

# Foreign Aid, Norm Diffusion, and Local Support for Gender Equality: Comparing Evidence from the World Bank and China's Aid Projects in Africa

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Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijcsird.v10.i1.05

## Abstract

Does foreign aid change local attitudes toward gender equality? Drawing on a theory of norm diffusion through intervention, we contend that when donors integrate norms into aid projects, such norms can be diffused to individuals in recipient countries. The World Bank and China are two comparable donors to examine this relationship. We matched the geocoded aid projects of the two donors from Aid Data and Afro barometer surveys in Africa to test our hypotheses. Our strategy is to compare respondents' attitudes toward gender equality who were near a site where the project had been implemented at the time of the interview to those who were close to a site where the project would be started after the interview. We find that the World Bank aid increases local support for gender equality and the results differ across sectors and gender. Aid going to gender-sensitive sectors has the most significant impact on women's attitudes toward gender equality. In contrast, Chinese aid shows no similar effects. This study sheds light on the linkage between aid and social norm change and is expected to exert implications for policymakers and development practitioners adventuring in the land of aid.

**Keywords:** *Foreign aid, Norm diffusion, Gender equality, World Bank, China & Africa*

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*First Published:* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-023-09381-4>

### **Background to the Study**

Promoting gender equality is one of the main aims of development projects provided by traditional donors and multilateral development agencies. Funding for reducing gender inequality was at an all-time high at 42.1% of bilateral official development assistance (ODA) in 2018 (OECD 2020). As a leading donor agency, the World Bank Group (the Bank) has been advocating gender equality in development since 1977 and began instituting policies to address gender issues in its projects in the late 1990s (World Bank 2010a). The Bank advanced its gender agenda over the past two decades following gender mainstreaming (GM) strategy which was introduced by the Bank in 2001 followed by comprehensive Gender Action Plans.

Compared with the World Bank, gender issues were largely ignored in the development projects provided by China and rarely discussed in China's foreign policies (Cai 2021; Cai and Liu 2016). The concept of gender was introduced into China in the 1990s along with Beijing's host of the Fourth World Conference on Women. Chinese feminist scholars and activists used the concept to reinterpret the “equality between men and women” from the aspects of political, economic, reproductive rights, and autonomy (Hsiung et al. 2002; Kaufman 2012; Hsiung 2021). Gender equality to a large extent means promoting women's economic empowerment, which is deeply rooted in the Marxist materialist view on women's liberation in the Chinese political context.

### **Background and Literature Review**

#### **Gender Mainstreaming and the World Bank**

As a major global strategy to address gender inequality, gender mainstreaming was established for the promotion of gender equality in the Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995. In 1997, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) called for “mainstreaming the gender perspective into all policies and programs in the United Nations system” and developed important principles for gender mainstreaming (ECOSOC 1997). In the conclusions, the concept of gender mainstreaming is defined as integrating gender perspectives into development.<sup>5</sup> Gender mainstreaming has been adopted by many international organizations, governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in aid practices to an unprecedented degree over the past decades (Zwingel 2012:115).

As for gender norms, the Bank regards gender equality as a matter of human rights and social justice which is essential for achieving overall development goals. And it has integrated gender equality norm in its development programs for decades with a clear strategy. In contrast, China prioritizes economic benefits over norm diffusion in its foreign aid. At the project level, the Bank's gender mainstreaming strategy integrates gender equality norm into all projects and all stages of projects: design, implement, monitor and evaluation. And also, the Bank provides various resources including budget, training, policy tools, and expertise to support the application of gender polity in its programs. There are no similar measures or policies in the Chinese aid projects

**Table 1:** Differences in aid principles and policies concerning gender norm diffusion between the Bank and China

	<b>World Bank</b>	<b>China</b>
Basic principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interference is necessary and matters for development</li> <li>• Conditionality applies (when needed)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual benefit or win-win</li> <li>• Non-interference and non-conditionality</li> </ul>
Gender norm policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender equality is as a matter of human rights and social justice</li> <li>• Gender equality is essential for achievement of other overall development goals</li> <li>• A strategy of gender mainstreaming is in place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender issues belong to domestic affairs of recipients and non-interference policy applies to the area</li> <li>• Prioritize economic development rather than gender equality</li> </ul>
Application of the policy at the project level	<p>Integrate gender into all projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Design:</i> gender assessment and analysis (diagnosis) to help identify and design the gender-responsive actions that are important for development before starting of a project</li> <li>• <i>Implementation:</i> integrating the identified gender-responsive actions into the World Bank project. Community-based groups and civil society groups as implementors</li> <li>• <i>Monitor and evaluation:</i> gender equality as a core indicator for project monitoring and evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absence of a gender strategy and no gender norm diffusion in design, implementation and assessment of its aid projects</li> <li>• State-owned entities as main project implementors</li> </ul>
Policy support for gender equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing training, operational tools, and building capacity in implementing agencies</li> <li>• Budget, accountability and mandate, staff and expertise, and partnership with other organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absence</li> </ul>

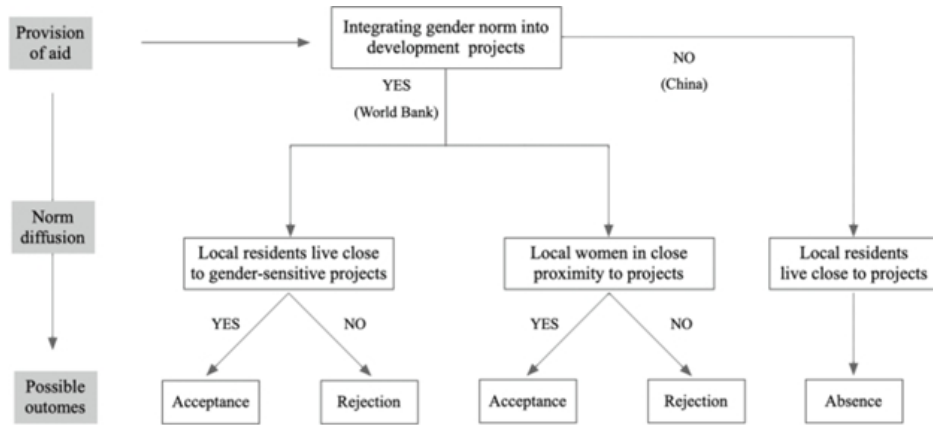
**Source:** Authors' compilation with a thorough review of policy documents related to aid from the World Bank and China

### **A Theory of Gender Norm Diffusion Through Aid**

Norm diffusion, by definition, is the transfer or transmission of objects, processes, ideas, and information from one population or region to another (Hugill and Dickson 1988: 263–64). Norm diffusion has received lots of attention in international relations, anthropology, geography, and sociology (a brief review, see Cortell and Davis 2000). In terms of gender equality norm, which is more relevant to our study, previous studies on global gender norm diffusion find international advocacy and foreign policy for gender equality matter for translating gender norms to different countries (True and Mintrom 2001; Gray et al. 2006; Zwingel 2012).

Hence, we argue that a mechanism of norm diffusion through foreign aid connects foreign aid and the local attitudes toward gender equality. Meanwhile, improvement of economic status

without norm diffusion does not necessarily change local attitudes toward gender equality. The dynamics featuring norm diffusion through aid projects that impact local attitudes toward gender equality can be summarized in Fig.1.



**Fig. 1:** Theoretical Framework

Integration of norms in aid matters for local attitudes toward gender equality. As an external intervention, aid with gender equality norm would awaken local awareness of gender equality of residents exposed to these aid projects. The Bank provides overwhelmingly 16.62 times more government and civil society projects to Africa from 2000 to 2014 than China (Table 2). Also strikingly, among the Bank's aid (main sectors) to Africa in our study, more than half of them (53.47%) falls in the government and civil society sector (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Aid to Africa by sectors: The Bank versus China, 2000–2014

Sectors	World Bank	China
Health	27	286
Transport and storage	308	192
Education	60	147
Government and civil society	1,546	93
Other social infrastructure and services	404	94
Water supply and sanitation	267	61
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	279	50

Data from the Aid Data projects included in our analysis (see the data section for details). Only the main sectors are presented here. Meanwhile, in others sectors like energy, transport and storage, and water supply and sanitation—which do not directly target gender equality,

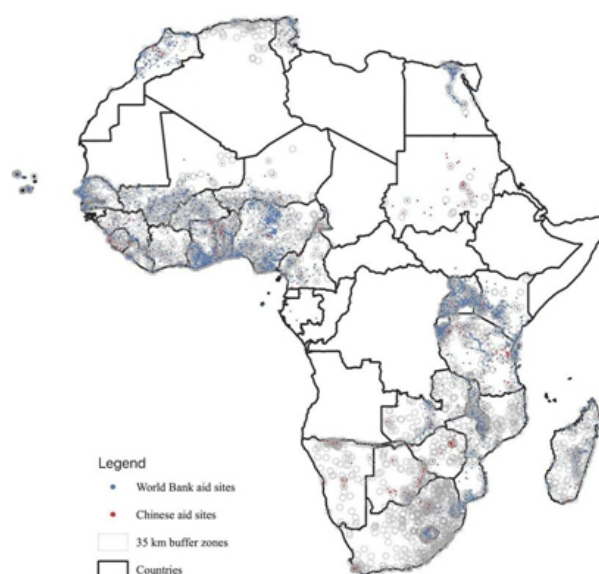
therefore to incorporate gender norms is less likely. The different characteristics of norm takers must be taken into consideration. The gender differences across policy domains can vary. Gottlieb et al. (2018) finds greater financial independence narrows the gender gaps of policies in the labor and infrastructure while gender gaps in political representation and participation remain.

Hence, following the above discussion, three key predictions with two sub-hypotheses for quantitative exercises are devised:

- H1:** The integration of gender norms into aid project increases local support for gender equality. Individuals exposed to the World Bank aid projects are more likely to support gender equality while those exposed to Chinese aid aren't.
- H2:** Women in proximity to aid projects in which gender norms are integrated (the World Bank) are more likely to support gender equality than men. H2. 2: Individuals who live near gender-sensitive projects (of the World Bank) are more likely to support gender equality.
- H3:** The effects of aid projects on local support of gender equality are most salient among the group of women living close to gender-sensitive projects.

### Aid Data

To compare the impact of aid from different donors on local gender equality, we use geocoded World Bank and Chinese aid project data. To make our comparison consistent, we use both types of aid projects from 2000 to 2014. In this study, we use only the most accurate information of a project—that is, when and where each aid project was implemented.



**Fig. 2:** Distribution of aid projects and 35 km buffer zones around Afrobarometer survey clusters



## **Robustness Checks and Additional Qualitative Evidence**

### **Robustness Checks**

The benchmark results of the World Bank aid (the four samples of full, female, gender-sensitive, and gender-sensitive and female observations) are robust over a wide range of alternative specifications.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, our results suggest that although systematic changes in gender equality remain difficult to achieve, foreign aid helps diffuse gender norms to local population. Earlier studies of gender and development pay less attention to the gender norms change and rarely link it with foreign aid. Our findings also suggest aid projects from different donors, and in different sectors may have different impacts and females are more likely to be impacted by the aid projects with gender norm diffusion.

The World Bank and China represent two distinct donors as the former overwhelmingly adopted gender mainstreaming in aid while the latter did not during the period of data collection. This experience is reflected in China's aid to African countries.

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