

Putting Women and Girls at the Center of Development: a new Grand Challenge

Introduction:

Gender equality and women’s empowerment are key goals in their own right and are central to all other development goals. In particular, gender inequalities and the marginalization of the needs, roles and potential of women and girls are key factors limiting advances in development outcomes for all – women, men, boys, girls and their communities and societies around the world. Moreover, strong associations have been identified between addressing inequalities and enhancing women and girls’ empowerment and agency, and improved development outcomes across sectors ranging from maternal newborn and child health and nutrition to agriculture to water sanitation and hygiene.

As Melinda Gates advanced in a recent publication in [Science Magazine](#), smart development intentionally addresses gender inequalities and measures the impact of health and development programs, not only on sector outcomes – such as contraceptive prevalence rates, agricultural productivity or access to digital financial services – but also on gender outcomes – such as equitable decision-making power, shared control over assets and income, personal safety, mobility, and equitable interpersonal relations (Figure 1). These gender outcomes are also the key ingredients that enable and empower women and girls to be engines of change in their households, communities, institutions and societies. Furthermore, development interventions are more successful when they empower and create enabling environments (e.g., through engagement of men and boys) where women and girls have the confidence and capacity to speak up and make decisions (i.e., they have voice and agency), freedom of mobility and are free from violence. Intentional efforts and strategies are required so that development can contribute more to gender equality and gender equality can contribute more to development.

Many organizations have worked for years to identify effective ways to address gender inequalities and empower women and girls. The *Putting Women & Girls at the Center of Development Grand Challenge* is part of an exciting evolution at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in which we are seeking to accelerate discovery of *how* to most effectively and intentionally identify and address gender inequalities and how this relates to sectoral outcomes; scale-up approaches known to work, in context-relevant ways; and do more to develop better measures of the impact of approaches to enhance women’s and girls’ empowerment and agency.

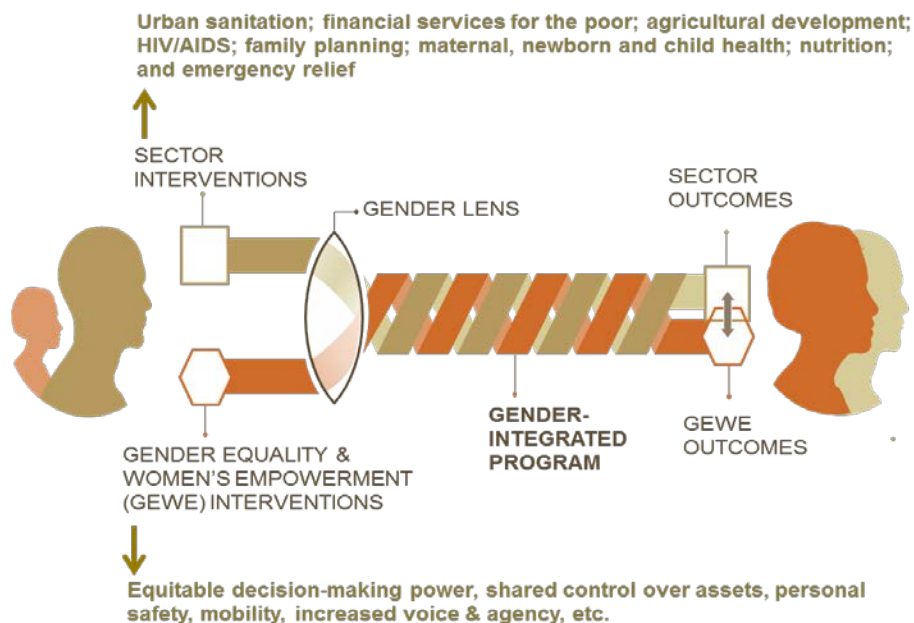


Figure 1: Gender Integrated Approach

The Challenge:

Effectively reach and empower the most vulnerable women and girls to improve health and development – including economic – outcomes as well as gender equality.

What we are looking for:

We are looking for **innovative solutions** to effectively **reach** the most vulnerable women and girls¹ to simultaneously improve health, development and economic outcomes (as appropriate to the proposed approach) for them, their families and communities, and **empower** women and girls and promote gender equality (Figure 1). We are most interested in solutions that generate evidence on **how** to empower women and girls and promote gender equality— particularly **equitable decision-making power** at individual, household and societal levels— **sustainably** and **cost-effectively**, with potential for **scale**. In addition to equitable decision-making power, we will also consider other approaches that lead to increased women’s and girls’ agency and voice (e.g., control over assets/resources, personal safety, mobility, equitable interpersonal relationships).

We are looking **for solutions** (see Figure 1 above) in the following programmatic areas: *urban sanitation; financial services for the poor; agricultural development; HIV/AIDS; family planning; maternal, newborn and child health; nutrition; and emergency relief*. **Further information on sector-specific areas of interest can be found in blog posts at <http://www.impatientoptimists.org/>**. *Multisectoral projects/solutions that integrate or combine sectoral programming and achieve outcomes in more than one program area as well as promote gender equality are of greatest interest to us and will be prioritized.*

For example, we are looking for solutions that will:

- Empower women and girls to have equitable influence as decision-makers on decisions that affect their and their family’s opportunities and lives, and address how these decisions can be effectively influenced;
- Foster an enabling environment for women’s partnership and leadership, removing the structural, social and cultural barriers to women and girls gaining equitable influence over decisions;
- Increase the individual and intra-household decision-making power of women and girls—with particular interest in reproductive, maternal and child health, and nutrition choices—to drive understanding of power dynamics and effective behavior change communication;
- Effectively engage and leverage men and boys as partners to achieve gender equality and empowerment, including equitable decision-making power. We understand that to achieve gender equality between the sexes we need to engage and transform the attitudes and beliefs of men and boys and encourage and support solutions targeting and engaging them as partners and agents of change;
- Rapidly connect women to digital financial services that enable them to more easily store, transfer, secure and build financial value digitally, beyond mobile money payment transfers; help shed light on the relationship between women’s and girls’ use of digital financial services and empowerment within their households including equitable decision-making power;
- Empower girls to stay in school with a particular interest in the impact of building their social capital and how the provision of cross-sector services can best improve school attendance and completion by girls.
- Empower girls in HIV hyper-epidemic settings to improve decision making around sexual health – age of debut, choice of partners, STI and HIV avoidance, contraceptive use;
- Leverage and expand on existing high-impact solutions with rigorous evaluations and to achieve impact at scale, and/or evaluate such solutions across sectors.

¹ The most vulnerable women and girls = those most susceptible or already subject to child marriage, school dropout, child labor, HIV infection, sex work, early pregnancy, social isolation, hunger, malnutrition, gender-based violence, etc.

Characteristics of successful proposals:

We seek proposals that clearly demonstrate the following attributes:

- **Gender integrated solutions** (that effectively integrate a gender perspective). We request that proposals include an analysis/review of existing evidence about the proposed approach to addressing gender inequality and empowering women and girls and how this particular solution is innovative or improves on previous similar, solutions;
- Have a strong logical design and **measurement** component to their interventions. Specifically, we would like to see a robust logic model between the planned intervention and outcomes of interest (health, development and equality/empowerment outcomes), and a clear, budgeted plan for measuring and reporting these results (including indicators and data collection approaches). In particular, **we are interested in supporting innovative and more meaningful ways to measure gender equality and empowerment of girls and women**, and will allocate resources for improved measurement in these areas.
- Demonstrate how **the intervention will build the evidence base** on what works best to empower women and girls, particularly equitable decision-making power. Therefore, each proposal should indicate the applicant's plan for evaluation to generate evidence about effectiveness, scalability and cost-effectiveness, as relevant. The foundation's Measurement & Evaluation team will review the measurement and evaluation plans for design and methodology and may choose to undertake additional evaluation activities to compare/understand portfolios of interventions.
- **Integration** between sectors or a holistic approach to reducing gender inequalities while improving sectoral as well as multi-sectoral outcomes. Those which do so across multiple sectors will be given highest priority;
- Provides evidence that the proposal **represents the priorities of women and girls** (i.e., that women and girls are engaged as partners in the development of solutions), more so than a study about women and girls;
- Have a strong likelihood of achieving a **substantial impact on health, development and economic outcomes**; clearly define how that impact will be demonstrated and account for how the project could potentially scale sustainably; demonstrate, wherever possible, whether proposed solutions are within the strategies of governments in country of interest (or within the scope of being included in the future).
- **Value** in terms of appropriateness of the budget and timeline relative to project complexity, risk, and potential impact.

What we are NOT looking for:

Solutions and/or projects that do not provide a clear path to development and testing of prevention and intervention strategies:

- Studies that lead to solutions applicable to only a small fraction of the population (e.g., because of a focus on a specific issue or condition with limited prevalence). Sub-groups within the broad spectrum of women and girls would be acceptable (e.g., very young adolescents).
- Projects that generate data about women and girls or about gender gaps, without proposing and testing an approach to address gender inequalities and empower women and girls.
- Projects lacking metrics to determine success or failure and to allow decisions about the appropriateness of follow-on funding.
- Solutions that are only slight improvements over existing approaches.

Types of Grants:

We will invest in a portfolio of projects and seek groundbreaking innovations by:

- **Providing 2-year exploratory grants** at USD \$500,000 to support the initial development and validation of solutions.

- **Providing 4-year full grants** at USD \$2.5 million to develop, refine, and rigorously test larger multi-sectoral approaches, including those that have previous data demonstrating proof of concept, and show promise and potential for scale.

Who we will fund:

- **Investigators in low-income and middle-income countries** (see [World Bank - Low Income Countries](#) for definitions). Subject to the eligibility requirements in the Rules & Guidelines, investigators in low- and middle-income countries are invited (in connection with the organization with which they are affiliated) to apply through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s application portal. We reserve the right to determine eligibility for this call based on these characteristics. Grants will go to investigators in low- and middle-income countries, but we encourage partnerships with investigators in other countries, especially where the opportunity exists to build on existing collaborations. **We particularly encourage applications from women-led organizations and applications involving projects led by women.**

Letter of Inquiry (LOI) Guidelines for the *Putting Women & Girls at the Center of Development Challenge*:

In addition to the application content described in the Rules & Guidelines, applications (also called “Letters of Interest” or “LOIs”) should include within the section on project approach (and subject to the overall five-page limit):

- A discussion of “Women & Girls Engagement” that describes the role of women in leadership in the organization; describe ways in which the organization hears from women and girls and incorporates their needs and preferences. Furthermore, describe how women and girls are included in the conception, design, development and implementation of the project.
- A brief logic model between the planned intervention and outcomes of interest (health, development and equality/empowerment outcomes) and a plan for measuring and evaluating the proposed solution/project.

Grand Challenges

Definition

Grand Challenges is a family of initiatives fostering innovation to solve key problems in global health and development for those most in need. It seeks to establish a portfolio of projects with complementary approaches that encompass multiple types of innovation, including innovation in biological research, medical health technology and product development, service delivery, and behavior change. Grand Challenges initiatives therefore seek to:

- Engage diverse investigators, including those outside of the areas that might traditionally be associated with the initiative.
- Encourage partnerships that bring together investigators from diverse organizations, including for-profit institutions, non-governmental organizations, academic and health research institutions, foundations, and civil society groups.

History

Today, a variety of funding partners use “Grand Challenges” to accelerate research, creating an expanding network of funding and research partnerships spanning diverse topics. Below are some key examples highlighting how the Grand Challenges family has grown over time:

- In 2003, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched [Grand Challenges in Global Health](#), a US\$450-million research initiative that came to include multiple funding partners and, in 2007, it launched [Grand Challenges Explorations](#) (GCE), an accelerated program providing small, initial grants for exploratory research.
- In 2010, the Canadian government funded [Grand Challenges Canada](#) to support global health researchers in low- and middle-income countries and in Canada through multiple grant programs.
- In 2011, USAID launched [Grand Challenges for Development](#), an initiative that brought the Grand Challenges approach to diverse new areas, including agriculture and child reading, through multiple grant programs.
- In 2012, the Gates Foundation and the Brazilian government established [Grand Challenges Brazil](#), a partnership to fund researchers in Brazil through GCE and, to date, the grant program [Reducing the Burden of Preterm Birth](#).
- In 2013, the Gates Foundation and the Indian government launched [Grand Challenges India](#), a partnership to fund researchers in India through GCE and, to date, the grant programs [Achieving Healthy Growth through Agriculture and Nutrition](#) and [Reinvent the Toilet Challenge – India](#).