

Economic Security & Gender Norms

Why Our Current “Empowerment Model”
of Funding Won’t Work & How to Fix It



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A Gender Dictionary

“Gender” is used in multiple contexts. Here’s a quick guide.

Gender Equality/Equity

Ensuring equal access to resources, power, opportunity for females, males, children and families, LGBTQ, etc.

Gender Expression

How we express feeling feminine and masculine through dress, hair style, adornment, posture, etc.

Gender Identity

An inner sense of being male or female; useful when discussing transgender individuals who feel a conflict between their sex and gender identification.

Gender Lens or Gender Analysis

Being aware of the impact of gender equity and/or gender norms on a problem or issue.

Gender Norms

Socially-constructed ideals, scripts, expectations for how to be a woman or a man.

Gender Roles

Social and behavioral norms for how men and women are expected to act: being a doctor or nurse, being martial or maternal.

THE EMPOWERMENT MODEL

High rates of poverty among US women and children make it imperative for funders to continue seeking out, and supporting, new and innovative pathways out of poverty.

Yet funders are seldom challenged to find new and innovate approaches to economic justice. Philanthropic attention continues to focus most on initiatives that promote things like financial literacy, skills building, job creation, and improved education.

All of these areas are important pieces of the puzzle. Yet they are all based on a set of tacit assumptions which are seldom made explicit, including that women and girls are:

- Autonomous actors;
- Making logical decisions based on the information at hand; and,
- Able to take action to put their decisions into effect.

For shorthand, we might think of these assumptions collectively as the Empowerment Model. But what if they turn out be untrue? Or only true in very narrow circumstances?

What if philanthropic assumptions behind the “Empowerment Model” turn out to be untrue?

To begin with, these assumptions certainly don’t describe the realities of many young women and girls in low-income communities.

Such women are less likely to be able to take action as solitary individuals, and more likely to be enmeshed in the complex social networks and contexts most adolescents need to survive, particularly in impoverished communities.

They are also likely to have extensive family obligations and daily responsibilities, from taking care of younger siblings and infirm grandparents to helping with chores or bringing in needed extra income.

Adolescents in particular are as likely to base economic decision-making at least in part on emotion as on cold, logical assessments of the data, including being driven by how they want to be seen, the demands of boyfriends, and what is considered popular among their peers.

Even when they do make good economic decisions, young women and girls are unlikely to have anything like full agency to take action on their own behalf.

For instance, consider this parent’s story from the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota’s 2014 report, *On the Road to Equality*:

Our daughter was one of the top welders in her junior-high school program and would have been very successful in that field, but she wasn't encouraged by us as parents or people in construction. Why not? Because she would have had to struggle for acceptance by men in that field, and they would not be welcoming. So, she's not in that career. Even though they may have the skills, women have to always fight that battle.

This girl had training, opportunity, and resources, but that wasn't enough to move her into the high-paying field she was trained for and for which her skills entitled her. Certainly they did not secure economic security for her.

**Training, opportunity and resources
aren't always enough.**

A "REVOLUTION OF THE OBVIOUS"

What held her back? And what might this tell us about the Empowerment Model?

One answer might come from considering a new initiative at the World Bank to address situations like these.

Over the years, the Bank had invested hundreds of millions of dollars and loans, grants, and other direct aid to improve gender equity for women and girls around the globe.

Yet it found that there was an "invisible ceiling" to making further gains, and this was true regardless of how much more money and programs they invested. They realized they were missing an important hidden variable.

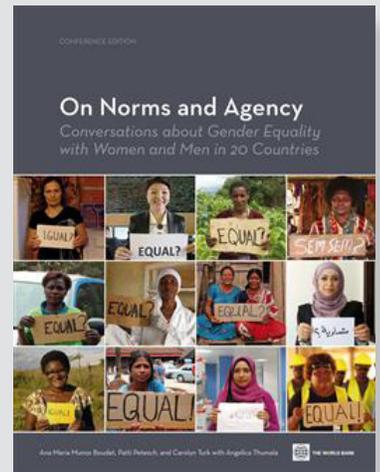
To uncover it, they spent two years interviewing 2,000 people in hundreds of communities across dozens of countries.

In analyzing their data, the Bank found that the common factor holding women and girls back was cultural gender norms.

In fact, "gender norms were...as important as jobs and opportunity" in moving women and girls out of poverty.

**Gender norms are as important
as jobs and opportunity.**

As our welding student found, communal attitudes about girls' place and what they can and ought to do, have tremendous impact on their autonomy and economic horizons.



"[B]ehind the progress towards gender equality and persistent gender gaps lies an almost universal set of factors embedded in social and gender norms... that shape and reinforce the gender inequities of power and impact the choices and freedom of women and girls (and men and boys)."

On Norms and Agency:
Conversations about Gender Equality
with Women and Men in 20 Countries;
World Bank, 2012, p12-13.



Low Income Communities

The impact of rigid gender norms can be enhanced in low-income communities, where gender codes on the street are apt to be especially narrow, and penalties for transgressing them can be particularly harsh.

If community beliefs are that, “Girls don’t do X,” then it is unlikely any amount of money or programming will move significant numbers of girls into X.

Community attitudes, practices, and beliefs act like invisible “guard rails,” locking existing inequalities into place while silently shaping and narrowing young women’s future economic choices and their ability to make them.

This is not the power over visible, concrete discrimination, which our theory and policy prepare us to recognize and combat.

Instead, group norms often show up as negative power, as absence: doors that just don’t open, choices that just aren’t made, or actions that just seem off-limits.

In many ways, this is not surprising. Anyone who has been around or raised an adolescent is already very familiar with the power of group norms in everything from dress and hairstyle to course selection and after-school activities.

In this sense, gender norms are a “revolution of the obvious:” something practically everyone knows although no one really discusses. Yet that very lack of attention may actually increase, rather than diminish their power.

Gender norms depress labor force participation and autonomy, reinforcing women’s lower economic status.

For instance, as Loren Harris noted in the Ford Foundation’s landmark 2007 report, “*Why We Can’t Wait—A Case for Philanthropic Action:*”

Gender roles influence the way men understand and engage educational opportunity, labor force participation, and relationships.... limiting conceptions of opportunity and success and exposing some to stigmatization, abuse and violence...

He was referring to young Black men, but his insights about gender norms apply equally well to young women of color.

Women are pushed away from economic opportunity and towards fewer and lower-paying jobs.

In fact, research consistently finds that gender norms act to “push young women and girls away from economic opportunities and towards ... a smaller range of jobs with lower entry barriers, less stability, and lower wages, continuing a vicious circle of inequality.” And this finding, while perhaps obvious, is something with which philanthropic attention in the U.S. has largely yet to engage.

WHAT ARE GENDER NORMS

If gender norms are so powerful, what exactly are they?

Gender norms are socially constructed ideals, scripts, and expectations for how we are expected to look, act, and think as boys and girls and women and men. We begin learning these rules from birth from practically everywhere: family, schools, religious institutions, courts, and of course, the media.

Studies suggest that there is a surge—a “gender intensification” period—from ages 9 through 14, when interest in traditional gender norms accelerates and belief in them solidifies.

During this period, learning to be seen as a masculine young boy and a feminine young girl is a primary rite of passage—perhaps the central rite of passage—for every adolescent.

For young men, this can include mastering attitudes and behaviors that embody strength, aggression, sexual prowess, and psychological toughness. For young women, it often includes learning to master the “three D’s” of femininity: being deferential, desirable, and dependent.

Femininity narrows the economic horizons of young women in two important ways. First is externally, through the attitudes of parents, teachers, and other gatekeepers, as well as those of their classmates and peers.

Second is through the beliefs and attitudes the girls themselves internalize and the actions they take based on them.

For instance, in researching STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) for the Motorola Solutions Foundation, TrueChild asked young women in low-income communities if they couldn’t be both smart at science and math and feminine and popular with boys. They laughingly replied, “Yes...but not in junior high!”

They went on to explain that in middle school they had to “dumb it down” and focus more on being attractive for their boyfriends.

In another group, they first answered in the affirmative—but then immediately went on to describe a studious female classmate with “long, straight hair” whom “no one sees as a pretty girl because she is so smart—she’s like a nerd.”

When we provided SUNY’s Tech Prep program with model exercises that challenged narrow feminine ideals, girls’ scores on liking, wanting to study, and planning to stay in STEM all leapt.

Yet for decades, the attention of STEM funders has been focused solely on external barriers like teacher bias, parental attitudes, and lack of role models: girls’ beliefs in gender norms is never directly addressed.



Geeta Rao Gupta

Gender Transformative

A term coined by Geeta Rao Gupta that refers to approaches that highlight, challenge, and ultimately change rigid gender norms and the inequities they cause and perpetuate.



“The powerful influence of gender norms on an individual’s actions is one of the foundations of gender inequality.”

A GATEWAY BELIEF SYSTEM

In fact, three decades of research has found that when girls and boys buy into rigid gender norms, they have markedly lower life outcomes in a cluster of related areas, including economic security, academic achievement, and basic health and wellness.

As a result, some researchers have begun referring to gender norms as a “gateway belief system.” Their purpose is to underscore how once a young person internalizes rigid gender ideals, it can lower their life outcomes across a range of measures.

This is one reason that major international development institutions like CARE, PEPFAR, UNAIDS, USAID, the World Bank, and the World Health Organization (WHO) have implemented “Gender Transformative” approaches that try to highlight, challenge and ultimately change rigid gender norms and the inequities they cause.

For instance, USAID no longer funds new programs that lack a strong analysis of gender norms and inequities, and PEPFAR, the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, has made it the centerpiece of their work in sub-Saharan Africa and their third of their five top priorities.

In fact, there is now so much information circulating at the international level that USAID created a website (www.igwg.org) to better share and collate information, and PEPFAR created a Gender Technical Working Group to better address factors like “harmful gender norms.”

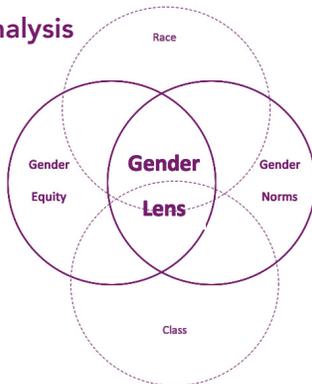
As one senior World Bank manager recently explained, “We’re not doing this because it’s trendy or politically correct—we’re data-driven economists after all. We’re doing it because the numbers show it works better.”

We’re doing this because the numbers show it works better.

The Bank has initiated a multi-year, multi-million dollar program designed to teach its staff about gender norms so they will begin pulling it through everything they do.

Yet in this area, US grantmakers continue lagging behind. Why?

Gender Analysis



CONFUSING CAUSES WITH EFFECTS

At least three possible answers come to mind. First, US grantmaking tends to address factors that are often linked to our concept of rights such as age, race, class, or sexual orientation. What these have in common is that all of them are characteristics of individuals.

But gender norms aren’t like that. They are characteristics of communities, the shared product of common attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. For some, this can make gender norms feel “squishy” and difficult to think about clearly or discuss precisely.

Second, economic justice thinking has traditionally focused on the concrete face of financial discrimination or disempowerment: job termination, union busting, or sexual harassment.

But gender norms aren't like that either. Beliefs and attitudes do their work silently and invisibly, through absence, as the examples about welding and STEM sought to illustrate.

Addressing the tribe, the village, or the clan highlights the need to address group beliefs, attitudes, and practices.

It may be international funders familiarity with addressing the tribe, the village, or the clan as the unit of analysis that has helped them see beyond narrow models of individuals empowerment to recognize the importance of addressing community-wide beliefs, ideals, and practices.

Finally, many US funders feel they do address norms, because their grantmaking already employs a "strong gender lens."

This usually refers to prioritizing women and girls through funding that addresses how gendered systems of privilege and power create economic inequality.

This approach, however, risks confusing causes with effects.

The effect is lower educational achievement, limited career options, lower pay for equal work, and generally constrained economic choices.

A root cause is prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and practices about the proper role and place of women and girls—and men and boys.

No matter how much money we invest into effects, we'll never get the results we—and women and girls—seek until we also address root causes.

The good news is norms do change.

THE GOOD NEWS

"The good news," notes the World Bank President Dr. Jim Yong Kim, "is that social norms can and do change."

Just as many programs have found overseas—and a growing core in the US as well—the World Bank found that you can teach young women and girls to think critically about and challenge rigid gender norms that help hold them back.

Indeed, challenging rigid gender norms allowed women and girl to move from complying with them, to questioning them, and ultimately to improving their economic security.

Isn't it time we moved beyond the Empowerment Model and began replicating this work here in the US? On Page 8 are some concrete suggestions to help funders get started.

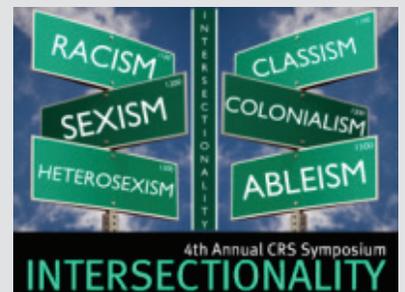
ADOPTING GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE FUNDING

Agency and attitudes are central to improving women's economic horizons, and gender norms are central to both. Programs that address and challenge the rigid gender norms will be more effective than those that ignore them.



Dr. Jim Yong Kim,
President, World Bank Group

"The good news is that social norms can and do change."



Intersectional Approach

Addressing different facets of oppression—race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc.—as interacting in people's lives rather than compartmentalizing them and treating each as independent of the others.



But from a strictly practical standpoint, how might programs integrate a more gender transformative approach into their funding? Below are some concrete suggestions, based on experience with existing US funders.

Grantmaking

1. When writing RFPs and vetting proposals concerned with employment, education, skills development, or job readiness, ensure that specific content which teaches women and girls to think critically about rigid gender norms is included.
2. Fund women-oriented programs for men and boys that challenges them to rethink rigid gender attitudes about women and girls in areas like education, employment, leadership, and family.

Staffing

3. Ensure that existing staff are trained to recognize and understand gender norms and how they can hold back women and girls' economic security. Integrate similar training into the materials for on-boarding of new staffers.

Theory of Change

4. Ensure your theory of change incorporates an awareness and dismantling of rigid gender norms. Consider adding gender norms into your mission and/or vision statements.

Communication

5. Do a "Gender Audit"® of website, brochures, newsletters, leave-behinds, and other materials and add content on gender norms wherever there are statements about the causes of economic insecurity, or whenever age, race, or class are mentioned.

Development

6. If your organization does fundraising, use gender transformative funding to reinvigorate and relaunch conversations with existing donors, as well as seek out new ones who might find this innovative approach and the promise of greater efficacy appealing.

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