



A mixed bag: Norway's support for women and girls' rights and gender equality in international development

OVERVIEW

Norwegian Development Cooperation's support to strengthening women and girls' rights and gender equality ranges from visionary and highly effective in some areas to underperforming vis-à-vis its donor peers in others.¹

Where Norway's support shines is in:

- > its long-term nature, which is vital for changing deeply entrenched social norms that reinforce gendered attitudes and practices – for example, around female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) or men's role in supporting gender equality and gay rights;
- > its strong linkages with civil society groups, including traditional and religious leaders, who often play a key role in shaping public opinion on culturally sensitive gender issues;
- > its tailored support for more gender-responsive interventions in the agricultural and energy sectors;
- > its willingness to think 'outside the box', addressing complex challenges around governance and women's political empowerment, boldly going where other donors might fear to tread.

But compared with its peers, Norway appears to be underperforming in terms of:

- > the lack of a clear theory of change guiding interventions to support women and girls' rights and gender equality;
- > underinvestment in rigorous programme monitoring and impact evaluations, compounded by weak knowledge management and learning systems;
- > not playing a consistently proactive role in donor/government/NGO working groups in improving and coordinating support to gender issues at country level;
- > the disconnect between its strong track record in promoting women's rights and gender equality domestically and its international development aid portfolio, which the evidence suggests is less effective in delivering positive changes in women's lives.

This evaluation brief presents key findings of a recent evaluation of how Norway's development cooperation (from 2007 to 2013) has strengthened women and girls' rights and promoted gender equality (see Box 1 for an overview). The findings at international and country levels are presented first, followed by three broad recommendations for action.

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BOX 1: EVALUATION OVERVIEW

Evaluation mandate: To assess the relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of Norwegian Development Cooperation's support to women's rights and gender equality, and how it aligns with the core pillars of Norway's Gender Action Plan

Timeframe: 2007-2013

Commissioning agency: Norad Evaluation Department

Evaluation team: SIPU, Sweden, in collaboration with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), Norway, together with national experts

Methodology: Document review; key informant interviews in person and by phone in Oslo; three in-depth country case studies in Ethiopia, Mozambique and Nepal; two desk-based studies in Tanzania and Zambia

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HAS NORWAY'S SUPPORT ON GENDER PRODUCED THE INTENDED RESULTS?

Overall, the evaluation found that while Norway is making a positive contribution to strengthening women's rights and gender equality internationally and, in some sectors, at country level, there is considerable room for improvement in achieving and measuring results.

At the international level: Norway has been an important advocate of gender-focused aid through the multilateral system, playing a key role in supporting UNICEF and UN Women. But actual aid allocations to gender-focused projects and programmes are comparatively low. Indeed, among the top 10 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) donors of bilateral official development assistance (ODA), Norway ranks only in the bottom half on gender-marked aid².

² The gender equality policy marker gives an indication of aid flows to activities that support gender equality.

There are also significant bottlenecks in terms of achieving results-based reporting on Norway's efforts to strengthen women's rights and gender equality. Quality of aid and results are dependent on robust reporting and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, but the evaluation concluded that these are weak and fragmented. Moreover, there is inadequate guidance and detail about the specific reporting requirements for interventions to support women's rights and gender equality, and existing guidance is poorly enforced. These problems are exacerbated by underinvestment in strengthening the skills and capacity of embassy staff to consider how women's rights and gender equality can be promoted in different sectors.

At the country level: The evaluation focused on outcome-level changes in three countries (Ethiopia, Mozambique and Nepal) and found mixed evidence of results.

- › At the **systemic level**, country case studies suggested that Norway is achieving stronger results in terms of contributing to policy and legal changes in recipient countries, encouraging shifts in national discourses on gender, and strengthening the evidence base on women's rights and gender equality (see Box 2). It is having weaker results in terms of persuading recipient countries to increase their investments in women's rights and gender equality initiatives, and securing greater political commitment to addressing gender issues through its dialogue with recipient governments.
- › At the **project level**, results varied significantly. This was more to do with the quality of project design and the rigour of M&E and learning systems rather than the type of implementation partner. In terms of bringing about changes in beneficiaries' lives, there was stronger evidence of improvements in women's decision-making roles in the household, community and political spheres. There was also evidence that community leaders (and the community more broadly) were more aware of gender issues and related rights as a result of Norway's support (see Box 3). There was weaker evidence of improvements in making services more gender-responsive, in engaging with men and boys on women's rights and gender equality issues, and in enhancing the skills and capacities of local government staff to address gender issues.



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> At the **organisational level**, there was positive evidence that Norway has supported civil society organisations to engage more effectively on women's rights and gender equality issues, at scale and in a sustainable manner. There was somewhat weaker evidence of effective support to increase the capacities of government, UN agencies and twinning partners (Norwegian government agencies directly delivering programmes or services in recipient countries) to mainstream gender on a sectoral basis.

BOX 2: CONTRIBUTING TO A SEA CHANGE IN NATIONAL POLICY AND DISCOURSE ON FGM/C IN ETHIOPIA

Thanks to its long-term funding commitment and a vision that recognised the slow and winding trajectory of changing deeply entrenched social norms around gender, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Ethiopia has contributed to significant changes in policies and attitudes at national and local levels. It has done this through supporting a programme implemented by Norwegian Church Aid and Save the Children International alongside local partner organisations, with the aim of eliminating female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in Ethiopia.

Even a decade ago, FGM/C was generally a taboo subject in the country. But now, the programme and its 22 national partners have been instrumental in getting a target to virtually eliminate FGM/C into the country's 2010-2015 national Growth and Transformation Plan. It has also contributed to the development of a National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Children in 2013.

The programme also enabled Norwegian Church Aid to build a long-term relationship with key religious institutions and leaders, culminating in the adoption of position papers based on their own religious texts and explaining why FGM/C is not in keeping with their religious traditions. To date, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Protestant denominations and the Ethiopian Catholic Church have all developed high-level declarations on FGM/C. These have the potential to reach hundreds of thousands if not millions of people in Ethiopia and change what they do, given the strong influence that religious leaders have at community level.

BOX 3: HELPING WOMEN TO ACCESS CLEAN, AFFORDABLE AND SUSTAINABLE ENERGY IN NEPAL

A flagship programme supported by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Nepal – the National Rural and Renewable Energy Programme – has made a vital difference in enabling rural women to meet their households' energy needs. It has also freed up time for them to take up paid work and engage in the productive economy.

The programme promotes technologies that directly address women's household needs, such as solar energy (water pumps and lights), improved cooking stoves, micro hydropower, biogas, improved water mills, etc. It is integrated into all relevant public institutions at national and subnational levels and aims to improve rural living standards by using energy to increase employment and productivity.

Issues around gender equality and social inclusion were included from the start and built into each programme component. This included affirmative action for target groups (women, including female-headed households and minorities) through subsidies and credit facilities for off-grid energy services. Women's participation in programme activities was secured through the use of quotas.

Preliminary results show the project has positively affected women's lives at scale and increased their ability to take on paid work through technical training and income-generation initiatives to ensure the services are sustainable over time.



The Evaluation Department, located in Norad, initiates evaluations of activities financed over the Norwegian aid budget. The Department is governed under a specific mandate and reports directly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The evaluations are carried out by independent evaluators, and all evaluation reports are made public.

May 2015
No of copies: 500
ISBN: 978-82-7548-803-7
Cover photo: Nicola Jones

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POLICY AND PROGRAMMING RECOMMENDATIONS

Women's and girls' rights are increasingly on the global development agenda, and as the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals begin to be rolled out, with multiple targets for improving women and girls' lives, now is an opportune time to think about how Norway's development cooperation can make a stronger contribution to achieving women's rights and promoting gender equality. The evaluation points to three broad areas where Norway could make strategic investments to deliver stronger results on the ground.

1. Strengthen Norway's catalytic role as a donor championing women's rights and gender equality

It is critical to harness Norway's competitive advantage in international development and continue to invest in areas where it shines. These include strong linkages with civil society, championing changes in harmful social norms and practices within communities, promoting human rights, making key sectors including agriculture and energy more gender-responsive, and innovating to advance women's political empowerment. There is much more that could be achieved through the strategic and expanded use of the Women and Gender Equality Grant, while at the same time leveraging greater support in these areas from larger donors. Norway could also draw more heavily on its core domestic social and economic policy experiences vis-à-vis women's rights and gender equality policy and programming and use these to inform its international aid portfolio. This could include promoting women's potential contribution to private sector development and entrepreneurship, and developing family-friendly employment policies, including accessible and affordable childcare that frees women up to pursue opportunities for paid work and economic empowerment more broadly.

2. Improve reporting on women's rights and gender equality results and learn proactively

It is vital to undertake more detailed and contextualised mandatory reporting on WRGE results, which will allow learning by all stakeholders (internal and external) and encourage them to use learning to inform practice. At a global level, this could be facilitated by developing a clear theory of change to underpin Norway's Gender Action Plan and ensuring greater consistency in how the gender marker system is used and monitored. It could also be supported by a clearer division of responsibilities for gender work between Norad and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One option might be to set up a unit (possibly along the lines of the gender helpdesks of Sida and the UK's Department for International Development) to field requests for support from embassies as well as to provide more detailed annual checks of their results reporting. Better reporting of results could be achieved by creating gender focal points within embassies – people whose role is to coordinate gender activities across the embassy's full programme of work.

3. Build the skills and capacity of staff to apply gender analysis and implement rigorous M&E approaches

Although weaknesses in gender analysis and gender-responsive programming have been repeatedly signalled in evaluations over the past decade, they remain a significant concern. These weaknesses will only be addressed through a more in-depth and tailored effort to strengthen the capacity of staff to conduct this type of work. This requires 'skilling up' in terms of enabling staff to apply gender analysis competencies at every stage, right from project design, and especially in strategic sectors such as agriculture, climate change, energy and the private sector. It also means developing more rigorous monitoring, mixed methods impact evaluation and learning skills, both in-house and among all partners.