



Report

Using adaptive development to support feminist action

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Cover photo: Women march to Tahrir. Credit: Gigi Ibrahim

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Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome	LHSTM	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
Ausaid	Australian Agency for International Development	NIBR	Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research
CBO	Community-based organisation	M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
CEDOVIP	Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention	MP	Member of Parliament
CSO	Civil society organisation	NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
CSSP	Civil Society Support Programme	ODA	Official Development Assistance
DAC	Development assistance committee	ODI	Overseas Development Institute
DDD CoP	Doing Development Differently Community of Practice	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
DFAT	Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	OPM	Oxford Policy Management
DFID	UK Department for International Development	PDIA	Problem-driven iterative adaptation
DLP	Developmental Leadership Program	PLP	Pacific Leadership Program
FBO	Faith-based organisation	POGO	Politics and Governance Programme, Overseas Development Institute
FEDO	Feminist Dalit Organization	RCT	Random controlled trial
FGM/C	Female genital mutilation or cutting	SAVI	State Accountability and Voice Initiative
FIDA	Federation of Kenyan Women Lawyers	SDD	Social Development Direct
FLOW	Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women (Dutch-funded programme)	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
FPTP	First-past-the-post (electoral system)	ToC	Theory of Change
GADN	UK Gender and Development Network	TWP CoP	Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice
HEfDA	Harmee Education for Development Association	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus	VAW	Violence against women
INGO	International NGO	VAMP	Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad
INTRAC	International NGO Training and Research Centre	V4C	Voice for Change
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer	WVL	Women's Voice and Leadership

Gender and adaptive development: two moons rising

Development trends are cyclical. Concerns, issues and approaches – as well as the people and funding attached to them – rise and fall like astrological bodies. Right now adaptive development and gender are two moons in the ascendency in the development universe. Will they orbit harmoniously or are they set to collide?

Adaptive development is shorthand for a set of ideas about how best to manage and support development processes. Its advocates call for reform efforts and related assistance to be locally led, politically smart (i.e. astute in working with and around political realities) and adaptive (i.e. based on the need to test, learn, adapt). Building on earlier waves of learning and advocacy, these principles derive from two basic insights about what development is and how it occurs. First, development processes are context-specific, complex and unpredictable – which means that problems and realistic solutions cannot be determined in advance and change is unlikely to unfold in a linear manner. Second, development entails the redistribution of power and resources among social groups. Often, therefore, reform is resisted, and coalitions of reformers who can work with and around political realities are needed to make change possible.¹

Some have criticised adaptive development discourse, and related communities of practice (e.g. on thinking and working politically), for being gender-blind and not sufficiently attuned to development as social transformation (Green, 2013; 2015). In other quarters, political economy and adaptive development enthusiasts have questioned whether the pragmatism (what is) of politically smart and adaptive approaches make them a poor fit with the normativism (what ought to be) of gender equality.²

This paper argues that the gender and adaptive development communities have something to offer each other, and that collaboration can be mutually strategic. On the one hand, gender and power analysis can broaden the understanding of power relations, and of informal rules and norms, used in political economy analysis in mainstream development (Koester, 2015). A more expansive understanding of power and institutions can expose the different experiences of diverse groups of women and men, uncover structural barriers to development, and highlight reform constituencies and strategies that are missed when the focus is on elites and/or overt expressions of power (UK Gender and Development Network, GADN, 2015; Moyle, 2015). Cross-disciplinary collaboration is also necessary to increase the wellbeing and rights of women and girls, and feminist analysis and methods are critical tools in the response to mainstream development problems.

On the other hand, adaptive development principles are just as important to the effectiveness of gender-related assistance and strategies as to other development sectors. Gender equality, or the more reductive, women and girls, is a key priority for many aid agencies – but there is a risk that increased funding will be spent on palliative approaches that focus on the symptoms of gender inequality, not the underlying causes. Reducing gender inequalities requires altering entrenched social norms, discriminatory laws and unequal power relations between men and women. These are all complex, context-specific and highly political processes. Assistance to women's rights and gender equality is often too prescriptive or rigid to support feminist action and gender reform that is genuinely locally led, and too siloed within

1 Examples of researchers and practitioners at the forefront of recent efforts to inject both politics and adaptive approaches into development programming include: Andrews et al. (2013); Booth et al. (2016); Booth and Unsworth (2014); Carothers and de Gramont (2013); Doing Development Differently Community of Practice (DDD CoP) (2015); Denney and Domingo (2014); Denney and Kirwen (2014); Fritz, Kaiser and Levy (2009); Fritz, Levy and Ort (2014); Leftwich (2011); Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) (2015); Rocha Menocal (2014); Wild et al. (2015).

2 This was part of the conversation between the gender and governance cadres from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, at the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice Meeting (Bangkok, June 2015).

organisational ‘gender ghettos’³ to tackle root drivers of inequality. This includes assistance from multilateral and bilateral government agencies and from intermediary organisations that implement aid-funded programmes (e.g. international NGOs (INGOs) and private companies).

Feminist bureaucrats and practitioners can use adaptive development principles to strengthen the case for cross-sector collaboration and locally led problem-solving around the underlying reasons why women and girls have worse development outcomes than men and boys.



Women's rally, Kenya. Credit: Anique

3 According to Goetz (2015), the ‘gender ghetto’ is ‘the most marginalised and underfunded part of any institution you choose to work for’.

More effective support to feminist action and women's empowerment

The call to move away from externally driven, best-practice approaches to development is not new. What is different about current advocacy is the optimism that incrementally shifting the organisational incentives within aid agencies that perpetuate less effective ways of working is possible (Booth et al., 2016). This optimism comes from the efforts of a loose community of practice to gather concrete examples of adaptive development, demonstrating not only that it is achievable but also that it can generate better results than conventional development approaches.⁴

As a contribution to these efforts, this paper considers whether and how principles of adaptive development are being applied by aid-funded women's rights organisations and gender programmes. The paper focuses on official development assistance (ODA) for feminist action and gender-related activities in low- and middle-income countries (see Box 1). Many different types of organisation, through many different forms of funding/implementation, can be involved in moving financial and other forms of assistance from foreign governments to intended beneficiaries.⁵ While the lines can be blurred when women's rights organisations act as implementing agencies, there are important differences between the motivations and operations of political/activist organisations and aid programmes. The implications of these differences in terms of people's incentives and capacity to apply adaptive development principles emerge throughout the discussion.

Box 1: What is feminist action?

Feminism is the belief that women and men are equal. Feminist action is political action to expose and incrementally change the structural causes of gender inequality, such as women's relative lack of power and rights, gender-based discrimination, harmful gender norms, and deeply entrenched expectations about the roles and capabilities of women and men, girls and boys.

Some organisations define themselves as feminist and take direct political action to change structural injustice. Other organisations and programmes work 'under the radar', trying to make incremental changes to women's and/or men's attitudes, power and capabilities without using the language of rights and gender equality. Still others try to meet women's practical needs (e.g. for improved health, education, safety) without seeking to change the structural causes of their subordination to men. This latter category includes groups and organisations led by and for women (e.g. mothers' groups), some of which may even support/reinforce gender hierarchies (e.g. some faith-based organisations).

4 The growing set of reports and books with case studies of reform coalitions and development programmes that have worked in adaptive ways include: Andrews (2011); Booth (2014, 2016); Booth and Chambers (2015); Booth and Golooba-Mutebi (2015); Booth and Unsworth (2014); Chambers and Cummings (2015); Denney and McLaren (forthcoming); Desandi et al. (2016); Faustino and Booth (2015); Fritz et al., (2014); Ladner (2015); Law and Development Partnership (various); Sidel (2014); Wild et al. (2015).

5 This includes bilateral development agencies and country offices, ministries of foreign affairs and embassies, multilateral government agencies and country offices, international NGOs and country offices (including feminist/women's rights organisations), private consulting firms, university departments and policy think tanks, domestic ministries, domestic universities and research organisations, domestic NGOs, including feminist/women's rights organisations, other domestic civil society organisations (CSOS), including professional organisations, community-based organisations (CBOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs). In some instances, only two types of organisation might be involved in an aid project (e.g. direct bilateral funding to a government agency or to a domestic NGO). Often, however, there are several organisations involved (e.g. bilateral-multilateral-NGO/CBO, or bilateral-INGO-NGO-CBO), with each link in the chain having the potential to facilitate or frustrate effective ways of working (Valters et al., 2016).

The paper starts from the premise that gender-related assistance is subject to the same widely recognised pressures and shortcomings as other types of development assistance,⁶ and there is a need for concrete examples of what can be done differently. Rather than focus on what is not working, the illustrative examples therefore show potential ways of working within the binding constraints of aid and country environments.⁷ These include established women's organisations or gender programmes that demonstrate how to use politically smart and adaptive approaches to achieve political and social change (even if they do not use that terminology themselves). Other examples are of recent programmes that are consciously

seeking to apply new ways of working, with results as yet uncertain.

The next four sections look at four principles of adaptive development: (i) support change led by local stakeholders, not external funders; (ii) start with problems or issues, not with ready-made solutions; (iii) be politically informed and use smart tactics; and (iv) build learning and adaptation into organisations and programmes. After outlining the principle, each section reflects on why aid-funded women's organisations and gender-related programmes may not work in this way and provides examples of some that do.



UNDP Administrator Helen Clark in Turkmenistan. Credit: UNDP

⁷ The discussion and examples are drawn from a substantial body of POGO research and advisory work, both related specifically to women's power and gender equality, and includes evidence reviews and primary research (Domingo et. (2013, 2014, 2015); Castillejo and Tilley (2015); Chambers (2015); Domingo and McCullough (2016); Domingo and Rocha Menocal (2015); Jones and Abu Hamad (2016); Larson (2016); O'Neil and Domingo (2016); O'Neil et al. (2016); Valters and Jahan (2016), and to adaptive development in other sectors (e.g. Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Foresti et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2016; Wild et al., 2015). It also builds on engagement with gender policy advisers and programme managers in donor agencies and international NGOs (INGOs) and members of the TWP and DDD community of practice. In addition, semi-structured interviews were used to gather further information and documents about promising programmes (see Annex).

Support change led by local stakeholders, not external funders

Local stakeholders are ‘those who are close to the problem, including its underlying causes, and who have a strong and enduring interest in its resolution’ (Wild et al., 2015: 37). In the context of gender-related assistance, working with and through local stakeholders means partnering with the indigenous actors and organisations whose ideas, interests and actions principally shape gender rights and relations in the relevant area. In every society, there are people with an interest in reducing gender inequality with whom international organisations can work.

Working with unconventional partners

Feminist and social justice organisations and movements, both elite and grassroots, have been at the vanguard of gender reform (Domingo et al., 2016; Htun and Weldon, 2012), often with the support of professional associations (e.g. lawyers, doctors) and intellectuals. Interested parties also include those who perpetuate harmful norms and potential spoilers of gender reform, such as religious and traditional leaders, conservative women’s groups and other community groups. Depending on both country and issue, politicians and bureaucrats can be champions, pragmatic allies or staunch opponents of progressive gender reforms.

In spite of the broad range of groups and people with an interest in gender relations, in general aid agencies prefer to fund and work with organisations that are urban, visible and speak their language and technical jargon, such as government and professional NGOs. They find it more difficult to work with less organised civic groups, which may be less formalised and predictable, and may not share the donor’s view or work in conventional ways. Research on women’s political participation in Afghanistan, Gaza and Malawi, for instance, indicates that important criteria in selecting partner organisations are their accessibility (which includes security issues in conflict-affected countries) and ability to meet political or bureaucratic requirements, such as having particular governance arrangements and the ability to bid and report in desired formats (Jones and Abu Hamad, 2016; Larson, 2016; O’Neil et al., 2016).

Sometimes urban, professional NGOs and other elite organisations will be appropriate partners – to support more gender-sensitive electoral, constitutional or legal reform/processes, for instance. But even for the more limited objective of obtaining formal recognition of women’s rights and needs in peace agreements, constitutions and law, the experience in many countries is that alliances between elite and grassroots organisations are important to their success because they provide women’s movements with legitimacy and leverage (Domingo et al., 2014; 2015).

In any case, gender inequality is maintained not just through discriminatory formal laws, but also through a combination of written and/or unwritten (e.g. customary, religious) law, hierarchical gender norms and women’s relative exclusion from resources and decision-making. Donors must therefore fund and work at different levels of society with the groups and institutions with roots in the relevant constituency if they are to help with the things that will make a difference in women’s lives, e.g. implement gender-responsive laws, increase women’s de facto power and alter women’s and men’s attitudes and behaviour. For example, the Irish NGO, Trócaire, brokered an innovative partnership between the Catholic church and a women’s rights organisation in Uganda in order to reduce violence against women (VAW) and HIV (see Box 2), and USAID deliberately chose to work through a Kenyan umbrella organisation in order to reach beyond the ‘usual suspects’ to counter misperceptions about women’s rights provisions during the constitutional reform process (see Box 3).

Avoiding harm, supporting sustainability

Women’s rights and social justice organisations and movements in developing countries need finance. The move to providing budget support for partner government squeezed their funding in the early 2000s, and the elevation of women and girls as priority issues is not translating into financing for women’s rights organisations (Arutyunova and Clark, 2013). Rights organisations can also find it difficult to raise domestic funds, and particularly so when

Box 2: Partnering with the Catholic church to reduce violence against women in Uganda

International support for the Uganda women's rights organisation, Raising Voices, and its SASA! methodology, is a good example of how external funding can support locally led social change and innovative partnerships, including with less conventional development partners. SASA! (meaning Now! in Kiswahili) is a community mobilisation approach to preventing violence against women (VAW) and HIV, designed by Raising Voices and piloted by the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP) in Kampala. A random controlled trial (RCT) of SASA! conducted between 2007 and 2012 found that the approach was effective in changing men's and women's attitudes and behaviour.⁸ Irish Aid was a funder of Raising Voices and the church-based Irish NGO, Trócaire, spotted an opportunity to facilitate a partnership between the Catholic church in Uganda and Raising Voices to extend the reach of the approach. In 2008/2009, Trócaire was able to draw on its identity as a faith-based organisation (FBO) to bring the leadership of the Catholic church on board, and Raising Voices worked to adapt and use the SASA! methodology at the diocesan level. To increase local ownership, external support remained behind the scenes, e.g. not using Trócaire or Irish Aid branding on publications (Trócaire and Raising Voices, 2013).

governments are conservative or extremist,⁹ the indigenous middle class is small, and/or the organisation works in poor/remote regions or advocates for women from a marginalised group.¹⁰

But poorly conceived forms of funding and partnerships are unlikely to be effective because they do not reach the right organisations, and can also create the wrong incentives and do actual harm. This is a particular risk in funding CSOs in countries without a history of civic voluntarism and activism independent of the state, and where democratisation can lead to a sudden proliferation of new NGOs that lack a clear membership base and whose activities are highly dependent on external finance. In these circumstances, there is a danger that

Box 3: Reaching grassroots civic groups in Kenya

USAID-funded civil society programmes (2004-2011) in Kenya present another example of efforts to offer support beyond the 'usual suspects'. Following the election-related ethnic violence in 2007, USAID saw the constitutional reform process as an opportunity to use civil society organisations (CSOs) funding to advance women's and other progressive rights, but also recognised the importance of reaching a broad range of Kenyans. USAID therefore selected an international NGO, PACT, to manage a programme aimed at national and regional organisations, such as the Federation of Kenyan Women Lawyers (FIDA), but deliberately chose a Kenyan umbrella organisation, Uraia Trust, to manage a second programme aimed at grassroots CSOs and networks able to influence the broader population.

While Uraia Trust was able to reach relatively inaccessible and unconventional groups, such as working with 'bar girls' to spread messages, USAID found that Uraia Trust lacked the organisational capacity to manage a large number of grants. USAID staff therefore had to invest significant time to support the Trust to, inter alia, plan its work, manage its finances and workload. USAID also had to be creative and flexible in order to be able to work with small organisations while also meeting their own bureaucratic requirements (e.g. providing cash for grantees without bank accounts, using 'spot checks' rather than formal reporting to not overburden partners). Given these challenges, the programme manager reflected that USAID should have begun building relationships with the grassroots organisations much sooner (KII #5).

challenge funds and project-based funding encourage people to create the organisations that donors want to see,¹¹ distorting local agendas and voluntarism, fostering competition rather than cooperation, and thus hampering the development of the women's movement, in particular, and a diverse and mature civil society more generally (Domingo et al., 2015; O'Neil et al., 2016; Larson, 2016; Jones and Abu Hamad, 2016).

8 The study found, among other things, that communities exposed to SASA! were half as likely as the control communities to think that physical or sexual violence against women is acceptable and that women in SASA! communities were 52% less likely to experience intimate partner violence and more likely to say that they were able to refuse sex with her partner. Qualitative research was also undertaken alongside the RCT to study pathways of change (Kyegeombe et al., 2014; Raising Voices, LSHTM and CEDOVIP, 2015).

9 For example, right-wing and religious governments in all regions are squeezing the space for women's rights organisations (and human rights organisations more generally). For instance, the election of the Hamas government in Gaza has made it more difficult for liberal women's organisations (Jones and Abu Hamad, 2016), and women's rights organisations in Eastern Europe report increasing state harassment.

10 As is the case for FEDO Nepal (KII#7).

11 When CSOs depend on aid rather than volunteerism, membership or other domestic sources of finance for their activities, there is a high risk that they make formal changes (e.g. to their structure or operating rules) to signal their legitimacy or trustworthiness to external donors, without making changes to underlying incentives and practices. Prichett and de Weijer (2010) call this behaviour 'isomorphic mimicry' in their research on state institutions and their predilection to make formal but not functional changes as a signal to foreign funders.

Box 4: Partnership between Womankind Worldwide and Feminist Dalit Organization

Womankind forms long-term partnerships with in-country women's rights organisations and movements based on shared values and solidarity. For example, Womankind has a partnership with Nepal's Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO), a volunteer organisation and movement working towards equality for Dalit women. Established by a group of Dalit women in 1994, FEDO works now has 58,850 members organised in a network of 2,154 solidarity groups across 56 of Nepal's 75 districts. These solidarity groups function as savings and credit schemes, and more activist groups form political pressure groups that engage with community and governance structures (e.g. forest users groups, local government), advocate for Dalit women's political representation and support Dalit women candidates. Testament to their durability, FEDO solidarity groups were among the first structures to resume activities following the 2015 earthquake, distributing relief to remote rural communities.

Womankind and FEDO began their partnership in 2010 and have collaborated on three projects, all of which work through FEDO's solidarity groups, most recently through a four-year Dutch-funded project on women's political participation (Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women, or FLOW). By acting as an implementing agency on larger projects, Womankind enables international assistance to reach small rural organisations, such as FEDO. It can also tailor donor objectives and requirements in ways that support women's organisations' existing agendas, translate donor jargon, and protect frontline organisations from the administrative burden of managing aid-funded projects.

Womankind's relationship with partners is not bound to particular projects. Rather, it uses unrestricted, non-project funds (e.g. membership fees, fundraising activities) to provide technical assistance to its partner organisations, to help them to secure funding for their operations and to give international visibility to their causes. As a voluntary organisation, FEDO's activities also continue regardless of project funding, but securing additional resources means that it can pay its community mobilisers and recruit specialist staff.

Source: KII #6, #7; Jackson (2015).

For example, many new NGOs, including ones working on gender, were set up and registered within a short period during the democratic transition in Malawi (1992-1994) and, as required by the Malawian NGO Law, all have the 'proper' governance structures (e.g. constitution, board of trustees). However, two decades later the women's movement in Malawi, and civil society more broadly, remain extremely weak; organisations continue to revolve around their founder member, lack a clear membership base or independent sources of finance, and are mainly externally oriented (Kayuni, 2013; O'Neil et al., 2016).

Even established, organic civic groups can find it difficult to sustain new, increased or more professionalised activities without government or foreign funding. As such, partnership, rather than project-based, models may be more appropriate to nurture and offer sustained support to indigenous feminist and social justice organisations and networks (see Box 4). For this type of 'arm's length aid' (Booth, 2013) to contribute to substantive change, it is vital to choose appropriate intermediary organisations – for example, grant programmes managed by specialist international or national organisations with the local knowledge and networks to identify appropriate partners.

This is not to suggest that financial resources are the only, or even the most important, way that aid can support social and political change. Long-term partnerships that include organisational support are also important to nurture promising indigenous organisations and networks,

one that have established their own agenda and base, and to protect successful ones from being overwhelmed by new finance and attention (Cornwall, 2014).

Aid agencies may also have the power to convene different domestic parties with an interest in reducing gender inequality. In Kosovo, for example, the head of the UN Women project office, a long-time civil society activist, worked effectively behind the scenes as a 'trusted broker' to bring together high-level leaders and change brokers able to move forward gender-progressive reform in the security sector within politics (e.g. the Deputy Prime Minister), public sector (e.g. former head of the Kosovo Police) and civil society (Domingo et al., 2013; Foresti, 2013). Teams set up to manage and implement externally funded projects can also play this role, often by separating this function from the grant element or keeping the grants very small.¹² The Australian government funds the Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) to support indigenous reform coalitions, for instance – including successfully supporting the Director of Women's Affairs in Vanuatu to build alliances to achieve a gender quotas in municipal government, and women leaders to collaborate on women's economic empowerment in the Solomon Islands (Denney and McLaren, forthcoming; Rousseau, 2016; KII #4).

¹² SAVI in Nigeria and Pyoe Pin in Myanmar are two well-documented examples of aid-funded governance/civil society programmes that are fostering effective reform coalitions (Booth and Chambers, 2014; Booth and Unsworth, 2014).

Key takeaways: locally led aid to women's rights and gender equality

- To support changes in gender-related attitudes, behaviour and outcomes, donors must fund and work with a range of stakeholders at different levels of society. Less accessible and formalised organic civic groups are critical partners, and donors need to find creative ways to fund them.
- Women's rights organisations need finance, but poorly designed civil society funding can undermine civic voluntarism and collective action. Funders should take concrete steps to mitigate these risks, such as avoiding short-term project funding and working through specialist, intermediary organisations with established grassroots networks.
- Beyond financing, aid staff and programmes can bring together parties with an interest in an issue, and provide technical/organisational support to coalitions. 'Taking the money of the table' and separating out grants and non-monetary agreements can increase trust between funders and partners, and may help to clarify roles and expectations, and discourage involvement of NGOs without a genuine interest in the problem at hand.



A woman votes in the Sudanese national elections. Credit: United Nations Photo

Start with problems or issues, not with ready-made solutions

Social and political change, including reforming gender norms and practices, is context-specific and highly complex. It is complex because actions that will shift gender norms and increase gender equality may not be known ('causal complexity'), and also because the environments in which interventions are implemented comprise many interlinked and, often, moving parts ('context complexity') (Valters et al., 2016). Rather than assume that solutions are known at the outset or are transferable from other contexts, problem-driven approaches therefore begin by asking searching questions about the underlying causes of a set of problems. Only then do they think about potential solutions in the context of prevailing social, political and economic conditions (Fritz et al., 2009; Harris, 2013; Wild et al., 2015).¹³

Embracing complexity and context-specificity

By contrast, development interventions tend to over-specify solutions, often in the form of preconceived ideas about social and political arrangements, and to over-simplify what is needed to reform rules and norms and, critically, for these new institutions to function as anticipated (Andrews, 2011). Unsurprisingly, gender programmes are also susceptible to being too deterministic about what

is needed to reduce gender inequality, while also having ill-defined or unrealistic ideas about what will bring about change.

Legal (or policy) reform as a solution of choice to the problem of gender discrimination is a case in point. New or revised laws may be a key 'outcome' of a gender intervention, but they are never a stand-alone solution. Laws can do little to improve people's lot if they are not enforced and/or respected, and both context and appropriate design of interventions shapes whether legal reform will be improve the wellbeing of women and girls. One factor that influences implementation is the nature of state actors, their interest in the particular issue,¹⁴ and their authority or capacity to implement law. For example, both the Ugandan and Rwandan governments have passed Domestic Violence Acts, but only the latter is actively implementing it (Ahikire and Mwiine, 2015; Chambers, 2016).

Another limiting factor in using legal strategies within gender programmes is that male elites seldom drive gender reforms¹⁵ and gender-responsive laws are rarely 'self-implementing in the sense that they lock in new market dynamics or patterns of behaviour' (Faustino and Booth, 2014).¹⁶ Implementation therefore also turns on the presence of civic actors with an interest in pushing for

13 On problem-driven approaches to institutional reform, see also Fritz et al., (2009) and Andrews (2011). Matt Andrews and Lant Prichett from Harvard Kennedy School in particular have popularised the need to proceed iteratively to work out solutions to underlying problems, also known as problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA).

14 Receptiveness of government varies depending on the law or policy in question, and the context – for example, where religion or customary leaders are influential, national male elites tend to be particularly resistant to changes in women's sexual and reproductive rights (e.g. abortion rights), or their right to inherit and own property.

15 While women's organisations have been at the vanguard of initiating and sustaining gender reform, there are occasions when male leaders independently champion women's rights and gender equality because it is in their interest to do so – for example, to signal to a domestic or international audience a new ideological dispensation (e.g. inclusivity, liberalisation or communism), to marginalise religious elites and/or to stimulate economic development (Chambers, 2015; Htun and Weldon, 2011).

16 Drawing on The Asia Foundations experience of brokering reform coalitions in the Philippines, Faustino and Booth argue that 'there is particular value in aiming for reforms that are "self-implementing"'. The key feature here is that the reforms become part of everyday practice – as a result of either 1) market dynamics, where consumers and firms are locked into interacting in a new way, or 2) changes in the relationships between state and non-state actors that induce politicians, bureaucrats, private organizations and citizens to adopt new forms of self-interested behavior' (Faustino and Booth, 2014: 9-10).

reform and the capacity to do so — and this cannot be assumed in countries without strong feminist organisations or independent women’s movement (Domingo et al., 2015; Molyneux, 2010)¹⁷ or where the judiciary lacks independence or a tradition of judicial activism on social issues (Epp, 1998; O’Neil et al., 2015). The disproportionate concentration of international support on getting laws passed or revised, rather than implemented, further limits their effects.

Even if a new law has elite or state backing, legal compliance relies to a large degree on citizens regulating their own behaviour and, outside authoritarian states, this requires that the most citizens regard the law as legitimate. This can mean that legal reforms will be an effective response only after other activities to change attitudes and expectations – or at least when established attitudes and practices have begun to be contested (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund, 2013). For example, criminalisation of harmful gender norms and practices, particularly those that are seen as family or private decisions, such as domestic violence, child marriage or female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) – or indeed customary practices and initiation rituals that harm young men – will not work on their own to change practice, and can even be counter-productive, driving harmful practices further underground. In contrast, by recognising the importance of working with communities over long periods of time to find context-appropriate solutions to a specific issue, the Tostan

informal community education programme in Senegal has fostered community-wide declarations of an end to FGM/C, something that blanket criminalisation failed to do (see Box 5).

Finally, laws will only achieve their anticipated objectives to the degree that they are designed in ways that are compatible with already existing other laws and informal norms. Whether quotas will empower women, and which women they empower, for instance, depends on the type of quota used and how it fits with electoral rules, party system, political culture and gender norms. Where women are economically dependent on their husbands, criminalisation of domestic violence alongside severe penalties for men found guilty can actually deter women from seeking redress, or force them to choose between their personal safety and their and their families economic security. It is precisely because rules work in sets, through their interactions with other existing rules and norms, that legal transplants tend not to be effective.

This is not to suggest that legal reform is not important; there is strong evidence that equal rights are a necessary foundation for women’s empowerment. But legal strategies will only improve women and girls wellbeing if designed on the basis of specific contexts and problems, recognising complexity and uncertainty about what might work or not, and thinking through the complementary or follow-on activities needed for laws to be upheld and enforced.



A journalist in Afghanistan conducts an interview for her radio program. Credit: Knottleslie

17 See for example, Htun and Weldon (2012), on the importance of autonomous women’s organisations to strength of government’s response to violence against women.

Box 5: Effective action to reduce female genital mutilation/cutting in Senegal and beyond

Set up in 1997, the Tostan Community Empowerment programme shows how adaptive development principles can be used to change attitudes and behaviour regarding even the most secretive and seemingly entrenched social practices. Tostan's founder, Molly Melching, developed the experimental non-formal education programme by living with a rural community for three years. Melching had experienced the failure of top-down mainstream development approaches. Tostan's approach was therefore to use dialogue to understand people's daily lives and needs and factors that perpetuate harmful customs. And modules were designed around issues of daily relevance, with problem-solving, numeracy and literacy rolled in, and with local stories, songs and proverbs as key teaching aids.

The programme was piloted in other communities (44 in 1991, and had reached 350 by 1994). Facilitators were from the same ethnic groups as the participants and provided an 18-month non-formal education programme. Villages who had completed this could then undertake an additional module for women on early childhood development. A women's health and rights module grew out of Tostan's extensive participatory research with rural women, including the issue of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and its health risks.

FGM/C is a highly secretive practice in Senegal, overseen by mothers, grandmothers and traditional cutters but rarely spoken about among women or between spouses. The health problems suffered by girls and women following FGM/C are commonly ascribed to 'evil spirits' not the practice. Simply talking about 'the tradition', as it is known colloquially, therefore risked Tostan being ejected from communities. The module was therefore first piloted in 20 villages. It also uses a non-judgemental approach, first introducing the topic of harmful social norms and leading participants to reach their own conclusions about how the practice conflicts with other values they hold e.g. to have a healthy child.

A breakthrough came when the women from the group in one village, Malicounda Bambara, decided following long debate that they would no longer practise 'the tradition' and that they would make a public declaration. Nearby villages reacted negatively to the declaration, however. This led Tostan and the community to realise not only that it was not enough to change individual social attitudes to FGM/C, or even the views of the village as a whole; instead, the decision to end FGM/C had to include surrounding villages because otherwise uncut girls risked being ostracised and so remain unmarried. A traditional cutter, Oureye Sall, and an imam and village chief, Demba Diawara, became key advocates of the need to end the practice. Over many years they travelled to surrounding villages to do outreach work and, with the backing of senior religious leaders, explained the serious health risks of FGM/C and that it is not a religious obligation as commonly believed. In the late 1990s, an Oxford academic bolstered Tostan's implicit theory of change when he saw the parallels with his own research on foot-binding in China. A practice also related to marriageability, foot-binding ended fairly rapidly through coordinated action and public pledges, followed by 'organised diffusion' to surrounding communities.

By 2007 Tostan employed over 1,300 people, including 108 full-time staff. Its programme has been extended out to other regions of Senegal, achieving impressive results: 2,653 villages in Senegal had publicly declared their abandonment of FGM/C by 2007, affecting approximately 2.1 million people (although Tostan recognises that public declarations do not mean there are no parents who continue to practise 'the tradition'). In 2010 the Government of Senegal announced a national action plan to end FGM/C based on the Tostan's rights-based education approach. Tostan's approach has now won many international awards and is being adapted for use in other countries (Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Gambia and Somalia).

Source: Bicchieri and Mercer (2014); Molloy (2013); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2013)

Treat the cause not the symptoms

Not taking a problem-driven and context-specific approach to gender programming also risks misinterpreting the nature of the problem and applying off-the-shelf or palliative approaches that do not address the underlying causes of gender inequality. For instance, women's political participation programmes are often designed around, at best, partial responses to women's under-representation. They may use training and awareness raising to increase

the 'supply' of women candidates, for example, but do not include activities to address the fundamental (and intractable) problem of lack of 'demand' for women candidates from male-dominated parties (see Box 6). International actors are also prone to advocating quotas as a best practice solution to women's political under-representation but in isolation from other political institutions and reform (e.g. electoral rules and sanctions, party system, strength of oversight) necessary if quotas are to empower women in practice (Domingo et al., 2015).

Box 6: Partial solutions to women's under-representation in Malawi

In Malawi, the strategy for increasing women's representation has revolved around a 50:50 advocacy campaign and short-term support to women candidates in the months preceding an election. However, the paucity of women in politics is as much to do with party selection processes and the widespread belief that women are less able to lead than men, as it is to do with the skills of individual women. Limited support for women's representation in Malawi may achieve programme outputs or outcomes in the short term, but does little to influence the underlying problem.

The approach persists not because of a lack of understanding of the problem – many Malawian experts and organisations, including donors, recognise the need for a comprehensive approach, which includes long-term civic education and engagement with political parties – but because stakeholders have not found ways to work around binding constraints. Malawian organisations working on women's political participation are almost wholly reliant on external funding, and this is most often in the form of projects clustered around election years. On the donor side, there is limited funding for women's political empowerment and a reluctance to work with elected MPs – in part because of the dismal performance of past support to Malawi's National Assembly, and in part because helping women MPs to retain their seats may not be welcomed by the government when it does not hold a majority of seats (O'Neil et al., 2016).

Increasingly, feminist activists in Malawi advocate for quotas to redress the gender balance in parliament. There is strong evidence that quotas can be effective (Larserud and Taphorn, 2007; O'Neil and Domingo, 2016), but they are not a 'one-size-fits all' solution to women's under-representation. Whether they work to empower women in practice, and which women, depends on their design and how they work with other parts of the political system (electoral rules, party system, informal political norms/culture, strength of sanctions). Malawi has a first-past-the-post system (FPTP), which is the least conducive to a quota solution (though legal activists are also pressing for proportional representation). Further, even if a particular type of quota is the best way to increase women's representation in a particular country, it is a solution only if male-dominated governments and political parties are willing to adopt and implement them (Domingo and McCullough, 2016 ; O'Neil and Domingo, 2016; Tadros, 2014).

In addition, while a formal rule change can increase the number of women in formal positions of power in some circumstances, women continue to lack genuine authority and influence unless parallel steps are taken to bring about more fundamental changes in their access to resources and capabilities, such as higher education and technical knowledge, economic independence, and organisational strength (O'Neil and Domingo, 2016). In other words, interventions stop at the first cause of women's lack of political power – their lack of access to political decision-making positions and process – but do not address deeper causes.

As well as failing to address structural causes of inequality, gender programmes that do not work with stakeholder to identify genuine problems or barriers can actually do harm. Helping women into political office but not to perform well once there can reinforce stereotypes that women are unable to lead if women MPs are then viewed as tokenistic or unable to 'deliver' to their constituencies. Externally driven gender interventions may even disempower women. An Indian sex workers' collective, Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) use the slogan 'Save us from Saviours' to signal to foreign 'rescuers' that their efforts to 'save' them not only does not address the most serious problems they face, such as the discrimination they and their families endure, police harassment and under-age sex work, but also leads to a

loss of income, choice and control, and to greater suffering (Cornwall, 2014).

Mainstream development programmes, such as economic or education interventions, designed without an understanding of gender dynamics are also unlikely to increase women's access to resources in practice. For example, microcredit programmes for individual women may raise household income but not women's control over the loan or household decision-making – which is more likely to occur when economic empowerment programmes support women to organise collectively and explicitly seek to shift gender norms, including by working with men and communities (Domingo et al., 2013; Kabeer, 2001). Increasing girls' formal rights to primary and secondary education is insufficient to ensure their actual attendance without efforts to tackle the structural factors inside and outside schools that keep them away, such as exposure to gender-based violence, lack of facilities, child marriage, or care duties (Watson, 2014). Similarly, because university coincides with the age women are most likely to have children, higher education scholarships for women may fail to translate into more women obtaining tertiary education if they are not accompanied by interventions that allow them to delay marriage or support their childcare needs (Clifford et al., 2012).

A pilot project that is part of the Civil Society Support Programme in Ethiopia shows how a problem-focused and collective action approach can help tackle barriers to girls'

Box 7: Working together to tackle the causes of girls dropping out of school in Ethiopia

The Munessa project on girls' education is part of the Civil Society Support Programme (CSSP) in Ethiopia. CSSP is a five-year (2011-2016), £40 million multi-donor programme (led by Ireland, and including Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK), and implemented by a consortium led by the British Council and including INTRAC and IDLGroup (now part of Palladium). Munessa began as a pilot project to apply the principles of the broader CSSP to 'mitigate challenges to female education' in Munessa Woreda. These principles include a 'test and learn' approach to local coalition building and a 'watershed' approach.¹⁸ The Munessa pilot project was extended after the first year, and is likely to continue into the second phase of the CSSP.

Munessa works through a grant and technical support to Harmee Education for Development Association (HEfDA), a membership-based organisation set up in 2006 by volunteers representing the educated elites and rural community members of Munessa Woreda and with a focus on female students in the formal education system. HEfDA, the only active NGO in Munessa, brought together the community, CSOs and (different parts of) government through the creation of two Task Forces. Early dialogue with communities revealed that migration (to the Middle East to do domestic work, sometimes involving girls as young as 12 years of age), abduction and harmful traditional practices (e.g. early marriage) were among the underlying reasons for girls dropping out of school.

Through working with government, schools and communities/families, including through girls clubs and women's associations, Munessa is changing community attitudes and has increased government commitment and response to these issues. This is reflected in the project results in its first year (2012-2013): a 67% reduction in abductions of girls (from 18 to six), a 76% reduction in migration (from 928 to 223) and a 76% fall in school drop-out rates (from 3,972 to 939). Munessa is also reported to have built trust between CSSP and the government and to have increased 'its interest in what civil society has to offer' (CSSP Progress Report), potentially providing implementers with increased room for manoeuvre.

Source: KII #3; Bajama and Gnyawali (2013); Itad (2014).

education in a relatively short period of time. In this case, the consortium worked with a grassroots NGO to build coalitions among community leaders and groups, schools and government to improve girls' education. Following dialogue with communities, efforts were focused on the issues of migration, abduction and harmful traditional practices, leading to a 76% fall in the number of girls dropping out of school in the first year of the programme (2011-2012) (see Box 7).

Beyond mainstreaming: problem-driven cross-disciplinary collaboration

A problem-driven approach to women's rights and to gender equality demands cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration. Women's empowerment cannot be achieved by separate gender departments, policies or programmes that focus on providing resources to women and girls in isolation; it also requires working with and through 'mainstream' development sectors to reduce gender inequality, including interventions related to livelihoods and growth, education, health and political institutions, among others. Feminist analysis and methods are important to solving many development problems, because gender exclusion is an important reason why women and girls often have worse development outcomes than men and boys.

Feminist activists working in line ministries and development agencies (or 'femocrats') and CSOs have advocated a 'twin track' strategy – gender mainstreaming alongside targeted resources for women and girls – to reducing gender inequality since it was adopted in the UN Beijing Platform for Action at the Fourth UN Conference Women (1995) (Derbyshire, 2012). The mainstreaming part of the strategy – the integration of gender equality into the mainstream of an organisation's culture and operations (OECD, 2011) – has had serious shortcomings, however. Most aid agencies now have formal commitments to take gender into account throughout their operations or have policy and programming priorities around improved outcomes women and girls.

However, feminists have widely criticised development organisations for adopting gender mainstreaming in bureaucratic and tokenistic ways, stripping power and politics out of women's empowerment, and focusing on women's individual rights and opportunities (what women can do for growth and poverty reduction), rather than the structural and collective changes needed for women to be empowered (Cornwall, 2014; Eyben et al., 2008).¹⁹ As women and girls have risen back up the

18 The watershed approach draws on the practice of geographical watersheds, which involves 'a range of actors working together to secure benefits for everyone in an inter-dependent human and ecological system' (<http://cssp-et.org/grants/pilot-projects/>)

19 Discussion of the limitations of empowering women within disempowering social and economic conditions is set to gain ground in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the linkages between Goal 5 on gender equality and other SDGs (e.g. macroeconomy and unpaid labour) (GADN, 2015; various, 2016).

policy agenda, there are also concerns about organisations without expertise or experience in women's rights and gender equality capturing new resources and narratives, exacerbating the problem of gender being used in instrumental and de-politicised ways (Arutyunova and Clark, 2013).

There are parallels between efforts to integrate into mainstream development gender, on the one hand, and political economy, on the other. Booth (2015) argues, for instance, that governance for development should be seen as a 'skill-set', not a stand-alone development 'sector'; and that objectives such as increasing state capacity and responsiveness are best achieved by getting out of the 'governance ghetto' and embedding political economy within mainstream development interventions. Further, reflecting on efforts to increase uptake of political economy approaches, Booth and colleagues (2016) conclude that one-off political economy analyses, often written by consultants, make limited contributions to programming, and 'much more influential are factors internal to the organisation, to do with incentives and motivations' (p.5). Similarly, evaluations of gender mainstreaming point to 'policy evaporation' and 'invisibilisation' as a key problems: agencies have good policies in place but country offices do not implement them, using gender analysis only at the beginning of a programme, if at all, and failing to measure or report on concrete outcomes for women and girls and gender equality (Byron and Ornemark, 2010).

The principal factor found for the failure of gender mainstreaming is the absence of genuine high-level leadership, as expressed in actions and resources that create organisational incentives to take gender inequality seriously (NIBR, 2006; Derbyshire et al., 2015). Many feminists remain committed to mainstreaming gender in their organisations but call for it to be done better, with a focus on the internal organisational transformations necessary to ensure that women and men are treated equitably, such as adopting the policies and measures needed to increase gender balance in senior positions (GADN, 2012; Derbyshire, 2012). As gender advisers and champions are acutely aware, however, many policy-makers and practitioners do not see the relevance of gender analysis and objectives to their work, and may also be turned off by the language of gender mainstreaming,

further limiting substantive work to interventions focused on 'women and girls'.

In the absence of high-level action to counter this, entrepreneurial femocrats have found more discreet and creative ways to progress gender objectives and women's rights within their organisation and its operations (Eyben, 2010).²⁰ Tactics include identifying strategic allies outside the gender cadre or community, reframing issues as about operational effectiveness not women's issues, collecting evidence on what can be done differently and seizing opportunities for incremental (if imperfect) changes. By focusing on a specific problem and using these tactics, for instance, a small group of UN femocrats were able in 2008 to achieve something that seemed impossible, the UN Security Council's formal recognition that that conflict-related sexual violence is not simply a humanitarian or 'women's' issue but is a matter of international peace and security and therefore amenable to political and military response (UN Security Council 1820). This breakthrough resolution has been followed by further resolutions established accountability architecture and funding flows for women, peace and security (Goetz, 2015).²¹

The call for more problem-focused approaches to development assistance can be used by feminists in aid bureaucracies and international NGOs to strengthen the case for cross-sector collaborations to address gender inequality. This is particularly the case in agencies, such as DFID, with ministerial and other high-level support for gender equality and/or women and girls. There are relevant lessons from the experience of trying to integrate political economy analysis into mainstream programming. These include the need to make language and analysis accessible to sector colleagues and to recognise that the latter often have tacit knowledge about how politics and power inform the way things work in their sector. Another lesson is the shortcoming of training as a tool to change thinking and practice (Booth et al., 2016). Consequently, as with political economy, feminist methods and insights are more likely to inform mainstream programmes in meaningful ways if technical assistance and analysis is embedded throughout the programme cycle – recognising that implementers' imperfect analysis is better than more polished studies undertaken by external consultants.²²

20 For discussion of how feminist bureaucrats work to progress women's right and gender equality from within their organisations, also see chapters in Eyben and Turquet (2013).

21 Former UN Women Chief Adviser on Women, Peace and Security, Anne Marie Goetz, provided a rare insider account of the micro-politics and behind-the-scenes tactics that led to this and other UN SCR resolutions on WPS in the 2015 Annual LSE Fred Halliday Memorial Lecture (available for download at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/>).

22 See also Denney's (2016) guidance on use of political economy analysis in conflict, security and justice programmes, which sets out four preconditions: begin PEA early in the design process and ensure programming processes are in place to support it, allocate sufficient time for staff to regularly undertake and update PEA; draw on technical skills/sector knowledge alongside that of politics and context; have realistic expectations.

Key takeaways: problem-driven aid to women's rights and gender equality

- Donors should not over-specify solutions to gender inequality or under-estimate what is needed for meaningful change to occur.
- Within both stand-alone gender programmes and mainstream ones, aid should help local stakeholders

to identify the underlying reasons for the poor development outcomes of women and girls, and then possible responses given prevailing conditions.

- In their efforts to collaborate with sector colleagues to tackle barriers to women's empowerment and wellbeing, problem-driven approaches can provide gender advisers and programme managers with an alternative language and argument to gender mainstreaming.



Participant at 2007 World Social Forum in Kenya. Credit: Angela Sevin

Be politically informed and use ‘smart’ tactics

Advocates of adaptive development make a strong case that politically smart approaches go hand in hand with problem-driven and adaptive approaches to development: ‘Understanding the political environment is necessary to grasp what might be politically feasible, while starting with the problem provides a way to explore and test such politically smart ideas in order to make headway on specific issues’ (Wild et al., 2015: 27). There are two elements to being politically smart: being politically informed and working in politically astute ways (Booth and Unsworth, 2014).

Those responsible for funding, commissioning and managing aid projects, who are seldom nationals of the country in which these projects are implemented, need to be aware of the local political economy in order to make sensible decisions about who and what to fund, and how. While national-level political economy analyses have been criticised on the grounds that their findings are difficult to operationalise, they are a useful tool for giving in-country donor staff, who may be unfamiliar with the country, an insight into how and why things work the way they do.

A shortcoming in their usefulness in guiding gender-related assistance, however, is that political economy analyses to date have been almost completely gender-blind. They do not acknowledge that women and men experience power, politics and economics differently or analyse how both gender and other socially constructed identities (e.g. ethnicity, sexuality, caste) shape people’s ideas, interests and actions (Koester, 2015). The origins of political economy thinking and frameworks in development in New Institutional Economics partly explain the failure to see beyond a relatively homogenous ‘rational man’. Another reason is that stakeholder mapping often begins and

ends by ‘mapping the most significant power-holders in a context, and men dominate these positions and sources of power’ (GADN Women Participation and Leadership Working Group, 2015: 2). Rectifying this requires an analysis of power relations, of different forms of power and inclusion of those ‘who hold comparatively less or very little power’²³ (ibid.). It also means recognising that gender norms are one type of informal institution that structure how formal institutions work and how reforms unfold (Waylen, 2014; Krook and Mackay, 2015).

Identification of a problem, and of its underlying causes and potential responses, goes only so far. This is where the second element of being politically smart comes in, which is working in politically astute ways.²⁴ Once a potential response or solution to a problem is identified, local reformers need to read the political environment and work out what strategies or sequences of action might achieve the desired response – the programme theory of change (ToC).²⁵ The potential solutions to a problem, and strategic actions to achieve it, may not be obvious and so require trial and error (Valters et al., 2016). While the first will draw on experience and/or existing research and evidence about what has or has not worked under different conditions (Denney and Domingo, 2015), the second requires political skills and judgement.

For a reform coalition or feminist organisation working to achieve more equitable gender relations and better outcomes for women and girls, political smartness is about working out how to negotiate barriers and use opportunities within a political system in order to achieve its objectives. It therefore requires understanding how the given political and socio-economic system works, who has power within it and why, establishing which groups

23 Power is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down and therefore to theorise, but there is general agreement that it is a multidimensional concept that goes beyond overt forms of power that enables one person to get another person to do something they might not otherwise do. In development, the work of Stephen Lukes and John Gaventa has been particularly important in developing more a sophisticated understanding of power, which includes hidden/internalised power arising from hegemonic ideas (see, for example, Gaventa’s seminal work on power and powerlessness (Gaventa, 1982) and his work with IDS on the Power Cube (Gaventa and Pettit, 2011). In relation to gender and power specifically, Jo Rowlands’ (1997) typology – power within, power over, power with, power to – has been influential.

24 Booth and Unsworth define being political astute to ‘ways of working that use information about the politics (including political economy) with intelligence and creativity. Donors or their partners need political skills. That is, they must be not just well-informed but clever operators, with the capacity to work with the politics or around them according to what works best in the context ... In the case of donor staff, the most important political skills may be those involved in devising funding and management arrangements for third parties who are more politically informed and astute than outsiders can ever be’ (Booth and Unsworth, 2014: 3)

25 ‘A Theory of Change is an ongoing process of reflection to explore change and how it happens – and what that means for the part we play in a particular context, sector and/or group of people’ (James (2011), cited in Valters, 2015).

and individuals have an interest in the reform because they stand to gain or lose from it, and working out what tactics and relations will lead to change. Political smartness recognises that what appears to be the best solution, whether technical or moral, is not in fact the best solution to a concrete problem if it is not achievable.

In the abstract, the pragmatism of politically smart approaches might alarm activists precisely because it may appear to prioritise means over ends. But the push for problem-driven, politically smart and adaptive development presents an important opportunity for feminists to re-politicise aid for women's rights and gender equality. Political realism does not mean supporting the status quo. All elements of development require change, and usually involve the redistribution of power and resources, and transformative agendas can be politically feasible. In any case, feminists already work in smart ways to negotiate both national politics and community and household power relations – and have always needed to do so given the resistance to gender reform. Case studies show that campaigning is only the most public face of feminist struggles, and even rights-based strategies require tactical and pragmatic compromises and alliances to be effective.²⁶ Two common components of feminist strategies are smart framing and smart alliances (O'Neil and Domingo, 2016).

Smart framing

The primary obstacle to gender equality is discriminatory gender laws, norms and practices. Women's rights and empowerment organisations and interventions seek to influence, shift or work with and around these in some way. Head-on tactics and wholesale change may not be possible or effective, however. Instead, feminists often build on accepted ideas and practices, and frame issues and arguments in ways that will build support for change and minimise opposition, from both women and men. For example, as noted earlier, Tostan in Senegal uses a non-judgemental approach to discussing harmful gender norms, starting from the premise that communities that practise FGM/C love their children and want them to be healthy, and worked with religious and community

leaders to increase understanding that FGM/C is not a religious obligation. Similarly, the Ugandan women's rights organisation, Raising Voices, works with whole communities to reduce VAW and HIV, engaging them in non-judgemental dialogue about their and others' experiences of power, rather than simply focusing on and condemning men's power over women (Raising Voices, n.d.; Raising Voice et al., 2015).

Women's rights are often a sensitive issue for governments, and foreign assistance can be construed as interference in cultural and family matters – further reinforced by widespread assumptions that family relations are private and not of public concern. Managers of aid-funded programmes may make a strategic decision to avoid the language of rights and gender equality, particularly if government engagement is important for a programme's success. For example, the Ethiopian government is sensitive to what it perceives as lecturing by foreigners, and the country's Civil Society Law also constrains work on women's rights. The British Council-managed Civil Society Support Programme (CSSP) described earlier therefore decided not to use the language of social equality and chose instead to refer to 'hard to reach groups' – which automatically include women and left open the possibility of making grants to groups working on gender issues. This proved to be an effective approach to building trust with the government, leading to collaboration between the government and civil society to reduce violence against adolescent girls in a way that is unlikely to have been possible through a more direct approach.

To harness support, domestic reformers may use stereotypes of women and ideas about femininity strategically – such as the perception that women are peaceful, natural carers or, even that they need male protection. Women parliamentarians and activists in Afghanistan, for instance, often opt for 'quiet' voices to lobby male power-holders because being seen as outspoken or associated with Western ideas or agencies carries a high reputational risk (Larson, 2016). Women parliamentarians lobbying for a new Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Law provisions regarding child marriage appealed to their male colleagues as fathers,

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25 'A Theory of Change is an ongoing process of reflection to explore change and how it happens – and what that means for the part we play in a particular context, sector and/or group of people' (James (2011), cited in Valters, 2015).

26 See case study research from the Developmental Leadership Program (<http://www.dlprog.org/research.php>), the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Programme (<http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/>) and the Women's Voice and Leadership Programme (<https://www.odi.org/women-and-power>).

playing down more controversial provisions (O’Neil et al., 2016). Strategies that harness ‘essentialised’ ideas about women and femininity have to be chosen carefully, however, because they risk reinforcing gender hierarchies and women’s marginalisation and insecurity – again underlining the importance of working with and through local reformers and organisations more able to make these judgement calls.

Conversely, to avoid ‘ghettoisation’, politicians and bureaucrats may position gender-related objectives so that they are not seen as ‘women’s issues’ (Rousseau, 2016). With support from the DFAT-funded Pacific Leadership Program (PLP), the Director of Women’s Affairs in Vanuatu, Dorosday Kenneth, successfully led a coalition lobbying for temporary special measures (reserved seats) for women in municipal government. An earlier bill on family protection had finally been passed but effectively marginalised because it was not seen as being in line with religious views on men and women’s roles being different but complementary (‘gender complementarity’). To avoid this, Kenneth situated the measures within other domestic reforms underway, in particular electoral reforms and a land law, and allowed these departments to be the public face of the proposed reforms rather than the Department of Women’s Affairs (Rousseau, 2016; Denney and McLaren, forthcoming).

Smart alliances

Coalitions are at the heart of reform processes (Unsworth, 2010), including gender-related reforms. Coalitions and alliances vary greatly – for instance, they can be more or less formal, more or less inclusive, and more or less marriages of convenience rather than principles. Which types are most appropriate depends very much on the context and objective (Denney and McLaren, forthcoming).

The coalition lobbying for temporary special measures in Vanuatu revolved around the Director for Women’s Affairs, who managed it in a relatively exclusive and top-down way. She had an inner circle, a taskforce, through which she brought together key political and technocratic allies, including from the State Law Office, the Electoral Commission, a prominent MP and an academic. The broader Women in Shared Decision-Making Coalition also included civil society and women’s organisations that Kenneth engaged with and kept informed – but also distanced herself from them to some degree because the movement was divided and also to avoid framing the reform specifically as a women’s issue (Rousseau, 2016). In other circumstances, broad-based alliances may be crucial to give feminist struggles legitimacy and power. The

ability of women’s organisations to forge alliances across class, ethnic, religious and other divides – often in the face of divided male elites – have been a key factor in their success in peace, constitutional and legal reform processes (Domingo et al., 2015).

In many countries, the feminist community is relatively small. As they move between different positions in the course of their careers, active feminists form personal networks across civil society, political and state organisations. For example, Engender Scotland is a small team but one reason for its effectiveness is that it has a strong network of ‘useful friends’ – feminists who have worked with or in the organisation (e.g. founding or board members) and who are now in prominent positions in government, academia and other CSOs.²⁷ The organisation also uses more inclusive strategies as appropriate – such as broad consultation in the development of a manifesto for the independence referendum, Gender Matters (Engender, 2015), with its endorsement by 20 organisations giving it weight as a lobbying tool (KII #9).

Effective feminist action also requires alliances with others with different positions and interests, male and female. At all levels of society, men dominate private, political and public life, and particularly the most powerful sectors and positions. What is more, political and economic decisions and deals are often struck outside formal political processes and the public gaze, often in locations that are male-only, whether because of rules or social convention, such as over a beer or a game of golf. While women’s movements can be politically influential from a distance, through protest and media campaigns, activists and reformers also need to influence male gatekeepers and power-holders to achieve and sustain changes in gender relations – whether at the national or community level. Alliances and coalitions are therefore central to progressive gender reform, not only principled coalitions among like-minded people but also pragmatic ones among people and groups with some degree of shared interest.

Whether they are principled or pragmatic, alliances and coalitions always entail exchange, accommodation and compromise. The need for women to make deals and accept second best outcomes are a common feature in the negotiation of legal agreements, including new constitutions. Activists in Malawi, for example, had been campaigning for a new Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act since the early 2000s. The Bill was rejected the first time the Minister of Gender presented it to the cabinet, in part because it outlawed polygamy, which is still widely practised among Malawi’s minority but politically influential Muslim community. The Act that was eventually passed in 2015 was less than ideal from the perspective of gender equality – for example, polygamy continues to be

27 As our informant noted, however, the possibility of such close ties – between feminists but also developing relationships with other allies – is in part related to the size of the country and sector – since Westminster is much more distant and more difficult for Scottish activists to influence than the Scottish Assembly (KII #9).

legal and there is an extremely strict definition of marital rape (deemed as such only when spouses are separated) – but nevertheless contains many other provisions that extend women’s rights in Malawi (O’Neil et al., 2016). Sometimes activists make a judgement call about second-best process rather than content – for example, even though laws made by Presidential Decree are less secure than those made by parliament, the Afghan women’s movement chose it as a channel for the Elimination of Violence Against Women Act (2009) because it was unlikely to survive a parliamentary vote (Larson, 2016).

In many cases women’s rights organisations and movements combine different relationships and tactics – including broad-based alliances between women’s organisations and more selective relationships with well-placed individuals, and public campaigning and more informal lobbying and negotiation. This was the case in Kenya’s constitutional reform processes, where elite women’s organisations joined forces with grassroots women’s organisations from around the country, mobilising the media, as well as targeting and privately lobbying male politicians and other power-holders (Domingo and McCullough, 2016). During the constitutional reform processes in Nepal, FEDO also effectively combined movement tactics in its campaign for equal citizenship rights for Dalit women. This included working with women’s solidarity groups throughout Nepal and forming an inter-party Dalit Women’s Alliance, public campaigning (media mobilisation, protest and a hunger strike), alongside more targeted political tactics, including alliances with non-Dalit organisations and sustained public and private lobbying of political parties (KII #6, #7; Hunt, 2015).

Reformers need political judgement and political economy insights (albeit seldom thought of in this way) to walk the line between cooperation and co-optation, to know when oppositional tactics are likely to help or hinder the cause, and to know when to accept a less than

perfect outcome, or when the second-best, short-term gains would derail longer-term objectives. In 2010, for instance, Malawian civil society activists calculated that, while representing an improvement, a constitutional amendment passed by parliament to raise the age of marriage to 16 would make their objective of a minimum age of 18 and a new Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations law much harder to achieve. They therefore successfully petitioned the President to not approve the amendment, and held out for the new law, which was finally achieved five years later (O’Neil et al., 2016).

Key takeaways: politically smart aid to women’s rights and gender equality

- Political realism does not mean support the status quo, and politically smart development presents an opportunity for feminists – both within bureaucracies and civic society – to re-politicise aid for women’s rights and gender equality.
- Feminists in developing countries are already working in astute ways to negotiate political realities and power relations and to achieve gender reform within male-dominated states and societies.
- Two common political tactics are to frame issues and arguments in ‘smart’ ways to convince allies and neutralise opponents, and to forge smart alliances, which includes pragmatic coalitions and deals with people with different political values and objectives.
- To make effective decisions about who and what to fund, people who commission and manage gender-related assistance need to be aware of local political economy, including gender relations. They also need political skills to negotiate their own organisational constraints and provide funding in ways that enable frontline implementers and activists to work politically (Booth and Unsworth, 2014).

Build learning and adaptation into programmes and strategies

The uncertain and context-specific nature of social and political change means that both gender-related programmes and frontline women's rights organisations must work in adaptive ways. As Wild et al. (2015) argue, however, 'adaptive processes are not about "muddling through". Rather, they start with some initial hypotheses, test these and then revise the approach in light of what is found, using the best available information at the time' (p.34). Initial hypotheses should draw on the existing evidence base, though 'keeping in mind the need to translate evidence from one context to another to ascertain its relevance' (Denney 2016), *emphases in the original*). Experimenting is then integral to these processes: making 'small bets' by trying out things based on informed best guesses (Andrews, 2011; Faustino and Booth, 2014). An adaptive programme therefore needs both a mechanism for learning and feedback, but also the 'the opportunity to use that learning to adjust, and actually adjusts' (Valters et al., 2016: 5, *emphases*). In turn, flexible funding and programme arrangements make these in-programme adjustments possible (Booth and Unsworth, 2014).

Adaptive programming

Programmes and reformers need to be adaptive in two ways, related to the two types of complexity noted earlier (Valters et al., 2016). Causal complexity means that the potential response to a problem may be unclear at the outset (e.g. what is likely to improve justice outcomes for women subject to intimate partner violence in refugee camps in Bangladesh?). Or, if the response appears clear (e.g. the need for citizenship rights for stateless people as a precondition for their access to legal redress), the

actions needed to achieve it may not be (e.g. would the best route be diplomatic pressure, strategic litigation, public advocacy and/or an informal network of power-holders?). Programmes need to be open to experimentation in order to seek to learn from different possible solutions and/or strategies for achieving them – which in turn requires being open to failure.²⁸ Context complexity means that programmes may need to adjust their strategy and activities in order to stay on track to meet higher objectives when the external environment changes.

Our research finds, however, that conscious and systematic experimentation is the principle least applied in gender-related programmes, and in development programmes more broadly. Small frontline women's rights organisations appear to undertake informal forms of regular reflection and adaptation. Both FEDO and Engender Scotland are small activist teams, whose staff interact continually and regularly to discuss progress, what is working and not, what opportunities can be seized and what strategic changes are needed (KII #7, #9). Engender Scotland, for example, had planned to write a report on sex and power in Scotland, and to develop a strategy on gender and housing, but the Scotland Bill presented significant new entry points for women's rights regarding newly devolved responsibilities (e.g. social security/welfare, abortion), and so this has taken priority over other planned activities (KII #9). These frontline organisations appear less often to examine and test different possible solutions to an underlying problem – perhaps because this type of searching is less relevant for political organisations seeking fundamental rights or reforms, such as citizenship rights or protecting women's pensions.

²⁸ As Valters and colleagues (2015) outline, there are many different types of learning (e.g. sequential, parallel, experiential, feedback, and double-loop). Which is the most appropriate will depend on the problem at hand, the type of information needed and the rapidity of the feedback.

Structured learning and adaptive ways of working are of clear relevance to gender-related aid programmes, but appear not to feature here either. A large-scale evaluation of UN Women programmes in conflict-affected and fragile states, for instance, found that most lacked the building blocks for learning and adaptation – including a clear and logical theory of change (ToC), robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E), including in-year learning and feedback. Rather, log-frames were often over-ambitious and lacked a clear progression from inputs to outputs, outcomes and impact, assumptions were often formulaic and unrelated to the specific context, and reporting in annual reviews was most frequently against outputs (Domingo et al., 2013; O’Neil and Wood, 2013). Such programmes lack the processes and information to understand and assess the contribution the intervention has made to any changes that have happened or have not been achieved. In these circumstances, a programme is not only failing to take several small informed bets on what might work but is not even making one large informed bet.

In fact, evaluations point to M&E systems as the weak point of gender-related (and other types of) development programmes.²⁹ For funders, M&E appears often to be driven by bureaucratic accountability demands,³⁰ and for implementers and beneficiaries by doing what is needed to satisfy the funder’s reporting requirements. Implementing organisations commonly report on a set of predetermined and unchanging inputs and outputs. For these to contribute to programme outcomes and higher-level objectives would mean, at the very least, either that the external environment was static or that some activities were not reported.

Theory-based evaluations reveal that staff managing gender programmes that do not have an explicit ToC or robust log-frame may nevertheless be reactive to external changes and use a tacit ToC to guide their decisions. As was the case for the head of the UN Women Kosovo Project Office, this unwritten hunch about how change will happen – existing sometimes mainly in the head of one individual – is more likely to revolve around processes and relationships than more tangible activities and outputs, such as the number of trainings delivered or pamphlets produced (Domingo et al., 2013). Since they are not part of the log-frame, however, these important process, relationship, and decision-making elements of the programme logic are rarely articulated or reported. This omission means that learning is lost (within and beyond the programme) and that staff time is wasted reporting on

Box 8: Discovering new ways to tackle women’s economic exclusion in Mozambique

Ligada (meaning ‘connected’ in Portuguese) is a new six-year DFID-funded (£14 million) programme. It is still at the inception phase but aims to use a testing-and-learning approach. Reflecting this, the programme documents set out the overarching problem – how to increase ‘female economic empowerment’ in four Mozambican cities – but do not specify activities. Instead, the eight-month inception phase is being used to define the scope of the programme and identify the types of intervention that might work best in the inter-connected programme pillars: innovate to create jobs; broker relations, and use branding and communication, to remove barriers to women’s and girls’ access to work; and embed reflection and learning throughout the programme cycle.

In the first ‘discovery phase’, the OPM-led consortium commissioned research and held meetings with key stakeholders and influential people. To better integrate research into the programme decision-making and cycle, the research teams include the Ligada management team. An overarching ToC has been developed outlining different pathways to test women and girls’ access to jobs, with a view to taking more successful ones to scale. The team is designing an M&E system and considering innovative methods to collect qualitative and quantitative data, such as using regular beneficiary assessments rather than larger impact evaluations, micro-surveys using mobile phones, learning blogs to capture lessons, and building in ‘learning moments’ to assess the ToC. The management team includes a DFID secondee, funded by the programme, designed to ensure that the ‘link from the programme to DFID is hardwired to enable the best chances of influencing DFID and taking [programme successes] to scale through other DFID programmes’.

Source: KII #2, #8.

activities that may no longer be relevant or were incidental to the outcomes.³¹

Some recent DFID-funded programmes, managed by consortia of international and national organisations, are consciously trying to work in adaptive ways to identify causes of, and potential solutions to, gender inequality.

29 This is also true of other types of development programme – for example parliamentary development assistance and political party support (Rocha Menocal and O’Neil, 2013) or voice and accountability (O’Neil et al., 2008; Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008).

30 See Natsios (2010), for example, on the primacy of bureaucratic compliance over learning forms of accountability in USAID and how it is ill-suited to the challenges of assisting complex social and political change.

31 Two approaches being used in programmes to manage and record structured experimentation and adaptation are strategy testing and problem diaries (Denney and Domingo, 2015). Also see Faustino and Booth (2014) for the management tools to guide iterative ‘learning by doing’ approaches.

Box 9: An adaptive approach to norm change and gender equality in Nigeria

Voices for Change' (V4C) is a DFID-funded (£39 million) programme being implemented by a consortium comprising Palladium, SDD, Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternatives and ITAD. V4C seeks to promote an enabling environment for gender equality and empower adolescent girls and young women in Nigeria. Its working theory of change (ToC) is based on the belief that social norms, and the expectations about girls' behaviour that uphold them, are a primary barrier to women's empowerment. V4C seeks out new ways to change these social norms by working across the three layers of change: individual, society-wide and legal/political structures.

V4C has a 20-year horizon, and the first four-year programme (2013-2017) is being used to test what does and does not work. This included a one-year inception period for research and engagement with stakeholders to identify focal areas of social norm change (violence against women (VAW), women's leadership, and women's role in decision-making). The programme is also working with some unconventional groups and organisations. Rather than working with the poorest adolescents, it focuses on low- to middle-income young urban women (aged between 16 and 25 years) with access to mobile technology and the time and energy to 'set trends'. It is also actively engaging with key influencers in broader society, such as men's professional organisations and celebrities, to change attitudes to femininity and masculinity, well as with traditional/religious leaders, political parties and parliament to bring about legal change.

Drawing on nudge and norm diffusion theory, V4C is testing out approaches to behavioural change with a 'fail fast and scale fast' philosophy – test, monitor, seek feedback, and adapt/iterate or drop. It uses the metaphor of 'lighting fires': light many fires, pursue those that 'catch' and extinguish the rest. The ToC has two 'solid' reviews a year. Output and outcome levels indicators are altered as the programme evolves in order to stay on track to achieve the overarching outcomes and impacts. Multiple channels of feedback are used to learn about what is or is not working – and to make adjustments based on what is found about inter-state variations (e.g. more uptake on radio programmes in the northern states, but an online platform worked better in the southern states).

V4C has also been working with unconventional implementing partners, such as media and marketing specialists, alongside women's organisations and networks, and testing messages among different audiences, e.g. finding it works better to talk in terms of 'gender justice' with religious leaders, and 'equity and fairness' with traditional leaders. The team structure has changed too, and fewer development and more communication specialists have been recruited. Where possible, the programme works with existing platforms and self-supporting coalitions to avoid creating dependence.

Source: KII #1; V4C (n.d.; 2014a, b).

For example, beyond its objective of increasing women's economic empowerment in four cities, the six-year Ligada programme in Mozambique has begun with a relatively blank sheet. Instead of fixing activities at the outset, it has a working ToC and is using a 'discovery phase' during an extended inception period to conduct research with stakeholders to define the scope of the programme and pilot interventions (see Box 8). While women's rights and other types of frontline organisation do use research to learn about their activities, including substantive participatory research with partners, this is often conducted after the event.³² Research and other forms of learning that are not embedded in the programme cycle may benefit future programme design but cannot inform in-programme decisions or design.

Voice for Changes (V4C) in Nigeria is another programme that is explicitly incorporating problem-solving and experimentation in its design. Drawing on nudge and norm diffusion theory, V4C aims to change harmful social norms and expectations regarding masculinity and femininity. It works directly with girls and young women (aged between 16 and 24 years), but also with opinion formers and key influencers in broader society (e.g. men's professional organisations, celebrities, traditional/religious leaders), as well as building networks to effect legal change. As media and communications is a central strand in the programme, V4C has recruited communications as well as development experts, and is working both with media and marketing organisations and with women's organisations and networks. V4C has a 20-year horizon, using its first four-year programme (2013-2017) to test what does or

³² For example, Womankind Worldwide has conducted primary research to learn more about its partners' activities towards the end of the Dutch-funded, FLOW programme (see, e.g. Jackson, 2015).

does not work by ‘lighting many fires’, seeing which ‘catch’ and investing in them (see Box 9).

The V4C programme highlights a broader question about how to assess success and failure in using adaptive approaches to women’s rights and gender-related change, and appropriate timeframes for doing this.³³ Achieving women’s empowerment and reducing gender inequality are never linear processes, but unfold through processes of change and counter-change (Domingo and McCullough, 2016). Electoral quotas are a good example of this. While electoral quotas may not have been the perfect solution to women’s under-representation in Kenya (for example, proportional representation might be more effective), women’s movements considered that electoral quotas were the most politically feasible option, and succeeded in getting them included in the 2010 constitution. Measured in terms of the proportion of women in the national and local government and the public sector this strategy was successful (e.g. the proportion of women MPs increased from 7.5% in 2011 to 19.1% in 2013). In time, this change may also have important symbolic effects on attitudes (Domingo et al., 2015), but it has also had negative effects. Male-dominated political parties have used it to deter women from competing for single-constituency seats. Women appointed through quotas are not regarded as equal to those elected through open competition and there are complaints that they are too quiet (Domingo and McCullough, 2016). In narrow terms this could mean that the quotas are judged to have been a failure, but it is also possible to argue that further actions are now needed to make the quotas a meaningful instrument for achieving greater representation of women.

Observable changes in people’s attitudes and behaviour towards gender norms and in concrete improvements in outcomes for women and girls may well take a generation or more to achieve. Even putting aside the difficulties of attributing the contribution of individual programmes to social change, this means that a programme’s higher-level ‘success’ and the robustness of assumed causal connections cannot be tested within the conventional period of one to four years.³⁴ Instead, a meta-theory of change about what contributes to women’s and girls’ empowerment or reductions in gender inequality must be broken down into smaller chunks, so that programmes identify realistic timeframes and indicators for the first step so that they can assess what is or isn’t working and make the necessary programme adjustments (Denney and Domingo, 2015).

For example, V4C works on the assumption that changing adolescents’ attitudes to gender norms will have

inter-generational effects. It will not be clear whether this hypothesis is correct until the cohort become parents, but it can make informed judgements about interim steps – such as changes in attitudes or legal/policy reforms – and experiment with different ways to achieve these. Early interim successes include gaining the support of religious leaders for Gender and Equal Opportunities bill in Enugu State and exerting pressure on uninterested politicians to approve the bill to go to the next level, and some indications of a change in behaviour/attitudes on the part of young men and community leaders (e.g. towards women’s leadership, domestic responsibilities).

Flexible arrangements

How aid agencies commission, procure/contract and fund development shapes incentives for implementers and frontline organisations and their ability to work in adaptive ways (Denney and Domingo, 2014). As Booth and Unsworth (2014) note, organisational incentives in aid and implementing organisations work against locally led, politically smart and adaptive development, including ‘a focus on achieving direct, short term results based on project designs that over-specify inputs and expected outputs; pressure to spend that makes relationships with partners aid-centric and allows insufficient time for iterative learning; and squeezes on expenditure deemed “administrative” which, when coupled with high staff turnover, impede the acquisition of in-depth political knowledge and the application of skills’ (p.v-vi). While most programmes have some scope for between-year changes in activities and, sometimes outputs, there is often little possibility of in-year changes. Organisations that depend on aid or have shareholders to satisfy currently have few incentives to report failure to their funders (Denney and Domingo, 2015).

Long contracting chains can further accentuate the factors that currently deter adaptive ways of working, and make it less likely women’s rights and other frontline organisations will be treated as ‘innovators not contractors’ (Cornwall, 2014). Flexibility involves risk and therefore requires some degree of trust between the funder and implementer. Inserting one or more intermediaries between the funders and the organisations with a direct interest in the change process slows down communication and decision-making and increases the chances of misunderstandings. It also augments the number of organisational agendas and incentives structures involved in a single development project

33 See Denney and Domingo (2015) for discussion of the need for appropriate timescales for judging what is/isn’t working when using problem-driven and iterative approaches in the context of the justice and security sector. They also caution against funder setting up new incentives for rapid changes of courses ‘at the whim of a team leader’ in the name of results: ‘adapting programming should mean strategic, considered change – not ad hoc guessing that may do more harm than good’ (p.11).

34 Testing assumptions about the long-term effects of programmes for women and girls is also important but is rarely done since it requires longitudinal data. This is a gap that the new ODI-led DFID-funded Global Girls Research Initiative (2015-2023) is seeking to fill.

(Valters et al., 2016). A recent bilateral programme to promote women's political empowerment, for instance, channelled grants to in-country organisations through an INGO but used management consultants to oversee the contract. The funder had no direct contract with the INGO implementing the programme, let alone the in-country organisations. Instead, the implementers used an online system to report progress against activities and quantitative indicators, based on categories that remained unchanged during the four-year programme (KII).

It helps to employ knowledgeable staff who are committed to the issue they are working on since they are more likely to work around organisational constraints to flexibility and adaptation where necessary. In the women's political empowerment programme, for instance, the international implementer still supported its in-country partners to change their activities as necessary in order to stay on track to achieving their objectives. They were able to do this because they were reporting against broad output areas, but it meant that pertinent information about what decisions partners had taken and why, and what they had achieved outside the original log-frame, was recorded only in a 'comments' section. To work around procedures, the USAID adviser in Kenya leading up to the constitutional reform discussed earlier designated the civil society programme as responding to a crisis to build in the flexibility she needed, and depended on a team of Kenyans dedicated to reform and able to decipher the constantly changing political landscape.

It is more efficient, however, to use funding and programme approaches that encourage or require implementers and beneficiaries to work in adaptive ways. Surveys undertaken as part of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment found that 'what works ... is a regular, dependable source of income that is at the discretion of the organization to spend on activities they believe to be most effective in making a difference' (Cornwall, 2014: 26).³⁵ Where the funder has an established relationship of trust with an organisation and is confident of their effectiveness, core funding is one way to support adaptive development. This is also borne out by experience in high-income countries. For example, the Scottish government provides untied funding to Engender Scotland, a small but effective feminist advocacy organisation. Core funding both reduces the administrative work for the four permanent staff (two full time, and two part time), and allows the team to change tack when a strategy is not working or the

external context changes. Their funding proposal is based on what they will do and how they will influence change rather than specific issues. This agility has been critical to the organisation's ability to take advantage of the political openings provided by the independence referendum and devolution (KII #9).

Grant schemes, challenge funds and programme funding can also all be provided and designed in ways that deliberately enable locally led and adaptive ways of working. For example, the DFAT-funded Pacific Leadership Program (PLP), now in its third phase, is a grant facility to coalitions and development leadership in the Pacific, including the Women in Shared Decision-Making Coalition in Vanuatu. It explicitly used innovative elements to foster greater ownership among partners and nimbleness for the management team. This included a co-location model during the two phases of the PLP (2008-2014), in which an Ausaid (as it was then) staff member with decision-making authority was part of the Cardno programme implementation team, enabling the programme to respond rapidly to new information and opportunities. Another notable feature is the programme's genuine commitment to partnerships rather than simply contractual/funding relations. The first PLP Director was a trained partnership broker and partnerships are based on tailored agreements with technical/organisational support and mentoring alongside funding – and grantees report high levels of trust and ownership (Denney and McLaren, forthcoming; Henderson and Roche, 2012; KII #4). Funds that are managed by organisations with local knowledge and networks are better able to identify and correctly assess which partners are most likely to support women's empowerment and gender equality. Further, as Valters et al. (2016) argue, incentivising genuine learning and iteration also requires a contractual shift, making learning a core (possibly even the only) activity defined in the log-frame.³⁶

Key takeaways: adaptive aid to women's rights and gender equality

- Some frontline feminist organisations and gender-related programmes use informal reflection and adaptation to adjust their strategies to changes in their external environment – but these decisions and the reasons for them are rarely recorded or reported.

35 Cornwall continues: 'If a fraction of the funds currently funnelled to the accountancy giants were redirected to women's funds such as Mama Cash, we would see real gains for women's empowerment ... Rather than impose upon women's organizations a fixed set of goals and expectations, and instruments such as logical frameworks that drive a linear, results-focused, approach, what works to strengthen them is investment in their capacity to respond creatively to emerging opportunities, more trust in their knowledge, and sensitive, supportive accompaniment' (Cornwall, 2014: 26).

36 Recognising that payment by results favours larger organisations able to take the financial risk, Valters et al. (2016) suggest that 'payment by learning' may be a better option in some aid partnerships/contacts – an important consideration given that women's rights organisations worldwide receive on average only \$20,000 in funding each year, and as low as \$12,136 in sub-Saharan Africa (figures based on 740 women's organisations in 140 countries in 2010, (Arutyunova and Clark, 2013)).

- Gender-related programmes and organisations do not commonly use structured experimentation to test different possible ways of empowering women and girls and to adapt their approach based on learning about which programme activities work more or less well.
- For this to be possible, implementers must put in place the building blocks for systematic learning and adaptation: a problem-driven approach, an explicit theory of change, structured learning with rapid feedbacks, and potential for in-programme adjustments to outputs and indicators.
- Funders must enable and incentivise adaptive programmes through long-term horizons and trusted partnerships, flexible funding arrangements, and more creative thinking about results and how they are reported.



Women's rights rally. Credit: Keith Reed

Adaptive gender programming: using political means to further normative ends

Concerns about an inherent mismatch between aid to women's empowerment and gender inequality versus politically smart adaptive approaches to development are misguided. There is no tension provided that the basic principles are adhered to – that aid is getting behind local stakeholders, is provided in ways that genuinely enable them to set the agenda, identify problems and potential solutions, and that incentivises and holds them accountable for real experimentation and learning-by-doing. In every country there are feminist activists and social reformers seeking more equitable development that aid could support. There is no intrinsic tension between working pragmatically with and around political realities and women's rights. All development objectives are based on normative beliefs and involve a new vision of the social order. Worldwide, feminists have in practice applied adaptive development principles to secure reform in male-dominated institutions and societies.

The gender and adaptive development communities have much in common and could learn and gain from greater collaboration. We outline three areas in which each community could learn from the other.

What gender and development communities could do better

First, there is a need for new thinking on gender mainstreaming, which adaptive development principles can provide. The experience of encouraging those outside the governance cadre to use political economy approaches

shows that the uptake of new thinking and practice is not primarily about more or better policy, training or analytical frameworks. Rather, it is about changing the incentives of those responsible for funding and managing mainstream development programmes by making the issue or approach relevant and/or necessary to them.³⁷ In the absence of high-level leadership to motivate the changes in ideas or ways of working, one way to demonstrate relevance is to forge tactical relationships with interested colleagues that produce shared results.

For this, adaptive development principles and approaches, such as problem-driven iterative adaptation, are potentially powerful – particularly in organisations that give priority to women and girls. Gender advisers can use a problem-driven approach to increase interest in removing obstacles to objectives that relate directly to gender-based inequality in areas such as health, education, livelihoods and food security, and conflict-reduction efforts and post-conflict reconstruction.³⁸ Gender advisers can also use adaptive principles to re-politicise work on women's empowerment, directing attention away from palliative approaches that focus on individual women to the deeper structural issues that sustain gender inequality.

Second, stand-alone gender programmes need to be more problem-focused and to use structured experimentation and learning. Again, this will help to reinsert questions of power into analysis of women's poverty and insecurity relative to men's, and enable genuine local approaches to incrementally changing these entrenched norms and interests. In turn, adaptive

37 As Eyben argues the 'contradictions between the instrumentalist and transformative agendas can be managed by using the instrumentalist agenda to make the status quo case for mainstreaming, while hoping and working towards more transformational goals, concerning which the activist stays silent except with co-conspirators' (Eyben, 2010: 60).

38 For example, if the objective is to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS among women, addressing the underlying causes immediately exposes gender inequalities and, for instance, women's inability to refuse sex or to insist that a sexual partner use a condom.

and politically smart programmes require funding and contractual arrangements that encourage learning around meaningful change and have the flexibility to support this way of working. Locally led gender reform also requires long-term partnerships that ensure that funding reaches organic feminist and other types of organisations and networks working to advance women’s rights and wellbeing in their communities.

Third, the political requirement that aid agencies demonstrate results will not go away, but the results agenda can be reformed so that aid is more likely to contribute to meaningful development processes. In this, **thinking and research from Doing Development Differently communities can help to improve results regarding women’s rights and gender equality in at least two ways.** They can contribute to thinking about how to better set and assess results – with growing advocacy around more process and relationship-related activities and indicators. They can also help in developing theories of change that facilitate thinking through the various stages of reform to ensure that assistance does not start and end with paper reforms and formal changes. For example, researchers at both the Harvard Kennedy School and the Developmental Leadership Programme have produced work on what reform leadership and coalitions look like, and how they are different for various of the reform process.³⁹

What Doing Development Differently networks could do better

First, the content may be different but **political economy and adaptive development enthusiasts** can learn from the experiences of gender mainstreaming. For over 20 years, feminists in aid agencies, government ministries and NGOs have been chipping away at organisational resistance to integrating gender into mainstream operations and development programmes. They have found that it is possible to achieve isolated gains through having committed individuals dotted around organisations – in much the same way that there is often a trail of innovative governance programming following individual adaptive development enthusiasts in aid agencies. But such gains are extremely tenuous without high-level leadership to institutionalise change and to create a groundswell of new organisational thinking and practice. Some members of the adaptive development community recognise this and are working more closely with allies in aid agencies to think through what organisational changes are needed to make them nimble and adaptive, such as in their procurement

rules or performance management (Booth et al., 2016; Denney and Domingo, 2014, 2015).

Second, **feminist theory and analysis can enrich the use of political economy in mainstream development.** Political economy analysis has been used in development processes to better understand how ‘interaction of political and economic processes in a society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time’ (DFID, 2009). To date, however, these analyses have overwhelmingly focused on the interests and actions of, overwhelmingly male, elite actors and/or the relations between elites and supposedly homogenous groups of poor people. A more sophisticated analysis of power and power relations brings into view different sets of people and their interests, including new groups of reformers and avenues for reform – such as women, even the most marginalised, and gender reform (see Box 10). Aid agencies interested in reducing inequality and poverty

Box 10: Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) – a political movement for Dalit women in Nepal

Dalit women face overlapping forms of discrimination in Nepal’s caste-based and patriarchal society. Elite women capture measures to address gender-based discrimination, and male Dalits capture those to address caste-based discrimination. Despite the obstacles, FEDO has successfully lobbied for recognition of Dalit women in the new constitution, and supported the election of Dalit women to the constituent assembly. This example illustrates that even those who appear to have the least power can lead progressive reform when the right configuration of factors come together – visionary leaders, voluntary participation in a civic group based on a shared interest, external support, political opportunity, and strategic action.

(and in implementing the SDGs) cannot afford to miss these opportunities for progressive coalitions among elite and non-elite groups.

Beyond analysis, a thornier issue is whether locally led, politically smart and adaptive approaches to development should always be sensitive to gender in terms of programme design and implementation. This debate is unresolved. Some argue that all issues have a gender dimension and that aid agencies have explicit obligations in this respect. This could, however, be seen as simply an

³⁹ See Andrews (2011), and resources available on Harvard University’s Building State Capability website (<http://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/>), including short videos providing overviews of key concepts used in problem-driven iterative adaptation.

extension of the arguments for gender mainstreaming, and faces the same problems. An alternative approach is to separate analysis from the programme objectives and strategies for achieving them. This would mean accepting that not all interventions will have gender equality as an objective, and not all strategies or approaches will be inclusive of women or other disadvantaged groups. But it would also mean investing limited resources in better analysis of the structural obstacles to development and in advocating for women as subjects and drivers of reform, and in strategic collaboration with mainstream colleagues with an interest in addressing these obstacles in ways that advance women's rights and wellbeing.

Third, problem-driven approaches raise questions about who gets to define the problem (Denney and Domingo, 2015; Denney, 2016). **Collaboration with gender colleagues reduces the risk that adaptive approaches will favour the status quo and reproduce structural inequalities.** Further, it can also deepen understanding of how the 'authorising environment' for reform (Andrews et al., 2016) necessarily varies depending on the issue. Some degree of buy-in from power-holders is still needed for gender-related reform, but the interests in reform and reasons for resistance will be different to, say, infrastructure or justice sector reform. Governments and male leaders are less likely to see women's rights as integral to the elite bargain than other development objectives, and more likely to see male privilege as important for its maintenance.⁴⁰ This does

not rule out the possibility of reform, but it may call for different coalitions and strategies to achieve it.

Improving development outcomes for women and girls is a core priority for many aid agencies. Gender equality and women's empowerment is also a stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal. The gender moon – and the funding that follows in its wake – is therefore set to continue its ascendancy within the development universe. Doing Development Differently networks should engage with gender advisers, practitioners and activists for the same reason they reach out to mainstream development sectors – to share learning on how to support locally led, politically smart and adaptive development, to show that it is possible in all areas of international aid and to document results vis-à-vis more conventional approaches.

Unlike mainstream sectors, however, governance and gender communities begin with a shared understanding of development as being as much about power and politics as economics, and a shared experience of trying to break down an organisational ghetto. Some feminist bureaucrats have been working in entrepreneurial and smart ways for some time. But adaptive development principles could help them to better direct increased gender-related aid flows to the underlying causes of gender discrimination and inequality. The broader gender community can contribute to this endeavour by further building the evidence base on adaptive approaches to women's rights, empowerment and gender equality.

40 Both political context and reform sector/issue will inform elite interests. Building on a collaboration with the Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) Research Centre (<http://www.effective-states.org/>), Kelsall and colleagues (2016) use political settlements analysis to understand variation in government support for universal health coverage. They propose that reform champions adapt their strategy (supporting, connecting or substituting for government action) to both the political settlement type and the 'policy domain'. ESID has a parallel work stream on gender and political settlements, and it will be interesting to see if they extend Kelsall's hypothesis to the 'policy domain' of women's rights and gender equality.

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Annex: Key informants

Semi-structured interviews lasting between 1 and 2 hours were held, remotely or person, with staff of gender-related programmes and women's rights organisations. Details below are their name, title/organisation and the date of the interview.

- Caroline Enye, Team Leader, Voices for Change Nigeria, 4 December 2015
- Luize Guimaraes, Programme Manager, Ligada, Oxford Policy Management, 8 December 2015
- Beverley Jones, Strategic Advisor, Ethiopia Civil Society Support Programme, 4 December 2015
- Chris Roche, Chair in International Development, La Trobe University, and Senior Research Partner, Developmental Leadership Program, 30 November 2015
- Catie Lott, Former Democracy, Rights and Governance Officer, USAID Kenya, 2 March 2016
- Wendy Ngoma, Programme Manager, Womankind Worldwide, 18 February 2016
- Renu Sijapati, General Secretary, Feminist Dalit Organisation Nepal, 24 February 2016
- Caroline Wood, Policy and Research Advisor, Ligada (DFID secondee), 4 December 2016
- Jill Wood, Policy Manager, Engender, 23 February 2016



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