

TRANSFORMING GENDER NORMS TO ACHIEVE EQUALITY NOW

Curated Discussion Report #3

MARCH 2021



INTRODUCTION

The Generation Equality Forum (GEF) is a global gathering for gender equality, convened by UN Women, and co-hosted by the governments of Mexico and France, in close partnership with civil society and youth actors. The Forum kicked off in Mexico City from 29 to 31 March 2021. It will culminate in Paris from 31 June to 2 July, where a set of concrete, ambitious and transformative actions to achieve immediate and irreversible progress towards gender equality will be launched.

In the lead-up to Paris, the GEF is organizing a series of Curated Discussions. These bring diverse gender advocates together to cultivate insights around key topics related to the Forum. Two initial discussions made recommendations already taken into consideration for the Mexico City and Paris programmes as well as for the establishment of the Generation Equality Action Coalitions.

On 1 and 3 March 2021, the GEF convened a third Curated Discussion, “Transforming gender norms to achieve equality now”. Two sessions hosted approximately 130 attendees from varying age groups, locations and backgrounds, resulting in a rich conversation. This report draws from plenary and breakout groups, highlighting themes, thoughts and key recommendations on how to leverage the Generation Equality Forum to shift mindsets and transform harmful gendered stereotypes and norms. Insights summarized below will feed into the design and outcomes of the Forum, and help strengthen multistakeholder alliances for gender equality.

WHY IS TRANSFORMING GENDER NORMS KEY TO ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY?

Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given social context. [These norms shape women’s and men’s \(often unequal\) access to resources and freedoms, thus affecting their voice, power and sense of self.](#)¹ Gender norms are embedded in both formal and informal institutions, and in our minds. They are produced and reproduced through day-to-day interactions.

Harmful gender norms disproportionately affect women and girls, and directly contribute to violations of their rights, such as to education, health and independence. They present a key barrier to gender equality. [Mounting evidence suggests](#) in fact that some of the strongest forces behind persistent gender gaps are harmful social norms and stereotypes that limit expectations of what women can or should do.² The United Nations Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Women concluded that [changing norms should be at the top of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). A recent study published by UN Women and Kantar, “[Are you ready for change? Gender equality attitudes study 2019](#)”, highlighted how discriminatory social norms lead to a wide range of persistent human rights violations and the systemic denial of women’s equal access to political participation, education and justice. Such norms undermine women’s protection from all forms of violence.

Transforming harmful gender norms is therefore a top priority in creating a world where every woman and girl can pursue the life that she wishes to lead, and where men are also free from the confines or adverse social norms and stereotypes of manhood and masculinity. Transformation will require identifying the root causes of harmful norms and inequality, and tackling discriminatory social practices and institutions that reinforce them.

1 See: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323075180_Transforming_gender_norms_to_achieve_gender_equality_What_is_the_role_of_social_norms_theory.

2 See: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/11/why-is-gender-equality-in-decline-and-how-can-we-reverse-it/>.

SPEAKER SESSIONS

Intergenerational Dialogue

The Curated Discussion opened with an intergenerational dialogue. Drawing on lived experiences and expertise, panellists discussed key questions and framed the broader context for addressing gender norms and stereotypes. Participants engaged with speakers by submitting questions via the chat function.

Session One: 1 March 2021



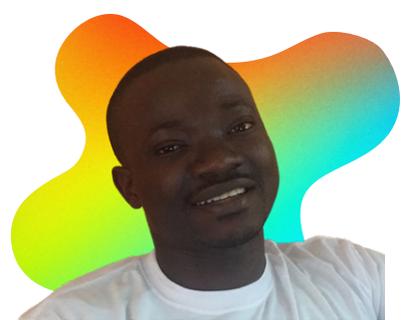
Anna -Tulie Araujo

Co-founder of ULTRA, Brazil



Selin Ozunaldim

National Gender Youth Activist
and HeForShe Advocate



Sylvain Obedi

Founder and National Coordinator,
Enable the Disable Action

Session Two: 3 March 2021



Dipty Chander

President of E-mma Association,
Employee at Google, France



Laxman Belbase

Co-director, Men Engage Alliance



Marwa Sharafeledin

Scholar and Activist, Advisory Board
Member of Musawah

KEY THEMES RAISED IN THE DISCUSSIONS

The context: Why now?

All speakers outlined the significance of the moment we are living in: 26 years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and experiencing the shocks of the global COVID-19 pandemic. There is an urgent need to take meaningful action now to address discriminatory gender norms and promote gender equality. Dipty pointed to the fact that, while COVID-19 has compounded inequalities, these moments of struggle also challenge people to create new and brilliant ideas to change the world, including those with an immediate and powerful positive impact on women and girls. Anna-Tullie highlighted opportunities to amplify the gender equality agenda through its intersections with other imminent challenges that humanity faces, notably, the climate crisis.

While some good progress has been made in shifting harmful norms at the policy level, Laxman explained that implementation lags due to cultural, social and economic factors. To achieve meaningful advances, policy change needs to occur in tandem with social transformation that shifts norms at the individual and interpersonal levels. Sylvain echoed this idea, highlighting that meaningful change will start with altering mindsets, for example, to recognize the rights and agency of the disabled community.

THEME 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

Changing curricula

Sylvain called for educating populations about the importance of equality to ensure everyone can generate change. In an intervention from the floor, Lemona Chander explained that this could begin with revising school syllabi, as harmful gender norms and stereotypes are often taught to young children in their formative years. Dipty suggested having more female technology advocates and teachers so girls have role models. Selin agreed that prioritizing education is crucial for reasons that include girls needing digital and IT skills to prepare them for the job market.

The family

Laxman pointed out that, while curricula shape mindsets, we must also look at our homes and ask if we are doing enough to displace gender norms there. As Sylvain explained, inequalities begin in the family, so it is the work of everyone – mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers – to create an “equal generation”. Young people make up the majority of the world’s population, so if we start teaching our children notions of equality, we can achieve transformative change. Anna-Tullie agreed, explaining how families need to adapt to new realities, including LGBTQI+ acceptance.

THEME 2: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF TECHNOLOGY

The power of technology to shift social norms

Selin explained that technology catalyses innovation, and shifts social norms and culture. It enables us to communicate, think, organize and build communities much faster, so we can bring issues such as racial injustice to media attention. Technology also has potential to empower adolescent girls socially and economically, providing access to vital information, social connection, services and life-changing opportunities such as education and employment.

Risks and barriers

Laxman highlighted that many activists operate in a restrictive online environment where the government controls the freedom of articulation and expression. People with diverse gender identities often have their rights curtailed and are monitored

online. Selin also spoke about digital gender-based violence, pointing out that women are 27 times more likely than men to be harassed online. Dipty pointed to the need for improved content regulation, and the importance of better anticipating challenges arising around technology.

Drive for diversity

Selin highlighted that technology is primarily designed for and created by men, and therefore does not reflect the interests of adolescent girls. Diverse teams are, however, more productive and better at solving problems, so companies need to reflect this when hiring. As a solution, Dipty suggested campaigns calling for equal access to the workplace to help boost representation and shift norms. Both speakers emphasized the responsibility that technology companies have to recreate notions of what people in the technology industry look like.

THEME 3: THE NEED TO ENGAGE WITH DIVERSE ACTORS

Engaging with the private sector

Anna-Tulie outlined how the private sector could be a major force driving social norms shifts, but these organizations must take more responsibility for doing so. Sylvain agreed, stressing the importance of private sector actors investing in projects and solutions. Selin pointed out that all social issues are interconnected, so we cannot work in silos. “We need more holistic solutions and all hands-on deck,” she stressed. “It is time for both public and private sector to get on board to create change.”

Engaging with men and boys

Laxman explained the importance of relating the term “gender” with men to support the understanding that men are gendered beings. Social and gender norms have implications for their lives and behaviour. It is key, however, to move from understanding the individual ways men experience these norms to understanding how men and boys carry power and privilege at the structural level. This is crucial for them to take responsibility for dismantling systems that perpetuate discrimination. Further, when engaging men and boys, we are not asking them to give up privileges to achieve equality, but instead ensuring that all human beings can enjoy fundamental human rights.

Engaging with religion

Marwa spoke on the need to engage with religion as it not only informs social norms and practices but is also found in constitutions, which are sources of all legislation. In countries around the world, discriminatory family laws can lock women in violent, abusive relationships that they are unable to leave. In several recent gender equality surveys and rankings, the majority of countries ranked in the bottom 25 had discriminatory family laws, sustained by actors who believe that reform would go against their beliefs.

Marwa described how laws that entrench gender inequality have been successfully reformed, but only when this is politically and economically beneficial for those in power. An organization she works with, Musawah, aims to demonstrate that law can be based on religion without discriminating against women. Musawah compiled legal provisions that were amended or reformed to reflect more gender equality and justice, finding all of the reforms were based on arguments from within the Islamic legal framework.

THEME 4: THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY

Intersectionality

Anna-Tulie and Sylvain both highlighted intersectionality as a driving principle throughout our shared work. Sylvain stated that we need intersectionality to recognize difference and reconsider diversity as wealth, not as a problem or as indicating a lack of power. Anna-Tulie explained that in places of reflection, discussion and policy proposition, such as the GEF and Action Coalitions, it is crucial to draw on the intersectionality of the social complexities that we live in as a global community. We should not propose ready-made solutions but instead change the nature of analysis to embrace complexity, and build solutions that respond to intersecting social problems.

Feminist movement building

Laxman maintained that to create an impact, the GEF and Action Coalitions will have to focus on dismantling the patriarchy from an intersectional feminist perspective. There cannot always be a “one solution” approach; we have to think differently and work with diversity across feminist movements. Marwa agreed, outlining the integration of the work of existing initiatives around the globe as a key tactic for mobilizing action.

Spaces for conversation and connection

Anna-Tulie stated that open spaces to reflect on social demands is the first step towards change. Sylvain agreed, emphasizing platforms that give people a chance to share their opinions, learn from the lived experiences of others and make their voices heard. Both expressed the importance of spaces for vulnerable communities to speak for themselves about the exclusions they face. Laxman agreed while also urging a broadening of the discussion to include those not usually included.



BREAKOUT GROUPS



What kinds of discriminatory social norms are prevalent (or common) in this arena?

The socialization of gender roles: The idea of the family as the normalized and traditional unit hides discriminatory practices that take place within it. Norms lived everyday within the family unit are then reproduced by children and later generations, and become pillars of unspoken discriminatory social beliefs. This is the case, for example, with the expectation that men are the source of income and women stay home.

Education: Girls are often left behind in educational choices made by parents, and have limited to no decision-making rights within the family. Girls may be forced out of school due to child marriage, for example, affecting future opportunities for employment and financial independence. There is often a “son bias”: The mindset that boys are a better investment for the family than girls, which grants boys greater access to resources and educational options than girls.

Unpaid care burden: Domestic work impedes opportunities for women in terms of education and accessing paid work.

Violence: A lack of accountability for violence against women in the home, and for discriminatory practices such as female genital mutilation, contributes to the existing high level of violence against women and girls worldwide.

What factors contribute most to shifting social norms in this arena? Who/what kinds of actors/institutions need to work together to make this change?

Education and public awareness: Dismantling a pervasive discriminatory culture requires measures such as changing the stories that children consume and internalize through media, books or TV, as these influence how women and girls view themselves.

Economic empowerment: Empowering women to participate in the job market requires, for example, subsidizing nurseries to help redistribute the burden of unpaid work. More value, both societal and economic, should be given to care work.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights: By improving access to services and contraceptives, we can shift towards a narrative of rights that supports women’s and girls’ bodily autonomy, and challenges the normalized expectation that a women’s primary role is to start a family.

Policy: Understanding how systems of justice are less effective, accessible or available to women is a step towards taking interventions to rectify shortfalls, such as targeted trainings for justice officials.

THEME 2: MEDIA, CULTURE AND THE PRODUCTION OF STEREOTYPES

What kinds of discriminatory social norms are prevalent (or common) in this arena?

Perpetuation of stereotypes: The media perpetuates harmful social norms and stereotyping. Toxic masculinity is glorified and normalized, while liberated women are criticized, and women are often oversexualized and objectified.

Representation: Women are underrepresented in media and media institutions. We do not see enough women on screen; women do not have enough opportunities to speak. This reduces potential role models for young girls.

Safety: The lack of safety for women journalists or protection for women on social media is a significant barrier to women's participation in media.

What factors contribute most to shifting social norms in this arena? Who/what kinds of actors/institutions need to work together to make this change?

Funding: Governments should allocate funding to support gender transformative media and women-owned or -led media. Funding should not support media that entrenches harmful norms and stereotypes.

Diverse voices: Different actors such as youth, women and marginalized groups should be involved in the creation of media. Broadening the representation of people on screen would reflect reality.

Accountability: Quotas and goals for representation should be agreed and institutions held accountable for achieving them.

Activism: Bloggers and influencers should understand the impact of their communications and their responsibility for messaging on their platforms.

THEME 3: PRIVATE SECTOR, CORPORATIONS, PHILANTHROPIES

What kinds of discriminatory social norms are prevalent (or common) in this arena?

Norms and stereotypes: Discriminatory expectations persist in the private sector, ranging from office dress codes to expected areas of expertise for women employees. There is an entrenched idea that leadership of the private sector is a male-owned space, and that women there are exceptions.

Sexual harassment: A normalized culture of harassment in the workplace has been brought to light by #MeToo. Companies do not prioritize fixing the problem unless they are incentivized or forced to do so.

Hiring practices: Talent pipelines are still so rooted in gendered norms that adolescents and young women are prohibited from pursuing aspirations and technical skills, and using their education.

Access: Access to private sector spaces is dominated by middle- and upper-class populations, predominantly those who are white and urban.

What factors contribute most to shifting social norms in this arena? Who/what kinds of actors/institutions need to work together to make this change?

Cooperate: Diverse actors need to be brought together to overcome these issues. It is essential that the private sector takes part in conversations and cooperates with international organizations, governments and civil society. Bringing together girls' and women's organizations, movements and the private sector can be challenging but will increase private sector accountability.

Open up the conversation: Many men believe that gender equality has been solved. We need to engage and show what it actually means to be a woman in the workplace.

Consumer power: Consumers need to demonstrate the expectation that brands will contribute to a more progressive society.

Reshape definitions: Opening up the definition of leadership in the private sector should include masculine and feminine qualities.

Recruitment: Recruitment processes should become more accessible; women should be proactively recruited for key positions.

THEME 4: PUBLIC SERVICES

What kinds of discriminatory social norms are prevalent (or common) in this arena?

Access to services and opportunities: In some countries, married women require their husband's signature or permission to complete everyday activities, such as opening a bank account. Services may only be accessible to people who confirm to binary gender identities.

Lack of representation: Women are underrepresented in leadership positions and public offices, generally because of discriminatory cultural norms that portray women as not able to fulfil such roles.

Health care: Some groups are historically excluded from sexual and reproductive health care due to discriminatory social norms. For example, HIV services are often aimed at LGBTQI+ communities and exclude heterosexual women living with HIV.

Laws: Discriminatory laws and/or complex legal procedures limit girls' access to justice. There is also weak implementation of laws even if progressive legislation has been passed.

What factors contribute most to shifting social norms in this arena? Who/what kinds of actors/institutions need to work together to make this change?

Legislation and policies: It is important to require organizations to consider and promote gender equality in their policies, programmes and services. Gender-responsive and participatory budgeting should become the norm.

Build alliances: Non-traditional leaders, including religious leaders, need to be involved as allies, for example, in comprehensive sexuality education. All members of communities should be engaged, including men.

Education: School curriculums should educate people about gender equality from childhood. Girls need to be educated about their rights. Education beyond the classroom can support discussion of norms and solutions in a safe space.

Advocacy: Advocacy needs to be supported from the grass roots up, elevating the voices of women's rights organizations, civil society and grass-roots women. Publicly owned media need to use progressive messaging.

THEME 5: ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

What kinds of discriminatory social norms are prevalent (or common) in this arena?

To help people achieve their maximum potential and realize their rights, an enabling environment should incorporate laws, policies and frameworks, and support discussions of diversity.

What factors contribute most to shifting social norms in this arena? Who/what kinds of actors/institutions need to work together to make this change?

Law and policymaking: More laws and policies should focus on gender equality and be backed by implementation. Mechanisms to protect gender-centred human rights defenders should be in place. Young women and girls should be able to meaningfully participate in and lead the design and implementation of policies and laws.

Accountability: Government work should be regularly monitored and reported.

Education: Education should ensure sufficient knowledge of gender and women's rights in the population at large. Women's movements could give teachers more recognition as their work can be truly gender transformative.

Resources: Strengthened investment and capacity for collective action can build on steps such as improved gender-responsive budgeting.



THEME 6: COMMUNITY AND LOCAL LEVEL

What kinds of discriminatory social norms are prevalent (or common) in this arena?

Social norms: Social norms make it acceptable to drop out of school, especially during COVID-19. Discrimination is often hidden and normalized, such as through harmful traditional practices, including female genital mutilation.

Barriers to education: Norms prevent women from continuing with schooling, which in turn makes it hard to access paid work, much less ascend to higher ranks.

Safety and public space: Normalized practices such as catcalling allow men to make women uncomfortable and afraid to walk alone or take public transportation at night.

Objectification of women: Women are hypersexualized and seen as objects, a driver of gender-based violence. Much of the advertising we consume encourages objectification.

What factors contribute most to shifting social norms in this arena? Who/what kinds of actors/institutions need to work together to make this change?

Religious and traditional leaders: These actors have powerful roles in supporting and embodying social norms change due to their importance at the community level. They need to be engaged through intentional strategies.

Funding: Feminist movements on the ground need long-term, unrestricted funding. The private sector should contribute to their financial empowerment. Governments should allocate resources in a gender-responsive way.

Role models: Female mentors should work directly with women and young girls, and have conversations around female empowerment and solidarity.

Accountability: Communities should hold private sector leadership accountable for wealth and opportunity sharing. Local organizations can also hold governments accountable.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR THE GENERATION EQUALITY FORUM AND ACTION COALITIONS

1 Create safe, diverse spaces for discussion and the sharing of stories

The GEF should offer safe and inclusive places where participants can share stories and personal experiences. Those most affected by the issues should be at the table, and given opportunities to amplify their voice and show their agency. Open dialogues should take up topics such as menstrual issues and sexual and reproductive health to help deconstruct social norms and stigmas around them.

2 Support feminist movements, including through funding

The GEF should partner with organizations already shifting narratives or norms. The power of grass-roots organizing should be fully recognized and celebrated, and investment in the leadership of marginalized women prioritized. More work should be done to understand the needs of feminist organizations, strengthen their capacities and ensure sustained investment.

3 The Action Coalitions should reflect diverse needs

The Action Coalitions need to foreground the realities of intersecting issues and local contexts. The diversity of needs based on race, caste, ability and sexuality, for example, must be prioritized across each coalition theme. The Action Coalitions should commit to active learning, which means listening and gaining feedback from a wider pool of people representing many backgrounds and identities.

4 Support public education and awareness on gender norms

This could range from improving education in schools by changing curricula, to educating private sector actors about benefits from shifting harmful norms and stereotypes. The Forum should advocate for ending curricula that reinforce gender roles and create deep-seated biases. Resources should be made available to create effective and impactful communication that improves public awareness, and to advocate for more inclusive narratives in the public sphere.

5 Flip the narrative and represent diversity

Gender norms should be shifted by ensuring diverse women participate in all parts of the GEF. The Forum should both promote and represent diversity, and ensure that all communication reflects diverse realities, including by putting the voices of transgender and black women at the forefront. It should co-create a positive narrative with adolescent girls and represent their agency in the public sphere.

6 Leverage media and advocacy to bring activism to the headlines

The GEF must make the news and bring activism to the headlines. It should find ways to use media to break the echo chamber, deploy online advocacy tools and make commitments public as a means to ensure States remain actively engaged. Sharing success stories widely on social media can inspire more people and communities.

7 Drive standard setting and accountability

The GEF should support advocacy for improved accountability measures for governments and private sector leaders. Guidelines should be produced for stakeholders engaging with or communicating about the Forum to generate awareness of diversity standards and how to transform stereotypes. The Forum should advocate for strengthened accountability for institutions controlling or influencing the media to make sure they portray women's realities.

8 Localize the GEF and help local voices influence the global conversation

The GEF should localize its work in each country, as context is important in addressing sexism. Grass-roots, youth and local voices should be intentionally elevated and prioritized throughout the Forum. It should uplift on-the-ground successes, showcase achievements of different communities, and amplify inspirational stories of female leaders and gender-transformative work.

9 Constructively engage with a wide variety of actors beyond the “usual suspects”

Alliances should be built with diverse actors, including men, and community and religious leaders. To accelerate transformative and lasting change, this process should reach beyond progressive actors who are already acting for gender equality. Community ambassadors could be designated and encouraged to participate in the GEF. All actors need to be shown the value of engagement in multistakeholder cooperation and action.



THANK YOU

We would like to offer our deepest thanks to all those who committed their time to make this Curated Discussion as rich and empowering as possible, and look forward to continuing the GEF journey together, in solidarity.

For more information, visit our website: forum.generationequality.org
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