



European Bank  
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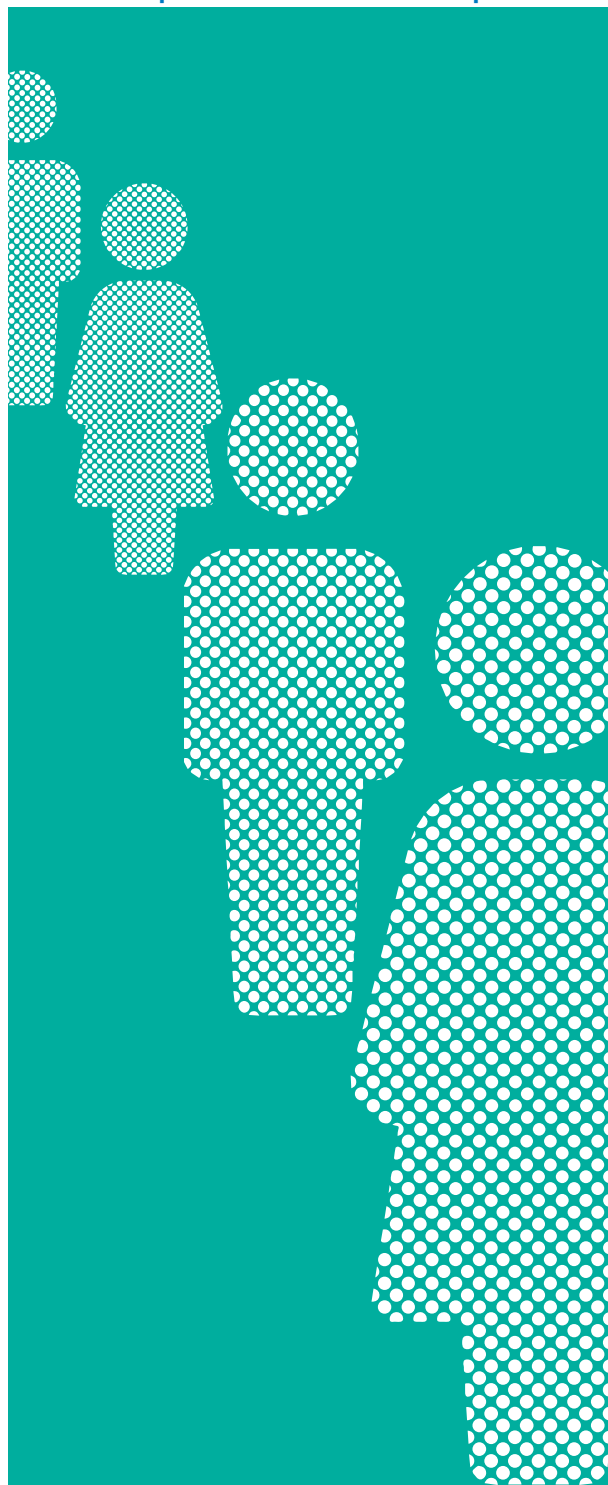
Independent Evaluation  
Department

# CONNECTING THE DOTS

EVIDENCE THAT  
DRIVES CHANGE

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EBRD Independent Evaluation Department



## Evaluation insights on International Financial Institutions' support to gender mainstreaming 2025 updated version

For decades, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have supported efforts to close gender gaps and mainstream gender considerations across their operations. They have developed tools to enhance results and track progress, and numerous evaluations have provided evidence-based findings and lessons to inform and strengthen future efforts.

Building on this body of work, key questions emerge: How can IFIs most effectively promote gender equality and equal opportunities? What lessons have been learned about implementing, mainstreaming, planning, prioritising, monitoring, and learning from gender-focused initiatives?

This paper updates the 2021 Connecting the Dots publication, which reviewed 12 independent evaluations and related strategies, scorecards, and diagnostics from eight IFIs. Since then, between April 2024 and April 2025, the evaluation departments of the Asian Development Bank, European Investment Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the World Bank Group have released new gender-related evaluations. These provide additional evidence and insights to further inform IFI practices.

The updated version revisits the six key lessons for effective gender mainstreaming—highlighting both enablers and barriers—and introduces two new lessons, expanding the framework for advancing gender equality in IFI operations.

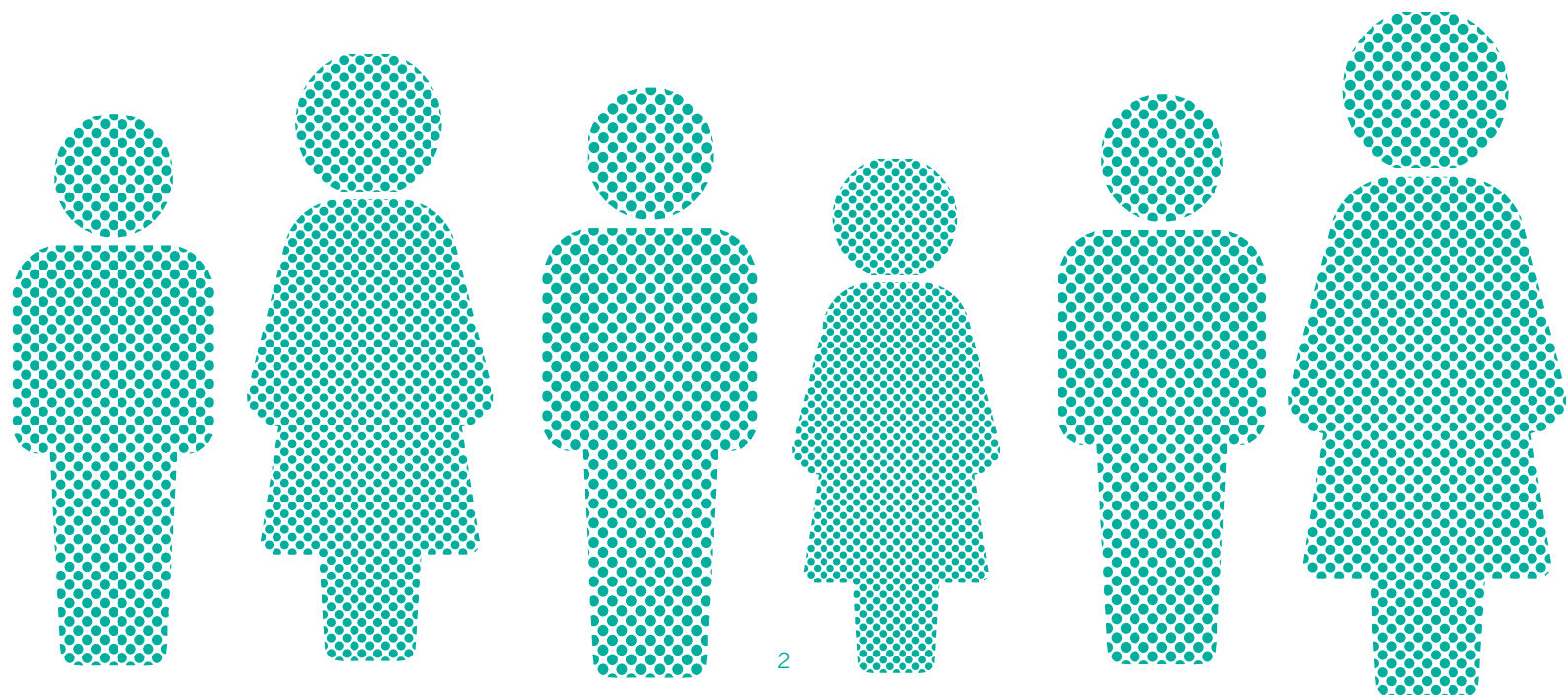
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# 8 key evaluation insights on Gender Mainstreaming

- 1 A well-grounded and comprehensive strategy that drives the operational gender agenda is critical for effective gender mainstreaming and for sustainable results
- 2 A country driven approach to prioritisation of instrument and intervention, such as policy dialogue, proves to be more effective in reducing the gender gap
- 3 Integrating or linking gender policies to corporate strategic plans and results frameworks helps to mainstream gender at the highest levels
- 4 Portfolio performance ratings can facilitate better institutional performance
- 5 Gender focal points and gender specialists within operations advance progress in gender mainstreaming, when they are empowered and have clarity of roles
- 6 All entry points for mainstreaming in the project cycle need to be strategically used for maximum impact

## New Lessons:

- 7 Strong collaboration among key project stakeholders, including clients, bankers and gender specialists leads to more effective implementation of projects' gender components, even in time of crises
- 8 To achieve meaningful gender outcomes, impact and accountability require stronger internal systems with a sharper focus on end beneficiaries



## **A well-grounded and comprehensive strategy that drives the operational gender agenda is critical for effective gender mainstreaming and for sustainable results<sup>1</sup>**

A comprehensive strategy implies that an IFI's country gender profiles (CGPs)/ country-level gender diagnostics should be linked to the country strategy documents. In operations, evidence of gender analysis should be incorporated in the continuum from gender-related objectives to outputs. This can be done by linking country-specific gender analysis to suggested interventions that close gender gaps, and by integrating relevant gender responsive performance indicators beyond sex-disaggregated data (like data on trainings, employment or any other dimension that the project may be addressing). Also, in project logframes there is often limited logical consistency between desired gender outcomes and specified indicators.

Furthermore, there is heavy reliance on output-level indicators, usually in line with Gender Strategy monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks at IFIs. In addition, inclusion of custom gender-sensitive output and outcome measurements remains limited.<sup>2</sup>

The country gender profile/ diagnostic itself should provide a well laid-out and relevant analysis of gender issues across sectors. The IFI methodology for country gender analysis should include in-country data collection, an approach that is often not prevalent among IFIs, and beneficiaries should be consulted during the development of the country gender profile. The main weakness and missed opportunity are the limited comprehensive integration of that knowledge and analysis into country strategy documents (like Country Strategy Papers).

### **Recent evaluation insights:**

The 2024 World Bank Group Independent Evaluation Group report<sup>3</sup> (WBG IEG) underscores the need for a strategic and operationally grounded approach to gender equality. It recommends strengthening the country-driven engagement model through greater selectivity, prioritisation, and coordination of portfolio activities that support gender objectives, with increased focus on implementation. The report also highlights a critical gap in scaling gender-transformative projects. While half of stand-alone projects are designed as pilots with potential for replication, only 22 percent include a strategy for

scaling up—an issue confirmed by case studies and IEG's evaluation of gender inequalities in FCV contexts. This points to the need for comprehensive strategies that ensure both sustainability and scale—key elements of effective gender mainstreaming.

Similarly, the EBRD's Independent Evaluation Department<sup>4</sup> (IEvD) notes that despite strong institutional commitment through strategies such as the Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality, implementation often falls short. A comprehensive strategy must be supported by effective mainstreaming across the institution, rather than relying overly on a small, dedicated team of experts.

The Asian Development Bank's evaluation<sup>5</sup> of its support for gender equality also identifies challenges in consistently integrating gender diagnostics into country strategies. Strengthening this process requires ensuring that diagnostic findings are systematically incorporated into strategic planning and decision-making. This includes building the capacity of country teams to conduct robust gender analyses and translate them into actionable strategies within Country Partnership Strategies.

**A comprehensive strategy must be supported by effective mainstreaming across the institution**

<sup>1</sup> AfDB Gender Evaluation, findings from comparison of 11 IFIs done in the AfDB evaln.

<sup>2</sup> ADB Gender Evaluation, pp.22.

<sup>3</sup> An Evaluation of World Bank and International Finance Corporation Engagement for Gender Equality over the Past 10 Years, <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/evaluations/evaluation-world-bank-and-international-finance-corporation-engagement-gender-equality>

<sup>4</sup> Evaluation of EBRD's support of Gender Equality

<https://www.ebrd.com/home/news-and-events/publications/evaluation/gender-equality-evaluation.html>

<sup>5</sup> ADB's Support for Accelerating Progress in Gender Equality

[https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/Evaluation%20Document/937836/files/te\\_gender-equality.pdf](https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/Evaluation%20Document/937836/files/te_gender-equality.pdf)

## A country driven approach to prioritisation of instrument and intervention, such as policy dialogue, proves to be more effective in reducing the gender gap

The enhanced approach requires that operations, supported by policy dialogue and diagnosis of gender gaps, align with Country Partnership Framework objectives in a coherent manner that helps close gender gaps.

In the sample of country programs examined as part of the World Bank Group (WBG) Gender Strategy Mid-Term Review, the approach to addressing gender gaps ranges from stand-alone projects to the collective use of multiple Bank Group instruments, with stand-alone projects being the more common approach.

Part of the reason that individual projects are emphasised may be the pressure for a project to be counted toward gender-tagging targets set by WBG Regions and Global Practices. In 2017, the WBG launched a new gender “tag” to strengthen links between country-level and/or sector gender equality objectives and WBG operations and identify those operations that meaningfully narrow gaps between males and females in the four key pillars of the WBG Gender Strategy. The gender tag identifies those projects that have a clear results chain (e.g., links analysis, actions, and M&E). Under the Eighteenth Replenishment of IDA (IDA18), the WB has set a new target for at least 55% of operations to fulfill the tag criteria. The tag and target was also planned to cascade to the corporate scorecard in 2017.<sup>6</sup>

Country Partnership Frameworks reflect the gender gaps among their priorities. However, those priorities are not consistently translated into operations/projects that address gender gaps. Without prioritisation, gender issues in the portfolio can appear to be “sprinkled” rather than strategic.

Hence the WBG in Bangladesh, the Arab Republic of Egypt, Kenya, Peru, and Vietnam is focusing interventions on specific gender-related areas. In such cases, country directors and managers act as champions for gender and communicate the priorities to task team leaders, project leads, and investment officers. Experience in Bangladesh and Vietnam shows that WBG and International Finance Corporation (IFC) country and regional units should have central roles in implementing the gender strategy, with the gender groups providing the leadership and

coordination that generate an environment conducive to implementation.<sup>7</sup>

### Recent evaluation insights:

The 2025 evaluation by the European Investment Bank’s Evaluation Department (EIB EV) emphasises the need to systematically integrate gender engagement across all levels of country operations, ensuring alignment with country-specific priorities. It finds that gender resources are currently dispersed across multiple sectors and themes, and recommends a more strategic use of gender expertise. This includes focusing on key sectors and themes with recognised gender gaps, where the EIB’s approach is scalable, and where it can make the greatest contribution—particularly in alignment with EIB and EU priorities.

Similarly, the ADB Independent Evaluation Department (ADB IED) evaluation notes that while gender components are often included in projects, their transformative potential is limited when not embedded within broader country and sector strategies. Early integration of gender objectives, supported by rigorous contextual analysis, would enhance coherence and long-term impact. Effective policy dialogue has also proven instrumental in advancing gender outcomes. The ADB’s evaluation highlights successful examples in Bangladesh and Georgia, where policy dialogue contributed to improved gender equality outcomes in education and health.

Without prioritisation, gender issues in the portfolio can appear to be “sprinkled” rather than strategic.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank Group, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/207481489888852225/pdf/Strategy-Update-to-the-Board-2-17-17Final-02172017.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> World Bank Group, Gender Strategy Mid-Term Review, pp.ix.

The importance of a country-driven approach is also emphasised in the EBRD IEvD evaluation, particularly in aligning gender-related projects with national strategies and client priorities. The Saïss and Garet project in Morocco is cited as a strong example, supporting agribusiness and women-owned enterprises in line with the Ministry of Agriculture's priorities and the national Green Morocco Plan.

A country-driven approach to gender equality involves identifying and addressing national gender priorities through robust diagnostics and context-sensitive policy dialogue. In the WBG, this means jointly

defining gender priorities with governments, private sector clients, and other stakeholders, and ensuring these are consistently reflected across all country engagement instruments—analytical work, strategies, policy dialogue, and operational portfolios. Yet, as the IEG 2024 evaluation notes, fragmentation remains a challenge, and the Country Management Unit's role in coordinating and tracking implementation is critical, though currently unsupported by formal accountability mechanisms.

3

### **Integrating or linking gender policies to corporate strategic plans and results frameworks helps to mainstream gender at the highest levels**

Monitoring gender at the corporate level can incentivise an IFI to collect sex-disaggregated data and ultimately ensures that the intent of the strategy translates into the results chains of projects. For example, International Finance Corporation (IFC) plans to report on all capital increase commitments related to gender, including the annual financing dedicated to women and women led SMEs.

It should be noted that just having women as a number of beneficiaries as currently reported in the corporate scorecard of many IFIs does not provide data and detail on the demographic, types, and issues related to gender-focused participation. For example, the

data does not tell anything about the demographics of the women (young/ old, rural/ urban etc.), sector (land, water use, fisheries etc.) or the issues (access to resources, decision-making, socioeconomic benefits).

#### **Recent evaluation insights:**

The ADB IED gender equality evaluation calls for an update of the gender policy and a clarification of responsibilities. It notes that ADB's current policy framework is outdated and no longer reflects transformative gender equality goals. A refreshed policy is needed along with clearly defined institutional roles and coordination mechanism.

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## 4

## Portfolio performance ratings can facilitate better institutional performance

Establishing portfolio performance ratings at project entry, implementation, and completion can help in monitoring and assessing change in institutional performance on gender. It can also help assess the contribution of an institution's projects to gender equality results, especially for agencies and financial mechanisms with grant, loan, and/or investment portfolios.<sup>8</sup> Some gender policies or gender action plans establish portfolio performance indicators and targets within their own results frameworks. Often these indicators are included in and reported on as part of the overall corporate results framework. Several agencies, especially multilateral development banks and climate funds, including the Global Environment Facility (GEF), have introduced such measures to ensure quality in the design and implementation process and in results at project completion.<sup>9</sup> The International Fund for Agricultural Development uses a project completion report scoring system that also measures changes brought about in, for example, women's economic empowerment, women's representation and decision making, and workload reduction and balance.

At the Asian Development Bank, the correlation between the overall project success rating and gender

success rating is strong. Gender-mainstreamed projects tend to have more rigorous design analysis than non-gender-mainstreamed interventions.<sup>10</sup>

The GEF Gender Evaluation noted a shift occurred in many GEF Agencies from quality-at-entry to better implementation and monitoring to ensure the delivery of projects' intended gender equality results. Some Agencies have revised their tracking and project completion reports to better capture and report gender equality results and to measure gender impacts as part of terminal evaluations.

### Recent evaluation insights:

Consistent and meaningful application of the gender classification across the full portfolio supports the culture of gender equality and helps develop gender smart businesses, as noted in the EBRD IED report.

The ADB IED's report also implies that systematic performance ratings—when properly implemented—can support institutional learning and accountability, thereby enhancing institutional performance.

## 5

## Gender focal points and gender specialists within operations advance progress in gender mainstreaming when they are empowered and have clarity of roles

Gender Focal Points and gender specialists within operations advance progress in Gender Mainstreaming, despite challenges in clarity of roles, availability, and their positioning in the organisational structure. Evaluative findings from several IFIs indicated that increasing the capacity of gender focal points and gender specialists within the organisations led to more robust gender mainstreaming across sectors and regions. These focal point and specialist roles can be full-time or part-time but it's important that

their gender-focused tasks be clearly defined as part of the staff's work program (or equivalent) and not be 'ad hoc add-on' tasks that carry the risk of slipping through the cracks. Incentives can include IFI business group like health, agriculture, or infrastructure being awarded for incorporating gender-sensitive project design, frameworks and implementation in the field, as well as recognition through team awards for staff teams that have focused on systematic gender integration in both country strategies and operations.

<sup>8</sup> GEF Gender Evaluation

<sup>9</sup> GEF Gender Evaluation

<sup>10</sup> The ADB gender evaluation found that of the 72 projects reviewed that were approved during 2005–2015 and had a project completion report and a gender success rating, 47 successfully delivered gender results which is a 65 percent success rate.

Limited availability and varying depth and breadth of sectoral knowledge were a challenge<sup>11</sup> to consistently incorporate gender dimensions. For example, a gender specialist may be an expert on the intersection of the gender and transport sector, but that same gender specialist may not be able to provide help on how to integrate gender in irrigation projects or technology projects that close digital gender gaps. Decentralised decision-making has made funding for Gender Specialist positions uneven, left to the discretion of regional management,<sup>12</sup> which can lead to both positive and negative effects on gender capacity in the organisation.

Staff designated to support work on gender are critical to connect strategic imperatives to practices in WBG operations. However, staff designated to support work on gender at the WB are constrained in their ability to provide optimal support by the lack of clear selection criteria, insufficient time to complete required functions, limited professional development opportunities, and little recognition within performance management processes.<sup>13</sup> The selection and professional development of gender focal points in the WB is ad hoc, partly because a gender specialty is not a recognised career path in the Bank Group.<sup>14</sup> These constraints are less pronounced at the IFC, though they do occur.<sup>15</sup> In context of implementation of the WBG Gender Strategy, IFC has taken a more active role in organising and coordinating gender leads and focal points in comparison to the WB. The WBG takes a less active approach to the coordination of staff designated to support work on gender, even though it organises a community of practice monthly. IFC's Gender Business Group, in contrast, works through regional and product gender leads who often manage other staff at the global, regional, and country levels and coordinates with focal points in industry groups. IFC has successfully connected country-level advisory services with global programs, such as the Women's Insurance and Tackling Childcare projects. The WB

Gender Group has a broader scope to cover, making an approach like IFC's difficult. In the WB, no single unit is responsible for coordinating expertise to support the gender strategy or ensuring the adequacy of capacity and time allocation, which leads to variability in resourcing and skills.<sup>16</sup>

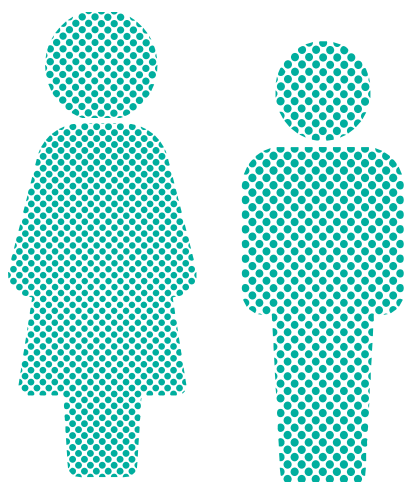
### Recent evaluation insights:

Evaluation findings note that ADB continues to face institutional capacity constraints in gender expertise. Despite its strong commitment to gender equality, the absence of mandatory training and a lack of shared conceptual understanding among staff result in inconsistent application of gender approaches across projects. The new operating model, which consolidates gender experts into a single Gender Equality Division, offers opportunities for improved coordination but also poses risks. These include potential loss of institutional memory and reduced integration with operational departments, leading to over-reliance on a small team and limiting effective mainstreaming, a risk also noted in EBRD-IEvD's evaluation.

The EIB EV evaluation similarly emphasises the importance of strengthening the network of gender champions across the EIB Group. These champions play a key role in raising awareness, identifying opportunities, and reinforcing gender expertise. Continued staff training is also recommended to build capacity for applying a gender lens in operations.

The EBRD IEvD evaluation finds that clients would benefit from greater involvement of gender experts during project implementation, as the importance of gender integration is often not well understood or supported. It recommends reinforcing the gender champion role to alleviate the burden on the Gender and Economic Inclusion team and to enhance the Bank's ability to encourage clients to fulfill gender-related commitments.

Limited availability and varying depth and breadth of sectoral knowledge were a challenge to consistently incorporate gender dimensions



<sup>11</sup> AfDB evaluation, pp.3.

<sup>12</sup> AfDB evaluation, pp.3.

<sup>13</sup> Page vii. World Bank Group Gender Strategy Mid-Term Review (by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group).

<sup>14</sup> 'Not recognized' means there are very few staff that have 'Gender Specialist' titles but rather are called Social Sector Specialists or Infrastructure Specialists etc, and hence gender is not a career track by itself.

<sup>15</sup> Page xii. World Bank Group Gender Strategy Mid-Term Review (by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group).

<sup>16</sup> Page x. World Bank Group Gender Strategy Mid-Term Review (by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group)

## 6

## All entry points for mainstreaming in the project cycle need to be strategically used for maximum impact

All entry points for Gender mainstreaming in the project cycle need to be strategically used for maximum impact.<sup>17</sup> A clear mapping of all existing gender mainstreaming entry points like including country gender analysis in project design and implementation across the project cycle would enhance the ability to collect, collate and use gender-focused evidence across operations. Furthermore, quality gender-related diagnostics (like country gender profiles, sectorial checklists, comparators' documents and Environmental and Social Impact Assessments/ESIAs) can be used to find entry points that facilitate evidence-based project design and implementation, and subsequently develop evidence-based Theories of Change (ToCs) at the start.

Participatory ToC development would permit the thorough interrogation of the intervention's feasibility and its underlying assumptions. Obligatory involvement of the gender specialist at the Project Concept Note and Project Appraisal Report stage in the development of the ToC and/or project results framework would improve their gender responsiveness.<sup>18</sup> The GEF evaluation also suggests

that gender analysis should be a mandatory element of project design.<sup>19</sup>

### Recent evaluation insights:

Recent evaluations note that a reliable and consistent gender classification process is critical for effective gender integration. The EBRD IEvD report highlights that, in the reviewed sample, inaccurate tagging of gender-related projects—particularly before the implementation of the gender SMART tag in 2021—could lead to some misreporting and weakened accountability. Embedding rigorous classification into project design enables better tracking of gender outcomes and supports institutional learning.

The EIB EV evaluation recommends EIB and EIF should strengthen their institutional environment for promoting gender equality through a series of measures, including enhancing commitment of all levels to foster focusing on EIB gender-related technical assistance and technical contribution to projects, drawing from tangible examples where such contributions have been successfully made and generated positive outcomes.

## 7

## Strong collaboration among key project stakeholders, including clients, bankers and gender specialists leads to more effective implementation of projects' gender components, even in time of crises

The EIB and EIF have significantly enhanced their visibility as institutions committed to advancing gender equality. Both have launched a range of programmes to raise awareness and promote women's economic empowerment within and beyond the European Union. The EIB Group also actively collaborates with domestic and international partners to establish and promote market standards, amplify its impact on gender equality, and demonstrate practical application of these standards. As the first multilateral development bank to join the 2X Challenge, it inspired others to follow. EIB gender experts helped revise the

2X criteria, a global benchmark for gender finance. To extend coverage beyond emerging markets, the EIB and EIF introduced the Finance for Gender Equality criteria for the EU. The EIF also developed gender-smart criteria for InvestEU and promoted them internally. Additionally, the EIB led the MDB Working Group on Gender and engaged peers on reporting standards.

The ADB IED evaluation finds that projects with strong collaboration—particularly among clients, bankers, and gender specialists—combined with dedicated

<sup>17</sup> From findings of other IFIs in the AfDB Gender Evaluation, pp.5.

<sup>18</sup> AfDB Gender Evaluation, pp.6.

<sup>19</sup> GEF Gender Evaluation, pp.36.

gender incentives and centralised expertise, tend to achieve deeper gender results. However, these practices are not yet consistently institutionalised. The evaluation recommends promoting more gender-transformative approaches, ensuring adequate resources and incentives are in place to support new ways of working. This includes revising the gender mainstreaming categorisation system and how it is applied. Similarly, IEG notes that gender goals are more effective when integrated across sectors—such as education and transport—and pursued through partnerships with governments, the private sector, and civil society.

Evidence from the EBRD IEvD reports further underscores that effective collaboration among project stakeholders is a key factor in successful implementation. IEvD observed that close collaboration between the Gender and Economic Inclusion team and the operational leaders of two projects in Albania contributed to the projects' positive employment outcomes. This highlights the importance of a holistic, results-driven approach to mainstreaming gender in investments and technical cooperation projects.

8

## **To achieve meaningful gender outcomes, impact and accountability require stronger internal systems with a sharper focus on end beneficiaries**

Multiple evaluations stress the need to move beyond institutional commitments to ensure that gender outcomes reach end beneficiaries. Strengthening monitoring systems is a recurring recommendation.

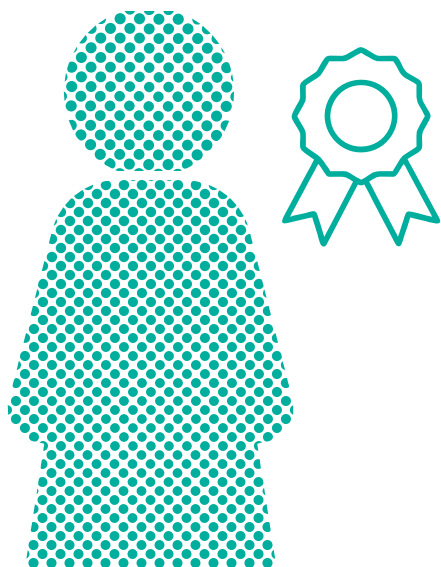
The EIB EV evaluation notes that while the EIB Group has made institutional commitments to gender goals, it must also ensure these translate into tangible benefits for end recipients. Specifically, the EIF should enhance its capacity to track and report gender outcomes at the level of ultimate beneficiaries, rather than focusing solely on intermediaries. Internally, the EIB is encouraged to strengthen its systems by embedding gender-sensitive KPIs, expanding staff training, and introducing performance incentives that align with strategic gender objectives.

Similarly, the ADB evaluation highlights that the current emphasis on output-level indicators limits the ability to understand real change. It calls for improved systems to track gender outcomes, particularly those experienced by end beneficiaries.

The IEG adds that robust measurement and diagnostics are essential, recommending the use of high-quality baseline assessments, mixed-method indicators, and iterative monitoring systems to better capture impact. IEG evaluation stresses that gender equality must be a clearly defined and measurable objective across corporate, project, and country levels, supported by a strong theory of change and M&E systems. Capturing complex gender results requires both quantitative indicators and qualitative narratives to monitor process-level outputs and broader country-level outcomes achieved in partnership with stakeholders.

The EBRD IEvD evaluation reinforces these findings by emphasising the importance of effective reporting and data systems for accountability. It notes that the absence of gender-specific indicators, baselines, and monitoring frameworks has hindered impact assessment. In many cases, projects without defined targets were unable to demonstrate results, even when activities were implemented.

**Multiple evaluations stress the need to move beyond institutional commitments to ensure that gender outcomes reach end beneficiaries.**



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