



# Policy Insights No. 15

## Culture, Gender and Growth

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While the overall picture for gender equality is still gloomy, recent changes in family institutions in some countries provide an enlightening example.

### A Wind of Change

Developing countries are starting to reform cultural barriers to gender equality that limit their growth prospects. Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and some states of India are some examples of countries that are trying to reform institutional frameworks that limit women's participation in the labour force and their education and training. They are thus enhancing their growth prospects. They are clearly right to do so, but what obstacles do they face? How can donors support this very much needed change?

Within the overall institutional setting, social institutions and cultural practices – i.e. laws, norms, traditions and codes of conduct – are often 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. Donor intervention in social institutions is particularly difficult, because they are highly sensitive and action could easily be viewed as “cultural imperialism”. 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).

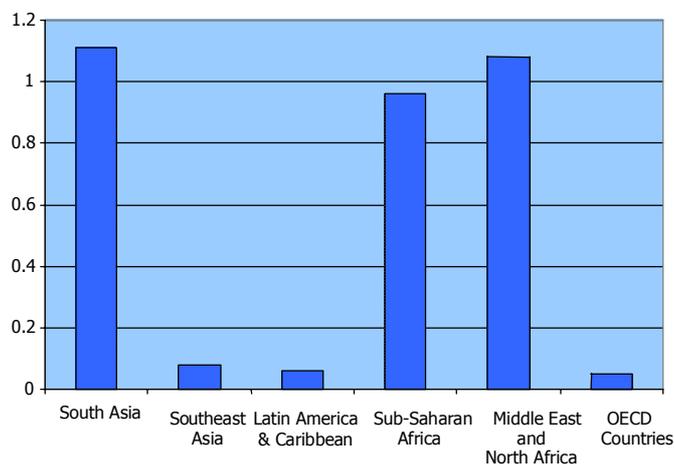
### Important Regional Disparities

Addressing gender inequalities 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. These should not only include gender disparities related to access to education, health care, political representation, earnings or income and so forth, but also 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.

1. This *Policy Insight* has benefited from excellent research assistance by Silke Friedrich and Jennifer Davies.

Figure 1 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 Sub-continent and the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, on the other.

Figure 1. **Regional Indices of Discrimination against Women**



0 = No discrimination. 2 = Maximum discrimination.  
 Benchmark values for OECD countries are less than 0.05.  
 Source: For details see Morrisson and Jütting (2004).

## All Dominant Religions Allow for Flexibility

The depth of discrimination against women can also be calculated for religious affiliations (Figure 2). While there is an overall trend towards less discrimination in Buddhist and Christian countries, compared to Muslim, Hindu and Animist societies, there are important exceptions. Countries like Malaysia, Turkey and Tunisia have changed within the overall institutional framework and women have now more rights with respect to marriage, authority over children, divorce, freedom of movement and access to property. All dominant religions allow for some flexibility in interpreting the role of women in society.

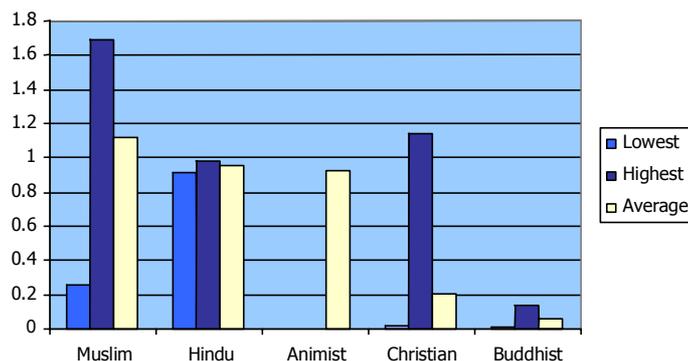
## Trying hard, but.....

Since gender equality is good for growth, economic development and poverty reduction, the persistence of gender discriminating cultural practises and social norms is perplexing. What are the reasons?

First, the “legitimacy” of reform is often contested. Popular acceptance of reform depends very much on a country’s specific history, cultural legacies, group composition, level of development, degree of participation and political liberties. 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 “intimate family-related matters” (*Le Monde*, 29 September 2004).

Second, flawed interpretations of religious laws and the depth of tradition often stand in the way of further progress. 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 (see Figure 2). The Islamic countries have received particular attention with respect to the relationship between the Islamic law (*Sharia*) and the situation of women. Reported examples from countries like Sudan, northern Nigeria 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.

Figure 2. **Levels of Discrimination against Women, by Religious Affiliation**



Third, forming reform coalitions is difficult as changes are often not in the perceived interest of men. 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 for items that benefit the whole family, particularly the children (e.g. school fees and healthcare). 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.

Finally, due to a lack of enforcement of existing laws, good intentions are not translated into action on the ground. Many countries show a wide gap between the publication of a law and its effective implementation. The reasons for this concern, essentially, the attitudes of national and local governments, public opinion and the family. 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. In some Indian states women have been assassinated because their dowries were insufficient, but the police failed to pursue any further investigations.

The success of reforms depends on the willingness of governments to challenge traditions and privileges in existence for centuries. This calls for a global, coherent and sequenced approach. Improvement in the situation of women will not occur if the focus rests only on improving females' access to education, healthcare and factors of production (land, credit, technology and information).

Reforms on the national and community level 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 for the possibility of compensation to men. Fostering cultural openness could also help, including using the press, radio, the internet, foreign television, teaching of foreign languages, cultural exchange with foreign schools, temporary migration for paid employment and welcoming tourists. The socio-economic context is highly important, and different approaches may be necessary in urban and rural areas.

## Achieving Changes: Role of Donors

Donor intervention in social institutions is particularly difficult, given sensitivities to accusations of "cultural imperialism". Reforming personal law and the *code de la famille* is very complex; families generally resent intrusion into 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 limited. This resistance is not specific to any religion or culture. How can donors then help?

√ Donors should adapt their strategies to levels of development.

In poor countries, where most of the population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture high female illiteracy, extreme workloads for women and high transaction costs in communication and trading raise important barriers to any improvement in gender equality. Promoting targeted investment in infrastructure, timesaving and labour-saving technologies as well as information and communication technologies is crucial. Public-private partnerships can serve as an important instrument to achieve this goal.

√ Interventions should be designed to tackle potential male resistance from the outset.

Most gender-related programmes in lower-middle and middle-income countries focus entirely on women, ignoring the crucial influence of men on the outcomes of these interventions. Project staff should be recruited with particular knowledge and training on these highly sensitive issues and they should come from a cultural background similar to that of their clients. Donors can also assist in reforming legal institutions that discriminate against women, while supporting monitoring systems to help ensure that such changes not only go on paper but also get enforced.

√ Donors should assist in changing social attitudes *vis-à-vis* women.

Public-opinion campaigns are needed to change mentalities and mindsets. 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 media and entertainment personalities 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. Cultural exchanges also promote gender equality if international agencies adopt coherent, prudent and global strategies. Donors could, for example, introduce positive discrimination by bringing more female students from developing countries to study in western universities.

Policy coherence in and among OECD countries is also important. Their policies related to trade, investment, migration and development aid are linked to the conditions of women in developing countries. The achievement of Millennium Development Goal Three – empowerment of women – will not only depend on aid policies that address the issues raised in this Insight, but will also be influenced by others. 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 have shown women's working conditions in the export sector to be often far better than those in agriculture or in domestically oriented production. More foreign direct investment could also help directly to promote gender equality. Multinational enterprises generally follow corporate governance rules that do not discriminate against female employees and permit women to assume higher positions and to manage men.

The drivers of change must, however, 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. Tremendous changes are taking place; we must now seek the optimal ways of supporting them.

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