



ESID Briefing No. 19

The politics of promoting gender equity in Uganda

KEY FINDINGS:

- The promotion of gender equity and female empowerment in Uganda is closely shaped by the dominant ideas and interests within its evolving political settlement. Although Uganda was initially a leading force for women's empowerment, it has become increasingly difficult to convert women's political inclusion into gender equity gains.
- Potentially transformative agendas, such as the Domestic Violence Act, could only be passed following a highly strategic campaign by activists, which involved reframing the domestic violence issue and adapting the policy agenda to avoid opposition from dominant actors. The result was a somewhat diluted Act that remains poorly implemented.
- Less challenging agendas, such as Universal Primary Education for girls, have been passed and implemented much more successfully, in part because they help to fulfil political objectives (e.g. voter popularity in rural areas) and align with global policy agendas, rather than because of a political commitment to gender equity.
- International actors, and the ideas they promote, can play important roles in supporting gender equity agendas in Uganda. However, these have tended to focus more on policy change than on the critical challenges of implementation.



INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, Uganda was among the trailblazers on the African continent in terms of women's involvement in policy-making. On the one hand, women have made inroads into important political and policy-making spaces in Uganda. On the other hand, however, they are seen to have decreasing levels of autonomy and influence over the promotion of women's rights and gender equality.

“The promotion of gender equity should not be seen as the sole responsibility of women representatives”

The promotion of gender equity should not be seen as the sole responsibility of women representatives. Such a perspective ignores the structural constraints on such actors and overlooks the role and responsibility of male political actors in promoting gender inclusiveness. It also serves to instrumentalise women's participation, which should be understood as a right and an end in itself.

The framework used in this study brings together a political settlement approach and recent feminist analysis of women's political empowerment. In order to explore how the general configuration of power establishes the key incentives and ideas that shape the ways in which institutions work to deliver gender-inclusive development, this framework has been applied to two policy cases in Uganda: the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) and Universal Primary Education (UPE).

The two policies reflect the distinction between what have been characterised as 'ameliorative policies', which seek to alleviate lack of female access to development (such as the focus on girls' education within policies on UPE), and 'transformative' approaches that seek to achieve a deeper reconfiguration of gender power relations (e.g. the DVA). Through an analysis of the politics of each case, the paper tests the logic that one would expect transformative policy agendas to encounter stronger forms of resistance from dominant interests and ideas within a given political settlement than more ameliorative approaches.

FINDINGS

In very specific ways, Uganda's political settlement limits the parameters of a gender-inclusive agenda and severely constrains women's capacity to develop a long-term gender equality agenda. In contexts characterised by clientelism and patronage, politics is largely conducted on an informal and personalised basis, and women often lack the social and financial capital required to operate effectively within these informal networks and spaces.

“Uganda's political settlement limits the parameters of a gender-inclusive agenda”

Policy case 1: Domestic Violence Act (2010)

The DVA constitutes a landmark, as the first instance of the state in Uganda passing legislation on the domestic sphere. Key moments in the passage of the law included the formation of a coalition in 2008 specifically for the task by the Uganda Women's Network (UWONET). While the coalition had at its core national organisations working directly on women's rights, it also pursued a deliberate strategy of extending its support base by enrolling a much wider set of actors, including religious leaders and international groups, as the campaign moved forward.

Importantly, the campaign was shaped by the coalition's own political analysis of the key drivers for and against the bill. This power-mapping identified both the most powerful actors and the means of gaining their support, with a particular focus on making personal contact with key players involved in Uganda's political and policy process and framing the proposed legislation in ways that would be persuasive to them. The key categories identified were: those in official positions of political and policy-making power; those who had a direct influence over them, particularly women with a vested interest in supporting the bill; and those with political influence, but not holding formal office, including religious leaders and the media.

The coalition spearheaded the framing of ideas around the domestic violence bill, mobilising the public through workshops and peaceful demonstrations, and engaging the media to ensure that domestic violence legislation remained in the limelight. Female activists and MPs worked hard to form alliances with influential male MPs and bureaucrats and to work through informal networks and spaces. Concerted efforts were also made to frame the bill as being for men as well as women.

“ Ideas as well as interests played a key role in securing the institutional changes ”

Ideas as well as interests played a key role in securing the institutional changes associated with the passage of the DVA. The discursive strategy adopted by the coalition was strongly informed by the problems experienced by the campaign to promote the Domestic Relations Bill, which, in its failure to generate political support for co-ownership of land and laws against marital rape, had revealed the political constraints on women's rights in Uganda. The overarching ideas that the bill became associated with were therefore not associated with women's rights per se, but with ideas around the developmental benefits of tackling domestic violence, and a broader appeal to 'family values'.

This messaging around family values was deemed critical to winning over influential religious leaders. However, whilst this move certainly seemed to help advance the progress of the bill, this non-threatening and instrumentalist narrative tended to undermine the bill's more transformative elements and directly shaped the substantive content of the domestic violence law. Interestingly, most of those male champions who supported DVA would later be at the forefront of shooting down the Marriage and Divorce Bill that was tabled in 2013, to the extent that it could not even be debated on the floor of parliament. This may suggest that, rather than opening up a new front on women's rights through adopting an ameliorative approach to preventing domestic violence, women may have created a situation that played more into a patronage mode, as well as entrenching male privilege in terms of determining what should matter for state policy.

Also the momentum created for policy-making was not carried through to implementation and there is widespread frustration that the DVA has largely remained on paper. For example, there is no single state-run shelter for victims of violence and only minimal inputs from the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development to support the work on NGOs in implementing the Act, indicating the government's half-hearted approach to addressing domestic violence.

Policy case 2: Girls' basic education within Universal Primary Education

When it was introduced in 1997, UPE commanded the full support of all key political and policy players within Uganda, as it was closely aligned with dominant incentives and ideas within the political settlement at the time. This has continued, particularly in terms of the growing need for the president to secure his legitimacy through the support of his core rural constituency following the return of elections in 1996. The focus on girls' education, however, was something of an afterthought, influenced by dialogue with international actors.

“ UPE had the strongest possible political backing ”

Given its genesis, UPE was implemented as a matter of urgency by public officials. They clearly understood the initiative to be a political imperative that had the personal support of the president, and moved rapidly ahead with implementation in 1997. The convergence between the interests and ideas of the president, powerful donors and the National Resistance Movement's core constituency of poor rural people meant that UPE and, within it, the near accidental focus on the girl child, had the strongest possible political backing.

From 2000 onwards the focus on girl child education has been on an upward trajectory. By 2008 (slightly over a decade of implementation), Uganda had hit the 50/50 mark in terms of enrolment and in some cases a slight gender gap of 49/51 in favour of girls. The entry of large numbers of girls into the largely unprepared schools soon meant that gender concerns were approaching crisis levels, with the gaps in UPE implementation, such as high dropout rates and limited sanitary facilities, all affecting girls more acutely. The general momentum of gender mainstreaming in the country, even in its limited technocratic manner, thence generated a gender-focused policy environment within the education sector. This led to the revision of the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2007-2015, the introduction of the Gender in Education Policy (2009) and the National Strategy for Girls' Education (2000).

“ Political logics far outweighed other elements of the policy process ”

The progress of UPE vividly demonstrates key features of Uganda's political settlement, with political logics far outweighing other elements of the policy process, including any wider commitment to gender equity. The implementation of the policy, largely cast as a presidential gift of patronage, rather than as a right, reflects both the significance of the rural poor as a core constituency within the National Resistance Movement's ruling coalition and the clientelistic mode of rule by which the ruling party secures loyalty amongst voters.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The passage of the DVA shows what is possible when a committed and politically astute coalition of feminists combines forces to promote policy change in favour of gender equity. Building strong alliances across political and civil divides is particularly important here.
- However, this case reveals the political limits that are placed on the achievement of women's rights in Uganda, and that difficult trade-offs are likely to lead to diluted policy agendas.
- The case of the DVA also suggests that campaigners need to plan carefully for the post-adoption phase, with a much stronger focus on trying to generate the capacity and commitment required for policy implementation.
- International support for women's rights in Uganda needs to become more consistent and also redirected to a focus on implementation as well as policy adoption.
- The UPE experience similarly demonstrates the need to consider the practicalities of implementing policies, particularly in terms of the quality of provision and educational experience for girls.
- Policies need to be monitored and evaluated in order to generate the evidence of positive impacts required to sustain them over time, including in relation to the kinds of arguments used to promote the policy in the first place (e.g. the developmental benefits of the reforms).

FURTHER READING

ESID Briefing No. 7. 'Researching the politics of gender: A new conceptual and methodological approach' (2014).

ESID Working Paper No. 55. (2015). 'The politics of promoting gender equity in contemporary Uganda: Cases of the Domestic Violence Law and the policy on Universal Primary Education' by Ahikire, J. and Mwiine, A. A. Manchester, UK: University of Manchester.

Nazneen, S. (forthcoming). 'Gendered politics of securing inclusive development: Framing ESID's research approach', research note.

Republic of Uganda (2010). *Millennium Development Goals Report for Uganda 2010: Accelerating Progress towards Improving Maternal Health*, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Kampala.

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This briefing was produced from an ESID project investigating the relationship between women's inclusion and gender-inclusive development. It draws on research framing by ESID researchers Sohela Nazneen and Simeen Mahmud. The briefing was drafted by Kate Pruce, adapted from ESID Working Paper No. 55, with inputs from Professor Sam Hickey (ESID Research Director, The University of Manchester) and Josephine Ahikire (Centre for Basic Research and Makerere University). The research was conducted by Josephine Ahikire and Amon A. Mwiine (Centre for Basic Research and Makerere University).

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