

ALiGN

Advancing Learning and
Innovation on Gender Norms

10 WAYS TO TRANSFORM GENDER NORMS



WHY GENDER NORMS?

Currently, powerful interests continue to entrench the rights of the few and curtail the rights of the many. Hard-won rights, which are indebted to the work by women's and LGBTQI+ advocates, are being actively rolled back across the globe.

While this is a result of a patriarchal system, it is the invisible gender norms that help sustain social acceptance of these unequal conditions. This normalisation of male power and privilege is so prevalent that it often passes by undetected in our assumptions and beliefs: *men make better political leaders than women; women are asking to be raped if they are out late alone; women are better suited to childcare; boys don't cry; girls don't do science.*

Why is it, for example, that women's work does not always translate into improved social and economic status? Why, despite every proclamation that women can stand for public office, do they feel unable to do so? Patriarchal norms put a brake on our collective economic, political and social progress, but because norms are hidden in the social fabric of our lives, this is not always obvious.

By illuminating these invisible barriers to gender justice, we reveal the actions needed to drive change.

Patriarchal gender norms may fuel misogyny, violence and male power, but they also deprive men of a full life too. They may give men some authority and access to power, but norms confine them to certain roles, subject them to hierarchical and oppressive work or social arrangements, and often make them complicit in disadvantaging women in their lives or their children. Patriarchal norms reinforce intersectional oppressions based on class, race and social constructs, upholding the rights of a few over the rights of the many.

Norms exist at the societal level – in the rules, laws and conventions that guide our collective life, as well as in schools, legal systems and religious practices. But they also exist in people's minds, where attitudes and behaviours depend on group approval or disapproval, and on rewards and sanctions for conforming or diverging from these implicit rules.

Shifting restrictive, discriminatory and oppressive norms is by no means the only answer – but it is one powerful piece of a big and complex puzzle for transformative change. This booklet lays **five critical areas for investment** and **five spaces in which to organise** so progressive actors can align to counter a global patriarchal backlash.

FIVE AREAS FOR INVESTMENT

- 1 Invest in gender-equitable education**
- 2 Invest in sexual and reproductive rights for all**
- 3 Invest in promoting women's economic rights and financial independence**
- 4 Invest in the expansion of women's power in politics**
- 5 Invest in the elimination of gendered-based violence in all its forms**

FIVE ORGANISING SPACES

- 6 Organise to fund women's feminist and intersectional social justice movements**
- 7 Organise to make digital platforms safe and inclusive for all**
- 8 Organise to expand and build pro-feminist men's movements**
- 9 Organise to resist 'norm spoiling' in international agreements**
- 10 Organise to expose and disrupt patriarchal norms driving backlash against feminism**

1 INVEST IN GENDER-EQUITABLE EDUCATION



Childhood and adolescence are pivotal moments in human development where new values, attitudes and behaviours form.^{1,2} School is often the first place beyond our home where we absorb gender norms: a critical site for norm reinforcement or disruption.³ Teachers and students alike often reproduce and perpetuate social norms and gendered stereotypes, whether consciously or not. Curricula, textbooks, and the ways in which gendered biases play out in the classroom, can all affect our understanding of gender and the attitudes, behaviours and roles, expected of us.

But education can be an effective antidote to gender biases. Many educational initiatives worldwide now challenge gender biases and support the development of equitable values. Embedding gender equality content in life skills education, in sexuality education or other areas of the curriculum shows real promise. In India, for example, an innovative curriculum for students in grades 6 to 8 in three states has resulted in more gender equitable attitudes among those students more than two years after completing the course.⁴

No society committed to a more gender-equal world can ignore the importance of investing in norm change through its education systems – in planning processes, in curriculum reform and in the updating of learning materials – to remove stereotypes and promote positive, gender-equitable messages. Investment also needs to ensure that pre- and in-service teacher education helps teachers to reflect on their own biases, equipping them to promote gender equality and build inclusive, equitable school environments.^{5,6} Investment should also maximise the potential of non-formal education, to encourage reflection on gender norms in family and community life.

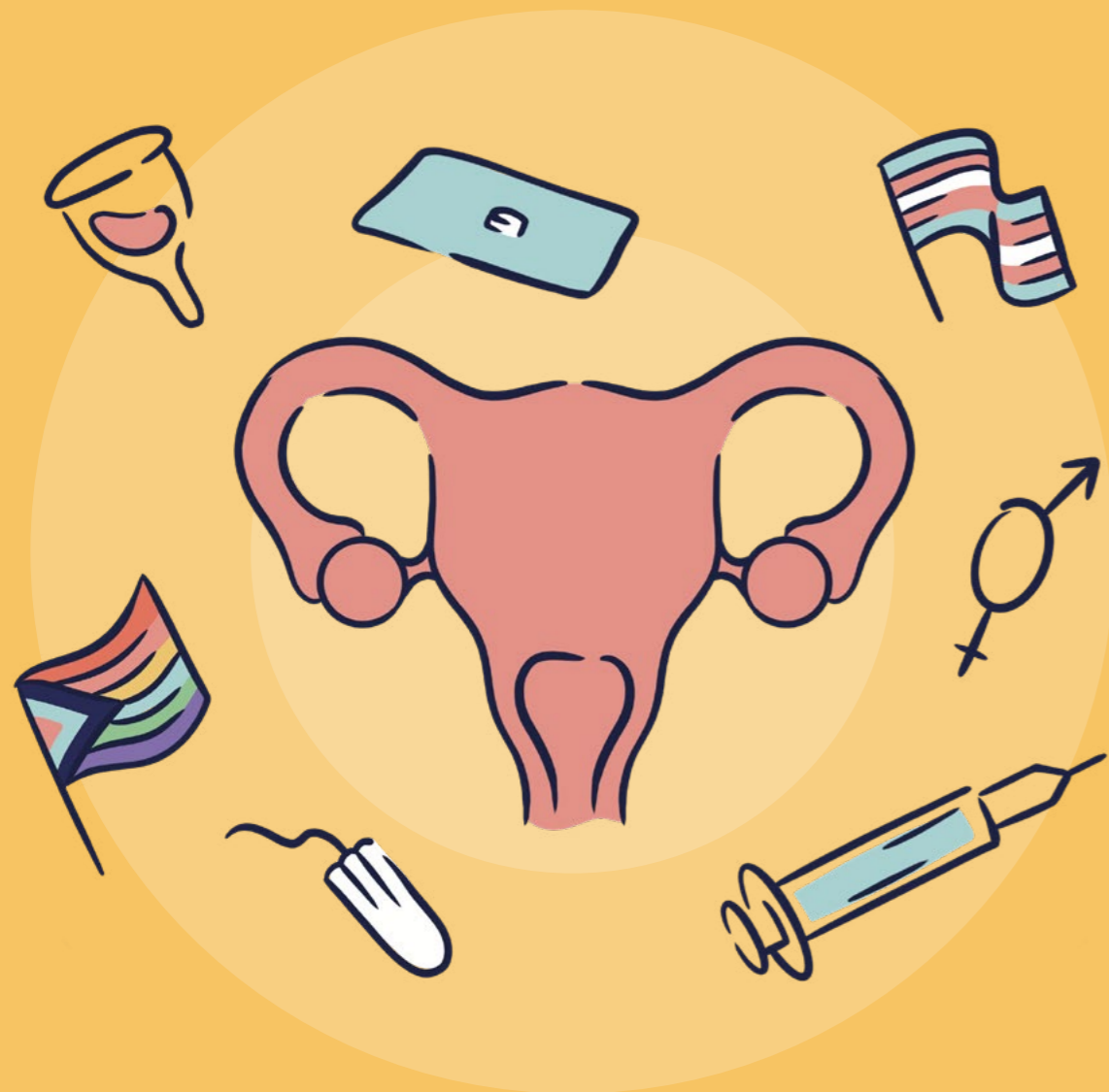
KEY READING

'Education and gender norms: the bedrock of change' in *Gender, power and progress: How norms change* Harper, C., Marcus, R., George, R., et al. (2020) London: ALIGN

Projecting Futures: Exploring teachers' and students' perspectives on gender in rural Peru Wong Oviedo, M. and Spurzem, P. (2019) London: ALIGN

Achieving gender equality in and through education. A knowledge and innovation exchange (KIX) discussion paper Unterhalter, E., Howell, C., Parkes, J. (2019) Washington, DC: Global Partnership for Education

2 INVEST IN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS FOR ALL



Securing the right to sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom is essential for progressive gender norm change, where our control over our own bodies and reproductive decisions is non-negotiable. This also allows more autonomy over other aspects of life, such as education and employment.⁷

The female body has always been a battleground for the expression of patriarchal power, with control of a woman's reproductive choices reflecting the extent of unequal relations. Key policy and legislative gains are now being rolled back as part of a global patriarchal backlash enabled by misogyny embedded in institutions.⁸

An increase in politics that is authoritarian and anti-gender can be seen in the many reversals on safe medical abortion, contraceptives, and comprehensive sexuality education which now restrict women's hard-won freedoms from the USA to Poland and India. Progressive laws are being challenged, including those against early and forced marriages in South Asia or female genital mutilation/cutting in multiple countries.

The rights of LGBTQI+ people to access health services and express their sexuality are under attack, as seen in Pakistan's Supreme Court ruling declaring transgender identities as un-Islamic, or Uganda's new law criminalising homosexuality.

It is critical to double down to defend individual sexual and reproductive rights. Key drivers of positive change include: the expansion of quality health services and access to contraception; access to education, including comprehensive sexuality education for all; engaging religious institutions and leaders; working through the mass media and the internet; and funding women's and feminist movements.⁷

KEY READING

'Gender norms and sexual and reproductive health and rights' in *Gender, power and progress: How norms change* Harper, C., Marcus, R., George, R., et al. (2020) London: ALIGN

Gender equality, norms and health

The Lancet (2019) Series from the Lancet journals. New York: The Lancet

3 INVEST IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC RIGHTS AND FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE



Nearly 2.4 billion women of working age do not have the same legal economic rights as men,⁹ a clear reflection of how norms against women's control over assets remain embedded in societies, often rooted in notions of 'male breadwinning and female homemaking'. By strengthening their economic agency women can exert greater autonomy over their expenditure, mobility and time. Increased economic power for women acts as a lever to shift other deeply-entrenched norms around, for example, girls' education and women's political representation¹⁰, and can provide the financial security that enables women to leave abusive relationships.¹¹

Women's economic independence is also a powerful driver for gender-equal societies. It can be supported through systemic measures, including legislation that protects the right to strike; that guarantees equal access to financial services and bank accounts; that outlaws discrimination in the workplace; and that enshrines women's equal inheritance to land, and the ownership and use of assets.¹² It's equally important for employers to ensure that employees are fairly paid and have decent working conditions that are safe,¹³ free from violence and harassment. And all of these measures should be backed by robust social protection provisions to safeguard women, children and families against poverty.

Economic rights have repercussions that go beyond the immediate economic sphere. For example, public provision of social and childcare services is crucial and can be transformative,⁹ with the universal provision of accessible and good quality care services relieving women of gendered obligations based on patriarchal norms. Some countries in Latin America are developing innovative comprehensive national care systems. These often enshrine a 'right to care',¹⁴ aiming to recognise, reduce and redistribute care responsibilities, with encouragement for men to do their share.¹⁵

KEY READING

'Gender norms around paid and unpaid work and care' in *Gender, power and progress: How norms change*
Harper, C., Marcus, R., George, R., et al. (2020) London: ALIGN

Shifting discriminatory gender norms affecting women in the workplace: Social media campaigns in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam

Marcus, R. (2023) London: ALIGN

Addressing Gender Norms to Increase Financial Inclusion: Designing for Impact

Koning, A., Ledgerwood, J., Singh, N. (2021) Technical Guide. Washington, DC: cgap

4 INVEST IN THE EXPANSION OF WOMEN'S POWER IN POLITICS



Women's under-representation in politics remains one of the most persistent gender inequalities in societies around the world.¹⁶ In early 2023, only 19 countries had a woman as head of government and only 23% of members of parliament were women.¹⁷ The notion that men are natural leaders while women's capacity for leadership is to be questioned is embedded in many societies. Male-dominated spaces, such as parliaments, make for masculine norms, institutions and behaviours which are often, also, modelled by women.¹⁸ Norms-based barriers to women's leadership include violence against them in politics, online harassment, gendered media coverage of female candidates, unequal care responsibilities, and limited educational opportunities.

Women need strong democracies with open civic spaces if their political demands are to be heard and met. The more women there are in politics – in government cabinets, parliaments, or local councils – the more they can change gender norms through their greater visibility in spaces that have been male-dominated, and by engaging in, and changing, the nature of, public life.¹⁹ When more women enter formal politics, it becomes possible to advance their collective interests by influencing policies and ensuring their implementation.²⁰

Drivers of norm change have included the influence of role models, the collective agency that has been mobilised by women's political movements, strong measures to combat violence and harassment, and women's economic inclusion and agency.¹⁹ Gender quotas, when implemented and enforced, have also played a key role in enabling women to enter politics, as have electoral systems based on proportional representation.

KEY READING

'Gender norms and political voice and representation' in *Gender, power and progress: How norms change* Harper, C., Marcus, R., George, R., et al. (2020) London: ALIGN

'Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010' Hughes, M., and Mari Tripp, A. (2015) Article in *Social Forces* 93, no. 4 (2015): 1513–40

Gender and Informal Institutions

Waylen, G. (2017). London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

Engendering Transitions: Women's Mobilization, Institutions, and Gender Outcomes

Waylen, G. (2007) New York: Oxford University Press

5 INVEST IN THE ELIMINATION OF GENDERED-BASED VIOLENCE IN ALL ITS FORMS



Gender-based violence (GBV) remains pervasive worldwide, in both private and public spaces.²¹ Its forms include physical assault, femicide and murder, intimidation, humiliation, verbal and online abuse, unwanted advances, indecent exposure, coercive control and harassment.

GBV is sustained and sanctioned by misogynistic gender norms that underpin the acceptance of male authority and dominance over female bodies.²² The norms that drive GBV include ideas of masculinity that uphold toughness and heterosexuality as central to being a man, and that promote male camaraderie through the objectification of women, sexist humour and sexual dominance. Violence is often excused as being ‘just banter’ or women are blamed for inciting men. Where men go unpunished, violence becomes normalised.²³

Everyone is entitled to a life free from violence, and GBV is a gross abuse of human rights. Male violence also maintains and reproduces patriarchal power and reinforces gender inequality. Patriarchy relies on violence to ‘keep women and gender non-conforming people in their place’,^{24 25} and to generate the fear that limits peoples’ freedoms.

Effective prevention strategies include: school or education-based interventions, community workshops, on- and offline communication campaigns, and the enlisting of men and boys to dismantle patriarchal norms.²⁶ The work of feminist and women’s movements in highlighting the prevalence of violence has been critical, as well as strong advocacy for solutions. These efforts now need to be matched by the transformation of our institutions, such as the judiciary.²⁷ Too often, they prop up a misogynistic culture that perpetuates impunity²⁸ for those who inflict violence and tend to be blind to the needs of women and other marginalised genders.²⁹

KEY READING

Feminist activism to end gender-based violence in the public sphere

Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, D. (2022) London: ALIGN

‘Unpacking the context of femicide in Mexico’

Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, D. (2022) ALIGN blog. London: ALIGN

Preventing violence against women and girls: Community activism approaches to shift harmful gender attitudes, roles and social norms

Jewkes, R., Stern, E., Ramsoomar, L. (2019) London: DIFD/UK AID

6

ORGANISE TO FUND WOMEN'S FEMINIST AND INTERSECTIONAL SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS



Feminist movements are crucial in the push to change gender norms,³⁰ often driving transformations towards gender justice. They have triggered legal changes on GBV,³¹ land and property rights, political representation, family law, labour law, and health and reproductive rights. They have also broken cultures of silence and stigma that have sustained women's oppression – such as blaming victims of GBV and shaming girls and women around menstruation. And they have promoted changes that have emancipated and empowered their members.

Women's leadership and participation in social justice movements has demonstrated that their roles – whether they are explicitly concerned with gender or not – have generated a renegotiation of gender relations among those involved in the movement, their families and their communities. This impact has been seen in land rights movements, democracy struggles, the mobilisation of Indigenous people and, increasingly, in the struggles for environmental or climate justice.³² And women are increasingly acting as environmental-climate defenders around the world.³³

Within these movements, however, women must often fight on two fronts: contesting gendered inequalities in the political space and in their communities, while resisting the extractivist policies and practices of states and their profit-driven private sectors.^{33 34}

The actions of these movements have included: lobbying governments and political actors, appealing for adherence to international conventions, running educational workshops and campaigns, producing new information and tools, creating art³⁴, being active on social media and occupying public spaces.³⁵ Many feminist movements have remained active after they have achieved the legal change they wanted to ensure or demand its implementation.

Feminist movements now need much wider support. Chronic lack of funding is a barrier faced by feminist movements worldwide.³⁶ Donors need to think outside the box and rethink their funding approaches, as they are crucial for the achievement of a more just and feminist future.³⁷

KEY READING

The logics of gender justice: state action on women's rights around the world

Htun, M. and Weldon, S. L. (2018) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

'Women's mobilisation for legislative political representation in Africa'

Tripp, A.M. (2016) Article in Review of African Political Economy 43/9, pp. 382-399

Mobilising for change: how women's social movements are transforming gender norms

Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, D. Harper, C., George, R. (2021) London: ALIGN

7 ORGANISE TO MAKE DIGITAL PLATFORMS SAFE AND INCLUSIVE FOR ALL



In 2022, 4.4 billion people worldwide had internet connection.³⁸ Online platforms now spread ideas about how we should behave at a once unimaginable scale and speed. Online media have become vital tools for feminist activists, but also for their opponents: anti-feminist and anti-rights actors.³⁹ These groups want to roll back, and prevent the extension of, the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people, and make extensive use of social media to do so.⁴⁰ Online violence and anti-rights mobilisation are visible parts of a space where patriarchal, racist and other social biases are ‘baked into’ the algorithms that shape what we see.⁴¹

We must organise to push back. Despite the potential of the online sphere as a space where inequitable norms can be shifted, people who promote feminist ideas risk gender-based violence both on- and offline. People from minority groups are particularly at risk, and the internet is fertile ground for incel radicalisation and violence.

Content moderation policies to prevent hate speech can easily be ‘weaponised’ to suppress feminist content.⁴² Analysis of Facebook content moderation has found that misogynistic content is the least likely to be removed.⁴³ There are now growing concerns about how biases are replicated in the algorithms that underpin social media, and in the expansion of artificial intelligence (AI).⁴⁴

Countering online violence means more content moderation, more moderators from diverse backgrounds and the monitoring of algorithms and AI to identify their biases. It also means building alliances to track and respond to online misogyny, including in online porn,⁴⁵ as seen in the consortiums that already exist to counter terrorism and extremism.⁴⁶ And it means strengthening legal protection against online hate speech, improving access to justice, and enhancing digital media literacy so that Internet users can engage more critically with the content they see each day.

KEY READING

Hidden in plain sight: how the infrastructure of social media shapes gender norms

Diepeveen, S. (2022) London: ALIGN

Hashtags, memes and selfies: can social media and online activism shift gender norms?

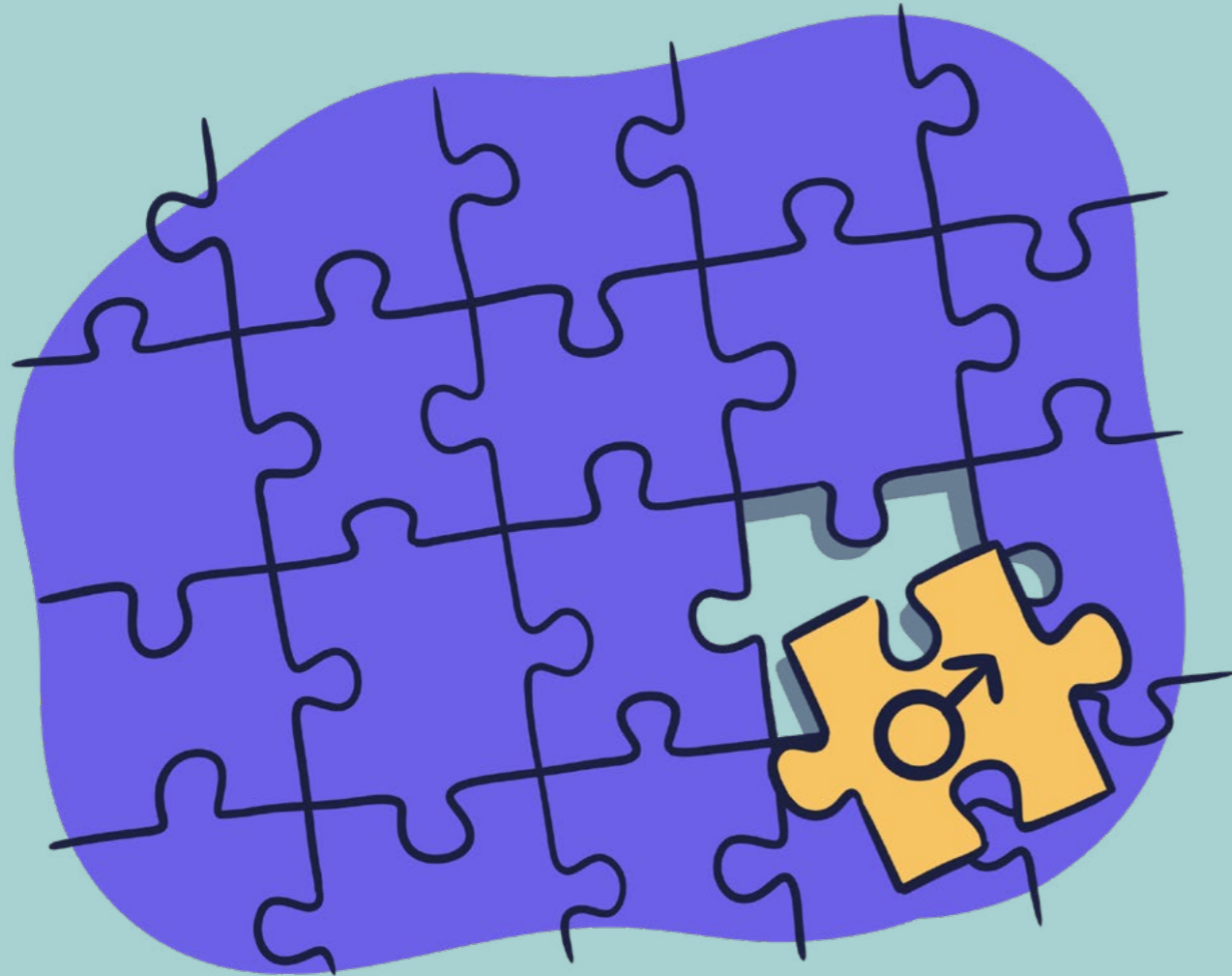
Washington, K., and Marcus, R. (2022) London: ALIGN

‘How do you solve a problem like Andrew Tate?’

Kaur, G. (2023) ALIGN Blog. London: ALIGN



ORGANISE TO EXPAND AND BUILD PRO-FEMINIST MEN'S MOVEMENTS



Gender justice and norm change are not just ‘women’s issues’. Everyone – including men – has a crucial role to play. Patriarchal norms around masculinity – while they undoubtedly give men some privileges – are also incredibly harmful for them. Conforming to societal pressures to ‘be a man’ curtails their chances to express themselves authentically, and ultimately contributes to misogyny and violence.⁴⁷

Men who support women’s rights must become critical allies in advocacy for gender justice.⁴⁸ This takes work – including internal self-reflection – as well as conscious and intentional actions by individuals within systems to enhance the power of women and people with diverse gendered identities. A more gender-equal future be achieved by building men’s movements that mobilise and use various strategies to drive change, including activism, advocacy and campaigning, research, and education.

A pro-feminist man can role-model positive alternative masculinities to shift gender norms and create more equal gender relations. He can influence his peers and work colleagues through his own example, by participating in feminist spaces or men’s consciousness-raising groups, educating himself and others through literature, podcasts or events,⁴⁹ and by not being a passive bystander when he encounters harassment or sexist behaviour in public or with family or friends.⁵⁰

Taking equal responsibility for unpaid care work at home is also a huge step towards transformative change. Overall, we need to foster a greater acknowledgement of men’s essential role in contributing to gender justice. This can help normalise the steps that must be taken to piece together a jigsaw for change, and dismantle patriarchy for the collective good of all.⁵¹

KEY READING

ALIGN guide | Gender norms and masculinities

Kedia, S. and Verma, R. (2019) London: ALIGN

Public dialogue | From allyship to action: how men can step up to end violence against women

ODI and ALIGN (2022) ALIGN-hosted event. London: ODI and ALIGN

‘Concluding Critical Commentary: Men’s Experiences as Agents of Feminist Change’ in *Masculine Power and Gender*

Equality: Masculinities as Change Agents

Flood, M. and Ertel, D. A. (2020) Springer, Cham

9

ORGANISE TO RESIST 'NORM SPOILING' IN INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS



There were important milestones for international human rights in the 1990s, with global agreements around sexual and reproductive rights and women's human rights, and recognition of the connections between rights and political and human development. Human rights frameworks have expanded: from a recognition of the rights of individuals in civil and political life, to additional protection for other categories of rights in social, cultural and economic life.

But we are now seeing a pushback gaining significant traction, led by anti-rights actors, movements and institutions, often motivated by religious ideologies. These actors may be backed by governments and individual politicians who weaponise gender norms to further their own interests. As a result, anti-rights actors wield real power in transnational policy spaces as they try to change the language of human rights agreements. Some, for example, advocate for 'natural rights, family rights and the right to life of the unborn'. This process, known as 'norm-spoiling', leverages these 'rights' against the rights of women.⁵²

Feminist groups and allies must resist 'norm-spoiling' and remain vigilant to safeguard the gains achieved through the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Vigilance and action are also needed on the part of civil society and governments to pursue United Nations negotiations around gender justice. Constant advocacy with national governments is critical to hold them to their international commitments, and more financial resources are essential to support feminist organisations in these efforts.

KEY READING

'Nothing is as it seems: 'Discourse capture' and backlash politics'

Lewin, T. (2021) Article in *Gender & Development*, 29(2-3), 253-268

'Norm spoiling: Undermining the international women's rights agenda'

Sanders, R. (2018). Article in *International Affairs*, 94(2), 271-291

10 ORGANISE TO EXPOSE AND DISRUPT PATRIARCHAL NORMS DRIVING BACKLASH AGAINST FEMINISM



Democratic backsliding is often accompanied by the rise of the ‘strong man’ who relies on misogynistic political leadership based on exclusion.⁵⁴ Gender norms become weaponised, feminism and women’s rights are attacked,⁵⁵ and democracy is dismantled in favour of populist authoritarian rule.⁵⁶ Authoritarian populism fuels anti-feminist backlash through relying on a playbook of ‘toxic masculinities’ and exclusionary norms and ideologies that stoke division by targeting the rights of women, LGBTQI+ communities and racialised groups.

In this kind of climate, progress towards gender justice is easily rolled back, as seen in the repeal of Roe vs. Wade in 2022 by the US Supreme Court.⁵⁷⁵⁸ Such coordinated attacks are linked, in part, to men’s continued domination of the formal institutions of power, as well as the failure of progressive constituencies to recognise that feminism is at the forefront of the fight for democracy and human rights.

Resisting backlash and advancing gender rights demands greater recognition of the actors behind the backlash, their intentions, their narratives and their tactics. It also means raising impact and visibility of male voices, mobilising them as critical allies and activists to challenge the discourse of backlash actors and pushback against patriarchal systems.

At the same time, a bigger and stronger platform for women’s voices at every level of political decision-making and public life is needed. This can complement the generation of new concepts, stories and analysis to counter the backlash and win public and political support for gender justice. Greater international collaboration, supported by Feminist Foreign Policy, can ensure a principled and coordinated multilateral policy response.

To transform gender norms for the long-term, this must coincide with tangible support for feminist movements, through renewed international and donor funding for their mobilisation, with enhanced accountability mechanisms in place to stop funds being diverted to anti-rights organisations in local contexts.⁵⁹

KEY READING

‘Disentangling and locating the “global right”: Anti-gender campaigns in Europe’

Paternotte, D., and Kuhar, R. (2018). Article in *Politics and Governance*, 6(3), 6–19. Scopus

‘Facing the backlash: what is fuelling anti-feminist and anti-democratic forces?’

Khan, A., Tant, E., Harper, C. (2023). London: ODI

ALiGN



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This info-booklet is the product of the collective efforts of the ALIGN team, with particular thanks to: Emilie Tant, Emily Subden, Caroline Harper, Rachel Marcus, Ayesha Khan, Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, Ján Michalko, and Aatif Somji for their contributions to conceptualising, drafting and finalising the publication. We are very grateful to Angie Hawke for copy-editing, and Design by Maia for the beautiful illustrations and design work. Finally, the team is particularly grateful to those who financially support the ALIGN Platform to continue its work to generate new knowledge and transform gender norms.

ABOUT ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on changing gender norms.

If you would like to know more about how to collaborate with ALIGN or support our work, please get in touch: align@odi.org.uk • www.alignplatform.org

References: For access to the full reference list of cited work, please visit: www.alignplatform.org/resources/booklet-10-ways-transform-gender-norms

Disclaimer: This document is an output of Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN). The views expressed and information contained within are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, ODI or our partners and donors and they accept no responsibility for such views or information or for any reliance placed on them.

Citation: ALIGN (2023) 10 ways to transform gender norms. ALIGN info-booklet. London: ODI. (www.alignplatform.org/resources/booklet-10-ways-transform-gender-norms).

Copyright: © ALIGN 2023. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).