



DEEP THEMATIC PAPER 1

# The role of social norms in ending extreme poverty

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June 2023



THE WORLD BANK



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## About DEEP

Our mission is to build evidence, insights, and solutions that help end extreme poverty globally.

We aim to contribute to new global and national data and evidence that governments, decision makers, citizens and researchers can use to improve people's lives and support the world's poorest people in their efforts to escape extreme poverty.

We are a consortium of the Universities of Cornell, Copenhagen, and Southampton led by Oxford Policy Management, in partnership with the World Bank's Development Data Group and funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

**How to cite:** Lenhardt, A (2023) 'The role of social norms in ending extreme poverty', DEEP Thematic Paper 1, Data and Evidence to End Extreme Poverty Research Programme, Oxford.

**Available at:** <https://doi.org/10.55158/DEEPTP1>

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## Questions:

- **How are social norms expected to affect efforts to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030?**
- **What are the leading outstanding gaps in evidence on how to reduce extreme poverty amidst harmful social norms?**

## Summary

Harmful social norms cut across drivers of extreme poverty and contribute to some groups being 'left behind' by policies and programmes that aim to reduce poverty. Social norms are implicit or informal rules embedded within the institutions of a given society or group. They are influenced by beliefs, economic circumstances, political discourses, and historical factors (ALIGN, 2023; Cislighi, Maji & Heise, 2018). Social norms provide order and predictability to society, they also reflect power structures and often reinforce them (Wazir, 2023). Classifying social norms as 'good,' 'bad,' or 'harmful' is fraught: it is both conceptually challenging, and subject to parochial bias (Thrasher, 2018). The notion of a 'culture of poverty' has been rightly discredited, as have generalisations that particular cultures or societies are predisposed to harmful social norms. Both are false and damaging. This paper applies a welfare approach to understanding the relationship between social norms and poverty. For the purposes of this paper, social norms are considered harmful when they result in net welfare losses, as compared to the welfare that would result from their absence.<sup>1</sup> Harmful social norms are those that contribute to the impoverishment of certain groups within societies, recognising that welfare is much broader, but in-line with

Data and Evidence to End Extreme Poverty's (DEEP) focus on extreme poverty.

This paper explores the role social norms may play in efforts to reduce extreme poverty by 2030. It has two primary objectives. First, to summarise the latest well-evidenced research on efforts to tackle extreme poverty through policies and programmes that address social norms. Second, to identify priority areas where further research would be most valuable. It is a non-systematic review of the leading drivers between poverty and social norms, the current body of evidence on measures to address these drivers, and well-documented gaps in evidence.<sup>2</sup> The paper draws on peer-reviewed academic research, grey literature, and blogs from leading institutions and thinkers. It aims to identify evidence gaps that might be filled by the DEEP project, with a focus on DEEP priority countries, while also introducing principles for the prioritisation of research on policies and programmes with potential to promote extreme poverty reduction.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an imprecise definition of harmful social norms that merits further consideration. Thrasher (2018) discussed the limitations of this definition and offers a more robust metric for evaluating social norms, though further consideration of the practical applications of this approach to understanding poverty is needed.

<sup>2</sup> A targeted literature review was conducted to identify recent (since 2015), high quality and widely referenced articles related to social norms and poverty. It drew on the EBSCO host database and websites of relevant UN agencies, multilateral institutions, non-government organisations, and universities. The 3ie Development Evidence Portal was used to identify systematic reviews, evaluations or evidence gap maps related to social norms and poverty. The paper is intended to be a true working paper, rather than a comprehensive assessment of existing evidence on the topic.

## How social norms are expected to affect efforts to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030

The persistence of harmful social norms may well be an important barrier to ending extreme poverty. However, the relationship between poverty and social norms is complex and often contested. Moreover, we have a poor understanding of the channels through which specific norms affect poverty, and vice versa. There is a lack of evidence on how addressing harmful social norms could contribute to ending extreme poverty – and on how failure to do so may make efforts to end poverty untenable. Existing analysis has often yielded mixed or contested results. More research is sorely needed to contextualise policies and programmes and inform how they can be adapted to address the needs of particular social groups. Addressing the harmful norms that keep these groups in chronic poverty will be necessary for reaching the ‘last mile’ of extreme poverty reduction by 2030.

The channels through which social norms perpetuate poverty include:

- Formal and informal institutions can be embedded with harmful social norms that lead them to discriminate or exclude people, limiting their opportunities to escape (and remain out of) poverty. Social norms related to gender, for example, may restrict girls’ access to education, lead to their early marriage, and limit their ability to own assets. Social norms related to disability might also restrict access to education, employment, and participation in civic and political spheres.
- Harmful social norms vary from one context to another. However, there are certain groups that are likely to be impacted by them in most – if not all – contexts. These include those related to gender; ethnicity, race, caste, and religion; citizenship status; disability status; and sexual and gender identities. Developing a comprehensive understanding of how these harmful norms were established and are perpetuated across societies is complex and beyond the scope of this paper. But it is important to emphasise that there is a relationship between these categories of norms and poverty in all societies around the world.
- The risk of impoverishment is greatest when an individual or a household experiences multiple forms of discrimination or exclusion due to harmful social norms.
- Social norms often stigmatise the experience of poverty. They can exacerbate the psychosocial dimensions of poverty by reinforcing negative perceptions about those living in poverty. When interventions attempting to address poverty distinguish ‘the poor’ from ‘the non-poor’ they can inadvertently reinforce these norms. The very language used to denote someone as poor needs to be re-examined to reflect that people are not inherently poor but rather experience poverty due to structural, situational, and personal constraints.

These channels, and their impacts on extreme poverty, differ by country context.

Looking at indices that measure the impact of harmful social norms in DEEP focus countries, some areas stand out for prioritising new and better evidence to investigate how these norms affect poverty reduction strategies. Among DEEP focus countries:

- Nigeria ranks highest on the Minorities at Risk index and on the number of internally displaced people. Nigeria is also predicted to have the highest poverty rate among DEEP focus countries by 2030.
- Tanzania ranks high on the number of people projected to be living in poverty in 2030, while ranking low on indices of gender equality and access to employment for persons with disabilities.
- Bangladesh ranks lowest on the Social Institutions and Gender Index.

### **Leading gaps in evidence on how to reduce extreme poverty amidst harmful social norms**

Rigorous and systematic evidence exists on effective strategies for reducing poverty through programmes that address (or incorporate a focus on) social norms. These include:

- The effectiveness of social protection programmes in reducing poverty among marginalised groups has been studied. For DEEP focus countries, however, lessons may need to be drawn out to help support expanded coverage; apart from India and Bangladesh, all have less than 20% social protection coverage (ILO, 2022).
- Financial inclusion programmes are a growing area of interest, though their disaggregated effects on groups impacted by harmful social norms is weak.
- Quotas and reservations have been introduced to promote the inclusion of specific groups in education, labour markets and political institutions. There is evidence of immediate outcomes for some countries (e.g. women's representation in politics in India) though few studies explore the transformational impacts of affirmative action policies.
- Harmful social norms have been linked to breakdowns of social cohesion. Most evidence in this area relates to outcomes in fragile and conflict affected settings; there is little evidence on how interventions targeting social cohesion can contribute to sustainable poverty reduction.

Evidence gaps persist across the range of possible policy and programme areas. These include:

- Sensitisation campaigns are a strategy employed to change attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate harmful social norms. These can be standalone initiatives implemented in combination with other types of programmes. Although some immediate outcomes from these types of programmes have been observed in the literature, more transformational outcomes have tended to be neglected or show negligible results.
- Few evaluations of social norms initiatives present disaggregated results for different social groups, overlooking the distributional effects of programmes being studied. Likewise, for most national-level or internationally comparable data, do not disaggregate findings for relevant social groups. Data disaggregated by gender; ethnicity, race, caste and religious identity; and disability status are highlighted in this paper, though other identity factors suffer similar gaps.

## Background

There is a complex two-way relationship between harmful social norms and extreme poverty. In one direction, harmful social norms may lead to discrimination and exclusion that causes or exacerbates poverty. This can occur in poverty reduction strategies themselves, with some groups being systematically excluded from the intended benefits. It can also occur in wider social interactions that affect poverty. For example, women and girls are more likely to live in poverty due to harmful social norms that diminish their agency; people with disabilities often face social barriers to entering the labour market; people from marginalised ethnic groups are regularly denied the right to engage in the public decision-making processes that affect them. Group-based disadvantages:

Are created through cultural norms and practices which serve to disparage, stereotype, exclude, ridicule and demean certain social groups, denying them full personhood and equal rights to participate in the economic, social and political life of their society (Kabeer, 2011).

In the other direction, poverty itself can generate or reproduce harmful social norms, as can drivers of poverty such as conflict, migration, and inequality. For example, growing inequality between different groups can produce or reproduce harmful social norms, leading to the exclusion or exploitation of certain groups.

The inequalities that arise from harmful social norms are reasonably well known. Evidence on the magnitude of these disparities, and on how to address them, however, is seriously lacking. Data that allow for the disaggregation of poverty outcomes for different social groups are extremely limited. Further, compared to other drivers of poverty, the treatment of social norms tends to have a less definitive sectoral designation in international development policy and programming. Some governments and donors tack on attempts to deal with, or work through, social norms to the remit of certain ministries or departments (e.g. Ministries of 'women's affairs'), often under the guise of gender mainstreaming and sometimes broadening to social inclusion. There is rarely any meaningful commitment attached to these efforts in the form of political and legal actions or financing.

Mainstreaming often occurs organisationally while failing to translate into practice (Mehra & Gupta, 2006).

### Immediate versus longer term causality

Harmful social norms that lead to the impoverishment of a particular group tend to be deeply embedded in social structures. They are therefore difficult to change in the short term. Programme interventions take place over a brief period relative their intended impacts. Many studies are carried out shortly after a programme is completed. They are thus limited to the immediate impacts of an intervention, such as service uptake or knowledge transferred, and blind to intermediate changes, such as improved income and asset

accumulation (Duvendack & Mader, 2019; Sonnenfeld et al., 2021; Waddington et al., 2019). It is rare to study transformative changes related to normative structures and agency among groups facing exclusion and discrimination. This is partly due to practical and methodological challenges in doing so, such as the absence of a counterfactual and lack of funding to follow up. Studies on the longer-term impacts of policies and programmes aimed at addressing harmful social norms are sorely needed.

### **Social norms, chronic poverty, and impoverishment**

Harmful social norms are strongly associated with the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Inherited traits, such as being from a particular ethnic group, being born in a particular place, or belonging to the social class of one's parents, can result in children being born into, and thereby inheriting, poverty. Globally, children are twice as likely as adults to be living in poverty (UNICEF, 2020). Policies that engage with the normative structures that perpetuate the impoverishment of certain groups, and tailored programmes to prevent the intergenerational transmission of poverty, are important for addressing chronic poverty. For example, the knowledge that it is beneficial for a child to attend school may be overshadowed by norms that condone child marriage or child labour. Under economic or social pressures, parents living in poverty might lean into these norms, even where the benefits of education are known, leaving children without formal education at a disadvantage as they enter adulthood. There is a great need for longitudinal data that observes the lifelong impacts of poverty and the markers of chronic poverty among those that experience it over a lifetime.

### **Links between social norms and other drivers of extreme poverty**

Social norms are likely to interact with other drivers that entrench poverty. Groups subjected to harmful social norms, such as marginalised ethnic groups or migrants, are more likely to live in precarious environments that are highly exposed to climate change and to experience regular disruptions to their livelihoods (Barbier & Hochard, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2014). Evidence linking harmful social norms with conflict and impoverishment is robust; social norms both drive conflict and contribute to the unequal experience of poverty amidst conflict (see Stewart, 2011 for a review). Further, as non-inclusive growth and rising inequality threaten the breakdown of social cohesion, it is possible that people living in poverty will be characterised as a drain on public resources and denied full agency and visibility in public discourses. In this way, the persistence of poverty itself can create harmful social norms. Multifaceted programmes that adopt a social normative lens to extreme poverty reduction are needed.



## Channels between social norms and poverty

### Psychosocial determinants of poverty

The experience of living in poverty is clearly linked to lower wellbeing and sense of self-worth. When harmful social norms reinforce this lowered sense of self-worth, leading a person to identify themselves as being inherently poor, a cyclical pattern can be created. Interventions that attempt to address poverty can inadvertently reinforce these norms by characterising ‘the poor’ as somehow distinct in nature from ‘the non-poor’ (Roelen, 2017). Early scholarship considered the so-called culture of poverty, described as ‘an adaptation and reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a stratified, highly individuated, capitalist society’ (Lewis, 1966, p.21). While these notions have been widely criticised for viewing ‘the poor’ as a subculture with a value system distinct from the non-poor, harmful characterisations of people living in poverty persist in various forms across cultures (Aronowitz et al., 2015).

More recent scholarship in this area examines the psychosocial determinants of poverty. This considers the impact that psychological and social channels that are ‘firmly embedded in a social, cultural and political construct[s]’ have on an individual’s wellbeing (Attah et al. 2016, p.1118). In a review of studies on psychosocial impacts of social protection interventions, Samuels and Stavropoulou (2016) show that people’s experiences of poverty include frustration, shame, hopelessness, humiliation, and a lack of dignity and confidence. Harmful social norms often reinforce the negative stereotypes associated with living in poverty.

### Discrimination and exclusion based on group identity

- Harmful social norms vary by context. Constructing an exhaustive list of affected groups is not possible. Group identities are also malleable; they shift over time and within a given context. However, harmful social norms are known to impact some group characteristics across most or all contexts. These include: gender; ethnicity, race, caste and religion; migration status; disability status; sexual and gender identities (Kabeer, 2011; UN DESA 2020; Arauco et al, 2014). The social exclusion faced by these groups:
- is created through cultural norms and practices that serve to demean, disparage, stereotype, ridicule, trivialise, and make these groups invisible, denying them full personhood and equal right to participate in the economic, social and political life of their community” (Arauco et al., 2014, p.10).
- Discrimination based on identity, which contributes to poverty, can be embedded in a wide range of formal and informal institutions and social interactions. Harmful social norms can also become internalised by members of these groups. This can contribute to poverty through limited aspirations, self-esteem, hope, or identities shaped by the experience of poverty (Lenhardt et al., 2023). The following sections broadly summarise

evidence of how discrimination and social exclusion toward these groups contributes to poverty.

## **Gender**

Gender discrimination is a defining feature of poverty, with women and girls being more likely to live in poverty than their male counterparts (Bradshaw et al., 2017; UN Women, 2015a). While the ‘feminisation of poverty’ has become widely cited in the discourse on extreme poverty, statistics on the gendered dimensions of poverty remain highly insufficient to determine the magnitude of this feature of poverty (Bradshaw et al., 2017; UN Women, 2015a). Most poverty-related statistics focus on the household level, making the attribution of poverty at the individual level ‘impossible’ (UN Women, 2015b, p. 20).

Despite data limitations, available estimates indicate that harmful social norms toward women and girls are a key driver of their poverty across contexts. Women’s engagement in paid work, coupled with their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic care, remains unequal and ‘the vast majority of women still work in insecure, informal employment’ (UN Women, 2015a, 14). According to the World Bank’s latest Women, Business and the Law Report, there are legal barriers that prevent women’s full economic participation in 176 countries maintain (World Bank, 2023). In countries that have these laws in place, harmful social norms that perpetuate gender discrimination persist, despite institutions aimed at preventing it, which sometimes drive harmful practices underground or provoke backlash. And with the expansion of the formal sector, exploitation is often driven to the informal sector, where women are more likely to work and where protections are weak.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is considered to be one of the most comprehensive international agreements promoting women’s rights. Poverty reduction is a central focus of the agreement. The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration’s adoption by participating governments was in 2020. A review of the declaration’s achievements since inception found that progress in advancing gender equality has been made, but it also noted that ‘a rise of exclusionary politics, characterised by misogyny and xenophobia’ is leading to an erosion of rights and ‘hard-won victories have either stalled or are being reversed’ (UN Women 2020). In recent years, an escalation of patriarchal backlash has emerged where ‘gender itself is politicised to create divisive narratives about “bodies,” “families” and “nations,” to “fix” these sites down and create order amidst crises’ (Edström et al., 2023).

## **Ethnicity, race, caste, and religion**

Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, race, caste or religion infiltrates formal and informal institutions. It can drive poverty by limiting people’s access to economic opportunities, social services, and opportunities for civic and political engagement, among other ways. In formal institutions, discrimination can manifest directly, through laws and policies that

explicitly perpetuate harmful social norms, or indirectly, where anti-discrimination legislation is either absent, insufficient, or unenforced. Informally, racism, xenophobia and prejudice can manifest across all manner of social interactions with the potential to drive poverty. Racial or religious bias in the job market and in educational institutions can limit economic opportunities and political participation and can lead to violence or harm that restricts people's movement and social participation.

The outcomes of harmful social norms related to ethnicity, race, caste and religion have received significant attention in some countries in recent years. Though data for tracking poverty among different ethnic, racial, caste and religious groups are very limited, what data does exist suggests there are wide disparities. The 2020 World Social Report found that, at the current rate of progress, it will take more than four decades to close the gap between ethnic groups in child stunting – a strong marker of extreme poverty (UN DESA, 2020, p.4). While income poverty in India declined by 40% between 1983 and 2005, the decline was only 35% among Dalits (the caste that is historically the most marginalized) and 31% among Adivasis (a tribal group) (Arauco et al., 2014). A recent study by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) found that indigenous peoples are three times more likely to live in extreme poverty than non-indigenous peoples (ILO, 2020). Data allowing for the disaggregation of poverty estimates among religious groups is very scarce, but some country-level studies show variable poverty rates among religious groups. Ferreira et al.'s recent (2021) study of poverty dynamics in Myanmar is one example. It found that, between 2015 and 2017, Christians, Hindus, and Animists were more likely than Muslims and Buddhists to fall into poverty or remain in poverty.

Most countries have signed on to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. There are, however, notable exceptions, including several DEEP countries: Myanmar is among the 12 countries that have taken no action on the convention, while Bangladesh and Nigeria both abstained from the declaration when it was adopted in 2007. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination monitors the implementation of rights related to racial discrimination and continues to find barriers to the realisation of rights across contexts (UN OHCHR, 2022).

### **Harmful social norms related to disability**

People with disabilities are at a disproportionate risk of impoverishment due to a range of factors. These include barriers to accessing education, health, and other social services; barriers to employment; and exclusion from social and political spheres (UN DESA, n.d.; Pinilla-Roncancio & Alkire, 2017). People with disabilities and their families may also have 'additional indirect, direct and opportunity costs and characteristics that increase their vulnerability to become poor or chronically poor' (Pinilla-Roncancio & Alkire, 2017, p. 1). While data that allows for disaggregating poverty prevalence by disability status are scarce,

those that exist indicate that a higher proportion of people with disabilities live below national and international poverty lines, in some cases twice the rate than for people without disabilities (UN DESA, n.d.). More than half of all children with disabilities are estimated to be excluded from education in low- and middle-countries, and in some countries the figure is closer to 90% (HI, 2020). Those living with disability often have limited access to services that could support livelihoods, such as financial services, in comparison to people without disabilities. Direct discrimination in the labour market is common, but few countries have adopted or promoted affirmative action measures to counter this.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted in 2006 and has been ratified by 184 countries. The convention recognises that most people with disabilities live in conditions of poverty and asks signatories ‘to ensure access by persons with disabilities, in particular women and girls with disabilities, to social protection... and poverty reduction programmes’ (United Nations, 2006). The Washington Group on Disability Statistics has made concerted efforts to promote better collection of data on persons with disabilities. They developed a short and long form set of questions for collecting comparable statistics that identify disability status in a standardised and accessible way (Washington Group on Disability Statistics, 2022).

### **Migration status**

Racism and xenophobia directed toward migrants have both become more visible in countries with high rates of migration and are sometimes normalised. This applies to migrants moving within countries as well as those moving between countries. These norms have also been embedded in immigration policies and amplified through political rhetoric. Fragile and conflict affected settings, where internal and international migration are significant, are home to around half of all people living in poverty (based on the World Bank classification of fragility). A person living in a country facing ‘chronic fragility and conflict’ is ten times more likely to be living in poverty than someone in a country that has not experienced conflict or fragility in the past 20 years (Corral, et al., 2020). International and internal migrants are often less able to access essential services, are more exposed to violence, and are more likely to adopt negative coping strategies, such as reducing meals, taking out high interest loans, selling assets, and engaging in child labour (UNHCR, 2020, p.87). Refugee children in low-income countries are also less likely to go to school: under 50% are enrolled in primary school and just 11% in secondary school (UNICEF, 2022, p.2). The Global Compact for Migration, agreed in 2018, is the first intergovernmental agreement covering all dimensions of migration. Signatories to the compact agree to:

Mitigate the adverse drivers and structural factors that hinder people from building and maintaining sustainable livelihoods in their country of origin” while also “striving to create conducive conditions that enable all migrants to enrich our societies through their human, economic and social capacities (United Nations, 2022).

The compact was originally agreed to by all United Nations member states save for the United States. It was formally adopted by 164 countries, indicating wide support for addressing the drivers of poverty among migrants. As a voluntary agreement, however, countries are left to decide on how (or whether) to translate this into practice.

### **Intersecting inequalities**

The risk of impoverishment due to harmful social norms is greatest when marginalised group identities intersect, such that an individual or household experiences multiple forms of discrimination or exclusion (Kabeer, 2011; UN Women, 2015a). In this way, disadvantage from gender-based discrimination can be compounded by socio-economic status; geographic location; race, caste, and ethnicity; sexuality; and disability (UN Women, 2015a, p.12). For example, Indigenous women living in poverty in Latin America have significantly less years of education than average for the countries they live in (Kabeer, 2011). 'Immigrant, ethnic minority women working in domestic service are often stigmatized... thereby justifying their subordinate position vis-à-vis their employers' (UN Women, 2015a, p.50). Arauco et al. (2014) emphasise that:

It is the intersection, rather than the simple addition, of these different forms of inequality... - the fact that they reinforce each other – that explains the enduring nature of the exclusions experienced by certain groups within a society (p.11).

Ending extreme poverty by 2030 will inevitably require addressing the harmful social norms that reinforce these inequalities. Those facing these intersecting inequalities are likely to be the 'last mile' of poverty reduction and require reaching those 'furthest behind.'

### **Harmful social norms and poverty in DEEP focus countries**

Without significant course correction, DEEP priority countries are predicted to maintain some of the highest rates of extreme poverty by 2030. They are also among those that rank high on the prevalence of harmful social norms. Compared to other countries, they tend to have weak institutional capacity or commitment to addressing these norms. Table 1 summarises rankings for the eight priority countries, according to a selection of indices that measure the channels of harmful social norms that impact on extreme poverty noted above. Column 1 shows poverty rates projected for 2030 from Abidoye, et al. (2021). Column 2 ranks countries according to the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), a composite index of 27 variables measuring discrimination against women in legal frameworks and qualitative assessments of discrimination in social norms and in practice (1/120 being the country with the lowest discrimination, 120/120 the highest). Column 3 shows the prevalence of economic discrimination against ethnic groups according to the Minorities at Risk Database which records overall levels of political and economic discrimination for 284 ethnic groups (the value displayed is the highest level of economic inequality faced by any group in the country on a scale of 0-4). Column 4 compares the unemployment rate for

persons with disabilities to that of the wider population using ILO data. Column 5 shows the number of internally displaced people as of 2020.

*Table 1: Harmful social norms and poverty rates in DEEP priority countries*

Country	Projected extreme poverty headcount (millions) <sup>1</sup>	SIGI Index <sup>2</sup>	Minorities at Risk <sup>3</sup>	Unemployment rate, persons with disabilities: total population <sup>4</sup>	Internal displacement headcount <sup>5</sup>
<b>India</b>	51	80/120	3	N/A	1,402,000
<b>Tanzania</b>	24	103/120	0	62% : 15%	38,000
<b>Bangladesh</b>	4.6	114/120	3	N/A	772,000
<b>Nigeria</b>	110	102/120	4	72% : 44%	2,873,000
<b>Myanmar</b>	0.2	95/120	N/A	86% : 35%	509,600
<b>Ethiopia</b>	17	75/120	1	46% : 17%	2,693,000
<b>Mozambique</b>	24	55/120	N/A	N/A	769,000
<b>Madagascar</b>	24	104/120	0	N/A	1,6000

1. Source: Abidoye et al., 2021; 2. Source: OCED 2022; 3. Source: Minorities at Risk Project (2009); 4. Source: ILO STAT (2020); 5. IDMC (2020). N/A = data not available.

In countries that are predicted to have high poverty rates in 2030, and poor institutional capacity to address harmful social norms as highlighted by these indices, large sections of society are likely to stay trapped in poverty if these norms are not addressed. Tanzania, for example, is predicted to have 24 million people still living in extreme poverty by 2030.

Tanzania also ranks among the lowest on the SIGI, Global Age Watch, and measures of unemployment rates for people with disabilities. Significant policy reforms and programming will be needed to address the social norms keeping women and girls, older people, and people with disabilities in poverty in Tanzania. Nigeria ranks highest on the Minorities at Risk index and has the largest number of internally displaced people among

DEEP countries. This indicates further efforts are needed to understand harmful social norms there. Bangladesh also stands out for scoring the lowest on the SIGI Index, suggesting a greater focus on gender discrimination is needed to support women and girls to escape poverty.

## Evidence from leading policy and investment areas

### Social protection

Existing research has explored the impacts of social protection programmes on a range of social groups experiencing poverty due to harmful social norms. Many Latin American countries have used universal social protection measures to extend coverage for indigenous groups and ethnic minorities where the ‘historical legacy of colonization, slavery and dispossession of lands serve[s] to exclude indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities from social protection’ (UN DESA, 2018, p.1). A review of evidence on what works to prevent child marriage found that cash or in-kind transfers, alongside interventions to support girls’ schooling, has had significant impacts (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021). Asset and cash transfers were found to have some of the largest effects on women’s ownership of assets, credit, and income, in a systematic review of gender sensitive and gender transformative interventions to increase women’s empowerment and gender equality in fragile contexts (Lwamba et al., 2021). A meta-analysis of programmes to support participation and accountability of marginalised groups in decision making around social protection found small positive effects on livelihoods and economic wellbeing (Waddington et al., 2019).

There is relatively strong evidence on the potential contributions that social protections can have to mitigating the impacts of discrimination and exclusion faced by marginalised groups. However, most DEEP focus countries have highly inadequate social protection programmes in place. Apart from India and Bangladesh, all have less than 20% social protection coverage according to the ILO. OCED analysis looking at Eastern Africa (including Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Tanzania) found that, at the current rate, economic growth alone will:

take generations to reduce headcount poverty... largely due to rapid population growth and high inequality. Accelerating the decline in poverty will thus require governments to find a solution to the last-mile problem – the challenge of reaching the extreme and chronically poor through social assistance (Kolev, 2017, p.3).

### Financial inclusion

Financial inclusion programmes are a growing area of interest among development partners. These include those promoting access to credit, savings, insurance, among others that individuals and households might not otherwise have access to. For example, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development recently introduced a financial inclusion strategy targeting groups impacted by ‘external events such as long-term stressors and shocks, as well as by changing social norms, biases, and legal frameworks’ (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, n.d.).



In recent years, interventions to improve financial inclusion have received significant attention in the literature and in policy discourses. Evidence on their impact on groups experiencing the effects of harmful social norms, however, appears to be weak (Duvendack & Mader, 2019, p.v). A systematic review of savings programmes in sub-Saharan Africa found 'small but significant impacts on poverty reduction,' though the effects were larger for male participants and adults compared to women and younger people. (Stenert et al., 2018). A recent study drew largely positive conclusions about the relationship between access to financial services and poverty reduction, based on 11 meta-analyses, though the authors note that effects depended on programme design and contextual factors (Duvendack & Mader, 2019). Evidence on the effects of such initiatives on other marginalised groups appears to be limited, including for ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. We identified one systematic review examining labour market interventions for people with disabilities. More research is needed to better understand if (and how) better financial inclusion may help ameliorate the impoverishing effects of harmful social norms.

### **Affirmative action**

Some settings have introduced quotas and reservations to promote the inclusion of specific groups in education, labour markets, and political institutions. Political reservations for specified groups, such as women, are one common strategy to improve the political representation of discriminated groups. Affirmative action measures are sometimes combined with other programmes to support inclusion. For example, the Female Secondary School Stipend Programme in Bangladesh combines tuition fees and a monthly stipend for girls (UN Women, 2015a, p.138). Affirmative action can contribute to poverty reduction in a number of ways. Meaningful participation of people from marginalised groups in decision making helps ensure that the interests and needs of their communities are reflected and issues that contribute to impoverishment in their communities are more likely to be considered. Increased visibility of marginalised groups can also help to counteract xenophobia and the false stereotypes that feed harmful social norms, reducing their purchase in formal and informal institutions.

A review of effective anti-discrimination measures found that affirmative action to increase political participation has been relatively well studied, though with mixed results (Marcus et al., 2017). The authors found that interventions have been effective in increasing the number of women represented, but only a few studies looked at interventions to support other groups' participation in politics. They also found that few studies have explored the transformational impacts of affirmative action policies, with most focusing on participation as the outcome. Some exceptions include India's political, educational, and labour market reservation for scheduled castes and tribes which have been associated with reduced poverty among these groups (though with complex political outcomes) (Marcus et al., 2017). Lwamba et al.'s (2021) study similarly found quotas had significant positive effects on

women's political representation, but they were limited by embedded power dynamics. The authors concluded that 'entrenched patriarchal norms necessitate an increased buy-in by... stakeholders such as local cultural or religious leaders for appropriate uptake at the community level' (Lwamba et al, 2021, p.ix). Another review found that attitudes towards women in leadership was more progressive, on average, in countries with voluntary gender quotas in place when compared to those with mandatory quotas or no quotas (Harper et al., 2020) The authors concluded that quotas can be used to help change norms around women's participation in politics, but their efficacy depends on the type of quota used and the political context from which they are set (Ibid).

### **Policies and programmes promoting social cohesion**

Group-based inequalities have been linked to a break-down of social cohesion, particularly when income and wealth are unevenly distributed along ethnic or religious lines (UN DESA, 2020). The effects of such inequalities in driving or exacerbating conflict have received attention in the literature (see Stewart 2011 for a review). A systematic review of studies evaluating programmes that promote intergroup cohesion in fragile contexts found small positive effects across intervention areas, concluding that 'programmes that accurately identified local bottlenecks to intergroup social cohesion tended to have larger and more positive effects' (Sonnenfeld et al., 2021, p.v). The studies that were identified largely focused on sub-Saharan Africa (with Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Nigeria included among DEEP countries).

While a large proportion of extreme poverty rests in fragile and conflict affected settings, evidence on the effectiveness of policies and programmes targeting social cohesion beyond conflict situations appears to be limited. With declining trust in government alongside broader discontent about inequality being observed around the world, there is increasing demand for evidence on policies and programmes to promote social cohesion as part of sustainable poverty reduction (Kolev, 2017). Further study is needed to contextualise the effects of social cohesion interventions beyond conflict settings and to examine relevant outcomes of efforts to sustainably reduce extreme poverty.

## Outstanding evidence gaps

### Sensitisation campaigns

Sensitisation campaigns aimed at changing attitudes and behaviours are one direct way to tackle harmful social norms. These campaigns might be introduced as stand-alone interventions aimed at longer-term normative change or linked to complimentary development to support longer-term transformational changes. They can be top-down campaigns oriented towards prescriptive normative changes conceived by outside actors, community-driven campaigns built around facilitated dialogue, or a combination of these. For example, a gender budgeting initiative in Tanzania aimed at sensitising budget officials and politicians on the importance of gender-responsive resource allocations launched a media campaign to keep the public informed about the budget review process (UN Women, 2015a, p.221). In Rwanda, sensitisation programmes have been introduced as part of land registration policies, informing officials and communities of women's rights to land ownership (UN Women 2015, p.112). The SASA! Initiative is a social norms community mobilisation programme promoting changes to attitudes and behaviours around gender, violence and HIV infection which has been implemented in around 30 countries (Raising Voices, 2023).

Some immediate outcomes from sensitisation programmes have been observed in the literature, though more transformational outcomes have tended to be neglected or show negligible results. A randomised control trial of the SASA! programme found that the community mobilisation intervention was associated with a decrease in the acceptance and incidence of intimate partner violence among women and men in Uganda (Abramsky et al., 2014). Lwamba et al (2021) reviewed women's empowerment programming in fragile contexts, finding sensitisation campaigns had a positive effect on women's attitudes towards claiming their rights and being empowered, though they found no effects on reduced harmful social norms such as violence towards partners. Rwanda's land titling reforms have contributed to more formally married women being joint landowners yet led to a decrease in informally married women having documented land ownership (UN Women, 2015, p. 111-112). And while Rwanda leads the world in women's representation in parliament, misogyny and gender discrimination continue to limit women's agency and decision making (Warner, 2016).

### Data and evidence for specific groups

#### Gender

Gender is perhaps the most widely researched group characteristic among studies that consider the effects of harmful social norms on extreme poverty. However, as UN Women (2015b) and others have highlighted, many studies observe poverty at the household level and not at the individual level, thus overlooking the disproportionate impact poverty has on

women and girls. This may be an appropriate unit of measurement for some studies, but greater effort is needed to measure poverty incidence and magnitude among women and girls. More studies are also needed to understand the underlying drivers of poverty linked to harmful social norms related to gender, particularly in those countries where institutions to address gender discrimination are weakest (e.g. Bangladesh, see Table 1).

### Ethnic, racial, and religious minorities

While some evidence on the effects of ethnic and racial discrimination in driving extreme poverty exists from country level studies, comparable data and cross-country analysis is particularly limited (UN DESA, 2020). Marcus et al. (2016) noted that there is limited evidence on affirmative action policies for racial and ethnic groups experiencing discrimination, and evidence is skewed heavily towards South Africa and India. With historical and contextual factors likely to play a significant role in determining the effects of ethnic, racial, and religious discrimination on extreme poverty, evidence is needed in a broader range of contexts to better understand how these factors can be addressed. Marcus et al. (2016) noted, for example, that Nigeria has affirmative action policies in place which have received little attention in the literature.

Evidence on the relationship between religious discrimination and poverty is particularly thin, with very little data to draw upon and scant attention in the literature. While studies of social norms and poverty often include religious identity alongside ethnic and racial identity, they tend to focus on the latter aspects of identity, which may overlap with religion, but in the context of social norms, need to be understood in their own right.

### Disability

The number of studies analysing poverty incidence among persons with disabilities has increased in recent years, but there is still a dearth of data and evidence on people with disabilities (Pinilla-Roncancio & Alkire, 2017). National-level estimates of unemployment among people with disabilities are only available in half of DEEP's focus countries (see the ILO statistics summarised in Table 1). Though studies of harmful social norms often refer to persons with disabilities, few disaggregate results by disability status. Evidence on the impacts of effective programming is most often found in one-off studies of education and labour market interventions. A systematic review of interventions in the labour market concluded that robust evidence in this area is very minimal and suffers from potential bias (Tripney et al., 2017).

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