



GUIDANCE NOTE

IDEOLOGIES, INSTITUTIONS AND POWER

ADDRESSING DISCRIMINATORY
SOCIAL NORMS

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Copy-editing: Tina Johnson
Layout: Laure Journaud

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
HRC	Human Rights Council
IPV	intimate partner violence
IRRF	Integrated Results and Resources Framework
MVF	Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VAW	violence against women

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For decades, international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action have emphasized changing social norms as a key strategy for achieving gender equality. Addressing discriminatory social norms has also long been central to UN Women's work and is reflected as a cross-cutting outcome in its recent Strategic Plans (2022–2025 and 2026–2029). Since 2022, UN Women has invested in generating an evidence-based approach to more systematically define and operationalize its work on social norms. This framework is the result.

The framework begins by presenting the evidence generated around three key questions: What are social norms? How do they change? And how can such change be measured? Then, based on new research, it sets out UN Women's institutional approach to transforming discriminatory social norms, outlining three interlinked pathways towards social norms change. Finally, it describes how the framework will be embedded across UN Women's triple mandate and how progress and change will be measured.

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL NORMS

UN Women defines social norms implicated in gender equality and women's empowerment as embedded rules, standards and practices that prescribe relationships between people and the social institutions of the state, market, community and family. Discriminatory social norms are rooted in intersecting ideologies that justify inequality and discrimination on account of gender race, caste,

class and other social hierarchies. They define where women and men are placed within social institutions as well as their relative power and privileges. Social norms come to life through narratives and material conditions that structure everyday life and shape what is done, how it is done, who does it and who benefits.

Discriminatory social norms are often framed as an attitudinal and behavioural issue, but feminist scholars and practitioners emphasize that these norms are embedded in broader social, economic and ideological structures.

To fully understand and transform discriminatory social norms, three key interrelated concepts are important.

Ideologies

Social norms that uphold gender, class and racial inequalities are rooted in ideologies such as patriarchy, casteism, racism and classism. These ideologies justify social hierarchies using narratives of divine will, biological determinism or individual merit. These narratives are spread through everyday discourse in public and private spheres: in government institutions, in trade conferences, in religious discourse, in the media, in community meetings and within households. Today, anti-gender movements aggressively spread misogynistic and nationalist rhetoric, particularly through digital media. The 'manosphere', an online network of misogynistic communities, exemplifies how narratives are used to reinforce patriarchal norms and counter feminist progress.

Social institutions

Norms become ‘social’ through institutions that organize societies: the state, market, community, family and, in many contexts, religion. These institutions embed and reproduce norms that prescribe relationships between people and institutions – for instance, men as political actors, women as caregivers. They interact and often form alliances that reinforce dominant ideologies. UN Women’s research in Egypt and India, for example, illustrates how discriminatory norms – such as excluding girls from education or unequal marital relationships – are institutionalized, requiring systemic, not individual-level, interventions for change.

Power

The unequal distribution of power and privileges based on intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, caste and class is a central feature of discriminatory social norms. The production, reproduction and transformation of social norms are also an exercise in power. Those who benefit from these hierarchies – such as cisgender, heterosexual, upper-caste, white men – control the narratives, laws and policies to maintain their privileges. However, resistance to oppressive norms has always existed, with individuals and movements challenging discrimination. Transforming discriminatory social norms requires organized resistance and strategic interventions targeting institutional change and individuals in position of power, not just the general public.

HOW DO SOCIAL NORMS CHANGE? THREE PATHWAYS

Evidence from UN Women’s research, and the broader literature, suggests that social norm change is context-specific; no single model works everywhere. But in all settings, women’s rights movements remain the key force behind progress. The transformation of discriminatory social norms relies on three mutually reinforcing pathways.

Transforming narratives and building consensus

Norms gain strength through narratives that justify discrimination, such as the idea that men are breadwinners while women do not work. Evidence shows that feminist, participatory approaches can be used to bring people together to critique discriminatory narratives, which exposes myths and disinformation and promotes alternative, egalitarian views. When egalitarian narratives are supported by large groups of people from diverse walks of life, this can push and influence powerful institutions and people to change. For example:

- In Brazil, women farmers used agroecological logbooks to document their economic contributions, shifting narratives on women’s roles in agriculture.
- In Egypt, feminist scholars drew on progressive interpretations of Islamic teachings and international human rights frameworks to challenge patriarchal family laws and the narrative about women’s subservience in the family.
- In India, grassroots activists confronted caste- and gender-based discrimination by advocating for the education of girls and children from Dalit communities and conducted door-to-door dialogues with every household in a village to build consensus.

Changing material conditions in women’s and girls’ lived realities

Changing material conditions through the provision of social, economic and political opportunities subverts discriminatory social norms that exclude women and girls from such opportunities. Economic opportunities for women challenge the male breadwinner norm; provision of good quality services for women subverts norms that entitle men to be the only recipients of social services; and legal changes can provide women with a tangible source

of egalitarian norms – concrete rights – enabling them to challenge and bargain out of discriminatory norms. For example:

- Abortion accompaniment networks in Argentina have enabled women to challenge norms that stigmatize sexual and reproductive health and rights and restrict women's bodily autonomy.
- In Brazil, feminist agroecologists created alternative markets for women farmers, shifting norms on the value of their work and improving their economic position and decision-making power.
- Legal reforms for women's equal right to divorce in Egypt have supported women's claims and negotiations within families.

Strengthening countervailing power

Changing discriminatory social norms requires redistributing power across all social institutions and strong coalitions demanding and supporting change. Unleashing women's 'power within' through self-organization of marginalized groups, as well as building 'power with' through coalitions with a range of social movements, collectives and allies, can generate a critical mass to drive change. For example:

- In Argentina, the Green Tide movement united reproductive rights activists, labour unions and human rights groups, building nationwide support for abortion rights.
- In the Democratic Republic of Congo, conflict-affected women became peer supporters and community leaders, shifting their identity from victims to change agents while challenging norms around gender-based violence.
- In India, adolescent girls organized into committees, resisting early marriage and mobilizing child protection services.

Given that social norms are embedded in institutions, UN Women's research suggests that the measurement of social norms change needs to go beyond measuring people's attitudes and behaviours. A combination of indicators aligned with the three interlinked pathways of change – shifts in narratives, changes in material conditions and the strength of countervailing power – is needed, as well as measures that capture whether these changes have translated into improvements in the lives of women and girls.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR UN WOMEN'S WORK?

This framework outlines how UN Women will work on social norms, adopting an institutional approach based on the three pathways to address and transform discriminatory social norms implicated in gender equality and women's empowerment.

The framework will be embedded across UN Women's triple mandate – normative, coordination and operational – and across all thematic areas as well as the Gender Equality Accelerators. This will be done through reframing existing policy and programming, developing new policy and programming and informing the discourse on social norms in international development.

UN Women will adopt a dual approach to the measurement of social norms change through monitoring indicators that lend themselves to tracking on an annual basis via the Integrated Results and Resources Framework (IRRF) that accompanies UN Women's Strategic Plan 2026–2029; and through specific programmes and pilots that uncover, capture and communicate compelling stories of how social norms change.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, as UN Women adopted its Strategic Plan 2022–2025, changing social norms was prioritized as one of seven cross-cutting systemic outcomes for achieving progress across its four impact areas: full and equal participation of women in leadership and decision-making; income security, decent work and economic autonomy; ending violence against women and girls; and increased influence of women in, and benefitting equally from, peace building and humanitarian action.¹ The implicit assumption in this theory of change was that shifting norms would lead to stronger impacts on gender equality, women's rights and the empowerment of all women and girls. In the new Strategic Plan 2026–2029, changing discriminatory social norms continues to be an important part of UN Women's theory of change, reflected across three systemic outcomes on norms, institutional practices and resources and agency.²

While UN Women (and its predecessor organizations) have worked on social norms for many years, it was recognized that operationalizing the outcome area on social norms, and measuring it effectively, required reflection and learning from both within and beyond the entity. Therefore, it embarked on a learning phase, a nuanced engagement with evidence, to elaborate a framework for its work on social norms. This work was jointly managed by two UN Women's sections: Research and Data and the Political Analysis and Programme Development Unit, with strong engagement throughout from many teams across all thematic areas and in all regions.

As well as this internal rationale, UN Women's intention to strengthen its work on social norms comes at a time of growing political polarization, weakening

democratic institutions, a breakdown in the social contract between people and the state and growing backlash against gender equality. In this context, understanding discriminatory social norms and how they can be transformed in support of gender equality and women's empowerment is especially important and timely.

This paper is a result of the learning phase and provides a framework to guide UN Women in its work to address discriminatory social norms with the ultimate objective of achieving gender equality and the realization of the human rights of all women and girls, irrespective of their gender and sexual identity and expressions, caste, class, race, ethnicity, ability or any other factor that is invoked to deny them their rights. In line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and UN Women's human rights mandate, the goal of this work on social norms is to advance substantive gender equality, which goes beyond formal equality, equality of opportunity or balanced representation in decision-making roles to embrace equality of outcomes and the equal valuing of women, girls and others marginalized on account of gender inequality.

Section 1 of the paper presents a brief overview of the steps that UN Women took to develop the organization's approach to social norms, including commissioning research, a virtual expert group meeting, extensive internal and external consultations and an internal independent evaluation. Section 2 then discusses key findings from the research, providing a conceptual framework for understanding social norms, a working definition of social norms implicated in gender equality and

women's empowerment and evidence on how social norms have changed and how this change has been measured. In section 3, the paper describes the approach adopted by UN Women, which includes three interconnected pathways for changing discriminatory social norms: (i) transforming narratives; (ii) changing material conditions; and (iii) strengthening countervailing power. The paper concludes with a description in section 4 of how this new framework would be implemented and how UN Women will measure its contribution to social norms change.

This framework paper will be accompanied by programme guidance materials to provide more detailed explanations, evidence and suggestions to support existing and new UN Women work across its normative, coordination and operational mandate.

1

**UN WOMEN'S
LEARNING PHASE
ON SOCIAL NORMS**

The following set of feminist principles to guide the learning phase was adopted: (i) learn from the grassroots up; (ii) examine gender-power hierarchies in unpacking norms; (iii) engage in a participatory process of unpacking social norms within UN Women across thematic areas and regions; and (iv) apply an intersectional feminist approach to enquiry and elaboration. These principles were adopted in the research that was commissioned as well as in an internal evaluation of UN Women's existing work on social norms.

The learning phase included the following activities:

- (i) Commissioning research on social norms: UN Women commissioned seven research papers on social norms from leading academics and practitioners, including original papers on how change happens in five countries in the Global South. Four of the papers have been published in its peer-reviewed [Discussion Paper Series](#), with one more in the pipeline for publication (see Box 1).

BOX 1

Commissioned research on social norms

Literature review: "Social Norms, Gender and Development: A Review of Research and Practice".^a

This paper by Tara Cookson and others provides a 'state of the evidence' on social norms change. Based on a review of studies and evaluations of programmatic interventions to shift social norms, as well as insights from a broader body of evidence, the paper aims to answer four questions: What are social norms?, How do social norms change?, How are social norms measured? And what role (if any) should global development organizations play in shifting social norms?

Brazil: "Transforming Social and Gender Norms through Feminist Methodological Approaches within the Agroecology Movement in Brazil".^b This paper is based on the work of feminist agroecologists and non-governmental organizations in Brazil, supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Author Rodica Weitzman provides an in-depth analysis of the impact of agroecological logbooks implemented there between 2013 and 2020, focusing on women's empowerment, gender norms transformation and the recognition of women's economic contributions in agriculture.

Democratic Republic of Congo. "Healing Together: A Community-based Psychosocial Approach to Changing Social Norms in South Kivu".^c This paper is based on the work of the feminist women's rights organization Réseau des Femmes pour les Droits et la Paix (RFDP) and the African Institute for Integral Psychology, supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Authors Aziza Aziz-Suleyman and Simon Gasibirege describe how collective grieving and healing practices were utilized to address conflict-related trauma and served as an entry point for transforming norms on intimate partnerships, violence against women and women's place in the community.

Egypt: "How Does Change Happen? Social Norms, Religion and Family Laws in the Middle East and North Africa Region".^d This paper is based on the work of an Egyptian civil society coalition and Musawah, a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family, whose work is supported by UN Women. Author Marwa Sharafeldin demonstrates how constructive engagement with religion, democratizing

the production of religious knowledge on gender with a feminist lens, and astute activist and political engagement through civil society coalitions led to important changes in family law and, arguably, norms governing the family in Egypt.

Fiji: “Feminist-led Structural Change in the Pacific”.^e This paper is based on the work of the feminist organization DIVA for Equality and Habitat for Humanity in promoting the employment of women and gender-diverse individuals in the male-dominated construction industry in Fiji. Authors Claire Slatter, Yvonne Underhill-Sem and Romitesh Kant describe how the programme built on the Pacific concept of relationality, emphasizing the interconnectedness among members of the community, to challenge societal norms.

India: “Recasting Social Norms to Universalize Education for Adolescent Girls: The Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation Experience”.^f This paper is based on the work of the the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF) in eliminating child labour and universalizing education in three districts of a state in India. Authors Rekha Wazir and Shantha Sinha provide insights into what is involved in changing social norms on gender, caste and poverty in their programme for adolescent girls. Their community-led approach is presented as a sharp contrast to the behaviour change strategies increasingly being used in international development.

Measurement: “Measuring Social Norms for Gender and Development: Lessons and Priorities”.^g In this paper, Kate Bedford and Magali Brosio review seven initiatives on measuring social norms, including by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Bank and UN Women. They identify emerging lessons and assess gaps, particularly in measuring institutional dimensions of social norms, and propose three priorities for engaging with the question of measuring social norms.

Beyond the papers commissioned by UN Women, the following papers have also informed this framework:

Argentina: “Feminist Activism, Legal Reform, and the ‘Social Decriminalization of Abortion’: Argentina as a Case Study”.^h This paper is based on research by authors Barbara Sutton and Nayla Luz Vacarezza on abortion rights activism in Argentina, which has had profound impacts on shifting norms on women’s bodily autonomy and reproductive rights in the country and the wider region.

State of Palestine: “The Root Causes of Gender Discriminatory Norms in Palestine”.ⁱ This paper, commissioned by UN Women’s Country Office in the State of Palestine, examines the discursive and structural embeddedness of discriminatory norms within the family, labour market and political sphere. Author Ibtesam Al-Atiyat applies an intersectional and decolonial theoretical perspective to provide actionable recommendations for transforming these norms.

Notes: ^aCookson et al. 2023; ^bWeitzman forthcoming; ^cAziz-Suleyman and Gasibirege forthcoming; ^dSharafeldin 2026; ^eSlatter et al. 2023; ^fWazir and Sinha 2024; ^gBedford and Brosio 2024; ^hSutton and Vacarezza 2023a; ⁱAl-Atiyat forthcoming.

(ii) A virtual global expert group meeting in October 2023: All the research papers were discussed at an expert group meeting, with a majority of experts from the Global South, which provided recommendations for UN Women’s approach to addressing social norms implicated in gender equality and women’s empowerment. UN Women staff representing country and regional offices as well as headquarters also participated. Key takeaways can be found in Box 2. Based on the findings of the research

BOX 2

Expert group meeting on social norms: Key takeaways

- Social norms on gender are rules about power and privilege, and therefore power analysis must be central to understanding and addressing them.
- Social norms are constructed, reinforced and contested at multiple institutional sites, including the institutions of the family, community, market, religion and state, and so interventions must centre on transforming power relations in these institutions.
- While social norms on gender are everywhere, they manifest differently in different contexts and intersect with social norms on other social hierarchies; therefore, social norm work must be context-specific and intersectional and reject one-size-fits-all approaches.
- Three interlinked pathways are crucial for transforming discriminatory norms: developing counter narratives and building consensus; changing the material realities of women and girls; and building movements, collective actions and coalitions.

and the deliberation at this meeting, the expert group recommended that UN Women develop an institutional, intersectional, feminist and decolonial approach to social norms.³

(iii) Intensive work to understand and map UN Women’s existing work on social norms: This work included extensive consultations with colleagues across the organization – including thematic areas, regions and country offices – and globally through a community of practice⁴ and consultations with UN Women partners.⁵ The community of practice provided a space for knowledge exchange and peer support. An externally commissioned mapping of UN Women’s current work and understanding on social norms⁶ was followed by an internal review of annual reports from 2022–2024 on UN Women’s outcome area 3 on social norms. Promising programmes and research initiatives on social norms⁷ were identified and selected for case studies to feed into an internal corporate evaluation of the entity’s work in this area so far.⁸ Since engagement with men and boys has been an intrinsic component of outcome area 3, findings from the global⁹ and regional reviews¹⁰ of UN Women’s work to engage with men and boys for gender equality also fed into the learning phase.

A key finding from the internal mapping exercise, reviews and evaluation is that UN Women – and its predecessor organization UNIFEM – have been engaged in challenging social norms for decades. However, this work has not been coded as social norms change work per se, and consequently UN Women’s contribution to this area is under-reported. A related finding is that the absence of a coherent understanding of and corporate approach to social norms, in the context of varied and often contradictory definitions and frameworks in international discourse, has affected the framing of UN Women’s work in this regard, including in its Strategic Plan 2022–2025, which does not capture

much of the organization's work on social norms change. There was a general lack of clarity across the organization on what social norms are, how they change and how these changes can be tracked and reported, which mirrors the conceptual inconsistencies and lack of consensus in literature in this field.¹¹

In particular, the reviews found that the increasing conflation of social norms with the attitudes and behaviours of individuals has led to an overemphasis on individual behavioural change approaches as a tool for social norms change, obscuring the importance of institutional transformation.¹² This lack of clarity, consistency and a coordinated approach, as well as the narrow focus on individual level changes, was also found in the review of the organization's gender equality work with men and boys,¹³ which has led UN Women to move beyond the 'male engagement' framing and adopt a new, more system-focused approach called 'Transforming Patriarchal Masculinities'.¹⁴

The framework for addressing discriminatory social norms described in this paper seeks to fill the gaps identified through the various internal reviews and evaluations and serve as an anchor to build coherence on social norms understanding and programming across all UN Women's work. Based on the evidence and understanding generated through the above-mentioned research, reviews and consultations, section 2 of this paper unpacks social norms implicated in gender equality and women's empowerment, provides a working definition of social norms and presents evidence on how these have changed in diverse contexts.

2

**UNDERSTANDING
SOCIAL NORMS:
LEARNING FROM
THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

2.1. WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS? IDEOLOGIES, INSTITUTIONS AND POWER

For over three decades, international development and human rights frameworks have positioned social norms on gender as one of the bases for pervasive gender inequalities. Consequently, promoting normative change is posited as an important driver for achieving gender equality outcomes.

CEDAW requires State Parties to “address social and cultural patterns of conduct, prejudices, customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women” (article 5 (a)). Changing gender norms and challenging stereotypes are discussed in several of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in the Beijing Platform for Action. More recently, in 2022, the salience of social norms was recognized in United Nations General Assembly resolution 77/193,¹⁵ which called for the intensification of efforts to address social norms and stereotypes. The resolution pointed to the role of institutional and structural discrimination and called on Member States to “prevent and eliminate discrimination, gender stereotypes, negative social norms, attitudes and behaviours and unequal power relations in all public and private spheres”. UN Women’s *Progress of the World’s Women* reports highlight the importance of addressing discriminatory social norms to support their economic and social rights as well as their human rights within diverse families.¹⁶ Analysis by UN Women and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) of gender equality across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) concludes that challenging discriminatory norms is critical for progress.¹⁷

As well as growing salience in normative documents and frameworks, there has been longstanding study of social norms in the social sciences, and challenging deep-seated societal norms impeding gender equality has been central to the work of feminist

scholars, practitioners and women’s rights movements¹⁸ for decades. International development organizations have also taken up the issue, including United Nations organizations, international non-governmental organizations, bilateral donor agencies and philanthropies, often citing addressing social norms as key to progress on gender equality and other desirable social and economic outcomes.

UN Women’s research suggests that the answer to the questions “What are social norms?” and “How do they change?” largely depends on who is being asked.¹⁹ Some of the diversity in views reflects differences in disciplinary traditions between, for example, sociologists and behavioural scientists, but approaches to social norms are also influenced by the positionality of their proponents in the international development community. It has been argued, for instance, that there is a chasm between the ‘ivory tower’²⁰ of social norms researchers, primarily from the Global North, and the ‘real world’, particularly locally rooted movements, interventions and initiatives in the Global South.²¹ Even as a feminist evidence base has emerged, it is not clearly reflected in much social norms theory and research, which provide multiple, conflicting and confusing definitions. These have proliferated while being increasingly removed from the fields of practice and the ways in which feminist and women’s organizations talk about social norms. Much social norms theory does not adequately reflect the varied drivers – social, political and economic – behind historical changes in social norms, including the role of women’s movements.

So, what are social norms? The term ‘social norm’ originates in Western, largely Euro-American social science traditions and does not have direct or literal equivalents in many non-Western languages and scholarly traditions. Yet, as a concept, versions of social norms as ‘rules of society’ that define social conduct to keep society ‘functioning well’ are found across the Global South. Often these are loosely translated into English to mean regulation (*etai niyom*²²), cultural tradition (*sanskriti*,²³ *Традиції/Tradytysiyi*,²⁴

*chikhalidwe*²⁵), duty/obligation or religiously ordained (*dharmā*,²⁶ *Al Araf*²⁷), providential ordination (*vidhi ka vidhan*²⁸), natural (*prakritik*²⁹), standards of society (*chuẩn mực xã hội*³⁰) or custom or habit (*Al Adat*³¹).

Other than being normative – rule, should, must – social norms are also described as what is usual, common or normally done, often expressed in terms of prevalence (what is, how things are done, what usually happens, what is commonly done). Both tell us something important about how societies function. However, they are distinct and should not be conflated because what is normative is not always what actually is. For example, the norm that one must love one’s neighbour, rooted in Judeo-Christian texts, does not mean that everyone or most people do love their neighbours.

Social norms have multiple layers, from concrete to abstract, and in practice they reveal diversity, contradiction and contestation as well as consensus. It is important to recognize that both gender-egalitarian as well as gender-inegalitarian or discriminatory norms exist across all contexts.³² Social norms are dynamic, and inegalitarian norms are not always rooted in (outdated) traditions and history. Evidence shows that ‘modern’ policy interventions or external shocks can create new forms of discriminatory social norms, displacing older and more egalitarian

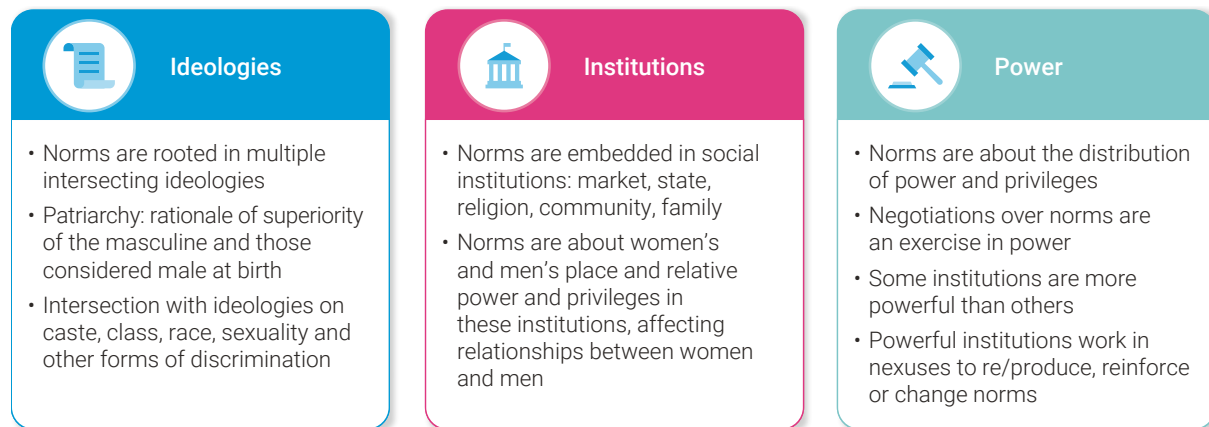
norms, or lead to the resurgence of older discriminatory norms after decades of progress towards egalitarian ones.

For example, contemporary land privatization interventions that transfer land ‘traditionally’ under women’s or community control to men have produced gender-discriminatory norms on land ownership.³³ In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, norms about unpaid housework and child care became more ‘traditional’ across countries, with women taking on an even greater share of domestic work compared to men.³⁴ The alarming rollback on gender equality in different parts of the world taking place now, such as on the rights of women and girls to education, to reproductive health services or to protection from genital mutilation, are undermining decades of interventions to change discriminatory norms.

The research that UN Women commissioned, across very diverse contexts and spanning different social issues, found that to understand social norms implicated in gender equality and women’s empowerment, and how they change, there are three inter-related and intersecting concepts to analyse and unpack: ideologies, social institutions and power (see Figure 1). Together these are the three pillars of UN Women’s conceptual framework on social norms, which are elaborated in this section.

FIGURE 1

Three pillars of UN Women’s conceptual framework on social norms implicated in gender equality and women’s empowerment



2.1.1. Ideologies

The social norms implicated in gender inequality are ideological rules and not simply a result of real or perceived expectations from one's social circle. This is why social norms on gender, class or racial inequality operate very differently to those on eating at the table, smoking in public or handwashing. Therefore, approaches to changing social norms on gender are not analogous to changing those on table manners, smoking or handwashing.

Since societies are organized hierarchically across various dimensions such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity and so on, many social norms are rooted in ideological rules that uphold and justify such social inequalities. They are about how power and privilege will be bestowed. Norms – the rules, the shoulds, the musts – are what holders of power, those at the top of these hierarchies, wish to have accepted by all. Standards, rules and practices to maintain the gender hierarchy are not only based on the ideology of patriarchy, the idea of the supremacy of cis-heteronormative males, but are also rooted in, and in the service of, ideologies of other social hierarchies such as caste,³⁵ class³⁶ and race, depending on context. Norms on caste that intersect with gender are rooted in the idea of caste purity and pollution (casteism), norms on race that intersect with gender are rooted in the idea of the supremacy of white people (racism) and norms on class that intersect with gender are rooted in the justification of economic inequality on account of merit (classism).

These ideologies are justified and defended based on nature, divine will or merit through narratives or normative discourses promoted by the powerful with all the tools at their disposal. In the current global context, there is organized, aggressive and well-funded promotion of narratives that are anti-gender equality and anti-feminism, fused with narratives around national identity, cultural preservation and reinforcing of the 'traditional' family. Narrative production and reproduction, particularly through unregulated digital/social and traditional

media,³⁷ is often under the control of the state, corporate actors and technology companies. Information is driven by their power and profit interests.³⁸ Such media have been deployed to promote inegalitarian and discriminatory ideologies, false narratives and anti-feminist and anti-gender narratives and disinformation. The 'manosphere', the online ecology of misogynistic sites, memes and message boards – which is very effective in attracting young men in particular – is constructed around a narrative of feminism's oppression of men and a rejection of the evidence of men's patriarchal oppression of women.³⁹

2.1.2. Institutions

Norms, the normative (rules) and what is commonly done, become 'social' through institutions that organize societies. Four key social, economic and political institutions through which societies are organized are the state, the market, the community⁴⁰ and the family.⁴¹ In addition to these four, especially in the context of gender-based social norms and indeed caste-based ones, a fifth institution is relevant: religion.⁴² Table 1 unpacks these social institutions.

Insofar as social norms are embedded in social institutions, they may be understood as institutional prescriptions about the relationship between people and institutions on the one hand and between people on the other. These are norms, for instance, on the relationship between men and the state (e.g., that they are the appropriate holders of political power), women and the market (e.g., that they are primarily responsible for unpaid care work) and men and the family (e.g., that they are the heads of households), and they also define relationships between women and men across the social institutions where they interact – in the family, community, religion, state and market. For example, in rural or agrarian societies, these norms underpin inheritance laws, authority over land use decisions, dynamics in the household and practices in agricultural marketplaces.

TABLE 1

Unpacking social institutions for social norms analysis

Institutions	Entities of social institutions (illustrative list)	Persons with power/resources in these entities (illustrative list)
State	Parliaments, courts, police, government agencies, military, media, educational entities	Parliamentarians, elected representatives, heads of government agencies, political leaders, heads of government-owned media and educational entities
Market	Public and private sector firms, financial corporations, farming enterprises, industries, multinationals, private media, educational entities	Heads of firms, business/industry owners and leaders, managers of organizations, heads of privately-owned media companies, commercial/large landowners
Religion	Religious texts, faith-based/religious organizations (churches, mosques, etc.), faith-based media, religious-affiliated educational entities	Religious leaders, heads of religious bodies, heads of religious schools, heads of faith-based media
Community	Community-based networks (geographic and other identity-based), tribunals, associations, informal networks, collectives, cooperatives, unions	Heads/leaders of community, collectives/associations/networks, unions, cooperatives
Family	Household, extended families, lineage groupings	Heads of households/clans

Source: Adapted from Kabeer 1999.

Social institutions interact with and influence one another, with the more powerful ones in any given context influencing the social norms of the less powerful ones. In addition, powerful groups in institutions interact with and influence each other, often forming a nexus to enforce their norms and ideologies. For example, the dominant norms of communities often influence norms in families; the nexus of religion-state or state-market exercises a powerful influence over both communities and families.⁴³

A concrete example of this is how the norm on exclusion of girls from education is often misunderstood as a ‘norm of the family’, emerging from and operating only in that domain. But UN Women’s research in **India** shows that the exclusion of girls is in fact embedded in the rules, norms and practices of the Government’s delivery of education. This then intersects with the rules, norms and practices of the wider community that exclude girls and children from marginalized castes from education.⁴⁴ Similarly, UN Women’s research in **Egypt** shows that the norm of unequal relationships between women and their husbands is not so much a norm of specific families but a ‘norm about family life’

enshrined in a particular inegalitarian interpretation of religious texts promoted by the state and religious authorities.⁴⁵ This understanding of how norms are produced and reproduced matters for those trying to change them, so that they can design interventions that are effectively targeted at the right institutions and not simply at individual behaviour change.

2.1.3. Power

Power is central to social norms in two ways. First, power inequalities based on social hierarchies (gender, race/ethnicity, caste, etc.) are the key content of discriminatory social norms, prescribing which category of people – by sheer accident of birth – will have what kind of power and privileges in different social institutions. For instance, upper-caste/white/cisgendered/heterosexual men (as a group) are born into class, caste, race and gender privileges in access to education, formal sector jobs and political leadership that are not available to people of colour, those belonging to marginalized castes, people living in poverty, women and/or gender minorities.

Second, the operation and maintenance of social norms, including their production, reproduction and transformation, is an exercise in power. Social institutions with greater power and social groups in greater positions of power in these institutions have a privileged position over others concerning how rules, norms and conventions are interpreted, as well as how they are put into effect (see Table 1). Powerful groups assert their interests through control over narratives and discourses, laws and policies and by using their resources and power to persuade or even coerce others.

For example, UN Women's research from **Brazil** shows that men's unequal control over land, as supported by the state, both produces and reproduces the norm of men as primary economic agents and women as non-economic or, at best, secondary economic agents. Nearly 90 per cent of rural properties in Brazil are owned by men, limiting access to and control over land and resources by women despite their significant involvement in agricultural production.⁴⁶ In **Egypt**, UN Women's research shows that discriminatory norms about family life, which bestow control over their wives and decision-making power to men, are defined by powerful male religious leaders and supported by male political leaders who choose a selective and discriminatory interpretation of religious texts.⁴⁷ Power over the production and application of religious knowledge and subsequently over laws and norms on the family is held by the institutions of religion and state, dominated by men, leaving little power for women or for different interpretations of religion.

Men and women not in positions of power or privilege often subscribe to prevailing ideas about gender inequality as divinely ordained, biologically given or economically rational,⁴⁸ even as these ideas are hurting and oppressing them. That norms are widely adhered to, however, does not mean universal consensus or agreement. Indeed, resistance to and contestation of discriminatory social norms by those marginalized by them have always existed,

across all societies and across time. People have, individually and collectively, protested, contested, bargained and 'deviated' from such norms, often at a cost.⁴⁹

Understanding how power is implicated in discriminatory social norms is crucial for designing transformative interventions. Most social norms change interventions focus on changing the attitudes and behaviours of ordinary people – often targeting those from marginalized communities – who are at the bottom of intersecting social hierarchies and have the least power and privileges. Understanding the institutionalized dimension of power and privilege, rather than focusing on how individuals behave or what they think, draws attention to gender biases implicit within the rules and practices of different social institutions. To bring about broad, durable change, the sites of norm change are therefore social institutions, not individuals.

2.1.4. Proposed definition on social norms

Based on this understanding of the concepts of ideology, institutions and power, and their interaction, the following definition of social norms will guide UN Women's work:

Social norms implicated in gender equality and women's empowerment are embedded rules, standards or practices that structure relationships between people and social institutions – namely the state, market, community, family and religion – based on intersecting ideologies that uphold social hierarchies, including patriarchy. Social norms can be understood as prescriptions for where women and men are placed in relation to social institutions as well as their relative power and privileges within institutions and, consequently, in relation to one another. Social norms influence how people are treated in and by institutions, and how the institutions of the state, market, community, family and religion function to serve and reinforce social hierarchies.

In other words, social norms shape “what is to be done, how it is to be done, who does it, and who benefits”.⁵⁰ Social norms implicated in gender equality and women’s empowerment are both ideological and material in nature, coming to life through narratives and the material conditions under which people live their lives.

UN Women proposes using the phrase ‘social norms implicated in gender equality and women’s empowerment’ rather than social norms on gender or gender norms because it recognizes that social norms based on other intersecting ideologies, such as caste, race, class, sexuality and others, can also influence gender equality and women’s empowerment depending on the context.

2.2. HOW DO SOCIAL NORMS CHANGE? THREE INTER-LINKED PATHWAYS

Feminist scholars and practitioners recognize that social norms are not always discriminatory but that they are fundamentally institutional and ideological. Where they are discriminatory, they thus require change at the level of ideologies and institutions. This means changing the rules that structure and influence the family, the community, the market, the state and religion and not just fixing how people think and behave as individuals.

This approach is distinct from mainstream strategies to social norms change. As international development organizations have taken up the issue, the approach that has become dominant frames social norms narrowly as an attitudinal and behavioural problem that needs to change, with interventions focused at individual and community levels. The dominant approach “systematically draw[s] the focus away from the constraints and limits imposed by persistent, deeply embedded structural inequalities and power structures and relocates the source of the problem in the behaviour, choices and actions of the very individuals experiencing these development deficits”.⁵¹

To make the discourse on social norms more inclusive and offer a corrective to the narrow dominant perspectives, UN Women commissioned research – mainly from scholars and practitioners in the Global South – to generate grounded insights on how social norms are implicated in gender equality and women’s empowerment and how discriminatory social norms change.

This research, and the recommendations of the expert group meeting,⁵² called for a different, more nuanced approach to social norm change, one that embeds a strong anti-racist, intersectional feminist and decolonial perspective. Such an approach needs to privilege voices from the Global South and decentre the ‘white gaze’ in the social norms discourse as well as the dominance of experts with class, caste and race privilege in thinking and action on social norms.

UN Women’s research across a very diverse set of issues and countries (see Box 1) has revealed two overarching factors in social norms change. The first is that historical, geographical and social context matters: When it comes to changing social norms, there is no one-size-fits-all. And the second is that, irrespective of context, women’s rights movements have been critical to driving change in every case.

Socio-economic trajectories of different contexts, including colonial legacies and the impact of globalization, influence both the manifestation and influence of social norms as well as contestations and resistance against them, presenting different challenges and opportunities for progressive change.⁵³ The context of the Green Revolution in Brazil,⁵⁴ the history of colonialism in India, Egypt and the Pacific, Israeli occupation, warfare and weaponization of hegemonic masculinity⁵⁵ and protracted armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo were all directly linked by scholars to how present-day discriminatory norms influence outcomes for women and girls.⁵⁶

Scholars have also noted that women’s resistance, negotiation and ‘bargaining’ with patriarchal norms differ based on their contexts, as demonstrated

through contrasting strategies employed by women in the ‘classical patriarchal belt’ of South Asia and the Middle East and those in sub-Saharan Africa: The former display submission and manipulation to secure a long-term place in the household; while the latter protect and maximize their autonomy in the face of polygynous insecurity.⁵⁷ Context therefore matters not only because of which social norms are implicated, how they evolved and manifest and which institutions and people hold power, but also because in each context, different strategies of resistance have worked for women, girls and those marginalized on account of gender. Expertise emerging from such lived experience and/or with deep understanding and engagement with these realities have led to bottom-up innovations in social transformation.

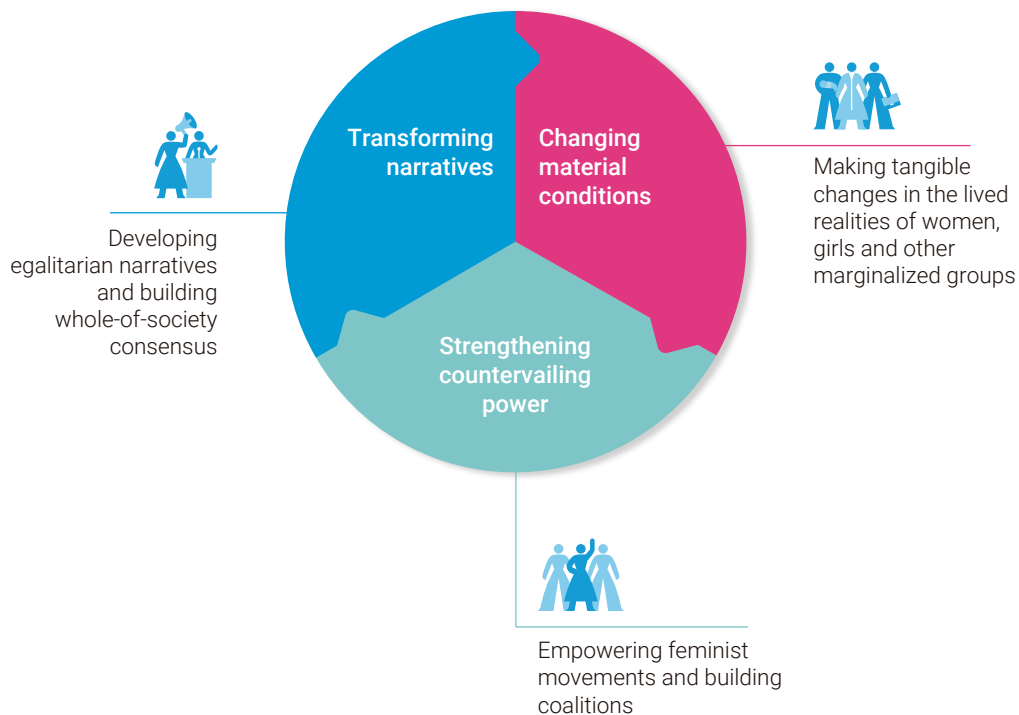
That the women’s movement and feminist organizations have been at the forefront of challenging gender-discriminatory norms is now well

evidenced, including in the research that UN Women commissioned.⁵⁸ Addressing social norms based on patriarchal and other discriminatory ideologies that impede women’s safety, economic empowerment, leadership and political participation, as well as their engagement in peace and security, have been a central part of the work of women’s organizations to realize the human rights of all women, girls and others marginalized on account of gender. This has included working with non-state institutions, such as the community and family; with the state, including through gender equality advocates in governments; and with the social institutions that often sit in between, notably the market and religion.

Beyond these two overarching factors on context and the role of women’s movements, three key intersecting and interrelated pathways to changing social norms implicated in gender equality and women’s empowerment emerged from the research (see Figure 2):

FIGURE 2

Three pathways to changing discriminatory social norms implicated in gender equality and women’s empowerment



- Transforming narratives through the development of counter-narratives and building whole-of-society consensus
- Changing material conditions through tangible changes in the lived realities of women, girls and other marginalized groups
- Strengthening countervailing power through empowering feminist movements and building coalitions.

The research also clearly demonstrates that none of these approaches worked in isolation: Irrespective of the context, it was the confluence and coalescence of all three strategies, in different ways, that enabled change to happen.

This section uses this original research – from Argentina, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt and India (see Box 1) – as well as other available scholarship and evidence to further unpack the overarching findings and each of these approaches.⁵⁹

2.2.1. Transforming narratives: Developing egalitarian narratives and building whole-of-society consensus

Norms need a narrative to come to life.⁶⁰ The ideologies behind discriminatory norms are brought to life through narratives across institutional sites that justify discrimination and inequality on account of divine will, nature or merit. Such narratives often misrepresent facts to align with discriminatory ideologies. In the case of women and work, for instance, a common and longstanding narrative is that women do not work. This is clearly not based on evidence: Women everywhere work, whether at home, on homestead land or for others, with or without remuneration. The norm that the man is the breadwinner, while the woman is his dependent, unproductive homemaker, is supported by narratives that ‘invisibilize’ and undervalue women’s work to align with the discriminatory norm. One of the most crucial elements of interventions to change norms, therefore, has been the development of

alternative, egalitarian narratives based on ideologies that promote equality and non-discrimination and that often include bottom-up evidence gathering and ‘truth-telling’. Egalitarian narratives are drawn from the vision and values of human rights enshrined in national and international normative frameworks, from feminist egalitarian reading of religious texts, from using principles of feminist economics to visibilize women’s work and by appealing to shared humanity and the vulnerability of marginalized men and boys. Participatory methodologies can inspire marginalized people and compel those holding power to become part of efforts to counter inequalitarian narratives and discriminatory norms. Efforts to shift narratives have the following features:

- (i) They draw on egalitarian ideological sources from within various cultures, religions and contexts to drive critical reflections. While international normative frameworks, such as CEDAW, have been appealed to, those aiming to shift discriminatory social norms often call on indigenous sources for alternative egalitarian narratives. For example, in **Egypt**, the religious and secular narratives privileging and valorizing men’s role and control over women in the institution of the family were challenged not only through CEDAW and other international frameworks but also by mobilizing feminist egalitarian interpretations of religious texts and appeals to existing egalitarian legal frameworks in the country. In **India**, the narrative that girls and children from Dalit communities do not need or deserve an education was widespread in the school system and the wider community, which influenced families’ practices.⁶¹ This co-existed with narratives around the need for girls to be married early. Both narratives were simultaneously challenged by the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF) through appeals to values of freedom, equality and rights enshrined in the Constitution. This example both shows the

importance of an intersectional approach to norms change and demonstrates that addressing one set of norms – for example, on education – paves the way for subversion and transformation of other, connected social norms (in this case, on early marriage).

- (ii) They use participatory, feminist pedagogies to co-create alternative narratives centred on the lived realities of people. In so doing, prevalent norms and narratives that contradicted how people lived their lives, or disregarded their values and aspirations, were exposed and could be challenged. In **Brazil**, for instance, the privileging and valorizing of men's agricultural production for the formal market over women's farming work were challenged using agroecological logbooks to record, analyse and make visible the latter's value. Data were analysed with women farmers, mixed gender members of the community and state agricultural extension workers, who were all men. The narrative that women do not work and are not part of the agricultural economy was shifted at multiple levels, eventually enabling women to claim social protection and access new markets.⁶² In **Egypt** and eight other countries with Muslim laws, feminist Islamic scholars and practitioners used participatory and empowering research, reflection and learning techniques to co-create knowledge on the impact of norms and laws on women's lives, challenge the existing narrative that these laws and norms benefitted women and build consensus on alternative egalitarian narratives.⁶³
- (iii) They change institutional narratives and build consensus. Successful interventions to change norms have targeted institutional narratives justifying discrimination at the level of the state, market and religion. In **Egypt**, for example, counter-narratives were developed with the participation of powerful arbiters of norms, for example, religious leaders and scholars of

Islamic and secular law. Activists, policymakers, parliamentarians, judges, lawyers and artists were equipped to use the counter-narratives in their discourses in various decision-making locations, including in the Parliament.⁶⁴ In **India**, grassroots mobilizers helped members of the community and local elected representatives understand instances of girls' elopement or falling in love as a natural part of adolescence and a matter of bodily autonomy. From a context in which girls' healthy sexuality was not considered or valued, the work has resulted in people standing up for girls' rights and advocating for their return to school.⁶⁵

- (iv) They reach the 'whole of society' through various routes and through persistence: In **Argentina**, for instance, street demonstrations and public hearings were central to bringing new narratives and discourse around women's reproductive rights to the streets. A series of workshops with a range of collectives – for example, teachers' unions and medical workers' associations – were also key to wide outreach.⁶⁶ Multiple, repeated interactions sustained over months and years with broad constituencies led to tangible, measurable changes in narratives and norms. In **India**, the work to shift discriminatory norms included multiple door-to-door dialogues with every household in a village until every single child and adolescent girl was accounted for. All existing social networks within the village were engaged in dialogues, including employers of child labour, and every relevant government agency mobilized.⁶⁷

2.2.2. Changing material conditions: Making tangible changes in the lived realities of women, girls and other marginalized groups

When alternatives are not available to women and girls, or at least visible, they are hard to imagine or aspire to. Until the contraceptive pill became

available, it was difficult for women to imagine a life free of unplanned pregnancies and having control over their bodies. Whether intentional or accidental, material changes in lived realities have created the conditions for the transformation of social norms implicated in gender equality and women's empowerment. Women and marginalized persons have been able to overcome discriminatory social norms when a possibility to change lived realities has become available on a wide scale.

UN Women's research identified three broad ways by which changing the material conditions of women's lives subverts discriminatory social norms and paves the way for more egalitarian norms. First, and most obvious, is that explicitly creating economic opportunities for women subverts the norm of 'male breadwinner'. Second, the provision of good quality services dignifies women and signals that women's well-being, protection and empowerment are valued. And third, legal changes and the implementability of egalitarian provisions in law provide women with a tangible and legitimate egalitarian norm and concrete rights, making duty-bearers accountable and enabling women to challenge and bargain out of discriminatory norms.

The following examples, including from research commissioned by UN Women, show how changes in material conditions in the lived realities of women and girls are important in creating these preconditions:

- (i) Providing economic opportunities to women influences social norms in three interconnected ways: (1) It puts a value on women's labour and is a shift in norms on work; (2) it loosens the hold of discriminatory ideas on, for example, female seclusion or the primacy of the male breadwinner in family and community decision-making; and (3) it gives women greater control over assets or resources, through which they gain a 'fallback' position and are more able to negotiate a better deal for themselves in their families and communities, the market and the state.

Economic opportunities have not always been created with the intention of changing social norms. Unintentional norms change on women's employment occurred, for instance, in the aftermath of the two World Wars in the Global North⁶⁸ and as a result of globalization and neoliberal economic policies in the Global South. While the presence of large numbers of women in the labour force has not displaced the dominance of the male breadwinner norm/model in the Global North, it has created wider acceptance of the idea of women as secondary breadwinners and of the dual breadwinner family. In the South Asia, the opening up of job opportunities for women has enabled them to overcome seclusion norms.⁶⁹

In rural **Bangladesh**, for example, gender-discriminatory seclusion norms controlling women's mobility were subverted by large numbers of women joining garment factories to support export-led economic growth.⁷⁰ The motivation of this state-market led intervention was to exploit cheap labour, not to promote gender equality, but it helped large numbers of women side-step seclusion norms in the interest of family income, break the dominant norms of the market and change their lived realities. Not only were women negotiating their mobility, but they also bargained within their households for their daughters' right to education. This example highlights that social norms change is not always (just) a change in the norm (in this case, the norm of seclusion) but a change in the influence of the norm in determining outcomes for women. Also in South Asia, women's control over land supports their bargaining power within households, making it easier to override discriminatory norms.⁷¹ In rural **India**, for example, women who were once landless but acquired independent plots of land reported an enhanced sense of economic security and self-confidence (and therefore negotiating ability), and improved treatment from husbands and other family members.⁷²

In **Brazil**, the intentional pursuit of feminist economic models that allow for a more diverse and inclusive market have promoted more egalitarian norms. Commercial markets excluded women farmers from selling their produce because it was in smaller quantities, so feminist agroecologists promoted 'open markets' and other alternative commercial outlets to create opportunities for them to earn an income. This increase in women's earnings and contribution to the family income in turn affected 'family economics', increasing women's influence in family and family-farm decision-making. The entry of women farmers in large numbers into the agriculture market, and advocacy by women farmers' collectives, led to banks allowing them to access credit for farming and to the state including them in the agriculture extension service for the first time.⁷³ This example shows that changes in social norms have been pursued both by enabling women's claim to privileged and valued spaces reserved for men (agricultural markets, banks) as well as by making visible, validating and valuing spaces women already occupy (care work, bio-diverse backyard gardens).

It is important to note that while the changing economic position of women is one of the drivers of change in social norms, these changes are not always towards greater equality. Economic changes have also reinforced other social hierarchies based, for example, on class. As opportunities have been created for middle- and upper-class women to enter the paid workforce, their unpaid work has been shifted to poorer women, often from racial and ethnic minorities, who work as undervalued and underpaid domestic workers.⁷⁴ What this reveals is that while material changes, including economic opportunities, can create the conditions for progressive change on social norms, unless change is pursued in an intersectional

way, to benefit marginalized women, the result will not be transformative for *all* women but will rather only change social norms for some, often relatively privileged women.

- (ii) Creating access to good quality gender transformative⁷⁵ services: In **Argentina**, despite the criminalization of and social stigma around abortion, feminist organizations made available safe abortion services, including through the provision of confidential and accompanied services. In so doing, they challenged norms curtailing women's control over their own bodies. Abortion accompaniment networks facilitated access by taking care of logistical and security issues, arranging transport and financial support, addressing legal and bureaucratic obstacles and navigating state and medical surveillance, among other issues, subverting the stigmatization of women seeking abortion services.⁷⁶ In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, the provision of comprehensive psycho-social care services, through the 'healing from wounds of life' approach, which engaged both women and men in community-based therapeutic processes, had transformative effects on norms governing spousal relationships, including on consensual sex, non-violent communication and spousal violence.⁷⁷
- (iii) Legal reforms and implementation of legal guarantees: Where laws are discriminatory against women or other marginalized groups, the elimination of that legal discrimination supports change to social norms, though it is rarely automatic or instantaneous. The relationship between social norms and law is bi-directional. Sometimes legal change precedes and influences changes in social norms; in other cases, legal change is possible because social norms have already shifted. Laws also pose a risk to marginalized groups when they are discriminatory, and so laws are also a location for change.

UN Women's research suggests that legal or policy changes influence changes in social norms in three ways: First, they support claims-making by women, girls and those marginalized on account of gender inequality. For example, in **Egypt**, where laws and norms derive from religion, an egalitarian interpretation of religious texts to inform secular laws was seen as a crucial pathway to change norms about family life. The subsequent legal reform granting women the right to divorce on an equal basis with men is being used by women to negotiate within their families to negotiate and demand better treatment. Second, laws create rights holders and provide mandates and instructions for state actors to implement the law or policy. For example, in **India**, the constitutional guarantee of the right to education for all children was used to mobilize law enforcement agencies to challenge discriminatory norms embedded in the school system and the wider community, ultimately leading to universalizing education for girls in three districts of Telangana State and changing norms there about girls' education at multiple levels: family, community and the state. Third, laws send a message to the public about what is acceptable and what is not, contributing to building narratives on equality and non-discrimination. Evidence on legal reforms regarding intimate partner violence (IPV) suggests that even weakly enforced laws can contribute to changing social norms. Throughout the world, legal reforms have offered a concrete alternative where IPV is increasingly questioned, problematized and condemned by law. Even though IPV persists, more women are reporting, it is becoming less acceptable and data from some countries indicate that prevalence is declining.⁷⁸

Notably, research shows that when accompanied by a social process of proposal-making, advocacy and debate surrounding the law, the enactment of a new law makes people aware

of changing norms and practices. For example, in **Argentina**, feminist activists pursued 'social decriminalization'⁷⁹ of abortion, building a broad consensus on the acceptability of abortion to push the National Congress to legally decriminalize it, a move that in itself is a shift in norms, paving the way for legal access to abortion for women, non-binary and trans persons.⁸⁰

2.2.3. Strengthening countervailing power: Empowering feminist movements and building coalitions

Since the unequal distribution of power and privilege is central to social norms, and negotiations over social norms are an exercise in power, their transformation requires the redistribution of power and the strengthening of countervailing power. A critical and organized mass of activists and supporters who can challenge the power of vested interests and institutions is crucial.⁸¹ This has included organizing and empowering marginalized people and strengthening women's rights movements, as well as mobilizing solidarity from other social movements, to collectively push those with power to change the 'rules of the game'. These approaches are based on an understanding of the need for marginalized people to unleash the 'power within', through the development of transformative identities, healing and critical self-reflections, as well as facilitating 'power with', through self-organization of marginalized groups and building coalitions for collective action.⁸² Developing the collective leadership of women, girls and those marginalized on account of gender is a common feature of these initiatives. Strengthening countervailing power involves:

- (i) Empowering and building solidarity: In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, women affected by conflict, including women survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and IPV, were collectivized as peer supporters. While being offered services to heal from their trauma, they were

also coached in participating in and taking leadership of the community-based Peace Monitoring Committees.⁸³ Speaking about and seeking support for IPV was normalized, and women's collective activism contributed to changing norms on women's role in social life and on the acceptability of violence against women. Women's self-identity and labelling underwent a change from the status of 'victims' facing social ostracism to 'survivors' and 'agents of change', through which they could play crucial roles in community leadership.

In **India**, children's participation and exercise of agency were indispensable in bringing about a transformation in their own lives and in building new social norms in the community. Adolescent Girls' Committees, organized by the girls themselves, were supported to analyse gender issues and the struggle against patriarchy and were better able to resist pressures for early marriage from their families.⁸⁴ As a group, they provided mutual support to each other, intervening with families and mobilizing child protection services to prevent early marriages and defend their right to education by, for example, successfully petitioning for transport facilities between their villages and schools.

- (ii) Building coalitions with a range of social movements, collectives and allies: There is strong research evidence that building coalitions between feminist networks and other social justice movements and collectives is key to challenging and transforming social norms. In **Argentina**, the national campaign to legalize abortion⁸⁵ was part of what became known as the Green Tide movement and involved building coalitions with sexual and reproductive rights organizations as well as with labour unions, human rights organizations, professional associations, political parties and movements for social and racial justice, all of which helped build support for abortion rights across society.⁸⁶

There is also evidence that feminist engagement with allies within institutions of power supports social norms change. In **Egypt**, feminists mobilized a diverse coalition of activists, lawyers, government officials, civic leaders, legislators and scholars as well as working with high-ranking religious leaders and officials, a majority of whom were men, facilitating deliberations based on feminist interpretation of religious texts to make women's right to divorce a legal reality.

In **India**, grassroots organizations invoked secular public institutions such as *Gram Panchayats* (elected local government) to counter the power of de facto traditional institutions that were gatekeeping caste and gender norms (caste *panchayats*) and establish new values of gender equality for adolescent girls. In addition, every social network in the community – women's groups, self-help groups, youth associations and farmers' associations as well as formal networks such as parent-teachers associations and school management committees – was mobilized to form local pressure groups to resist discriminatory norms and promote new norms in favour of girls' education and delayed marriages.⁸⁷

- (iii) Growing movements from local to national to transnational: This is an important strategy for building a powerful critical mass and solidarity. In **Argentina**, the Green Tide for abortion rights spread across borders as the growth of the movement in one country emboldened initiatives in neighbouring countries, changing laws and norms along the way.⁸⁸ In **Brazil**, the feminist agro-ecological movement includes women farmers' collectives in rural areas as well as the Women's Working Group in the National Network for Agroecology, which facilitates the representation of women farmers' interests in national policy on agriculture and agroecology.⁸⁹ In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, larger, urban and relatively better-resourced women's

organizations supported the strengthening of collectives of women survivors in neighbouring villages, extending solidarity, exchanging ideas and creating access to gender-based violence response services.⁹⁰ Musawah, the global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family, was started by a national level women's organization in **Malaysia**. The global movement has since put its weight behind women's movements in many countries to reform discriminatory Muslim laws and change social norms in families.⁹¹

- (iv) Mobilizing men and boys to challenge discrimination embedded in institutions, including through strategic engagement with male-dominated power structures as well as by cultivating collective solidarity within the wider population. Men are engaged not as individuals or exclusively in the context of their interpersonal relationships with women but in their various roles in social institutions. Shared vulnerabilities, including on account of other social hierarchies (e.g., class, race or caste) and the mutual need for justice and healing have been used to mobilize men's and boys' support to end discrimination against girls and women. For example, in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, in addition to the focus on the empowerment of women survivors of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence and IPV, entire village communities were treated as a unit on the basis of their collective experience of trauma caused by armed conflict.⁹² Addressing conflict-related trauma experienced by both men and women, through the use of the 'healing from wounds of life' methodology for community-based psychosocial healing, was an effective entry point for their collective reflections on women's trauma and men's accountability for IPV. Men were also strategically included in participatory processes where contradictions between existing inequalitarian narratives and their lived realities were made visible, paving the way for the emergence of new narratives.

In **Brazil**, feminist agroecologists included the husbands and children of women farmers in community dialogue circles where data from agroecological logbooks were analysed and discussed. Government and non-governmental organizations-appointed rural extension and technical service agents, who were almost exclusively men, were also engaged in the logbook exercises.⁹³ The participation of men – from across the institutions of the family, community, state and market – in the analysis of the data was a key strategy for shifting dominant narratives and norms about family farms and women's role in agriculture. In **Egypt**, where power over legislation and religious and political discourse on family and marriage norms was vested among political leaders, parliamentarians, religious and legal scholars – most of whom were men – the feminist movement mobilized these powerful men and sympathetic allies to open pathways to change.⁹⁴

This section has analysed and synthesized the key learnings from the research that UN Women commissioned on how change happens on social norms. It has identified three key approaches to catalyse such change – transforming narratives, changing material conditions in women's lives and strengthening countervailing power – and has unpacked each of these approaches, using the different country contexts that were studied. As well as examining each of these approaches individually, it is important to see that these three approaches do not work in isolation but rather come together in different ways to transform social norms. For example, only working to shift narratives on girls' education or child marriage, without the work to change institutions at multiple levels and to build the countervailing power of adolescent girls and key allies, would not have made the change that the MVF achieved in **India**. In every context, in different ways, these three approaches are interlinked and interdependent.

The specific strategies and tactics employed to change social norms will always be context-specific and often need to be flexible to adapt to dynamic social contexts. In addition, the work has involved two different and seemingly contradictory but carefully adopted strategies, often simultaneously – peaceful dialogues and consensus building as well as protests and angry opposition – with the very same institutions and the powerful who uphold discriminatory norms: political leaders, government agencies, local councils and governments, employers and corporate firms and even members of the family.

Given that pathways to social norms change are highly context-specific, nuanced and complex, the following questions then arise: How can changes in social norms be measured? How do researchers, activists and practitioners know if their work is making a difference? The next section seeks to answer these questions. For UN Women, this is important not only to measure its own work and contributions to social norms change but also to explore the potential to develop sophisticated measures of social norms change for broader application.

2.3. HOW HAS SOCIAL NORMS CHANGE BEEN MEASURED?

2.3.1. Challenges with conventional measurement models

As interest in social norms has grown in international development organizations, so have efforts to measure them and the extent to which they are being changed. Therefore, UN Women commissioned an in-depth review of the methodologies used.⁹⁵ This found that, despite their proliferation, many suffer from inherent limitations and are largely detached from the way social norms change is understood by scholar-practitioners engaged in this work, particularly in the Global South.⁹⁶ The paper identified four key shortcomings in

efforts by the international development community:⁹⁷ (i) inconsistencies in definitions and measures of social norms; (ii) unclear causal pathways, including about the role of tradition and institutions at various levels; (iii) poorly evidenced or conceptually under-justified recommendations, including in relation to the role of legal reform and private sector actors; and (iv) the failure to consistently consider or measure the role of collective agency and contentious politics in social norm change.

As discussed in section 1, much of the work to change discriminatory social norms promoted by global development institutions is framed, and therefore measured, in terms of the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, with a focus on ‘ordinary’ people, as opposed to those that wield power, and often measured through attitudes surveys. Such surveys, by their own admission, do not really capture change in social norms, failing to take account of norms embedded in social institutions or measure complex social change over time. In addition to being poor proxies for social norms, individual-focused attitude surveys suffer from multiple other limitations, including that: (i) they often capture responses at the surface level of consciousness, relying on generalized abstract statements that may not reflect actual social practice or deeply held beliefs; (ii) respondents may provide answers they believe are socially acceptable rather than their true opinions, leading to an over-estimation of social consensus; (iii) contradictions in attitudes, which are important for understanding potential sources of change, are often excluded as ‘random noise’ during the scaling process; and (iv) they typically emphasize averages, ignoring the degree of variation in attitudes that can conceal significant differences within groups.⁹⁸

The assessment of people’s attitudes can be one useful component for understanding social norms and their influence over these attitudes (as shown by the example of Mexico in section 2.3.2). However, evidence suggests that discerning the link between

a reported attitude and social norms requires more robust methodology than individual surveys. This includes information on other indicators including, crucially, data on tangible gender-related practices such as on division of labour in the household, experience of violence or workforce participation.⁹⁹

2.3.2. Alternative methods for measuring social norms change

The work of scholar-practitioners in the Global South reveals three key features of their efforts to measure social norms change: (i) they do not diagnose or measure norms and norms change per se but are able to tell compelling stories of how change happened and gauge that norms have changed while measuring gender equality outcomes; (ii) their indicators for assessing change in social norms are aligned with their approaches to changing them; and (iii) measurement of social norms change serves a clear purpose for the beneficiary group, reflecting their priorities and using methodologies that contribute to their empowerment.¹⁰⁰ An overarching finding from the UN Women paper on measurement is also that since social norms change requires long-term interventions, methodologies for measuring social norms need to have longitudinal dimensions.

The following examples present the indicators used and/or proposed in the research commissioned by UN Women, indicating how the indicators align with the three pathways of change (see section 2.2).

The work of **Musawah**, the global network of Islamic feminists, suggests that norms change can be discerned through measuring the following:¹⁰¹

- Changes in public discourse on religion and gender (narrative shifts) by analysing, for instance, public pronouncements of state-appointed officials such as those in the Ministries of Religious Affairs, the Grand Imams of religious institutions, Muftis and religious councils and their representatives to the public.

Other spaces where public discourse can be tracked are Sharia court judgments, curricula of state-owned religious and non-religious schools and universities and social media.

- Changes in law and policies related to women's rights (material and/or narrative shifts) by tracking changes in laws, policies and ministerial decrees, including on compliance with the law, and tracking how women are using the law and whether courts are granting women provisions by law. An assessment of women's use of the (new) law granting women the right to no-fault divorce in Egypt found that the law had restored "a certain equality between husband and wife". It allowed the wife "to strengthen her place within the couple", to put "pressure on the husband to spend more on the family", to circumvent obedience cases filed by husbands in court and/or to access social security support available to women divorcees.¹⁰²
- Changes in the lived realities of women and families in the specific context (prevalence) by tracking the decrease in prevalence of domestic violence against women, which is one of the objectives of the legal reform, as well as changes in women's lives that create the 'conditions of possibility for transformation', including for instance, numbers of women in decision-making, women's ownership of land and property and guardianship transactions by women on behalf of their children.

MVF in India ascertains changes in social norms on girls' education and early marriage through measuring a combination of the following:¹⁰³

- Government functionaries defending the rights of girls, and traditionally conservative bodies such as caste *panchayats* and priests arguing against early marriage and refusing to solemnize marriages of minors (narrative/material shifts)

- Action taken by families, communities and local governments to demand/ensure good quality education for adolescent girls or to prevent early marriages (countervailing power)
- Adolescent girls and their groups pushing back against child marriage and in favour of continuing education (countervailing power)
- Increased school attendance and retention and decreased incidence of child labour and early marriage (prevalence rates)

Similar sets of indicators emerge from feminist research carried out in **Mexico** to ascertain how norms on IPV had changed.¹⁰⁴ Three intersecting pathways were identified: (i) public demand for new legislation, including extensive media coverage (narrative shift); (ii) mass mobilization by feminist movements (countervailing power); and (iii) enactment and implementation of the law (material shift). Based on analysis of over three decades of existing data collected exclusively from women through a national survey (ENDIREH¹⁰⁵), the research presents a cautiously optimistic assessment of the emergence of new norms on violence against women (VAW) in the country, following the enactment of legislation in 2007, based on the following indicators:

- Increase in the proportion of women who learned about legislation to protect their rights (narrative shift)
- Shift in attitudes condoning violence (narrative shift)
- Decline in the share of women experiencing IPV (prevalence)
- Increase in reporting rates (prevalence)

This example highlights how changes in attitudes, when combined with a broader set of indicators – in this case, prevalence of violence experienced and prevalence of reporting – can be useful for fully capturing change in social norms.

2.3.3. Towards a nuanced approach to measuring social norms change

Findings from UN Women's research suggests that a nuanced approach to measurement is needed, grounded in a robust understanding of social norms change and tailored to different contexts and programmes. Such a nuanced approach is currently being piloted by UN Women in Nepal through the Storytelling Initiative, which draws on the country's long tradition of storytelling and uses it as a tool for data collection and analysis.¹⁰⁶

Aligning with the feminist principles that guided UN Women's learning phase (see section 1), the three pathways of social norms change (see section 2) and lessons emerging from UN Women's research and pilot on measurement, the following principles and sets of indicators are proposed for developing a sophisticated method for understanding and measuring social norms change in specific programmes as well as at a broader level.

Principles for measuring social norms

- **Inclusive:** A range of voices needs to be included in assessing social norms and social norms change, stretching beyond the most influential international organizations, academics and development funders. Centring the expertise of those leading change on the ground in designing models for measurement, as well as collecting and analysing data, would enable the generation of context-informed and meaningful data.
- **Purposeful:** The purpose of efforts to measure and report on social norms change, beyond accountability to member States and donors, is to contribute to the empowerment of women, girls and others marginalized on account of gender inequality. Notably, this requires the use of horizontal, participatory methodologies that prompt collective reflection. The purpose of measuring social

norms change is not to compare and rank countries across the world but to allow for a deeper understanding of diverse social norms in different contexts and track where – and, most importantly, how – change is happening.

- Combined research methods: Measuring changes in social norms requires a combination of research methods, giving weight to those that produce the fullest understanding of complex social situations. A combination of quantitative, ethnographic, life-history, media and institutional studies is more likely to deepen understanding of the social norms implicated in gender equality and women’s empowerment and normative change than quantitative methods alone.¹⁰⁷
- Longitudinal: Given that social norms change over long periods of time – sometimes over decades – measurement requires longitudinal tracking.¹⁰⁸ This could be achieved through retrospective analysis of existing data-sets, as in the case of research on VAW norms in Mexico and through research that

accompanies long-term interventions such as those described in UN Women’s research from Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt and India.

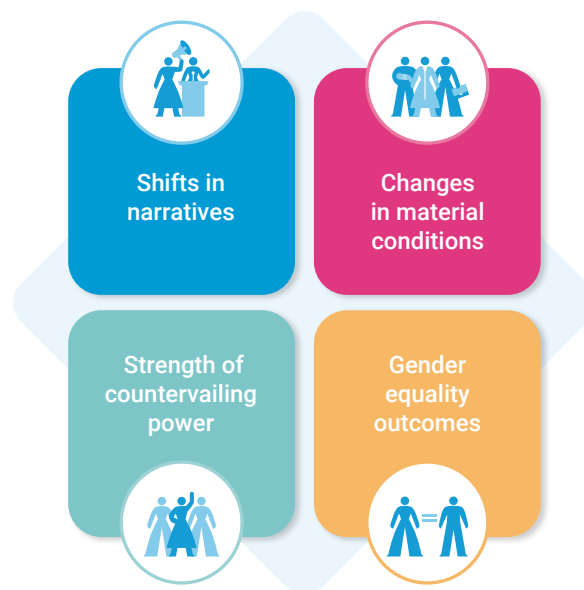
A set of indicators to tell the story of change

Any effort to measure social norms change should look at three sets of indicators – corresponding with the three pathways of change – that will collectively show that social norms have changed (see Figure 3). In addition, a fourth set of indicators is required to triangulate the findings: gender equality outcomes. In each case, the indicators need to be tailored to the specific context and discriminatory norms that are targeted for change.

- Shifts in narratives on the place of women and men in different social institutions: *Whether the discourse on gender and social institutions has changed across institutional sites.* This would include tracking arguments, justifications, stories, language, symbols and so on that defend or oppose gender-egalitarian or gender-discriminatory ideas in political discourse in parliaments; legal arguments

FIGURE 3

Indicators for measuring social norms change



and decisions in courts; discourse within companies, industries, financial institutions and advertising; discourse in arts, media, including digital media, and literature; discourse in religious entities; discourse among civil society organizations, trade unions and village councils; and discourse within households, clans and kinships.

- Changes in material conditions in the lived realities of women, girls and those marginalized on account of gender inequality: *Whether structural changes have been made in the social institutions of the family, community, market and state to enable women's equitable role in those institutions.* Depending on what norm is being tracked or targeted, this could include data on some of the following: the availability of jobs/income-earning opportunities for women; affirmative action for women's participation; availability of appropriate care infrastructure; safety measures to enable women's mobility and use of public spaces; enactment and implementation of legal and policy provisions and entitlements to secure women's equal place in all social institutions; policy changes for the redistribution of land; access to education, training and skills; access to gender-transformative services, financing, technology and so on.
- Strength of countervailing power/strength of contentious and collective action in the negotiation over social norms: *Whether a critical and organized mass of activists, organizations and allies are pushing back on inegalitarian norms and advocating for egalitarian norms across institutional sites.* This includes, for example, the strength and growth of feminist women's movements (visibility, reach and resources); strength of collectives of women and allies in support of gender equality and women's empowerment in various entities of the state, market, religion,

community and family; and advocacy in favour of this by a wide range of social justice movements, other collectives, diverse stakeholders, within their own spaces and at local, regional, national or international levels.

- Changes in outcomes in the lives of women, girls and those marginalized on account of gender inequality. *Whether the changes in narratives, the material conditions of women, girls and those marginalized on account of gender inequality and the presence of strong social movements in favour of egalitarian norms have ultimately led to actual changes in the lives of women.* These could include indicators on the prevalence of, for instance, IPV and other forms of gender-based violence or of women living in poverty; progress towards gender parity in, for instance, land ownership, labour force participation, elected leadership and representation in political, economic, peace and development decision-making spaces; and other gender equality outcomes such as a more equal distribution of care work, a narrowing of the gender pay gap, changes in age at marriage and increases in secondary school completion.

Having described the findings from UN Women's research on what social norms are, how they change and how they can be measured, the next section outlines UN Women's new framework for addressing discriminatory social norms.

3

**UN WOMEN'S
STRATEGIC PATHWAYS
FOR TRANSFORMING
SOCIAL NORMS**

Based on evidence generated from expert scholars-practitioners leading change on the ground (see section 2), UN Women's framework for addressing social norms will focus on social institutions as sites of change, countering discriminatory ideologies and narratives and redistributing power in the control of and influence over norms. The framework aims to address discriminatory social norms to achieve substantive gender equality and the equal valuing of women, girls and other marginalized groups. It will:

- **Guide UN Women's work:** It provides a structured approach to help UN Women strengthen existing initiatives and develop new programmes to address and transform discriminatory social norms.
- **Improve reporting and measurement:** It will enable UN Women to report on its contributions to social norms change more accurately and meaningfully and proposes a nuanced methodology for measuring social norms change.
- **Inform and influence global discourse:** It aims to inform the broader international development community and United Nations system to adopt a more holistic and effective approach to changing discriminatory social norms.
- **Provide the basis for partnerships and joint work on social norms:** It is a proposal to the United Nations system from UN Women, as the lead agency on gender equality and women's rights, to work together to achieve change on discriminatory social norms.

Programmatic guidance materials for applying the framework to different thematic areas and technical support for developing and implementing the strategies will be made available across the organization.

3.1. AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH: CHANGING THE RULES OF THE GAME

UN Women will adopt an institutional approach to address and transform discriminatory social norms implicated in gender equality and women's empowerment across all its work. Decolonized, participatory, context-informed solutions will be pursued in collaboration with a diverse set of partners across institutional sites, while centring and aligning with the broader vision, ideals and principles of social justice and human rights enshrined in every context, especially through state and non-state actors driving and defending gender equality and women's empowerment.

- **Target of change:** UN Women will seek to transform the discriminatory norms that structure and influence the functioning of all social institutions: the state, market, religion, community and family. Exclusion of women and other marginalized people, and privileging of patriarchal masculinities¹⁰⁹ in the practices and narratives of social institutions, will be addressed through the three inter-linked pathways for change: transforming narratives, changing material conditions in lived realities of women and girls and strengthening countervailing power that demand change.
- **Sites of change:** UN Women will support interventions in and through the state and its political entities; the market and its private and public sector entities; religion and its organizations; the community and its various groups; and the family in all its diverse forms (see Figure 4).
- **Drivers of change:** Organizations and people across institutional sites who are committed to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment will be the key drivers of change. UN Women will mobilize, convene and support organizations across institutional sites, as well as scholars, activists and

FIGURE 4

Entities across institutional sites, to illustrate where UN Women will focus efforts to change discriminatory social norms



practitioners – particularly those committed to feminist principles of intersectional equality, justice and fairness – to drive the transformation of narratives, change lived realities and strengthen collective demands for egalitarian social norms.

3.2. THREE PATHWAYS FOR TRANSFORMING DISCRIMINATORY SOCIAL NORMS

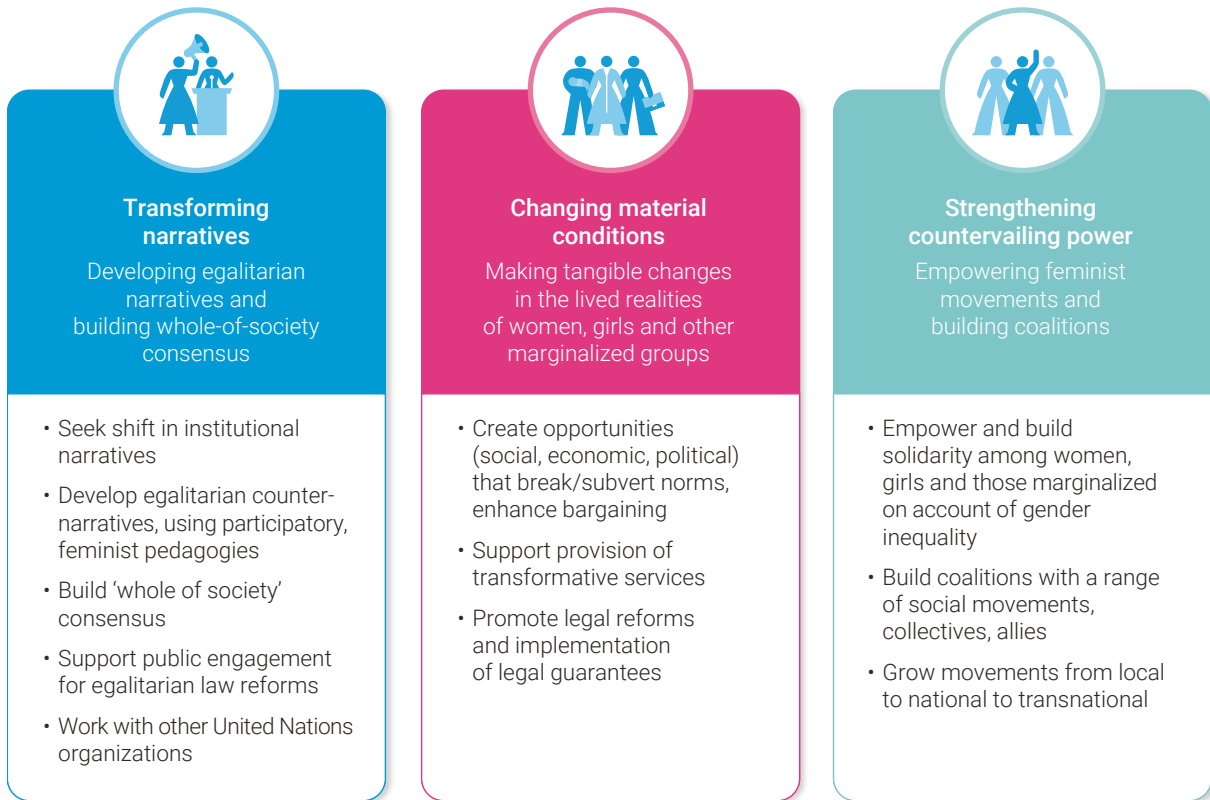
UN Women will work on the three interconnected pathways identified through the research discussed in section 2 – transforming narratives, changing material conditions in lived realities and strengthening countervailing power – to achieve transformative

change in social norms throughout its work (see Figure 5). While elements of the three pathways are already being pursued across the various interventions by UN Women (see Figures 6, 7 and 8), going forward the entity will pursue integration of all three across all its initiatives.

Since the three pathways feed into each other, UN Women – in consultation with governments, local experts and partners – will identify the most appropriate entry points depending on the context and issues being addressed. For example, analysis of a particular context may indicate that the most effective starting point is the development of a new counter-narrative around which consensus can be built. The process of doing so may support

FIGURE 5

UN Women's pathways for social norms change



the building of countervailing power, which together with an effective counter-narrative can trigger policy and technical solutions to shift material conditions. Entry points and the sequencing of change will vary and may also shift and change in the process.

3.2.1. Pathway 1: Transforming narratives through the development of egalitarian narratives and building whole-of-society consensus

Egalitarian narratives and consensus-building with the whole of society can transform discriminatory norms by supporting: (i) Participatory critiques of discriminatory narratives promoted by powerful actors, exposing myths and disinformation by providing facts and promoting alternative, egalitarian values; and (ii) the emergence of new narratives,

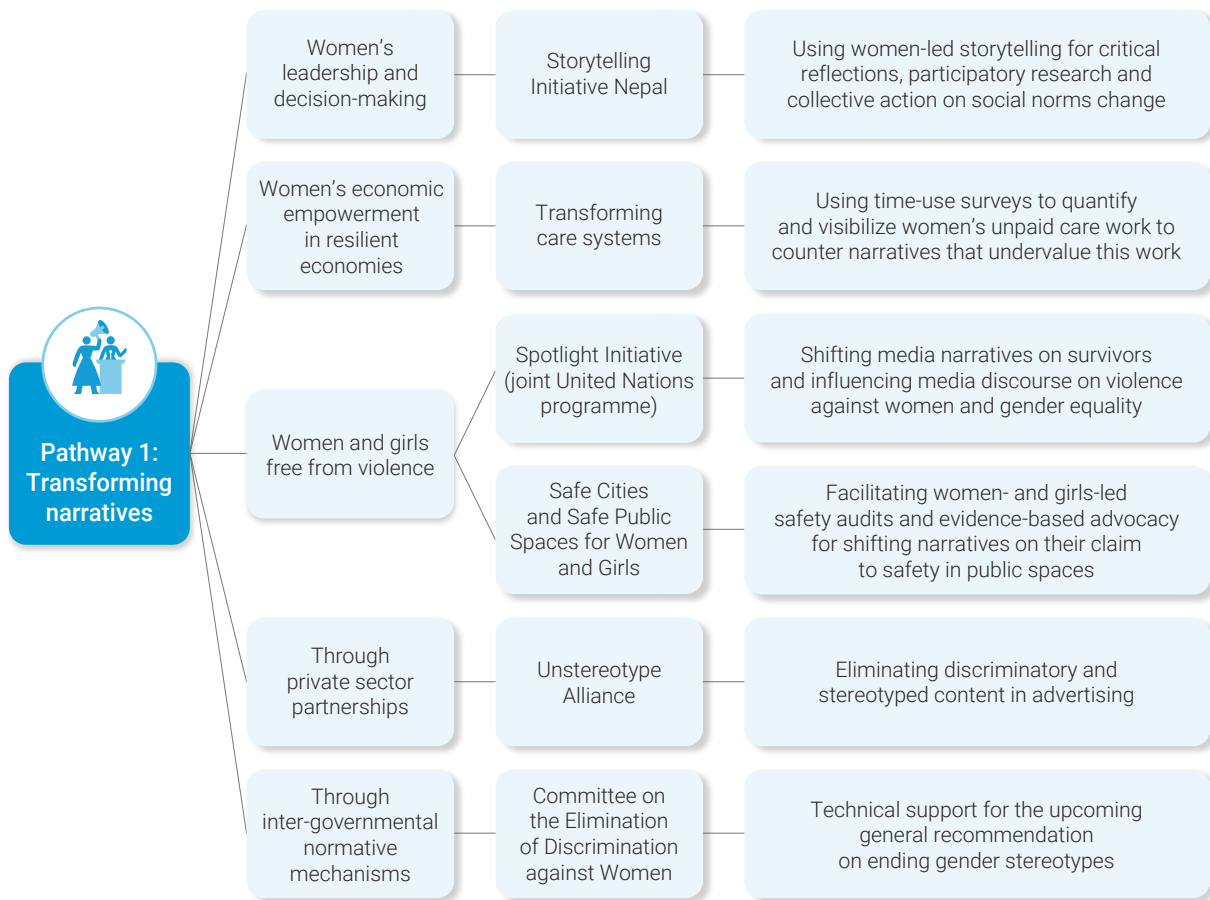
supported by large groups of people from diverse walks of life, which can push and influence powerful institutions and people to change and catalyse technical and policy solutions from the bottom up.

UN Women will strengthen existing work towards shifting narratives (see Figure 6) through more intentional actions in the following areas:

- Taking whole-of society approaches to support critical reflections with women and men in legislative, executive and judicial bodies, firms, companies and enterprises, religious organizations and associations as well as community-based entities and in households
- Supporting the participatory development and dissemination of egalitarian counter-narratives and challenge

FIGURE 6

Transforming narratives: Illustrative examples from promising work of UN Women



misinformation and disinformation in and through public, private and civil society organizations

- Strengthening public engagement in favour of legal reforms and boosting the uptake and implementation of laws to make people aware of changing norms and practices
- Working with and throughout the United Nations system through joint UN-programming and technical support to inter-governmental and human rights bodies such as the CEDAW Committee, the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

3.2.2. Pathway 2: Changing material conditions through tangible changes in the lived realities of women, girls and other marginalized groups

Increasing women's access to entitlements over tangible social, economic and political resources and opportunities transforms norms in three ways: (i) Redistributing resources equitably and creating tangible opportunities for women and girls subverts discriminatory social norms that exclude women and paves the way for more egalitarian norms; (ii) provision of good quality services for women challenges norms that entitle men as the only recipients of social services and exclude or stigmatize women accessing services for their well-being,

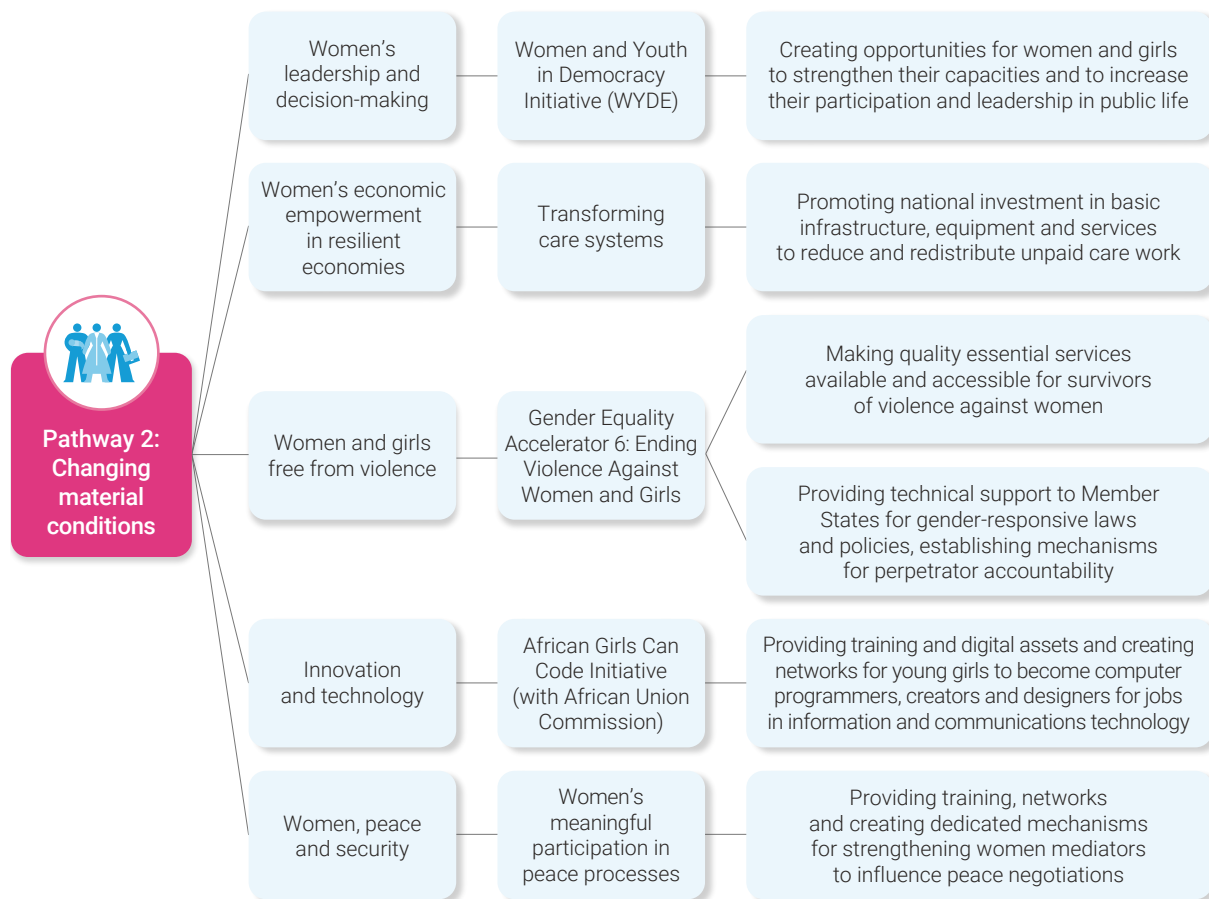
protection and empowerment; and (iii) non-discriminatory laws (especially if they are effectively implemented) provide a legitimate source of egalitarian norms and new and enforceable rights as well as ensuring the accountability of duty-bearers, enabling people to challenge and reject discriminatory norms.

UN Women will strengthen existing work towards changing lived realities (see Figure 7) through more intentional actions in the following areas:

- Supporting policies for increasing women’s control over land and other assets and for the creation of jobs and other income opportunities for women that will allow them to be breadwinners and benefit from emerging and better paying jobs in the future
- Promoting investments in infrastructure and equal opportunities for balanced representation and leadership of women in decision-making in political bodies (parliaments, parties, councils, etc.), public offices (courts, police, hospitals, etc.) and across civil society spaces (faith-based organizations, education and academia, media – conventional and digital – sports, arts, literature, etc.)
- Eliminating discrimination embedded in the availability, provision, design, logistics, security and cost, as well as legal and bureaucratic obstacles, in access to social, economic and protection services for women, girls and other marginalized groups

FIGURE 7

Changing material conditions: Illustrative examples from promising work of UN Women



- Providing technical support to member States for the elimination of any discrimination embedded in law, promulgation of legislation that prohibits discrimination and strengthened implementation of laws.

3.2.3. Pathway 3: Strengthening countervailing power through empowering feminist movements and building coalitions

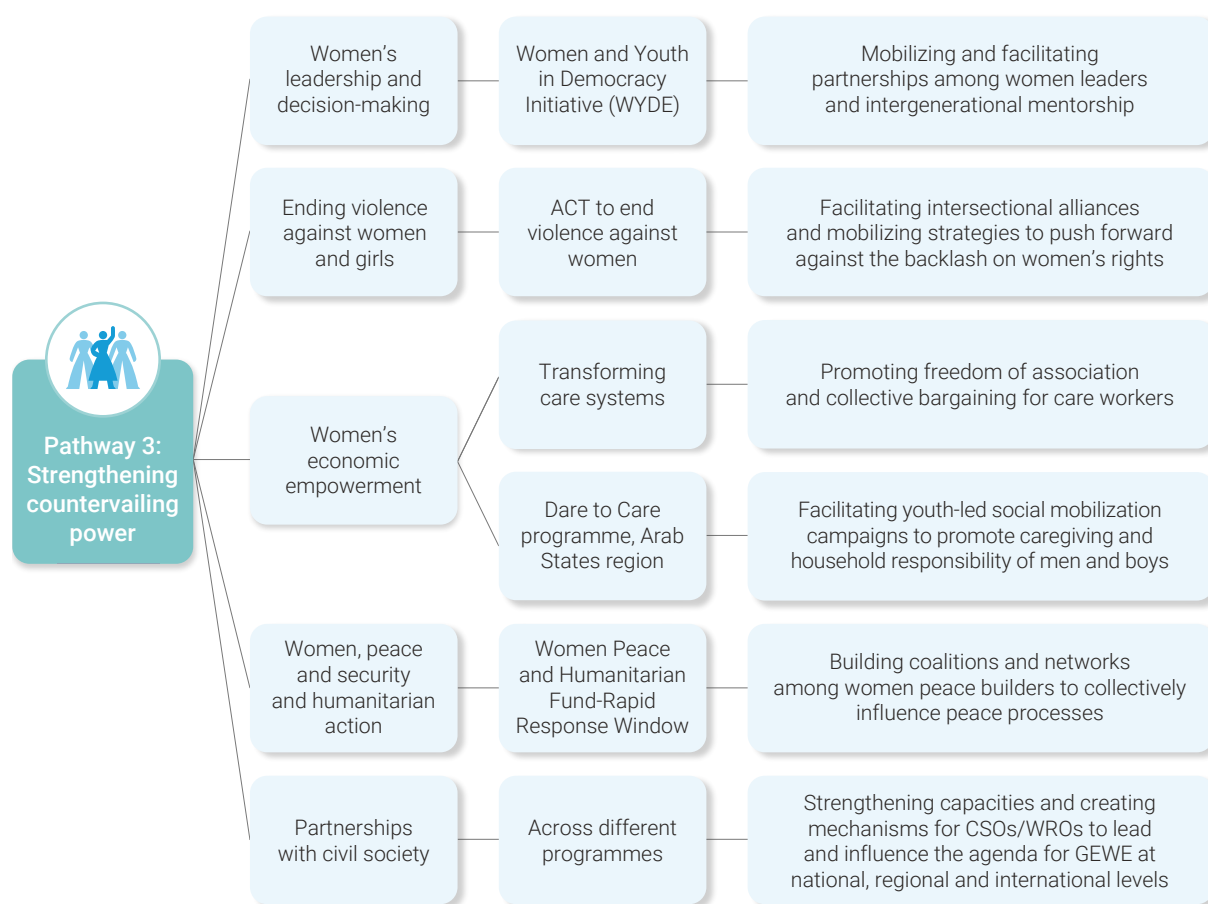
Challenging and shifting power imbalances in social institutions and in control over norms and narratives can transform discriminatory norms in the following ways: (i) The creation of a large group of

people across institutional sites who represent the voices, interests and perspectives of the marginalized groups and their allies can break the monopoly of the powerful over norms; (ii) self-organization and collective leadership and action empowers people to challenge discriminatory norms in private and public spaces, often mitigating the cost to individuals of going against dominant norms; and (iii) enhanced sense and expression of agency by women, girls and marginalized people challenges norms that rob women of control over their lives.

UN Women will build on existing work to strengthen countervailing power (see Figure 8) through more intentional actions in the following areas:

FIGURE 8

Strengthening countervailing power: Illustrative examples from promising work of UN Women



Note: CSOs: civil society organizations; GEWE: gender equality and women's empowerment; WROs: women's rights organizations.

- Facilitating collective empowerment through participatory and feminist consciousness-building methodologies, strengthening networks and collective action among women, girls and other marginalized groups at local, national and transnational levels
- Building critical mass in favour of egalitarian norms through strengthening coalitions between women's rights organizations and other social justice organizations and with diverse stakeholders committed to gender equality from the public, civil society and private sectors
- Mobilizing allyship with formal and informal peer networks of men and boys across community networks, labour unions, members of parliament, members of religious groups, members of business and industry collectives, sporting associations and other peer collectives.

4

IMPLEMENTATION AND MEASUREMENT

4.1. EMBEDDING THE SOCIAL NORMS FRAMEWORK ACROSS UN WOMEN'S TRIPLE MANDATE

UN Women will embed this framework across its triple mandate, all thematic and impact areas as well as the Gender Equality Accelerators (see Table 2).

Three sets of action will be required to implement the framework across the organization: reframing existing work, developing new work and informing the discourse on social norms in international development. Across all sets of action, it will be important to resist the temptation to focus exclusively on the low-hanging fruit and the least powerful actors, namely individuals and families, and instead target the more powerful institutions of the state, the market and religion at national level as well as through transnational interventions. UN Women should move beyond changing and measuring individual attitudes and focus more on changing and measuring how social institutions are structured to improve the lived realities of women and girls, transforming and measuring changes in narratives and strengthening countervailing power in favour of gender equality.

4.1.1. Reframe

UN Women will reframe its existing work – both the design of programmes and the reporting against them – to more accurately and compellingly describe its efforts to change discriminatory social norms.

Concrete actions to support this goal include:

- Conducting a comprehensive institutional analysis of social norms implicated in gender equality and women's empowerment across different intervention areas and contexts, covering all relevant social institutions. Such an assessment in existing programmes will indicate any modifications that could be introduced in the current phase and/or set the stage for designing subsequent phases. Guidance will be developed on how to conduct an institutional assessment of social norms implicated in gender equality and women's empowerment.
- Mapping how programme/policy design align with the three pathways of change and assess whether any element/s are missing or their integration could be strengthened. Proofs of concept will be developed for the application of the new framework in existing programmes, including all the Gender Equality Accelerators and the entity's approach to 'Transforming Patriarchal Masculinities'.

TABLE 2

Applying the framework across UN Women's triple mandate

Normative	Coordination	Operational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informing global, regional and national normative frameworks • Supporting treaty bodies (e.g., CEDAW) and intergovernmental bodies (e.g., CSW) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative knowledge and evidence building on social norms change • Joint-United Nations efforts to transform discriminatory social norms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmes across thematic areas and Gender Equality Accelerators • Policy and advocacy at national, regional and global levels • Research and data initiatives on social norms

Note: CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; CSW: Commission on the Status of Women.

4.1.2. Develop

UN Women will develop new work in programme, policy, advocacy and research around the framework.

Concrete actions to support this goal include:

- Integrating the new framework into the new global Strategic Plan 2026–2029 and the upcoming regional and country strategic notes. The three strategic outcomes in the new Strategic Plan – on norms, institutions and women’s agency and access to assets, resources and services – lend themselves well to this integration.
- Developing new and adjusting existing global, regional and country-level programmes informed by this framework. This has already started through the development of proofs of concept for applying the framework to the global programme on transforming care systems, Gender Equality Accelerator 6: Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, and the Women and Youth Democratic Engagement Programme (WYDE), among others.
- Expanding research on how change happens to other thematic areas under-represented in research done so far (for example, in the areas of women’s political participation and women, peace and security and humanitarian action).
- Exploring new methods for measuring social norms change supported by UN Women’s interventions, building on the research already conducted and the analysis in this paper.

4.1.3. Inform

UN Women will inform and contribute to the expansion of national, regional and global discourse on social norms.

Concrete actions to support this goal include:

- Publishing and disseminating new research and the framework on social norms
- Convening inclusive knowledge building and exchange around social norms change, particularly as it applies to gender equality and women’s empowerment
- Driving a more holistic and effective approach to changing discriminatory social norms implicated in gender equality within the United Nations system, including through joint programmes and the Gender Equality Accelerators
- Providing inputs and technical support to the United Nations treaty bodies (e.g., the CEDAW Committee), inter-governmental bodies (e.g., the HRC, the CSW) and United Nations special rapporteurs on transforming discriminatory social norms
- Informing and encouraging governments and donors to make long-term investments in transforming discriminatory norms.

4.2. MEASURING UN WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIAL NORMS CHANGE

Based on lessons emerging from research on measuring social norms change, and the corporate strategy on social norms change (see section 3), UN Women will adopt a dual approach to the measurement of social norms change. First, through the Integrated Results and Resources Framework (IRRF) that accompanies UN Women’s Strategic Plan 2026–2029, the entity will monitor progress on selected indicators that lend themselves to tracking on an annual basis. And second, to complement this annual tracking, the entity will develop new approaches based on lessons learned (see section 3) to uncover, capture and communicate compelling stories of how social norms change through specific programmes and pilots.

The new IRRF of UN Women has integrated key elements from the entity's strategy for addressing discriminatory social norms across its three systemic outcomes. Annual tracking and reporting through the IRRF will help measure UN Women's contributions to social norms change as follows:

- Indicators for outcome 1 [Protect and advance normative frameworks, laws and policies for women's and girls' rights] will track progress on egalitarian norms and standards, which will also indicate UN Women's efforts towards shifting narratives (pathway 1 of social norms change).
- Indicators for outcome 2 [Strengthen institutions to drive accountability through financing, data and practices that support gender equality] will track UN Women's contribution to holding institutions accountable and will thereby track social norms changes at the institutional level.
- Indicators for outcome 3 [Support women's agency and access to quality services, resources and assets] will track UN Women's contribution to strengthening women's agency and access to assets, resources and services, thereby tracking the social norms change pathways 2 and 3 (changing material conditions and strengthening countervailing power).

UN Women will measure its contributions to all three pathways through specific programmes focusing on social norms change at country, regional or global levels. Research and/or evaluations accompanying programmes will develop context- and issue-specific indicators under each pathway (see section 2.3.3 for an illustrative list of indicators) and select context-appropriate methodologies to tell in-depth stories of change.

In addition, building on the insights emerging from the Storytelling Initiative implemented by UN Women in Nepal,¹¹⁰ a couple of countries in each region will pilot participatory, context-specific methodologies

for tracking social norms change aligned with this framework. Such pilots will allow for long-term, longitudinal studies that simultaneously empower marginalized groups and reflect their priorities.

ENDNOTES

- 1 UN Women 2021.
- 2 UN Women 2025a.
- 3 UN Women 2025b.
- 4 In addition to consultative webinars through the global community of practice, lessons from the research and the expert group meeting, the building blocks of an approach for UN Women were discussed through consultations involving thematic leads and senior leadership from across regional and country offices as well as at head office.
- 5 These include consultations with (grant) partners of the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls and partners of the Storytelling Initiative in Nepal.
- 6 Ladysmith 2023.
- 7 These are programmes implemented by UN Women offices in Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Ethiopia, Georgia, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Rwanda, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and State of Palestine. Corporate evaluation included programmes in the following seven countries and regions: Caribbean, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Nepal, Samoa and Serbia.
- 8 UN Women 2024a.
- 9 Greig 2021.
- 10 UN Women 2024b.
- 11 Ladysmith 2023.
- 12 These findings from UN Women’s internal review and evaluations are also echoed in more recent literature on social norms. See, for instance, Wazir 2022; Cookson et al. 2023; Green 2017.
- 13 UN Women 2024b. Similar critiques of the ‘men engagement’ framing and work were found in a review of global evidence base (see Greig and Flood 2020).
- 14 ‘Transforming Patriarchal Masculinities’ was adopted as an organizational approach to the gender equality work with men and boys in 2021 (see UN Women forthcoming).
- 15 United Nations General Assembly 2022.
- 16 UN Women 2015, 2019.
- 17 UN Women and DESA 2023.
- 18 ‘Women’s rights movements’ here mean all social movements across the world that believe in the social, political and economic equality of all genders and that advocate for equal rights and opportunities for all women and girls.
- 19 Cookson et al. 2023.
- 20 Wazir 2022.
- 21 For more on differences in understanding and approaches towards social norms, see Green 2017; Wazir 2022; Cookson et al. 2023.
- 22 Bengali.
- 23 Hindi, Bengali, Nepali, Sanskrit.
- 24 Ukranian
- 25 Chechewa/Bantu.
- 26 Hindi, Bengali, Nepali, Sanskrit.
- 27 Arabic.
- 28 Hindi, Bengali, Nepali, Sanskrit.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Vietnamese.
- 31 Arabic.
- 32 Connell and Pearce 2014.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Saxler et al. 2024.
- 35 Wazir and Sinha 2024.
- 36 Weitzman forthcoming.
- 37 Traditional media refers to older, established forms of mass communication that existed before the widespread adoption of the internet and digital technologies.
- 38 Ressa 2022.
- 39 MenEngage Alliance 2020.
- 40 In international development, ‘community’ is often understood as a group of people living in the same geographic location. However, in this framework, it refers to social groups with shared characteristics including, but not limited to, geographic location. It includes social groups based on, for instance, occupation (e.g., community of farmers/workers, the international development community, academic community), social identity (e.g., Dalit community, LGBTIQ+ community) and other shared social characteristics.
- 41 Kabeer 1999.

- 42 See Sharafeldin 2026 and HRC 2024. Notions of ‘traditional values’, ‘public morals’ and ‘national values’ are commonly used in discourses that are hostile to the human rights of women, LGBTIQ+ persons and religious and belief minorities, and often rely implicitly or explicitly on religious and belief norms and values.
- 43 See, for instance, Wazir and Sinha 2024; Aziz-Suleyman and Gasibirege forthcoming.
- 44 See, for instance, Wazir and Sinha 2024; Kabeer and Subrahmanian 1999.
- 45 Sharafeldin 2026.
- 46 Weitzman forthcoming.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Kabeer 1994.
- 49 See, for instance, Agarwal 1997; Connell and Pearce 2014.
- 50 Kabeer 1999.
- 51 Wazir 2022.
- 52 UN Women 2025b.
- 53 See Al-Atiyat forthcoming; Sharafeldin 2026.
- 54 Weitzman forthcoming describes how the invisibilization and devaluing of agro-ecological work by women farmers in Brazil, such that they were not counted as workers in national surveys, not offered credit by banks and excluded from agriculture technical support services, is a result of the Green Revolution that downplayed modes of agricultural production carried out mostly by women.
- 55 Al-Atiyat forthcoming.
- 56 See Box 1.
- 57 Kandiyoti 1998.
- 58 Weldon and Htun 2013 found that feminist activism was an important and consistent factor driving policy change to end violence against women in 70 states from 1975 to 2005; Ning Ma et al. 2023 found that women’s empowerment efforts in low- and middle-income countries contributed to the decline in IPV prevalence in 53 countries over 2000–2021; Htun and Jensenius 2022 found that decades of feminist struggles produced notable impacts on violent cultures and the prevalence of IPV in Mexico, and indeed the emergence of new norms on VAW there, between 2003 and 2016.
- 59 For example, ‘altering the narrative’ and ‘building countervailing power’, along with ‘policy solutions’, are part of a triad proposed by Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson for tackling social bias in technology (see Acemoglu and Johnson 2023).
- 60 van Dunné 1996.
- 61 Wazir and Sinha 2024.
- 62 Weitzman forthcoming.
- 63 Through the Global Life Stories Project, ordinary women were supported to narrate and analyse their lived realities and experiences, using a feminist lens to look at how existing family law and norms influenced their daily lives.
- 64 Sharafeldin 2026.
- 65 Wazir and Sinha 2024.
- 66 Sutton and Vacarezza 2023b.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 The direct and indirect effects of the World Wars on the male breadwinner model and women’s workforce participation, discussed by many scholars, include the challenge to gender norms from the wartime mobilization of women to work in the factories and the reassertion of the male breadwinner idea after the war. On the United States of America, see Goldin 1991; on Britain, see Summerfield 2013; on France, see Boehnke and Gay 2022.
- 69 Kabeer 2024.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Agarwal 1997.
- 72 Agarwal 1994.
- 73 Weitzman forthcoming.
- 74 This subject has been extensively discussed by various scholars and organizations. For a discussion on the transfer of care work of women privileged by race and/or class to less privileged women, see Salazar Parreñas 2015; for a discussion on how low-wage immigrant women care workers subsidize high-wage women to increase their hours of market work, see Folbre 2014; for a discussion on shifting care responsibilities towards migrants and care gaps in home countries, see Hussein 2022.
- 75 In the continuum of approaches for gender equity, ‘gender-transformative’ refers to those approaches that go beyond responding to specific needs arising from gender-based discrimination by actively challenging the root causes of gender inequality, included embedded discriminatory norms. A ‘gender-transformative approach’ is increasingly referenced as preferred by many United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and others.
- 76 Sutton and Vacarezza 2023b.

- 77 Aziz-Suleyman and Gasibirege forthcoming.
- 78 For global estimates on the link between legal reforms in IPV and declining prevalence, see Ning Ma et al. 2023. For a detailed discussion on the ‘expressive power’ law in changing social norms, see Htun and Jensenius 2022.
- 79 ‘Social decriminalization’ is a term deployed by Latin American feminists to describe the set of strategies that transform the meanings and perceptions of abortion to destigmatize the practice and build the social consensus that helps create and maintain legal reform. Activists believed that changing legislation or the judicial interpretations of the law was not sufficient; it was crucial to change the social conversations on abortion in both the public as well as private spheres. See more in Sutton and Vacarezza 2023b.
- 80 Gutiérrez 2023.
- 81 Sutton and Vacarezza 2023b.
- 82 These concepts ‘power with’ and ‘power within’ have been extensively elaborated by various feminist scholars-practitioners across diverse contexts, including Jo Rowlands, Naila Kabeer and Srilata Batliwala.
- 83 Aziz-Suleyman and Gasibirege forthcoming.
- 84 Wazir and Sinha 2024.
- 85 Sutton and Vacarezza 2023b.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Wazir and Sinha 2024.
- 88 Sutton and Vacarezza 2023b.
- 89 Weitzman forthcoming.
- 90 Aziz-Suleyman and Gasibirege forthcoming.
- 91 Sharafeldin 2026.
- 92 Aziz-Suleyman and Gasibirege forthcoming.
- 93 Weitzman forthcoming.
- 94 Sharafeldin 2026.
- 95 The seven initiatives that were reviewed in this paper include: (i) the OECD’s Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) global report (OECD 2023); (ii) UNDP’s Gender Social Norms Index (UNDP 2023); (iii) the World Bank’s Reshaping Norms report (World Bank 2022); (iv) UN Women’s Gender Equality Attitudes Study (UN Women 2020); (v) Investing in Women’s SNAP survey of urban millennials in Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam (Investing in Women 2022); (vi) UN Women Nepal’s Measuring Social Norm Change through Storytelling initiative (Holland and Rishal 2023); and (vii) The Global Early Adolescent Study and the Growing Up GREAT! WAVE 5 Report (Center for Gender Equity and Health et al. 2022).
- 96 Bedford and Brosio 2024.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Connell and Pearce 2014.
- 99 Ibid.
- 100 Bedford and Brosio 2024.
- 101 Sharafeldin 2026.
- 102 Bernard-Maugiron 2011 quoted in *ibid.*
- 103 Wazir and Sinha 2024.
- 104 Htun and Jensenius 2022.
- 105 ENDIREH is the Mexican National Survey on the Dynamics of Household Relations, designed and implemented by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) in collaboration with the National Women’s Institute (INMUJERES) to learn from women about the prevalence of, and their attitudes towards, violence against women in the home, at work and in the street.
- 106 For a brief overview of this initiative, see UN Women Nepal 2023. For the baseline report of this research, see Holland and Rishal 2023.
- 107 Connell and Pearce 2014.
- 108 Bedford and Brosio 2024.
- 109 Transforming patriarchal practices and cultures of social, economic and political institutions is a core priority under UN Women forthcoming, which contains the entity’s approach for gender equality work with men and boys.
- 110 Holland and Rishal 2023.

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UN WOMEN EXISTS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS.

As the lead United Nations entity on gender equality and secretariat of the Commission on the Status of Women, we shift laws, institutions, social norms and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. Our partnerships with governments, women's movements and the private sector, coupled with our coordination of the broader United Nations, deliver lasting changes. We make strides in four areas: leadership, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and peace, security and humanitarian action.

UN Women keeps the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.

This framework is UN Women's strategy to address discriminatory social norms implicated in gender equality and women's empowerment.

Based on extensive research by UN Women, primarily in the Global South, on 'how change happens' and on the advice of an expert group, the framework defines social norms as embedded in social institutions and proposes three pathways for changing discriminatory norms: (i) Transforming narratives through the development of egalitarian narratives and building whole-of-society consensus; (ii) changing material conditions through tangible changes in the lived realities of women, girls and other marginalized groups; and (iii) strengthening countervailing power through empowering feminist movements and building coalitions with diverse movements and actors.

This framework outlines how UN Women will implement this strategy, report more accurately and meaningfully on social norms change and inform the broader global discourse on social norms. It provides the basis for partnerships and joint work on social norms change.



220 East 42nd Street
New York, New York 10017, USA

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