Valuing Women's Empowerment: Tracking Funding in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Women’s empowerment is now a global development objective. However, the instrumentalization of this approach to gender equality has prompted calls for research into the financing of interventions. With donors now reporting the gender credentials of their spending, this article follows the money for one region—Southeast Asia—to investigate how donors are engaging with women’s economic empowerment. Through a systematic review, it identifies and codes women’s economic empowerment projects. Data is analyzed according to geographic distribution, thematic distribution, and participant types. The article offers important insights into funding patterns, and deficiencies in current reporting practices. It finds, first, while there is a more thematically diverse mix of projects being funded than indicated in previous research, women’s economic empowerment continues to be interpreted in Southeast Asia as women’s market inclusion, continuing the trend of instrumentalization. Second, and consistent with emergent research highlighting the political uses of aid transparency, it demonstrates that donors are engaging in gender wash by inadequately and incorrectly reporting project characteristics. By upselling their gender credentials, donors are characterizing their activities as advancing gender equality despite often intensifying the challenges faced by women, thus underscoring the urgent need to reform reporting practices.

Keywords: women’s empowerment; aid transparency; aid traceability; Southeast Asia; International Aid Transparency Initiative; gender programming.
Introduction

Women’s empowerment is now firmly enshrined as a global development objective, evident in Sustainable Development Goal 5: ‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ (Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2022). A range of actors have rallied behind this agenda—donors, governments, and companies—and initiatives are funded at significant levels. For example, a review of 170 initiatives to empower women and girls found that between 2005-2020 a total of US$14.6 billion was pledged (Miller, Arutyunova, and Clark 2013, 6). With increased support for this objective, however, has come its instrumentalization. Conceptually, this is captured in the rhetoric of ‘smart economics’ where proponents claim to target the ‘double bottom-line’ of empowering women and increasing profits (Chant and Sweetman 2012). Programmatically, the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment is captured in the focus on women’s economic empowerment, and within this narrower field, projects targeting individual women’s market inclusion (Gerard 2019).

Alongside increased support and funding for women’s empowerment, donors have responded to calls for aid transparency and traceability by reporting the gender credentials of their funding. Through existing institutional structures, such as Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reporting mechanisms, as well as newly-established platforms, such as the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), many donors publicly report their spending, identifying whether individual projects target gender equality and to what extent.

This article responds to calls for further research into financing for women’s empowerment (Arutyunova and Clark 2013; Grabowski and Essick 2020; Miller, Arutyunova, and Clark 2013; Prügl 2015). In seeking to understand the trajectory—and financing—of women’s
emPOWERment, it investigates the relationship ‘between aspiration and actuality’ (Davies and True 2022). By following the money, it traces how donors report their commitments and how they understand and realise women’s economic empowerment through funded interventions, including the types of projects, countries and organisations that dominate the funding landscape. In short, it asks: have donor’s commitments been translated into funding, and if so, how?

These questions are of critical importance in International Political Economy, for two reasons. First, feminist political economists have underscored the need to disrupt the gendered dichotomies of International Political Economy, notably the opposition between production and reproduction (Elias 2020; Prügl 2021). The production/reproduction binary has long been destabilised by women’s historical involvement in remunerative activity that is often informal, piece-rate, or home-based, despite the limited attention this economic contribution has received (Boeri 2023). This binary is only further destabilised by the contemporary re-envisioning of this economic contribution as a women’s empowerment intervention—despite this contribution intensifying the challenges women face in reconciling remunerative activities alongside their reproductive work (Chant 2008). In investigating if and how donors are realizing their commitments to women’s empowerment, the article examines current interpretations of the production/reproduction binary in the aid sector.

Second, these questions are of critical importance in International Political Economy in terms of evaluating recent shifts in aid and development. Development policy has been retooled to target economic growth rather than poverty reduction, with this shift accompanied by donors’ increased focus on corporate partnerships and financialization (Mawdsley 2018). This article embeds our analysis of these broader shifts, contextualizing them as they relate to a specific case—gender equality programming—and their impacts on frontline actors.
The article first describes current aid reporting practices for gender equality and their problems, and then seeks to follow the money for one region: Southeast Asia. Through a systematic review, it identifies and codes women’s economic empowerment projects across Southeast Asia, drawing on results sourced from the IATI database and a web search. In examining the extent to which donors are meaningfully engaging with and advancing women’s economic empowerment, data are analyzed according to geographic distribution, thematic distribution, and the types of participants in the aid chain.

The article’s contributions are threefold. First, it provides a detailed account of why and how aid transparency and traceability matters for women’s empowerment, including by contextualizing existing analyses of aid contractualization and highlighting the challenges this shift has generated. Second, its empirical contribution is to expand the nascent research on funding for women’s economic empowerment, and in particular, for a geographic region—Southeast Asia—that has been largely understudied. Through its granular project-level analysis, the article develops a detailed characterization of funding in Southeast Asia, and demonstrates that women’s economic empowerment continues to be interpreted as women’s market inclusion, furthering the trend of instrumentalization.

Third, this empirical contribution underpins its input into debates on aid transparency and traceability, and on aid reporting for gender interventions. The article highlights two key problems in donors’ reporting practices. First, the majority of results identified through the IATI database were removed because donors inadequately or incorrectly reported project characteristics. Crucially, donors mismarked more than a third of projects as primarily targeting gender equality. These mismarked projects were designed for universal access,
meaning they did not exclude women, however they were not designed for women, or indeed, to advance women’s economic empowerment. Second, most donors did not report the outcomes of their projects, making it incredibly challenging to investigate claims of how projects advance gender equality. Current reporting practices are, consequently, highly flawed in that they enable donors to up-sell their gender credentials. These limitations in aid reporting practices for gender equality add empirical weight to arguments that donors’ targeting of gender equality—and their expanding partnerships with the corporate world—constitutes gender wash (Gerard 2019; Prügl and True 2014; Walters 2022). By misleading communication, donors are characterizing their activities as championing gender equality, despite often intensifying the challenges faced by women. Aid transparency initiatives need to enforce stringent requirements on coding gender interventions to ensure that donors’ commitments are being substantiated, and enable analysis of whether projects meaningfully empower women.

1. Women’s empowerment and aid transparency and traceability

1.1 Instrumentalizing women’s empowerment

The movement for women’s empowerment was spearheaded in the 1980s by DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era), a network of global South activists, researchers, and policymakers. It advocated a holistic approach targeting economic participation as well as the institutional changes needed to tackle the drivers of gender inequalities (DAWN 1995; Sen and Grown 1987). When originally conceived, the women’s empowerment approach was characterized by two qualities: power and popular education. It was an ongoing and multi-faceted relational approach to tackling gender inequality, where facilitators supported women in identifying the power relationships to which they contributed, and altering these relationships to exert greater control over their lives.
(Rowlands 1997). Crucially, women’s empowerment was conceived as an open-ended approach, with the facilitator’s role limited to setting up a supportive environment. Empowerment, consequently, could not be ‘granted’ or ‘done’ to a person, and policymakers could not control outcomes (Cornwall 2016).

Support for women’s empowerment has since risen to meteoric heights, however not as this approach was originally conceived. Conceptually, its instrumentalization is captured in the rhetoric of ‘smart economics’ where proponents claim to target the ‘double bottom-line’ of empowering women and increasing profits (Chant and Sweetman 2012). The focus on transforming relationships that produce and sustain gender inequalities has largely disappeared, with women’s empowerment instead constructed as an economistic and individualistic agenda. Importantly, this process of instrumentalization has occurred not by accident, but through specific discursive acts, with the World Bank a key player. For example, Prügl (2017) demonstrates that gender experts within the World Bank have undertaken substantial work to ‘prove’ that employment empowers women, despite the lack of conclusive data on this topic. Similarly, Gerard’s (2019) analysis of the World Bank project, Results-Based Initiatives, found that its argument that market-oriented approaches are the only possible way of economically empowering women relied on the authors excluding key works in their literature review. These attempts to position gender equality as aligned with the dominant mode of development highlight the way in which gender experts at the World Bank have redefined feminist knowledge such that it resonates with neoclassical economics and an enduring commitment to expanding capitalist markets.

Relatedly, the dominant way in which women’s empowerment has been interpreted in aid programming has focused on women making choices, emphasising questions of power and
agency. This conceptualization drew from Kabeer’s pioneering work, which focused on ‘possible inequalities in people’s capacity to make choices rather than in differences in the choices they make’ (1999, 439, emphasis in original). However, while Kabeer noted three qualifications attached to women making choices—the conditions under which choices were made, the distinction between trivial and significant choices, and the consequences of choice for the broader structures of social inequality (1999, 460-1)—these qualifications have received limited attention in project design and evaluation (cf. Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014). Cornwall (2007, 1) critiques this emphasis on choice, arguing it ‘says less about the capacity to determine the parameters of the possible, than the possibility of selecting the options that development intervention makes available’.

Programmatically, the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment is captured in the focus on women’s economic empowerment, and within this narrower field, projects targeting individual women’s market competitiveness (Gerard 2019). The prevalence of instrumentalized interventions is indicated in studies tracing the thematic foci of funding. Miller, Arutyunova and Clark’s (2013, 19) mapping of 170 women’s empowerment initiatives found that women’s economic empowerment was the most prevalent thematic focus. Moreover, Pereznieto and Taylor’s (2014, 235) review of 254 academic and grey literature women’s economic empowerment project evaluations found that of eight identified thematic areas, projects focused on five: financial services, business development services, skills training, social protection, and market access. Moreover, just under half of all evaluations (46%) focused on projects related to financial services, predominantly micro-credit and self-help groups (2014, 235). Projects focused significantly 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) (2014, 237). Thematic
analyses of funding have, therefore, found that donors are overwhelmingly interpreting women’s empowerment as women’s market inclusion, underscoring the instrumentalization of this approach.

The instrumentalization of the women’s empowerment approach is problematic for two key reasons. First, macroeconometric studies\(^1\) have found that economic growth does not consistently and robustly contribute to gender equality. The relationship between economic growth and gender equality has received significant attention, with studies investigating if economic growth contributes to gender equality, as well as the reverse relationship. Kabeer and Natali’s (2013) evaluation of peer-reviewed quantitative studies finds that the relationship is asymmetrical: gender equality, particularly in education and employment, contributes to economic growth far more consistently and robustly than economic growth contributes to gender equality, with the latter largely confined to high-income countries. Kabeer’s (2016) study of why economic growth is not consistently and strongly related to gender equality finds that women’s conformity to socially ascribed maternal roles means that they cannot participate equally with men in economic activity and in public life more generally. These findings underscore how markets are not neutral spaces, with their form and function mediated by people’s interactions and relationships and our many social identities, shaping how they distribute resources and opportunities. These differential outcomes are particularly pronounced in labor markets, with Seguino’s (2000) analysis of a set of semi-industrialized countries across 1975 to 1995 finding that growth was positively related to gender wage \textit{inequality}.

The instrumentalization of the women’s empowerment approach is problematic for a second

\(^1\) Numerous studies have been conducted, as detailed in Appendix 1 in Kabeer and Natali (2013, 48-58).
reason, namely that analyses of economic empowerment projects have shown them to be largely ineffective. Cheema’s (2017) assessment of peer-reviewed quantitative evaluations of four types of economic empowerment interventions (microfinance, skills training, business development services and asset transfers) finds that these typically do not advance empowerment, and in the cases where they do, their impacts are limited to only increasing access to or control over the specific service or asset that the intervention offers. Importantly, there are very few instances of the ‘hypothesized “spillovers” in social and political spheres’ (Cheema 2017, 7). Microfinance, in particular, has been called into question, with researchers highlighting deep problems: on the one hand, women were targeted because they were more likely to repay; on the other, women already structurally disadvantaged relative to male dominated families and communities were often made more physically and economically vulnerable through microfinance (Goetz & Sen Gupta, 1996; Johnston 2020; Rankin, 2001).

Instrumentalized women’s empowerment interventions thus overlook how markets can exacerbate inequalities and reproduce patterns of exclusion and discrimination. Through their individualistic and economistic focus, instrumentalized interventions do not engage with the structures that produce gender inequalities for which women are made responsible for addressing (Chant 2014). Chant’s (2014) notion of the ‘feminization of responsibility and/or obligation’ goes to the heart of this issue. Instrumentalized interventions focus on increasing women’s incomes through their increased involvement in remunerative activity. However, ‘while at one level the “economic empowerment” such interventions nominally offer is positive, the result is often an intensification of the difficulties faced by women in reconciling unpaid reproductive work with economic contributions to household livelihoods’ (Chant 2014, 297). At the same time, women have also not gained leverage ‘in respect of negotiating
greater inputs to household survival on the part of men’ (Chant 2008, 182), with domestic gender inequalities remaining untouched.

Instrumentalized interventions thus take the by-products of gender inequality—like a woman’s desire for flexible work that can be paired with reproductive tasks—and redeploy these as the rationale for women’s (precarious) market inclusion. Frequently overlooked is how women’s increased engagement in waged labor has occurred alongside the changing nature of employment. Women have gained employment in jobs that are less-skilled, typically low-wage, and increasingly on a casual basis (Standing 1999). In the case of home-based work, a key—and exploitative—aspect is that ‘by taking advantage of gendered constructs, it relies on someone who is always available at home’ (Boeri 2023, 2). Hence, the individualistic and economistic focus of instrumentalized interventions does not just overshadow gender equality objectives, but means they are embedded in—and reinforce—existing patriarchal structures (Wilson 2015, 807). These findings 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 women’s unpaid work, with the instrumentalized version of women’s empowerment thereby continuing the longer framing of women as a development resource (Elson 1991)—what Moser dubbed the ‘efficiency approach’ to tackling gender inequalities (1989).

These impacts are acutely felt across the global South for three key reasons. First, the welfare state was never as established as it was in the global North (Bahramitash 2005, 5). Second, informal conditions of production overwhelmingly characterise post-colonial capitalism, with reproductive and care labor—predominantly undertaken by women—being ‘new and significant sites of capitalist labor’ (Mitra, Samadar and Sen 2016, 15). Third, the aid sector’s
expanding partnerships with corporations and the associated targeting of gender equality through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives across the global South has seen instrumentalized interventions ‘reproduce gendered neocolonial relations with institutionalized support from supranational institutions, governments, NGOs, and local elites’ (Ozkazanc-Pan 2019, 861).

This trend is also concerning in light of recent cross-country research highlighting the significance of collective action in generating improvements in women’s rights (Htun and Weldon 2010; 2012). Htun and Weldon (2012) find that it is the presence of feminist movements that best drives policy changes to tackle violence against women, and not national wealth, women in government, or the success of leftist parties. However, rather than address the structural drivers of gender inequalities, instrumentalized interventions shift the burden onto individual women, as opposed to collective movements. As argued by Kabeer:

In a context where cultural values constrain women’s ability to make strategic life choices, structural inequalities cannot be addressed by individuals alone… individual women can, and do, act against the norm, but their impact on the situation of women in general is likely to remain limited and they may have to pay a high price for their autonomy (1999, 457).

Hence, instrumentalized interventions fail to engage with the complex interplay of factors through which women are discriminated, instead intensifying the challenges faced by women.

Alongside the instrumentalization of the women’s empowerment approach, changes to the aid landscape since the 2000s have meant that while funding for women’s empowerment has increased, funds reaching local women’s organizations have declined. Key donors and development agencies have retooled development policy to target economic growth—rather
than poverty reduction—and an expanded role for the private sector (Mawdsley 2015). Aid bureaucracies have been transformed through their wide uptake of private sector logics and practices, and their expanding partnerships with corporations. The increasing contractualization of aid has been an element of this transformation. In line with the contracting out of other state services, aid has increasingly been disbursed through aid chains, where work is subcontracted to organizations socially and geographically closer to recipients (Burger, Owens, and Prakash 2018; Gerard 2023). As part of this shift, donors concentrated funding, typically into large two- to five-year contracts, with extensive application and evaluation requirements, and disbursed it through competitive tenders (Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2007). This drove consolidation and concentration among NGOs, as larger NGOs were typically in a better position to bid for contracts than their smaller counterparts. This has seen the rise of a small number of very large NGOs, with the biggest now comparable to large corporations in form and function, having budgets of more than a hundred million dollars and global workforces in the thousands (Mowles 2010).

Aid chains have created challenges in delivering high-quality 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 it (Burger, Owens, and Prakash 2018). Aid chains have also exacerbated the challenges faced by local women’s organizations by narrowing the space to both design and contest policy, while also privileging knowledge construction processes that are not well suited to conveying the slow, processual work of shifting gender norms (Gerard 2022). Moreover, aid chains have seen a decline in funds going to those at the frontlines of gender interventions. For example, a 2011 survey of 740 women’s rights organizations globally reported a significant drop in the share of income they received from INGOs, from 14% in 2005 to 7% in 2010 (Arutyunova and Clark 2013, 19). Additionally, 48% of
respondents had never received core funding, while 52% had never received multi-year funding (Arutyunova and Clark 2013, 17). More recently, the OECD reported that as a share of overall bilateral aid, DAC support for women’s rights organizations declined from 1.3 percent in 2015 to less than 1 percent in 2018 (Tomlinson 2021, 166).

These trends are particularly concerning when considered alongside recent changes to the aid landscape in Southeast Asia. Authoritarian leaders across the region have developed sophisticated strategies to manage civil society dissent, including lengthy NGO registration procedures, procedures for declaring sources of foreign funding (which typically attract further scrutiny), and restrictions on funding from external sources to promote democracy and human rights (Morgenbesser 2020, 25). The Cambodian government’s Law on Associations and NGOs typifies this development, with the Cambodian government selectively deploying this law to target specific issues and dissenting actors (Curley 2018).

While regional and local women’s organisations seek work-around solutions, these procedural tools have constrained their capacity to receive funding and/or pursue agendas that are not aligned with government objectives. The decreasing funds making their way to those on the frontlines of gender interventions is also concerning given the rise of various forms of patriarchal backlash, making the threats faced by women human rights defenders more acute. The financial flows towards the latter movements are also not insignificant: at least US$280 million has been spent since 2008 by US Christian Right groups to fuel campaigns against the rights of women and LGBTIQ people across five continents (Archer and Provost 2020).

These trends have prompted calls for a feminist funding ecosystem, with increased funding that is flexible, long-term and unrestricted (Miller and Jones 2019)—this being the type of funds typically not available through aid chains. The dominance of instrumentalized
initiatives alongside the decline in funds reaching those at the frontlines of gender interventions thereby makes tracking aid crucial.

1.2 The transparency and traceability of gender funding

The aid transparency agenda emerged in the early 2000s with the ambition of increasing transparency and oversight. The problems of aid chains also generated interest in aid traceability—the process of tracking funds throughout aid chains in the delivery of development programs. As a result, there are now multiple sources of aid data, including multilateral (such as the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation) and national (such as open aid data dashboards). The sources with the widest coverage are the OECD database and the IATI database.

Around this time, many donors also committed to increasing the proportion of their aid that targets gender equality—and reporting these commitments. For example, the Australian government’s 2014 Aid Policy established women’s empowerment as a priority and set the target that 80% of all aid, regardless of objective, would effectively addresses gender issues when implemented (DFAT 2014, 25). Similarly, in 2018 the Canadian government announced its Feminist International Assistance Policy, which includes a benchmark of 95% of aid spending to target gender equality by 2022. The reporting of these commitments is operationalized primarily through OECD practices.

The OECD database documents Official Development Assistance (ODA) that is allocated by OECD-DAC members. In documenting spending by OECD-DAC members, it records only bilateral aid, thereby excluding multilateral aid, such as that from the World Bank. The OECD characterizes a project as being gender equality focused if ‘it is intended to advance
gender equality and women’s empowerment or reduce discrimination and inequalities based on sex’ (OECD 2022, 1). Given that gender equality is a cross-cutting issue, the OECD database uses a gender equality policy marker that qualitatively tracks financial flows using three categories:

- Principal (marked 2): gender equality is the main objective of the project/program and is fundamental in its design and expected results. The project/program would not have been undertaken without this objective.
- Significant (marked 1): gender equality is an important and deliberate objective, but not the principal reason for undertaking the project/program.
- Not targeted (marked 0): the project/program has been screened against the gender marker but has not been found to target gender equality (GENDERNET 2016, 6).

Examples of projects to be marked Principal are those focusing on ‘legal literacy for women and girls’ or ‘male networks against gender violence’ (OECD 2022, 1). These differ from those marked Significant, such as ‘a social safety net project which focuses on the community as a whole and ensures that women and girls benefit equally with men and boys’ (OECD 2022, 1). Projects marked Not Targeted are those that have been screened (meaning this is not a default category) and found not to target gender equality, such as ‘A basic education and literacy project designed to benefit boys and girls but with no specific objectives or activities that aim specifically to address gender-specific barriers to education’ (OECD 2022, 1).

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2 This OECD definition is indicative of broader discursive trends in the aid and development sector to pair ‘gender equality’ and ‘women’s empowerment’. We follow this practice when referring to policy documents, but acknowledge the distinction between the two, as detailed in the previous section—notably the conceptualization and application of the women’s empowerment approach as a means of advancing gender equality.
The IATI is a global initiative to improve the transparency of development resources and was launched at the Third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Accra in 2008. Funding organizations publish to a publicly available database in a consistent format according to the IATI Standard, this being a set of rules on how to publish data. When it comes to tracking gender equality funding, there are important differences between the IATI and the OECD databases. The IATI has a wider scope than the OECD database, including categories on project-level data. This is important, given the challenges of aid chains and the question of traceability. A more diverse range of organizations also publish to the IATI—including donors, multilaterals, philanthropic foundations, companies, NGOs, and research organizations—with over 1,300 organizations publishing by August 2022. On reporting aid spending for gender equality, the IATI uses the OECD-DAC’s three-tier categorization, described above.

The OECD and IATI databases provide critical information on aid funding for gender equality. Yet, despite their utility, key challenges remain in terms of tracking exactly how much is spent, on what, by whom, and with what outcomes. Crucially, these platforms are only as useful as the data being entered into them. As observed by Keijzer (2016), the level of detail that is submitted by reporting agencies can vary substantially while key information (such as project objectives) is often omitted. However, in what appears to be a more fundamental challenge, organizations will often inconsistently and/or incorrectly assess their funds across gender equality markers. This problem was revealed by an Oxfam study that examined 72 projects from seven donors providing over US$6 billion for gender equality (Grabowski and Essick 2020). Drawing on IATI data, the study found that approximately a quarter of projects were mismarked with the incorrect gender equality marker (Grabowski and Essick 2020, 3, 6). Moreover, only two of the 72 projects provided all the data that the OECD advises should be included for a project to be marked as a gender equality project.
The researchers also found many qualitative issues in the projects examined, such as only 20% identifying or addressing unintended negative consequences, thereby possibly putting women and girls at increased risk of negative outcomes (Grabowski and Essick 2020, 3). These findings suggest a significant gap between self-reported funding and high-quality projects.

Such findings call into doubt donors’ reporting of the gender credentials of their spending. The OECD reports that between 2010 and 2018 the proportion of aid that ‘focussed on gender equality and women’s empowerment’ increased to 42% (GENDERNET 2020, 1). While this figure appears promising, it is overwhelmingly made up of projects targeting gender equality as a significant objective (38%) (GENDERNET 2020, 2). The total number of projects targeting gender equality as a principal objective have stalled at 4% (Thompson and Hedman 2020). Moreover, the high incidence of mismarked funds along with the low quality of gender projects more generally suggests that while donors have increasingly targeted gender equality, funds are not being allocated to projects that transform the structures that produce gender inequalities (Grabowski and Essick 2020). By mismarking projects, donors are instead contributing to the growing tide of gender wash and, more broadly, the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment.

This issue aligns with previous research on aid transparency and traceability that highlights the disconnect between the assumed benefits of aid databases and their actual uses—and beneficiaries. Keijzer (2016) highlights how donors have focused largely on the ‘supply side’ of aid transparency and traceability, making vast amounts of data publicly available, but typically in ways that are not readily understood. Hedlin (2018), consequently, investigates why aid transparency initiatives continue to thrive, despite the public’s lack of interest, and
finds that their expansion reflects donors’ desire for prestige, achieved through top positions in international aid transparency rankings. Pamment (2019) argues, moreover, that aid transparency has become a strategic performance, pointing to redactions and the editing of data that reduce the depth and quality of transparency.

While the gap in aid reporting for gender interventions is significant because it makes it difficult to monitor progress and hold donors to account, it is also important given the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment and the subsequent need to examine the kinds of projects being funded. Based on the challenges identified here, the following section seeks to follow the money for one region: Southeast Asia.

2. Methodology

Our analysis focuses on Southeast Asia for two reasons. First, women’s economic empowerment has high salience in Southeast Asia due to the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015. The creation of a more integrated regional market was forecast to intensify gender inequalities, with a gender-segmented labor market as well as inequalities in labor market participation rates and the care economy meaning that women are excluded from those sectors that were projected to grow (Jha and Saxena 2016). This prompted interest from governments, donors, companies, and development institutions in how these impacts might be mitigated (OECD 2017). Second, Southeast Asia is not strongly represented in existing studies documenting funding for women’s economic empowerment (Miller, Arutyunova, and Clark 2013; Pereznieto and Taylor 2014).

Our search adopted procedures similar to those of a systematic review (Khan et al. 2003). Data were collected between December 2020 and March 2021. Our search was two-pronged,
using the IATI database, as well as a web search. We used the IATI database as it provides more detail on project-level data than the OECD database, including some information on aid chains, this being a particular focus of our analysis. IATI also provides information on projects funded by donors other than OECD-DAC members, with the growing diversity of the funding ecosystem meaning it is critical to pay attention to the movement of resources by and across a diversity of actors, not just ODA (Arutyunova and Clark 2013).

The IATI database search was conducted on 15 December 2020, via the dportal.org platform. The search was restricted to projects conducted in the 11 Southeast Asian countries, with a policy marker of Gender Equality as Principal objective (category 2). No other filters were applied; thus, the search was open to both active and completed projects from all sectors and value ranges. In all, the IATI search returned a total of 1,792 projects (501 of which were active). Referring to the project descriptions and documentation provided on d-portal, in addition to web-based resources for further project detail, each of the 1,792 projects were reviewed and each result awarded multiple keywords from an expansive list that we compiled of 51 project foci.

Given our interest in understanding the instrumentalization of women’s empowerment—and in particular, the economistic and individualistic dimensions of this trend—we then traced the

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3 Access to employment; Access to finance; Administration; Business development; Business leadership; Capacity building; Child protection; Civic participation; Disability; Early childhood development; Education (adult); Education (childhood); Education (higher); Education (professional development); Education (secondary); Education (vocational); Employment conditions; Entrepreneurialism; Environment protection; Familial structure; Food security; Gender training/mainstreaming; Governance; Housing and shelter; Human rights; Humanitarian relief; Information & communication technology; Land tenure; Legal services; Market access; Microcredit; Nutrition; Partnerships; Political participation; Post-conflict; Program development; Public health; Regulatory action; Reproductive labor; Reproductive rights; Research (includes program evaluation); Rural development; Sanitation; Social inclusion; Social protection; Social services; Trafficking in persons; Violence against men; Violence against women; Violent extremism; Women's health; Women's rights.
thematic characteristics of projects. With this objective, some results were discarded because while they related to women’s empowerment, they were not focused on women’s economic empowerment (such as projects focused on violence against women, women’s health, and nutrition). Our treatment of all IATI results is detailed in Table 1.

[Table 1 here]

As shown, we discarded 523 results (29.2%) because they were not focused on women’s economic empowerment. We then discarded 45 results (2.5%) because they were not gender focused (either Principal or Significant), and we discarded an additional 598 results (33.4%) because they focused neither on gender nor economic empowerment. Finally, we discarded a further 349 results (20%) because the listings did not include sufficient information for us to ascertain their thematic focus. This left us with 277 results, being 15.5% of all IATI listings returned from our initial search.

Based on this categorization process, we observe that 35.9% of projects were marked as having a Principal focus on gender (category 2) despite gender equality not being a consideration in the project (according to the OECD definition, noted above). As such, these projects should more appropriately have been marked as Not Targeted (category 0). Over one-third of results, consequently, were discarded from our analysis because they were only tangentially related to gender. These projects were designed for universal access, meaning they did not exclude women, but were not specifically designed for women. When combined with those that were discarded because they did not include enough information to ascertain
the project’s thematic focus, over 50% of the IATI results were discarded because donors inadequately or incorrectly reported project information.

From the initial 1,792 projects, 277 thus met the criteria of being focused principally on gender equality (marked 2) and on women’s economic empowerment, including both active and recently completed projects (the earliest being from 2008). For these 277 projects we then conducted a second review of the project information for each result and categorized each according to Pereznieto & Taylor’s (2014) eight thematic categories (or one of three additional categories, discussed below). For each project we allocated a single primary thematic category and then multiple secondary thematic categories. For example, the project, *Improving Market Opportunities for Women Agricultural Producers*, led by the Canadian International Development Agency, sought to ‘increase access to credit, inputs, market linkages, and new technologies for women’. We categorized it with the primary thematic code of ‘Financial Services’ and secondary thematic codes for ‘Business Development Services’, ‘Skills Training’ and ‘Asset Provision’.

The IATI search was then complemented by a web search, conducted during February and March 2021. Using Google, a set of consistent search strings were applied: ‘women’s empowerment’ and ‘Southeast Asia’; ‘women’s empowerment’ and [individual country names]. In addition to those projects picked up in this systematic manner, a snowball technique was adopted. To ensure consistency with the IATI search, the web search was limited to projects that are either active or completed no earlier than 2008. In all, 139

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4 It is noted that while all search results—irrespective of language—were reviewed for inclusion, the fact that the search terms were in English will have invariably resulted in a strong degree of English language bias in the search results.
projects were identified via the web search, taking the total number of projects from both sources to 416.

Two additional points on the data cleaning and coding processes are necessary. First, there were significant variations in reporting standards on the IATI database that presented challenges in interpreting the data. One issue was that some IATI-listed projects have a new entry for each country in which the project is run, while others include multiple countries within one listing. To ensure consistency, we separated multi-country projects into distinct listings, to enable analysis of country-level data. Another issue was that while many IATI projects had multi-year timeframes, some were carried out on an annually recurrent basis, with each year’s project listed separately. For consistency, we condensed all repeated instances into a single project.\(^5\)

Second, in our thematic review of the dataset, additional categories were identified that did not fit neatly within the Pereznieto & Taylor (2014) rubric. A social reproductive labor category was added, as this is an important—though often overlooked—element of women’s economic empowerment. Further to the discussion above, projects targeting women’s economic empowerment can seek to improve social reproductive capacities.\(^6\) Projects could, for example, include the provision of childcare facilities or community services alongside measures to increase women’s waged labor. We also found it necessary to include a thematic category for projects targeting gender training. Many projects address gender capacity-

\(^5\) We also found one instance where the reported figures were not converted to US$ in the exported datasheet. We made this conversion (effective 9/7/21).

\(^6\) The inclusion of this additional category could significantly widen the field of results, given the breadth of social reproduction activities (for example, any project relating to child nutrition or education). Consequently, we only included those projects with a clear gender equality component, such as the World Bank project, *Childcare Provision in Garment Factories*. 
building in companies, civil society organizations or government departments. Such projects somewhat fit the ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ category, in that a gender-informed organization will be better positioned to advocate for reforms. However, the activity of gender training is distinct from that of gender advocacy. An example of the distinction is the Asian Institute of Technology project, *Gender, Cross-border Migrant Workers and Citizenship*, which examines how Thai government policies impact on the gendered wellbeing of Burmese women migrant workers in Thai border factories (coded ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’), as compared to the DFAT project, *Capacity Development for Gender Integration*, which takes ‘practical capacity development steps in the implementation of a gender sensitive Aid Program’ (coded ‘Gender Training’). Finally, we also found it necessary to include one other thematic category—Economic Empowerment Unspecified—to encompass all projects that mention women’s economic empowerment, but do not provide sufficient detail to make a more specific thematic determination. These additions generated a total of 11 thematic categories:

1) financial services;
2) business development services;
3) skills training;
4) asset provision (both financial and not financial);
5) social protection;
6) unions and fair employment;
7) trade and access to markets;
8) regulatory and legal frameworks;
9) social reproductive labor;
10) gender training;
11) economic empowerment unspecified.
Results were compiled into a database according to project characteristics and uploaded to a publicly available website\(^7\). For each project, the following characteristics were recorded, where available: funding organization’s country; implementing/partner organizations; partnership type; project contact; disbursement type; total commitment; total spend; project weblinks; activity status; project start/end date; evaluation source and method; reported results; thematic area primary and secondary codes; project objectives; English translation of project description, where applicable; and any additional relevant project information.

3. Analysis

3.1 Geographic distribution of aid

The total value of all IATI-listed\(^8\) women’s economic empowerment projects in the present database (amount committed as of 15 December 2020) amounts to US$345M. While Cambodia has been the recipient of the greatest number of unique development projects, over 44% of these have a project value of less than US$100k. In line with population, Indonesia has received by far the most aid, accounting for over 42% of all expenditure.

[Table 2 here]

\(^7\) [https://wee-sea.wixsite.com/projectsite](https://wee-sea.wixsite.com/projectsite)

\(^8\) While data on project costs (both amount committed and amount spent) are provided for all projects from the IATI database, reliable expenditure figures were not always available for those projects identified via the web search. As a result, comparative analyses of aid expenditure by country and by thematic area are conducted only for IATI listed projects.
Table 3 shows the distribution of projects by country, across the value range. A high proportion of projects are very small in scale, with a budget of less than $50,000. In particular, projects in Cambodia and Thailand are of comparatively low value, while the region’s high value projects are concentrated in Indonesia and the Philippines.

[Table 3 here]

### 3.2 Thematic distribution of aid

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of primary themes across projects. The categories of ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ and ‘Financial Services’ are the most common, accounting for 24% and 21% of projects, respectively.

[Figure 1 here]

Projects focusing on regulatory and legal frameworks cover those which apply research, technical assistance, and capacity building to foster an improved policy environment for women. One example is the Australian government’s *Empowering Indonesian Women for Poverty Reduction (MAMPU)*, which ‘work[s] with Government, civil society, parliamentarians and the private sector to target improvements to selected policy and
regulatory reforms’. The 21% of projects focusing on financial services include (micro)credit and savings schemes (such as the INGO-led Micro Credit and Saving Project in Binh Dai District), and financial support for business growth (such as the multi-country, IGO-Business partnership Women Entrepreneurs Opportunity Facility). Unlike ‘Financial Services’, ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ is highly complementary, with a further 35 projects having this as a secondary thematic category (compared to only five for Financial Services), reflecting advocacy and regulatory capacity-building often being included as supplementary project elements.

The next most common themes are ‘Skills Training’ and ‘Gender Training’, which are the focus of 15% and 10% of projects, respectively. ‘Skills Training’ projects include those addressing formal education (secondary, tertiary and vocational) and professional development, as well as more informal and community-based education. This is distinct from ‘Gender Training’, which focuses specifically on gender capacity-building in organizations, such as the INGO-led Gender in Value Chains, which ‘aims at building Gender in Value Chain expertise to support organizations and projects to make value chain development gender sensitive’. Both ‘Skills Training’ and ‘Gender Training’ are also highly complementary, with a further 81 and 59 projects, respectively, having these as secondary themes.

The themes ‘Business Development’ and ‘Unions and Fair Employment’ are also well represented. Business development, a focus of 10% of the projects (and a secondary focus in a further 11%), comprises initiatives that support business expansion or foster entrepreneurialism, such as the Canadian government’s Supporting Women Micro-Entrepreneurs to Improve Women’s Economic Empowerment, which works with women ‘in
the food, clothing, and home-style sectors to successfully and sustainably grow their businesses’. In relation to the ‘Unions and Fair Employment’ category, a focus of just under 8% of projects (and a secondary focus in a similar number), the emphasis was typically on employment conditions and access, rather than on the role and capacity of trade unions. Indeed, trade/labor unions were involved as project partners in only 10 of the 416 projects.

The remaining thematic categories were not strongly represented. Despite the importance of social protection as a foundation for gender equality (Braunstein, Seguino, and Altringer 2021), it is the focus of only 5% of projects, close to half (43%) of which are provided by one organization: UNICEF. An example of UNICEF’s work in this area includes efforts to strengthen the capacity of national and sub-national administrations ‘to design, implement, monitor and evaluate gender sensitive and equity focused social protection programs’. ‘Trade and Market Access’ comprise just 3% of projects, with one example being Farming for Prosperity (TOMAK), ‘link[ing] farming households and groups to markets and income generating opportunities’. Only 1% of projects focus primarily on ‘Social Reproductive Labor’, and in only 2% of projects is this a secondary aim. An example of this work is a project by Handicap International Belgium which aims to challenge traditional gender roles within Laos households via rehabilitation plans that ‘ensure that all family members play a role in child development and rehabilitation’. Finally, ‘Asset Provision’, encompassing the provision of both financial and non-financial resources, is not a primary focus of any of the projects, and only a secondary focus in three of the 416 projects.

On project outcomes, a key concern was that most projects provided no details on outcomes, and in no instance was information provided on evaluation method, source, geographic scope, or timeframe. This information is critical for understanding the impacts of different types of
interventions. Its absence presents a significant gap in attempts to understand the characteristics and trajectory of women’s economic empowerment funding.

Turning to project cost, Table 4 presents summary statistics for the number and value of projects per thematic category. The most funding is expended on projects focused on ‘Financial Services’, ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’, and ‘Business Development Services’. The latter two categories also have the highest proportion of highly valuable projects, with over 9% valued over US$5M. However, it is also evident that the total and average value of projects by theme can be significantly skewed by a few very large projects; the fact that the dataset’s three most expensive interventions\(^9\) have a focus on either ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ or ‘Business Development Services’ serve to greatly inflate the average value of projects under these themes. When these three outliers are excluded (see Table 4, figures in parentheses), the average value of projects within these thematic categories is significantly reduced. On average, projects allocated smaller grants are those focused on ‘Skills Training’, ‘Unions and Fair Employment’, and ‘Gender Training’, with over 50% valued at under $USD100,000.

\[\text{[Table 4 here]}\]

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\(^9\) The three most expensive IATI listed projects are the Australian Government’s US$59M Empowering Indonesian Women for Poverty Reduction (MAMPU I), US$41M Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment (MAMPU II), and US$29M Aus4Equality project. No other IATI project exceeds US$12M in value.
3. 3 Aid chain participants

Table 5 demonstrates that governments are the most active donors\(^{10}\). Of the 416 projects, 263 (64\%) are funded (in full or in part) by a government donor. Moreover, government donors comprise 10 of the top 15 funders, with the Australian government the most active in terms of project numbers (56). Intergovernmental organizations, particularly UN bodies, are also very active in the region, as donors of 133 separate projects.

[Table 5 here]

On the relationship between organization type and project thematic categories, as demonstrated in Table 6, businesses held a strong preference for projects focused primarily on ‘Financial Services’ (43\%), followed by ‘Skills Training’ (22\%) and ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ (20\%). While governments funded a diversity of projects, there was also an evident preference for ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ (25\%) and ‘Financial Services’ (22\%). Similarly, while INGOs funded a range of projects, there is, again, a clear thematic preference for ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ (29\%) and ‘Financial Services’ (29\%). ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ was also the clear preference for Intergovernmental Organizations (23\%).

\(^{10}\) The quantum of funding per agency cannot be reliably discerned, as many projects are listed with multiple funders and these amounts are not broken down on a per agency basis in the exported IATI dataset.
It was noted earlier that globally, despite the increasing resources dedicated to the pursuit of gender equality, local women’s organizations are increasingly shut out from funds. This also appears to be the case in Southeast Asia. While not shown in the above table, further analysis of the 389 distinct organizations who participated in some way (whether as project donor, lead, or implementing agency) to the projects under review here, only 40 (10%) can be reasonably described as local women’s organizations. Moreover, of the 416 projects reviewed, only 37 (9%) involved the participation of a local women’s organization.

Table 7 displays the number of occasions each organization type was involved in implementing a project. While this table does reveal that partner country (local) NGOs were involved as implementing agencies in more projects than any other organization type, a presence in only 110 projects (26%) would appear to be relatively low—and indeed, it is only marginally higher than INGOs and IGOs, who were each involved as implementers in approximately 20% of projects.

4. Findings

Women’s economic empowerment funding in Southeast Asia is dominated by key donor governments, comprising 263 of 416 projects. The most prolific donor government to the
region is Australia, a funder of 56 projects, followed by the EU at 39 and Canada at 36. The
geographic distribution of funding likely reflects the dominance of the Australian government
as a donor to the region. While Cambodia has the largest number of projects overall (75),
these are of comparatively low value. Indonesia, on the other hand, follows closely behind
Cambodia in terms of the number of projects (68), but the comparatively higher value of
these projects sees Indonesia capturing the lion’s share of the region’s funding, at 43%,
compared to Cambodia receiving just 7%. On the comparative need for gender interventions,
Indonesia ranks 107 in the UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index (equal tie with the Philippines),
with Cambodia significantly more unequal at 144 (just behind Myanmar, ranked 147). The
large proportion of aid to Indonesia, despite comparatively lower levels of gender inequality,
likely reflects how Indonesia looms large in Australian foreign policy, as Australia’s closest
neighbor and a large—and strategically important—Muslim democracy (Nabbs-Keller 2020).

Of 11 thematic categories, two are dominant: ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ at 24% of
projects, and ‘Financial Services’ at 21%. This suggests a more thematically diverse mix of
projects than found in earlier research (Pereznieto and Taylor 2014). Instrumentalized
interventions, nonetheless, still dominate women’s economic empowerment programming in
Southeast Asia. Microfinance appears to have its shine as the preferred approach, however
when Financial Services is grouped alongside the number of projects focusing on Business
Development Services, Skills Training, Unions and Fair Employment, and Trade and Access
to Markets, these comprise over 50% of all results. This indicates that women’s economic
empowerment continues to be understood primarily as women’s market inclusion11. Donors

11 This point comes with the caveat that not all projects categorised as ‘Skills Training’ may neatly cohere with
the agenda of women’s market inclusion. One example is DFAT’s project, Women in Sports Journalism, that
sought ‘develop current and emerging female talent in sports journalism’ in Indonesia. However, by the same
token, not all projects categorised as ‘Regulatory and Legal Frameworks’ adopt non-instrumentalized
approaches, as some may target standards that simply facilitate women’s employment. The exact quantum of
projects that adopt an instrumentalized approach is, thus, very difficult to ascertain from the information made
continue to understand women’s empowerment not as those interventions that in fact alleviate burdens—but instead as interventions that expand the demands on a woman’s time.

Moreover, by seeking to increase remunerative activity without providing resources for women’s social reproductive labor (underscored by the limited resources devoted towards Social Protection and Social Reproductive Labor), these interventions are also likely coming at the expense of women’s health and wellbeing, and with negative impacts for households and communities (Rai, Hoskyns and Thomas 2014).

It appears that the dominance of instrumentalized approaches reflects the preferences of the region’s major donors. In the case of the key donor to the region, the Australian government has emphatically embraced the ‘smart economics’ discourse. This is evident in DFAT’s ‘Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy’, which stated: ‘Experience over recent decades demonstrates that gender equality, economic growth and development are mutually reinforcing and significantly correlated. The relationship runs in two directions’ (DFAT 2016, 3). Crucially, the reference provided for this quote was Kabeer and Natali’s (2013) review, discussed above. Kabeer and Natali find, however, that this relationship is asymmetrical: gender equality contributes to economic growth far more consistently and robustly than economic growth contributes to gender equality. DFAT’s representation of this relationship as ‘mutually reinforcing and significantly correlated’ indicates the fervour with which it has embraced the ‘smart economics’ discourse. This fervour may be a consequence of the favoured access that Australia’s business community has had in aid policymaking, which has been central in driving an expanded focus on economic growth and trade liberalisation since 2013 (Rosser 2016).

available through current aid reporting practices. However, the dominance of key thematic areas indicate that women’s empowerment remains primarily understood in Southeast Asia as women’s market inclusion.
Business donors held a strong thematic preference for projects targeting ‘Financial Services’ (43%) and ‘Skills Training’ (22%). These findings underscore Miller et al’s analysis (2013, 19), whereby many corporate actors have sought to implement women’s empowerment by addressing their own business practices—primarily through integrating female labor into their supply chains. Interestingly, however, while the numbers are very small, it is noteworthy that more businesses than governments fund projects addressing social reproductive labor.

Governments, for their part, funded a diverse range of thematic categories, though with a strong preference for ‘Financial Services’ and only limited involvement in projects closely associated with government roles, notably ‘Social Protection’.

While the category of ‘Unions and Fair Employment’ was reasonably well represented, at 8% of projects, these overwhelmingly focused on employment conditions and access, rather than on the role and capacity of trade unions. Moreover, trade unions were involved as project partners in only 10 of the 416 projects. This likely reflects the undermining of trade unions across the region, which has been well-documented (Hewison and Kalleberg 2013). The data also revealed the limited involvement of local women’s organizations: of the 416 projects examined, only 9% involved the participation of a local women’s organization. As Arutyunova and Clark (2013) suggest, the difficulties faced by local women’s organizations may in part be the result of INGOs assuming a greater role in project implementation to the exclusion of local organizations. These findings contextualize the broad shifts observed in the political economy of development aid, with the rise of aid contractualization occurring alongside the reduced participation of local women’s organizations. The article thereby underscores how—despite increased funding for gender equality—those closest to discrimination and injustice have been increasingly locked out of the funding ecosystem.
On the process of tracking aid spending, the article highlights significant problems in how donors are reporting the gender credentials of their spending. First, over 50% of the IATI results were discarded because donors were inadequately or incorrectly reporting project characteristics. Within this, over one-third (35.9%) of projects were discarded because they were only tangentially related to gender. Many were designed for universal access, meaning they did not exclude women. But by virtue of including women, these projects cannot be considered to be targeting gender equality. Reporting organizations are evidently adopting low thresholds when assigning gender equality markers. The wide scope for donors to up-sell their gender credentials is of significant concern both for holding donors to account, and for ensuring that projects target the structural drivers of gender inequalities.

Second, most funders are not reporting the outcomes of their projects, while in no instance was information provided on the evaluation method used. Information on project outcomes is critical for understanding the impacts of different types of interventions. With very few funders reporting project outcomes, it is incredibly challenging to investigate their claims of how projects—and aid more generally—improves gender equality.

The two limitations in current aid reporting practices for gender equality identified here add empirical weight to arguments that donors’ targeting of gender equality—and their expanding partnerships with the corporate world—constitutes gender wash (Gerard 2019; Prügl and True 2014; Walters 2022). Through these reporting practices, donors are presenting their activities as championing gender equality at the same time that most interventions intensify the challenges faced by women.
Conclusion

Feminist scholars have long critiqued the instrumentalization of the women’s empowerment approach, highlighting how it has intensified the challenges faced by women by increasing their remunerative activity without increasing provisions for social reproduction. The economistic and individualistic focus of instrumentalized interventions also undermines collective action, despite the significance of feminist movements in generating improvements in women’s rights. The impacts of instrumentalized interventions are most acutely felt in the global South, where expanding partnerships between donors, global development agencies, and corporations have delivered gender equality CSR programs that exploit women’s participation in remunerative activities bound to the informal conditions of production that characterise post-colonial capitalism.

This article provides empirical support for these critiques by demonstrating that donors’ commitments to empowering women have not been matched by substance. Donors in Southeast Asia are not meaningfully engaging with—and advancing—women’s empowerment. Women’s economic empowerment continues to be interpreted in Southeast Asia as women’s market inclusion, continuing the trend of instrumentalization. Donors, consequently, continue to understand women’s economic empowerment not as those interventions that in fact alleviate burdens—but instead as interventions that expand the demands on a woman’s time. Moreover, donors’ failure to accurately report on whether their spending targets gender equality, while typically not reporting on project outcomes, suggests they are actively up-selling their gender credentials. By engaging in gender wash, donors are characterizing their activities as championing gender equality, while at the same time often intensifying the challenges faced by women. These findings underscore the continued emphasis in aid and development on measures targeting the by-products of gender inequality,
rather than its structural drivers. Further research is needed into how current practices of aid reporting for gender interventions might be reformed, as well as the appetite among donors for change, to ensure that aid reporting practices accurately reflect project characteristics and outcomes and interventions target the structural drivers of gender inequalities.

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**Declaration of Interest**

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.
References


### Table 1. Treatment of 1,792 IATI results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Number of projects</th>
<th>% of IATI results</th>
<th>Project keywords (number of projects)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discarded: not economic empowerment</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>Violence against women (86); Civic participation (81); Administration (77); Reproductive rights (70); Political participation (55); Women's health (45); Humanitarian relief (42); Research (40); Public health (37); Human rights (36); Capacity building (33); Child protection (29); Social protection (29); Trafficking in persons (26); Early childhood development (26); Women's rights (25); Governance (22); Post-conflict (19); ICT (18); Sanitation (18); Partnerships (16); Higher education (13); Disability (12); Environment protection (11); Legal services (11); Food security (10); Social services (8); Rural development (7); Social inclusion (4); Secondary education (4); Violence against men (3); Adult education (3); Gender training/mainstreaming (2); Violent extremism (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discarded: not gender focused</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Rural development (8); Environment protection (7); Business development (7); Disability (6); Vocational education (5); Social services (4); Higher education (4); Entrepreneurialism (4); Civic participation (3); Public health (3); Governance (3); Capacity building (3); Research (3); Human rights (2); ICT (2); Social protection (2); Housing and shelter (1); Communications (1); Program development (1); Administration (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discarded: not economic empowerment AND not gender focused</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>Public health (130); Early childhood development (119); Child protection (94); Sanitation (54); Capacity building (51); Governance (37); Nutrition (36); Administration (64); ICT (33); Environment protection (32); Humanitarian relief (30); Civic participation (23); Human rights (26); Secondary education (16); Social services (17); Women's health (14); Post-conflict (14); Disability (11); Political participation (8); Food security (7); Communications (7); Regulatory action (7); Housing and shelter (6); Social inclusion (5); Gender training/mainstreaming (5); Reproductive rights (4); Trafficking (4); Higher education (2); Violent extremism (1); Violence against men (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discarded: insufficient project information</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included: economic empowerment AND gender focused AND sufficient project information</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>Research (51); Entrepreneurialism (46); Employment conditions (41); Capacity building (35); Access to employment (34); Access to finance (27); Vocational education (21); Civic participation (20); Gender training/mainstreaming (19); Violence against women (19); Business development (19); Social protection (18); Women's rights (15); Rural development (15); Public health (12); Disability (10); Legal services (9); Child protection (8); Land tenure (8); Market access (8); Secondary education (7); Regulatory action (7); Program development (6); Women's health (6); Social services (6); Governance (5); Trafficking in persons (5); Professional development (5); Microcredit (5); Higher education (4); Political participation (4); Administration (3); Food security (3); Adult education (3); Familial structure (2); Reproductive labor (2); Post-conflict (2); Early childhood development (2); Environment protection (2); Business leadership (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Projects have multiple keywords, and hence figures in column 4 are greater than the number of projects listed in column 2.*

### Table 2. Total number of projects and project value, by country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>No. projects (IATI+Web)</th>
<th>No. projects (IATI only)</th>
<th>Total funds committed (IATI)</th>
<th>Per Capita funds committed (IATI)</th>
<th>% of region’s population</th>
<th>% of region’s total funding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei Darussalam</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td># projects</td>
<td>% projects</td>
<td>Total value (in USD)</td>
<td>Average value per project</td>
<td>IATI % projects</td>
<td>% IATI projects &gt;$5M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>$25,639,873</td>
<td>$1,51</td>
<td>2.51%</td>
<td>7.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>$147,340,591</td>
<td>$0.53</td>
<td>40.94%</td>
<td>42.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>$6,864,427</td>
<td>$0.93</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>1.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>$1,421,393</td>
<td>$0.04</td>
<td>4.86%</td>
<td>0.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>$43,635,122</td>
<td>$0.80</td>
<td>8.12%</td>
<td>12.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>$52,561,114</td>
<td>$0.47</td>
<td>16.45%</td>
<td>15.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>$3,338,844</td>
<td>$0.05</td>
<td>10.36%</td>
<td>0.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timor-Leste</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>$7,289,489</td>
<td>$5.42</td>
<td>0.20%</td>
<td>2.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>$56,480,521</td>
<td>$0.58</td>
<td>14.54%</td>
<td>16.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEA unspecified</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>416</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>$344,571,373</td>
<td>$0.51</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Population data sourced from World Bank (2022)*

**Table 3. Country percentage of projects by project value**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cambodia</th>
<th>Indonesia</th>
<th>Lao PDR</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
<th>Myanmar</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
<th>Timor-Leste</th>
<th>Viet Nam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under $50k</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50k-$100k</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100k-$500k</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$500k-$1M</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1M-$5M</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over $5M</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: IATI listed projects only, committed funds. Brunei Darussalam and Singapore not shown as these countries received no funding.*

**Table 4. Number and value of projects per thematic area**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic area</th>
<th># Total projects (%</th>
<th># IATI projects (%)</th>
<th>Value of IATI projects</th>
<th>Average IATI project value</th>
<th>% IATI projects &lt;$100k</th>
<th>% IATI projects &gt;$5M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>85 (21.0%)</td>
<td>36 (13.0%)</td>
<td>$36,300,232</td>
<td>$1,008,340</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business development services</td>
<td>40 (9.8%)</td>
<td>33 (11.9%)</td>
<td>$57,838,790</td>
<td>($28,443,990)</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills training</td>
<td>61 (14.9%)</td>
<td>47 (17.0%)</td>
<td>$20,913,815</td>
<td>$444,975</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asset provision</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social protection</td>
<td>21 (5.1%)</td>
<td>20 (7.2%)</td>
<td>$23,914,534</td>
<td>$1,195,727</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unions and fair employment</td>
<td>31 (7.6%)</td>
<td>23 (8.3%)</td>
<td>$3,643,446</td>
<td>$158,411</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and market access</td>
<td>12 (2.9%)</td>
<td>5 (1.8%)</td>
<td>$2,798,410</td>
<td>$559,682</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5. Projects by donor organization type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization type</th>
<th># projects</th>
<th>% projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International NGO (INGO)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner country NGO (PCNGO)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National government (GOV)</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/private org. (BUS)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor union (UNION)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational institution (EDU)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-national government (SUBGOV)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergovernmental org. (IGO)</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Table presents the number of occasions an organization of each type was involved with the delivery of a project as a donor agency. Percentages are provided based on 416 total projects.

### Table 6. Thematic preferences of funding agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic area</th>
<th>INGO</th>
<th>PCNGO</th>
<th>GOV</th>
<th>SUBGOV</th>
<th>BUS</th>
<th>IGO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business development services</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills training</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asset provision</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social protection</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unions and fair employment</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and access to markets</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory and legal frameworks</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social reproductive labor</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender training</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic empowerment unspecified</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of projects</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Total number of projects includes those from the IATI and the web search. The value columns are based only on IATI listed projects and represent committed funds. These columns include adjusted figures (that exclude the dataset’s three most expensive projects) in parentheses.

### Table 7. Implementing agencies by organization type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization type</th>
<th># projects</th>
<th>% projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

---

44
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INGO</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCNGO</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOV</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUS</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNION</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDU</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUBGOV</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGO</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table presents the number of occasions an organization type was involved with the delivery of a project as an implementing agency. Percentages are provided based on 416 overall projects.

Figure 1. Thematic distribution of projects

![Pie chart showing thematic distribution of projects]

- Financial services: 21%
- Business development services: 10%
- Skills training: 15%
- Trade and access to markets: 3%
- Unions and fair employment: 8%
- Social protection: 5%
- Gender training: 10%
- Regulatory and legal frameworks: 24%
- Social reproductive labour: 1%
- WEE unspecified: 5%
- Social reproductive labour: 1%
- Gender training: 10%