



Combating Discriminatory Gender Norms Is Smart Development Policy

Jordan Bernhardt

July 23, 2013

Last winter the brutal gang rape and beating of a young woman on a bus in New Delhi, India—who later died from her injuries—shocked the world, and a new World Health Organization report shows just how disturbingly often such acts of violence against women occur.¹ According to the report, more than one-third of women worldwide are victims of physical and sexual violence, with devastating consequences for their physical, emotional, and economic well-being.

The young victim of the vicious assault in New Delhi—known by the pseudonym Nirbhaya, meaning “fearless one”—had overcome tremendous odds to reach the cusp of a professional life as a physiotherapist, which pays a monthly salary roughly four times of what her father earns.² Her father had worked long hours and sold a small plot of land so that not just his two sons but also his daughter could go to school. She attended classes for five hours each day before heading to a call center to work the night shift until 4 a.m. But her uplifting and inspiring story was tragically cut short, a casualty of pernicious norms and beliefs that privilege men above women.

The costs of gender-based violence, however, are not limited to women’s health. The norms—overt and veiled power structures that proscribe choices and prescribe roles and behaviors—that help spur violence against women also excuse not investing in girls’ education, block women from entering certain professions, limit their freedom of movement, deny them fair access to capital markets, and constrict their political participation. The rape and murder in New Delhi was a heartbreaking example of forces that act daily to limit women’s economic and social advancement and hinder economic development in India and around the world.

The relationship between gender and economic development is both complex and interdependent. This issue brief will examine how gender norms interact with economic development and anti-poverty efforts and will also explore possibilities for reforming discriminatory norms. Economic growth, if done right, reduces poverty, helping reduce discrimination by alleviating resource constraints. Empowering women—giving them more personal control over resources and decision making while broadening the per-

sonal and professional options available to them—can lead directly to a better allocation of resources and speed growth.

Effective economic-development policies must target both poverty alleviation and discriminatory norms while recognizing the sometimes-perverse interactions between development and pre-existing gender hierarchies. Policymakers must continue to mainstream gender—looking at both men and women—into poverty reduction and other related economic-development strategies. They should identify innovative ideas and methods for challenging and changing discriminatory norms. Finally, successful programs—such as those that bring young women into male-dominated fields, work with men in small groups to challenge their perception of gender norms, or increase women’s participation in politics—should be scaled up and expanded.

Contesting norms as economies grow

Economic growth can be either positive or negative for women’s rights and empowerment. The generally more, if not perfectly egalitarian norms in developed countries compared to developing countries suggest that there is a positive relationship between wealth and empowerment, but there is not a straight path from growth to empowerment. In fact, growth can even exacerbate existing inequalities in some cases.

Economic development can empower women through a number of channels, most directly by reducing poverty. When resources are scarce, the battle for their control is more intense and the stakes are higher.³ When families lack sufficient income, they may have to choose which children get to attend school and for how long, and there may not be enough food for every family member to eat their fill. Unfortunately, in many developing countries, but also sometimes in developed countries, families deal with this type of situation by privileging boys, even if girls show more talent. In India, for example, boys and girls ages 15 to 19 hailing from the top quintile of the income distribution both reach the 10th grade on average; in the bottom quintile where resources are scarcer, however, the average boy reaches the 6th grade, and the average girl only reaches the 1st grade.⁴

This investment improves boys’ human capital at the expense of girls’ human capital, reinforcing patriarchal norms. When economic growth reduces poverty, however, it can alleviate these resource constraints and allow families—provided they see the value—to invest more in both boys and girls. As girls’ human capital increases, their ability to fight and win battles against discriminatory practices increases.

Economic growth also tends to increase the economic cost of systematically excluding women. Patriarchal norms often force women to contribute unpaid household labor rather than participate in the paid labor market. If wages increase, however, the foregone earnings from blocking women’s participation in the labor force grow, and more families

might opt to have two wage earners. Indeed, the available evidence shows that women's labor-force participation initially increases as countries' gross domestic product, or GDP, per person increases from initially low levels, but, as we will see, those gains in labor-market participation have historically dissipated somewhat in a middle stage of economic development before increasing again.⁵

Moreover, when mothers control resources, it can lead to more long-term growth through better-targeted investments. A large body of research in developing countries shows that mothers and fathers use income differently: Fathers spend more money on consumer goods such as alcohol and tobacco, whereas mothers spend more on health and education for children.⁶ This is one reason why social transfer programs such as the Oportunidades program in Mexico and the Bolsa Família program in Brazil give money directly to mothers. This difference between how mothers and fathers use income can have profound impacts on economic growth, especially if mothers are able to funnel greater resources and food to children in their critical early years. An increase in mothers' control of household resources could also engender these effects, giving some grounds to hope for a virtuous circle in which empowerment and growth are mutually reinforcing.⁷

Economic development, however, can sometimes reduce women's empowerment and reinforce counterproductive gender norms. For example, the current model of economic globalization, in which factories move to developing countries, has unfortunately led to more women working in exploitative jobs where they toil in unsafe conditions for very low pay. If men appropriate the majority of the gains of their work, women may end up disadvantaged.⁸

Globalization and an increase in the share of resources going to women rather than men can also interact negatively with chauvinistic norms. Men, for instance, may react to an increase in women's empowerment by taking actions to block further advances. As more women work and their earnings increase, it may threaten traditional conceptions of manliness such as the role of primary provider for the family. Even if men are still the primary earners, the relative decrease in their financial responsibility could decrease their bargaining power within the family. One response by men is to try to claw back some of the privileges they used to hold by trying to prevent women from working or entering particular occupations. Unfortunately, it can also take the form of an increased rate of gender-based violence. This idea of male privilege is notoriously difficult to combat and it is not unique to developing countries.

Changing norms to support growth and empowerment

The broad impact of economic development on gender norms and vice versa calls for incorporating gender-focused policies into all areas of development policy. It also means broadening what counts as economic-development policy. Programs that aim to reduce

domestic violence or improve women's health, as well as reforms to political institutions that expand participation, all have economic-development implications through their influence on gender norms.

There has been an admirable commitment in recent years to incorporate gender into various aspects of development policy. The U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, the World Bank, and various regional development banks have all adopted commitments to incorporate gender into their work. These commitments have spurred the collection of gender-disaggregated data and have led to the incorporation of specific gender-related targets in finance, health, education, and other projects.⁹

But aid and development organizations need to continue to think about the gender implications of their programs and do more to directly target discriminatory gender norms. The current gender-mainstreaming agenda does more to address the visible effects of gender discrimination than to attack the underlying causes. It tends to focus on overcoming easily measured barriers such as the ratio of boys to girls in school, rather than aspects that are more difficult to quantify, such as the prevalence of discriminatory norms. Pairing more traditional development programs—such as improving education systems, enhancing access to credit, or providing food support—with programs that focus on combating pernicious gender norms would address the ways in which the traditional programs are refracted through gendered norms. The programs also need to target men as agents that perpetuate discriminatory practices.

There appear to be opportunities to expand this type of matching. An evaluation of the ProJoven vocational education program in Peru by the Inter-American Development Bank found that the program led fewer women to enter traditionally female-dominated sectors such as sales, restaurant and food services, and domestic help, and instead enter sectors traditionally dominated by men. ProJoven offers job training and internships to qualifying low-income youth along with a stipend and actively encourages women to enter training courses for traditionally male jobs. The evidence that the program helps women break down this segregation suggests an opportunity to use targeted education interventions to combat discriminatory gender norms, although gender equality makes up only a small fraction of the program's budget.¹⁰

The Technical and Vocational Vouchers Program in Kenya has shown similar results.¹¹ A sample of Kenyan youth selected to receive subsidized vocational training also received information about the expected wages if they entered training programs in various sectors, with an emphasis on the difference between wages in male-dominated jobs such as electricians and female-dominated occupations such as seamstresses. The women that were told about the different expected wages were much more likely to choose training for the higher-earning male-dominated sectors than the women who did not receive the information about the expected labor-market returns. This suggests that in some cases, the discriminatory norms may be weak enough that providing information along with

vocational education can overcome labor-market biases. Helping women enter non-traditional sectors could also indirectly increase empowerment and help women break down discriminatory norms by increasing labor productivity and earnings.

Gender mainstreaming should also mean recognizing when and why women are prevented from accessing various educational opportunities. Traditional development programs have tended to focus on supply constraints, such as too few schools, or have tried to directly break down the norms that prevent girls from accessing opportunities that do exist. But a study in India by Robert T. Jensen, a professor of public policy at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that there is also evidence of a demand-side problem. Families—and male family heads—underappreciated the true value of education for girls due to a lack of information. Informing families of the true potential economic returns from keeping girls in school, however, led to girls staying in school longer.¹² Targeting men in addition to women, as in Jensen’s study, has consistently led to more egalitarian outcomes.¹³ More studies should seek to identify where these demand-side constraints prevent greater gender equality and develop solutions. A greater focus on the connection between male control over family resources and women’s opportunities outside the home would be a productive start.

The Jensen study on the role of information in the educational return for girls and their subsequent enrollment in school also suggests that at least some discriminatory norms are quite malleable. Indeed, there are numerous examples in which information has led to changes and improvements in gender norms:

- In India, the spread of cable television has been associated with increased autonomy and decreases in the rate at which women report that domestic violence is acceptable, although the study did not measure the actual rate of violence.¹⁴
- Listening to the radio influenced older Bangladeshi women’s attitudes toward egalitarian gender norms, likely by exposing them to information with which they had not come into contact.¹⁵
- In Brazil, the increased access to popular soap operas, which tend to feature women with relatively few children, has helped shape women’s preferences on how many children to have and what to name them.¹⁶

The common theme in these studies is that the various media programs exposed their subjects to more progressive norms than they encountered in their previous experiences. While still clearly situated in the local culture, the women in contemporary television and radio programs tend to be more educated, have fewer children, and adhere to more progressive conceptions of gender roles. Women who watch or listen to these programs appear to update their opinions and preferences to more closely match the opinions and preferences of the women in the programs. Content producers should thus

be encouraged to feature independent women and women that promote progressive practices. Expanding the amount and reach of progressive entertainment could therefore be a promising avenue for combating discriminatory gender norms.

Furthermore, while mass media has been shown to influence women's perceptions of appropriate behavior, small groups also have a track record of reforming young men's preferences and behavior. In Brazil, India, and various countries in Africa, small groups have been an effective way of changing young men's perceptions on the acceptability of domestic violence and their conception of manliness.¹⁷ Young men participating in structured conversations in these small groups on what it means to be a man, such as the role of economic provider and men's relationship vis-à-vis women, adopted more progressive norms. The discussions exposed young men to new norms and gave them a peer group in which they could find support for practicing progressive rather than regressive behavior.

These types of small-group discussion programs should be expanded. They should also include more discussion on how men should invest in their daughters and support women's economic advancement and general empowerment. Aid agencies could provide funding so that these types of programs could be directly incorporated into school curriculums.

The influence of media campaigns, as well as the small-group discussions, point to the importance of role models in shaping gender norms. Elected officials, due to their visibility and ability to influence policy, make especially attractive role models. In fact, research shows that having a local female political leader:

- Increases the likelihood of women becoming entrepreneurs and having increased mobility outside of the home¹⁸
- Improves girls' career aspirations and increases how long they stay in school¹⁹
- Develops trust in police with respect to prosecuting perpetrators—and respecting victims—of gender-related violence²⁰
- Raises the chances of a woman running and winning in subsequent elections²¹

These effects for girls and women are likely the result of a combination of changing norms and different policies pursued by female leaders relative to male leaders. The effect on men of having a female leader, however, is also encouraging. Having a female leader positively influences men's opinions of whether women should serve in elected office, and it also appears to improve men's perceptions of the effectiveness of female leaders.²²

The influence of women on both policy outcomes and gender norms suggests that promoting female political leadership could be an effective economic-development tactic. International policymakers should not unfairly influence foreign elections, but there

is likely ground to encourage more women to participate in politics. Some countries, such as India, have instituted laws that require a certain number of elected officials to be women. India requires at least 50 percent of elected representatives to village councils to be women, but at the national level, where there is no requirement, only about 10 percent of the members of parliament are women. Countries around the world, including India, should look for ways to increase the number of women in politics at all levels.

Conclusion

Much more must be done to combat discriminatory gender norms. In developed and developing countries alike, inequalitarian practices and beliefs expose women and girls to physical, sexual, and emotional violence while simultaneously stunting their own and their societies' economic potential.

Although researchers have a solid understanding and appreciation for how discriminating against women hurts economic development, how to decrease discrimination—by combating the deep-seated patriarchal attitudes that plague many societies around the world—remains a challenge. The major development organizations conduct analyses on how their projects—from extending financial services to infrastructure construction—impact women specifically, which is a good first step. But more needs to be done to address the underlying sources of discrimination.

Numerous programs have shown at least some ability to push norms in a progressive direction. Targeting women for inclusion in untraditional education programs, sharing information about new lifestyles and norms, and increasing the number of female politicians have all shown promise. The next step should be to expand pilot programs that show potential.

Pushing gender norms in an egalitarian direction will be a slow and arduous process. It will require testing innovative ideas, creating culturally sensitive interventions, and scaling up successful trials. Not every program will work, but standing still is not an option. The lives of countless Nirbhayas depend on it.

Jordan Bernhardt is a Research Assistant with the Just Jobs Network at the Center for American Progress.

Endnotes

- 1 World Health Organization, "Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-Partner Sexual Violence" (2013).
- 2 Krishna Pokharel and others, "New Delhi Attack: The Victim's Story," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2013, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323482504578227751166162988.html>.
- 3 For an overview of this theory, see Esther Duflo, "Women's Empowerment and Economic Development," Working Paper 17702 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2011).
- 4 World Bank, "World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development" (2011), p. 74.
- 5 See Joshua Eastin and Aseem Prakash, "Economic Development and Gender Equality: Is There a Gender Kuznets Curve?", *World Politics* 65 (1) (2013): 156–186. Using a long and geographically diverse panel, Eastin and Prakash demonstrate that there is an S-shaped relationship between GDP and a number of proxies for women's empowerment, including women's labor-force participation rate. Eastin and Prakash posit that, starting from low levels of GDP, labor-force participation increases due to the new opportunities available to women and the higher returns. As GDP increases, men assert traditional gender roles, leading to a decline in women's participation. Eventually, GDP increases enough that the cost of discrimination rises past the point that continuing to exclude women makes men better off, and women's labor-force participation rate increases. For a less statistically dense examination of the interaction of growth and gender norms with similar results, see Stephanie Seguino, "Plus Ça Change?: Evidence on Global Trends in Gender Norms and Stereotypes," *Feminist Economics* 13 (2) (2007): 1–28.
- 6 For a review of this literature, see Duflo, "Women's Empowerment and Economic Development," or Andrew Morrison, Dhushyanth Raju, and Nistha Sinha, "Gender Equality, Poverty, and Economic Growth," Policy Research Working Paper 4329 (World Bank, 2007).
- 7 For evidence on this virtuous-circle argument, see Morrison, Raju, and Sinha, "Gender Equality, Poverty, and Economic Growth."
- 8 Peter Hancock, "Women, Work and Empowerment: A study of women workers in two of Sri Lanka's export processing zones," 26th annual conference, The Australia Sociological Association, Perth, Australia, December 2006.
- 9 For example, see USAID, "Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy" (2012), available at http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/Gender_Equality_Female_Empowerment_Policy_Factsheet.pdf; World Bank, "Integrating Gender into the World Bank's Work: A Strategy for Action" (2002); Asian Development Bank, "Guidelines for Gender Mainstreaming Categories of ADB Projects" (2012).
- 10 For a review of the ProJoven program in Peru and its impact on young women, see Hugo Ñopo, Miguel Robles, and Jaime Saavedra, "Occupational Training to Reduce Gender Segregation: The Impacts of ProJoven," Working Paper 623 (Inter-American Development Bank, 2007).
- 11 For a review of the Technical and Vocational Vouchers Program in Kenya, see Joan Hamory Hicks and others, "Vocational Education Voucher Delivery and Labor Market Returns: A Randomized Evaluation Among Kenyan Youth" (World Bank Spanish Impact Evaluation Fund, 2011).
- 12 See Robert T. Jensen, "Economic Opportunities and Gender Differences in Human Capital: Experimental Evidence for India," Working Paper 16021 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010). Jensen's study in India provided information on the potential future labor-market returns from educating young girls. He found that knowledge of the higher returns increased girls' education but did not decrease boys' education, suggesting that the low initial levels of education for girls was due not to a lack of educational opportunities (supply constraints) but a lack of demand for opportunities that already existed.
- 13 Lidia Farre, "The Role of Men in the Economic and Social Development of Women: Implications for Gender Equality," Policy Research Working Paper 6323 (World Bank, 2013).
- 14 Robert Jensen and Emily Oster, "The Power of TV: Cable Television and Women's Status in India," Working Paper 13305 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2007).
- 15 Niels-Hugo Blunch and Maitreyi Bordia Das, "Changing Norms about Gender Inequality in Education: Evidence from Bangladesh," Policy Research Working Paper 4404 (World Bank, 2007).
- 16 Elliana La Ferrara, Alberto Chong, and Suzanne Duryea, "Soap Operas and Fertility: Evidence from Brazil," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 4 (4) (2012): 1–31.
- 17 For a review of programs in Africa, see Gary Barker and Christine Ricardo, "Young Men and the Construction of Masculinity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for HIV/AIDS, Conflict, and Violence" (Washington: World Bank, 2005). For Brazil, see Julie Pulerwitz and others, "Promoting More Gender-equitable Norms and Behaviors Among Young Men as an HIV/AIDS Prevention Strategy" (Washington: Population Council, 2006). For India, see Ravi Verma and others, "Promoting Gender Equity as a Strategy to Reduce HIV Risk and Gender-based Violence Among Young Men in India" (Washington: Population Council, 2008).
- 18 Ejaz Ghani, William R. Kerr, and Stephen D. O'Connell, "Political Reservations and Women's Entrepreneurship in India," Policy Research Working Paper 6307 (World Bank, 2013); Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov, "Empowering Women: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Afghanistan," Policy Research Working Paper 6269 (World Bank, 2012).
- 19 Lori Beaman and others, "Female Leadership Raises Aspirations and Educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India," *Science* 335 (6068) (2012): 582–586.
- 20 Lakshmi Iyer and others, "The Power of Political Voice: Women's Political Representation and Crime in India," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 4 (4) (2012): 165–193.
- 21 Lori Beaman and others, "Powerful Women: Does Exposure Reduce Bias?", *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124 (4) (2009): 1497–1540.
- 22 Ibid.