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# What works to strengthen women's empowerment and gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected situations?

In 2020, 23 percent of the world's population lived in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS), including 76.5 percent of those living in extreme poverty. Women and girls are affected by both fragility and conflict in unique ways and are also often the targets of war. However, women and girls are not just victims of war. Rather, they play a key role in building sustainable peace, as recognized by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) commissioned the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) to conduct a systematic review of the evidence on gender-specific or gender-transformative interventions in FCAS. The review was based on the four pillars of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Recovery and Relief) and examines their outcomes across the three dimensions of women's empowerment (Resources, Agency and Achievements). The objective of this review was to synthesize the large body of evidence around gender-specific and gender-transformative interventions in FCAS to inform policy and practice decisions within the field of transition aid, particularly as it relates to gender-focused programming.

## Highlights

### What is the impact of gender-specific and gender-transformative interventions in FCAS?

- Interventions supporting women's empowerment and gender equality in FCAS produce, on average, positive effects on the outcomes related to the focus of the intervention.
- There are no significant negative effects of any included interventions.
- Interventions do not achieve positive and significant effects for downstream behavioral outcomes, such as intimate partner violence.

### How to maximize intervention effectiveness

- Explicitly target specific empowerment outcomes and tailor intervention components to the particular needs of targeted populations and contextual drivers of gender inequity.
- Pay attention to contextual gender norms and practices that could undermine empowerment outcomes.
- Consider multiple dimensions of empowerment tailored to local norms and practices (resources, agency and achievements).
- Target the right beneficiaries based on quality baseline analyses that include, among others, context analysis, stakeholder mapping and needs assessment.



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## Overview of evidence

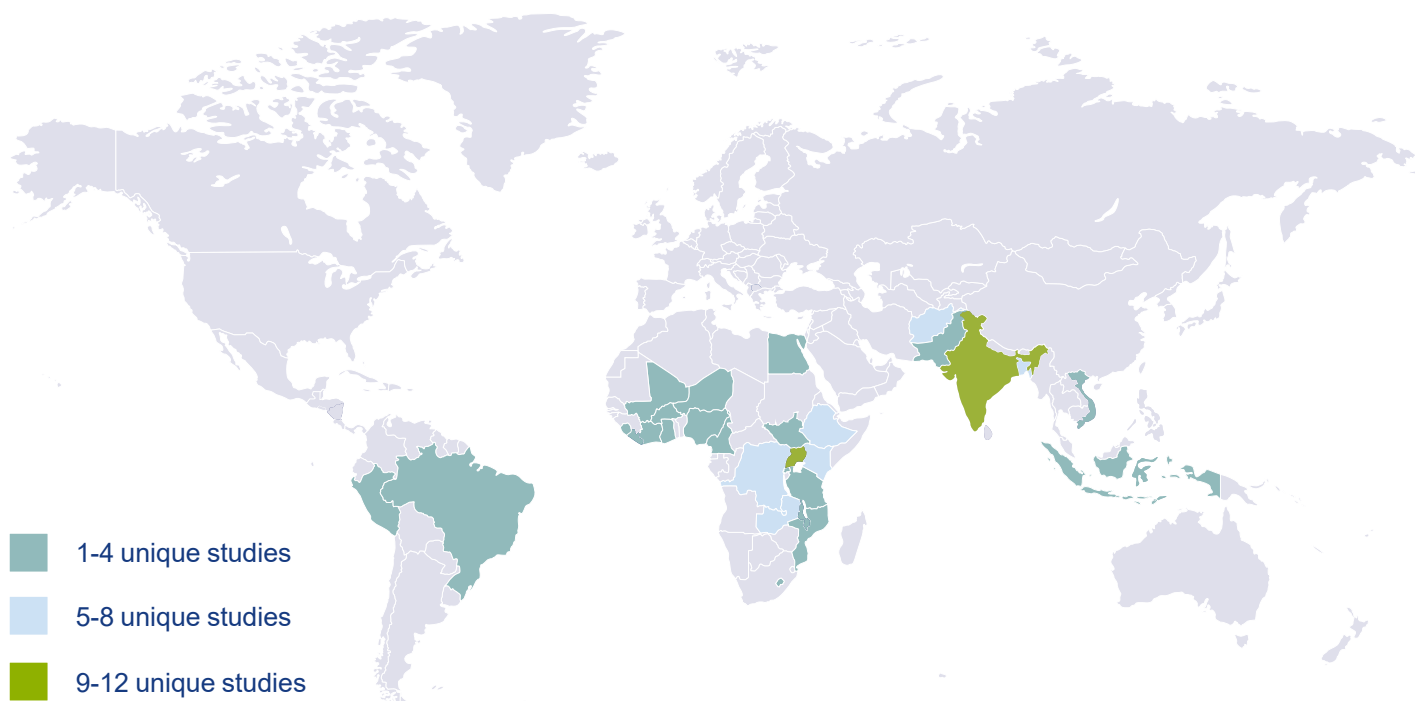
We identified 104 studies covering 55 programs across 29 FCAS in East Asia, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa and comprising 14 intervention types. These were complemented by 32 linked impact evaluation papers and 90 linked qualitative studies.

**Table 1: Intervention groups related to each pillar of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda**

Pillars of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (UNSCR 1325)	Intervention group (number of unique studies included)
<p><b>Participation:</b></p> <p>Interventions that create opportunities for, build acceptance of, or strengthen capacities for the equal participation and full involvement of women and girls in political, economic, and social institutions and decision-making processes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Asset transfers (10)</li> <li>■ Cash transfers (19)</li> <li>■ Community-based services (1)</li> <li>■ Inclusive community-driven development (3)</li> <li>■ Institutional provision of loans and savings (6)</li> <li>■ Quotas (2)</li> <li>■ Self-help groups and Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) (12)</li> <li>■ Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (10)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Prevention:</b></p> <p>Interventions that build capacities and systems to support gender responsiveness and inclusivity of violence prevention and conflict transformation processes. This also includes efforts to hold perpetrators of violence accountable through formal or informal means.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Community dialogues and reconciliation (1)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Protection:</b></p> <p>Interventions that create, facilitate access to, or build awareness of and support for legal or social protections for women's and girls' rights. This also includes behavioral, legal and environmental interventions that aim to reduce women's and girls' risk of experiencing sexual and gender-based violence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ All-women police stations (1)</li> <li>■ Sensitization campaigns (7)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Multi-pillar:</b></p> <p>Interventions that intersect across multiple pillars. In our study, multi-pillar interventions targeted both the participation and protection pillars.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Discussion groups (4)</li> <li>■ Safe spaces (6)</li> <li>■ Life, social, and livelihood skills and capacity building (19)</li> </ul>



**Figure 1: Heat map of included studies**



## Main findings

### 1. Most gender-specific and gender-transformative interventions in FCAS have overall positive effects on the primary dimension of women's empowerment they target; no intervention leads to negative effects.

- Asset and cash transfers have relatively large positive effects on women's access to resources, including access to and/or ownership of assets, credit and income.
- VSLAs and institutional provisions of savings and loans improve women's capacity to effectively use and understand financial, banking and business services.
- Life skills and capacity-building programs lead to women having better life skills.
- Community-driven development results in an increased representation of women in local and sub-national civil and political processes.
- TVET interventions do not appear to increase women's access to employment, and the evidence suggests contextual barriers that prevent translation of skills into jobs.

### 2. With few exceptions, observing positive effects on multiple dimensions of women's empowerment and "downstream" outcomes is not common.

- There are effects on "downstream" outcomes, such as increased women's participation in decision-making, improved attitudes toward women, and less agreement with reasons justifying sexual and gender-based violence, but these effects are generally smaller in magnitude relative to effects on other outcomes. For example, while we are able to analyze effects on intimate partner violence outcomes for seven intervention types, we do not observe positive effects for any of them.
- Cash transfers, self-help groups and TVET programs produce beneficial effects across all three dimensions of women's empowerment (resources, agency and achievements).
- Asset transfers (resources and agency), sensitization campaigns (agency and achievements) and capacity-building programs (resources and agency) show positive effects across two of the three dimensions of women's empowerment.

### 3. There are several gaps in the existing evidence.

- There is scant evidence about all-women police stations and community-based services.
- We identified very few studies in the Arabian Peninsula specifically.
- More broadly, we observed gaps of evidence with regard to gender-specific and gender-transformative interventions focusing either on recovery and relief or the active role of women in peacebuilding.

### 4. Structural gender norms can limit the effect.

- Scale-up from the specific to the structural impact of an intervention is only possible if structural gender norms are taken into account.
- Norms can inhibit the ability of interventions to affect women's empowerment in a multidimensional way despite their effect on primary outcomes.

### 5. Targeting the right beneficiary is a driver of success.

- Appropriate targeting requires a deep understanding of which groups of participants are right to include in the program.
- This requires appropriate baseline assessments and contextual analyses.



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## Implications

### Implications for policy and practice

- **There are a number of promising gender-focused interventions aiming to improve women's empowerment in FCAS.** Cash transfers, self-help groups and VSLAs, and TVET improve multiple dimensions of empowerment, while asset transfers, sensitization campaigns and capacity-building programs bring promising results across some dimensions of the empowerment framework.
- **To maximize effects on multiple dimensions of women's empowerment, it is crucial to design program components with this goal in mind.** Interventions need to design multiple components targeted at specific outcomes, and these need to be tailored for empowerment-related outcomes.
- **Implementers need to design complementary program components that create space for peer-to-peer exchanges** and other similar mechanisms that nurture networks, support systems and collectives of women (e.g., via mentoring and women's groups).
- **Program designers and implementers need to address contextual issues, such as constraints on access,** restrictive social norms and other barriers that

may conflict with intended outcomes. Successful programs are those that demonstrate a clear understanding of the barriers to empowerment within their respective context and tailor the design of components accordingly.

- **Embedding programs in existing structures could enhance legitimacy** and increase access to participants.
- **Targeting the right beneficiaries can enhance effectiveness.** Targeting procedures should be informed by baseline assessments and contextual analyses to identify the most vulnerable households, minimize beneficiary selection errors and maximize trust in the administrative process.
- **Applying a gendered implementation plan contributes to program effectiveness.** Plans require a careful application of a gender lens to assess whether implementation choices are gender-sensitive.

### Implications for research

- There is a need for more evidence on the effects of a number of gender-focused interventions; in particular, program focusing on recovery and relief as well as the participation of women in peace processes (e.g., peace and reconciliation processes, community dialogues, etc.).

- There are a number of geographical gaps in the evidence base. More studies are needed on the effects of gender-specific or gender-transformative interventions in the MENA and Central and Latin America regions.
- Gender-specific or gender-transformative interventions should specifically target lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) groups.
- Evaluation studies need to follow rigorous methodological designs and report their research in a way that allows for transparency and assessment of study quality.
- Researchers need to report information on the methods used to generate and analyze qualitative data within impact evaluation reports.
- To ensure the reliability of studies and allow for easier comparisons across studies and contexts, researchers should adopt existing scales with documented validity and reliability for measuring empowerment outcomes.

- Investment in evaluations of the longer-term impact of interventions will allow for an examination of whether these types of programs have lasting effects on the lives of women and girls.





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## What is a systematic review?

3ie systematic reviews use rigorous and transparent methods to identify all of the studies that qualify for analysis and synthesis to address a specific research question. Reviewers identify published and unpublished studies and use theory-based, mixed methods to analyse and synthesise the evidence from the included studies. The result is an unbiased assessment of what works, for whom, why and at what cost.

## About the review

This brief is based on the 3ie publication, *Strengthening women's empowerment and gender equality in fragile contexts towards peaceful and inclusive societies: A systematic review and meta-analysis* by Etienne Lwamba, Shannon Shisler, Will Ridlehoover, Meital Kupfer, Nkululeko Tshabalala, Promise Nduku, Laurenz Langer, Sean Grant, Ada Sonnenfeld, Daniela Anda, John Eysers and Birte Snilstveit.

The review analyzed both the quantitative and qualitative data of 104 unique studies published between 2000 and 2021 in 29 countries and across 14 intervention types. The analysis takes into consideration elements of risk of bias, consistency and precision, plausible confounding, effect size and the likelihood of publication bias. The review received funding from the Transitional Development Assistance Programme of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and was undertaken in cooperation with the German Corporation for International Cooperation GmbH (GIZ).

## About this brief

This brief was written by Etienne Lwamba, Meital Kupfer, Will Ridlehoover, Shannon Shisler and Birte Snilstveit. They are solely responsible for all content, errors and omissions. Content has been designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta and Tanvi Lal.



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A female street vendor, part of a cooperative, conducts business in Wandegeya, Kampala. The majority of street vendors in Kampala are women. Cooperatives are initiatives that enable women in the informal sector to mobilize and improve their skills in the marketplace.

The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) promotes evidence-informed, equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. We support the generation and effective use of high-quality evidence to inform decisionmaking and improve the lives of people living in poverty in low- and middle-income countries. We provide guidance and support to produce, synthesise and quality assure evidence of what works, for whom, how, why and at what cost.

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