



Report No 57

Gender and Development: Frequently Asked Questions

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1. Gender in Development

What right have we to interfere in other people's cultures?

All development interventions engage with other people's cultures regardless of whether they have gender equality goals or not. However, many within the international development community only label it 'cultural interference' when it comes to confronting and redressing gender inequalities. This fails to recognise that gender equality is now firmly fixed as an international priority, including by partner governments, often the signatories of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This 'cultural caution' also denies legitimacy and support to the local women's organisations and NGOs struggling for women's rights to be recognised as human rights within their country. Successful interventions are therefore more about sensitive partnership rather than interference.

Cries of 'cultural imperialism' and 'western interference' are also used by local people and Governments to reject development interventions generally. Whilst there are genuine concerns around international power relations and who can legitimately set the development agenda, these defenses of 'culture' tend to be used to selectively reject those interventions seeking to challenge unequal gender power relations. The voices that tend to be absent from these debates are those of the women themselves. Careful use of participatory methodologies can give weight to local women's priorities and solutions. This can guard against male imposed agendas, whether from within or outside the country, and from well meaning yet insensitive calls for intervention from western feminists that might fix local women with 'victim' status. Local women need to set their own agendas – which may involve changing cultural norms and practices or prioritising more general anti-poverty measures – and gain support for these from international development agencies and from their own governments.

As a man, how is gender relevant to me?

'Gender' is not shorthand for 'women' – the achievement of gender equality requires change from both women and men. The term 'gender' is about the socially acceptable ideas of what it is to be female or male, and concerns how these ideas impact on the power relations between women and men at all levels in society. Given that it is women that tend to be excluded or disadvantaged in these relations, efforts to redress the balance have more often focused on women. However, a mistake early on in development cooperation was to focus on women exclusively, rather than on the social relationships in which they are embedded. Frustration with the lack of progress of such an approach in changing women's lives and influencing the broader development agenda, brought the focus onto both women and men in relation to each other.

Whilst women have primarily taken the lead in fighting for gender to be placed at the heart, rather than in the margins, of development thinking and practice – men have also played a role in this process. This includes men's organisations that advocate women's rights and gender equality, and male gender advocates within development cooperation agencies. It is necessary to broaden the support and participation of men in order to strengthen this process.

The pursuit of gender equality is in everyone's interest and is both women's and men's responsibility. A gender perspective also recognises that cultural ideas of gender identity can also constrain men as well as women - and that specific initiatives may have to focus on men's problems which have failed to be addressed, such as reproductive and sexual health needs.

'If gender is to be everybody's issue, then we need to find constructive ways of working with men as well as with women to build the confidence to do things differently'
(Andrea Cornwall, 1997:12)

I can see how gender is relevant to health, but how is it relevant to economic policy?

In fact, gender is relevant to all sectors and all disciplines. The mistaken belief that 'gender' is just another term for 'women' has led some people to conclude that gender concerns are only relevant to sectors traditionally associated with women, such as health, and therefore irrelevant to economic policy for example. In fact gender is a cross-cutting theme.

Care is seen across most societies as a woman's domain due to their socially ascribed roles as child-rearers and household managers. This explains the predominance of women among both users and front-line providers of health care, although not among highly trained medical experts. Whilst women do have special health needs different to those of men, and may prefer health providers who are female, casting reproductive health as a women's domain reinforces women's role as carers, with costs to their time and freedom to engage in other activities. It may also be damaging for men as their specific health needs and interests may be overlooked.

By contrast, economic policy is typically 'gender blind'; the vast majority of economists are men and gender issues are not seen as relevant at this level. In part this stems from a general failure of economic policy frameworks to be 'people-centred'. More specifically, it relates to the lack of understanding in economic theory of, for example, inequalities in household resource allocation, and of unpaid labour, predominantly performed by women, as being crucial to economic life. However, this is now changing with increasing recognition of the relevance of gender in the inter-linkages between macro and micro levels of the economy. For example, how the division of labour and control of resources within the household shape the opportunities and outcomes for women outside the home. And how macroeconomic policy, such as structural adjustment programmes, cannot assume the infinite elasticity of women's unpaid labour to take up the increased care burden that falls on the household in times of public health expenditure cuts. Therefore, gender concerns cross-cuts all sectors and disciplines, having great relevance to each.

Won't economic growth lead to gender equality?

Not necessarily – economic growth is not a panacea as gender inequality is found in all societies. There is no strong correlation between high gross domestic

product (GDP) and gender equality. While some countries with high GDP also have relatively high levels of equality, others do not. Indeed there are some countries, such as Mexico, China, Cuba and Costa Rica with relatively low GDP levels, that outperform Japan and France in terms of women's empowerment (measured by the UNDP Gender Empowerment Measure – GEM). Similarly, among poorer countries, there is great variation in the degree of equality. For example, Mozambique outperforms the richer Zambia in terms of women's participation in economic and political life.

In fact, much has been written about the potential of export-oriented growth to improve women's well-being through enhanced employment opportunities. However, the evidence for significant improvements in gender equality is scant. It has been suggested that it is gender inequality itself, particularly in terms of gender wage inequality, that is positively correlated with GDP growth in these newer export-oriented economies. UNIFEM research suggests that whilst women may have been the initial beneficiaries of export-oriented employment in Mexico, increasing male unemployment and increasing reliance on high technologies has led to men's share of employment rising at the expense of women's in border export processing zones.

How can we talk about the luxury of gender equality when millions live in poverty?

Gender equality is not a luxury to be aspired to only once other needs have been met - it is in everyone's best interests. For centuries, women of different classes, races and cultures have struggled to attain equal rights and status with men. These hard won rights are now firmly established in international conventions (such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW]) and agreements (such as the Beijing Platform for Action) to which most governments worldwide are signatories. In some cases they have also been translated into constitutional and legal rights.

Although equality provisions exist on paper, in reality gender discrimination persists. Gender inequality contributes to poverty because women's access to resources is constrained by cultural norms and practices which reinforce their subordinate status. Women's choices are limited by discrimination in public life, in the workplace and the home. Many of the millions who live in poverty are women (some estimates suggest 70 percent) and especially many of the poorest are women. Therefore, without addressing gender discrimination we cannot bring about an improvement in overall well-being and meet targets for poverty reduction.

Who is looking after the interests of men?

In fact, over time, development interventions have tended to benefit men's interests. Because men dominate decision-making in political and economic institutions, and indeed in development cooperation agencies, policies tend to reflect the interests of men rather than women, however unintentionally. This male-bias in the development process has been exposed and challenged in recent times – but there remains much work to be done. For example, continued focusing of development resources on the male household head fails to

appreciate how inequalities in household gender relations can mitigate against all household members benefiting equally. Structural adjustment programmes that fail to factor in any affect on the unpaid labour sector can lead to ever increasing work burdens for women, having to cope with the shift of health care to the household, for example. It is therefore crucial to redress these type of imbalances through gender concerns being mainstreamed throughout organisations.

This is not to say, however, that men's needs and interests should not be looked after— but not presented as 'society's' interests or at the expense of women's interests. If social justice and equity are to be the outcomes of development efforts, then both women's and men's interests need to be addressed. There are certain areas such as reproductive and sexual health where men's needs and men's participation in decision-making have in fact been neglected. Recent male sexual health initiatives and reproductive health projects that aim to foster male responsibility have aimed to redress this balance. Furthermore, it is increasingly being recognised that the understanding of and challenging of restrictive ideals of masculinity as well as femininity can have a positive benefit to both women and men in terms of their psychological well-being and satisfaction in relationships. It is therefore in both men's and women's interests to pursue goals of gender equity.

2. Gender Analysis

How can we measure women's empowerment?

There are a variety of understandings of the concept of empowerment and hence various ways proposed to measure it. With women's empowerment being the objective of many development policies and programmes, measures are needed to both reveal the extent to which women are already empowered, and to evaluate if such policies and programmes have been effective towards their stated aims. Each method has some value, but none can be taken as a complete measure. The nature of empowerment as a multi-faceted and contested concept means that it is not readily quantifiable. However, indicators of empowerment used fall into two categories: those which attempt to measure women's empowerment at a broad societal level in order to make comparisons, and those which are developed in order to measure the effects of specific projects or programmes.

The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) of the Human Development Report (HDR) (UNDP, 1995) falls into the first of these categories. It aims to assess the relative empowerment of women in comparison to men by using measurements of participation in economic and political life, and share of national income. Alternatively, indicators developed in the context of credit programmes provide an example of the second type of measurement of empowerment. For example, eight indicators of empowerment were used in Bangladeshi Villages (Hashmi et al, 1996). These included the degree to which women were: involved in major household decisions; mobile; economically secure; relatively freed from domination in the family; and politically and legally aware. It was concluded that the longer a woman was a member of a credit initiative, the more likely they were to be empowered against this form of measure.

Why prioritise gender when race and class are also so important?

Gender cross-cuts these other dimensions of disadvantage in social relations – they are not mutually exclusive goals. Indeed the pursuit of gender equality, by both women and men, can be a powerful catalyst to also transforming other relations of inequality. However, tackling race and class tends to be seen as politically more acceptable than gender strategies in development cooperation, which are more likely to be seen as 'cultural interference' or 'meddling' in people's private lives. Hence the gender-based inequalities that tend to be silenced need to be pushed to centre stage, whilst recognising that people's experiences of gender relations are also shaped by race, ethnicity and class factors.

Whilst women may share certain gender-based interests, they are not a homogeneous group. Class, race, ethnicity, age and religion could also shape their interests and priorities and women themselves may not always prioritise gender. For example, today in South Africa, or in past nationalist struggles such as in Zimbabwe, race may be prioritised. But bitter experience reveals that when women are active in nationalist movements, promises of gender equality post-Independence have never been fully realised. This highlights the importance of gender-sensitive consultation and participation mechanisms which give emphasis to the diversity of women's and men's needs and interests, and guards against over-generalisation.

Don't participatory approaches mean that communities decide whether gender is an issue for them?

Participatory approaches are not automatically gender-sensitive. This means that 'community' identified priorities do not necessarily reflect the priorities of women in that community. Whilst participatory development initiatives tend to question and address the power relations behind any simplistic idea of 'community', they have been less successful in understanding and tackling gender power relations. Socio-cultural and material barriers can be put in the way of women's participation – for example cultural norms that dictate that women do not speak in public, or poor timing and location of meetings that fail to fit women's timetables or relative lack of mobility. Even where women are present they may not feel able to speak, or feel able to speak openly about their concerns. Indeed, in communities where gender disparities are particularly marked, women may feel even less able to voice their gender priorities.

Therefore the complexities of the concept of participation need to be understood and addressed. Gender-aware participatory approaches can give space to women's voices and empower them to speak. Women can then help to identify the issues of concern for that community, including those relating to gender. Indeed such techniques can facilitate dialogue between women and men, to not only address women's practical needs but to also negotiate structural changes in power relations between them. Nowhere do women, for example, have equal power, equal access to resources, and freedom from gender violence - gender is therefore an issue in all communities.

Haven't we done enough on gender – don't we need to pursue new priorities?

This isn't a fad but an on-going process of social transformation. This is required to close the persistent gaps between women's and men's life experiences. It does not exclude other development goals but needs to inform them. Whilst there has been significant progress made towards gender equality in the last fifty years, there remains much work to be done. Across the world, including the so-called 'developed' world, a lack of gender equity can be seen. For example: in some of the poorest countries, women have lifetime risks of maternal death of one in ten or higher; about two-thirds of the illiterate people in developing countries are women; globally women form only just over 10 percent of representatives in national governments; and domestic violence is a leading cause of injury and death to women worldwide. These are stark reminders that we are far from having established gender equity, and that we need to protect any progress from erosion.

Development cooperation agencies therefore need to prioritise gender concerns across all of their work through a carefully conceived strategy of gender mainstreaming. However, gender equality goals and other development goals are not mutually exclusive. In fact gender concerns must permeate all other development goals.

As gender equality is a human rights issue, isn't legislation the answer?

Gender-based discrimination is a human rights issue and legislation is certainly part of the answer. It can also form part of the problem. Gender-neutrality of the law is too often assumed. It may perpetuate or ignore gender discrimination, reflecting broader patriarchal attitudes in society. But the law, at the national level, has the potential for being a powerful ally towards gaining gender equality. Indeed if the international conventions and declarations on gender equality are enshrined in domestic law by the signatory governments, this can mark significant progress. With women's active participation, constitutional and national legal reform is certainly a necessary, albeit insufficient tool towards gender equality. However, weak implementation of the law, women's poor knowledge of beneficial legislation, and their limited access to the legal system, can mitigate any transformatory potential.

Extensive constitutional and legal reform in Zimbabwe, which upholds gender equality principles by for example enhancing women's legal status and their property and inheritance rights, looks better on paper than it does in practice. With parallel systems of judicial and customary law, the traditional laws that privilege men can still be invoked, hence hi-jacking prospects of gender justice intended by the reformed judicial law. In other contexts such as Nigeria, Islamic law supported by local religious leaders, at times directly contravenes the protection women may otherwise be afforded by the Nigerian Constitution.

Whilst legal reforms, effectively implemented are crucial, women need to be aware of their rights, of the legal structures and processes open to them, and to have sufficient financial resources and emotional support to fully exercise their legal rights. Civic education programmes - such as that supported by DFID in Zimbabwe – combined with legal aid initiatives, can go some way towards facilitating legal access. However, women's economic dependence within the household can mean the fear of family destitution can prevent women taking action against abusive husbands. Therefore, effectively implemented legal reform and women's improved access to legal redress are important – but there is also need for various non-legal, multi-levelled and cross-sectoral entry strategies. This might involve strengthening civil society capacity to lobby and advocate on gender equality.

What is meant by the feminisation of poverty?

The idea that women are increasingly more impoverished than men has gained much currency in recent years, but there is much confusion surrounding this idea. It has been used to mean three distinct things: that women have a higher incidence of poverty than men; that their poverty is more severe than that of men; and that there is a trend to greater poverty among women, particularly associated with rising rates of female headship of household. This 'feminisation of poverty' idea has led to poverty reduction approaches which target resources at women, such as the targeting of subsidies and micro-credit rather than attempting to change the underlying 'rules of the game'. Unequal gender power relations may mediate the outcomes of such interventions, with men siphoning off the benefits or men withdrawing existing support for household expenditures.

Such evidence as does exist suggests that a universal association between female headship and poverty is not valid. Nevertheless, it does seem that certain categories of women-headed households (this differs with the context) are disproportionately found among the extremely or chronically impoverished and therefore are valid targets for anti-poverty interventions, providing a careful contextual analysis is carried out. Furthermore, although in general, women are not always poorer than men, because of the weaker and contingent basis of their entitlements, they are generally more vulnerable and, once poor, have less options in terms of escape. This suggests that interventions to address women's poverty require a different set of policy responses.

3. Gender Mainstreaming by Donor Agencies

How can donors include gender in their work?

The adoption of a gender mainstreaming strategy means that all those involved in projects and programmes are responsible and accountable for gender equality outcomes. This does not mean transforming work into ‘women’s programmes’ or adding a ‘women’s component’. But it will require initial gender analysis to identify opportunities to support gender equality objectives in your existing and new work. In short, gender equality needs to be integral to all donor policies, programmes and projects at country, regional and head office levels. It must also inform staff and consultant selection. Support can also come from outside - from local gender consultants who intimately know the country context, and through dialogue with partners, state machineries, and civil society organisations.

Implementing a Gender Equality Approach – the example of the UK Department for International Development (DFID)

DFID has a clear commitment to gender equality, with a strong policy framework that directly supports the Global Platform for Action agreed at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, and is consistent with the DAC gender equality guidelines. Indeed, the Social Development Division (SDD) - that has spearheaded gender within the organisation – has seen significant growth. And for over twelve years it has introduced initiatives to mainstream gender within DFID. The outcomes include high levels of staff and partner gender awareness, good evidence of the positive impact of gender-aware approaches to development, and numerous examples of good practice.

A major contribution to gender mainstreaming in DFID programmes has been the introduction of the Gender Equality Mainstreaming (GEM) initiative (www.genie.ids.ac.uk/gem). This internet site aims to provide initial support to enable successful incorporation of gender concerns into planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes. It offers sector-specific analysis, examples of best practice, sector-specific gender guidelines and logical frameworks to assist operationalisation.

However, progress has been uneven. DFID has suffered, as have many other donors, with what has been termed ‘gender policy evaporation’, where initial commitments to gender equality goals have ‘evaporated’ before and during the project implementation stage. Many lessons have been learned, including the importance of management advocacy and support, and the key role of staff with gender expertise (sometimes called ‘gender entrepreneurs’) to spearhead any mainstreaming process. The new DFID ‘twin-track’ approach to gender mainstreaming is a concerted effort to broaden and deepen the commitment to reducing gender inequalities in development outcomes and to foster responsibility and accountability amongst all staff and partners. This approach ensures gender is at the heart rather than the margins of programmes by addressing gender inequalities in all strategic areas whilst still supporting certain specific initiatives to enhance women’s empowerment.

If agencies are mainstreaming gender, why do they still need gender specialists?

Gender experts, acting as advocates and catalysts, are crucial for successful gender mainstreaming. Indeed, recent research into mainstreaming gender equality has

identified such ‘gender entrepreneurs’ as vital in inspiring and spearheading such efforts. Whilst the emphasis of a mainstreaming strategy is to diffuse responsibility for gender equality across the organisational structure, a combined strategy can be particularly powerful. A catalytic central unit with a cross-sectoral policy oversight and monitoring role, and a web of gender specialists across the institution can successfully combine with broader capacity building and accountability. Without this, ‘everyone’s responsibility’ can too easily drift into ‘nobody’s responsibility’ if not carefully monitored. Accountability needs to be embedded in standard tools in project design and monitoring, as well as staff training, recruitment and incentive processes.

Will employing more women in development co-operation agencies ensure that gender concerns are a priority?

Not necessarily – whilst the majority of gender advocates in agencies have been women, you cannot assume that women will necessarily identify with women’s gender interests. Care must also be taken not to imply that somehow gender is women’s responsibility within the organisation. Notwithstanding this, it has been suggested that under-representation of women in development cooperation agencies, does act as a barrier to the successful institutionalisation of gender concerns. Also of importance is the capacity of any new staff to engage with gender concerns in their work, and therefore needs to be an element of the recruitment criteria, for both women and men. This can assist the ‘seeding’ of gender capacity, across sectors, regions and country offices.

In any case, it is important to get a gender balance of employees at all levels and within all sectors, in the interests of equal opportunities. Currently women are concentrated in the less powerful positions within development cooperation agencies. The very act of employing more women, and in more strategic positions, might signal to staff that managers are taking seriously the need to transform the organisational culture. Gender concerns must permeate the very organisational structure and culture of the development cooperation agency itself. Gender discrimination needs to be identified and redressed in personnel selection procedures, recruitment practices, training and incentive mechanisms. Family-friendly employment practices can also enable women with caring responsibilities to participate on an equal footing.

In order to truly mainstream gender, is significant organisational change required?

Organisational change is certainly required but the extent depends on the gender mainstreaming approach. Broader institutional change is needed if pervasive male advantage is to be challenged and gender equality is to be at the heart of programming – and this needs to go beyond adding women-specific projects at the margins. Gender needs to be acknowledged as a cross-cutting theme, relevant to all areas of programming. Two approaches to gender mainstreaming have been identified, the ‘agenda-setting’ and the ‘integrationist’ approaches.

The ‘agenda-setting’ approach seeks to transform the development agenda itself. It requires the rethinking and challenging of existing development paradigms and priorities, the

transformation of sectoral agendas, accountability and participation mechanisms, in light of goals of gender equality. The more politically acceptable 'integrationist' approach brings women's and gender concerns into all of the existing policies and programmes, focusing on adapting, rather than transforming, institutional procedures to achieve this. Employment practices must also stand up to close examination and be reoriented to remove gender discrimination in selection and other employment practices.