



On Norms and Agency (Directions in Development)

Ana María Muñoz Boudet, Patti Petesch

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Social norms, gender roles, beliefs about one's own capacity, and assets, as well as communities and countries, determine the opportunities available to women and men—and their ability to take advantage of them. World Development Report 2012 shows significant progress in many areas, but gender disparities still persist.

Our study covered 20 countries in all world regions, where over 4,000 women and men, in remote and traditional villages and dense urban neighborhoods, in more than 500 focus groups, discussed the effects of gender differences and inequalities on their lives. Despite diverse social and cultural settings, traits and expectations of the ideal “good” woman and “good” man were remarkably similar across all sample urban and rural communities. Participants acknowledged that women are actively seeking equal power and freedom, but must constantly negotiate and resist traditional expectations about what they are to do and who they are to be. When women achieve the freedom to work for pay or get more education, they must still accommodate their gains to these expectations, especially on household responsibilities.

Girls' desire for education, which nurtures their aspirations for greater agency, exceeded that of boys in rural and urban communities. Both young women and men wished for more education and better jobs than are common in their communities and strikingly wanted to marry later, bear children later, and have more autonomy in choosing their partners than traditional community norms dictated.

The main pathways for women to gain agency are education, employment, and decreased risk of domestic violence. A safer space encourages women to negotiate for more participation and equality in household discussions and decisions. Women's ability to contribute to family finances and control (even partially) major or minor assets helps them gain more voice at home and in public spheres. Women's aspirations and empowerment to break gender barriers occur regardless of dynamic or poor economies, while men's perceived gain in agency—and their identity as breadwinner—largely depends on economic conditions.

When only a few women manage to break with established norms—without a critical mass—traditional norms are not contested and may be reinforced. The process of gender norm change thus appears to be uneven and challenging, lagging behind topical conditions. The easy co-existence of new and old norms means that households in the same community can vary markedly in how much agency women can exercise, and women feel less empowered when opinions and values of families and communities stay with traditional norms.

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