

# The devil is in the details: challenges in tracking ODA for gender equality

BY EBBA HENNINGSSON, ONE

JULY 6, 2020

Gender equality was recently added as a sector of analysis across all 14 of the [Donor Tracker's](#) donor profiles and is the topic of a forthcoming DT Insights series. This Partner Perspective from [ONE](#) provides important context for the Donor Tracker's work on gender equality as it highlights some key limitations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) gender data upon which we base part of our analyses.

ONE is a non-profit focused on ending extreme poverty and preventable disease in Africa by 2030. To reach this goal, ONE believes in the necessity of tackling the root causes of poverty and inequality; as a result, gender equality is at the core of much of ONE's work.

Ending gender inequality will take coordinated efforts from governments, activists, and donor countries alike. Through their foreign policies and official development assistance (ODA), donor countries can carry their share of the responsibility. This will require donors to allocate sufficient resources to these issues, to target the most vulnerable and marginalized, and to ensure gender-equal representation at all stages of policy development and implementation.

Spurred on by the #MeToo movement, which pulled back the curtain on the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment, efforts toward achieving gender equality have been on the rise. Whether it be in marketing campaigns or social media, gender-related issues have gained increasing visibility.

Even in donor countries' development assistance strategies, terms such as women, girls, gender equality, and feminism are appearing more and more frequently. Following trendsetters Sweden and Canada with their 2014 Feminist Foreign Policy and 2017 Feminist International Assistance Policy respectively, most major donors now have dedicated global gender equality documents and strategies.

Data from the OECD's Creditor Reporting System (CRS) provides further indication of the global community's expanded commitment to gender equality efforts. The shares of both bilateral allocable ODA and total disbursements to projects targeting gender equality are at an all-time high.

A closer look at the data, however, reveals that the details are much murkier than these headline figures might suggest. While the overall positive trend in funding for gender

equality is encouraging, more and better data is needed to fully assess the impact of gender-related financing and to ensure donors' continued commitment to the cause.

## OECD policy markers are used to identify funding that promotes gender equality

Development spending in support of gender equality is tracked through donors' self-reporting using the OECD Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) gender equality policy markers. The markers are used to identify projects that have a positive impact on advancing gender equality, reducing gender discrimination, or meeting gender-specific needs.

Projects are marked using a three-tiered scale based on the extent of their gender equality focus:

**Not targeted:** used in cases where programs do not target gender equality;

**Significant:** for projects in which gender equality is an important and deliberate goal but not the main objective; or

**Principal:** meaning that gender equality is the main objective of the project or program.

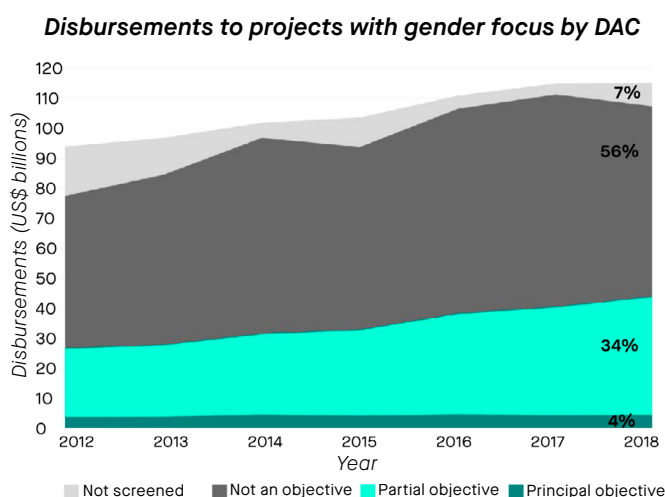
Screening funding against the policy marker is voluntary meaning donors can also choose to leave this field blank when reporting development funding to the OECD. This funding is then reported as ‘**not screened**’.

### Larger shares of development assistance are being allocated to gender equality, but screening against the policy marker declined in 2018

In 2018, the most recent year for which data is available, 38% of bilateral allocable ODA disbursed by DAC members targeted gender equality (including both significant and principal funding). This is an increase of just over 3% from 2017. The share of gender-focused bilateral ODA has risen from approximately 29% in 2012, so even though in 2018 most development funding remained gender-blind, these figures reflect a slow but steady increase in the prioritization of gender equality by DAC donor countries.

Total funding for gender-equality also increased in 2018, reaching US\$44.1 billion. This represents a 9% increase (in real terms) from the year before. The increase in ODA towards gender equality was driven by several donors, including Germany, EU Institutions, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, which all increased their gender equality focused funding by over US\$400 million between 2017 and 2018. Germany, the largest donor to gender equality, increased its total gender-related funding by 12% (or US\$790 million) compared to 2017, to a total of US\$7.1 billion in 2018.

In 2018, donors’ screening of funding against the policy marker declined compared to the previous year. In total DAC donors provided information on projects’ contributions to gender equality for 93% of eligible funding, a drop from 97% the year before.



This drop is largely attributable to the EU which, after providing gender information on 100% of its funding in both 2016 and 2017, provided no gender information on 26% (US\$4.8 billion) of its total bilateral allocable ODA in 2018. Large parts of this funding appears to have been marked as not having a gender focus in 2017 and then left not screened in 2018. This is the case for example, for the majority of funding to the sectors energy, banking and financial services, and transport and storage, which jointly account for 75% of the EU’s un-screened funding in 2018.

Because it is not possible to identify the gender intentions of projects not screened against the OECD’s gender markers, screening of funding is key to increasing the transparency and accountability of donors’ efforts towards gender equality. When screening against the markers decreases it reduces opportunities to hold donors accountable to their stated commitments to gender equality.

### Government and civil society, education, and emergency response projects receive the largest share of gender-related funding

The largest share of funding targeting gender equality in 2018 was allocated to projects focused on government and civil society. This sector represented 21% of all funding targeting gender equality. A further 11% was spent on education, and 9% on emergency response projects.

These shares have remained largely stable since 2015. This means that gender-relevant funding for government and civil society related projects increased by US\$3.0 billion in real terms between 2015 and 2018, reaching a total of US\$9.3 billion in 2018.

When looking only at projects with gender equality as a principal objective that received funding in 2018, the share of funds allocated to government and civil society increases to 32%. Population policies and reproductive health received 19% of principal funding in 2018, while education received 11%.

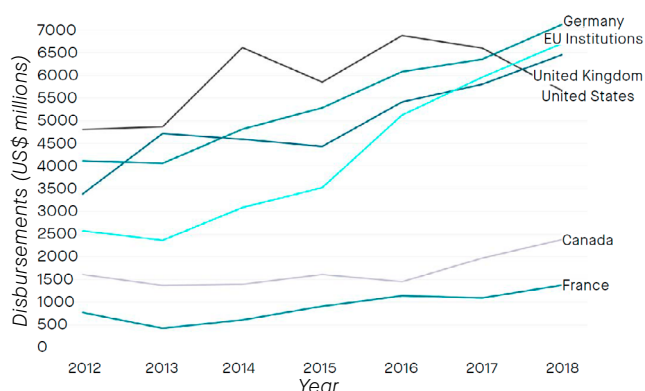
### Funding to projects with gender equality as a significant objective has driven the overall increase in gender-related ODA

The 9% increase (in real terms) in overall ODA for gender equality between 2017 and 2018 was largely the result of ramped up disbursements for projects which included gender equality as a significant objective, rather than a principal goal. In real terms, projects with a partial focus on gender equality grew by 9% to a total of US\$39.1 billion, from US\$35.7 billion in 2017.

Alongside overall increases in significant gender-related funding between 2017 and 2018, a series of donors increased funding to projects which named gender equality as the principal objective by over 100%. This included France (up by 165% to a total of US\$311 million), Canada (up by 133% to a total of US\$149 million), Japan (up by 122%, reaching US\$206 million), and Italy (up by 111%, to US\$65 million).

However, despite these large percentage increases by some countries to projects with a principal objective of gender equality, total allocations from DAC donors grew by only 2% (US\$115 million) to a mere US\$5.0 billion in total in 2018. This is concerning given the increased impact potential of projects which are explicitly working toward achieving gender equality compared with projects which simply integrate gender equality beneath other development goals.

#### Donor disbursements to projects with gender equality as principal and partial objective



#### Self-reporting on the gender equality policy marker comes with inherent challenges

Despite the increasing prevalence of gender-related keywords (like woman, girl, female, gender equality, mother, maternity, childbirth) in governments' development strategy documents, these words<sup>1</sup> appear in only 59% of the descriptions and titles of projects marked as having a principal objective on gender equality, in the OECD's CRS database.

This highlights the inherent challenges of self-reporting: variances in donor countries' interpretation and application of the gender markers. This can result in a mislabeling of funding as gender-focused when there is no clear indication of a project's relevance to gender equality. A recent [Oxfam study](#) found major inconsistencies in infor-

mation provided by donors about projects' actual links to gender equality.

DAC donors too have raised concerns: For example, Norway, which prioritizes gender equality in its development policy, has attributed the relatively low share of its ODA spending on gender-related issues (35% of its ODA in 2018; DAC average: 44%) to its stricter interpretation of the gender policy marker compared to other DAC donors.

While the OECD's gender equality policy markers can be a very useful research and accountability tool, without oversight and increased congruency in their application, there is a risk that these markers might become little more than a box-ticking exercise.

What % of projects marked as having a principal objective on gender equality mention keywords?

Slovak Republic	100%
Iceland	99%
Italy	89%
Australia	82%
Finland	80%
Sweden	78%
Australia	77%
Norway	77%
Ireland	76%
Canada	75%
Korea	73%
Slovenia	70%
Czech Republic	62%
Germany	57%
Spain	57%
New Zealand	56%
United Kingdom	53%
Japan	51%
United States	47%
Poland	34%
Portugal	34%
Denmark	34%
Switzerland	33%
Netherlands	27%
Belgium	24%
EU Institutions	22%
Luxembourg	6%

### The bottom line: more and better data is needed

Given these findings and the issues related to the self-reporting nature of the OECD's gender equality policy markers, more and better data is needed. Without this, despite the positive trends in increasing volume and share of total bilateral allocable ODA towards gender equality, the true impact of this funding on gender equality is impossible to assess.

Ensuring the availability of high quality, accurate data on funding for gender equality is fundamental to tracking and pushing forward global efforts toward achieving a more just, equitable, and prosperous world for people of all genders. To achieve these goals, donors must urgently work to increase the quality and accuracy of their reporting to the DAC.

*Interested in exploring the data for specific donors through an interactive tool?*

Head over to [ONE's gender aid dashboard](#) for a detailed breakdown of nine major donors' gender equality focused ODA. The dashboard shows how donors spend their gender-focused ODA, outlines their key strategies, and provides cross-donor comparisons.

<sup>1</sup>Words searched: Woman, Women, Girls, Girl, Female, Females, Gender, Genders, Gender Equality, Mother, Mothers, Wife, Wives, Maternity, Maternal, Childbirth, Childbirths, Daughter, and Daughters. Content searched: Project Titles, Short Project Descriptions, and Long Project Descriptions. Only in English; as such, France cannot be seen on this list due to their reporting of projects in French.