



**DRIVER 1 WORKING GROUP PAPER**

CHANGING NORMS IN SUPPORT OF  
WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT



The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General established the High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment in 2016 to bring together leaders from different constituencies—government, civil society, business and international organizations—to launch a shared global agenda that accelerates women's economic participation and empowerment in support of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its promise that no one will be left behind.

The first report of the High-Level Panel (September 2016) examined the case for women's economic empowerment and identified seven drivers for addressing systemic barriers to women's economic empowerment. These seven drivers were further explored by working groups, comprising High-Level Panel members and other stakeholders. Each working group prepared a paper with specific recommendations for transformative change.

The second report of the High Level Panel (March 2017) provided a synthesis of the recommendations of each of the seven working groups within the framework of the essential enabling environment to accelerate and deepen the impact of the seven drivers. In addition to the working group papers, each working group prepared a toolkit, focusing on how to take forward the recommendations of the working group, along with case studies and good practices where relevant.

This working group paper has been prepared by the Working Group for Driver 1—Norms and women's economic empowerment.

Its companion toolkit is published as a separate document.

High-Level Panel reports and working group papers and toolkits are all available online.

**Members of Working Group on Driver 1—Norms and women's economic empowerment**

Lead	Consultant	Working group members
<b>Amadou Mahtar Ba</b> Co-Founder and Executive Chairman, AllAfrica Global Media Inc.	<b>Elise Klein</b>	<b>Isabelle Cardinal</b> , Team Leader, Economic Inclusion and Gender Team, Economic Development Directorate, DFID <b>Jenna Harvey</b> , Research Assistant, WIEGO <b>Kim Henderson</b> , Gender Justice Lead, Oxfam International <b>Philippe Lust-Bianchi</b> , Knowledge Management Specialist, UN Women <b>Siriël Mchembe</b> , Specialist, Social Protection and Women's Entrepreneurship, Institute of Financial Management, United Republic of Tanzania <b>Nanjira Sambuli</b> , Digital Equality Advocacy Manager, World Wide Web Foundation <b>Lisa Wong</b> , Technical Specialist on Non-discrimination, ILO

For more information please visit: [hlp-wee.unwomen.org](http://hlp-wee.unwomen.org)

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While staff of the Bretton Woods institutions reviewed and provided comments on the working papers and toolkits in their respective areas of expertise, they were not members of the working groups.

In regard to the recommendations aimed at international organizations in these documents, the Bretton Woods institutions may endorse or support them to the extent these are consistent with their roles and in accordance with their mandate.

# CONTENTS

<b>OVERVIEW</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>GAP ANALYSIS AND PRIORITIES</b>	<b>1</b>
Gendered social norms	<b>1</b>
Economic norms	<b>2</b>
<b>KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING GENDERED SOCIAL NORMS AND ECONOMIC NORMS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>NEXT STEPS: ACTION ON NORMS AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>NOTES</b>	<b>4</b>



## OVERVIEW

Women's economic empowerment is affected by norms—the rules of conduct considered acceptable by a dominant group or society. Norms are gendered in that they shape the values and structures of individuals, families, communities, institutions and societies with respect to gender roles. Norms can be firmly entrenched, and change will take time, such as norms that segregate occupations between men and women. Other norms may not be embedded so deeply, and change can be rapid. Transforming norms, though challenging, is possible and must form an integral part of a comprehensive approach to women's economic empowerment and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

This short working paper and its related toolkit builds on the first report of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment. The recommendations developed here respond to three key gaps identified in the analysis emerging from the High-Level Panel.

First, the paper has a renewed focus not just on gendered social norms but also on economic norms affecting women's economic empowerment. For example, the working group found economic norms essential to addressing the stigmatization of the informal economy and the insecurity facing many agricultural workers.

Second, the paper reiterates that if action on women's economic empowerment is to be bold, the push for change should be on norms that regulate institutions, structures and policies, and not so much on those regulating individual behaviour. For example, studies in Scandinavian countries have shown that even where there is a strong public culture of gender equality, the persistence of gender divisions of labor and hierarchical inequalities remain because they are deeply embedded within economic structures and related institutions.<sup>1</sup>

Third, the paper recognizes that the four women's worker groups—women in the informal sector, women in agriculture, women entrepreneurs and women in the formal sector—face different norms, so “women” should not be taken as a homogeneous group. For example, an executive in the formal sector faces many different norms from a woman agricultural worker, though there may be some commonalities. Because of the severe challenges facing informal and agricultural workers, we have found it especially important to level our recommendations in support of these vulnerable groups. And within these four worker groups, there is a need to consider gender intersecting with age, religion, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, mobility and racial relations.

Including men,  
not just women,  
in the process of  
changing norms  
is important

## GAP ANALYSIS AND PRIORITIES

To tackle adverse norms, it is useful to think of them as gendered social norms and as economic norms.

### GENDERED SOCIAL NORMS

Gendered social norms are at the root of overt and covert, direct and indirect, and recurrent gender discrimination, which adversely affects women's rights.<sup>2</sup> For example, norms that deem women to have one group of abilities and men another lead to regimented roles around care work and occupational segregation, limiting women's choices and opportunities in the workplace as well as in public and private domains.<sup>3</sup>

For example, in Gallup data, 7 of 10 respondents agreed that it was easier for women to cope with the demands of work and family matters than men—6 of 10 men and close to 8 of 10 women thought this was the case.<sup>4</sup> And in the World Values Survey, both men and women were asked the question “On the whole, men make better business executives than women do.” For men and women from countries that had data, 43 percent either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. In the same survey, men and women were asked if they believed that men make better political leaders than women do. From countries that had data, more than 50 percent of women said they strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

Such norms can not only restrict women who want to access male-dominated sectors that are often better paid, but they can also restrict men from transitioning into the care economy. Norms that ascribe abilities based on gender also affect the success of women-owned enterprises<sup>5</sup> and the gender-pay gap.<sup>6</sup>

Gender norms can have perverse effects on agricultural workers because norms can restrict access and ownership of land and livestock, as well as perpetuate discriminatory inheritance practices. Norms about women's and men's abilities segregate agricultural roles, leading to unequal access to productive resources. Discriminatory norms are compounded by the double burden of care work and by the lack of resources and infrastructure for social protection and rights protection in rural areas. The impact of such gendered social norms on agricultural workers is profound. Research by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) suggests that closing the gender gap in agricultural yields through supporting women's collective agency and their access to resources could bring as many as 100–150 million people out of hunger.<sup>7</sup>

Norms can also make violence and discrimination against women and girls acceptable.<sup>8</sup> For example, norms that instrumentalize and sexualize women's bodies can lead to discriminatory practices from

harassment, limits to reproductive rights, assumptions about employability and ability, and violence.<sup>9</sup> Violence constrains a woman's agency physically, socially and psychologically—and restricts opportunities for becoming economically empowered.<sup>10</sup> Women exposed to intimate partner violence are employed in higher numbers in casual and part-time work,<sup>11</sup> and their earnings are 60 percent lower than women who do not experience such violence.<sup>12</sup> Sexual harassment in the workplace is also an issue. In European Union countries, 40–50 percent of women have experienced unwanted sexual advances, physical contact or other forms of sexual harassment at work.<sup>13</sup>

The presence of such adverse gendered social norms can mean that women are often denied recourse to justice where workplaces, community leaders, the police and the judiciary do not always give due weight to violence. Therefore, efforts for women's economic empowerment should be undertaken in parallel with efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women—especially because as women's economic empowerment increases, men may respond with a backlash as patriarchal systems are challenged.<sup>14</sup>

Engaging men as individuals or within institutions such as government and business is critical in transforming discriminatory norms and violence. This can be done through establishing gender-sensitive employment policies, strengthening laws and implementing institutions, starting education at a young age, engaging community leaders and media and using positive individual or organizational role models. For example, the use of the media to communicate positive role models (not just individuals but also best practice examples of collective action, policies and initiatives), can be a way to challenge gender norms. The Women in News Project supported by the Graca Machel Trust has committed journalists to rewriting affirming narratives about women and women's groups in the media.

Education in schools is another area for challenging gendered social norms. The Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) school-based program is aimed at helping primary-school male and female students adopt more gender-equitable norms. An evaluation of this program in Mumbai after two years of implementation among 8,000 students reported that “participating students were more likely to support higher education for girls, openly express opposition to gender based violence and champion delaying marriage.”<sup>15</sup> Education in the workplace is also important. DFID's HERrespect workplace training sessions with Bangladeshi garment factory workers has been important to challenge gender norms and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights.

## ECONOMIC NORMS

The “economy” is commonly misunderstood as an inert system requiring technocratic management. But it is actually

Effective action on norms must consider the way gender intersects with age, religion, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, mobility and racial relations as well as structural processes in the economy.

bound by norms, which underpin the policies and practices promoted by governments, businesses and international financial institutions. These economic norms affect women's economic empowerment.

The devaluation of care work is one example. Everyone needs care at some point in their life, and care work is essential to the functioning of society and the economy.<sup>16</sup> But care work is valued less than other forms of work.<sup>17</sup> This devaluation of care is closely linked to the fact that care work has been unpaid and unrecognized for generations.<sup>18</sup> Norms for roles of men and women have meant that women tend to undertake a larger proportion of unpaid care work, often considered lower value and lower skill.<sup>19</sup>

Women's unpaid work, conservatively estimated, contributes US\$10 trillion a year globally, or 13 percent of global GDP.<sup>20</sup> One strategy to address this norm includes documenting the real value of care in societies and economies.<sup>21</sup> Another is to challenge norms that assign care work to women—and masculine notions that men should be “breadwinners” not “carers.” State investments in care and parental leave can also shift norms and redistribute care work between men and women.<sup>22</sup>

Informal workers are often stigmatized by discriminatory norms. The majority of women workers in developing countries—and an increasing share in developed countries—are informally employed in jobs not regulated or protected by the state. Stigmatization can occur when governments either ignore the informal economy in planning and policymaking or aim to eliminate or restrict it by imposing prejudicial measures on informal workers and firms. Informal workers may then have to contend with various taxes and bribes, confiscations of goods, evictions from public spaces or restricted access to resources such as financing and training. Stigmatization can also be compounded because of discriminatory norms about different vulnerable groups of informal workers, such as minority ethnic groups, tribal/lower castes and informal migrants.

Although informal workers lack access to the benefits and legal protections that many formal workers enjoy, they make significant contributions to local and national economies. Street vendors provide a low-cost source of goods and services and add vibrancy and economic diversity to cities. Home workers produce or add value to domestic and global supply chains. Waste pickers perform an environmental service. And domestic workers make it possible for others to participate in the labor force. Having workers organize for collective action and having governments recognize workers and their representative organizations are critical to increasing awareness of these contributions and to challenging the stigmatization of the informal economy.<sup>23</sup>

Also widely assumed is that norms promoting economic modernization and industrialization are emancipating for women. But in reviewing the evidence, it is not clear

Bigger gains  
can come from  
targeting norms  
within the gendered  
economy.

that economic growth always leads to gender equality, especially where occupational segregation, inequality and economic insecurity endure for such groups as agricultural workers and informal workers.<sup>24</sup> Norms promoting liberalization of trade can

also improve women agricultural workers' economic opportunities, but research shows the impacts can both support women's economic empowerment and hinder it.<sup>25</sup>

Women coming together through organizing and exercising collective agency to contest or defend access to and participation in economic opportunities is very important for norm change at both an individual and a societal level. In India, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has organized nearly 2 million working poor women in the informal economy. SEWA members describe a change in sense of self-worth and confidence after joining a collective effort through SEWA. For many of the women, this change at an individual level was followed by shifts in social norms in the family and even in the community.<sup>26</sup>

Governments and international organizations have important obligations to set policies and frameworks to support women's economic empowerment. They should do this by working with women workers and setting statutory bodies for consultation and engagement—especially for vulnerable workers. Creating awareness about the gender and class aspects of macro- and micro-economic policies is also key to tackling adverse economic norms. And providing social protection can help sustain norm change. The private sector can also play a role. For example, Unilever and other businesses are examining the impacts they have on women workers further down the supply chain.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING GENDERED SOCIAL NORMS AND ECONOMIC NORMS

- 1. Eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.** Take action to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls in their homes, in their communities, in the world of work and in public spaces. Enforcing legal and regulatory frameworks, protocols and disciplinary procedures is critical. So are awareness-raising and violence prevention campaigns in collaboration with women workers, businesses, trade unions, employer organizations and women's organizations.
- 2. End discrimination and stereotypes that ascribe gender to roles and abilities.** Take action to change discrimination and gender stereotypes that ascribe gender to roles and abilities, including care work, and remove discrimination in the workplace, through education with
- 3. Eradicate the stigmatization of informal workers.** Governments, intergovernmental organizations and civil society should take action to support and recognize informal-worker organizations such as unions, cooperatives and voluntary associations.

## NEXT STEPS: ACTION ON NORMS AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Adverse norms affecting women's economic empowerment can and do change. Gendered social and economic norms that support women's economic empowerment can also be strengthened. Building on the First Report and Second Report, the toolkit for norms and women's economic empowerment explores specific examples and ways that action on norms can be taken, such as through collective action, education, economic security and social protection, public deliberation, empowering legal frameworks, and the media. There are some principles that are key in taking any meaningful action:

1. There must be a central role for grassroots women's organizations in identifying and leading strategies and solutions for action on norms. This is in recognition that there are many women's groups already taking action on norms to support women's economic empowerment. Also, context matters for any action on norms. Because norms are culturally embedded, it is essential to understand the local context of how and why particular norms exist and how people relate to them. Many local women's groups have sophisticated knowledge of the local context and can properly lead initiatives.
2. Norms are relevant at various levels, but reducing poverty and inequality requires addressing not just individual behaviour but norms within formal and informal structures that operate as gatekeepers.
3. Not all women are affected the same. Norms need to be put in context, and any action to address these norms must consider how gender intersects with age, religion, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, mobility and racial relations.
4. In addition to reducing adverse norms, actions can be taken to strengthen positive norms—for example, gender equality is a norm that can be strengthened through education, policies and laws.
5. Transformational changes in norms to support women's economic empowerment can be achieved through individual and collective action, but also through events such as migration, urbanization, market shocks, crises and technological change.

## NOTES

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