

ALiGN

Advancing Learning and
Innovation on Gender Norms



SUMMARY REPORT

GENDER, POWER AND PROGRESS

HOW NORMS CHANGE

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Introduction

Gender norms – the informal rules that define how people of a particular gender are expected to behave – have a profound impact in every society. They determine what people think and what they do, and they shape the attitudes and behaviour of both women and men in relation to each other. In turn, the structures, institutions and economies of every society reflect and enforce the gendered expectations upheld by these norms. However, gender norms are not permanent and can change for the better. Successive generations have built on past achievements to shift the gender norms that hold back progress and to move further towards gender equality. And while these shifts encounter setbacks, stagnations and reversals, there is always momentum for change.

Addressing norms as the often-invisible barriers to progress has not always been at the top of the gender-equality and women's rights agenda, but interest in social and gender norms has soared in recent years. Gender norms have become an increasingly important focus in many areas of policy and action, and this report responds to a worldwide surge of interest in these norms and gender-related issues. Twenty-five years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we draw on global data and learning to ask:

- how have gender norms changed over the past quarter-century?
- what has supported and blocked changes to gender norms in four key areas? and
- how can change happen faster and become robust enough to resist backlash and withstand crises?

We focus on change since Beijing in 1995: a watershed year for the gender equality movement.

The report identifies four key areas that are critical in shifting gender norms to achieve lasting change.

1. *Education* is the foundation for personal transformation and has huge potential to drive change – but it can also reinforce discriminatory gender norms.
2. *Sexual and reproductive health and rights* enable women to make their own choices around childbearing, and can spur on women's progress in other areas, such as work.
3. *Fair paid and unpaid work* can boost women's autonomy in many areas and shift norms within families and communities about power and control.
4. *Women's political voice and representation* are critical for women to vocalise their need for transformative change, and to support action to achieve that change.

Background

Unequal gender norms can be seen in attitudes, such as: '*women should stay at home and men should earn an income*' or '*women are too emotional to be politicians*'. They are also seen in behaviour, such as a man beating his wife; a woman politician receiving abusive emails; a boy being bullied for aspiring to a role seen as 'feminine'; or a girl being married early because her only role is to be a wife and mother.

Often lumped together under the heading of culture, these aspects of society are often seen as unchangeable and ‘just the way we do things here’. What we know is that this idea of ‘the way we do things’ has far more influence on social progress and social justice than once thought.

The rise of social and gender norms in agendas for social justice and economic development reflects a growing understanding that ‘culture matters’, and that discriminatory and harmful norms hold societies back. Gender norms permeate deep into every society as Wilchins (2020) describes: *‘Norms are more like invisible “guard rails” that shape and narrow people’s thinking, behaviours, and opportunities. So, norms often show up as a kind of negative power, as absence rather than presence: doors that just didn’t open, choices that couldn’t be made, opportunities that just seemed out of reach’.*

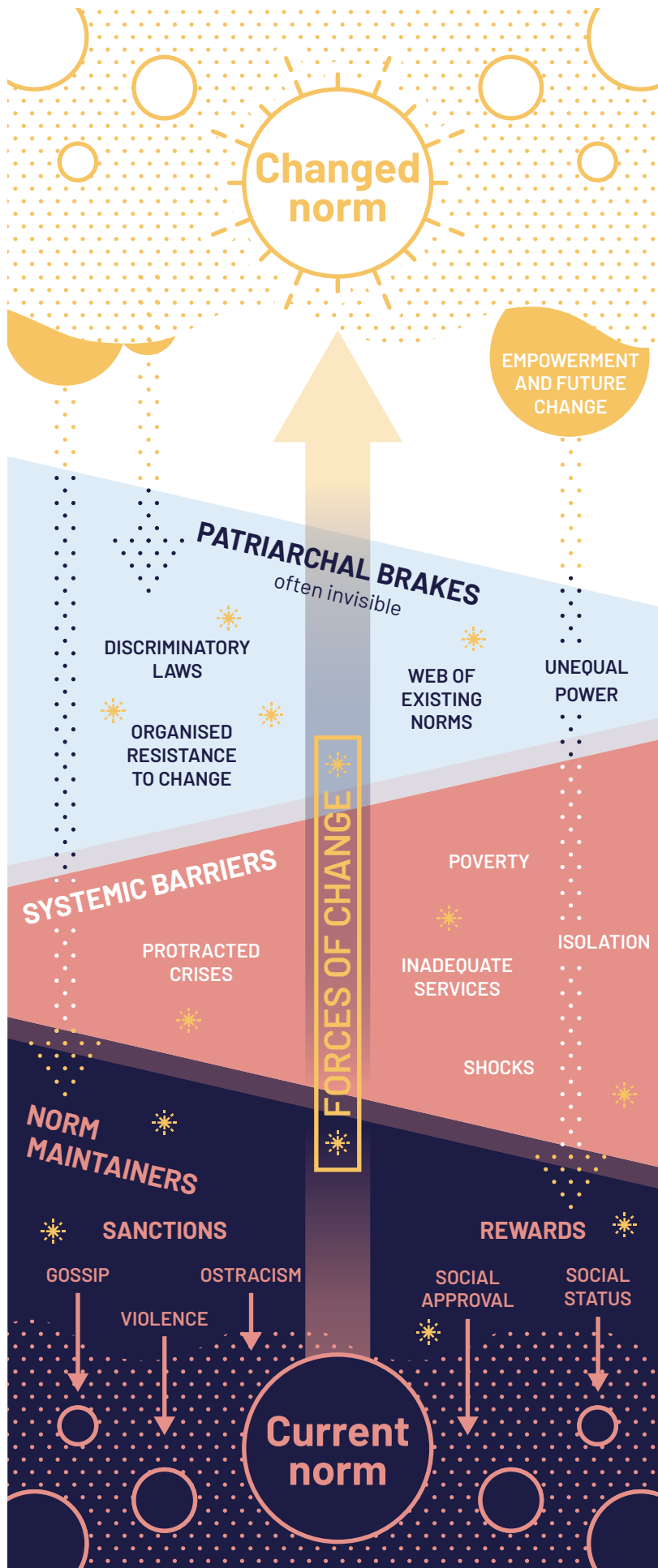
It is important to understand how powerful norms act as these ‘invisible guard rails’ and how they shape expectations of people’s attitudes and behaviour, because this knowledge shows just how deeply entrenched these norms are, and how they are propped up by powerful interests. The deep-set nature of gender norms explains why change is slow, and why it demands more than a few individuals changing their own attitudes and behaviour – change is needed across society.

This report explains the apparent ‘normality’ of gender norms in many settings and cultures, which are based on the exercise of privileged male authority and intersect with other forms of oppression. Recognition of intersectionality – the overlapping aspects of people’s identity, including race, ethnicity, class and sexuality, to name a few – is also critical to understand how gendered norms develop, evolve and apply differently to different groups. As we discuss in this report, this recognition is often missing from current knowledge and data. We also explain that while not every norm is harmful, those that are often harm people of every gender.

Our conceptual framework illustrates how important it is to make the ‘invisible guard-rails’ of gendered norms visible. It also recognises the opposition that must be overcome if norms are to change, including the sanctions or rewards that encourage the maintenance of norms. Changing norms also means uprooting or defying unseen and informal laws, codes of conduct, moralities and resistance that is often highly organised – all of which maintain patriarchal authority. These are not the only barriers, however. Norm change can also falter as a result of shocks and crises, physical isolation, restricted services and poverty.

Where norms start to change, this can act as a trigger for change in other areas, creating a virtuous cycle. A family, for example, may overcome attitudes that a girl should marry instead of going to secondary school. They may defy what is seen as normal, and either disregard or overcome the sanctions imposed locally, such as gossip or being ostracised. They may even have to overcome the active harassment of their daughter in school. But if they prevail in the face of these challenges, and if they also overcome other barriers such as income poverty or a crisis, then this can generate small shifts in attitudes about a girl’s education. And, coupled with the benefits to the educated girl herself, these shifts can eventually influence further norm change in her community.

A conceptual framework: a path from a current norm to a changed norm



Patriarchal brakes: often invisible gender-biased norms, values and stereotypes that uphold male power and privilege. They include norms allocating care work primarily to women or stereotypes that women are less capable than men. Gender norms often intersect with other forms of identity-based discrimination, creating additional obstacles for marginalised groups. Discriminatory laws and practices and organised resistance to change are among the forces maintaining these brakes.

Systemic barriers: aspects of a person's environment and particular context that limit norm change. These include: economic, environmental, security, service- and infrastructure-related factors.

Forces of change: Includes enacting and enforcing stronger legal protections against violations of gender-based rights; enabling school attendance and enhancing the quality of education; improving services and infrastructure to address gender gaps in access and social support; removing financial barriers to empowerment (e.g. enabling women to engage in work, education, politics); supporting social movements and engaging powerful and widespread institutions (e.g. religious bodies, parliaments and workplaces) to support and act on change; the spread of new norms through mass and social media; and the implementation of behaviour change programmes. These actions help drive norm change across all types of brakes, maintainers and barriers.

Norm maintainers: the processes that maintain and reproduce a norm. These include sanctions for deviation from what is perceived as normal, as well as rewards for compliance. Violence and ostracism (shunning) individuals act as widespread sanctions against change. Social rewards include enhanced social status and inclusion.

Source: The authors.

Data

This report draws on three main sources of data and evidence. First, data on attitudes and outcomes available from key longitudinal datasets (such as the World Values Survey and Demographic Health Surveys). Second, we use qualitative evidence from literature on gender norms and norm change. Finally, ALIGN’s in-depth research draws on qualitative evidence and observation from middle-aged and older women in Nepal and Uganda, which explores the factors that have driven changes in norms in their own lives and in their societies. Their experiences of changes in gender norms and of progress towards gender equality across generations illustrates women’s voices and illuminates some trends observed over the past 25 years and more.

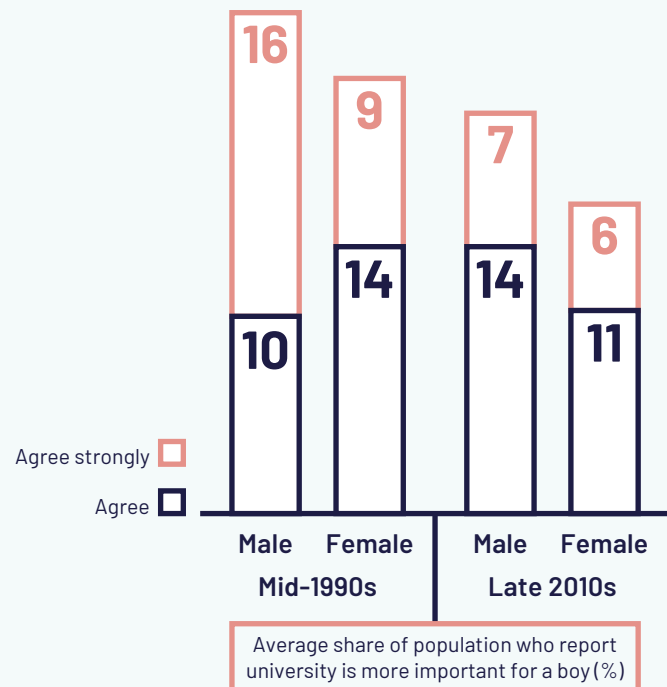
Almost all of the available longitudinal data probe attitudes or outcomes, rather than social expectations. Even so, they provide a valuable insight into whether and how norms are changing. We apply, where possible, an intersectional lens – though limitations in the data have made it difficult to disaggregate by different groups. This is an important gap, and a key area for future research.



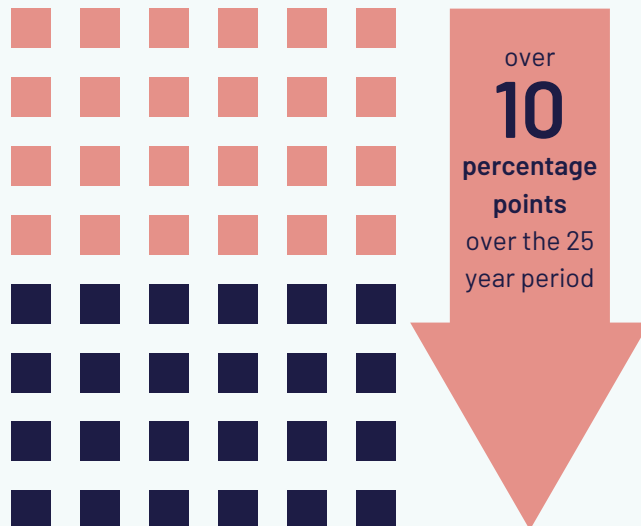
Evidence and learning from four key areas

Education

Attitudes towards boys' and girls' university education have become more equitable since the mid-1990s in 40 of the 48 countries for which there are data.

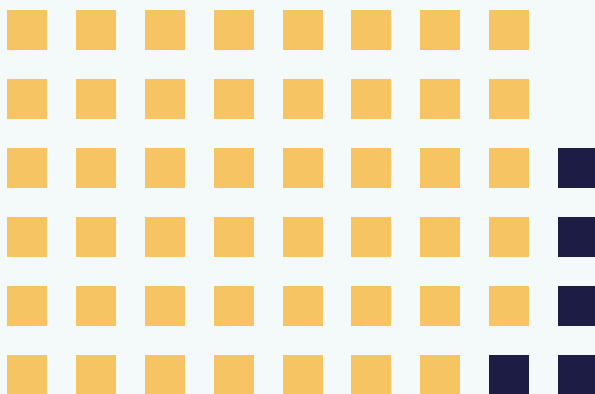


In **24 countries** the share of people who agreed that boys should have priority fell by



Sexual and reproductive health and rights

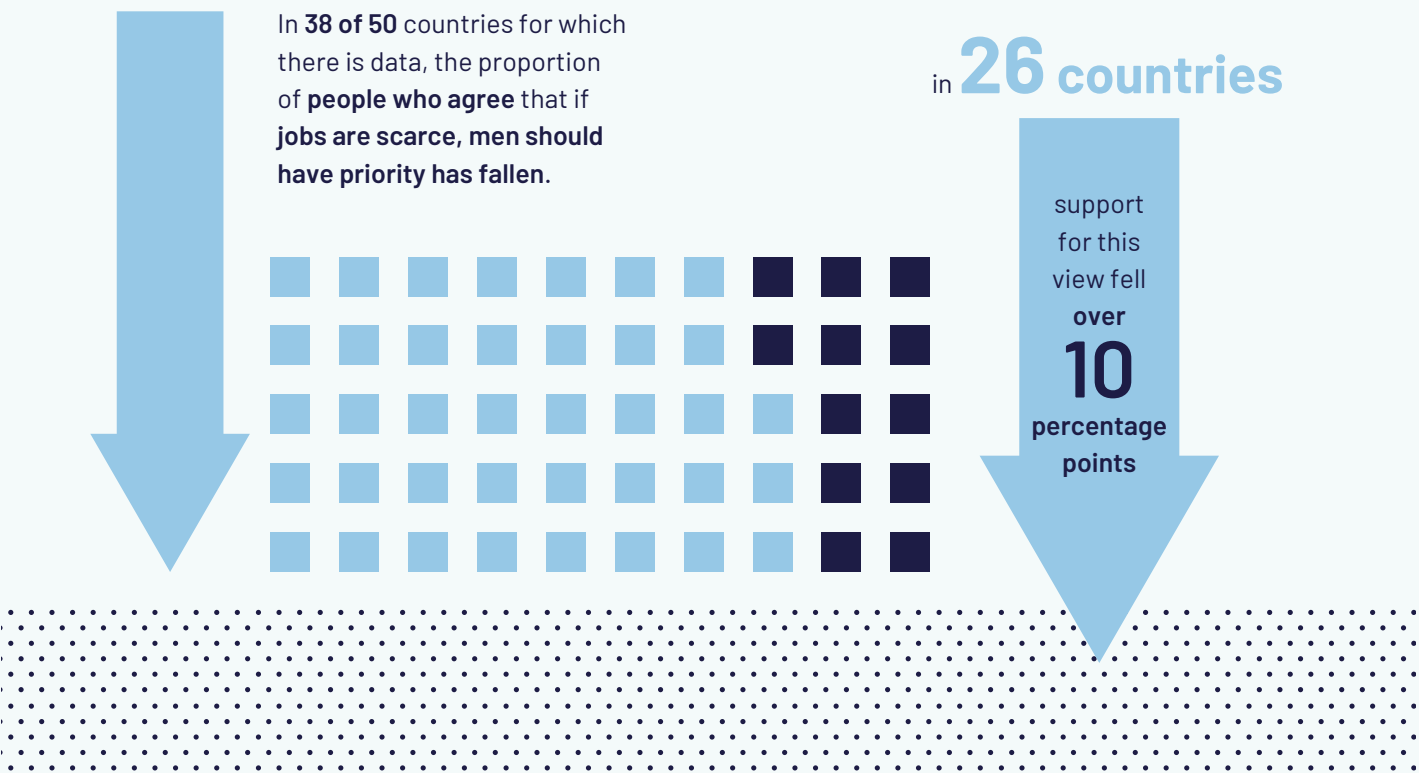
The proportion of **women who considered wife-beating ever to be acceptable** fell in 41 out of 46 countries.



in **10 countries**

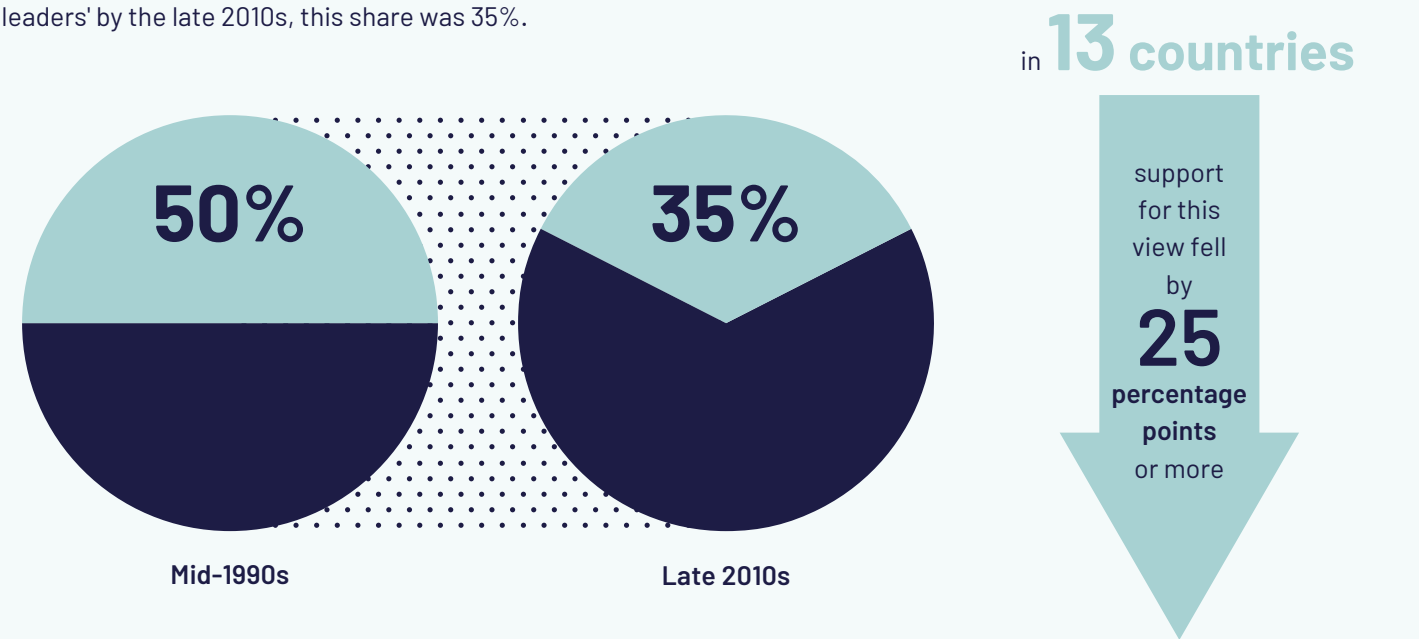
it fell by **25** percentage points or more

Paid and unpaid work



Political voice and representation

According to World Values Surveys in the mid-1990s, 50% of people surveyed globally agreed that 'men make better political leaders' by the late 2010s, this share was 35%.



a. Education

The proportion of children and young people with some secondary education – the level of education that is most likely to catalyse shifts in gender norms – has increased substantially over the past 25 years worldwide. This increase is one of the key factors that underpins many of the shifts in norms that are discussed in this report.

There is still some way to go, however. Although gender gaps in education have narrowed, girls in low-income countries and households – and particularly in rural areas – still account for most of the children who will never go to school at all. Adolescent boys, and especially those from poor households, are more likely than girls to drop out of school to work, meaning they miss out on education at a critical period in their lives when their attitudes towards gender equality are being shaped.

Worldwide, around 258 million children and young people (split fairly equally between girls and boys) were already missing out on education before the Covid-19 pandemic. The quality of education, particularly for children who face intersecting forms of marginalisation, continues to be low. This means that those who are in school are not always gaining the key skills and knowledge that would enhance their lives and help them to challenge discriminatory norms.

Education has a unique potential to drive shifts in gender norms. It can do this through, for example, exposure to new knowledge, ideas and people; by expanding horizons and raising aspirations; and by developing critical thinking and socio-emotional skills, such as communication and collaboration. Equipped with these tools, students can reflect, discuss and negotiate change in gender norms, in their families, communities and beyond. However, in low-income countries in particular, overcrowded classes and a lack of teachers who are skilled in learner-centred methods mean that students are missing opportunities to develop these critical skills. Furthermore, without an explicit emphasis on gender equality, discriminatory norms are easily reinforced through curricula, learning materials, and staff and student behaviour.

Key actions to foster education systems with the potential to speed up changes in gender norms include:

- continued investment in physical and financial access to education
- improving the quality of education, and giving more attention to a wider range of knowledge and skills
- institutionalising gender-equitable curricula, teaching and learning materials, and
- support for all schools to develop gender-equitable environments that are free from all forms of discrimination and violence.

b. Sexual and reproductive health and rights

Gender norms lie at the heart of most people's experiences of sexual and reproductive health and have shifted significantly in some areas and contexts. Norm changes since the Beijing Declaration can be seen in greater access to, and use of, contraception, as well as a falling global fertility rate: down from 2.9 to 2.4 births per woman between 1995 and 2018.

Major differences remain, however, across and within regions, suggesting that patriarchal norms still block progress in some places, and in particular areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The norms that shape trends in physical and sexual violence, for example, remain particularly 'sticky'. Of the 24 countries with available data, the prevalence of such violence has fallen in 18 since the mid-1990s, has stayed the same in 1, and has risen in 5.

While norms have shifted around adolescent sexual activity and around child, early and forced marriage, many gender-unequal attitudes have endured, restricting girls' sexuality and valuing their virginity more than that of boys. Norms around gender and sexual minorities such as the LGBTQI+ community are also shifting, but this picture is mixed. While the identities and experiences of LGBTQI+ people are increasingly normalised in some countries, violence and abuse persist elsewhere, based on discriminatory norms about the acceptability of sexual and gender diversity.

Trends in sexual and reproductive health are shaped by gendered norms and expectations about a woman's primary role: to be a wife and mother. Changing gender norms that affect contraceptive use and fertility rates are related to, in large part, system-wide changes that include the expansion of health services and the growing availability of contraception. However, as the report illustrates, access alone is not enough to end male control over a woman's body. That also requires norm change within households, families and across communities.

Mass media, the internet and popular culture – particularly soap operas that portray more gender-equal relationships and showcase the new lifestyles of working women – have helped to change peoples' hearts and minds at the community level. Again, however, this is not enough on its own. It must go hand-in-hand with increased access to education and economic opportunities at the system level.

Finally, legislation has helped to change the norms that shape women's sexual and reproductive health. Laws that legalise abortion, decriminalise homosexuality and criminalise child, early and forced marriage, or that protect all women from physical and sexual violence – especially at the hands of their partners – are paramount for ensuring that women can exercise their sexual and reproductive rights.

Key actions to shift discriminatory norms around sexual and reproductive health and rights include:

- continuing to expand access to quality health services and contraception, including through mobile technologies for women and girls in rural and remote communities
- providing comprehensive sexuality education for all, particularly curricula that address issues of dominant patriarchal gender relations and that empower girls and women
- facilitating mobilisation and social movements that aim to change norms at the individual and community level, as well as through legal systems, and
- leveraging mass media, popular culture and the ubiquity of the internet to foster more gender-egalitarian norms by portraying new behaviours for women and men.



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c. Paid and unpaid work

Contrary to common belief, paid work does not automatically empower women – particularly if working conditions are oppressive and exploitative. However, it often underpins greater autonomy for women and their greater influence in the family and in society, as well as widening their horizons more than unpaid work at home.

While global figures show little change in the proportion of women in the workforce over the past 25 years, data for some countries show notable increases, such as a 20 percentage-point increase in Colombia between 1985 and 2017. The data also show some substantial declines, as in China (a fall of 13 percentage points) and India (down by 10 percentage points). The global aggregate figures show little change in the proportion of time women and men spend on unpaid care and domestic work (which is much higher for women than men), but there is an overall trend towards greater gender equality in many countries.

Looking back over a longer period than this 25-year timeframe, it seems that increased education for girls, falling fertility rates and greater job opportunities have been critical in driving changes in women's labour force participation and in the gender norms that surround paid and unpaid work. Our analysis of World Values Survey data, for example, shows falling support for the view that men should have priority for jobs when jobs are scarce, and for the view that children of pre-school age suffer if their mothers are working.

Rising education and increased job opportunities combine with gender-egalitarian changes in laws and policies to create a virtuous cycle, leading to shifts in some of the gender norms around work. This cycle can, however, still be blocked by gendered norms that act as patriarchal brakes. These include norms around care responsibilities, the importance of maintaining respectability and chastity, and norms that tolerate gender-based violence – all of which can prevent women taking up paid work.

Existing evidence suggests that a combination of actions to shift hearts and minds, and to change systems, is needed to shift norms around work. For example, changing norms around gender-based violence in the workplace requires workplace education to help 'de-normalise' sexual harassment, effective workplace structures to report and respond to harassment, and laws that criminalise workplace gender-based violence. Better work conditions can also contribute to more supportive norms about women undertaking paid work outside the home.

Key actions to shift discriminatory gender norms around paid and unpaid work include:

- community-, school- and workplace-based education to shift norms around gender equality, equal care roles and gender-based violence
- the use of mass and social media to build momentum for norm change, particularly around equal care roles and to normalise women's engagement in paid work
- facilitating the development of good quality, affordable childcare services, and
- enabling the expansion of decent work opportunities.

d. Political voice and representation

Despite relatively significant gains on the legal rights of women to vote and stand for political office in the 20th and 21st centuries, discriminatory norms and society-wide barriers continue to hold back the representation and voice of women in politics. Gendered norms shape the ways in which male candidates are treated differently to women, and how men and women are held to different standards by the media, voters and other political actors when aspiring to power as well as when in power. These norms can also shape ongoing barriers to women's political participation, such as the violence and harassment that targets individuals who are seen to violate the established norms that govern an often-masculine political space.

There are, however, promising signs that once firmly held discriminatory gender norms in this area are eroding across cultures and contexts. Women's representation in the world's parliaments has, on average, doubled since 1997, rising from 12% to 25% – an advance that both reflects and drives changes in norms around women in positions of power. Women's active participation in protests and social movements has always been important and has also increased slightly overall since 1995, although the extent varies from one country to another. Despite limited data, qualitative evidence suggests that women's representation and engagement in local politics is also expanding.

According to the World Values Survey, 50% of people surveyed globally in the mid-1990s agreed that 'men make better political leaders' – a share that has since fallen to 35%. In some cases, a reduction in gender-discriminatory attitudes is linked to increases in women's representation in national political roles, but not always. Intersectional factors are critical in situations where only certain women are empowered or supported, while other women are held back by persistent barriers and vulnerabilities that are often based on entrenched and unequal gendered attitudes and behaviours. In other words, the representation and political activity of only specific classes or types of women are seen as 'normal' or acceptable in some settings.

Where norms around women's political representation and engagement have shifted, these shifts have been supported by wider gains in gender equality, including in women's education and economic inclusion, the influence of leaders and role models, and the collective agency of social and protest movements. Quota systems have sometimes played a role, though the form of quota that has the greatest impact on attitudes seems to vary, and not all quotas lead to lasting change. Certain patriarchal brakes and systemic barriers continue to slow or halt progress, including unequal care responsibilities, violence against women in politics, online harassment and gendered media coverage of female political candidates.

It is clear that gender norms in this area are changing, but the evidence explored in this report suggests that more needs to be done to sustain and accelerate this change. Shifting attitudes have both followed and prompted some changes in representation, but the pace of change is slow.

Key actions to shift discriminatory norms in women's political voice and representation include:

- mentoring and civic education initiatives for women and girls who aspire to political roles and activism
- skills training and capacity building activities for women in political roles
- targeted political violence prevention and protection measures, alongside gender sensitisation for actors engaging with and covering politics, and
- support for women's groups and movements to enable women's collective social and community voice and action.



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Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the many challenges identified in this report, there is cause for optimism. Gender norms can and do change, and far more is known now than ever before about what drives that change. However, large knowledge gaps and major barriers to action continue to impede efforts to achieve the human rights and gender equality aspirations and commitments laid out in Beijing in 1995.

One key message of this report is that for norm change to be sustainable it must capture the hearts and minds of individuals and transform society as a whole. In other words, it is not only personal social expectations, attitudes and behaviour that must shift, but also the ways in which these are represented and enforced in wider society, across all the formal and informal rules and laws and practices that govern the way human beings behave.

Changing hearts and minds means supporting behaviour change among individuals, in communities and society. Therefore, civic action and community dialogue, mentoring and training schemes need to work alongside the efforts of, for example, social movements and mass media to influence social norms, attitudes and behaviours.



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Changing society means engaging with institutions. Individuals create and maintain institutions and re-enact within them many of the same norms that shape their personal lives. Promoting gender-equitable norms across sectors and institutional levels includes, for example, enacting and enforcing stronger legal protections against violations of gender-based rights; improving services and infrastructure to address gender gaps in access and social support; removing financial barriers to empowerment (such as enabling school attendance); and engaging powerful and widespread institutions, such as religious bodies, parliaments and workplaces, to support and act on change.

This report identifies a general pattern of progress towards gender equality, starting with educational achievement, moving on to greater control over fertility, participation in the labour force, and finding political voice. Each shift has required gender norm change. However, progress in the short term is not linear, and even when progress towards gender equality seems to be on track, it can be halted or reversed. The report makes three important observations about the nature of norm change:

- Shifts in gender norms often take a long time to develop and progress often stalls and plateaus before moving on. Our expectations regarding the speed of change must be realistic;
- Changes in gender norms often take place at unequal speeds, with the most disadvantaged often left far behind. Attention to issues of intersectionality are vital to progress change;
- Progress often seems to stall, repeatedly, at the very point when women are poised to achieve significant change or power. Persistence is essential.

Taking these patterns, and the evidence of progress discussed in this report into account, we note reasons to be hopeful. It is reasonable to be optimistic, for example, about the pace and scale of change, given the ever-widening interest in norms; the evidence for work at scale, especially in education; promising new norm changing media channels; and suggestions that success breeds success (with shifts in one norm area fuelling shifts in others). Taken together, these are valid reasons to believe that change can gather momentum. In relation to inclusion, however, it is remarkable how rarely the available data aim to understand intersectionality. We regard this as a critical flaw in analysis and action. If only some people or groups benefit from norm change, societies cannot progress. Yet a new focus on intersectionality is emerging and, with sufficient support, could lead to important change.

Regarding the depth of change, we note that, all too often, changes are superficial. For example, assertions by male politicians about power-sharing with women politicians are often accompanied by a range of contradictory behaviours such as verbal abuse, controlling behaviour, talking over and harassing women, not listening to them, and criticising their physical appearance. If changes are superficial, the potential for stalling, backsliding and reversals is obvious. However, given the enhanced focus on and interest in norm change, we expect more linked-up efforts around meaningful change in individual attitudes and behaviour, with concurrent changes in social expectations and in institutions.

Finally, if a phenomenon is not named it can remain unseen. If it is not shown in the data, it remains misunderstood. This applies to understanding patriarchy, social and gender norms, and to intersectionality, all of which are often invisible, complex and under-documented. But the naming of patriarchy and norms is increasingly commonplace. Spreading this language and understanding to an ever-widening geographical and sectoral community of policy and practice will, in time, produce results.

The challenge we face is to change millennia-long structures of power. As Beard asserts, *‘when it comes to silencing women, western culture has had thousands of years of practice’* (2017: xi). And it is not just in western culture – multiple cultures endure long-standing discriminatory patriarchies. Given a timeframe of discrimination that goes back so far, the changes we are seeing within a few generations – and sometimes even within one generation – are relatively swift. As one Nepali professor, who took part in the ALIGN research, said:

‘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.’ (Harper et al., 2020: 19).

This report shows that the baton is being passed on from one activist, one woman, one educator, one progressive leader, and one generation, to another. And as the baton passes forward, gender norms change.

References

For full references, see main report: www.alignplatform.org/gender-power-progress



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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality.

It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through all its work ALIGN seeks to promote gender justice.

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