



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

## Social norms and women's economic empowerment

Social and gender norms are a critical underlying factors in determining whether a woman can work, what kind of work she can do, and what responsibilities she has aside from paid work. Indeed, they may be the most influential, and unspoken barriers to women's economic empowerment. While there is little evidence on what works, policies and programs that facilitate norm change can have significant long-term impacts on gender equality.

### WHAT'S AT STAKE?

**S**ocial norms play a central role for women's economic empowerment. Studies from the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program have highlighted how they constrain women's economic opportunities. They differ by region and culture, but across the world, social norms often restrict women's ability to enter the labour market, their access to many occupations, and physical mobility. Moreover, women are seen as primarily responsible for unpaid care work, and this norm reduces women's ability to explore other options.

### FINDINGS

- Hard to change norms include those regarding 'suitability' of jobs, norms limiting women's mobility and access to public spaces, and about gender divisions of labour and care work.
- In some cases, there are outright prohibitions on women engaging in certain kinds of work, in others, norms are enforced via gossip or intimidation.
- Fear of sexual and gender-based violence is a significant constraint on women's economic activity.
- There is limited evidence of some shift towards more gender equitable attitudes as national incomes increase.

### KNOWLEDGE GAPS AND POLICY INSIGHTS

- Better data, and more in-depth policy-oriented research are clear priorities to understand the role of social norms.
- Incentives can be effective to facilitate behaviour change, but whether that translates to norm change is unclear. Similarly, the links between laws and social norms need be better understood.
- There are examples of norm change through the formation of women's groups or access to daycare services for example, and these need to be understood better to inform programming.

While the importance of social norms is generally recognized, few studies shed a clear light on why they are so persistent. Programs for women's economic empowerment generally pay only scant attention to social norms, and practitioners are often wary of the prospect of changing social norms. This brief therefore highlights the lessons that have been learned about social norms in the GrOW program, to inform programming on women's economic empowerment.

## RESEARCH APPROACH AND DEFINITIONS

GrOW funded 14 research projects in over 50 low-income countries. These studies did not set out specifically to examine issues related to norms, but they generated a body of evidence about the ways that social and gender norms affect women's economic opportunities in different contexts. This was synthesised in a paper by Rachel Marcus of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

Social norms are collective definitions of socially approved conduct, unstated rules or ideals. Such norms are part of both formal and informal institutions, and are produced and reproduced through social interaction. They are often implicit and invisible, rather than clearly articulated. However, norms are only one of the factors influencing actions, and publicly expressed norms and private behaviour can be disconnected; people's behaviour and actions may at times appear to contradict prevailing norms.

Gender norms are the social norms that express the expected behavior of people of a particular gender. They can reinforce gender-based inequalities across economic, social and political life. Gender norms are context-dependent, and often interact with norms relating to other forms of social differentiation, such as class, race and caste. Descriptive norms are those that are followed by the majority of people in a given community, and that they believe others follow.

## KEY FINDINGS

GrOW studies highlight persistent social and gender norms that significantly impact gender equality. The majority of the evidence from GrOW focused on the constraining impact of norms. Macro-level quantitative studies analysed gendered patterns of economic activity and social change, and large-scale influences on these patterns. They show patterns of women's economic activity and changes, from which norms can be inferred. A few studies also examined linkages between economic trends and changing attitudes (notably, intimate partner violence), which can be understood as proxies for norms.

Norms about education appear to have changed considerably in many contexts, which points to a supportive policy environment and relatively malleable norms,

but norms related to the labour market have changed significantly less.

### Norms about women working outside the household

The GrOW studies found that norms about whether or not women should work outside the home are both important and complex. They seem fixed in some cases, where ideas of respectability and mobility limitations keep women in the home. They are flexible in others, including circumstances of high poverty where extra income is needed. Norms limiting women to the home are particularly important in South Asia, but matter in all contexts.

Norms idealising women's roles as homemakers are strong, but in practice, economic pressures can override this, with low income women commonly working out of distress. Norms for highly-educated women, with better job opportunities are often more supportive of women working. Young women with secondary education are, in some contexts, increasingly motivated to find work outside the home, even where this contravenes prevailing norms and the views of the older generation.

Women in the middle of the income and education spectrums are more likely to stay in the home as it is considered more respectful and reflects better on her husband. These norms are expressed more strongly in South Asia than in Sub-Saharan Africa.

GrOW research also highlights that technological and economic changes can impact gender norms. The research on trade liberalisation shows that women do enter into paid labour and take up new opportunities when they arise. On the other hand, a study from Bangladesh suggests that women working in factories is not uniformly accepted and can be a source of shame for families.

### Norms about mobility and respectability

Norms about whether women should work are strongly bound up with cultural values about decorum and respectability. In South Asia in particular, this generally implied a preference for women working from home, in prestigious female-dominated activities such as tutoring, or not engaging in paid work. Barriers identified include fear of gossip and reputational risks associated with going out alone, as well as for their daughters' reputation and safety. In Central and East Africa, women's involvement in some forms of mining was felt to contravene norms related to contact between men and women, and of decorum and appropriate dress.

Norms restricting women's mobility emerged as a significant constraint to economic activity. These norms came through most strongly from the studies in South Asia, where women felt unsafe using public transportation in urban areas in Pakistan, and women in rural areas were restricted to the confines of their village, making it difficult to access opportunities like training.

## Norms about household work and marriage

Norms assigning the majority of unpaid household work and child care to women emerged as a major direct constraint on women's paid economic activity, as well as affecting their mobility. GrOW studies found that norms assigning unpaid care to women were stickier in South Asia than in Sub-Saharan Africa, but are important everywhere.

GrOW research shows that norms around marriage also matter for economic opportunities. Child marriage and child labour are associated with lower levels of education and lower likelihood of high quality work. Norms that favour marriage in adolescence or as a child can have negative implications for women's subsequent economic trajectories, as well as the well-documented adverse effects on health, vulnerability to violence and lack of voice.

## Jobs deemed suitable for women

Labour markets are, and continue to be strongly segregated, with women concentrating in specific jobs and sectors. GrOW studies including in the mining sector show the role that norms play in confining women to specific, often less-rewarding activities. The GrOW studies also highlight women's unequal access to assets as contributing to job segregation as they were typically concentrated in self-employment activities that could be undertaken with limited capital.

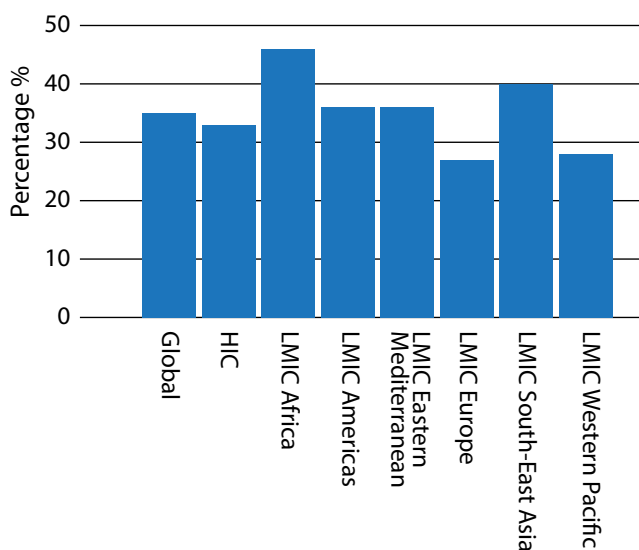
For example, in a study on the school to work transition across six countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, researchers found that even as education levels rise among women, this has not translated into the number of white-collar jobs available to women. The women who do achieve these roles often have higher literacy levels than their male colleagues, indicating perhaps that they require more skills or qualifications for the same role.

In some cases, there are outright prohibitions on women engaging in certain kinds of work. In others, norms define which activities are appropriate for women and men, and these were enforced via gossip or intimidation. The research showed that such norms were closely tied in with norms about maintaining propriety, mobility, contact between unrelated men and women, and norms about responsibilities for domestic care work. There is also a persistent attitude that in an environment where jobs are scarce, men should be prioritized for work opportunities.

## Sexual and gender-based violence

Fear of sexual and gender-based violence emerged as a significant constraint on women's economic activity. Violence and harassment at home, on transit and in workplaces are common, indicating that it is a descriptive norm in some of the research contexts. Violence against women is a global issue, and no region is immune. The following graph shows the prevalence of intimate partner violence and/or non-partner sexual violence around the world, and it is particularly high in Africa and Asia.

## Prevalence of GBV worldwide



LMIC = Low-middle-income countries

HIC = High income countries

Source: WHO, 2010

Quantitative studies using DHS data showed that increased labour force activity is associated with increased intimate partner violence in some contexts, for example in Latin America and East Africa and for women working in agriculture, but not in others.

However, GrOW research did not explicitly probe the norms that uphold such behaviour, and this is a key research priority. Also, whether intimate partner violence is rising in response to women's increased labour force participation, and attempts to change gender norms needs further research.

## How norms are maintained

GrOW research did not focus on understanding how gender norms work, but the studies do shed light on how deeply embedded they are, and are reinforced by both men and women. For example, the research showed that norms regarding child marriage were reinforced within girls' peer groups. The research on the care economy showed how community members commented on working women not taking adequate care of their children or home. And the norms about the kind of jobs women can undertake in mining were enforced by gossip and intimidation as well as outright prohibitions.

## Are norms changing?

The macro studies under GrOW showed some shift towards more gender equitable attitudes as national incomes increase, along with stickiness of norms about marriage and childbearing. Micro studies, e.g. in Sri Lanka and Central and East Africa where women went out to work despite social pressure, showed clear cases where women defied existing restrictive norms. But whether cases of defying norms lead to long term norm change is a different story.

In Central and East Africa, women are severely underrepresented in mining associations and in higher paying jobs on mining sites. In some cases, they were actively barred from sites at certain times or depending on factors like pregnancy. However, some women were breaking into the higher paying mining functions with support from male peers, and there were reports of all female mining teams. Whether this leads to an increase in the number of women profiting from mining depends on improving the policy and governance structures to be more inclusive.

In Sri Lanka, there are many examples of women who need to go out to work after the war because they lost the male head of the household. But they face considerable challenges, and continue to be hindered by norms about the suitability of jobs, mobility and sexual harassment.

## POLICY INSIGHTS

**G**ROW highlighted examples of programs that can effectively change norms. Mahila Samakhya, a broad-based women's empowerment programme based on women's discussion groups and collectives showed positive impacts on discriminatory gender norms (and women's voice and self-efficacy), in contexts of entrenched inequalities in rural India. The GrOW childcare studies found that if good quality day care is available, families are generally willing to make use of it, indicating that norms about home-based family care are flexible.

Cash and in-kind incentives aimed at preventing early marriage and increasing women's and girls' levels of education and training may help create new norms about appropriate age of marriage. In the program offering incentives tied to delaying marriage for girls, Kishoree Kontha did not experience a sudden surge of marriage as soon as girls reached age 18. But incentives operate in a given context and may be most effective when they facilitate economic activity that can be accommodated within prevailing normative frameworks, instead of outright challenging them.

## Knowledge gaps and priorities

Social norms often remain the unexplained factor in research and policies on women's economic empowerment. They clearly matter, but we know very little about how they are maintained, how they change, why they change in one dimension and not others, and risks of backlash. Better data, and more in-depth research are clear priorities. Specific areas for further work include:

- understanding the way norms change, and how to ensure change is sustainable;
- the role of institutions, asset ownership and laws that facilitate women's economic empowerment in supporting norm change;
- men's attitudes, masculinity, and the relationship between intimate partner violence and women's economic empowerment;
- the role of conflicts and post-conflict dynamics in changing and maintaining norms.

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*The synthesis was prepared by Gillian Dowie and Arjan de Haan, based on findings from an evidence review written by Rachel Marcus of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) which looked at ways that social and gender norms affect women's economic opportunities in different contexts.*

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