

AID FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

CAREN GROWN¹, TONY ADDISON² and FINN TARP^{2,3*}

¹*The World Bank, Washington, DC, USA*

²*United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), Helsinki, Finland*

³*Department of Economics, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark*

Abstract: This UNU-WIDER special issue of the *Journal of International Development* comprises a set of papers on the theme of aid and gender equality. While the topic of aid effectiveness has been examined in this journal and elsewhere, the focus on how well development assistance to countries and non-governmental organizations promotes gender equality and empowers women is relatively new. This special issue is the first to marshal quantitative evidence and case studies on several themes: (1) macroanalyses of aid effectiveness and gender equality; (2) the determinants of aid for gender equality and women's empowerment; and (3) gender issues related to aid for education, health, land administration, fragile states and climate finance. © 2016 UNU-WIDER. *Journal of International Development* published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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1 INTRODUCTION¹

International donors have been concerned about gender equality and women's empowerment since at least 1975, when the United Nations launched the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985), followed, over the next 40 years, by a number of key governmental commitments bringing women's rights to centre stage. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 (United Nations, 1995) and the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 5 in 2015. In parallel with these global commitments, major

*Correspondence to: Finn Tarp, UNU-WIDER, Helsinki, Finland.
E-mail: finn@wider.unu.edu

¹This article is based on UNU-WIDER (2014).

bilateral and multilateral donors have initiated a large number of projects and programmes on gender equality and female empowerment, especially in low-income countries.

What has been the impact of such assistance? Have donor efforts translated into large-scale transformation for women's empowerment or progress in closing gender gaps in key domains? This special issue of the *Journal of International Development* examines the theme of aid and gender equality.² While the topic of aid effectiveness has been examined in this journal and elsewhere, the focus on how well development assistance to countries and non-governmental organizations promotes gender equality and empowers women is relatively new. This special issue is the first to marshal quantitative evidence and case studies on several key themes in aid for gender equality: (1) macroanalyses of aid effectiveness and gender equality; (2) whether donors provide support for gender equality and women's empowerment on the basis of need or rewards to countries that are committed to closing gender gaps; and (3) micro-level evidence on the impacts of gender equality-focused aid in education, health, land administration, fragile states and climate finance. This introductory article is structured as follows. The first section discusses the context for donor aid over the past few decades. The second section reviews the macroliterature on aid and gender, while the third section examines the qualitative and case study literature on specific approaches and sectors. The final section concludes.

Overall, this analysis finds that donor support has contributed to reducing maternal mortality and gender gaps in primary enrolment and completion, and the case study and impact evaluation literature has documented the good practices that have made this progress possible. On the other hand, action on improving women's employment, asset ownership and participation in key governance structures such as national parliaments has been slower; donors have only recently begun to invest in these areas, and impact evaluations on what works are not yet conclusive. Donor attention in these areas is critical as far too many women are still left behind in the process of economic development, and talk of 'inclusive growth' cannot be made a reality if women's skills, access to decent work, ownership of businesses, land and finance and meaningful participation do not match those of men (and without a deterioration in living standards for all).

2 DONOR EFFORTS

Early in the 1970s, the predominant approach followed by donors included investing in projects targeted to women, especially in the sectors of education and health. More recently, donors have moved to a twin-track approach—supporting direct investments in activities for women and/or girls in specific sectors, and 'mainstreaming' a gender perspective in all donor policies and programmes (Brouwers, 2013).

While mainstreaming was intended to help institutions move beyond a fragmented project approach, it has not lived up to early expectations. Mainstreaming involves 'systematically integrating gender perspectives in policies, programmes and projects'.³ Recent reviews, however, document that mainstreaming has not succeeded in embedding a gender equality orientation into the institutional DNA of most development agencies,

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³Beijing Platform for Action, Strategic Objective H2.

and gender equality results have been fragmented and too rarely scaled up.⁴ Donors have been faulted for making commitments to address gender equality without follow-through to build staff capacity, allocate adequate financing and monitor and evaluate results (African Development Bank, 2011).

Part of the problem lies with the multi-dimensional nature of gender equality, which does not neatly align with most programme categories or sectors where donors typically work, and which requires specialists with both expertise in gender analysis and sector-specific or context/country-specific skills. This multi-dimensionality further makes it difficult to track efforts to close gender gaps systematically in the routines of resource allocation, and many agencies may not even be aware of whether their allocations are sufficient to match their policy commitments. Indeed, a review of donor resources allocated to gender equality reveals that they do not match the policy rhetoric.⁵ During 2002–2013, the amount of screened aid⁶ that can be attributed to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment ranged between 8 and 18 per cent (with the higher percentages mainly in the latter 6 years). The shift to gender mainstreaming is seen to have exacerbated the problem because it has not been linked to flows of funding in donor agencies (Grown *et al.*, 2008).

Moreover, while many donor institutions' policy documents recognize the multi-dimensionality of gender equality and women's empowerment, it has been hard to implement gender mainstreaming systematically and comprehensively across development sectors. Most bilateral donor aid for gender equality is channelled to specific sectors, notably education and health. In education, which receives the largest share of gender equality-focused aid (about 40 per cent), funding is focused on increasing girls' enrolment in basic and secondary school. About a third of gender equality-focused aid is in basic health—including primary healthcare programmes, health infrastructure and health education. Support for family planning and reproductive health care make up a very small share of total aid that is gender-focused in the health sector, although it has increased in recent years as has the focus on maternal death (Hsu *et al.*, 2012). By contrast, a relatively small share of aid in the economic sectors (transport, communications, energy, banking and business, agriculture, industry and mining) or in governance has a gender equality objective (UNU-WIDER, 2014).

The sector-specific focus and existence of development programme 'silos' leads to missed opportunities for multi-dimensional action. For instance, donor agency programmes commonly refer to increasing women's economic status as a pathway to improving reproductive health outcomes, yet rarely do health programmes link to economic interventions, and interventions that combine economic and reproductive health are also rare.

⁴Two excellent recent reviews are African Development Bank (2011) and Brouwers (2013.)

⁵Since 1991, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) has been tracking member countries' commitments to gender equality/female empowerment using a policy marker that screens commitments according to whether their principal objective is to promote gender equality/women's empowerment, or whether the promotion of these objectives figures as a significant component within a larger programme. The 'principal objective' category reflects stand-alone projects targeting women and girls, and the 'significant' category reflects gender mainstreaming (e.g. interventions within a larger sector programme such as education, health, agriculture, rural development, urban development, water and sanitation and energy). For example, agricultural projects may include special components to recruit and train women extension workers, or education programmes may include special subsidies for girls to attend school. See OECD-DAC (1999).

⁶All 24 DAC members now use the marker when they report their aid statistics. However, in interpreting the data, the OECD-DAC (2012, p. 4) cautions analysts to take into account the proportion of aid, which is screened with the marker, because 'a high percentage of gender equality-focused aid alone does not mean that aid is well aligned with the gender equality policy objective; such a conclusion would only be valid for a donor with 100 per cent coverage'. In 2011, approximately 80 per cent of commitments were screened for the marker.

Another problem with mainstreaming is that, in practice, the term ‘gender’ is often seen to be synonymous with women. A more sophisticated approach aimed at understanding the relational context between men and women, or the ways in which gender norms are embedded in institutions, market forces and cultural interactions, is infrequently found in donor programmes and projects. However, achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment requires this more nuanced understanding in order to effectively target and reduce gender bias. Finally, while there may be a need to target the disadvantage of either women or men in the context of a specific programme, or need for separate spaces for men and women, overall strategies for gender equality must engage all key stakeholders. Sexual violence will not disappear until male allies, perpetrators and victims are partners in solving the problem. Employment and small business projects to promote women’s economic well-being will have the greatest durable results when structured so that men see the benefits to themselves and their household’s well-being (Koppell & Grown, 2012).

3 EFFECTIVENESS OF AID: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Given this context, what is known about the effectiveness of donor assistance to promote gender equality? Pickbourn and Ndikumana (this issue), using OECD data to assess the sectoral allocation of aid, find that aid in health has been effective in reducing maternal mortality and that aid in education is effective in reducing the female–male gap in youth literacy. These findings reinforce other research on aid in these two sectors (Riddell, 2012).

A number of analyses explore the determinants of aid for gender equality and specifically the role that female participation plays. Balamoune-Lutz (this issue) asks whether overseas development assistance to women’s equality organizations and institutions promotes women’s political empowerment, which leads to other outcomes beneficial to women. She finds that development assistance to women’s equality organizations and institutions increases the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. And, when women become a critical mass in national parliaments, there is a stronger push for gender equality laws (Hallward-Driemeier *et al.*, 2013). So, development assistance to women’s equality organizations and institutions can play a crucial role in enhancing women’s role in shaping policies and laws in their countries for greater gender equality outcomes.

A twist on this question is whether female representation in parliaments or aid agencies in donor countries leads to higher allocations of aid for gender equality or differences in the composition of aid.⁷ Kleemann *et al.* (this issue) test the hypothesis that gender inequality in education in recipient countries—represented by indicators for gender gaps in education—is more likely to shape the allocation behaviour of donor countries which are more gender aware, proxied by female leadership of the ministry that carries the principal responsibility for the allocation of aid, over 1995–2011. Women on average were politically responsible for the allocation of aid in roughly a third of the 17 years under consideration, but the authors find no evidence for a needs-based allocation of aid. Rather, recipient countries where gender-neutral and gender-specific indicators reveal greater need

⁷An early study by Breuning (2006) finds that stronger female representation in parliament is associated with more generous aid policies; this hypothesis was retested and expanded by Lu and Breuning (2014) to include women’s participation in cabinet and specific ministries (foreign affairs, trade, development cooperation) in 2011. They affirm the earlier result that female representation in parliament has a significant impact on donor generosity, while female representation in cabinet and ministries is insignificant.

are typically *less* likely to be selected, and selected countries receive *less* aid for education, controlling for economic conditions. Although female leaders of the relevant ministries behaved as their male counterparts in selecting recipients of aid for education, they were more generous than male leaders in subsequent decisions about the amount of aid.

In contrast to assessing whether aid is performance based, an alternative is to focus on whether aid is needs based, which is the approach followed by Breuning (2006). She examines whether four large donors (France, Japan, the UK and the USA) account for gender equality (measured by the male–female literacy gap) when they allocate aid to African countries and finds that aid recipients with a higher gender literacy gap received a larger share of the overall aid these donors have given to Africa from 1993 to 2003. More recently, Dreher *et al.* (2015) investigate whether overall aid commitments and aid to specific sectors are higher to countries where gender inequality is particularly severe, and whether and how donors respond to changes in gender gaps. Their analysis covers 1982–2011; indicators measure outcomes of women relative to men as well as levels of absolute outcomes for women in five domains: women’s rights, life expectancy, education, employment and political participation. The authors find that gender gaps in education and health affect the allocation of aid overall and in relevant sectors. Similar to Baliaoune-Lutz, higher female political representation and a better protection of women’s rights are correlated with higher aid flows overall and in some sectors, while gender gaps in employment do not seem to affect the allocation of aid. But they also find that aid is needs based; if a recipient country provides good legal conditions for women, but large inequality persists, donors are more likely to increase aid. However, the quantitative effects of the statistically significant variables are rather modest and differ by donor groups and characteristics.

4 EFFECTIVENESS OF AID: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The macroliterature/sectoral literature discussed in the preceding text establishes some correlations on aid effectiveness and closure of gender gaps but does not answer specific questions about which specific interventions work and why. Impact evaluations, case studies and qualitative research illuminate these issues and lessons learned.

The impact evaluation literature shows that, in education, scholarships and stipends for secondary education are proven interventions for enrolment and completion, while promising but unproven approaches include transportation strategies, boarding schools, and community engagement, gender-awareness training for teachers, mentoring, tutoring and peer support for girls. Evaluations have identified a number of effective interventions to reduce maternal mortality and improve reproductive health within and outside the health sector—strengthening integrated (as opposed to siloed or vertical) health systems and community-based education programmes.⁸ While a number of options exist in theory to enhance women’s economic status—including provision of loans and equity capital for

⁸See Greco *et al.* (2008), Freedman *et al.* (2005) and Rand and Tarp (2011). The literature on maternal mortality has converged on an essential packet of interventions: high-quality delivery care composed of a skilled attendant at delivery, access to emergency obstetric care and a functional referral system, with the latter being the core of the package. All three interventions are aimed at reducing delays in reaching a facility and improving the provision of care after reaching a facility. Family planning services are also an integral part of health systems, but they have not yet been sustainably integrated and scaled up in many low-income countries. Implementation research is necessary to guide expansion of proven integration models.

business development, vocational training, direct income generation schemes, services to help the transition from school to work and activities to improve labour standards and conditions of work—in practice donors have tended to focus on microcredit and enterprise development. The sizeable impact evaluation literature on microcredit and enterprise development suggests that it can improve women's roles in household decision-making (in some but not all contexts) but show mixed impacts on business viability and success. Other potential interventions to reduce gender gaps in asset ownership and upgrade wage employment have not yet been systematically evaluated but show potential.⁹ In this issue, Munk Ravnborg *et al.* discuss what has worked to promote gender equality in land tenure as part of the new wave of land governance reform, including joint titling and registration but also reforms in marital and inheritance law. This reinforces other impact evaluation findings, including Ali *et al.* (2011, 2012) examining land tenure regularization in Rwanda and Tanzania, Deininger *et al.* (2007) examining land certification in Ethiopia and Newman *et al.* (2015) analysing joint land titling in Vietnam.

Quotas and reservations are a 'proven' tool to increase female representation in national and local political bodies, but not sufficient for changing power relations.¹⁰ Promising approaches include leadership training for female politicians, media interventions and civic education addressing views of female office holders. In the area of peace and security, Hellsten (this issue) explores implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Kenya to tease out promising approaches and challenges for development agencies. As a response to gender-based violence, promising interventions include 'one-stop shops' that provide legal, health and economic assistance services, while interventions to prevent intimate partner violence—such as norms change, curbing alcohol abuse and reducing childhood exposure—are in their infancy, especially in low-income and mid-income countries.¹¹

Cornwall (this issue) revisits and draws on foundational feminist work on the concept of empowerment from the 1980s and 1990s, 'Pathways of Women's Empowerment', to explore paths of positive change in women's lives in diverse contexts. The study introduces the Pathways programme, its methodology and themes, to disclose key findings highlighting examples of 'what works'. Drawing out principal lessons, the article concludes with reflections on implications for development policy and practice.

Embedding gender into climate finance is a newer concern. Focusing on the examples of tree planting, climate-smart agriculture and disaster information dissemination projects, Wong (this issue) argues that climate finance can achieve gender equity if three aspects are critically considered: (1) how different incentives and preferences, between men and women, are shaped by their livelihood experiences and priorities, and what factors enable, and restrict, their access to resources; (2) how formal and informal participatory arenas offer genuine space for women, and men, to make decisions that empower them; and (3) how women's practical and strategic needs are met and the contradictions resolved.

⁹Buvinic *et al.* (2013) provide a meta-level review of random-control impact evaluations covering different types of interventions in entrepreneurship, wage employment and agriculture on increases in women's productivity and earnings.

¹⁰Beyond increasing female representation over a fairly rapid period of time, quotas and reservations are associated (in varying degrees) with a number of other outcomes, including increased legislative responsiveness to female concerns, targeting of public goods, better governance and changed girls' aspirations and educational attainment (Pande and Ford, 2011; Beath *et al.*, 2013).

¹¹See Heise (2011) for a review of stand-alone, single or multi-component activities as well as single or multi-sector activities incorporated within sectors such as education, micro-enterprise or access to justice that aim to prevent and respond to intimate-partner violence.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Gender equality advocates and others have for decades been working to alter the distribution of power, opportunity and outcomes for women and men, calling for a fundamental shift in the approach to development that is based on such transformations. Yet, innovations have proven difficult to translate into practice at the scale required to bring about profound change. In light of the increasingly compelling evidence that donors and partners need to do a better job, how can they improve efforts to achieve gender equality and female empowerment?

A number of changes in the institutional practices of development agencies would be a first step. Donors should move away from characterizing ‘gender’ as a cross-cutting issue. Describing gender as cross-cutting means it is less likely to be addressed systematically across all the domains where gaps exist between men and women—from economic growth, to food security, to effective governance, to peace and stability. Rather, an approach that directs country strategies, programmes and projects to concrete results in partner countries is likely to be more successful. This means identifying specific gaps between men and women that should be targeted for closure—for instance, targeting productivity gaps between female and male smallholders as part of agriculture and food security programmes and whether these are due to constraints in access to inputs or returns to inputs (Arndt & Tarp, 2000; Doss, 2015; Kilic *et al.*, 2015). Too often, strategies, programmes and projects are vague about the outcomes they seek to achieve for men and women, the gender biases that need to be addressed and the gaps and inequalities between men and women that need to be reduced for better outcomes. Such outcomes should reflect the commitments countries have made under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and Millennium Development Goal 3 and reflected in national or sector action plans.

Donors can put in place stronger institutional mechanisms for fostering synergies and knowledge across sectors and monitoring systems to help them assess whether they are achieving identified outcomes. Donors should conduct and use higher-quality gender analysis more systematically in policy, programme and project design and implementation. They can invest more resources in impact evaluation and the collection of sex-disaggregated data to help understand what works and what does not across contexts. Internal learning processes, geared at strengthening donors’ capacities for analysis and responsiveness, are part of what will be needed for such investment to produce returns to development. They can improve upon and use more systematically a variety of tools to estimate the costs of gender inequality, and the financing needs for interventions that promote it within and across various sectors.

Data gaps at the national and sub-national level are a large impediment to assessing and monitoring aid effectiveness. Considerable improvements have been made in collecting gender data over the last decade. Data users know much more today about differences in women’s and men’s situations. Furthermore, users of data are asking more questions and demanding high-quality statistics. Yet, cross-country data are still lacking on many topics that are important for assessing inequalities between women and men within and across countries. For instance, only 70 countries have conducted population-based surveys on the prevalence of violence against women, and only 40 of these are at the national level (UN Women, 2013). Because data are a public good and underfinanced, development agencies can play a key role to help countries and the international system fill key gender data gaps—such as those on economic activity and gender-based violence.

6 CONCLUSIONS

While this review has shown development assistance has contributed to progress toward gender equality, much still remains to be investigated. It is our hope that this UNU-WIDER special issue on aid and gender equality, which emerged from UNU-WIDER's Research and Communication Programme on Foreign Aid, will stimulate more analysis on this vitally important topic. With the Sustainable Development Goals now in place, and the heightened attention given to gender equality and female empowerment in these goals, we can expect more action by donors and their country partners in the years ahead. But to be effective, and to have impact at scale, this action must be informed by high-quality research that yields recommendations for practical action.

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