

MODULE 4:

Education and norm change – key pathways

By Rachel Marcus

Key messages

- Education – particularly secondary schooling – is strongly associated with shifts to more equitable gender norms. These can include greater overall support for gender equality, reduced support for gender-based violence (among both women and men), and increased decision-making power among educated women.
- These shifts take place through exposure to new knowledge and ideas and wider social networks, as well as the development of socio-emotional skills, which together can help young people develop the agency to challenge norms they disagree with.
- Similarly, educational qualifications make it easier to find better-paid work, and this, in turn, gives people – particularly women – more space to reject gender norms they find restrictive or discriminatory.
- These processes are not automatic despite strong evidence linking education with more equitable gender norms. They are shaped by the nature of the education system, and the wider economic, cultural and political environment, which can enable or limit opportunities for change to take root, and/or mobilise active opposition to gender norm change.
- Individual students who adopt new norms or advocate for change within their family or community may face sanctions, including increased control or supervision (particularly for girls), gossip, ostracism or violence.

Introduction

1
Access

2
Biased norms

3
Outcomes

4
Pathways

5
Transformative

6
Masculinities

7
Early childhood

8
LGBTQI+

About this module

Focusing on school environments, this short module unpacks the different ways in which education can nurture more equitable gender norms, providing an overview of pathways to change. These can take place even in challenging educational, cultural, political and economic contexts, but are more likely to do so where enabling factors are present.

This module outlines the potential for education to promote gender-equitable norms and values. It should be read alongside [Module 5](#), which presents approaches – from policy and system levels through to school and community levels – that can help to reinforce the positive potential of education in this area.

Shifts to more equitable gender norms are more likely to take place in education systems that emphasise the development of socio-emotional skills and that have explicit commitments to gender equality.

Introduction

Education has long been recognised as a key pathway to liberation and, in the context of this guide, specifically to women’s empowerment. Studies continue to confirm this relationship, despite some of the challenges outlined in previous modules. A systematic review of 20 studies from around the world of the relationship between education and gender attitudes found that, in almost all cases, greater levels of education were associated with more equitable attitudes ([Hossain and Islam, 2024](#)). This is consistent with a wide range of studies that focus on *attitudes* to different aspects of gender equality (as a proxy for norm change). However, shifts in attitudes do not guarantee similar shifts in behaviour, as shown in a study from China by [Du et al. \(2020\)](#) (see Table 4.1 for summary examples).

Table 4.1: Selected studies examining the relationship between education and gender equality attitudes

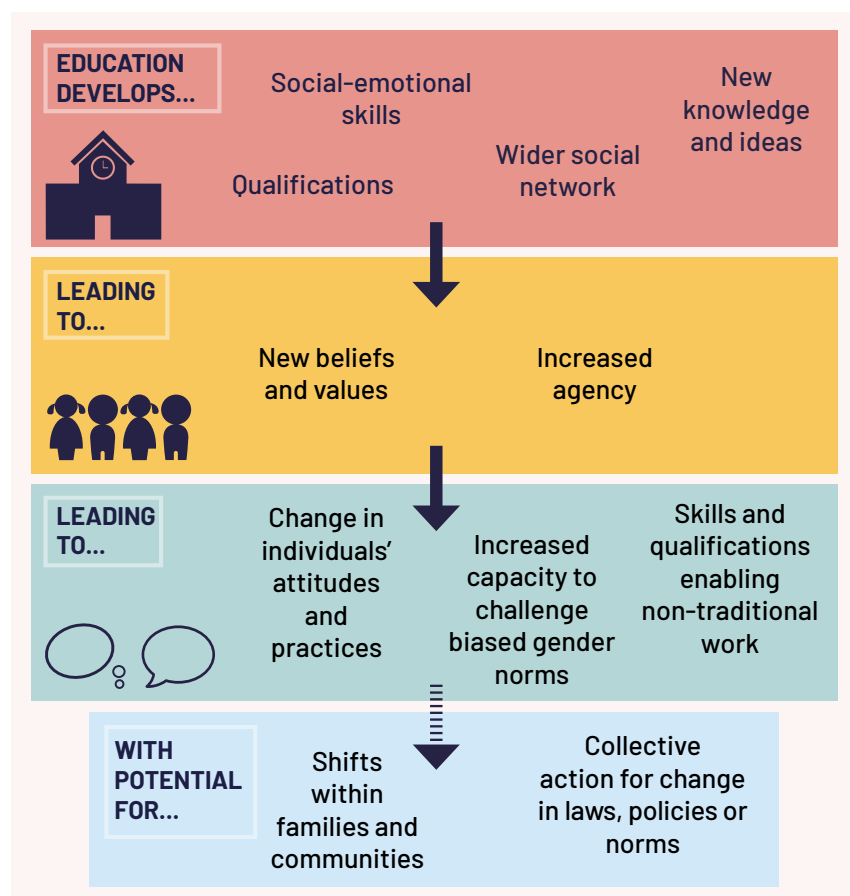
Country/ies and study	Data source	Findings
12 countries in Middle East and North Africa: Auletto et al. (2017)	Arab Barometer data collected between 2006 and 2024	Men and women with a high school diploma were more likely to support women working outside the home than those without. In 7 of the 12 countries, people with high school diplomas were more likely to approve of women attending university.
5 African countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Zimbabwe): Kyoore and Sulemana (2019)	World Values Survey, Wave 6 (2010–2014)	The higher the level of education acquired, the more supportive an individual’s attitudes were toward gender equality.

Country/ies and study	Data source	Findings
China: Du et al. (2020)	China General Social Survey, collected between 2010 and 2015	The extension of compulsory education was associated with more gender-equitable attitudes, particularly among women and in urban areas. The impact on behaviour, however, was much lower than the impact on attitudes.
Nepal: Adhikari (2023)	Nepal Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS) from 1996 to 2022	Education was associated with a reduced preference for sons, particularly in the earlier study years; son preference declined among all groups; some evidence of a continued son preference norm remained by 2022 for women of all levels of education.
United States: Yu and Duan (2021)	National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979, Children and Young Adults Dataset (NLSY79-CYA)	Education was found to shift norms on issues related to women's economic opportunities but not on dating practices and boy-girl interactions.

Pathways to shifts in gender norms through education

How do educational processes contribute to these widely observed shifts? Various aspects of education contribute to the development of knowledge, skills and agency that, in turn, underpin shifts in gender norms. These pathways to shifts in gender norms reinforce each other and are summarised in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: How education can lead to shifts in gender norms



Source: Author

Shifts to more equitable gender norms are more likely to take place in education systems that emphasise the development of socio-emotional skills and that have explicit commitments to gender equality, as discussed in more detail in [Module 5](#). Supportive political and economic contexts also increase the likelihood of education catalysing shifts in norms. But as the evidence in Table 4.1 implies, education can underpin shifts in norms even without this explicit emphasis, and in challenging political and economic contexts. In such contexts, individual inspiring teachers can play a crucial role in driving change. It is also important to recognise that the nature and extent of change through education may differ for children from different social and cultural backgrounds (e.g. by class, religion, ethnicity, etc.).

On a spectrum from the most immediate influences to those that are less direct, the pathways to shifts in gender norms through education include four key routes, as follows:

First, exposure to new knowledge and ideas. New knowledge and ideas that students encounter through the curriculum can challenge their ideas about gender differences, roles and stereotypes. While subjects such as life skills or relationships education, civics and social studies are more likely to include content on gender equality, students may also find that knowledge challenges norms through science, language and literacy, history or other subjects (see [Module 5](#) for more detail on gender-transformative curricula).

Students are exposed to new ideas not only through the curriculum or learning materials, but also through contact with peers from different backgrounds (see below). As discussed in [Module 2](#), while the values and behaviour of peers and teachers can reinforce discriminatory norms, they can also underpin shifts to embrace equality. By exposing students to wider horizons, education can also expand their aspirations and increase their desire for a future that does not necessarily conform with prevailing norms.

Second, enhanced socio-emotional skills. Education that helps children to develop strong socio-emotional skills (curiosity, critical thinking, collaboration, etc.) can enable them to articulate their ideas and interests, and to pursue their goals individually or collectively, despite norm-related and other obstacles ([Nuamah, 2019](#)). Critical thinking skills can help students understand and formulate their own views on gender and other biases in their society, while strengthening their communication skills can help them to articulate and defend pro-equality views.

These shifts are particularly likely when there is a scaffolded, learner-centred process that helps students understand gender biases and inequalities in their society and creates a safe and supportive climate for such understanding ([Bendraou and Sakale, 2024](#)). [Module 5](#) discusses such processes and critical accompanying elements in more detail. These include having teachers who are trained in learner-centred and gender-responsive pedagogies, and who have space to examine their own beliefs and biases, as well as effective safeguarding procedures, recognising that challenging gender norms can expose students to violence.



By exposing students to wider horizons, education can also expand their aspirations and increase their desire for a future that does not necessarily conform with prevailing norms.

Third, wider social networks. Through education, students also develop more extensive social networks beyond their families and immediate neighbourhoods. Exposure to peers from varied ethnic, religious or other social backgrounds can help students understand that gender roles and norms vary and can, therefore, be challenged ([Querejeta, 2022](#)). Exposure to adult role models, including teachers, former students and community figures who visit schools, can help to shape children's sense of possibilities ([Ciampi et al., 2024](#); [Kipchumba et al., 2024](#)). Some studies have found that co-education can help to dismantle gender stereotypes ([Evans, 2014](#); [Giani and Krakowski, 2026](#)). This exposure to wider social networks can influence norms in three main ways:

- It can increase an individual student's sense of new possibilities and aspirations to do things differently. For example, girls may stay in school in contexts where they are expected to drop out and get married, or pursue studies or careers in non-traditional fields.
- Students may bring new ideas home to their families – although whether or how far these are adopted depends on a family's openness to specific new ideas and practices. This is, in turn, is influenced by their perceptions of prevailing norms in the wider community and the consequence of non-compliance.
- It may inspire collective action where young people – often including school students in alliance with other youth movements – mobilise to change norms, laws and values ([Browne et al., 2025](#)).

Fourth, obtaining qualifications that enhance access to decent work. While it is a less direct route to norm change, obtaining school-leaving certificates or equivalent qualifications can increase young people's opportunities to enter the labour market and find relatively desirable and well-paid jobs. An increase in the number of women in the workforce can, in turn, contribute to shifts in norms about expected life paths for girls and catalyse wider changes in society ([Jensen, 2012](#); [Iregui-Bohórquez et al., 2020](#)). However, the potential of this pathway can be limited by a lack of jobs and by specific norms about care responsibilities, such as those that curtail women's freedom to work outside the home if married or if they have young children ([Assaad et al., 2018](#); [Deshpande and Singh, 2021](#)).



An increase in the number of women in the workforce can, in turn, contribute to shifts in norms about expected life paths for girls and catalyse wider changes in society.

Are there thresholds for norm change?

A growing body of evidence suggests that – in most contexts – it is largely secondary or higher education that leads to shifts in gender norms. This may reflect the longer exposure to new ideas and social networks at this level, as well as more opportunities to develop new socio-emotional skills and the greater likelihood of obtaining qualifications that increase labour market possibilities. Box 4.1 summarises some key recent studies.

Box 4.1: Thresholds for the impact of education on gender norms

Most evidence suggests that while primary education plays a critical role in developing foundational skills, including socio-emotional skills, it is largely secondary education that contributes to shifts in gender equality attitudes, practices and – ultimately – norms.

- In a study of 14 European countries, [Rivera-Garrido \(2022\)](#) found that each additional year of full-time education reduced the probability of agreeing with the statement ‘men should have more right to a job than a woman’ by more than 11 percentage points. It also reduced the probability of agreeing with the statement ‘a woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family’ by 13 percentage points for women and 9 percentage points for men.
- Using Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data from 70 countries, [Alves \(2026\)](#) found that people were less likely to support wife-beating as their level of education increased from primary through to higher education.
- Also drawing on DHS data, [Le and Nguyen \(2020\)](#) found that a woman with a college degree was 16 percentage points more likely to have higher intra-household decision-making authority and less friction in relationships, and, therefore, a lower risk of intimate partner violence than a woman with no formal education. Each additional year of education was associated with increased decision-making power for women.
- In Malawi, [Triulzi et al. \(2024\)](#) found that men with secondary or higher education had notably more gender-equitable attitudes than those with primary or no education.

This evidence is supported by earlier studies that identified around 10 years of education as a threshold for women’s economic and social empowerment in Pakistan and India ([Aslam, 2013](#)). As labour markets change, the thresholds for the effects of empowerment are also likely to shift – particularly through access to paid work.

Useful resources

[Auletto et al. \(2017\)](#) - *Educational attainment and egalitarian attitudes toward women in the MENA region: Insights from the Arab Barometer* shows that increased educational attainment is associated with greater support for women's employment and women's participation in post-secondary education.

[Deole and Zeydanli \(2021\)](#) - *Does education predict gender role attitudes? Evidence from European datasets* finds that increased school education is associated with more supportive attitudes to gender equality, drawing on data from 15 countries.

[Hossain and Islam \(2024\)](#) - *A systematic literature review on the relationship between education and gender ideology* is a useful compendium of resources. However, it uses gender ideology in its social scientific sense, not as used by some conservative campaigners.

[Marcus \(2020\)](#) - *Education and gender norms: the bedrock of change*, a chapter from Harper et al. (2020), *Gender, power and progress: how norms change*, outlines how education drives progress towards more equal gender norms, and how its potential to do so can be strengthened.

[Tuki \(2025\)](#) - *Examining the effect of gender, education and religion on attitudes toward gender equality in Nigeria* shows that education increases support for gender equality, and outlines how location, religion and gender affect gender equality attitudes.