



Wikigender online discussion: summary

“Addressing discriminatory social norms: the case of Uganda”

18-21 May 2015

With the support of the Austrian Development Cooperation, the OECD Development Centre partnered with the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) to work on the first country pilot of a Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) in Uganda. The [Uganda SIGI country study](#) seeks to inform the design of evidence-based policies to tackle the root causes of gender inequality in Uganda at the sub-national level. In the lead up to the presentation of the results of the country pilot on 27-28 May in Kampala, Wikigender organised an online discussion on how discriminatory social norms impact on women’s empowerment and rights in Uganda. The discussion was run with the participation of: *Caroline Harper* (Overseas Development Institute); *Grace Bantebya Kyomuhendo* (School of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University, Uganda); and *Tina Musuya* (Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP)). *The OECD Development Centre’s gender team* also provided inputs based on the Uganda SIGI country study. The following questions were asked during the discussion:

- How do social norms affect women and adolescent girls’ development outcomes in Uganda? How do they intersect with gender inequality and levels of poverty? What are the differences at sub-national level? Why are these important?
- Where are the knowledge/data gaps in which more investment is needed?
- What are examples of policies, programmes or initiatives that improved women and adolescent girls’ lives in Uganda, both at national and sub-national level? Which ones worked better to address discriminatory social norms and why? How can we scale them up?

The three main messages emerging from the discussion were:

1. **Discriminatory social institutions affect women throughout their life cycle:** social norms, such as early marriage or bride price, are mutually reinforcing and limit women’s well-being and empowerment opportunities throughout their lifetime.
2. **Levels of gender discrimination in Uganda vary between regions:** discriminatory social norms affect women and girls differently across the country; more research is needed to understand the drivers of women’s poor development outcomes and inter-linkages with poverty and other factors.
3. **Shifting the power imbalance between women and men by tackling attitudes:** community mobilisation through awareness raising, education and training helps to address discriminatory social norms.

The below provides a summary analysis of the three key messages outlined above.

1. Discriminatory social institutions affect women throughout their life cycle

a. Defining discriminatory social norms

The 2014 edition of the Social Institutions and Gender Index defines discriminatory social institutions as “formal and informal laws, social norms and practices that restrict or exclude women and consequently curtail their access to rights, justice, resources and empowerment opportunities”. The Uganda SIGI country study is the first evidence-base measuring discriminatory social norms at the sub-national level, covering 112 districts. Throughout the discussion, participants identified several social norms that discriminate against women and girls in Uganda and negatively impact on their lives.

“A social norm is the accepted behaviour that an individual is expected to conform to in a particular group, community or culture. (...) Every time a person does not feel like following a social norm s/he may do so because of the social pressure that is put on him or her to conform”.

Tina Musuya, Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP)

Tina Musuya explained how social norms in Uganda define strict gender roles across a woman’s life cycle and in different settings, including the home, school, work place and public places. For example, established perceptions highlight girls’ and women’s role to do domestic work or provide caregiving to family members. The lower status given to them means that they are less likely to participate in decision-making processes both in the private and public spheres. Women are discriminated with regards to access to resources and are vulnerable to discrimination and poverty.

b. Identifying drivers of poor development outcomes for women and girls in Uganda

Participants listed the following discriminatory social norms throughout the discussion: early marriage, bride price, son preference, inheritance practices, legal and customary parental authority and polygyny. The following were the most discussed:

Early marriage was largely discussed as linked with poverty and a key factor of inter-generational poverty. The Uganda SIGI country study defines early marriage as “a formal marriage or informal union entered into by an individual before reaching the age of 18”. Findings from the study indicate that early marriage is decreasing in Uganda but the practice remains pervasive and widely accepted, especially in the East Central, Mid-Eastern and Mid-Northern sub-regions. In the discussion, the OECD Development Centre shared that almost two out of three women living in the poorest families are married before 18 in Uganda, compared to one in four women in the richest families.

Participants discussed how poor families tend to view their daughters as an economic burden or as a source of wealth through the practice of bride price. The survey carried by the OECD Development Centre and UBOS indicates that 45% of respondents believe that girls should be married by 18, while 85% think that men should be married later. Caroline Harper stressed that discriminatory social norms are embedded in society and so addressing poverty is important, but it is equally important to address attitudes and practices. Participants agreed that as a result of early marriage, girls’ education and their empowerment opportunities are limited. One participant shared that the

regional differences in Uganda are positively correlated with educational attainment: where early marriage is more common, the gap in secondary education is higher.

Bride price is defined in the Uganda SIGI country study as “an amount of money, property or other form of wealth paid by a groom or his family to the parents of the woman he has just married or is just about to marry”. Participants widely discussed the impact of bride price on women’s lives. One participant argued that through bride price, men view women as their acquired property. As a result, women have no choice but to stay in a sometimes abusive relationship, for fear of having to pay back the dowry if she leaves. However, it was recognised that bride price provides more rights to women as it legitimises their status in the household. Overall, the consensus between participants was that bride price limits women’s agency and that harmonising the different laws according to the Constitution would help ensure that such practices do not discriminate against women.

Polygyny – where a man has multiple simultaneous wives – was another social norm presented by one of the participants as deeply rooted and causing poverty, in particular in Kampala’s urban slum areas. She referred to findings from the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS): despite an overall decrease in polygynous marriages, it is still prevalent in rural areas – and the number of unions increases with age. She also highlighted the negative impacts of polygyny, explaining that when men have more children than they are able to financially support, women are left with the responsibility of caring after the children on their own. This often means that women struggle financially and are unable to send the children to school. She also pointed to the fact that women rarely seek help from formal justice systems to hold men accountable as it rarely brings results.

Discriminatory inheritance practices were also highlighted as a social norm favouring men. The Uganda SIGI country study found that 40% of the population in Uganda thinks that widows should not have the same rights as men to inherit land; in the Western region, this figure goes up to 55%.

c. Discriminatory social norms intersect and reinforce women’s marginalisation

The Uganda SIGI country study showed how social norms, such as early marriage, are strongly linked with women’s limited decision-making power and low status in the family. Such social norms are internalised by women and reinforce their marginalisation. For example, the study reveals that 72% of the population considers that bride price provides ownership of the wife to her husband. Participants agreed that discriminatory social norms have negative impacts on women and girls’ rights on multiple fronts, including their well-being and empowerment opportunities. For example, Keiko Nowacka argued that discriminatory social norms and marginalisation are internalised by women. She mentioned that as a result, women do not claim their rights. In addition, Gaëlle Ferrant explained how the strong social stigma associated when not complying with a social norm makes it difficult for women to move away from discriminatory social norms.

2. Levels of gender discrimination in Uganda vary between regions

a. Levels of discrimination differ from region to region in Uganda

The Uganda SIGI country study highlights the regional diversity in the levels of discrimination experienced by women and girls. For example, in the Mid-Northern sub-region, half of the population sets the minimum age of marriage for girls before 18, while in Karamoja this figure rises

to 72%. In addition, age of marriage differs depending on the region. Similar trends were noted by participants, who isolated bride price as an example that is particularly pronounced in the Northern region of Uganda, significantly higher than in other regions. It was agreed that measures to address discriminatory social norms need to be tailored to the sub-national context of Uganda, taking account of these differences.

b. Areas where more research is needed and data issues

More research is needed to understand the drivers of women's poor development outcomes and the inter-linkages with poverty and other factors. Participants stressed the lack of data in the agricultural sector as a key challenge: not knowing the number of women smallholders makes it difficult to measure and therefore assess women's needs. As for measuring the prevalence of early marriage, Caroline Harper argued that using 'age of first pregnancy' would be more significant. She explained how girls can be in abusive sexual relationships without formal or informal recognition of marriage.

Several areas of future research were outlined. These include:

- exploring the links between polygyny, poverty, gender inequality and violence against women and children;
- exploring ways for women who wish to pursue support from their husbands, regardless of whether they are legally married or not;
- research on how to ensure adequate representation from legal aid providers; and
- research on operations to improve men's ability to pay for child support.

3. Shifting the power imbalance between women and men by tackling attitudes

Participants shared some strategies and programmes that work or could work to eliminate discriminatory social norms against women and girls. Grace Bantebya Kyomuhendo suggested working with communities and families to shift attitudes and end a practice like early marriage. Estelle Loiseau stressed the importance of investing in boys' education to help shift discriminatory attitudes towards girls. She referred to the fact that expectations and perceptions on gender roles start to shift during childhood. Tina Musuya gave the example of "SASA!", a programme between Raising Voices, CEDOVIP, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Makerere University. The SASA! methodology was successfully implemented in Kampala to address the 'power imbalance' between women and men and between girls and boys – a core driver of violence against women and HIV/AIDS. It engages with key members of the community through local activism, media and advocacy, communication materials and training. Tina Musuya shared the following figures as evidence of the effective community mobilisation through SASA! in Kampala: in SASA! communities, the level of physical partner violence is 52% lower than in control communities, and 28% more women and men believe it is acceptable to refuse sex.

Click here to access the full thread of comments and exchanges during the discussion:

http://wikigender.org/index.php/Online_Discussions

Click here to access the Uganda SIGI country study:

http://www.wikigender.org/images//4/4f/THE_UGANDA_SIGI_E-BOOK.pdf