

Conclusions and policy recommendations



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As girls and young women become more visible in development and poverty reduction debates and action, it is critical that policy and programme design are informed by a deeper understanding of the discriminatory social institutions that too often constrain their life opportunities and the exercise of their full human agency. This report has underscored the importance of taking social institutions and culture seriously to make effective progress towards breaking the poverty traps facing girls and young women – not only in childhood and early adulthood, but also potentially across their life-course and that of their children. Girls' and young women's experiences of poverty and vulnerability are multidimensional and complex, and often intersect with other forms of social exclusion, such as caste, ethnicity, disability, sexuality or spatial disadvantage. There is, however, compelling evidence that progressive social change is possible, with promising policy and programme approaches emerging globally, although much more needs to be done to take such initiatives to scale, as well as to effectively monitor, evaluate and learn from such experiences cross-nationally.

Because of the context specificity of social institutions, different models of change will be essential in different places and at different times. Nonetheless, this report has identified a number of crosscutting findings about the linkages between gendered social institutions and girls' and young women's experiences of chronic poverty. These inform the report's recommendations for action, which are inspired by some of the effective policy, programming and advocacy approaches discussed in the chapters.

First, the recent focus in development circles on girls and young women is clearly very positive. It does, however, present a number of analytical and programming challenges:

- Gender- and age-disaggregated data on girls' poverty experiences over time in developing country contexts are very limited, constraining well-tailored policy and programme interventions. Longitudinal research initiatives such as the Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Young Lives and Plan's

Real Choices, Real Lives Cohort Study are important exceptions, but both suffer from a number of limitations.¹ In the case of adolescents and youth, the data gaps are more pressing still: these age groupings are often not easily identifiable in national household surveys.

- Within international legal and human rights frameworks, female youth in particular are not well covered (either in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) or the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)). There is a clear need for thinking about the specificities of poverty and vulnerabilities facing this age group, and the specific measures that need to be developed or strengthened to protect them from the poverty traps besetting them at this stage of the life-course.
- Definitions and understandings of childhood, adolescence and youth vary considerably according to cultural context. There is a need to pay more attention to these differences, and to the challenges (especially in terms of legal frameworks) and opportunities they present for development interventions.
- It is also important to consider in more depth the specific poverty and vulnerability experiences of boys and young men, in particular the role that they can play in reforming gender discriminatory social institutions.

International development actors are increasingly recognising that promoting gender equality makes economic and development sense, but discourses on chronic poverty have been slower to adopt a gender lens. Our analysis has highlighted that debates about chronic poverty would be enriched by more systematic attention to gender dynamics, both within and outside the household, and by analysis of how these play out over the lifecycle, starting with infancy and childhood (see Table 4). Understanding how the experiences of girls and boys, young women and men are in turn shaped by

Table 4: Girls' vulnerabilities to chronic poverty

Across the course of childhood and beyond
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty is a dynamic process which impacts on individuals and groups with differing levels of intensity according to their stage in the lifecycle. • Girls' vulnerability can begin even before they are born. Prevailing patterns of son preference linked in part to parental expectations about differential influence on poverty dynamics can lead to gender-selective foeticide. • From infancy, girls may be subject to lower parental investments in their care and nurture, and from early childhood to higher demands on their time and labour. • Adolescent girls in particular are subject to a specific set of poverty dynamics. Although no longer children (in the eyes of their community), they generally lack intra-household decision-making power, legal representation, economic power, asset entitlements and community and political voice. Without adequate adult support, this can intensify their potential to fall into poverty, as well as limit options for exiting it. • Adolescent girls/young women are, however, subject to the dichotomy of also being considered adult – expected to participate in adult practices such as marriage and childbearing before their full physical and psychological development and before they have established an independent livelihood.
Intergenerational poverty transfers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childbirth impacts not only a girl's own well-being (through the physical dangers associated with young childbearing, associated medical costs, time poverty owing to care responsibilities, limited economic opportunities owing to foregone human capital development opportunities, etc, all leading to a downward poverty dynamic), but also the well-being and development of her children. Girls' nutrition is directly linked to infant nutrition and health, and girls' education levels in particular can have critical impacts on their offspring's nutrition, health and education, as well as their vulnerability to harmful traditional practices. • Girls' comparative lack of economic, legal and community standing means that they are dependent on others, and their children even more so. In the event of divorce or widowhood, this insecurity becomes even more apparent, as non-inheritance of assets can render them and their dependants even more asset insecure and heighten the risk of intergenerational poverty transfer. • Marriage in youth can impact on a girl's intra-marriage bargaining power (often determined by her bride wealth/dowry/assets), thereby determining her monetary control and power over assets or household expenditure and her potential for inheritance or management of assets. • Girls' lack of community voice and political participation means that they have very limited outlets to represent themselves or their children outside of the family sphere.
Long-term poverty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic poverty can be brought about by adverse incorporation into social structures like early marriage. • Discriminatory livelihood practices or systemic market inequalities mean that girls are often forced into adverse employment – informal, insecure and lacking any social protection benefits. • Assetlessness, through persistent discriminatory socio-cultural traditions like patrilocality, is another key source of vulnerability for girls and women. • Physical risks which disproportionately affect girls are embedded within this, i.e. sexual violence resulting in childbirth, feminisation of diseases like HIV/AIDS, etc.

other social categories, especially ethnicity, caste, urban/rural locality, disability and sexuality, would further enhance our knowledge base on poverty traps and strengthen our collective ability to support individuals and groups to break out of these.

Putting gender relations and girls in particular centre stage in development dialogues is key, but the specific contribution of this report lies in spotlighting the pivotal role that culturally-specific social institutions play in shaping development outcomes. Although it is widely accepted that gender is a social construct imbued with power relations, too often there is a disconnect with policy and programme development. In other words, if we want to promote progressive social change, we need to think carefully about how best to reform discriminatory social institutions which shape the realm of the possible for girls, their families and communities. Indeed, in the lead-up to 2015, 'culture' and 'the social' need to become

much more visible components of debates on the MDGs and on post-MDG frameworks. These concepts need to be explored more fully, and more work undertaken to develop a clearer operational definition, drawing on insights from the broader social sciences and informed by interdisciplinary approaches. Strengthening voices and interpretations from within various cultural and social traditions and from the perspectives of women and girls themselves is also critical to gaining a fuller and more contextual understanding of how cultural forces and social institutions are experienced, as well as how dynamics of change may occur.

In this regard, we recognise the important role that the SIGI plays in helping to jumpstart a debate around these key issues of culture and discriminatory social institutions. Rather than treating 'culture' and 'the social' as spigot variables that can be turned on and off when other explanatory frameworks

fail, the SIGI signals the need for a more systematic approach. However, as we have emphasised throughout the report, much more is needed, including:

- Understanding how social institutions affect boys and girls, adolescents, men and women throughout the lifecycle;
- Recognising the effects that social institutions have not just on economic participation but also on well-being more generally;
- Expanding the consideration of social institutions to encompass a broader range of gender discriminatory norms, practices and formal and informal laws across family, religion, state and the market (including exclusionary male networks which shape economic and political opportunities, the gender-segmented nature of the labour market, especially the informal sector);
- Paying greater attention to potential Western bias in the construction of the SIGI sub-indices and involving more Southern voices in the index's critique and (re-) evaluation;
- Encouraging equal or greater investment in complementing quantifiable indicators with more nuanced qualitative analyses/assessments so as to avoid reductionist approaches.

Recommendations for action

Given the complex patterning of girls' and young women's experiences of vulnerability and chronic poverty, policies and programmes that address both the immediate and the longer-term causes and consequences of gender discrimination are critical. Gender discrimination is a deeply embedded social construct that manifests itself in different ways at different times and in different contexts – affecting attitudes and belief structures or ideologies that often permeate and help shape institutional arrangements for governance, production and reproduction. Action is necessary at all levels, by a broad array of actors – not only the state. As decades of struggle in the women's movement have shown, such attitudes cannot be legislated away, or erased by enlightened policy alone: rather, they require continuous movement of social actors operating at different levels and by different means.

Enlightened teachers in progressive educational systems have shaped attitudes and outcomes in schools; media attention to social injustices resulting from gender discrimination shines a powerful public light on behaviours and practices that often thrive in private; private sector involvement in efforts to enhance productivity through approaches aimed at expanding the capabilities of all workers can help transform our productive spheres; and collective action by women and girls, with men and boys as allies, has been a powerful tool

to advance common goals and transform social structures and expectations. Governments must set the stage, of course, through appropriate legislation and enforcement; through policies promoting and supporting social equity; and through support for expanded civil liberties, representation and participation in public affairs. But it is only through a conjunction of efforts and strategic partnerships, facilitated by effective coordination mechanisms, that broad-based change can come about.

In developing a vision for a multipronged approach of this nature, many of the policy recommendations that emerged from the Chronic Poverty Report 2008–09 are pertinent. These include: developing public services for the hard to reach; promoting individual and collective assets; expanding social protection; strengthening measures for anti-discrimination and empowerment; and addressing migration and strategic urbanisation. However, as this report has highlighted, it is critical to pay more in-depth attention to age and gender dynamics if these policy approaches are to reach the poorest and most vulnerable. Approaches that overlook the multidimensionality of gendered and generational experiences of chronic poverty and vulnerability are more likely to flounder and to fail to support girls and young women in new pathways to empowerment. Moreover, families and wider communities are likely to miss out on the potential multiplier effects of investing in girls and achieving development goals more broadly.

To tackle chronic poverty more effectively and to promote progressive social change, the report's findings support the following recommendations for policy, programming and advocacy action:

1. Develop and enforce context-sensitive legal provisions to eliminate gender discrimination in the family, school, workplace and community:

- As our report's findings have shown, legal reforms to harmonise national legal frameworks with international commitments to gender equality (especially CEDAW and the Beijing Platform) are critical, as is ensuring that customary laws and codes are harmonised with more formal legislative approaches.
- Such reforms should include: bans on sex-selective abortion; promotion of gender equality frameworks; gender-based violence prevention, penalisation and rehabilitation; reform of family codes, including age of marriage and inheritance laws; expansion of birth registration; etc.
- Equal attention is required to ensure that gender-sensitive laws are enforced, including through enhanced monitoring efforts and capacity development for police and judicial personnel.
- Attitudinal changes among girls/boys and women/men are also critical and require innovative approaches,

informed by a careful understanding of cultural dynamics and sensitivities. These can include: legal literacy for officials and communities; creative use of media; support for role models; alliances with traditional authority structures and – in the case of harmful traditional practices – identification of champions to introduce alternative cultural rites; measures aimed at building self-esteem, including through girls' involvement in sport; development of girl-friendly schools and community centres as important arenas for attitude formation and change; etc.

2. Support measures to promote children's and especially girls' right to be heard and to participate in decisions in areas of importance to them:

- Empowerment programmes for adolescent girls, which provide a 'safe space' to participate in decision making, including through girls' movements, microfinance groups, etc, emerged as a key approach to promoting girls' voice and agency in the report. The sustainability and impact of such initiatives can be enhanced through measures to address demand- and supply-side barriers to girls' education (see Recommendations 3, 4 and 6 in particular).
- Issues of particular importance within such initiatives include: girls' perspectives on climate change and the environment; school-to work transition opportunities; reproductive health concerns; and experiences of gender-based violence within the family, school and community.
- The involvement of mentors to form and structure such participation is equally important, especially for girls and young women who have had limited or no education and/or exposure beyond their home environment.
- Programmes targeting girls should be complemented by educational programmes for boys and young men. This is especially important in the area of gender-based violence, to challenge aggressive understandings and practices of masculinity and raise awareness on different ways of relating to girls and women within and outside the family.
- Participatory research initiatives should be encouraged so as to promote fuller articulation of different voices in development debates and in the design of policies and programmes.

3. Invest in the design and implementation of child- and gender-sensitive social protection:

- There is strong evidence that social protection can be a powerful tool to mitigate the worst effects of both economic and social risks and to promote pathways out

of poverty. Child- and gender-sensitive social protection in particular can support investments in girls' human capital development and minimise deficits in their protection from exploitation, abuse and neglect.

- It is essential, therefore, that care be taken to integrate a gender and age lens into the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of such programmes. Selection of a particular social protection instrument should begin with a systematic assessment of contextualised gender- and child-specific vulnerabilities. Women and girls should also be included in the design and implementation of social protection measures.
 - Demand-side initiatives to promote girls' schooling and delay marriage and childrearing appear to be especially effective. These include: cash transfers; school feeding programmes; take-home supplements for girls (such as cooking oil); and girls' scholarship programmes.
 - Cash transfers with embedded awareness-raising components can also be a useful mechanism to empower parents and communities to protect their children – particularly daughters – from the risks of harmful forms of early marriage, child labour (especially domestic work, which girls disproportionately take on) and human trafficking.
 - Social health protection, including social health insurance and health fee exemptions, is another critical approach to minimising the barriers to girls' access to, and uptake of, health services.
 - Asset transfers (e.g. small livestock such as goats) can help build young women's productive asset base and are an important means to support their economic participation and eventual independence. Protective measures to enhance young women's ability to utilise and conserve such assets are an important part of such efforts, and include technical assistance as well as organisational support.
 - Public works programmes which create infrastructure designed to reduce female time poverty (such as fuel and water collection points) are also to be encouraged.
- ## **4. Strengthen services for girls who are hard to reach, because of both spatial disadvantage and age- and gender-specific socio-cultural barriers:**
- Promoting coverage of the 'hard to reach' typically focuses on spatial disadvantage, i.e. those who are marginalised through remote or hostile geographic locations. This report has underscored the importance of expanding this concept to include girls who too often remain hard to reach because of socio-cultural barriers, especially those that restrict mobility and limit public participation in community affairs.



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Bangladesh, Natore district, Rajshahi. Young women use the library and computer training centre on a boat run by Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha NGO.

- Initiatives aimed at promoting girls' access to and use of existing services need to focus on innovative and gender-sensitive means of extending: microfinance, vocational training and income-generating opportunities; health and especially reproductive health services; nutrition support; education; legal and paralegal services; and protection from abuse, exploitation and neglect (such as shelters, counselling).
- Provision of affordable, culturally appropriate and accessible child care services is critical too, not only for young mothers but also for girls who often shoulder the care work burden of younger siblings at the cost of educational achievement.
- Greater efforts are needed to bring services to girls, especially because of the vulnerabilities that many face in the spaces where they spend most time (families and schools), as well as because of the mobility constraints that may limit their access to available services. Initiatives can include: ensuring that schools are closer to communities so as to minimise the risk of physical violence; supporting the development of a female teaching corps; creating safe spaces for girls in communities; and offering home-based or mobile

services, such as visiting health care workers or female agricultural extension workers.

- In the design and delivery of such services, our analysis suggests that it is essential to be aware of other forms of social exclusion which may compound gender-related exclusion (e.g. caste or ethnicity, disability, sexuality), and ensure that service delivery approaches are tailored accordingly.

5. Support measures to strengthen girls' and young women's individual and collective ownership of, access to and use of resources:

- Strengthening girls' and young women's ownership of, access to and use of resources, especially in terms of inheritance and physical resources (water, land, energy sources), is critical to promoting their empowerment as well as to reducing their time poverty and vulnerability to violence and exploitation.
- Our report's findings have highlighted that, given their relative powerlessness and severe resource constraints, collective access to resources may be especially important for girls and young women, for example in access to financial services, land and collateral.

- Collective approaches can also be powerful in helping girls to gain confidence with and through each other and to develop a sense of agency often denied them in the family, where they are too frequently viewed less as individuals with assets than as assets themselves (as a labour supply source, as upholders of the family honour, etc).
- A collective approach, supported by strong mentors, can also promote information sharing, self-esteem, capability development and social capital. In other words, it is critical that empowerment approaches have an emphasis on the relational and not only the individual.

6. Strengthen efforts to promote girls' and women's physical integrity and control over their bodies, especially in conflict and post-conflict settings:

- Given the potential multiplier effects of girls' education and delaying marriage and childbirth, our findings underscore the importance of investing in the provision of culturally sensitive, affordable and accessible reproductive health information and service provision. Efforts should include innovative approaches that work through girls' and young women's self-help groups, as well as initiatives that involve men (and especially young men) as partners.
- Programmes to raise public awareness about the problems of female foeticide in high prevalence countries, especially drawing on multimedia approaches with the potential to reach a broad cross-section of the public, are also essential if entrenched gender discriminatory attitudes are to be effectively uprooted.
- Educational and empowerment programmes that raise girls' and young women's awareness of their right to be protected from violence in all spheres and to seek redress in cases of violence are critical, not only from a human rights and justice standpoint, but also in terms of harnessing the broader development synergies from investing in female education, nutrition, health and economic participation.
- Efforts to counter the culture of impunity surrounding gender-based violence in conflict and post-conflict settings are vital. These should be informed by context-specific understandings of the political economy dimensions of gender-based violence.
- Involving girls and young women in age- and gender-sensitive disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes is important to promote their rehabilitation and potential psychosocial healing.

Notes

- 1 The Young Lives Project to date has paid relatively little attention to gender dynamics, although there is potential for more work on the basis of the dataset. It is also present in only four countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. The Plan study, despite providing scope for a more in-depth gendered analysis, has only a very small sample (135 girls from 9 countries).