Locating leverage: contesting “empowerment lite” from the lower rungs of an aid chain

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**Abstract**

The development sector’s adoption of private sector logics and practices has seen donors increasingly disburse funds using aid chains. Aid chains consist of at least two nodes, with work subcontracted from donors to organizations socially and geographically closer to beneficiaries. Aid chains enable ethics dumping, where subcontracting facilitates higher-tier actors distancing themselves from the messy work of engaging in the politics of interventions. The power inequalities of aid chains stand in sharp contrast to donors’ “partnership” rhetoric and raise the question of how lower-tier actors can challenge donors. This question is particularly pertinent for aid chains for women’s empowerment projects, given that the agenda of women’s empowerment has been instrumentalized. This article considers the resistance strategies used by lower-tier actors to contest policy. Analyzing a rare on-the-record case of resistance, it examines a women’s empowerment project implemented through a four-tier chain. The article documents the strategies deployed by a lower-tier actor to advance the understanding of women’s empowerment not as market inclusion but as originally conceived: as movement building. Its analysis offers insights into how feminist advocates can advance alternatives, as well as the impacts of aid subcontracting and how “partnership” is interpreted in practice.

**KEYWORDS** Aid chains; women’s empowerment; partnership; development; resistance
Introduction

The notion of aid partnerships has come to occupy a central place in the development imaginary since its inclusion in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. However, “new public management” – termed “new development management” – reforms have seen the sector widely adopt private sector practices and logics. This has led to the rise of aid chains, where funds are disbursed through networks of subcontracting relationships, with donors fully specifying the outputs that they seek and contractors merely delivering. This has transformed relationships in the aid sector in ways that are in stark contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of partnership. Existing studies of aid chains have highlighted their power inequalities, specifically how higher-tier actors (typically donors, private sector consultancies, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs)) limit the scope for lower-tier actors (typically small NGOs and grassroots organizations) to contest policy and calibrate projects according to conditions “on the ground” (Aveling 2010; Bebbington 2005; Burger, Owens, and Prakash 2018; Morse and McNamara 2008; Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2007; Watkins, Swidler and Hannan 2012). The notion of aid partnerships has consequently been critiqued, with the sector’s paradigm of standard modalities, instrumentalism, and managerialism reproducing – rather than challenging – Global North–Global South hierarchies (Aagaard and Trykker 2019). This raises the question: can lower-tier actors contest policy, and if so, how?

This question is particularly relevant for aid chains for women’s empowerment projects. Over the past two decades, during which new development management has transformed the practices and relationships of the development sector, women’s empowerment has become a global objective. This empowerment agenda has attracted significant support and resources from donors, development institutions, companies, and NGOs. However, projects are largely focused on driving women’s market inclusion rather
than tackling the structural drivers of gender inequality – what Moser (1989) termed ‘the efficiency’ approach to tackling gender inequalities, and Cornwall (2018) recently dubbed “empowerment lite.” This approach is reflected in the focus on women’s economic empowerment, and within this sphere, the dominance of specific projects in aid programming – namely, access to finance, markets, skills, training, business development services, and social protection (Pereznieto and Taylor 2014).

Aagaard and Trykker (2019, 2) find critiques of partnership in aid chains justified and argue for a pragmatic approach that “takes to heart existing critiques of partnerships but maintains an idealistic belief that they can actually work in practice.” Based on this position, they look to identify how a praxis-informed analysis of partnerships between Global North and Global South NGOs creates a basis for capacity development. Donors have since the early 2000s had limited success in effectively engaging with political analyses and adopting more flexible and adaptive alternatives to development management (Copestake and Williams 2014; Hutchison et al. 2014). This, and indeed the persistence of the bureaucratic form (Whitty 2019), offers little hope for the prospects of a pragmatic approach. Consequently, this study adopts a different approach. Taking the current conditions of the aid-granting system as given – and thereby accepting that relationships in aid chains are highly unequal – the article investigates how lower-tier actors can contest donor policy. I thus adopt the position, like Mowles (2012, 546), that the aid chain and its foundation – new development management – is here to stay, but that there is nonetheless scope for practitioners to reflect on how they engage with others in “negotiating means and ends.”

The article is concerned with how lower-tier actors in women’s empowerment aid chains contest policy. It does this by analyzing a case study of a women’s economic empowerment program in Southeast Asia implemented through a four-tier chain. Multiple studies (Cornwall 2018; Gregoratti 2016; Prügl 2015) highlight the pressing need for further
research analyzing women’s empowerment initiatives to consider how specific feminist ideas are being incorporated into aid programming, and how projects may create openings for contesting gendered power relations. This article responds to this call by examining a case of resistance. Specifically, it considers the strategies deployed by a lower-tier actor to contest the prevailing view of women’s empowerment as market inclusion. It is based on an analysis of project documents, in-house training materials, and a narrative interview with a key informant. This case is significant given that the power inequalities of aid chains mean that there are very few cases of resistance.

Furthermore, lower-tier actors have been highly disinclined to speak on the record about resistance strategies, given possible consequences such as having their funding cut (Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2007). The narrative interview thus enabled the documentation of the possibility of resistance. My informant explained the motivations and obstacles that informed the design of project documents and training materials such that women’s empowerment was understood not as market inclusion but as originally conceived: as movement building.

The first section describes the conditions that drove the emergence of aid chains, and their specific practices and the contested role of partnership. The second section highlights the radical roots of the women’s empowerment agenda and how it has been instrumentalized. The third section turns to the case study, a four-tier women’s economic empowerment aid chain with funds disbursed in Southeast Asia. The objective of the aid chain is to respond to the gendered inequalities of economic integration in countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The article identifies two strategies employed by lower-tier actors to counter the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment – namely, discursive disruption and leveraging the language of partnership. In so doing, it responds to calls for further research into aid-subcontracting practices and their impacts (Burger, Owens, and Prakash
2018) and into the meaning and function of partnerships in aid chains (Barnes, Brown, and Harman 2016; Morse and McNamara 2008). Moreover, by documenting resistance strategies and the conditions that enabled their operationalization, the article offers insights for feminist advocates eager to advance alternatives.

**Aid chains and the problems of partnership**

In the 1980s, the concept of “partnership” was peripheral to the development imaginary but moved to the center in 2005 when it was canonized in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Barnes and Brown (2011) attribute the wide appeal of the concept in the development sector to how it speaks to multiple audiences. Specifically, it can be presented as a progressive way of transforming unequal power relationships and as satisfying concerns about the behavior of aid recipients and connections between “welfare aid,” corruption, and recipient ineffectiveness. Of these two interpretations, it is the progressive version of partnership that has waned. This is because aid has increasingly been delivered through networks of subcontracting relationships known as aid chains, defined as

> the series of organizations and actors involved in the process of moving funds from their initial institutional source to be spent on behalf of the targeted beneficiaries in the recipient area, and the associated processes of accounting to donors for the use of these funds. (Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2007, 12)

Chains consist of at least two nodes, with the work subcontracted from the source of funds to organizations that are typically socially and geographically closer to aid recipients. The original source of funds is often referred to as the “back donor.” These chains can be
configured with just two nodes, or many. As an example, Burger et al. (2018, 1) describe a three-level hierarchy:

(1) bilateral government and multilateral aid donors enter into a contract with an international NPO [non-profit organization], (2) which subcontracts a local, predominantly urban, national NPO, which in turn, (3) subcontracts a local, often rural and more informal community NPO.

Aid chains appeal to donors because they reduce the scope for opportunism in contracting, with information asymmetries between principals (donors) and agents (subcontractors) enabling the latter to “upsell” their credentials and project outcomes (Burger et al. 2018). The use of aid chains by donors can also be attributed to the structure of the aid landscape – namely, that donor markets are monopsonies in which donors are able to fully specify the outputs that they seek with contractors merely delivering (Burger et al. 2018).

Donors’ increased use of aid chains more generally has been driven by the sector’s adoption since the 1980s of the practices of new public management. Development managerialism focuses on scientific practices and rational tools for planning and measurement, with its key principles being efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency (Mowles 2010). Driving these reforms was the assumption that the public sector was underperforming and that reorganizing aid bureaucracies along private sector lines increases efficiency. Funds were increasingly disbursed through competitive tenders with NGOs, think tanks, university research centers, and corporations bidding for contracts, subjecting aid to market-based mechanisms. Donors also concentrated funding, typically into large-scale contracts of two to five years, along with substantially increasing application and reporting
requirements. This drove consolidation and concentration among NGOs, as larger NGOs were typically better positioned to bid for contracts than their smaller counterparts.

The drive for efficiency gains in the development sector received a further push from the mid-2000s when donors refocused their attention on markets by targeting economic growth rather than poverty reduction and – following on from this – an expanded role for the private sector. This has been termed “private sector-led development” (Mawdsley 2015), “corporatized development” (Moeller 2018), and “deep marketization” (Carroll 2015). Private capital investment in aid has expanded alongside continuing attempts to create enabling environments for markets. This shift was a consequence of various factors. First, increased competition for development finance, with middle-income countries becoming aid providers, placed pressure on “traditional” (OECD-DAC) donors and their practices, notably loan conditionalities. Second, the targeting of economic growth and measures to embed the private sector occurred in the long shadow of the global financial crisis, which saw high-income countries embrace austerity and balanced budgets. Aid budgets were subsequently squeezed, and there were increased levels of scrutiny and demands for greater impact and efficiency.

With the shift to private-sector-led development, donors increasingly linked domestic, commercial interests to aid budgets, deploying the latter for more explicitly nationalist objectives – termed “aid for trade.” Provost (2016) reports, for example, that the UK Department for International Development spent GBP90 million through a UK aid consultancy, Adam Smith International. This was twice what the department spent tackling HIV and AIDS in the same period. Mawdsley et al. (2018, 40) term this “retroliberalism” – namely, the “support for domestic capitalism under the guise of aid.” Many OECD-DAC donors also underwent a transformation in their expertise and focus. This involved department restructures, where senior staff stepped down or were relocated, along with the
slower transition accomplished by departing specialist staff being replaced by non-specialist diplomatic staff cycling through aid divisions as part of their career progression (Murray and Overton 2016). An increasing proportion of employees also came from the private sector, and the refocus on economic growth opened up opportunities for contracting with accounting, financial, and management consultancies (Mawdsley 2015).

Like other government contracting relationships, aid chains create challenges for democratic accountability by shifting responsibility away from the government (Berrios and McKinney 2017). Aid chains also create challenges in the delivery of desired outputs because they send risk and uncertainty down the aid chain and away from the donor – typically to where there are fewer resources for managing that risk (Burger et al. 2018). This can be characterized as “ethics dumping”: the more powerful and resourced actors distance themselves from the messy work of “doing development” and effectively engage in the politics of interventions. This is revealed in several case study analyses. Burger et al. (2018), for example, describe aid chains as analogous to for-profit supply chains. In their analysis of the activities of three Ugandan NGOs in aid chains, the authors find that donors adopt an “exploitative” and “muscular approach” that “inhibits [NGOs’] ability to adapt to changing local conditions and be responsive to community needs” (Burger et al. 2018, 2, 9).

Bebbington (2005) similarly finds that the rise of aid chains has seen trust levels decline, with lower-tier actors being less forthcoming about problems that they encounter, while spending more time on monitoring and evaluation tasks and less on substantive issues. The author argues that this has had deleterious impacts on the work of those actors, such as focusing production-oriented interventions on a smaller number of households from a less poor stratum of the community to guarantee impact. Aveling (2010) similarly examines the impacts of aid chains on health interventions and finds that, despite the rhetoric of partnership, marginalized communities are positioned only as recipients.
Moreover, Wallace et al. (2007), in their analysis of how aid chains are experienced by lower-tier actors, highlight the disciplining effects of the funding conditions imposed by higher-tier actors in a highly competitive funding environment. Interviewees described reporting requirements as demanding, complex, and constantly increasing, taking resources away from other activities. Reporting must also be done in accordance with donor expectations, which has implications for communicating a project’s problems and how they might be addressed. As Wallace et al. (2007, 113) explain,

[d]onors have the power to sanction poor reporting and weak performance by refusing further funding, even though the difficulties for NGOs and communities to fit their diverse, complex realities into the current reporting formats are well known … [A]t each level of the aid chain there is editorial control to ensure the “right” kind of report reaches the donor … Although donors say they want reporting on failure, UK NGOs cited many examples where they felt funding was threatened because of openly discussing problems.

Eyben (2010, 389) similarly argues that while the rhetoric of partnership is promoted, relations may instead just be characterized as “groupthink,” where the opportunities for voicing alternatives is muted and “evidence is sought to check whether one is still on track, not to ask whether there are other tracks.”

Hence, lower-tier actors in aid chains have increasingly been viewed as contractors despite the rhetoric of partnership, while the competitiveness of funding has made them more compliant and less inclined to criticize policy (Mawdsley et al. 2018; McGregor et al. 2013; Murray and Overton 2016). Moreover, they have become increasingly responsible for engaging in the politics of interventions, while typically being less involved in project design
and subject to various oversight mechanisms that do not the opportunity to consider how projects could be improved. This raises the question of how lower-tier actors can contest policy. The following sections consider these questions by exploring the case of a women’s economic empowerment project in Southeast Asia.

“Empowerment lite” and its pitfalls
At the same time as new public management has altered the practices and relationships of the development sector, the agenda of women’s empowerment has been instrumentalized. The goal of women’s empowerment emerged in the 1980s as the radical agenda of mobilizing women to transform structural inequalities. Central in this was Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), a network of Global South activists, researchers, and policymakers. DAWN’s members advocated for a collective and bottom-up development process, focusing not just on women’s economic participation but also on questions of distribution and the institutional changes required to tackle the drivers of gender inequalities.

Two characteristics marked these early debates regarding the empowerment approach. First, empowerment was fundamentally about power. The approach aims for women to increase their power but understands power not just as “power over” or domination, but also as processual – increasing women’s self-reliance and their collective capabilities (Moser 1989). The second hallmark of early debates regarding empowerment was the concept and practice of popular education, drawing on Paulo Freire’s conscientization approach in Latin America in the 1970s (Batliwala 1993, 2007; Rowlands 1997; Yuval-Davis 1994). This approach focuses on people developing an awareness of their circumstances and social context – their critical consciousness – to motivate action. Consciousness raising was recognized as a key component of empowerment and focused not only on challenging patriarchy but also the mediating structures of race, class, and ethnicity (Batliwala 2007).
Hence, empowerment was understood to entail an individual process of increased self-awareness, developed in a collective setting. The focus on power and popular education underscore empowerment as a relational process; it is a process by which people make sense of their world and the power relationships to which they contribute, and is intended to change these relationships so that people can exercise greater control over their lives.

From the 1990s, empowerment became well established in the vocabulary of development, having been attached to a range of programs but most visibly those concerning gender equality. As the approach was increasingly embraced, it was also instrumentalized, as seen in the claim of many proponents that empowerment targets a “double bottom-line” of empowering women and generating economic growth. Programs are structured around achieving a high rate of return. Returns are framed not only as being achieved for women “as human beings with intrinsic value” but also in terms of what the investments deliver for economies, poverty, population growth, or the environment (Moeller 2018, 36). The instrumentalizing of empowerment is captured in the narrative of the “business case” for gender equality and its framing as “smart economics.” Roberts’ (2012) concept of “transnational business feminism” highlights the actors driving this project – namely, a coalition of companies, capitalist states, NGOs, and development institutions – and points to the significant expansion of the power of corporate actors in shaping how gender inequality should be addressed through their multi-scalar and transnational activities. In practice, this has meant a return to the Women in Development (WID) approach of the 1970s, where liberal feminists advocated for development institutions paying greater attention to women’s productive capacities (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). Development agencies largely embraced WID on the basis that women’s contributions to the development process would increase economic growth.

As highlighted by Gerard (2019), scholarly analyses of women’s empowerment
programs have centered on two lines of critique. Such analyses have focused, first, on programs typically advocating deeply essentialized understandings of gender. Women are contradictorily presented as both saviors with respect to the problems of global development as a consequence of their inequitable burden in social reproduction, and as universalized victims in need of saving. Second, scholarly critiques have highlighted problems in conflating the goals of gender equality, economic growth, and profit. Calkin (2016), Chant and Sweetman (2012), Moeller (2018), Roberts (2015), and Roberts and Soederberg (2012) demonstrate that this perpetuates an ahistorical and apolitical understanding of gender-based inequalities. It also ignores how measures to achieve these goals may be in tension with one another, as well as the benefits that gender inequalities yield for the private sector.

Underpinning these critiques are studies highlighting the narrowing of the concept of empowerment. From the radical goal of mobilizing women to transform structural inequalities, programs have increasingly focused on women’s economic empowerment, and within this sphere, on measures to increase individual women’s market competitiveness. Pereznieto and Taylor’s (2014) review of 254 academic and “gray literature” evaluations of empowerment projects found that of eight thematic areas, projects focused on five: financial services, business development services, skills training, social protection, and access to markets. Moreover, just under half of all evaluations (46 percent) focused on projects related to financial services. Projects focused far less on legal and regulatory frameworks (two out of 254), unions and fair employment (six out of 254), and asset provision, both financial and non-financial (four out of 254). The thematic areas that Pereznieto and Taylor identify as dominating projects seek to empower women by improving their ability to compete in markets, with markets thereby understood as drivers of gender equality.

This conceptual narrowing continues the longstanding framing of women as a development resource (Elson 1991) – what Moser (1989) dubbed the “efficiency approach”
to tackling gender inequalities, and Cornwall recently termed “empowerment lite” (2018). This is a problem because, as succinctly put by Cornwall and Edwards (2014, 27), “[p]olicies that view women as instrumental to other objectives cannot promote women’s empowerment because they fail to address the structures by which gender inequality is perpetuated over time.” Furthermore, economic empowerment programs have been shown to be largely ineffective. Cheema (2017) reviews analyses of economic empowerment interventions and finds that, more often than not, they do not advance empowerment. Even when they do, their effect is limited to only increasing access to or control over the specific service or asset that the intervention offers. There “are very few programmes that create the hypothesized ‘spillovers’ that are expected to positively impact a broader set of empowerment and collective action indicators” (Cheema 2017, 6). The findings of his review align with decades of feminist scholarship arguing that women entering labor markets cannot be the solution to gender inequalities because they simply add paid work to the unpaid work already done by women.

It is not coincidental that the rise of aid chains has emerged alongside the instrumentalization of empowerment. Development organizations, like most organizations (Acker 1990), are deeply gendered (Altan-Olcay 2020; Bedford 2009; Ferguson 2015; Springer 2020). This can prevent gender practitioners from challenging norms and practices, and indeed “acts as a brake on work for gender equality” (Rao and Kelleher 2005). The use of the logical framework (logframe) to disburse funds through aid chains is a key example of how the gendered nature of development organizations promotes the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment. A logframe is the basic document used to list project goals, timetables, required inputs, and expected outcomes that are attached to indicators or measures, along with a list of internal assumptions and external factors that may be a risk to the achievement of the project goals. Logframes have been criticized on several levels: for
assuming that change is a linear process that can be measured through a simple comparison of achievements and predefined indicators; for privileging quantitative measures and marginalizing more qualitative and less readily identified impacts; for prioritizing upward accountability to donors and, in doing so, shifting power away from beneficiaries and those at lower tiers of the aid chain; and for not having the scope to consider unintended effects (Shutt 2009; Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2007). More generally, logframes assume that development planning can be conducted by policymakers and other experts possessing specialized knowledge, rendering development a technical exercise rather than a process of contested structural change. Consequently, logframes pay inadequate attention to the complexity of social relations and their everyday variable iterations and contestations. This is particularly troubling for gender equality interventions where activities are process oriented, and outcomes can be open ended or difficult to attribute to a single factor. The widespread adoption of logframes for funding that is disbursed through aid chains thus has significant negative consequences for the types of knowledge that matter in designing, implementing, and evaluating gender equality interventions.

The gendered nature of development organizations also produces unequal opportunity structures for gender practitioners, which has prompted some to selectively promote the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment to garner institutional support. Altan-Olcay (2020) and Springer (2020) explore how gender practitioners engage in the “micropolitical encounters” produced by unequal opportunity structures and the strategies that they use to advance gender equality objectives to hostile audiences. These strategies include selectively deploying instrumentalist constructions of women’s empowerment, as well as arguing for quantitative gender metrics. Both strategies are viewed by gender practitioners (typically women) as “expeditious bureaucratic tools” to motivate cooperation by reluctant coworkers (typically men) (Springer 2020). In a similar vein, Bedford (2009) and Prügl (2017)
demonstrate that gender advocates within the World Bank have not only strategically employed the framing of gender equality as increasing efficiency, but that they have undertaken substantial work to “prove” that employment empowers women, despite the lack of conclusive data on this topic. The gendered nature of development organizations has thus seen gender practitioners invoke private sector logics and practices to appeal to skeptical (or indeed, hostile) audiences. While beneficial in building institutional support in gendered contexts, these strategies also further validate the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment and marginalize feminist knowledge construction processes.

The rise of aid chains has therefore exacerbated the challenges faced by gender practitioners by narrowing the space to both design and contest policy, while also privileging knowledge and knowledge construction processes that are not well suited to conveying the slow, processual work of shifting gender norms. This raises questions regarding how gender equality objectives can be advanced. Multiple studies call for further research into how women’s empowerment projects may create openings for contesting gendered power relations (Cornwall 2018; Gregoratti 2016; Prügl 2015). In particular, Prügl (2015) argues that the selective adoption of feminism into neoliberal development policy is not surprising, and that, rather than critiquing this trend, a more fruitful and necessary approach is to acknowledge the tendency of initiatives to disempower as well as their scope for engendering contentious politics. As Cornwall (2018, 10) asks with regards to empowerment, “what might it take to recuperate some of the elements it once had, to re-animate it, breathe fire and life back into it as a political concept and contest its domestication in the service of neo-liberalism?” The following section considers the scope for contestation in women’s empowerment interventions by analyzing the strategies deployed by actors at the third tier of a four-tier aid chain.
Contesting “empowerment lite”

Women’s economic empowerment projects are a burgeoning area of donor funding in Southeast Asia. One driver of this expansion has been the ASEAN Economic Community, which was signed into existence in 2015 to establish a more integrated regional market. It is projected that the ASEAN Economic Community will intensify existing inequalities between women and men in Southeast Asia. A report developed by the ASEAN Secretariat, UN Women, AusAID, and Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung highlights that, given the gender-segmented labor market and inequalities in labor market participation rates and the care economy, the vast majority of women will be excluded from those sectors that are projected to grow (Shreyasi Jha and Saxena 2016). These projected negative impacts have prompted calls for targeted interventions for women, and support has come in a variety of forms from member countries, companies, and donors.

The case considered here is a women’s economic empowerment project for AU$1 million over three years. The donor granted the funds to an INGO that then selected a regional NGO to implement the project with its in-country NGO partners in targeted countries. This created a four-tier aid chain, as shown in Figure 1.

[[[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]]]

**Figure 1.** Women’s economic empowerment aid chain.

Following Cornwall and Edwards (2014), my analysis focuses on practitioners because of their significance in determining the relational aspects of empowerment. Practitioners undertake the work of interpreting, implementing, and evaluating empowerment, and, in doing so, negotiate the practical and conceptual constraints of the
structures in which they work. While these structures limit what is possible in terms of reforming development bureaucracies (Hutchison et al. 2014), practitioners nonetheless have agency and can actively contest the processes and tools through which the politics of interventions are marginalized (Eyben 2013; Li 2007). I focus on the activities of the regional NGO, given that it operationalized “empowerment” by developing resources and training materials for in-country NGOs, meaning its conceptualization and communication of empowerment is central to identifying and evaluating the scope for contesting gendered power relations. Based on analysis of program documents, in-house training materials, and a narrative interview with a key informant, I trace how staff at the regional NGO contested the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment.

The project’s overarching goal was to “strengthen women’s economic engagement with ASEAN bodies and the private sector” (project documentation, 2014, on file with author). This goal was broken down into three objectives: (1) increase the capacity of women’s organizations to develop their analysis of the impact of ASEAN integration on women and challenge discriminatory laws and practices; (2) strengthen networks within countries and across the region; and (3) engage with ASEAN policymakers and with the private sector (interview with staff member of IWRAW-AP, Kuala Lumpur, May 20, 2017). The project involved the regional NGO developing training materials that were translated into local languages and then running a series of capacity-building workshops for in-country NGOs in seven of the ten ASEAN member countries. The in-country NGOs were responsible for training other in-country NGOs. Both the project’s design and its mode of delivery are indicative of capacity-building interventions more generally, making it an appropriate case to consider how lower-tier actors in aid chains contest policy.

The regional NGO for the project was International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAW-AP), based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. IWRAW-AP takes an
explicitly feminist and rights-based approach to its work. As described on its website, IWRAW-AP is

a feminist organization committed to the full realization of women’s human rights through the pursuit of equality. We act to disrupt structures, systems, and institutions that violate women’s human rights, and we engage in movement building that amplifies women’s voices and activism to create alternative political narratives and spaces. (IWRAW-AP n.d.)

IWRAW-AP’s focus on the “need to eliminate multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination at all levels” is driven by its efforts to build collaborations and alliances (IWRAW-AP n.d.). Reflecting IWRAW-AP’s approach, its staff designed the project around women’s empowerment as movement building (as originally envisioned) rather than market inclusion. This is evident in their activities for each of the three objectives of the project.

The first project objective was to increase the capacity of women’s organizations to develop their analysis of the impact of ASEAN integration on women and challenge discriminatory laws and practices. ASEAN has framed the establishment of the single market, the ASEAN Economic Community, as increasing economic growth by enabling the region to become a production base for transnational capital through the removal or reduction of barriers to the movement of goods, services, skilled labor, and capital. This has not, however, been a straightforward process. An integrated regional market requires extensive regulatory reform, impacting the distribution of resources and power among the region’s politico-business alliances. Rather than a fully integrated market being established, a highly partial and uneven process of integration can be observed; a few sectors are integrated, and others remain nationally bound. This unevenness reflects the region’s political economy.
Conflicts have emerged among politico-business alliances over this attempt to rescale governance of some issues from the domestic to the regional level, with their support or opposition determined by their potential to benefit from the process (see Gerard and Bal 2020; Jones 2015).

Gender is a particularly acute point of unevenness in regional economic integration. While acknowledging this, donors in the region have predominantly focused on strategies that target women’s market inclusion rather than those that target the structures that drive gender inequalities (for example, OECD 2017). In contrast to this approach taken by higher-tier actors, staff at IWRAW-AP designed the training materials and workshops around equipping in-country NGOs to analyze how regional economic integration differentially affects women and men. This entailed discursively disrupting the donor narrative of economic integration and global value chains as modes of development. A staff member at IWRAW-AP outlined the rationale for developing training materials to realize this disruption:

When you’re using the language like “value chains” and “global production networks” and all these very technical terms, it is hard to engage. It was also quite intimidating. All the material out there is very economical and not very interested in transforming the structures of value chains … You can give women all these things, but if those structures are inherently discriminatory, it’s not going to lift anyone out of the feminized poverty. Bearing that in mind, we then crafted the program so that it could unpack value chains from a rights-based and gender perspective and engage in a way that is not very typical – really simplifying the language but not the concept. Just so that people can really understand how their countries participate in value chains. (interview with staff member of IWRAW-AP, Kuala Lumpur, May 20, 2017)
The 24-page section of the training materials titled “Women’s Economic Rights: Analyzing Issues” focuses on three thematic areas. There is a gender analysis of each theme and its key dimensions in ASEAN, along with questions for discussion and case studies. The subsection on “Multinational Corporations, Gender and the Value Chain” rejects the usual “global value chains for development” mantra advocated by ASEAN and key development institutions (see ASEAN 2015). Instead, it first describes the key characteristics of global value chains, notably how they encourage flexible and informal employment. The training materials then conduct a gender analysis of the global value chain that highlights its unequal impact on women and men. For example, referencing two International Labour Organization papers, the training materials note:

It has been argued that the informal working arrangements that many global value chains adopt benefit women, offering much-needed wages and contributing to a “sense of economic agency and self-worth and the capacity to renegotiate relations with parents and husbands.” However, the concentration of women at the informal end of the value chain continuum, while the men are found more at the formal end, is an important distinction that surfaces the gender inequality and discrimination that lies within the sector … Workers in the informal sector are generally paid less, have less secure jobs, and are unprotected under labour laws. The notion that women prefer to work this way, informally, in small workshops or home-based, fails to recognise the lack of options many women have or how women have to balance work with their reproductive roles and other tasks.

(IWRAW-AP 2015, 39)
This gender analysis is followed by a discussion of how Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) commitments are relevant to the differing experiences of women and men employed in global value chains. Case studies and discussion questions are then provided.

Hence, the donor defined the first project objective as capacity building and specifically increasing the analytical skills of women’s organizations so that they can examine the gendered impacts of economic integration and lobby governments to better regulate discriminatory practices. However, rather than focusing only on improving the regulation of discriminatory practices (and thereby largely bypassing the structural drivers of gender inequalities), IWRAW-AP rejected the donor’s framing of women’s economic empowerment as market inclusion. Instead, it provided in-country NGOs with the conceptual and analytical framework for rejecting the idea that jobs for women equates to empowerment.

The second project objective was to strengthen networks within and across countries. Here, IWRAW-AP focused not only on fostering connections among women’s organizations, but also on developing highly nuanced approaches to advocacy that are calibrated according to the interests of relevant actors and on building cross-sectoral alliances. This approach is particularly important in the Southeast Asian context, where groups have historically been highly repressed and atomized. As charted by Hewison and Rodan (2012), the political Left was highly significant in the nationalist struggles of the 1930s and after the Second World War. However, dissenting views and spaces for political expression were repressed first by colonial authorities and then by authoritarian states, after which the Cold War presented a decidedly inhospitable environment for political organization. From the late 1980s, the rise of “authoritarian liberalism” across the region brought a rapid and predatory mode of capitalist development (see Jayasuriya 2000). Central to the region’s economic “miracle,” though
rarely acknowledged, was women’s labor: women were channeled into manufacturing employment for export industries at the same time that governments held a strong non-welfarist orientation, increasing the burden on female household members (Elias 2020). Those whose fortunes improved with the region’s economic development began demanding political participation, prompting the renewal of civil society. However, civil society demands were predominantly focused on the protection of rights, liberty, and representative forms of government – largely compatible with market reforms – and not on reforming the structural drivers of economic and gender inequality. With ASEAN’s “community-building” agenda from the mid-2000s, groups began regionalizing their activities, such as the Southeast Asia Women’s Caucus on ASEAN that brings together more than 100 organizations to engage with ASEAN on women’s rights. However, given decades of repression and atomization, such efforts are challenging.

A staff member at IWRAW-AP described the justification for seeking to not only strengthen networks but build cross-sectoral alliances:

We really wanted to bring [the unions] in as part of building our understanding of the context and the challenges and finding out how they have engaged with private actors, and what are their tactics and how can we work together … So for the dialogue they did come, but after a lot of pushing. I don’t know if it was that we’re so used to working in silos. We’re all so split … And so the dialogue was good in that we were able to bring all the different factions together and to benefit from the experience and an understanding of the challenges. So it was also good to hear from them how receptive have companies been when you want to raise worker protections. That was very interesting. (interview with staff member of IWRAW-AP, Kuala Lumpur, May 20, 2017)
The fourth section of the training materials is a 13-page guide to advocacy. Drawing on cases from across the globe, this section describes what advocacy is and how it can take shape. It emphasizes the importance of connecting advocacy to the realities of women’s lives; identifying who has power, who are potential allies, and who are opponents; and then developing an advocacy plan based on a map of these various interests. The training materials also explain why connecting advocacy strategies across scales can be important and how this can be achieved through, for example, connecting grassroots struggles to processes such as CEDAW reporting and the submission of shadow reports, as well as recently developed regional networks, notably the Southeast Asian Women’s Caucus on ASEAN. On this second project objective, the donor was looking for IWRAW-AP to strengthen networks within and across countries. IWRAW-AP, however, went far beyond this. It designed project materials to support in-country NGOs in developing highly nuanced advocacy skills. The training materials link overarching strategies to women’s experiences and political economy analysis of advocacy campaigns. IWRAW-AP also sought to build cross-sectoral alliances by organizing meetings connecting women’s organizations and trade unions. In these ways, IWRAW-AP recast as movement building the donor’s objective to strengthen networks.

The third project objective was engaging with policymakers and the private sector. Supporting civil society in engaging with policymakers is a longstanding mode of development assistance. However, the donor’s request that NGOs engage with the private sector is a more recent phenomenon and reflects the broader shift in development policy toward private-sector-led development described above. This focus on engaging with the private sector is particularly complex in Southeast Asia, where rapid industrialization from the 1980s saw the fusing of state and business interests across the region, such that business interests have extensive influence over public policy and governments have limited
independent regulatory capacities (see Rodan, Hewison, and Robison, 2006).

On this third project objective, IWRAW-AP worked with the in-country NGOs to first determine the most appropriate course of action for engaging with the private sector in their specific political context. The severe contraction of political space in the region in recent years has created a very challenging context for independent civil society organizations. Indeed, any attempt to engage with the private sector on the negative impacts of their activities might attract a harsh response from the relevant politico-business coalitions. This challenge is particularly acute in advocating for women’s rights, given the region’s persistent male bias in understanding the economy and development that has led to the underacknowledging and undervaluing of women’s labor (Elias 2020). Recognizing these challenges, IWRAW-AP leveraged the subcontracting structure of the project and the rhetoric of partnership to advocate on behalf of the in-country NGOs such that the latter could tailor how they engaged with the private sector according to their particular context. A staff member at IWRAW-AP outlined the rationale for highlighting to those higher in the aid chain the challenges of private sector engagement for in-country NGOs:

We need people like [the donor], like [the INGO], to lead the process in creating those spaces and understanding the kind of risks that come from wanting to engage with the private sector … They seemed to get it – that it’s definitely not something we can do on our own. And what we’re doing as part of our tactic is pushing [the INGO] because [the INGO] does have a lot of campaigns and a lot of work with the private sector. (interview with staff member of IWRAW-AP, Kuala Lumpur, May 20, 2017)

In contexts where the prospects for engaging with the private sector would potentially put in-
country NGOs at risk, in-country NGO staff instead engaged only in research, this being the most viable course of political action. Hence, rather than accepting the donor’s agenda of private sector engagement and, in doing so, potentially exposing in-country NGOs to harm, IWRAW-AP drew on the aid chain structure and partnership rhetoric to argue that the INGO and the donor should assess the complexities and contradictions of this project objective.

Across their activities to address the three project objectives, IWRAW-AP thus challenged the dominant narrative that women’s empowerment can be reduced to market inclusion. Central in contesting this dominant narrative was IWRAW-AP’s approach as a feminist and rights-based organization. Indeed, a staff member noted that “the whole project is contesting the idea, the instrumentalist idea, that gender equality, that it is an engine for economic growth, because we don’t ever ever want it framed like that” (interview with staff member of IWRAW-AP, Kuala Lumpur, May 20, 2017). Instead, IWRAW-AP designed and delivered the training materials and workshops around women’s empowerment as initially conceived: as movement building.

Likely significant to the success of IWRAW-AP in contesting “empowerment lite” was the minimal funds disbursed for this project. While not insignificant, AU$1 million over three years is not a large aid project. For comparison, the budget for the first of two phases of the Australian government’s flagship project for women’s economic empowerment, Investing in Women, is AU$46 million over four years (DFAT 2015). However, documenting the strategies deployed by IWRAW-AP staff in successfully contesting “empowerment lite” in this small project is important when considered alongside the politics occurring within and between donors, development institutions, and NGOs. As described above, the gendered nature of development organizations creates significant challenges for gender practitioners, such that some have embraced private sector logics and practices as a means of winning over skeptical audiences. Meanwhile, Chant and Sweetman (2012) note that “empowerment lite”
projects are frequently the only source of funds available for gender interventions, making them eagerly welcomed by gender practitioners. By documenting the strategies used to contest the dominant framing of women’s empowerment as market inclusion and the conditions that enabled their operationalization, the article provides examples for feminist advocates seeking to challenge the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment. These examples assist in pushing the boundaries of how gender interventions are formulated and advocating for alternatives.

**Conclusion**

Aid has increasingly been disbursed through aid chains that shift responsibility and accountability away from those with greater resources and power. The growth of aid chains and their associated practices sit uncomfortably alongside the rhetoric of partnership, which has been critiqued for reproducing Global North–Global South hierarchies. This raises the question of how lower-tier actors in aid chains can contest policy. This article has explored this question through analysis of a four-tier women’s empowerment aid chain in Southeast Asia. The focus on a women’s empowerment intervention is of particular significance in considering how practitioners can challenge the instrumentalization of this agenda.

The article has highlighted how staff at a lower rung in the aid chain conceptualized and communicated women’s empowerment as initially understood – not as market inclusion, but as movement building. Their success relied on two strategies. First, staff at IWRAW-AP discursively disrupted the dominant framing of ASEAN economic integration and global value chains as modes of development by providing in-country NGOs with the conceptual and analytical tools to examine how women and men are unequally included. IWRAW-AP staff also discursively disrupted the dominant framing of women’s empowerment as market inclusion by presenting women’s empowerment as being about economic rights and
advocacy, by connecting women’s organizations and trade unions, and by providing training in developing highly nuanced advocacy skills. Second, IWRAW-AP’s success also relied on leveraging the structure of the aid chain and the rhetoric of partnership to challenge the donor. By drawing the donor’s attention to the practical implications – and potential harms – of their agenda of private sector engagement, IWRAW-AP calibrated the project according to conditions on the ground.

The power inequalities of aid chains mean that the strategies available to lower-tier actors to contest policy involve creatively reframing issues and sensitively negotiating challenges with higher-tier actors, rather than more overtly presenting resistance. However, these strategies also reveal a further key role for lower-tier actors – namely, educating higher-tier actors on how development interventions (and women’s empowerment interventions in particular) can be more effectively delivered. In documenting the strategies employed in a rare on-the-record case of resistance, these findings contribute to understanding how feminist advocates can push the boundaries of gender interventions, as well as how the power inequalities of aid chains can be challenged.

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Note

1 See Murray and Overton (2016) for an overview of changes in Australia, Canada, New
Zealand, the Netherlands, and the UK.

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