

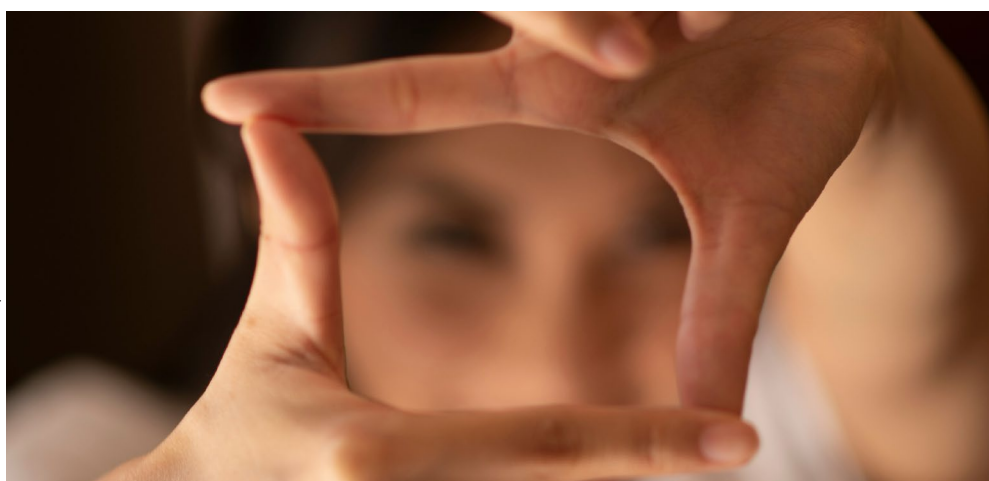
Backgrounder

Gender

Keywords:
Gender justice, gender equity

iied

Issue date
March 2024



Credit: Trac Vu on Unsplash

Moving towards gender justice

Shifting the lens from equality to justice in gender analysis

Gender and development: a brief history

Since at least the 1970s, feminists and advocates of women's rights have sought to mainstream gender in the international development agenda, rallying around gender equality as a shared aspiration. This goal has taken different forms around the world, from struggles for reproductive rights to efforts to grant women greater access to and control over economic and natural resources.

How we understand a problem shapes how we respond to it. Underpinning the 'Women in Development' approach, for example, was an assumption that gender inequality could be tackled by more fully realising women's roles as productive agents (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). This problem framing led to solutions that sought to increase women's economic contributions to development,

thereby 'empowering' them and lifting them out of poverty. Interventions focused on resource distribution but failed to challenge gender stereotypes or structural power dynamics in ways that addressed the root causes of gender inequality.

A shift towards 'Gender and Development' in the 1980s aimed to refocus attention away from women as the 'problem', placing greater emphasis on transforming gender relations in the household and community. There was also an attempt to consider how structural forces other than gender, such as sexuality, ethnicity, class and age, shape women's lives. However, the focus remained on the distribution of resources and power within countries, ignoring how supra-national and historical forces shape gender inequality and the diverse, nuanced ways in which gender inequality operates in different parts of the world and at different moments in time.

KEY TERMS

- **Gender justice:** a holistic approach that breaks the gender binary and seeks to rectify the deeply ingrained structural inequalities that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and exclusion, with an intersectional focus. It entails dismantling systems that perpetuate gender injustice, including unequal power relations, within national boundaries and across regions. It seeks not only to level the playing field but also to rectify historical and systemic gender injustices.
- **Gender equality:** an approach that focuses on ensuring equal opportunities, rights and treatment for men and women.
- **Patriarchy:** a system in which men hold social, political and economic power in ways that exclude and oppress women.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

- Gender justice aims for fair and equitable societies in ways that transcend parity. The aspiration for gender justice refocuses the problem, putting intersectional inequality and cumulative disadvantage within and between countries at the centre, bringing in principles of fairness, justice and dignity. This also allows for an examination of the role of colonial legacies in perpetuating the status quo.
- Broadening the problem framing beyond equality allows for more holistic solutions that address systemic causes of gender inequality that go beyond numerical goals like gender quotas, and that push for a

Contact and feedback: **Karen Wong Pérez** karen.wong@iied.org; **Giulia Nicolini** giulia.nicolini@iied.org

[@iied](https://twitter.com/iied) www.facebook.com/theIIED

From gender equality to gender justice

The struggle for gender equality has been instrumental in making visible the recurrent ways in which patriarchal structures rob women around the world of their rights, resources, aspirations and opportunities.¹ As the Association of African Women for Research and Development points out, while it is true that patriarchal structures oppress and take away women's rights all over the world, women also belong to classes and countries that dominate others and enjoy privileges in terms of unequal access to resources, rights and opportunities.²

The concept of gender justice provides an analytical lens through which we can make visible and address the multifaceted challenges faced by people of all genders within and beyond country boundaries. It allows for an understanding of disadvantage as a dynamic, long-term process rather than as a snapshot at one moment in a particular place. It aims to tackle the root causes of systemic, structural and historical gender-based disadvantages.

Gender justice as an analytical lens

The establishment of normative global goals for gender equality, such as Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), as well as policies to achieve gender equality within institutions and at country level, is indispensable. There are, however, at least three analytical lenses that can be expanded by moving beyond an ambition for equality and towards gender justice.

The first lens concerns **focus**. Traditionally, gender equality framing refers to equalising opportunities, rights and resources between men and women in a binary conceptualisation of gender that risks portraying women as a homogeneous group. A gender justice framing brings a focus on intersectionality, understanding the interconnections between gender, race, class and other systems of marginalisation and power dynamics.

The second lens refers to **scope**. Traditionally, the scope of gender equality analysis is bounded in entities, be they companies, organisations or countries. The

results of set gender equality objectives are measured in these spaces and compared to each other. Valuable as this is, extending the framing to gender justice would allow us to broaden the focus of analysis to the relationships between these entities, as well as to understand the material differences in power, resources and interests between women in the global South and the global North.

The third lens refers to the **timeframe**. Indicators and results of gender equality objectives, such as gender quotas, are usually based on snapshots in time. The gender justice framing expands the analytical timeframe to allow a historical understanding of the processes shaping gender inequalities, including how power structures inherited from colonial processes have cemented the channels through which resources, opportunities, advantages and disadvantages are distributed.

Looking ahead

Although it is not a new concept, many have struggled to apply gender justice in their everyday work, including in international development.

Addressing deep-seated inequalities requires concepts and tools that expand the framing of the problem — thereby opening up possibilities for more radical, and ultimately effective, solutions. The three analytical lenses discussed above — focus, scope and timeframe — could enrich gender analysis practices and provide the depth of analysis that is needed to inform transformative interventions.

At IIED, we have embarked on a path towards gender justice and are seeking to partner with organisations that share our interest in collectively understanding, measuring and advancing gender-just societies.

systemic transformation both within and across national boundaries.

- A gender justice framing goes beyond the gender binary, which classifies people as being either a man or a woman, and helps to make visible the challenges and justice claims of LGBTQI+ communities — who have traditionally been excluded from gender equality framings.
- Gender justice addresses the root causes of exclusion and discrimination, advocating for the rectification of historical, racial and systemic injustices.

¹ Cornwall, A and Rivas, AM (2015) From 'Gender Equality and 'Women's Empowerment' to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development. *Third World Quarterly* 36 (2): 396–415. DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2015.1013341

² Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) (1982) The experience of the Association of African Women for Research and Development. *Development Dialogue* (101-13). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12279568/>

This backgrounder has been produced with the generous support of Irish Aid and Sida (Sweden).



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

FIND OUT MORE

Our work on gender justice is being undertaken by IIED's gender network, an internal group driving efforts to think about gender in our projects and workplace. Find out more about our work at www.iied.org/gender