



# Social norms, gender norms and adolescent girls: a brief guide

September 2015



**Knowledge to action:**  
Understanding  
gender norms that affect  
adolescent girls



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## Summary

- This Research and Practice Note provides an overview of key thinking on social norms of relevance to challenging gender inequalities that affect adolescent girls. It defines gender norms as informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviour on the basis of gender.
- It brings together insights from gender theory and social norms theory to help understand what influences gender norms and how they operate in particular circumstances. It distinguishes gender norms from practices (manifestations of norms) and the values that underlie norms, drawing on fieldwork in Ethiopia, Nepal, Viet Nam and Uganda.
- It considers the relationship between poverty and discriminatory gender norms, and concludes that while poverty can sharpen gender discrimination, it does not always do so, and that sometimes discriminatory gender norms affect better-off girls more.

## Social norms and gender norms: a whistlestop tour

There is currently a great deal of interest in social norms because of the role that norms can play in underpinning practices that are seen as problematic in some way (for example, they contribute to poor health outcomes, or to upholding gender discrimination). There are many different ways of understanding norms, which reflect the approaches of different academic disciplines - and all can help shed light on what norms are and how they contribute to upholding gender inequalities. In particular, psychology, economics, anthropology and sociology have all contributed key insights to the understanding of norms.

### Definitions

The term 'norm' or 'behavioural norm' can be used simply to mean a common practice, what most people do in a particular context. For example, most people in a given community use umbrellas or raincoats if it's raining. This common practice is distinct from a social norm.

There are many different definitions of social norm, but all of them emphasise the importance of shared expectations or informal rules among a set of people (a reference group) as to how people should behave. Most also agree that norms are held in place through social rewards for people who conform to them (e.g. other people's approval, standing in the community) and social sanctions against people who do not (such as gossip, being ostracised or violence).

Some definitions consider the informal rule plus the resulting pattern of behaviour to comprise the norm (e.g. Bicchieri, 2006; 2015; Heise, 2013); others (e.g. Young, 2014) consider the norm to be the informal rule - in other words, a standard of behaviour that people do not necessarily

meet. This difference between the rules or standards people commonly expect and what they actually do has led to Cialdini et al. (1990) distinguishing between 'injunctive norms' (what people believe they and others are supposed to do) and 'descriptive norms' (what people actually do).

The term 'norm' is often used to describe **practices**, such as early marriage or female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), (and can also be used as equivalent to 'cultural values') and this can lead to confusion. In order to avoid such confusion, in this series we refer to **norms as the informal rules governing behaviour**. We distinguish these from underlying values and from practices - regular patterns of behaviour - which we see as the manifestation of norms, values and of other factors. So, for example, for many young women, sexual harassment in public is a common experience. To understand the ways that different factors contribute, we suggest that it can be helpful to distinguish between three closely linked, but distinct elements:

- **Underlying values** - such as ideologies of male superiority, of men's right to women's bodies, and of girls' and women's place being in the home
- **Norms of behaviour** - such as it being acceptable for men to leer, wolf-whistle, make sexually explicit remarks or to touch women (without their consent)
- **Practices (or regular patterns of behaviour)**, which are manifestation of norms and other drivers - in this case, sexual harassment

### Social norms can fulfil a range of functions

Social norms have arisen for a variety of reasons and fulfil a range of functions. They can be any or all of the following:

a) *A way of coordinating action* – for example:  
 - a mechanism for governing use of a resource (eg a norm that leads to sustainable use of forests or fisheries)  
 - a way of preventing the spread of diseases (eg a norm about handwashing, or covering one’s mouth when sneezing or coughing)

b) *An expression of local beliefs* – these can be ‘non-social’, such as beliefs about the value of breastfeeding or the foods that pregnant women should eat, or ‘social’ - beliefs about what others do and think (such as beliefs about how long others breastfeed for and think is the appropriate time to start and stop breastfeeding)

c) *An expression of cultural or religious values* – for example, norms that limit girls’ freedom of movement are often related to values concerning the importance of virginity before marriage

d) *A means of upholding the social order*. This can mean, for example, that:

- norms can reflect and reinforce inequalities of power (as we will discuss below in relation to gender norms)

- norms can reflect fear of certain differences, and reinforce stigma and social exclusion (as for example, with some disabilities or stigmatised diseases, such as HIV)

Understanding why a norm is in place, or what function it is playing in relation to a practice is crucial for understanding routes in to changing a specific norm (if norm change is needed). A norm that is related to deeply held values or contributes to upholding the social order (by, for example, mandating that women and girls defer to men and boys) will require different change strategies to a

norm that reflects mistaken beliefs (eg that good mothers do not feed infants colostrum because it is bad for babies). Table 1 below shows how change strategies can be tailored to the reasons for the persistence of a norm.

### One of several factors underpinning practices

Although some practices persist purely because of social norms that mandate certain kinds of behaviour it is often the case that practices are upheld by several different factors, such as values or ideologies, economic, political and legal-institutional factors. Several different norms can also contribute to upholding a practice. For example, norms concerning girls’ education, freedom of movement and parents’ decision-making authority, as well as norms specifically related to marriage, contribute to the practice of child marriage. Identifying the relative importance of norms and other drivers of a practice is crucial in developing effective change strategies. Box 1 on the following page outlines the range of factors, including norms that can underpin child marriage in particular circumstances.

### What are gender norms?

Gender norms are social norms that relate specifically to gender differences. **In this series we use the term ‘gender norms’ to refer to informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviour on the basis of gender.** For example, a common gender norm is that women and girls will and should do the majority of domestic work.

Using this definition, gender norms differ from informal rules or expectations that relate only or primarily to the behaviour of one sex, such as norms about whether, how, and how long to breastfeed.

**Table 1: How strategies can be tailored to the reasons for the persistence of a norm**

Reason for Norm	Change Strategy	Example
Coordinating action	Change attitudes through raising awareness of problems associated with current practices. Co-ordinate abandonment of old norm and adoption of new norm, through legislation and/ or participatory dialogue.	Co-ordinated efforts to get everyone in a community to use toilets rather than defecating outside
Expression of local beliefs	Provide new information that challenges beliefs. If this is insufficient to motivate change, market new social norm.	Information campaigns and community level education/ dialogue on colostrum use
Expression of cultural values	Stress the ways in which new norm is consistent with cultural values, or ways new norm can be adopted in ways that leave other values in tact.	Some FGM/C abandonment campaigns
Means of upholding unequal social order	Raise awareness of discriminatory consequences of norm and alternative norms through media or community dialogue. Promote changes in institutions or practices related to the norm	Challenging gender discriminatory norms through community dialogue, media messaging and institutional change (eg in laws and policies). Work with power-holders as well as disempowered groups to shift norm

### Box 1: Spotlight on child marriage: interacting values, norms and other drivers

Child marriage is often thought of as an example of a discriminatory gender norm. Using the set of definitions outlined above, we suggest that it is more helpful to think of it as a **practice (or set of practices)** i.e. as the manifestation of a norm (and other factors), rather than the norm itself. A large number of factors contribute to the practice of child marriage, not all of which are relevant in any given circumstance. These include:

- **Social expectations (norms) concerning the appropriate age of marriage.** These expectations often reflect observation of what the majority of others do (a descriptive norm) and fear that girls who marry ‘late’ may not find a husband.
- **Cultural and/ or religious values emphasising virginity,** which encourages marriage in adolescence or before, and **girls’ future roles as wives and mothers,** which can limit girls’ aspirations and parents’ aspirations for the daughters.
- **Gender ideologies and roles** that assign the majority of domestic work to girls, which can, in turn, impede their opportunities for study. Where resources are scarce this can lead to investments being concentrated on boys who have a lower burden of chores and are freer to fulfil their potential.
- **Son bias,** which as well as affecting the resources invested in girls’ education can lead to families viewing girls and their marriageability as an ‘asset’ to be traded at the appropriate time, and boys as worth investing in as they will stay in the parental home.
- **Gender norms and values that limit girls’ voice** and opportunities to challenge decisions concerning them.
- **Economic pressures** that can lead parents to arrange their daughters’ marriages so as to minimise dowry, bring in resources through brideprice, or lead girls to marry or start to cohabit as a means of escaping poverty at home.
- **Limited educational or economic opportunities** – leading parents and girls to conclude that getting started on adult life through marriage and motherhood is preferable to waiting around at home.

Gender norms are not necessarily harmful to girls’ wellbeing and development – for example, they can enable girls to develop specific skills and knowledge that will be useful to them, during adolescence and in adult life. But because gender norms reflect and contribute to inequalities in the distribution of power and resources that often disadvantage women and girls, many gender norms do, in practice, limit girls’ development opportunities and undermine their wellbeing.

Our approach to understanding gender norms draws on insights from several different bodies of thinking – most importantly:

- **Gender theory,** which draws primarily on insights from sociology and anthropology, and emphasises how people are socialised into upholding prevailing cultural values about gender and how gender norms reinforce existing inequalities of power and access to resources and;
- **Social norms theory,** which draws primarily on social psychology and behavioural economics, to understand why social expectations exert a strong influence on how people behave.

### Insights from gender theory: norms, interests and power inequalities

*‘Norms are vital determinants of social stratification as they reflect and reproduce relations that empower some groups of people with material resources, authority, and entitlements while marginalizing and subordinating others by normalizing shame, inequality, indifference or invisibility. It is important to note that these norms reflect and reproduce underlying gendered relations of power, and that is fundamentally what makes them difficult to alter or transform.’*

*(Sen et al., 2007: 28)*

### Gender ideologies

Because people are socialised into their community’s gender ideologies and rules about how boys and girls are expected to think and behave from early childhood – often with limited exposure to other ideas or influences – they may not be able to imagine different ways of doing things. Gender ideologies and their associated norms can thus set the boundaries of what girls and boys and adult women

and men think as well as what they do; they can make inequalities of power and resources seem natural or God-given, and thus unchangeable. Values and norms about who can speak out or make decisions also directly affect how power is distributed in society – typically to the disadvantage of children and adolescents in general, and girls in particular (Sen et al., 2007; Marcus and Harper, 2014).

Because gender norms help maintain inequalities in access to resources and power, many people have a vested interest in upholding discriminatory gender norms. Adult men benefit most clearly, but adolescent boys also have a stake in norms that deal them a better hand than girls: more power, more freedom, better access to resources, and a promise of substantially more power in adulthood. Older women can also have a stake in upholding discriminatory gender norms if they have benefited from the prestige associated with having adult sons, or from having a daughter-in-law to share or take on the burden of domestic chores (Kandiyoti, 1988). People often misperceive how far they benefit from existing gender norms, and/ or see these inequalities as natural and not open to change.

*‘God created us differently, the men and the women. That’s why culture also treats us differently. It is government which is spoiling things. How can my son cook, bathe the children, wash my clothes, or fetch water when the women and the girls are there? How can my wife build the hut when I or her sons are there? Can I call my daughter to help to slaughter the cock when God blessed me with all these sons? God would curse me if I did.’*

*Focus group with men and women, Uganda  
(Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2013)*

Discriminatory gender norms are not only upheld through the rules of behaviour in everyday life that children quickly internalise – at home, at school, in the workplace, at markets, and in other public places – but also by wider social institutions. These include organised religion, traditional social structures (e.g. chiefs’ courts), education systems and the media. Efforts to replace discriminatory gender norms with more equitable attitudes and practices therefore need to change how the norm is promoted and reinforced across all these institutions and settings (Marcus and Harper, 2014).

## Insights from social norms theory: conformity, sanctions and rewards

A body of recent research in behavioural science has explored why and when people conform to social norms (particularly those they disagree with or go against their self-interest). Key insights from this body of research suggest that in addition to intrinsic motivations (related to individuals’ beliefs or interests):

*‘My father thought it was unnecessary for girls to read and write but in my case he did not object ... None of my peers were sitting idle at home so I also went to school.’*

*18-year-old girl in Bangladesh (Schuler, 2007: 191)*

- **People often comply with norms because they value other people’s approval, even if they do not agree with the norm.** One example might be sending sons and daughters to school where this has become the ‘right’ thing to do, even if they do not necessarily agree with this norm.
- **People comply with norms because they fear negative reactions from others if they don’t.** People are often acutely aware when others are not conforming to social norms, and police this behaviour through face-to-face comments, gossip or violence. Not complying with norms can also have a negative impact on people’s livelihoods; people who go against local norms can find that others refuse to trade with them, cooperate in labour-sharing arrangements or lend them support in times of crisis. This is more likely in close-knit rural communities, as urban communities are often more mixed and social norms are not so binding.

The power of social expectations and the drive to ‘belong’ can be so strong that people comply with norms even where these contradict their personal beliefs and attitudes. For example, some people interviewed in our research in Nepal continued to seclude menstruating girls and women – not because they believed it was necessary but because they feared what others in the community would say if they did not. The drive for social approval can also motivate individuals to change their behaviour and attitudes. We discuss this further in another Note in this series, *How do gender norms change?*

## The power to defy norms

How far people comply with prevailing norms depends on their attitudes and beliefs, and their agency (their ability to make and act on their own decisions). As already explained, norms can be so powerful and widespread that people do not consider the possibility of going against them. But even the most conservative, conformist societies give rise to ‘free thinkers’ and rebels from time to time

– people who do not accept prevailing norms – and are willing to risk social disapproval to follow their beliefs.

A person's beliefs, attitudes and agency reflect their personality (their individual drive to conform or rebel) and their personal history (their families' values, ideas they have come across from peers, education, religion and mass media, for example). They also reflect (but are not determined by) people's socio-economic circumstances: for example, whether people risk financial loss from complying (or not complying) with particular norms and, crucially, whether their status in a family, peer group or community allows them to negotiate or challenge accepted norms and practices. Typically, adolescent girls, being both young and female, are expected to comply with decisions made by adults, and often have less room to challenge or follow an alternative path than their brothers. Nonetheless, as the Research and Policy Notes in this series show, many adolescent girls are actively challenging gender norms that discriminate against them.

The fieldwork we conducted in Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam as part of our programme of work on Transforming the Lives of Adolescent Girls suggests that norms are slowly changing: the men and boys we spoke with were not always comfortable with gender norms that discriminated against their daughters or sisters; while many women aspired for their daughters to be free of some of the constraints that gender norms had imposed on their generation. In all four countries, we found striking examples of men and women defying local norms to give their daughters a better future. One such man was Aisha's father in Uganda who was determined to support Aisha to graduate from high school, despite her getting pregnant when she was 17. Aisha's father negotiated with the headteacher to let her return to school once she had given birth and supported her and the baby financially. These individuals were typically trendsetters and 'positive deviants' – they were unusual and noteworthy.

## What underpins discriminatory gender norms and practices? Insights from our fieldwork

Our research in Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam examined norms and practices concerning child marriage and girls' education and the factors that promote change or are holding them in place. In addition to well-documented factors, such as poor quality or inaccessible education, and norms concerning the appropriate age of marriage, we found that three main clusters of gender ideologies and values underpin norms and practices concerning child marriage and education:

1. *'Son bias'* –valuing boys more than girls;
2. *Ideologies of femininity* at different stages of the life cycle, which affect perceptions of how adolescent

girls should behave and their transition from girlhood to womanhood; and

3. *Ideologies of masculinity*, which not only govern the behaviour of boys and young men but also have far-reaching effects on girls' lives.

It became apparent in our research that changing norms and practices related to child marriage and girls' education needs to involve change to these underlying values and ideologies. (Other changes such as increasing work opportunities for educated girls are also needed. Please see detailed research reports and recommendations for the four countries [here](#)). We now look at these three sets of ideologies and values, and how they affect gender norms in more detail.

### Son bias

Son bias can reflect deep-seated perceptions (rooted in culture and religion) of the relative roles and values of boys and girls/men and women. Among Hmong communities in northern Viet Nam, for example, having a son to perform funeral rites and lead ancestor worship is perceived as essential to ensure wellbeing in the afterlife. Son bias is often exacerbated in communities where daughters are perceived as an economic drain on the family, because they will join another household upon marriage, or where it is not acceptable for parents to accept financial support from their daughters, as in some of the communities in Nepal where our fieldwork took place. Son bias can also be compounded by the fact that economic opportunities are often gendered, so parents perceive that it is more worthwhile to invest in boys as they will bring better financial returns to the family. It can also contribute to parents regarding daughters as assets who can provide labour or bring in resources upon marriage, rather than as individuals with equal rights to their sons.

Son bias manifests itself in a range of norms and practices that lead to negative outcomes for girls. These include: unequal access to education (because parents regard boys' education as a better investment or boys as more deserving of education); a greater burden of household duties (with girls typically working longer hours and having less leisure time than boys); lower aspirations for girls' futures on the part of parents, and where girls have internalised this bias, also among girls; and limited

*'A girl is seen as a "small shop" (kaduka) out of which parents can gain income when she marries – even when she goes into the cohabiting arrangements, they can gain something from this. There is even a song about a young girl being more beneficial than a small shop.'*

*District Education Officer, eastern Uganda  
(Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2014)*

opportunities for girls to influence household decision-making. For married girls, son bias can mean pressure to continue childbearing until a son is born (in our fieldwork this was particularly evident in Nepal and among the Hmong communities in northern Viet Nam).

### Ideologies and norms of femininity (through girlhood and womanhood)

A second cluster of highly influential gender ideologies, values and norms are those related to girlhood and the transition to womanhood. In our four focal countries, values concerning femininity emphasised the importance of service to one's family, maintaining family honour, and deference to husbands and in-laws. These values translate into commonly accepted roles and standards of behaviour for people of different ages and genders. For example, girls are expected to shoulder much of the burden of household labour. This serves two purposes: helping households run smoothly, and training the girl so she has the skills she will need as a wife and mother. In some of our research communities (in parts of Uganda, for instance), girls are expected to serve food to the men in their family and any visiting guests. Working hard is a defining feature of what it is to be a 'good' girl or woman, to the extent that Hmong boys in northern Viet Nam said the most important consideration for them in choosing a wife was her ability to do farm work.

Among the communities in our study sites, sexual maturity (the onset of menstruation and developing breasts) signalled the end of a girl's childhood and the start

*'I think this whole notion of what an ideal girl should be, this emphasis on purity – that is the most important norm that is leading to discriminatory practices.'*

*Interview with Nepal research team (April 2015)*

of womanhood, and therefore her readiness to assume adult responsibilities and behave as an adult woman. As one district official in Uganda 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'* (Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2013). For girls, there seems no recognised time of adolescence – in terms of the transition between childhood and adulthood – whereas for boys, there appears to be a gradual change where they are less and less subject to parental authority. As more and more girls who have reached puberty are attending school, sexual maturity is no longer such an abrupt marker of readiness for marriage and adult life. But in many communities, these traditions continue to influence norms about the appropriate age for marriage.

In some of our research communities (particularly in Nepal and Ethiopia), chastity and virginity at marriage were considered important elements in a girl's personal and family honour. These norms severely limit girls' freedom of movement outside the home: girls feel they must avoid being seen in situations where they could be accused of unchaste behaviour, or where they would be at risk of sexual harassment.

Limits on girls' mobility and the high value placed on virginity before marriage in some cultures affect girls' access to education. Parents can be reluctant to send girls to mixed schools where they can form relationships with boys, or fear they may interact with (or be harassed by) boys and men while travelling to and from school. This cluster of values and norms contributes to the persistence of child marriage in some of our study areas.

As well as limiting girls' opportunities for education, ideologies and norms about appropriate femininity can

#### Box 2: Expectations of girls' behaviour: insights from Nepal

'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.'

*Source: Watson and Harper, 2013*

also undermine their health (for example, the likelihood of early pregnancy and repeated pregnancy where there is son bias). They also undermine girls' ability to express their own opinions, make decisions and, in short, develop their agency – their capacity to make decisions based on their own will, and act on them.

### **Ideologies and norms of masculinity (from boyhood to manhood)**

Although our research did not set out to examine norms of masculinity, their influence on girls' lives and opportunities for development emerged repeatedly in our fieldwork. Traditional or idealised norms of masculinity were often defined in opposition to norms of femininity. So, for example, in all countries, 'good' men were expected to be breadwinners, and boys were expected to learn skills or study hard so that they could fulfil this role in future; with this role as family provider came the expectation that a man would be the head of the household and be the ultimate decision-maker, with women and children deferring to him. Girls, by contrast, were typically expected to earn some income but this was secondary to their main role as mother and home-maker – although this expectation was changing as a result of economic pressure in some research sites.

In all four countries, adolescent boys – like girls – are expected to obey their parents and to contribute to the household through some form of domestic work or farming; but their workloads are generally lower and they typically have greater freedom than girls to meet with friends outside the home and to move around their communities independently. As they do so, they are further exposed to norms of masculinity modelled by adult men and by their peers. Peer-derived norms – particularly concerning the treatment of girls – can condone sexual harassment as boys prove themselves to their peers, and can reinforce a vicious cycle of girls' limited mobility as they seek to avoid places where boys congregate and where they might be harassed (as we found in Nepal and Ethiopia).

Norms of masculinity include being virile (interpreted in different contexts as freedom to have more than one sexual partner, and fathering many children, particularly sons). In all our research communities, norms of masculinity condone physical violence against women and girls in certain circumstances, and particularly once a girl is married. In Hmong communities in northern Viet Nam, for instance, girls reported that the most desirable characteristic of a potential husband was for him not to be violent (Jones et al., 2014a).

Table 1 on the following page summarises our research communities' expectations about what makes a 'good' boy, man, girl and woman. These norms continue to have

a strong influence on how people behave, even though they are changing and people do not, in practice, adhere to them completely (see *How do gender norms change?*).

### **Is poverty a key driver of discriminatory gender norms?**

Aren't many of the deprivations adolescent girls face really a problem of poverty? All our research took place in poor, rural communities, and it was apparent that many of the deprivations adolescent girls face reflect the combined effects of poverty and discriminatory gender norms. While widespread and deep poverty limits the development opportunities available to boys and girls alike, it is clear that gender norms work alongside poverty to determine people's decisions about how they use scarce resources and what the future holds for each of their children. Below, we give some examples of how poverty and gender norms combine to constrain adolescent girls' development and wellbeing.

#### **Gender norms lead to choices that disadvantage girls.**

Poor families have to make difficult decisions about how to use scarce resources, and gender norms can set the parameters for these choices. A common example is where poor families prioritise their sons' education because sons have better earning prospects and/or because their natal family will benefit from their earnings (Nepal, Viet Nam and Uganda). Another example is where poor families marry daughters off early to bring money into the household through bride price (Uganda) or to reduce the number of mouths they have to feed (Ethiopia, Nepal). Poor girls in the countries where our research took place and

#### **Box 3: How poverty and gender norms collide: a case study from Ethiopia**

Rabia's parents forced her to drop out of school in grade 3 to earn money. She has been married twice; the first time was as a very young child. Her 27-year-old husband grew tired of waiting for her to mature and so divorced her and married another wife. However, her parents arranged a second marriage for her to a much older man because they were poor and had neither land nor cattle to provide her with. 'He told me that he had money in the bank and his own house here. He promised me he would buy me clothes. But he didn't buy clothes as he promised.'

Now Rabia is trapped in an abusive relationship with a much older man whose promises of wealth and stability have failed to materialise. Although she wants to return home to care for her elderly parents, she lacks the financial means to do so and, crucially, her husband's support.

*Source: Jones et al., 2014b*

**Table 1: What makes an ideal boy, girl, man or woman**

Good boys...	Good men...	Good girls...	Good women...
<b>Expectations around... household matters</b>			
Engage in productive activities and do household chores (Uganda)	Allow their wife to work and help with household chores when she is sick or busy (Uganda, Viet Nam)	Should be good at household work (Nepal, Ethiopia, Viet Nam)	Care for their husband, by cooking, getting water ready for bathing, washing clothes and welcoming him (Uganda, Viet Nam); care for sick family members (Viet Nam)
Build their own house and stay with the family (Uganda)	Make the final decisions, are the head of the household and enforce discipline (Uganda)	Do domestic chores – washing utensils, clothes, mopping house, cleaning compound, washing, cooking, collecting firewood; and caring for any children (Uganda)	Stay at home to manage the household and feed their husband and children (Ethiopia, Viet Nam, Nepal)
Worship ancestors and perform burial rites (Nepal, Viet Nam)	Control finances and decisions about family size (Ethiopia)	If necessary, prioritise helping in the household over education (Viet Nam, Ethiopia)	Know how to entertain and welcome visitors (Uganda, Viet Nam)
	Do not cook (Ethiopia)		Are able to do housework (Nepal)
<b>... marriage and sexuality</b>			
	Care for their wife, respect her and are faithful to her (Uganda, Viet Nam)	Should get married, leave her birth household (Nepal) and have children (Uganda, Viet Nam)	Should not divorce their husband (Viet Nam, Ethiopia)
	Fulfil their wife's wishes (Nepal)	Should get married before, or as soon as, starting menstruation (Uganda), between 14 and 19 (Viet Nam), by age 17 (Ethiopia), between 16 and 19 (Nepal)	
	Discuss plans and decisions with their wife (Ethiopia)	Should stay a virgin until marriage (Viet Nam, Nepal, Ethiopia, Uganda) and should not have children out of wedlock (Ethiopia, Viet Nam)	
<b>... relationships</b>			
Respect parents and are helpful (Uganda)	Do not beat wife (Nepal, Uganda, Viet Nam)	Respect and obey parents and are helpful (Ethiopia, Nepal, Viet Nam, Uganda)	Are submissive or humble to their husband or father, and get along with their in-laws (Nepal, Viet Nam, Uganda, Ethiopia)
Avoid peer pressure (Uganda)	Avoid alcohol (Uganda, Nepal, Viet Nam)		Should treat neighbours well and keep honour of the house – e.g. do not complain about in-laws to neighbours (Nepal)
Do not rape girls (Uganda)			Should tolerate domestic violence within marriage (Viet Nam, Ethiopia)
<b>... mobility and clothing</b>			
		Limit movement outside the household – do not go out without a good reason (e.g. for household work or to a market) and should not talk to men other than family members (Nepal, Viet Nam, Ethiopia); do not watch movies or go to discos or bars (Uganda)	Limit interactions with men outside the household and only go out for household work (Viet Nam, Nepal, Uganda)
		Wear traditional clothes (Nepal)	Do not wear clothing which shows too much skin, do not cut their hair (Nepal) and do not wear trousers (Nepal, Ethiopia)

**Table 1: What makes an ideal boy, girl, man or woman (continued)**

Good boys...	Good men...	Good girls...	Good women...
... education and employment			
Do well at school (Nepal)	Should be more educated than their wife and daughter (Nepal)	Should be educated (Viet Nam) so that she can aspire to have an educated husband and contribute to the household (Ethiopia) and obtain higher bride wealth payments (Uganda); but not too educated as this may make her a poor mother (Viet Nam, Nepal)	Work hard for the household (Nepal, Viet Nam, Uganda, Ethiopia) and not undertake 'male' jobs (Ethiopia, Uganda)
Support their parents financially in old age (Nepal, Viet Nam)	Have a job or otherwise provide income (Nepal, Viet Nam, Uganda, Ethiopia)	Girls should also do well at school in order to become teachers, doctors, manage a small business or, at the very least, become better wives and managers of the home (Ethiopia)	

Sources: Ghimire and Samuels, 2014; Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2014a, 2014b; Watson, 2014

their parents typically have fewer choices when negotiating marriages, and may have to settle for men seen as 'second choices', as in the case study of Rabia (see Box 3 on page 9).

Where girls have some space to make their own decisions, these likewise reflect their limited choices: our research in Uganda found girls entering into informal marriages of their choice rather than formal marriage arrangements, because they perceived that the young men in question could support them better than their parents, as the quotes in Box 4 below show. Likewise, girls interviewed in Ethiopia and in Hmong communities in northern Viet Nam saw marrying a better-off man as a route to social mobility (Jones et al., 2014a, 2014b).

#### Poverty limits access to education and to new ideas.

Children from poor households typically spend less time in school than their better-off peers and often only have access to poor quality schooling. Parents' decision-making about school investment is also gendered: our research in Uganda and Nepal found that parents were more likely to pay for private education, which was perceived

as better quality, for boys than for girls. Parents from poor households in low and middle-income countries are much less likely to have attended school at all, and to have completed either primary or secondary school, than parents from better-off households. This means that among poor families, parents and children are less likely to have been exposed to ideas of gender equality through education; they are less likely to be literate and to be able to read posters or newspaper articles urging changes in gender norms and in specific practices.

Poor households also have less access to the media and to communications materials. Women interviewed in Uganda, for example, reported that they could not afford radio batteries. In Hmong communities in northern Viet Nam, limited communications infrastructure limits access to ideas that might change gender norms. Poor people are often less likely to access public services, such as clinics, where information about the health consequences of early marriage (for example) is disseminated. In some situations, poor people are also less likely to migrate (because they cannot raise the funds needed to embark

#### Box 4: Perspectives on poverty as a driver of girls' decisions

'Now children are looking for their own survival since the land is no longer there...That is also why girls are running off with some boys, looking for survival in others ways.'

Parents don't care for or support their girls, who find boys who help them instead. These days a new form of 'stealing of girls' is taking place – if a boy likes a girl, he takes her far away and they stay together for a year or two (fearing police if the girl is still of school age) before coming back... Girls lack things from their parents – like clothes, knickers, lotion – so they get them from elsewhere. Parents don't counsel their children when young.'

'Parents at times are not able to give enough to their children, and girls mostly get attracted by the small things given by the boys who go fishing, and end up in problems of pregnancies.'

*Key informants from two districts in eastern Uganda (Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2014)*

on migration); this means they miss out on new ideas and practices that migrants are exposed to at their destination, which can also (though does not always) contribute to changing gender norms, both among migrants and in their communities on their return (Marcus and Harper, 2014).

**Surprisingly, poverty and wealth can both drive people to go against gender norms.** Poorer people may be too poor to comply with prevailing gender norms. For example, even if norms confer disapproval on girls and women moving outside the home independently or working outside the home, poor families' need for the income generated by these activities generally overrides their desire to comply.

On the other hand, the fact that better-off families have more money and greater social status can mean that they are better placed to defy certain norms, particularly if they regard them as constraining what they want to do. For example, our research in Nepal encountered a local leader who had sent his daughter to Kathmandu to study for a Master's degree, despite disapproval from the rest of his community. Respondents in Hmong communities in northern Viet Nam also mentioned that officials had much more room for manoeuvre than ordinary people (farmers) when it came to defying gender norms, and could educate their daughters to a higher level without worrying about their marriage prospects.

## So, if poverty is eradicated, will girls experience less discrimination?

A long tradition of research has drawn attention to the fact that economic development tends to reinforce some gender inequalities while reducing others (Jackson,

*'If economic development and infrastructure develop, then that opens up new opportunities for them to learn about the outside world and they can learn new things, different things relating to social norms, mostly through high-tech technology. At least now they have mobile phones and CDs also.'*

*Interview with Viet Nam research team (March 2015)*

1996; Razavi, 2011; World Bank, 2011). Likewise, our research in all four countries suggests that the role of poverty, cultural values and other factors in reinforcing or undermining gender norms depends on the issue in question. For example, we found that poverty was a common reason why adolescents dropped out of school and that – counter to global trends (UNESCO, 2014) – girls were disproportionately affected. Although some respondents may have said they could not afford to send their daughters to school when they had other, less socially

acceptable reasons for pulling them out, our research suggests that when family incomes are under strain, it is often girls who drop out of school.

With respect to child marriage, although economic pressures are a major reason why girls marry in adolescence, it is clear that in the research sites in all four countries, social disapproval of delaying marriage and having a family continues to exert a strong influence on decision-making about when to marry. This is borne out by analysis of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data from 78 low and middle-income countries, which shows that 54% of girls in the poorest income quintile marry before they are 18, compared with 16% of girls in the richest quintile (UNFPA, 2012). By contrast, norms limiting girls' freedom of movement outside the home were often particularly strong among better-off households who were less reliant on income earned by female family members (see Box 5 below). Other research also confirms that among communities where son bias is strong, sex-selective abortions are more common among better-off households, as poorer households cannot afford them (Bhalotra and Cochrane, 2010).

### Box 5: Independence of poverty and gender discrimination: a view from Nepal

*'Apart from the fact that some families who were well off economically sent their daughters and daughters-in-law for higher education, there was no clear evidence both from Salena and Wayal that families who were better off economically or in political status were the ones that challenged or resisted discriminatory social norms.'* (Ghimire and Samuels, 2014)

*'We found that a lot of rich families were also even more restrictive, so they were sending their girls to school but then if you move beyond that ... what do they do after ... school? Are they allowed to have a career that they want? There was no chance for them to do that. So I would not agree that only economic prosperity would lead to an end to this discrimination.'*

*Interview with Nepal research team (April 2015)*

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Listen to researchers Grace Kyomuhendo Bantebya and Florence Muhanguzi discussing how gender norms and poverty combine to limit girls' opportunities. Grace and Florence suggest that poverty sets a context in which discriminatory gender norms provide a guide as to how cope with resource scarcity, but that discriminatory gender norms are not only the outcome of poverty and affect women and girls of all economic backgrounds.

## Implications for action

None of practices, norms or the values and ideologies that underlie them are set in stone. All change in response to forces such as changing economic opportunities, the spread of new ideas, and more specific actions, such as government policies, programmes and information campaigns. It is often easier to encourage people to change a specific harmful practice or the norm that governs it than to change underlying cultural values – but these, too, can and do shift over time. The companion Note *How do gender norms change?* discusses these issues and the implications for action in more detail.

## 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 focuses on social norms around early marriage, and how these are linked to norms around girls' education in Doti, Nepal. Child marriage is common practice, with girls marrying between 14 and 18 years; and there are gendered expectations for boys and girls from birth, with 'good' girls being submissive, restricted in their movement outside the house, and upholding chastity and family honour by keeping interaction with members of the opposite sex to a minimum.

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 research from fieldwork in Ha Giang province, northern Viet Nam, on what drives the shifting and persisting norms surrounding marriage practices for girls within the Hmong community. It looks at how these norms are shaped by individual agency, socioeconomic conditions and demographic factors, as well as cultural and political institutions and their impact on girls' capacities, in terms of education, economics, decision-making, sexual and reproductive health and physical wellbeing.

Jones, N., Tefera, B., Stephenson, J., Gupta, T., Perezniето, P., Emirie, 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 shifting gender norms for adolescent girls in the Amhara region of Ethiopia and focuses on how these norms influence girls' educational opportunities. Drivers of progressive change in gender norms include: access to education, positive local role models, supportive male relatives and top-down social mobilisation and legal changes. Factors impeding change include: the unequal division of household tasks, girls' limited mobility and isolation and conservative norms about girl's bodies and sexuality.

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 builds on two years of fieldwork to examine the norms and practices around marriage and education for adolescent girls in Mayuge, eastern Uganda. It discusses how these are changing in response to broader socioeconomic and cultural transformations occurring within an overall setting of generalised poverty, but also continuing to limit girls' opportunities. Persisting norms include traditional gender expectations within marriage, with the husband considered the head of the household, and the wife (or young bride) valued primarily for her reproductive role.

Kyomuhendo Bantebya, G., Muhanguzi, F.K. and Watson, C. (2013) *Adolescent Girls and Gender Justice: Understanding Key Capability Domains in Uganda*. This study examines the ways in which adolescent girls' lives are shaped and constrained by gender discriminatory norms, attitudes and practices in two rural communities in Uganda. Girls often carry a heavy burden of household work, making them less likely to attend school; they are excluded from ownership of and control over critical productive assets, and their physical security is undermined by patriarchal norms of male control over female bodies. The report presents recommendations about how policies and programming can contribute to changes in these gender norms – for example, through information campaigns around marriage law reform, and making schools more welcoming places for girls (including adequate female-only facilities).

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.

Tefera, B., Perezniето, P. and Emirie, G. (2013) *Transforming the Lives of Girls and Young Women: Case Study, Ethiopia*. This report explores the role of discriminatory gender norms in depriving girls of opportunities to achieve their full potential. It explores how these norms limit girls' educational attainment, increase their likelihood of marrying early and having children in adolescence, and shape their future roles as home-makers and mothers. The research finds that girls' increased access to information is having a positive impact on girls staying in school and accessing information about sexual and reproductive health. International migration is identified as an increasingly common way for girls to leave an oppressive domestic context and explores the many risks that this involves.

Watson, C. (2014) *Understanding Changing Social Norms and Practices around Girls' Education and Marriage: Lessons Learned and Emerging Issues from Year 2 of a Multi-Country Field Study*. This report provides an overview of findings from fieldwork in Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam, which explored the range of social norms around girls' education and marriage, how they are manifested in each context, and the forces that inhibit progress or contribute to positive change. While change is occurring in each country, early marriage remains prevalent and gender roles remain 'traditional', typically prescribed by discriminatory norms guiding behaviour.

Watson, C. and Harper, C. (2013) *Adolescent Girls and Gender Justice: Understanding Key Capability Domains Across a Variety of Socio-cultural Settings. Lessons learned and Emerging Issues from Year 1*. This report outlines key findings from fieldwork in Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam, highlighting some of the ways in which gender norms are changing or persisting and the factors that underpin current norms and practices. It discusses some of the underlying values and ideologies that contribute to norms affecting girls' lives in a range of areas.

### Other literature

Bicchieri, C. (2015) *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure and Change Social Norms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This book explores what constitutes a social norm and how to decide whether a collective behaviour is a norm or simply a shared custom. It examines the experience of and differences between social expectation, customs, and norms, and what drives each of these, using examples of social norms in different contexts. Additional chapters provide insights into measuring social expectations and norms.

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.

Heise, L. (2013) '*Social norms. Introduction*'. *Presentation at the Expert Workshop on Empowering Adolescent Girls, 26 April, London*. This presentation provides succinct definitions of attitudes and norms. It offers some key insights on effective behaviour change strategies, including considering whose opinions matter most, and making emerging changes highly visible as a means of quickening the pace of change.

Sen, G., Ostlin, P. and George, A. (2007) *Unequal, Unfair, Ineffective and Inefficient. Gender Inequality in Health: Why it Exists and How We Can Change It. Final Report to the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health*. Solna: Karolinska Institute. This report examines how gender relations of power constitute the root causes of gender inequality and are among the most influential of the social determinants of health. It is gender norms and expectations which influence whether people's health needs are acknowledged and whether people can realise their rights. The report argues that addressing gender inequality and changing gendered norms and practices will ultimately reduce the health risks women and girls face and transform the gendered politics of health systems, which currently limit women's access to and quality of care.

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