



## **POLICY BRIEF No. 27**

### **Changing Social Institutions to Improve the Status of Women in Developing Countries**

*by*

**Johannes Jütting and Christian Morrisson**



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## Introduction

Recent Development Centre research (Morrisson and Jütting, 2004, 2005; Morrisson and Friedrich, 2004) has shown the institutional framework as key to understanding the economic role of women in developing countries, yet this framework has not received the attention it deserves. This *Policy Brief* summarises the lessons from this and other research to answer three questions. *First*, why are social institutions so important for gender equality? *Second*, what obstacles impede reforms of discriminatory social institutions, and why is progress so limited? *Third*, what policy lessons emerge for donors?

Feminist studies emphasised the major role of institutions for gender inequality early and repeatedly (Elson, 1991; Marchand and Parpart, 1995; Parpart, 1993). They argued that patriarchal structures perpetuate gender inequality. To overcome it, women must challenge existing power relations and change or abolish patriarchal institutions. A landmark World Bank study on gender equality (2001) also puts priority on the need to reform institutions to establish equal rights and opportunities for women and men. Within the overall institutional setting, social institutions and cultural practices — i.e. laws, norms, traditions and codes of conduct — often are the main sources of persisting discrimination against women in developing countries. Examples include polygamy, unequal inheritance rights, obstacles to free movement and early, family-imposed marriages of teenagers.

Where traditions still largely determine people's behaviour, standard policies to promote gender equality — building more schools, giving micro-credit to women and so on — are important but not sufficient. Building schools where custom or tradition forbids girls to leave the house alone after puberty will not make much difference. Giving micro-credit to women in rural villages where they are denied access to land, technology and information will not deliver the desired effects.

Finding options to address unfavourable institutional frameworks presents a tremendous challenge. Quick fixes or blueprints of reforms will not work and could be counter-productive. Donor intervention in social institutions is particularly difficult, because they are highly sensitive and action could easily be viewed as “cultural imperialism”. The Human Development Report 2004 addresses the definition of cultural liberty and how it relates to social institutions. “...[N]either cultural freedom nor respect for diversity should be confused with the defence of tradition. Cultural liberty is the ability of people to live and be what they choose, with adequate opportunity to consider other options” (UNDP, 2004, p. 4). Promoting change in social institutions is not a step against cultural liberty

but allows women to make their own decisions. Promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women is not a western view imposed on developing countries. All 191 member states of the UN unanimously adopted it in the United Nations Development Declaration (Millennium Development Goal Three).

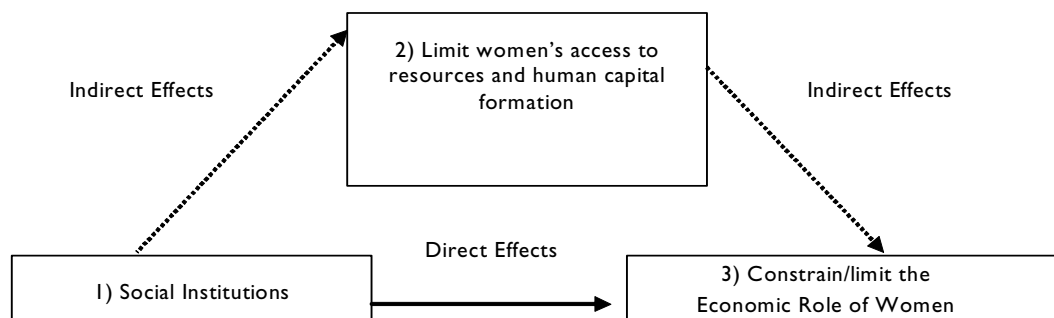
### **Discrimination against Women World-wide: Concept, Causes and Consequences**

To address gender inequality in a country properly requires knowledge of the sources and the depth of discrimination. Valid indicators that capture various aspects of gender inequality are indispensable for informed policy making. The existing indicators tend to focus on gender disparities related to access to education, health care, political representation, earnings or income and so forth. The aggregate indices that have received the most attention are the UNDP's Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The UNDP's Human Development Reports cover both regularly for individual countries. The GDI is an unweighted average of three indices that measure gender differences in terms of life expectancy at birth, gross enrolment and literacy rates and earned income. The GEM is an unweighted average of three other variables reflecting the importance of women in society. They include the percentage of women in parliament, the male/female ratio among administrators, managers and professional and technical workers, and the female/male GDP per capita ratio calculated from female and male shares of earned income.

Both of these indices have a fundamental problem. They measure the results of gender discrimination rather than attempt to understand its underlying causes. The school enrolment ratio and the percentage of women among managers, for example, are useful in comparing different country situations, but neither explains why these differences arise. They ignore the institutional frameworks that govern the behaviour of people and hence the treatment of women. In most developing countries, especially poor ones, cultural practices, traditions, customs and social norms hold the keys to understanding the roots of gender discrimination.

Figure 1 highlights how social institutions affect the economic role of women, i.e. their chances to have access to the labour market and to better paid and more qualified jobs such as professional workers, technicians, administrators and managers. Social institutions can exert their influence in two ways. Traditions, customs and social norms can constrain women's activities directly — by not allowing them to start their own businesses, by refusing them jobs that involve contact with or managing men, or by simply not allowing them to leave the home alone. All these direct factors lead to an exclusion of women from entrepreneurial activities that are often the first step towards independence, self-esteem and liberty of choices. Morrisson and Jütting (2004) analyse empirically the relationships between social institutions and the economic role of women. They measure the depth of discrimination caused by social institutions with economic (ECO) and non-economic (NON-ECO) indicators (for explanation, see Box 1). They find that the higher the value for ECO and NON-ECO variables the lower the probability that women will play an active role in the economy. A further econometric analysis puts into question the widely believed view that a rise in income will generally facilitate women's access to the labour market.

**Figure 1. The Double Effect of Social Institutions in Constraining the Economic Role of Women**



### Box I. Measuring Social Institutions

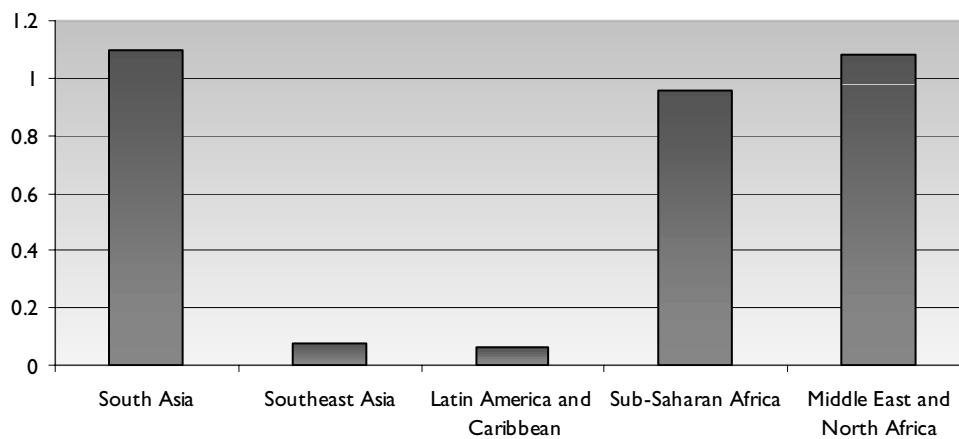
The following indicators offer a broad perspective on the depth of gender inequality based on information about social institutions in more than 60 countries. These ECO and NON-ECO indicators are aggregate indicators reflecting longstanding norms, customs and traditions that usually have prevailed for more than a century. The ECO indicator for a country refers to the family code in place that affects the ability of women to undertake economic activities. The NON-ECO indicator is composed of variables that have no direct link to the economic role of women. For more details see Morrisson and Jütting (2004).

ECO Indicators	NON-ECO Indicators
Right to Inherit	Genital mutilation
Freedom of movement and dressing	Marriage before the age of 20
Right to ownership and access to property	Polygamy
	Authority over children

Beside these direct effects, social institutions can also impact on the economic role of women indirectly. It is well known that better education and access to health care and productive resources affect women's chances to participate in the labour market. The determinants of access to such resources are less clear, however. Traditional institutions can hinder females' access to resources (land, credit and capital) and constrain the building of human and social capital. For example, in traditional societies where girls are married between the ages of 12 and 15, parents may simply be unwilling to invest in the education of their daughters because the girls will leave parental households early, making the return on such investment low. In some parts of the world (e.g. rural Sudan) parents might even not send their girls to school at all if schooling goes against local culture and tradition. Such limited access to education will substantially reduce the probability of women's entering the labour market at any time in their lives. Using proxies like polygamy, excision, arranged marriages and parental authority for the institutional framework, Morrisson and Jütting (2004) find a significant negative impact of these variables on literacy, enrolment and life expectancy. The first two of these indicators measure inequality in access to education; the third measures access to health care.

Figure 2 shows the degree of discrimination against females due to social institutions for different regions in the world. It reveals important differences between two large multi-regional groupings — Southeast Asia and Latin America, on the one hand, and sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East/ North Africa (MENA) region, on the other. The ECO and NON-ECO values are consistently very low in the first group and comparable to those of OECD countries, indicating relatively low discrimination. In Southeast Asia and Latin America polygamy is forbidden, early marriages are not frequent, inheritance laws are more egalitarian and women generally have access to property and can circulate and dress freely. This does not mean, however, that women face no discrimination in social institutions. In Latin American countries, for instance, they can find access to land and capital difficult, although they are not systematically excluded as in countries with high discrimination values. Women also do not suffer from genital mutilation, but violence against them is reported frequently. Despite these caveats, a distinct gap in the condition of women exists between Southeast Asian, Latin American, European and North American countries on one side and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent and countries of the MENA region on the other. Some exceptions appear in the second group, such as Mauritius, Tunisia and Turkey.

**Figure 2. Regional Indices of Discrimination Against Women**

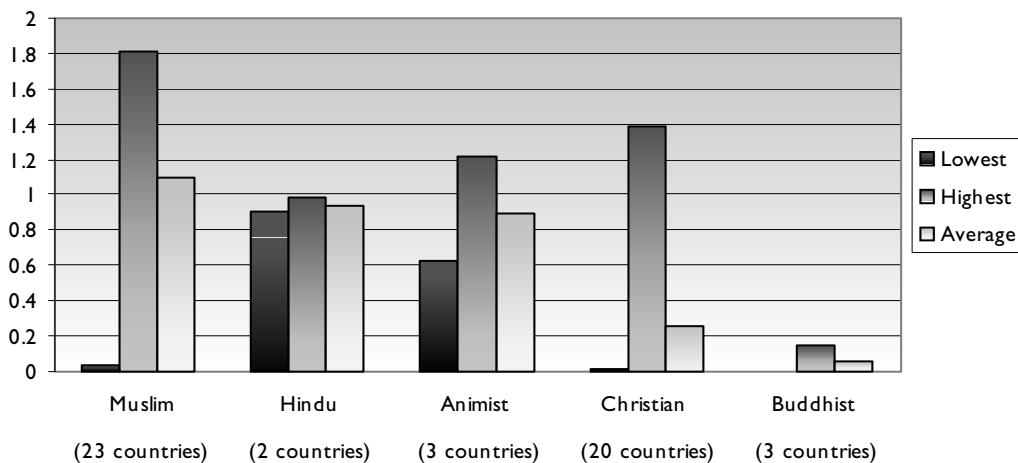


*Note:* 0 = no discrimination; 2 = maximum discrimination; numbers present the added value of ECO and NON-ECO for different regions.

*Source:* Morrisson and Jütting (2005), p. 7.

The ECO and NON-ECO variables can also be calculated for religious affiliations. The added average values of both indicators suggest that Muslim, Hindu and Animist countries tend towards greater gender inequality than do Christian and Buddhist ones<sup>1</sup> (Figure 3). This point does not hold up especially well in a more detailed examination of the indicator values for individual countries, however. In a Muslim country the discrimination index can drop to below 0.1 while in a Christian country it can reach over 1.2. This reveals variation within religious affiliations in views on the role of women in society. The Muslim countries from Morocco to Indonesia display great differences in the status of women. Western media focus attention on some Gulf countries or on Pakistan, but in several other countries (e.g. Malaysia, Turkey or Tunisia) women have more rights with respect to marriage, authority over children, divorce, freedom of movement and access to property. Even in more traditional countries such as Libya or Syria, women have equal access to property and can dress as they like. In Syria a husband needs the agreement of the tribunal if he wants to marry a second spouse. The Muslim world is in fact very heterogeneous.

Figure 3. Indices of Discrimination Against Women, by Religious Affiliation



Note: 0 = no discrimination; 2 = maximum discrimination; numbers present the added value of ECO and NON-ECO for different regions.

Source: Morrisson and Jütting (2005), p. 7.

1. The results for Hindu, Animist and Buddhist countries have to be interpreted with caution, as the overall sample size is rather small compared with Christian and Muslim countries.

## **Obstacles and Solutions for Reforming Social Institutions**

The “legitimacy” of reforms is critical. Policies that aim to improve women’s access to education, health care, credit and the labour market bear costs and may engender technical problems, but people generally will not see them as interference in their private lives. This is not the case if a government challenges traditions like polygamy, genital mutilation, inheritance rules or males’ authority over women. Such reforms touch the private lives of citizens and might contradict religious beliefs and millenary traditions. The current discussion of the reform of the *code de la famille* in Algeria provides a good example. Islamists strongly oppose the government plan to make it necessary to ask a judge for permission for several marriages; they stress that judges have no role to play in such “intimate family matters” (*Le Monde*, 29 September 2004).

The crucial question thus concerns a government’s legitimacy when it tries to change religious teachings, laws, traditions and the family code, all of which form an important part of the private sphere of citizens. One could argue that a democratically elected government has a legitimate mandate to change social institutions to establish cultural liberty for the whole population. Even in OECD countries, however, some religious minorities like Jehovah’s Witnesses might still contest laws not in agreement with their beliefs. Establishing democracy is important, and it can influence positively the chances for the reform of social institutions. Yet it is not a cure-all. Democracy alone is often not sufficient. Discrimination against women still exists in many poor countries with democratic structures, because governments’ influence on family life remains limited or non-existent, particularly in rural areas. A context of illiteracy, poverty, a non-monetised economy and a mainly rural society does not favour reforms to reduce discrimination.

The chances for successful reforms are highest in middle-income countries that are democratic and where the whole population has access to basic services like education, information and health care. Few such countries have high measured levels of discrimination against women, but several middle-income countries that are non-democratic do maintain high discrimination values.

Introducing changes of social institutions in favour of women seems most complex in lower middle-income countries where the shares of rural populations remain important along with the percentages of illiterate women. Overcoming long-lasting discriminatory cultural practices depends heavily on the authority of countries’ leaders. Two scenarios are possible:

- ◆ In a non-democratic environment — as in countries that have political leaders with exceptional authority — leaders can not only introduce but also enforce reforms that the majority of the population would otherwise reject. Historical examples of such authoritative leaders include Kemal Ataturk in Turkey in the 1920s after a war and a revolution, and Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia in 1956 after a long fight for independence.
- ◆ In a democratic context, top-down or bottom-up development can make a difference in societies generally open to change owing to trade openness, cultural exchanges, tourism development and media freedom. The current changes in the *code de la famille* in Morocco exemplify a mainly top-down development. The influence of women in the society has increased under a generally open regime allowing people access to information about different lifestyles. In this environment, the highly popular King Mohammed VI has introduced substantial institutional changes in favour of women. In principle, the political establishment within a society could also introduce such top-down changes or, alternatively, react to pressures generated by a bottom-up democratic process. The history of the development of gender equality in Western countries reveals that lobby and pressure groups have often organised and channelled support for changes, which political parties eventually incorporated into their agendas.

The foregoing discussion shows that a uniform way of legitimising reforms for gender equality does not exist. Whether most of the population accepts or does not accept reform depends very much on a country's specific history, cultural legacies, group composition, level of development, degree of participation and political liberties. Moreover, and in addition to the question of legitimacy, reforms can encounter four main obstacles that take on different weights in different country environments:

- ◆ Constraints on empowering women;
- ◆ Flawed interpretations of religious laws and the depth of traditions;
- ◆ Missing drivers of change and the vested interests of men; and
- ◆ Limited enforcement of reforms.

### **Constraints on Empowering Women**

To make reforms of social institutions happen as well as to ensure their sustainability, women must obtain empowerment and become their own agents in handling their lives. In many societies and for various reasons men often take the decisions that concern the lives of women. There are three important conditions for empowering women and making changed institutional structures possible.

*Improving Females' Access to Education.* Increasing female education, especially literacy rates and basic education, is key. Without education, women have no access to paid employment, cannot take over functions in associations and cannot become members of local assemblies or parliaments. They have hardly any consciousness of their rights and often retain their inferior status. Education also allows women to take part in political debates and thereby ensure sustainability of reforms. When an important Islamic movement started to develop in Tunisia in the 1990s, educated women supported the government's effort to fight against it. This would have not been possible in the 1950s, when most Tunisian women remained uneducated.

Several sub-Saharan African and South Asian countries need most urgently to increase female enrolment until the age of 14. Female schooling rates at all education levels remain largely inferior to those of males. Making school attendance compulsory efficiently increases primary schooling. Moreover, it is preferable to have non-mixed schools as well as female teachers. In some francophone African states both have proven successful in increasing the enrolment of girls. Because families often refuse to educate their girls in order to retain their labour, governments should provide them compensation in cash or in kind. Examples from Bangladesh show that such measures helped to increase the female schooling rate. Public investments in infrastructure (roads, schools and transport) reduce the costs for families to send their girls to school. The quality of teaching also needs improvement. Unmotivated teachers, high absenteeism rates among them and classes with more than 40 pupils discourage parents from sending their daughters to learn.

*Better Access to Health Services and Family Planning.* Access to health care is also essential for the empowerment of women. The introduction of user fees has proved very damaging to women's use of health services, particularly in societies that discriminate highly against women. The further development of innovative risk-sharing institutions tailored to women, such as the Self Employment Women's Association health insurance programme in India, would represent a

step forward. A related aspect, improved free access to family planning, enables women to participate in the labour market, obtain their own income and with this gain more independence from their husbands.

*Better Access to Factors of Production: Land, Credit, Technology and Information.* Improved access to factors of production ensures a long-lasting empowerment of women as a pre-condition for overcoming traditions and norms of behaviour. Women's access to land is crucial. They often have no right to own land and cannot inherit it. If the husband dies and has no sons all the land can go back to his family, leaving his wife without resources. Gaining access to information is important too. With telecommunication facilities accessible to women in rural areas, information circulates more easily and transaction costs fall, leading in turn to more market opportunities for women. The Grameen Village Phone Initiative in Bangladesh furnishes an excellent example of how information access can overcome many bottlenecks in the empowerment of women.

These three options for empowering women usually form parts of policies that attempt to address gender inequalities. They are important and necessary, but far from sufficient. The conventional approach to gender inequality can pay off fully only if, at the same time, other measures address the deep, societal roots of discrimination against women.

### ***Flawed Interpretations of Religious Laws and the Depth of Traditions***

As discussed earlier, discrimination against women in Christian and Buddhist countries is generally lower than in Animist, Hindu or Islamic countries, although this generalisation is subject to important caveats. The Islamic countries have received particular attention with respect to the relationship between the Islamic law (Sharia) and the situation of women. Reported examples in countries such as Sudan, Nigeria (the northern part) or Saudi Arabia seem to suggest that the Koran is to blame for gender discrimination. This interpretation misses the point. In fact, interpretations of certain surates of the Koran have often been tailored to fit pre-existing traditions or to suit power relations between men and women. Islam is a religion that rules family life, and the different verses of the Koran impose certain regulations on the status of women through a code. The introduction of this code represented progress in Arabia, compared with the situation of women before Islam became the dominant religion. During the colonial era, foreign authorities respected Muslim populations and maintained Islamic law through the personal status code; but Islamic law does not forbid reform of personal status. Morocco recently undertook a reform decided by the

King, who is both the spiritual and the temporal chief of the Moroccans. It does not formally forbid polygamy, but makes it almost impossible in practice. It transforms repudiation into divorce available for both spouses. It erases the rule of obedience for a wife towards her husband, and wives can choose their partners freely. Thus the verses of the Koran can indeed be reinterpreted and pluralism of interpretations is admitted. This pluralism allows for change, provided that certain precautions are taken, namely:

- ◆ Any intervention of a non-Muslim in the reform process should be avoided. All changes should be discussed strictly between Muslims;
- ◆ Applying foreign laws can entail more resistance than if the new laws refer to the Koran;
- ◆ The reform must always appear as an interpretation of some surates of the Koran;
- ◆ Religious authorities should approve reforms. Governmental policies must never appear as laic, atheist, or pro-western; and
- ◆ Governments must proceed step by step, because gradual reforms of family laws raise fewer reactions than radical ones.

In the Hindu religion, too, very different interpretations with respect to gender issues are common. A detailed analysis of the conditions of women in various Indian states by Morrisson and Friedrich (2004) shows a big gap between the four northern and the four southern states. The indicators measuring the depth of gender discrimination are nearly twice as high in the North as in the South, even excluding Punjab and Kerala, where Hinduism is not the dominant religion. The same gaps exist today as 60 years ago for access to education, health care, the labour market and more highly qualified jobs. The changes in law in favour of women in the 1950s and 1960s have been put into practice and enforced much more in the South than in the North. Different types of family structures (matrilineal versus patrilineal) as well as historical factors (invasion of Muslims in the North) seem to play a role in explaining these remarkable differences (Dyson and Moore, 1983).

Whereas in the ongoing debates “religion” is referred to as the main factor constraining change, deeply rooted traditions and customs often really play the main role in holding back improvements. Traditions impose heavy discrimination against women in many countries. Genital mutilation, a particularly severe practice, continues despite all the actions led by governments and international as well as non-governmental bodies. None of the main religions prescribes such

practices. It is easy to promulgate a law, but rural populations remain attached to traditions as long as states remain unable to control family behaviour. The abolition of such traditions is a long-term process and requires great perseverance as well as a sequencing of reforms.

The first step is the legal interdiction of discriminating customs and a concentration of efforts to enforce it, especially in urban areas. A government can, for example, forbid traditions such as marriage before the age of 15 and genital mutilation, then try to enforce and gain respect for the law through controls, incentives and advertising campaigns. The second step would then target the rural population, which generally sticks longer to its traditions. The mentalities of rural populations change slowly, but they do evolve. It is important to target separately and obtain the support of the local chiefs and religious leaders. As respected authorities, they can add pressure on families more efficiently than national administrations can do.

In both urban and rural areas, improvement in female primary schooling offers an excellent means to accelerate the evolution of attitudes, especially when combined with measures such as subsidies to families, fines, advantages for families that respect the laws, support for women's associations and media campaigns. The example of Kenya shows strikingly how schooling can have an impact. Educated women tend to refuse genital mutilation for their daughters.

Besides legal changes, the provision of incentives and education, fostering cultural openness could also help. The means to achieve it include the press, radio, the internet, foreign television, teaching foreign languages, cultural exchange with foreign schools, temporary migration for paid employment and welcoming tourists. Information on how people in other countries live and about their rules and norms of behaviour and living conditions can help mentalities to evolve. Morocco's cultural openness since the 1960s greatly enlarged the possibilities for the King to propose and enforce changes in the personal code in favour of women.

### ***Missing Drivers of Change and the Vested Interests of Men***

The politics of reforms promoting gender equality can be complex. Gaps often open between the views of people such as heads of state, reform-oriented ministers or party members on the one hand, and parliamentarians on the other. The latter, generally males, show hostility towards reforms reflecting that of their electors. Governments can enter into deep conflict with parliaments on laws that aim to abolish gender inequalities. In India, for example, the Parliament did its best to prevent Nehru from ameliorating the status of women. When such measures

were finally passed, the parliaments of several states sabotaged their application (Coonrod, 1998). In Kenya, the Parliament has twice refused a law reforming the marriage code. Men oppose reforms in many countries (Morrisson and Friedrich, 2004). In Egypt, a presidential decree in 1979 liberalised the Family Status law to strengthen a Muslim woman's rights to divorce and child custody, but this decree was repealed in 1985 by the Supreme Constitutional Court (AFROL, 2003)

Resistance to new reforms links not only to religious or traditional beliefs, but also to economic interests. In all societies where women have a status inferior to that of men, this inequality provides men with material advantages that they lose upon reform. Surveys of household expenditures reveal that women usually spend money on items that benefit the whole family, particularly the children (e.g. school fees and health care). In contrast, men often tend to buy consumption goods. Empowering women affects the distribution of welfare between household members and can improve children's welfare at the expense of husbands' perceived interests.

Polygamy allows wealthy, old and already married men to have second spouses generally 20 to 30 years younger than they are. These unions come close to commercial transactions, in which poor parents "sell" their daughters against financial compensation. Polygamy usually links with repudiation, a Muslim law that allows any husband to dismiss his wife when he likes and without allowance. If legal reform puts divorce law in place of repudiation, the husband must pay a living allowance to his divorced wife and their children.

How can one address these obstacles? Two complementary actions are necessary. First, guarantee women more participation in decision making from the community to the national level. Women can then influence decisions that have an impact on their daily lives. Second, give men incentives to accept rather than oppose or boycott changes.

A crucial step forward would ensure more equal participation of women in elections, reserve quotas of seats for women in parliaments and assure that at least some women gain top positions. With the percentage of women in parliaments now often inferior to 5 per cent, quotas of 20 per cent would represent real progress and give women considerable weight in decision making. Such quotas should be associated with higher quotas (30 per cent, for example) at the community level. In India, Pakistan and Argentina, a third of municipality seats are reserved for women, who can bring forward women's concerns and interests such as support for primary education, access to family planning and health care or acting against domestic violence. Larger shares of women in decision-making processes can help to bring issues to the table that are otherwise

neglected and can influence discussion and decisions in favour of the local female population. All this takes time, however, and it involves a learning-by-doing exercise for women who take on more responsibilities.

Barbados, Fiji, Mozambique, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Uganda have started gender-sensitive budgeting processes that allow systematically tracking the impact of budgets on women. Civil-society organisations can help such endeavours. In South Africa and Tanzania, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) evaluate public finances and their impact on access of women to public services. Moreover, in addition to these kinds of processes, women also need the power to lobby for change. Women's associations play a crucial role and deserve promotion, support and training at national as well as local levels. Professional associations can help women to gain better access to resources, teach them how to create and manage enterprises and make their voices heard.

Addressing the male-incentive problem requires, first, emphasising the benefits of gender equality for the whole society including men. In many rural areas in developing countries women are the breadwinners as well as caretakers of the children. In urban areas, booming exports of manufactured goods often produced by women have stimulated growth. Without these exports, growth would have been slower. The central role of women for economic development and ultimately the wealth of men needs better articulation to convince more men not to sabotage changes favouring women. A literate woman can better feed and educate her children, including boys. Women who have access to resources and gain economic independence contribute substantially to household revenue and thereby to the social status of the household head. Nevertheless, men rarely renounce their privileges. Reforms imposing gender equality generally do impact on the distribution of individual incomes and wealth in favour of women, although the extent of this effect often remains unknown because statistics concentrate on gross household incomes and estimate average individual incomes, which does not reflect gender disparities. In light of all these factors, overcoming continued strong male resistance to reforms may require not only better enforcement of existing laws but also financial compensation to men.

### ***Limited Enforcement of Reforms***

Many countries show a wide gap in performance between the publication of a law and its effective implementation. The reasons for this that must be understood and addressed concern essentially the attitudes of national and local governments, public opinion and the family. Governments face great international pressure to change laws to favour women and in general to reduce gender

inequality. To secure development aid, decision makers may pursue changes on paper to fulfil the requirements of donors, but have rather less interest in actually enforcing them, given existing male resistance. In Kenya, reported cases suggest that the local judiciary does not apply laws that guarantee women equal treatment with men with respect to inheritance. In Iraq the law of succession in 1963 imposed new priorities in inheritance, but it was gradually diluted by judges' interpretations to the extent that the traditional Sunni priorities continue today to apply to inheritances of Sunni Muslims (Beck and Keddie, 1978). In some Indian states women have been assassinated because their dowries were insufficient, whereupon the police produced death certificates and did not pursue any further investigations. Both the police and local administrations are composed mostly of men, who often strongly oppose the new reforms (Coonrod, 1998). Addressing these obstacles calls for more equal representation of women among political decision makers, among judges and in the public administration. Positive discrimination might be necessary for some time to introduce effectively an anonymous, written and competitive examination to get more women into public administration.

Public opinion can be another important obstacle to the application of laws. Divorce is legal in India, for example, but in reality very few women ask for it because a divorced woman often faces social stigma. The custom of the Sati, under which widows immolate themselves on the pyres of their husbands, was abolished in 1870 but remained in practice long after with the support of public opinion. In Africa, girls not excised are highly stigmatised by their schoolmates. To act against this informal resistance, governments should use the media and aim at offering a systematically egalitarian vision of gender relationships through schoolbook texts. They also should put more emphasis on highlighting the benefits for the whole society of treating women equally with men.

The family often throws up the last bastion of resistance to changes in social institutions. If the head of the family wishes to marry off his daughter before she reaches the age of 15, he will do it whatever law regulates the conditions of marriage. Family pressures are strong. In Kenya, even if a woman may buy goods, she lets her husband take care of the transaction to respect traditions. In the north of Sudan, a woman will not leave the house even though the law allows her to do so. In the north of India, women must wear the purdah, which contradicts Indian law, to follow their husbands' will. In Jordan women legally have access to any job, but families often prevent them from working (Miles, 2002). Connections are critical to securing jobs in Jordan, but several women reported in a survey that their parents used their connections only for their sons. In some families fathers forbid young women to work. In poor families husbands refuse wives work that pays

more than their own jobs because they want to save their dignity. Accepting reforms is a long and slow process for families, especially in rural areas. The state can reduce this resistance to its actions with support from the media, local chiefs and religious authorities. Television and radio can play critical roles. Family-series programmes, which enjoy increasing interest, can transmit a picture of how families in other societies live.

### **How Can Donors Assist in Challenging Discriminatory Social Institutions in Developing Countries?**

Most donors and the international community at large have not yet focused on the analysis of social institutions that affect the economic conditions of women. Donor agencies do cover a wide range of issues related to women's access to resources such as education, health care and nutrition as well as micro-finance. More recently questions related to governance, trafficking in human beings and information and communication technologies have attracted attention. Yet the role of social institutions in determining the status of women gets addressed only at the margins, if at all. A recent UNDP report (2003) notes that most development agencies do not use "social relations analysis", a concept that covers the power structure of a society in a broad sense, including its processes.

The recently released report of the UN Task Force on Education and Gender Equality (UNDP, 2005) lists seven strategic priorities necessary to achieve Goal Three (promoting gender equality and empowering women) of the UN Millennium Development Declaration. Although the report addresses important areas — guaranteeing women's property and inheritance rights and eliminating gender inequality in employment — it does not discuss specifically how to overcome and change social institutions that lead to gender inequality. It leaves out culturally sensitive issues such as polygamy, genital mutilation and early marriages.

Donor intervention in social institutions is particularly difficult, given sensitivities to accusations of "cultural imperialism". To reform personal law and the *code de la famille* is a very complex task; families generally refuse penetration of their private sphere by their own governments and even more so by donors. Foreigners do not have the same traditions, customs, religion and culture, and their legitimacy in proposing or helping governments in such reforms is denied. This resistance is not specific to any religion or culture. In Kenya, people consider foreign interventions against genital mutilation as similar to cultural colonialism, and they see governmental decisions in favour of women as an abandonment of

African traditions to occidental values. The major problem of perception in the West arises from the well-known belief that gender equality is normal, whereas in many countries, because of religion, culture and traditions, most people regard gender inequality as normal.

What role can donors then play? Donors should adapt their strategies to levels of development. The most difficult task appears in poor countries where most of the population lives in rural areas and depends basically on agriculture. High female illiteracy, extreme workloads for women in basic tasks such as fetching water and firewood and high transaction costs for communication and trading raise important barriers to any improvement in gender equality. Promoting targeted investment in infrastructure, time-saving and labour-saving technologies and innovations, and information and communication technologies (for example, the Grameen Village Phone Initiative) is crucial to remedy these problems. Public-private partnerships that provide and disseminate technologies targeting women can serve as an important instrument to achieve this goal.

More options are available in lower-middle and middle-income countries. Most gender-related programmes in these countries have an underlying problem. They focus entirely on women, ignoring the crucial influence of men on the outcomes of these interventions. Interventions should be designed to tackle potential male resistance from the outset. In addition, if a specific project challenges traditional institutions, then project staff should be recruited with particular knowledge and training on these highly sensitive issues. Ideally, project staff should come from a cultural background similar to their clients'. Donors can also assist in reforming legal institutions that discriminate against women, e.g. property rights, inheritance laws, divorce laws and family codes. Establishing monitoring systems could help ensure that such changes not only go on paper but also get enforced.

Special cases arise in post-conflict countries. Because of the often fundamental changes in formal and informal social institutions that may have occurred or be underway, new opportunities and entry points may open for gender strategies if gender relations are in flux. This requires gender sensitivity within aid organisations. Effective policies require careful analysis of the transformation of gender relations during the conflict and its implications for achieving gender equality during post-conflict development.

In all environments, donors should assist in changing social attitudes vis-à-vis women. To influence the media and communication channels in general is crucial. If a developing country wishes to abolish traditions such as marriage before the age of 15, polygamy or genital mutilation, public-opinion campaigns are needed to

change mentalities. Donors can choose among many tools supporting women. Local conditions may suggest giving priority to one main measure, but usually the difficulty of generating change will suggest the use of several. Subsidising or establishing open and free media can efficiently help women to safeguard their interests and disseminate more information on women's living conditions in different societies. Another approach involves "popular information" through street theatres and campaigns run by stars, singers and the like with pro-women themes. Donors can subsidise women's associations and supply free training to women who manage these associations. They can finance reading courses for illiterate women and fund micro-credit lenders to women. Financial contributions to funds granting compensation to men for their perceived losses can help governments to avoid their resistance. Finally, cultural exchanges also promote gender equality if international agencies adopt coherent, prudent and global strategies. Donors could introduce positive discrimination to bring more female students from developing countries to study in western universities

Policy coherence in and among OECD countries is also important. Various links connect their policies related to trade, investment, migration and development aid with the conditions of women in developing countries. The achievement of the MDG Three, i.e. empowerment of women, will not only depend on aid policies that address the issues raised in this Brief, but will also be influenced by the other policies. OECD countries can, for instance, promote investments in manufacturing and open their markets particularly for products with important female labour content. This could boost both export revenues and the demand for female employment in developing countries. Recent studies (e.g. Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004), have shown women's working conditions in the export sector to be often far better than those in agriculture or in domestically oriented production. The phase-out of the Multifibre Arrangement (MFA) for textile products puts female employees at risk in countries such as Bangladesh. More foreign direct investment could also help directly to promote gender equality. Multi-national enterprises generally follow corporate governance rules that do not discriminate against female employees and that permit women to assume higher positions and to manage men.

Donors can only help to initiate processes that might in the end lead to changed social institutions. The drivers of change must emerge from within the countries themselves; donors can only cautiously assist. In this diverse and complex task donors must be well informed on local attitudes, social practices, histories, religious affiliations and cultures.

## **Conclusions**

This *Policy Brief* has addressed the role of social institutions in developing countries as major obstacles to gender equality, the Millennium Development Goal Number Three. The international community supports the promotion of women's rights and seeks to reduce political, social and legal discrimination, but women continue to suffer from failure to recognise their rights and to grant them opportunities. Gender mainstreaming into the development process represents conceptual progress, but it does not mean much on the ground. Rights must be recognised and enforced.

The success of reforms depends very much on the willingness of governments to challenge traditions and privileges in existence for centuries. This calls for a global and coherent approach with careful sequencing. A successful improvement in the situation of women will not occur if the focus rests only on improving females' education, health care and credit markets. These measures are important, but success demands challenges to discriminatory institutions.

Changes and improvements in the situation of women do not depend on specific levels of income or dominant religions. Changing social institutions in existence for centuries requires approaches at both the national and the community levels. Reforms need to take into account enforcement as well as modifications in legal structures. They should include incentives for potential allies of change, respect feasible sequencing and provide some compensation to men if or when they lose from the changes. The socio-economic context is highly important, and different approaches may be necessary in urban and rural areas.

The successful generation of social change demands analysis of the real makeup of a society rather than an attempt to deal with gender problems from a pre-conceived standpoint. It requires examining social power relations and seeking changes in traditional values and habits, to identify appropriate reforms and put them into place. A flexible strategy is preferable. Interventions should take into account religion, culture and history and ensure male support so as to implement reforms successfully. The King of Morocco successfully used his ability to interpret the Koran as the religious authority. Strategies of rupture like those of political revolutions may impose social revolution to the profit of women. Yet when constraints disappear, resistance reappears. Any group wishing to maintain the status quo can use religion to drive the whole population against reform. The long-term success of reforms depends less on high-profile political and legal measures that often are incapable of implementation, and more on the overall political will for change. This *Policy Brief* finds encouragingly that changes in favour of women are indeed possible in very different settings.

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One of the long-standing priorities of the international community is to reduce gender disparity in developing countries. Yet, the overall picture is still gloomy: women continue to be excluded from access to resources and employment and are denied basic human rights. *This Policy Brief* explains why progress has been so minimal and what should be done about it. It demonstrates that family institutions are the main obstacle to gender equality. Challenging long-existing traditions and privileges that appear to benefit men will need a mixture of incentives and sanctions that should vary according to different socio-economic environments and rural and urban settings.

### OECD DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

2, rue André-Pascal,  
75775 Paris Cedex 16  
France

Tel.: +33 (0)1 45 24 82 00

Fax: +33 (0)1 44 30 61 49

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