household and family structures and ideologies often conspire to constrain the full realisation of adolescent girls' capabilities, as shown by the examples below.

2.2.1 Gender norms embedded within the household

- In study sites among the Hmong in *Viet Nam*, girls' family lives, according to tradition, are bound by three rules. Before marriage, they must obey their fathers; during marriage, they must follow their husbands' lead; and after widowhood, they must listen to their sons. Often seen as 'other people's women' from the moment of their birth and constrained by the traditions of family preference for sons and filial piety (deference to parents or elders), Hmong girls are socialised from early childhood through adolescence to develop the skills and traits they will need to become 'good' wives and daughters-in-law, spending long hours on domestic chores with little chance to rest, play or socialise, let alone complete secondary education or vocational training. By contrast, Khmer girls in our study sites emerged as examples of positive deviance, having considerably greater voice within their families, supported by mothers and grandmothers who in turn had been afforded a greater role in decision-making within the household.

- In study sites in *Uganda,* patriarchal norms, attitudes and practices that characterise the household division of labour, decision-making processes, marriage and inheritance practices, and future expectations permeate the experience of girls through socialisation processes that are internalised to different degrees by both boys and girls. Such patterns are then replicated in different ways in the wider community and institutional structures that reproduce the underlying norms and values. As one key informant noted: *'Within the first seven years of life, girls are already indoctrinated into the idea of being subject to men. This starts in the household and is reinforced in the community.'*

- In study sites in *Ethiopia*, a substantial number of girls have no say in how they spend their time, following the orders of their parents before they marry and the orders of their husbands or parents-in-law after marriage. In general, girls look after their grandparents, their younger siblings or sick relatives from a young age. This shapes them as caregivers from their earliest years, often at the cost of developing any other role. Additionally, girls often work on family farms, which further cuts into time for education and other activities.

- In study sites in *Nepal*, young married adolescents often become acutely vulnerable and powerless – particularly when cut off from their natal kin through residence patterns which dictate that they should live with their husband's family where they are subject to the demands of their in-laws. As one married adolescent girl commented: '*One is caught in a type of bondage – one is not free.'*

Analytically, such findings highlight the need to more fully comprehend the underlying and/or changing social relations – among siblings, between parents and children, and within the extended family – that maintain or reshape household structures. This will be important in order to understand: the relative weight of formal and informal or customary family codes/laws and religious injunctions in maintaining or combating gender discrimination within the household; the nexus of social values, norms and expectations underlying the 'care economy' and their implications for adolescent girls' capabilities; and changes and persistence in gender roles, responsibilities and capabilities within the family as girls move from natal to marital households.

Programmatically, it is vital to explore more fully the implications for girls of gender inequalities experienced within the household and family. There is also a need to conduct a more thorough mapping of existing interventions that seek to support gender justice at the household level. Key priorities should include: integrating concern for adolescent girls into communications and advocacy work to promote more egalitarian gendered divisions of labour within the household; reviewing and revising discriminatory family codes – whether formal or informal; working with local and religious authorities; and providing special outreach services and policies for married adolescents.

2.3 The interaction of social norms and other contextual factors or characteristics

Most country studies clearly showed that the capabilities of adolescent girls are affected by the prevailing gender norms as well as by wider contextual features of the community or society – such as geography, urban/rural location, or socioeconomic status.

2.3.1 Poverty as a key factor of exclusion

In study sites in *Ethiopia* and *Uganda,* entrenched gender discriminatory norms and practices combined with high levels of poverty and limited service provision in isolated rural communities to significantly limit the development of adolescent girls' capabilities. This seems to be particularly the case in Uganda.

Moreover, while certain characteristics of gender discrimination may be common across all settings, particular gender norms manifest themselves differently in different settings, where their form and intensity may vary by group characteristics (ethnicity, caste, religion, culture, political heritage).

2.3.2 Socio-cultural norms and gender

In *Nepal,* gender norms were seen to be less discriminatory among indigenous groups than among Hindu castes. In *Viet Nam*, Hmong girls are seen to be in 'double jeopardy' in terms of exclusion from mainstream society as gendered norms and ethnicity intertwine to shape their lives while Khmer girls faced arguably less discriminatory gender norms than the Kinh majority, underscoring the importance of disaggregating the category of 'ethnic minorities' and exploring the specific historical and socio-cultural trajectories of each minority community.

Analytically, these findings raise the challenge of how (and to what extent) to unravel the effects of contextual factors (such as poverty, rurality, and lack of access to services/opportunities) from the effects of social norms on limitations in capabilities so as to determine causality. Does a poor rural girl have limited opportunities for empowerment because she is poor, because she lives in a rural area, or because she is a girl – or is it all three? Which is the direct and which is the indirect cause, and how are they linked or reinforced? The study findings also raise questions about how to more fully comprehend the specificities of gender norms linked to group characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, culture, and political heritage, and how to represent such specificities within broader analytical conclusions. Are broader conclusions even possible, or is everything context-specific?

Programmatically, it is clear that a multi-causal framework is needed, which can identify different factors leading to exclusion, discrimination and the denial of opportunities for girls to develop their capabilities, as a basis for evidence-based programming to enhance such opportunities. It is also clear that specificities matter and that, within a broad array of interventions available to support adolescent girls' empowerment, particular options or design features are needed to tailor approaches to different socio-cultural contexts.

2.4 Gaps between policy, practice and local realities

The country studies highlight significant gaps between policy and practice in terms of implementation on the ground of the broad array of formal laws, policies and programmes that exist at national level to promote gender equality and gender-responsive services.

2.4.1 Policy and practice: significant gaps

- In *Ethiopia,* while the national Constitution promotes gender equality and women's rights, it also recognises the legitimacy of customary or religious laws, particularly on family matters, which do not always uphold such equality. Moreover, while significant national efforts are being made to expand educational opportunities for girls and improve reproductive health services, demand for these services is still limited by many factors, including the prevalence of discriminatory social

norms that curb the ability of girls to access such services freely. Meanwhile, efforts to implement laws against early marriage face obstacles as parents continue to flout the law and avoid sanctions by taking such marriages 'underground'.

- In *Uganda*, while an enabling legal and policy environment for gender empowerment and adolescent girls' development exists, stakeholders point to large gaps in application and practice, with weak implementation and enforcement and inadequate allocation of human and financial resources. At the same time, national reform measures aimed at gender equality often meet with considerable resistance, as is the case with current efforts to revise the Marriage and Divorce Bill, which is faltering around clauses pertaining to cohabitation, polygamy, co-ownership of matrimonial property (particularly land), and marital rape.
- In *Nepal,* the School Sector Reform programme has expanded opportunities for girls' education by providing cash or cooking oil as incentives to their parents and raising awareness of the importance of education for girls. Nevertheless, girls continue to face gendered obstacles to retention in school, including time spent on domestic duties, restrictions on mobility, lack of appropriate sanitation in schools, and social practices related to menstruation.
- In *Viet Nam,* where despite economic liberalisation and increasing decentralisation, the one-party state retains tight control over the national policy arena, top-down approaches can stifle both innovation and targeted responses to strategic and practical gender needs in particular contexts. For example, while there is a unified push to encourage families to have no more than two children, there is insufficient attention paid to the diverse drivers of fertility in different communities.

Analytically: It is important to investigate more fully the reasons why existing national laws and policies are not being implemented in particular country settings. Is it primarily a capacity gap at sub-national level such that local officials and service providers lack the resources, know-how, power or authority for implementation? Is it more of a communication gap, whereby the full import of the laws and policies has not been sufficiently transmitted to sub-national levels? Is there an overall lack of political will, which means that the laws and policies are paper policies only? Or is it actually a process whereby the formal laws and policies are conflicting with or contradicting informal laws, norms and practices, and thereby meeting resistance at all levels from a series of 'gatekeepers' whose actual values and/or vested interests are at stake?

Programmatically: In addition to addressing existing capacity or communication gaps, policy and programming – from the national to the local level – needs to focus more strongly on how social norms, attitudes and practices may be affecting both the supply and the demand for key services, and limiting the ability of girls to claim and to benefit from their entitlements. In particular, it is critical to work at community level with local officials, elders and other opinion-makers or 'gatekeepers' in order to change the attitudes that hinder girls' development.

2.5 Forces of change and persistence

Findings from all country studies indicate that while some norms seem to have changed over time (particularly, it would appear, around education, in line with greater opportunities now available for girls), others remain particularly 'sticky' and resistant to change (notably domestic roles and expectations; gender-based violence; and 'son bias' in its varied dimensions).

Moreover, some behavioural patterns might change faster than the attitudes governing them, or vice versa (for example, parental investment in the education of daughters even though sons remain more important to them for future support); and some segments of society or even individuals may hold different perceptions of existing social norms and the need for change or continuity (examples of 'positive deviance' versus 'gatekeepers').

Some broad-stroke comparisons of change and continuity are presented for illustrative purposes below; however the complexity encountered within each country setting makes any further generalisations problematic.

Table 1: Change and continuity in gender norms and practices: selected examples

Country study	Change is occurring	But discriminatory norms and behaviour persist
Viet Nam (Hmong)	• More Hmong girls are completing lower secondary school • Child marriage is becoming less common • Ideal family size is rapidly shrinking	• Upper secondary school remains out of reach • Social norms – especially filial piety and domestic responsibilities – constrain full capabilities • Social isolation prevails among adolescent girls
Viet Nam (Khmer)	• More Khmer girls are completing high school and going on to tertiary education • Parents support girls' decision to select their own marriage partners • Girls expect to have only one or two children • Girls are actively and equally involved in community cultural activities	• Inadequate access to sufficiently detailed information and advice on sexual and reproductive health issues is still a concern to adolescent girls • Opportunities for adolescent girls to seek advice from trusted adults in safe spaces are also lacking • Vocational training opportunities remain limited and highly gendered
Nepal	• Girls' education is becoming more valued • Early marriage is less common • Girls are consulted more in the selection of their husbands	• Gender-based violence is common • Girls combine schooling and household chores • Son bias remains prevalent; women are expected to bear male children • Girls are considered the guardians of family honour and prestige
Ethiopia	• Girls are pursuing new economic opportunities, including labour migration • The incidence of divorce is rising as girls seek to achieve freedom after they have been married at an early age	• Child marriage remains prevalent • Mobility is often restricted • Domestic violence is widespread and seen as 'normal' • Menstrual taboos and misconceptions remain, fuelling early marriage
Uganda	• Government policies are contributing to expanded educational opportunities for girls • Age at first marriage is rising in some communities	• Girls lack voice and decision-making ability, as well as income-earning potential and skills • Sexual and gender-based violence is prevalent and legal recourse and protective services are weak • Access to reproductive/sexual health information and services is severely constrained

Analytically, such findings bring to the fore a number of questions concerning how best to investigate and account for such variable change and persistence. Do differences depend on underlying contextual factors (as outlined in Section 3); on the individual (which would bring to the fore considerations of personal agency); or on the norm itself (with some norms more embedded in institutional sites, structures and processes than others)? Or does all change involve a variety of factors operating at different levels and varying in degree or intensity, as suggested by our conceptual framework? Drivers of change in general and in particular contexts need to be more fully explored, as suggested below.

2.5.1 Exploring drivers of change in more depth

- Why and to what extent does poverty drive different outcomes in different contexts? In some contexts (for example, **Uganda**) it can be a contributing factor to gender discriminatory norms, enacted through bride wealth and early marriage; and in other contexts (for example, *Ethiopia*) it might help 'relax' norms through opportunities for greater economic participation in migration.
- How can one understand/account for the role of political ideologies (Maoism in *Nepal;* communism in *Viet Nam*) in breaking down certain gender norms? And what are the implications for other national contexts where such ideologies do not exist or are not as strong?
- How can one more fully understand and account for the role of religion (mentioned particularly in *Nepa*l, *Ethiopia* and *Uganda*) in either maintaining 'stickiness' or accommodating change?
- Why do some individuals demonstrate 'positive deviance' in promoting girls' capabilities in the face of prevailing norms and practices (e.g., the father in *Uganda* who refused to accept bride wealth for his daughter's marriage; the uncle in *Ethiopia* who registered his niece in kindergarten without the mother's knowledge)? How do some girls themselves manage to exert their own agency in order to advance their interests *('I can choose my own happy life',* stated one 16-year-old girl in *Viet Nam, who went on to say: 'My parents can't provide the life I need or afford it – they can't make me happy so I have to make my own choices, and treasure my happiness. I want to finish school.'*
- Why, in so many different settings represented in our country studies, do women and girls continue to face gender-based violence, mostly at the hands of people who are in regular contact with them? What is it about norms surrounding male violence that makes them so 'sticky'?
- What is the specific role and effect of information and communication technologies (ICT) in either reinforcing or changing gender norms? Mobile phones, for example, were mentioned in most country studies as a significant factor in expanding social connectedness for adolescent girls who are otherwise isolated due to restrictions on their mobility; but they were also associated in some countries with increasing risk of exploitation and trafficking.
- What role does community-level positive deviance play in supporting adolescent girls' capabilities, and how can this be enhanced from a policy or programme perspective?

Programmatically, one priority would be to identify positive forces of change and to build on and support them through appropriate policies and programmes. These should be accompanied by culturally appropriate attempts to counteract forces leading to the persistence of gender discriminatory norms and practices.

3 Conceptual lessons learned

3.1 A need to re-examine old analytical constructs

The country studies raise issues that resonate with seminal feminist theoretical constructs. It may be useful to revisit such constructs through the lens of adolescence and with particular reference to social norms, and to make these more explicit within our conceptual frameworks for moving forward. A number of thematic areas that might offer scope for more detailed investigation are identified below. Taken together, these might serve as useful entry points to illuminate our understanding of gendered social norms and practices; they could also pave the way toward integrated interventions that take full account of the manifold ways in which gender discrimination manifests itself in the inter-linked domains and institutional structures that characterise the lives of adolescent girls and their families.

3.1.1 Public and private

To varying degrees, adolescent girls in the study countries experience restrictions on their mobility as well as particular expectations about their behaviour that are linked to ideologies of 'public' and 'private' domains. As depicted in a long body of feminist writing, the social norms underlying such ideologies function – with varying degrees of influence – to exclude girls and women from developing and exercising capabilities within the public domain (including pursuit of higher education, engagement in economic opportunities, participation in civic or political affairs, development of social networks beyond the immediate family or neighbourhood) while maintaining them under male control within the family or household.

Critical analysis has highlighted both the dichotomous nature of public and private domains – particularly in settings where gender-segregation is at its most extreme – as well as the ways these two domains intersect, ebb and flow, reassembling themselves in various guises in different social, cultural and historic contexts. It would be useful to examine more fully the social norms governing ideologies and practices around public and private spaces, focusing on how these affect capability development for adolescent girls.

Ideologies of public and private in practice

In *Viet Nam*, the government's post-Doi Moi emphasis on tradition and culture, intended to fight the 'social evils' that were seen to accompany globalisation, has had unintended consequences for girls and women – particularly their private roles. By pronouncing women 'the soul of the family', the government has placed women's domestic roles at the 'mythic locus of traditional cultural values and a production mode worthy of government support' – ironically limiting women's freedom by placing them on a pedestal.

In *Uganda*, particular gender-based limitations on girls' participation arise out of deeply entrenched ideologies of 'public' and 'private' domains, with adolescent girls strictly consigned to the latter. Their scope for participation and leadership is greatest in schools, but even here, they face limitations, particularly the 'shyness' that they have been socialised to exhibit from an early age. One notable development, however, has been the sudden arrival of the mobile phone in the lives of many adolescents, which allows them to expand their social networks. However, some older community members have expressed negative opinions about this new technology.

3.1.2 Honour and shame

The honour and shame complex is a well-known anthropological construct used to depict the social norms and ideologies underpinning cultural enactments of male control over female bodies and behaviours, which are seen to be the repositories of family 'honour'. This complex is most apparent in cultures that are characterised by the practice of extremes of behaviour around the safeguarding of virginity and female chastity through so-called 'honour killings', female genital mutilation/cutting, and strict enforcement of female seclusion or 'purdah'. However, elements of this complex might also be detected – at least on an ideological level – in a number of other cultural and religious traditions that place a premium on the 'purity' of girls and women and emphasise the need for social controls over their sexuality. As such, this complex lends explanatory power to social norms around adolescent girls' physical integrity, early marriage, and restricted mobility, as well as around behavioural expectations of the 'good wife'.

Country studies identified explicit as well as implicit social norms connected to the honour and shame complex and described how these affect adolescent girls, as illustrated below. This might serve as a fruitful strand for additional investigation.

Culturally proscribed feminine behaviours

In *Nepal*, challenges to achieving well-being of girls include the persistence of restrictive social institutions and norms. Many of these norms are guided by Hindu notions of chastity and honour, which are applied to women and girls more than men and boys. These restrictive norms translate and guide social structures and power relations within the private boundary of the family and also in public spaces. Gendered norms and notions of what makes a 'good' daughter or woman continue to constrain adolescent girls' abilities to realise their capacities. Girls are expected to be submissive, docile and shy, and not to be outspoken, opinionated and mischievous. Similarly, girls' behaviour is closely linked to notions of honour, shame and prestige, with girls feeling they are under the close and continued scrutiny of society.

This means girls are constantly under pressure to think about the family name and honour in their daily lives, ranging from the clothes they wear to the way they behave in public. Thus a girl cannot stay overnight at a friend's house; she cannot be seen to roam around/be mobile; she cannot be seen to be talking/interacting with boys. While boys can express their sexuality and sexual curiosity, girls face great pressure not to show interest in knowing about sex, sexual activity, or sexual appeal. Fear of being ostracised from society is the main reason girls do not challenge established norms, although this does not stop them from criticising and questioning both the norms and their own situation.

In *Ethiopia*, appearing in public places with male friends who are not relatives creates suspicion and is a cause for gossip; girls' mobility is particularly restricted when they are unmarried, so a few female adolescent respondents felt that early marriage, followed by a divorce, was one way to be 'liberated'. Other girls find the pressures of social norms of behaviour to be unbearable and prefer to leave the community, seeing migration as a way to free themselves from such burdens.

3.1.3 Production and reproduction

The contradictions inherent in the social organisation of systems of production and reproduction lie at the centre of current debates about the gender implications of the 'care economy'. Feminist analyses have documented women's unequal participation in labour markets and productive employment opportunities as well as the common phenomenon of gender stereotyping of jobs as typically 'male' or 'female', with the latter often accorded less value in terms of social recognition and monetary remuneration. Parallel analyses have highlighted the unequal division of labour within the household, with 'reproductive' chores linked to the care and maintenance of the household and its members commonly defined as 'women's work'. This has been identified as a major factor contributing to 'time poverty' among women and girls, limiting their opportunities to participate in other activities – including paid work, civic engagement, and personal development.

The social norms that underpin and maintain such systems of production and reproduction both reinforce and are reinforced by prevailing notions about the family, about women's 'caring' nature, and about the 'proper' contributions of men and women to the domestic and wider economy. For adolescent girls, breaking out of such socio-cultural expectations about their future roles and contributions can be a huge challenge that requires more than just expanded access to educational opportunities, vocational training, or childcare provision at the workplace – it requires major changes in expectations about gender roles and the social norms that support them. The country studies highlighted the ways in which gender discrimination in systems of production and reproduction were experienced by adolescent girls in different settings, as illustrated in the case of Ethiopia below.

Redefining gender roles through migration in Ethiopia

In *Ethiopia*, the division of household roles and responsibilities is made along gender lines. This limits girls mainly to domestic activities, while boys are able to generate income outside the household. This division of roles and responsibilities is seen as normal: *'Boys do not bake injera* [teff flour flatbread] *as girls do not plough.'*

Adolescent girls in the Ethiopian study areas faced a number of discriminatory social norms that create disadvantage in the economic realm compared to boys: they have weaker negotiating power within households resulting in a lower accumulation of assets; the assets they do accumulate or are given generally come under their husband's management once they get married; they face work segmentation, which pushes them to lower-paid activities or lower wages for doing the same work as boys; and the gendered nature of the economy leaves less time for girls to complete their studies and engage in well-remunerated activities. All of these factors contribute to adolescent girls' lower social and economic status.

This might be one of the reasons why migration (with adolescent girls primarily working as housemaids for families in the Gulf states) has become such an attractive prospect in some parts of Ethiopia, as it is seen to offer a more transformative potential in enabling them to escape from the limitations of social gender norms at home. Interestingly, while the jobs they undertake when they migrate are in the reproductive realm of the household and come with attendant risks of abuse, the monetary rewards for such care work for others brings a value that is not attached to care work within their own families.

3.1.4 Patriarchy

Perhaps because the household was such a critical locus of research, the concept of 'patriarchy' came quite clearly to the fore in the country studies, where different systems of patriarchal control of the family were encountered, and their implications for girls were analysed. In patriarchal societies, son bias is common: male children are valued for the continuation of family lineage and support in old age, because girls join other families on marriage. This contributes to inheritance patterns that favour boys and men. Household decision-making is also largely the prerogative of men, as decision-making overall is generally a male domain. This might extend to men controlling any income earned by women from their own enterprises or labour, or limiting women's asset accumulation. This is particularly problematic because women can rarely own land in their own right and cannot generally access credit without their husband's (or father's) permission.

It is important to identify and analyse the ways in which patriarchal structures and ideologies may limit gender equality within the family, but also to understand how the social norms that underpin patriarchy may replicate themselves in the wider institutions of society.

Multiple forms of patriarchy in Uganda

In **Uganda**, a key informant stressed that: '*Patriarchy and its multiple and evolving forms provide the fundamental framework patterning the lives of women and girls. If we are really going to look at adolescent girls, we need to understand the deep roots of patriarchy.'*

She noted how this permeated everything in Ugandan society – family, politics, religion – and was being reinforced and reshaped all the time – for example, through patronage politics and the introduction of new elements into marriage ceremonies, whereby the bride is expected to kneel before the groom. Gender equality

activists are meeting enormous resistance and backlash, crystallising at times around issues of 'culture', which itself is being recast in the image of patriarchy.

3.1.5 Son preference as a particular manifestation of patriarchy

Beyond its more extreme form of female infanticide, which has been identified as a critical problem – particularly in Amartya Sen's treatise on 'missing girls' in South Asia – son preference manifests itself in a number of ways in our country studies, including pressure on women to bear sons, preferential treatment of sons within the family, and parental investment in sons over daughters, including for education. These are, in turn, reinforced and sometimes even codified in family law, inheritance and marital practices.

It is therefore important to explore what son preference may mean - in both ideology and practice - for adolescent girls and young women in different contexts, and to trace and delineate the multiple channels through which it might deny gender justice by stunting the development of girls' capabilities. Son preference, so intricately linked up with gender identities and future expectations, might in this way be conceptualised as part of the 'foundational' domain of the household where it can feature as an embodiment of the patriarchal structures, norms, and behaviours that take root at the household level. As already seen, these may then be reflected in different ways in the wider society, with implications for gender justice in all capability domains.

Our country examples of son preference illustrate just how entrenched it is in patrilineal social systems where the male line preserves the lineage, regulates structures of inheritance and asset accumulation, and ensures happiness in the afterlife – backed up by ritual and everyday behaviours (as shown in the examples below). At the same time, there are examples to suggest that the norms and practices linked to son bias may also be changing – or at least bending – in certain contexts. The forces underlying change as well as continuity need to be more fully understood in order to identify actions that can be taken to increase the value of girls as perceived within the household, and to reinforce positive change.

Son bias in various forms

- In *Viet Nam*, sons are seen as crucial to continue the family line and to provide support in old age; their birth improves the status of their mothers within the family, and the status of their fathers within the community; women often feel great pressure, particularly from husbands and in-laws, to have a son. Families with limited resources typically prefer to invest in sons, which keeps girls out of school, places a too large share of housework on their shoulders, and pushes them into the labour market in higher numbers.
- In *Nepal*, pressure to bear sons was experienced differently in the two research settings. In Doti, pressure to have a son often outweighs any education or awareness received on family planning. As one youth volunteer put it: *'Everyone knows two children are god's gift, but if they have a daughter, they keep on having children...'* In Ilam, however, there is little evidence of son preference; older women maintained that: *'Even if they have two daughters they are satisfied. They say if a son can do anything, daughters can also do it.'*
- In *Ethiopia,* parents still prefer to invest in the education of their sons because daughters are expected to get married and move to their husband's home. Several girls interviewed expressed their regret at not having been educated as a result of this parental priority for the education of their brothers.
- In *Uganda*, a 15-year-old girl put it plainly: '*For us girls, what are we expected to do? It looks like we are not liked in many places – including home... It's like everyone wants you to get out of the way. Tell me, what's wrong with being a girl?'*

3.1.6 Male violence and norms of masculinity

Findings from the country studies uncovered disturbingly high levels of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, reports of rape and 'defilement', and insults and humiliation in homes, schools and other settings. Moreover, fear of male violence against girls was commonly cited, particularly by parents, as a reason for maintaining girls close to home, denying them schooling if distances to school were too long, and excluding them from public spaces in general. Male violence – particularly in the form of domestic violence – was often

considered to be the 'norm' that was accepted, or even condoned; some women and girls even interpreted a husband's violence as a sign of 'love'.

Understanding the masculinities–violence nexus is crucially important to finding ways to mitigate what has been found in many settings to be a masculine tendency towards violence. Feminist scholarship on 'masculinities' seeks, among other things, greater understanding of how being violent may enter into the gender identity of boys and men, and how this may be changing or maintained across different generations. This, in turn, highlights the need to understand socialisation processes of boys and girls by using a holistic gender lens, and to explore more thoroughly the links between violence (or the threat of violence) and male power.

Male violence as social control

- In both *Uganda* and *Ethiopia,* girls give voice to pervasive fears of male violence which they experience as a threat to their use of public space. As one girl explained in *Ethiopia*: '*Boys and men bother me when I go out to town. They call me a whore or a daughter of a whore. Whether they are educated or not they are the same. It is difficult to walk around without being pestered.*' Girls in a focus group in *Uganda* described how, '*When coming from school there is a risk of rape from men along the way so a girl has to leave school early, wait for colleagues and move in a group, or carry stones to throw at them. If it was possible a girl needs to be in a boarding school.*' Young girls in one community in Uganda recounted experiences of '*bad boys*' from the town taking marijuana and '*hijacking girls on the long lonely way where there is no one to rescue you. They once chased us nearly all the way home.*'

- In all countries, domestic violence was reported to be pervasive. In *Nepal,* when a girl marries and moves into the husband's home, she may face physical abuse and beating from the husband and, particularly in Doti, from the mother-in-law who may verbally abuse her. In the past, she might even be expelled from the house if she were judged to be not performing her expected household tasks. Women often fear to report domestic violence either because they do not see it as a violation of their rights or they cannot risk being thrown out of the house, as they are financially and socially dependent on their husbands. In *Ethiopia,* domestic violence is still seen as 'normal' and is simply endured, undermining young women's physical security and integrity. Respondents identified a variety of situations in which domestic violence is perpetrated and often 'justified', including husbands' jealousy – when girls sometimes even accept the blame. The same is true in *Uganda*, where district officials informed us that, '*In fact, at community level, they say that if a man beats a woman it's a sign of love.*' In *Viet Nam*, among the Hmong, the issue of alcohol-fuelled domestic violence was something almost all women faced: '*Hmong people up here, only one [out of ten] does not get drunk often. All those men will drink, but one will not get drunk and [not] beat his wife and children. The other nine men like drinking and then will beat their wives when they get home.*'

- *Ethiopia*, *Uganda* and *Viet Nam* are all marked by traditions of marriage by abduction. While these are now fading out and have, in fact, been outlawed, the ideology of men's physical dominance over women seems to persist and, in some cases, the practice continues. In some areas of *Ethiopia*, particularly in the south, abduction is still considered a legitimate way of procuring a bride; girls are 'kidnapped' for marriage on their way to school, or even from within the school compound itself, by the parents of boys. In *Uganda*, a girl who has been raped might be forced to marry her rapist if subsequent negotiations between the two families so decree, thus continuing in a new form the tradition of marriage by abduction and force. In *Viet Nam,* however, this tradition appears to be dwindling and no longer a significant threat.

3.2 The importance of cultural definitions and understandings of adolescence

We started our research with a clear-cut age group in mind, of girls between 10 and 19 years, as the standard definition of adolescence. We broke this down into younger girls (10–14) and older ones (15–19) and were willing to give some consideration to young women as well, since they presaged so much of the near future for adolescents.

What we did not anticipate were the different cultural understandings and meanings of adolescence we might encounter in the field, nor the possibility that some communities may not even have a category within the lifecycle called 'adolescent'. What we found in reality was that communities defined life trajectories for girls in a number of different ways – not always, or even usually, in terms of age, but more often in terms of physical characteristics (particularly the stage at which they developed breasts) marking the debut of womanhood that would be fully defined (irrespective of age) by either marriage or pregnancy. Could it be that lack of cultural recognition of a long intermediate phase between childhood and womanhood contributes, in part, to early marriage practices and withdrawal from school?

Definitions of 'youth' were also variable, but often made with reference to an older age group, and sometimes one that is predominantly male. Moreover, in societies organised around vertical hierarchies such that age confers higher status and power, there seemed to be little acceptance of children and young people's right to participate in decision-making or discussions at the household or community levels.

These differences in cultural conceptualisations of age groups and the social norms governing their characteristics are important, as they are linked to policy and programme considerations that need to be made in the establishment of appropriate services or support. Particular attention is needed to characterisations of married adolescents, who by virtue of marriage, which transforms them into adults, might not be considered eligible for participation in youth or adolescent-specific services.

From girl to woman: abrupt transitions

- In *Uganda,* an abrupt change from childhood to womanhood marks girls' experience of adolescence, underpinned by cultural conceptions of sexual maturation as the defining characteristic. Girls' sexual maturation – manifested by menstruation and the development of breasts – was seen to mark the dividing line between girlhood and womanhood, with no transitional period of 'adolescence' in between, unlike for boys. As one district official explained, *'If a girl starts having menstrual periods (around nine or 10) she stops being a child… She is now a woman. Also when she has a child – even if she is only 13 years old, she is considered a woman.'* A Muslim cleric further explained that '*Once a girl leaves her home for marriage and gives birth, she becomes a woman.'* By this logic, he continued, *'It is only boys who can be adolescents or youth.'* Thus, for girls, 'maturity' is linked more or less directly to 'physical maturity' in the sense that she has 'ripened', as demonstrated by the popular saying, '*What is immature cannot ripen.'* Both girls and boys, by virtue of their youth, had generally little scope for participation in household or community decision-making, with girls particularly excluded, even (sometimes) from participation in school discussions, out of behavioural norms of 'shyness' that have been internalised by the girls themselves.
- In *Viet Nam*, local and national informants, including girls themselves, confirmed that the very concept of adolescence as a crucial stage in a girl's life cycle is relatively new among the population in general and among the Hmong in particular. It is a concept that has, to date, been neglected by government and development organisations alike, and is rooted in law, with the Vietnamese legal code setting the age of majority at 16. Moreover, in Vietnamese culture, youthfulness is a significant barrier to participation in discussions or decision-making, as reflected in the saying '*Trung sao khon hon vit?'* ('How can the egg be wiser than the duck?').

3.3 Meeting practical and strategic gender interests

Our research has been conducted with a view to strengthening the evidence base to contribute to efforts to 'transform the lives of girls and young women'. It thus seeks to identify and understand the structural nature of gender inequalities and the social norms, attitudes and practices that hold such inequalities in place. In this way it addresses, first and foremost, girls' strategic gender interests, defined as those most instrumental in moving toward equity and empowerment.

At the same time, however, our research hopes to contribute to the understandings needed for the fulfillment of practical gender interests as well – those relating to current gender roles, responsibilities and expectations, and

helping girls and young women to navigate concrete life experiences. As research moves forward, particularly with the enhanced focus on change, it will be important to capture the potential interaction of practical and strategic gender needs and interests, analysing how fulfillment of one may also contribute to fulfillment of the other, and so lead to longer-term transformation.

Understanding how discriminatory social norms operate in different forms and at different levels is important for both strategic and practical policy and programme development, as is an understanding of potential entry points for positive change. It is likely that a two-pronged approach is needed, to: (1) support initiatives that address discriminatory social norms head-on – through laws, policies, social mobilisation and behavioural change/communications activities; and (2) support programmes designed to expand opportunities and services for girls so as to enhance their capabilities as one step towards a broader process of social change.

Our conceptual framework and the analytical lessons drawn from our country studies indicate that a variety of interventions are needed, spanning different sectors, in order to address (directly and indirectly) the complex web of social norms and practices that limit adolescent girls' capabilities, and to support context-specific forces that are trying to promote gender justice. The following recommendations emerged from our country studies as critical across the different domains that were the focus of our investigation.

Practical programme and policy recommendations with strategic potential

- Support girls to complete *secondary education* (which is seen as optimal for empowerment and transformation) including through enhanced agency on the part of adolescent girls. Complementary efforts to create gender-sensitive school environments, teaching–learning practices and curricula are a critical part of this process.
- Expand access to non-gendered *vocational training and economic opportunities*, including self-employment (which is essential for achieving gender equality in the productive realm), and reform discriminatory employment and property laws to create more equitable access to productive assets and resources.
- Strengthen *adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services* so that girls can gain greater autonomy over their bodies and physical well-being.
- Create *'safe spaces'* where girls can gather without fear, socialise with peers, and discuss concerns with trusted adults as a means of building both horizontal and vertical social capital.
- Develop programmes for *mentoring and support* and *enlist role models* to serve as positive examples of change and success to which adolescent girls can aspire.
- Strengthen *systems of protection and access to justice* for adolescent girls, and support them in voicing their claims to such entitlements.
- Reform *family codes,* including formal and informal laws related to marriage and inheritance and family well-being, so that gender justice in the reproductive realm is inscribed in law.
- Promote opportunities for *civic engagement*, participation in clubs, and leadership positions for girls in their schools and communities.
- Conduct well-designed and targeted *communications and awareness-raising activities*, including among opinion leaders, men and women, and boys and girls, with the aim of changing discriminatory attitudes and practices and achieving consensus around goals for gender justice.
- Supplement the above with *social mobilisation efforts* and the nurturing of both grassroots and national constituencies of girls and women, boys and men, engaged in a broad-based movement for social transformation.

4 Methodological lessons learned

The study employed a **wide variety of different research tools**, designed to elicit information of different sorts from different types of respondents. The multiplicity of tools was important, as it enabled the research teams to approach topics from different angles and, to some extent, to triangulate responses. Some teams, however, felt that using such a variety of research instruments could be overly cumbersome in practice, with the tools themselves often too lengthy to be internalised such that they could be flexibly adapted to the different contexts and situations. For future research, it was agreed to maintain a wide variety of research tools, but to shorten each individual tool and promote greater flexibility in its application in particular situations through continued capacity-building of national teams in qualitative research methods.

Other practical and methodological issues encountered in the field highlighted the importance of gaining access to research communities. Preliminary site visits were suggested as a useful first step, alongside: building trust with study respondents, which would require more time in the field; engaging with both boys and girls/ men and women as an essential strategy for a holistic understanding of gender norms; using age-appropriate instruments or refocusing research on older adolescent girls and boys; and sequencing the application of instruments in different ways. In investigating in particular processes of change, the intergenerational pairings were found to be useful, as were the life histories.

Lessons learned on **data recording and analysis** included the need to plan enough time for lengthy processes of translation and transcriptions; to apply thematic matrices for analysis; and to build capacity on the use of software for qualitative data analysis.

Distilling research conclusions and their implications for programmes and policies requires detailed policy and programme mapping at the local level in order to contextualise findings. It also requires ongoing engagement with key stakeholders at different levels to communicate and discuss findings and maintaining a careful balance in order to preserve the voices and insights of girls themselves while linking them to existing policy frameworks and programme contexts.

5 Looking forward: phase 2 research

The first year of research was designed to examine far-reaching capability domains underpinning girls' current and potential well-being and to explore the factors that either enable or hinder the realisation of these capabilities. The focus was on the role of formal and informal laws, norms and practices relative to other drivers of exclusion such as poverty, geography and access to services, and ethnicity. The work was highly valuable in terms of presenting a baseline about adolescent girls in particular communities in each of the four countries, and in providing a much more holistic picture of their well-being – and of the forces of discrimination that detract from their well-being – than is typically found in the country-specific literature. Of added value was the priority given to eliciting the voices of girls themselves through a range of qualitative and participatory research tools.

Moving into the second year of research, we plan to focus in more depth on processes of change and/or continuity around one set of norms linked to early marriage and education for adolescent girls. This is likely to provide more in-depth understanding about this particular set of norms, about the drivers of change that might be positively affecting adolescent girls' well-being, and about the forces of resistance that might be operating to maintain gender discriminatory social norms and practices. This, in turn, will provide a stronger evidence base to inform policies and programmes that seek to promote gender justice for adolescent girls.

Phase two of the multi-country research will be further informed by the rapidly increasing body of literature, academic analysis and practitioner attention to social norms. This provides us with new conceptual frameworks, an enhanced understanding of what gender norms are and how they are experienced, and a broader reference base for understanding how gender norms change. Field research will be accompanied and supported by a literature review of drivers of change in gender norms and practices, and a systematic review of the role of communications in changing social norms around gender.

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