BRIEFING

Narratives of change and resistance in confronting discriminatory gender norms in Uganda

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Key messages

- **Uganda has seen a number of positive changes in discriminatory gender norms and practices.** Rising levels of education for women and girls reflect shifts in parental attitudes on the value of the girl child, recognition that education is important for both girls and boys, and a vision of female potential that extends beyond marriage and family alone. Marriage practices and expectations have also shifted towards greater agency for girls in choice of spouse, more flexibility around bride wealth payments, and delayed marriage. Economic empowerment has included women's entry into professions previously reserved for men, while women's participation in political spaces is now more accepted and more common.

- **Such positive changes have been brought about through a combination of factors.** These include: expanded educational access and opportunities for women; progressive policies backed by law; increased availability of services; mass awareness-raising efforts; and political will that has valued women's voice and representation. Many of the positive changes are interconnected and produce synergies. For example, greater access to education is leading to expanded economic opportunities for women; stronger political voice has contributed to more gender-equitable policies; and more women in positions of leadership are serving as role models to encourage the younger generations.

- **Women's agency – both individual and collective – has been critical in challenging discriminatory gender norms.** Individual women have struggled within their own homes and communities to push for more equal opportunities and respect, while collectively they have come together as a movement to effect wider societal change. Women have provided the vision and models for what gender justice entails and for what women can be and do; women have also helped to establish the laws, policies and processes needed to effect and safeguard transformative change. Agency is sometimes borne from opposition, but is also nurtured by supportive families and communities, strong collective institutions, ideas and inspiration from both national and international women's movements, and from the political space provided for women's empowerment, voice and action.

- **Progress in changing discriminatory gender norms and practices is not linear.** Change does not always move forward at a steady pace, nor does positive change at national level necessarily affect all groups or categories of women equally. The process in Uganda – though on an early upward arc – has been dynamic and ever partial, with twists and turns as well as current backlash and reversals that require constant action and attention. Many gains are fragile and could be eroded under changing circumstances that weaken the enabling environment and allow for a resurgence of patriarchal norms.

- **'Sticky' norms persist in a number of key domains.** Discriminatory gender expectations and power relations within the family have been highly resistant to change and continue to impede progress for women and girls. These revolve around issues of son preference and the continued devaluation of the girl child (including customary expectations about marriage for girls, unequal access to education, and discriminatory inheritance and property ownership practices) as well as the unequal gendered division of labour, the double burden on women in taking on responsibilities both inside and outside of the household, and women's restricted autonomy and decision-making authority within the household. They also include limitations on women's economic empowerment and the persistence of domestic violence, with the rise of new sources of marital discord caused in part by clashes over changing gender norms and

expectations, coupled with the emergence of new forms of abuse and gender-based violence against women and girls.

- **Obstacles and resistance to transformative gender norm change are seen to arise from the power and persistence of 'patriarchy'.** The norms, attitudes and practices associated with patriarchy as a system continue to operate at all levels of society and through all institutions, serving to reinforce discriminatory gender norms and thus maintain male power and privilege. They are deeply rooted in broad-based socio-cultural norms of the male-dominated organisation of the household and family; they are transmitted through discourse and socialisation processes in both public and private domains; they may change in shape and intensity in different contexts; and they are often backed up by law and other institutions such as religion, politics and education as well as by force or intimidation at both the individual and societal levels.

- **Strategic priorities for moving forward require sustained and integrated action on a number of fronts.** This entails reinvigorating the women's movement and collective agency through strengthened political representation and alliances, including at grassroots level, and mobilisation that builds on, reinforces and expands gains already achieved. Priorities include further expansion of quality education for all; continued development of gender-equitable laws and policies (for example, around family law) coupled with intensified efforts for effective implementation and enforcement on the ground; and ongoing advocacy and sensitisation efforts through both traditional and social media, as well as transformative education and socialisation processes. Study participants suggested that it is the combination of these factors, working in tandem, which is most conducive to sustainable changes in norms and practices aimed at women's empowerment and gender justice.

Introduction

Research background, aims and methodology

This briefing note summarises findings from a qualitative study undertaken in Uganda as part of a History and Change research series of the Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) project.[1] ALIGN is led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It seeks to further knowledge-sharing and innovation to ensure that evidence and learning on norm change informs more effective policy and practice in promotion of gender justice and women's empowerment.

The History and Change research seeks to pull together and draw lessons from personal narratives and analyses of change and resistance in gender norms, expectations and behaviours as these play out against a backdrop of broader social, economic and political processes. The overall aim is to enhance understanding of the factors that enable or challenge positive changes as these are perceived and experienced through the lives of individual women at national level.

The research has been guided by the project's conceptual understanding of gender norms – both how they operate and how they either change or resist change.[2] It is also underpinned by current thinking around gender justice and entitlements and has been informed by the capabilities approach to human development, which posits that progress across the life cycle in a number of key domains is critical to the empowerment of women and girls and their equitable attainment and exercise of full capabilities. Narrative investigations have therefore covered norms around: household and family relations; education; physical integrity and health; psychosocial well-being; and political and civic participation.

> **Fieldwork** was undertaken over 10 days in Kampala in August 2018, with 55 study participants (49 women and 6 young men), through:
> - 16 in-depth individual interviews with women professionals of different ages and backgrounds who have been or are currently active in politics and the law, government and policy-making, civil society activism, and academia and research;
> - 1 focus group discussion with a group of women professionals;
> - 1 focus group discussion with a mixed group of recent university graduates;
> - 4 intergenerational interviews with professional women, their mothers and their daughters;
> - a literature review to add background information and context to the findings.

Study participants were asked about their own experiences of gender norms over their life course as well as their perceptions of broader changes, progress and constraints over time in gender equality and women's empowerment. The key study respondents are all highly educated and constitute what might be considered the intellectual elite, who are among the 'movers and shakers' of the women's movement in Uganda. While their personal experiences cannot be considered representative of those of Ugandan women as a whole, their broader reflections on progress and obstacles to progress in changing gender norms for women in different contexts and socioeconomic settings contribute to our expanded understanding of the situation more generally.

National context

Uganda has, in many ways, been a trail-blazer in the development of gender-sensitive national policies, processes and structures for the empowerment of women and girls and has much to offer in terms of lessons learned in confronting discriminatory gender norms and practices. The country has made significant progress in efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, particularly after the coming to power of the current regime in 1986, through the expansion of educational opportunities for girls and boys, the opening up of political spaces to women, and the creation of a ministerial structure dedicated to gender justice and equality (the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD)) as well as the rise of a vibrant women's movement in civil society. The 1995 Constitution stands as a hallmark of gender-

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1   Full results of the study can be found here
2   For more information, please see the ALIGN website at https://www.alignplatform.org/FAQ

sensitive legislation, and a plethora of progressive national laws, policies and programmes have been developed to foster equitable and inclusive development.

Indicators of women's empowerment and well-being have, for the most part, improved significantly over time. Educational levels have been rising; affirmative action policies have boosted women's participation in government at all levels; women's economic participation has expanded as poverty reduction measures take force; and women's sexual and reproductive health (SRH) has improved with expanded access to information and services. Some surveys also show changing attitudes around the acceptability of gender-based violence (GBV) (Republic of Uganda et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, progress has been uneven, with important disparities. Gender parity in education has been reached only at primary level as a combination of factors induce high dropouts among girls as they transition into secondary education; women face unequal access to economic resources and discrimination in the workplace; gendered stereotypes of political leadership and other factors contribute to limiting women's exercise of power in the public domain; rates of maternal mortality – though declining – remain high, along with teenage pregnancy and childbirth; and violence against women and girls remains widespread. Significant obstacles and continuing challenges remain in critical domains affecting the roles, statuses and opportunities of women and girls in Uganda (UWONET, 2014a, 2014b; FOWODE, 2017; WEF, 2017; Republic of Uganda et al., 2018). A number of recent national assessments to measure progress in Uganda against international benchmarks and commitments identify negative gender norms as an obstacle to gender equality and women's empowerment (CEDAW, 2009; Bantebya Kyomuhendo et al., 2013 and 2014; MGLSD 2014; OECD/UBOS, 2015; UNDP, 2015; UNFPA, 2017; Watson et al., 2018).

Narratives of growing up and coming of age

Experiences of gender norms in childhood

A number of study participants described unstable home lives growing up and early personal encounters with discriminatory norms and gender inequality. A senior woman leader, now in her 60s, reported that '*As I grew up, I personally experienced discrimination, particularly vis-à-vis my older brother*'. Others, however, reported very supportive home environments where they saw little difference in how their parents treated sons and daughters. In the face of gender inequality experienced in childhood, many of the older or middle-aged women in our sample found that they either had to accept things as they were, or had to '*rebel*' in some way against societal norms in order to fully exercise individual agency. A professional woman explained that, '*It is only the rebellious women who have excelled. They have had to rebel in some sense and know that they are seen as weird or as prostitutes – loose women.*'

The younger study participants – daughters of professional women in our sample – seem to have faced fewer restrictive norms in their natal families, as their parents consciously strove to create more gender-equitable home environments, though even then some found that expectations about what girls should be doing began to change as they approached adolescence. As a young professional in her 20s noted: '*You begin to see the boys no longer doing the dishes and the girls will be in the kitchen!*'

Many study participants overall experienced some degree of gendered norms around roles and responsibilities within the family, with girls expected to perform more household chores and to limit their movements outside of the home. They also

> "We never minded about boys and girls doing different things because that was our nature. The boys would play football or play, but a girl never had the chance as she was occupied with chores all the time – she would not have time to roam around. And you would get used to it. We did not question, no! And all the people in the community knew about that."
>
> (Grandmother, in her 70s)

point to discriminatory inheritance favouring boys: when they questioned why girls could not also inherit, they would be told '*It is not in our culture*'.

Determined struggles for education

All of our study participants recognised that quality education offers a pathway to empowerment for women, both individually and collectively, and therefore have striven to access this and promote it at all costs. While some women indicated that their parents supported the education of sons and daughters, others spoke of having had to fight for their right to education as girls or to find allies to support them in the context of prevailing norms favouring boys. The struggle often started around school fees at primary or secondary level (before the policy of universal education) and would continue over the desire to continue to university, as well as over the choice of which subjects were most appropriate for women to study. Those who attained education themselves – often against considerable odds – thereafter served as role models and paved the ways for younger sisters to go on to study, with less resistance from within their family and community.

> A young civil society activist in her 30s, the eldest of seven in an up-country family, had to struggle to continue education beyond O-levels as the thinking in her community was '*These are just girls – let them stop at Senior 4, do a teaching degree, and start teaching, since girls are just going to get married.*'
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> She resisted her father's efforts to enrol her in a teaching institute and sat at home at a stalemate until her uncle came to her defence. An educated man who had educated both his sons and his daughters, he admonished her father, '*If you don't educate your children, they will never sit at the same table as my children, as what would they discuss?*'
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> She went on to university, paving the way for her sisters to attend as well. Now her father is himself a champion of girls' education, promoting this in his community by proudly saying '*For me, I have four degrees at home and they are all girls!*'

Education was a critical factor in the lives of the senior women born in the colonial period who served as early leaders of the women's movement in Uganda: it not only gave them the skills and standing to engage in technical and political activities, but it also channelled and chiselled their understanding of gender issues and discrimination such that they could engage with these in their professional lives and address what they increasingly saw as structural imbalances and social injustice. It has served much the same function among women of younger generations – opening up both awareness and professional opportunities that have allowed them to engage directly with individual and collective efforts to combat discriminatory gender norms.

Narratives of marriage and family
Exercising agency against discriminatory norms in marriage and the family

Among all of the women we interviewed, getting married and founding a family were considered essential, socially sanctioned steps in their life trajectories and central to their lives and identities as women. Many, however, insisted on entering into this on their own terms and in this way going against prevailing gender norms. Examples include: delaying marriage and choosing their own spouse; refusing or only symbolically acquiescing to the practice of bride price; contesting religious injunctions on the wife's submissiveness in marriage; insisting on property rights within marriage; managing reproductive expectations; and standing up against domestic violence.

Some credited their husbands with standing up for them against the gender-inequitable social expectations of in-laws and the wider community about the '*proper*' role and demeanour of women in the household; others admitted that the husband needed to be '*trained*' in this first! Many spoke of the challenges faced in combining their professional lives and their roles as mothers and wives, highlighting the importance of supportive spouses, extended family arrangements for childcare, and

the widespread practice of engaging household help or maids, as well as the ability to take advantage of boarding schools for older children. A number of respondents pointed to their gender-equitable parenting practices as a means of further chipping away at traditional gender norms within the family. Older women further reported on their struggles to maintain dignity and independence in widowhood.

Delaying marriage: *'When women are younger in marriage, they have more difficulty negotiating – it is important for her to get a job first. This helps her in her decision-making ability in the family.'*

Refusing bride wealth: *'I did not want to be sold – I didn't think it right that my worth was being calculated in cows.'*

Creating gender-equitable households: *'I have trained him that sharing roles is important to moving forward – if not, it wouldn't work.'*

Raising gender-sensitive sons: *'I cannot accept to groom a boy to grow up into a bad man who will fight women, so I insist that they have to know how to treat women.'*

Maintaining rights and dignity in widowhood: *'I dare you to not allow me to speak at my husband's funeral. If I can't speak, nobody will speak.'*

Narratives of professional engagement and collective agency

Awareness stirring commitment to act

Some of our study participants recalled very early stirrings of awareness about discriminatory gender norms and a desire to combat them and work towards gender justice, while others describe more gradual *'awakenings'* later in their young adult lives. This was sometimes as a function of higher education that opened their eyes to new ways of analysing and processing gendered experiences that they had hitherto considered '*normal*'. A number of women mentioned that the opportunity to study and travel abroad was a particularly powerful gateway to heightened understanding and awareness of the way gender norms have shaped attitudes, expectations and behaviours in their own country.

Some had to battle against restrictive norms within their own families, while others were inspired and supported by activist parents who worked for social justice. The different pathways to such personal realisations and subsequent professional engagement around women's rights in Uganda reveal a combination of early visceral reactions to what are clearly perceived as personal injustice through one's own experience, growing observational awareness of injustices occurring around them, and more gradual intellectual awakenings.

The power and excitement of collective agency

Through their diverse political and professional activities, research participants have contributed in multiple ways to combating discriminatory gender norms and advancing the agenda on gender equality and women's empowerment. Some have pursued political activism as Members of Parliament (MPs) or as leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs) devoted to women's rights. Others have moved up through the civil service to play key roles in government ministries. Still others have devoted their lives to research and university teaching in subjects such as gender studies and law – thus preparing future generations to take up the struggle. All have demonstrated the power of coming together to work collectively and have rich reflections to share on their experiences as these have unfolded over time in Uganda. They offer, in this way, unique perspectives and a number of lessons learned.

Many have been active participants and leaders of the women's movement in Uganda, identifying the excitement in the air from the mid-1980s, when a confluence of factors – internal and external – sparked a massive mobilisation and activist

engagement among women. At international level, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was in the process of ratification around the world throughout the 1980s and was ratified by Uganda in 1985, while the global women's movement was also brought home to Africa through the Nairobi Conference in 1985 (the third in a series of world conferences organised through the United Nations and civil society). At national level, the advent to power of Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) in 1986, after a five-year '*bush war*', established the foundations for democracy and opened up political space for heretofore marginalised groups, including women, establishing an affirmative action quota system for women's political representation.

Together, these formed a conducive environment for the burgeoning of new ideas and new possibilities of organisation and participation for women working for social change in Uganda. A period of intense and hopeful collective activity stretched through the late 1990s, reaching a high point in 1995/96 after several participants attended the fourth world women's conference in Beijing, which was described by one of the participants as being '*very empowering and providing massive exposure*'.

Our study participants took full advantage of this fertile period and beyond too – seizing the opportunity to organise and act on issues of importance to women and gender equality. They participated in political processes for women's advancement and civic representation, joining politics at all levels; they contributed to the development of the new, progressive and gender-sensitive Constitution; they helped change national laws and enact both policies and legislation designed to counter harmful norms and practices; they developed mechanisms to redirect and 'engender' national sectorial budgets to ensure that women's priorities were addressed; they initiated a new programme of gender studies at university level and engaged on transformative research; and they created new institutions dedicated to working for women's rights and gender justice. They also developed linkages with women at the grassroots level and helped promote women's economic empowerment and render women's work more visible.

'The period 1986–1996 was the high point – women were spitting fire! We were looking at issues that fundamentally affect us.'

'When the NRM came in, it came with the women's question high on the agenda. It was like opening a cage where the dog is caged all this time. When I got out I was unstoppable. I wanted to climb up a mountain and shout out to women to refuse.'

'There was a new conversation and re-politicisation in feminist terms – not just women's rights for the sake of women's rights. At the time we did not have the advantage of social media – so it was just networking among women's groups that gave a sense of solidarity and solidity. Energy was high, with hope for real changes happening.'

'Women had a common purpose – to free themselves from bondage and discrimination.'

There was 'a strong and vibrant woman's movement, and the passion of individual, purpose-driven women willing to spearhead the cause. We were wild – moving forward. We were burning with fire.'

'This was one of the first times in Uganda's history that there were organised women's groups, with a lot of caucuses formed around women's rights, children's rights, disability …'

'In the late 80s to mid-90s, when women were the most influential, you could feel the vibe – women speaking to power, engaging with processes and being listened to – with many things to show for it.'

(Professional women and senior leaders)

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Confronting and overcoming resistance

The tasks undertaken were not always easy, and resistance was encountered all along the way, but women's agency – both individual and collective – found ways to move forward in spite of obstacles during this period of what seemed like boundless possibility. In politics, for example, exercising political voice and assuming leadership positions demanded courage, as doing so entailed breaking clear socio-cultural norms against women's assertiveness and visibility in the public domain. But the energy and openness of the time, along with strong commitment and perseverance, allowed women to power through. Some women learned the ropes of politicking in the Constituent Assembly (see box).

> *'It was a real fight [on the Constituent Assembly]. When they refused to pass the things that I wanted, I would threaten to stand on the table until they were passed. One provision that we put in was removed when the women representatives were absent from the room – that was the time I insisted that I wouldn't move forward without this.'*
>
> *'I learned that on some issues you have to keep your mouth shut; on some you have to shout; and on some you have to give warnings. You have to master and manage all these tactics and tricks of politics. For example, prolonging discussions until time runs out and people will just sign off.'*
>
> *(Senior women leaders)*

Many women in Uganda have had to combat perceptions that they were acting like '*Westerners*' and accusations that promotion of ideals of gender equality betrays the values of their own society. As one senior woman leader noted, '*There is an idea of feminism as Western and the perception that you are angry, unreasonable, and difficult*'. Many people would say to her '*But you can't be a feminist – you are a nice person!*' So she would explain that feminism is actually just about human rights. She did not attack or defend, just took them through reality, looking squarely, for example, at beating – intimate partner violence – and asking: '*Is being against this foreign?*'

Others experienced more vehement public attacks but were able to maintain their strength of character and determination to carry on. One woman activist, a professional, who has raised her voice against the patriarchal thrusts of religious interpretations had a *fatwa* issued against her at one point and reported that pastors are '*obsessed*' with her and her '*satanic ways*'. She observed wryly that one year she was voted the '*worst woman of the year*' in a national newspaper, along with Joseph Kony (leader of the notorious Lord's Resistance Army) as the worst man. But she states that she wears this as '*a badge of honour*' because it means they are taking her seriously: '*I am a threat to their ideologies … If you are rocking the boat, of course you will be attacked. I would be disappointed if not.*'

Progress in moving forward
Positive changes in gender norms and practices

Looking both within and beyond their own personal narratives and bringing in other voices, study participants agree that there have been many positive changes over time in Uganda overall. These include: rising levels of education; greater representation and participation of women in politics and government; growing economic empowerment and autonomy; and improved SRH rights and conditions. Participants have also witnessed or experienced some changes in marriage practices, relations and expectations as well as changing attitudes towards gender-based violence.

Many study participants also highlighted a new sense of self-confidence, awareness of rights, and assertiveness on the part of girls and young women, who – as a combined result of higher educational levels, increased economic participation, and expanded information and services to protect them from rights violations – no longer feel the need to conform to traditional norms of the meek, submissive, and silent female. '*When I was growing up, shouting and playful, my parents said "You are a girl – you should not do or say these things." But now I have learned that I have a right to shout*' (young woman in focus group discussion with recent university graduates). They are thus more prepared to voice their concerns and to take action. As one young professional woman put it: '*We have inherited our mothers' resilience, but not their silence, with many women even calling into radio stations to air things that were once kept quiet*'.

> *'The value of the girl child has changed and there are now more options for her than just marriage. Higher education is also possible – at university, the student body is now 50% female.'* (IDI, professional woman)
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> *'Before it was thought that the girl child should not go to school because girls will just get married, so this was a waste of time – but no longer.'* (Young man in focus group discussion with recent university graduates)
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> *'The public space … has opened up for women.'* (Senior woman leader)
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> *'Women have come up to where decisions are being made. In my time, there were 40 women in Parliament – now there are 120. It has made a difference.'* (Senior woman leader)
>
> *'Today, when you see a girl, you might think she is a boy, because they do all of the same things. In my time, there was work that was meant for boys and work that was meant for girls.* (Grandmother)
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> *'More women owning resources today than 10 years ago'* (professional woman). This is seen to be a sign of growing *'economic justice'* (focus group, women professionals).
>
> *'Women increasingly control the number of children they have, and teenage pregnancy – though still a problem – has actually been declining … This is partly a result of more girls in school.'* (Professional woman)
>
> *'At the time of my parents, there was a lot of early marriage – my mother married at age 13 and dropped out of school. But I am now studying at the university and at age 26, am double the age of her mother when she dropped out!'* (Young woman in focus group discussion with recent university graduates)
>
> *'Women can now sit down at the same dining table with men, whereas before she would just prepare the food and lay a mat down for her husband to eat.'* (Young professional woman)
>
> *'Men overall are not so proud of violence against women, so in this way, things have gotten better – also in terms of respect for women.'* (Professional woman)

Key enabling factors

Participants explained that these positive changes have been brought about through a combination of factors, including progressive policies, expanded availability of services, and political will – all underpinned by greater agency, both individually and collectively. Many of the positive changes are connected and produce positive synergies. For example, greater access to education is leading to expanded economic opportunities for women and thus an expanded vision of women's potential roles in society. Stronger political voice has challenged deep-rooted norms of male dominance in the public sphere and has contributed to the development of more gender-equitable policies.

Education is seen to be both a positive gain in and of itself and a catalyst for other gains in gender equality and empowerment for women and girls. A conducive environment favouring democracy and the political will to open up spaces for collective voice provide the essential foundation for women's empowerment. Collective agency and a vibrant women's movement have been critical in carrying priorities forward, including at grassroots level. The connection with international streams of thinking about and activism around women and gender equality, and opportunities to travel in the region and internationally to share ideas and compare ways of being with other women around the world, have helped enlarge and strengthen the collective force for changing discriminatory gender norms in Uganda.

Progressive laws and policies, from the Constitution onwards, have served as essential conduits for further change in the direction of gender equality. Affirmative action for women – in both political participation and in education – is largely viewed as a critical springboard into opportunities that were hitherto denied to women. Specific laws and policies to protect and promote women's rights and well-being have been critical in a number of areas, including education, economic empowerment and gender-based violence. Information and awareness-raising activities have contributed to a heightened awareness of rights that has, in turn, supported individual agency and activism as a critical ingredient in the struggle. Role models, in the form of fearless women leaders, have provided powerful stimuli and inspiration for individual action, while mentors – coupled with support from family members – have provided guidance and encouragement for a new generation of women activists to emerge.

Obstacles and constraints

Uneven progress and backlash

In spite of the acknowledged progress, many study participants (professional women) described the current situation as '*stagnant*', '*limping*', with '*erratic progress*' and only '*marginal transformation*'. Some spoke of '*critical reversals in the gender domain ... Things we thought we had overcome 20 years ago are now becoming the norm again and in a more powerful manner.*' Many, therefore, feel that progress has been '*a mixed bag*', characterised as '*one step forward and two steps back*'. One professional woman suggested that '*there seem to be two parallel streams of progress and regression, or maybe it goes in and out – some changes, some persistence. It is often insidious.*' '*Dismantling these structural forces is complex – you are up against the gender division of labour: the mother's role vis-à-vis the father's role; the wife vis-à-vis the husband. Those traditional, structural issues that affect women everywhere.*'

A large proportion of study participants clearly identified '*patriarchy*' in all its forms and shifting shapes as a pernicious force that continues to operate at all levels of society and through all institutions to reinforce discriminatory gender norms and thus maintain male power and privilege. '*Something is simmering below the surface and it is patriarchy*' (professional woman). Participants suggested that this is deeply rooted in broad-based socio-cultural norms derived from the patriarchal organisation of the household and family; that these norms are transmitted through discourse and socialisation processes in both public and private domains (through which both boys and girls/men and women internalise its precepts); and that norms are often backed up by law and other institutions such as religion and politics, as well as by force, at both the individual and societal levels. Emerging trends are seen to be part of a backlash by men who feel threatened and will do anything to maintain power and privilege, with the principles of patriarchy invoked in different guises as a means of maintaining control. '*Patriarchy changes shape as women get empowered, enlightened, or move out of the traditional shape of things*' (professional woman).

> '*We are trying not to dismantle the source of our own identities, in adherence to norms to be properly married, with children, with certain traditional norms such as not challenging men or challenging them quietly – not openly, for if you do, they will squeeze you against the wall…*
>
> *Maybe as activists we have never unlearnt what we learned when we were young [socialisation], while men have never even seen a need for unlearning, because it benefits them. I myself am ashamed that if I were to take a plane and hear at take-off that the pilot is a woman, I would want to jump out of the window.*
>
> *I am also questioning myself when I look at female students and judge their sexy dresses with shock. Maybe we were all just talking but not making deeper changes. Gender is so personal – so deep-rooted.*'
>
> *(Professional woman)*

Intertwined with (and often underpinning) discriminatory norms in other domains are aspects of deep-seated cultural beliefs, customs and laws that influence attitudes and practices. These are also backed up and/or accompanied by institutions such as the Church, which may be purveyors of '*traditional*' notions of male dominance and female submission or may reinterpret such notions to back up patriarchy. Other stereotypical or harmful images of women and girls are conveyed in common sayings and/or communicated through media of different forms. Together, these have helped fuel cultural resistance to women's empowerment and gender equality, and feed male backlash against efforts to move forward. Moreover, women themselves have often internalised some of the prevailing gender norms.

Critical sticking points

Study participants detailed a number of critical '*sticking points*' in discriminatory gender norms and power relations within marriage, the family and household that have proven to be highly resistant to change and continue to impede progress for women and girls. These are seen to revolve around issues of son preference and the overall devaluation of the girl child. They include customary expectations about marriage for girls, unequal access to education, and discriminatory inheritance practices; the unequal gendered division of labour and the double burden on women; and women's restricted autonomy and

decision-making authority within the household. They also include the persistence of domestic violence, with new sources of marital discord arising in part from the clash of changing gender norms and expectations within the household, coupled with the emergence of new forms of abuse and gender-based violence against women and girls.

> 'At household level, women are really struggling – men are neglecting families and no longer providing. That is one way of positioning women to do what society expects them to do and to be. Even if the woman has taken on new roles, the man supervises to see that you continue to maintain your household roles – not openly at times. That leads to marital breaks, gender-based violence and domestic violence – in spite of laws and policies. A woman will be judged if she brings the complaint and asked, "Well, why didn't you prepare the food?" Those institutions like the police don't guard or promote gender equality. It is at the family level where the problem starts – there are so many questions … Patriarchal ideals around the family have fractured somehow, but still women are subordinated to men.'
>
> *(Professional woman)*

Partly as a result of increasing tensions at the household level, which get magnified in the community at large, but also as a continuation of deep strains of violence against women and girls present in some traditional norms and practices, gender-based violence remains a critical concern at all levels. Its forms include domestic violence and rape or incest by family members, as well as other forms of violence and economic or psychological abuse. And this in spite of laws, policies and programmes to criminalise these violations of women's rights and establish structures for reporting such violations. So while some attitudes towards gender-based violence may have changed – with more people now acknowledging that it may be 'wrong' – the practice persists.

> 'Is the work women are doing liberating or not? It is very evident that men are withdrawing – at all levels. Maybe they have found a new identity. Provisioning has been demystified – it is not a source of power. In my day, man was the provider – to eat meat, this had to be provided by men. Now men are no longer doing this and seem to be enjoying the status quo and might be taking on a new sense of identity. But they somehow still remain in charge. So women are paying school fees but men demand that you take the children to a certain school. One way men are retaining control is by using all of the women's money for household needs; they can then use their own money for enjoyment (drinking) or investment (maybe buying land that they hide from you).'
>
> *(Professional woman)*

Some hold that even the attitudes have not changed much, and that national surveys reporting that domestic violence is now viewed as less acceptable do not reflect reality. Moreover, new forms of economic and psychological violence are arising everywhere, and particularly among the professional classes. One professional woman suggested that '*Maybe this is also part of the backlash. The egoism and machoism of men are threatened by women in high positions.*'

Furthermore, in spite of advances in economic empowerment, more equitable access to resources of different sorts, and higher levels of participation in managerial and supervisory positions, women still struggle to achieve gender equality in the economic sphere. Fierce debates have taken place over issues of land ownership, in a context where customary land tenure practices sit alongside more formalised systems that both uphold men as the primary land owners. Women still face discrimination in the workplace as well as constraints in access to credit. Women's dual needs as mothers and workers are not adequately taken into consideration in work and employment legislation and practices, and their inequitable situation vis-à-vis men who control the means of production leave them struggling for autonomy.

Many study participants described the current moment in Uganda's political history as one of retrenchment, diminishing democracy, and a closing down of space for civil society, which have dashed some of the high hopes of women activists and political leaders who had revelled in the early days of the movement towards democracy and gender justice starting from the mid-1980s. The environment now is, according to many women, 'hostile' to their interests and is getting worse. They also voiced a sense of frustration with current women political leaders whom they accuse of increasingly '*buying into*' the male power system of '*patriarchy and patronage*' and not speaking with one voice to focus on critical concerns for women. This has led some to question the benefits of the affirmative action system, which had been based on the premise that ensuring a '*critical mass*' of women representatives would be enough to provide the '*tipping point*' for moving forward.

As a combined result, most also concurred that they have lost the sense of a '*movement*' that had incited so much excitement and propelled so many women forward when they were just starting out. In the current political environment, the strong collaboration that had existed between women in politics and government and women in civil society is seen to have broken down. Some also pointed to a growing disconnect between urban women in the capital and daily realities for women at the grassroots. The government agencies charged with advancing gender equality and CSOs at different levels are both starved of resources and often compete for external funding, which is usually tied to donor interests and time limited, rendering a long-term and cohesive vision difficult to articulate and move forward.

> *'When the government became undemocratic and women – mainly in the NGO [non-government organisation] world – were fighting against inequality and injustice, they were no longer seen as allies; now women are in politics because they are patronised by the government and they cannot raise these issues.'*
>
> *(Senior woman leader)*

Study participants acknowledged numerous constraints and frustrations in moving forward with some key legislative and policy priorities such as the Marriage and Divorce Bill and the Succession Act; they identified ingrained biases in the legal domain overall, which is seen to privilege male power and control, and highlighted operational difficulties in actually implementing new laws or policies on the ground, with access to gender justice a continuing concern.

> *'Before, it was more open because the women's movement had not gone into the core doctrinal issues that challenge patriarchy – the qualitative aspects of gender relations in terms of culture, religion. At the time, the regime was just finding its feet out of crisis, the guerrilla movement, etc. and girls' education as a topic was not that controversial and so they were amenable to such discussions.*
>
> *But now the terrain has changed as we move into the period we have now. Women's education does not push doctrinal laws. But once you push into those doctrinal norms around marriage – the last host or enclave of patriarchal power that is neatly woven into how people define themselves – this terrain is guarded jealously. But only once you shatter this one, can you move.'*
>
> *(Professional woman)*

Despite efforts to mainstream gender into national planning processes and all sectoral development plans and programmes, study participants reported that this remains an ongoing struggle: '*The integration and analysis of gender have not yet become systematised – it still requires individual efforts by women*' (professional woman).

In spite of a host of progressive laws and policies promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, implementation remains weak on the ground: the systems, standard operating procedures, resources and capacity for implementation are lacking. Policies such as universal primary and secondary education have boosted enrolments but are not addressing issues of quality. In the context of Uganda, government capacity to provide services of all sorts remains weak, with inadequate budget allocations from the centre and lack of capacity at local government level. Health and education services – both critical to women's empowerment – have suffered as a result, as have efforts to expand access to justice.

Conclusions and recommendations

What we have learned

This study has shown that significant progress has been made in efforts to combat discriminatory gender norms and advance gender equality and women's empowerment in Uganda. This progress has come about as a combined result of: expanded educational access and opportunities for women; progressive policies backed by law; increased availability of services; mass awareness-raising efforts; and political will that has valued women's voice and representation. Many of the positive changes are interconnected and produce synergies. For example, greater access to education is leading to expanded economic opportunities

for women; stronger political voice has contributed to more gender-equitable policies; and more women in positions of leadership are serving as role models to encourage the younger generations. Overall, women's agency – both individual and collective – has been critical to challenging gender discriminatory norms.

Nevertheless, progress has been neither linear nor complete, and significant obstacles remain to transformative change. 'Sticky' norms have been encountered in a number of domains. These revolve around issues of son preference and the continued devaluation of the girl child (including customary expectations about marriage for girls, unequal access to education, and discriminatory inheritance and property ownership practices) as well as the unequal gendered division of labour, the double burden on women, and women's restricted autonomy and decision-making authority within the household. They also include limitations on women's economic empowerment and the persistence of domestic violence, with the rise of new sources of marital discord coupled with the emergence of new forms of abuse and gender-based violence against women and girls.

Participants stress that discriminatory gender norms, attitudes and practices remain embedded in the '*power of patriarchy*' that is so formidable that constant vigilance and resistance is required in both personal and professional/political domains. The shape-shifting nature of patriarchy and its ability to re-articulate itself through different periods and institutions requires strategic re-positioning and tactical deployments of women working to change the bases of the gender injustices that such a system throws up.

The way forward

Study participants have clear and concrete ideas on the strategies needed to advance the struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment in Uganda. Recommendations aim both to build on gains already achieved – through intensification of the kinds of efforts that seem to have worked best – and to confront new challenges arising within the changing environment and period of backlash that many have identified. Women activists note that 'Gender issues keep changing face and we have to be prepared to deal with the changes'. And that '*It takes a certain kind of fighting spirit to keep pushing*'. This requires a reinvigorated women's movement to support collective efforts.

Thematic priorities include: strengthening collective action through a reinvigorated women's movement – drawing strength from both national and international solidarity – and more engaged political representation; expansion and reinforcement of quality education at all levels; elimination of gender-based violence in all its forms; and strengthened approaches to economic empowerment and financial inclusion for women.

While the required focus for action as well as advocacy is seen to remain on women – both individually and collectively – study participants suggested that some of the greatest gains might accrue from a focus on the younger generations. They also suggested that renewed attention be paid to men and boys (to bring them into empowerment efforts as allies) and opinion leaders in religious and cultural institutions. Finally, they recommended deeper action and analysis at household level, where many of the most stubborn gender discriminatory norms and practices prevail.

A clear cross-cutting theme and strategy for all thematic priorities is the need to continue work on the legal and policy environment – filling remaining gaps (for example, around family law) – while strengthening efforts to implement laws and policies on the ground and establish operational systems that are gender-sensitive and promotive. '*In general, we are blessed with good policies – we can use them to cement coherence and move forward around women's issues including economic empowerment, violence and voice*' (professional woman). Participants suggested that integrated approaches are critical for addressing multiple sources of inequality and the underlying norms that support them in the social, economic, political, and ideological domains. As part of such efforts, information and awareness-raising activities at all levels and intensified use of media will also be important.

Participants recognise from long experience that there is '*no magic bullet*' – that part of the strategy will simply be intensified efforts to mobilise around all of the issues that remain pertinent: '*We need to keep plugging on all the different fronts. Many battles are needed to win the war*' (professional woman). Since everything is intertwined – the economic, cultural, political and social – everything remains a priority. Some have expressed dismay at the current state of affairs, but also voice a determination to continue the struggle at both the personal and professional level, keeping the longer-term goal in mind.

'Maybe we expected too much change too fast and didn't realise that the journey is so slow, personalised, and deeply rooted in what we have been socialised into. But the more we see the bad effects of not changing these norms, the more we are encouraged to move forward; inspired also by the fact that so many things are no longer the norm – even the earlier sense of power and maleness and entitlement. The time needed for change is important – for change in something so deep-rooted. But at least we now know that we can move forward, and this will never change.'

(Professional woman)

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ALiGN Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms

About ALIGN

ALIGN is a four-year project aimed at establishing a digital platform for the Community of Practice (CoP) centred on gendered norms affecting adolescents and young adults. Project ALIGN seeks to advance understanding and challenge and change harmful gender norms by connecting a global community of researchers and thought leaders committed to gender justice and equality for adolescents and young adults. Through the sharing of information and the facilitation of mutual learning, ALIGN aims to ensure knowledge on norm change contributes to sustainable gender justice.

ALIGN's Research Fund

ALIGN's Research Fund supports small-scale action research or research translation projects which advance knowledge and evidence on gender norms across a wide range of contexts.

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