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WALKING THE TALK -

Moving towards a gender-equality- focus in Austrian development cooperation



Experiences from Austrian NGOs
and partner organisations
in the Global South

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to systematise the experiences of Austrian civil society organisations (CSOs) / non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as their local offices and partner organisations [1] engaged in development cooperation and humanitarian aid in the Global South. It focuses on the shift in their activities from development interventions with general gender equality considerations (Gender Equality Marker 1) to those with a principal focus on gender equality (Gender Equality Marker 2). This shift had been requested by the Austrian public donor agency, the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) [2], since 2019 and will be explained in more detail below in chapter 4. During the last six years, Austrian development NGOs and especially their local partner organisations have made significant efforts to make this transformation become a reality.

The paper begins with a brief introduction to the methodological approach (Chapter 2), followed by basic (background) information on the international gender equality marker system (Chapter 3). Chapters 4 and 5 provide a brief history of the gender equality focus as an ADA requirement for the funding of projects, programmes, and strategic partnerships in Africa, and its impact, respectively. Nevertheless, the core of this paper (Chapter 6) focuses on the challenges and opportunities of “walking the talk” and implementing the required gender equality focus. These “lessons from the field” were primarily collected via online meetings between gender experts from Austrian development NGOs and their partner organisations in the Global South.

- 1 In this text we use the terms “local offices” / “(local) partner organisations” to refer to the actual implementing organisations in the Global South.
- 2 The Austrian Development Agency (ADA) is Austria's federal agency for development cooperation and humanitarian aid.

WIDE (the Network for Women's Rights and Feminist Perspectives in Development in Austria) [3] acted as the facilitator of the meetings of this "Community of Practice". Finally, the main findings are summarised in a "Conclusions" chapter at the end of this paper.

2. METHODOLOGY

To collect "lessons learned from the field", capturing challenges and opportunities of local implementers of gender equality activities, WIDE organised five "Community of Practice (CoP)" [4] online meetings between November 2024 and June 2025. From the beginning, WIDE had emphasized that the CoP was a confidential space where participants were invited to share positive and negative experiences, as well as challenges and opportunities, in a collegial spirit, with the aim of identifying good practice. With the consent of the participants, an external note-taker documented the meetings and anonymised the information for the purpose of this discussion paper.

Before inviting organisations to the CoP meetings, a quick review (in September 2024) [5] was conducted to find relevant organisations working under ADA's funding instruments that required gender equality as a principal objective (OECD Gender Marker 2 score). At this point of time, the relevant funding instruments entailed the "Framework Programme" and "Strategic Partnership". The intention of this review was to ensure that WIDE would invite the most concerned NGOs to participate in the CoP.

In 2024, twelve Austrian NGOs implemented one of the above funding instruments, in cooperation with numerous local partner organisations in the Global South. Seven of the twelve relevant organisations were represented by gender experts at the CoP meetings. The Austrian experts had invited their counterparts from their local offices and/or partner organisations. The number of participants in the online meetings varied between nine and sixteen, without the facilitators. Representatives from the Global South were present at all meetings; participants came from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Mozambique.

Once the discussion paper was elaborated, it was shared with the "Community of Practice" participants (in July/August 2025), and their feedback was integrated into this paper.

3. BACKGROUND: THE OECD DAC GENDER EQUALITY MARKER SYSTEM

In 1997, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) introduced a gender marker system through its Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to monitor aid allocations in support of gender equality by DAC member countries. Since 2007, data on official development assistance for gender equality and women's empowerment has been available on the OECD DAC website, where changes can be tracked over time. An annual summary of the share of ODA allocated to gender equality by individual OECD members is also available. [6]

3 Entwicklungspolitisches Netzwerk für Frauenrechte und feministische Perspektiven. WIDE is an Austrian network of NGOs and individuals who engage for women's rights and feminist perspectives in development policies and humanitarian aid. <https://wide-netzwerk.at/wide-austria/>

4 A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfil both individual and group goals. For further information refer to: <https://www.communityofpractice.ca/background/what-is-a-community-of-practice/>

5 Source Austrian Development Agency webpage "list of projects": <https://www.entwicklung.at/en/projects>

6 For further information refer to OECD dashboards on "[Development Finance for Gender Equality](#)"

The “Gender Equality Policy Marker” (hereafter referred to as the “Gender Marker”) provides information on whether in a project or programme gender equality is considered the main objective (principal target = Gender Marker 2/GM 2), an important but secondary objective (significant target/gender mainstreaming = Gender Marker 1/GM 1), or not a target at all (Gender Marker 0/GM 0). The following definitions are applied: [7]

GM 2

PRINCIPAL TARGET

Gender equality is the **main objective** of the project/programme and is fundamental in its design and expected results. The project/programme would not have been undertaken without this gender equality objective. The project/programme is designed with the principal intention of advancing gender equality and/or the empowerment of women and girls, reducing gender discrimination or inequalities, or meeting gender-specific needs.

GM 1

SIGNIFICANT TARGET

Gender equality is an **important and deliberate objective**, but not the principal reason for undertaking the project/programme (gender mainstreaming). The gender equality objective must be explicit in the project/programme documentation and cannot be implicit or assumed. The project/programme, in addition to other objectives, is designed to have a positive impact on advancing gender equality and/or the empowerment of women and girls, reducing gender discrimination or inequalities, or meeting gender-specific needs.

GM 0

NOT TARGETED

The project/programme has been **screened against the gender marker and has not been found to target gender equality.**

4. THE PRACTICE OF THE GENDER MARKER SYSTEM IN AUSTRIAN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

In recent years, the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) and the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs (MFA) - collectively referred to as the Austrian Development Cooperation, or ADC - have increasingly used the gender marker system for monitoring, setting targets and establishing requirements, primarily in the context of cooperation with civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The current “Three-Year Programme of the Austrian Development Policy 2025-2027” is the core guiding document for the cooperation of ADA and Austrian NGOs. The document clearly commits to promoting gender equality through development cooperation:

"In Austrian development policy, gender equality is promoted both as an objective in itself and as a prerequisite for long-term democratic, equitable, and sustainable global development in all Austrian development policy interventions, including humanitarian aid and cooperation with the private sector. The approach is applied across three levels: Political dialogue, systematic gender mainstreaming in all relevant strategies, programmes, and projects, as well as targeted measures to improve gender equality and the lives of women and girls in all their diversity. By promoting partnerships and targeted measures, Austrian development policy contributes to all thematic areas of engagement of the EU Gender Action Plan (EU GAP III)." [8]

Additionally, the ADC "Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls Guidelines for Implementing the EU Gender Action Plan in Austria's Development Cooperation (2024–2030)" promotes a gender-transformative approach and specify gender targets: "ADC is committed to secure the share of new programmes and projects that have gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment as a significant (GM 1) or principal (GM 2) objective of at least 85% by 2025, in line with the EU GAP III." [9]

In September 2018, MFA explicitly requested ADA to strengthen development projects and programmes targeting gender equality as the main objective (GM 2) within the Austrian bilateral development cooperation for Africa, announcing the aim of "to progressively approach 42,5% of funding targeting gender equality as the main objective (GM2) by 2030". [10]

Following this requirement, ADA issued new funding guidelines for their funding instruments, namely "Single Projects South", "Framework Programmes", and "Strategic Partnerships" in March 2019, including the following provision: "Projects in African countries can only be funded if they pursue gender equality as their primary objective. Accordingly, they must meet the criteria of Gender Equality Policy Marker 2 as defined by the OECD-DAC."

Austrian NGOs responded ambivalently to the announcement of this new target for Africa. They perceived it as a "top-down" approach, since no prior consultations or discussions had been organised with them. [11] The new requirement was also questioned because it only applied to funding instruments for NGOs, rather than to other ADC funding instruments. [12] The regional focus, which applied only to cooperation in African countries, was also questioned. There were concerns that the new approach would not align with the areas of expertise of many Austrian NGOs and their partners in the Global South. Some also pointed out that focusing on gender mainstreaming (GM1) would be more appropriate and relevant for certain projects. However, it was also considered an opportunity to strengthen commitment to gender equality and build capacities. Following clarifications and consultations, in July 2019 ADA amended the new funding guidelines to exclude "single projects" from the Gender Marker 2 conditionality. [13] Furthermore, ADA urged NGOs to incorporate gender capacity development for local partner organisations in their project and programme financial plans.

8 Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs/MFA (2025) Three-Year Programme of the Austrian Development Policy 2025-2027, p. 20

9 Federal Ministry for Europe and International Affairs, (2024) "Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls Guidelines for Implementing the EU Gender Action Plan in Austria's Development Cooperation (2024-2030)", p.24

10 Ibid.

11 Thallmayer (2022) "Alles erreicht? Geschlechtergleichstellung im Top-Down Verfahren", in WIDE 30 Jahre Festschrift p.37-39

12 Arbeitsgemeinschaft Globale Verantwortung, (2019) "Gender Marker 2 in den neuen Förderlinien der ADA."

13 Bayr (2019) "Gender Marker 2 also Förderkriterium. Parlamentarische Anfrage."; Schallenberg (2019) "Gender Marker 2 als Förderkriterium. Parlamentarische Anfragebeantwortung."

5. DATA ON “GENDER MAINSTREAMING” AND “GENDER EQUALITY FOCUSED” AUSTRIAN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The agreed gender target in the EU's Gender Action Plan (GAP) III states that “85% of all new actions throughout external relations will contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment by 2025”. [14] Additionally, CONCORD, the European NGO platform, and WIDE advocate that 20% of these actions should fulfil the criteria of Gender Marker 2.

This table shows the percentage of projects, programmes and partnerships financed by the Austrian Development Agency in the period of 2018-2023 that fulfil Gender Marker 1 and Gender Marker 2 respectively.

YEAR	GM 1 IN %	GM 2 IN %	GM 1+ 2 IN % (TARGET=85%)
2018	67,85%	11,45%	73,30%
2019	47,87%	32,73%	80,60%
2020	60,40%	13,71%	74,10%
2021	60,28%	13,46%	73,74%
2022	73,61%	20,13%	93,73%
2023	70,97%	15,93%	86,90%

Source of the table: ODA Report Tables, 2020 and 2023. [15]

Note: The data refers to funding commitments from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) only and does not cover overall bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA).

The data shows that the proportion of Gender Marker 1 in all signed contracts has increased since 2018, although it has fluctuated somewhat between 2019 and 2021.

Funding for Gender Marker 2 projects was 11% at the time when MFA requested ADA to increase its Gender Marker 2 efforts. Gender Marker 2 increased in the following year but also faced large fluctuations and remains below 20%, except in 2019 and 2022. The data suggest that more effort would be required to increase the share of Gender Marker 2.

Looking at the GAP III target of 85% for Gender Marker 1 and 2 (combined), ADC has achieved this in 2022 and 2023 so far.

14 European Commission (2020): [“Together towards a gender equal world. EU Gender Action Plan III”](#), p.5

15 For further information refer to [Austrian Development Agency webpage](#), publications: Bundesministerium für Europäische und Internationale Angelegenheiten [ODA Bericht 2020 \(Tabellen\)](#), Bundesministerium für Europäische und Internationale Angelegenheiten [ODA Bericht 2023 \(Tabellen\)](#).

6. EXPERIENCES WITH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GENDER EQUALITY FOCUSED DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

This chapter is the core piece of this paper: It is the outcome of the exchange between gender experts from Austrian development NGOs and their counterparts in local partner offices and organisations in the Global South. Representing “lessons learned from the field”, it reveals that implementing activities that lead to greater gender equality is not an easy task. Most partner organisations had to change projects or programmes from Gender Marker 1 interventions to activities focused on gender equality (Gender Marker 2). For many of these organisations, this represented a substantial organisational and programming change.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

For some organisations, changing from a gender mainstreaming approach to a gender equality-focused approach was a significant challenge. During the “Community of Practice” meetings, it was reported that it took time to clarify the differences between Gender Marker 1 and Gender Marker 2, raise awareness among the teams, explain the rationale and benefits, and foster a sense of ownership. It became evident that CSO/NGO staff at various levels required increased capacity to address equality issues in project/programme management and implementation.

Specific gender capacity within organisations – gender advisors and gender focal points

Most partner organisations built additional resources for capacity building into their budgets, enabling them to hire local gender advisors. Assigned budgets for capacity building also allowed partner organisations to strengthen existing gender focal points [16] or establish new ones within their organisations, thereby increasing their gender capacity.

Gender-sensitive staff at all levels – from senior management to volunteers

As part of the programme or project, staff were trained in gender equality issues, gender mainstreaming, gender analysis, gender sensitive indicators, data collection tools, and other relevant topics. Trainings were organized with the technical support of gender experts from local or regional partner organisations/networks and Austrian NGOs. Training materials and tools were developed or revised.

However, transforming deeply rooted social/gender norms and attitudes also requires ongoing dialogue and exchange. For example, after some general training sessions, one organisation considered it important to address specific thematic issues in greater depth and adjust to concrete contexts. One such adjustment was exploring what gender equality might mean for “governance” within its own structures.

Various discussion opportunities and sharing formats were created. These included exchanges with colleagues from the same organisation working in different countries, as well as exchanges with colleagues working in similar thematic or technical areas. For example, discussions were organized about creating safe spaces for girls in schools. Sharing information and experience is considered an important organisational tool for self-reflection, practical learning, and developing the willingness and capacity to engage and act.

In the CoP conversations it was highlighted that shifting from Gender Marker 1 to Gender Marker 2 sometimes contradicted organisational or local priorities. There was one example where Gender Marker 1 was already perceived as a big step forward in relation to the hierarchical structure of the local organisation and the patriarchal power structures in the communities. During the planning phase, it took a lot of effort from the team to convince senior management to support the shift from Gender Marker 1 to Gender Marker 2. However, when the implementation phase began, a new management team joined with different expectations, which caused some tension. Therefore, it was essential to continuously engage with and support senior management, but this may require a substantial time investment.

As some organisations also engage volunteers, it was emphasised that they should be included in training and supervision. They regularly interact with the local community, particularly with gatekeepers such as religious leaders, who can be challenging to communicate with. Training should therefore include sessions to strengthen communication skills and provide practical examples.

Another challenge shared was that improvements for female participants were mainly perceived as a way of satisfying monitoring and reporting requirements, rather than reflecting the aim of women's empowerment. This highlights the importance of ongoing awareness-raising and long-term commitment to gender equality at all levels within organisations.

In summary, different capacity development opportunities for various staff, partner organisations, and communities were explored and utilized. These opportunities created a safe space for reflecting gender equality issues including participants' own biases.

Networking with women's rights organisations

Some organisations commented that they had previously collaborated or partnered with women-led organisations or organisations promoting women's rights only on a limited basis, if at all. Thanks to the additional resources, new partnerships and collaborations could be established, or existing ones were strengthened. The exchange with new organisations was esteemed particularly valuable with regard to gender-based violence and rights issues. Information drawn from expertise, knowledge, attitude and practice studies, and other sources were also shared and utilised.

Organisational gender analysis

One organisation reported on the usefulness of several gender self-assessments at organisational level, even though this was not a Gender Marker 2 requirement. This included a survey conducted with all the relevant implementing partner organisations. It was deemed important to evaluate knowledge, attitudes and policies relating to gender equality within the organisations. It was assumed that organisations must lead by example and that all staff members need to understand what "gender equality is all about." Following the survey, consensus-building workshops were organised to identify gender gaps and issues, and to agree on priority actions (e.g. capacity development, training, self-reflection, gender policies, and monitoring). It was also mentioned that, if "Plans of Action" resulted from such assessments, resources would need to be made available, even if this exceeded the project or programme period.

Gender policy

As part of the shift from Gender Marker 1 to Gender Marker 2, several organisations realised that it would be especially useful to develop a gender policy to define the relevance of gender equality issues at organisational and project levels, and to use it as a reference document. [17]

It was suggested that gender-related terms should be clarified in the policy, as some stakeholders associated gender primarily with “activities for women only”. It was also mentioned that the use of certain gender-related terms had led to some activities being rejected. Therefore, adapting language to local cultural and social contexts was considered beneficial as it contributes to a shared understanding of concepts and should form part of a gender policy. Having a gender policy in place can therefore clarify potential misconceptions on gender, guiding the organisation and supporting the operationalisation of gender equality at the implementation level. In this regard, partner organisations commented that it would be useful to include brief practical examples in the respective gender policy.

In general, the lack of a gender policy was found to be a hinderance factor for moving towards Gender Marker 2. Therefore, some organisations developed a gender policy based on the national framework or initiated the process of revising the existing one. It was also shared that it is important that a gender policy is supported and communicated by senior management to ensure that all stakeholders recognize its importance.

Gender analysis on project/programme level

Gender Marker 2 projects/programmes require relevant data. CSOs/NGOs reported that insufficiently disaggregated data by sex, age or disability made it very challenging to plan interventions that address gender inequalities. Not all projects/programmes were based on the findings of a preceding gender analysis. Therefore, staff and key implementing partners were trained in how to conduct gender, diversity, and inclusion analysis. This training enabled staff and partner organisations to gain a good understanding of the gender analysis methodology, including participatory data collection tools, ethical issues, and practical experience. However, data analysis, interpretation and report writing were also perceived as challenging and required substantial support and additional time. As a result, however, more gender analyses were conducted, and their findings and recommendations were considered in the project/programme planning and development phase.

Findings from various gender analyses also provided more clarity on the needs and requirements of different community groups. For instance, it was revealed that people with disabilities are a much more heterogeneous group than originally anticipated. They face different challenges and therefore require different intervention approaches. Gender analysis was also considered relevant in order to illustrate the impact of restrictive laws on those affected by them, who are thereby denied human rights (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer persons). Discrimination and prosecution have increased in some partner countries in recent years.

Different gender analysis reports demonstrated numerous similarities in various regions and countries but also identified specific issues. For instance, one gender analysis discovered gender related issues which were unknown before. The respective organisation had collected a broad range of information already, but staff were not aware about sexual harassment in a certain community. The analysis brought to light that women were sexually harassed and abused during their business and vendor engagements. These findings were taken seriously and considered in the project/programme interventions.

Gender action planning

In general, strong efforts were undertaken in considering the recommendations from the gender analysis into the project development phase. The experience shared was that gender action planning requires substantial guidance and support, since it was a separate new exercise for most project partner organisations.

Based on the findings from the gender analysis, one organisation stated that it was important to organize regular meetings, analyse each intervention and determine how individual project/programme contributions could strengthen gender equality. Even if no gender equality issues were identified at first in a certain sector, additional discussions were organized to assess whether any eventual gender barriers had been overlooked.



Additionally, it had been significant to discuss and engage community members in the gender action planning process, though this is also an issue of human and financial resources and capacities. In such meetings – and where appropriate – attempts were made to include sexual and reproductive health and human rights issues in general.

However, based on prior gender analysis, it was stated that the gender action plans were sometimes too ambitious, as community members and project staff wanted to focus on many issues at once, including for instance governance and financing at a higher level. It was concluded that, given the available resources, it would be more beneficial to focus on a few realistic targets and go step by step.

Monitoring

Measuring and tracking change in behaviour was also found challenging, e.g. how to monitor the “change in mindsets” and gender equality in general. Different quantitative and qualitative tools were developed and applied to monitor changes with GMSCALE [18], for example, noting personal impact stories and quotes (documented before and after interventions). Baseline surveys and rapid assessments were also conducted to establish initial benchmarks, and follow-up assessments were carried out periodically to measure the shifts in attitudes, behaviours, and project outcomes. Local teams were trained to collect relevant data. In this regard it was also reported that it was essential to conduct group discussions for men, women, and youth separately.

It was also stated that relevant and disaggregated data would need to be included in all reporting lines, otherwise the information may get lost. Therefore, it was necessary to develop or update monitoring tools to become more gender sensitive and to revise planning and reporting templates for various reporting requirements. Developing well defined indicators for measuring gender equality progress does not only support data collection for regular monitoring but also for future evaluations.

One interesting experience shared was that the disaggregation of data required for Gender Marker 2 revealed that the number of girls not in school was even higher than originally anticipated. This finding increased the number of project participants but also the project budget requirements.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AT THE PROJECT AND PROGRAMME LEVEL

Stakeholders

At the local level, it became evident that progress towards Gender Marker 2 would take time, given the challenges involved in questioning and transforming traditional norms, attitudes and beliefs, particularly when it comes to discussing these issues with men and boys at a community level. It was also mentioned that men and boys often felt excluded when women were the only participants in project activities, which could lead to negative consequences for the programme.

In general, it remains a challenge working with community leaders, cultural leaders, religious leaders, and community/local power structures but they are key for the success of this transformation. CSO/NGO staff were able to participate in relevant gender equality training, which enabled them to reflect on gender norms in their communities. This better equipped and prepared them to engage at the community level. Harmful practices and norms were also discussed in workshops and interactive sessions.

Increasing participation of men and boys in project interventions was perceived as a key factor in improving gender equality. It is necessary to clarify to participants that both women and men would benefit from gender equality. Some organisations reported that they experienced resistance from local male leaders regarding the work on harmful social and gender norms within communities. For instance, it was quoted that projects related to gender equality were labelled as “making women more superior to them.”

Do not harm strategy

To progress from Gender Marker 1 to Gender Marker 2, it is crucial to prevent negative reactions from men. In this context, developing a “do no harm” strategy was considered valuable for identifying the potential negative impacts of interventions and offering guidance on how to address them as they arise.

Additionally, creating space and finding innovative ways of engaging men in reproductive health and other issues was perceived as particularly important. Female genital mutilation/cutting, early marriage, menstrual hygiene, access to resources, economic empowerment, access to land and other issues still need to be addressed on an ongoing basis.

Role model approach

Some organisations reported using various initiatives and models involving men and boys, such as the “Men and Boys’ Engagement” model, the “Family Development Planning” model, the “Parenting for Respectability” model, and the concept of “Positive Masculinity.” As a result, they have strengthened male commitment to relevant project/programme interventions, enhanced men’s participation and promoted respectful family dynamics. They had also found role model men and boys who play an important mentoring and influencing role in supporting gender equality activities. This was regarded as an essential step-by-step process to raise awareness. Sensitisation training contributes to changing attitudes and behaviour. In general, the role model approach was perceived as a useful strategy, with “committed individuals making all the difference”.

In this regard, it was further commented that community engagement requires flexibility in terms of time, for example, to enable staff to meet community members at their workplace. Fisher men, for instance, are usually free in the morning, so this would be the best time to meet them. It requires local knowledge of the different socio-economic groups within the respective societies.

New partnerships

Working with women’s rights organisations and with organisations of persons with disabilities was also perceived of great relevance. New partnerships were established; expertise and specialized knowledge were gained and shared.

Communication strategy

Also, communicating complex project goals and objectives on gender equality, especially to journalists, was experienced as being challenging due to the risk of misinterpretations. Therefore, a positive approach was to identify media houses and journalists and provide training on how to integrate gender equality and gender responsive reporting in the media. A comprehensive and targeted communication strategy was perceived to be useful to identify key messages tailored for different stakeholder groups.

A particular challenge was emphasized when the partner organisations were part of larger hierarchical and patriarchal structure (e.g. faith-based organisations). In this context, engaging in gender equality issues requires even more resources regarding staff time. A continuous engagement and a “long breath” were perceived useful and necessary.

Intersectionality

A gender analysis should consider multiple forms of discrimination, such as that experienced by women with disabilities. However, translating this approach into concrete action points requires a deliberate intent to ensure that nobody is overlooked and that women are not homogenised as a group. This needs to be well communicated to partner organisations.

Knowledge of laws

It was also shared that sometimes it was not so much the resistance by men but rather a lack of knowledge about laws, data, evidence, and information in general.



One CoP participant reported about a local training that community leaders had not been aware of a relevant law regarding early marriages. The local leaders were surprised and committed themselves to find out more; they were open to raise awareness and advocate in their community against the marriage of girls under eighteen. In this case, it turned out that referring to the law was the best advocacy tool. Therefore, sharing information about laws and providing space for discussing legal issues at community level should be integrated in project and programme interventions.

Knowledge about the legal framework provides a basis for project implementation - working on gender norms and harmful practices, using the domestic violence act, for example, for developing gender-based violence (GBV) interventions and working with government officials and influential people in the communities. Sometimes, staff and other stakeholders may not be aware of national laws, or the information on laws has not trickled down on purpose. Sometimes, laws are also not available in local languages.

It was perceived important that also staff know about international laws, regional laws, national gender-related laws, and human rights systems to use them as references. International standards often inform regional and national regulations on gender equality. They authorise behaviours influencing national and local practices and procedures. Therefore, being able to explain and discuss gender equality norms and standards referring to laws is relevant for policy and programme/project engagements and interventions.

Staff should also be aware of national gender equality plans and respective reporting and accountability mechanisms since countries are accountable to international bodies for reporting their progress towards gender equality. Being familiar with these tools can facilitate collaboration, learning and exchange on gender equality issues.

7. CONCLUSIONS

So far, the experiences with the new requirement for the focus on gender equality as a principle target (Gender Marker 2) by the Austrian Development Agency for its major funding lines for the civil society (NGO) cooperation with African countries have been challenging but overall positive.

An important factor for success was that ADA has provided additional funding to promote capacity building at the organisational and project/programme level. As a result, Austrian CSOs/NGOs and partner organisations could strengthen their interventions by integrating their increased knowledge and expertise. Some CSOs/NGOs have been able to create positions for gender advisors, strengthen their gender focal point system, and provide training and reflection workshops. This increase in capacity at various levels is perceived as a sustainable contribution towards gender equality.

Additional financial resources have also enabled organisations to conduct more in-depth gender analyses. They have become a binding tool for project development, and efforts have been undertaken to collect more detailed and disaggregated information/data. Also, gender policies have been revised or newly developed. With a focus on Gender Marker 1 only, most of these efforts would not have taken place.

Nevertheless, to pursue a Gender Marker 1 and gender-mainstreaming approach could still be useful for creating benefits and opportunities, depending on the local socio-political situation and power dynamics.

Due to the Austrian donor's request to shift from Gender Marker 1 to Gender Marker 2, Austrian CSOs/NGOs have strengthened their dialogue with partner organisations on gender equality and engaged in processes to adapt projects and programmes accordingly.

Moving the approach towards Gender Marker 2 has provided more financial resources and “energy” to gender equality issues and has led to an increased understanding of gender roles and norms at the conceptual and the intervention level. As a result, for example, it was reported that women had been able to increase their participation at the community level and take a greater leadership role than before.

In general, it was perceived that Gender Marker 1 and Gender Marker 2 match well together, but only by aiming at Gender Marker 2 targets, an organisation would be able to deal effectively with structural and organisational issues, as well as to address barriers and underlying factors related to social and gender norms.

Important factors for success

Based on the experiences shared in the “Community of Practice” online meeting in 2025, it can be concluded that the following factors contribute to a successful shift from a “gender mainstreaming” to a “gender equality focused” approach in development projects and programmes:

- Increase of financial resources
- Increase of human resources and strengthening capacity development (gender advisor, gender focal point system, training and continuous reflection workshops and learning opportunities, training materials, and tools)
- Support by senior management in planning and implementation of Gender Marker 2 projects/programmes
- Implementation of a gender analysis at project/programme level as per requirements of the OECD DAC
- Implementation of a gender analysis at the organisational level

- Development or strengthening partnerships with women led, women’s rights organisations, and organisations of persons with disabilities
- Development or revision of a gender policy
- Development of gender action plans based on a gender analysis at community level
- Development or adaptation of gender equality objectives and well-defined indicators (logframes)
- Adjustment of monitoring and reporting templates, integrating gender in-/equality data
- Development of realistic targets since it takes time to transform gender norms and practices
- Engagement with different stakeholders including community, cultural leaders, and religious leaders
- Use of a role model approach
- Use of participatory tools at community and organisational level
- Development of a do not harm strategy and a communication strategy
- Applying an intersectional approach during the entire project cycle
- Knowledge of local culture, norms, practices, and power dynamics
- Knowledge of international, regional, and relevant national/local laws



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