
Sustainable Development Programme

Overcoming gender inequality for sustainable development

Professor Paul Jackson¹
Dr Sanne Weber²

Executive summary

The British Academy's *Sustainable Development Programme* funds world-class research aimed at addressing the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and advancing the UK's Aid Strategy. This brief discusses the impact of gender upon sustainable development, offering important lessons for policymaking. It outlines the importance of gender equality in decision-making processes and for ensuring that development benefits both men and women. It posits that gender-sensitive development policies should not address only women, but also households and communities, in order to transform role divisions. This requires long-term strategies of education and awareness-raising about gender roles and the need for equality. Policymaking should address the social, religious and cultural barriers to women's participation in economic development. Furthermore, policies should include strategies to compensate for, and re-distribute, household and caring tasks in order to avoid an increased burden for women. The projects discussed in this brief suggest various ways of enhancing women's role in economic development, such as through training in financial and technical skills to start projects that diversify family and community income.

Introduction

The British Academy's 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* funds world-class research aimed at addressing the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and advancing the UK's Aid Strategy. The [16 interdisciplinary research projects](#) funded by this programme provide important evidence geared towards informing policies and interventions aimed at improving people's lives in developing countries, by reducing poverty and advancing socio-economic development. The *Sustainable Development Programme*, launched in 2016, has so far supported research projects in three core areas: *Sustainable Governance*, *Sustainable Growth* and *Sustainable Human Development*. Gender equality cuts across all of these themes.

¹ Professor Paul Jackson led the British Academy's Sustainable Development Programme 2016.

² Dr Sanne Weber is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Birmingham.

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognise that the attainment of the full human potential and sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied the complete range of human rights and opportunities. SDG 5 in particular calls for achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Its targets include:

- Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere;
- Ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life;
- Undertaking reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property and natural resources.

The Millennium Development Goals, the precursors of the SDGs, did not manage to accomplish their targets in terms of some of the issues which are most crucial to women, especially those related to maternal and reproductive health. Gender continues to be one of the most pervasive drivers of inequality.

While SDG 5 pays special attention to gender and women, the other 17 SDGs also have gendered elements. The UN recognises that realising gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the goals and targets. It is also clear that failing to include a gender perspective in efforts to promote the SDGs means that these will not achieve their full potential. Thus, actions benefiting both men and women are needed. The projects funded by the British Academy's 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* suggest ways of doing this, by providing evidence about how gender is related to various aspects of the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda. This brief sets out key insights, specifically addressing the ways in which gender inequality affects economic growth, how gender is connected to ownership and management of land and property, and how gender is related to other axes of social identity which determine people's access to development.

Gender, households and economic growth

When considering strategies to promote economic growth at the community or family level, it is important to look at gender relations. Traditional gender roles, still present in many developing countries, generally mean that men are considered as breadwinners, while women are seen as mainly responsible for caring and household tasks. Women's domestic responsibilities constitute a key aspect of gender inequality, since household work is generally not valued as 'real work' as it is not remunerated. Although women often undertake agricultural activities, their work tends to focus on subsistence crops which are used for household consumption, in contrast to men's work producing cash crops that are sold on the market to generate income.ⁱ Thus, although women's household work is crucial for the maintenance of their family, this is not sufficiently recognised. At the same time, women's household obligations often prevent them from undertaking paid work, which is valued more. This maintains a cycle of gendered inequalities at the household level, which is reproduced at the community and societal level. This results in women's under-representation in politics and the labour market, and ultimately facilitates different forms of violence against women. Several projects funded by the 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* show that these gendered household dynamics also impact upon strategies to combat poverty.

The project **Equitable Resilience in Local Institutions** has demonstrated how household relations affect development in Bangladesh. In many communities, women are those who perform the agricultural daily wage work, since men frequently move away to look for better-paid jobs. Families thus largely rely on the income produced by women.ⁱⁱ This reflects how women in Asia often have a dual role: as housewife and full-time labourer.ⁱⁱⁱ Nevertheless, women in certain regions of Bangladesh are seen as commodities, to be married off to other families. Since paying a

girl's dowry is a serious concern for poor families, girls are often married at a very young age, because the younger the child bride, the lower the dowry. Moreover, since family money is invested in dowry rather than the girls' education, girls and young women are often poorly educated and have little awareness of their rights. Compounded by religious, social and cultural beliefs, this results in poor family planning. Women are, therefore, often confined to looking after the children, which limits their options for work, and results in them undertaking household and agricultural tasks close to home.

Short-term anti-poverty approaches such as micro-credit can come at the expense of more strategic interventions to promote gender equality. Longer-term strategies of education and awareness-raising are crucial for sustainable change.

NGO interventions have helped girls in some areas of Bangladesh to become more educated and independent. Supporting these efforts continues to be an important area for policymaking. However, the strong emphasis of many NGOs on micro-credit frequently shifts the focus away from more long-term strategies of awareness-raising and support.^{iv} Women's lack of education and independence means that women continue to be excluded from many of the opportunities and benefits of (human) development. At the same time, development efforts fail to benefit from the capacities and strengths that women and girls can mobilise for the betterment of their

communities. Short-term anti-poverty approaches, such as micro-credit, can thus come at the expense of more strategic interventions to promote gender equality. Policy-makers should, therefore, keep the long-term goal in sight when designing policies for combating poverty. Apart from responding to principles of equality and non-discrimination, making women an integral part of development and anti-poverty policies can ensure that policies have a more long-term and sustainable impact on development.

The importance of long-term strategies to include women in economic development is also evidenced by the project [Living Amid the Ruins: Archaeological Sites as Hubs of Sustainable Development for Local Communities in Southwest Turkey](#). This project suggests ways for women to become more important actors in economic growth, by analysing the potential to develop tourist enterprises around archaeological sites. Women could play an important role in these enterprises, for example by making and marketing locally made products, such as herbal teas or olive oil, for tourists. In order to really transform women's roles, it is important to find activities that increase women's income, and allow them agency over their own activities and earnings. This requires women to have access to markets.

In order to enhance women's role as economic actors, policies must promote activities that can increase women's income and allow them agency over their own earnings.

Another project, [Asset Transfers or Cash Transfers: The Design of Anti-Poverty Transfers to the Ultra-Poor](#), focuses on poverty alleviation programmes in Pakistan by comparing cash and asset transfer programmes. It has revealed that without a gender perspective, such programmes risk failing to achieve their full potential, or can even lead to adverse impacts for women. Reviewing an asset transfer programme, the project team found that although men received the training to work with the assets (often livestock) and decided on the use of the assets and the resulting profits, women seemed to do most of the work in relation to the livestock. This increased their workload considerably. Moreover, since women did not receive the required training, the results of their work were not always optimal.^v This demonstrates how programmes which lack a gender perspective risk increasing women's burden, while failing to guarantee that

women benefit equally. This dynamic can eventually impact on the well-being of the family, since women more than men tend to spend money on household needs rather than their own needs. Giving women equal decision-making power over their family's income can help to improve the situation of families as a whole.

Anti-poverty policies should ensure that those receiving support also participate in making decisions about it.

The project also revealed that women seemed to prefer asset transfers, especially livestock, over cash transfers. Cash transfers were considered less useful, since women have less control over spending. This is a well-known phenomenon, which has not yet been effectively addressed in policymaking. Research on the gendered dynamics of micro-credits since the 1990s has established that men's privileged access to markets means that they tend to have

greater control over loans and household income-generating activities.^{vi} Policy-makers should carefully consider these gendered dynamics of decision-making strategies in the household before designing anti-poverty programmes and policies. Moreover, they should combine these programmes with strategies to transform unequal decision-making patterns. Family planning is another factor to consider. The project's research in Pakistan has shown that having large families creates a financial burden,^{vii} which makes it more difficult to overcome poverty. Anti-poverty strategies should, therefore, not only focus on technical and economic aspects, but also seek to transform the social, religious and cultural barriers to women's participation in economic development.

Gender, natural resources and land

Access to land and natural resources touches upon another area of structural gender inequality. In many developing countries, customary and formal laws of marriage and inheritance exclude women from land ownership and decision-making about land and natural resource use – even though women often bear the main responsibility for household food security, which is dependent on land and natural resources.^{viii}

Customary and formal laws of marriage and inheritance constitute a key area of gender inequality in development.

The [Asset Transfers or Cash Transfers](#) project supported by the British Academy's 2016 Sustainable Development Programme found that land ownership in Pakistan is mainly in the hands of men. Women tend to have little knowledge about land ownership, or even awareness of their lack of land rights. Tradition and culturally defined gender roles mean that most land is inherited by sons, since they are expected to take care of their parents in old age. Not owning land or assets leaves women in a vulnerable position. They can be left with nothing in case of divorce or the death of their husbands. Moreover, women recognise that working in the countryside is dangerous for them, not least because of the risk of sexual violence. Therefore, they often express a desire for their daughters to receive vocational training, to prevent them from having the hard lives their mothers lead.^{ix} Policies should support women's education and training, allowing them to play new roles in their communities. They should also include processes of awareness-raising about the need to share ownership over property equally among men and women.

Similarly, the project [Integrating Policies on Land Use Changes and Coastal Zone Management to Deliver Food Security and Environmental Conservation \(Land2Coast\)](#) evidences how women in Quintana Roo, Mexico often have little or no control over the use of funds, the content of development plans and the economic activities of their *ejido* communities (*ejidos* are a traditional form of communal landowning). This situation illustrates the

need to promote gender equality in local decision-making processes, and to ensure that development and economic growth benefit women to the same degree as men. The **Land2Coast** research team conducted a series of workshops with women in Quintana Roo, in order to better understand the gender dimensions of strategic development planning. Although tourism generates income for their communities, women expressed concern over the destruction of natural resources and the environment caused by unchecked tourism. They recognise that this will eventually diminish the tourist attraction of their region, in turn reducing economic growth. The women were keen to develop more diverse and sustainable ways to generate income for their communities without damaging the environment, particularly involving young people. They considered that this is crucial not only to increasing income, but also to strengthening the social resilience of their communities, preventing the migration of youth from the villages and ensuring the continued transmission of Maya cultural heritage to younger generations.

Policy-makers must consider women's diverse and innovative visions for sustainable development, and implement training processes to increase women's potential to make changes a reality.

Similar to the above described findings in Turkey, these women identified the potential of heritage tourism and eco-tourism. This led the project to develop a series of trainings that will focus on enabling women to gain an array of transferable organisational and basic business skills. Learning these skill sets will be critical for building self-esteem, enabling the women to have both the human and social capital to fully participate in development planning, and providing them with a new voice that can help them to realise their visions for their communities. This will ultimately contribute to increasing community resilience, and shows the importance of considering women's diverse and innovative visions for the future of their communities,

and of implementing training processes to increase women's potential to make these changes a reality.

Gender, social and cultural norms

The lack of women's participation in traditional *ejido* communities in Mexico shows the influence of cultural and social norms on gender equality. This is also a topic analysed by the project **Building Sustainable Inclusion: From Intersecting Inequalities to Accountable Relationships**, which starts from the premise that social norms, related to gender, class, disability, religion or other social identities, tend to silence certain groups, whose experiences and ideas are therefore not taken into account in development planning. In order to understand how development affects women, and learn about and from the ideas women have for promoting the development of their communities, it is crucial to listen to women in the first place. Women are, however, often not used to participating in larger groups or speaking in public. This makes it difficult to know and include their perspectives on development.^x

In rural Ghana, for example, it had gone almost unnoticed that the private sector-led depletion of a salt lagoon affected women. Their decreased reliance on salt-winning meant a loss of income, which in turn reduced the family budget available for children's education and their own needs. Furthermore, it produced a loss in women's social standing in their communities and more troubled relationships with their partners.^{xi}

Through the locally appropriate use of song and dance and other participatory methods, amplified via community radio, women have made their voices heard, eased tensions and started conversations with traditional and formal authorities. Governments must ensure the creation of safe spaces that allow women to tell their stories and create awareness about the inequalities that they face. Based on this collective awareness-raising, participatory and creative methods such as

digital storytelling, community theatre or radio can be used to help women tell their stories to policy-makers in their own words, to press for the changes they need. This can provide important inputs for policy-makers, ensuring that policies respond better to women's situations and needs.

How social and cultural norms can serve as barriers to women's empowerment is also apparent from another project supported by the 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme: Syrian Refugees in Jordan: the Challenge of Sustainable Development*. This project examines the effects of the influx of Syrian refugees on gender norms among Jordanian and Syrian refugee women. Previous work by the project's researchers, focusing on gender norms, has shown that migration not only moves people but also norms. Although this norms transmission is often associated with positive change, the researchers have shown that the migration of Jordanian men to more conservative Arab countries with higher levels of gender inequality can have negative impacts on gender equality. When returning home, these men tend to bring back more discriminatory attitudes towards women.^{xii} The current project about the influence of Syrian refugees on Jordanian society shows different gender roles among the Syrian and Jordanian population in Jordan. Syrian refugees in Jordan have higher fertility rates than Jordanian nationals, at a total fertility rate of 4.4 births per woman. Nevertheless, the fertility levels for Syrian refugees are lower now than they were for this population prior to their displacement to Jordan. On the other hand, there is no evidence that the Syrian refugee influx has impacted marriage or fertility rates among the Jordanian host population. Early marriage is an important challenge in Jordan. Just under one in ten Jordanian girls are married before the age of 18 compared to about two in ten Syrian refugee girls. Girls who marry before the age of 18 are at a greater risk of negative health and socio-economic outcomes.^{xiii} Although no direct negative impact of Syrian refugees on gender norms among the Jordanian population can be discerned, it is clear that gender equality and the promotion of policies to empower girls and women continues to be important for both Syrian and Jordanian women in Jordan.

Migration policies must respond to the dynamics of norms transmission.

Conclusion

The findings of the research projects outlined in this brief shed light on the diverse ways in which gender norms and roles impact on development:

- Development policies should be designed on the basis of a thorough analysis of local gender relations, to avoid reinforcing gender inequalities.
- Gendered dynamics in households define the way in which the benefits of development are enjoyed and shared. Therefore, development policies should not only focus on economic strategies, but also address gender relations, roles and perceptions at the household and community level, in order to improve gender equality in decision-making processes.
- Although gender is often translated into measures targeted at women, in reality it is a relational concept. Instead of 'adding women', gender-sensitive policies should be based on a gender analysis which also addresses the role which men play in maintaining or transforming gender inequality.
- One factor in maintaining gender inequality is the fact that men, more than women, earn income in developing countries. To counteract this, policies should support women in developing projects and activities that generate income. These policies should also address gender role divisions at the household level, in order to prevent creating an additional burden for women.
- Lack of land and property rights place women in a vulnerable position. They often face the burden of providing for their families, without the decision-making power about the way in which land and natural resources are used. Policy-makers should, therefore, keep

emphasising the need for shared ownership of land and property, and equality in decision-making processes concerning these.

- In order to give women more autonomy, awareness-raising about their rights and collective identity building are crucial. Strategies in this regard can be the provision of information and (vocational) training for women, to enable them to make the step from having rights to claiming those rights.
- Women often have innovative ideas about how to contribute to the development of their communities. Policy-makers must provide spaces where women can express their ideas and must support women in making these ideas a reality.

For more information about the 2016 Sustainable Development Programme, visit <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/sustainable-development-2016> or email gcrf@thebritishacademy.ac.uk

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^{vi} Goetz, A.M. and Sen Gupta, R. (1996), 'Who Takes the Credit? Gender, Power, and Control over Loan Use in Rural Credit Programs in Bangladesh', *World Development* 24(1), 45-63.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Kanji, N., Tan, S.F and Toulmin, C. (2007), 'Introduction: Boserup Revisited'.

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^{xiii} Krafft, C. and Sieverding, M. (2018), 'Jordan's Fertility Stall and Resumed Decline: An Investigation of Demographic Factors.' Economic Research Forum Working Paper Series 1193. Cairo, Egypt.