



How do gender norms change?

September 2015



Knowledge to action:
Understanding
gender norms that affect
adolescent girls



Acknowledgements

This Research and Practice Note is part of the Knowledge to Action Resource Series 2015, produced as part of a 4-year programme - 'Transforming the Lives of Adolescent Girls' - involving fieldwork in Ethiopia, Uganda, Nepal and Viet Nam.

This Note was written by Rachel Marcus and Caroline Harper with Sophie Brodbeck and Ella Page, and copy edited by Kathryn O'Neill. Thanks to Carol Watson and Nikki Van der Gaag for comments on material used in this Note and to Lucy Peers for her inputs on the conceptual diagram.

The Knowledge to Action Resource Series was funded by DFID.

Series editors: Rachel Marcus and Caroline Harper.

Overseas Development Institute

203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
E-mail: info@odi.org.uk

www.odi.org
www.odi.org/facebook
www.odi.org/twitter

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material from ODI Reports for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holder, ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI.

© Overseas Development Institute 2015. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (CC BY-NC 3.0).

ISSN: 2052-7209

Cover photo: Three generations in Nepal © Fiona Samuels, 2014

Key points

Gender norms can change as a result of:

- Broad drivers of change, such as economic development or the spread of communications technology
 - Deliberate efforts to encourage change, such as new laws, policies or programmes, or social and political activism
 - Exposure to new ideas and practices that get discussed through formal and informal channels (conversations, role modelling), including the media.
- The forces that can contribute to changing norms are often the same forces that can reinforce discriminatory norms. Our research highlights that processes of norm change are rarely straightforward; they are often messy (with old norms existing alongside new ones as they take hold) and can have unexpected consequences.
 - As new ideas and practices begin to emerge, they are often contested, prompting resistance or a backlash against those challenging the prevailing norms. This can lead people to mobilise to defend values or traditions they perceive as being under attack. Engaging respectfully with all sections of a community may not dispel all resistance to change, but can help minimise it.

Setting the scene

Because societies and economies change over time, so do gender norms. Change in gender norms can be so slow that people hardly notice change, or it can be relatively rapid. It can be driven by broad processes such as economic development or the spread of communications technology, or by government-led action, such as legal or policy reform or expansion of education and other key services.

Norm change can also be driven by individuals and organised groups who see some common attitudes and norms as problematic and are determined to change them. Activism of this kind generally leads to change from the bottom up, starting with individual families and communities. But it can also lead to transformation from the top down, through legal, policy and programme reform. It is often the combined effects of several drivers working together simultaneously that lead to change, but the combinations that lead to change in particular circumstances are not always easy to identify.

Drawing on ODI fieldwork in Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam, and a review of literature, this Research and Practice Note outlines some of the main drivers of norm change. We look at how new norms develop and are adopted, and some of the main factors that influence how people perceive norms – and whether individuals act on them or not (summarised in Figure 1 on page 4). We then highlight examples from our research of where gender norms have begun to shift, and the consequences of those shifts. There are also some tips on how to minimise or respond to resistance to change. Finally, the Resources section highlights further reading.

Drivers of change in gender norms

Depending on the circumstances, the forces we outline below can either serve to promote positive change in gender norms or reinforce discriminatory norms.

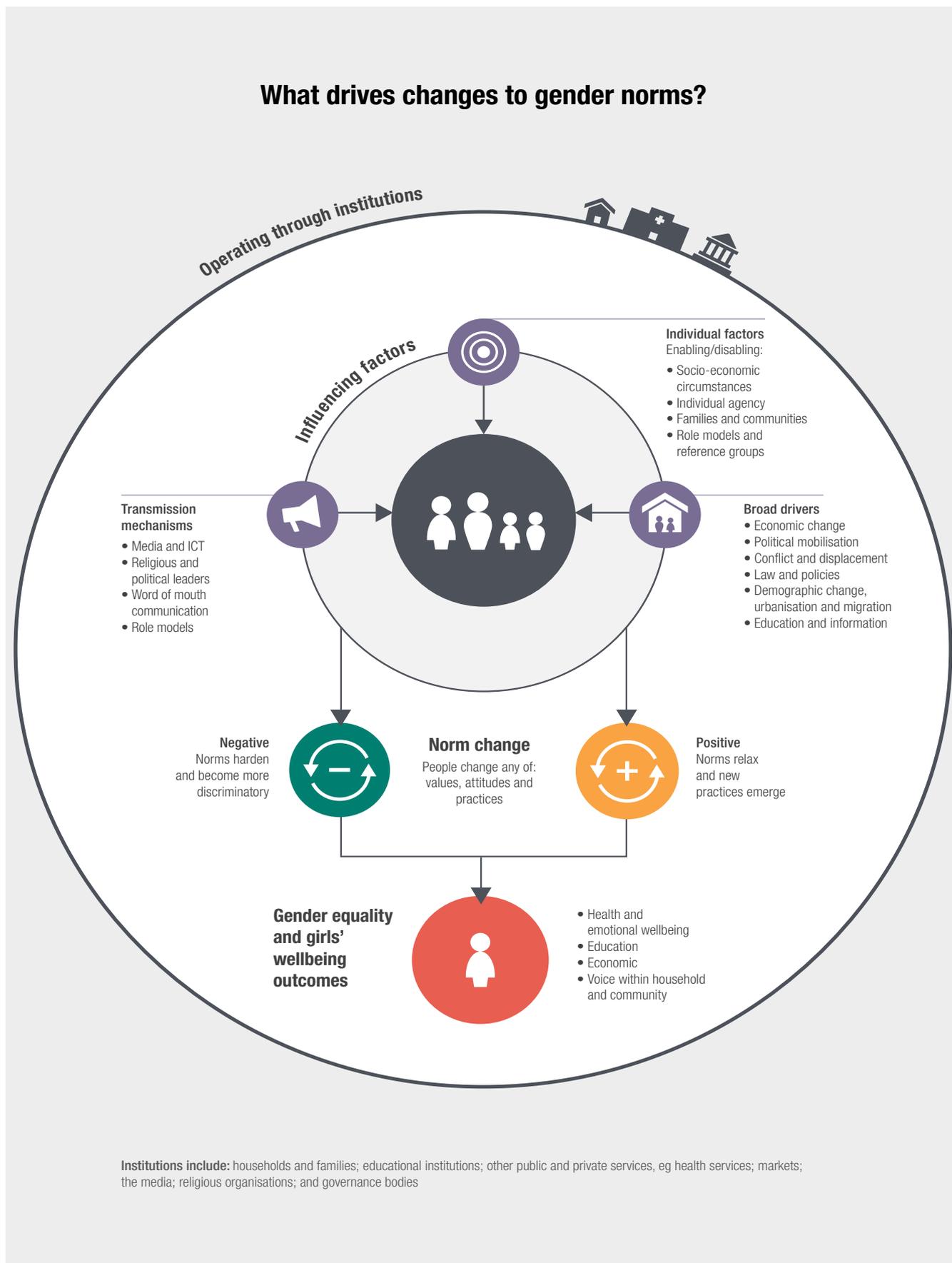
Broad drivers of change

Economic development. Economic developments (either new opportunities opening up or existing opportunities ending) can lead to rapid change in gender roles, which can, in turn, lead to changes in gender norms. But there is often a time lag between changes in a given norm and changes in the practices those norms lead to. For example, women are often accepted in workplaces before norms about labour equality change.

Broad economic changes can, in particular, contribute to changes in norms about gender roles and the value of education. This is the case whether economic opportunities close down or open up. For example, changing norms around investing in daughters' education and young women working outside the home in India and Bangladesh have been largely driven by recognition of the economic benefits of these activities (Jensen, 2012; Hossain, 2011). Likewise, we know that child marriage is more common among poor households; economic development and poverty reduction can thus lead to an environment in which child marriage is less of an economic necessity, and new norms about the value of education or delaying marriage can take hold (UNFPA, 2012).

Our research findings reflect the role that broad economic developments can play in changing gender norms. Among Hmong communities in northern Viet Nam, better road links to local markets have brought

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



opportunities for girls to earn money – for example, by selling wine and vegetables at these markets. In Ethiopia and Uganda, we found young men aspiring to marry educated girls and young women who could bring more income into the household.

‘Educated girls bring a bigger “envelope” on marriage. Men like such a girl because she can get a job and work – she can contribute to the family income.’

*49-year-old mother, Baitambogwe, Uganda
(Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2014)*

Economic changes can also drive norm change in more indirect ways. For example, in eastern Uganda, we found that more wage labour opportunities on sugar plantations for boys and young men were contributing to changing gender norms in that young men had, for the first time, money with which to initiate relationships or to pay for sex. These economic opportunities are important factors contributing to the rise of informal cohabitation arrangements between young men and adolescent girls, who perceive these young men as offering better material security than their parents.

Urbanisation and migration. Research indicates that urbanisation often brings with it more egalitarian gender norms (World Bank, 2011; Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012). This reflects new educational and economic opportunities for women and girls in urban areas, and reduced exposure to some of the structures that reinforce existing gender norms (such as traditional leaders). Migrants to urban areas are often exposed to people from other regions and cultural and ethnic groups, as well as the media, new ideas and lifestyles. Migration, whether in-country or across national borders, can have similar effects, giving men, women, boys and girls the chance to do things that go beyond the limits of accepted gender roles in their home communities. Alternatively, migration can reinforce conservative or discriminatory gender norms – for example, if diaspora communities cling to gender norms and practices of their former communities as a means of asserting their identity in their new environment.

Political activism and change

In many cases, changes in gender norms have been spurred by social and political activists mobilising for change. Typically this has involved a combination of approaches: challenging people to reflect on and change their own behaviour and attitudes, while mobilising for legal or policy changes nationally or internationally. For example, social movements tackling gender-based violence often take a dual approach, challenging individuals to stop committing or condoning violence while mobilising citizens to support law reform and other positive changes

(such as training police to deal sensitively and respectfully with victims of gender-based violence, or providing better support services for survivors).

Periods of conflict, or other significant political change or disruption, can also lead to change in gender norms. They can disrupt old beliefs and practices around masculinity and femininity, or lead people to do things that do not fit with traditional gender roles, simply in order to survive. Sometimes political or armed movements explicitly aim to remodel gender relations – in some cases towards a more egalitarian society (as with the Maoist movements in Nepal) and in others promoting more conservative social relations.

Legal, policy and programme drivers

Legal reforms, policies and programmes can drive norm change by introducing or stimulating new norms and practices. They can also ‘license’ norm changes that were already occurring and, by changing how people behave, can change the way people think about new practices. For example, among Hmong communities in northern Viet Nam, a combination of school fee reductions and government campaigns to persuade families to educate girls has led to a situation where sending boys and girls to school up to grade 9 has become the norm. Legal and policy reforms typically have the greatest effect in driving norm change when people are confident that laws will be enforced and programmes implemented.

Giving people new information that prompts different values and attitudes. Our field research found that a combination of factual information (for example, on health problems) and broader messaging on gender equality had contributed to changes in gender norms. In Ethiopia, for instance, health messaging that emphasised the risk of fistula had contributed to respondents changing their views about the best age to marry (with many now thinking of this as between 18 and 20, compared with 15 or younger, as people used to think). In Viet Nam, messages about the health risks of adolescent pregnancy and the economic advantages of completing school before starting a family had also inspired some young people to delay marriage and the age at which they had their first child.

A growing body of evidence highlights the potential of mass media to drive change in gender norms, both through factual and overt messaging about gender equality, and through popular entertainment programmes that present an alternative vision of gender relations (Marcus and Page, 2014; Sugg, 2014). For example, our research in Hmong communities in Viet Nam found that mass media (particularly TV) programmes played an important role in raising girls’ hopes for a different future beyond marriage and farming, offering them alternative visions (whether realistic or not) of love-based marriage and more equal gender relations.

Increasing access to education for girls, boys, men and women. Rising levels of education across all age groups (including adults) are a critical driver of norm change. Through education, boys and girls are exposed to new knowledge and ideas, including gender equality, which is a formal part of the curriculum in many countries. Education (particularly secondary education) is associated with reduced support for a number of discriminatory or harmful practices, including child marriage and gender-based violence.

Girls' own desire for education is an important driver of norm change. Increasingly, girls are aware that education opens up opportunities for a better life, for them and their families – one that goes beyond marriage, motherhood and (in rural areas) small-scale farming. This creates a virtuous circle, as educated girls are typically more accepting and supportive of gender equality, develop greater self-confidence, and are more able to voice their opinions and influence decisions that affect them.

'If you can go to the outside world, you can see many new things which you can only see in the outside world. If you spend all your time at home, you only follow the buffalo's and cow's asses and you can't do anything.'

*18-year-old Hmong girl, northern Viet Nam
(Jones et al., 2015)*

Education can give adolescent girls a place in which to think and develop away from the constant demands on their time in the household; it can expose them to role models (such as women teachers or girls who have graduated from high schools and universities) and broaden their horizons. Education can also give adolescent girls a peer support network, offering emotional and practical support to deal with the problems they face, including challenging gender norms should they wish to do so. Interestingly, these positive outcomes seem to occur despite the fact that the quality of education is often very low and many schools actually reinforce gender stereotypes through assigning duties on the basis of gender (such as cleaning or chopping firewood), or by paying more attention to boys.

Education for boys can be an equally important driver of norm change. As with girls, education can give boys access to new knowledge and ideas about gender equality, encouraging respect for girls' and women's rights. It can enable them to see girls as competent and knowledgeable, challenging stereotypes about boys having greater innate abilities (Evans, 2014). The International Men and Gender Equality Study (IMAGES), which interviewed boys and young men in 10 countries, found that young men who have attended secondary school are much more likely to be supportive of gender equality than those who have only

attended primary school (Kaufman et al., 2014). A case study from Viet Nam (see Box 1) shows how powerful educating boys can be as a driver for changing gender norms.

Figure 2 on the following page summarises how each of these drivers can either contribute to positive changes in gender norms or reinforce discriminatory norms.

How do new norms and practices take hold?

New ideas, knowledge and practices are typically spread through everyday communication – people seeing what others do. This is usually combined with more periodic exposure through the media (traditional and social media) and from religious, political or community leaders. Where sufficient numbers of people have adopted a new practice and believe it is the right thing to do, the norm associated with that practice can be said to have changed.

Box 1: Educating boys and young men can be a driver of norm change

Sai Thi Mai is a 27-year-old mother of two who is a role model in her commune. Regularly forced to work in the fields for hours each day after she returned from school, she was left with no 'time to review my lessons and do homework before going to class the next morning'. When she was 18 she married a young man, now a commune official, who had already begun his tertiary education – and her life took a sharp turn for the better.

Mai and her husband have a marriage that is remarkable because they treat each other as equals; 'I listen to whatever he says, and he listens to whatever I say,' she reported. Because he is busy working most of the time, it falls to Mai to make the household decisions. 'If I let him decide, he's often out, he's not home,' she explained. 'If I wait for him to decide, maybe it won't be done. I just make decisions myself.'

Mai knows how lucky she is: 'My life, compared to the neighbours, I feel happy.' She and her husband 'don't fight and argue like other people in the village'. Furthermore, when her husband has time off work, 'he goes home to play with the two kids'. Because they share decisions relating to their children, he even bought her a mobile phone 'so that if the kids were sick, I could call him so that he would call home'.

Asked why her life looks the way it does, Mai replied: 'I think it's because my husband has been out in society more.'

Jones et al., 2014a

Figure 2: Drivers of change in gender norms that affect adolescent girls

Drivers		
How driver contributes to pro-gender equality norm change		
But...		
<p>Economic change</p> <p>Increase in economic opportunities</p> <p>Economic decline</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift in perceptions about what is a suitable job for women/ girls • Greater acceptance of women/girls working outside home • Women and older girls working outside the home, interacting with men and boys, and moving outside the home independently can become to be seen as the norm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resentment if new jobs are perceived to be 'captured' by young women • Can contribute to men abandoning their familial responsibilities • Potential for new norms that condone exploitation of young women • Changes resulting from 'the force of necessity' can be resented and seen as contrary to cultural values
<p>Education</p> <p>Improved returns to education</p> <p>Increased availability of/ improved quality of primary, secondary or post-school education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift in parents' perceptions about the value of educating girls and boys • Education can become the norm if most girls are in school – particularly if returns are perceived to be good • Girls can develop through being exposed to new ideas and role models, and have the chance to develop new reference and support groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idea that education 'spoils' girls and undermines their capacity to be good wives and mothers • Backlash against measures that facilitate girls' school attendance in absence of similar provision for boys • Can reinforce gender stereotypes
<p>Migration and displacement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to more gender-egalitarian practices through mixing with other social groups in neighbourhoods, workplaces, public services, and the media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservative gender norms can provide emotional security in a new environment
<p>Communications and media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can enable the spread of ideas and knowledge on gender equality and women's rights • Can give girls and young women with restricted freedom of movement a chance to communicate with others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used to promote an anti-gender equality agenda
<p>Other technological change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can reduce the burden of household chores and lead to new norms about time use and/or gender divisions of labour • Can contribute to broader economic opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be incorporated within existing gender norms and result in no change • Can be focus of backlash (e.g. reproductive technologies)
<p>Political mobilisation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can lead to acceptance of pro-gender equality ideas among society in general and among politicians and other leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those opposed to gender equality can mobilise and promote norms and policies that limit girls' opportunities

Remember, though, that norm change can either act as a positive force in adolescent girls' lives, or a negative one.

Studies of behaviour change have found that what other people do has a greater influence than what they say (Paluck et al., 2010), particularly for visible behaviour. For behaviour that others can see – such as sending daughters to school or child marriage – seeing what others do (or don't do) may be just as important as what they say – and what people actually do in practice may change before the norm that governs the practice changes. For behaviour that is less visible (such as girls and boys sharing housework), new norms and practices are more likely to be spread by people talking about and endorsing them, rather than simply by imitating others.

Role models – whether a real person someone encounters in their everyday life or someone who can be seen in the media who people aspire to be like – are often influential in leading others to do things differently. For example, our research in eastern Uganda found that simply having a woman from that region as speaker of the parliament gave adolescent girls the message that women could hold powerful positions in public office.

Leaders (whether of formal institutions or informal peer groups) can also play an important role in encouraging people to change their attitudes and practices, thus speeding up the adoption of new norms. For example, in Ethiopia, when the Ethiopian Orthodox Church started supporting the government's position on the minimum age of marriage, people began to change their beliefs and practices, leading to a change in norms about child marriage. But where some Church representatives did not uphold the new attitudes (with some priests themselves taking young brides), this diluted the impact of the Church's official position. Our research in Uganda found that leaders of local community organisations working with the Gender Roles, Equality and Transformation (GREAT) project were instrumental in spreading new ideas about girls' rights to education and delayed marriage.

The media is another important channel through which new norms are transmitted. Our research found that mass media (particularly radio in the rural study sites) was an important source of new information, values and norms. Interactive media programmes that encourage debate (where audiences can phone or write in, and/ or which include on-air discussions) can be particularly important in allowing people to 'own' any change, rather than feeling they are being told what to do or think. Our systematic review of communication initiatives and gender norm change found that the impact of radio and TV programmes was often enhanced when broadcasts were backed up with print materials, and/or listener groups in which people could discuss the information and stories they had heard (Marcus

and Page, 2014). To find out more about how the media and other communication mechanisms can contribute to gender norm change, see one of the other Notes in this series:

Communications to change discriminatory gender norms affecting adolescent girls.

Table 1 on the following page shows how new norms can spread and take hold, using two issues as examples – one that is highly visible (child marriage) and one that is less visible (men and boys doing their share of housework).

Individual factors affecting norm change

While the broad drivers we have discussed can make change more likely, norm changes only occur when a critical mass of individuals adopt new attitudes and behaviour. What influences people to adopt new norms, and when?

- **Socioeconomic circumstances.** As discussed in more detail in *Social norms, gender norms and adolescent girls: a brief guide*, people's economic situation can affect their willingness or ability to adopt new norms and practices. Often this means that better-off people are in a stronger position to push the boundaries of gender norms while retaining social approval and respect. But this is not always the case: sometimes people who are living just above the poverty line are among the strongest adherents of prevailing gender norms; they may be determined to comply with traditions that (for example) restrict the free movement of girls and women outside the home, in order to show that they are not reliant on female earnings.
- **Fit with personal beliefs.** People start to adopt new norms and practices if those norms and practices fit with their personal beliefs. Such beliefs may be long-standing, and reflect their family environment and socialisation, or may reflect recent exposure to new ideas.
- **Fear of negative reactions from others.** People can also be motivated to change because they fear other people's reactions if they don't. They may want to avoid being labelled negatively (being thought of as old-fashioned or ignorant), being insulted, or may even fear violence if they do not change what they do. For example, in our research in Amhara state, Ethiopia, we found some evidence of child marriage being stigmatised by (unmarried) young people as something that 'only uneducated people do' (Jones et al., 2014b).
- **Opportunities to reflect on current norms and potential alternatives.** While some new practices are spread through a simple process of imitating what other people do, enabling people to reflect on and discuss old norms and practices and see the value of change can facilitate and speed up change (Marcus and Page, 2014; Bicchieri and Mercier, 2014). People are more likely to have such

Table 1: How new norms are spread

Process	Child marriage	Housework
Information	Parents receive information about the benefits of educating girls, the availability of education, or about the law and girls' right to an education	Giving boys and young men information on why it's good for girls to complete their schooling could help motivate them to 'do their bit', both to help their sisters study and to help their country develop
Informal dialogue between peers articulating the new norm(s)	Parents, community and traditional leaders and girls themselves state why they think delaying marriage is important (health grounds, completing education, etc.)	Boys and young men who talk about doing household chores to their friends can help shape a new norm for their peers and their younger siblings. This new norm could highlight values such as helping girls/ sisters achieve their rights, encouraging better relationships within the household, and could counter the idea that doing housework is 'unmanly' or 'uncool'
Modelling new behaviour	Families are continuing to send girls to school, to turn down marriage proposals; girls are continuing to live with their families	Adolescent boys and young men do some of the housework, perhaps including activities that are done outside, which other people can see (e.g. sweeping, hanging up laundry). By doing this they can show that they do not consider it unmanly to do housework, or that they are 'ahead of the curve' with new, more equal ways of living
Endorsement by role models	Religious or traditional leaders state that there is no traditional or religious need for girls to be married by puberty. Celebrity role models speak out against child marriage, pledge to let daughters marry in adulthood	A celebrity sports star or musician is seen/ heard (in mainstream or social media) doing housework or taking care of a young child. This can help present a more equal division of labour within the home as positive and progressive. If a religious leader speaks in favour of sharing housework, this can help shift the idea that housework is a divinely ordained female activity

opportunities if they are not socially isolated (which adolescent girls and women often are) and if they are exposed to fora in which these discussions takes place. This could be through formal or non-formal education, through social networks, or as part of development programmes that encourage dialogue and reflection.

- **Individual agency and resilience.** Defying gender norms or blazing a trail with new gender norms can expose people to strong criticism and gossip. Being resilient and having a strong belief in the need to change are vital personal qualities for people who are willing to defy existing gender norms and help shape new ones. This is one reason why many girls' empowerment programmes involve activities designed to boost self-confidence and resilience. For more detail, see *Girls' clubs and empowerment programmes*.

Many factors contribute to individual agency; they include personal resilience and determination, family support (see below), social status, and norms about how much freedom an individual or group has to make and follow through decisions. Often, adolescent girls have limited agency and have little say in decisions made by their parents or other adults in influential positions. We did, however, encounter many strong-minded girls and young women during the course of our research who had resisted prevailing gender norms in pursuit of education, because they aspired to a particular type of work, or simply because they did not want to get married at that time or to a particular man.

- **Supportive families, role models and reference groups.** Having a supportive family (to give emotional as well as practical support) can also make an enormous difference to people who want to challenge gender norms. Although some of the trailblazing girls we met in our research had to work hard to convince parents or husbands to let them follow their dreams, many others had been able to defy gender norms thanks to the support they received from family members (see box 2 for stories of two girls, Hajara and Amina, and watch another story, about a girl called Aisha). It was notable that men (fathers, husbands, brothers or uncles) had often played a pivotal role in pushing for different futures for their daughters, sisters or nieces. Inspiring role models – who are visible to families as well as adolescent girls themselves – can also help people defy norms as they are living evidence of the potential gain from adopting new norms, and can help bolster family support for girls who go against tradition.

Supportive reference groups also help, because knowing that the wider community approves of change can help reinforce individuals' determination to adopt new practices. This desire for approval from the reference group can motivate people to adopt new practices even if they do not support them, or even mildly disagree with them (Bicchieri, 2015).

Box 2: The difference that family support can make

Hajara's story, Uganda

Hajara is one of three girl graduates in her community. She is the 13th of 19 children, one of 16 girls. Her parents are subsistence farmers, with cash crops providing some, but not all, of the school fees for the children. Even with her grandmother helping out financially, most of Hajara's brothers and sisters have not completed school. Despite these odds, Hajara managed to go to university.

'I attribute my staying in school till university level to the support and advice I got from my mother and father. When I was in S1 [first year of secondary school], my mother used to sit me down and tell me how to keep myself together. She used to ask me about my performance, and our dad used to surprise us with gifts when we performed well in class. He would also take us to graduation parties to motivate us.'

Amina's story, Ethiopia

'I was in grade 5 at the time [approximately age 12]. My father and mother decided to marry me off. My sister objected to the idea of marriage and took me with her. I stayed with my sister until I completed my elementary education.'

Gender norms in constant flux

When people start to behave in ways that diverge substantially from idealised norms of behaviour, the norm itself can often lag behind and take some time to reflect changes in practice. When this occurs, norms can weaken. Tipping point theory (Gladwell, 2004) suggests that once enough people start to act differently – for example, by allowing their daughters to stay on in school and marry at a later age – others may rapidly follow suit. However, there is likely to be a period of flux where old norms are weakening but still in place, before the new norm has fully emerged and sets new standards (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012).

For example, our fieldwork in Uganda found that although pregnancy outside of marriage continues to be stigmatised, it is becoming more common and many parents now (reluctantly) accept their unmarried pregnant daughters and future grandchildren, whereas in the past the mother might not have been able to return to her parents' home, or the baby might have been given to a relative to bring up (Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2014).

The pace at which gender norms change is typically uneven and unpredictable, as it is often driven by (and reflects) clusters of local circumstances. These can include variations in access to transport, education or the media,

new work opportunities that arise, the presence (or absence) of NGO or government programmes promoting new ideas and setting up girls' or women's groups, or of respected local figures (preachers, chiefs, leaders) speaking out in favour of (or against) change.

Changes in gender norms can also have unexpected drivers and consequences. For example, our research in Uganda found that the rise in opportunities for young men to earn money through casual labour in sugar plantations was affecting the way that young people formed marriages: rather than negotiating a marriage with parents and clan elders, as in the past, young people were beginning to choose their own partners. Young men were using their newfound cash to start relationships (sometimes several simultaneously) by buying girls presents or offering them a better life than with their parents. Compared to formal marriages, which had the blessings of elders and a degree of moral pressure on the young people involved to stay together through difficult times, informal marriages (termed 'marriage through the window') had no such support structures and much more limited social obligations. As a result, more girls and young women (and their children) were being abandoned by their partners (Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2015).

Alongside our research findings, our literature review enabled us to identify the conditions in which gender norms are most likely to change – and when they are less likely to change (see Table 2 on the following page).

How are gender norms, values and practices changing? Insights from our research in Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam

Here we highlight our findings on how gender norms around child marriage and girls' education are changing. In all four countries, it was clear that shifts in these two areas reflected a wider set of changing norms and values, as well economic transformations and the effects of policies and programmes. It was also striking how strongly these different forces are connected – for example, in many of the research communities, a changing sense of what is possible for girls in future is contributing to girls staying on in school beyond early adolescence. This trend is also driven by significant government investment, which has increased the availability and reduced the costs of education, and (in some countries) by growing demand for educated wives, so that social pressures towards marriage in mid-adolescence have started to wane. Other key changes we observed include the following:

An increasing sense or awareness that girls and women have potential and capacities beyond marriage, motherhood and farm work. For example, in Uganda, we found that parents and grandparents are placing greater

Table 2: The conditions that help or hinder changes in gender norms

Gender norms are more likely to change when...	They are less likely to change when...
.. no one stands to lose out economically from change or to gain from keeping old norms in place	... there are strong economic interests in upholding existing norms and practices
.. people have a strong economic interest in changing certain norms	
.. no one's power is directly threatened by change	.. certain groups perceive their power and status to be directly undermined by change
.. one key factor underpins a norm (e.g. lack of information)	.. several factors contribute to upholding a norm (e.g. lack of information, pressure of social expectations, economic constraints)
.. there are no religious mandates requiring a certain particular practice	.. the practices in question are seen as mandated by religion
.. a critical mass of others have already changed what they do	.. very few others have changed what they do
.. role models and opinion leaders (including religious leaders) promote a different norm	.. role models and opinion leaders (including religious leaders) promote the status quo
.. changes in the institutional or political context provide opportunities for different practices	.. the broader institutional or political environment is resistant to change
programmes or policies designed to change norms are accompanied by opportunities for people to put new ideas into practice	.. people don't know how to do things differently
.. change is understood as seizing or preparing for new opportunities	.. change is mainly experienced as a loss (of power, of valued culture or traditions) or otherwise unwelcome
.. there is change in the wider society – for instance, with women gaining more of a voice or gaining newfound economic power	.. change is isolated

value on girls' education and young men are aspiring to marry educated young women, in the knowledge that they can support their families financially just as boys can. Our research also found many examples of girls aspiring to a better life than their mothers had – for example, to university education and employment (Viet Nam) or migrating to a different country to find work (Ethiopia). These changes were starting to redefine the possibilities of different kinds of girlhood and womanhood, which included (but went beyond) marriage and motherhood.

Increasing numbers of girls attending school – and for longer periods. The expansion of primary and secondary schooling, government incentives, community mobilisation campaigns, and a growing perception that girls' education can lead to a better life (through less poverty and more healthy children, for instance) – all these factors have contributed to more girls attending school in all the areas we conducted research. Notably, girls are also staying in

school for longer, often until the end of lower secondary schooling (grade 9-10), rather than stopping when they complete primary school or go through puberty (whichever happens first).

Changing ideas about masculinity. Our research found examples of traditional notions of masculinity giving way to more egalitarian ideas, which in turn was contributing to changes in girls' and young women's lives. For example,

'Most men want educated girls as wives, because they want girls who can contribute to the family income. This is a new development. Before, they used to fear educated girls, but now they want them.'

*18-year-old girl, Baitambogwe, Uganda
(Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2014)*

Box 3: When practices change faster than norms

Our research in **Uganda** found that although the norm that girls should wait until they are married before having sex was still in place, the reality was that many girls were not waiting; they were responding to norms about femininity that emphasise the importance of having children as a crucial part of womanhood, or did not know how to avoid becoming pregnant. Because parents perceived that girls were likely to get pregnant during adolescence, some were marrying their daughters even earlier than had been the case to avoid the risk of them engaging in premarital sex. Despite adolescent pregnancy being relatively common, the persistence of norms around virginity at marriage was leading to unmarried girl mothers being stigmatised and treated as ‘*scrap*’.

In **Nepal**, we found that the spread of mobile phones had given rise to young people forming relationships, often despite limited face-to-face contact with the other person. In a context where social contact between unrelated girls and boys is frowned on, and can damage a girl’s reputation, young people who have forged such relationships are then tempted to elope. Some parents were seeking to marry daughters off as early as possible to avoid the stigma that elopement brings to the family, which was actually lowering rather than increasing the average age at marriage in some communities.

in Nepal, some boys reported that they wanted to do a better job of being supportive husbands and fathers compared to older generations. In Viet Nam, some Hmong boys perceived that men and women with more equitable relationships were less likely to be poor and more likely to lead happier lives, while others reported that they had learned to listen more to their sisters and would negotiate with their parents on their sisters’ behalf over unwanted marriages. In Amhara state, Ethiopia, we found that being willing to make joint decisions was increasingly seen as a sign of a good husband. Both because they aspired to more equal relationships and because they perceived educated girls to have greater earning potential, some men and boys we interviewed reported that ‘men don’t want to marry an illiterate girl’. This represents a notable change from the past, where education was seen as unnecessary or even negative if it made women more assertive.

A growing sense that adolescents (girls and boys) should have a say in major life decisions (such as choice of marriage partner). This appeared to be part of a generational shift, affected by changing opportunities and discussions about people’s rights – whether coming from government, the media, NGOs, or other sources. It is still the case, though, that parents or other senior family members generally make the big decisions about girls’ futures (such as who they will marry and when, and dropping out of school). It was notable in our field research that in Nepal, norms around who should decide a girl’s marriage partner had changed little in recent times, whereas there had been greater shifts in the other three countries.

A slow but gradual rise in age at marriage. Overall, our research was consistent with statistics showing a slow rise in the average age at marriage in all four countries. However, in some communities we found a perception that

young people were actually getting married earlier than in the past, as they had more opportunities to get to know each other through school (Viet Nam), or because they had arranged to elope using mobile phones (Nepal). We also found evidence of people failing to register marriages, conducting ceremonies in secret, or simply cohabiting (living together as a couple without having married) in order to avoid legal penalties (see *The law as a tool for changing gender norms* for more detail).

None of these changes were smooth or seamless though. And despite the forces supporting change, many traditional norms remain ‘sticky’. For example, girls continue to shoulder much of the burden of household chores and farm work, which limits their school attendance and study time. This means they are often more likely to fail exams and drop out of school, which fuels a perception that they are ready for marriage. Parents in some of the research communities were worried that ‘too much education’ would make their daughters unmarriageable because they would be perceived to be incompetent at housework and farm work. They also feared that girls going to school during adolescence would give them more chance to mingle with boys, thereby putting them at greater risk of a damaged reputation or pregnancy. And despite some moves towards more egalitarian relationships, many young men still expect to make the big decisions in their households.

Change for the better might not always feel like that at first

Despite its potential to be a strong force for good in adolescent girls’ lives, the uneven pace of change can make life difficult and challenging for girls and their families. For example, school might expose girls to new ideas about gender equality and women and children’s rights, so that they expect a greater say in decisions that affect their lives. But if their families and communities uphold the prevailing

norms, girls can become frustrated; having their hopes dashed can undermine their emotional wellbeing and possibly even the family's cohesion.

Listen to researcher Anita Ghimire discussing the personal challenges and contradictions of norm change:

Box 3 on the previous page shows how changes in practice often outstrip changes in the norms that govern how people should behave. This can have knock-on consequences, including people who follow new practices being stigmatised, even where those new practices are common. It can also lead to people trying to reinforce old norms by adopting more restrictive practices – in this case, marrying girls off even earlier.

Resistance to change

Changes in gender relations are sometimes perceived as being in direct confrontation with deeply held religious beliefs or cultural values about the different roles of men and women and how people live their lives. We found that changes in norms about authority within the family were particularly controversial because men (and, to some extent, women) experienced this change as a loss of status. In Ethiopia and Uganda, some respondents reported that talk about women's and children's rights was 'eroding tradition', encouraging disobedience, and resulting in confusion and tensions across generations and between men and women. As more equal gender norms take hold, the perceived loss of status for men can feel disempowering (see Box 4, 'Empty trousers'). In contrast though, many respondents viewed the emphasis on girls' education as a positive change overall, acknowledging its potential developmental benefits.

'It is after the coming of the notion of equality that people stopped respecting each other.'

Married girl, focus group discussion, Ethiopia

Box 4: Empty trousers: an unexpected consequence of changing gender norms in eastern Uganda

In Uganda, a combination of factors – including economic pressures that undermine men's ability to provide for their families, and messaging about women and children's rights (which are seen as challenging men's authority within the family) – have contributed to some men feeling they are no longer valued and have been reduced to 'empty trousers'. Some men regard women's growing economic and decision-making power as 'licence' for them to ignore their responsibilities and spend their time drinking and gambling rather than working to support the family.

Some women reported that men who strive to be good husbands and fathers were ridiculed by their peers, who say they have been bewitched and emasculated by their wives. The rise of informal cohabitation arrangements has partly facilitated this trend; these relationships are built on mutual agreement between the two young people concerned, rather than being sanctioned by their families and clans. There are thus fewer social pressures on the young men involved to provide for their current or former partner and any children they have had together.

TIP

How can you reduce any backlash or resistance to change?

Engage, engage, engage. Much of the resistance to change comes from misunderstanding, and from the feeling that changes are imposed from above or outside. Engaging respectfully with all sections of a community may not dispel all resistance but can help to minimise it. Tailoring approaches to different groups to emphasise what they are likely to gain from any change, rather than focusing on what they stand to lose, can also help to reduce any backlash. For example, Mackie and Le Jeune (2009) suggest that efforts to change norms around female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) have benefited from emphasising how ending the practice is in accordance with fundamental values of doing one's best for one's daughter, rather than concentrating on the negative health effects of FGM/C.

Make sure your messages resonate locally. Phrasing messages in such a way that they tap into local contexts and cultures can increase their chances of being accepted and acted on; so can 'aspirational' messages that tap into people's desires for a better life, with more money and greater social status. Our research among Hmong communities in Viet Nam found that messages that stressed the economic benefits of delaying marriage had motivated some young people to wait until they were in their early twenties; in Ethiopia, we found that messages that tap into fears – in this case of fistula and other health problems related to early marriage – had contributed to changing norms about the appropriate age of marriage for girls.

Get opinion leaders on side. Opinion leaders (whether religious leaders, community leaders or politicians) can be 'trend-setters' – individuals who influence people's opinions and practices in a given community. If these leaders condone changes in norms (and are seen to do things differently rather than just talk about doing things differently), others are more likely to follow suit.

Get role models on side. These could be well-known men or women (such as popular musicians or sports stars) who endorse new values and practices and are seen to be living by these values. Or they could be locally important figures, such as teachers, NGO workers, or sports coaches, who adopt more egalitarian gender norms in their own lives and are seen to do so.

Resources

ODI programme outputs

Ghimire, A. and Samuels, F. (2014) *Change and Continuity in Social Norms and Practices around Marriage and Education in Nepal*. This report outlines key drivers of change in social norms, including long-term interventions by government and NGOs, positive female role models and supportive families. It draws on interviews and focus group discussions with adolescent girls, their families, and key 'gatekeepers' in the community. The report also outlines factors that inhibit change, such as fear of social disapproval.

Jones, N., Presler-Marshall, E., Tran, T.V.A., Thuy, D., Le, D. and Thao, N. (2015) *'You must be bold enough to tell your own story': Programming to empower Viet Nam's Hmong Girls*. This report focuses on three initiatives broadly aimed at shifting entrenched social norms affecting adolescent Hmong girls in Viet Nam, including girls' clubs and parents' groups. Girls' clubs led participants to change their aspirations regarding marriage age and led to improvements in girls' communication skills and confidence, with some challenging their brothers' discriminatory gender attitudes. Other initiatives led to children having a better understanding of their rights and gave them the chance to spend more time with their friends, enhancing their support networks. The report highlights examples of good practice, and offers policy and programming recommendations to address girls' many vulnerabilities.

Jones, N., Presler-Marshall, E. and Tran, T.V.A. (2014a) *Early Marriage Among Viet Nam's Hmong: How Unevenly Changing Gender Norms Limit Hmong Adolescent Girls' Options in Marriage and Life*. This report draws on primary research to examine how social norms surrounding marriage practices for girls within the Hmong community are shaped by individual agency, socioeconomic and demographic factors, and cultural and political institutions. It also explores key drivers of social norm change, which include fines for breaking the law on age at marriage, national investment in educational infrastructure, and community exposure to positive role models (such as fathers who have supported their daughters' education).

Jones, N., Tefera, B., Stephenson, J., Gupta, T., Perezniето, P., Emire, G., Gebre, B. and Gezhegne, K. (2014b) *Early Marriage and Education: The Complex Role of Social Norms in Shaping Ethiopian Adolescent Girls' Lives*. This report examines key drivers and obstacles to change in gender norms related to early marriage and adolescence, drawing on field research from Ethiopia's Amhara state. Drivers of change include legal and law enforcement reforms, including interventions by health workers, Women Association leaders and school directors to raise awareness of the legal penalty for marrying children under the age of 18. The report also highlights the efficacy of social change communication initiatives at the community level, such as local radio stations broadcasting information about the dangers of early marriage, and school clubs teaching girls about sexual and reproductive health and children's rights.

Kyomuhendo Bantebya, G., Muhanguzi, F.K. and Watson, C. (2015) *'This is not the work of a day': Communications for Social Norm Change around Early Marriage and Education for Adolescent Girls in Uganda*. This report reviews three programmes in Uganda aiming to change gender norms affecting adolescent girls. These include programmes to foster safe sexual and reproductive health practices among adolescents through newspapers, radio programmes, outreach and training; and to protect vulnerable children through public celebrations and community dialogues. Such programmes have led to positive changes in school dropout rates and teenage pregnancy. They have helped girls in many ways – for example, gaining new income-generating skills, coping better with menstruation, and improving their psychosocial wellbeing.

Kyomuhendo Bantebya, G., Muhanguzi, F.K. and Watson, C. (2014) *Adolescent Girls in the Balance: Changes and Continuity in Social Norms and Practices around Marriage and Education in Uganda*. This report provides an in-depth understanding of how and why discriminatory gendered social norms are changing (or resistant to change), so as to inform related policies and programmes. It outlines key drivers of change, including socioeconomic transformation at national and local levels, effective laws and policies (such as Uganda's Universal Primary Education policy) and the promotion of children and women's rights.

Kyomuhendo Bantebya, G., Muhanguzi, F.K. and Watson, C. (2013) *Good Policies Versus Daily Discrimination: Adolescent Girls and Gender Justice in Uganda*. This report examines gender norms that discriminate against adolescent girls across six domains: the household and family; education; economic independence; physical integrity, security and health; psychosocial wellbeing; and political and civic participation. It offers recommendations about how to change these norms, reduce girls' vulnerability and increase their

opportunities. It also outlines further research considerations around work with adolescent girls and their surroundings and communities.

Marcus, R. and Harper, C. (2014) *Gender Justice and Social Norms – Processes of Change for Adolescent Girls*. This report outlines different approaches to understanding gender norms. It outlines different perspectives on social norms, the insights they generate and how they can be applied to help develop a deeper understanding of the discriminatory gender norms that affect adolescent girls. The report draws on insights from ODI's field research and from wider literature.

Marcus, R., Page, E., Calder, R. and Foley, C. (2014) *Drivers of Change in Gender Norms: An Annotated Bibliography*. This highlights key literature on drivers of change in gender norms and practices, focusing on broad trends and large-scale processes, rather than programme evaluations. It summarises texts that focus on changing economic opportunities, migration, education, communications, law reform, social and political mobilisation, and conflict.

Other key literature

Bicchieri, C. and Mercier, H. (2014) '*Norms and beliefs: how change occurs*' in B. Edmonds (ed.), *The dynamic view of norms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This chapter explores the power of social norms to support and maintain discriminatory practices, arguing that it is necessary to change norms in order to eliminate such practices. It discusses how social norms develop and explores the conditions under which norms and practices are most likely to change. These include situations where the law (for example, against early marriage) is widely perceived as legitimate, fair and consistently enforced. CHANGE REF

Muñoz Boudet, A., Petesch, P., Turk, C. and Thumala, A. (2012) *On Norms and Agency: Conversations about Gender Equality with Women and Men in 20 Countries*. Washington DC: The World Bank. This report explores findings from a study of more than 4,000 women and men discussing the effects of gender differences and inequalities on their lives. It explores how participants characterised the ideal qualities of a good wife, husband, boy and girl, and examines the complex processes by which gender norms change. Key findings include young girls and boys appearing to have greater autonomy than their counterparts in previous generations. Many have ambitions that go against current practices, from age at marriage to level of schooling.

UNICEF (2013) *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Statistical Overview and Exploration of the Dynamics of Change*. New York: UNICEF. This report presents extensive data from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) on trends in the practice of FGM/C across 29 countries over 90 years. It discusses effective legislative and policy action against FGM/C in Egypt, Burkina Faso, Kenya and Senegal, and examines the processes used to measure changing social norms around FGM/C. It highlights the efficacy of public debate and exposure to information in tackling FGM/C, disaggregating changes in patterns of attitude by gender, and changes in practice by age and ethnic group. It presents programming implications, including more engagement with boys and men, and creating greater awareness of (at present) hidden attitudes favouring abandonment of the practice of FGM/C.

Other works cited

Bicchieri, C. (2015) *Norms in the wild: how to diagnose, measure and change social norms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Evans, A. (2014) '*Co-education and the erosion of gender stereotypes in the Zambian Copperbelt*', *Gender & Development* 22(1): 75-90.

Gladwell, M. (2002) *The tipping point: how little things can make a big difference*. London: Abacus.

Hossain, N. (2011) *Exports, equity, and empowerment: the effects of readymade garments manufacturing employment on gender equality in Bangladesh*. World Development Report 2012 Background Paper. Washington DC: The World Bank.

Jensen, R. (2012) 'Do labor market opportunities affect young women's work and family decisions? Experimental evidence from India', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 127(2): 753-792.

Kaufman, M., Barker, G., Peacock, D., Vess, J., Robles, O. and Sharafi, L. (2014). *Engaging Men, Changing Gender Norms: Directions for Gender-Transformative Action. Advocacy Brief*. New York: UNFPA.

Mackie, G. and Le Jeune, J. (2009) *Social Dynamics of Abandonment of Harmful Practices: A New Look at the Theory*. Special Series on Social Norms and Harmful Practices Working Paper 2009-06. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

Paluck, E., Ball, L., Poynton, C. and Sieloff, S. (2010) *Social Norms Marketing aimed at Gender-Based Violence: A Literature Review and Critical Assessment*. New York: International Rescue Committee.

Sugg, C. (2014) *Making Waves: Media's Potential for Girls in the Global South*. London: BBC Media Action.

UNESCO (2015) *Education for All, 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNFPA (2012) *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*. New York: UNFPA.

World Bank (2011) *Gender Equality and Development. World Development Report 2012*. Washington DC: The World Bank.



ODI is the UK's leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material from ODI Reports for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holder, ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI.

© Overseas Development Institute 2015. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (CC BY-NC 3.0).
ISSN: 2052-7209

All ODI Reports are available from www.odi.org

Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300
Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399

www.odi.org

