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# The Challenge of Closing the Gender Gap in Developing Countries

By Dwyer Gunn

*Which is more effective in improving life for women: economic development or specific programs aimed at increasing equality?*



Krishnendu Halder/Reuters

While the developed world discusses the glass ceiling, [the end of men](#) and whether women can really ever [have it all](#), activists in developing countries tend to focus on more basic issues like combating [violence against women](#) and providing equal access to vaccines, basic healthcare, and primary education.

"Today, it is estimated that 6 million women are missing every year (World Development Report, 2012)," writes MIT's [Esther Duflo](#), one of the world's foremost [development economists](#) and a [John Bates Clark medalist](#), in a new comprehensive literature review on the relationship between poverty and gender inequality across the developing world, published in last week's [Journal of Economic Literature](#). Sex-selective abortion, infanticide, unequal treatment in childhood, and the risks of childbirth all play a role in the missing women phenomenon.

Duflo's paper is concerned primarily with the best way to fix this problem. Will economic development, with its

attendant rising incomes and resources, eventually lead to gender equality on its own, even without targeted efforts at improving conditions for women? Or is gender equality a [prerequisite](#) to achieving development goals, as Kofi Annan and others have argued? And in this age of diminishing foreign aid budgets, can organizations focus their meager resources on just one of these two channels?

There's lots of evidence that gender inequality declines as economic development occurs and incomes rise. Prior to development, poverty-stricken families respond to income shocks by re-allocating resources to sons. "In India, the excessive mortality rate of girls, relative to boys, spikes during droughts," writes Duflo, in reference to [a 1999 paper](#) by Elaina Rose. "When they cannot afford to feed everyone, families disproportionately sacrifice the welfare of girls." On the other hand, Rose found that wealthier families with assets—land they can sell during particularly rough times—don't show the same gender disparities.

Economic development in a community not only brings more doctors and health facilities, but also increases families' abilities to weather the kinds of crises that disproportionately harm girls. In Duflo's words: "[B]y reducing the vulnerability of poor households to risk, economic development, even without specifically targeting women, disproportionately improves their well-being."

Development is also often accompanied by decreased maternal mortality and increased labor market opportunities for women, both of which may encourage parents to invest more in their young daughters. In other words, parents who think their daughters have a better chance of surviving the perilous childbearing years, or of one day getting a high-earning job outside the home, might make very different decisions about feeding and educating those daughters. A 2009 [evaluation](#) of a policy initiative in Sri Lanka found that a reduction in maternal mortality led to increases in female life expectancy, literacy and years of education.

But is it enough? "Is there a reason to design policies specifically targeted towards improving the condition of women?" asks Duflo. "Or is it sufficient for improving women's condition to fight poverty and to create the conditions for economic growth in poor countries?"

Duflo doesn't think development alone will be enough—gender gaps in wages and political participation persist in even the world's most developed countries, and researchers have found evidence of sex-selective abortion in countries like China, South Korea, India and Taiwan—and among [certain ethnic groups](#) in the U.S.

So what about the other lever—empowering women through political quotas or scholarships—in the hopes it will drive development for both women and men? Kofi Annan isn't the only one who views gender equality as a prerequisite for development—many microcredit loans and cash transfer programs are offered exclusively to women due to the belief that they make better spending and investment decisions than men.

Empowering women—either through cash transfer programs given only to women, scholarships, parliamentary/government quotas aimed at increasing female participation, or laws designed to protect women's rights—does change the way families make decisions. "[C]ompared to income or assets in the hands of men, income or assets in the hands of women is associated with larger improvements in child health, and larger expenditure shares of household nutrients, health, and housing," writes Duflo.

Efforts to increase female participation in government, through quotas in India, for example, also result in different spending and investment decisions—despite early concerns that female leaders would simply vote as directed by their husbands.

"Women invest more in infrastructure that is directly relevant to the expressed development priorities of women,"

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writes Duflo. "In West Bengal, where women complained more often than men about water and roads, reserved councils [those with seats reserved for women] invested more in water and roads. In Rajasthan, where women complained more often about drinking water but less about roads, reserved councils invested more in water and less in roads."

But Duflo is skeptical of the theory that women are purely benevolent and always make better decisions than men. For example, those investments in water in West Bengal and roads in Rajasthan? They came at the expense of investments in schools.

Research on the South African pension program, an old-age program that was somewhat rapidly expanded to cover elderly South Africans of all races after the end of apartheid, also found somewhat troubling results—while young girls living with pensioners showed improved health outcomes, no such improvements were seen for young boys. Much like male policymakers, male pensioners also seem to emphasize education more than women: "[C]hildren are more likely to be in school when they live with an eligible man than with an eligible woman," writes Duflo. "Here again, we find evidence that the identity of the income holder matters. In this case, however, it is when men receive the pension that they make the decision favorable to well-being and development."

Even more importantly, in resource-limited developing countries, these empowerment interventions have real costs—for both boys and girls. Not only does a scholarship designated for a girl mean one less spot for a boy, it means less money to hire teachers for everyone.

Duflo's ultimate message is, in her words, not the "most comforting message to deliver." "[N]either economic development nor women's empowerment is the magic bullet it is sometimes made out to be," she concludes. "Equity between men and women is only likely to be achieved by continuing policy actions that favor women at the expense of men, possibly for a very long time."

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