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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender-transformative action, social norms and economic empowerment

Tara Patricia Cookson, *tara.cookson@ubc.ca*
University of British Columbia, Canada

Ruth Carlitz, *r.d.carlitz@uva.nl*
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Alex Berryhill, alex@ladysmithcollective.com
CARE USA, USA

Lorena Fuentes, *lorena@ladysmithcollective.com*
Ladysmith, USA

Feminist advocacy for 'gender transformative' approaches to development, public policy and humanitarian action that account for social norms has surged in recent years. This article intervenes in the debate around norms and implications for transformative approaches. We draw on a unique set of quantitative, global 'gender data' collected in 2020 and 2021 and examine how social norms inform women's experiences of economic empowerment, as well as how these relationships map onto the current debates around interventions to address social norms and the form these interventions ought to take. Our data show that social norms matter for access to and control over resources; in addition, they illustrate that an individual belief in gender equality is fairly common around the world but that such individual beliefs frequently do not coincide with what people think their neighbours believe. These findings suggest a need for consideration of factors beyond individual attitudes towards and beliefs in gender-transformative interventions for women's economic empowerment.

Keywords women's economic empowerment • social norms • gender norms • gender-transformative approaches • gender equality • survey data

Key messages

- Global analysis shows that social norms matter for women's access to and control over resources.
- Individual support for gender equality is more widespread than commonly assumed.
- Individual and community beliefs about gender inequality are frequently not aligned.
- Interventions in social norms may need to address economic, political and social drivers of community life.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a surge in feminist advocacy for 'gender transformative' approaches to development, public policy and humanitarian action (Oxfam, 2019; UNFPA et al, 2020; IFAD, 2023). Reflecting dissatisfaction with the persistence of gender inequality in many spheres of life, such approaches broadly seek to address the underlying structural causes that maintain the status quo (MacArthur et al, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and related economic fallout have added additional momentum to calls for transformation, with a growing body of evidence illustrating how crisis-driven policies halted and even reversed progress towards equality (Chhachhi, 2022; Cook and Staab, 2022). Studies from around the world have shown that women spent more time on unpaid care and domestic work than men during the pandemic, reduced formal employment at a greater rate than men, and were slower than men to return to work (Seck et al, 2021; Flor et al, 2022; Hoehn-Velasco et al, 2022; Ogando et al, 2022). Gender-based violence, which was endemic prior to the lockdowns, was exacerbated by gender-blind lockdown policies that kept people at home and restricted access to needed services (Guterres, 2021; UN Women, 2021). These outcomes brought to the fore feminist calls for transformative action.

One of the distinguishing features of such calls is an explicit focus on discriminatory social and gender norms. In the words of Pearse and Connell (2016: 31), '[social] norms, to a first approximation, can be understood as collective definitions of socially approved conduct, stating rules, or ideals; and gender norms are such definitions applied to women and men'. Pearse and Connell note that this definition, while a useful starting place, masks the complexity and contradiction that characterises the broad and dispersed bodies of literature on social and gender norms. In reality, social and gender norms perspectives draw from a diverse range of disciplines – including social psychology, behavioural economics, sociology, anthropology and women's and gender studies – as well as from feminist practice, with different schools of thought proposing ontologically distinct understandings of social norms and how they might be transformed (Cislaghe and Heise, 2019). A recent review of social norms theory and practice in the context of the 'gender and development' (GAD) field underscores that these debates are not merely an issue of semantics or scholarly disagreement; rather, the complexity and contradiction characterising social norms theory is related to how norm change is defined, measured, funded and ultimately implemented (Cookson et al, 2023).

The explicit focus on social norms emerging in development practice and 'gender-transformative' programming serves in part to answer the call of feminists working in international development since the 1970s, who documented the ways in which discriminatory social and gender norms functioned to constrict women's opportunities and maintain their subordinate position (see, for example, Elson, 1991; Kabeer, 1994). Yet, some of the norms-change approaches rising in prominence and attracting major funders did not originate in feminist thought (Wazir, 2023). These

approaches are anchored in social psychology and behavioural economics, and they prioritise changing individuals' beliefs and behaviours over and above those that seek to transform the social, political and economic systems that feminists have shown also shape and are shaped by social norms (Piedalue et al, 2020). For example, a strong critique has been levied against what is referred to as the 'social norms approach' (SNA) promoted by some influential development donors (Wazir, 2023). The SNA is not new, though it has changed over time, finding early use in the 1980s in public health campaigns to curb substance use (Burchell et al, 2013). The approach is informed by social psychology theory and, broadly speaking, attempts to achieve change by making individuals aware of behaviours which researchers, practitioners or donors view as problematic in relation to less problematic or improved behaviours. Conventionally, the SNA involved public 'social marketing' campaigns, though newer iterations of the approach involve targeting small groups with workshops (Burchell et al, 2013). SNA critics point out that while feminists have been working to shift discriminatory social norms for a very long time, including in such issue areas as child marriage and education where the SNA is being applied, approaches like the SNA overlook community-driven, feminist ways of practice (Wazir, 2023). The deployment of a narrow focus on individuals, moreover, risks overlooking the more insidious, structural causes of problems, such as poverty and violence, and the policy, legal, economic and other changes that would also be required to address them (Grieg and Flood, 2020; Piedalue et al, 2020).

Critics of the emerging social norms approaches also stress that they overemphasise measurement and thus integrate highly technical models for measuring change that often require the use of costly, external consultant expertise to execute (Wazir, 2023). Indeed, the broader interest among development organisations in new approaches to shifting social norms also entails discussions about and efforts to improve the measurement of norm change, with a preference for replicable and comparable data typically produced through quantitative methods. To be sure, it is considerably more methodologically complex to measure the systems-level change that many are calling for compared to shifts in individuals' attitudes and behaviours (Cookson et al, 2023). It is thus a challenge for practitioners and researchers to find ways of measuring shifts in social norms that capture the complex dynamics involved in social change, and even more so in a development sector where quantitative data form the backbone of evidence-driven policy (Eyben et al, 2015).

This article intervenes in the debate around social norms and the implications for transformative approaches. Our interest lies in the relationship between social norms and women's economic empowerment: in the details of how social norms inform women's experiences of economic empowerment, how these details map onto the current debates around interventions to address social norms and the form these interventions ought to take. To do so, we draw on a unique set of global 'gender data' collected in 2020 and 2021 through the Survey on Gender Equality at Home (SoGEH). The data set is unique in three dimensions. First, it includes questions related to both economic empowerment and social norms, enabling an examination of the relationship between them. Second, the survey was administered in countries around the world at two different time periods during the COVID-19 pandemic, when comparable data were hard to come by. Third, the survey moves beyond a focus on individuals' self-reported attitudes and beliefs to additionally generate a picture of perceived community beliefs, which helps us get closer to understanding the 'social'

dynamics of social norms. It does so by asking questions about not only individuals' own attitudes and beliefs but also their perceptions of their neighbours' attitudes and beliefs on the same topics. This community-oriented perspective is significant because individuals can hold attitudes and beliefs that go against those held and observed in broader society, that is, attitudes and beliefs that go against the norm. For example, an individual man might believe that both women and men can assume unpaid caregiving roles, but if he perceives that those in his community would disapprove of his doing so, that perception may impact his behaviour (for example, he may choose not to assume an unpaid caregiving role, at least publicly). Being able to identify gaps between individual and community beliefs opens up possibilities for interventions that leverage this tension productively (Bicchieri, 2017). This is something that both proponents of approaches like the SNA and those involved in grass-roots, feminist consciousness-raising work would likely agree with, though where they might find disagreement is whether necessary interventions should involve targeting individuals in isolation or embedding that work within a larger agenda that engages with other structures. The inclusion of questions regarding perceived neighbour beliefs thus constitutes an advancement in large global data sets used to understand social norms, which have often used individual attitudes and beliefs as proxies for norms (see the Methods section).

We make three key contributions. First, we generate valuable quantitative evidence that social norms matter for access to and control over resources, which is one important facet of women's economic empowerment, across various global contexts. Second, we illustrate the need to further investigate both individual- and community-level norms given that the two are not always aligned: while individuals' self-reported support for gender equality (for example, beliefs in equitable caregiving and breadwinning roles) is perhaps more widespread than we might expect (particularly in the context of discussions of backlash), a sizeable number of respondents around the world report that their communities may not share these beliefs. Third, we illustrate that not only are individual-level and community-level norms sometimes distinct but perceptions of community beliefs also have an independent relationship with economic outcomes. Together, these findings support the call for gender-transformative interventions that tackle discriminatory gender norms – both at the community and the individual level – to advance women's economic empowerment. Importantly, they also suggest that such interventions should not forgo the more challenging work of tackling the economic, political and social systems that structure community life, even when changing individual attitudes seems more straightforward.

Gender-transformative approaches: expectations about norms and economic empowerment

Transformative approaches to gender and development

In recent years, discussion of 'gender transformative' approaches to international development has risen exponentially (MacArthur et al, 2022). United Nations (UN) institutions, including the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), have all produced some form of 'gender transformative' guidance (UNFPA et al, 2020; UNICEF, 2022); the international non-governmental organisation CARE has

published a toolkit on measuring gender-transformative change (Hillenbrand et al, 2015); and Oxfam (2019) has called for gender-transformative humanitarian action. These are only a few examples. In a comprehensive review of English-language scholarly and grey (policy) literature published on gender-transformative development between 1990 and 2022, MacArthur et al (2022: 3) found that 'only two papers were from the 1990s, 21 from 2000 to 2009, 193 from 2010 to 2019, and 140 between 2020 and March 2022'.

At the heart of a gender-transformative approach is the position that 'gender-equal futures rely on a full reshaping of the fabric of society – a gender-transformation' (MacArthur, 2022: 1). While the term 'gender transformative' (or some variation of it) has gained traction only more recently, the language and idea of transformation emerge significantly further back in GAD practice and scholarship (Moser, 2020; MacArthur et al, 2022). Even the agenda outlined at the 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing could be considered, by some counts, 'gender transformative' (Subrahmanian, 2007, cited in Moser, 2020). Yet, in practice, implementing a transformative agenda has not been straightforward. For example, some argue that the technocratic and top-down approaches adopted by many large development organisations – such as gender mainstreaming – have generated change but stopped short of 'fully reshaping' society in the ways feminists originally envisioned (Moser, 2020).

The recent writing on gender-transformative approaches emphasises the need to address gender and other social norms to advance gender equality – something understood to not have been comprehensively tackled in decades past (MacArthur et al, 2022). Such approaches stress that development interventions must address 'the causes, and not just the consequences of existing inequalities' (MacArthur et al, 2022: 8), with social norms paramount among these. Yet, the many ways in which social norms are defined and approached, and the complex ways in which they operate and persist, continue to pose a number of operational challenges for development actors seeking their durable transformation (Cookson et al, 2023). These various and often conflicting definitions are worth engaging with because they have implications for both research and practice.

Social norms and gender norms: complex fields of study

The various conceptualisations of social and gender norms result in a diverse range of perspectives on the subject (Pearse and Connell, 2016; Cislaghi and Heise, 2019; Piedalue et al, 2020). Social norms are broadly understood as the informal rules or standards that shape collective behaviours within a group. This broad definition, however, masks significant variation in how social norms are understood across social science disciplines and in different fields of practice. Perspectives and approaches influenced by social psychology and behavioural economics, for example, tend to view social norms as collectively held beliefs influencing individuals' attitudes and behaviours (see, for example, Bicchieri, 2017). Approaches to social norms measurement and change anchored in this perspective tend to focus on individual attitudes, beliefs and behaviours as both data points and sites of intervention. This perspective is in tension with approaches influenced by sociology, political science and anthropology, which tend to understand social norms more in terms of systems and structures, that is, as embedded in the social, cultural, economic and political organisation of society (see, for example, Parsons, 1937; Durkheim, 1985 [1982]).

Correspondingly, this perspective would suggest that efforts to shift discriminatory social norms require changing those systems and structures.

Gender norms are broadly understood as a subset of social norms, specifically relating to gender differences (Cislaghi and Heise, 2019). Gender norms vary across and within societies because they are influenced by other factors of social differentiation, such as religion, culture, class, race, sexuality and age, among others. Cislaghe and Heise (2019) note that it was only by 2000 that the term 'gender norms' took hold in academia, though it had risen exponentially by 2010. Yet, feminist scholars, activists and practitioners have theorised and taken action on gender norms for decades, recognising how gender norms shape and are shaped by various areas of social, political and economic life, including the laws, policies, traditions, processes and practices that form part of these (Piedalue et al, 2020; Wazir, 2023). The growing body of literature on gender norms is also characterised by tension with regard to definition and approach, with feminist scholarship on gender norms having been strongly influenced by sociology, anthropology and political science, as well as feminist practice and action (see Pearse and Connell, 2016; Cislaghe and Heise, 2019).

In recent years, large global health and development donors, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as the various UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) funded by such donors, have taken an explicit interest in programmatic work to shift discriminatory gender norms as a path to achieving gender equality and sustainable development (see Gates, 2019).[1] Yet, these actors have largely tended to adopt approaches that did not originate in feminist thinking and practice – approaches anchored in social psychology and behavioural economics perspectives that place heavy emphasis on the measurement of gender norms and technocratic theories of change that tend to locate the 'problem' in the beliefs and behaviours of individuals (Piedalue et al, 2020; Wazir, 2023). Social psychology and behavioural economics perspectives lend themselves more readily to a data-driven development paradigm responding to the demand for measurable and comparable results, short programme financing cycles, and 'theory of change' approaches emanating from management consulting (Cookson et al, 2023). In contrast, perspectives on gender norms in much of the sociological, anthropological and political science literature, including women's and gender studies, are often 'so sweeping and complex that they risk provoking paralysis when it comes to operationalization' (Cookson et al, 2023: 19).

This tension between approaches plays out across a variety of areas of gender equality work. For example, the adoption of a 'social norms approach' to reduce men's perpetration of gender-based violence (GBV) emerges in individual-scale interventions to change attitudes and perceptions, largely at the neglect of the broader political, social and economic contexts of violence in which men and women exist (Grieg and Flood, 2020). In response, feminist scholars have attempted to also refocus attention on the tangible and structural drivers of GBV, emphasising that while gender norms operate at the individual level, they are also 'political and embedded', existing 'in all domains of social life, shaped by and shaping the material and institutional' (Piedalue et al, 2020). More recently, interest in gender norms has grown within global health (Cislaghi and Heise, 2019). Notably, a 2019 special issue of *The Lancet* that featured commentary from Melinda Gates cast a spotlight on gender norms as an important but underexplored factor in health outcomes for women and men, as well as individuals with other gender identities (Darmstadt et al, 2019).

Gender norms and women's economic empowerment

While programmatic interventions to shift social and gender norms have a longer history in areas like GBV and have attracted considerable philanthropic attention in global health, there is increasing interest among development donors and the organisations they fund in shifting gender norms as an explicit means to achieving women's economic empowerment. In this area too, feminist scholars have developed an extensive literature on social and gender norms, as well as how these shape and are shaped by economic systems, policies and practices (Pearse and Connell, 2016). Naila Kabeer's research among women workers in the Bangladesh garment industry documented the relationship between economic opportunity and social norms in the context of a large-scale entrance of women into the labour market. Kabeer showed that women renegotiated social norms around *purdah* (female seclusion) and appropriate roles for mothers in order to justify their employment in garment factories (even though they were primarily motivated by a combination of labour market opportunity and economic necessity) (Kabeer, 1991). Research on this same topic has further documented the complex and non-linear nature of social norms change, noting that 'the factories did not head for Dhaka intent on liberating Bangladesh's women. As is often the case in a complex system such as the global garment trade, the evolution of gender norms was an accidental by-product of structural changes in the economy' (Green, 2016: 51). Moreover, women's entrance into the labour market did not resolve all gendered power imbalances of an economic nature: gendered power dynamics within the garment factories between male union leaders and the women workers indicated organisational hierarchy and paternalistic social norms that discouraged women from challenging men's authority (Dannecker, 2000). Research on women's economic empowerment in development processes has documented the presence and functioning of discriminatory social norms in other contexts too. Diane Elson's edited volume, *Male Bias in the Development Process*, showed through a range of cases (factory work, agriculture, service provision) how 'hidden assumptions' about appropriate roles for women and men shaped differentiated economic opportunities and outcomes. These assumptions were everywhere, in 'everyday attitudes and decisions, in theoretical analysis, and the process of defining and implementing public policy' (Elson, 1995: 13).

Yet, feminist perspectives on the relationship between gender norms and women's economic empowerment like Elson's and Kabeer's – which already already recognised and addressed social norms in relation to economic systems, policies and practices three decades ago would appear to be having limited purchase on the approaches to social norms being adopted by many major development agencies (Wazir, 2023). A recent review of economic empowerment interventions in development contexts concludes that no amount of gender-aware, technical 'tinkering' to change individual practices could ensure the success of an intervention if strong social norms exist preventing women from engaging in paid work (Buvinić and O'Donnell, 2019). While the point is valid, the authors' critique of 'tinkering' falls short of acknowledging the kind of large-scale economic policy that enabled women to shift social norms in Bangladesh. Another recent review of the International Development Research Centre's Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women programme identifies discriminatory gender norms as a key barrier to women's educational and employment opportunities, as well

as ability to translate new opportunities to improved well-being (Marcus, 2018). The review calls for future research to inform more transformative policy and programming decisions, including identifying which norms facilitate women's economic empowerment and how they do so (Marcus, 2018: 4). Yet, such calls overlook the rich body of work that already exists on gender norms and economic empowerment – though largely from a sociological and political science perspective, and often (though not always) explored through qualitative research methods. This call for more research is perhaps suggestive of a preference among global development organisations for approaches influenced by social psychology and behavioural economics, which lend themselves more readily to clearly defined and time-bound development interventions, the impact of which is measurable in quantitative terms (Cookson et al, 2023). Further work is needed to make sense of conversations about economic empowerment and social norms occurring in different disciplines, as well as in different practitioner and scholarly spaces.

Our study focuses on a specific aspect of women's economic empowerment: women's access to and control over resources. Our interest in access to and control over resources derives from feminist thinking which asserts that control over resources, including both material assets and human, intellectual and financial resources, is a key component of the individual and collective process of achieving women's empowerment (see Batliwala, 1994; Kabeer, 1999). To be clear, women's access to and control over resources is not the only factor contributing to women's economic empowerment, but it is an important one, feeding into greater agency, decision-making power and influence within and beyond the household (Cornwall, 2016; Filgueira and Martínez Franzoni, 2017; Laszlo et al, 2020). Here, we acknowledge two important points. First, while we focus on access to and control over resources within households in this article, we recognise that households are one of many spaces in which processes of empowerment need to occur to achieve transformations in society (alongside workplaces, labour unions, economic markets and governments, among others). Second, feminist scholars of economic empowerment recognise it as both an individual and collective process; for example, not only must individual women gain access to and control over resources but women must also collectively do so. Our data, as described later, enable us to focus on individual units of analysis, which is necessary but insufficient for understanding economic empowerment. We are not, for example, able to make claims in this study about the collective, material realities or economic advances that specific groups of women experience. That said, through an analysis of individuals' perceptions of their neighbours, we are able to look at the question of gaps between individual attitudes and community beliefs, thus opening up possibilities for exploring tensions between individuals and communities, as well as exploring where collective action may be possible.

We begin our inquiry with a global analysis of individual beliefs about gender equality. The analysis spans all world regions and includes a breakdown of average beliefs held by women versus men in a given country. Next, we compare individual beliefs with people's stated beliefs about their communities, drawing attention to discrepancies and their implications. Finally, we examine the implications of individual and community beliefs for economic empowerment and further reflect on the implications for 'gender transformative' approaches to development.

Data and methods

Data

Our study draws primarily on data collected through the first two rounds of the SoGEH (Meta Data for Good, nd). The first round of the survey was administered at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in July 2020; it captured 461,748 respondents in 208 countries, territories and islands through Facebook's platform and included questions on demographics, gender norms, decision making and time and resource allocation across household members. The survey achieved gender balance, reaching 159,040 women and 160,633 men. The median respondent was of working age (between 26 and 64 years old) and resided in an urban area (though the survey reached over 124,000 people in rural areas). Summary statistics are provided in Table A1 in the Appendix.

A subsequent round was fielded in August 2021, capturing responses from 96,000 Facebook users in 200 countries, islands and territories.[2] Although constituting a smaller sample, the surveyed population is demographically similar to that of Wave 1 (see Table A2 in the Appendix). Reflecting its co-design by practitioners and researchers, as well as the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, the second round of the survey included a number of new questions and also excluded some from the first round. We focus our analysis primarily on questions asked in both rounds.

Given the survey's administration through Facebook, it necessarily only captured the online population in each surveyed country. As only about 63 per cent of the global population was online (ITU, 2021) by Wave 2 of the survey, the resulting data are not nationally representative in many parts of the world. Rather, the survey presents a unique snapshot of the lived experiences of the online population at a time when large-scale data on lived experiences were very difficult to generate.

Methods

We use data from the SoGEH to answer three main questions. First, we map overall trends in individual gender equality attitudes, looking at the breakdown between men and women in surveyed countries and regions. Next, we look at perceptions about gender equality within an individual's community – in other words, what individuals perceive others in their communities to believe about gender equality. That the SoGEH data set included questions not only about individual attitudes and beliefs but also about what people perceive to be their neighbours' attitudes and beliefs is a significant advantage over other global data sets focused on attitudes and beliefs alone (for example, all waves of the World Values Survey until the latest Wave 7), as this begins to get at the collectively held nature of social norms. Finally, we look at the implications of individual and community beliefs about gender equality for women's economic empowerment. We answer the latter question in a multivariate regression framework, where the unit of analysis is an individual survey respondent. The analysis is based primarily on logistic regressions, where the dependent variable indicates whether the respondent has answered 'Yes' or agrees with the survey item in question. All regressions incorporate country fixed effects, allowing us to focus on variation within countries. We also examine conditional effects by gender in some cases.[3] Our key independent and dependent variables are operationalised as follows:

- Individual beliefs about gender equality: we again draw on multiple dimensions of gender equality, noting that questions around such beliefs were worded differently in the two waves of the survey. In Wave 1, we consider agreement with the following statements: 'Men and women should have equal opportunities (e.g. in education, jobs, household decision-making)' and 'Household expenses are the responsibility of the man, even if his wife can help him'. These questions were not asked in Wave 2, so we instead look at agreement with the statement, 'Boys and girls should share household tasks equally'.
- Perceived community beliefs about gender equality: for all of the aforementioned questions about individual beliefs, respondents were also asked to indicate how many out of ten of their neighbours they thought held similar beliefs. The subsequent regression analyses thus also include an indicator of whether a respondent says that the majority of their neighbours (that is, more than five out of ten) agree with the statement in question.
- Women's economic empowerment: we examine a number of variables capturing women's (and men's) access to and control over resources as a key component of the definition of women's economic empowerment laid out earlier. First, we consider an indicator of whether a man in the respondent's household is the primary decision maker about large purchases and spending priorities. Next, we look at an indicator of whether the respondent fully depends on someone else in their household to cover living expenses. Finally, we consider an indicator of access to household money. These indicators let us consider access to and control over material and financial resources.
- Control variables: we aim for a balance between parsimony and combating omitted variable bias in the subsequent regressions and thus estimate models that include factors that affect both the primary independent and dependent variables of interest. These include respondent gender, whether the respondent is of working age (between 25 and 64 years old), whether the respondent has completed more than secondary education, household wealth (proxied by an index of household assets) and whether the respondent resides in a rural or urban area.

The Appendix presents more details about the operationalisation of key variables.

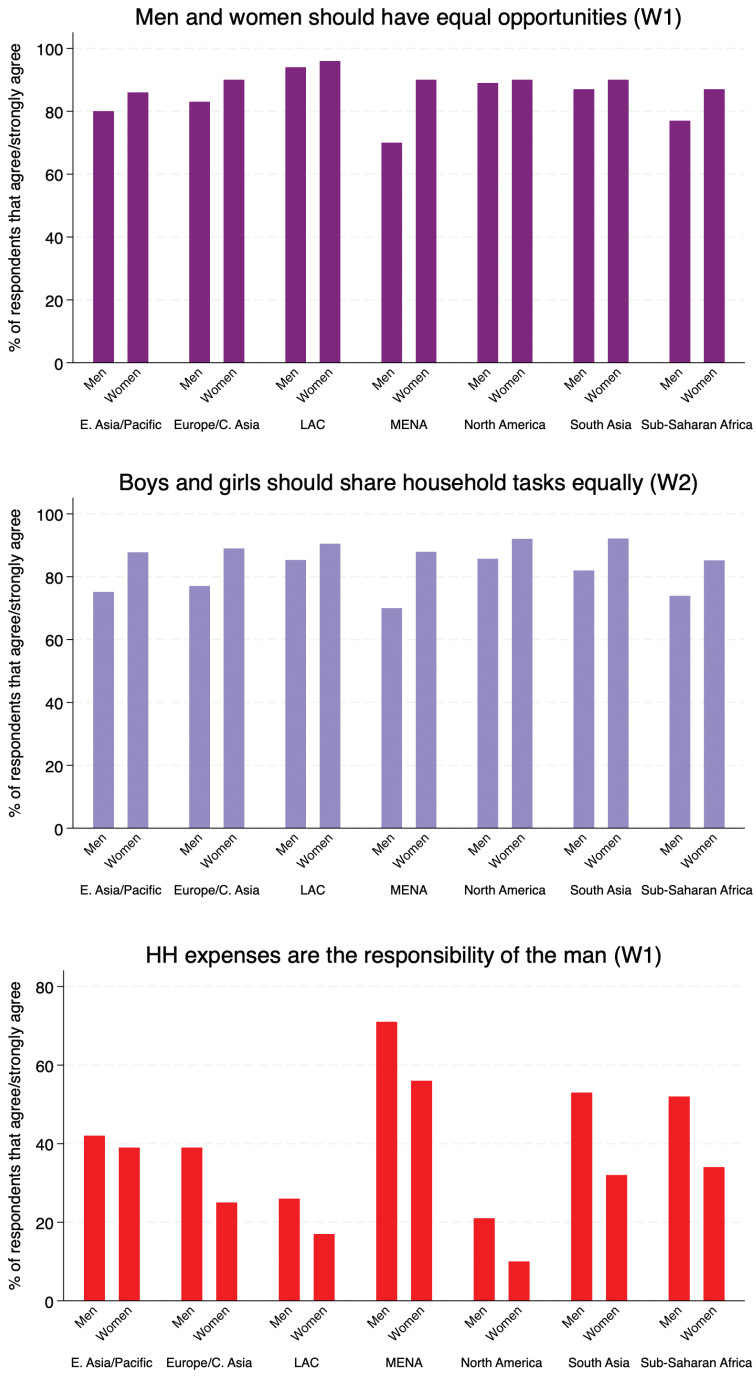
Results

Mapping individual beliefs about gender equality

We begin by mapping individual beliefs about gender equality by world region. Figure 1 presents two striking trends: first, the proportion of both men and women who express individual belief in gender equality is, on average, above 80 per cent across all world regions. As a corollary to this, we also see that the proportion who believe in gender-specific roles within the household (that is, that household expenses should be the man's responsibility) constitute the minority in much of the world. Second, we see that within world regions, women are somewhat more likely to espouse a personal belief in gender equality, though the discrepancy is not very pronounced in most places. (Looking within countries, we find that women are, on average, about 43 per cent more likely to espouse gender-equal beliefs in Wave 1 of the survey and more than twice as likely to agree that boys and girls should share household chores in Wave 2.)

Given that the survey is based on the responses of Facebook users (with aggregate responses weighted to represent the online population in a given country/region), these proportions do not necessarily reflect the opinions of those with limited or no Internet access. We also acknowledge that the responses to the questions about gender

Figure 1: Individual beliefs about gender equality (averages by gender and world region)



equality and household responsibilities may be characterised by social desirability bias. However, even if respondents are to some extent giving what they perceive to be the 'right' answer, it is notable that even in world regions assumed to hold more conventional beliefs (the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and sub-Saharan Africa), there is a wide consensus that gender equality is the 'correct' answer to supply. This speaks to the power of this (individual) norm.[4]

To get a better picture of how gender norms operate within communities, the next section turns to a set of questions that ask people what they think their neighbours think about the same questions. Such questions also represent a means of getting potentially less biased responses (Bicchieri, 2017).

Comparing individual versus community beliefs about gender equality

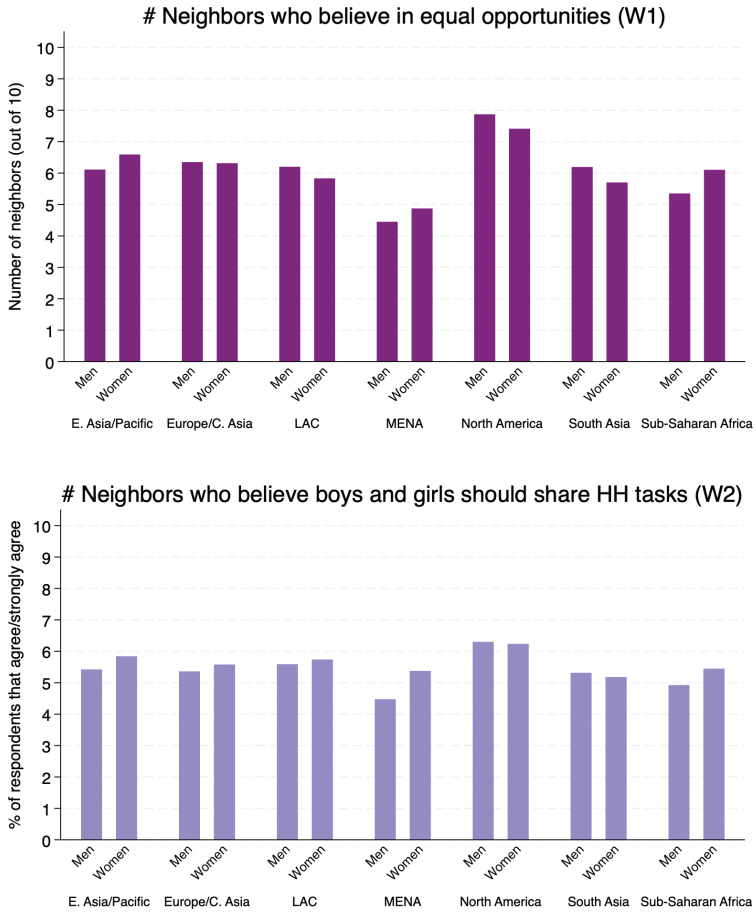
This section turns to the influence of individuals' perceptions of gender norms in their broader communities. We do this specifically by examining what survey respondents say they think their neighbours believe. As a first step, it is important to note that people's individual beliefs and reported beliefs about their neighbour's beliefs (their normative expectations) do not always coincide. Figure 2 shows that the extent to which people think their neighbours hold gender-equal beliefs is considerably lower than the proportion expressing such beliefs themselves.

Moreover, there is considerable variation in such discrepancies both between men and women and across countries. For instance, while 90 per cent of women surveyed reported holding gender-equal beliefs (that is, agreeing that women and men should have equal opportunities), on average, women reported that they believe only about six out of ten of their neighbours hold such beliefs. Such discrepancies are greatest in countries in the MENA region (for instance, on average, 94 per cent of women surveyed in Iraq hold gender-equal beliefs but expect that fewer than four out of ten neighbours hold such beliefs; discrepancies of similar magnitudes may also be found in Libya, Egypt and Morocco). At the same time, even Finland – considered to be one of the most gender-equal countries in the world – exhibits a discrepancy between individual beliefs and perceptions of community beliefs about gender equality: while 94 per cent of women surveyed in Finland say they personally hold gender-equal beliefs, they only expect between seven and eight out of ten of their neighbours to hold such beliefs.

The average discrepancy is similar, though somewhat smaller, among male respondents: on average, 83 per cent of surveyed men report that they individually hold gender-equal beliefs, but they believe that only six out of ten neighbours hold such beliefs. Here, it is notable that men's average beliefs about their neighbours mirror women's to a great extent, so the smaller discrepancy is driven by men being, on average, less likely to hold individual beliefs about gender equality. Again, we see notable discrepancies in the MENA region, though also in Latin America and Europe: while 95 per cent of men in Brazil report holding gender-equal beliefs, they believe that fewer than six out of ten neighbours hold such beliefs. Portugal also stands out in this regard: 97 per cent of men report holding gender-equal beliefs but say that just six out of ten of their neighbours agree that men and women should have equal opportunities.

Again, these discrepancies may in part reflect the fact that the SoGEH only captured responses from people with Internet access, a somewhat rarified group in many

Figure 2: Perceived community beliefs about gender equality (averages by gender and world region)



countries. However, they still speak to the importance of examining individual and community beliefs separately, not taking one to stand in for the other. In what follows, we examine the implications of both individual beliefs and people's perceptions about their neighbours' beliefs for women's economic empowerment.

Implications of gender equality beliefs for reported access to and control over economic resources

The preceding analysis has established that expressing an individual belief in gender equality is fairly common around the world but that such individual beliefs frequently do not coincide with what people think their neighbours believe. We now therefore examine how individual and community beliefs about gender equality relate to lived experiences of access to and control over resources.[5] Table 1 shows that both men and women who hold gender-equal beliefs are less likely to report that men in their households are the sole decision makers over large purchases or household spending priorities. In addition, both men and women who say that household expenses are

Table 1: Implications of individual and community beliefs for women's economic empowerment (Wave 1)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Purchases	**Purchases**	**Priorities**	**Priorities**	**Full access (women)**	**Full access (men)**
Agree that men and women should have equal opportunities	0.67*** (0.03)		0.68*** (0.03)			
Majority of neighbours believe in gender equality	0.84*** (0.02)		0.83*** (0.02)			
Agree that household expenditures are the man's responsibility		1.37*** (0.03)		1.41*** (0.04)	0.89*** (0.03)	1.16*** (0.03)
Majority of neighbours believe men should make household decisions		1.03 (0.02)		1.03* (0.02)	0.92*** (0.02)	1.03 (0.03)
Working age (25–64)	0.58*** (0.02)	0.61*** (0.02)	0.62*** (0.02)	0.65*** (0.02)	3.47*** (0.16)	3.43*** (0.14)
More than secondary education	0.87*** (0.02)	0.88*** (0.02)	0.88*** (0.02)	0.88*** (0.02)	1.34*** (0.05)	1.34*** (0.04)
Household wealth (asset index)	0.97** (0.01)	0.98 (0.01)	0.97** (0.01)	0.98 (0.01)	1.41*** (0.02)	1.42*** (0.02)
Rural	1.01 (0.03)	1.01 (0.03)	1.01 (0.03)	1.02 (0.02)	0.84*** (0.02)	0.86*** (0.03)
Observations	56,476	81,253	55,820	80,132	41,179	39,352
Pseudo R-squared	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.25	0.22

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in Models 1–4 is a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent says that the man in the household is solely responsible for decisions over large purchases or spending priorities.
Model 5 depicts results for female-identifying respondents only, while Model 6 depicts results for male-identifying respondents. The dependent variable in these latter models is a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent says they are fully dependent on someone else in the household or have limited access to household money. All models include country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by country.
* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

the man's responsibility are more likely to report that men in their households are the sole decision makers. These results are robust to the inclusion of controls, which exhibit predictable effects: people of working age are less likely to indicate that men are the main decision makers, as are more educated respondents and people from wealthier households. Finally, Models 5 and 6 in Table 1 show that women who agree that household expenses are the man's responsibility are also less likely to report that they have full access to household money, while men who agree with this statement are more likely to report having full access. While this is perhaps an unsurprising result, it provides confidence that our measures of perceived gender relations in the household are reflected in practice. This result is robust to the inclusion of control variables, which again behave in an expected manner: both men and women of working age,[6] with more education and from wealthier households are more likely to report that they have full access to household money, whereas both men and women residing in rural areas are less likely to report having full access.

Table 1 also shows that what people think others in their community believe has an impact that is independent of individual beliefs. That is to say, regardless of whether an individual espouses a personal belief in gender equality, believing that the majority of one's neighbours hold such a belief reduces the likelihood of saying that men are the sole decision makers about household purchases or spending priorities (see Models 1 and 3 in Table 1). Thinking that the majority of one's neighbours believe that men should make household decisions is also reflected in related behaviour at home, *though only for women*: women who hold such a belief about their neighbours are less likely to report having full access to household money (see Model 5 in Table 1). However, there is no significant relationship between community beliefs and access to household money for men (see Model 6 in Table 1).

The structure of the Wave 2 survey precludes replicating this analysis, though Table 2 confirms the results for Models 5 and 6 to an extent: we see that both men and women who hold gender-equal beliefs are more likely to report full access to household money, though the result for women is not robust to the inclusion of controls. More notable is the fact that women who think the majority of their neighbours hold gender-equal beliefs (regardless of the respondent's individual beliefs) are in turn more likely to report having full access to household money; however, the same is not true for male respondents. The control variables also behave in expected ways: both men and women of working age, who are wealthier and who have been educated beyond the secondary-school level are more likely to have full access to household money, whereas respondents residing in rural areas are less likely to report having access (this latter result is only statistically significant for women).

Table 2: Implications of individual and community beliefs for women's economic empowerment (Wave 2)

	1	2	3	4
	Household money access (W)	Household money access (W)	Household money access (M)	Household money access (M)
Agree boys and girls share responsibility for chores	1.12* (0.07)	1.00 (0.07)	1.22*** (0.06)	1.12** (0.06)
Majority of neighbours agree boys and girls should share household chores	1.15*** (0.05)	1.15*** (0.06)	0.97 (0.04)	1.00 (0.04)
Working age		2.26*** (0.13)		2.69*** (0.16)
Education beyond secondary		1.37*** (0.07)		1.34*** (0.06)
Household wealth (asset index)		1.52*** (0.03)		1.49*** (0.03)
Rural		0.88*** (0.04)		0.95 (0.05)
Observations	15,075	12,816	15,558	13,272

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is a dummy variable indicating that the respondent has full access to household money.
Models 1–2 present results for women and Models 3–4 for men. All models include country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by country.
* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Discussion: social norms within a transformative agenda

This article makes three contributions. First, our findings contribute valuable quantitative evidence of a significant relationship between social norms and lived experiences of having access to and control over household resources. Both men and women who think that the majority of their neighbours hold gender-equal beliefs and who report holding gender-equal beliefs themselves are more likely to live in households where consequential financial decisions are not the sole purview of men. This is important given that such decisions can in turn further entrench or mitigate women's subordinate roles, for example, when it comes to deciding whether boys or girls in a household should benefit from higher education or whether household resources should be allocated to pay for childcare or domestic tasks and thus alleviate the burden of unpaid labour that often falls to women in many societies. We also find that women who live in communities where gender roles are more circumscribed (that is, where respondents report that fewer of their neighbours, on average, hold gender-equal beliefs) are in turn less likely to report having access to household money and are more likely to depend on someone else in their households. Notably, this result holds when controlling for household wealth and country income level, and it thus echoes Rai et al's (2019: 373) caution that 'payment for women's labour does not necessarily entail an improvement in their relative position, if intra-household bargaining dynamics result in an outcome whereby men continue to control their income'. Access to and control over household resources, however, is only one important element of economic empowerment. Feminist scholars have emphasised the limitations of economic empowerment approaches that concern themselves solely with what happens within households.

Our second contribution comes with regards to the finding that the majority (over 80 per cent) of respondents hold gender-equitable beliefs – which was surprising in the context of persistent and increased gender inequalities across various issue areas, from time poverty to gender-based violence. That said, our findings, specific to social norms related to economic empowerment, add to recently published results of UN Women's (2022: 10) *Gender Equality Attitudes Survey*, which showed that, for example, 91 per cent of individual respondents believe that 'more respect for women's rights across all areas is important for their country's future success' and that 'a significant majority supports the progress of women in access to health care and education, equal pay, business and politics as key for their country's future success'. This is not to say, however, that everything is rosy: the same UN Women study found that misogynistic attitudes about the acceptability of gender-based violence increased during COVID-19, mostly in Sweden, India and the US (UN Women, 2022: 30).

One could certainly argue that more needs to be done to shift attitudes and beliefs that are unfavourable to gender equality and thus women's economic empowerment. Yet, our findings would also suggest that work may not only be needed at the individual scale, for example, through training or workshops that attempt to reverse individuals' deeply held biases. Indeed, it was outside the household in their broader communities – among their neighbours – that respondents seemed to locate more pronounced gender-inequitable beliefs. However, it is also possible that the neighbours themselves hold attitudes and beliefs that are more equitable than their public behaviour might convey. Our findings are suggestive of a dynamic that others have written about in which an unpopular norm is maintained until the conditions that

hold it in place are abandoned (Bicchieri, 2017). Abandonment of norms in such cases can be triggered by a variety of different interventions, for example: one that prompts public discussion about a norm so that members of a community have the opportunity to realise that others also dislike it (for example, as can happen in consciousness-raising activities); a legal or policy change that gives people public permission to do things differently; or a change in the built environment or economy that may soften the logistical or financial drivers of behaviour. In any case, our findings would seem to support arguments in favour of efforts to consider the broader social, political and economic dynamics that shape collective behaviours rather than targeting individual attitudes and beliefs in isolation (Grieg and Flood, 2020; Piedalue et al, 2020). A practitioner tool that is used in various fields is the socio-ecological model (for an example, see Cislaghe and Heise, 2019). This model is intended to guide inquiry and practice so that it accounts for micro-, meso- and macro-level factors that shape social norms and individual and collective behaviour. This model prompts thinking about the constellation of factors that may serve to hold a discriminatory social norm in place – and whether changing those factors may provoke the negotiation or abandonment of the social norm.

The discursive shift towards gender-transformative approaches signals, at least in part, a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo of past and contemporary development models, seeking to turn the driving ethos from 'what women can do for development' to 'what development can do for women' (Cornwall, 2016: 342). Yet, if a gender-transformative agenda is to be truly rooted in early feminist calls (see, for example, Molyneux, 1984; Kabeer, 1994), it must understand gender norms as social systems that exist not merely as attitudes and beliefs in the hearts and minds of individuals but rather as embedded in and shaped by economic and political systems and the organisations that form part of these. Indeed, 'the goal of social change is not reform within the existing system, but radical transformation of the system itself. Social, political and economic structures should be transformed in order to redistribute power and resources fairly' (Maguire, 1984, quoted in MacArthur et al, 2022: 8). The unique data presented in this article provide some quantitative motivation for interventions that at the very least consider this possibility.

ORCiD IDs

Tara Patricia Cookson https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1269-169X
Ruth Carlitz https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7840-2331
Lorena Fuentes https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9397-7440

Notes

[1] It is worth noting that practitioner organisations like UN Women and other gender-focused NGOs and civil society organisations developed and implemented programming to shift discriminatory gender norms long before the current donor interest, though the elements around shifting norms were often implicit, forming part of programming on women's economic empowerment or political participation and leadership, or ending gender-based violence.

[2] For more detail on the survey's methodology, see Mehanna (2021).

[3] The survey was worded in terms of gender, reflecting its socially constructed nature, rather than asking respondents to specify their biological sex. Thus, all of the comparisons in what follows are between people who identify as women and people who identify

as men. The survey included an 'other' option, but very few respondents selected it, precluding the ability to generate meaningful estimates for populations who identify as non-binary.

[4] In the social psychology approach to social norms, norms are understood as comprising both descriptive and injunctive norms, where the latter comprise beliefs about desired behaviour (how a person should behave) (Hewstone et al, 2012). Social pyschologists and practitioners informed by this discipline view both types of norms as important for understanding behaviour.

[5] All results are displayed in terms of exponentiated coefficients and may thus be interpreted as odds ratios, indicating a positive relationship when the coefficient is greater than 1 and a negative coefficient when the coefficient is less than 1.

[6] While certainly not the case in all contexts, it is likely that people of working age are also more likely to contribute to household income and thus have access to it.

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Author biographies

Tara Patricia Cookson is Canada Research Chair and Assistant Professor in Gender, Development and Global Public Policy at the University of British Columbia's School of Public Policy and Global Affairs, Canada. Her research explores how power operates in development, focusing on gender data, care and social protection. She is a co-founder of Ladysmith.

Ruth Carlitz is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She researches the politics of public goods provision in low-income countries from the perspectives of both governments and citizens. She has also conducted studies commissioned by UN Women, the World Bank and other practice-oriented organisations.

Alex Berryhill is currently Senior Manager of Innovation at CARE USA, an international humanitarian organisation. She is also a former researcher at Ladysmith. As a practitioner and researcher, her work explores the intersection of gender and technology, particularly in unstable contexts.

Lorena Fuentes is the co-founder and director of Ladysmith, a feminist research collective that helps international organisations to collect, analyse and take action on gender data. Her research explores how different types of gender data shape visibility and action in development, with a focus on gender-based violence.

Conflict of interest

This article draws on a data set owned by Meta (formerly Facebook). The authors of this article participated in the development of the survey on which the data set is based. They were paid for that work (consultants on survey design). This study, however, has been entirely independent. Meta/Facebook did not pay for, advise on or review the results of the study prior to submission to this journal.

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