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Bahá'í International Community

MenEngage Alliance
working with men and boys for gender equality

UN WOMEN

DISCUSSION BRIEF

Making Justice Systems Just

CSW70 Policy Recommendations on Addressing Patriarchal Masculinities

On 6 November 2025, the Bahá'í International Community, MenEngage Alliance and UN Women jointly convened a dialogue with experts and practitioners on how transforming patriarchal masculinities can address discriminatory norms and promote inclusive and equitable legal systems. This Discussion Brief is a summary of the key themes from the dialogue, which aimed to deepen understanding of how patriarchal masculinities shape access to justice and to identify the broader feminist transformations required to advance gender and social justice. It examined the structural, political and cultural barriers within justice institutions—including gender bias, power asymmetries, impunity and weak accountability—that undermine fair and equitable legal outcomes. The dialogue underscored the urgency of transformative institutional reforms to ensure justice systems serve all people equally and offered feminist perspectives on addressing patriarchal masculinities as part of advocacy and national-level preparations for CSW70.

1. Introduction

Patriarchal masculinities—rooted in discriminatory social norms and harmful gender stereotypes and increasingly amplified online—shape how laws and justice systems are designed, implemented and experienced. They influence whether, how and with whom women, girls and diverse marginalized groups are able to seek, access and navigate services along the path to justice. Transforming patriarchal masculinities, through transforming male-dominant institutions and their practices, as well as by engaging men and boys, is integral to increasing access to and improving the performance and responsiveness of justice systems.

Emerging evidence indicates that when efforts to transform patriarchal masculinities and work with boys and men for women's rights and gender equality are informed by intersectional, feminist, human rights and gender-transformative approaches, it contributes to making justice systems more equitable and accountable. It is critical to move beyond tokenistic or superficial initiatives and engage men and boys—particularly men in positions of power and decision-making—through gender-transformative approaches that confront male privilege and address systematic inequalities and the most pressing challenges of our time, from anti-feminist backlash to the climate crisis, in order to advance equitable justice systems and women's and girls' access to justice.

The priority theme of the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70) in 2026 will be *"ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, including by promoting inclusive and equitable legal systems, eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices , and addressing structural barriers."* CSW70 will convene amidst a complex and shifting landscape of access to justice for women, girls and marginalized populations, shaped by intersecting global trends. Conflict, colonial and conservative geopolitics, rising authoritarianism and backlash against gender equality, shrinking civic space, widening income inequality, climate change and disparate digital transformation contribute to a "deep, pervasive and relentless" gender pushback. The right to access justice for women, girls and marginalized populations faces threats

precisely when it is most needed to advance rights, equality and justice. Despite these challenges, the CSW70 priority theme reaffirms that justice for women and girls in all their diversity is not a matter of protection but of entitlement—as citizens and rights holders. Access to justice related to patriarchal masculinities must therefore be framed around the realization of rights.

There are persistent gaps in transforming patriarchal masculinities in relation to gender equality and access to justice. Without critical examination, these gaps risk reinforcing and exacerbating patriarchal power inequalities, norms and practices rather than dismantling them. Male policymakers, parliamentarians and community leaders often act as gatekeepers of justice system reform, especially where discriminatory laws and practices remain in place. Engaging these actors in examining how legal systems reinforce their own privilege, perpetuate discrimination and hinder women, girls and marginalized populations from seeking justice—while also highlighting how equality strengthens societies—can help dismantle legal expressions of patriarchal masculinities. Such engagement can shift justice delivery away from patriarchal attitudes and towards outcomes that are more fair and just.

By transforming patriarchal masculinity norms—as a structural barrier and root cause of discriminatory legal systems and lack of access to justice —Member States, civil society, UN agencies, development organizations, corporations, donors and partners can accelerate the achievement of equitable justice systems and access to justice services, reduce male impunity, and advance the realization of the human rights of all women and girls as envisaged in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

2. Manifestations of patriarchal masculinities across justice systems

- **Patriarchal masculinities in the judiciary**
  Justice systems are not immune from the social norms that shape the societies in which they were created. Patriarchal masculinities are deeply embedded in the design, functioning and culture of justice systems, influencing how laws are developed and interpreted, and whose voices are legitimized within the legal process. These masculinities equate authority, objectivity and rationality with male experience, establishing a structural hierarchy in which women and marginalized groups are positioned as subjects to be judged rather than as equal rights holders. When such hierarchies define judicial reasoning, the principle of impartiality is compromised. The law ceases to be a tool for equality and becomes a mechanism through which gendered power relations are reinforced. True independence and equality before the law cannot exist while the systems that deliver justice remain shaped by patriarchal norms that privilege certain experiences and silence others.

- **Patriarchal masculinities embedded in both formal and informal justice systems**
  Patriarchal masculinities shape who drafts and interprets the law; the standards of credibility applied to women, girls and marginalized populations; and the cultures of police stations, courtrooms and community forums. This produces a cycle: discriminatory norms inform discriminatory rules and procedures, which in turn reproduce impunity and erode trust. Patriarchal masculinities also shape informal justice systems—customary, religious and community mechanisms—where authority and dispute resolution may be organized around male privilege and gender bias. These dynamics repress reporting, erode trust and produce unequal outcomes even where statutory law appears gender-equitable. Without human rights–based safeguards, patriarchal authority can become entrenched and women's claims subordinated. Patriarchal messages about "keeping the family together" or "community harmony" being more important than women's and girls' well-being can prevent women from reporting or even seeking services; these same beliefs are sometimes shared by service providers, compounding barriers for women, girls and marginalized people to access justice services.

- **Weaponization of justice systems**
  Patriarchal masculinities also manifest in the misuse of justice systems to reinforce social control. In such contexts, law becomes an instrument for policing gender roles rather than protecting rights. Legal institutions may criminalize women's and girls' personal choices, restrict bodily autonomy and punish those who challenge gender hierarchies. This weaponization of justice transforms the courts from guarantors of equality into enforcers of patriarchal discipline. When the law legitimizes gendered subordination, it dismantles its own credibility as an avenue for redress and creates a cycle in which discrimination is both sanctioned and reproduced by the state.

- **Gender biases in every stage of the pathway to justice**
  Gender bias runs through the entire pathway to justice, shaping outcomes from the first point of contact to final enforcement. It is reproduced through norms, procedures and institutional policies that privilege male authority and disadvantage women, girls and marginalized people. When laws, rules and institutional cultures normalize bias, bias becomes systemic. Stereotypes about women's credibility, behaviour and roles influence whose testimony is believed and how women are treated, as well as the legal outcomes. Justice systems reproduce impunity "by design"; their procedures mirror social hierarchies instead of correcting them. The result is a justice process that appears neutral but continually reaffirms gendered power relations, undermining impartiality, equality before the law and public trust in the system itself. Such patterns are evident across multiple domains of law, from criminal justice to family and labour disputes. The persistence of gender biases and stereotypes reveal that inequality is not an anomaly in judicial practice; it is institutionalized through rules, procedures and interpretive traditions that elevate patriarchal authority as the standard of judgment.

- **Everyday sexism and patriarchal masculinities in the workplace within justice institutions**
  Within justice institutions themselves, patriarchal masculinities sustain a culture of hierarchy, conformity and discrimination. Everyday sexism shapes daily interactions—from how women professionals are addressed and interrupted, to assumptions about competence, emotion and authority. Even where gender training is mandatory, knowledge often remains performative. Judges and staff may articulate equality in principle yet unconsciously reproduce bias in behaviour, such as discounting the testimony of female witnesses, trivializing sexual harassment or deferring to senior men in deliberations. Women lawyers, judges and law enforcers can face sexism or harassment within their institutions. Harassment and hostile environments for women judges and lawyers undermine parity and impartiality. Gender inequality within the justice sector is not limited to outcomes in the courtroom but is embedded in the organizational structures that govern how justice is delivered. Until institutions address the gendered dynamics of their own workplaces, they will continue to replicate the inequalities they are tasked to eliminate.

- **Intersecting inequalities and compounded barriers to justice**
  Patriarchal masculinities do not operate in isolation; they interact with other entrenched systems of power and exclusion. Within justice systems, these intersections magnify barriers for women and girls whose identities connect multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization. Race, class, caste, ethnicity, migration status, age, sexual orientation and gender identity, among other identity markers, shape who is deemed credible or "deserving" of justice. These overlapping intersectional inequalities amplify the effects of patriarchal masculinities, resulting in a justice system that privileges certain groups while marginalizing others, deepening both procedural and substantive inequities.

3. Addressing patriarchal masculinities at the institutional level

Transforming patriarchal masculinities requires more than changing individual attitudes. It demands systemic reform at the institutional level. Institutions—courts, police, prosecutorial services and judiciary entities—are not neutral structures but repositories of norms, culture, hierarchies and traditions that have historically centred male authority and privilege. These norms shape decision-making processes, laws and policies and the cultures of justice institutions. When institutions are built on patriarchal norms, they reproduce inequality. Patriarchal masculinities within institutions manifest through gender-inequitable hierarchies and systems that privilege men. Addressing patriarchal masculinities at this level means interrogating how implicit and explicit policies, processes and practices sustain unequal power relations, including by men in positions of power within legal institutions, noting their role as gatekeepers to institutional transformation.

A focus on institutional transformation recognizes that personal awareness or behavioural change cannot by itself dismantle structural discrimination. Without systemic transformation, even well-intentioned actors revert to ingrained norms embedded in the institution's design. Working with individuals within the justice system to address individuals' inequitable behaviours and practices is not sufficient. By addressing institutionalized patriarchal masculinities, reform moves from individual change to collective responsibility, making gender equality a core principle of institutional accountability and performance, to enhance access to justice for all.

CSW70 is an opportunity to highlight the issue of patriarchal masculinities as a structural barrier to women's and girls' access to justice; and to frame the work on addressing patriarchal masculinities within a feminist, rights-based transformation of institutions. References to masculinities should reinforce, not dilute, commitments to eliminate discriminatory laws and practices, ensure survivor-centred approaches, and build inclusive and equitable legal systems.

Photo: UN Women / Ryan Brown

4. Learning from emerging practices

Emerging practices and lessons learned point to effective approaches for transforming patriarchal masculinities within justice systems and institutions.

- **Transforming justice systems requires moving beyond fragmented, project-based interventions towards sustained institutional reform** anchored in policy, governance and accountability. Short-term projects and pilot initiatives—often framed as awareness-raising or capacity-building—may generate useful models but rarely shift the structural conditions that enable bias and discrimination to persist. Projects confine transformation to temporary activities, leaving underlying power relations, incentive structures and institutional hierarchies untouched. Change demands embedding gender equality objectives into the core mandates, structures and performance systems of justice institutions. Without this systemic anchoring, progress remains episodic and dependent on external funding cycles, rather than transforming the architecture of justice systems.
- **Engagement with community and religious authorities helps ensure that informal justice mechanisms are aligned with normative standards and rights-anchored,** including referral pathways to formal justice systems and rights- and equality-based interpretations of laws. Efforts to address patriarchal masculinities in justice systems must be done across the formal–informal nexus, to prevent parallel systems from undermining women's, girls' and marginalized people's access to justice and protection. Faith-based feminist reinterpretation of religious laws demonstrates that reform is possible within religious frameworks. Engaging religious scholars, jurists and policymakers can realign legal norms with principles of justice and equality which are inherent in faith traditions.
- **Achieving gender equality within the justice system requires more than increasing the number of women in judicial or legal professions.** Representation without reform is not effective. Structural transformation means re-examining the laws, procedures and institutional norms that uphold patriarchal authority and prevent equitable participation. It requires embedding gender equality into codes of ethics, performance standards and systems of accountability. Only by addressing the patriarchal foundations of the system's internal operations can justice institutions truly deliver on the promise of equality before the law.
- **Institutional accountability sustains change.** Justice institutions having zero-tolerance policies on harassment is critical. Policies can include safe reporting channels for justice workers, independent oversight with sanctioning power, and gender parity. Eliminating stereotyping is necessary not only in justice deliberations but also in internal workplaces where bullying and harassment affect women's ability to serve and lead.
- **Women's rights movements lead; men in power act as accountable allies.** Tokenistic "men and boys" initiatives are not transformative and far from sufficient. It is important that efforts to engage men and boys and to transform patriarchal masculinities are co-created with women's rights organizations, LGBTIQ+ groups, youth and other affected constituencies so that they are not stand-alone and can work towards supporting gender-transformative outcomes within justice systems, to achieve justice for all.
- **Eliminating bias in justice systems begins with how judges, lawyers and legal students are trained.** Legal education often treats the law as neutral, without examining how patriarchal gender norms shape interpretation and decisions. Training must therefore include a strong gender perspective as a core part of legal and judicial preparation. It should help justice actors recognize and challenge stereotypes in how they assess evidence, credibility and sentencing and interrogate how patriarchal norms shape interpretation and reasoning. Law schools and judicial academies must equip future and current justice actors with tools to identify and eliminate bias in their judgments and to apply international standards on equality and non-discrimination. Training must go beyond memorizing gender laws to foster an emotional and empathetic understanding of discrimination, and to internalize

learnings on how to dismantle patriarchal masculinities within the actors themselves. Interactive methods—such as experiential workshops, visual campaigns and peer dialogue—help justice actors internalize gender equality principles and translate them into behaviour and decision-making.

- **Justice and care are interdependent.** Embedding an ethic of care—grounded in attentiveness, responsibility and competence—within justice systems can strengthen accountability and survivor-centred practices. This includes recognizing care obligations, such as the state's responsibility for child maintenance and support, as integral to delivering justice.

5. Recommendations

- **Eliminate gender stereotyping and bias within justice systems:** Enact courtroom and policing protocols that prohibit gender stereotyping and bias; integrate bias-screening tools in investigations and decisions; and address beliefs and practices based on stereotyping women.
- **Reform discriminatory laws and close implementation gaps:** Review national legislation to identify and repeal discriminatory laws. This includes family, labour, property and criminal laws that reinforce unequal power relations or restrict the rights of women, girls and marginalized people. Legal reforms must align with international human rights standards, close implementation gaps and ensure equality is reflected in both law and practice.
- **Reform justice institutions' cultures and leadership:** Ensure political and leadership commitment to gender equality, especially among men in positions of power within legal institutions, and the creation of safe and harassment-free work environments for all justice professionals; address gender stereotyping and bias within justice institutions individually and institutionally.
- **Bridge formal and informal justice:** Ensure coherence and protection across all justice mechanisms, grounded on normative standards; develop clear guidance for community dispute resolution and restorative justice practices; align customary and faith-based practices with international normative standards and frameworks; ensure that informal and formal mechanisms are survivor-centred; and strengthen partnerships with traditional, religious and civil society actors to address any doctrines that justify unequal treatment.
- **Resource the full pathway to justice:** Fund women's rights, LGBTIQ+, youth and other community-based legal assistance programmes, shelters, psychosocial support and accessibility services to ensure comprehensive, survivor-centred, rights-based access to justice within formal and informal justice systems.
- **Frame patriarchal masculinities as a structural issue and problem:** Address patriarchal masculinities through transforming laws, procedures, accountability mechanisms and justice institutions, not as merely awareness-raising or individual behaviour change activities.
- **Bridge the gap between justice and care:** Integrate an ethic within justice systems to strengthen accountability and survivor-centred practices, recognizing care obligations such as the state responsibility for child maintenance and support, as integral to delivering justice.
- **Integrate gender and human rights training in legal and judicial curriculum, including on how to dismantle patriarchal masculinities:** Include a strong gender perspective as a core part of legal and judicial preparation; equip future and current justice actors with tools to identify and eliminate bias in their judgments and to apply international standards on equality and non-discrimination; and develop experiential training methodologies that address beliefs and behavioural change, not only theoretical gender perspectives.

Photo: UN Women Rwanda

Advancing access to justice for all women and girls requires sustained and systemic transformation that addresses patriarchal masculinities. Addressing patriarchal masculinities, particularly at the institutional level, is not optional. It is central to dismantling discrimination, ending impunity and rebuilding justice systems that are truly impartial and rights-based. The evidence is clear: when justice systems confront gendered power imbalances, eliminate discriminatory practices and work in partnership with feminist and women's rights movements, they become more equitable, accountable and responsive. In preparation for CSW70, stakeholders across governments, civil society and the UN system have the opportunity to jointly and coherently drive this agenda. Centring rights, dismantling impunity and reimagining justice institutions through feminist, intersectional and survivor-centred approaches will be essential to deliver justice for all women and girls.

This Discussion Brief is a summary of the key themes from the dialogue convened by the Bahá'í International Community, MenEngage Alliance and UN Women in November 2025 to discuss how transforming patriarchal masculinities can address discriminatory norms and promote inclusive and equitable legal systems.

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