

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Voice and Agency

Empowering women  
and girls for shared  
prosperity



WORLD BANK GROUP

This work is a product of the staff of The World Bank Group with external contributions. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this work do not necessarily reflect the views of The World Bank Group, its Board of Executive Directors, or the governments they represent. The World Bank Group does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this work. The boundaries, colors, denominations, and other information shown on any map in this work do not imply any judgment on the part of The World Bank Group concerning the legal status of any territory or the endorsement or acceptance of such boundaries.

Nothing herein shall constitute or be considered to be a limitation upon or waiver of the privileges and immunities of The World Bank, all of which are specifically reserved.

This work is subject to copyright. Because the World Bank Group encourages dissemination of its knowledge products, this work may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial purposes so long as full attribution to this work is given.

Copyright 2014 by the World Bank Group

Cover: A woman raises her hand to speak at a community meeting in Aurangabad, India.  
Photo: Simone D. McCourtie / World Bank Group.

Design: Miki Fernández / ULTRAdesigns, Inc.

# Executive Summary

## Why voice and agency?

By ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 188 states have committed to advancing gender equality by confronting “any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which [impairs] the enjoyment or exercise by women ... of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Alongside CEDAW, which came into force in 1979, the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action and various United Nations Security Council resolutions provide universally accepted benchmarks. These benchmarks include recognition of women’s right to sexual and reproductive health, the right to be free from gender-based violence, and equal rights for women and men to access and control land—rights that establish a clear framework for our global report on voice and agency. At the same time, accumulating evidence and experience have made clear that tackling poverty and boosting shared prosperity demand that *all* people have the opportunity to realize their potential and participate fully in all aspects of life.

At the individual level, this requires *agency*—meaning the capacity to make decisions about one’s own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome, free of violence, retribution, or fear. *Agency* is sometimes defined as “empowerment.” As an Ecuadorean woman said, “I have free space, to decide for myself, no longer dependent

on others. For me, this is a source of pride, my husband asking [my advice]. Now there isn’t this machismo. There is mutual respect. Together we decide.” Similarly, one man in Vietnam commented that “happiness and equality are related. If the husband understands that and is supporting and helping his wife ... the happiness of the family will be reinforced.” Full and equal participation also requires that all people have *voice*—meaning the capacity to speak up and be heard, from homes to houses of parliament, and to shape and share in discussions, discourse, and decisions that affect them.

Increasing women’s *voice* and *agency* are valuable ends in themselves. And both *voice* and *agency* have instrumental, practical value too. Amplifying the voices of women and increasing their agency can yield broad development dividends for them and for their families, communities, and societies. Conversely, constraining women’s agency by limiting what jobs women can perform or subjecting them to violence, for example, can create huge losses to productivity and income with broader adverse repercussions for development. We argue that overcoming these deprivations and constraints is central to efforts to end extreme poverty and boost shared prosperity.

Nor is this a zero-sum game. Increasing women’s agency need not curtail men’s agency, and men and boys stand to gain from gender equality that improves the economic and psychological well-being of

all household members, as many men have come to recognize. “The woman helps the man manage the household,” one urban man in Niger said during discussions undertaken to inform this report. “It’s a partnership. We want it that way. Here, in town, a man does better when his wife contributes.”

## Context

There has been unprecedented progress in important aspects of the lives of girls and women over recent decades. Yet even where gender gaps are narrowed, systematic differences in outcomes often persist, including widespread gender-based-violence and lack of voice. These deprivations and constraints sometimes reflect persistent violations of the most basic human rights. And in many instances, constraints are magnified and multiplied by poverty and lack of education.

*Voice and Agency: Empowering women and girls for shared prosperity* is a major new report by the World Bank that shines a spotlight on the value of voice and agency, the patterns of constraints that limit their realization, and the associated costs, not only to individual women but to their families, communities, and societies. It highlights promising policies and interventions, and it identifies priority areas where further research and more and better data and evidence are needed. Underlining that agency has both intrinsic and instrumental, concrete value, this report puts advancing women’s voice and agency squarely on the international development agenda.

Removing constraints and unleashing women’s full productive potential can yield enormous dividends that help make whole

societies more resilient and more prosperous. For example:

- Delays in marriage are associated with greater educational achievement and lower fertility. And lower fertility can increase women’s life expectancy and has benefits for children’s health and education.
- When more women are elected to office, policy-making increasingly reflects the priorities of families and women.
- Property ownership can enhance women’s agency by increasing the social status of women, amplifying their voice, and increasing their bargaining power within the household.

Recognizing agency constraints in development project design can also improve effectiveness. Use of reproductive health services by adolescents, for example, is better where projects address mobility constraints and train providers to address possible issues of stigma. This fact underlines the broader significance of understanding how agency constraints operate and how policies and public action can lift those constraints and enhance agency.

The good news is that promising directions for enhancing agency are emerging. Moreover, the global momentum to tackle this agenda is growing. This trend is perhaps most vivid in the case of ending gender-based violence, a major focus of this report. The number of countries recognizing domestic violence as a crime has risen from close to zero to 76 in just 37 years. In countries with legislation against domestic violence, women’s acceptance of wife beating is lower. This finding suggests the value of enacting

legislation that criminalizes violence. At the same time, laws are not a panacea, and awareness of the law and effective implementation and enforcement are critical.

### Where do we stand?

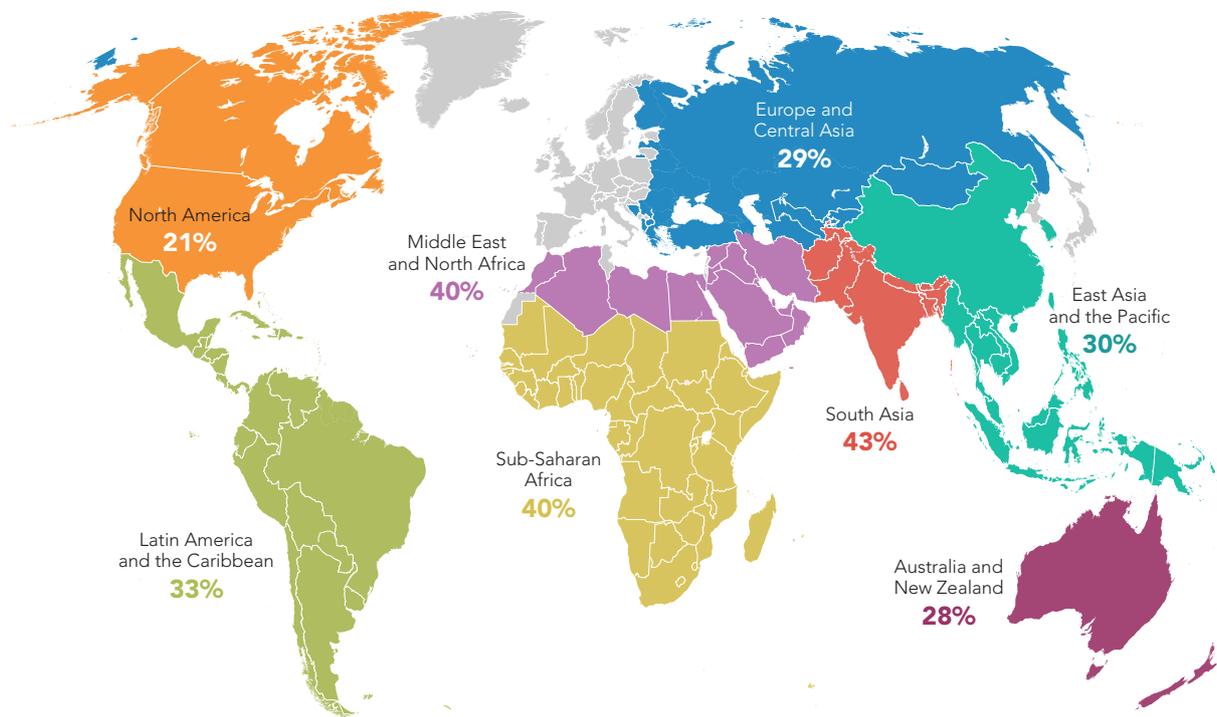
Expanding agency is a universal challenge. Agency constraints and deprivations affect women and girls in all countries, whatever their income level. The basic facts are sobering:

- **Gender-based violence is a global epidemic, affecting women across all regions of the world.** In most of the
- **Many girls have limited control over their sexual and reproductive rights.** On present trends, more than 142 million

world, no place is less safe for a woman than her own home, with more than 700 million women globally subject to physical or sexual violence at the hands of their husbands, boyfriends, or partners. As shown in the map in figure 1, regional rates of such violence range from 21 percent in North America to 43 percent in South Asia. Across 33 low- and middle-income countries, almost one-third of women say that they cannot refuse sex with their partners.

**FIGURE 1**

Share of women who have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence during their lifetime



Source: Preliminary analysis of WHO (World Health Organization), global prevalence database (2013) using World Bank regions.

Note: Areas shaded in grey are not calculated or do not have relevant data.

girls will be married before the age of 18 in the next decade. And each year, almost one in five girls in developing countries becomes pregnant before her 18th birthday. The lifetime opportunity costs of teen pregnancy have been estimated to range from 1 percent of annual gross domestic product in China to as much as 30 percent in Uganda, measured solely by lost income. In developing countries, pregnancy-related causes are the largest contributor to the mortality of girls ages 15–19—nearly 70,000 deaths annually.

- **Fewer women than men own land and housing.** In some cases, this differential is wide. In Burkina Faso, for example, more than twice as many men as women (65 percent and 31 percent, respectively) report owning a house. In many countries, women can access land only through male relatives.
- **In too much of the world, women are grossly underrepresented in formal politics and positions of power.** Worldwide, women account for less than 22 percent of parliamentarians and fewer than 5 percent of mayors. Rates vary across countries and regions. In Nordic countries, for example, women hold 42 percent of parliamentary seats, and in Rwanda, the share is close to two-thirds.

Agency has multiple dimensions and is inevitably context specific. To enable global coverage and add value, this report limits its focus to four central domains of women's agency: freedom from violence, control over sexual and reproductive health, ownership and control of land and housing, and voice and collective action. At the same time, it recognizes that these are just a few areas of

women's lives that are important for promoting women's agency and gender equality.

## Determinants and drivers

This report focuses on key drivers and determinants of voice and agency. What we see in practice is a series of compounding constraints. Some arise from women's and girl's limited endowments (health, education, and assets) and economic opportunities. Even where endowments and economic opportunities are better, social norms about gender roles are limiting. This problem is evident, for example, in gender roles surrounding child care and housework. Even when women are taking on more work outside of the home, they typically remain largely responsible for housework and child care.

Social norms can limit women's mobility and ability to network, restrict women's representation in politics and government, and be enshrined in discriminatory laws and practices. Unequal power relationships within households and in society as a whole have broad-based effects. Gender-based violence, for example, is associated with social norms and expectations that reinforce inequality and place the choices of women and girls outside their realm of control.

Legal discrimination is pervasive. In 2013, 128 countries had at least one legal difference between men and women, ranging from barriers to women obtaining official identification cards to restrictions on owning or using property, establishing their creditworthiness, and getting a job. Twenty-eight countries—mainly in the Middle East and North Africa and South Asia—had 10 or more differences. In 26 countries, statutory inheritance laws differentiate between women and

men. In 15 countries, women still require their husbands' consent to work. Other laws limit women's agency in marriages and family life. Laws and legal institutions also play a central role in prohibiting gender-based violence and in enabling women to realize their reproductive health rights.

Laws and social norms interact. Women's land ownership, for example, is determined by a complex interaction between sometimes contradictory sets of statutory laws, customs, and norms. Social norms, customary practices, the inaccessibility and weak capacity of institutions, and, in many cases, women's lack of awareness pose important barriers to the full realization of women's land rights.

### Overlapping disadvantage and agency deprivations

Constraints on agency do not occur in a vacuum and differ in nature across and within countries. A banker in Beijing may be struggling to balance elder care with work while also facing glass ceilings in her career. These challenges clearly differ in nature and scope from those faced by adolescent girls hoping to attend school in a low-income developing country. Here we explore overlapping disadvantages—that is, the systematic exclusion that many people experience as a result of multiple inequalities that limit their life chances. For example:

- Poverty increases the likelihood of agency deprivations. Girls living in poor households are almost twice as likely to marry before the age of 18 as girls in higher-income households, as are girls from rural areas versus their urban counterparts.

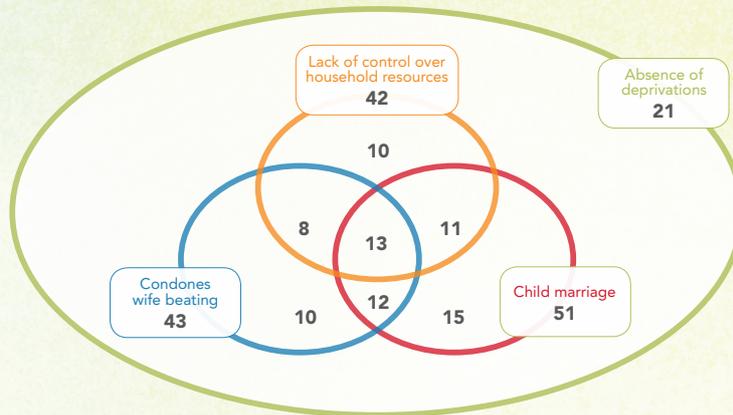
From other studies, we know that intimate partner violence is more frequent and severe in poorer groups across such diverse settings as India, Nicaragua, and the United States.

- Ethnic minority status can further magnify disadvantage. Nearly three-quarters of girls out of school globally belong to ethnic minorities in their countries.

New analysis of Demographic and Health Survey data from 54 countries reveals that women often experience deprivations and constraints across multiple domains of agency at the same time. We find most women (four in five) lack control over household resources, believe gender-based violence is justified under certain circumstances, or were married before they turned 18. Just as striking, almost half of all women report being deprived in more than one of these areas, and almost one in eight experiences all three (figure 2). However these averages mask vast differences across countries. In Niger, for example, almost all women experience at least one constraint (figure 3).

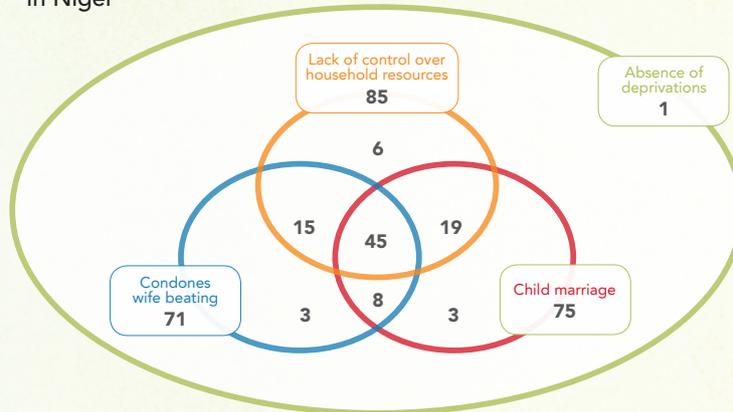
Agency deprivations and constraints are linked to other disadvantages—particularly access to education. Figure 4 shows that about 90 percent of women with a primary education or less experience at least one of the deprivations shown in figure 2, and almost two-thirds experience all three. This finding contrasts with about 1 in 5 and 1 in 20, respectively, of women with a secondary education or higher. Almost 1 in 5 rural women with a primary education experience all three deprivations compared with 1 in 100 urban women with a higher education.

**FIGURE 2** Share of women experiencing overlapping agency deprivations in three domains



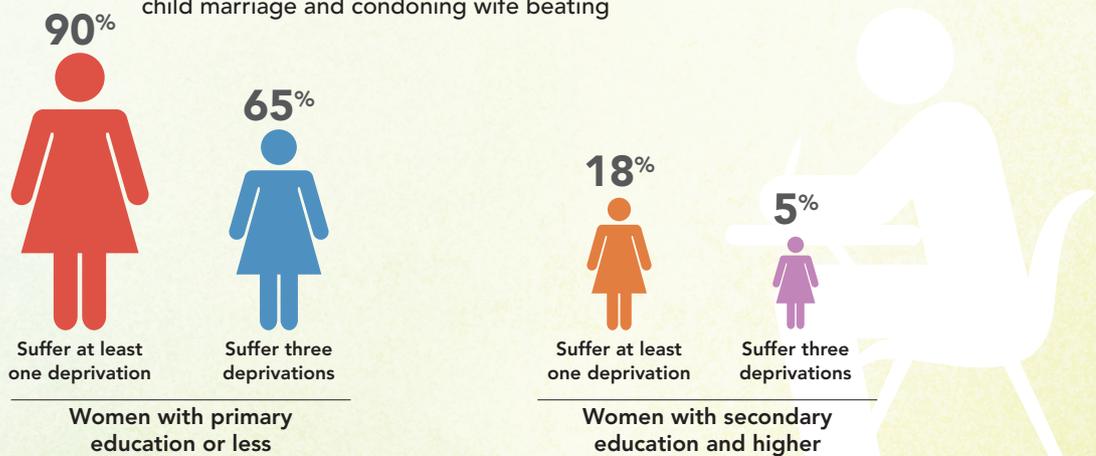
Source: Voice and Agency 2014 team estimates based on Demographic and Health Survey data for 54 countries using latest data available from 2001-2012.

**FIGURE 3** Share of women experiencing overlapping agency deprivations in three domains in Niger



Source: Voice and Agency 2014 team estimates based on Demographic and Health Surveys for Niger using data from 2006.

**FIGURE 4** Correlation between education levels and deprivations in control over resources, child marriage and condoning wife beating



Source: Voice and Agency 2014 team estimates based on Demographic and Health Survey data for 54 countries using latest data available from 2001-2012.

## Overarching policies and measuring progress

The report identifies promising entry points for public actions to promote women's agency. These entry points include policies that change social norms and the law, alongside programs to promote economic opportunities, social protection, and education, where well-designed interventions and new approaches to implementation are demonstrating significant benefits for women's agency. The evidence on effectiveness of interventions designed to combat violence against women and other agency deprivations is also investigated in depth.

Addressing social norms is critical because adverse norms underpin and reinforce the multiple deprivations that many women and girls experience. Although there is no silver bullet for promoting changes in norms, evidence suggests a need for public actions that both enhance women's and girls' aspirations and change behaviors of women and men, boys and girls, so that social norms become gender-equal. Promising ways to promote such changes include working with men, boys, households, and communities, as in Australia, where the Male Champions of Change initiative works with male chief executive officers and leaders throughout business and the federal government to push for significant and sustainable increases in the representation of women in leadership. Similarly, promoting awareness of progressive laws can help stimulate changes in norms and behavior. Evidence across eight countries, for example, found that men who were aware of laws addressing violence against women were nearly 50 percent

more likely to prevent a stranger's act of violence.

Progressive constitutions and legal reforms can support the transformation of social norms surrounding agency. We focus on three core areas: ensuring that all sources of law adhere to principles of gender equality; supporting effective implementation and enforcement of laws; and expanding access to justice for all women, including through customary processes.

Expanding women's economic opportunities can have wide-ranging benefits, including benefits for women's agency. Research on norms and agency drawing on data from women and men in 20 countries in all regions, for example, concluded that "women's ability to work for pay... may be one of the most visible and game-changing events in the life of modern households and all communities." But not all work is equally empowering—working conditions matter, as does the type of work that women do. Among the promising new approaches are programs that tackle norms and provide young women and girls with new information and opportunities, as in Uganda's Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescent program, which provides girls with life-skills training and local market-informed vocational training. In addition to the economic benefits, participating girls have demonstrated much greater control over sexual and reproductive health.

Social protection can be transformative. Programs that go beyond protection per se and include elements to tackle regressive gender norms have had promising results. Such elements have included addressing child care responsibilities; increasing access

to finance and assets; increasing skills, self-confidence, and aspirations; incentivizing girls' schooling; and providing information and building awareness about gender issues and rights.

Education has major significance in this story, with a focus beyond achieving basic levels to quality and content. Around the world, we see that better educated women are often better able to make and implement decisions and choices, even where gender norms are restrictive. In South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, women with more education are less likely to have to ask their husband's or family's permission to seek medical care. In all regions, women with more education also tend to marry later and have fewer children. Enhanced agency is a key reason why children of better educated women are less likely to be stunted: educated mothers have greater autonomy in making decisions and more power to act for their children's benefit.

### **Promising interventions targeting agency deprivations**

Promising interventions to tackle violence, enhance sexual and reproductive health, increase access to assets, and enable voice typically have multiple components and engage at different levels. They address norms and involve the wider community—engaging men, boys, women, and girls. And they reflect commitment over time—one-off or short-term interventions are less likely to be effective. As already indicated, a common factor of successful approaches across all of the domains explored in the report is an acknowledgment of the powerful role

of gender norms. Effectively engaging men, boys, communities, and traditional authorities to change norms around violence, marriage, reproduction, household gender roles, and the roles of women and men in public life have helped to promote women's agency in countries as diverse as Australia and Senegal.

Several types of interventions have been shown to expand women's and girls' sexual autonomy and control over reproductive decisions. They include programs that promote more gender-equitable communication and decision-making and improvements in access to and quality of information and health services. Interventions to expand life opportunities for women and girls offer promise when they include provision for safe spaces, life skills, and job skills. Women's sexual and reproductive agency can also be supported through more equitable laws related to marriage and property, among others, provided such legislation is coupled with strong implementation and enforcement.

Reform of discriminatory laws, particularly in the realm of family, inheritance, and property law, is an important first step for advancing women's access to land and housing. But legal reform must be coupled with actions to improve implementation and enforcement, gender-sensitive land administration, collection of richer sex-disaggregated data, and monitoring of results.

Women's collective action and autonomous women's movements play a pivotal role in building the momentum for progressive policy and legal reform. Development agencies and partners can help to enable change, including through knowledge

exchange, support for innovative and locally driven pilot programs to shift behaviors, and help in capturing and sharing good practices. Such support should embody large elements of local problem solving and learning by doing.

At the same time, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are opening up new spaces for collective action and women's participation in public life. Along with the media, ICTs are shaping the aspirations and hopes of the next generation of women and girls. These wider horizons can be especially valuable for women and girls whose mobility and opportunities are most restricted.

## Data gaps and the way ahead

The data challenges are large. We can establish profiles of women's voice and agency by using proxies to measures specific aspects, such as exposure to violence, levels of unmet need for contraception, prevalence of female land ownership, and representation of women in politics. But to better capture progress toward gender equality, greater investments are needed. We need to develop new measures and invest in higher-quality data that more accurately reflect constraints on and expressions of agency, hold governments and development agencies such as the World Bank Group to account, and incorporate these findings into our everyday work and decisions.

\* \* \*

**This report distills an array of data, studies and evidence to shine a spotlight on the pervasive deprivations and constraints that face women and girls worldwide—from epidemic gender-based violence to laws and norms that prevent women from owning property, working, making decisions about their own lives and having influence in society. It identifies some promising programs and interventions to address these deprivations and constraints.**

**Policymakers and stakeholders need to tackle this agenda, drawing on evidence about what works and systematically tracking progress on the ground. This must start with reforming discriminatory laws and follow through with concerted policies and public actions, including multi-sectoral approaches that engage with men and boys and challenge adverse social norms. There is much to gain. Increasing women's voice and agency is a valuable end in its own right. And it underpins achievement of the World Bank Group's twin goals of eliminating extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity for girls and boys, women and men, around the world.**

# Voice and Agency

***“The World Bank Group’s twin goals of ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity demand no less than the full and equal participation of women and men, girls and boys, around the world.”***

—World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim

***“The world is changing beneath our feet and it is past time to embrace a 21st Century approach to advancing the rights and opportunities of women and girls at home and across the globe.”***

—Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, remarks at 2013 Women in the World Summit



[www.worldbank.org/gender/agency](http://www.worldbank.org/gender/agency)