

Tracking International Funding to Women's Empowerment Collectives in Bangladesh

Summary

[Publish What You Fund](#) has tracked international funding to women's empowerment collectives (WECs) in Bangladesh. Our aim was to provide greater insights into the funding landscape to support policymakers, funders, and gender advocates. This is part of a [broader programme](#) which examined funding for women's economic empowerment (WEE), WECs, women's financial inclusion, and assessed gender integration approaches in [Bangladesh](#), [Kenya](#), and [Nigeria](#).

Our analysis examined projects that supported both WECs, as well as women's groups which featured defining characteristics or elements of WECs. There are limitations to the data currently available to understand how international funders are supporting these programmes. We detail these limitations in our report and offer recommendations for funders on how to improve the publication of financial and programmatic information that would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the WECs funding landscape.

A WEC is a women's group that features five critical elements:

1. group solidarity and networks,
2. pooled savings and shared risks,
3. participatory learning and life skills,
4. critical consciousness of gender, and
5. access to markets & services and collective bargaining.

Together these elements build women's human, financial, and social capital. WECs are one approach for integrating and scaling positive financial, health, and livelihood outcomes for women and girls.

We tracked funding from bilateral, multilateral, development finance institutions, and philanthropic organisations between 2015–2019.

International funding to WECs and women's groups with WECs elements remains a small proportion of funding to WEE

We identified 18 grant funded projects that supported women's groups with WECs elements but none that featured all five WECs elements. Grant funding for women's groups with WECs elements was a small proportion of funding for WEE between 2015–2019. We did not identify any relevant non-grant funding (loans, guarantees, and equity).

In many cases, WEC activities are a sub-component of a larger project. To reduce the risk of overestimating funding amounts for projects supporting women's groups with WEC elements, the rest of our analysis uses project numbers as the unit of analysis.

Which groups of women did this funding intend to support?

We found that 13 of the 18 projects specified certain groups of women that they intended to support. Of those, farmers, persons with disabilities, and girls were most commonly specified as target groups of women. Other specified groups included poor women and female garment workers. Identifying the specific group(s) of women that the funding is intended to support greatly enhances our ability to identify gaps in funding and address the differential needs of women given that economic empowerment and access to resources are shaped by intersecting discriminations.

Who funds WECs activities and how?

Most of the funding to women's groups projects came from bilateral government funders with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reporting the highest funding amounts. Other top funders include the International Labour Organization (ILO), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Finland MFA), and Traidcraft Exchange. This represents 93% of the total funding supporting women's groups with WECs elements.

We screened projects for the five WECs elements to identify which elements funders are supporting.^a The most common WECs element we identified was participatory learning and life skills, followed closely by access to markets & services and collective bargaining. Many of the projects targeted multiple WEC elements, and it was not uncommon for projects to include participatory learning as well as other WECs elements.

Funders most often targeted **participatory learning and life skills** when funding women's groups with WECs elements

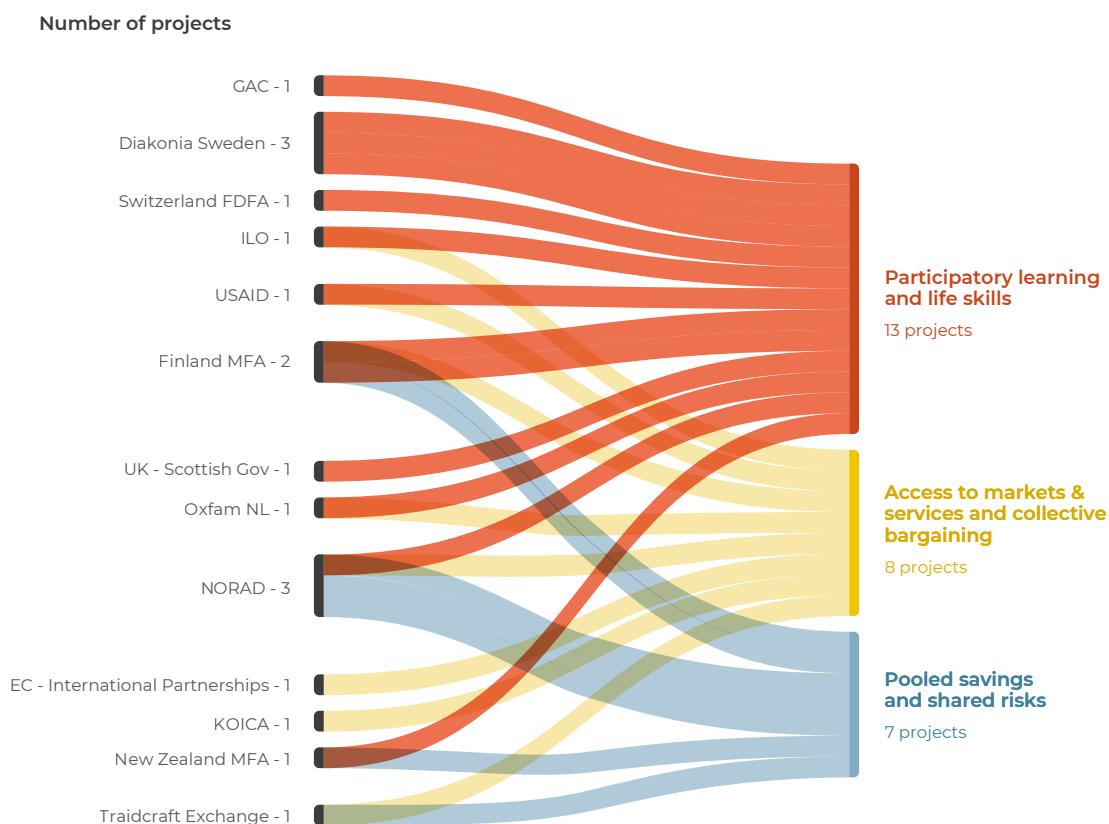


Figure 1: Grant funders (by number of projects) mapped to WECs elements (2015–2019)

Our review further suggests that:

- When mapped against our typology, most women's groups fit into the non-financial category. These groups did not feature any financial activities such as savings, credit, or insurance, but often engaged in economic activities more broadly.
- Eight of the 18 projects established new women's groups. Five projects layered new programming onto existing groups (training on enterprises and income generating activities, and collective bargaining capacity building). Four projects supported existing groups' activities.
- The majority of women's groups with WECs elements were integrated into WEE/gender or broader development projects (eight projects each). Only two projects were purely focused on women's groups with WECs elements.
- Funders did not publish results data for most projects identified in the open data sources used for this analysis. Only one project had a project completion review that outlined their results. Results data is key for monitoring progress and understanding impact.

^a Group solidarity and networks is a prerequisite WECs element for a project's inclusion.

Our complete report series can be accessed [here](#).