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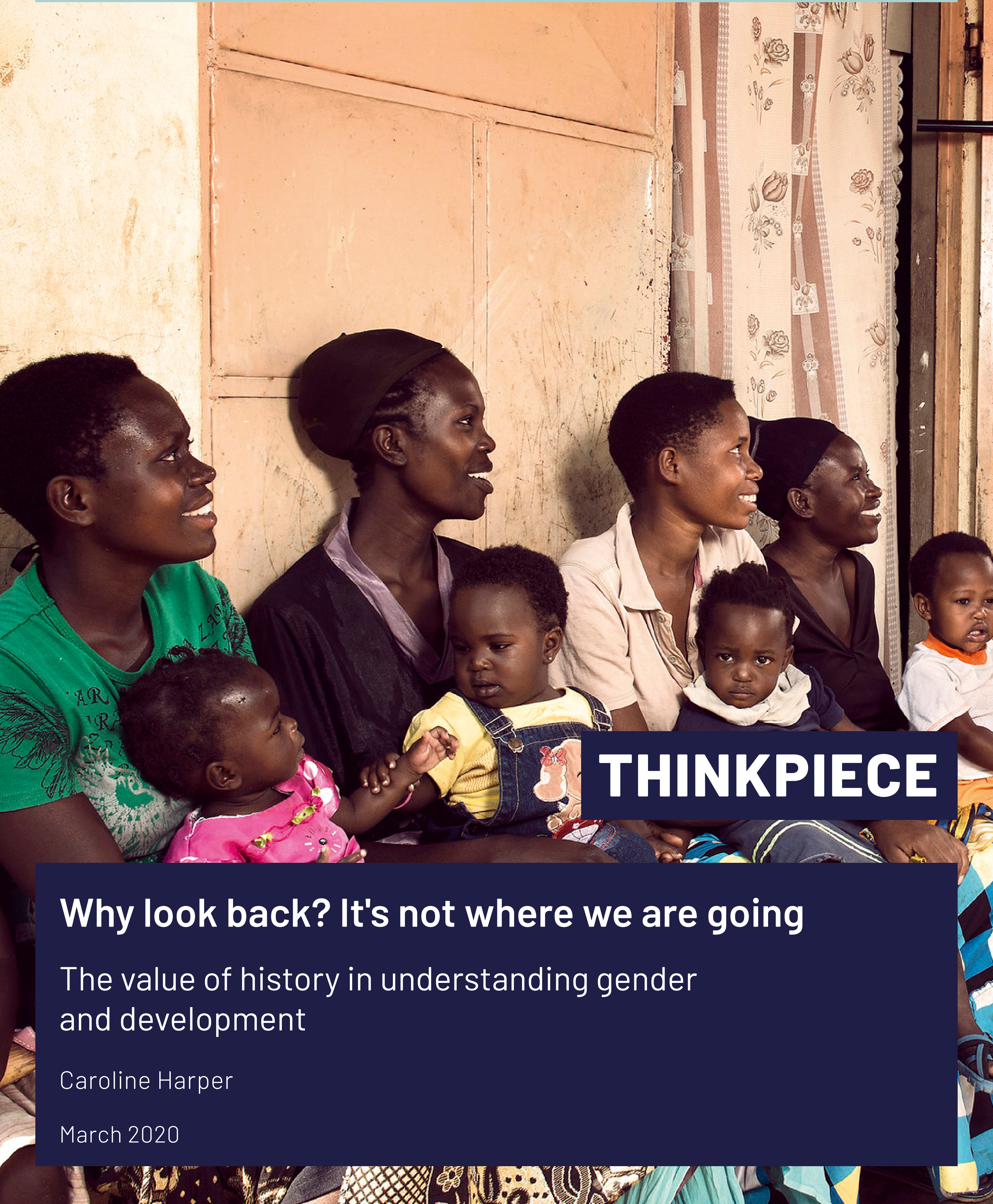
Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms



THINKPIECE

Why look back? It's not where we are going

The value of history in understanding gender and development

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Introduction

How much can we learn from the struggles of the past? Maya Angelou believed that it was essential to do so, writing: '*History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again*' (Angelou, 1993). There are many sentiments from the famous and wise about the value or otherwise of historical perspectives. Whilst Confucius allegedly urged all to '*study the past if you would define the future*', many others claim that history is written largely by the winners. They are all, in part, correct of course. Lessons can be learnt, knowledge is passed on, but we also must examine and re-examine historical account to challenge and offer alternative historical narratives.

Yet development policy and practice are rarely, if ever, informed by the intense scrutiny of historical patterns and processes of change. And this matters for efforts to challenge discriminatory gender norms that have roots that stretch back into the distant past and that are deeply embedded in society as a result.

'*Don't look back – it's not where you are heading*' seems to be a typical sentiment, with most suggestions for interventions based on – at best – a cursory glance at the far past and a more in-depth study of very recent experiences. This may explain the popularity of situation analyses focused on current conditions, and impact assessments that are carried out, for the most part, during and immediately after an intervention or policy change. Few actors in policy and practice development return to assess the sustainability of their project interventions more than a year after their project comes to an end (Marcus et al., 2017 and 2018).

This lack of historical insight in development practice is compounded by the reluctance of historians to draw on the past to predict the future, and for good reason. In looking back, the historian can see the combination of complex individual, social, political and economic circumstances that led to a particular outcome. Such a range of evidence cannot yet exist for the future, hence the professional view that:

> '*the canonical skill of the historian is being able to immerse themselves sufficiently in the full context of a period or a juncture faced by those in the past that they can recreate the openness to the alternatives that were available at that time, in the way that our own future is currently indeterminate to us today. As such, their task is to explore what other outcomes were plausible, and how particular combinations of actors, structures and events coalesced or not (for whatever reason or reasons) at a particular moment to give rise to the outcome that did occur rather than another*' (Woolcock et al., 2009: 13).

This is not the only hesitation. Historical interpretation is also seen as infested with ex-post rationalisations, assumed by those in power to justify the status quo. In development, such narratives, for example, can skim over the very real exploitation of resources that supported the development of rich nations to the detriment of less powerful countries. Instead, these narratives suggest that innovation, skills, behaviour changes and institutional reforms, are what is needed to achieve real progress. It can be argued, therefore, that it is simply easier and more convenient to ignore the historical perspective and get on with interventions based on short-term learning.

Why history matters for gender equality

For those working on gender equality and gender norm change, the norms reflected in discriminatory attitudes and behaviours are often rooted in belief systems that have a long history and deep roots in society. This does not mean they don't change, but it's often hard to quickly 'nudge' behaviours towards more gender-equitable forms, although there are exceptions when incentives or new opportunities can accelerate the speed of change.

Very often, it is hard for individuals to adopt new behaviours as they are constrained by others and by the institutions that shape their society. Unlike habits that can be broken, such as public spitting, smoking or not wearing seat belts, the ties that bind people to gender inequality rely on power, authority and control over others and these tend to change very slowly.

A long view, therefore, provides particularly useful insights into how to address gender inequalities, because it tells us about the past struggles and achievements on the long road towards gender justice. What we appreciate less, however, is the actual experience of achieving change, the effort involved in shifting norms, the time it takes and the areas that have proved most resistant as detailed in a companion think piece and paper for this series (Harper, 2020; Watson et al., 2020).

History provides a reality check

Perhaps this neglect of the long view is because once they open the box of historical experience, policy and practice actors soon realise that interventions that aim to generate achievable and sustainable change in less than 10 or 20 years make little sense. Even apparently straightforward interventions, such as inoculations, the provision of clean water, or the building of health facilities, take place in

complex environments that will shape their uptake and sustainability within any social context.

Success depends on changes in behaviours and beliefs to accommodate new infrastructure, organisations and understandings. Legal change, for example, has to penetrate a society if its implementation is to really benefit that society. Equality of service access and delivery has to be negotiated; and wider political and environmental conditions may still reinforce, or even scupper, the most rational and reasoned plan.

The one constant needed to tackle all of the above is a long time frame, so that social contexts can adapt and change, and interventions can make a meaningful and more lasting impact, as Woolcock et al. (2009: 20) argue:

> '*....if all development policy makers and practitioners had to read serious scholarly accounts by historians of successful national economic development in the past, they would come to a sobering realisation of the kind of time-scale they should be envisaging for their polices and plans to come to fruition. They would realise that units of time of approximately a half-century and certainly at the very least a quarter-century are required. Policy horizons of five years and even of ten years are, frankly, painfully and unrealistically short to anyone acquainted with economic history*'.

A longer view on processes of change presents development actors with a far more realistic understanding of their development efforts as Woolcock et al. (2009: 23) state:

> '*the flow of history in a developing society is too often regarded as "the problem", the embodiment of the inertia, the traditional ways, as something which needs to be changed or transformed by the application of development policies. More intelligent and realistic policies would start from the premise that the receiving society and its historical momentum are much more powerful and important than the applied policies, and the latter only really have a chance to succeed if they can work with the flow and the momentum of the society's history to encourage the desired kinds of selective adaptations*'.

Direction of travel

The long view also equips actors with vital clues about the direction of travel for interventions and policy actions. In particular, this could identify changed circumstances that make backward movement impossible. Backlash is sometimes envisaged as inevitable, but while some resistance to change is likely, change strategies can move from advocating merits or mitigating resistance to implementation and a deepening of commitment, if the underlying conditions and drivers of discrimination no longer exist.

Cook (2003: 1) has assessed departures from notions of strict sexual morality in post-1960 Britain, when the availability of contraceptives and promise of higher wages released women and men into new modes of behaviour.

> '*The clock could only be put back if the advances in contraceptive technology could be airbrushed away, and if women could be comprehensively denied equal pay and access to their preferred careers. Since neither of these is within the realm of the possible, it follows that the traditional pattern of family and sexual practice must be treated as obsolete; the enabling conditions which sustained it over several centuries no longer exist. The sexual revolution is a fait accompli, and the task of government is...to manage it*'.

When the drivers of such practices cease to exist, the draw of tradition or belonging is more easily dismissed.

Cultures are not fixed

The long view also makes it possible to contest arguments that cultures are fixed, dense and too complex to merit engagement by development actors. While sentiments such as '*this is our culture, leave it alone*' have become much less common, they are still heard, and often in relation to women's rights.

Long-view lessons tell us that cultures are not fixed, and a deep analysis can reveal that they are, in fact, fluid and constantly changing, which gives us important insights into potential arbiters of positive change. Douglas (1966), for example, identified the fluidity of social practices that are constantly adapting and changing, despite a preference for continuity.

One problem is that the long 'tradition' of culture is often viewed as a state of permanence or part of a fixed social order. However, analysis of change over time often illustrates that the opposite is true – that society is almost always in a state of flux and that norms are being contested (García Iommi, 2019; Sandholtz, 2019).

As the eminent social anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966: 140) wrote, '*Perhaps all social systems are built on contradiction, in some sense at war with themselves*'. Douglas identifies the prevailing experience in society as one of

paradoxical change, rather than order and continuity. But this sits uncomfortably with the tendency of societies to try and construct order and boundaries to hold back the perceived dangers of change. In reality, change is always with us, and as Douglas explains, '*the actor can resist and condemn, and try and turn back time or, more positively, can confront the anomaly and create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place*' (ibid: 38).

The challenge for individuals is to be able to step out of their own 'normal' and see that a different world and way of living is possible. Bourdieu (1990), for example, examines the notion of Doxa, where understanding the world outside one's own 'normal' appears impossible to conceive. And indeed, many local development interventions encourage just this type of reflection, especially in relation to gender norms, stepping outside of one's own assumptions and belief systems to examine alternative ways of thinking and doing. Change causes fractures in social relations that can take time to heal, and resistance or backlash can be strong. Giving up power and privilege is a challenge for individuals and groups, particularly where one party gains considerably from the status quo.

A cultural unravelling occurs, as Watson et al. (2018: 192) describe in relation to their research on Uganda:

> '*the "sense of chaos", with which the leaders, the guardians of ethnic and religious values in the ideational sphere, are struggling, in the face of larger forces of socioeconomic and cultural change, their authority challenged as cultural control and the power of sanctions are lost*'.

In this case, male elders refer to themselves as 'empty trousers' depleted of power over their daughters whose opportunities now preclude the early marriages parents had anticipated.

For development actors, recognising that change is inevitable and helping to accommodate the change towards more equitable norms by family and community (or even just encouraging space for peer-to-peer reflection), can greatly support change processes. But changing behaviours and norms is not simply an individual choice: it is a society-wide process.

Bedrocks for change

Investment in health and education, the development of legal systems and economic and social policies are all fundamental to drive change. Continuous development in these areas is of course vital for any functioning society, but progressive change needs progressive laws which are then implemented, education systems which are transformative and attentive to gender equality, and health systems which recognise how gender norms impact on almost every aspect of health delivery, including research and training (*Lancet*, 2019). Transformation of gender relations needs institutional and not just individual attention.

The long view illustrates only too clearly that social progress and justice rely on inter-dependent processes and combinations of actors, structures and events. It also reminds development actors that change as a result of policy or development projects is anything but linear, and that it is essential to understand the specific context: '*policymakers need to be more realistic about the way in which their policies will mix into the flow of a society's history and not simply imagine they will achieve the "laboratory" results they wish for them*' (Woolcock et al., 2009: 23).

Wider trends and pressures, largely beyond a nation's control, also have profound impacts on social relations and can unsettle the status quo. Fast economic growth or recession, migration, climate change and related environmental hazards – all of these factors are largely beyond the individual control of policy and practice actors, but they can stymie or stimulate intended change processes. Some, such as the climate crisis, now occur at unprecedented scales and represent new territory. Others have more predictable impacts. Economic crisis, for example, has well-studied social and gendered impacts and well-reasoned mitigation strategies, producing lessons from which some countries have learnt (Harper, et al., 2012). Similarly, the social impacts of environmental hazards can be anticipated. The much wider impact of climate crisis, migration and conflict on norm change requires more understanding.

What we do understand, however, is that gender norms will not change without legal institutions that protect rights, and without education that lifts individuals to new opportunities and provides them with skills for critical thinking. But even with strong legal systems and education, gender norms may not change. Both are vital bedrocks for social change. Their impact, however, depends on the actors, the contexts, the civil organisations in place and the courage that is needed to use all of these structures and systems effectively to accelerate equality and opportunity (Harper, 2020).

Educated women, for example, continue to be denied jobs or are paid less than their male counterparts. They may be allowed to speak, but that doesn't mean they are heard. They have capabilities but are denied opportunities

and critically, given their care responsibilities, they consistently have less time than men for anything outside the home. Even so, education and strong legal systems and laws that protect rights are crucial areas for investment. But they have to be implemented and their potential actually realised, if they are to be of real value in the push for gender equality.

Mary Wollstonecraft, the radical author of the late 18th century (sometimes referred to as the founder of western feminism) saw education as the key to social improvement and was a dauntless advocate of political reforms. Writing in 1792 she stated: '*If women be educated for dependence; that is, to act according to the will of another fallible being, and submit, right or wrong, to power, where are we to stop?*' (Wollstonecraft, 1792). This sentiment is as true now as it was then.

Dominant narratives

As George Orwell warned: '*Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past*' (1949: 44). Historical interpretation, whether it's an interpretation we like or not, is often deployed by political actors to justify particular actions, trajectories and practices. It is important, therefore, that historians, policy analysts and activists keep our collective memory sharp, so that all actors can challenge myths and erroneous narratives that may be used to justify inaction ('*this is the way we have always done things*') or neglected action ('*our women expect to be treated in this way*'). Otherwise, change actors risk falling into such complacent ways of thinking, or worse, such narratives may enable an entire population to maintain an inequitable status quo.

Women in important roles, who have made important discoveries or taken important actions, are often airbrushed from historical accounts. This is certainly the case in science, politics and in social movements. Historical accounts can uncover these injustices and reveal role models who are, in themselves, a vital ingredient in the change process, inspiring new generations of actors. As the testimonies from women activists in Uganda and Nepal illustrate (Harper, 2020: Watson et al., 2020), their brave action over 30 years is an untold narrative of social change in both countries.

Courage

Finally, one important lesson about the long view is that we should recognise the courageous acts of individuals or groups, and courageous persistence in the face of defeat, both of which play a role in systemic changes. The inspiration of role models and leaders and the often unspoken and undocumented courage of individuals should not be underestimated.

The powerful will always scorn, deride and undermine courageous acts as they try to maintain the status quo and their own source of power, as we see in the bravery of climate activist Greta Thunberg as she takes on an increasingly public and high-profile role. She has been patronised by the President of the United States and dismissed and derided by senior politicians and economists (New York Times, 2019; VOX, 2020). The rest of us, however, are in her debt. In Uganda, one feminist activist who raised her voice against the patriarchal directions of religious interpretations had a fatwa issued against her (Harper, 2020; Watson et al., 2020). She reported that pastors are '*obsessed*' with her and her '*satanic ways*'. She observed that she was once voted the '*worst woman of the year*' in a national newspaper, taking her place alongside Joseph Kony (of the Lord's Resistance Army) as the worst man. But she states that she wears this as '*a badge of honour*' because it means they are taking her seriously: '*I am a threat to their ideologies…If you are rocking the boat, of course you will be attacked. I would be disappointed if not*' (Harper, 2020: 16).

Untold histories, when revealed, tell us that even though individual actions, particularly by women, are erased from social history, we can see the impact of such action if we look hard enough. Solnit (2009) has found that unseen social movements – as well as unseen individual women – have been instrumental in forcing change. The power of social movements often goes undocumented because such movements tend to be a loose fabric of dispersed actors, all playing small but significant roles. Solnit (2009: 22) writes that accounts of change often overlook '*groundswells, sea cliffs and alternatives, the forms in which popular power manifests itself*'. Perhaps that is why this often-quoted sentiment seems to resonate so widely: '*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has*' (Margaret Mead quoted in Keys, 1982: 79).

It is typical of each new generation to be both angry and inspired. To use new energy to address some old and some new problems. To argue for a better way forward. We know we build on what went before, but we don't necessarily understand the struggles of the people involved or the timeframes necessary for change. After five years we expect our efforts to be rewarded. After 10, we begin to doubt. At 15 years we may feel that it is all hopeless and question our own labour. I suggest that we take a more positive view: after 25 years we begin to understand the nature of change and see that our work has, after all, been worthwhile.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and what works to change – discriminatory gender norms.

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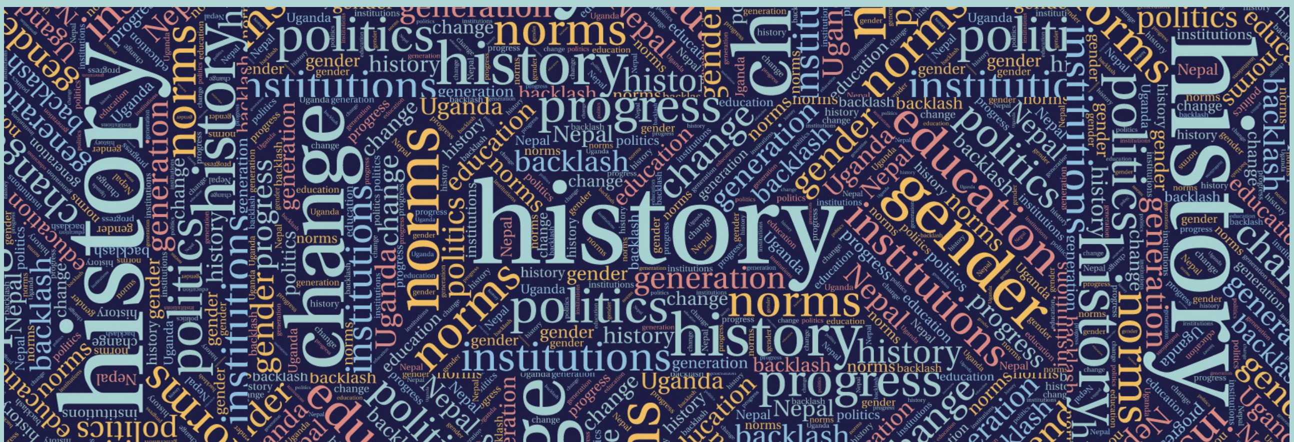
Front cover: A community health promoter teaches mothers with small children about nutrition at her home hear Mityebili, Uganda. © Stephan Gladieu/World Bank



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