



Policy brief

Gender-transformative approaches: Good practices and future frontiers

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Abstract

The Government of Ireland supports gender-transformative approaches through its foreign and development policy as a route to advancing gender equality. Recognising the innovative work of its partners and missions, Irish Aid commissioned ODI to lead a collaborative research and learning project, bringing together civil society, governmental and international organisations, and mission staff from the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Sierra Leone and Tanzania to identify how the Government of Ireland and other donors can enhance the use of gender-transformative approaches (GTAs).

The key findings of this collaborative research and learning project are distilled in this policy brief. They include the good practices identified across five GTA strategies, and five systems-level ‘enablers’: practices and policies that donors can implement to enable the effective use of GTAs.



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Key messages

The Government of Ireland supports gender-transformative approaches (GTAs) through its foreign and development policy as a route to advancing gender equality. Recognising the innovative work of its partners and missions, Irish Aid has commissioned a collaborative research and learning project, bringing together civil society, governmental and international organisations and mission staff, to identify how the Government of Ireland and other donors can enhance the use of GTAs.

The facilitated learning of diverse stakeholders from the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Sierra Leone and Tanzania working on various facets of gender equality has forged closer relationships and energised participants at a time of intense anti-feminist and anti-gender backlash. It has also identified good practices across five GTA strategies, namely:

- Empowering the voice and representation of marginalized people
- Conducting direct norm-change activities
- Promoting legal and policy change
- Addressing gendered economic inequalities
- Providing gender-equitable, high-quality services

Most crucially, five ‘enablers’ – systems-level practices and policies – have emerged for consideration by Irish missions, as well as other donors and funders, to enable the effective use of GTAs:

- Long-term, flexible core funding
- Equitable and locally aware partnerships
- Coordination and joint programming
- Capacity strengthening and learning support
- Acting politically, and helping others do the same.

Gender-transformative approaches: what they are and why they matter

Tackling gender inequalities is a policy priority for Irish international cooperation, with Ireland pledging ‘an overarching focus on women and girls in all of our partnerships and interventions’.¹ Gender-transformative approaches (GTAs) are critical for the achievement of this policy ambition, as they aim to address the root causes of gender-based inequalities and transform harmful gender roles, norms and power imbalances.² They focus on the intersections of these imbalances with other forms of privilege and oppression, such as race, class, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. For this reason, the Government of Ireland recognises the potential of GTAs throughout its foreign and development policy and direct programming.

Interventions to address gender inequalities can be found along a continuum, from approaches that may exacerbate gender inequalities to approaches that support a sustainable, positive shift towards gender equality. Between the two lie approaches that may recognise or respond to gender inequalities, but may not challenge the underlying structures that allow them to persist.³

Approaches that are truly gender-transformative encompass every level of society – from the individual and family through to laws and policies – that can help to drive change. As such, GTAs require a focus on systems-level change. They also span multiple thematic areas, going beyond single-focus and gender-specific programmes to embed a gender lens into every other aspect of socio-economic development, from health and education to political participation.

To examine how Irish missions can better enable their partners to achieve their gender-transformative goals, Irish Aid convened a research and learning project to identify good practices from the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Sierra Leone and Tanzania. The project promoted learning across these different contexts and fostered relationships and networking for better collaboration within and across countries.

‘Hearing about each other’s experiences and work was motivating and empowering.’
Workshop participant

1 Government of Ireland (2019) A Better World: Ireland’s Policy for International Development. Dublin: Government of Ireland (www.irishaid.ie/media/irishaid/aboutus/abetterworldirelandspolicyforinternationaldevelopment/A-Better-World-Irelands-Policy-for-International-Development.pdf).

2 Harper, C., Marcus, R., George, R., et al. (2020) Gender, Power and Progress. London: ODI (www.alignplatform.org/gender-power-progress).

3 For examples of various gender transformative continuums, see the presentation on ‘The Gender Integration Continuum by the Interagency Gender Working Group (www.igwg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Gender-Continuum-PowerPoint_final.pdf) or UNICEF’s technical note on GTAs to end child marriage (www.unicef.org/media/58196/file).

Aiming to overcome often siloed approaches to GTAs, the project also drew on different stakeholder groups (governments, civil society and funders) and areas of intervention, including gender-based violence (GBV), sexual and reproductive health (SRH), female genital mutilation (FGM), and women's economic empowerment (WEE). The project used interviews, a desk review and an in-person participatory learning workshop that brought together 25 stakeholders from the three countries.

At a time of growing backlash against many GTA initiatives, those working on women's empowerment and gender equality often face burn-out, frustration and anxiety. Bringing together individuals from different contexts who share these challenges, as well as a passion for gender equality, has helped to restore their resolve and energy.

What works for gender-transformative approaches: good practices

This section summarises examples of good practice that can stimulate shifts and changes in gender transformation within five strategies that represent interlinked levers for gender transformation. Within these strategies, programmes can intervene to have a long-lasting impact on gender inequalities in their intersections with other injustices, and seek to prevent backlash. While the examples are not exhaustive or a blueprint for any specific strategy, they have been highlighted by participants as being useful for the promotion of GTAs by other stakeholders, tailored for specific contexts.

Strategy 1: Empowering the voice and representation of marginalised people

Provide rights education. This enhances the voice and agency of girls and women to demand their rights. The [Msichana Initiative in Tanzania](#), for example, inspires adolescent girls and young women to speak out for their rights, and advocate for social, political, legal and economic change.

Create representative bodies. This enables the participation of marginalised groups through, for example, advisory councils or panels. In Sierra Leone, [UNFPA](#) amplifies youth voices through its support for a youth advisory panel, whose members participate in, for example, the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy (NSRTP).

Support access to the legal system. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights ([PCHR](#)) offers legal representation for women on issues such as custody or divorce. However, many women do not use this service because they are misinformed about their rights in sharia courts. PCHR, therefore, also provides awareness raising to enable more women to claim their right to justice.

Strengthen the gender mainstreaming capacities of key political institutions. In Sierra Leone, [UN Women](#) supports the creation of new Gender Units to ensure the implementation of the 2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment law. The new law mandates a minimum 30% representation of women in public elective and appointive bodies and the creation of a Gender Unit in the Planning Directorate of every government ministry, department and agency.

Strategy 2: Conducting direct norm-change activities

Tackle disinformation through education. Investment in education and critical thinking was highlighted as a systems-level solution to disinformation on gender issues. For example, [UZIKWASA](#) in Tanzania mobilises local leaders and community members through film, theatre, and community radio for a continuous dialogue about gender justice.

Promote equitable masculinities and replace harmful sexist norms. In Sierra Leone, the Engaging Men Through Accountable Practice (EMAP) curriculum (part of a programme led by the International Rescue Committee), supports mentor-led men's groups that aim to transform harmful beliefs through critical self-reflection.

Strategy 3: Promoting legal and policy change

Plan for policy implementation through capacity building and resourcing. Participants stressed the need for policies, but also reported limited implementation, often linked to a lack of resources, capacities and political will. This continues to hamper the transformative potential of policies.

Support high-quality comparable evidence and data gathering. Evidence is crucial to counter resistance to gender equality. Lack of data, for example, on attitudes towards the practice of FGM allows opponents of progressive change to create narratives that minimise the need for such change or for urgent action. It is crucial, therefore, to fund the collection of high-quality data and collaboration on research.

Work with the most impactful legal system. Some countries have multiple legal systems, including traditional or religious institutions such as chiefs or sharia courts. Participants from oPt, for example, reported competing and overlapping jurisdictions, underscoring the need for a context-specific understanding of the political system to identify the legal strategies most likely to have an impact.

Strategy 4: Addressing gendered economic inequalities

Support women's economic empowerment (WEE). Economic independence and access to resources is crucial for women's ability to influence decisions and push back against harmful practices. This can include micro-loans, savings and skills development but without increasing women's burden.

Support systemic changes that enhance WEE, including, for example, legal changes that give women rights to inherit and own land, and a proactive role for governments in ensuring equitable land access.

Strategy 5: Providing gender-equitable, high-quality services

Focus on education and health. Access to good quality education and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) can challenge prevailing gender norms. In Tanzania, [Femina Hip](#) promotes access to quality SRH information and services for adolescent girls and boys through its network of clubs, its magazine, radio shows and other forms of community engagement. Emerging evidence suggests that this is reducing early and forced marriage.

Five systems-level enablers for gender-transformative approaches

This section outlines five systems-level enablers that support in-country partners working on gender-transformative programming. Many of these are already being carried out by Irish missions and can be replicated, supported or scaled up – with adaptations made for specific contexts – by other donors.

Enabler 1: Long-term, flexible core funding

'Feminists are doers. We are always running and chasing. But we need to take time to reflect to better respond to changes in our context. Reflecting takes time and it needs funding.'

Panel discussant, women's rights organisation

It could take a generation for GTAs to transform norms and bear fruit for gender equality. Long-term planning and consistent effort, as well as anticipation and adaptation, are essential for their success. This demands flexibility by both donors and implementing partners in their response to learning and to changing contexts.

The provision of long-term, flexible and core funding is, therefore, crucial for gender transformation because it:

- solidifies change;
- empowers partners and enhances trust;
- promotes meaningful learning and adaptation;
- motivates human capital retention;
- enables adaptation; and
- enhances the sustainability of outcomes.

The three Irish missions promote long-term commitments, as well as flexible responses to changing circumstances, including by allowing extensions or revisions of budget lines, or by establishing multi-year memoranda of understanding. In oPt, for example, civil society organisation (CSO) partners receive core funding to promote democracy and dialogue. This allows them to plan operations predictably and flexibly, and to respond to emerging priorities.

Enabler 2: Equitable and locally aware partnerships

‘Funders can improve the effectiveness of gender-transformative approaches and aid effectiveness by taking time to understand the mandates and strengths of their partners.’
Workshop participant, international organisation

GTA are most effective when they cut across multiple sectors of society as well as levels: from an individual and their families through communities to laws and policies. It is not possible for one single entity to drive a GTA across all of these levels alone. Partnerships are therefore crucial.

The research participants identified four good partnering practices that enable gender-transformative programming:

1. **Respecting the mandates**, remit and skills of diverse stakeholders and taking advantage of their complementarities. This avoids inefficiencies and tensions amongst partners.
2. **Communicating clearly and transparently** across the sector in which the partnership operates. This ensures shared expectations and decreases the barriers to cooperation.
3. **Enabling meaningful** participation by having contextual knowledge and relationships. Many participants highlighted the value of the local insights and relationships of long-term mission staff.
4. **Creating an infrastructure that supports CSOs**, particularly those that are relatively small and community-based. This can be done through smaller funds and skills development to increase CSO ability to receive and manage funds over time, or through intermediaries such as Women Fund Tanzania ([WFT](#)), which worked with the Irish Embassy to provide grants to grassroots women’s movements.

Enabler 3: Coordination and joint programming

Coordination and joint action reduce duplication and competition for resources and contribute to aid effectiveness. They are vital for interlinked GTA strategies that span contexts such as education, health, trade and global value chains. Good practices in coordination and joint programming include:

1. **Using coordination modalities that respond to partners' needs.** These include communities of practice, informal coalitions and coordination bodies, such as the Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence (ICGBV). This alliance of international human rights, humanitarian and development organisations provides a shared space for learning on violence against women and girls. The mission in Sierra Leone has drawn on the lessons gathered by the ICGBV to establish a GBV Working Group.
2. **Aligning with and supporting government policies and priorities,** rather than creating parallel systems. This may require investment to build the coordination capacity of government bodies. In Tanzania, for example, the Health Basket Fund (HBF) is a pooled fund that supports the Government's strengthening of primary health care services, including reproductive health. Ireland and other donors contribute to the HBF, which speeds fund disbursement and enhances community ownership of health services.
3. **Resourcing coordination.** Without adequate funding, coordination and joint action cannot last. Where necessary, intentional budgeting for coordination should be included within programmatic plans.
4. **Designing programmes with partners to play to their strengths.** This requires an understanding of these strengths, and consideration of joint action from the design stage.

GTA also require the coordinated involvement of multiple ministries and agencies. While ministries of gender and women's affairs tend to 'own' the gender equality agenda, issues such as FGM or GBV require action by ministries of health, justice and education, as well as the police and civil society.

Enabler 4: Capacity strengthening and learning support

Insufficient capacity is a frequent barrier to GTA implementation. It is crucial, therefore, to institutionalise capacity strengthening and learning across government institutions, partners and missions. This helps to avoid the loss of skills when staff leave and prevents any over-reliance on individuals.

Such institutional capacity strengthening has been central to the implementation of support services for GBV survivors in Sierra Leone. Here, the Government now operates a network of one-stop centres that provide medical and legal support. The centres' practices are based on the learnings about survivor-centred approaches and models of centres operated by the [Rainbo Initiative](#) with support from the International Rescue Committee and funding from Irish Aid.

The good practices identified for capacity strengthening and learning include:

1. **The organisation of field visits** to meet partners and develop a mutual understanding of realities ‘on the ground’. When combined with funding flexibility, this enables programmes to respond to changing circumstances.
2. **Providing accompanied action research by third-parties.** For example, a two-year action research project by ODI on social norms and teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone accompanied three international non-governmental organisations working on this issue. The project summarised lessons on gender norms, as well as key entry points for norm change.⁴
3. **Providing clear reporting and guidance about evaluation and learning methods.** Monitoring, evaluation and learning systems, developed by donors in collaboration with partners, enable implementers to use innovative tools and adapt GTAs. The personal testimonies of GBV survivors, for example from a Women Fund Tanzania grantee, Voice of Kipunguni Community, have served as powerful reminders of the benefits of qualitative evidence, including storytelling, to demonstrate gender-transformative change.

Enabler 5: Acting politically and helping others do the same

GTAs relate directly to power and can be hampered by a lack of political will. However, political will can also enable gender-transformative change, as seen in the lifting of Sierra Leone’s ban on pregnant girls attending school in 2020, triggered by the arrival of the ‘New Direction Government’.⁵

Good practices for thinking and working politically that emerged from this research and learning project include:

1. **Leveraging the reputation and diplomatic power of Ireland** as a gender equality champion to withstand backlash. This is vital in the face of resistance to GTAs from groups and individuals in positions of power.
2. **Supporting partners – particularly CSOs – to hold governments to account** on GTAs through funding and skills strengthening.
3. **Trusting and enabling the political agency of partners.** Organisations working for gender equality cannot be politically neutral. They have the ability to frame issues related to gender-transformative change in a way that suits their local context.

4 Castillejo, C., Buell, S., Denney, L. (2021) ‘Social norms and the problems of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/social-norms-and-the-problem-of-teenage-pregnancy-in-sierra-leone/>).

5 Amnesty International (2020) ‘Sierra Leone: Discriminatory ban on pregnant girls attending school is lifted’. London: Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/sierra-leone-discriminatory-ban-on-pregnant-girls/).

In conclusion

Gender-transformative approaches are not blueprints: they require localisation to the power dynamics of the specific context. However, this research and learning project has identified a number of common threads across geographical contexts and areas of gender equality. Further exploration from the specific contexts of other funders and partners would enhance knowledge on what works for gender transformative change.



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