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CanWaCH GEWG Complex Issues Brief #4

Gender and Health: Failures in Development

Speakers: Ajita Vidyarthi, Plan International Canada; Maggie Zeng, Consultant

What is a Complex Issue?

An issue with multiple and interconnected parts, a quick fix is not possible. Instead, complex problem solving requires innovation, multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives. It involves considering the impact of the solution on the surrounding environment and individuals.

Why is “Failures in Development” a Complex Issues?

Failure in international development, much like successful programming, is complicated. It can be linked to cultural, socio-ecological, multi-sectoral factors, result out of external issues, stem from design¹ and implementation² flaws or project intent³. What makes failure in Gender Equality (GE) focused projects particularly complex is the scarcity of GE focused donors and overall monies for the cause. While it is a success that 15% of Canada's ODA spending goes to GE focused projects⁴, 85% does not. It seems like any admonition to failure might jeopardize the little funding available. GE initiatives are particularly focused on calling out harm and injustice so the last thing we want to admit to is inflicting more harm or perpetuating inequalities. Proving the value for money in the not-for-profit sector is a priority and heavily documented and analyzed by aid workers, in a way that shortcomings never are. In the absence of robust and systematic assessments of failures, those with lived experiences of engaging with communities impacted by unsuccessful projects, become critical in identifying valuable lessons.

¹ Design failure: puts the very theory of change, its assumptions and analysis under scrutiny.

² Implementation failure: when management issues are under scrutiny because robust designs fail due to capacity issues among partners.

³ Hidden (agenda) failure: when the hierarchical nature of development is under scrutiny. Hidden motives of donors versus recipients or implementers versus rights-holders.

⁴ Donor tracker https://donortracker.org/donor_profiles/canada/gender



Discussion

(I) Homogenous strategies when uniformly applied to diverse, multi-country contexts run the risk of adverse outcomes. Adapting approaches which prioritize contextualization of project activities is key to responding to the unique barriers to health outcomes faced by diverse community members. Significant here is the need to engage with rights-holders in program interventions, instead of prescribing solutions in a top-down manner or from a global north perspective.

Project thematic focus	Unintended consequences	Lessons
Preventing pre-term birth, including the reduction in hard labour by women in advanced stages of pregnancy	SBCC activities towards encouraging women to avoid hard labour resulted in men dictating lifestyle choices to women. These included husbands taking away women's bikes for their own use. Burden of labour fell on children and other women as replacements.	Multi-country designs that apply homogenous approaches can fail; a need for decolonial approaches that respond to local gendered power hierarchies between intimate partners is helpful and there is a need for clear and concise messaging that address local gender norms, stereotypes and barriers.
Increasing maternal, newborn and child health outcomes for women of reproductive age, including male accompaniment in antenatal care	Single or unaccompanied women were refused antenatal care because of by-laws developed by local community leaders to mandate male accompaniment in antenatal care.	Failure to recognise diversity among genders and responses can lead to exclusion. Exceptions needed to be made for single women, girls and those with husbands who cannot attend or will not change.

(II) At the heart of gender transformative programming, is unpacking local gendered power hierarchies, to strengthen the agency, voice and choice of non-dominant groups, in particular women and girls. Projects that are unable to fully understand prevailing power dynamics in communities, run the risk of consolidating power in the hands of those who already dominate and further marginalize those with limited agency.



Project focus	Unintended consequences	Lessons
Strengthening adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights and supporting survivors of child early and forced marriage. One activity focused on strengthening intergenerational dialogue to promote contraceptive use among adolescents.	Parents started to force daughters to use contraceptives since they would rather have the “small shame” of contraceptive use than the “big shame” of unplanned pregnancy: this was revealed in an FGD with youth on decision-making rights and autonomy	Power dynamics between project stakeholders (such as parents and adolescent children in this case) need to be explored through participative means. Creative engagement such as parenting lessons on how to discuss SRHR with sons and daughters could be worked into project design. Sexuality education for parents and teenagers.
Strengthening aquaculture and resilience with a focus on women’s cooperatives, including diversification of traditional livelihoods, biodiversity and coastal conservation and overall increase in women’s role in the seaweed value chain.	When women started bringing in more money than men, interpersonal conflicts started to increase with their male partners, with many women leaving the seaweed industry.	Backlash and uneven power dynamics are frequent and can be anticipated at baseline through multi-stakeholder engagement. Triangulating information from multiple diverse stakeholders who have relationships and/or influence over primary project stakeholders can support this.

(III) Midterm evaluations can be a key to reimagine successes, allowing for iterative processes that can be adjusted when the need arises. Rigidly sticking to original designs, without data to inform course corrections, risks perpetuating unintended harm to target groups.



Project focus	Unintended consequences	Lessons
Strengthening sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and women including reducing child, early and forced marriage and unintended adolescent pregnancy.	During project implementation, while rates of child marriage decreased, and knowledge about modern contraceptives and access increased, adolescent pregnancy increased at a statistically significant level.	The project theory of change relied on assumptions that teenage pregnancies occurred only in a context of high incidence of child, early and forced marriage and poor knowledge about and access to modern contraceptives. Consequently, other potential reasons related to harmful gender norms, SGBV, and girls' choice were not adequately accounted for. A human-centered approach, centered around girls' aspirations, can allow for early testing of initial assumptions and leave room for adapting project strategies.
Women's economic empowerment including women living with disabilities.	While there was excitement about entrepreneurship opportunities, informal meetings with women revealed reductions in time to rest. This, however, was never documented via formal evaluation. Women depended on the resources provided by the project.	Assessing women's aspirations and priorities multiple times throughout a project is critical in designing programs for empowerment and well-being.

Recommendations

Recognising that colonial or top-down approaches persist in multiple layers of leadership and hierarchies, understanding gendered power dynamics and using MEAL to course correct are key strategies to name failure and prevent harm. GE practitioners can play a role in this by advocating for meaningful engagement with diverse communities while also pushing an inclusion agenda. Anticipating backlash and uneven power dynamics can help us prepare for failure and build in room for solutions, certainly engaging men and boys in various social strata can help prevent this. GE practitioners can work closely with MEAL colleagues or MEAL colleagues could be trained in GE to ensure that multiple checks and balances are designed into the MEAL plan. This is true throughout the project cycle and requires on the ground



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expertise or training for colleagues involved in monitoring. Flexible project design also managers and donors is desirable as these examples suggest that well intentioned GE projects can fail or even do harm if not course corrected. Engaging with multiple diverse stakeholders who have relationships and/or influence over primary project stakeholders can avoid false or limited assumptions and allow for improved agency. Human-centered design and other participatory methodologies like feedback and complaints mechanisms can allow for more flexibility and adaptability in projects, so when failures happen there is room for course correction and responsiveness.