Global norms, gender equality and development cooperation: the need to build on strong local support to change gender relations

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Theme[1]

Do global norms on gender equality diffuse to all corners of the world? Based on a study of major organisations in international development cooperation this seems questionable.

Summary

Much work is undertaken to establish global norms, not least in development cooperation. The 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals constitute a recent example, but to what extent do they influence development activities in individual societies? A study of how development organisations engage with global gender equality norms demonstrates that these organisations cannot avoid addressing the norms, but they do so in substantially different ways. Thus, global norms seem to diffuse only symbolically, whereas their specific contents are twisted and changed according to circumstances. Policy makers and stakeholders should acknowledge this and find local support to promote global norms on gender equality.

Analysis

International development cooperation is a field of norm production and engagement. International meetings, negotiations and declarations provide an important framework for concrete development cooperation. For many years, actors have come together to discuss both the objectives and the instruments of development cooperation which could, accordingly, be seen as a field of excellence when it comes to norm diffusion. Some have argued that development organisations are 'carriers' of global norms seeking to use them and support them in projects and programmes and thereby bring them to most parts of the world[2].

International discussions of gender equality go a long way back and from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s many substantial declarations were adopted to specify a whole variety

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of principles, objectives and issues under the heading of gender equality. These agreements have provided frameworks stimulating the consideration of gender equality in development initiatives across the globe. However, gender equality has been described as an 'empty signifier that takes as many meanings as the variety of visions and debates on the issue allow it to take'[3]. Accordingly, the term allows for interpretation, 'translation' and very diverse activities supposed to strengthen gender equality.

This is amplified by the fact that gender equality is a deeply political issue. While much can be done by changing traditional practices and ideas marginalising women but being of little benefit to men, there are also substantial issues of distribution of resources and opportunities from which men gain at the expense of women. Thus, global norms on gender equality are not harmless, but may challenge the existing distribution of advantages and disadvantages.

This analysis summarises some findings from a research programme studying specific development organisations and how they engage with global norms on gender equality. The cases have been selected to cover some of the diversity in contemporary development cooperation and include AMEXCID (Mexico), Danida (Denmark), Islamic Relief, Oxfam GB, South Africa's Development Cooperation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the World Bank. This selection of development organisations comprises both newer and older organisations; governmental, non-governmental and multilateral institutions; and agencies from the global South and North. As such, the organisations cover a wide range of large aid agencies taking a comprehensive view on development.

The analysis begins with some points about the nature of global norms on gender equality. Subsequently, it turns to major observations from the study of development organisations and, finally, it discusses the future of the struggle for gender equality. This struggle is and should be local and contextualised, but development organisations may provide a helping hand.

The global normative regime on gender equality

Apart from rather few, very specific issues (eg, women's suffrage), global gender equality norms consist of relatively *diffuse*, *changing*, sometimes *contradictory,* and often *contested* ideas about gender equality. The norms are *diffuse* in the sense that they can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, the question of whether women's equal access to the labour market should imply parental leave for men may be interpreted very differently in distinct societies. Moreover, the very fundamental notion of gender equality may be differently understood as equal rights and opportunities, as making room for different gender identities or as deconstructing gender stereotypes.

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[3] Verloo, M., & E. Lombardo (2007), 'Contested gender equality and policy variety in Europe: introducing a critical frame analysis approach', in M. Verloo (Ed.), *Multiple Meanings of Gender Equality: A Critical Frame Analysis of Gender Policies in Europe*, Central European University Press, Budapest, p. 21-49.
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Furthermore, gender equality norms are *changing*[4]. Also in the field of labour markets, norms have moved from emphasising the protection of women to viewing such practices as further marginalising women [5]. Likewise, norms regarding women's political participation have changed from a focus on suffrage and access to political office to an equal number of political positions for women and men[6].

An example of the *contradictions* between different aspects of these norms is the relationship between gender-balanced decision-making and gender mainstreaming, particularly as a consequence of their respective development since the Beijing conference in 1995. Whereas gender mainstreaming was then seen as a broad encompassing framework for many elements in gender equality, it has become a more technical term in development cooperation associated with the implementation of projects and programmes. It draws attention away from political processes and suggests that gender equality can be achieved with technical means in depoliticised development activities. Gender-balanced decision-making, on the contrary, is a clear political objective implying that more women and fewer men will have a seat at the table.

The issue of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is especially *contested*[7]. In international negotiations the issue continues to provoke resistance from a so-called unholy alliance composed of the Vatican, certain Islamic states, sometimes the US and recently Russia, whereas other countries (eg, Denmark) regard it as a primary concern to promote. The fact that one of the targets of SDG 5 refers specifically to SRHR is counted as a major achievement by some, given that the annual sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women repeatedly constitute a battleground, with SRHR among the most fiercely debated issues.

All in all, it is not possible to fix a particular meaning of global gender equality norms[8]. They do not constitute a coherent, unambiguous body of ideas about gender relations. Even so, this is not to say that 'anything goes'. Certain practices and institutions are at odds with most (though not necessarily all) interpretations of gender equality norms. One may describe global gender equality norms as an ambiguous normative regime, open to interpretation, seeking to address gender-based discrimination; but despite the formal

[4] Van Eerdewijk, A., and C. Roggeband (2014), 'Gender equality norm diffusion and actor constellations: a first exploration', in A. Van der Vleuten, A. Van Eerdewijk & C. Roggeband (Eds.), *Gender Equality Norms in Regional Governance: Transnational Dynamics in Europe, South America and Southern Africa*, Houndmills: , Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, p. 42-64.

[5] Zwingel, S. (2016), *Translating international women's rights: the CEDAW Convention in context*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

[6] Krook, M.L., & J. True (2012), 'Rethinking the life cycles of international norms: the United Nations and the global promotion of gender equality', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 18, nr 1, p. 103-127.

[7] Kabeer, N. (2015), 'Tracking the gender politics of the Millennium Development Goals: struggles for interpretive power in the international development agenda', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 36, nr 2, p. 377-395.

[8] Zwingel, S. (2019), Gender equality norms in international governance – actors, contexts, meanings', in L. Engberg-Pedersen, A.M. Fejerskov & S. M. Cold-Ravnkilde (Eds.), *Rethinking Gender Equality in Global Governance: the Delusion of Norm Diffusion*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke

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international agreements that it builds upon, the regime covers a wide range of interpretations, some of which clearly disagree over what can be described as acceptable or unacceptable gender-related practices. This obviously weakens the regime.

The origin, culture and structures of organisations

Turning to the question of how development organisations engage with these global norms, a first observation is that the history and the purpose with which these organisations were first established clearly influence how they take up questions of gender equality. When actors engage with norms in particular organisational contexts, this is done amid layers of practices, rules and ideas embedded in the institutional history. Having an historically religious, entrepreneurial, banking, anti-apartheid, ministerial or voluntary origin greatly shapes how gender equality will be conceptualised within an organisation. The framing of gender equality is highly dependent on how the organisational culture legitimises different arguments, ideas and concerns[9].

Within the World Bank, the (re)turn to 'gender equality as smart economics' gained legitimacy and credibility by being framed in a way that was particularly appealing to the dominant logic of economists. Around 2000 a number of micro-economic studies emphasised gender in relation to the allocation of resources within households, making gender a legitimate research subject amongst micro-economists. Later, over the next decade, economists at the World Bank began to focus on different evaluation techniques, including randomised control trials, and micro-economic concerns increasingly dominated the Bank's knowledge production. When economists were brought into the gender group in order to produce the Gender Action Plan in 2006, not only had an overall positive relationship between women's activities and development outcomes already been established, but gender had become an important and acknowledged issue in the analysis of micro-economic processes. However, the way that gender-related issues were framed at the Bank clearly sought to fit its original purpose and organisation. Gender was interesting not in itself, except insofar as it helped to explain resource allocation and development outcomes.

Similarly, gender equality norms have had to assimilate to the dominant organisational culture characterised by 'quantitative impact measurement' and 'technology-as-progress' mantras at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. With the help of strong norm entrepreneurs and support from top management, gender was taken up and turned into a Gender Impact Strategy in 2008. However, gender equality proponents were careful to frame their concerns in line with the foundation's origin and basic orientation 'as something "*right and smart*" to do, not in a moral sense, but rather through the aim of increasing impact and results. Institutionalising gender equality notions should thus not be perceived by the programme officers as a new requirement being imposed, but rather as a logical extension of the foundation's mission and nature'.

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[9] Mosse, D. (2004), 'Is good policy unimplementable? Reflections on the ethnography of aid policy and practice', *Development and Change* , vol. 35, nr 4, p. 639-671.

Its origins have also marked the ways in which Islamic Relief Worldwide has approached gender equality. Despite the fact that this NGO –one of the largest Muslim NGOs in the world today– has changed fundamentally, both quantitatively and qualitatively, since its creation by two medical students in 1984, its original purpose of channelling religious alms and donations to needy Muslim communities (as basic relief and support for the celebration of religious holidays) has framed how norm entrepreneurial staff members have sought to promote gender within the organisation. Three simultaneous processes characterise how global gender equality norms are addressed in the organisation: bridging, thinning and parallel co-existence. Norm entrepreneurs have done much to bridge global ideas about gender equality with their conservative Muslim counterparts, both by downplaying potentially provocative elements and by challenging religious authorities to rethink common Muslim ideas and interpretations of the Qu'ran. However, and particularly during the move from headquarters to country programmes, gender equality norms have been weakened to the extent that anything even slightly related to women has come to be described as gender-related activities. Moreover, clearly distinct normative ideas about women, gender and family co-exist within the organisation, due in part to organisational structures and insufficient communication across departments.

Contingent factors: organisational pressures and priorities

When norms are addressed within organisations, they are strongly influenced by the organisational pressures and priorities prevailing at the given time and place. Such pressures and priorities include management concerns and organisational threats or opportunities that staff may see as overriding the more immediate daily purposes of their work. Particularly in relation to new projects and policy-making, organisational pressures and priorities tend to set a determining framework for organisational processes. Organisational leaders may assess sudden significant windows of opportunity as being central to their organisation, but threats to organisational survival and organisational change are typically at the top of leaders' and managers' agendas. Thus, staff perceptions of both formal and informal priorities can influence whether and how gender equality norms acquire strong focus within concrete development programmes. When Warren Buffett granted US$30 billion to the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation in 2006, that action sharply reframed the organisational context into which gender equality norms were being introduced at the time. In some organisations, disbursement pressure is significant, while gender equality is rarely a concern that can move a lot of money quickly. Conversely, thanks to continuous administrative cuts at the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one significant organisational priority shaping the context of a new gender equality policy was that it require as little administrative capacity as possible.

Organisational culture and history do not change rapidly over the course of years or even decades. The organisational history of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, reveals it to be deeply embedded in private sector practice and thought, with a

strong belief in technology and measurability as cures for the world's illnesses[10][11]. Such cultures are not easily challenged or transformed. On the other hand, organisational pressures and priorities can experience rapid change as a consequence of change in leadership, or through the influence of stakeholders, or shifts in the normative environment. This is frequently the case with public aid agencies, where elections are a regular source of disruption in political priorities and a source of organisational pressures. At Oxfam GB, recent discussions of gender equality and its conceptualisation have been heavily influenced by both organisational restructuring and funding pressures. The Oxfam family is changing its organisational set-up in a strategic process lasting into 2020, and this is seen by staff as the paramount concern of top managers. At the same time, Oxfam's fundraising has been challenged both politically and through increased competition. All this has led to the conceptualisation of a gender-related programme that has been likened to a tumbleweed –blown in all directions and never settling down[12].

Normative environments

Normative environments refer to actors sharing organisational or social spheres with the organisation in question. These environments are characterised by specific values that influence the organisation, even though actors in normative environments may have no relation of formal authority with the organisation[13]. Actors may be part of a similar institutional or organisational field, or else be perceived as legitimate stakeholders, such as those representing civil society, the media or academic environments. Normative environments encourage particular forms of actions, logics and goals, and they may accordingly favour particular kinds of norm engagement, exerting indirect power through knowledge, legitimacy or prestige.

Responses to such forms of pressure from the normative environment may take many forms. 'Decoupling' is a central idea[14], according to which organisations disconnect foreground (symbolic) changes from more structural or procedural changes in the organisation's machinery. Pressure from (perhaps several different) normative environments creates multiple, often conflicting demands to which the organisation is expected to respond in timely fashion, which is not always possible. Moreover, public aid agencies are expected to respond simultaneously to the national political environment and the normative framework espoused by the international community of aid agency peers.

[10] Fejerskov, A.M. (2017), 'The influence of established ideas in emerging development organisations: gender equality and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation', *Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 53, nr 4, p. 584-599.

[11] Fejerskov, A.M. (2018), 'Development as resistance and translation: remaking norms and ideas of the Gates Foundation', *Progress in Development Studies*, vol. 18, nr 2, p. 1-18.

[12] Crewe, E. (2018), 'Flagships and tumbleweed: a history of the politics of gender justice work in Oxfam GB 1986-2015', *Progress in Development Studies*, vol. 18, nr 2, p. 110-125.

[13] Meyer, J.W., & R. W. Scott (1983), *Organizational Environments: Ritual and Rationality*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA.

[14] Meyer, J.W., & B. Rowan (1977), 'Institutionalized organizations: formal structure as myth and ceremony', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 83, nr 2, p. 340-363.

Several of the case studies emphasise how different normative environments entail the bridging of very distinct, sometimes contradictory sets of norms in order to appeal to different audiences. In building its identity as a regional development partner, South Africa is navigating between the normative environments of liberal internationalists (who believe that the country's regional leadership would be best pursued through the promotion of human rights and democracy) and constituents (primarily concerned with non-interference and anti-imperialist discourses). Moreover, historical contestations in South Africa between feminists and nationalists over the meaning and interpretations associated with gender issues continue to shape gender discussions among actors inside and outside the administration (Cold-Ravnkilde, forthcoming).

In the case of Mexico's Agency for International Development Cooperation, or AMEXCID, debates around gender equality and women's rights are introduced and framed to simultaneously resonate with and address a national crisis of feminicide[15]. By emphasising its own national historical experiences with (unsuccessfully) addressing violence against women, gender policy-making has come to form an important part AMEXCID's identity as a development partner in the region. Mexico's gender-related South-South cooperation seeks to appeal to domestic constituencies, the international donor communities and targeted partner countries in the region. The bridging of these normative environments is far from unambiguous, nor is it moving in a definite direction. Support as well as opposition may arise in unforeseen ways and influence the ongoing framing of gender equality.

Conclusion

What does all this mean for the struggle to create a more gender-equal world? First, as international development cooperation is a field of norm production, policy makers and development organisations should be aware of the importance of international meetings, negotiations and declarations framing development discussions and policies. The current international normative struggles concerning the issue of sexual and reproductive health and rights clearly weaken the scope for promoting this significant aspect of gender equality. Thus, policy makers should invest efforts in global norm production.

Secondly, global norms on gender equality allows, however, different interpretations, implying that reticent governments and societal actors can legitimately interpret the norms in ways not producing the changes that, eg, women's organisations sought when they fought for the adoption of the norms. Thus, women's organisations and local organisations advocating gender equality are needed to put pressure on governments in order to ensure an interpretation of global norms that will correspond to their needs and concerns. Global norms do not diffuse automatically and political change does not come about easily. It requires work and political struggle.

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[15] Sørensen, N.N. (2018), 'Diffusing gender equality norms in the midst of a feminicide pandemic: the case of AMEXCID and decentralized Mexican South-South cooperation', *Progress in Development Studies*, vol. 18, nr 2, 95-109.

Thirdly, even so-called 'norm carriers' like development organisations engage with global norms in very different ways shaped by their history, their normative environments and contingent factors. This has several implications. It is futile to expect, for instance, a bank concerned with growth and production to be a leader in political change enabling gender equality. Rather one should expect it to twist the issue to something manageable and understandable for itself, exactly like the World Bank has done when turning gender equality into a matter of 'smart economics'. Moreover, as normative environments may influence organisations there are sometimes opportunities for organisations advocating gender equality to put pressure on public and private institutions to take global norms seriously. However, institutions may pay lip service to the norms and decouple their concrete activities from their official policies. Thus, getting the right policies in place is rarely enough. It is also necessary to check how they are implemented. Finally, contingent factors may overrule most other concerns. In cases of political, organisational or economic crises, actors may be significantly circumscribed from or, sometimes, induced to take action. This may create windows of opportunity or seriously close them, and advocates of gender equality need to be aware of such contingent factors which may change rapidly again.

The future of gender equality is basically determined by the amount of strength and support that advocates of gender equality can mobilise. Global norms do not by themselves create a more gender-equal world, but they do constitute reference points which can be used in local struggles everywhere to create more equal and fair relations between women and men. If development organisations take gender inequalities seriously, identify locally embedded actors and provide flexible, pragmatic support, they may significantly facilitate these struggles. As gender inequalities are lived and experienced in everyday life, it is also in those specific situations that they should be changed. This requires strong and sustained actions by women's organisations and everybody else, including policy makers and development practitioners, who want to change one of the biggest and most tenacious injustices in the world.