

Next Generation

The power of gender norms

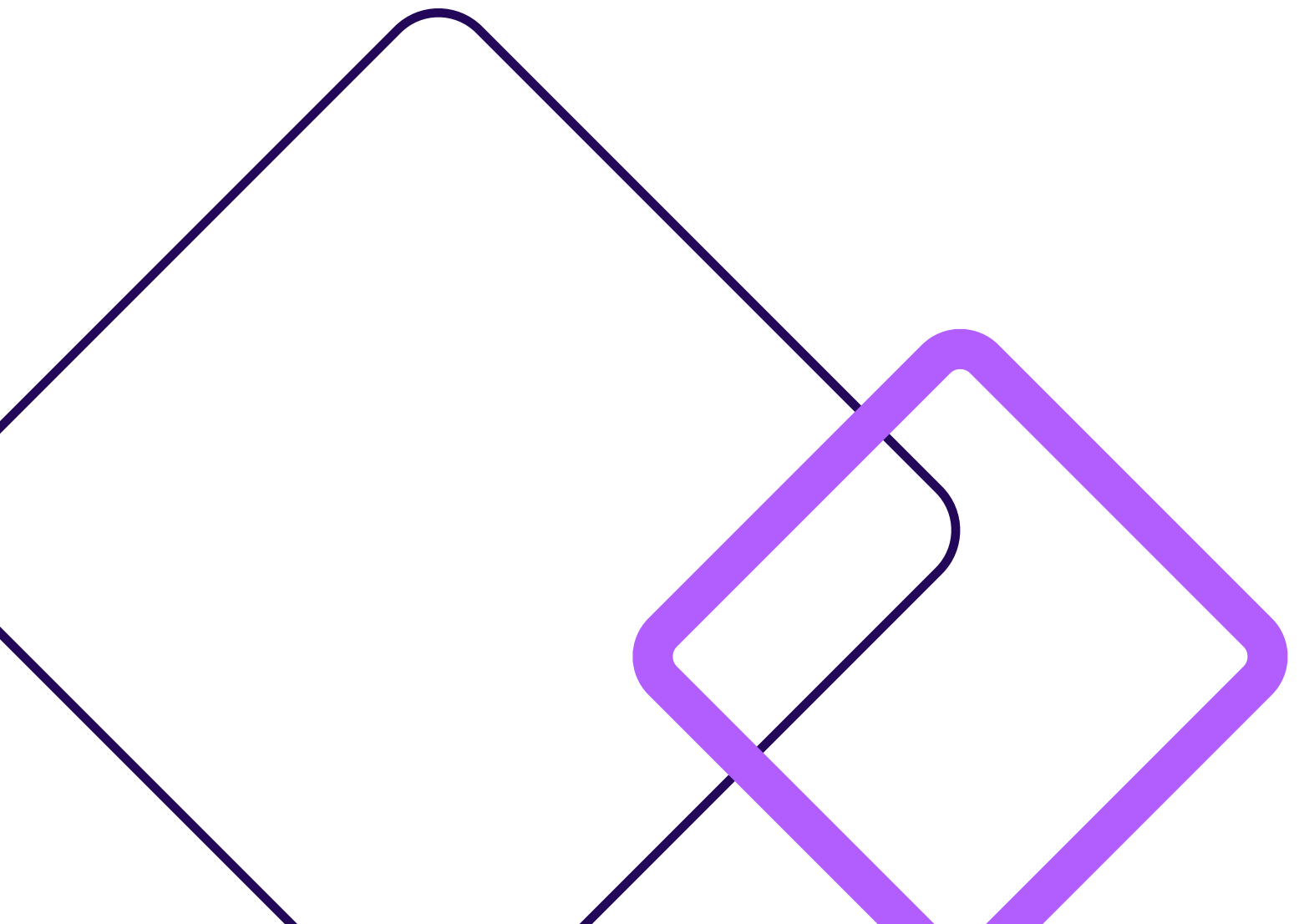
What we know brief

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Executive summary

This briefing paper seeks to understand how gender norms impact women and girls in four key areas: education and skills, ending violence against them, and their socio-economic and political empowerment. It focuses on seven countries where Next Generation studies were conducted between 2018 and 2023. These are spread across South and East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe, and include Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland.

The paper points to the critical and urgent need for dismantling restrictive gender norms to unlock the boundless potential of women and girls. It also demonstrates the potential areas for key stakeholders to collaborate and enact norm changes.

Overall, the paper finds it crucial to:

- Prioritise holistic approaches to empowerment, with a focus on improving economic resources and on enhancing social networks and social capital for women and girls that enable them to break free from traditional roles and spaces.
- Emphasise diverse perspectives of power and leadership, by encouraging discussions and initiatives that challenge traditional notions of leadership, including redefining motherhood as a form of leadership within families and communities.

Thematic findings are as follows.

The impact of gender norms on women and girls' education: Gender norms entrenched within family structures pose significant obstacles to the education and career choices of women and girls in many countries. These norms result in exclusion from formal education at a young age, early drop-out from secondary education, and reluctance to pursue higher education. Moreover, they limit the career paths available to women and girls, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), due to prevailing stereotypes. Occupations associated with caregiving roles receive more societal acceptance. Discriminatory practices rooted in these norms further marginalise young women and girls based on gender and intersecting factors like ethnicity, religion, and disability.

The impact of gender norms on ending violence against women and girls: Harmful gender norms contribute to the widespread acceptance of violence against women and girls, with many individuals regarding it as a normal and socially acceptable behaviour. These norms, influenced by traditional, cultural, and religious beliefs, foster discriminatory practices that hinder the development and potential of women and girls from a young age. Additionally, these norms perpetuate social stigma and blame towards survivors of violence, discouraging them from seeking help, reporting their abusers, and seeking justice. As a result, survivors face significant barriers in accessing support and recovery resources.

The impact of gender norms on the socio-economic and political empowerment of women and girls: Gender norms prioritise men's economic contributions over women's and consequently undermine family support for women's careers, confining them to household roles. This results in limited job opportunities and upward career mobility for women and girls across countries.

Gender norms also hinder women's political engagement and empowerment in numerous countries. They limit family support for women's political aspirations, influence biased media portrayals of politically active women, and contribute to the fear of violence and objectification, which discourages women from participating in politics and voicing their opinions.

Way forward

A key group of actors are found to be critical in delivering norm change that specifically empowers women and girls in different social settings. Recommendations are laid out for each to consider.

Government actors

1. **Formulate inclusive policies:** Develop policies and programmes that prioritise inclusivity, particularly for women and girls with disabilities and from minority communities.

2. **Support economic participation:** Promote gender equality in economic participation by investing in social infrastructure including affordable childcare, and enforce workplace regulations to reduce the impact of norms on women's economic empowerment and gender-sensitive infrastructure in rural areas.
3. **Implement gender-transformative curricula:** Education ministries should consider prioritising the development and implementation of gender-transformative curricula to challenge and change traditional gender norms within educational systems.

Schools and higher education institutions

1. **Promote alternative visions:** Capture alternative visions of women's roles in society and introduce them earlier in childhood through education.
2. **Implement comprehensive sexuality education:** Offer comprehensive sexuality education that goes beyond formal structured learning, addressing broader aspects of gender equality and empowerment.
3. **Launch gender-transformative curricula at scale:** Work with education ministries, schools and higher education institutions to adapt teaching and learning material to reflect more positive contributions of women and girls in social, economic, and political change processes.
4. **Inculcate key skills in young students:** Focus on developing critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills to empower young individuals to challenge and reshape gender norms.

Civil society, communities, and families

1. **Redefine notions of power and leadership:** Challenge male-centric definitions of power and leadership by broadening the scope to include various forms of influence, including the role of mothers as leaders within households.
2. **Create awareness campaigns:** Design campaigns that explicitly challenge patriarchal gender norms (and specifically engage men and boys as advocates for gender equality).
3. **Empower through collective action:** Work on building power within communities through self-care practices for women and girls and collective action through women's groups.

Media actors

1. **Non-stigmatising reporting:** Media outlets need to ensure that reporting about women, including instances of violence against them, is done in a non-stigmatising manner.
2. **Avoid reinforcing stereotypes:** Refrain from perpetuating one-sided models of women as self-sacrificing individuals and portray a diverse range of gender roles and experiences.
3. **Focus on marginalised communities:** Act as a bridge between marginalised communities and the broader society, promoting understanding and inclusion through nuanced media representation.



1 Introduction

Gender norms are powerful social constructs. These exert a profound influence on the empowerment trajectories of young people, shaping their lived experiences and perceptions in countless ways. Together with broader social norms, they affect the life choices and decisions of billions of women and girls around the world, in the present and the future.

In seven Next Generation countries, which are the focus of the British Council's thematic study on *What we know on women and girls* – Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland – gender norms are significant barriers for women and girls in four areas: education and skills, ending violence, and socio-economic and political empowerment.

While rigid gender norms act as barriers, constraining the agency and choices of young women and girls, they also serve as catalysts

for resilience and transformative action. Understanding the multifaceted impact of gender norms on the empowerment journeys of young people across diverse country contexts is therefore crucial for developing targeted interventions and fostering inclusive societies where all young people can thrive and contribute meaningfully to norm change.

The paper is organised as follows: Chapter 2 presents the methodology; Chapter 3 discusses the concepts of gender norms, power, and empowerment; Chapter 4 shares insights on young people's perceptions of power and the impact of gender norms on their empowerment journeys; Chapters 5 to 8 explore the impact of gender norms on education and skills for women and girls, ending violence against them, and their socio-economic and political empowerment; and Chapter 9 concludes with recommendations.

What is the Next Generation programme?

The Next Generation is a global research programme that explores the needs, potential, and aspirations of young people across the world. The research seeks to analyse the conditions that support young people to reach their potential as fulfilled, productive and active citizens. It includes those from underprivileged or geographically isolated backgrounds, as well as those from more established communities and represents the aspirations of young women and girls, as well as young men and boys.

Research is initiated in countries that are experiencing a period of notable change, with the purpose of ensuring that young people's voices are heard, no matter their background or gender, and that their interests are properly represented in decisions that will have lasting implications for their lives. The research is always completed with a series of recommendations to support policy change.

The overall aim of Next Generation is defined through three strands:

- **Research:** Understanding youth attitudes and aspirations, including those from underprivileged backgrounds and differences by gender.

- **Youth voice and capacity building:** Amplifying youth voices from a range of backgrounds, including supporting their active participation, inclusion within the research process and opportunities for skills development.
- **Policy impact:** Supporting better youth policymaking, including perspectives of underprivileged youth and support that increases the inclusion of women and girls.

Next Generation research has been conducted in Colombia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Viet Nam, Lebanon, Turkey, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Albania, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and the UK. Follow-up reports have been developed for Myanmar and Lebanon, and an overview report has been conducted on Next Generation countries in Africa. Work is currently underway in Iraq and Bangladesh, and new research will shortly be launched in Brazil and Kazakhstan.

This is the second of the What We Know research series based on the Next Generation studies, with a central focus on women and girls.

2 Methodology

The paper uses a mixed-methods approach. It combines insights from the seven Next Generation country-level reports and datasets from 2018 to 2023 and new qualitative interview data from 2023.¹ Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model from the 1970s, which posits that people exist and interact within a complex ecological system of interrelated levels, provides a compelling framework to analyse the data. The five levels include:

- 1. Individual:** The physical and cognitive characteristics of youth, such as age, education, income, experience, interests, attitudes, and beliefs.
- 2. Interpersonal:** The immediate social circle of youth, such as peers, partners, family, teachers, and community leaders, who influence young people's perceptions and behaviours.
- 3. Organisational/community:** The structured communities and settings in which social relationships occur, including schools, workplaces, training academies, and neighbourhoods. The characteristics and interactions in each space can either facilitate or hinder young people's access to education, political, social and economic empowerment. Furthermore, they play a crucial role in fostering or addressing violence against women and girls.
- 4. Societal:** The broad societal factors that shape youth participation in education, political, social and economic change processes, including social and cultural norms that help to maintain or rebalance inequalities and violence between groups in society.
- 5. Policy and legal:** Public policies, laws and regulations at various levels – including local and national policy frameworks – and programme interventions around education, skills, violence against women and girls, and broader policies on empowerment.

Since the Next Generation reports were published at various points in time over the five-year period, the team reviewed policy and grey literature published between 2018 and 2023. This helped to better understand the contexts of each country. The research team also clustered key findings from the seven reports into themes, enablers, and barriers using the different socio-ecological levels. Fifty-eight semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and 31 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted across the seven countries in native languages and English. Stakeholders for the KIIs included government officials, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, implementing partner agencies, and civil society (academics, thought leaders, activists, influencers, and rights-based organisations). Individuals for IDIs were selected from British Council programming beneficiary lists and the research team's in-country networks. Data from the interviews was anonymised and coded in a qualitative analysis grid using the socio-ecological levels. Data on gender norms from across the various themes is presented in this paper.

Cross-country insights derived from global and Next Generation datasets have focused on questions that allowed comparisons across at least four of the seven countries. Recommendations in the paper have been co-created through multicountry stakeholder workshops held in 2024.

¹ Reports (most recent first): Pakistan (June 2023), Indonesia (October 2022), Poland (May 2021), Nigeria (November 2020), Viet Nam (August 2020), Ethiopia (October 2019), and Sri Lanka (March 2019).

3 Gender norms, power, and empowerment

In four Next Generation briefing papers on women and girls, gender norms appear as a form of negative power, undermining young women's efforts to advance their learning trajectories, live free from harm, and feel empowered socially, economically, and politically (Khan et al., 2024).

3.1 Key definitions

A close look at the linkages between gender norms, power, and empowerment is critical to understanding:

- How gender norms uphold power inequalities between women and girls and men and boys in different countries.
- The negative impacts of norms on women and girls, communities, and societies.
- Areas where norm change is vital and urgent because of their negative impacts and the risks they pose in perpetuating gendered power imbalances.
- Potential mechanisms for amplifying positive norm change where these are found to exist and for fighting social resistance to norm change.

3.1.1 Gender norms

Gender norms, a subset of social norms, delineate expected behaviours in society for individuals identifying, or identified by others, as male or female, often disregarding non-binary or gender-fluid identities (Harper et al., 2020). These norms intersect with other societal expectations related to age, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Recognising and addressing these intersections is key to norm change (ibid.). Typically, gender norms reflect and perpetuate unequal gender relations. While they affect women and girls, they also impact men and boys who diverge from prevailing gender norms (ibid.).

Internalised early in life, they can establish a life cycle of gender socialisation and stereotyping. Failure to comply can trigger strong social sanctions, such as ridiculing, ostracising or even violence, or less visible punishments, such as exclusion from employment opportunities, gender pay gaps, marriage or early motherhood. People also self-regulate their own behaviour to conform to what they think is expected of them by others (O'Flynn and Cowell, 2022).

3.1.2 Power

Power is the ability to make free and informed choices about our lives (O'Flynn and Cowell, 2022). When we can make our own choices about where to live, how to live, who to live with, things as basic as what to eat and when to sleep, we are on our way to becoming empowered human beings (ibid.). Power is not static and can shift over time. It is exercised in the social, political and economic relations between individuals and groups (ibid.).

Social systems construct power and, usually, it is distributed unequally between women and men, and boys and girls.

One way of thinking about power is looking at it in six ways:

- **Power over:** The power of the strong over the weak, including the power to exclude others.
- **Power to:** The capability to decide actions and carry them out.
- **Power with:** Collective power, through organisation, solidarity, and joint action.
- **Power within:** Personal self-confidence, often linked to culture, religion or other aspects of identity, which influences the thoughts and actions that appear legitimate or acceptable.
- **Power for:** The power of a clear vision and sense of purpose.
- **Power under:** Passing on mistreatment to others through fear, humiliation, anger, resentment, superiority, and arrogance (Oxfam, 2021).

Power is at the core of the concept of empowerment because it requires that power changes or shifts. The importance of women's power cannot be overstated in the pursuit of a fair, equitable, and thriving society. Beyond mere representation, women's power embodies the capacity for influence, decision making, and leadership across all spheres of life. When women hold positions of authority and are empowered to exercise their agency, diverse perspectives are brought to the table, enriching discourse and decision-making processes. Furthermore, women's power serves as a catalyst for social progress, driving initiatives that address gender disparities, promote inclusive policies, and foster environments where everyone can reach their full potential.

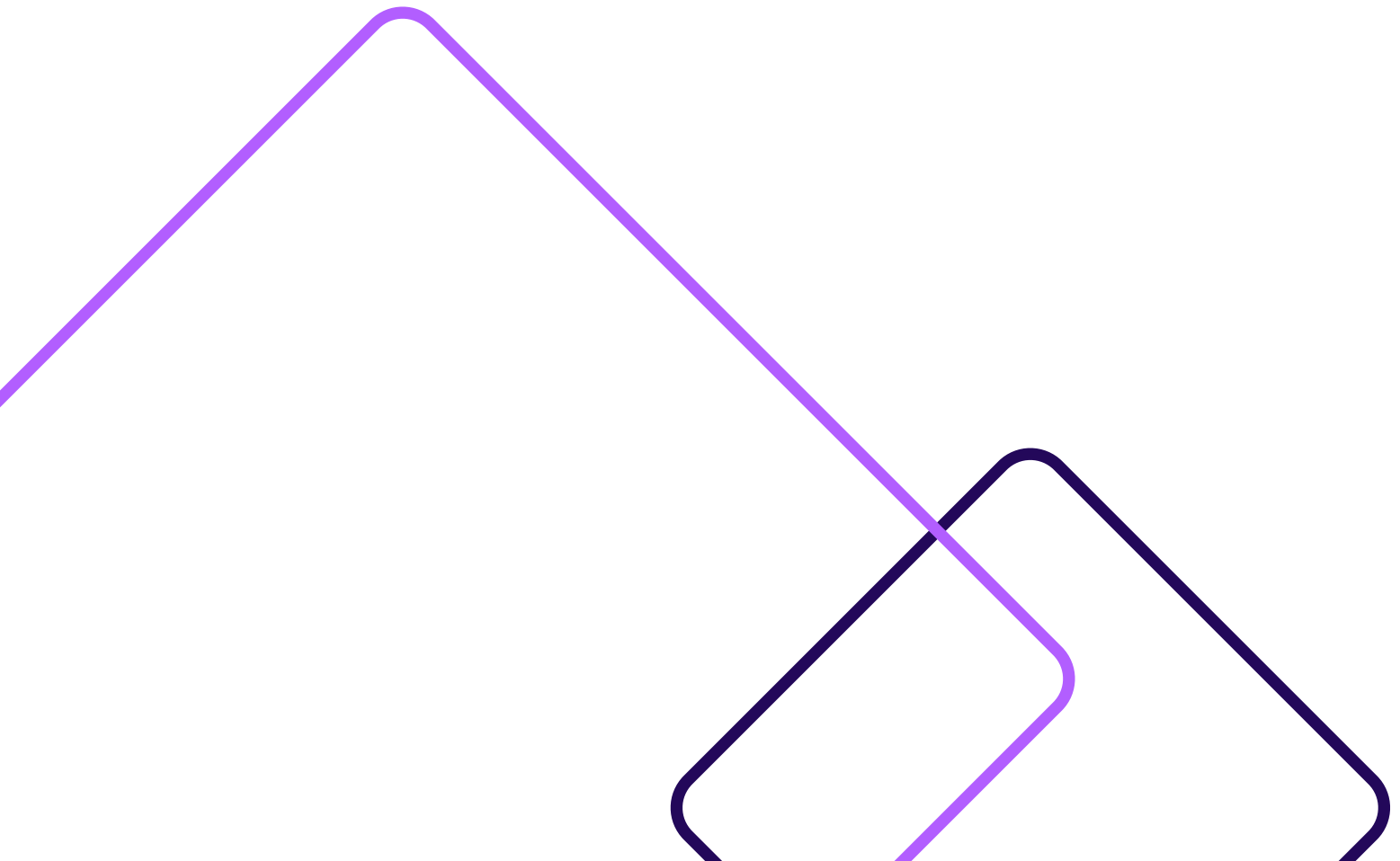
3.1.3 Empowerment

Empowerment is a social and relational process. The term has its roots in feminist theory, which stressed the personal and inner dimensions of power for women, but also questioned the underlying reasons for women's subordination and disempowerment (O'Flynn and Cowell, 2022).

It is multidimensional and occurs within social, cultural, economic, psychological, and other dimensions. It also occurs at various levels, such as individual, group, and community.

Women's empowerment is closely related to, but goes beyond, gender equality to cover not just women's condition relative to men's, but their power to make choices and their ability to control their own destiny. Some common elements of women's empowerment include access to and control over resources, meaningful political participation, the reduction of women's unpaid care responsibilities, and the ability to have control over their own bodies such as living free from violence and making decisions in relation to intimate relations and fertility (O'Flynn and Cowell, 2022).

An important element of contributing to women's empowerment is to support women's collective organisation and co-operation to challenge power structures which subordinate women (or other marginalised groups) (O'Flynn and Cowell, 2022).



4 Youth perceptions of power

4.1 What is power to young women and men

As part of the study, marginalised young people from the seven countries were interviewed on their perceptions of 'power' and 'powerful person' (based on their lived experiences) and to understand what they would do if they held power.

Notable differences are found between young women and men aged 18–24 and 25–35. Young men also describe power and powerful people using a more elaborate set of words, as illustrated by the word clouds for men in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Understandings of power among marginalised young women and men aged 18–35

Women:



Men:



4.1.1 Perceptions of 'power'

18–24-year-olds: Young women in this age group felt that power is the ability to lead, be independent and socially responsible. It is about self-confidence, self-control and self-respect, and having a valuable network of connections. Young men of this age also saw power as the ability to lead, control and influence others, to dominate women, and be independent, confident, and self-aware.

25–35-year-olds: Young women of this age viewed power as the ability to control and influence the actions of others and be responsible and independent. Young men associated power

with influence and control alongside financial independence, connecting with others, and having the strength, resilience, and ability to overcome personal limitations.

4.1.2 Perceptions of a 'powerful person'

18–24-year-olds: According to young women of this age, a powerful person is someone with the authority to make important decisions and exert influence over others. This power can manifest in various ways, such as managing a sports team like the national football captain, overseeing household affairs, controlling expenses and

household management, or holding economic and political positions. Money is viewed as a powerful resource, offering individuals the freedom to fulfil their desires. Furthermore, powerful people are described with traits like self-control, rationality, resilience, composure, confidence, leadership, and effective management of responsibilities.

According to young men of this age, a powerful person is associated with various attributes and contexts. Some perceive power in terms of physical strength, while others emphasise the ability to lead and protect. Negative associations with power in politics, such as dictatorship, are noted, while positive views include those who use their influence to assist communities and contribute to economic development. Family members, like fathers and mothers, are considered powerful for their support and ability to prioritise education. Strong decision making, resilience, and the pursuit of personal and societal goals are also seen as defining characteristics of powerful individuals.

25–35-year-olds: Young women associate powerful people with high positions, such as state officials, community leaders, or those with significant ability to influence others. Others relate powerful people with having opportunities and the ability to make decisions when granted access to resources like money. The importance of empowerment and self-reliance is highlighted, with examples of individuals gaining confidence and breaking away from dependency. Powerful people are also seen as disciplined, resilient, and able to overcome judgement and hardships. Family dynamics play a role, with some seeing themselves as powerful within their families, while others draw inspiration from strong family figures, like mothers.

Some young men define powerful people as being able to influence others, while some see them as successful in maintaining relationships. Powerful people are also associated with safety and security, with considerations for the responsible use of influence, awareness of boundaries, and a focus on contributing positively to societal issues. Family dynamics play a role, with parents often seen as powerful figures. The improvement of one's future and the responsible and purposeful use of power are considered a critical aspect of being a powerful individual.

4.2 What young women and men would do with power

18–24-year-olds: Young women want to promote change in their communities and help society at large. They also want better access to opportunities and equality at home. Young men want to focus on being able to solve their family problems and have more freedom in expressing themselves. Both men and women want to promote change within themselves, with men focusing on skills development and women placing emphasis on self-sufficiency, particularly financial self-sufficiency.

25–35-year-olds: Young women in this age group want to drive social change, including in educational centres, by lowering tuition fees and empowering youth with disabilities. Their self-improvement is focused on spending time pursuing hobbies and creative projects. Young men want to change their conditions at home and support their parents, along with driving change in their communities. They want to improve themselves by learning new skills and starting their businesses.

4.3 The impact of gender norms on empowerment journeys

In addition to understanding what power means to marginalised young people, they talked about their lived experiences, how they spend their time, and their aspirations for the future (including what could help them or pose barriers). These insights helped to create personas and journey maps. Gender norms came out clearly as a recurrent theme across the IDIs, affecting both women and men in detrimental ways.



Marginalised young women and men aged 18–24 contend with distinct challenges, significantly influenced by societal and gender norms and financial insecurity. The first journey map (Figure 2) illustrates how young women of this age may grapple with the balance of work and household chores, often being survivors of violence, facing gender-based discrimination, and striving for financial independence. Conversely, while the journey map of men in this age (Figure 3) may not be as densely populated with gender-specific challenges, they reveal the adverse effects of societal gender norms and expectations, leading to mental health issues. Additionally, young men encounter obstacles in economic empowerment as they endeavour to provide for their families, impeding their access to higher education.

Both young women and men aged 18–24 aspire to achieve financial stability and independence. Young women express a particular interest in aiding other women and girls within their communities, while young men focus on supporting their families and contributing to the broader community.

Young women and men aged 25–35 have similar challenges and aspirations as their counterparts aged 18–24 (Figure 4). Much like their younger peers, young women confront gender inequality and the intricate task of juggling work and household responsibilities. Notably, young women between the ages of 25–35 bear the additional expectation of providing financial support to their families. The aspirations of young women of both age groups align, emphasising financial independence, self-improvement, and community support.

Young men aged 25–35 grapple with similar challenges to young men aged 18–24, encompassing financial uncertainty, familial expectations, and mental health issues stemming from societal and gender norms discouraging open dialogue about their struggles (Figure 5).

The journey map for young men aged 25–35 also unveils new aspirations, such as property ownership and marriage. These ambitions stand apart from those of their female counterparts and younger men aged 18–24, underscoring a divergence in the interests or priorities of young men as they progress through life.



Journey Map: Young Women (18–24)

Ayesha

Ayesha, 22, is a single young woman from a marginalised background, working long hours in the informal sector, determined to improve her circumstances. She faces gender-based discrimination, financial struggles and has limited access to resources.

Where am I?



- Working tirelessly with demanding schedule
- Balancing work commitments and household chores
- Survivor of violence
- Subject to mobility restrictions
- Barely making ends meet

Where do I want to be?



- **Short term** = Strive for financial independence
- **Medium term** = contribute positively to communities including supporting women and girls

How will I get there?



- Accessible education
- Vocational training
- Networking
- On-the-job training
- Government initiatives

“
I need to be educated to empower myself, to be able to speak up.
”

Journey Map: Young Men (18–24)

Isa

Isa, 21, is a single young man from a low-income household, currently studying. Acknowledging societal expectations and gender norms, he maintains a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to supporting his family.

Where am I?



- Dedicates his time to studying and vocational training
- Faces financial struggles
- Subject to severe expectations
- Experiences mental health difficulties

Where do I want to be?



- **Short term** = Complete higher education
- **Medium term** = find stable job, own assets, entrepreneurship, providing for family and wider community

How will I get there?



- Exploring multiple avenues of income
- Hard-work
- Online training courses
- Networking
- Skills development

“
I must be determined to work hard to achieve my aspirations.
”

Journey Map: Young Women (25–35)

Zara

Zara, 31, is a married mother of two living under financial duress. Her journey involves the challenges of a difficult marriage and subsequent motherhood, all while facing financial pressures due to the lack of opportunities. Zara exhibits a resilient and persevering attitude.

Where am I?



- Subjected to an early marriage
- Financial pressure to support family
- Long hours in informal work
- Burden of childcare and housework
- Experiences systemic gender inequality

Where do I want to be?



- **Short term** = self-improvement, financial independence
- **Medium term** = become established entrepreneur, contribute to social empowerment of others

How will I get there?



- Acquire skills
- Engage with CSO workshops
- Resist existing stereotypes
- Mental wellbeing

“
I will keep earning and never give up working. I will acquire skills as much as possible.
”

Journey Map: Young Men (25–35)

Joseph

Joseph, 28, is a single man with a modest upbringing. He is burdened by conforming to outdated gender stereotypes. Societal norms dictate that he should fulfil multiple roles simultaneously, from family caretaker to landowner. He is determined to improve his and his family's life.

Where am I?

- Works in an informal business
- Generates low-income
- Overwhelming family pressures
- Struggling with mental health

Where do I want to be?

- **Short term** = buy land, get married
- **Medium term** = financial stability, grow business, support family, positive impact on communities

How will I get there?

- Hard-work
- Learning-oriented growth
- Incremental savings over time

“
I must build myself more in my career path.
”

5 The impact of gender norms on women's education

Gender norms exert a significant influence on women's educational potential, shaping their access to and experiences within educational systems. In many contexts, entrenched gender stereotypes and expectations dictate traditional roles for women, prioritising domestic responsibilities over academic pursuits. This often results in limited educational opportunities for girls, with families and communities investing less in their schooling compared to boys. Moreover, societal norms may discourage women from pursuing fields of study deemed 'masculine' or perceived as challenging, further constraining their educational pathways. These gendered expectations not only impede women's academic advancement, but also perpetuate broader inequalities by restricting their access to economic opportunities and decision-making roles. Recognising and challenging these gender norms is essential for creating inclusive educational environments that enable women to fulfil their educational potential and contribute meaningfully to society.

Gender norms in family structures

Gender norms in family structures constrain the education of women and girls in many countries. These can range from being completely out of formal education from a young age, dropping out at the secondary level, to not pursuing higher education. Many families expect women and girls to take on a greater share of domestic responsibilities, including chores and caring for younger siblings and the elderly, and to get married and have children. Social systems (and sanctions) do not allow women and girls to choose for themselves or defy their families' decisions. They are also socially conditioned to believe that their parents, older siblings, and other family elders are acting in their best interests and are well placed to decide on their behalf.

In Pakistan, a higher share of young women (19 per cent) relative to young men (12 per cent) stated that their families did not want them to continue their education (Next Generation data). Around 16 per cent of young women also dropped out to carry out domestic responsibilities (ibid.). According to interviewees, parents' perceptions are biased against young women and girls – particularly in rural areas, where high drop-out

rates are associated with less buy-in from parents (interviews, 2023). The overriding mindset is both dismissive of girls' ability to achieve anything and resigned to believing there are no opportunities for women and girls (ibid.). Additionally, women and girls are automatically expected to assume several roles that range from carrying out domestic tasks to looking after younger siblings or elders as well as working in the field (ibid.).

In Viet Nam, families impinge on young people's decisions to pursue education, particularly among dropouts (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020). Broadly, where households struggle financially, boys are prioritised, and girls are obliged to drop out (interviews, 2023). The situation is particularly prevalent among girls who belong to ethnic minorities and face multiple challenges: poverty, remote locations, poor access to quality education, and discrimination (ibid.). Girls with disabilities are far less likely to pursue education at all levels owing to family restrictions (ibid.). Early marriage and subsequent motherhood are also key factors that hinder girls' access to education (ibid.).

In Nigeria, women and girls have fewer educational opportunities than boys (Curran et al., 2020). According to key informants, in the northern areas, parents' decisions significantly contribute to girls dropping out after lower secondary school to get married (interviews, 2023). Girls get left behind in education because they are expected to fulfil the requirements of the household, which can range from taking care of siblings, undertaking domestic chores, or even helping parents with odd jobs related to their trades (ibid.). As a result, girls do not have the opportunity to regularly attend schools (ibid.).



In Ethiopia, despite improvements in access to education over the past decade, women and girls tend to discontinue their studies over time. Factors such as a disproportionate share of household responsibilities, early marriage, pregnancy, and expectations that they follow the wishes of their husband are key impediments over and above parents' influences (De Schryver et al., 2019). This resonates with the reflections of key informants who note that while girls' access to formal primary education is almost on a par with boys, or even ahead in some instances, girls tend to drop out at the junior and secondary levels. A key reason is that families grossly undervalue the significance of educated girls (interviews, 2023).

Gender norms constrain subject choices and career options

Gender norms constrain the choices of study and the professional careers of women and girls. Existing stereotypes hinder many women and girls from studying or pursuing a career in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Professions that highlight the role of women as caregivers also have greater family and social acceptance.

In Pakistan, women are more likely to study to become doctors or nurses – traditionally regarded as an appropriate occupation for females (interviews, 2023). Teaching is another occupation generally considered suitable for women (ibid.). Key informants in Sri Lanka also state that families discourage girls from pursuing engineering and ask them to consider other areas where they

can assume the role of caregiver (ibid.). In this case, being a doctor or a teacher is considered acceptable (ibid.).

In Indonesia, key informants note that socio-cultural factors steer women away from subjects that are considered masculine. For example, despite grants and scholarships being offered to women to study a vast array of subjects, most are inclined towards programmes that relate to education and teaching (interviews, 2023). At the same time, programmes that pertain to nursing, midwifery, and pharmaceuticals are preferred because they are considered feminine, whereas engineering is considered masculine (ibid.). Consequently, those areas within STEM considered feminine are acceptable for women to pursue (ibid.). Additionally, subjects such as communication, psychology and/or the social sciences and the humanities are common among young women (ibid.).

Gender stereotypes in Viet Nam mean that engineering, physics, maths, and technology are seen as masculine and 'too difficult for women', whereas areas of study considered more appropriate for women include the humanities, social sciences, teaching, and nursing (interviews, 2023). These inclinations are symptomatic of a broader responsibility of women to assume the role of caregivers in predominantly domestic but also in professional settings (ibid.).

In both Nigeria and Ethiopia, the rural-urban divide is a key factor in the functioning of gender norms. In Nigeria, interviewees find that young girls in rural areas are likely to be inspired by



local role models such as teachers and midwives with whom they associate positive attributes (interviews, 2023). In Ethiopia, interviewees believe that women and girls in urban areas have more freedom to choose what they want to study, including STEM. In rural areas, however, they are likely to conform to existing mindsets and settle for what is socially acceptable, thereby limiting their educational aspirations (ibid.).

In Poland, key informants note that women are generally associated with fulfilling traditional roles as caregivers (interviews, 2023). This affects what girls choose to study while at school and eventually the professions that young women pursue (ibid.). The predominant professions associated with women are teaching and nursing (ibid.). In rural areas, religion is a key factor that reinforces existing mindsets (ibid.). Some interviewees suggest that the indoctrination begins at an early stage at primary level and textbooks are an effective medium in communicating and reinforcing social norms and gender stereotypes (ibid.). For example, primary school textbooks commonly depict mothers and daughters cooking in the kitchen while fathers take sons out for bike rides; in depictions of work, women are shown as nurses, and men as doctors, but not the other way around (ibid.).

Gender norms amplify discriminatory practices

Gender norms tend to create discriminatory practices, which leave young women and girls behind because of their gender and other markers of social identity such as ethnicity, religion, and disability. In Pakistan, sons are prioritised over daughters, especially in the rural areas, resulting in higher drop-out rates among girls (interviews, 2023). The challenges regarding access to education become more complex since close to two-thirds of people with disabilities are women and girls, half of whom are denied education (ICRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023). In the survey data, a higher share of 25–35-year-old women with disabilities reported having no formal education in comparison to those of the same age with no disabilities (15 per cent vs 3 per cent) (Next Generation data). Almost 50 per cent of women and girls in rural areas from religious minority communities never attended schools (Chaudhry, 2023). For some interviewees,

constraints to education arise from a pattern of systemic discrimination against minority communities that ranges from negligible provision of education facilities in Hindu-majority areas to ongoing harassment of minority girls and forced conversions to Islam, all of which cause parents to not want to send their girls far from home (ibid.; interviews, 2023).

In Nigeria, discrimination based on gender, disability, and minority status manifests in several ways to limit access to education and skills. This is particularly evident in the case of young women with no partners (whether single, divorced, or widowed) including teenage mothers (Curran et al., 2020). Women also face discrimination when they pursue higher education (interviews, 2023). Gender and ethnicity further compound existing challenges for women from the northern parts of the country (Curran et al., 2020). Among 15–24-year-old girls and women with disabilities, 27 per cent have no formal education, compared to 13 per cent of those with no disabilities. For the older age group, the corresponding figures are 28 per cent and 13 per cent (Next Generation data).

In Poland, members of the ethnic Roma community face significant discrimination. While substantive gains are visible in terms of access to education arising from initiatives such as the Programme for the Integration of the Roma Community (2014–2020), key informants highlight Roma are commonly perceived as inherently lazy and have no aspirations (CoE, 2019; interviews, 2023). The key barriers to education are poverty and social exclusion which, over time, reinforces existing patterns of deprivation and lack of empowerment (ibid.). Moreover, following Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, an estimated 50,000 Ukrainian Roma refugees fled to Poland (Samber, 2023). Already stigmatised as a minority in Ukraine, refugee status in a new country adds another layer of dispossession reinforced through systemic discrimination and has negative consequences in terms of access to basic services (ibid.; interviews, 2023).

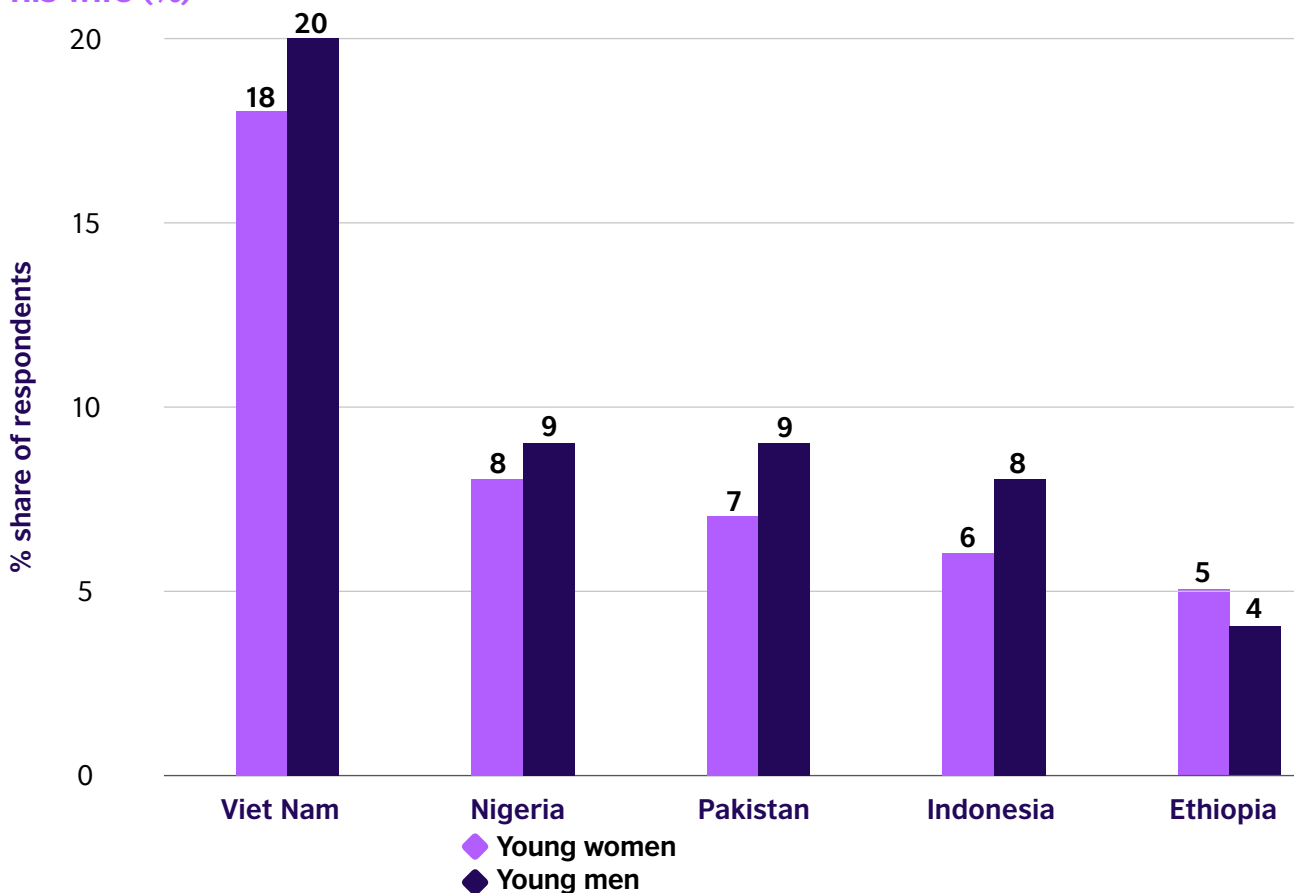
6 The impact of gender norms on ending violence against women

Gender norms play a profound role in shaping attitudes and behaviours related to violence against women and girls, perpetuating a culture of acceptance and normalisation. Societal expectations often dictate unequal power dynamics between genders, normalising men's control over women and condoning acts of violence as a means of asserting dominance. These norms not only excuse perpetrators but also blame victims, fostering a climate of impunity and silencing survivors. Additionally, rigid gender norms restrict women's autonomy and agency, making it challenging for them to report abuse or seek help. Addressing and challenging these harmful norms is essential for dismantling systemic barriers to gender equality and creating a society where violence against women and girls is not tolerated and survivors are supported in their journey towards healing and justice.

Gender norms normalise violence against women and girls

Large numbers of men and women consider violence against women and girls to be normal and therefore socially acceptable. In the 7th wave of the World Values Survey, 18 per cent of young women aged 16–34 and 20 per cent of young men of the same age believed it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife. Relatively smaller shares (6–8 per cent of young women) believed this in Nigeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia. In Ethiopia, a slightly higher share of young women agreed with this relative to young men (5 vs 4 per cent) (World Values Survey, 2022).

Figure 6. Share of respondents who believe it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife (%)



Source: World Values Survey (2022).

Key informants from Pakistan, Nigeria, and Ethiopia explained that women in their countries commonly perceive violence as an ordinary aspect of their lives and are often unaware of their rights and the protective legal frameworks in place (interviews, 2023). This frequently results in the lack of reporting. In Sri Lanka, key informants were concerned about women's acceptance of violence despite high education levels among them (ibid.).

Gender norms give rise to and perpetuate harmful practices

Gender norms that are shaped by traditional, cultural, and religious beliefs give rise to and perpetuate discriminatory practices that harm women and girls from an early age and minimise their prospects of reaching their full potential.

In Sri Lanka and Viet Nam, key informants raised concerns over the prevalence of intimate partner violence and cyber violence and explained that cultural norms profoundly influence perceptions of romantic relationships (interviews, 2023). Harmful norms in Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Ethiopia frequently lead to practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) and impede the comprehensive dissemination of information on family planning and sexuality, especially to young girls.

Interviewees from Indonesia said that there are many vulnerable girls in the country who are victims of child sexual abuse, child marriages, and FGM (interviews, 2023). In eastern Indonesia, the Nusa Tenggara Timur province has a cultural practice known as 'Kawin Tangkap' (capture tradition). In this tradition, a man forcibly kidnaps and impregnates a woman without her consent. If the woman becomes pregnant, the man then proceeds to marry her (ibid.).

Gender norms attach stigma and blame to women and girls

Gender norms attach social stigma and blame to survivors of violence, often deterring them from seeking care, reporting perpetrators, and accessing justice. Prevailing norms have detrimental consequences on survivors' reporting rates and recovery journeys.

Underreporting emerged as a common issue in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland. Key informants attributed this to deeply ingrained patriarchal mindsets, stigma surrounding reporting, and strong cultural traditions (interviews, 2023). In Ethiopia, key informants explained how norms encourage women to remain silent, and how reporting violence is met with shaming (ibid.). In Poland, women and girls are concerned about escalating violence and are not confident that the legal system would support them. A pervasive fear of being ridiculed and blamed makes victims and survivors less likely to report violence, while the lack of adequate support networks throughout the reporting process magnifies these challenges (ibid.).



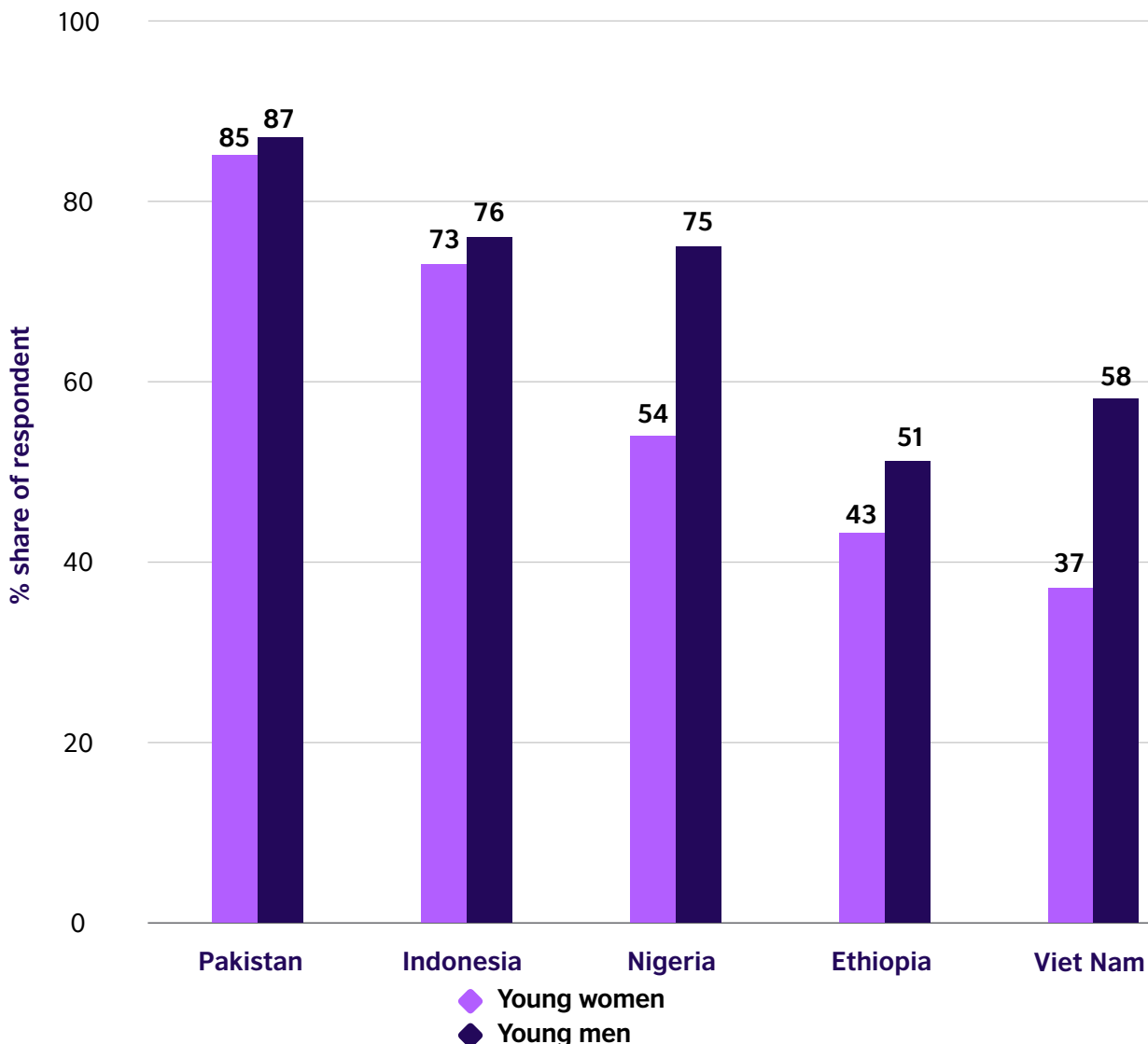
7 The impact of gender norms on women's socio-economic empowerment

Gender norms pose a significant barrier to young women's socio-economic empowerment. Societal expectations deeply rooted in traditional gender roles and biases contribute to the limited job opportunities and upward career mobility for women across countries.

Gender norms undervalue women's economic contributions

Gender norms attach a higher value to men's economic contributions relative to women's. In the 7th World Values Survey, high shares of young women and men agreed with the statement that, 'When jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women.' Relative to other countries, Pakistan stood out, as 85 per cent of young women and 87 per cent of men agreed with this statement.

Figure 7. Share of respondents who agree that when jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women (%)



In Pakistan, 91 per cent of women aged 25–35 were out of the labour force and identified as mothers/homemakers, whereas no men of the same age identified as homemakers (Next Generation data). In Indonesia, 68 per cent of unemployed women aged 25–35 reported having to look after their children as a reason for unemployment, relative to only 6 per cent of men of the same age bracket (ibid.). Key informant views were consistent with these findings.

Gender norms weaken family support for women's careers and confine them to the home

Family support is derived by gendered expectations of women's roles and responsibilities. In Pakistan, young women encounter obstacles in finding jobs, mainly due to family limitations and expectations. Women particularly struggle to achieve career success due to a lack of family support, leading to dissatisfaction and unequal career opportunities compared to men (Babar et al., 2023). Key informants from Pakistan said that women often lean towards a career in academia, which is seen as a safer option due to societal constraints related to household responsibilities and early marriages (interviews, 2023).

In Indonesia, young individuals navigate conflicting motivations between securing traditional, family-approved formal sector jobs and aspiring to unconventional careers. A generational gap is evident, with younger individuals favouring creative and tech-oriented sectors that offer freedom from nepotism and hierarchies (Allison et al., 2022). Yet, key informants explained that family approval remains a major hurdle for young people, especially women, impacting their access to funding and participation in economic programmes (interviews, 2023). One interviewee stated that:

'The challenge is around gender norms, where the perception that women are primarily responsible for household duties is widespread...We have encountered situations where women who aspire to join our programmes face obstacles because of their husbands. So, if we have 20 women from each city, sadly three of them do not join or complete our programmes because their husbands did not grant the necessary approvals.'

In Viet Nam, key informants underscored that family plays a central role in a woman's life, affecting her career path. The degree of family support she receives significantly impacts a woman's ability to return to work after giving birth. The division of household workload and the sacrifice of career paths are topics of serious discussion even before marriage (interviews, 2023). Because of this, young people often feel compelled to pursue family-preferred fields (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

In Ethiopia, key informants explained how gender norms coupled with cultural and religious beliefs make it extremely hard for women and girls to break through. The confinement to the home, to carry out household duties, means that women and girls have fewer avenues relative to men and boys to network and identify employment opportunities. It is much easier for men and boys to leave the home in search of these opportunities and to develop social networks and contacts and interact with many more people to access relevant information (interviews, 2023).



8 The impact of gender norms on women's political empowerment

Gender norms restrict the political empowerment of women and girls. These are etched in society, interpersonal relationships, and community dynamics, and heavily shape women's behaviours and opportunities.

Gender norms do not allow women to assume leadership roles

Gender norms disfavour women's political engagement and empowerment in many countries. In Pakistan, key informants shared perspectives on entrenched patriarchal norms – such as the expectation that women should prioritise having a family over a career and be caring and submissive rather than leaders – that profoundly influence their political participation (interviews, 2023). Media campaigns that disparage successful women contribute to a broader societal reluctance towards outspoken, educated, and assertive women (ibid.). According to the interviewees, the patriarchal fabric of Pakistani society, where men control household decisions, leads to substantial opposition to women stepping outside traditional roles. The perception of politics as a male-dominated and unattractive profession further compounds the challenges faced by aspiring women leaders (ibid.).

In Sri Lanka, key informants stated that cultural expectations firmly position women in roles associated with household responsibilities and child/elderly care, significantly limiting their participation in political activities. In their view, the impact intensifies as post-puberty cultural norms reinforce patriarchal values, perpetuating the perception that women need to be protected and should not take on leadership roles (interviews, 2023). This narrative extends to media portrayals of female politicians, which tend to focus more on controversies than substantive contributions (ibid.).

In Indonesia, key informants highlighted the society's deep-seated lack of trust in women's political capabilities, reflected in preferences for male candidates, even among women voters

(interviews, 2023). From their perspective, this ingrained mistrust obstructs women from pursuing leadership roles, forcing them to continually prove their worth in a society inherently sceptical of women in political arenas (ibid.). In Viet Nam, key informants stated that societal norms expect women to prioritise family over personal interests, acting as barriers to their political empowerment despite the existence of policies that encourage women's political participation (ibid.).

In Nigeria, patriarchal norms embedded in societal responses and decision-making processes significantly constrain women's potential contributions to society (interviews, 2023). In Ethiopia, key informants expressed views on how ingrained cultural norms discourage girls from assuming leadership roles, compounded by biased decision-making processes within households (ibid.). The intersection of cultural practices and traditional beliefs perpetuates a male-dominated and patriarchal system, contributing to structural social norms that disadvantage women economically and politically (ibid.).

Gender norms narrow family support for women's political interests and ambitions

Across Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam, interviewees explained the debilitating impacts of deeply ingrained norms on women and girls. These dictate rigid gender roles and underscore familial responsibilities, often overshadowing individual pursuits. In Pakistan, family dynamics, particularly the roles of fathers, brothers, and husbands, significantly shape a woman's trajectory in politics. The reliance on familial connections or male endorsements underscores the challenges faced by women lacking such support, illustrating the limited avenues for independent political engagement (interviews, 2023).

In Sri Lanka, the reluctance of parents or partners to send young girls to empowerment programmes has hampered their access to opportunities for political empowerment, perpetuating a cycle of restricted choices (interviews, 2023). In Viet

Nam, societal expectations for women include the prioritisation of family over a career or political involvement. The reluctance of women to pursue higher education or ambitious careers stems from the pervasive fear that such pursuits may lead to marital discontent, highlighting the negative impact of societal norms on women's aspirations (ibid.).

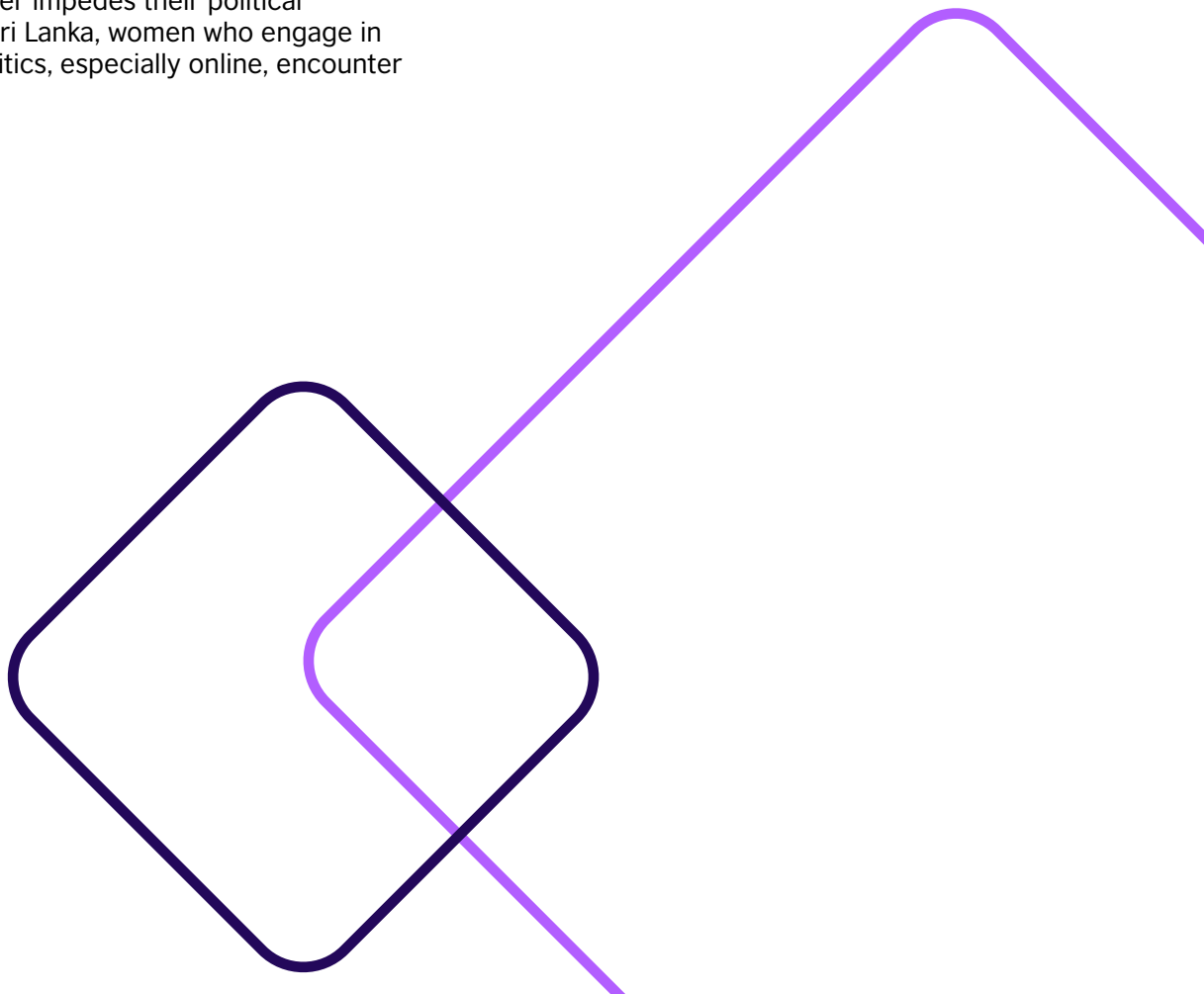
Gender norms corrupt media representations of politically engaged women

The phenomenon of gender stereotyping in media portrayal of political candidates, along with the sexualisation of female candidates, presents a significant challenge (Harper et al., 2020). Media coverage tends to exhibit differential treatment towards female and male political candidates, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating discriminatory norms that perceive female political ambitions and conduct as deviating from the norm or diverging from men's expression of political agency (ibid.).

The fear and experience of violence and objectification jeopardise women's interest in making their voice heard and engaging in politics. In Pakistan's media, female parliamentarians encounter objectification (interviews, 2023). The absence of safe spaces for female politicians in the media further impedes their political growth (ibid.). In Sri Lanka, women who engage in advocacy and politics, especially online, encounter

significant hate speech (ibid.). The amplified safety and security threats, particularly through social media, contribute to a hostile environment. The prevalence of fake news further affects visible women involved in political work, creating reluctance among many young women to share their opinions on various matters, not just limited to politics (ibid.). The romanticisation of gender roles is also played out in the media, where women politicians are penalised more heavily than male politicians for political failures in the country (stakeholder workshops, 2024).

In Nigeria, key informants explain the extra social censorship imposed by the media on female politicians who are found to be corrupt (interviews, 2023). Unlike male politicians, media treatment of these women is more damaging (ibid.).



9 Conclusion and recommendations

This paper reveals the detrimental impact of gender norms in four areas across seven different country contexts with diverse conditions: education and skills for women and girls, ending violence against them, and their socio-economic and political empowerment. It points to the critical and urgent need for dismantling restrictive gender norms to unlock the boundless potential of women and girls. It also demonstrates the potential areas for key stakeholders to collaborate and enact norm changes.

Overall, the paper finds it crucial to:

- Prioritise holistic approaches to empowerment, with a focus on improving economic resources and on enhancing social networks and social capital for women and girls that enable them to break free from traditional roles and spaces.
- Emphasise diverse perspectives of power and leadership, by encouraging discussions and initiatives that challenge traditional notions of leadership, including redefining motherhood as a form of leadership within families and communities.

Specifically, key actors would benefit from the following considerations.

Recommendations for government actors

- 1. Formulate inclusive policies:** Develop policies and programmes that prioritise inclusivity, particularly for women and girls with disabilities and from minority communities.
- 2. Support economic participation:** Promote gender equality in economic participation by investing in social infrastructure including affordable childcare, and enforce workplace regulations to reduce the impact of norms on women's economic empowerment and gender-sensitive infrastructure in rural areas.
- 3. Implement gender-transformative curricula:** Education ministries should consider prioritising the development and implementation of gender-transformative curricula to challenge and change traditional gender norms within educational systems.

Recommendations for schools and higher education institutions

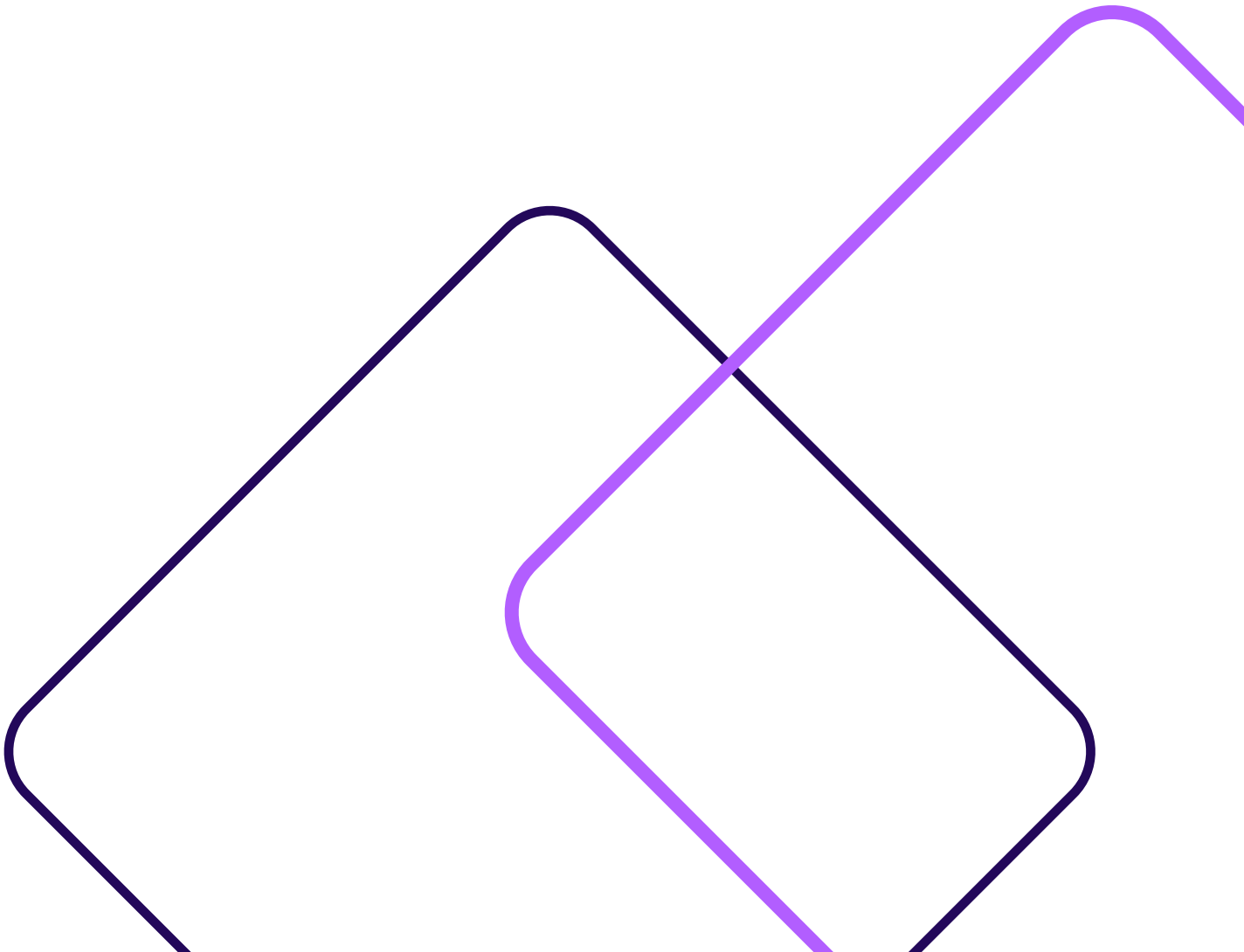
- 1. Promote alternative visions:** Capture alternative visions of women's roles in society and introduce them earlier in childhood through education.
- 2. Implement comprehensive sexuality education:** Offer comprehensive sexuality education that goes beyond formal structured learning, addressing broader aspects of gender equality and empowerment.
- 3. Launch gender-transformative curricula at scale:** Work with education ministries, schools and higher education institutions need to adapt teaching and learning material to reflect more positive contributions of women and girls in social, economic, and political change processes.
- 4. Inculcate key skills in young students:** Focus on developing critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills to empower young individuals to challenge and reshape gender norms.

Recommendations for civil society, communities, and families

- 1. Redefine notions of power and leadership:** Challenge male-centric definitions of power and leadership by broadening the scope to include various forms of influence, including the role of mothers as leaders within households.
- 2. Create awareness campaigns:** Design campaigns that explicitly challenge patriarchal gender norms (and specifically engage men and boys as advocates for gender equality).
- 3. Empower through collective action:** Work on building power within communities through self-care practices for women and girls and collective action through women's groups.

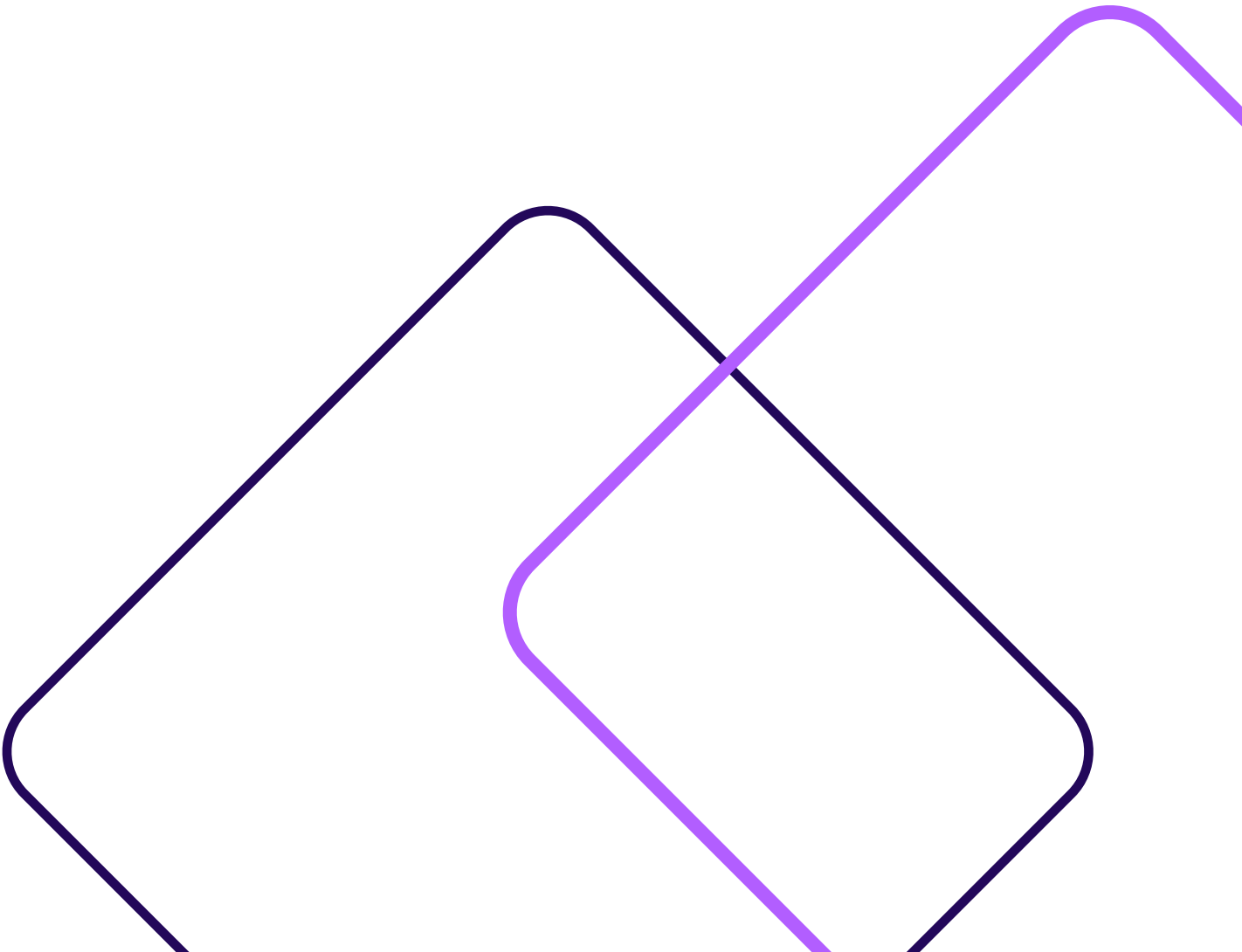
Recommendations for media actors

- 1. Non-stigmatising reporting:** Media outlets need to ensure that reporting about women, including instances of violence against them, is done in a non-stigmatising manner.
- 2. Avoid reinforcing stereotypes:** Refrain from perpetuating one-sided models of women as self-sacrificing individuals and portray a diverse range of gender roles and experiences.
- 3. Focus on marginalised communities:** Act as a bridge between marginalised communities and the broader society, promoting understanding and inclusion through nuanced media representation.



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