

Findings Brief

External Review of the Women's Rights and Citizenship Program

This findings brief is based on the report “Women’s Rights and Citizenship Program Review” by Drs Janet Billson-Mancini, Shoa Asfaha and Ranjita Mohanty. The full report is available from IDRC’s Evaluation Unit.

The Women’s Rights and Citizenship (WRC) program was launched in 2006 to support applied research in the field of women’s rights, citizenship and development. The program contributes to bringing Southern voices into current debates in the international gender and development field.

Since its inception in 2006, WRC has approved 45 research projects and 14 research support projects, in addition to carrying over 29 projects from the former Gender Unit. The program encompasses five core thematic entry points (women’s citizenship and governance; access to justice; sexual and reproductive rights; economic rights; and migration) that explore opportunities for and threats to gender equality.

WRC reflects two important trends among development-oriented researchers. First, many partners are moving away from the concept of isolated, individual social research toward a collaborative mode in which people of varying experiences in research, administration, or advocacy combine energies to produce quality research on pressing issues. Second, many partners are moving toward a more applied focus in the selection of research questions and practical application of research results. Both trends dovetail with IDRC and by extension, WRC’s practice.

1. Program Aims

WRC supports research and research-support activities to meet the following specific objectives:

1. To generate methodologically sound data and analysis on concrete issues of concern in the field of women’s rights, citizenship and development.
2. To expand the capacity of individuals and groups working on women’s rights and citizenship in the South to conceptualise and conduct research, and to disseminate results with a view to influencing policy.
3. To facilitate women’s organisations, civil society organisations, partners within the state and researchers to use evidence generated by WRC-supported research, and the space and capacity created by WRC-supported activities, to expose and challenge gender discriminatory structures, policies, programs, institutions and practices, and to formulate concrete recommendations for policy and/or social change.

2. Review Methodology

The review team undertook a mixed methods review using primary and secondary data sources. The data-collection methods included document review, individual and group interviews and field visits to Mali, Sénégal, India, Thailand, Barbados, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Honduras. In addition, the review team conducted an electronic survey of all project leaders in the current program portfolio to provide breadth of data for all current or recently closed WRC projects.

A sample of 15 projects was purposively selected based on region, thematic entry point, project life cycle, and special focus on at least one of the three major WRC objectives (sound research, capacity building, or policy influence). The review team interviewed IDRC staff, WRC partners and representatives of international organizations including research donors working on WRC issues.

3. Review Findings

The WRC program as a whole has evolved over its three years of implementation. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that WRC has moved substantially forward in meeting its objectives of supporting sound research and analysis in the field and building research capacity; networks are forming that will support both quality research and capacity building in the future, although this varies by region and by thematic area. WRC is making a noteworthy contribution to policy, legal, and economic development as the rights of women are expanded, protected, and legitimized; its contributions are not just about the individual policymaker but also about addressing the power structures, assumptions, stereotypes, and mythologies that are used to withhold women's full rights and citizenship.

The reviewers concluded that WRC is addressing its core thematic areas through its choice of grantees and reaching its objectives as a program via an integrated set of funded projects. It has built capacity among its researchers and has enabled young people, NGOs, and communities to work with seasoned researchers on women's rights and citizenship issues of mutual interest.

Projects reviewed indicated that significant progress has been made towards program objectives. Most projects have generated solid data and analysis, including some findings that challenge existing assumptions on women's rights and citizenship. A key finding at the project level is that facilitation of interaction among researchers is as important as technical support in contributing to methodological and analytical strength.

3.1 Niche

WRC makes important contributions to the field by producing evidence-based, methodologically sound analytical research on themes that are relevant to poor women in developing countries. The program meets a clear global need for thought-provoking, reliable research on women's rights and citizenship. Through its projects and supporting programmatic activities, WRC is building a body of evidence that contributes to global and regional debates on women's rights and citizenship. Respondents of all types commented that few resource providers exist for this type of research—and in many instances, WRC is the only one. The program's strong commitment to capacity building and policy influence, and consistent focus on rights and citizenship set it apart. Forging partnerships across widely different stakeholders has brought depth to the program and extended the reach of partners. The review indicated that the need for the program's conceptual framework is marked.

Mechanisms are in place for WRC's sustainability as a program: strong conceptual elements, effective program implementation, and a strong comparative advantage in funding applied research in defined niche area. WRC is the only program at IDRC explicitly organized around human rights and, in the view of respondents and the reviewers, has significant potential to reconfigure how researchers, policy makers, and women in general think about women's rights and citizenship.

3.2 Capacity Building

WRC has made appreciable progress in research capacity building in all regions reviewed. The program has supported partners in designing research with the potential of influencing policy and social change. Various strategies have been used such as establishing training institutes, promoting a collaborative model of research, enhancing research skills of young researchers through graduate scholarships and formal and on-the-job training, and enhancing management and communication skills of researchers. WRC funding for up to three years enables recipients to build over time, confidence and capacity in proposal development, research design, data collection, interpretation, critical thinking, data analysis, gender analysis, and reporting.

The program has made considerable progress in building capacities for collaborative research between academics and activists. The reviewers found evidence of this collaboration is in researcher teams and institutional partnerships, which have combined academic researchers and advocacy activists. Academic–activist collaboration has influenced research strategies and perspectives for influencing policy for social change. Academic partners stressed that working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) stands out as an excellent way to build capacity for conducting field research; learning more about the populations and how NGOs have worked with them allows for “a more rigorous analysis and comparability with the [project] teams of other countries.” This point is significant in light of the policy influence and social change intentions of WRC-funded research.

WRC has been successful in opening up and consolidating spaces for gender studies in academic institutions, where such research did not exist or was not recognized, including institutions that are technical in focus. In other contexts, WRC has consolidated and strengthened already existing efforts, thus making them more resourceful and visible (e.g., at universities in Sénégal, Latin America and South Asia).

WRC support has also assisted researchers in developing innovative methodologies that are suited to gathering data among unique populations and in difficult contexts. In cases reviewed, partners have been able to overcome time and resource limitations by revising strategies and engaging senior researchers more heavily in the field, and by empowering younger researchers. Examples were found in each region visited. The West African project on female genital mutilation, a highly sensitive issue, has adopted participatory and reflexive analysis. In South Asia, a project on decentralization uses a more nuanced understanding of women’s voice based on the political connotations of language. Another study provides an interpretation of how women’s identity and membership is constructed in drinking water and irrigation projects. In India a project interprets how governance issues appear different when viewed through the lens of low-caste rural women compared to the lens of policy makers. A research laboratory in Latin America uses a socio-legal framework to clarify how migrant women are constructed as victims.

3.3 Influencing and informing public debate and policy

Policy impacts are becoming visible. The Information Communication Technologies/Female Genital Mutilation project in Africa is changing the cultural practices of female genital mutilation through changing the attitudes and behaviour of young people in communities. Among WRC projects on decentralization, an India-based project is mobilizing communities to change the cultural practices of discrimination against lower caste persons and women; this has a bearing on their performance as elected representatives in decentralized local governance. In Latin America, a project is heightening awareness of how machismo and domestic violence deter women from participating in local councils. These projects are most effective where policies or legislation are already in place, but have remained only as rhetoric in the absence of accompanying cultural or social change.

Virtually all beneficiaries consulted mentioned working with and through primary actors, including bureaucrats who determine public policy at the local level. Some partners work through legislative assemblies, which develop the legal norms (laws) and/or through central governments, which both develop and execute policy. The justice sector has been another avenue of influence. For example, a child support project in Latin America has provided hard evidence on gender inequities under the law and has invested in consciousness-raising with district attorneys and other legal professionals. Collaboration with justices has made the difference in moving public (and government) opinion toward reform of the child support system.

3.4 Communicating Research Findings

Creating public opinion to influence the policy environment and cultural practices has been a consistent focus for WRC. Positive program outcomes have occurred in WRC's dissemination of research findings at the program and project levels. In addition to scholarly publications, the reviewers noted that partners are disseminating findings to governments and donors, civil society organizations, and the wider public. In South Asia, WRC has helped partners share findings through regional conferences and seminars. In certain cases WRC has taken up the task of influencing policy and communicating research results, e.g., the Adverse Sex Ratio ("Daughter Deficit") project in South Asia. WRC's 2008 Decentralization Conference in Mexico, successfully brought together partners from several regions, as well as participants from universities, international organizations, governments, and civil society organizations.

WRC supported researchers have formed or joined existing networks in which they communicate their perspectives and findings to policy makers. Forest Action, Nepal, has held multiple forums to engage with the drafting of the new constitution. Policy influence has also involved sharing the findings with international agencies such as the United Nations and the International Organization on Migration (in migration projects in Latin America, South Asia, and South East Asia), among others. The research on the Daughter Deficit in India has drawn media and government attention that may well have an impact on public opinion and cultural practices. Newspapers, television, radio, and photo exhibits (the Thai-Burma Border Migration project) have been used by the program and its partners to communicate research for the purpose of influencing public opinion. Recipients did, however, inform the reviewers that they would like increased support for the strategic dissemination of research findings.

3.5 Knowledge Sharing

Survey respondents said that WRC has helped bring stakeholders together, create wider regional networks, provide helpful insights and feedback, build credibility for research institutions, support the advancement of knowledge, and enable local women to use science for advocacy. Most significantly—WRC has allowed for completion of research that would otherwise not be possible.

A review of the WRC web pages reveals sophisticated statements that explicate "rights" and "citizenship." The review team recommended a more strategic use of these pages in order to highlight key findings and lessons learned regarding research strategies and policy influence.

3.6 Risk management

WRC appears to be anticipating and managing all of the risks set out in the "IDRC Corporate Risk Profile—2008-2009". The persistence and power of deeply rooted social hierarchies and their negative effects on women can be discouraging for researchers and community stakeholders alike. Thus, risks surround research on highly charged and politically sensitive topics that have broad policy implications (such as the HIV/AIDS, female genital mutilation, and child support projects). Research on women's rights and citizenship may in itself be threatening to policy-makers, who might ignore, dismiss, or recast valid findings.

WRC has evaluated its activities/recipients through routine risk assessments and approval procedures at project start-up. Partners consulted view WRC program staff as being helpful in advancing research capacity and focus on policy influence. Interviewees commented positively upon effective program management and WRC's intensive and constructive comments at the proposal stage, which has often helped to avert risk down the road. Given that WRC funding can involve both corporate and project level risks, more formative program and tighter project-level evaluation would allow the program to increase its learning around research design and communication of findings.

4. Issues for consideration

WRC appears to have made impressive strides towards accomplishing IDRC's mission of "Empowerment through Knowledge." Those consulted by the review team perceive WRC as a critical player in the field of women's rights, with its approach to social change, support for capacity development, and intention to influence both academic and policy discourse. They see women's rights and citizenship as a critical field for investing resources for research for development. It makes sense for the program to further connect women's rights and citizenship to the larger processes of democracy, political participation, and governance (beyond decentralization) to achieve broader impact.

4.1 Increase knowledge sharing and reach

Isolation of projects from each other reduces research quality, analytical rigor, and the possibilities of policy influence. During the review process, recipients referred to a disconnect between their small-scale projects in relation to the large-scale changes they aspire to make. WRC could play a much stronger role in breaking down the isolation between partners/projects and in building capacity for both research and policy influence. WRC could extend the reach of its policy influence work by consolidating key findings across different themes and sub-themes and engaging in more research synthesis and sharing lessons learned across regions on how to engage at the institutional level.

Since networks can play a critical role in taking policy work forward, there is a demand for WRC to support the development of regional and global networks and linkages among peers. Although there has been some support in these areas, WRC has been traditionally focused on research supply rather than research demand. There is now a need to close the gap between the two through the further development of south-south and south-north networks and encouraging relationships between research partners (producers) and research users.

4.2 Program focus

To further contribute to shaping the academic and policy discourse on women's rights and citizenship, the program should consider targeting a few key thematic entry points to maximize chances of visibility. Thematic entry points can cover a huge canvas of countries and multiple local levels of government in a vast region. WRC's resources are taxed due to their spread across multiple thematic areas, regions, and researchers. By focusing more on a few critical issues, WRC could have more impact. Although the program is firmly rooted within the field of women's rights as articulated in key international instruments (for example, the MDGs), WRC could maximize its policy impacts by selecting some research projects that explicitly build evidence for what works in achieving these goals (all of which depend on women's rights for realization). As a result, policy implications would be more transparent to governments and the findings would have more immediate relevance for policy debates and social change efforts.

4.3 Capacity building and research excellence

WRC should continue to work toward balancing capacity building and excellence of research objectives. Given the nature of some of the socially contested issues that are addressed by WRC-supported research, it is critical that policy engagement efforts be underpinned by analytically and methodologically solid research findings. By identifying a few regional institutions where partners could turn for training, technical skills, and mentoring, the program could offer more intensive, systematic methodological training, given the risks inherent in working with grassroots organizations. The reviewers offer a number of suggestions for balancing and working toward the achievement of capacity building and research quality objectives including the development of regional capacity building hubs and the building of cadres of feminist researchers through a cohort model.

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