



Upholding momentum on the women's rights agenda

Highlights and recommendations from the event on 10 December 2020

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Key messages

General

- Shifts in gender norms often take a long time to develop and progress can stall and plateau. Our expectations regarding the speed of change must be realistic.
- Progress often seems to stall at the very point when women are poised to achieve significant change or power. Persistence is essential.
- While gender-based violence (GBV) and opposition to women's political voice and leadership remain barriers to gender equality more broadly, there is reason to be optimistic about change.
- The most disadvantaged are often left far behind. Attention to issues of intersectionality is vital.

Gender-based violence

- Progress has been made in understanding what drives GBV, recognising the value of both societal and system-wide responses, as well as what works to change hearts and minds and to make change last.
- Intersectional action needs to work more effectively with men and boys to address toxic masculinities by adopting trauma-informed responses and change strategies within social protection processes.
- Young people remain resolute regarding change. While acknowledging the sometimes intractable nature of violence, they voice determination to see change in their lifetimes.

Political voice

- High-level commitments have been driven by women's organising, resilience to backlash, solidarity and inclusion, demonstrated across the women's movement, especially in the 25 years since Beijing.
- There has been some impressive change, but now that women are in political positions, doors must be opened for their inclusion across political mandates and to listen to and respect their voices.
- GBV in political settings is a significant inhibitor of progress.

Introduction

Set against the backdrop of the global Covid-19 pandemic and the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration, the case for upholding momentum on the women's rights agenda seems as crucial as ever in 2020. While landmark achievements have accelerated gender-equality efforts, especially concerning girls' access to education, this year has proven that where progress emerges, backlash rises. In activism this phenomenon is well documented and acknowledged as a sign of doing something right to upset the rigid and often outdated status quo. However, when the backlash redoubles its efforts, numbers and resources, and seeks to suppress change with violence affecting all levels of social, political and economic life, those driving change must adapt to thinking and working smarter, not harder.

In their new report *Gender, power and progress: how norms change*, produced with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation and Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and released to coincide with this event, ODI's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion team reflect that changing society at large requires changing hearts and minds to influence values

and behaviours. It also requires addressing the systematic inequities and barriers to progress that are deeply rooted within the mechanisms of society that both inform and reflect culture. Such learnings framed the event by asking:

- What actions help drive norm change across all types of patriarchal brakes, maintainers and barriers?
- How have gender norms changed over the past 25 years?
- What has supported and blocked changes to gender norms in key areas surrounding ending GBV and supporting women's political voice and leadership?
- How can change happen faster and become robust enough to resist backlash and withstand crises?

In sharing strategies to enhance knowledge exchange, drive resource mobilisation to the front lines, and to recognise and respond to those living at the intersections of inequality who shoulder the heaviest burdens, the global women's rights and gender equality movement has demonstrated flexibility and resilience. We have also learned that our greatest resources are often each other. Therefore, in recognition of the

Box 1 Event on 'Upholding momentum on the women's rights agenda'

Background: The event sessions reflected on progress since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, and looked at the range of actions necessary to enable gender-norm change. This involves society-wide actions – legal protections, political leadership, jobs for women and quality services, and more – alongside action to change the hearts and minds of individuals, such as social movements, behaviour-change programmes and mass media.

Speakers: Following a short video, welcoming remarks and framing for the event were delivered by Sara Pantuliano, Chief Executive, ODI, with opening remarks from Elissa Golberg, Assistant Deputy Minister for Strategic Policy, GAC (in both French and English). To examine progress the sessions focused on one inhibitor of change and one force for change: gender-based violence and women's political voice and leadership, respectively. The event was concluded with an intergenerational dialogue featuring experienced leaders and youth activists, with keynote remarks from Rt Hon. Helen Clark, before final words from Sara Pantuliano and Dr Caroline Harper.



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60th anniversary of ODI, and with the support and contributions of GAC, a half-day event was held on 10 December, Human Rights Day.

As a bookmark piece to conclude the United Nations Secretary-General's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence campaign, and in response to Human Rights Day's official theme for 2020, Recover Better, this event aimed to leverage leading minds from academia, activism, policy and programming active in women's rights. Conversations were convened to examine the deeply entrenched gender norms that both limit progress and fuel violent personal and political backlash against women, gender non-conforming individuals and their allies. The event was structured into three thematic sessions addressing gender-based violence and women's voice and political leadership and an intergenerational dialogue of expert and emerging leaders. Summarised below are key themes from the event.

Session 1: Preventing violence through society-wide, community and individual action: a post-Beijing +25 agenda

Gender-based violence (GBV) was a critical area on the agenda in Beijing, and an area which has seen progress, setbacks and the onset of new and complex challenges. Covid-19 has brought even further into the fore the dangers of intimate partner/domestic violence and the critical role that flexible, accessible services play in the response. Meanwhile, the rise of internet technology has brought with it new opportunities as well as threats and dangers as online GBV and harassment proliferate. Large-scale actions to prevent violence in policies, laws, services and other areas can be critical for eliciting and supporting lasting change. They also have limitations. For example, enacting and shaping these laws can prove difficult; sometimes progressive policies and services do not go far enough when discriminatory gender norms in society hold firm, and sometimes supportive legal and service systems can only go so far when their implementation is weak, or populations are

unable to access the protections and services they aim to provide. Alongside these formal strategies, change through individual and group action and mass media plays an important role.

The case for addressing gender norms

As framed by the report *Gender, power and progress: how norms change*, and by its lead author and session chair, **Dr Caroline Harper** (Director of Programme, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, ODI), 'gender norms are at the centre of gender equality and until we see norms change, we will not see behaviour change'. The often invisible gender-based norms, values and stereotypes that uphold male power and privilege both serve the polarising, potentially paralysing and paradoxical narratives propagating entitlement, insult and violence, as well as the silence, submission and subservience required to maintain these patriarchal brakes. It is therefore crucial to interrogate both the root causes of and address solutions to change; maintain and sustain new narratives until they in turn become the new norms determining values, culture and actions; and determine what is and what is not accepted by society.

While substantial change takes generations, there is reason to be optimistic

As outlined by session speaker **Rachel Jewkes** (Director of Global Programme, What Works to Prevent Violence), 'we all play a role in maintaining or changing social norms'. This individual power that has been harnessed in a collective for decades by women's movements, community activists and grassroots organisers is integral to driving norm change at societal level. However, in order to address the problems, research into understanding both the scale of and solutions to ending GBV must continue to be prioritised.

Examples from **Poonam Muttreja** (Executive Director, Population Foundation of India), demonstrate modern solutions to old but enduring issues. Via innovative community-level communications, such as television serials and chat bots, educational messages transmitted through entertainment mediums have influenced change in attitudes, with a 20% decrease in GBV cases among participants. Additionally,

empowered male participants were cited to have self-mobilised and launched their own commitments and campaigns to prevent male-on-female violence and begin driving norm change towards more peaceful and equitable masculinities.

Adopting a trauma-informed, systems-wide approach

In addressing the reductive norms and aggressive behaviours perpetuated and prescribed by toxic masculinity, it is essential to again take a new approach in addressing long-standing issues, as well as intergenerational cycles and patterns that make change so difficult to instil. As speaker **Gary Barker** (President and CEO, Promundo-US), outlined, men's use of violence is partly driven by norms but also trauma, where they are three times more likely to commit GBV if they have witnessed it, mainly in childhood. To further widen reach of effective, trauma-informed programming, where mixed-sex learning further yields stronger results, efforts can be scaled across social protection programmes. By integrating what works within education or health sectors, huge numbers can be reached and institutional norms can be challenged.

Gender–power analysis of systems and solutions

Despite progress in legal reforms and gender-responsive budgeting to support national action plans to end GBV, legal changes alone have not had the trickle-down effect on changing hearts and minds. However, recognition of where systems uphold gender discrimination is crucial to addressing the multiple sources and entry points for systemic and society-wide changes. In addition to the community-driven work shown to be effective in overcoming GBV, **Lori Michau** (Co-founder and Director, Raising Voices), and **Professor Lori Heise** (Johns Hopkins University), proposed the relational nature of norm change and state that 'changed people change people' and positive role modelling for alternative, more peaceful ways of living are strong signifiers in behaviours that are adopted at scale. The post-Covid-19 period may present an opportunity to capture hearts and minds and drive new

narratives around gender norms, when more people are plugged into the internet and the potential for ideas to spread faster is increasing.

Session 2: Charting a forward-looking agenda for gender equality through political voice and leadership

Once firmly held discriminatory gender norms that shaped the political space appear to be eroding in many contexts around the world, though various forms of gendered discrimination and barriers remain. Women's representation in the world's legislative bodies has, on average, doubled since Beijing, rising from 12% to 25%, and women leaders, though few in number, have been lauded for their responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Globally, according to World Values Surveys, those that report 'men make better leaders' has also declined from 50% to 35%. Despite these gains, many gender-unequal attitudes and stereotypes continue to hold back equality achievements and pose significant challenges to more widespread deep and lasting change.

Is the pendulum swinging the wrong way?

Chaired by **Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou** (Director of Programme, Politics and Governance, ODI), **Her Excellency Wafa Bani Mustafa** (Member of Parliament, Jordan, and Chair, Coalition of Arab Women MPs to Combat Violence Against Women), and **Meredith Preston McGhie** (Secretary General, Global Centre for Pluralism), outlined how in some political arenas where women are encouraged to compete against other women, they are still discouraged from taking 'men's jobs', or senior roles historically held by men. Despite the barriers women politicians often face in gaining office or wielding power once in position, women also tend to be leaders in social activism and policy work to create change. Barriers to their equal and full participation in politics are reflected in there being relatively few senior leadership posts occupied or sustained by women leaders. As is often the case, the tools used to undermine women in power often rely on othering to cause divisions and mistrust. Pluralism and inclusion are key principles within a framework

for supporting women's political voice and representation, which focuses on the interplay between the 'hardware' of legal and policy frameworks which need to be inclusive and rights-based alongside need for change in the 'software' of society, or the social/gender norms and individual attitudes and behaviours.

The business case for women's political leadership

As outlined by **Shannon O'Connell** (Senior Gender Adviser, Westminster Foundation for Democracy), the impacts of women in positions of power are multifaceted. Overall, women leaders tend to work harder to develop relationships with their constituents, increasing levels of trust between constituents and their representatives. Most interestingly, the group benefiting most from women's leadership has been men, for whom gender norms restrict the prioritisation of their health, but who benefit from a prioritisation of public service delivery. The society-wide cost of domestic violence is also a well-documented challenge to healthy societies at large, placing significant demand on health services especially.

Feminist policy-making and the role of movements

Laurel Weldon (Distinguished Simon Fraser University Professor of Political Science), illustrated the essential link between feminist policy-making and women's organising since Beijing. As noted, feminist movements have been the most important driver of the enactment of gender equality policies in the last 40 years, and the autonomy of these movements from national governments and in their self-governance has been critical to their successes. Whereas women's autonomous organising has doubled since 1995, the resilience required to respond to backlash lies in the counter-mobilisation work of women's movements to block notions of a fictitious past when 'families were united, and the economy was strong'. Notions that gender equality work therefore threatens 'national strength' have been effectively rebuffed and a key success for global feminist movements were attributed to 'us learning solidarity'.

Session 3: New ideas, old challenges: learning and leading across generations and addressing old and new challenges

Covid-19 has laid bare many of the challenges and fault lines holding us back from the goals set out in the 1995 Beijing Declaration. The rise of populism has presented multiple global challenges for the women's equality agenda. There are also opportunities to build a 'new normal,' with young people both driving and deeply affected by many of the decisions being made today that could give rise to this change. However, what do challenges reveal about progress towards gender equality? What are some of the strategies for addressing particularly the most pressing impacts on women and girls and can some of the past challenges inform some of the ones to come? In this solution-focused final session looking through the lens of current challenges such as Covid-19 and populism, we examined what should be prioritised in a forward-looking agenda for gender equality and what lessons from past movements and from women's experience can be raised for the next generation of feminist leaders.

Learning from each other

Chaired by **Sara Pantuliano** and framed by a keynote speech by **Rt Hon. Helen Clark** (Former Prime Minister, New Zealand, and former United Nations Development Programme Administrator), the session began with reflections from Helen's '30 years in the trenches' working towards a more gender-equitable world. As a 'serial glass-ceiling breaker', Helen reflected on the changing political landscape she has witnessed and encountered throughout her career. Helen noted that there was resistance only once women were noticed by those who would prefer them to have stayed on the other side of the wall that they were forced to break through. The call to respond to the low rate of change since Beijing in 1995 was that of a necessary anger to redouble our efforts to address stark projections, including that full economic equality would take 257 years, according to the 2019 Global Gender Gap Report, following last year's World Economic forum.

Helen also reflected that there is cause for optimism once similar tipping points mean women cannot be held back from creating the change needed in society en masse, which she noted was being reflected in more gender parity in the New Zealand government. Helen noted that temporary special measures such as quotas are crucial in accelerating the otherwise unacceptably slow progress. Additionally, in the area of women's political leadership, Helen highlighted that political parties need to better support women candidates and leaders with resources and that pressure must remain high on addressing barriers to women's economic empowerment such as childcare support to address the gendered unpaid labour gap. In the context of Covid-19, Helen noted that structural violence and rollbacks on reproductive rights for women globally will become clear once data is able to capture the inevitable consequences of the de-prioritisation of essential women's health and safety services. In recognition of women's diversity, it was also raised that those at the intersections of marginalised identities experience the world very differently to those with relative privilege, inviting more intersectional work to address structural discrimination on its multiple and simultaneous levels. Helen concluded by reflecting on what she wished she had known 30 years ago when she was prime minister and acknowledged the essential contributions of networks of both women and men working in solidarity. Helen called for more women leaders but also for more feminist leadership. She also noted that patience would not accelerate the essential progress that must be made towards gender equality and women's full empowerment.

Chamathya Fernando (Sri Lanka Girl Guides Association) outlined the collective power of

girls' voices. Non-formal education delivered by youth activists was cited as a tool for community mobilisation around ending GBV and as a crucial driver in elevating young women in particular and demonstrating their capacity to act as leaders in their own lives.

Grace Kyomuhendo-Bantebya (Professor of Women and Gender Studies, School of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University) presented the case for perseverance in the face of backlash and confirmed the power of community outreach work to change and maintain more gender-equitable norms.

Steve Lee (Executive Director, Foundation for Environmental Stewardship) commented on how women and other marginalised groups are disproportionately impacted by crises such as climate change and outlined how crises can further set back progress, but also how young people are driving inclusive change-making at community and policy levels.

Roberta Clarke (Chair in Office East and Southern Africa, UN Women) highlighted that legal reforms alone will not sustain social change and political will is driven by social demand, emphasising the role of community mobilisation and feminist activism.

Sagar Sachdeva (The YP Foundation) reflected on the work being done by men and boys as allies (and victims) of GBV and gender inequality and also commented on behaviour-change programmes and the role of social media in youth-driven leadership to improve gender norms.

Finally **Zoey Roy** (poet and community educator) outlined the essential need to listen to women's voices in decision-making processes, to make reparations for failures by the state to prioritise and protect the most marginalised and for collective healing through collaboration.

Recommendations

- Engage men and boys more as allies and as beneficiaries of gender equality work to ensure they understand that being part of gender equality conversation does not mean they will be under-represented or disenfranchised.
- Garner more support on how to operationalise gender equality in policy-making spaces and at implementation level so local authorities can deliver on commitments and put forth the business case for ending GBV and advancing women's leadership.
- Effect more intersectional action for more flexible funding to directly support informal women's groups and movements, particularly those covering intersectional identities and inequalities and responding to crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Investments must continue to map the scale of GBV as well as what works to change it.
- Integrate anti-GBV work into social protection systems, specifically within education and health systems that have the potential to scale progress dramatically.
- Address the organised counter-mobilisation occurring around the globe, with focus on examining the 'angry internet' and digital platforms and programming with the capacity to reach scaled-up audiences. As Helen Clark said: backlash that we are seeing should be an invitation to 'get angry' and not be patient but practical and work with our allies.
- Where women are held to different standards to men, establish checks and balances to encourage women to move to leadership spaces and not limit their ascension to roles of seniority. Prioritise youth leadership and better integration of marginalised voices through inclusive processes.
- Invest in programming that encourages consciousness to grow among men, in order to remove gendered and norm-driven barriers and allow men to understand themselves as gendered beings who benefit from feminist policies, more peaceful societies and women leaders, and support men's advocacy to end GBV and reject toxic masculinities that rely on violence.

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Annex 1 Session outline and speaker list

Session 1: ‘Preventing violence through society-wide, community and individual action: a post-Beijing +25 agenda’ was chaired by Dr Caroline Harper, Director of Programme, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, ODI, with reflections by Rachel Jewkes, Director of Global Programme, What Works to Prevent Violence; Gary Barker, President and CEO, Promundo-US; Lori Michau, Co-founder & Director, Raising Voices; and Poonam Muttreja, Executive Director, Population Foundation of India.

Three simultaneous breakout groups followed, facilitated by Megan Daigle, Senior Research Fellow ODI; Rachel George, Research Fellow, ODI; and Rachel Marcus, Senior Research Fellow, ODI, including Firestarters (senior leaders acting as discussants and offering reflections), Professor Lori Heise, Johns Hopkins University and Ana Buller, Research Fellow, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Interventionists from Global Affairs Canada and from leading youth movements – Commonwealth Youth Council, Welfare Association for New Generation and Spotlight Initiative Guyana – joined the discussions alongside targeted audience participants.

Session 2: ‘Charting a forward-looking agenda for gender equality through political voice and leadership’ was chaired by Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou, Director of Programme, Politics and Governance, ODI, with reflections by Her Excellency Wafa Bani Mustafa, Member of Parliament, Jordan and Chair, Coalition of Arab Women MPs to Combat Violence Against Women; Meredith Preston McGhie, Secretary General, Global Centre for Pluralism; Shannon O’Connell, Senior Gender Adviser, Westminster Foundation for Democracy; and Laurel Weldon, Distinguished Simon Fraser University Professor of Political Science.

Three simultaneous breakout groups again held detailed discussions, chaired by Kerrie Holloway, Senior Research Officer, ODI; Rachel George, Senior Research Fellow, ODI; and Pilar Domingo, Senior Research Fellow, ODI, with Firestarter Tam O’Neil, Senior Gender Advisor, Care International UK and Interventionists from Global Affairs Canada and the Equality Fund, alongside Amina Doherty and youth activists from Public Health England, the International Federation of Medical Students Associations and Youth Advocacy Foundation joining audience participants.

Session 3: ‘New ideas, old challenges: learning and leading across generations and addressing old and new challenges’ was moderated by Sara Pantuliano, Chief Executive, ODI, with a keynote speech by Rt Hon. Helen Clark, Former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former United Nations Development Programme Administrator. Experienced leaders and youth activist discussants included Chamathya Fernando, Sri Lanka Girl Guides Association; Grace Kyomuhendo-Bantebya, Professor of Women and Gender Studies, School of Women and Gender Studies Makerere University; Steve Lee, Executive Director, Foundation for Environmental Stewardship; Roberta Clarke, Chair in Office East and Southern Africa, UN Women; Sagar Sachdeva, The YP Foundation; and Zoey Roy, poet and community educator.

Closing reflections and conclusions of the conference were shared by Dr Caroline Harper and Sara Pantuliano before a closing poem by Zoey Roy. Digital rapporteurs moderated online Google Jamboards to capture audience reflections, questions or interventions throughout the sessions.



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