

# From Principles to Practice: Strengthening Accountability for Gender Equality in International Development

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## CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

Existing accountability mechanisms focused on global gender equality are largely retrospective in nature. Where mechanisms do probe at governments' commitments to future progress, they often lack accompanying incentive structures ("carrots and sticks") to encourage ambition. Countries report their progress implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action, participate in annual Commission on the Status of Women sessions, and touch on gender equality as part of voluntary national review reporting for the Sustainable Development Goals. Although these processes, among others, provide an opportunity for country reflection and for civil society engagement, they do not mandate that governments establish and adhere to forward-looking, specific commitments detailing how they aim to promote gender equality.

The absence of future commitments makes it difficult for civil society actors to hold governments to account according to well-defined metrics. At the same time, governments and women's rights advocates worldwide are increasingly discussing and adopting "feminist foreign policies" and "gender-responsive budgeting." There is a need to clearly define with robust and transparent metrics what these terms mean and how to hold countries who claim to be "feminist" and "gender-responsive" accountable for ambitious progress, while also encouraging other countries to increasingly prioritize gender equality.

This year offers a unique opportunity to advance global gender equality by strengthening accountability: the 25th anniversary celebration of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The official Beijing +25 review process is underway. Countries were asked to submit their national reports by May 1, 2019, and reports are now being synthesized. UN Women will submit a global summary report at the 64<sup>th</sup> Commission on the Status of Women session in March 2020, ahead of Beijing +25 "Generation Equality" celebrations in Mexico and France.<sup>1</sup> To ensure that the Beijing +25 anniversary catalyzes accelerated progress towards global gen-

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women (2019), "About Generation Equality," <https://www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/beijing-plus-25/about>.

der equality, the predominantly retrospective review process currently underway must be complemented by new efforts and clearer incentives to spur future policy reform and financial investment. The anniversary offers researchers, advocates, and policymakers the chance to critically examine the nature and scope of the global gender equality accountability architecture, document the successes it has yielded, and propose recommendations to develop new approaches to ensuring accountability.

This policy note seeks to contribute to maximizing the impact of Beijing +25, and strengthening accountability for global gender equality more broadly, by grappling with three core questions: For *what* should governments be held accountable? To *whom* should they be accountable? And *how* can feminist researchers and advocates hold governments accountable?

Using these guiding questions, I aim to step beyond the high-level definitions and principles surrounding feminist foreign policy and broader gender-responsive policymaking towards proposing concrete means of operationalization. For context, I define full “accountability” as the state in which governments (1) rely on a process of commitment-making, implementation, and evaluation that is transparent, inclusive, and evidence-based; and (2) generate outcomes that both do no harm and benefit those impacted. Within the context of gender equality and international development, beneficial outcomes refer to the narrowing of gender gaps across sectors (such as health, education, economy, security, political representation, voice, and agency), leading to improvements in the lives of women and girls. I primarily highlight ways in which donor governments, as well as low- and middle-income country governments, can be held to account for more and better financing and policymaking to promote gender equality. I do not argue for or against specific substantive goals (e.g., promoting girls’ school-to-work transition, women’s financial inclusion, or access to contraception), recognizing that the binding constraints on women and girls and needs for action will vary by context. Rather, I aim to examine the existing tools and structures that can be harnessed (and in some cases strengthened) to allow us to better identify substantive priorities and to hold governments accountable for action once priorities are articulated.

## QUESTION 1: ACCOUNTABLE FOR WHAT?

Since Sweden’s adoption of the world’s first “feminist” foreign policy in 2014, researchers, advocates, and policymakers focused on advancing global gender equality have grappled with how a foreign policy branded as “feminist” should be defined, developed, implemented, and evaluated. Work by the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, the International Center for Research on Women, Our Secure Future, and others have delved into these questions.<sup>2</sup> Thompson and Clement (2019), drawing upon a 2019 workshop exploring how the United States can move towards adopting a feminist foreign policy, propose this definition for the term:

*Feminist foreign policy is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes gender equality and environmental integrity, enshrines the human rights of all, seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures, and allocates significant resources, including research, to achieve that vision. Feminist foreign policy is coherent in its approach across all of its levers of influence, anchored by the*

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<sup>2</sup> See Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (2019), “Feminist Foreign Policy,” <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/feminist-foreign-policy>; Clement, R. and Thompson, L. (2019), “Toward a Feminist Foreign Policy in the United States,” Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women; Foster, S., Markham, S., and Dharmapuri, S. (2019), “Operationalizing A Feminist Foreign Policy: Recommendations for the US Government,” Washington, DC: Our Secure Future.

*exercise of those values at home and co-created with feminist activists, groups and movements, at home and abroad.*<sup>3</sup>

With this definition, Thompson and Clement bring us closer to a clear vision of how to define feminist foreign policy. But questions remain as to how this aspirational vision can be operationalized. How must “colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures” be disrupted? What are “significant” resources, and what constitutes “coherence” in a foreign policy approach?

There are donor and developing country governments alike that have not termed themselves “feminist” but have committed to advancing gender equality through signing on to international agreements and developing their own gender strategies. But questions remain regarding exactly *what* governments should be responsible for delivering and the process by which they should be responsible for delivering it. Given the complex and cross-cutting nature of gender equality, we encounter difficulties in pinning down concrete definitions and prioritizing objectives. Accordingly, the conventions, declarations, and platforms for action that governments have signed on to are far reaching in scope and extensive in their mandates. Country governments, especially lower-income countries with limited fiscal space and state capacity, will not realistically meet the objectives outlined in international agreements in the near term. How can we complement existing visionary agreements with accountability mechanisms that incentivize concrete, high-impact action in the short term?

One way to build on current momentum around the concept of “feminist foreign policy” and to harness the opportunity Beijing +25 offers across countries is to get more specific about short-term goals. Lessons can be drawn from the models of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), the Canadian government, and even standard human resources performance reviews and goal-setting exercises, which all use the “SMART” framework: one that demands that articulated objectives be specific, measurable, answerable (sometimes “audience-specific” or “attainable”), relevant, and time-bound.<sup>4</sup> In more detail, this means:

- **Specific:** The commitment precisely describes the problem it is trying to solve, the activities it comprises, and the expected outcomes. Among other details, SMART commitments should specify the resources (financing, personnel, etc.) required for their achievement.
- **Measurable:** It is possible to verify the fulfillment of the commitment.
- **Answerable:** The commitment clearly specifies the main government actor (e.g., agency, ministry) responsible for implementation; the coordinating or supporting actors where relevant; and, if necessary, other civil society, multilateral, or private sector partners who have a role in implementing the commitment.
- **Relevant:** The relevance of the commitment should be clearly articulated and well-justified. Within the context of gender equality and international development, a relevant commitment is one that addresses a binding, gender-specific constraint on individuals’ health, economic opportunity, safety and security, or other dimensions of well-being.

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<sup>3</sup> Clement, R. and Thompson, L. (2019).

<sup>4</sup> See Open Government Partnership (2019), OGP Handbook: Rules and Guidance for Participants, [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/OGP\\_Handbook-Rules-Guidance-for-Participants\\_20190313.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/OGP_Handbook-Rules-Guidance-for-Participants_20190313.pdf); Government of Canada (2017), “Writing SMART objectives,” <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/environmental-funding/tools-for-applying/writing-smart-objectives.html>, MIT Human Resources, “Goal Setting,” <https://hr.mit.edu/performance/goals>.

- **Time-bound:** The commitment clearly states the date when it will be completed, as well as dates for milestones, benchmarks, and other potential deadlines. For example, in the case of OGP, governments must create action plans to implement under a two-year timeline.<sup>5</sup>

The World Bank offers a recent, concrete example of what a “SMART” commitment looks like in practice. In October 2019, rather than framing its education portfolio around all of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”), the bank zeroed in on addressing learning poverty through articulating a SMART goal: “Worldwide, reduce the number of 10-year-olds who cannot read and understand a simple story by half by 2030.”<sup>6</sup> By focusing on one specific dimension of SDG 4 (Target 4.6: “By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy”) for a specific demographic and according to a set timeline, the World Bank has made it easier to hold itself accountable for accomplishing something specific, and allows external stakeholders to do the same. Working towards the institution of a SMART framework is not revolutionary, but it is critical from an accountability perspective. We are much more likely to hold governments accountable for implementing well-defined, measurable objectives than for abstract aspirations or unrealistic goals.

That said, it is important to acknowledge the tradeoffs accompanying precision and prioritization. Because its investments are guided by the country governments it lends to, the World Bank will not entirely abandon investments in early childhood development or school-to-work transition, as countries will continue to prioritize these and other areas of education. But the bank’s emphasis on learning poverty may mean that these efforts are prioritized should tradeoffs become necessary.

Prioritization within any context is not easy. This is especially true with regard to the particular facets of promoting gender equality, where the range of important issues and the efforts of their respective constituencies are wide. But prioritization is important to ensure that governments do not stall progress by trying to do everything at once, or fail to act at all when faced with daunting, unrealistic objectives. OGP recommends that participating governments “cap the number of commitments per action plan to 20, with a suggested maximum of five milestones per commitment, with the aim of incentivizing more ambitious commitments.”<sup>7</sup> The OGP experience has shown that action plans comprising fewer (i.e., 5-15), high-quality commitments are more effective than those with a larger number of less ambitious commitments. This lesson of privileging quality over quantity should be applied to government commitments on gender equality.<sup>8</sup>

Prioritization can be made easier and more effective by (1) grounding the selection of both problems to address and methods of intervention in **rigorous evidence identifying the most binding constraints** women and girls face within particular contexts and what works to address them and (2) **ensuring priorities are driven by local populations**, and in particular, women and girls who will be impacted by interventions or policy reforms (more on this below). To stick to the context of education, if disproportionately high rates of school attrition among girls is identified as a binding constraint to gender equality, this would mean, in most contexts, prioritizing interventions that lower costs of

5 Open Government Partnership (2019).

6 World Bank (2019), “New Target: Cut ‘Learning Poverty’ by At Least Half by 2030,” <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/10/17/new-target-cut-learning-poverty-by-at-least-half-by-2030>.

7 Open Government Partnership (2017), “Renewed Promise in Challenging Times: Year in Review 2017,” [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/OGP\\_Year-Review\\_20180504.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/OGP_Year-Review_20180504.pdf).

8 Ibid.

schooling over those that relate to menstrual hygiene, given that one is proven to be a more significant, prohibitive barrier to girls' educational attainment.<sup>9</sup>

In identifying evidence-based binding constraints and proven interventions and policy solutions, **governments do not have to start from scratch**. Indices produced by the World Economic Forum, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Equal Measures 2030 point to where countries experience the largest gender gaps (e.g., in health, education, labor force participation, political representation, etc.).<sup>10</sup> Statistical analyses drawing on these tools can pinpoint the extent to which particular gender gaps explain additional and broader disparities between groups of men and women (e.g., if the gender gap in use of formal financial services can be explained by a gender gap in education, literacy, or access to a mobile phone, or is exogenous to these factors). To identify “what works” to narrow gender gaps within a particular context or for a particular population, governments (and the civil society groups seeking to influence them) can also look to rigorous evidence: studies conducted by researchers at the Center for Global Development, as well as the World Bank Gender Innovation Labs, Innovations for Poverty Action, and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, among other research organizations, point to the interventions proven to drive impact in narrowing gender gaps.<sup>11</sup>

As the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality, **UN Women is well-positioned to call upon country governments to frame future commitments on gender equality in “SMART” terms**. Such a call could complement the ongoing Beijing +25 review process. Referred to as “the most comprehensive global policy framework and blueprint for action” on gender equality, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is a nearly 200-page document covering issues ranging from poverty, education and training, health, violence, the economy, the media, and the environment.<sup>12</sup> UN Women prepared a guidance document for governments participating in the Beijing +25 review, which poses 40 questions to respondents. Of these 40, 38 questions, or 95 percent, focus on past efforts governments have made to promote gender equality or ask about the extent to which particular institutions and processes to promote gender equality are already in place.<sup>13</sup> For each, the guidance document asks country governments to provide specific details of their past efforts. It states, “Please provide details of up to three concrete examples of measures taken, including aims and scope of measures taken, target population, budget, impact evaluations, lesson learnt, and links to further information. Please also provide information about actions for specific groups of women and girls.”<sup>14</sup>

However, far less attention is paid to future commitments. One question contained within the guidance document asks about “the top five priorities for accelerating progress for women and girls in your country for the coming five years through laws, policies and programs,” and another focuses on

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9 Oster, Emily, and Rebecca Thornton (2011), “Menstruation, Sanitary Products, and School Attendance: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 3 (1): 91-100.

10 See World Economic Forum (2018), *The Global Gender Gap Report*, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018>; United Nations Development Program (2018), *Gender Inequality Index*, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii>; Equal Measures 2030 (2019), *SDG Gender Index*, <https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/products/sdg-gender-index/>.

11 As examples of syntheses of rigorous evidence on proven interventions, see Buvinic, M. and O'Donnell, M. (2016), *Revisiting What Works: Women, Economic Empowerment and Smart Design*, Washington DC: Center for Global Development, Campos, F. et al. (2019), *Profiting from Parity: Unlocking the Potential of Women's Businesses in Africa*, Washington, DC: World Bank.

12 UN Women (2000), “Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: Beijing +5 Political Declaration and Outcome,” <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration>.

13 UN Women (2018), *Guidance note for comprehensive national-level reviews*, <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/head-quarters/attachments/sections/csw/64/national-reviews/csw64-guidance-note-for-comprehensive-national-level%20reviews-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5456>.

14 UN Women (2018).

countries’ “top three priorities for strengthening national gender statistics over the next five years.”<sup>15</sup> The guidance document does not instruct countries to provide specific details regarding target populations, budgets, or impact evaluations as it does for the retrospective questions. Instead, it states simply, “Please provide brief reflections on how you plan to address these priorities” (for the question on laws, policies, and programs) and “Please provide a brief explanation and examples of your plans” (for the question on gender statistics).<sup>16</sup>

**Generation Equality convenings marking the Beijing +25 anniversary serve as an opportunity to pilot a SMART approach** with a number of champion countries, including Mexico and France as hosts of these convenings and other countries that have identified themselves as “feminist” (Canada, Sweden). This would allow UN Women, in partnership with these champion countries, to build on the current Beijing +25 reporting and commitment-making process, before identifying opportunities for scale-up or universal application of a SMART framework for gender equality commitments. Generation Equality Action Coalitions, with their mandate to “develop a set of concrete, ambitious, and transformative actions that Coalition members will take between 2020 and 2025,” can play an important role in jumpstarting a SMART approach in their recommendations and resulting commitments.<sup>17</sup> To ensure that the Beijing +25 anniversary is not merely another “moment” but a game-changing catalyst for improved accountability and accelerated progress on global gender equality, efforts should also be made to harmonize accountability frameworks developed through Generation Equality convenings with those that fall under CEDAW and the SDGs more broadly. These should also be SMART, with short-term priorities clearly articulated, evidence-based, and driven by local actors.

**A complementary approach would be to integrate SMART commitments that relate to gender equality into action plans made under other existing platforms**, such as through OGP national action plans, which already must follow SMART guidelines. OGP has placed a priority on promoting gender equality by launching the Feminist Open Government initiative, as well as the Break the Roles campaign, with a call to action to its 99 members to take meaningful steps on gender and inclusion in 2019. Today, 31 governments are either currently implementing or have pledged to implement a gender equality-related commitment, surpassing the original goal of 30 percent.<sup>18</sup> The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) has also signaled the importance of promoting gender equality, recognizing that the extractives sector can have disproportionate, negative effects on women and girls. Governments signed on to the EITI standard must ensure that reporting processes are inclusive and that employment data collected within the extractives sector are disaggregated by gender, among other steps to promote gender equality.<sup>19</sup> But more can be done through a SMART framework to make the EITI platform one that encourages countries to take a fully gender-responsive approach, equally benefiting women and girls and reducing harm caused by extractives.

**Finally, a third, longer-term option lies in establishing a new, independent accountability mechanism focused on gender equality that sits apart from the UN system or existing accountability platforms dedicated to other issues.** A new accountability mechanism tracking progress on global gender equality could be modeled on OGP; in addition to requiring countries to make SMART com-

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15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 UN Women (2019), “Generation Equality Forum,” <https://www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/beijing-plus-25/generation-equality-forum>.

18 Open Government Partnership (2019), “Gender,” <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/policy-area/gender/>.

19 Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (2018), “EITI and Gender Equality,” [https://eiti.org/sites/default/files/documents/eiti\\_brief\\_gender\\_equality\\_1.pdf](https://eiti.org/sites/default/files/documents/eiti_brief_gender_equality_1.pdf).

mitments, it would include a diverse set of initial partners, reflecting the universality of gender gaps and a globally representative commitment to closing them; minimum eligibility criteria as a barrier to entry, to ensure partners are credible champions for global gender equality; civil society engagement in the drafting and implementation of action plans; and an independent reporting mechanism charged with reviewing and assessing the quality of SMART commitments and their implementation over time. As discussed by Charles Kenny, as well as Aurélie Gal-Régniez, Friederike Roder, Joe Powell, and Philippe Leveque, these aspects of the OGP, if applied to government commitments on gender equality, could strengthen stakeholders' ability to hold governments accountable.<sup>20</sup> A new accountability mechanism's advantages, however, should be weighed against potential risks, including increased competition over scarce resources by those in the gender equality space, or reporting fatigue by government representatives. If a new accountability mechanism for global gender equality is considered, these risks should be thoroughly documented and examined to assess whether mitigation is possible.

## QUESTION 2: ACCOUNTABLE TO WHOM?

Strengthening accountability for gender equality within the context of international development will require financial resources to be strategically allocated. In the present system, where implementing organizations based in donor countries receive the vast majority of funds allocated by governments to international assistance, too little money is flowing directly to local actors best versed in communities' specific priorities, needs, and constraints. The latest figures from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) reveal that all DAC donors combined allocated only USD \$31 million to "local women's organizations in developing countries."<sup>21</sup> In contrast, in 2018, just one US government aid agency, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), allocated about \$1.5 billion to Chemonics International, a single private sector firm.<sup>22</sup>

It would be untenable to entirely eliminate the "middleman" in the near term, given the current starting point. And local women's rights organizations and Chemonics and other USAID implementing organizations (FHI 360, Palladium, CARE, etc.) can serve different and complementary purposes. **That said, over time, we should dramatically increase investment in organizations that are locally rooted and operated by those who know their contexts best.**

Some donor governments and philanthropic foundations are already on their way to doing so. In 2017, the Netherlands launched the €40 million "Leading from the South" fund, which supports women's organizations in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>23</sup> The fund is administered by regional women's funds: the South Asia Women's Fund, the African Women's Development Fund, Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, and the FIMI Indigenous Fund. Similarly, the

20 Kenny, C. (2016), "Time for a Global Gender Equality Partnership," <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/time-for-gender-equality-partnership>; Gal-Régniez, Aurélie et al. (2019), "Let's hold G7 leaders accountable to their promises on gender equality," EURACTIV, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/lets-hold-g7-leaders-accountable-to-their-promises-on-gender-equality/>.

21 <https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/OECD-report-on-womens-rights-organisations.pdf> OECD DAC Creditor Reporting System (CRS), <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=CRS1>; OECD DAC, "Aid in Support of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Donor Charts," in <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-topics/Aid-to-gender-equality-donor-charts-2019.pdf>; figure confirmed by Jenny Hedman, OECD Gendernet.

22 USAID (2019), Foreign Aid Explorer: The official record of U.S. foreign aid, <https://explorer.usaid.gov/>.

23 Government of the Netherlands (2017), "Netherlands invests in boosting women's organisations in southern countries," <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2017/02/09/netherlands-invests-in-boosting-women%E2%80%99s-organisations-in-southern-countries>.

Equality Fund, a collaboration between what was formerly the MATCH International Women's Fund, the African Women's Development Fund, Calvert Impact Capital, the Canadian Women's Foundation, and others, will invest CAD \$300 million in women's organizations and movements.<sup>24</sup> The Equality Fund is using an innovative approach to ensure its sustainability: allocating a large percentage of the CAD \$300 million into gender-responsive financial investments, whose profits will then sustain allocations to grant funding provided to grassroots organizations over time. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has also allocated \$20 million into Mama Cash, the Prospera Network, and other grantees, with the aim of having this money flow to grassroots women's organizations.<sup>25</sup> But there is still lots of progress to make, given that the Netherlands allocated \$5.6 billion in overseas development assistance between 2017 and 2018, Canada allocated \$6.1 billion in aid in 2018, and the Gates Foundation has made \$50.1 billion in grant payments since its inception in 2000.<sup>26</sup> And most donors are even farther behind.<sup>27</sup>

Most recently, the Foundation for a Just Society, the Open Society Foundations, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation have teamed up to invest \$20 million over the next five years in women's funds, defined as "organizations that provide financial and other support to advance the human rights and opportunities of women, girls, and LGBTQI people around the world."<sup>28</sup> Taking a demand-driven approach that moves past traditional consultation into a stronger co-creation model, the initiative was designed with women's funds, including through a needs assessment conducted by Prospera International Network of Women's Funds.

How can we build on this momentum to accelerate increased investment in local women's rights organizations? First, researchers should continue to make the case for the impact these investments can have. Some evidence already exists (including the often-cited 2013 Weldon and Htun paper that points to feminist activism as more consequential than the presence of progressive political parties, women legislators, or GDP in pushing governments to institute policies to combat violence against women).<sup>29</sup> More recent papers are summarized by Françoise Girard to support the case for increased support for women's movements.<sup>30</sup> But more evidence, and especially research conducted by independent third parties linking investment in women's rights organizations not only to policy change but to beneficial outcomes for women and girls, would further solidify the case for investment in local women's rights organizations among skeptics—or those who simply do not have women's rights organizations as an investment possibility on their radars.

Investments by the Netherlands, the Equality Fund, and the Gates Foundation's \$20 million grant portfolio present opportunities for researchers to examine and validate this investment model. In

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24 Equality Fund (2019), "Our Collective," <https://www.equalityfund.ca/>.

25 Daniels, A. (2017), "Gates Commits \$20 Million to Women's Groups," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Gates-Commits-20-Million-to/241247>.

26 Donor Tracker (2019), "Netherlands," Canadian International Development Platform (2019), <https://donortracker.org/country/netherlands>; "Canada's Foreign Aid," <https://cidpnsi.ca/canadas-foreign-aid-2012-2/>; Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2019), "Who We Are: Foundation Fact Sheet," <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/who-we-are/general-information/foundation-factsheet>.

27 OECD (2019).

28 William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2019), "Four private foundations announce they will provide at least \$20 million in a combined grantmaking initiative to strengthen women's funding organizations around the world," <https://hewlett.org/newsroom/four-private-foundations-announce-grantmaking-initiative-to-strengthen-womens-funding-organizations/>.

29 Weldon, S. Laurel, and Mala Htun (2013), "Feminist mobilisation and progressive policy change: why governments take action to combat violence against women," *Gender & Development* 21.2: 231-247.

30 Girard, F. (2019), "Philanthropy for the Women's Movement, Not Just 'Empowerment,'" *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/philanthropy\\_for\\_the\\_womens\\_movement\\_not\\_just\\_empowerment](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/philanthropy_for_the_womens_movement_not_just_empowerment).

particular, the latest commitments by the Foundation for a Just Society, the Open Society Foundations, Wellspring, and the Hewlett Foundation offer a promising chance for a rigorous research study to document the impact that funding to women’s rights organizations can have. Donors state that, at the end of five years, they “will commission and publish a third-party evaluation of the initiative that will include recommendations for further action.”<sup>31</sup>

Rigorous documentation of the impact of investment in women’s rights organizations has the potential to tilt the scales. As in the context of “cash benchmarking,” where an intervention is evaluated to demonstrate whether it has more dollar-for-dollar impact than providing the cash equivalent to beneficiaries (i.e., if a program costs \$10 million overall to implement and reaches 5,000 people, demonstrating that it improves individuals’ lives more than handing each individual \$2,000 would), the presumption over time should be to prioritize providing financing to local actors, and within the context of gender equality, to women’s rights organizations, unless evidence demonstrates that an alternative approach is likely to yield more impact.

Secondly, **we should capitalize on political windows of opportunity where governments are already prioritizing a shift towards local ownership and support for grassroots organizations.** USAID’s “Journey to Self-Reliance” emphasizes the well-known (but often in practice under-emphasized) objective for the international development sector to work itself out of a job and have investments be increasingly locally owned and led by country governments and in-country constituencies. The Journey to Self-Reliance offers a window of opportunity to raise questions about how, over time, USAID can move away from reliance on implementing organizations based in the United States and build capacity not only for country governments, but also for local nongovernmental organizations (including women’s rights organizations) often charged with service delivery and holding governments accountable.

One challenge (including to past efforts to promote local ownership, such as the USAID Forward reform initiative) is donor countries’ current procurement and reporting systems, which are often inaccessible and/or overly burdensome to local civil society organizations, which are much smaller in scale and limited in financial resources. **Procurement procedures and reporting requirements should be made proportional to organizations’ capacity, and technical assistance to seek bids and report on progress should be provided.** Following the lead of the Netherlands, the Equality Fund, and philanthropic foundations, other donors should look to women’s rights networks and funds (e.g., regional women’s development funds, the Global Fund for Women, Mama Cash) as intermediaries that can facilitate connections to local organizations and lend support in navigating procurement and reporting requirements. Simplifying procurement and reporting systems more broadly for all grantees would likely also streamline international development grantmaking and reduce waste.

### QUESTION 3: HOW DO WE HOLD GOVERNMENTS ACCOUNTABLE?

Finally, how can we hold governments accountable for instituting inclusive processes and generating beneficial outcomes through their efforts to promote gender equality? Establishing mechanisms for **(1) external validation of governments’ self-reported progress and (2) increased coordination/harmonization among governments** to streamline reporting processes are strong starting points.

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<sup>31</sup> Lehnert, T. (2019), “What Can \$20 Million Do For Women’s Funds Internationally?” Philanthropy Women, <https://philanthropywomen.org/womens-funds/a-twenty-million-dollar-investment-in-international-womens-funds/>.

Jeremy Konyndyk and Rose Worden, in their recent publication *People-Driven Response: Power and Participation in Humanitarian Action*, make a compelling argument highlighting the need for external validation of self-reported information:

*In the financial accountability realm, reliance on independent audit firms and transparent publication of audit conclusions is standard procedure because no one would trust an organization (no matter how reputable) to audit its own books. The accountability of a transparent and independent audit process provides a critical incentive for the audit subject to maintain faithful and accurate financial records. The same standards of independence and transparency should be applied to performance accountability.*<sup>32</sup>

Konyndyk and Worden focus on humanitarian assistance, but their logic can be applied to international development efforts more broadly, including those focused on gender equality. Existing tools within the international architecture for promoting accountability for gender equality, as well as those that exist within individual governments, offer opportunities to increase external validation of governments' self-reported progress.

Looking at the international tools at our disposal, at present donor governments report annually to the OECD DAC under its gender policy markers, detailing the percentages of aid that “principally” or “significantly” focus on promoting gender equality.<sup>33</sup> Notably, the DAC policy markers play a role in other gender equality accountability mechanisms. For example, the guidance note prepared by UN Women for Beijing +25 asks whether countries “track the proportion of official development assistance (ODA) that is invested in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.”<sup>34</sup>

The importance of the gender policy markers should not be underestimated. Today, all 30 DAC members, as well as a number of private foundations and multilateral organizations, report under these markers on an annual basis to the OECD, and quantitative data as well as descriptive program information are made publicly available. The DAC outlines clear definitions, with accompanying examples, of what qualifies as “principally” or “significantly” targeted aid. That said, as with the vast majority of reporting processes, information is self-reported by donors, and the extent to which different donors adhere to prescribed definitions is difficult to ascertain.<sup>35</sup>

As a next step, reporting governments and organizations could be asked to report on the extent to which they have adhered to prescribed criteria for projects that are “principally” or “significantly” focused on gender equality. This would mean reporting (and ideally providing supporting documentation to validate) whether a gender analysis was conducted, whether it informed the project design, whether indicators that disaggregate by sex are present in evaluation frameworks, and whether these are reported against, for example. This information, which is presumably already collected and stored within donor organizations but not currently public, would allow for improved civil society

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32 Konyndyk, J. and Worden, R. (2019), “People-Driven Response: Power and Participation in Humanitarian Action,” CGD Policy Paper 155. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

33 The DAC gender equality policy marker is based on a three-point scoring system to qualitatively track the financial flows that target gender equality. “Principal” (marked 2) means that gender equality is the main objective of a project and is fundamental to its design and expected results. The project would not have been undertaken without this objective. “Significant” (marked 1) means that gender equality is an important and deliberate objective, but not the principal reason for undertaking the project, often explained as gender equality being mainstreamed in the project. “Not targeted” (marked 0) means that the project has been screened against the gender marker but has not been found to target gender equality. OECD (2019), “DAC gender equality policy marker,” <https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/dac-gender-equality-marker.htm>.

34 UN Women (2018).

35 OECD (2019).

oversight and external validation by independent experts. Over time, it would facilitate thinking on how to build on the current system to increasingly raise questions of how to measure not just financial flows but associated outputs, outcomes, and impact.

For all governments, **Sustainable Development Goal 5.c.1 (“Proportion of countries with systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality and women’s empowerment”)** offers an **opportunity to mobilize increased investment** for gender equality from, including low- and middle-income country governments.<sup>36</sup> To maximize the utility of SDG 5.c.1, more country governments will first need to report under it. Ministries of finance or budget offices are responsible for responding to questions under the indicator template, and at present, just 69 countries have done so.<sup>37</sup> The indicator could also be built upon over time to assess more specific facets of gender-responsive budgeting architecture, including, as discussed above, the extent to which governments are supporting local women’s organizations.

The International Monetary Fund, UN Women, and the OECD are all well-positioned to lend technical assistance and/or encourage ministries of finance to collect and report the data for which the indicator calls. As reporting rates increase, governments’ self-reported data could be complemented by external validation, as is suggested for the DAC policy markers. Researchers can also undertake analyses comparing countries’ scores under 5.c.1 to improvements in gender equality-related outcomes over time, to gauge whether increased “gender-responsive budgeting” corresponds with improvements in gender equality-related outcomes. Gender-responsive budgeting will take a variety of forms, so an analysis examining SDG 5.c.1 data and relationships with improved outcomes would shed light on best practices to be modeled.

Making use of tools within the international accountability architecture can be complemented by using those at a national level, present within country governments’ national infrastructures. The US Congress, for example, has the opportunity to ask the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to investigate the impact of US policy, including international development assistance and/or broader foreign policy as it relates to the promotion of gender equality. Within the US context, **Congress should request that the GAO investigate the impact of US international assistance (as well as trade relations, diplomacy, and defense) on narrowing global gender gaps** to provide a clearer picture of past impact and where progress can be made. Other governments may have opportunities to conduct parallel investigations of their own impact on global gender equality through similar mechanisms.

**Ministries of finance can also exert leverage to increase accountability for global gender equality across national agencies.** For example, Rwanda’s system requires the Ministry of Finance to review all budgets submitted by other ministries to ensure gender gaps have been sufficiently considered. Using more of a “carrot” than a “stick” approach, the “Growing Girls and Women in Nigeria” initiative, launched under the leadership of Nigeria’s former Minister of Finance Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, provided incentive or “top-up” funds to ministries that considered and addressed gender gaps and/or issues exclusively affecting women and girls (e.g., reductions in obstetric fistula) through their activities.<sup>38</sup>

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36 UN Women (2018), “Sustainable Development Goal Indicator 5c1,” <https://gender-financing.unwomen.org/en/highlights/sustainable-development-goal-indicator-5c1>.

37 Ibid.

38 Budlender, D (2014), “Tracking Climate Change Funding: Learning from Gender-Responsive Budgeting,” International Budget Partnership, <https://www.internationalbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/Tracking-Climate-Change-Funding-Learning-from-Gender-Responsive-Budgeting.pdf>; Center for Global Development, (2016), “Incentive-Based Approaches to Narrowing Gender Gaps,” <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/1-billion-table.pdf>; World Bank (2014), “Gender Equality Community of Practice for Finance Ministers,” <https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Gender/>

**Finally, increased coordination, particularly through harmonization of results frameworks, will facilitate holding governments accountable for promoting gender equality.** Again, this can be done using existing tools at both the national and the international levels (though over time, an ideal scenario would allow for most results frameworks to be applicable multilaterally). In the US context, the **Women’s Global Development and Prosperity Initiative (W-GDP) offers one starting point.** The interagency initiative focused on women’s economic empowerment brings together 10 US government agencies, all of which will be responsible for reporting into a unified results framework.<sup>39</sup> The framework, which is still under development, should be concise and prioritize outcome indicators where possible, allowing for a snapshot of US progress in improving women’s economic opportunities while retaining flexibility for individual agencies to make use of their own monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Of course, this increased coordination comes with a set of challenges to be acknowledged and addressed. If individual agencies continue to use different monitoring and evaluation systems and then report into one unified results framework, there is a risk that the unified framework ends up comparing apples to oranges. While pushing towards harmonized metrics where possible, actors charged with coordinating W-GDP reporting among agencies should examine in concrete detail the distinctions between agencies’ measurement methodologies, push for alignment where possible, and clearly outline distinctions where they exist to mitigate the risk of obfuscation.

Internationally, **2X Challenge can be looked to as a model.** Fourteen development finance institutions have signed onto 2X Challenge, which aims to mobilize at least \$3 billion to promote women’s economic empowerment by 2020. 2X Challenge began as a collaboration among G7 DFIs, and they have since been joined by DFIs from Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland, and by the European Investment Bank. All DFIs joining the 2X Challenge agree to a set of criteria outlining what qualifies as a 2X investment (e.g., investing in a firm that is 51 percent women-owned, has 30 percent women on its board or investment committee, or has a 30–50 percent female workforce), and results will be monitored according to the same framework.<sup>40</sup> The 2X Challenge criteria serve as a strong example of how similar institutions can coordinate to harmonize reporting and be more easily held accountable for results. **As noted above, this effort would be strengthened through periodic external validation in addition to DFIs’ own self-reporting, as well as through expansion of the partnership to additional bilateral and multilateral DFIs.**

Finally, to refer back to the priority emphasized under the previous question, **local actors—not just governments but also civil society constituencies and individual citizens impacted by projects and investments—should have a meaningful role in identifying the metrics prioritized** within harmonized results frameworks. Cognizant of the burdens that “assessment fatigue” can place on both government actors accountable for reporting under accountability frameworks and civil society constituencies seeking to hold them to account, **governments should steer away from launching the umpteenth siloed, small-scale initiative on particular aspects of gender equality** that will add to reporting burdens but not meaningfully move the needle towards narrowing gender gaps at scale or sustainably.<sup>41</sup> Such initiatives are common as tied to multilateral summits, including G7 and G20 convenings, which have recently led to eSkillsforGirls (under Germany’s 2017 G7 presidency) and the

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Summary%20of%20Inaugural%20Gender%20Equality%20Community%20of%20Practice%20for%20Finance%20Ministers.pdf .

39 Women’s Global Development and Prosperity Initiative (2019), “Partners,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wgdp/>.

40 2X Challenge (2018), “2X Challenge: Criteria,” <https://www.2xchallenge.org/criteria>.

41 Konyndyk, J. and Worden, R. (2019).

Biarritz Partnership (under France’s 2019 G7 presidency). The Biarritz Partnership, for example, focuses on legal reform to promote gender equality, and while this focus is commendable, there is a risk that this kind of piecemeal approach, especially when priority-setting processes lack transparency, will not guarantee that the whole adds up to more than the sum of the parts. It can, in fact, risk causing confusion and place additional time, energy, and resource burdens on both government and civil society actors reporting and/or tracking implementation of commitments under a wide variety of overlapping partnerships and initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

Strengthening accountability for global gender equality will be accompanied by hard choices and tradeoffs. Within the sphere of international development, pushing governments to be more concrete and “SMART” in their commitments may mean prioritizing some objectives over others in the short-term. Increasing financing dedicated to grassroots women’s rights (and other civil society) organizations may require governments to transition away from their heavy reliance on current subcontracting arrangements and the institution of less labor-intensive procurement and reporting procedures, as well as technical assistance enabling local organizations to navigate both. Instituting mechanisms for external validation of governments’ self-reported progress and increased coordination among international development actors will require time and resources.

But the benefits of these reforms outweigh the risks, which can be mitigated with creative thinking and careful planning. Even recognizing the accompanying challenges, governments themselves, as well as civil society advocates and researchers seeking to hold them to account, should continue to push towards increasingly concrete and specific commitments; directly supporting those who know their contexts best and are well-positioned to advocate for and implement practical, sustainable solutions within them; and monitoring frameworks that are externally validated and better harmonized.

*The author thanks Jenny Hedman (OECD Gendernet), Beth Woroniuk (Equality Fund), and Charles Kenny (CGD) for their comments.*

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