



# Gender-Transformative Approaches: From Theory to Impact

Discriminatory social norms and structural inequalities impact people's lives and behaviour. They are obstacles to individuals' access to rights and services and have negative implications for the whole of society. **Gender-Transformative Approaches (GTA)** focus on addressing the root causes of gender inequalities. GTA aim to move beyond treating the symptoms of gender inequalities, to **changing discriminatory social norms, unequal political, legal, and economic structures, and power dynamics**, all of which can make inequalities seem normal and natural in a given context.

Systemic, institutional, and cultural realities legitimise discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation and gender identity, age, disability, and other factors. The **intersectional approach** helps to understand how gender norms and characteristics interact with other factors and power systems (e.g., sexism, ageism, racism, classism, etc.) in a given context. The approach recognizes that groups who experience discrimination because of one characteristic (e.g. women due to their gender) are not homogenous. There are no 'single issue lives'. With an intersectional approach, it is possible to understand how the individual characteristics interact with, and are reinforced through various dimensions of discrimination and power systems. These need to be considered in order to truly leave no one behind.

**i** Women face discrimination due to patriarchal structures, and can at the same time face discrimination, for example on the basis of disability or due to racist structures.

The **human rights-based approach (HRBA)** supports individuals in demanding their rights and in holding duty bearers (governments, authorities) accountable. Universal human rights principles and standards provide a joint framework within which GTA should be applied.



**Gendered social norms** govern a person's behaviour in public and private spaces, due to what is commonly perceived as "proper gendered behaviour" within a social group. Not conforming often leads to social exclusion and punishment.



Still today, these norms find their legitimacy in deeply held cultural beliefs. They are embedded in national legal systems and patriarchal political structures, as well as in dominant (inter)national economic systems.

The EU is committed to advancing gender-transformative approaches. EU Council Conclusions **agreed language** is "transformative approaches that address the root causes of gender inequalities". This language is included e.g., in the Council Conclusions on [water in EU's external action](#), the [EU's renewed partnership with Least Developed Countries](#) and the [Youth Action Plan](#).

The [EU's Gender Action Plan III \(2021–2027\)](#), the [EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020 to 2025](#), the [EU's Strategy on LGBTIQ Equality](#) and the [EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024](#) guide member states to apply a gender-transformative, human rights-based and intersectional approach.

## Conceptualizing gender-transformative approaches

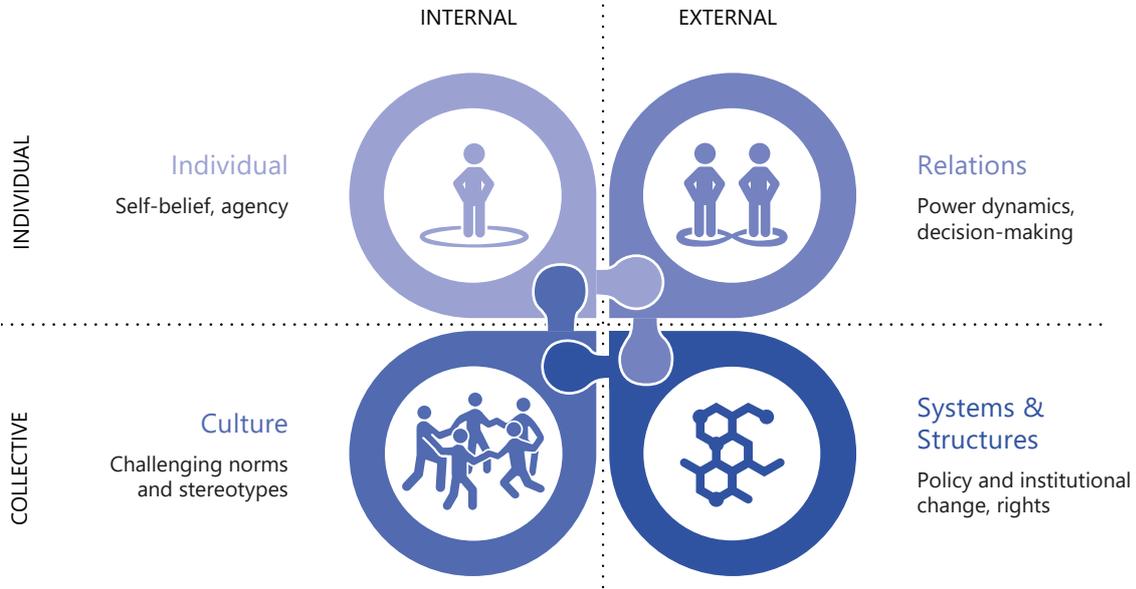
A **continuum scale** helps to identify how a programme, project, policy or topic approaches gender equality. **Gender equality can only be achieved when aiming for transformative change.**



Figure 1: Gender integration continuum  
 OECD (2022), *Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls: Guidance for Development Partners*

The gender integration continuum (Figure 1) points to how interventions can address gender inequalities. At the most **negative** end, there are **approaches that may exacerbate gender inequalities and harm human rights**. At the most **positive** end, there are **gender-transformative**

**approaches that most effectively support sustainable structural changes towards gender equality**. In between there are approaches that may recognise or respond to gender inequalities, but do not challenge the underlying structures and root causes that allow them to persist.



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Figure 2: Four dimensions of social change  
Adapted from *Gender-Transformative Change in ATVET, Agricultural Technical Vocational Education and Training for Women (ATVET4W)*, GIZ 2019.

Figure 2 shows four dimensions of social change. It highlights the combination of changes that are needed at the individual and collective level, both internally and externally, to progress towards gender-transformative change. All dimensions correlate, and **all are needed for facilitating**

**social change** and producing gender-transformative results that lead to sustainable development and equitable impacts.

The example of women tractor drivers in Figure 3 illustrates this.

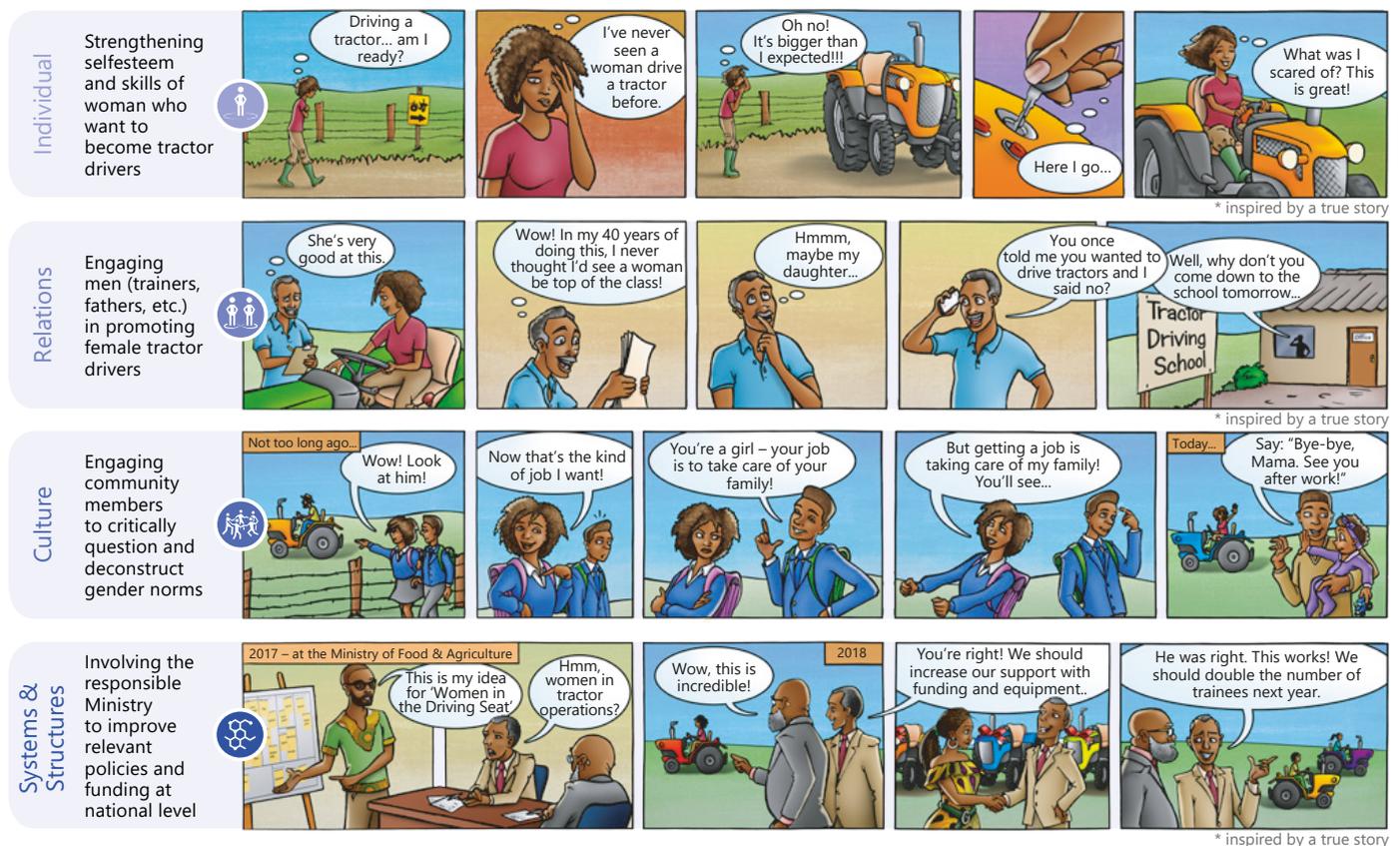
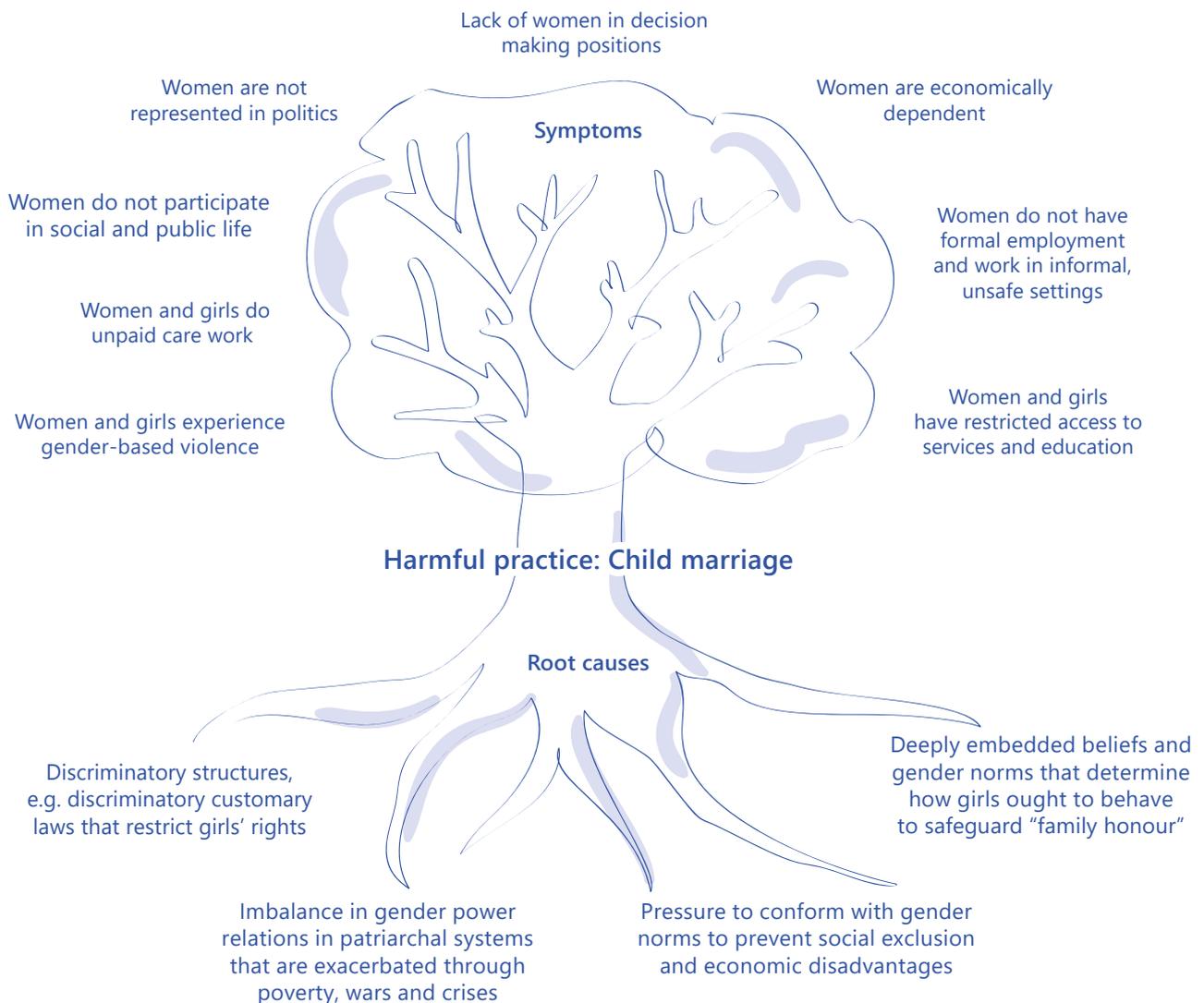


Figure 3: Four dimensions of social change in the agricultural sector  
Adapted from *Gender-Transformative Change in ATVET, Agricultural Technical Vocational Education and Training for Women (ATVET4W)*, GIZ 2019.

## Child marriage: root causes and symptoms

Child marriage is one expression of gender inequality that is rooted in patriarchal gender norms and discriminatory structures. Child marriage is a main obstacle for girls' access to education, opportunities for social, political and economic participation in the course of their lives, as well as their access to rights and services. The consequent lack of women in the labour market, social and political spaces,

etc., has negative social and economic implications on society as a whole. A law to end child marriage is unlikely to bring, in itself, the desired effect, unless governments, communities and partners properly also address other prevailing root causes of this harmful practice. Depending on the context within which child marriage is practiced, root causes and symptoms may include:



### Gender-transformative approaches in relation to the prevention and elimination of child marriage include...

...raising awareness among parents, community leaders, and the elderly about the harmful effects of child marriage and the idea of marriage as the only route for a woman to become a respectful member of community;

...complementary strategies to strengthen women's opportunity and status in society as illustrated in the below checklist for gender-transformative programming.

...facilitating dialogue between community members, incl. different generations, to openly discuss and reflect different views on the purpose and effects of child marriage, generating more transparency on personal convictions versus factors of social pressure;

## Checklist for gender-transformative programming

- Invest in a thorough gender analysis** to identify gender norms, incl. intersectional perspectives, based on the findings from inclusive, participatory consultations with e.g., women's and human rights groups and organisations.
- Work both with duty bearers and rights holders** – both decision-makers and communities, to strengthen accountability. Decision-makers at all levels depending on the context (national, regional, municipal), and rights-holders ensuring that everyone is involved. Remove barriers of participation and build capacity of those who may need support for participating in decision-making and dialogue. Remember to focus in particular on those who may face additional/intersectional barriers due to their gender, age, disability, socio-economic situation, sexual orientation or gender identify, minority status, indigenous origin or other factors.
- Work with opinion leaders, experts and role models** – religions and community leaders, legal experts, influencers (incl. on social media) and others who have leverage in a given society. Identify who is the best agent of change.
- Work on individual, interpersonal, systemic and grassroots (socio-cultural) levels in a complementary way**, when possible, incl. through strategic partnerships. While the change happens in communities and in people's everyday lives, it needs to be legitimised and sustained by laws, policies, programmes, budgets and accountability mechanisms. Include policy influencing in your objectives.
- Frame your programme in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and other international human rights standards, recommendations** that a country has received on the topic at hand, and respective national commitments. A development programme that helps a country to fulfil its human rights obligations increases sustainability.
- Work to change the distribution of power.** Identify power dynamics in a given context (incl. in your own organisations/institutions), in close connection with local partners, and identify pathways to shift power towards more equitable participation of all.
- Frame your programme with partners using **entry points that resonate with partners' interests and priorities** increases sustainability. Complementing the imperative of meeting human rights obligations with economic and development arguments can make a strong case.
- Build partnerships with those who believe in change.** Feminist, women's rights and youth organizations, organizations of persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples' organisations have the best contextual understanding and may have worked for the desired change for a long time. Look for unusual suspects, e.g. religious organizations who work towards gender equality.
- Have clear strategies for engaging men and boys in all their diversity.** Gender inequalities and restrictive gender norms affect everyone negatively, incl. those related to restrictive masculinities. Get inspired by the [OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index masculinities framework](#).
- Reach out to a large number of people (critical mass) to change discriminatory beliefs, misconceptions and attitudes at scale**, e.g. via mass media, large-scale communication, etc. to promote principles of gender equality, generating public attention on the topic and transparency on what people (particularly young people) really think and the social pressures that sustain harmful gender norms.
- Measure contributions along the way.** Gender-transformative change takes time – identify how your programme can contribute to the change. Identify the desired change and the steps needed to get there and engage participants/rights holders/target groups and partner organisations in the analysis and interpretation of progress results. Plan for longer-term engagement where possible. Measure change through both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Use stories and narratives alongside quantitative indicators, and draw from the illustrative examples on measuring gender-transformative change identified in the [OECD DAC Gendernet's guidance on gender equality and women's empowerment](#).

## Differences between gender-responsive and gender-transformative actions

In many cases, a combination of gender-responsive and gender-transformative strategies brings about the best change. Below we illustrate what gender-responsive and gender-transformative activities can look like in three key sectors: preventing and eliminating gender-based violence, education, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). However, whether an activity reflects a gender-responsive or gender-transformative approach always depends on the country and sector context.

SECTOR/THEME	GENDER-RESPONSIVE	GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE
<b>Preventing and eliminating gender-based violence*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train police, social sector workforce and justice system to understand and respond sensitively to all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse.</li> <li>• Provide shelters and transitional economic support for women escaping domestic abuse.</li> <li>• Develop national, regional and community data collection databases to track the prevalence of different forms of violence and harmful practices.</li> <li>• Work with public sector ministries to ensure adequate funding for gender-based violence services and programmes in national, regional and local budgets.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and enact protective laws, and policies (e.g. codes of conduct) across institutions e.g. in workplaces, schools, health services, online etc.</li> <li>• Community- and mass-media based norm change processes around gender-based violence (with men and boys, women, girls and gender-diverse people) focused on shifting norms of acceptable behaviour (e.g. perpetration of violence and reporting/intervening to prevent violence).</li> <li>• Initiatives to help build women's, girls' and gender-diverse people's confidence to set boundaries, leave harmful situations and take action.</li> <li>• Address and dismantle patriarchal systems that create inequalities, male dominance and control and foster positive masculinity to end gender-based violence.</li> <li>• Partner with and support women's movements at national and local levels to raise awareness of violence among communities, provide support to survivors, and advocate for legal and policy change around ending gender-based violence.</li> </ul>
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in universalising primary and secondary education, through support to sectoral expansion and addressing gender inequalities in access through cash transfers and fee waivers/abolition</li> <li>• Reduce girl-specific barriers to education, such as menstruation hygiene management.</li> <li>• Invest in safe and menstruation hygiene management friendly toilets, incl. water, privacy and sanitary pad disposal.</li> <li>• Measures that respond to transport-related constraints, especially for girls in rural areas, for example, bicycles, boarding houses, school buses etc.</li> <li>• Expand alternative learning pathways (ALPs) for girls who have missed out/dropped out of school, incl. increasing distance-learning opportunities, for example, by providing lessons by radio etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community dialogues and media campaigns to address gendered norm-based barriers to education at different levels</li> <li>• Ensure that comprehensive sexuality education in accordance to <a href="#">UNESCO guidelines</a> is provided in formal and informal setting, particularly for children, adolescents and young people</li> <li>• Mainstream gender-awareness in teacher training at all levels</li> <li>• Mainstream gender equality in curricula and learning materials</li> <li>• Institute 'whole school' approaches to end school-related gender-based violence</li> <li>• Challenge gender stereotypes about capacities to study particular subjects, e.g. by involving role models</li> <li>• Law reform and implementation to universalise primary and secondary education incl. increasing investment in evidence-based approaches and solutions that have gender equality and inclusive education as a primary objective.</li> </ul>
<b>Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), with a focus on dignified menstruation management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide sustainable and affordable menstrual sanitary products</li> <li>• Strengthen women's economic participation through women making and selling sustainable sanitary products</li> <li>• Build public washrooms that are safe to use for women and gender diverse persons, as well as menstruation hygiene management friendly, incl. water, privacy and sanitary pad disposal</li> <li>• Organise awareness-raising sessions about the importance of girls' education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government subsidized sustainable menstrual sanitary products</li> <li>• Community dialogues and media campaigns about SRHR and related norms with an emphasis on periods as a natural and positive phenomenon instead of something shameful and hidden</li> <li>• Working both with those that maintain and those that wish to change norms related to menstruation, incl. young women, boys and men, the elderly, parents, community and religious leaders</li> <li>• Activities towards criminalising menstruation discrimination, and elaborating policies, programmes and budgets to implement the law</li> </ul>

\* Spotlight Initiative has been instrumental in advancing gender responsive and gender-transformative actions to combat GBV: [A Comprehensive and Transformative Approach to EVAWG](#)