

Gender audits – from paper to practice

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Over the past few years, ACFID and our members have been at looking at how gender audits can help drive organisational change and improve practice on gender equality. The #MeToo movement has placed renewed importance on this work, and on ensuring development agencies are addressing the culture of their own organisations when it comes to their attitude towards gender equality.

Based on social auditing principles, gender audits draw on various methodologies – ranging from participatory to desk-based analysis – to comprehensively assess all aspects of an organisation's work, internal policies, and culture against gender equality markers. However, gender audits are only effective if the issues they surface are addressed by the organisation, leading to improvements in practice.

This juncture – the point at which gender audit findings get translated into practice – is the subject of our qualitative research, recently presented at Devpolicy's [Australasian Aid Conference](#). Our research explores the effectiveness of gender audits for changing organisational and development practice on gender equality, and what factors increase the likelihood that findings from a gender audit would be owned and applied.

Based on key informant interviews with staff from three international development agencies who had led or worked on a gender audit within the past five years, we identified some of the strategies staff used to overcome common risks throughout the process.

One of the key factors for ensuring a successful audit was **organisational readiness**. Conducting a gender audit may not be the right step for a given organisation at a particular time, but if there is readiness, the impact from an audit on ways of working can be significant. This includes ensuring your organisation has the necessary expertise – both in-house and, if required, by allocating resources for outside support – and political will in the form of support from the CEO and leadership team.

Ensuring leadership are on board with the process of undertaking a gender audit and understand the reasons behind it is critical to securing their support at later stages of the process. This is imperative, because gender audits raise expectations that actions will be taken to address any gender issues identified, and if this does not occur, the risk to organisational credibility and potential negative impact on staff commitment are high.

Communication was identified as one of the most important strategies to build and maintain this support. For a CEO, allowing a staff member of your organisation to survey other staff on their experience of working there, and look into all the nooks and crannies of your organisation, is a significant commitment. Early conversations with leadership to make sure they fully understand what the process involves, the difficult issues it might raise, and the importance of staying the course, are critical to securing the necessary political will to carry the audit from start to finish, and ensure the findings translate into practice. Beyond leadership, everything from regular newsletters and updates to conversations in the lunch room were raised as critical to ensuring staff across the whole organisation had ownership over the process and findings.

Staff ownership was a key source of **accountability** for organisations to follow through on gender audit findings. Coupled with interest from the Board, donors, international offices and partner organisations, having both internal and external accountability was critical to making sure that changes inspired by the gender audit were acted on. Linking changes to other organisational processes, like donor monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) and reporting, was also key to embedding change.

Ultimately, changing policies and procedures alone is not enough to move the needle on gender equality. Social norms around gender are deeply embedded, and it's particularly important for gender specialists to

remember that people's views are shaped by the culture that surrounds them. Meeting people where they are and taking them on a journey will be the only effective way to truly shift attitudes, behaviours, and practices. The power of gender audits is that they can shine a light on the way that cultural and social attitudes affect our views, and provide a basis for creating lasting change.

This blog is based on research presented at the Australasian Aid Conference 2018. The full presentation is available on the [conference website](#).

Our research is ongoing, so if your organisation has done a gender audit in the last five years, please get in touch to share what you have learned. Contact us here: [Alice Ridge](#) and [Dr Juliet Hunt](#).