



# UNEVEN EXPECTATIONS

Measuring gender norms to address children's engagement in unpaid work

In homes around the world, girls are performing more caregiving and chores than boys are.

**GLOBALLY, GIRLS BETWEEN THE AGES OF 5 AND 14 SPEND 160 MILLION MORE HOURS EVERY DAY ON UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK THAN BOYS OF THE SAME AGE.<sup>1</sup>**

They might help out with tasks like washing clothes and dishes, cooking, and looking after younger siblings or elderly or sick family members. Girls account for more than 60 per cent of children who perform this type of work beyond recommended age-specific thresholds.<sup>2</sup> As children mature into adolescence, girls' responsibilities intensify, and the gender gap widens even further.





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**The unequal gendered distribution of unpaid care and domestic work among children has serious implications for their well-being. It limits girls' time for learning, personal development and growth, and leisure, thereby stripping them of equal opportunities to thrive. These deprivations and missed chances will shape a girl's life well beyond childhood, potentially influencing her socioeconomic prospects, choices and accomplishments as an adult – and the well-being of her own children, should she become a mother. And there are likely to be impacts on boys, as well: For instance, boys may adopt a skewed sense of the value of girls' versus boys' time and grow up to play limited roles as fathers and caregivers.**

**Unpaid care and domestic work** describes “activities including food preparation, dishwashing, cleaning and upkeep of the dwelling, laundry, ironing, gardening, caring for pets, shopping, installation, servicing and repair of personal and household goods, childcare, and care of the sick, elderly or disabled household and family members, among others” .

Source: UN Statistical Division, [Metadata for SDG target 5.4](#), 2019.

**While the unequal amount of unpaid work performed by girls has been documented,<sup>3</sup> the factors that contribute to this disproportionate engagement need closer investigation. This includes measuring the important influence of **gender norms**, which play a prominent role in determining expectations, behaviours and practices for girls, boys, women and men.**

**Gender norms are...**

- informal rules and shared beliefs that distinguish expected behaviour based on gender identities at particular points in time and in particular social contexts
- usually internalized during childhood and adolescence and continue to shape gender stereotyping throughout throughout the course of one's life

Source: UNICEF, 'Promoting Positive Gender Norms and Socialization', Background Paper Series, UNICEF Gender Policy and Action Plan 2022–2025, New York, 2021.

## A CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE GAP

Robust measures of gender norms around unpaid care and domestic work are limited – a data shortfall necessitating action and sustained investments. As the global leader in monitoring children’s well-being, UNICEF is focused on closing this evidence gap: Building on previous internal and external efforts across a range of relevant areas, it is developing a standardized data collection tool to measure gender norms that influence children’s engagement in unpaid work.

This brief explains the rationale for measuring gender norms related to unpaid care and domestic work through population-level household surveys, considers how these data would inform relevant policies and programmes, and identifies what to measure. The data collection tool being developed by UNICEF will provide a vital step toward addressing gender imbalances not only in childhood and adolescence, but also in adulthood.



The [EMERGE project](#) examined 102 measures of women’s economic empowerment. Data items measuring gender norms were largely absent: Only nine measures of norms constructs were identified, three of which were related to unpaid care and domestic work.

This speaks to the large gaps in existing data collection efforts to measure factors contributing to girls’ unpaid care and domestic work.

This universal data collection tool and corresponding set of indicators will:

- **Integrate into nationally representative surveys** that collect key data on children and women’s well-being, shedding light on how gender norms contribute to observed outcomes
- **Arm policymakers with information** to better understand how gender norms affect children and adolescents and their transitions into adulthood
- **Enable countries to collect internationally comparable and statistically robust data** about gender norms as they relate to the distribution of unpaid care work among children, enabling insights into their ‘stickiness’ or potential for disruption
- **Be widely applicable** across cultures and socioeconomic contexts





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## HONOURING OUR COMMITMENTS

Examining children's workloads through the lens of gender norms is essential to any approach that seeks to level the gender playing field and ensure girls and boys have the same prospects as they mature. It is also key to achieving SDG target 5.4, which identifies the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work as a barrier to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

The social and economic instability created by the COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the need to address these gendered inequalities: Who has cared for younger children when schools have closed, often at the expense of their own education? Who has picked up more household chores as economic constraints tighten for parents? The data suggest that girls have taken on more of this unpaid work than boys.<sup>4</sup>

The global community has shown its resolve to address these inequities among adults, as evidenced by SDG target 5.4. This same resolve must be applied to the formative patterns that begin in childhood and shape girls' and boys' choices and opportunities as they mature.



### Sustainable Development Goal 5

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

**Target 5.4:** Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate



**WHY MEASURE GENDER NORMS RELATED TO UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK AT THE POPULATION LEVEL?**

## A QUESTION OF SCALE

Gendered norms reflect widespread power imbalances that are deeply embedded within and across societies. For this reason, gender transformation relies on longer-term, societal change. This means interventions must think broadly, beyond a narrow number of individuals – such as a specific group of boys and men – and beyond small-scale community-based or service-based activities.<sup>5</sup>

Population-level data have a wide reach, allowing measurement of the prevalence and strength of norms within a country. These data have the power to illuminate norms constructs – expectations, sanctions, individual attitudes and behaviours (see p. 9) – and to show how they are distributed within a population.

Survey data on norms-related indicators can be disaggregated by key characteristics such as sex, age, ethnicity, geographic area and socioeconomic status, enabling analysis of how gender norms may be experienced within different population subgroups. Standardized measures also facilitate important comparisons across countries, providing valuable insights into how discriminatory norms can generate unequal outcomes and how their influence varies across countries – all vital inputs in crafting strategies for change.

## INSIGHTS OVER TIME

Survey-based approaches make it possible to draw conclusions on the hold of norms within a given setting – in a district, country, or group of countries – and to observe changes over time. Repeated measurement enables changes in gender norms to be monitored over the long term, which is critical: Shifts in often entrenched gendered practices and attitudes are unlikely to occur over the short timespan of most projects. By collecting repeated, cross-sectional data every three to five years, household survey programmes offer valuable baseline estimates and allow for monitoring change over a more realistic timeframe.

Several multi-country survey initiatives demonstrate the importance and feasibility of collecting data on gender norms at the population level across a wide range of contexts.

For instance, [Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence](#) (GAGE) surveys address norms and attitudes around gender equality among adolescents. Surveys include questions “on attitudes and norms that resonated with adolescents during formative qualitative work in diverse parts of each country (rural, urban, pastoralist, and in Ethiopia, different religious and ethnic communities) and comprised issues that were common across the GAGE countries”.<sup>6</sup>

The [International Men & Gender Equality Survey](#) (IMAGES) measures norms relating to gender equity and masculinity in several countries that vary by geography, income level and other factors.

## Challenges of measuring gender norms

Measuring gender norms through population-level household surveys is not without limitations. For instance, questions on norms may be subject to social desirability bias – i.e., when respondents tell enumerators what they think is the socially appropriate response – and shifts in attitudes, behaviours and beliefs may not always follow a linear process, rendering observed changes difficult to interpret. In these cases, qualitative approaches, such as focus group discussions or in-depth interviews, can help make sense of changing gender norms. But by increasing scale and widening timeframes, population-level data forge an important path toward more robust monitoring and better solutions that address unequal distributions of unpaid work among children.

# HOW CAN POPULATION-LEVEL DATA ON GENDER NORMS INFORM RELEVANT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES?



**Norms data on children's unpaid work collected at the population level can drive transformative change throughout childhood and into adulthood. These data can:**

- **INFORM** the design of policies, interventions and services aiming to redistribute care and domestic work within households. These policies include:
  - Family-friendly labour market policies (e.g., maternity, paternity, parental leave)
  - Social protection policies (e.g., social assistance targeting women)
  - Investments in care-related infrastructure (e.g., childcare facilities and support)
  - Support for girls' education/free primary education
  - Provision of labour-saving technologies to households
- **ASSESS** to what extent restrictive gender norms around children's unpaid domestic and care work are predictive of how girls and boys spend their time, and how changes in gender norms influence children's well-being, including outcomes in education and health, and their transitions to adulthood
- **GENERATE** disaggregated data to derive nuanced understandings of how norms are distributed in a population to help identify how policies, programmes and services can be improved and targeted
- **PROMPT** evidence-based shifts in institutional policies, power relations and media discourse
- **CATALYSE** changes within communities and households to redress unequal workloads





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# WHAT TO MEASURE?

**Assessing gender norms – and social norms in general – typically involves the measurement of community members’ subjective perceptions of a norm. These measurements hinge on a set of common constructs that help quantify and capture how gender norms function in a society.**

CONSTRUCT	DEFINITION
Descriptive norm or empirical expectation	What I think others do
Injunctive norm or normative expectation	What I think others approve of/expect me to do
Reference group	Any group an individual uses as a standard for evaluating themselves and their own behaviour
Sanction (positive/negative)	Beliefs about the perceived benefits and rewards of adhering to a norm, or the perceived consequences of non-compliance
Attitude	What I think

## CAPTURING NORMS

To identify and analyse the gender norms that contribute to girls' and boys' respective workloads within a household, the survey module will assess both descriptive and injunctive factors. Measurement will focus on norms directly relating to unpaid care and domestic work, or so-called proximal norms, rather than broader norms around gender equality.

- **Descriptive norms**, or empirical expectations, refer to an individual's perceptions of typical patterns of behaviour. To collect data on norms related to unpaid care and domestic work, the survey module will evaluate the degree to which there is a perception that girls do more household chores than boys, asking, for example, 'How much do you agree or disagree that most boys and girls in this community share household tasks equally?'.<sup>7</sup>
- **Injunctive norms**, or normative expectations, reflect perceptions of what others approve or disapprove of. In this case, the survey module will gauge whether respondents think others perceive that girls do more household chores than boys, and to what degree, asking, for example, 'How much do you agree or disagree that most people in this community expect girls and boys to share household tasks equally?'.<sup>8</sup>

To date, many studies have focused on prevalence – how many people hold a normative belief – but not the impact of this belief, nor the extent to which people behave in a certain way because of the social norm. But effective interventions must consider not only how prevalent a gender norm is, but also how widely it is held – and capture what is known as normative strength, asking, for example, 'Out of 10 of your neighbours, how many do you think expect girls and boys to share household tasks equally?'.<sup>8</sup>

## IDENTIFYING INFLUENTIAL GROUPS

Specifying a reference group – any group used by individuals as a standard for evaluating themselves and their own behaviour – is critical to norms measurement.<sup>9</sup> These groups may be neighbours, community or village members, family members, friends, faith leaders, or more generally characterized as 'people whose opinions matter to you'.<sup>10</sup> Reference groups may differ by the behaviour in question, and may be more relevant for some individuals and some behaviours, and less so for others. Those

that influence unpaid care and domestic work may be broad in nature and difficult to name – this is because of how gender norms work: They may manifest within institutions and across cultural narratives, operating outside a conscious decision-making process.<sup>11</sup> Thus, determining whether distinct reference groups shape individuals' adherence to these norms, and if so, which ones – requires careful attention.

## WEIGHING THE PROS AND CONS

Measures of positive and negative sanctions from complying (or not complying) with a given norm provide additional insight into its strength. They also shed light on the types of backlash that might result from policy or programming that aims to foster normative change. In the context of unpaid care and domestic work, the survey module might ask to what extent boys are shamed for engaging in unpaid work, and to what extent girls are rewarded for participating or punished for not doing so.

Sanctions and benefits are important to quantify because of the documented prevalence of negative sanctions – e.g., ridicule, criticism, shaming and violence – to enforce so-called natural gender roles. For instance, women and men may fear stigma when men undertake household work;<sup>12</sup> women often are more critical of male engagement in unpaid care and domestic work than men are, and both women and men often perceive violence against women as acceptable when women do not fulfil these roles. Just as these gender roles influence adults, they may also shape expectations about boys' involvement in household chores.

## DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES AND GROUP EXPECTATIONS

Many tools designed to measure social norms are actually gauging attitudes. While there is an interplay between them, norms and attitudes are not the same; norms may not align with personal beliefs or attitudes.<sup>13</sup> Distinguishing between the two helps shape and focus interventions.

By measuring the extent to which norms and attitudes differ, the survey module can provide critical information regarding the hold of norms and inform change strategies: Norms are likely to be weaker and norm change more effective where personal attitudes and norms diverge.<sup>14</sup>

# CRITICAL STEPS, FUTURE PLANS

**Recognizing that unfair demands placed on girls in households restrict opportunities and limit gender-equitable worldviews for both girls and boys, UNICEF is taking concrete action to develop a universal measurement instrument that assesses the role of gender norms in these day-to-day choices. While important first steps have been taken, broader investments from stakeholders in the global gender community are needed to leverage UNICEF's efforts, integrate the module into population-level surveys and close this critical data gap.**

## KEY STEPS

- Conducted a literature review and mapping of existing data collection tools**
  - Queried how gender norms related to children's engagement in unpaid work are theorized, conceptualized and measured
  - Summarized methodological limitations of existing measures
- Developed a household survey module and corresponding set of indicators for cognitive and field testing**
- Test the module in geographically dispersed countries as resources become available**
- Analyse validity and reliability of the norms measures**
- Refine and finalize the module**
  - Develop implementation materials

## ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY

This module and set of indicators will support the collection of reliable, comprehensive and comparable data on gender norms, advancing the nexus between social norms theory and measurement. As data become available, analysis will shed light on the factors affecting norms prevalence and norms change related to children's unpaid work as well as the extent to which restrictive norms are predictive of children's and adolescents' well-being across a range of areas, including education, health, economic empowerment and gender equality. This important knowledge can be adapted to inform the design and monitoring of interventions that target norms change as a means to give girls and boys an equal chance to reach their potential.

UNICEF's new tool will help close an important gender data gap relevant to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (target 5.4) and drive efforts toward shared responsibility of unpaid care and domestic work between all members of a household.

**Questions? Want to know more? Get involved? Interested in supporting this important work? Write us at [data@unicef.org](mailto:data@unicef.org)**

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