

# Why are there so few women in top international development posts?

March 8 2023, by Astrid R.N. Haas

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A global reckoning is emerging in the international development sector. Donors and the wider public are recognizing the need for aid organizations to practice what they preach on [diversity and inclusion](#).

Diversity is about recognizing the multitude of characteristics all people hold. It encompasses gender, ethnicity, religion, disability and sexuality. Inclusion relates to the ability to use these traits by enabling everyone to participate.

Yet, as a woman of color who has led organizations in the development sector, I myself have experienced the challenges associated with a lack of diversity.

As an urban economist, I can see the evidence of the strong benefits of diversity and inclusion. Successful cities show what societies can achieve when they accept and include people from a multitude of backgrounds. The density of diversity is exactly the reason that cities are the [engines of innovation](#).

There is also a [growing body of evidence](#) suggesting that when [women](#) serve as [political leaders](#), governments are not only more inclusive but also better at delivering public services.

Yet globally, at a city level, [fewer than 5% of leadership positions](#) are held by women.

This is against a backdrop in which, since [colonial times](#), African cities women have been [central to economic activity, particularly in the informal economy](#). For example in Kampala, Uganda, it is estimated that over [70% of single person businesses](#) are owned and run by women.

In many African cities a disproportionate amount of work on infrastructure and service provision [is funded and carried out](#) by the international aid sector. And while terms like "gender-mainstreaming" and "inclusion" have become a common catchphrases in this community, from my own experiences it is not clear that some of these organizations are living up to their own standards.

To my knowledge, there has been no systematic analysis of the state of diversity and inclusion in the sector. Therefore, together with my co-researcher and fellow economist Giles Dickenson-Jones, I have embarked on a [project](#) to investigate this.

We have collected data on diversity for organizations operating in the international development sector. Our goal is to develop an "aid diversity index" that allows us to track and rank the relative performance of organizations across multiple measures of diversity and inclusion.

As a start, we've analyzed one core dimension of diversity: gender. This looks at how well women are represented in [leadership](#) positions [in the aid sector](#).

[Our analysis](#) suggests that women and men are almost equally represented on senior leadership teams, but the most senior positions in aid organizations are still dominated by men. This does not reflect the overall structure of the industry. Furthermore, it is likely that these organizations are losing out because, as cities across history and around the world have demonstrated, embracing diversity drives innovation and change.

## **Women in senior leadership**

Current available evidence is scarce. What is available suggests that women are likely to make up the [majority of the workforce](#) in the international development sector. If this was reflected in senior management and board positions, we would expect more of these positions to be occupied by women too.

But according to even the limited evidence, this is often not the case. For instance, in the US, women make up [75% of the not-for-profit workforce](#), but only 43% of CEOs. This was also the conclusion reached

by UNWomen. In its 2016 report on the [Status of Women in the United Nations System](#), it found that women tended to dominate junior positions, but accounted for a much smaller share of senior leadership.

To develop a comprehensive list of organizations operating in the international development sector, we analyzed data from the [International Aid Transparency Initiative \(IATI\)](#). The database included aid recipients as well as donor governments, philanthropic foundations, and other organizations that either provide or receive funding. We limited our initial analysis to major recipients of aid, selecting the top 150 organizations in terms of funds received. Complete data was available for only 72 of those organizations.

We then engaged several Ugandan research assistants who helped us review each organization's website to collect data on the size and composition of their senior leadership teams and board. The focus on the highest levels of management is based on the assumption that they provide the greatest influence on how an organization functions and resources are allocated.

For senior management, we included anyone with a senior title (such as "director"). This was based on the hierarchy of staff titles presented on their website.

Country and regional directors were also included but were separately categorized for analysis. Board members were also identified from an organization's website and included all members responsible for monitoring and advising on an organization's performance, strategy, governance or leadership.

One of the constraints in our approach is that we assigned the sex of each staff member by the information available on each organization's website, via their name, picture, title or chosen pronoun. We are aware

that this may not always reflect their gender identity. In the future we intend to seek feedback on the data from surveyed organizations to provide an opportunity to correct any factual errors.

## **Mixed results**

Our analysis showed that females held about 50% of senior leadership positions. This was a promising result. It indicated that men and women were equally represented at senior levels for the organizations surveyed. But it is lower than expected, given the proportion of females working in the sector is likely to be high.

Women also made up 50% of senior management, 48% of [board members](#) and 47% of country directors.

But women held only 32% of the most senior positions on senior management teams (such as CEO).

Nearly a third of the organizations had men holding 60% or more of positions on both their [senior management](#) team and board.

And more than 40% of organizations in our sample had men in all the available senior positions on their leadership teams.

This means that nearly half of the organizations in our sample have women serving in the most senior positions in their leadership team.

## **What's next?**

Our analysis shows that on the one dimension of diversity—gender—the aid sector still has a way to go to achieve parity. In future analyses, we will tackle other areas such as racial [diversity](#) in senior leadership

positions, which is [known to be a common problem](#).

More diverse and representative leadership teams will be more innovative and better suited to support the ultimate beneficiaries in cities where they work. This sector should therefore be embodying these values through their own policies, practices, and, above all, people.

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