

Patriarchal structures profoundly impact program effectiveness for women, creating multifaceted barriers that extend far beyond surface-level inequalities.



At the household level, patriarchal norms often restrict women's autonomy and decision-making power. For instance, in many contexts, women require permission from male family members to participate in empowerment programs or access services. A study in Nigeria's Bauchi state revealed that women needed their husbands' approval to attend social functions or even religious services, severely limiting their ability to engage in community activities or skill-building opportunities. Such restrictions not only impede program participation but also undermine the potential for women to apply newly acquired knowledge or skills in their daily lives.

The impact of patriarchal structures extends to the economic sphere, where gender-based division of labor and unequal access to resources persist. Women globally earn approximately 20% less than men for comparable work. This pay gap is not merely a result of individual choices but reflects systemic biases in how labor is valued and compensated. Furthermore, women often bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, which can limit their ability to engage in formal employment or entrepreneurship activities. A



comprehensive analysis of 104 impact evaluations in fragile and conflict-affected states found that interventions supporting women's empowerment produced positive effects on targeted outcomes, but struggled to achieve significant changes in behavioral outcomes further along the causal chain of empowerment.

In the political realm, patriarchal norms continue to obstruct women's meaningful participation. While quota systems have increased women's numerical representation in some contexts, they have not necessarily translated into genuine influence or policy change. In Nepal, for example, despite record levels of female political representation, women are still patronized and portrayed as less capable, with patriarchal values permeating political institutions. This underscores the need for interventions that go beyond surface-level representation to address the underlying power dynamics and cultural attitudes that marginalize women's voices in decision-making processes.

The persistence of gender-based violence (GBV) serves as a stark reminder of how patriarchal structures perpetuate harm against women. Globally, one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. This pervasive threat not only causes direct harm but also creates an environment of fear and insecurity that can deter women from fully participating in public life or asserting their rights. Programs addressing GBV often face resistance from traditional power structures, as evidenced in Nigeria where cases are frequently handled by Sharia or traditional legal systems that prioritize family settlements over survivors' needs.

Patriarchal norms also significantly impact women's sexual and reproductive health rights. Approximately 40% of women worldwide live in countries with restrictive abortion laws, and 270 million women lack access to modern contraception. These restrictions not only limit women's bodily autonomy but also have far-reaching consequences for their education, economic participation, and overall well-being. Programs aimed at improving women's health outcomes must contend with deeply rooted cultural beliefs and practices that often prioritize male control over women's bodies.

To effectively challenge these patriarchal structures, gender-transformative programs must adopt a comprehensive approach that addresses multiple levels of society simultaneously. This includes working with men and boys to reshape harmful notions of masculinity, engaging community leaders to shift cultural norms, and advocating for policy changes that institutionalize gender equality. The Breaking the Gender Trap report emphasizes the need to localize language and solutions about gender inequality, making them accessible and relevant without a one-size-fits-all approach.



Financial investment in gender equality initiatives remains crucial yet insufficient. In 2022, there was a 5% decrease in official development assistance contributing directly to gender equality worldwide, totaling \$5.5 billion. This decline in funding, coupled with the persistent challenges posed by patriarchal structures, underscores the need for sustained, long-term commitment to gender-transformative programming.

In conclusion, addressing patriarchal structures is not merely an add-on to development programs but a fundamental prerequisite for their success. By recognizing and systematically challenging these deeply embedded norms and power dynamics, we can create more effective, sustainable pathways towards genuine gender equality and women's empowerment. This requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts, sustained engagement with all segments of society, and a willingness to confront and transform the root causes of gender inequality.