

[Publish What You Fund](#) has tracked international funding to women's economic empowerment (WEE) 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 WEE, women's financial inclusion, women's empowerment collectives, unpaid care, and assessed gender integration approaches in [Bangladesh](#), [Kenya](#), and [Nigeria](#).

Our [methodology](#) for tracking funding to WEE is predicated on a holistic and rights-based approach that illustrates the numerous and intersecting dimensions of WEE. We tracked funding from bilateral, multilateral, development finance institutions, and philanthropic organisations between 2015–2019.

Funding to WEE remained largely unchanged

Overall international funding to Bangladesh more than doubled between 2015–2019. However, international grant funding to WEE remained largely unchanged. Grant and non-grant funding (loans, guarantees, and equity) levels were low for projects where WEE was the primary objective. There were not enough non-grant funded projects to make trend observations.

Which aspects of WEE receive funding in Bangladesh?

We tracked grant and non-grant funding to a broad range of projects that directly supported income earning, as well as projects which both support greater economic rights for women and girls, and create an enabling environment for WEE. We categorised these dimensions of WEE as 1) employment, entrepreneurship & productive resources access 2) rights, policies & supports 3) foundational capabilities.

International grant and non-grant funding to projects that directly target WEE through employment, entrepreneurship & productive resources access received the least funding compared to projects that support greater economic rights or create an enabling environment for WEE.

Employment, entrepreneurship & productive resource access includes activities most directly related to income earning. This includes access to productive and income generating resources, such as banking and financial services. Agriculture, forestry, fishing, manufacturing, and construction are the top sectors to employ women in Bangladesh.^a Despite this, funding for projects where WEE is the primary objective and/or projects that have a sole focus on women and girls was low for these sectors that are vital to WEE.

Rights, policies & supports includes activities which support greater economic rights for women and girls. These include funding to women's rights organisations to support WEE as well as projects that create an enabling policy environment and infrastructure for the realisation of WEE. For example, infrastructure projects, including energy access, rural development, and transport, are all important interventions to enable WEE. Although most of these sectors received funding that targeted WEE as one objective among others, funding for projects where WEE was the primary objective remains limited. Our analysis suggests that social dialogue and legal and judicial development were among the sectors that received the least funding for projects targeting rights, policies & supports.

Foundational capabilities includes activities that support income generating activities by enhancing agency through knowledge acquisition, improved individual and family health, bodily autonomy, and gendered social services and protections. This includes universal rights, education, access to health, and gender-based violence. Projects supporting foundational capabilities received the most funding in Bangladesh during our time frame; within this, most funding went to health and basic needs.

^a ADB Briefs. 2016. "No.68,2016. Women at Work." <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/203906/women-work.pdf>

Eighty-two percent of grant funding to basic needs is humanitarian funding, with 49% of basic needs grants funding allocated to the emergency response sector in Bangladesh. This is largely due to the ongoing refugee crisis in Bangladesh which has intensified since 2017.

Who funds WEE in Bangladesh?

Most of the international grant funding identified as targeting WEE in Bangladesh is funded by bilateral governments. The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (formerly DFID) reported the highest disbursements to WEE focused projects between 2015–2019. This was followed by the United States Agency for International Development, Global Affairs Canada, Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Germany's Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. Collectively, the top five grant funders represented 63% of the total grant funding to WEE projects in Bangladesh. A more nuanced analysis of the types of WEE projects funded by these top grant funders shows a clear priority for funding foundational capabilities with employment, entrepreneurship & productive resource access receiving only 10% of their funding.

The Asian Development Bank reported the highest non-grant funding commitment to WEE. The top five non-grant funders make up 98% of the total non-grant funding to WEE mapped for Bangladesh; 18% of this funding went to employment, entrepreneurship & productive resource access. This compares to 28% allocated to foundational capabilities and 53% to rights, policies & supports.

Which groups of women did this funding intend to support?

We found that for 69% of grant funded projects funders specified a certain group of women, compared to 43% of non-grant funded projects. In the case of grant funded WEE projects, 'poor', 'vulnerable', and 'rural' women were the most commonly cited target groups of women in Bangladesh. Girls or adolescents were the second most mentioned group. Non-grant funded projects tended to specify the same groups of women, with the addition of Dalit women, who were not specified for any grant funding. 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.

Unpaid care work and WEE funding

Our research included a focused analysis to determine which WEE projects also addressed women and girls' unpaid care work (UCW) in Bangladesh. Our analysis determined that only 3% of WEE projects addressed women and girls' UCW. This is less than 2% of total international funding to Bangladesh between 2015–2019. Even fewer projects explicitly included UCW as an objective or outcome.

- Funders are mostly integrating care services and social protection benefits in their WEE programs in Bangladesh which are also critical UCW policy areas.
- Our findings suggest two gaps in funding – projects targeting care-supporting workplaces and measurement tools such as time use surveys to reduce UCW.

COVID-19 and WEE funding

Given the time frame and data constraints, we have only limited data available to analyse funding for the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2020–2021, only 5% of grants with a COVID-19 component directly targeted WEE and women's employment, entrepreneurship & productive resources access. We identified one WEE non-grant-funded project with a COVID-19 component. Of the WEE projects we identified as having a COVID-19 response component, less than 12% targeted reducing unpaid care responsibilities for women and girls.

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