14 Gender equality work at USAID

Mandatory as applicable

*By Kai Spratt and Charles ‘Will’ Lewis II**

The wider context of development aid

No chapter on the role of donor involvement in advancing gender equality in environment and development would be complete without at least a cursory wade into the current global landscape of development aid and cooperation. Development aid involves both complex financial transactions and political processes of defining target agendas and priorities for funding. The consensus among a number of scholars is that the donor community narrative has significantly changed from poverty alleviation to ‘shared prosperity’ by means of active involvement of the private sector as a partner to stimulate economic growth (Campbell & Teghtsoonian, 2010; Eyben, 2015; Mawdsley et al., 2018; Murray & Overton, 2016; Roberts, 2014). Economic growth is therefore the vehicle by which prosperity and development is being envisaged.

Following the collapse of global capital markets in the 2000s, the principal means by which such markets were reconstructed was through the making of large financial stimulus packages, some of which fell under the umbrella of overseas development assistance (ODA). Donor states began to offer safety nets to private corporations to put economies back on track. Examples of these packages were the bail outs to large motor corporations in the US and banks in the United Kingdom, which was reminiscent of the post-war era, and thus thought to be ‘retroliberal’ (Murray & Overton, 2016).

Specific features define the current retroliberal nature of development aid, which Murray and Overton (2016) and Mawdsley et al. (2018) describe as follows: (i) economic growth is the principal target of aid causing earlier poverty reduction goals to recede; (ii) increasing dominance of donor state self-interest compared with previous periods when national interest was separate from principles of aid donation (or the ‘re-entangling of diplomacy and aid’); (iii) emphasis

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on infrastructural projects that are intended to enhance and boost outward trade; (iv) the use of aid in ways that align with security and military goals. These observations are buttressed by a recent Overseas Development Institute (ODI) paper on donor motivations measured through a Principled Aid (PA) Index that ranks 29 ODA countries according to whether their aid support is ‘principled,’ or supporting ‘long-term national interest in a prosperous, stable and secure world ... without sacrificing global development ambitions’ (Gulrajani & Calleja, 2019: 7). In short, the PA Index was intended to show whether donor states were straying from addressing development goals as they were conventionally framed. It is not coincidental that the making of the PA Index comes at a time when more donors are releasing sub-optimal aid allocations for reasons other than development, detracting resources and efforts away from the core and primary objectives of global sustainable development (Girod, 2008).

In the particular case of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Roberts’ (2014) study highlights the financial aid transactions and the rise of contracting US firms as the most significant relationship constituting US development aid today, thus giving impetus to a growing ‘industrial-development complex’. USAID has been observed to gradually morph into a sub-contractor of the substantive side of its development mission to contractors and hollowing out the technical capacities of the agency itself retaining mostly administration and management personnel. ‘USAID has been turned into a kind of distribution channel where the expertise that had taken years to build up has now migrated outside of the government’ (Roberts, 2014: 1035). Roberts’ paper also points to a regional geography of big and affluent players who receive USAID grants and contracts and are located within commuting range of Washington DC known as the ‘Beltway region.’ For example, 56 per cent of development aid grants to Haiti went to organisations in the Washington DC region (Johnston & Main, 2013).

From records pieced together by Roberts (2014), USAID contracting is dominated by for-profit companies, some of which have grown to be large corporations. Rajiv Shah, President Barack Obama’s choice for USAID’s administrator himself said in a 2011 speech that signalled his vision for internal reforms, indicated the worrying trend of contracting big firms, said: ‘USAID is no longer satisfied with writing big checks to big contractors and calling it development. There is always another high-priced consultant that must take another flight to attend another conference or lead another training.’ Shah also argued that development firms were more interested in keeping themselves in business than seeing countries graduate from the need for aid (Norris, 2012). To this, adds Roberts (pp. 1045, 1046):

It is particularly poignant that dollars allocated to make a positive impact in the lives of the world’s poorest often never make it beyond the Beltway region. These projects’ many reports, and the water pipes, health clinics, and studies they assemble, can be taken to indicate self-evident ‘spaces of development assistance.’ But, just as surely, the office parks, cocktail parties, awards luncheons, networking seminars, and multi-million-dollar homes of

development contractor CEOs in Northern Virginia are themselves ‘spaces of development’ or more properly spaces of development capital.

All these trends in development aid have implications on contemporary efforts to advance gender equality within USAID. It must be recalled that USAID was an early pioneer on women, gender and development programming in the 1980s and a precursor to the gender mainstreaming imperatives expressed and adopted by the Beijing Platform of Action in 1995 (Rathgeber, 1995; Overholt et al., 1985). Gender equality remains a policy within USAID, but current resources channelled to achieve this do not live up to the long history of its policy ambitions. As Campbell and Teghtsoonian (2010) point out, development aid is a set of ruling relations, thus current discourses on gender and development that focus on economic growth can define agendas and operations, posing risks that gender equality efforts may altogether lose their transformative edge. In tracing the trajectories of gender and development over decades, Eyben (2015), singles out the World Bank discourse on ‘gender equality is smart economics’ as aligning with the current centrality of economic growth in development aid, and thus the increasing propensity of primarily framing women as economic agents without efforts to address wider social and political economic structures that drive their inequality in the first place. Gender equality itself has been made ‘a business case,’ whereas feminists have long argued that economic growth as a goal and as a reality has not turned around gender and other forms of inequalities (Cullen & Murphy, 2018; Ferguson, 2015; Kabeer, 2013; Fraser, 2009). This poses serious dilemmas for gender experts who have to navigate ‘the business case’ (‘gender should generate bucks’ approach) to legitimate a gender equality agenda.

Like other development organisations these days, USAID as an early and celebrated pioneer of gender and development is perhaps now but a shadow of its former years: gender remains mandatory, but at the same time, expendable. There also seems to be little effort to turn around conventional practices of hiring personnel with technical portfolios, many of whom keep to their areas of expertise resisting any inroads of gender integration similar to many other technical organisations. Kai Spratt and Will Lewis, gender advisors, reflect on their day to day work in the Asia regional office and with the country missions of USAID. They highlight spaces for both contestation and negotiation; they show us how critical reflection as gender experts can indeed be an opportunity to see the political.

The historical evolution of gender work at USAID

The core business of USAID is to ‘promote and demonstrate democratic values abroad, and advance a free, peaceful, and prosperous world. In support of America’s foreign policy, USAID leads the US Government’s international development and disaster assistance through partnerships and investments that save lives, reduce poverty, strengthen democratic governance, and help people emerge from humanitarian crises and progress beyond assistance.’ The Agency was founded by an act of Congress in 1961. The Agency is headquartered in

Washington, DC. Country-level presence is in a ‘mission’ usually co-located with the US Embassy. USAID works in South and Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. USAID works in multiple sectors in every country: democracy, human rights and governance (or DRG); economic growth and trade; health; education; natural resources management and; energy and infrastructure. In its beginning, the business of development was considered mostly technocratic problem-solving, and practitioners just assumed they were reaching both men and women. It was soon apparent that ignoring gender was not a successful strategy.

Efforts to address gender inequality have been going on for decades at USAID. In 1973 the US Congress passed the ‘Percy Amendment’ to the Foreign Assistance Act, requiring focused integration of women into national economies through US bilateral assistance. USAID responded the following year by setting up the Women in Development (WID) Office, which championed gender-specific analysis, the usage of sex-disaggregated data, and strategies for explicitly benefiting women and girls. This era was very academically focused and research heavy. The WID emphasis would last through the mid-1980s, but the ‘Percy Amendment’ is still in effect today.

Then came the Gender in Development (GID) approach in the 1990s. These efforts were housed in a very small office with only a few staff whose job was to advocate for gender equality, train staff and do analyses and reports. The common perspective during the period was that ‘gender equals women.’ The focus was on the development of tools and processes, but much of the research focus of the WID era went away.

In 2012, with the overall reinvigoration of the policy office at USAID, we got the Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy (known as the Policy) that required us to integrate attention to gender into the work that we do in a much more formalized way. In the same year, we also got Agency guidance on how to implement the Policy (procedures called the Automated Directive System Chapter 205 (ADS 205) that strategically laid out a set of requirements for projects: gender analysis, use of gender sensitive indicators; requiring that missions have gender advisors or points of contact; that findings from gender analysis should inform project design and be integrated into contracts. We don’t use the term ‘gender-mainstreaming’ at USAID because we learned from the previous generations of working on gender in the development field that this often meant throwing in the word ‘women’ into a document a few times and you’ve gender-mainstreamed. The Policy and ADS 205 require that we be very specific about the gender inequalities we want to address in a project (we use the term ‘gender gaps’), so activities can be designed to address those gaps and measure progress towards closing the gaps.

USAID does development largely by disbursing grants and awarding contracts. In many cases, it releases calls for proposals, and organisations bid to win contracts to undertake the specified work (Roberts, 2014). The funding cycle for USAID grants and awards follow a 3–5 year cycle and is a result of the way we are funded by the US Congress. The idea of long-term investments projects is

usually not entertained. In general, USAID/Washington is the point of contact for Congress, for communication in Washington and the homeland on what USAID is doing around the world. In the field we may get urgent request for an answer to a question about what is going on in country X so that can be used for testimony to a meeting with a congressperson or committee who has specific questions about our work in a specific country or on a specific topic, like disabilities or trafficking or natural resource management. Our Administrator will meet with Congress, but so too will many others in the leadership hierarchy. Our job at the Mission is to provide them with updated information for these meetings. On the ground our senior American and local staff work to build bridges and relationships with the national and other governments through sponsoring technical workshops, holding consultations with governments and local organisations on developing of new five-year strategies.

At the Mission-level, the various Washington-based initiatives and directives are evidenced in each Country Development Cooperation Strategy, which describes five years of strategic engagement with host countries to resolve complex development challenges. It is mandatory within USAID that a gender analysis is done to identify regional and country-wide trends and gender equality gaps that the mission will address over the life of the strategy. It is expected that the gender advisors have a key role in conducting the analyses and in identifying how best to integrate the identified gender gaps, although the ultimate strategic decisions should be made by the technical office staff.

The work of gender advisors in the regional and bilateral missions

In the last 15 years, USAID has employed a more diverse set of people with degrees in development policy or business, agronomists, even public relations specialists. But 90 per cent of them are not social scientists.

Our job as gender advisors is to bring the process as described in the Policy and ADS 205 to the people that we work with to design and implement new projects. We can't do it all. We have to support our colleagues who are technical experts, program specialists, monitoring and evaluation advisors, administration staff, to understand how to do gender analysis and integrate activities to reduce gender gaps into our development work. We do not work with feminists every day. We work with people who truly care about gender equality, with people who are sympathetic, people who are hostile to the idea of gender equality and some people who still need to be 'sold' on the idea that it will make a difference to them achieving their project's goals. We are still trying to convince most people that our development work should address inequalities based on gender and other kinds of intersectional inequalities. Our colleagues will ask, 'What does social inclusion have to do with my energy project?' Or people will say, 'Well, this is an environment project, it's not a gender project. We can't take money from our budget to address that.' Our policy says regardless of the how projects are funded there has to be activities in that project that address gender disparities, gender-based

violence, and women and girls' empowerment. Colleagues are under considerable time constraints to design a project and release the proposal for bidding so there is often reluctance to spend the time and money to do a rigorous gender analysis. And so, we work under very significant time and resource pressures with few human resources with appropriate expertise.

Every regional and bilateral mission has (or should have) a gender advisor, according to ADS 205. This person can be hired or assigned if already working in the mission. The Regional Development Mission for Asia (RDMA) USAID, or the regional mission in Asia, has a very empowered Foreign Service Officer (Will) who is the gender advisor, though only 20 per cent of his time is dedicated officially to that role. He is privileged in that he can take on his American colleagues as an equal. The senior regional gender advisor (Kai) supports and mentors the bilateral mission gender advisors across Asia and, as an American with 20 years of experience and a PhD, is accorded time with senior leadership in every mission that the bilateral mission gender advisors are not privileged to have.

Becoming a gender advisor was rather accidental in Will's case. While he was a sociologist who specialised in gender and sexuality, with a sub-focus on international conflict and globalisation, as a US Foreign Service Officer (FSO), he was a generalist working on project design, research and monitoring and evaluation. However, as he worked on designs, it became rather obvious that he needed to develop systems, tools and templates to improve gender and social inclusion (GESI). His supervisors were gung-ho to allow someone with expertise to work on integrating GESI across development interventions, as long as he remembered that his 'real' job was in program and project design. He carved out a niche for himself, and, after eight years, he is still one of the few FSOs (and only male FSO) working on developing systems for integrating gender equality and female empowerment across development interventions. There is not a career track for a GESI Advisor in his position per se, so his work on gender equality is still rather at the mercy of future supervisors. As such, his peers are generally local staff members from other offices in Asia and the experts based in Washington, DC – they meet infrequently.

It should be noted that being a male Foreign Service Officer working on GESI integration and the power inherent within the institutional position allows him to shape the system in ways that might be more difficult for local staff. To be honest, he comes from a position of privilege. In Asia, 95 per cent of gender advisors are local staff or Foreign Service nationals (FSNs) stationed in the bilateral or country missions.

Most FSNs, like Will, do not have 100 per cent of their time focused on being the gender advisor: the average in Asia is 30 per cent. While there is no official or standard job description for a gender advisor, their job is to guide mission colleagues through every phase of gender integration from doing gender analysis, project design, to reviewing proposals and monitoring plans, assisting with development of gender sensitive indicators, staff training, providing feedback on outcome evaluations to reporting on mission progress to Washington. The majority of mission gender advisors have had no training on gender before being 'voluntold'

to be the gender advisor and little if any training or mentoring after being assigned to that role. They may have been chosen because they are the women in the mission, they were available, and they may have had an interest in gender equality. They are not monitoring and evaluation experts. They may or may not be comfortable being trainers. They are generally not subject matter or technical experts but are often program management staff. They generally have a mid-level professional ranking. They have a lot of responsibility but no authority. This makes their job very difficult. Their advice may not be heeded by technical experts who see them as ‘support staff’ and not technical advisors; they cannot compel higher ranking staff to conduct mandatory gender analysis or insist that a project report on gender sensitive indicators. They have to navigate the intersectional hierarchies within their own mission. That they persist is remarkable. Kai and Will have advocated for at least one Asia-wide gender advisors’ training yearly for gender advisors in the bilateral mission offices. Think of the impact gender advisors could have if they received comprehensive training and mentoring and were given authority to hold people accountable. Our work would look so different and we would be making a real difference. That they haven’t had comprehensive training and mentoring speaks to the importance of gender integration to the Agency.

Many of the FSN gender advisors are marginalised within their own offices, and their success in the role comes from not rocking the boat too much, especially in negotiation with American supervisors and other Foreign Service Officers. They are often limited to simply advising or trying simply to convince. One of the local gender advisors on seeking some advice for how to convince colleagues to do a mandatory gender analysis said, ‘I myself have little voice or even never dare to push for that. [We are just pushed] to get the [project] contract out.’ Cultural norms regarding gender and class, debate, interactions with higher ranking staff, giving feedback, and workplace behaviours shape their ability to be as effective. All this negatively impacts the work because it structurally silences our local staff who are the best resources for understanding development issues and the potential consequences for development solutions.

Thus, colleagues’ reaction to the mandate to integrate gender is very mixed and varies from mission to mission. You may go from one office which has done a good job to another mission that hasn’t. And so, it’s an uninformed approach. We have a sense that all depends on the mission. There are many people who really want to do well. They often say to us that we would like to learn more. We would like to be advocates. But they just don’t have the resources. And they don’t have the research to actually understand gender gaps in the work that they do. We in the regional mission are trying to think through how to make the process part easier so that they can do true analysis and integration.

Being a gender professional implies expertise, experience, and consistency in purpose and professional development. In many organisations, gender equality work is often viewed as part-time work and assigned to someone with little formal training who has ‘spare’ time. In development work though, we are striving to understand amazingly complex social issues with the ultimate goal of working with partner countries to shift behaviours. Mistakes and a failure to properly understand

cultures and people's needs could result in harm. As such, it demands a level of time, resources, expertise and accountability beyond a part-time approach or general advocacy- in short, a professionalism borne of competency rather than availability.

The work we perform may be immensely frustrating, and we aren't certain how much gender advisors in the missions have a sense of hope that we can and will and are making a difference. For many it is such a small part of the work that they are tasked to do they may not get a sense of what their efforts are accomplishing. Some aren't feminists, so the urgency of striving for gender equality is not a priority – it's just part of the job. For the ones who are feminists we have made an intellectual bargain, as one of the gender advisors aptly said, 'If I keep at it, even though I cannot speak my mind, I can still make a difference.' Maybe this is the very definition of 'hope' under constrained circumstances.

Accountability for gender equality

A 'gender professional' has to be a feminist – living in a world where there is equality for all has to be a deeply held personal commitment. Kai became a feminist after reading Betty Friedan's 'Feminist Mystique'; it absolutely changed her teenage ideas of what her life could be (Friedan, 1963). From then on she looked at situations through Diane Elson's lens 'Who's here? Who's not here? Why?' (e.g. Elson, 1995). What excited Kai about being a gender advisor at an international donor agency was a giddy optimism that if we really did ensure all our projects were addressing gender inequality, if we were really were working with local actors to address gender based violence and empower women and girls we would be meaningfully contributing to the transformation of social inequalities in the communities where we work. That's what our gender equality and female empowerment policy laid out. That is why Kai joined. That is not, it turns out, how it works. There are many really dedicated people at our Agency – some of whom have been at it for decades – working towards our policy goals but until there are real human and financial resources dedicated to transforming the way we address inequality our work is mostly symbolic. Our policy has never been costed out to understand what it will really take in human resources or staff capacity building to make it a reality. Somehow, through passive osmosis, all staff are supposed to understand how and what to do to integrate gender into their work.

Being a gender advisor and a feminist, one should also not fear to turn this critical perspective on oneself and one's organisation. While sexual harassment and overt discrimination are handled openly and acknowledged, more subtle bias is difficult to address institutionally. For example, there is the belief that social inclusion is a matter for women and minorities and, thus, marginal to overall development efforts. Thus, if you add a few women to one's project or address just opportunity, the action is sufficient. Deeper inequalities remain unchallenged. Mandatory training and advocacy help staff members understand why addressing inequality is important for achieving good development outcomes, but true integration only comes when we hold management accountable and are able to measure results with inclusive and well-designed monitoring and evaluation systems.

While our gender policy articulates that accountability rests with senior management, in actuality there are still no real incentives or disincentives for senior managers in terms of promotion to ensure gender is being integrated into the mission's work. There are a lot of other mandates from Washington that supersede the goal on gender equality. We are supposed to report on some 'mandatory as applicable' indicators every year. However, many mission leaders see the 'as applicable' phrase, and the gender indicators just drop out.

Also, we still struggle to make sure that all our data are sex disaggregated, which became a requirement in the mid-1980s. We don't want colleagues to approach gender equality as just reaching that bare minimum. We do want people to think critically about these issues, but it's really difficult in a large bureaucracy where there's not a lot of investment in helping people think about these things. We only have one required on-line course that takes an hour. We do have other courses on gender integration, integrating approaches to gender-based violence into different development sectors (health, economic growth, DRG etc.) but these are not required, even for Agency gender advisors.

Our job as gender advisors is to help people understand why gender equality matters for their project outcomes – that is the lens that most colleagues use to measure their success. The rhetoric we use is that if we address gender inequality, you'll actually have better outcomes. People will ask, 'Well, what is the business case for investing in this field?' Usually, we have to position everything as economic arguments for why we should address gender inequality, for example, how it will increase GDP or business profits. And that works better than saying, 'Well, this is the feminist agenda or feminism is the right thing to do.' Gender equality is a human rights issue. It is very uncomfortable for us having to take this instrumentalist, neoliberal approach because it is a human rights issue more than anything but that's not how we can approach it.

Another dilemma is when Washington might fund research for three years on a politically driven topic like women's economic empowerment that is meant to inform our work in the field. But 'all politics are local' – so is gender. What worked in Uganda to 'empower women entrepreneurs' might not work in Lao PDR. USAID has a penchant to look for 'scalability'. That can present some problems for our gender work. For example, it is almost dogma that women's employment will lead to empowerment. Research emerging from Asia is indicating that if women earn enough to be able to bargain on decision-making in the home this might actually increase GBV. So, I would resist our Missions claiming that women's economic participation will empower women. Do women need to earn money? Absolutely, but we need to understand the dynamics in sub-contexts to ensure we are doing no harm.

Optimising spaces for change

Given the complexity and these challenges, we spend much of our time advocating for improvements or pointing out deficiencies; however, we try to never lose sight of the many successes we see in programming – it is always rewarding when a USAID staff member or implementing partner transforms into a gender and social inclusion champion in their work.

For example, in our regional work on natural resource management and the environment, USAID has made some major contributions, writ large. We have a couple of projects that had visionary people on the design team who insisted that gender be included. USAID's five-year project on fisheries in Southeast Asia has a 'pillar' on gender and decent work. That was designed before we arrived at our Mission. It is a highly technical project that has provided some really important insights into the work of men and women in the fisheries sector and has been a first for USAID for the level of detail and the attention to how gender dynamics vary between countries in this sector. Will's efforts have spurred our wildlife trafficking project to consider the different roles of men and women in wildlife trafficking and in consumer demand. Also, REDD+, a global initiative USAID participated in, did a gender analysis back in 2012 and the USAID manager of that project insisted the implementing partner hire a gender advisor. How much the findings and efforts of that project have been integrated by the many agencies implementing REDD+ is still a question.

Recently, there has been much more attention to gender and social inclusion at anything USAID/RDMA is designing because there is another relentless gender advisor there – Will. We had an amazing gender analysis done for a coffee project we are supporting. We learned so much: Kai was so excited about the project's potential to address real gender gaps as opposed to 'include women in training', which is a rather facile recommendation that is often seen. That is what a gender analysis should do! The data were persuasive in not just identifying a value chain that could be shaped more equitably, but in also identifying the concrete gender and social inclusion gaps that must be closed to realise the project's goals. We have had some gender analysis done for our new work in energy; it is still to be seen how well we at RDMA and gender advisor colleagues at the Missions can convince their colleagues that gender inequality is an important issue in the energy sector – it's more than turbines cranking out energy. The most important current challenge for us in our environment work is ensuring that activities to address gender inequality and prevent and respond to GBV and empower women and girls are integrated throughout our project activities.

Currently, we have GESI analyses underway to study basic education and literacy, disability, violent extremism, trade, natural resource management in Tibet, and digital connectivity and cybersecurity, among others, which will allow us to address gender gaps in multiple sectors across Asia.

There are promising opportunities to effect change and the commitment to realise them is unwavering despite thin resources and some corners of resistance. It remains to be seen, however, whether USAID will re-work its entire architecture and narrative of development in the future, responding to the vision of a more equitable and sustainable world.

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