

FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

00:00:17:02 - 00:00:50:21

Yes. By pluralistic ignorance, we describe a situation where individuals might privately oppose a certain norm, meaning in our case, we could say everybody thinks that female genital cutting should be abandoned, but they believe that other people in society instead are supporting this norm, okay. At that point, they don't choose a different action. So it is possible for each individual in isolation to hold these incorrect beliefs.

00:00:50:27 - 00:01:25:26

And this per se, generates a situation where the bad equilibrium is not abandoned. For example, a very interesting paper on female labor force participation in Saudi Arabia has shown that many men there declared that they would privately be favorable to their wives working outside the home. But they were thinking that the other men in the room would actually frown upon that. And then these researchers revealed the true support to each of the participants in these experiments.

00:01:25:28 - 00:01:52:17

And after they learned that the other men were actually in favor like themselves, people signed their wives up for job search engines, for driving classes. So in that case, there was an indication the misperception about attitudes towards female labor force participation in society was one of the drivers of that choice not to facilitate one spouse's participation in the labor market.

00:01:55:08 - 00:02:36:03

I think one thing that's always struck me and as you said, there are a number of settings where it seems like the gender of your child influences you. I think the similar findings for judges in the US as well, that if they have a daughter, I think my son has worked on this, it affect the way you rule on, say, reproductive rights. The thing that's always struck me in majority heterosexual world that marriage doesn't do it. And I think that's actually because I think the conflict is a lot more if there are two partners and you have to decide, you know, who stays at home with the child, who undertakes an occupation, and there's less of that conflict into generationally.

00:02:36:05 - 00:02:54:15

Now, the flip side of it I always find depressing is that, yes, we see these effects when you have a daughter, but we don't see these effects when you get married, when you're actually living with someone of an opposite gender all the time. And so I completely agree with you, but I do think we sometimes underestimate what Sam said is the benefits of patriarchy.

00:02:57:03 - 00:03:34:17

If we pretend that female genital cutting or sati or whatever it is that we want to end is just kind of misinformation or at least in part misinformation. Don't know. Avoid kind of staring in the face just how entrenched it is as a cultural and social system and including serving the interests of some people rather than others over a very long time and becoming adopted in ways that are genuinely difficult to change. That said, I'm heartened by the progress that Eliana says that her studies and advice have led to.

00:03:34:19 - 00:03:51:01

I think to me, a really interesting issue in that kind of campaign is the perception of enlightenment being brought by outsiders versus kind of surveying grassroots struggle, which we haven't talked about. But I do think that the law can be a powerful tool.

00:03:54:04 - 00:04:13:04

Why do some countries advance while others fall behind? Who benefits from economic growth and who doesn't? How do inequality and climate change affect people, especially the most marginalized? And what role can data play in answering questions like these and informing policies that promote economic justice? Let's find out on voices and development.

00:04:18:16 - 00:04:34:00

So I want to start by asking each of you how your work intersects with what is a really big topic we're covering today, the role of norms in economic development in low and middle income countries. And maybe we'll start with Eliana.

00:04:34:08 - 00:05:09:05

So I've always been interested in development, economics and on policies that could help communities or disadvantaged groups reach their potential. And in studying these topics, almost unavoidable to come to terms with the fact that many of the obstacles that are in the way of escaping poverty, of course, have to do with lack of resources or endowments, but often also have to do with constraints that come from expectations that society has about the appropriate behavior.

00:05:09:07 - 00:06:01:13

So this is true when you think about human capital investment. So, you know who should study for how long? If you think about health, what is an appropriate behavior for a mother? How should kids be raised? But also in terms of economic transaction, who are you expected to trade with? In my work, I've tried to take these social constraints seriously and ask, first of all, how do they impact what's feasible when you try to implement anti-poverty policies? And then maybe a bit more ambitiously and recently, if some of these constraints don't appear to be functional for the goals of lifting people out of poverty, is there a way to change societal norms? And so in that case, the norm becomes the object of investigation.

00:06:01:15 - 00:06:25:07

But we still can use tools that come from economics to understand how why these norms have emerged, why they persist and how they could be changed. So at a general level, this would be how I have approached this intersection of development, economics and the role of social norms, and we can then delve into examples later.

00:06:25:10 - 00:06:38:00

Sounds great. Thank you, Eliana. Sam, I'd love to hear from you. Of course, there's a major relationship between norms and human rights, which we'll get into. But how does your background connect with this topic of norms and economic development?

00:06:38:04 - 00:07:13:19

Well, it's a privilege to be outnumbered by economists on this podcast. I'm a lowly historian, and I've been interested in the malleability of our moral ideals or norms from place to place and from era to era. And I did write a lot about the rise of human rights as a general way of thinking about what people are entitled to locally, globally. And one book I wrote called *Not Enough*, takes up kind of how human rights got into development thinking, which has a longer history.

00:07:13:21 - 00:07:54:08

And I was very interested in what's called the Basic Needs Revolution, which is the idea that development should be concerned not just with, let's say, aggregate growth on a national scale, but be concerned with poverty, which is something that really, you know, came about as recently as the 1960s and 70s. And so I'm interested, of course, in how things play out on the ground, which I don't study, but also with how

development theorists, including leading economists, have their own ideas and ideologies that that that change over time.

00:07:54:10 - 00:08:10:14

And Rohini, can you talk about your work as it relates to norms and economic development and also your idea really to bring Eliana and Sam together? We try to have interdisciplinary conversations in the Yale Development Dialogue. So why bring these backgrounds together around this topic?

00:08:10:16 - 00:08:44:10

You know, a lot of my interest in norms came from thinking about development, but more from a perspective of political economy, where we think a lot about institutions and a lot of the, I'd say the traditional political economy literature, has had a focus on thinking about formal institutions. So how do you think about electoral systems? Why do you think democracies are a good thing? And then you sort of realize that I think you pretty much have electoral democracies across the world now, but it hasn't achieved many of the kind of big goals that people believe just giving individuals the right to vote would achieve.

00:08:44:12 - 00:09:18:02

And that's when you realize that there continues to be a huge role being played, as Eliana put it, by expectations about what to do. But these expectations are also enforced by some individuals. So I've been very interested in trying to think about norms or expectations, but through a lens of informal institutions where there are some sets of individuals who may want to enforce existing norms because it serves the purpose. And I think in that way, trying to bring a little bit more of a discussion of power and politics in a way that I.

00:09:18:04 - 00:10:08:07

I think in formal institutions we are very comfortable talking about class interests, so we're very comfortable talking about rent seeking. I think sometimes people are quite a lot more uncomfortable thinking about that within a household or thinking about maybe two people who live together may not have aligned preferences and may actually actively prevent someone from achieving what they do. And I think that was one of the reasons also for trying to have this conversation with Eliana and Sam, because I think I was when I read Sam's book, I was particularly interested in this idea that something like human rights that were many of us would seem like a very anodyne concept, may actually in some ways be used to distract from perhaps other issues that may be more important actually achieving justice or an equal world.

00:10:08:13 - 00:10:24:24

And, you know, I think Eliana has a long history of working on some of these issues, really from the bottom up of thinking about, for instance, in ethnic societies in Africa, how do some of these tensions play out? So I just thought it'd be a great conversation to hear the two of them debate these issues.

00:10:24:26 - 00:10:30:24

Before we dive into harmful norms. I do just want to provide some examples, and we'd love to hear from each of you on this.

00:10:30:29 - 00:11:11:08

I can start on examples that are not harmful. It's how I came about, the idea of norms early in my research. If you study small communities, for example, in rural Ghana, you can see that there are very established patterns of interactions that, for example, give privileged access to members of one's kin group when it comes to loans or informal transfers. And there is actually a very rational economic motive for this

because people who belong to the same kin group can acquire information about each other more easily or can also enforce punishments for non-repayment more easily.

00:11:11:10 - 00:11:41:09

So this idea that maybe there is a norm that you need to help your kinsmen has some efficiency in it in making this transaction possible, but also dictates behavior. And similarly, you can think about norms, about who gets to inherit from a couple. And still in Ghana, there are very different traditions depending on the ethnic group you belong to. The Akan are a matrilineal group, so in that case, it's actually the children of a man's sister who get to inherit.

00:11:41:11 - 00:12:18:01

While in patrilineal society it is the children of the man himself. And I'm discussing the role of the father because again, in many of these societies, the vast majority of the properties are still held by men. So these are norms that govern transitions across generations when it comes to wealth, inheritance or credit transactions still very much related to the economic sphere and with some potential economic basis for their existence. Then there are norms that are more about, for example, women role as mothers or women presence in the labor market.

00:12:18:03 - 00:12:48:03

Again, across societies we see systems where women are very engaged work full time jobs, work is shared equally among women and men. And then we see societies where there is a very clear division of labor, and some of these might respond to returns on the labor market. What occupations are there, what seems to be most efficient again for the family in terms of allocation of tasks? But some are quite at odds with how the economy has evolved.

00:12:48:05 - 00:13:32:28

For example, in recent years, we see countries with extremely high levels of education for women, with industrial specialization that could very well employ female labor force, and still it might not be considered so acceptable or so common for a woman to work a full time job. So these are all examples of norms where there are certainly economic motives for making a choice, but also something about how other members of societies would judge a certain choice and whether these would be approved is approved, whether there might be sanctions enters into the calculation of a person to work, to have so many children to bequeath their property to someone or someone else.

00:13:33:00 - 00:13:35:23

So just some first set of examples.

00:13:35:25 - 00:13:45:04

And Sam, can you jump in on that? I also wanted to pick up on something you said earlier. You were talking about the malleability of our ideas and our norms. So can you give some examples of what you mean by that?

00:13:45:06 - 00:14:22:22

I think in the phrase "harmful norms," you could kind of focus on either word. And we've already heard from Rohini that if we're talking about norms, I suppose that's as opposed to institutions or laws. And as a legal scholar, we have a kind of big debate about the value of ordering through norms or laws. But of course both require some institutional picture. But on the harm question, we could think of harm as as a really contested idea because there's the question of harm to whom? According to whom? So a lot of what Eliana was describing sounded to me like patriarchy.

00:14:22:24 - 00:14:52:22

And of course, that served men for millennia and harmed women. It required institutions and laws, not just norms like the kinds of inheritance laws that Eliana mentioned and then court to enforce them and so on and so forth. But I think the place I would want to focus in response to your question is actually patriarchy is pretty helpful for people like me, and I've benefited from it just structurally in virtue of being a man.

00:14:52:24 - 00:15:17:01

And then I can see it's harmful, but it requires a struggle to change people's minds about what constitutes harm. And for people to either give up their power or to kind of change their minds about the way they see the world. And so the notion of harmful norms shouldn't mask how much people benefit from inflicting harm on others because it helps them to do so.

00:15:17:13 - 00:15:20:21

Rohini would love to hear more from you on some specific examples.

00:15:21:11 - 00:15:53:16

Yeah, I'd like to just jump in on a bit of what Sam was talking about in that I think it's not just a question of one person is benefited by a norm that's harmful for someone else. But I think for economists, often it may come under the veneer of what we would call sort of reducing frictions, right? So if just looking at it from the outside, I might think, well, if the patriarch's view always holds, then it's much easier than having to go across each member in a household, you know, trying to persuade them to do something.

00:15:53:18 - 00:16:30:03

It's much easier if I just need to talk to the patriarch and tell him this is what everyone should do, and then that's what would end up happening. And so I think if we are really to move away from harmful norms, I think as economists, one thing we perhaps have to deal with also is to perhaps moving away a little bit from our easy fall back on efficiency as what we want to maximize. Very often when we think about how to allocate resources, you think about how to do it in a way that leads to the largest amount of output being produced or the most productive use of those resources.

00:16:30:05 - 00:17:12:04

And you worry less about who gets access to those resources. So that would be what economists would think about is the difference between thinking about efficiency versus equity. Is that from a perspective of efficiency, you want to allocate resources so that you maximize output and then afterwards you can think about how to redistribute it. It can take a bit of time and effort to understand how different people's preferences are. They may not tell us as surveyors when we go in, you may not even hear it from elected representatives who benefit from there appearing to be just a single voice in the household and just going along with that is in a lot of ways a much simpler world in which to make policy.

00:17:12:08 - 00:17:22:26

You know, harmful norms, we may want to change it, but I think in order to change it, we also then have to think harder about whether we're willing to pay the costs that we would take in terms of how we, say, design policies and implement them.

00:17:22:28 - 00:17:53:26

I want to maybe offer a slightly more optimistic view, although maybe I'm just trying to be positive given all the harmful norms I've been studying recently. But I do think there are instances where these stickiness

of harmful norms or tradition also comes from lack of knowledge of what are the deep consequences or of how the underlying fundamentals in the economy or in society have evolved.

00:17:53:28 - 00:18:35:21

So if you think about gender bias, for example, there is a piece of research by Bonnie and Washington showing that politicians who have daughters behave differently from those who don't. And that's because you experience maybe the whatever difficulty your daughter is facing. And then going back to what Sam was saying, instead of simply focusing on the benefit that the patriarchy might have for you as a man, you see the other point of view, some of the work I've done, which has to do with intergroup interactions in where people might hold stereotypes about outgroup members, and this might lead to norms of non-cooperation as opposed to cooperation.

00:18:35:23 - 00:19:20:18

Recent research, both in economics and political science, has shown that a certain amount of exposure under circumstances where instead of having conflicting goals, you can engineer gains from cooperation. Those really change beliefs, stereotypes about the other group. So while I agree with Rohini that in the short run there might be some costs to be paid, it may also be worthwhile to understand where by simply providing more information or more chances for understanding the overall societal costs and benefit as opposed to the private one, how might this contribute to people's changing their positions.

00:19:21:10 - 00:20:03:03

I mean, just to recap, I think one thing that's always struck me and as you said, there are a number of settings where it seems like the gender of your child influences you. I think the similar findings for judges in the US as well, that if they have a daughter, I think Maya Sen has worked on this, it affects the way you rule on, say, reproductive rights. The thing that's always struck me in a majority heterosexual world is that marriage doesn't do it. And I think that's actually because I think the conflict is a lot more if there are two partners and you have to decide, you know, who stays at home with the child who undertakes an occupation and there's less of that conflict intergenerationally.

00:20:03:16 - 00:20:22:00

Now, the flip side of it I always find depressing is that, yes, we see these effects when you have a daughter, but we don't see these effects when you get married, when you're actually living with someone of an opposite gender all the time. And so I completely agree with you, but I do think we sometimes underestimate what Sam said is the benefits of patriarchy.

00:20:22:07 - 00:20:54:00

Yeah, I'm an optimist, too, and I really like the idea that we could engage in informational politics and enlighten people to move away from harmful norms. I mean, these studies fly in the face of the obvious fact that men have had daughters all the way back. And to me, the two changes that we would want to think about, which seem most obvious to me, as actually holding potential for undoing patriarchy are first feminist mobilization, which in the past 50 years has changed the face of the world.

00:20:54:02 - 00:21:25:07

And that's the kind of it's, it's a re-education project, which is to me is different from just informing people, but it's actually trying to change norms and at times through imposing hard outcomes on them, in this case, taking away some of men's power that they've enjoyed for all those millennia. But then, you know, in the case of the father-daughter relationship, I totally agree with Rohini that when we look at marriage, we may get a kind of different picture.

00:21:25:09 - 00:21:57:22

And yet for all those millennia, I think patriarchy reproduced itself even in regards to daughters who could be expected to play an important role in eldercare. And if we invent societies in which there are new functions for the kind of care of older people, older men, in this case, they may rely less on their daughters to take care of them, and that would be, to me, a way of disrupting this transmission of patriarchy, which I think has also historically affected daughters.

00:21:58:01 - 00:22:19:28

I had a question for Eliana. When it comes to changing harmful norms, your work on female genital cutting, which I know you spoke to in your Kuznets lecture, offers lessons for changing harmful norms because often it has to do with what people see as their identity and giving up something that is part of their identity. So can you tell us a little bit more about your work in this space and what lessons are emerging?

00:22:20:00 - 00:22:54:07

So let me maybe just quickly say what female genital cutting is and this is the removal of part or all of the female external genitalia for non-medical reasons. It's a practice that affects around 200 million women in the world. So it's a lot more widespread than what we would expect given the very high costs it involves from a health as well as a psychological point of view. It's also considered as a human rights violation by the international community.

00:22:54:09 - 00:23:32:01

So of course, here Sam may have a lot of insights for us to discuss. Let me say what I have been doing in terms of research on this topic, and I'm not the first one for sure to study it, of course, among sociologists, social psychologists as well as economists, this is a practice that's been under the lens for a while because of its seemingly excessive costs relative to the benefits that it brings about. What are these benefits? Well, traditionally, they are considered to be tied to attractiveness on the marriage market, for example, because a woman who's cut might be perceived as more pure, chaste, and so on.

00:23:32:03 - 00:24:04:22

But in work that we've done both in Somalia and in Sierra Leone, asking people why they cut their daughters, this marriage market benefit doesn't come up as the first explanation they give. It's often related to culture or identity, as you said, as well as in some cases, a perception that it might have to do with their religious duty. Now, what can we say about this? If you look at the evolution? Well, there are societies where this norm has been there for decades, if not centuries, and the economy has grown,

00:24:04:24 - 00:24:39:03

People have become more educated, but it's still there. Okay. So I mentioned Somalia and Sierra Leone. The rates of FGC in those countries are 98 and 90% respectively. So this is pretty much says that the entire female population is cut. Now, what I've been looking at is, first of all, whether we consider the evolution of the practice across generation, we can expect that a transition might occur simply as a result of different shares of people choosing different actions.

00:24:39:05 - 00:25:20:16

And in Somalia in particular, I've been interested in the role that an intermediate form of cutting plays. Somalia has two types of FGC that are widespread. One is called "pharaonic" circumcision and the other is called "suna." And pharaonic is a lot more harmful. It's what is also known as infibulation. And while it used to be the norm until the mid 90s, there has been a steady transition out of it and towards suna afterwards. So with a group of co-authors, we've asked whether these kind of intermediate still harmful but less harmful norm could be a first step towards then abandoning the practice altogether.

00:25:20:18 - 00:26:04:20

And we've used the lens of game theory as well as some data that we collected to study under which condition this could happen and whether we can expect this to eventually get us out of that equilibrium simply because of almost mechanical process where as the number of people choosing one type of action goes down, you feel less and less obliged to follow with that custom. And so far, the data that we have still don't give us a super hopeful message in the sense that the share of people who choose not to cut is so low that even though suna is now the prevalent norm, it doesn't seem to be leading to an abandonment anytime soon.

00:26:04:22 - 00:26:38:17

But then in Sierra Leone, with another co-author, Lucia Corno, we have decided to tackle the problem in a slightly different way. Also because the intermediate alternative is not present there. It's already starting from the milder form, so to speak. And there the cutting is part of a ritual that's called Bondo, where girls go in the bush for a month. They become part of a secret society, which is also like a support network. You know, the overall experience is about learning how to be a mother, how to be a wife.

00:26:38:19 - 00:27:10:27

And people attach a lot of value to that ritual. And so with Lucia, we thought, first of all, let's let's understand to what extent people are aware about the health consequences and possibly have an information intervention on that front. But also, let's work with a local NGO that's been promoting for some time what they call Bondo without cutting. So that's a ritual that preserves all these cultural and identity dimension. You still go to the bush for a month, but instead of cutting, you look for an alternative sign.

00:27:10:29 - 00:27:47:11

And we have just received our fourth round of data to, you know, these are things that you would need to study over decades. At some point, we want to start giving answers. So ours now is about three years after the intervention that we run and we're actually seeing reductions in the cutting rates. Not huge. Okay. So this is something that kind of slow but significant and going in the direction what one might expect. So I think there is a lot more, of course, to be done and to be understood, including how the interplay with the formal institutional framework works.

00:27:47:13 - 00:28:03:04

And in Sierra Leone, this practice has been there and there's no indication that the government, for example, is going to take any strong action very soon, despite of discussion about it. But I do think that we can make progress on similar approaches.

00:28:03:11 - 00:28:30:26

Eliana, If I can ask you one question in terms of the insights for other work around the world changing harmful norms, one of the aspects of your work that I found really fascinating was this idea of pluralistic ignorance that many people just misperceive how others feel about female genital cutting. Can you talk a little bit about that and you know, how that and perhaps other insights emerging from your work could be instructive for others working on changing harmful norms?

00:28:31:08 - 00:29:05:00

Yes, by pluralistic ignorance, we describe a situation where individuals might privately oppose a certain norm, meaning in our case, we could say everybody thinks that female genital cutting should be abandoned, but they believe that other people in society instead are supporting this norm. Okay, At that point, they don't choose a different action. So it is possible for each individual in isolation to hold these incorrect beliefs.

00:29:05:06 - 00:29:48:14

And this per se generates a situation where the bad equilibrium is not abandoned. Now, this is something that has economists very often we rule out when we write our models, we often ask. That these expectations are rational. So I cannot hold the belief that does not eventually square with the true beliefs in equilibrium. But other social scientists have been describing such instances. And recently, for example, a very interesting paper on female labor force participation in Saudi Arabia has shown that many men there declared that they would privately be favorable to their wives working outside the home.

00:29:48:16 - 00:30:27:18

But they were thinking that the other men in the room would actually frown upon that. And then these researchers revealed the true support to each of the participants in these experiments. And after they learned that the other men were actually favor like themselves, people signed their wives up for job search engine, for driving classes. So in that case, there was an indication the misperception about attitudes towards female labor force participation in society was one of the drivers of that choice not to facilitate one's spouse's participation in the labor market.

00:30:27:20 - 00:31:02:18

So we've done an intervention that is also attempting to correct misperceptions in Somalia, precisely because while there is broad support for suna nowadays, there is a lot less support for the most, most harmful form which is foreign. And so we elicited people's beliefs. We found out that a lot of people still thought that pharaonic was kind of widely approved in society. And then we revealed in some communities that the approval was lower. And we are finding that this leads to lower rates of pharaonic circumcision.

00:31:02:20 - 00:31:31:01

So first of all, doing some scoping work on which beliefs are correct and which are not, which calls into question, you know, why those beliefs still persist. And here maybe we could go back on who could have interest maintaining those beliefs even though they are now misaligned with the true personal attitudes. But then once we found those opportunities for aligning beliefs, thinking about the best form of communicating that information.

00:31:31:16 - 00:31:51:17

Keeping on gender-based norms, I know that, Eliana, you've described this before as restrictive gender norms that trap people in certain choices. And you mentioned labor rights is one example. Another that hasn't come up yet is the dowry and child marriage. And I wonder if we can hear a little bit more about that, maybe. Rohini, can you tell us more about how you see this coming up in your work?

00:31:51:29 - 00:32:25:17

From the perspective of, say, parents? It's hard for an individual parent to feel that they're making choices for their children that will be costly in terms of who they marry. And this could just be as simply as you care about your child's choices and your paternalistic, and you believe that they don't realize what's good for them? Or it could be, which is, I think what you were getting at and true in many societies is that there are actually financial transactions at the time of marriage.

00:32:25:25 - 00:33:03:29

And, you know, one of the things certainly I know from India, which is that, you know, dowry has been illegal for a reasonably long time. And I'd be curious whether, for instance, female genital mutilation on the books is illegal or legal, but it seems to have had no effect in actual practice of it. And so I think as we think about the intersection of, say, informal norms that we think may be harmful and how they sustain,

and it is also a question of the extent to which the law can actually enter the household and change practices there.

00:33:04:09 - 00:33:44:08

And I say that because and I think Eliana was hinting at this, is that if the state can't come in and actually change it, it's a pretty heavy lift for policies to actually coordinate informally across households. Right. I mean, we hope that the reason, while laws can work is that the state can just coordinate and impose it on individuals. But it seems to be a place where we particularly struggle is when you want the state to enter the house. And, you know, it could be, you know, thinking about how do you ensure that dowries or bride price aren't paid? Or it could be even trying to figure out how a women's bodily rights are protected when they are young and under their parents authority.

00:33:44:15 - 00:33:54:27

But to me, I think we can try to go along with through these community actions, but it's just I think it's just very hard to coordinate a group of people without the involvement of the law and the state.

00:33:55:06 - 00:34:01:24

Let's get Sam's perspective on this. I mean, what has the role of the law been and what can the role of the law be and what are the limits?

00:34:01:28 - 00:34:49:27

I think back to the debate among abolitionists in the United States in the 19th century about whether to pursue direct abolition or some kind of intermediate solutions. And we can think of just a host of different parallel dilemmas that advocates face. And as Eliana says, part of that calculus is, well, what is the nature of the phenomenon that we're trying to shift and how tough is the opposition? And I think that's where maybe some of the analytical difficulty comes in, because we wouldn't want to trivialize the nature of the problem when we see that it's an entrenched social system as slavery was.

00:34:49:29 - 00:35:19:27

And if we pretend that female genital cutting or sati or whatever it is that we want to end is, is just kind of misinformation or at least in part misinformation. Don't want to avoid kind of staring in the face just how entrenched it is as a cultural and social system and including serving the interests of some people rather than others over a very long time and becoming adopted in ways that are genuinely difficult to change.

00:35:19:29 - 00:35:55:15

That said, I'm heartened by the progress that Eliana says that her studies and advice have led to. I think to me, a really interesting issue in that kind of campaign is the perception of enlightenment being brought by outsiders versus kind of surveying grassroots struggle, which we haven't talked about. But I do think that the law can be a powerful tool. Note just in passing that for all of history, law has served the oppressors and not been an easy tool for the oppressed to turn to their ends.

00:35:55:17 - 00:36:33:27

And really, just very recently it's become a tool in that regard. I agree with Rohini that in the kind of thing we're talking about around gender and patriarchal orders, I mean, the law is a tool that precisely because it's done so much work in establishing a so-called private sphere, then it has a kind of weak it's weak so far. And that's not to say that it's useless, but I do think we should think really carefully about what the nature of the problem is.

00:36:33:29 - 00:36:46:09

We're trying to change why norms are so intransigent, because we need a theory of that, obviously, to have any hopes of engaging in the kind of strategic social science that's being described here.

00:36:47:02 - 00:37:33:04

Can I just quickly react to both Rohini's and Sam's points because they think they're super well taken. And so, first of all, Rohini, you asked about is it legal or not? And there's a very large number of countries where it's actually outlawed but still persists. But this doesn't mean that law doesn't play a role. Personally, I've had this experience where when we started this line of research with Lucia, we were initially planning to work in Burkina Faso, and it became clear pretty quickly that we weren't going to be able to elicit anything through questionnaires and household surveys, which is how we collect our data, because that government had been quite serious in recent years in enforcing the law.

00:37:33:06 - 00:38:10:00

They started taking circumcisers to court. They started taking the parents who had circumcised their daughter to court. And instead of doing it in the capital, they would actually take these trials to the villages for everybody to see. And people were terrified of discussing FGC. They said, no, this does not exist here. And so I do believe that there's a difference between the law on paper and the law when it is enforced, which takes our question one step down that says, well, why do certain governments choose to enforce the law and others don't.

00:38:10:02 - 00:38:44:11

You've called attention to the fact that this practice in particular, for example, might serve certain interests, and it is not—while in the past I can see how these might have been viewed as a way to preserve chastity, I'm not sure I see this as being very easy to still sustain as a motivation nowadays. So first of all, when we ask who makes the decision in both contexts where I worked, by and large, and this means like 85% of the cases, it is the mother of the girl.

00:38:44:13 - 00:39:19:16

Okay? Now, of course, the mother might have internalized her husband's preferences. So the fact that, you know, nominally she is tasked with this decision is not conclusive. But at a minimum, you know, there is some ownership that for one reason or another, is now passed on through the female line. The other thing is, again, this is fully anecdotal, but men have started realizing some of the costs of this practice, which have to do, for example, with women's lower interest in having sexual intercourse.

00:39:19:18 - 00:39:51:18

And so some it seems a joke, but some of the NGOs are actually thinking of pitching precisely this to the husbands as one reason why maybe an uncut wife might be a better partner from that point of view. So I don't know. I don't know enough to say that this is really used as a tool of oppression by men. I think there is some extent of really being stuck in an equilibrium that largely comes from a state of things that is no longer how many of these societies are.

00:39:51:20 - 00:40:43:16

That's all really helpful. I mean, I take your point that there can be these superannuated ideologies that we can get people to set aside when they recognize that they're just not fitting their way of life anymore and that maybe they would benefit from setting those ideologies aside. But then we don't want to trivialize the way that they persist. Even so, I mean, I think in this country of the fact that tens of millions of women voted for Donald Trump, which was in effect, a vote to deprive themselves of abortion rights, that seems to me a situation in which we have to acknowledge that oppression of women turns out to require the participation of women, and it could fall much more easily absent that participation.

00:40:43:18 - 00:40:59:15

And yet it it continues. And so I really do appreciate your point that we should really try to find out what's intractable and what's not. But what if it turns out that most of the problem is intractable and we have to figure out why that is.

00:41:00:29 - 00:41:38:10

So some I wanted to go back to something you mentioned very briefly, which was kind of grassroots change or grassroots movements. I completely agree with you that oppression often survives because for some of the oppressed, it actually given the system that's actually the best they can do, is to have that persist. And so I'm curious about, how you see in such settings a grassroots movement emerge and be successful. As I said, I think that the place that I struggle a little bit is just who will coordinate, right? Because the groups that are oppressed have less resources, less money, less power.

00:41:38:12 - 00:41:47:07

And so while we love this idea that it should be a grassroots movement within the country of the oppressed, it's just hard to know how that gets off the ground.

00:41:48:11 - 00:41:57:28

No, that's a fair challenge. And I'm not trying to romanticize ordinary people against elites or development experts or anything, but.

00:41:58:00 - 00:42:00:29

I thought you may have some historic examples which we'd love to hear about.

00:42:00:29 - 00:42:33:19

Well. So I mean, I think it's a great question because in in the human rights community, where really all the activism in the past 50 years, the lifespan of the organized human rights movement has come from the wealthy, developed north, and in recent years from really one man, and to an extraordinary extent, George Soros, who's funded not just Human Rights Watch, but the Open Society Foundation, which has spread the wealth to a lot of different groups.

00:42:33:21 - 00:43:09:06

I mean, you've had this move in spite of this need for Western elite funding to try to get local beneficiaries to set the terms of their own struggles just because it didn't seem like the top-down model was always as effective and you'd face certain limits without devolving authority, including power, to kind of set the terms of the struggle. But you're right that given how intractable I'm suggesting a lot of these phenomena are, I mean, it would be crazy to just wait on people to save themselves.

00:43:09:08 - 00:43:54:24

One backdrop here, obviously, is the history of European empire. Yeah. Since essentially all of these reforms, including the first protests about female genital cutting in the global South, were associated with imperial moralizing. And I think there's a really interesting question, although you know a lot more, Eliana, about kind of how this looks in the places you've studied, how do we separate the perception that this is an outside campaign from that colonial association and figure out how to operate as, let's say, do-gooders from the outside, while also recognizing the need for local ownership of these campaigns.

00:43:54:26 - 00:44:04:13

And I wish I had a good model for doing that. But it seems to me that that's the real, really hard thing that no one's figured out in these human rights movements.

00:44:04:15 - 00:44:30:17

I want to ask a question about how norm change is sometimes presented as a win-win. Helping communities see this as in their interest, or supporting members of the community who see this change is in their interest. But sometimes, norm change isn't a win-win, and sometimes people do have to lose, if you will, for change to happen. So I just love to hear thoughts on that. Maybe that's something Sam can speak to.

00:44:30:26 - 00:45:14:01

I think it's highly dependent on the context and situation, and I do believe in the possibility of win-win changes. But I mean, from what I can tell from history, if we're interested in the history of power, that's not something that seems always to be amenable to this kind of happy story where for someone to win, someone else doesn't have to lose. And I would say, I mean, just to be very general about it, that the campaign against patriarchy is mainly an example of some people winning and eroding the power of other people who lost power.

00:45:14:03 - 00:45:50:22

And that doesn't mean that we don't need to erode power by presenting it in ways that the losers will accept. Because why have kind of confrontation as the only way of making change? But as analysts, we don't want to, let's say, pretend that the erosion of some group's power is in their interests as a regular matter, maybe it is on occasion, but not always or even usually.

00:45:51:11 - 00:45:52:09

Other thoughts on that?

00:45:52:25 - 00:46:27:12

I want to use this to go back to something that Eliana said right at the start about what got her engaged with development and thinking about the goal of lifting people out of poverty. And I think especially in development at some level, we've been quite comfortable with having what we would call normative goals rather than just positive, right? I mean, if you say your goal is to end extreme poverty or have people have a better life, that's a normative goal. And you're somehow implicitly saying you're willing to pay the cost of redistributing away from the rich to get there.

00:46:27:28 - 00:47:04:18

And I think that sort of comes to this question of norm change, is that I think we should be comfortable and I think you can be optimistic and be comfortable with the idea that we want to change norms because the costs it imposes on some groups is too high. And yet at the same time, I see that as not necessarily needing to translate into a situation where we can't affect change if someone loses out. So I guess what I wanted to in a very long-winded way get to is this point that it's not a pessimistic view to say that norm change is very often not win-win.

00:47:04:23 - 00:47:13:23

I think it's completely consistent with, I think what has been a long-term goal of most development economists to say that some things are just unfair and we shouldn't let them be.

00:47:14:21 - 00:47:16:12

Eliana, do you have thoughts on that?

00:47:17:09 - 00:47:48:22

I think I agree on this broad point that there are very often losers from what we see as desirable norm change. There are examples, I think, where the pure coordination aspect is more significant. I don't think it's necessarily the unique motivation. I think there's often a blend of something to do with possibly redistributive considerations, but sometimes there's also an element of coordination that's important.

00:47:48:24 - 00:48:27:14

And so I can go from the maybe more trivial to the bigger picture historical example. If I think of one of the things that happened in Italy during the years when I was young adult. For the first time, there was a prescription that my country adopted and stuck with one day to the next, and that was the prohibition to smoke in public places indoors. Okay, so Italians are known for being a population that when they say you need to wear a seatbelt, start producing t-shirts with the black stripe going across so that you cannot be detected if you're driving on the road.

00:48:27:16 - 00:48:58:09

Right. But this time, to me, it was amazing that truly the day after the law was passed, you no longer saw people smoking in bars, in restaurants. And, you know, sure, there was a cost for the smokers to having to step outside, but it seemed as if there was this need for coordinating to a better equilibrium. And for some reason people, you know, saw it and embraced it. I cannot say that I understand how that particular fact happened.

00:48:58:11 - 00:49:46:27

And other maybe equally important coordination efforts failed in Italy. But I do think there are some instances where this is more feasible or more realistic. Now, the historical example I had in mind is one that social scientists have studied for a long time. Gerry Mackie is one of those who's best known for having worked on it, and that's the norm of foot-binding in China. So this is a norm that was present since basically the 10th century and consisted in binding the feet of girls so that they would really be really small and according to some aesthetic criterion, beautiful. Scholars have also read this norm as a norm that essentially limited women's mobility.

00:49:46:29 - 00:50:19:07

So it could be motivated by a very oppressive patriarchal society because it was so painful for women to move around that they couldn't so much. And in fact, among the poorer people who needed women to actually work, the practice was slightly changed so that the girl's feet, would not be bound until she got to marriageable age. Then they were bound for a little bit. And then after she got married again, it would stop because she still needed to go and work.

00:50:19:09 - 00:50:49:24

So you can see how the economic incentives came at play here. And then, you know, in the mid six hundreds, one of the emperors tried to outlaw it. It lasted six years. Then he lifted the ban. Then we're back to the time when missionaries started running campaigns against that, a law was passed, I think early 20th century. But really the practice stopped when the People's Republic of China was established in 1949.

00:50:49:26 - 00:51:32:24

So this is a case where, if you think ex post is the Chinese population happy that the practice ended? I suppose, yes. What would have been the economic costs? Immense. There was a dynamic of power, but maybe there was also some eventual abandonment – meant was a strong enough coordination solution that that pushed people out of it. So would we call it a win-win in this case? If we still think that the goal was to have women not so mobile or in a position of subordination, maybe not a win-win, but if we think of what it meant for productivity, health and so on.

00:51:33:00 - 00:51:37:16

Yes. So I don't know how you perceive these kind of situations.

00:51:37:20 - 00:52:16:22

It's a wonderful set of examples. And just to be clear, I mean, I'm an optimist in the sense that in the last few hundred years, I think there have been revolutionary emancipatory changes. But the phrase a win-wins in, say, the foot binding example conceals that what in fact happened is people change their normative standards and accepted new ends and therefore the destruction of their prior way of life. And I don't think that can really be thought of as a win-win because you're winning only at a new game and you've lost the game you used to be playing.

00:52:16:26 - 00:52:47:29

In this case patriarchal foot binding. So I do agree that sometimes that that kind of revolutionary change can happen in easier ways. And then sometimes it's really hard. And I think what the interesting thing is, since we're academics, you know, we might privilege the kinds of change that we can affect through, let's say, wonkish interventions. Think of the meteoric trajectory of the nudge intervention in our time.

00:52:48:01 - 00:53:15:27

And I guess my only reservation is that that can solve some problems and not others. And we wouldn't want to privilege the problems that seem more amenable to the kind of easier fixes just because they are easy or we know how to fix them, but we should fix all the problems. And the ones that you're discussing are I mean, are eminently worth addressing. And it's exciting that you're focusing on them.

00:53:17:07 - 00:53:41:06

You know, we started this conversation by hearing from each of you about how your work intersects with this big topic, the role of norms in economic development. And I think we've certainly covered what norms are, why they matter, and how changing them can be really hard to do. And I would love to hear from each of you a reflection you have coming out of this conversation that you might then bring back to your work.

00:53:41:14 - 00:54:09:11

The reflection I have, which I think comes every time I certainly talk to Eliana, is a reminder to be more optimistic about, you know, the good things that can happen in the world. So, I think that would be a reflection. I think the other reflection is that I think, you know, I think coordination is one of the hardest but the most important things we need to do to human behavior in order to, you know, make, I think, progress along dimensions that at least normatively we think are important.

00:54:09:13 - 00:54:09:29

Wonderful. Sam?

00:54:10:01 - 00:54:43:08

I will take a lot back to thinking about forms of social change. And, you know, as I said, I don't think we should maybe cast any disagreements in terms of optimism versus pessimism. Rather, I think it's really more about what kinds of tools are useful for making what kinds of change. And I do, you know, depart much more optimistic about the availability of certain kinds of changes than I was before I came.

00:54:43:12 - 00:55:50:10

It's been extremely educational for me, I must say, because I confess I've been so fascinated and focused on the beliefs, expectation, coordination aspect of all these things that I haven't really delved into the

institutional scenarios, especially historically, that made certain changes possible versus others. So I walk out of this with a lot of stimuli for learning more and trying maybe in future work to consider more seriously how some of these interventions that I've been studying or implementing, what's the scope for those to becoming part of a more structural approach to change that builds on formal institutions and the law? Because I must say, I do think that is really the end game, is when it becomes a feature of society that's embedded in formal institutions, it's a lot harder to erode.

00:55:50:12 - 00:56:07:23

So what conditions made it possible historically in different scenarios? I think that's something that, at least to me now, is probably the next aspect to understand and build on. Thank you for these extremely important and useful ideas.

00:56:07:25 - 00:56:11:18

Thank you. Eliana, Sam, Rohini, thank you so much for joining us.

00:56:11:25 - 00:56:14:02

Thank you. Thank you. Thanks.

00:56:24:17 - 00:57:00:22

That's all we have time for in this episode of Voices in Development. Thank you to everyone who helped to make it happen, including our guests who joined us at the Yale Broadcast Studio and several members of the Economic Growth Center team, including EGC Communications and Policy Associate Zahrah Abdulrauf, Vestal McIntyre, Communications Director at EGC, and EGC Production Intern Bomi Okuyiga. If you'd like to learn more about the Economic Growth Center, you can visit the website at egc.yale.edu, and look for the next installment of Voices in Development on EGC's website or on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.