

ALiGN

Advancing Learning and
Innovation on Gender Norms



RESEARCH REPORT

Stories of change and persistence: Shifting gender norms in Uganda and Nepal

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ALIGN	Advancing Learning and Innovations on Gender Norms
BA	Bachelors of Arts
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CPN	Communist Party of Nepal
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FCHV	Female Community Health Volunteers (Nepal)
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IDI	In-depth Individual Interview
IGI	Intergenerational Interview
KII	Key Informant Interview
MA	Masters of Arts
MAD	Marriage and Divorce Bill (Uganda)
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRM	National Resistance Movement (Uganda)
ODI	Overseas Development Institute (UK)
SGD	Small Group Discussion
SLC	School Leaving Certificate (Nepal)
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
UPE	Universal Primary Education (Uganda)
USE	Universal Secondary Education (Uganda)

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Cover photo: A teach in rural Nepal points to letters as she teaches her class how to read the English alphabet. © Aisha Faquir/World Bank

Key messages

- Uganda and Nepal have experienced similar patterns of change and persistence in gender norms.** The precise patterns are shaped by the distinct local and national settings and histories. Yet the overall trajectories of challenges to patriarchal gender norms have followed similar contours, have been driven by similar impulses and have confronted similar obstacles as women have pushed for gender justice.
- Progress in confronting discriminatory gender norms and practices has expanded options for women and girls and their own capabilities both countries.** This includes rising education levels, a greater voice in politics and public life, more economic opportunities, and major improvements in reproductive health care and rights. Women also have more say in decisions about when and who they will marry.
- Positive changes have been driven by a combination of factors.** Some are linked to broad societal changes including economic development and expansion of services, rural to urban migration, and advances in democracy. Others derive from deliberate policies backed by legal reforms which have expanded educational access and opportunities for women; established political environments conducive to the promotion of women's voice and representation; and favoured the burgeoning of civil society organisations that have raised awareness of rights, within a move towards global norms on gender equality and women's empowerment. Many of these changes are inter-connected and synergistic: more access to education leads to more economic opportunities; a stronger political voice means more gender-equitable policies; and more women in leadership positions means more role models for younger generations. Impulses for the change
- Women's agency – individual and collective – has been critical in challenging discriminatory gender norms.** Women in both countries have provided the vision and models for gender justice, establishing the laws, policies and processes needed for transformative change. Agency has sometimes emerged from opposition, but has also been nurtured by supportive families and communities, gender-sensitive men, strong collective institutions, women's rights movements, and greater political space.
- But progress on discriminatory gender norms has been uneven, and major challenges remain.** Progress in both countries has not always moved at a steady pace, and progress at the national level has not benefited all groups of women equally. The implementation of progressive laws and policies has often been weak on the ground, creating a disconnect between national aspirations and local realities. Rural women and girls in many areas continue to face heavy workloads linked to both productive and reproductive tasks, limited autonomy and educational deprivation, while some women remain vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion based on both gender and social identity. Many gains remain fragile and may erode as a result of backlash weakens the enabling environment.

- **There are particularly ‘sticky’ norms across Uganda and Nepal.** Discriminatory gender norms within the family are highly resistant to change and revolve around son preference and the continued devaluation of girls (including expectations about their marriage, their education, their rights to inheritance and property ownership). They are reflected in the division of labour, with a ‘double burden’ on women, and their restricted autonomy and decision-making authority within the household. Such limitations embody patriarchal norms that expand into the public domain to curtail women’s economic options and political voice. In both countries, perceptions of women as sexual objects whose bodies belong to men contribute to the social control that limits their freedom and autonomy and continue to justify gender-based violence and social exclusion.
- **The research signals strategic priorities in four key areas:**
 1. Strengthened social movements, comprising reinforced institutions, networks and alliances for collective action; and greater social mobilisation and awareness-raising to build on, reinforce, and expand gains already achieved. This would broaden outreach to engage women of different social groups at the grassroots, which is essential for further progress in gender equity.
 2. Legal reform to close remaining gaps in protection for gender equality and women’s empowerment, coupled with intensified efforts for implementation and enforcement of progressive laws and policies
 3. A quality education for all, alongside the promotion of equitable economic opportunities and political voice and leadership
 4. Gender-equitable socialisation processes, fostered within families as well as in schools where transformative education will be critical.

Introduction

Background, aims and methodology

This report summarises key findings and lessons learned from qualitative studies in Uganda and Nepal as part of a ‘History and Change’ research series by the Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) project. The ALIGN project, led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, seeks to advance knowledge-sharing and innovation to ensure that evidence on norm change informs more effective policy and practice to promote gender justice and women’s empowerment.

‘History and Change’ gathers and draws lessons from personal stories 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 main aim is to enhance understanding of factors that enable or challenge progress as these are perceived by individual women, as well as through inter-generational discussions with selected participants.

The research has been guided by the project's conceptual understandings of how gender norms operate how they either change or resist change. It is underpinned by current thinking on gender justice and entitlements and informed by the capabilities approach to human development, which argues that progress throughout a woman's life cycle in a number of key areas is vital for their empowerment and their equitable attainment and exercise of full capabilities. Narrative investigations have therefore, gathered their stories about household and family relations; education; physical integrity and health; psycho-social well-being; and political and civic participation.

In addition to a literature review on the history and policies relating to the lives of women in each country, the study drew on four qualitative research methods: in-depth individual interviews (IDIs); focus group discussions (FGDs); small group discussions (SGDs); inter-generational interviews (IGIs); and key informant interviews (KIIs).

Country studies

In Uganda, fieldwork was undertaken in Kampala over 10 days in August 2018, involving 55 study participants (49 women and 6 young men) aged 15-89. **In Nepal**, fieldwork was undertaken in Kathmandu over two weeks in November 2018, involving 51 study participants (43 women and 8 young men), aged 23-89 (*see box 1*).

Box 1. Overview of research activities in Uganda and Nepal

Research in Uganda

- 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.

Research in Nepal

- 18 in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) with women of different ages and professional profiles, including those who work in government, politics, law, national and international NGOs, the private sector and academia;
- 4 intergenerational interviews (IGIs) with grandmothers, mothers and daughters or daughters-in-law;
- 4 small group interviews with minority ward representatives, health workers, researchers and civil society activists;
- 1 focus group discussion with a mixed group of MA students;
- 1 key informant interview (KII) with a university gender studies expert.

Participants were asked about their own experiences of gender norms over their lifetimes as well as their perceptions of broader changes – positive or negative –over time in gender equality

and women's empowerment. All research participants live in their countries' capital cities, but came from different regional and socio-cultural backgrounds. While their personal experiences are not nationally representative, their broader reflections on progress and constraints for women in different contexts and socio-economic settings expand our understanding of the situation more generally in each country and provide lessons learned that may apply to other contexts.

This report follows the logic of the study proceedings themselves. It first presents some of the main features of national progress in gender equality and women's empowerment as drawn from the literature reviews. It then summarises in separate sections study participants' narrative experiences of and encounters with gender norms over their life course from childhood and adolescence, through marriage and family life, to professional engagement and activity. And finally it draws on participants' analytical perspectives on and insights into the broader trends in their respective countries to highlight key points of progress and remaining challenges as well as to identify recommendations for moving forward on gender equality and empowerment for all.

Gender dynamics in the study countries

Uganda

Uganda has a rich cultural heritage, with over 40 different socio-cultural groupings and pre-colonial social structures ranging from chiefdoms to kingdoms. Most of its people are Christian, with a minority of Muslims and Hindus. The country has had a turbulent history since its independence from Britain in 1962, with the current president Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) coming to power in 1986 after a five-year 'bush war'; and a 20-year insurgency against the current regime in the north.

Its decentralised system of governance works through multiple districts and sub-counties and has recently introduced multi-party politics. Over the past three decades the government has made significant progress on stability, poverty reduction and extending social services. Nevertheless, nearly 20% of its people are classified as poor and many of the rest are considered vulnerable to poverty. The majority of the population (80%) is rural and most engaged in subsistence agriculture.

Uganda has been a trail-blazer in the development of gender-sensitive national policies, processes and structures to empower women and girls and offers many lessons on how to confront discriminatory gender norms and practices. Progress has been marked since 1986 through: a deliberate policy of expanding educational opportunities for both girls and boys; the opening up of political spaces for women through electoral quotas to create seats for women, workers, youth and people with disabilities; and the creation of a specific ministry for gender justice and equality (the Ministry of Gender, Social Development and Labour), as well as the rise of a vibrant women's movement in civil society. The 1995 Constitution stands as a hallmark of gender-sensitive legislation, ushering in a mass of progressive national laws, policies and

programmes. Indicators of women's empowerment and well-being have, in general, improved significantly over time (*see table 1*).

Nevertheless, progress has been uneven, with obstacles in areas that are critical for gender equality. While women's political participation has expanded, they continue to battle gendered stereotypes that favour male participation in political leadership. Obstacles to their exercise of power include sexual harassment and aggression, negative portrayals and trivialisation of their needs and experiences in the media, and a lack of the resources and skills needed to participate in politics and public life. They still suffer unequal access to economic resources and assets, and face discrimination in the workplace. Despite the institutional structures that are in place, commitment to gender is prioritised in most sectors; public institutions suffer from poor public management, as well as under-staffing and under-resourcing, resulting in weak implementation of policies. Meanwhile, the space for civil society activity is shrinking in the current climate of political retrenchment.

Table 1. Overview of progress and constraints in gender equality and women's empowerment in Uganda

Progress	Ongoing constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A national priority in successive development plans, Uganda has made significant progress in poverty reduction overall (from 25.5% in 2009/10 to 19.7% in 2012/13), along with a rise in employment – including in professional, technical, and managerial sectors, with positive effects on women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women still have unequal access to economic resources and assets (only 31% own land or a house alone or jointly), and face discrimination in the workplace (73% of women vs 92% of men employed in 2016; 50% women vs 35% men employed in the 3 lowest-paying sectors; a 39% male–female wage gap in the private sector)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender-sensitive Constitution (1995); Local Government Act (1999); and Presidential Elections Act (2000) with affirmative action (including 30% reserved seats) contributing to ground-breaking levels of women in government at all levels (proportion of women MPs up from 18% in 2000 to 35% in 2012) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women continue to face gendered stereotypes of political leadership and obstacles to the exercise of power, including sexual harassment and aggression, negative portrayals and trivialisation in the media, and lack of required resources and skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Girls' education promoted through policies of universal primary and secondary education (UPE/USE), a National Strategy for Girls' Education (2014–2019) and affirmative action for university entrance (1.5 point advantage over boys in admissions criteria) contributed to doubling the median number of years spent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition to secondary school remains low for boys and girls alike (24% and 22% respectively), with continued high drop-outs among girls due to early marriage or teenage pregnancy, gender-insensitive teaching and learning environments, parental investments in education favouring

in school for girls since the 1990s (from 3.0 to 6.3) and gender parity at primary level	boys, and continued regional, urban-rural and socioeconomic disparities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improvements in women's sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care services have contributed to a decline in fertility (from 7.1 in the 1970s to 5.4 in 2015) and a reduction in maternal mortality from 687 to 343 per 100,000 live births between 1990 and 2015). The use of modern contraception has risen from 18.2% in 2001 to 35% in 2016. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maternal mortality still high, along with teenage pregnancy and childbirth (25% of women give birth by age 18), an unmet need for family planning, and disparities in access to SRH information and services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protective laws, policies, and programmes (Penal Code Amendment, 2007; Domestic Violence Act, 2010; National Gender-Based Violence Policy and Action Plan, 2016) accompanied by extensive mobilisation contributed to a decline in women's experiences of physical violence (from 59.9% in 2006 to 51% in 2016) and in societal acceptance of domestic violence (from 77% to 49% among women and 64% to 41% among men) between 2000 and 2016) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Violence against women and girls remains widespread (more than 1 in 5 women aged 15 – 49 have experienced some form of GBV), while access to justice is limited due to lack implementation of laws and policies on the ground, lack of awareness of rights, and high opportunity costs in bringing cases to court. Decades of opposition to a proposed Marriage and Divorce Bill leave women without protection of equal rights within marriage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A number of government institutions (such as the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development established to promote gender equality and non-discrimination along with a plethora of civil society organisations (CSOs) devoted to promoting the rights of women and girls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender not a priority in most sectors; public institutions on the whole suffer from weak public management, under-staffing and under-resourcing; and the space for CSO activities has been shrinking

Sources: Matembe, 2002; Tripp and Kwesiga, 2002; Republic of Uganda, 2015; Republic of Uganda et al., 1989; 1996; 2001; 2007; 2012; 2018; Bantebya Kyomuhendo et al., 2014; UWONET, 2014a, 2014b; 2016; Among, 2017; FOWODE, 2017; Oloka-Onyango and Ahikire, 2017; Aciro Lakor, 2017.

Nepal

Nepal is a geographically and culturally diverse country spanning three ecological zones (the southern plains; the central hill areas; and the mountains in the north). With over 126 castes and ethnicities, who use diverse mother tongues, its people are characterised by significant differences in livelihoods, socio-economic conditions and historical development as well as in customs and social norms, with a social structure marked by a caste system. Hinduism is the dominant religion, followed by Buddhism, with minorities following Christianity and Islam, while some indigenous groups follow animist traditions.

The country has faced upheavals throughout its political history, shifting from a monarchy into a multi-party political system through a People's Movement in 1990, facing a Maoist insurgency from 1996–2006, and a second People's Movement which transformed Nepal into a federal democratic republic under a Constitution adopted in 2015. The current Government is headed by the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) formed of a coalition of leftist parties. With 80% of its people living in rural areas, Nepal's economy relies heavily on agriculture, as well as remittances from many men who have migrated for work. While the poverty rate has dropped in recent years, 25% of Nepal's people are still considered poor, with significant regional, social and urban/rural disparities.

Government commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment has strengthened in recent years, particularly since the advent of democracy. Women were active in the social movements of the 1990s and have gained political representation through a quota system at different levels of government. The current president, Bidhya Devi Bhandari, is female – elected in 2015, together with the first female Speaker. Educational levels have risen for both boys and girls, and sexual and reproductive health rights and services have expanded. Legal reform has been central to the promotion of gender equality and many laws have been enacted to protect women's rights in numerous domains.

The adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 was a milestone, paving the way for Nepal to establish its first separate Ministry for Women, Children and Senior Citizens. Activist civil society organisations (CSOs) have also been created to promote and safeguard women's human rights, and a coalition has been formed to pursue a common platform. Most indicators of women's well-being demonstrate significant improvements in sexual and reproductive health rights, education, economic empowerment, and protection, with sectoral programmes in place to further these gains.

As in Uganda, however, significant challenges remain (*see table 2 for both progress and constraints*). Progressive laws and policies suffer from weak implementation, and progress has been uneven across the country's different geographic and social groupings, with patterns of exclusion and inclusion often correlated with demographic, socio-economic and cultural background. Girls' education is still limited in some areas by the unequal division of household labour as well as early marriages that cause girls to drop-out of school.

While many harmful and discriminatory practices have been outlawed, some persist in different pockets, such as *chhaupadi* (the isolation of menstruating girls and women), accusations of witchcraft, discrimination against widows, and the practice of polygyny. Women's economic empowerment is hindered by, for example, their dual responsibilities within the household; gender disparities in access to land and other resources (despite recent laws on equal inheritance); and restrictions on mobility that prevent them from benefitting from economic opportunities. Women's political participation and leadership, though safeguarded by law, continues to face strong norms that define the public space as male. Women and girls also continue to suffer from different forms of GBV, while access to justice is limited by a variety of constraints.

Table 2. Overview of progress and constraints in gender equality and women's empowerment in Nepal

Progress	Ongoing constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National development priorities have contributed to a drop in poverty from 40% in 1991 to 25.2% in 2011, with continuous emphasis on women's empowerment in successive national development plans fostering increased economic participation of women. From 1991 to 2011, the percentage of economically active women has increased from 45.5% in 1991 to 79.4% in 2010/11 – nearly equal to that of men (at 80.9%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poverty rates marked by significant disparities. Women's economic empowerment still hindered by numerous factors: patterns of male inheritance, which limit women's access to land and other resources; employment preferences for men; and restrictions on women's and girls' autonomy and mobility. Just under 20% of households report ownership of land or house in the woman's name. Women remain concentrated in informal or part-time work and subsistence agriculture, with relatively few women in managerial positions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender equality promoted through extensive legal reforms including the 11th amendment of the National Code (2002); Gender Equality Act (2005); Constitution (2015); revisions of the Civil and Penal Codes (2017); and enactment of other gender-specific laws and safeguards including around gender-based violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gaps remain in some laws and implementation on the ground is often weak. Gender-based violence continues, with numerous social, economic and geographical barriers hindering access to justice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political participation and representation of women promoted through a quota system at different levels. Women now make up a third of all Members of Parliament (MPs) and 40% of local government; the current head of state is a woman; and the proportion of women in civil and security services has doubled over the past decade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Party leadership remains largely male-dominated; women are sometimes restricted to reserved rather than open seats in government; and spaces for the nurturing of leadership skills among girls and young women are limited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded education and rising literacy rates among men and women, with rates of improvement highest for women (from 25% to 57.4% between 1991 and 2001). Girls surpassing boys in net attendance rates at primary and secondary levels; gross enrolment rates for girls now reach 111.8% in primary school, 90.8% in lower secondary and 84.4% in secondary schooling.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant disparities remain in girls' access to and parental investment in education; girls largely go to lesser-quality government-run schools while boys are sent to private schools; dropouts, particularly at secondary level, remain high due to household work responsibilities and (in some areas) early marriage; higher education remains a challenge for many due to parental underinvestment and restrictions on mobility outside the home
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant improvement in SRH rights and services between 1996 and 2016, with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services and information remain weak in some areas while various taboos, cultural barriers and

skilled assistance during delivery increasing from 9% to 58%; use of modern contraceptives rising from 26% to 43%; and around 57% deliveries now taking place in health facilities. This has contributed to improved maternal health (a drop in maternal mortality from 539 to 239 per 100,000 live births) and greater control over fertility, with total fertility rates dropping from 4.1% (1998-2000) to 2.3% (2016)

lack of awareness or autonomy negatively impact women's reproductive health. The median age at first marriage, though dropping, is still low at 17.9 years for women (compared to 21.7 years for men)

Sources: Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD), 2002; Nepal Law Commission, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2018; College of Development Studies of Nepal, 2013; CEDAW Shadow Report Preparation Committee, 2016; 2018; Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2017, 2018; CBS and UNDP, 2016; Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017; Ministry of Population and Environment, 2017; Ministry of Health et al., 2017; Ghimire et al., 2013; IPWA, n.d.; Presler-Marshall, 2017; Samuels et al., 2017; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2019; International Land Coalition, n.d.

Gender norms, challenges and breakthroughs over the life course

'Where I am now came from what I went through,' senior woman leader, Uganda.

'The work of girls was not seen as studying, but of staying home. Studying was only for the big jobs that were the ones requiring going out – and those were for men,' political activist, Nepal.

Stories of childhood and adolescence

Study participants in both countries report varied experiences of gender norms growing up, depending, among other things, on their age, where they grew up (including urban or rural locations), family socio-economic status and – particularly in Nepal – ethnicity or caste.

Some participants described growing up in gender-equitable family environments where sons and daughters were treated equally, parents understood the value of education, and encouraged the aspirations of all their children. Others, however, report discrimination within the household, particularly in the gendered division of labour, parental prioritisation of education for brothers, unequal inheritance practices, and – particularly in Nepal – higher ritual significance given to boys.

A number of participants highlighted their early resistance to what they perceived as unfair. Others conformed and did not realise the impact of discriminatory norms until much later in their lives. Several examples demonstrate experiences of different gender norms and the ways in which girls tried to overcome them.

Differential treatment of brothers and sisters

Older women took it for granted that boys and girls had different roles and responsibilities in the household. **In Uganda**, a grandmother in her 60s said: *'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 of going to play 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!'*

A grandmother in her 80s **in Nepal** recalls that she had no rest in her home in the village as a girl and that her life consisted of *'collecting water, working the fields, caring for livestock – collecting fodder.'*

This could spill over into later generations. **In Uganda**, a professional woman in her 50s resented the fact that she and her sister were expected to cook and clean while their brothers were playing. She always preferred playing with boys, including climbing trees. This was forbidden for girls as it was said that it would cause the tree to dry out: *'But when I observed that my climbing had no impact on the tree, I began to question this!'*

In Nepal, a professional woman in her 40s observed that both of her parents had full-time jobs outside the home, but: *'When they returned in the evening my father would just sit down to have a drink, while my mother did all of the housework.'*

A number of participants linked the son preference that was part of their childhood to the privileged position enjoyed by boys in patrilineal inheritance systems. **In Uganda**, a grandmother in her 80s recalls that *'Land was always for the boys. And these assets were often given to the boys.'* A professional woman in her 60s said that her father married additional wives to have sons after her own mother had only daughters. He favoured her step-brothers in education and today, even though she is caring for him in his old age, refuses to give her and her sister land, because, he says *'It is not in our culture.'* A recent university graduate in his 20s reported that his father warned him that he would be seen as *'an enemy of progress'* by his community if he raised questions about inheritance for his sisters because: *'In our culture, women do not inherit – women get married and enjoy the husband's land'.*

In Nepal, among Hindus in particular, such inheritance patterns were tied to ritual roles reserved for sons during funeral rites for their parents, as a young MA student explained, *'In Hindu culture, only a son can open the door of heaven for the mother and father.'* Another added: *'Whoever does the death ritual gets 50% of the property.'* Nevertheless, some participants reported taking over the rituals when there were no male relatives available, demonstrating some flexibility around specific gender norms in practice.

Tighter norms in adolescence

In both Uganda and Nepal, study participants confirmed a tightening of rules and restrictions for girls at the start of adolescence. Among the older generations, the onset of menstruation signalled readiness for marriage: grandmothers in both countries married early, and a one grandmother in her 80s **in Nepal** reported, *'By the time a girl starts menstruating, it is time for marriage.'* Among the younger women, adolescence was experienced as a time of stricter application of rules about clothing and 'decorum', as well as more limited mobility.

In Uganda, a young professional in her late 20s noted: *'Of course with the girl, they expect you to be more composed, calm. You shouldn't talk roughly, or bark out loudly in a rude way. They expected you to be calm and settled, compared to the boys. You really wouldn't have to question much. You just had to live with it.'* **In Nepal**, young women university students in their 20s often chafe at what they feel are over-protective parents who limit their mobility and autonomy, explaining that: *'It is culture and tradition that is making her parents behave that way, and this is deeply rooted.'* Also in Nepal, a professional woman in her 40s reported that her mother told her to stop playing football with boys when she reached the 8th grade. And when menstruation started, she knew that she was no longer allowed to touch certain things in the kitchen, water or statues of the gods. She did not feel that this was because she was considered impure, but she accepted it as part of her family's religion.

Gendered experiences of education

With the exception of some of the older women in inter-generational interviews and a few others, most of our study participants had reached higher levels of university education, in stark contrast with women from their parents and grandparents' generations, who lacked such schooling. But it was often a battle for them to access education and pursue higher level courses of their own choosing as they had to fend off parental and societal fears, expectations and attitudes. Some struggled to stay in school as they advanced to higher levels or chose particular courses that ran against parental or societal expectations for girls – just as women from the older generations had to struggle to access lower levels of education (or any schooling at all ([see box 2](#)).

While some parents were reluctant to keep daughters in school at higher levels for financial reasons, they also downplayed the professional value of higher education for girls who – in any case – *'would just get married'*. Beyond such concerns, parental fear – and societal approbation – of daughters staying in school as they became women were driven by fears around sexuality: that the unsupervised mixing of boys and girls would lead girls into ruin – either physically through loss of virginity and/or pregnancy, or socially through suspicions of *'bad behaviour'* leading to loss of reputation.

Box 2. Gendered experiences of education: participants' stories

Uganda

- A senior leader in her 60s reported that *'As I grew up, I personally experienced discrimination, particularly vis-à-vis my older brother.'* Her father sent his sons and daughters to the village school, which was unusual at the time. But when money was tight, her brother's school fees were prioritised and she would stay at home. She was expected to miss classes twice a week to care for her younger siblings while her mother was busy. *'So I questioned, and these questions were within me. I was feeling bad and feeling that it was unfair.'* Although she was the better student, her parents took her out of school once she reached senior level to enrol her in teacher training. *'These injustices and hardships make you sharp. I heard about scholarships for orphans and vulnerable children and at age 14 went to the district educational officer'* and within two or three days *'I had the scholarship, finished and went on to senior secondary school.'* She was

accepted into law school in Kampala, but again faced opposition from her father, who saw nursing or teaching as proper subjects for girls. *'I said no.....and told him that since I had already been accepted, he would have to go there himself and tell the chancellor why I was not enrolling. He who had never even been to Kampala!'* So she went to law school. *'Do you see resistance? I defied him!'*

- A young civil society activist in her 30s, the eldest of seven children in a rural family, struggled to continue in education after completing O-levels because her father insisted that she become a primary school teacher. Relatives told her parents *'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.'* She wanted to get her A-levels for university and – at an impasse – sat at home for a year until her uncle, an educated man who had sent all his sons and daughters to school, told her father that *'If you don't educate your children, they will never sit at the same table as my children when they get together, as what would they discuss?'* Her mother supported her, as she had been forced to leave school at Senior 4 to become a teacher. With their help, she went to university, paving the way for her sisters to follow in her footsteps. Now her father is a champion of education for girls, saying: *'For me, I have four degrees at home and they are all girls'.*

Nepal

- A university professor in her 40s from eastern Terai reported that her Madhesi family was part of a community with stringent norms for girls. When she went to India to further her studies after her School Leaving Exams her neighbours and relatives questioned the wisdom of this, saying that a girl would get *'spoiled'* there. But her father held strong. She was married in the last year of her BA to a man who agreed that she should study as much as possible and was supported in this by her father-in-law. She said she underwent a lot of pressure and *'torture,'* with people saying that she should not go to college and neighbours continuously asking her husband and his family, *'Why are you letting her study like this?'* But she persevered and eventually earned her PhD.
- A lawyer in her 50s from a traditional Hill Brahmin family in Terai was determined to go to college, which was about an hour away from her village home. Her parents at first refused to send her, so she went on a *'pretend'* hunger strike (eating in secret) and crying every day until they relented. She was one of the few girls in her circle who felt outrage at gender discrimination – most of her other friends simply accepted it as *'normal'* and got married between 18–20. She herself went to Kathmandu for her BA, planning to stay with her elder brother, but he was posted elsewhere just as she arrived. Her parents were upset at her being alone without a male guardian, but by that time it was too late to stop her and she gained her law degree.

Some participants experienced different treatment of girls and boys within school, particularly in behavioural expectations and the privileging of boys during recreation periods. At a mixed school **in Nepal**, for example, a professional woman in her 30s reported that teachers would treat you well if you were a good student, whether you were a girl or a boy, but boys were allowed to be

more 'rambunctious' and would monopolise the sports equipment during recess, *'leaving us girls with games like 'ludo'!*

A number of participants **in Uganda** contrasted the experiences of mixed and single-gender schools. A senior leader in her 70s who later went into academia suggests that mixed schools have certain advantages, for *'Once you prove yourself equal to men in the classroom – competing with them as equals, while you may fight and argue with men, you will never thereafter be subject to gender oppression because you have proved yourself on that terrain.'*

Others, however, vouched for all-girls' schools, as one professional woman in her 50s explained: *'there is space to do things that are usually reserved for boys such as taking on leadership roles, doing male dances, and even singing alto!'* One current student in a girls' secondary school agreed, *'because I don't think I could handle it as a teenager at a mixed school. People are confident with no boys around. You can be who you are.'* She said that she enjoys not having to worry about her appearance or menstrual leaks during the day: *'In mixed classes, what would boys do? Laugh? You would be so embarrassed and feel insecure, like everything about you is not perfect – they would make fun of you, bullying, etc. The fear of that makes you want to go to a single sex school.'*

A number of women **in Uganda** had attended Church schools, which were among the first to be established in the country, and still very prominent. One lawyer in her 50s, educated by nuns in a Catholic setting noted that *'I got accustomed to female power.'* It was not until she went to university that she began to experience the force of gender norms. *'At Makerere, I found a culture where girls would immediately slot themselves into positions of subservience – acting as if they had no knowledge, though we had all passed Senior 6!'*

Stories of marriage, household and family

In the experience of all of the women interviewed in both countries, getting married and having a family were considered essential, socially-sanctioned steps in their lives and central to their identities as women. Many social norms and expectations surround marriage practices in each country, with varying implications for women in specific contexts. Some participants conformed to such norms on getting marriage, but then pushed for more equality and autonomy within their marriages. Others, however, insisted on marrying on their own terms. They either delayed marriage to finish their education or negotiated before marriage for the right to continue education and to work outside the home (both **Uganda and Nepal**). Some chose their own spouse (**both Uganda and Nepal**); refused the practice of bride price, seen as symbol of a man's 'ownership' of a woman in marriage (**Uganda**); bent the norms around dowry (**Nepal**); and insisted on their property rights within marriage (**Uganda**).

Contracting marriages

The age of marriage appears to be rising in both countries, as shown by our intergenerational interviews and the comparison of the lives of older participants with those who were younger. This progress is linked in many cases to the expansion of educational opportunities for women. Historic traditions of marriage shortly after the onset of menses have been more or less discarded among the urban elite, though participants reported that they persist among some groups in rural areas. Indeed some of the grandmothers in our study were married at that time in the rural villages where they grew up.

Young women in both Uganda and Nepal now think that the late 20s or 30s is a good age for marriage. Recent university graduates **in Uganda** said that: *'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.'* One noted that *'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 my mother when she dropped out!'*

MA students **in Nepal** also linked the age of marriage to education: *'Once you have an MA is a good age now for both men and women.'* Nevertheless, women in both countries report pressure – either overt or subtle – to marry before too much time passes and, in the words of one participant **in Uganda**, they 'lose market value' as desirable marriage partners (see box 3). While this pressure is being applied later than it once was, it still occurs. As young professional women **in Nepal** report, *'All of this [pressure to marry] used to start after the BA – now it starts after the MA.'*

Box 3. Continued pressure to marry before it is 'too late'

Uganda

- *'That pressure to get married is there – even within you yourself – it may not be external pressure, but as a girl when you have reached 28, you feel that there is a systematic way life has to go, like you have to go to school, finish school, get a job and get married. That is how it supposed to be. So when you are done with school, everyone is like, "So where is the man?" I always tell them that the person will come – God will give me someone, so I do not have to rush. But that pressure is there.'* (young unmarried professional woman in her late 20s).

Nepal

- *'Parents still think of daughters as a burden and feel a lightness and relief when they are married off – daughters are the prestige of the family and if they do something bad or elope it reflects badly on the family, so there is a sense of relief when she is married off and parents don't have to worry about her anymore.'* (grandmother in her 80s).
- At a ceremony held to celebrate her BA, instead of congratulating her on her studies, her relatives said, *'Oh, so nice, now you are ready to get married.'* She resisted, however, and went on to earn her MA first (civil society officer in her 30s).

Traditionally, arranged marriages have been the norm in both countries, with marriage considered a union between families, and parents choosing partners with care. As the age of marriage rises, however, and young people have more chances to meet outside family circles, there is a move towards individual choice of marriage. This seems particularly strong among women interviewed **in Uganda**: one young professional in her early 30s reports, for example, that *'Arranged marriages have faded out actually – I no longer hear of these. I wouldn't accept such a marriage arranged for me by my mother'.*

While arranged marriages were still more of the norm among study participants **in Nepal**, younger women there say that this is now changing, with growing parental acceptance of 'love marriages' as long as these remain within the same caste. As recent MA students explain, *'In our grandparents' and parents' time the tradition was for arranged marriages and families decided before the bride or groom met. In our generation, everyone – relatives, parents – are happy to allow*

us to get married on their own, but they still need to meet the boy to make sure he is OK. As long as they are from the same caste, parents will allow love marriages and today from 60-70% are love marriages.’ ‘Elopement’ with someone outside your caste can have severe repercussions: in two cases from our study the woman was ostracised by her family for years.

In Uganda, traditional marriage payments have taken the form of bride price paid by the groom’s family to the family of the bride. In contrast, the dowry system prevails in **Nepal**, with payments by the bride’s family to the family of the groom (with the exception of some ethnic groups, where the payments go in the opposite direction). There has been some resistance to these payments in both countries – most strongly reported by participants in Uganda (see box 4).

Box 4. Resisting bride price in Uganda to challenge norms of male control over wives

- Two professional women in their 50s took marriage negotiations into their own hands – refusing the bride price set at 10 to 20 cows, and insisting instead on the symbolic exchange of one cow. One, now a professor, explained that *‘I did not want to be sold – I didn’t think it right that my worth was being calculated in cows.’* The other, a civil society activist, reported that *‘I refused to be the object of negotiation.’* Later widowed at the time her own daughter was ready to marry, she insisted that her daughter’s marriage would not entail a bride price, countering arguments from the groom’s family that this went against culture with the explanation that *‘I have created my own culture’*. She walked her own daughters down the aisle, usurping the traditional role reserved for the uncle.
- A younger civil society activist in her late 20s says of bride price: *‘I think it is crap because you can’t put a price on someone when you get down to it.’* So she intends to marry without bride price. She and a colleague her age echo the common view that when bride price is paid – particularly in the rural areas – the girl becomes property – *‘They own you. They bought you so you owe them – children, submission, etc. It’s like buying a servant.’*
- A grandmother in her 80s explained that she got married without bride price *‘because sometimes men would beat their wives because “they had paid for them” – they would treat you like a donkey. So everybody from my clan came and said they did not want anything in terms of marriage payment because they did not want anybody to disturb me in my marriage. Many people in the village were like this – they would actually say that they could not sell their children like goats.’*

Reproductive expectations, conditions and attitudes towards sexuality

Strong expectations about women and reproduction persist in both countries, with a particular emphasis on bearing sons (see box 5). Sons were seen as the children who would carry on the family lineage and inherit parental property. **In Nepal**, in particular, the dowry system was said to favour the birth of sons, given the potentially high costs of dowry for daughters, and sons had a far greater significance in relation to family rituals.

Box 5. Pressure to bear sons

Uganda

- A young female university graduate noted that *'If a woman gives birth to a girl in my community, she can be killed'*.
- A young professional with three young daughters reported that she is asked constant questions about *"What about a boy? You need an heir"*, with warnings that her husband may run away *"to try elsewhere"* if she does not produce a son.
- In a survey in rural Karamoja, an impoverished region in the north-east, a woman reported that she had six children, and as the data was being input, she added as an afterthought, *'The rest are girls'* (young professional woman).

Nepal

- A professional woman in her 40s, of a Brahmin family reported that her sister-in-law was favoured in part because her first two children were sons while her own was a daughter. During her second pregnancy her mother-in-law divined from the astrological charts that this child would be a son but that she would die in childbirth and happily made plans to find a new wife for her son.
- A professional woman in her 40s of a Newar family had such difficulty living in with her in-laws that she and her husband and daughter moved out. *'They tortured me for having only a girl as my first child.'* The family was invited to move back in after the birth of her second child: a son.
- An elderly Gurung grandmother, approaching 90, recalled that on the birth of each of her six sons, her husband – who was a soldier in India – would give a big party for his fellow soldiers, as this was prestigious. *'It would not have been the same for a daughter...they didn't give much importance to daughters, and my husband would not have distributed sweets in India if I had had a daughter.'*

In general, our women respondents were able to exert greater control over fertility than their mothers or grandmothers and aspire to smaller families. Fertility has dropped steeply **in Nepal** and, as young women researchers there explained: *'The in-laws now approve of and promote the daughter-in-law's work so they accept her putting off having children.'* **In Uganda**, where fertility remains high, younger women saw 3–4 children as the ideal number.

Contraceptive use has risen in both countries and **in Nepal**, abortion has been legalised (though sex-selective abortion has been outlawed). The conditions in which women give birth also show dramatic improvements: women in the older generations gave birth at home or in the fields while younger women have given birth in hospitals.

Nevertheless, social norms surrounding the sexual behaviour of unmarried adolescent girls and single women remain strict. **In Uganda**, fear of adolescent pregnancy reduced parental willingness to send girls to school, while sexual education for young people seemed to consist of messages about abstinence and policies and practices on providing contraceptives to adolescents remain ambiguous.

In Nepal, parental fears about daughters engaging in sex before marriage remain strong and society still frowns upon single women living outside family structures – such as women migrants, women rebels during the Maoist uprising. This even effects women moving from their home villages to the city to pursue higher education, where they are usually expected to live with relatives who will monitor their behaviour and protect their reputations.

Household roles and relationships

Many study participants spoke of the challenges they faced in combining their professional lives with their roles as mothers and wives, highlighting the importance of supportive spouses, extended family arrangements for child care, and the widespread practice of hiring household help. Some cited the ability to send older children to boarding schools (mentioned most often **in Uganda**).

In Nepal, one woman noted the complexities of balancing new economic roles for women outside the family with household roles and responsibilities that have persisted in the extended family with its multiple expectations. As one young woman professional explained, *'A woman is not only a wife, mother, and daughter, but a daughter-in-law and sister-in-law and all of these relationships must be maintained.'*

A number of women reported using gender-sensitive child-rearing practices – treating sons and daughters equally and instilling respect for women in their sons. Participants from **Uganda** were particularly outspoken about this, seeing such parenting as part of efforts to drive change in discriminatory gender norms in household relations. One, a civil society activist in her 50s, prides herself on raising her sons to be respectful of women, as *'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.'* Some participants **in both Nepal and Uganda** reported that husbands were becoming more cooperative at home, and sharing household responsibilities ([see box 6](#)); while this still seems to be much more the exception than the rule, it is nevertheless a sign of positive change.

Box 6. Creating gender-equitable households

Uganda

- A young professional in her 30s reported that both she and her husband work full time and now share household responsibilities such as taking their children to and from school. But, she confided, she worked hard to convince him that as they were both working they should share such roles: *'I have trained him that sharing roles is important to moving forward – if not, it wouldn't work.'* She also practices gender-equitable child care and parental modelling, so that her children see that both parents earn money and make their own choices. She doesn't allow her son to sit up front in the car – he must sit in the back with his sisters. She buys cars as toys – no dolls, and no pink or blue. Now when asked their aspirations, her son says *'I want to be a dad, drive a car and be an engineer'* while her daughter says *'I want to be a doctor and a teacher'* and never mentions motherhood.

Nepal

- A young professional in her 30s said that *'My husband used to have a business, but when we had our child we had to decide who would give up work to stay at home as primary caregiver. My husband proudly identifies himself as a house-husband. He is not very educated in a formal sense, but in a spiritual sense, yes – he is enlightened. There is not a bit of discrimination caused by his ego as with most other men. He doesn't care what others say and even washes my clothes. When asked where her parents are, our daughter replies "Mother is working in the office and Father is cooking in the kitchen." Our daughter has always seen this and considers it normal. Through our example, we may be slowly changing the thinking of others.'*

Such advances can, however, be fragile. Particular challenges for married women **in Uganda** may be linked to new tensions within households where both spouses are working, with many men seen to be 'abandoning' their roles as providers and conflicts, including GBV, coming to the fore in the face of gender transformations in household roles and responsibilities.

Particular challenges for married women **in Nepal** arise from the still strong tradition of living with the husband's family after marriage where they assume the role of daughter-in law under the authority of the mother-in-law. Some who lived in such extended household arrangements appreciated the care and support of in-laws; others, however, described intense strain in situations where, as daughters-in-law, they felt over-worked, under-appreciated and sometimes abused – some to the point of moving out to live with their own relatives or establish households on their own ([see box 7](#)).

Box 7. Problematic experiences of living with in-laws in Nepal

- A grandmother in her 80s reported that *'I had to do whatever the in-laws said – sit, go, don't go.'*
- A mother in her 40s noted *'I was always answering to others – with no rest at all...My shyness did not allow me to fight for my rights, and that was my downfall.'* Things got so bad that she and her husband left the household with their children.
- A professional woman in her 40s reported that her mother-in-law was always criticising her: *'She is not good – we can hear her walking – a girl should not be heard in the house.'* Or telling neighbours that she was a demon, complaining that *'Oh the food that is prepared by the daughter-in-law who does not say the mantra is like food touched by a dog.'* She and her husband have also now established a household on their own with their children.
- A professional woman in her late 30s confided that *'Agreeing to live with the extended family had been a bad decision.'* Her husband was working away from Kathmandu at the time, so she was there alone. She wanted to live with her own mother, a widow. But her husband said, *'If you want to live with your mom, then why did you marry me?'* She remained in his home with her brothers-in-law and their wives and had to contribute one-third of her salary for household expenses, as well as cook for 13 people – getting up at 4.30 am to do the housework before going to the office. Her sisters-in-law did nothing around the house. After five years of this she fell into a depression and needed counselling at work. She now lives with her mother while her husband is studying abroad.

- A newly married woman in her 20s reported that *'At my in-laws place, I realised the real difference between men and women – and a daughter-in-law in particular. I found myself in a completely different environment and I am really suppressed. All I can say is that my in-laws never wanted a wife for their son, but instead they wanted a daughter-in-law for themselves. That is what I have realised.'* Her mother-in-law does not acknowledge the verbal abuse she administers as 'violence', saying that she herself had been physically beaten by her own mother-in-law, so what is her daughter-in-law complaining about? As the young woman explains, *'People do not realise that they should not let the young generation face the same abuse that they faced; rather they want to take revenge for what they went through.'* As she concludes, *'I try my best to retain self-control, but at times I burst out crying...life is going on somehow.'*

Dissolution of marriage and widowhood

Ending a marriage that had soured was problematic **in both countries** where both social and religious rules require couples to stay together and divorce is an anathema. Women are seen as beings that must be under some sort of male control or supervision: either by the father; the husband or father-in-law. However, examples of separation were found in both country studies. Women **in Uganda**, for example, saw their greater economic autonomy as empowering in enabling them to leave abusive marriages if necessary, as they could support their families on their own.

Widows are vulnerable women in both countries, but the particularly among Hindu communities **in Nepal**, with their tradition of 'sati', or self-immolation by the wife on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. While laws safeguarding the rights of widows have come into force and the situation is improving, widowhood remains a perilous time for many women. They often depend for on their male relatives, including in-laws and sons, for support and, in the patrilineal lines of inheritance that prevail, may be deprived of their rights to inherit marital property, with some suffering social isolation and exclusion. While it is common for men who have been widowed to remarry, it is against social norms for women to do so, as they are considered – in Hindu ideology – the 'half-body' of their husbands and are expected to care for them in the after-life.

Box 8 provides case studies from the lives of widows in our study sample in both countries, highlighting both the strength of discriminatory norms and efforts to overcome and transform them.

Box 8. Struggling against discriminatory norms in widowhood

Uganda

- **A civil society leader now in her 60s** lost her husband to a sudden illness when her children were young. She found strength in friends and women's groups and associations, along with family support. After he died, she travelled to his home village across the lake for his burial – *'the longest journey of my life, full of misery.'* On arrival she found that the male elder in charge of the arrangements had not even put her name on the programme to speak. She asked *'But where am I?'* And he replied, *'You have no energy*

to speak – we will speak on your behalf.’ She said in a loud voice, *‘I dare you to not allow me to speak. If I can’t speak at my husband’s funeral, nobody will speak.’* All the women of her husband’s clan – stunned to hear a woman talk like that – applauded. She spoke then, and has been welcomed to speak at other clan functions, establishing a new tradition.

- **A woman activist in her 50s** reported that when her husband died, her mother suggested that she and her two children move back to her husband’s village. She replied: *‘There is only one person who has died in this household – it is not enough to disintegrate the family’*, commenting that, *‘You have to fight at every level.’* When her daughter got married, she carried out the marriage negotiations herself and walked her daughter down the aisle – contrary to the norms that delegated these roles to men.

Nepal

- **A woman from a Brahmin family** – now in her 80s – was widowed when her three children were young. Living with her in-laws on a farm in Kathmandu, she kept her children in government schools through scholarships for needy orphans, but struggled for 10 years to get her rightful portion of her husband’s land. She would go *‘from office from office to office, counter to counter’* to try to settle the issue, talking with different people each time. But, as she learned, *‘It was a whole system.’* Meanwhile, tension in the household affected the children, and the family was unable to fully exploit its land. She therefore instilled in her children – and especially her daughter – the need to study, work hard, and earn a living so that you could stand on your own two feet. She herself had never worked outside the house and felt that this was why, in part, her brother- and sister-in-law, who were more educated than she was, were able to dominate on many issues. *‘If a woman can earn, she does not have to look pleadingly into the faces of others, dependent on them to support her...’*
- **A retired government official in her 70s** was widowed and left childless shortly after her marriage as a teenager. Despite prevailing norms and attitudes in her Hindu Brahmin culture, she rose to a position of power within the district government. She suggested that while being single had its problems during her district postings, not having a family to support was an advantage, as she was not constantly searching for additional income. She was so busy she never thought about remarriage, though some people urged her to marry as a way to challenge gender norms that restrict remarriage for women, but not men, who have been widowed. Now retired from government service, she reflected, *‘If you stay single, they will talk and if you remarry they will talk.... They need to talk, so...’*
- The husband of a **hill Brahmin woman in her 40s** was killed in the Maoist struggle, leaving her with a young son as she continued her underground activities as chair of the women’s district committee. *‘I was married at 18, two years later at age 20 my daughter was born, and two years after that at age 22 my husband was killed and I became a widow.’* Her story shows how social norms can be challenged by a deliberate process of social and cultural transformation. Because she was on the run, she could not mourn her husband in the usual public way of wearing white and performing 13 days of sacrifices.

As more women militants were widowed, the party began to encourage their remarriage and as a leader within the party, she was under pressure to do so herself. In 2004, before the Peace Accord, she married a fellow activist who had lost his wife in the uprising and had one son, reporting that *'When we married, we exchanged weapons instead of gifts.'* She had worried about the reaction of her in-laws, and indeed the villagers disapproved of her remarriage. But her mother-in-law defended her and she continues to visit her first set of in-laws, since, as she explains, *'We have adopted the whole nation as our family.'*

Stories of work and professional activities

In Uganda, most of our study participants, with the exception of grandmothers in our inter-generational interviews, were involved with the women's movement, either politically (as MPs or government workers), through civil society activism or through academia. Their professional lives were, therefore, intertwined with collective work towards gender equality and women's empowerment and they saw themselves as a distinct part of that movement. All have demonstrated the power of collective agency and have rich reflections on their experiences as they have unfolded over time.

They participated in political processes for women's advancement and civic representation; contributed to the development of a new, progressive and gender-sensitive Constitution and helped change national laws and enact both policies and legislation to counter harmful norms and practices. They developed mechanisms to redirect and 'engender' national sectoral budgets to address women's priorities. They initiated a new programme of gender studies at university level and engaged on transformative research, as well as creating new organisations to work for women's rights and gender justice. They also built links with women at the grassroots level and helped to promote women's economic empowerment and make their work more visible.

In Nepal – again with the exception of the grandmothers in our inter-generational interviews – study participants were drawn from a more diverse set of professions spanning politics, government service sectors, civil society and academia (as in Uganda) but extending to the private sector. From the first woman to hold the highest district office, to the first woman to reach the top of the country's most technically demanding mountain peak, to the first police officer in her family – our participants proved that, in the words of one, *'women can do anything.'*

One became the first woman to be elected head of a national business organisation. Another honed her skills as a lawyer to engage in – and win – public interest litigation cases on behalf of women, founding a new women's rights organisation in the process.

Amplifying women's voice through politics and government

Women in both countries were active participants in the social and political movements marking national shifts towards democracy and joined their governments at different levels. All encountered both opportunities and constraints as they did so.

Uganda

A stimulus to women's participation in public affairs occurred with the coming to power of the current president Museveni and his National Resistance Movement which toppled the existing regime in 1986 and instituted a new political order, expanding political space and voice for women. As one senior woman leader put it: *'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. If not for Museveni in 1986, we would not have been able to move forward. He called for women to join: "Women, where are you? Women, come sit."*'

Women engaged in politics at all levels, in the early resistance councils (later the local council system) from village, to parish, to sub-county and finally to national level in Parliament. An affirmative action quota system was established for their political representation and they participated in the Constitutive Assembly that drafted the new Constitution of 1995, which was very gender-sensitive.

The Woman's Caucus within the Constituent Assembly helped members distil and consolidate action on key issues for women. *'Women had a common purpose'* reported one senior leader, *'To free themselves from bondage and discrimination...This was the most important thing in my life. I had wanted to change the law since I was a girl, but had never believed that I could actually influence this master law!'*

The task was not without difficulties, she continued: *'It was a real fight – 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'.*

As a former MP explained, *'The Chairman of Parliament was gender-sensitive and both favourable to and supportive of women's issues – also his vice chair [one of our study participants] was a woman. That is why they were able to capture around 40 gender-specific issues in the constitution'.*

Some women participants had worked through structures of the newly created women's ministry, formed as a follow-up to the Nairobi Women's Conference of 1985 as a means of *'helping women come out of their cocoons.'* They helped forge new programmes of community development to empower women at the grassroots and developed national policies to promote gender equality. Another later worked to develop gender budgeting through the Ministry of Finance while another worked on enforcement of legislation around gender-based violence.

Exercising political voice and assuming leadership positions demands courage as it means gender norms against women's assertiveness and visibility in the public domain. One senior leader recalled that *'I was called many names, including "This English- influenced lady"* but rather than letting this stop her, it spurred her on in her determination to have women treated as equal human beings.

As she explained, *'Nothing has been achieved in this country without clear strategies. When men would say, "But you are fighting only for women," I would reply, "Well, I am fighting for your sister, your daughter, your aunt. I agree that it is my responsibility to cook, but it is also my right to sit at*

the table and eat comfortably and not be chased away. Yes, women should make the bed, but they should also have the right to sleep there.” I was very clear on separating these two.’

After their success in the Constituent Assembly, one senior leader said, ‘*Women at the time thought that this was now the end – the Constitution would be the ‘panga’ [axe] to cut the chains. But it didn’t turn out that way.*’ Some setbacks were encountered at the legislative level, in the failure of efforts to promote family law reform through the Marriage and Divorce Bill. And despite the rising number of women in government, safeguarded by the quotas, many of our respondents – now retired – reported that the voices of today’s women Parliamentarians has become ever more muted, as unity around women’s causes dissolves into party politics and patronage and as the political space shrinks in a climate of government retrenchment.

The senior political women leaders participating in our study included those who had been ‘booted out’ for raising their voices against measures to constrict democratic processes, such as the removal of term limits. As one civil society activist noted, ‘*For women today – once you start criticising the structure, you are put out.*’ Current government officials also speak of a loss of ‘passion’, with one complaining that ‘*We have technicalised gender*’, citing a chronic lack of resources.

Nepal

A number of our study participants were active in the social and political movements of the 1990s, mobilising first for social change in the countryside and later moving up through party structures at central level as democratic institutions of government were created and a new Constitution established in 2015. They reported being inspired by the Marxist revolutionary writings circulating at the time, with their ideals of inclusive society and equitable social relations that positioned gender equality within a wider framework of social justice.

As in Uganda, great courage was demanded of women who mobilised for political and social change, and who dared to occupy public spaces once reserved for men – like ‘*hens crowing*’, according to a Nepali saying. Many in the rebel movement lost their lives, and – as noted in [box 8](#) – one of our respondents lost her husband in the struggle. Their grassroots mobilisation activities among village women often faced resistance: one political activist reported that villagers would point and say, ‘*Look, this daughter-in-law is stirring up our daughters-in-law and taking them out of the house.*’ Some women were too scared to join publicly, as their husbands would not allow them to go out, but they would offer support from the side-lines. One political leader explained, ‘*At the time the women were not aware of their rights and could not speak. They were scared and had no place to present their problems and no people who would listen to them.*’

After the 1996 Peace Accords ended the civil war, the focus turned to the capital city as parties came together to form a new democratic government. A number of our participants contributed to the work of the Constituent Assembly, working across parties with other women to ensure that the Constitution was favourable for women. As one political leader explained, ‘*We were afraid that men with their patriarchal mind set would not put in women’s rights, so we formed a women’s caucus to work on this. We did not always agree on everything, but we did agree on women’s rights. We were worried that men were leaving women out and that gave us energy to*

overcome our differences. An Inter-Party Women's Alliance formed to unite women of different political persuasions around a common platform and continues to work across party lines.

Minority women's ward representatives were also elected to give voice to marginalised groups, including indigenous women and Dalits (the lowest castes). As the Dalit representative explained, their struggle takes place on two fronts – fighting oppression as Dalits and as women, and *'You cannot look at a few empowered Dalit women and say things have changed and everything is fine now.'* As with the early village mobilisation efforts, they faced significant challenges when trying to raise awareness of rights among local women, with men telling their husbands, *'Don't let her come and interfere in this matter – your wife is teaching bad things and tarnishing our name – making our wives rebel.'*

One of our respondents, now in her 70s, had a distinguished career in government office at district level, beginning at the time of the first multi-party election in 1989/90 and serving for 11 years in different districts. As a widow, left childless at an early age, she experienced some restrictions on her movements and behaviour – taking great care not to sully her reputation: *'In your district functions, you are surrounded by men – a driver, guard, boy – all men, so you have to be careful.'* Nevertheless, she gained respect and authority: *'The others – all men – had to accept me. They tried of course to dominate me, but they could not'*, because she, like them, had been appointed directly by the Minister.

Others joined the new women's ministry, which aimed for the empowerment of women and social transformation. One woman has focused on strengthening women's groups – including cooperatives – at local level, to drive economic and social empowerment. Three of our study participants worked as government health service providers, supporting the expansion of sexual and reproductive health services in rural and peri-urban areas and the long-serving Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHV) programme, providing health outreach and information in remote rural areas. As noted, one because the first woman in her family to join the national police force, after the Government took its cue from the role of women in the country's armed and opened up recruitment to women.

As in Uganda, some political leaders who participated in our research said that the euphoria and strength of purpose that had united women during the days of struggle had passed and that women were experiencing a setback. They explained that *'All of the women in the movement were young and now they have gone back to their household roles – busy with families and children.'* And now, when it is about elections and state power, women have been side-lined: *'We have no muscle, no money (no relations with big contributors) so it is difficult to compete in elections.'*

The hard work that was focused on the Constitution has given way to an even tougher challenge for women of moving up into Party leadership positions that are still controlled by men:

- *'There is a general feeling that things are easier for women during times of Peace. But actually, for example, women were more represented among the Maoists – 40% – and everything was tolerated. But now after the Peace process, they have barely 15%: So it*

seems that the forest is a good place for women, but not society. When women are linked back into society it becomes more difficult for them. (political leader)

- *'Even when we have women representatives, we always have to fight for things – men might not say no to us outright, but they will go around and around and in the end their voice prevails. Also within the party [when we raise these issues] we are made to feel that we are going against the family'* (minority women's representative).

Civil society activism

Civil society institutions, which blossomed in both countries with the advent of democracy, have been central to the struggle for women's rights and gender equality, paving the way in particular for law reform and awareness raising on gender inequalities. A number of our study participants in both **Uganda and Nepal** were leaders and activists within such organisations and participated with skill and enthusiasm in the new spaces opening up for women's public voice and action.

Uganda

The women's movement and the rise of new CSOs for women was very much inspired by connections with the global movement for women, which opened their eyes to new forms of thinking about gender equality and new ways of organising to achieve it (see box 9). A senior leader reported that *'There was a lot of excitement in the air. 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...'* Another concurred: *'This is when we really took off. There had been no single organisation bringing women of all kinds together, with the only criteria for membership being a woman. We came up with fire!'*

Box 9. Passion, new ideas and solidarity at the height of the women's movement, Uganda

- *'The period 1986–96 was the high point – women were spitting fire! We were looking at issues that fundamentally affect us'* (professional woman)
- *'The passion and commitment were really there – you could feel it and the women's movement was very vibrant'* (senior woman leader)
- *'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'* (professional woman)
- *'Women had a common purpose – to free themselves from bondage and discrimination'* (senior woman leader).

Women lawyers worked within such organisations to promote law reform and protect the rights of women to equal opportunities, education, health and protection from violence, among other themes. For one, *'It was my first inkling of using law to help those less fortunate to access it through education or litigation, and that has broadened out to social justice, constitutional rights'*. Many engaged on policy development with the women's ministry. Others expanded social mobilisation efforts and, through networks established at grassroots level, consulted with women throughout the country to come up with successive versions of a 'Women's Manifesto' – the latest, for the period 2016–2021 setting out demands from a cross section women

in both rural and urban areas around issues of improved health, land and property rights, education, economic empowerment, and decision-making in politics.

At the outset, participants reported, there was close collaboration between women in CSOs and women in government. But the recent closing off of political space in has made such collaboration more difficult and there is less tolerance for women speaking out. One active professional woman explains that CSOs *'who are empowering women to speak out'* are increasingly viewed by the Government as *'the opposition'*: *'It is like you are the enemy.'* Funding is also a problem, with many organisations dependent on donors, leading to fragmented programmes and competition for resources.

Nepal

As in Uganda – but a decade later – Nepal's drive toward democracy in the 1990s witnessed a burgeoning of CSOs established to promote social justice and fight inequity. A number of participants focused on law reform, and advocacy through influential human rights organisations that they helped to establish.

One CSO leader filed her first public interest litigation case for girls' inheritance in 1993 and won, arguing that the existing law, which imposed conditions based on age and marital status, violated the Constitution and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Nepal had ratified in 1991. It took eight years to and the going was tough: it was not easily accepted by the *'patriarchal mind-set.'* MPs (mostly male) voiced loud objections, and people would ask her: *'Why are you trying to destroy the fabric of society and our social structure? The door of your maternal home will be closed to you.'* This, she explained, is because the *'ideal daughter'* is seen as one who leaves the property to her brothers, who will care for her as a guardian if she faces later problems in marriage. *'If you argue to retain this property for girls as well, you are seen as disruptive.'* But she persevered, firm in her conviction rooted in her deep sense of injustice. The age requirement was lifted in 2002/3; and the marriage proviso in 2015. The Supreme Court ordered that this become a Bill as part of equal rights legislation.

Other cases have revolved around outlawing the practice of *chhaupaudi* (the isolation of menstruating girls and women) and the reframing of marital rape as a sexual offence. CSO activists have also taken up transitional justice issues following social uprisings to deal with the social exclusion of women who either took part in the rebellion (and are suspected of having engaged in sexual relations while *'in the jungle'*) or women raped during that period (who are afraid to come forward now), with work still ongoing on these issues.

Restrictive social norms around the labour migration of women have emerged as critical issues, according to one young civil society activist who is working to address them. While *'society is proud of male foreign employment'*, the situation is more ambiguous for women, many of whom go to Malaysia or the Gulf States to work as housemaids or in sales. But, she noted, *'society doesn't look highly on girls going abroad for domestic work – most people think they will be involved in sexual activities there.'* So women have to hide the reality of their work from their families and communities, migrating through unofficial channels and leaving themselves vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

One development worker reported that her passion for work with rural women and her sense of solidarity with them stemmed from her own suffering and a sense of the oppression of gender

norms in her unhappy marriage. These included the requirement that she had to live in her in-laws' household.

Two participants were devoting their professional energies to a CSO that promotes and defends the rights of widows. Their focus is on strengthening widows' rights and well-being through law reform and advocacy (particularly around widow's rights to spousal property); capacity-building and leadership training (to empower them to claim their rights); enhanced access to resources (through a monthly government stipend and a single-women's savings and loans scheme); and changing discriminatory practices (such as the obligation to wear white and exclusion from ceremonial rituals). One of the CSO workers, a widow in her 60s, praises her organisation for giving her the moral support she needed to fight for and obtain her own rights as a widow: *'Before there were no groups for widows to join to share problems and experiences or learn new things or find support – this is the pioneering organisation for this.'*

Transformative research, scholarship and teaching

Uganda

A number of our study participants in Uganda were involved in academia, including the School of Women and Gender Studies established at Makerere University in 1991 at the height of the women's movement. A professor there noted that, *'Women in academia thought of themselves as the academic wing of the women's movement – there to guide them and provide concrete evidence, etc. and also preparing intellectual presentations.'* One professor reported that:

'In my work as a professor I see myself as a mentor/counsellor – also opening up the eyes of my students to the situation, breaking stereotypes, etc. I challenge them to re-examine things. And I then see them moving forward and see that I am having an influence (getting unexpected feedback here and there). In my own research, I am focusing on an analysis of masculinities that I hope will also have a big impact. Looking at the frustrations, lamentations and challenges of men vis-à-vis their wives and marriage, hoping to disseminate the results and get them to see that there is a cost to these things.'

Another professor reported that in teaching law through a critical gender lens, she tries to make her students aware that *'law is one of the formidable tools that the patriarchal state relies on to create and maintain its power and inequality.'* She was very conscious of her role as a teacher, influencing others and influencing transformation *'much more from the four walls of the lecture hall than as an MP....When I am in front of the lecture hall, I am doing politics – working to shift conversations, give a new lens to analyse the law.'* She had seen the impact on students she had influenced, with many now working in government or NGOs.

Recent university graduates who have participated in gender studies courses spoke of transformed awareness about:

- how *'social norms are obstructing women from achieving their dreams'* (young man)
- a realisation and acceptance that *'women can be above men – in education, knowledge, skills'* (young woman)
- an understanding that *'Gender is not only about women – it is inclusive and that gender activists are not only women'* (young man)

- and a reinterpretation of masculinities leading to such insights that *'even men can be victims of gender inequality and are affected by masculinity'* (young man).

Engagement in research of all sorts – even outside academia – has contributed to progress toward gender equality in many ways. One of our study participants, engaged by the National Planning Commission, re-examined labour statistics to reveal women's true contributions to the economy – particularly in agriculture. Her analysis of the results of the national census of civil servants demonstrated that women were mostly employed at the lower levels: *'The report of findings was very influential and was at the genesis of affirmative action in education – the 1.5 point advantage given to women at university, since women who were not educated at this level could not take up these positions.'*

Nepal

A number of our study participants taught for some years at primary-school level while pursuing their own studies in higher education. Their rich and varied experiences highlight both the struggles to achieve higher education and a firm belief in its transformative potential for women and men alike.

Two went on to teach at university – one of whom was instrumental in establishing gender studies as a discipline at university level. When the course was first introduced, few students had an inkling of the key concepts involved, but a critical mass has been building as the course encourages students to analyse their own experiences within the broader community. She often tells her students that *'This is about the little space that you create – the little change that you make and the new awareness you have built and then, as in a relay race, you pass the baton on to others.'* The other had created her own private research agency and now employs a number of young researchers – four of whom also participated in our study.

Engagement in research has contributed not only to evidence-based policy dialogues on gender norms and behaviours, but also to heightened personal awareness of such norms and how they work in society. The director of a research institute notes that the research she conducted on adolescent girls in Nepal coincided with her own daughter becoming an adolescent, contributing to her awareness as a mother of the gendered nature of the challenges of this time of life. Her new understanding of the power of social norms helped her to recast her own experiences as an adolescent. Her eyes were also opened to the variety of gendered norms and practices in different contexts by comparative findings from different country studies on adolescents that emerged from her wider research project.

Female researchers at the same institute also testify to the power of revelations arising from their involvement in various field studies. Their awareness of both caste differentials (and gender differentials within castes) was sharpened by findings from a study among Dalit communities in Terai, where girls' education was in jeopardy because they were sent to low-quality government schools while their brothers were sent to private English-speaking schools. Religious differences were also highlighted by findings that among Muslim women, daughters-in-law are confined to the courtyard – basically purdah – after the birth of their first child to maintain their purity. Such powerful social norms led the researchers to conclude that efforts to promote gender equality should start with socialisation processes within the family.

One older woman worked for many years in the administration of the university where she got her degree; her daughter worked for an NGO providing support and schooling to vulnerable children. Both credit their work with opening their eyes to social realities that differed markedly from those they experienced in their own families.

Our sample of professional women in Nepal included some who have distinguished themselves in the private sector, demonstrating how individual trajectories in particular fields can have wider ramifications for the breaking of barriers to women's professional engagement (*see box 10*).

Box 10. Breaking gender barriers in the private sector: experiences from Nepal

Mountaineering

Two women from the Sherpa ethnic group in Nepal's mountain villages have become trailblazers for women's mountaineering. They have both struggled over the years to overcome obstacles in this male-dominated profession.

The first, now in her 50s, started working as a porter aged 13. She has since become an active tourism entrepreneur with two autobiographies to her name and is head of a national mountain development organisation. In 1993 she participated in the first attempt by women to scale Everest, leading to the creation of a group of women Everest Team Leaders. She reported '*As a girl and woman, I faced a lot of challenges*', including an attempted rape by a male guide: rumours swirled and she was beaten by her father on her return home, even though she had resisted. For a woman, she remarked, '*her own body is her foe*' as she must contend with male aggression and threats to her reputation as well as the physical challenges of mountaineering.

The second, now in her 40s, runs a trekking company with her husband and promotes women's mountaineering. Commenting on the barriers she has had to face, she noted that '*This was the social thinking - that as a woman - you should not be out there, exposed on the mountains and surrounded by many men, as in future you may not be able to find a good man. But I say that if you want to do something bad, you don't have to go to the mountain to do it*'. After a five-year break from mountaineering following the birth of her daughter, she became the first woman to climb one of the most technically difficult peaks in Nepal, working with an all-women crew of mothers like herself. '*I wanted to send a message*,' she explained. '*People have already pre-decided what women can and cannot do.... If you have a dream, nothing is impossible but you have to find your path. Believe in yourself and don't pay attention to what others say.*'

Travel and tourism

A woman in her 40s from a Brahmin family now manages a family travel agency, having been encouraged by her husband to take charge when the company was in trouble. She worried about her lack of experience. But she told herself, '*Well nothing is impossible - I will learn what to do in this business*'. Within five years, she had restored the finances of the agency and is now one of only a handful of women running any of the 2,000 registered travel

agencies in Nepal. She is the only woman on the board of the body that promotes the country's tourism. She feels that her success stems from *'something that comes from inside – the sense of hospitality and the notion that guests are like gods. We learn this from our families and our culture and women may be particularly well-placed to put in practice these principles.'* She tries to empower other women – most of her office workers are women, and she employs women as trekking and city tour guides. Her advice to young women: *'You should be confident, have support from your family, work hard and be honest. You have to be strong yourself – not to give loose points to others to seize upon.'*

Business promotion and leadership

A woman in her 40s is head of a national business coordination office, the first woman in Nepal to hold such a post. Her early work on women's rights and violence against women convinced her that *'women need resources to fight for their rights– they have to pay for lawyers to argue their cases in court. So I saw a niche for women's economic empowerment.'* She opened a local branch of the Women's Entrepreneur Association of Nepal (WEAN), offering skills training to indigenous women. She then joined a national business coordination body, observing that, *'This was a different world – all men, and business men at that – and only one woman!'* Three years later she competed with 14 men for one position on the Board and won. She noted that while all the voters were men, they voted for her, *'which shows that to be successful as a woman you also need male support.'*

She then ran for vice-president, competing against a man. *'It is difficult as a woman to compete in election campaigns'*, she explains, *'as women are under many more restrictions than men – they cannot go out as male candidates do, for example, and sit around drinking with men.'* She found it tough, but she won, becoming first senior vice president, then president: the first woman to lead this body. She had once worried about speaking out. Today, she has no problem. Her advice for young girls: *'You have to be confident that you can do any task that men can do. There are only biological differences – nothing else. Just work hard, be positive.'*

Progress and enabling factors in changing social norms

'I have learned that I have a right to shout,' young woman recent university graduate, Uganda.

'Girls now have wings like a scooter!' middle aged professional woman, Nepal.

Key points of progress

Looking both within and beyond their own personal stories, study participants agreed that there have been many positive changes to gender norms and practices over time in both countries. Signs of progress include, in particular:

- rising levels of education for girls as more parents see the value of educating both daughters and sons and as more educational opportunities are available at all levels

- rising numbers (and greater acceptance) of women participating in politics and government
- growing economic empowerment and autonomy linked to expanded economic opportunities for women, including in domains that were once reserved for men
- improved sexual and reproductive health rights and conditions
- The expansion of information and services to protect girls and women from rights violations.

Some relaxation of, and greater individual flexibility in, marriage arrangements and practices as well as in household organisation has given women more freedom and agency in their roles, at home and beyond. These include, to varying degrees in each country:

- a rise in the age of marriage, greater freedom to choose one's own spouse, a growing contestation of marriage payments (particularly in Uganda), and more options to leave a trouble marriage (also in Uganda)
- some altered expectations around the gendered division of household labour that are more supportive of shared responsibilities in the home between men and women
- a slow erosion of the restrictions on mobility that have constrained the lives of women and girls and enhanced physical integrity, including changing attitudes towards GBV (reported mostly from Uganda).

Many study participants highlight a new sense of self-confidence, awareness of rights, and assertiveness on the part of girls and young women, who – as a result of these combined signs of progress – no longer feel the need to conform to the traditional norm of the meek, submissive and silent female. They are more prepared to voice their concerns and to take action. **In Nepal** in particular, vulnerable categories of women, such as minority women and widows, are also becoming more empowered to speak out against the weight of oppressive norms and attitudes.

The changing value of the girl child

Participants in both countries feel that the value of the girl child is changing as more opportunities open up for women to contribute to society. A professional woman **in Uganda** explained that *'The value of the girl child has changed and there are now more options for her than just marriage.'* **In Nepal**, a government official reported that *'To be born a woman used to be considered a curse. So when my own first child was a boy, I was happy – I didn't want a daughter.... Now however, I feel that I was totally wrong – that is the change that has occurred in me!'*

Older women expressed amazement at the new expectations, opportunities and behavioural norms for girls, including greater freedom. A grandmother **in Uganda** marvelled that *'Today, when you see a girl, you might think she is a boy, because they do all of the same things!'* As one mother in an intergenerational interview **in Nepal** put it: *'Girls now have wings like a scooter! Girls and women can now travel alone from place to place at any time – whereas before you could not go out after a certain hour.'*

Rising value of education for girls

The changing value of girls is linked to their rising educational levels as more educational opportunities become available and parents realise the importance of their education. **In Uganda**, university graduates explained that *'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. Professional women reported that *‘Higher education is also possible – at university the student body is now 50% female.’* They also noted that *‘More girls are also turning to subjects once considered the province of boys: which builds trust in capacities’.*

Similarly **in Nepal**, an older woman was amazed that *‘Women are educated now and can get jobs and go out – even working outside of the country’*, contrasting that to the past when they had limited educational or work opportunities and early marriage was the norm. *‘The work of girls was not seen as studying’* explained a political leader, *‘but of staying home. Studying was only for the big jobs that were the ones requiring going out – and those were for men.’* One grandmother said that *‘I didn’t even know how to speak – just making carpets, brewing alcohol for sale [which was traditional in her Gurung family], grinding paddy and selling rice.’*

Relaxation of some norms around marriage, family and household

Participants pointed to the rising age at marriage for women, linking this in part to norms of expanded education for girls. A recent university graduate **in Uganda** pointed out that *‘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!’* MA students **in Nepal** reported that *‘Once you have an MA is a good age now for marriage for both men and women.’*

There seems to be a movement away from arranged marriages – more quickly, perhaps in Uganda than in Nepal, but it signals changes in both countries in the degree of autonomy granted to young people in choosing their spouses. A young professional woman **in Uganda** reported that – in the urban areas at least – *‘Arranged marriages have faded out actually – I no longer hear of these. I wouldn’t accept such a marriage arranged for me by my mother’.*

Expectations about marital roles and gender relations within the household are loosening slightly as women become more educated and also work outside the home. A young professional woman **in Uganda** noted that *‘It is not about a woman just there to give birth and stay home and look after the children. We are seeing more women bringing in food to the table – things that before the man was supposed to provide – so now we also see men being more involved in parenting.’* And another confirmed this view: *‘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.’* **In Nepal**, a young professional reports that *‘Men are more supportive in the household these days’* and within the extended family setting relations may also be changing. A grandmother notes that *‘In my day girls and women had to be under someone. They could not answer back – they couldn’t speak – they would get thrashed. Nowadays, however, my daughter-in-law can answer back!’*

The ability to end an unhappy marriage remains problematic, as societal and religious norms in both countries aim to keep marriages intact – often to the detriment of women. But examples of women who ended their marriages were found in both countries. **In Uganda**, this was linked to the greater economic empowerment of women who are able – if need be – to support their own families. A young professional woman explained that: *‘Before, women didn’t have a choice – how*

could you leave your home? But now, if you are not happy in it, you don't have to stay there and suffer. If you can't tolerate it, then you tell him and you opt for a divorce.' **In Nepal**, one woman who distinguished herself as a mountaineer was glad that she had divorced her husband. Otherwise, she reported, 'I would have been a prisoner in the marriage, which subsequently broke up, but with economic independence, I could, and did, ask for a divorce.'

Improved sexual and reproductive health and information

Women in both countries report vastly improved conditions of sexual and reproductive health. The norm now – particularly in urban areas and wherever services are now available – is for women to give birth in hospitals, with significantly better health outcomes. A grandmother **in Uganda** said that 'These days, for childbirth, women go to the hospital and they even go under operation. But for me I mostly never gave birth in the hospital.' As a grandmother **in Nepal** put it, 'Nowadays in Kathmandu, the woman visits the doctor as soon as she is one month pregnant – but back there [in the village in her day] if they die they die.'

With more education, information and services available, and in a changing economy where the value of having a large family to support household income is diminishing, more women are taking control of their own fertility, particularly perhaps in urban areas where more services are available.

- Professional women **in Uganda** reported that '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.' A grandmother notes that in her day, 'They didn't get that time to tell us about things like pregnancy – even our school mistresses. I didn't know about pregnancy'; younger study participants said that mothers now inform them about reproductive health around the time of menstruation and that senior women teachers at the higher secondary school grades 'tell them about sex.'
- Women **in Nepal** also reported discussions with their mothers around the time of menses and health workers confirm that family planning information and services have now become more available – though, once again, particularly in urban areas.

Enhanced physical integrity

There is evidence that both awareness and attitudes towards GBV may be shifting, albeit slowly. **In Uganda**, a young professional woman reported that nowadays 'No one wants to be known as a wife beater.' And an older professional woman noted that 'Men used to be proud to beat their wives, and the women themselves would say that if the man doesn't beat you, it means he doesn't love you. A man who didn't beat his wife would be ridiculed, so he would go out to get drunk to gather courage to beat her and later apologise. Now with the change of generations, men who beat women do it in secrecy. Some say "Museveni has made our women rebels, we cannot even beat them".'

Professional women praised the work of CSOs that have 'broken the silence' on an issue that was once considered 'normalised, private and not to be brought to the public.' And 'Women now know

that they actually have a right to report and know that when they report, something will be done. And that also instils some fear in the man who would have violated someone's rights.'

Similarly, **in Nepal**, strenuous efforts have been made to break the silence on GBV: at the time of our study, campaigns were underway around the 16 days of activism against such violence. One human rights lawyer who worked on the criminalisation of marital rape reported that a woman had thanked her, saying that she had never considered sexual violence within marriage to be rape, saying, *'We are happy that you have re-defined this'* – proof of the importance of articulating the norms that you are trying to change. Also in Nepal, there has been a great deal of legal reform and activism around the practice of *chhaupadi* [the isolation of menstruating women and girls] and women health workers reported that *'In the far west, [where the practice of has been most common] women themselves have destroyed the chhaupadi huts.'*

Stronger political voice and participation

One strong finding in both countries is that voice of women in the public space is much stronger than in the past, particularly through their participation in politics, government, and leadership of CSOs and advocacy groups.

Senior leaders **in Uganda** noted that *'The public space...has opened up for women.'* And *'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.'* Professional women pointed out that women have *'more visibility, more voices and more women in decision-making.'* Now, *'women are in politics and can be elected and can even hold positions as speaker'* whereas before, *'It was always thought that it was always supposed to be a man to chair.'*

So too **in Nepal**, MA students pointed out that *'There are reservations and general representation from political level to policy making, through which women are given chances to forward their views, ideas and their voice.'* A development worker noted that *'Women's representation in political affairs has risen through the 33% quota at provincial and federal levels and 40% reservation as candidates at the local level. This is the only country in the region where this system is actually in practice and women are doing good jobs.'* Even at local level, *'Many of the village women from cooperatives have now entered local government because they have good leadership skills that they have learned here.'*

As more women enter the public domain and take visible leadership roles, they set examples for others and combat the traditional notion that public space belongs to men. If even the President of Nepal can be a woman, how can men say no to women's political participation at different levels?

Economic empowerment

As with political empowerment, economic empowerment was clearly identified by women in both countries as a great move forward, with more opportunities open to them across a range of domains, including those once reserved for men.

Uganda

A young professional woman noted that *'In the old days, it seemed that there were clear jobs for the women and others for the men, but now, it's all a mix. Today, women are not afraid to get into jobs that are considered masculine – like taxi driving'* An older professional woman added that *'By now it is no longer a mystery that women are in markets, in banks, owning cars, driving...'* A young professional in the private sector reported that *'Managers fear being seen as discriminatory'* so there are more even-handed employment processes, including equal provision of benefits and insurance, where once it was assumed that the woman would be covered under the man's policy.

Women themselves are becoming more aware of such issues: young professionals noted that *'Before [in the land transactions of a marital couple], the wife just signed as a witness and it was even worse in cohabitation, but now women are more aware that they should also sign as buyers. The fact that 'More women owning resources today than 10 years ago' is seen as a sign of growing 'economic justice' by our study participants.*

Professional women noted that *'These changes can be seen at the grassroots as well as at national level... In villages women are working very hard to earn income. They have moved out of the domestic sphere and are now earning income.... Women have more control in their communities, particularly through women's groups, which have evolved from supply groups to demand groups as well as self-controlled groups.'* One senior leader commented that *'Women [in rural areas] are now doing small businesses in the market – whereas women were not there when I was growing up.'* A grandmother marvelled that in contrast to her time, when women were totally dependent on men, today, *'If you want to construct your own house or you want to buy a plot of land, you do it because you have your own cash.'*

Nepal

A similar picture was painted in Nepal, with a young professional pointing out that *'More opportunities are there – women even get priority for jobs through policies of positive discrimination (ads in the paper stipulate that priority would be given to women, for example), even though once hired they get lower pay!'* A grandmother – dependent on others throughout her life – noted with pride that *'My daughter is standing on her own feet – she is economically empowered, and I am happy about that....'* She herself is now receiving a widow's pension and delights in the power of having her own money for the first time: *'I do not have to ask my family for money all the time – I can have visitors over and buy things to offer them.'*

Greater assertiveness, self-agency and awareness

Running throughout and underpinning many of the other gains perceived by our participants is a rising sense of self-agency, with greater assertiveness as their awareness of their right to gender equality expands and as their capabilities to claim that right grow stronger.

In Uganda, a grandmother recalled that *'Back then, women were very shy, they were quiet and feared to be seen, but now women do things without any fear. They do whatever they want – what*

they love to do – without anyone to reprimand them. Now a woman can do whatever she can, without even seeking a man's decision, and he leaves you to do your thing alone.' Social norms requiring girls to be quiet and demur are shifting. One young university graduate attested that: *'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.'*

With greater awareness and capabilities, professional women reported that *'More women willing to stand up and fight for their rights... They increasingly have their own identity and are more autonomous...Self-esteem has gone up throughout the country. Now women can look after children on their own and are increasingly taking decisions on their lives... Women are more confident – they are not scared to occupy any space. Girls are also increasingly making decisions and exercising agency here in the capital, though not so much in rural areas.'*

In Nepal, women and girls are also gaining confidence and awareness of who and what they are and can be. A political leader noted that *'In earlier times, women were not aware of these rights and could not speak. They were scared and had no place to present their problems and no people who would listen to them.'* Now, however, they are claiming these rights. A young MA student said that she has become more aware of restrictions on her behaviour, *'But our studies of gender issues have shown that this is not right and we should therefore fight for our rights.'* This is also happening among particularly vulnerable groups of women, such as widows: *'Earlier'*, reports one of the leaders working for widows' rights:

'It had been very difficult for widows to get out of the house. It was also hard to say you were a widow because there was stigma, and people treated widows very badly. Society is patriarchal – only the voice of the man is heard. If there is no male in your house, who will speak for you, and if you cannot earn, what are you for? Also, widows are believed to bring bad luck and older widows especially. But now widows can say, I am a single woman, I have my own group, I am raising my children. Also, now widows do not always have to wear white, so they are not so stigmatized in public places.'

Synergies across critical enabling factors

Study participants explain that such positive changes have been brought about through a **combination of factors**, including progressive policies, expanded availability of services, and political will – with every aspect of progress underpinned by both the individual and collective agency exercised by women. What matters is the power of positive synergies that span every aspect of women's lives. Greater access to education, for example, is expanding economic opportunities for women and, in turn, expanding the vision of their potential roles in society. Equally, a stronger political voice for women challenges deep-rooted norms of male dominance in the public sphere and has contributed to the development of more gender-equitable policies.

Education is both a positive gain in itself and a catalyst for wider gains in gender equality and empowerment for women and girls. Meanwhile, a **conducive environment** that favours democracy, coupled with political will to open up spaces for collective voice provide a solid foundation for women's empowerment. And **collective agency**, combined with a vibrant women's

movement (in politics, government and civil society) has carried priorities forward, including at grassroots level.

Wider synergies with **international thinking and instruments** to promote women's rights and gender equality have enlarged and strengthened the collective force for change in discriminatory gender norms. Some have been encapsulated in successive international women's conferences (starting in Nairobi for Uganda and Beijing for Nepal) and in national implementation and monitoring processes established once countries have committed themselves to CEDAW, as both of these countries have. As noted, activism around women's rights in Nepal, for example, has been strongly rooted in the broader movement for social justice inspired, in part, by Marxist ideals of equality and redistribution.

Progressive laws and policies in each country, anchored in gender-sensitive and inclusive Constitutions, have served as essential conduits for further progress towards gender equality. Affirmative action for women – including parliamentary quota systems in both countries and in education in Uganda – is viewed by most of our participants as a critical springboard to opportunities once denied to them. Specific laws and policies to protect and promote women's rights and well-being have been critical for progress on, for example, education, economic empowerment and GBV. In Nepal, in particular, legal protections and policy thrusts have helped to establish and safeguard rights for vulnerable women such as widows or those from minority groups.

Information and awareness-raising activities have helped to heighten a new recognition of rights that has, in turn, supported **individual agency** and activism as a critical ingredient in the struggle for gender equality. At the individual level, girls and women have exercised agency to negotiate for higher levels of education and more choice in their studies, insist on later marriage and/or on their own choice of partner, demand equal participation in religious ceremonies and politics, push for more equitable gender relations within the household, and take on – and succeed in – jobs traditionally set aside for men.

Role models in the form of fearless women leaders, or women who have 'made it' in their fields have stimulated and inspired individual action, while mentors, relatives and many men have supported, guided and encouraged a new generation of women activists.

Migration from rural settings to the cities of Kampala and Kathmandu was identified as contributing to change across generations, with the expansion of educational opportunities, economic choices and greater social mixing helping to transform some social norms and expectations around girls and women. This created **a ripple effect**, as higher levels of education and employment empowered women to exercise choices and challenge norms. Access to higher education, in turn, enabled women and girls to seize opportunities – in the economic, political, and social spheres – that were once closed to them.

Expanded access to services in general – from schools to health centres – has contributed to norm change in both attitudes (through the ideas and information transmitted) and behaviours (as they were closer to home, making it more acceptable for girls and women to use them).

A young professional in Nepal summed it up: *'I think the change in the thoughts of my generation has come about mainly due to education and also due to the awareness that we get every day*

through social media. We are getting vast experiences apart from only the schooling knowledge. Everything has changed in our lives.'

'Sticky' norms and obstacles to progress

'While the windows of opportunities remain open, the doors stay closed and even locked and guarded. Women are getting out only through the windows – and some just squeezing through the grates at the tops of these windows. Other women, meanwhile, remain stuck in the room. And even those who have gotten out are sometimes smashed against the wall outside.'(professional woman, Uganda)

'In spite of all of the revolutions, movements, transitions and the Constitution, the concept of 'woman' has somehow not changed.'(political leader, Nepal)

The impact of 'sticky' norms

Despite clear progress in both countries, study participants suggested that further progress is being stalled by a number of 'sticky norms'. As well as resistance and backlash in some areas, there is a sense of an unfinished agenda, given the continued strength of these norms and persistent disparities in the rate and depth of changes among different groups of women.

In Uganda, professional women described the current situation as 'stagnant', 'limping', with 'erratic progress' and only 'marginal transformation'. Some speak of 'critical reversals in the gender domain... Things we thought we had overcome 20 years ago are now becoming the norm again and in more powerful manner.'

In Nepal, a university professor noted that 'Stereotyped mentalities have not disappeared' – pointing to a recent insurance advertisement showing a family saving for a son's education and a daughter's marriage). And a civil society activist reported that some issues 'still manifest blatant patriarchy while some are moving backwards... Women thought that now that we have these rights, they can never be taken away from us. We became complacent and that is when our rights have started to erode.'

In both countries, and in almost every area of progress, there has been pressure to maintain – and sometimes even reinstate – gender norms that embody a 'default' mode of male privilege. One professional woman **in Uganda** 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.' Particularly 'sticky' norms were found to adhere around attitudes and behaviours in the following domains.

Women's sexuality and bodily integrity

Study participants in both countries suggested that deep-rooted norms and attitudes around women's bodies and sexuality are highly resistant to change and contribute to an overall devaluation of women as well as a denial of their full human rights. They also fuel ongoing GBV.

In Uganda, professional women reported that *'there is little breakthrough around women's bodies.'* You can see this issue in the dress code policy in the public sector where women must dress decently and in attitudes that the way you dress makes you responsible for rape. Another example is the anti-pornography bill. Everyone is up in arms about women's body – restricting what she can do or not do, how she can move or not move.' A human rights lawyer pointed to the crystallisation of such attitudes in law: *'It is obvious how the law is keeping women in a subordinate status, particularly around sexuality – abortion, sex work, etc. – where there are blatant double standards on men and women's sexuality.'*

So too, with GBV still widespread throughout society – among the rural poor as well as the urban elite – some respondents questioned whether attitudes have really changed or whether the continued violence *'is also part of the backlash...The egotism and machismo of men who are threatened...'* A professional woman argued that: *'Now people know that gender-based violence is considered an abomination, but they don't really think it is. The man still thinks he has the right to slap, but fears being reported. It is not about feeling that she doesn't deserve beating, but the fear of the law.'* Provisions against marital rape in the proposed family law reform – the Marriage and Divorce Bill – were cited as being one of the issues that turned men against the bill – including male local councillors and MPs – because, according to one professional woman, *'they feel that marriage confers the obligation of the woman to give sex and the entitlement of the man to have sex.'*

In Nepal, MA students felt that a key obstacle to progress was *'woman's lack of rights over her body.'* This, a civil society activist explained, is because *'virginity is still a strong social norm'* and *'In Nepali cultures, morality and goodness are all linked up into sexual activities – for women, not for men.'*

This leads to continued social strictures on women's movements and behaviour as, according to a Nepali saying, *'A woman's reputation is like water in a yam's leaves – even a small slip and it will fall off.'* Such views contribute to continuing parental desires to see their daughters married as early as possible – so they do not become *'spoiled'* beforehand – and, at the same time, to controlling behaviours by their daughters-in-law, to ensure that they do not *'tarnish the family name.'*

Women living on their own or outside such family structures – women militants during the Maoist movement; women labour migrants abroad; even women living on their own in the city to pursue higher education – are viewed with suspicion, as they are assumed to have engaged in sexual relations. A civil society activist reported, *'If the man is abroad, the in-laws will be constantly observing the wife's behaviour and trying to control her – very suspicious.'*

Similar norms feed into injunctions against the remarriage of widows, according to a civil society activist, *'Because when a father gives a girls' hand in marriage to another family, she is expected to be a virgin who will start a pure blood line (a 'new universe') for her husband's family. But if that role is not needed or possible anymore, the woman cannot create another universe for someone. Moreover, under patriarchal systems, a wife's body is taken as the husband's property. So if a widow remarries and has sex with another, she will be sullying the man's family and name.'*

And attitudes towards GBV may be slow to change as a result of these same underlying norms. A civil society activists reported that *'Women who have been raped are not able to come forward because of the stigma attached to sexual violence,]* and a government official explained that *'Society feels that women should save themselves – if they were good women, they would not suffer abuse. They don't see the need to change male behaviour. So women are facing problems with their biology.'*

Gender roles and expectations within marriage, the household and family

The household was reported to be the locus of particular tensions emerging from both changing norms and enduring expectations of women's role in the home. But such tensions took a markedly different shape in Uganda, where they revolved around relations between husband and wife, and in Nepal, where tensions arose with in-laws within the extended family and – to a lesser extent – with parents before marriage.

In Uganda, professional women argued that *'Patriarchal ideals around the family have fractured somehow, but still women are subordinated to men.'* And, *'In the household, not much gender equality has penetrated, yet people keep up the pretence of having a perfect household. The men are trying to inhibit women from progressing and things are breaking down.'*

'The sticking points', noted one professional woman, *'are in power relations within the family. Men do not want to see women – their wives – as more empowered than they are, and want even empowered women to be subservient.'* Regardless of women's enhanced status in society – particularly with higher education and professional work, *'There is not much change in power relations at household level – women are making food, cleaning, etc. while the man is just hanging out like the male lion.'* As part of part of the wedding ceremony in one culture, *'The man says "I speak twice, you once" and then slaps the woman.'*

Girls are warned by their elders not to become too 'rebellious' as nobody will marry them, as a recent university graduate reported: *'My aunt says to me when I go home that "You can be educated, but you still need to behave.... You people who have gender are going to end up being single.'* A young male university graduate noted that *'You see social norms reflected in our graduation gifts – a girl will get gifts of plates and cups whereas we boys get suits, i.e. office wear!'*

Professional women reported that men are increasingly abandoning their roles as providers and leaving that to women and even demanding that the women support them. When women resist, *'They are calling us educated women 'marriage breakers' because we refuse to hand over our salaries to men.'* And overall, women explain, *'If there is instability in terms of social/family structures, women who have gone to school are seen as destabilising social norms.'*

One professional woman summed it up as follows:

'The man demands respect even if he earns nothing or is uneducated because society gives him that mandate. That is why even as a woman minister, you leave your ministerial portfolio at the doorstep when you come home.' It is like a backlash... Men say "OK, you are a politician – go make the laws there, but not at home." So women are kings without a kingdom. Now, if women don't like it, they can leave, but then they have the stigma of being considered prostitutes – the idea that you are leaving your husband to go out to get sex

elsewhere.... The household setting and conditions are therefore critical. You might want to jump out, but you are trapped by all sorts of things – what will my neighbours say? The Church? What will happen to the children? The household becomes like a prison with no walls. This is an aspect of socialisation.'

In Nepal, social expectations of virginity before marriage can mean continued pressure for early marriage, as well as stricter control on the movements and behaviour of daughters from the onset of adolescence. The dowry system can fuel such tensions, with some study participants reporting that the cost of a dowry can rise with the age of the bride, so parents have an interest in seeing her married off as early as possible. While the actual age of marriage seen as acceptable is rising – at least among the urban educated women we interviewed– there are still strong societal concerns about the behaviour of women before marriage, as reflected in our study by reports of gossip about young women living on their own in the city while studying, and a continuing preference for them to live within family-based household arrangements while there.

Also in Nepal, as we have seen, tensions spring from continued expectations that a young bride will live with her husband's family and assume the roles and responsibilities of daughter-in-law, subordinated to the supervision and authority of her in-laws. The ideal of 'male guardianship' over women is symbolised during weddings, when the transfer of such guardianship passes from the father to the husband and father-in-law, accompanied by the saying: *'Now this is your property – your liability – either you kill it or you keep it and it is yours.'* The woman is effectively cut off from her own family: she assumes not only the name, but the lineage of her husband's family, with the physical expression of this change reflected in her new conditions of residence within the in-laws' household.

The adjustment can be difficult and relations can be particularly fraught with the mother-in-law, who often sees her new-found status as an elevation in her power over others. As one study participant pointed out, the impact can include unequal relations among women themselves, with older women dominating younger ones, as some mothers-in law reproduce patterns of oppression that they suffered in their own marriages. As MA students explained, *'We must also acknowledge in gender that there can be dominance of women over women, for example the mother-in-law over the daughter in law. Girls before marriage are worshipped as a goddess and after marriage are dominated by the mother in law.'*

Continued social expectations of the responsibilities of daughters-in laws within the extended family and their contribution to household maintenance and social standing can clash with changing expectations of women's role outside the home and their expanded opportunities for work. As one young professional said:

'In women's lives, everything is dependent on family issues – the in-laws, one's own parents, the husband, the children – it is all tangled up... Yes, we are lucky to have been educated and have experience, but there are also a lot of pressures building up. The in-laws now expect the daughter-in-law to have a job, earn income, but they also expect her at home, so she is in a sort of trap as the earlier social expectations have remained the same... A

woman is not only a wife, mother, and daughter, but a daughter-in-law and sister-in-law and all of these relationships must be maintained ...The daughter in law represents the prestige of the in-laws in society. If you are good and well-behaved and meet social expectations, the in-laws take that as a positive reflection on them. If you are not – they see it as a negative reflection on your maternal family. So how you handle these relationships is central. While men have the pressure of earning and may be caught in pressures between the wife and his family, it doesn't affect his career as it does for women.' (young professional woman, newly married)

Tension and oppression are not universal within extended households, and ; where they do become overpowering, individual women are managing to break away to establish households for themselves, their husbands and children. However, the social norm of the extended family still seems to prevail, as do attitudes – among both men and women – about women's subordination within that structure.

Many women have internalised gender norms within the household: *'In the household, boys may want to help but it is our mentality that we do not allow them'* explained a college professor. *'I, for example, feel uncomfortable when my husband tries to help me in the kitchen.'* And a husband's attitudes may lag even further behind. As one young professional put it: *'Men's expectations of wives are not really changing – my husband does want me to be a career success but also to provide care in the family.'* As another young professional explained, there are *'still some among the young generations who follow the legacy of the parents. I have met men who have the patriarchal thoughts and I stay away from them because they will never change their thought even when you try to explain to them.'*

And finally in Nepal, societal expectations of fidelity for a women who has been widowed – fuelled in part by the sense that women who have been married 'belong' to the husband's family – contribute to ongoing social strictures against their remarriage. Despite of progress in this domain, many widows in Nepali society remain vulnerable to deprivation of rights and dignity. *'Women's voices are heard so little'* explains a widow working for widows' rights. *'And people do not want the problems of widows and household relations and such to go outside of the private sphere into the public realm of policy'.*

The exercise of political voice

While study participants acknowledged the significant advances made in women's participation in politics and exercise of voice in public and civic affairs, women in both countries pointed to ongoing constraints in the effective exercise of political leadership and power. These constraints were seen to contrast with the greater openness and sense of possibility felt during the height of their involvement in pro-democracy movements. As noted, the derogatory image of 'hens crowing' has been evoked in both countries to belittle their attempts to participate in public life – an area still seen by many as primordially male.

In Uganda, women report a closing down of political space, and – regardless of the rising numbers of women in government – a muting of their ability to speak out as party politics takes precedence over gender unity and women find themselves unable to compete equally with men ([box 11](#)). Professional women were very clear in their analyses of the force of social norms:

'Social norms that keep women in the inferior spaces are transported into both the political and economic realms: In the political realm there is tokenism, affirmative action – make a few women feel comfortable and the other will think its ok.' (professional woman, Uganda)

They noted a dampening of women's actual influence in comparison to the early days of democracy when their participation was welcomed and women leaders emerged: *'Looking at the numbers, the trajectory is going up.'* explained one professional woman. *'Looking at influence and impact, it is sloping downwards.'*

Box 11. Constraints on women in politics in Uganda

politics and the rights of women, but not now. Why? Now, the numbers outweigh quality and many women join politics just to get wealthy' (senior woman leader)

- *'Having a critical mass doesn't guarantee feminist thinking – there are structural impediments and some women representatives can unwittingly or wittingly endorse patriarchy. The power of patriarchy is so formidable that you have to be very organised and systematic in even forming cracks in that wall. And that is lacking in women's leadership. There are a few voices, but most toe the line'* (professional woman)
- *'We are living in a society – patriarchy – where people see men as the leaders – dictating what women should do, and this is transmitted through socialisation. Because of socialisation, even women think that men are leaders. In some cases, men in the community reject female candidates, saying "We have well educated men – why should women boss us around?"'* (senior woman leader).

In Nepal, women felt that they were at a crossroads in the exercise of political power for the wider benefit of women. One political leader asked: *'Do you work within the party to make women strong or work with other parties to make women's issues strong?'* If you choose that latter path, *'Women are seen as having a separate group and not obeying/following the party line.'* Some women activists contrasted the freedom and openness of their time in the resistance *'in the jungle'* with the constraints of today's political processes and party politics in *'civilisation'*: the challenge is to achieve equality with men within parties and to come together as women across parties.

'All of the women in the movement were young and now they have gone back to their household roles – busy with families and children... We have no muscle, no money – no relations with big contributors – so it is difficult to compete in elections.' (political leader).

As in Uganda, study participants suggested that the quota system has gone only so far in enhancing women's political voice: paving the way for rising numbers, but not necessarily strengthening the voices raised (box 12).

Box 12. Constraints on women in politics in Nepal

- *'The reserved seats for women (proportional reservations) are not as powerful as the 'first past the post' positions, which are largely held by men' (development worker)*
- *'Just having women in government or positions of power does not ensure that they will work to promote gender-sensitive policies, as even women may not be gender-sensitive' (university professor)*
- *Gender equality in political representation 'is in the name of quota and reservations only...like giving out chocolates to make people happy, but not changing the actual structure of the system ... The government is hyping the fact that there is a woman president and speaker of the house, etc. but at the grassroots level there is just 2% representation where 50% is needed' (MA students)*
- *'It is just talk – and we are still struggling with this. Men are resisting this because, of course, if women come in, men will go out' (political leader).*

Economic empowerment

Continuing constraints on women's economic empowerment in both countries arise from unequal inheritance rights, dual responsibilities for work inside and outside the household, limited asset ownership, and unequal pay structures, as well as a continuing preference for men in some posts or professions.

In Uganda, customary laws of succession favour inheritance by males through the male line. This contributes to son preference and keeps women and girls dependent on others as they cannot amass their own resources. There has been no widespread progress on the idea that all children should have an equal share, because – as professional women explained – girls who marry 'go somewhere else', meaning that they join their husband's clan and family and contribute to a different lineage. If a parent wants to make an exception and keep something back for a daughter, *'one has to hide it in order to maintain it for girls.'*

Drawing on cultural conceptualisations of women themselves as property, the inheritance issue raises the common question, *'But how can property [i.e. women] inherit property?'* And while more fathers are said to be including their daughters in their wills, they are still the exceptions.

Resistance to efforts to promote equal rights to property within marriage and on its dissolution have also contributed significantly to the failure to pass attempted reforms in family law through Uganda's ill-fated Marriage and Divorce Bill. Particularly contentious issues include the call for co-ownership of marital property, which the women's movement argued should be considered joint property, and provisions for equitable distribution of property in the case of divorce.

A legal scholar among our study participants analysed resistance to the bill as follows: *'The main problem is the patriarchy in Parliament and in power who view the issue of equitable share of matrimonial property as a threat to their own power. Ownership and control of resources are central to patriarchy – they don't want to recognise women's contributions as they see these as taking away their resources. ... That is what patriarchy is all about – ownership and control of resources.'*

In the workplace, unequal pay continues to be justified on the basis of women's subordinate status in the household: a young professional working in the private sector noted that *'Women are given less because they think women are being taken care of by others – are catered for. So this enters into the human resource discussions of pay. There are no laws on equal pay – only a paper for discussions.'* And professional women pointed, in particular, to what is happening at household level to 'disempower' working women as a rising obstacle to progress (box 13).

Box 13. Challenges to economic empowerment in Uganda

- *'The concept of gender equality has become distorted and misunderstood. Now that we are earning, we are equal, but a lot of the additional household expenditures are being taken on by women only – for example, school fees. As soon as we begin earning, the men no longer contribute'* (professional women)
- *'Women may be becoming 'empowered' politically and economically. But those 'empowered' women say their husbands do not support them... For example, the spouses of women empowered through participation in village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) are leaving all household responsibilities to these women – to pay school fees, buy food, and the like'* (professional woman)
- *'Now with women's savings groups or catering groups at community level, some of the money earned has to be given to the husbands. Also – women MPs have to tell their husbands in advance what they, they husbands, will get out of this – men can control the accounts'* (professional woman)
- *'Women MPs at a meeting recount some horrible things that they are going through – husbands taking on new wives to care for the home and then asking the women MPs to bring back money to support them',* (professional women).

In Nepal, equally thorny issues arise around inheritance, which remains largely patrilineal. Despite constitutional guarantees, most land is inherited by male children, demonstrating the strength of customary practices. This – alongside ideological valuations that privilege men – contributes to ongoing patterns of son preference and puts girls at a disadvantage in terms of access to and control over assets. A number of our study participants have engaged in debates over the issues, with a bill passed just recently that provides for equal inheritance but that now faces an uphill battle in terms of implementation. There are also fears that a loophole will allow parents to circumvent the law and continue to pass on property to their sons, on the basis that it is sons who care for parents and perform ceremonial functions.

In general, property rights for women have been problematic. According to a civil rights leader, some MPs have argued that because a wife who divorces her husband is entitled to her share of the marital property, married women should not have inheritance rights for parental property. In 2018, a new civil code stated that if the woman is the cause of the divorce, she will get no property at all from the husband. It also states that the hard-won rights of a widow to her husband's property will be revoked if she remarries. To the civil society activist fighting for women's rights, *'This shows the strength of the patriarchal mind-set – as long as the older generation is there, this will not be changed easily.'*

Widows are particularly vulnerable to property grabs by their in-laws, as confirmed by the stories of two of our study participants, and there has been resistance to the empowerment of widows as *'In-laws do not want their daughters-in-law to gain awareness and claim rights!'* Through social mobilisation and activism, widows have gained new rights to a share of their husband's property and no longer, for example, need the consent of their children to sell property. However the provision in the new civil code revoking a widow's share in marital property on re-marriage shows how tenuous her individual human rights are within the complex web of social relations that define her as a dependent within marriage.

The stigmatisation of women who migrate for work has arisen from social norms that require them to remain under the supervision of their male relatives before and after marriage. This not only undervalues the contributions migrant women make to their households, but also increases their vulnerability in such situations. According to a civil society officer who works on such issues, *'There should be a proper rights-based approach because the ban is pushing them into more informal channels which increases their vulnerability. We need to make our policies and laws more woman-friendly.'*

Unequal educational levels within some groups may also place many women at a particular social and economic disadvantage. Such, for example, is the case for Dalit women who, according to a Dalit woman's ward representative, face more discrimination than Dalit men because they are less educated, have less access to income, and have no voice as they are not accustomed to participating in public spaces. Their lack of economic empowerment in turn renders them more vulnerable to domestic abuse as their economic dependence on men contributes to their fear of speaking out.

Factors that resist change and the 'unfinished agenda'

The pervasive power of 'patriarchy'

'Patriarchy' was identified as an ideology and structure by participants in both countries and was seen as a clear force that must be addressed. They see it manifested in such diverse forms as religious ideologies that give more social, economic, and ritual importance to men; laws – both formal and informal – that crystallise unequal gender relations, including around issues of son preference and inheritance; and gendered expectations of roles and responsibilities in family and household that can be detrimental to women who – on marriage – lose their own identities and join the clan or caste of their husbands. They also see it operating through political conceptualisations of power as a masculine domain and in 'sticky' norms around women's sexuality and the need to control their bodies.

- **In Uganda**, study respondents reported that *'Something is simmering below the surface and it is patriarchy'* which they see to be *'reflected in and supported by all institutions – the law, religion, culture, education, the media...'* It is seen as a form of 'resistance on the part of men [who] are threatened and will do everything to resist.' They noted that *'Patriarchy changes shape as women get empowered, enlightened, or move out of the traditional shape of things.'* It therefore requires vigilance and strategic engagement on many fronts.

- **In Nepal**, study respondents also identified the impact of patriarchy in multiple domains, noting *'the patriarchal mind-set' in the political domain that 'would not put in women's rights'; the patriarchal nature of society 'where only the voice of the man is heard' ; patriarchal systems where 'a wife's body is taken as the husband's property'; and the continued patriarchal attitudes among some young men 'who will never change their thought even when you try to explain to them.'* They also stressed that *'the patriarchal mind-set is embedded not only in men, but in women as well, and there will continue to be much struggle needed, as change is difficult to achieve.'*

Weak implementation of laws and policies

There have been challenges in translating progressive laws and policies into rights and action on the ground in both countries, where lack of implementation is identified as a critical weakness that impedes change and progress in many domains.

In Uganda, study participants noted a big distinction *'between law on the books and law in practice, or living law'* and identified implementation as *'the biggest challenge.'* With many good laws and policies now passed, there is growing frustration around the slow pace of change on the ground. They highlighted the need for *'political will to give adequate resources to allow effective implementation.'* They also stressed the need for systems and standard operating procedures to put progressive policies in practice. A civil society activist put it this way:

'If a woman is beaten and walks to the police – what happens? If a woman divorces her husband and tries to claim land – what happens? What energy does it take to get justice for women? It is the budgets, the attitudes of the service providers at the service points, the judges and magistrates, the training needed as civil servants who change all the time so you have to start all over with new ones.... This is very slow work. A change in the system includes the attention to these nitty gritty details on the ground. It includes attitudes and accountability.' (professional woman)

Some point to a failure to fully address contradictions in policy and implementation. A senior woman leader noted, for example, *'There is resistance to sex education for fear of spoiling children and conflicting messages on this – politicians say one thing; those who used to provide counselling no longer do.'* Others pointed to a failure to assess the effectiveness of policies, including the hallmark policies of universal primary and secondary education (UPE and USE) that have been positions as such a significant part of efforts to empower women:

'Teachers are underpaid and quality of education is not good– competing with private schools which are run as businesses so of better quality. Fathers then tend to send their boys to private schools and maintain their girls in public ones. At UPE schools, parents do not even provide lunches, so in rural areas, children are disadvantaged – child marriage is also on the increase and leading to drop out. We need to move toward rural areas and focus attention there. Most students at Makerere come from private schools – not UPE where drop out is high, nor USE where they do not get the grades needed. UPE needs to be reviewed for higher quality' (IDI, senior woman leader)

In Nepal, study participants reported that *'People never see policies – they are just flying about in rumours. Even service providers don't know them.'* They stressed that for genuine change on the ground, *'Laws have to be implemented in full: law plus implementation = change.'* They pointed to a range of factors contributing to lack of implementation: *'There are good laws and policies in place, but they are not enacted/implemented. This is due to a number of factors including: political*

instability; lack of political or bureaucratic will; lack of awareness on the part of women, leaving them unable to claim their rights.'

Some maintained that law reform alone has not been enough to change social norms: *'Although there are laws now, culture is deep-rooted.... The law has changed before social mind sets have changed.'* They also noted that *'Cultural norms are strong and will fight back.'* Others put it this way:

'So theoretically, there are laws, policies and regulations – the technical parts that are there; but practically, there are problems in moving ahead. Cases do not even reach the police yet – the problem starts with under-reporting, so we cannot even talk yet of police readiness to enforce / implement the laws... Implementation of progressive laws is impeded by cultural beliefs' (male CSO staff)

Shrinking political space

Shrinking political space was identified **in Uganda** as a significant factor in weakening the enabling environment for progress around civil rights in general and women's rights in particular. Just as the democratic movement and greater political participation of women was seen as the spark for mobilisation around gender equality and empowerment in the mid-1980s, the current period is seen to be one of retrenchment, diminishing democracy and a narrowing of space for civil society. This has contributed to the fragmentation of a women's movement that has been pivotal in contesting discriminatory norms and a silencing of voices that question power.

Study participants in Uganda recognised that *'These things are interwoven with the nature of political power.'* They reported that *'Civil society space is shrinking – the government is ensuring less and less breathing space for them... and there is a sense of fatigue – people are tired.'* And now *'You cannot criticise even one issue in government without being labelled as opposition.'*

They also suggested that the stakes may be higher now than they were in the early days of democracy, as *'the magnitude of questioning power has moved.'* They explained that *'The earlier context was totally different. Only when women start challenging power has this become a problem – it means you are questioning authority. It brings fear and what comes back is male leadership – male power...'*

As one study participant put it:

'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... But now the terrain has changed as you 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)

Uneven national development and persistent disparities

Disparities of all sorts were identified by participants in both countries in the realisation of gender equality and women's empowerment, contributing to the sense of an 'unfinished' agenda for national efforts.

In Uganda, such disparities were couched in terms of the growing gap between the urban elite and the 'grassroots', often overlapping with the distinction between rich and poor, and between the educated and un-educated. Many study participants recognised that the education that lifted up so many of today's generation of women leaders was often the result of parental investment in private or church-based schools, while poorer girls in UPE schools today may not benefit from an education of the same quality. Service provision of all sorts, including implementation of laws and policies, is weaker in rural areas, depriving girls and women in these areas of many of the stepping stones they need to challenge discriminatory norms and defend their rights.

University students reported that *'Those of us who have grown up in the city have gotten used to things like gender equality and women's empowerment, but back in the village there are these patriarchal norms.'* A young woman returning to her villages from university was told: *"Don't expect what you learn in school to be the reality on the ground"*, with her aunt adding *"You can be educated, but you still need to behave."* Another reported that *'I see more girls than boys at school in Kampala and so think the problem is solved, but then I go upcountry in the north and find more boys. The headmaster explained that when a girl reaches P5, there is no need to continue because she is ready for marriage and once married, some of the bride wealth will be brought to the school.'*

Regional differences and disparities can be stark: *'In the Eastern region, girls are still doing all the farm work and combining this with school – giving them no time for studying'* reported a recent university graduate and *'I also found in one district that women and girls are doing everything, including washing the brother's clothes – How weird is that?'*

Women professionals who have been leading the drive for gender equality admit that there is an increasing disconnect between the central discourse and policy thrusts around women's empowerment and the everyday lives of women in the countryside, which is leaving great swathes of women behind:

'There is a gap between women up here and down there. Policies come from the top, without looking at the grassroots. When the women's movement started, it started at the grassroots. But now it has been hijacked by these women who are making policies from top-down. But when I am an MP – as a modern woman, how can I make appropriate policies and programmes for women down there? In my time, we were more in touch with the grassroots and community-based rural organisations. The women who have made it now have lost contact with women at the grass roots. They see being in Parliament as their own promotions but the linkage with the grassroots – with women at the base are fading away. They don't have time to sit down on the grass with these women – the woman who does not know she is being oppressed by culture, who has no money for food, who is cooking over the fire with wood. If they do go there, they speak in English – not in the local language, look sophisticated, wearing trousers and the grass roots woman remains where she was 20 years ago – the gap is growing wider. Even in CSOs there are the same [elite] women from the urban areas, so how much do they know about the women down there? They have

studied, travelled around the world, but how much do they know? Even my children, raised in the city, in a middle class home, when they go back to their village the communication is not easy.' (senior woman leader)

In Nepal, regional development has been uneven and rural women and girls, in particular, continue to suffer from heavy workloads, limited autonomy and educational deprivation. The intersections of women's lives create a complex web of social and cultural expectations and obligations that can make it hard to move forward together. As noted, some women, such as widows, continue to struggle for their rights, while others, including minority women, face a double burden of discrimination on the basis of gender plus caste or ethnicity.

Recent university graduates pointed in particular to urban-rural disparities, noting that *'Gender equality is progressing more in urban areas than in rural areas. Lack of education and ingrained cultural values and norms are the reasons for gender discrimination.'* A college professor noted that *'In many rural areas, girls are still expected to marry early and drop out of school – but not in cities.'* And a government official added: *'Progress is faster in urban environments: social transformation works better in and is facilitated by mixed societies.'*

At the same time, regional, ethnic and religious differences can cut across the urban/rural divide and there are *'larger problems of social inclusion more generally,'* with issues of poverty and economic inequality. As a government officer working on women's development put it:

'There are issues of religion, caste, ethnicity, gender and class so in a densely packed society – how to peel away all of these layers to touch the real problems? You can never get to the root of the problem so when we get to the implementation level we cannot separate these things out.' (IDI, government official).

Conclusions and priorities

'It takes a certain kind of fighting spirit to keep pushing,' professional woman, Uganda

'This is about the little space that you create – the little change that you make and the new awareness you have built and then, as in a relay race, you pass the baton on to others,' university professor, Nepal.

Conclusions

The findings and lessons learned from our discussions with women in the two very different country contexts of **Uganda and Nepal** reveal surprising similarities in the progress made as well as the obstacles to changing gender norms. There are also some similarities in the norms that shape the daily lives of women in these two countries across critical areas, including education, marriage and the family, health, politics and economics. There were also, however, a number of country-specific findings that indicate significant differences in women's lived realities and their trajectories of change and resistance.

Positive changes and enabling factors

Despite their very different socio-cultural, political, geographical and historical characteristics, both countries have seen positive changes in discriminatory gender norms and practices that have expanded the opportunities available to girls and women. From education to greater voice for women in politics and public life, and from expanded economic opportunities to improvements in reproductive health care, women have seen a slow erosion of gender norms over generations, and sometimes within their own lifetime.

Progress in both countries has been fuelled by a combination of factors:

- democratisation and popular participation: a springboard for women to claim their rights, with women's collective action proving a significant force in each country
- women's participation in politics and government in both countries, boosted by affirmative action
- distinct ministries for women and gender, plus a host of gender-specific policies
- women-led CSOs that promote and support legal reform, social mobilisation and awareness-raising
- connections with the global women's movement and international instruments to promote women's rights
- rising levels of education of women – a cause and consequence of changing gender norms – as more educated women enter public life and employment and drive changes in norms through their enhanced collective and individual agency
- individual agency marked by a determination to succeed, a willingness to rebel against constraints, and efforts to model gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours in personal life, with such agency often nurtured and inspired by supportive parents, teachers and role models.

Sticking points

Progress in both countries has faltered on a number of 'sticking points', with both resistance and backlash in some areas, and continued disparities in the rate and depth of changes among different groups of women. The sticking points identified by study participants include:

- Constraints on women's political participation and leadership in both countries, particularly in Uganda where their space for political activism and voice is shrinking, in marked contrast to their intense involvement in pro-democracy movements
- 'Sticky' norms around women's sexuality in both countries, such as norms about their bodies, mobility and behaviour, continue to fuel GBV
- The burden of gender norms within the household, including the gendered division of labour, as well as marital rights and obligations constraints on women's economic empowerment as a result of unequal inheritance rights,
- The double burden of work inside and outside the home, limited asset ownership and unequal pay structures, alongside a continuing preference for men in some posts or professions the continued strength of 'patriarchy' as a clear force in both countries, with religious ideologies assigning more importance to men;

- Laws that crystallise unequal gender relations; and gendered expectations of roles and responsibilities that can be detrimental to women who – on marriage – lose their previous identities and join the clan or caste of their husbands. challenges in translating progressive laws and policies into tangible change for women on the ground, with lack of implementation identified as a critical weakness that impedes change.
- Disparities of all sorts in the realisation of gender equality and women's empowerment were identified by study participants in both countries, leading to a sense of an 'unfinished' agenda that must now be addressed across national efforts.

Priorities for action

Study participants were clear that strategic priorities to tackle the unfinished agenda require sustained and integrated action on a number of fronts.

In Uganda, the women's movement for enhanced collective agency must be reinvigorated through strengthened political representation and alliances (both national and international), a refocus on the grassroots and mobilisation around priority themes that build on or reinforce and expand gains already achieved. Priorities include:

- Further expansion of quality education for all, linked to enhanced economic participation
- Continued reform and development of gender-equitable laws and policies, coupled with intensified efforts to ensure adequate implementation and enforcement on the ground
- Ongoing advocacy and sensitisation efforts through both traditional and social media, as well as transformative socialisation processes at all levels.

Study participants suggest that it is the combination of these factors, working together, that is most conducive to sustainable changes in norms and practices for women's empowerment and gender justice. And they recognise that through all such efforts, in the words of one professional woman, *'We must address the social norms and cultural issues that have a huge bearing on what we do and who we are in all spaces we are in.'* In this effort, it is critical to work with both women and men, girls and boys.

Box 14. Voices for progress in Uganda

- *'The women's movement needs to be broadened into a grassroots movement rooted in people and not dependent on a few women leaders – mainly in NGOs. We need movement-building for collective power and voice.'* (professional woman)
- *'We have to look beyond education and link it with economic empowerment – tooling girl pupils and women students to navigate the environment of masculine spaces that they are negotiating into – the masculine files. Girls who come into this get a shock.'* (professional woman)
- *'All things are intertwined. Community sensitisation is not enough – people will just go back and sleep. Laws and how effectively they are applied will help determine attitudes – law is a very effective element in this.'* (IDI, professional woman)
- *'We need to look holistically at the family structure, including husbands, wives, in-laws...Starting with the family makes a lot of sense in changing gender norms.'* (professional woman)
- *'We need to help men think about negative social practices and the impacts on the community and also to articulate positive aspects of how they would like to make a difference in the community. Because if you empower women and leave their men behind in their lives, you are bound to get backlash.'* (professional woman)

Similarly, **in Nepal**, strategic priorities require sustained, integrated and locally-tailored action across a number of areas. The way forward requires continued, broad-based efforts around social mobilisation and awareness-raising to try to retain and accelerate the momentum towards equity and inclusion created by the social movements of the 1990s. Further safeguarding of rights in law is needed on priorities such as equal citizenship rights, as well as a far stronger focus on the implementation and enactment of laws and policies on the ground. The continued expansion of quality education is a key priority, alongside the equitable promotion of economic opportunities.

Integrated development approaches are critical, as women's empowerment is complex and depends on progress across intertwining social, economic and political dimensions. And finally, given Nepal's diverse socio-cultural context and the disparities that mark its women's status and development, the way forward must be based on differentiated, context-specific approaches that start from the bottom-up, learn from women's own voices and priorities, and encourage and support individual agency.

Box 15. Voices for progress in Nepal

- *'This is about the little space that you create – the little change that you make and the new awareness you have built and then, as in a relay race, you pass the baton on to others'* (university professor).
- *'You also need to be stubborn... We should not keep girls in (coddle them or shelter them from challenges) but send them out to make them strong. We have part of God in us and we contribute to our nation.'* (mountaineer)
- *'If you want to teach about women's rights, you need to teach the opposite sex. Just like for Dalits – you have to work with those who suppress them.'* (male CSO staff).
- *'In addition to legal reform, a key thing is to change the mind-set.'* (CSO activist)
- *'The accent is on working with local values, for until and unless people become internally convinced of something, they will not change.'* (government official)
- *'The aim is not just to promote economic activities and empowerment but to effect social transformation. You cannot start from economic empowerment only – you have to do everything at the same time – education, protection, leadership skills-training. So it is important to take an integrated approach.'* (government official)

Participants in both countries know, from their own experience that there is *'no magic bullet'* – that intensified efforts to mobilise around all of the outstanding and persistent issues must be part of any strategy. **In Uganda**, a professional woman stresses that: *'We need to keep plugging on all the different fronts. Many battles are needed to win the war.'* Women also recognise as well that *'cultural norms are strong and will fight back'* and that change requires relentless effort and commitment. In the words of a political leader **in Nepal**, *'So we always have to keep fighting in spite of all of the practical problems that women face... We have been able to expand awareness but are still working on implementation. And one day it will be possible.'*

Because everything is intertwined – the economic, cultural, political and social – everything remains a priority. Some participants expressed a sense of discouragement at the current state of affairs, but also voiced their determination to continue the struggle, keeping the long view 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.' (university professor, Uganda).

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