Turning Promises into Progress:

Gender equality and rights for women and girls - lessons learnt and actions needed

Introduction

2015 represents an important moment for gender equality and women's and girls' rights. It is twenty years since the landmark Beijing Conference on Women and fifteen years since the ground-breaking United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security was adopted. In light of these key milestones and as the post-2015 development framework is agreed and implemented, three UK Networks – the Gender and Development Network (GADN), Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), and the Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights Network UK - have come together to assess progress and make recommendations for turning the promises made into progress.

Over the last two decades there have been many new commitments and increasing political rhetoric on gender equality and the realisation of rights for women and girls, but limited real progress in achieving either. In our report, *Turning Promises into Progress*, we conclude that this is, in part, because the underlying causes of gender equality have not been addressed and there was insufficient political will to make the changes needed on the ground.

Every woman and girl experiences discrimination differently, and resources should be particularly focused on those facing multiple discriminations such as on the basis of their income, sexuality, ethnic group or disability. But there are also shared realities, universal themes and common lessons. Most striking is the need to tackling the underlying barriers that perpetuate gender equality and prevent transformative change. Unequal power relations between genders are a fundamental way in which societies are organised; yet failure to recognise these social relationships has led women and girls to be labelled as a 'vulnerable group' to be protected. In this way, the status quo remains unchanged and discriminatory social norms and unjust social and economic structures continue to hinder progress.

Part two of the report looks at progress and challenges across eight areas relevant to gender equality: women, peace and security; violence against women and girls; sexual and reproductive health and rights; political participation and influence; education; women's economic equality; unpaid care and social norms. While spotlighting specific issues, it is also important to underline the interconnectedness of gender inequality and

recognise the underlying causes that impact across issue areas and span political, social, economic, cultural and environmental spheres. The recommendations throughout the report are therefore inter-linked and mutually reinforcing. While the actions are intended to be relevant for all women and girls, specific attention must be given those who are the most marginalised, and who face multiple discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, disability and marital status. Recommendations made are aimed at the broader international community with relevance primarily to official international institutions and governments but also to civil society organisations (CSOs) and the private sector. This document is an extract from the report – the issue section on 'Women, Peace and Security'. For the full report please visit www.gadnetwork.org/turning-promises-into-progress or www.gaps-uk.org.uk.

Part two: Section 8

8. Social Norms

"You must allow the community to decide for themselves rather than condemning…It [FGM] doesn't stop when they [the community] superficially raise their hands, or when religious leaders say 'we declare it will stop'…It has to come from inside the community. It has to be discussed over and over again, in the African tradition. That's how change comes."
Bogaletch Gebre, Co-founder of KMG-Ethiopia[1]

8.1 The Issues

Throughout Part two of this report, the influence of discriminatory social norms - widely shared beliefs and practices often codified in formal and informal laws - is evident in every aspect of women's and girls' lives. Low priority in education; child and early forced marriage; occupational segregation; exclusion from household, community, national and international decision making; responsibility for unpaid care work, and the widespread acceptance of Violence against women and girls (VAWG) are all ways in which discriminatory social norms adversely impact on women's and girls' choices and chances.[2]

> **'Social norms** are the informal and formal laws, beliefs and practices that help to determine collective understanding of what are acceptable attitudes and behaviours. As such, they can either drive processes of social change or act as brakes and barriers to such processes'[3]
>
> Failure to comply with dominant norms can trigger strong social sanctions, such as ridiculing, ostracising or even violence, or less visible punishments such as exclusion from employment opportunities or marriage. People also self-regulate their own behaviour in order to conform to what they think is expected of them by others.[4]

All societies have strong gender norms that describe how women and men are expected to behave and what it means to be a woman or man.[5] Where these are discriminatory, they have a profound impact in perpetuating gender inequality and are a major reason why more progress has not been made in the last two decades. Discriminatory social norms can result in gender-biased legislation, laws not being enforced, programme interventions failing and continuing discrimination against women and girls.[6] The practice of dowry in India, for example, is now illegal but is so embedded in local custom that families continue to comply.[7] Religion often underpins the customs and traditions that limit the rights of women and girls, as evidenced by research on discriminatory social norms in relation to VAWG in Bangladesh, Egypt and Pakistan.[8]

It will simply not be possible to tackle the structural barriers to gender equality unless deeply entrenched social norms are transformed.

8.2   What's happened in the last 20 years?

Changes in some areas

Greater international attention and specific targeting of community attitudes and behaviour has led to a gradual change in discriminatory social norms in some areas. For example, there has been a gradual shift in attitudes and behaviour on girls' education,[9] and some evidence of a shift towards expecting girls to marry later and have fewer children.[10]

Entrenched norms in others

However, many more social norms have remained consistent over the last two decades. Almost everywhere men are still seen as the primary income earners or 'breadwinners,' and the main decision makers.[11] Meanwhile, women are expected to be obedient and caring[12] and to do the majority of unpaid care work and household duties[13] (see Part two: Section 7 on Care). Discriminatory norms around 'women's work' continue to entrench occupational segregation in the workplace, even when new employment opportunities arise, leading to the concentration of women in low paid and vulnerable employment.[14] Significantly, the expectation that women will work on family land without payment, access to profits, property ownership or inheritance rights continues in many countries.[15]

Menstruation is a taboo subject in many societies, creating stigma and negative connotations for women which can affect their self-esteem and ability to participate in public life. Lack of facilities for menstrual hygiene management is one reason why adolescent girls do not attend school. Tackling the social norms around menstrual hygiene can have positive effects, and lead to improvements in the provision of sanitary facilities.[16]

Social norms also act as a barrier to eliminating VAWG (see Part two: Section 2 on VAWG). There is growing evidence that beliefs around male authority and a man's

right to sex, internalised by men and enforced through peer pressure and other social institutions such as the media or sporting clubs, increase the likelihood that individual men will engage in sexual violence.[17] Research has found that both partner violence and non-partner rape are fundamentally related to unequal gender norms, power inequalities and dominant ideals of manhood that support violence and control over women.[18]

Gender norms and the media

Global communications have an extensive and increasing impact on what is considered acceptable in relation to notions of femininity and masculinity. Press coverage and advertising contributes to discriminatory social norms when it does not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse experiences and skills, reinforces gender stereotypes or contains violent or degrading images.[19] Moreover new communication technologies can facilitate direct threats, harassment and the widespread distribution of violent and misogynistic language and imagery (see Part two: Section 2 on VAWG).

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) calls on Governments to:

- Increase women's participation in and access to expression and decision making in and through the media and new communication technologies (J.1).

- Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in media (J.2).[20]

One of the key strategies for bringing about greater gender balance amongst media staff and sensitivity in the news is to develop ethical guidelines, gender policies and affirmative action targets. Gender Links has worked with activists and newsrooms across Southern Africa to persuade media organisations to develop such policies and targets.[21]

The media can also be a force for progressive change. Social media, such as twitter and Facebook, can play a vital role linking local and national actions, as with global campaigns such as the 16 Days of Activism to End VAWG.[22]

Increased interest and research by donors

The concept of social norms is not new, Article 5 of UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires countries to address and change social and cultural patterns that reinforce the stereotyping of women and traditional gender roles, or that promote the relative superiority or inferiority of either of the sexes.[23] However mainstream recognition of the role of norms in undermining attempts at gender equality is relatively recent, but now sufficiently established for the World Bank to produce a report Voice and Agency which examines the impact of social norms on women's empowerment.[24] A wealth of data is also emerging as a result of initiatives such as the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index.[25] Tackling discriminatory social norms was also prioritised in the draft conclusions for the 58th UN Commission on the Status of Women and in discussions among the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals.[26]

Working with men and boys

The women's movement has long recognised the need to engage with men and boys as allies and as targets in attitudinal and behavioural change education in order to achieve transformative change for women. Recently there has been an increased focus on this area of work, along with work to improve the lives of men and boys who are negatively affected by gender norms. Although seen as potentially valuable, there are also concerns[27] that it is being taken out of context with other gender equality work, and may lead to a diversion of funding and political support away from women's empowerment, when women's rights organisations are already chronically underfunded. There is also a deeper concern that the new focus on men and boys has in some cases seen a move towards men as leaders in gender equality initiatives, including gender-based violence (GBV), with an associated risk that women and girls will remain or be kept silent in debates around their rights.[28] There is even a fear that it will legitimise the strengthening of men's rights organisations seeking to undermine gender equality (See Part two: Section 2 on VAWG).

8.3   Challenges and ways forward

Changing discriminatory social norms requires action in a number of areas. Recognition of the interplay between each of the factors below is crucial, as is acknowledgement of the power relationships which underpin prevailing norms; success is likely to require challenging the notion that discriminatory social norms are 'cultural' and therefore acceptable or immutable.

Working with communities

Social norms are frequently deeply entrenched in the traditions and customs of a community. It is increasingly clear that neither legal reform, nor changing the attitudes of individuals, is enough and that the most effective way to bring about behavioural change is to alter perceptions in community standards.[29] It appears that a critical mass of opinion is necessary before people are prepared to risk challenging social norms by changing their behaviour, so that what was previously unacceptable becomes normal.[30] Persuading those influential groups that currently hold power such as community leaders, traditional rulers and religious leaders, or creating community champions can be an effective way towards creating this critical mass,[31] provided that this forms part of a comprehensive approach which prioritises the empowerment of women and girls.

Women's rights organisations and other progressive social movements have been challenging traditional orthodoxies for decades. In Ethiopia, the women's rights organisation Kembatta Mentti Gezzima (KMG) has successfully worked with traditional leaders, law enforcers, parents and girls to create mutually reinforcing pressure against the practice of FGM.[32] Working with, and learning from these organisations should be a central part of the efforts to change community norms. [33]

Interventions to promote gender equality must include long-term work to challenge discriminatory social norms, including working with faith-based and other local leaders.

Empowering women themselves

Even when new attitudes about women's rights and status are introduced into a community, this does not mean that women themselves will embrace these ideas. The power, for example, of the extended family and local 'gossip' can be extensive, making it extremely difficult for women and girls to go against social norms and change their behaviour. Women and girls may not see themselves as having any choice to act differently or may have internalised social norms to such an extent that they do not recognise violations of their rights.[34] For example, a woman may not report rape not only because she will be shunned by her community, but also because she considers herself to blame.

In contexts where women and girls have always been without influence, it takes time, patience and mentoring to build confidence so that they see themselves as having the power to make choices and to act on them.[35] This building of 'agency' will be most effective if it is combined with other interventions to increase women's empowerment and status in the community such as through education or employment opportunities.[36]

Challenging social norms should start by supporting women and girls to build their agency and autonomy.

Government policies and laws

While not enough on their own, legislation and policies can contribute to changes in perceptions and therefore social norms. For example, laws around flexible working for parents can influence attitudes on who does the child care or reform of inheritance laws can generate awareness that women are entitled to inherit property and land on an equal basis with men. However these measures will not be successful unless they are enforced by public authorities with adequate funding and a clear mandate to investigate whether informal laws, norms and practices are impeding implementation.[37] In countries where multiple legal systems operate, such as customary or sharia law, addressing gender discrimination in these and removing anomalies between legal frameworks needs to be addressed.

Moreover government and national institutions, such as the police and media, have a major role to play in perpetuating discriminatory social norms and their regulation will be part of any solution.

Formal and informal laws can support the development of new social norms and should be enforced and implemented fully, including the regulation of national institutions such as the media and justice system.

Investing in measurement

Interventions are most likely to be prioritised by governments and donors when success can be measured. Indicators on social norm change were not included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), partly because they were seen to be unquantifiable. However, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in available data, together with methods for measuring change, including demographic and health surveys, attitudinal surveys and gender elements within household and labour-force surveys.[38] In addition, the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) provides data on discriminatory social norms and institutions in over 160 countries.[39] A report from ODI and OECD shows how existing data could be used to measure changes in practice, attitudes and empowerment. The challenge to governments and the international community is to invest in collecting this data, and to use it to develop new indicators.[40]

Developing and using data and indicators in the measurement of social norms change should be a political priority and receive increased funding. The possibility of measuring social norm change should be acknowledged and corresponding indicators should be used by donors and in international frameworks.

8.4   Recommendations
International institutions/governments should:

1. Challenge discriminatory social norms by, in the first instance, supporting women and girls to build their agency and seek solutions through collective agency and movement building.

2. Work with whole communities and community leaders to challenge discriminatory social norms and identify champions.

3. Provide financial and political support to women's rights organisations that have a track-record in challenging discriminatory social norms.

4. Invest in collecting data on social norm change and developing new indicators to measure progress.

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