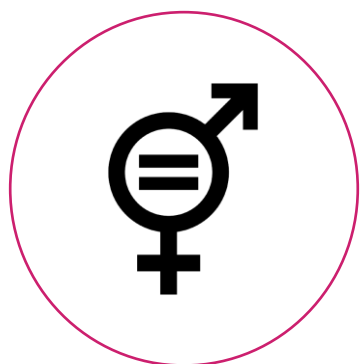
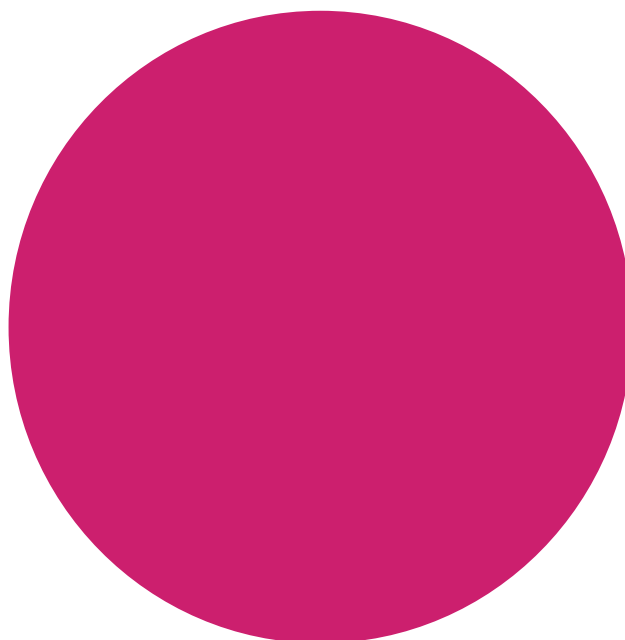


Misean Cara Learning Brief No. 2021/02

Towards gender equality

Learning from an evaluation of projects supporting women and girls



misean cara
Mission Support from Ireland

1. Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises equal rights for men and women, thus promoting a more just world with higher standards of living for all.

In recognition of this, achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls was made the fifth of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially focussing on six outcome-oriented goals, to:

- End discrimination against women and girls
- End all violence against and exploitation of women and girls
- Eliminate forced marriages and female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Value unpaid care and promote shared domestic responsibilities
- Ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making
- Ensure universal access to reproductive rights and health

With the desire to develop an organisational gender policy to further strengthen its work, in 2020, Misean Cara commissioned a review of six projects working for the empowerment of women and girls. While it is understood that working with women and girls does not automatically lead to greater gender equality, these projects were considered a useful starting point to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the approaches taken by Misean Cara members worldwide. This Learning Brief summarises the findings and recommendations of the external review.

2. Background

Addressing the inequalities experienced by women and girls is a common theme across many Misean Cara projects, with members using various approaches to support gender equality. Typical elements of such projects are:

- social and economic empowerment of women
- girls' education
- elimination of harmful traditional practices, including female genital mutilation (FGM)
- prevention of and protection from gender-based violence and gender-based discrimination

- infant and maternal health
- social and political rights awareness
- advocacy and policy influence

Misean Cara members address existing gender inequalities and economic marginalisation of women by upholding the rights of women and girls in society, especially challenging harmful norms and fighting gender-based violence by promoting girls' education, social and economic rights of women and the sensitisation of men about women's rights.

Misean Cara contracted Tetra Tech International Consultants to evaluate the different approaches of six projects implemented by five members across five different countries. A list of the selected projects can be found at the end of this document.



ADSOPUR improves the living conditions and resilience of marginalised families in crowded, urban settlements in Peru by teaching women the use of hydroponic cultivation techniques, enabling them to generate an income for their families and improving their nutrition.

3. Evaluation findings

Design and planning

While none of these projects was specifically designed to target gender equality, all sampled projects work towards creating better and more just opportunities for women and girls.

All projects were found to have a good design and solid planning. Yet, an opportunity was identified to further strengthen the inclusion of gendered analyses throughout this early stage of the project cycle. The consultants found that engaging men and boys early in the process can enhance gender equality outcomes and ensure the support of men for the projects.

When men are not engaged in the initial design, project teams might later face challenges gaining their support, which might eventually cause women to drop out of the project. Where men and women are both consulted during the project design, project teams were found to be better able to address gender-related attitudinal barriers and beliefs and engage men and boys as agents of change to support gender equality objectives during project implementation.

Gender mainstreaming

To ensure successful gender mainstreaming, it is important to reflect on gender issues during project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Project teams can conduct specific activities to target gender equality as a *significant* or *principal* objective.

- **Significant:** Gender equality is an important and deliberate objective, but not the main reason for the project.
- **Principal:** Gender equality is the main objective. The project would not take place otherwise.

The consultants found that when projects set specific targets to tackle gender inequalities, they chose gender-specific indicators as part of their results frameworks. These indicators were designed and tailored according to the specific projects and included ways to track women's empowerment, leadership and self-esteem. All projects, whether specifically seeking to enhance gender equality or not, collected data disaggregated by sex to track their progress in reaching marginalised women and girls.



The Ruben Centre improves access to quality and affordable health care in the crowded Mukuru informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya to reduce infant, child and maternal mortality and morbidity rates.

Challenging gender norms

Missionaries take a holistic approach to their work, regarding all people as individuals with a wide range of rights and capabilities. The dignity of every person is at the core of missionary projects. This dignity can only be achieved through advancing equality amongst individuals, including key considerations of gender equality.



The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto) Sisters challenge harmful traditional practices to end FGM in Kenya, offering an alternative rite of passage ceremony for girls.

The consultants found that all projects were contributing to long-term, positive changes in the lives of women and girls. Yet, some projects did not directly address underlying gender norms or barriers. Instead, they designed and delivered activities within existing gender relations. Projects were, for example, found to work within existing family structures to support women generate incomes, while also maintaining their primary roles as caregivers and housekeepers. Even though women reported enhanced decision-making, gender relations within the household largely remained unchanged.

Working to circumvent gender norms rather than addressing root causes of gender inequality such as power relations or distribution of responsibility for caring for children and other vulnerable household members can be successful in the short-term but may hinder long-term changes in the lives of marginalised women and girls.

The consultants thus identified an opportunity to create more fundamental change by recognising the underlying gender norms at play and addressing these within project approaches and activities.

Long-term, positive change

It was found that all projects were contributing to:

- an increase in participants' knowledge, skills or resources to generate a livelihood and income, to become economically more self-sufficient
- an increase in participants' self-esteem and well-being, and the ability to engage in healthy relationships
- an improvement in women's decision-making, autonomy and independence
- an improvement in women's access to quality healthcare and improved health
- reduced incidence of female genital mutilation

Being empowered through the activities, project participants now act as role models and agents of change, actively supporting other women and girls in their communities.

Women and girls driving change

- In Peru, empowered women created an active network, supporting other women to develop their own hydroponic cultivation systems.
- In Colombia, former project participants who were fleeing domestic violence and abuse or commercial sex work now train other women in similar circumstances in entrepreneurial and life skills.
- In Kenya, girls who completed the Christian Rites of Passage ceremony now advocate against FGM.
- Similarly, in Albania, young women who previously participated in a project now act as role models, protecting other girls from becoming victims of human trafficking.

Responding to changing needs

The evaluation showed that project teams were able to quickly adapt their interventions to changing needs and realities. In Albania, the project worked with local authorities to provide people affected by an earthquake with items of personal hygiene, delivery of food and medicine. Similarly, all projects were affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and organisations have developed new systems and

rapid response capacities as a consequence of this and other emergencies.

While the pandemic and resulting national restrictions on gatherings and travel often significantly hindered the ability to deliver face-to-face activities, projects were able to respond to newly arising needs, include new target groups, and find new ways of engaging with project participants. Some projects also responded to risks that were aggravated by the pandemic, such as increasing reports of FGM.



Levántate Mujer in Bolivia improves living standards of vulnerable women and their families by promoting entrepreneurship and gender-inclusive economic policies.

These new approaches and methodologies often equipped participants and project teams with new skills. In Bolivia, workshops led by the project team helped beneficiaries close the digital gap by learning how to use platforms such as Facebook and Zoom. In Colombia, women entrepreneurs learned to produce face masks, allowing them to respond to increased demand as COVID-19 spread.

Engaging in networks helped projects scale up their efforts or adapt their delivery strategies to respond to changes in needs or demands. In Kenya, one project worked with the local county government to expand its health services and meet the demand which had tripled relative to what had been expected.

In Peru, project staff wanted to address the threat of hunger caused by food shortages when the local economy closed down as a result of COVID-19. Purchasing the surplus vegetables produced by women with hydroponic systems yielded a win-win situation for all concerned.

4. Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the consultants made a series of recommendations, which will help to further strengthen the design, delivery and implementation of Misean Cara projects targeting gender equality worldwide.

Strengthening needs assessments

Conducting needs assessments and consulting with future project participants is important to ensure the feasibility and relevance of projects. To further strengthen these needs assessments, a gendered analysis of participant subgroups should be conducted to better understand the effects that project activities are likely to have on the target groups, as different groups face different types of barriers and opportunities. Women might, for example, not be able to participate in training activities during certain times of the day or in certain locations due to domestic tasks or safety concerns.



In rural Albania, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto Sisters) provides adolescent girls with life skills and tools to lead emotionally and physically healthy lives and to avoid becoming victims of trafficking.

At the design stage, projects should review which subgroups are the most disadvantaged, and whether particular groups of women and girls are significantly disadvantaged compared to men and boys (or *vice versa*). Such an analysis at the design stage can help identify gender issues that could risk project delivery and allow project teams to redesign certain activities or put in place appropriate mitigation measures.

These findings should be used during project design to prepare specific activities bridging these gaps. To create a strong project, it is important to establish clear links between the identified needs and individual activities, including in relation to gender and socio-economic factors.

Involving men and boys

Identifying opportunities to involve men and boys in the design and delivery of a project targeting women and girls can deepen its impact and contribute to long-term change.

When men and boys are not sufficiently consulted and engaged with, the impact of projects on the lives of women and girls is often more limited and less sustainable. Projects should therefore engage men and boys both as agents of change and as core participants. Depending on specific gender-related barriers that emerge during the needs assessment, project should also consider targeting marginalised men and boys as beneficiaries in their own right.

Using gender markers

Gender markers¹ can be useful tools to indicate whether activities target gender equality as an objective. Answering some questions at the design stage, projects can decide whether their activities have gender equality as a significant objective, as a principal objective, or do not target gender issues. Using a marker during the design stage, but also during monitoring and evaluation of projects, can help ensure gender equality is at least considered, if not targeted, across all projects. Gender markers can also support teams to reflect on additional gender-related barriers and ensure project activities or implementation strategies are suitable.

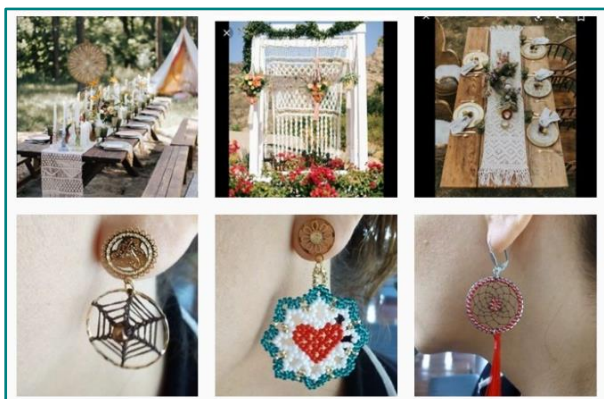
¹ The OECD-DAC Network on Gender Equality provides a useful resource: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/Minimum-recommended-criteria-for-DAC-gender-marker.pdf>

Preparing a gender policy

Defining how gender equality is understood by a project team or organisation is a first important step for setting clear expectations on how to address gender equality. A gender policy can help set these ambitions, reflecting on how to benefit from and build on previous successes.

Without an explicit, prior discussion on the approach to gender equality (e.g., how and to what extent to target this issue), some project activities might not be adequate to respond to the underlying structures, norms and other constraints that lead to gender inequality. Clear guidance in terms of addressing gender equality in projects can also help identify and overcome gaps in knowledge and skills of the project team. This can help address root causes of gender inequality in project design, and improve reporting on gender equality outcomes.

Setting clear requirements at the baseline stage can help project teams identify realistic, achievable objectives, including outcomes seeking to advance gender equality.



Fundación Opción Futuro is a social enterprise in Colombia run by women living in or fleeing contexts of violence, and who now train other women who are leaving commercial sex work.

5. Conclusion

This effectiveness review showed that projects which target women's equality can contribute towards gender equality, despite not being designed to explicitly address this issue. All projects were found to have widespread positive effects on the lives of marginalised women and girls, including increased skills, self-esteem and independence.

Women and girls participating in the projects are often keen to share their knowledge and support other women and girls in similar situations. If, additionally, men and boys are included as champions of change throughout the project design and in specific project activities, harmful gender norms can be challenged and overcome. Involving men and boys is a powerful way to create long-term positive changes within communities.

A carefully conducted needs assessment which includes gender considerations and analyses the underlying barriers to gender equality is crucial to ensure the support of the wider community. Gender markers can help assess to which degree the project targets gender equality.

“Encouraging projects to themselves undertake the assessment against the gender marker could also support teams further reflect on additional gender-related barriers and ensure their activities or implementation strategies are designed accordingly.”

Final Evaluation Report, Tetra Tech

Projects included in this evaluation

Location	Project Title	Organisation
Albania	Loreto Albanian Mission against Human Trafficking	Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto)
Bolivia	<i>Levántate Mujer</i> : Empowering women in entrepreneurship (Income Generation and Livelihoods)	Good Shepherd Sisters
Colombia	<i>Fundación Opción Futuro</i> : Strengthening Social Enterprise	Society of the Divine Saviour
Kenya	Ruben Centre Maternal and Child Health	Edmund Rice Development
Kenya	Termination of Female Genital Mutilation (TFGM)	Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto)
Peru	ADSOPUR Generating Family Income using Hydroponic Cultivation	Presentation Sisters

About Misean Cara

Misean Cara is an Irish and international missionary member organisation supporting development, humanitarian and emergency projects in over 50 countries in the Global South. The organisation works with some of the most marginalised and vulnerable communities to realise their human rights through delivery of basic services in the areas of education, health, livelihoods and income generation, as well as advocacy, networking and community mobilisation. Through the work of 88 Irish-based member organisations, Misean Cara's work is guided by its strategy, *Walking Together to Transform Lives* (2017-2021).

Our Strategy 2017-2021 identifies five goals:

- Uphold the right to quality education
- Uphold the right to better health, clean water and sanitation
- Uphold the right to sustainable livelihoods
- Uphold and advocate for human rights
- Enhance and promote the missionary approach to development.

Further expressing our desire to reach the most vulnerable and marginalised, the Strategy sees Misean Cara bringing a particular focus to bear on targeting five groups: women, children, refugees, displaced people and people with disabilities.

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