Realizing Gender-Responsive ID Systems: A Proposed Framework for Policymakers

Megan O'Donnell

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the available evidence, this article questions the gender neutrality of the design, implementation, and use of identification systems. It asserts that ID systems often interact with legal, economic, and social gender-specific constraints in ways that risk excluding women and girls from equal benefits of possessing an ID. Fortunately, ID systems can be designed and implemented to mitigate this risk and inclusively benefit people regardless of gender. The article proposes a simple decision framework for policymakers who seek to institute gender-responsive ID systems. It highlights key questions that should be asked from the outset of system design, drawing upon examples of promising approaches that can be scaled in existing contexts or considered for replication in comparable contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, women and girls continue to face gender-specific constraints preventing them from participating fully in society and benefiting equally from their contributions. The realm of identification is no exception. In this article, I contend that identification systems—in their design, implementation, and usage—cannot be assumed to be gender-neutral and thus equally beneficial to women and girls. The vast majority of ID systems are designed and implemented in contexts where deeply embedded gender norms drive gaps in access to opportunities for skills development, resources, mobility, and agency. The increased centrality of digital technologies in delivering ID and associated benefits—coupled with gender gaps in access to, independent use of, and skills surrounding these technologies—means that gaps may well be exacerbated. Accordingly, policymakers should presume that ID systems will not equally benefit women and girls, unless intentionally designed, implemented, and evaluated with a gender lens in mind.

How can this gender lens be applied practically? Here I present a set of simple questions as a proposed framework that can be used by policymakers to ensure ID systems' design, implementation, and use at minimum do not exacerbate—and ideally narrow—gender gaps in the access to and use of ID and associated benefits. In doing so, I draw upon examples from the wider gender and development literature

(e.g., education, economic empowerment, financial inclusion, and civil registration and vital statistics as a closely related field) to propose ways forward.

THE BENEFITS OF ID FOR GENDER EQUALITY & INCLUSIVE GROWTH

When women and girls are able to access and use IDs, the benefits are well-documented. Badiee and Appel (2019) [1] and Setel et al. (2018) [17] trace the importance of identification across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those focused on poverty eradication, nutrition, health, education, economic growth, reduced inequality, and peace and security. Dahan and Hanmer (2015) [7] point to women and girls' possession of ID as a necessity for accessing financial services, receiving social protection support, and participating in civic and political processes. Buvinic and Carey (2019) [4] similarly reference ID as a means to increase women's political voice and agency and economic empowerment. Women and girls face gender-specific risks where ID can serve as a form of protection, whether within the context of child, early and forced marriage; sex trafficking; or economic vulnerability following divorce or widowhood (Knowles and Koolwal 2016 [15]). For example, an ID documenting a girl's age can (in part) insulate her from being subject to child marriage; it is difficult to enforce laws criminalizing child marriage when a girl's precise age is unknown (Hanmer and Elefante, 2016 [12]).

Gender-equal access to and use of ID systems also enables better policy decision making that can result in inclusive benefits for populations. With a comprehensive mapping of its population, governments can ensure they reach individuals with information to boost civic engagement and well-being, through tax collection to generate revenue, and with social protection schemes to support vulnerable populations. By facilitating the ability of governments to target vulnerable populations with services to boost human capital and productivity, as well as to mobilize increased resources through tax collection, inclusive ID systems can lead to benefits for whole economies.

DEMONSTRATING GENDER GAPS

But the benefits referred to above are not guaranteed. Instead, they depend on the design, implementation, and use of ID systems benefiting women and girls equally. ID systems operate in contexts where gender inequalities exist, and can often risk limiting equal access to, use of, and benefit from ID among women and girls. In low-income countries, 44 percent of women lack an ID, in contrast to 28 percent of men (World Bank 2018 [20]). In Afghanistan, for example, almost twice as many men as women have an ID (World Bank 2018 [20]), and in Pakistan, women are 6 percent less likely than men to have an ID, with even more pronounced gaps observed among low-income populations (Knowles and Koolwal 2016 [15]).

In some contexts, through just examining access to ID between all men and all women, we may not see gaps at a national level. But national (or even subnational) averages can run the risk of masking gender inequalities in access to ID for certain subgroups (Bhatia et al. 2017 [2]). As a result, it is crucial to further disaggregate data by income level, caste, age, migrant status, and other demographic characteristics to fully grasp which populations may be excluded from the benefits of identification (more on this below).

HOW CAN POLICYMAKERS PROCEED?

Though gender gaps are universal, they manifest in different ways in different contexts. In certain contexts, for example, gender inequality is reflected in women's confinement to the private sphere, where women require permission from and accompaniment by a spouse or male guardian to travel outside the home. In Pakistan, for example, 73 percent of women are accompanied when traveling to obtain an ID card, compared to only 31 percent of men (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2013 [14]). In much of sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls are less often confined to the private sphere of the household, and often travel long distances to fetch water and actively participate in market-based economies, among other daily tasks. But gender inequalities persist, including in the form of disproportionate unpaid care work, gaps in education and skills, and social norms justifying gender-based violence. As a result of these contextual specificities, policy decisions taken to strive toward gender equality in the benefits of ID systems must also be context specific.

That said, some general questions can assist policymakers in identifying the need for and specific nature of context-specific solutions. The design, implementation, and use of ID systems have the potential to each work towards either inclusion or exclusion. I propose a framework for policymakers seeking to grapple with the complexities of how gender inequalities may intersect with the ID systems that they design and implement (Figure 1). To contribute to maximizing the impact of ID systems for all, including women and girls, I recommend posing the following questions:

Figure 1. Gender-Responsive ID: A Proposed Framework for Policymakers

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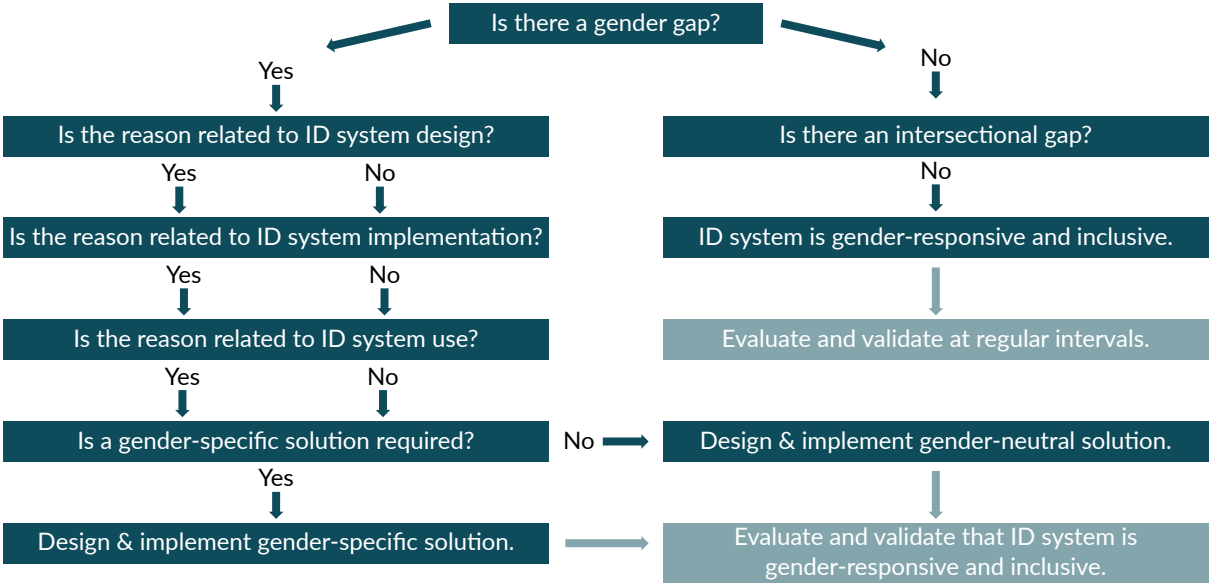
1. Is there a gap?

As a first step, policymakers should ask whether there are any observed disparities in possession of ID by gender.[1][2] As mentioned above, there are scenarios where a gap by gender alone will not be observed. Under these circumstances, policymakers must push themselves to think intersectionally, since women and men are not monolithic groups. This means interrogating whether gaps are present when gender and income level, age, location, migrant status, and other demographic characteristics interact.

We see this play out in the realm of birth registration in sub-Saharan Africa, where gender gaps are not borne out in national level data but are present in some contexts when girls belong to polygamous households. For example, in Burundi, Guinea, Kenya, Rwanda, and Namibia, girls are less likely to be registered than boys when they live in polygamous households (Koolwal 2016 [16]). This may be due to the fact that cultural contexts presenting polygamy between one man and multiple wives also see wider gender gaps in social status and agency, but more research is needed to explore underlying causes of observed trends. *Intersectionality* can also mean that women and girls of a specific age group are less likely to have legal documentation. In Pakistan, children regardless of gender are equally likely to have a birth certificate, but women (particularly young women living in particular provinces) are less likely to have an ID card (Knowles and Koolwal 2016 [15]).

It is also important to look beyond access to use—and thus benefits from—ID systems. In the area of financial services, women often open accounts (or have accounts opened on their behalf), but these accounts lie dormant and unused for a number of reasons (e.g., lack of demand for the account; lack of financial and digital literacy). Within the context of ID, policymakers must also broaden their focus to observe gaps in how ID systems—and ID documents once obtained—can be used (e.g., in accessing education, delaying marriage, voting, or accessing social subsidies and finance). Given the linkages between ID and these areas, there will likely be opportunities to narrow gender gaps in the use/benefits of ID where they are found.

2. Is the underlying reason intrinsic to the ID system's design, explained by its implementation, or driven by the way it is used?

Once a gender gap—intersectional or otherwise—in access to or use of ID has been identified, policymakers can transition into examining the underlying causes and how best to address them. Some gender gaps in accessing and using ID can be explained by gender-specific discrimination embedded within an ID system and its surrounding policy environment, whereas others may be driven by the intersection of a *prima facie* gender-neutral ID system that intersects with pre-existing discriminatory gender norms to exclude women and girls.[3] To better understand the drivers of observed gender gaps, policymakers should inquire as to whether gaps can be explained by an ID system's design, implementation, and/or use.

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1   This exercise relies on high-quality, comprehensive data reflecting which individuals and subgroups access, use, and benefit from an ID system, which many governments currently lack. Investing in data collection on this front should be prioritized to ensure the inclusivity of ID systems and related benefits. Espey (2019 [8]) further outlines the rationale behind investing in this type of data collection (within the context of CRVS) and provides some cost estimates.

2   Though this article focuses on the ways in which women and girls can be excluded from full access to and use/benefits of ID, a lack of ID may also harm boys and men, such as within contexts where boys are at risk of child labor. Where gaps are found that disadvantage men and boys, or certain subgroups of them, the same framework can be applied.

3   In contexts with limited data on gender and other gaps in access to and use/benefit of ID, the analysis of factors underlying these gaps should still be assessed while concurrent efforts are made to improve data on ID systems.

Within the realm of design, I place *de jure* gender discrimination expressly tied to accessing ID: laws on the books that treat women and girls differently from men and boys within the realm of ID systems. The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law database reflects that married women cannot get an ID card in the same way as married men in 11 economies (World Bank 2016 [18]). In Cameroon, for example, Women, Business, and the Law found that married women must supply their marriage certificates when seeking to obtain an ID card, a requirement that is not applied to married men (World Bank 2016 [18]). Other legal restrictions include the requirement that married women (but not men) must provide an additional signature from a father or another guardian or indicate the name of their spouse in order to obtain an ID. In other contexts, identity cards are optional for women but legally required for men. These restrictions also apply within the realm of women applying for passports; 36 countries (16 in Africa) place additional burdens on women seeking to apply for a passport (World Bank 2020 [19]).

Where these laws and policies are absent, there is still the risk of gender gaps in access to and use of ID being driven by a gender-biased implementation of an ID system. This may occur in contexts, for example, where officials charged with distributing ID cards require women to provide additional documentation or proof of consent from male relatives, though no legal requirement is present.

Finally, we are likely to find quite a range of gender-specific barriers to women and girls' equal use of an ID system rather than an explicitly gender-biased design or method of implementation. Examples include high costs of obtaining an ID and long distances to travel to obtain it. Policymakers must be vigilant in interrogating which facets of an ID system may *appear* gender-neutral but are not when layered onto pre-existing discriminatory gender norms. Financial costs and physical distances are not barriers that on their face appear to be gender-discriminatory, but they interact with pre-existing discriminatory norms in ways that risk excluding women and girls.

With regard to cost, patriarchal social norms may mean that when decisions have to be made regarding how to use limited household resources, acquiring ID for men and boys will be prioritized over ID for women and girls. This is consistent with observed trends in education, where we see boys' education prioritized over girls', especially when parents can only afford school fees for some of their children (Evans, Akmal, and Jakiela 2020 [9]).

With regard to distance, women's and girls' disproportionate unpaid care work, limited access to transport, and social restrictions placed on their physical mobility may all contribute to making "gender neutral" ID systems inaccessible, especially if accessing locations where ID cards and related benefits are available requires traveling long distances. We see time and mobility constraints similarly holding women and girls back from equal educational attainment, and in particular equal participation and advancement within the workforce (Buvinic and O'Donnell 2016 [6]).

3. Is a Gender-Specific Solution Required?

Policymakers should then inquire as to whether a gender-specific solution is required. In the case of *de jure* gender discrimination, the answer is straightforward. Policymakers should seek to reform discriminatory laws to ensure women and girls are able to equally access, use, and benefit from ID systems. Of course, even where discriminatory laws are reformed, efforts will need to be made to socialize these reforms and ensure they are fully implemented.

Addressing other barriers can be more complex. Drawing upon the broader gender and development literature, we see that there are instances where targeted, gender-specific intervention is most likely to be effective (and cost-effective) and other instances where a gender-neutral reform can work more effectively to eliminate gender gaps and improve the lives of women and girls. In the context of economic opportunity and agency, where we continue to see widening rather than narrowing gender gaps, a gender-specific approach is often necessary to effectively address the gender-specific constraints women face (Buvinic and O'Donnell 2018 [5]). In contrast, within the realm of education and specifically with regard to learning outcomes, we see that gender-neutral reforms—those that improve the quality of schooling across the board for all students regardless of gender—are actually more effective in improving girls' educational attainment, literacy, and numeracy (Evans and Yuan 2019 [10]).

HOW CAN THESE LESSONS BE APPLIED TO THE REALM OF IDENTIFICATION?

If resources allow, gender-specific barriers related to financial constraints, as well as women and girls' time and mobility constraints, can be addressed through gender-neutral solutions. For example, even if the financial cost of an ID, or the physical distance required to travel to obtain one, translates into only women being excluded from ID access, use, and benefits, a gender-neutral solution (i.e., removing the cost of getting an ID for all people, or bringing registration units closer to all communities, including through the use of mobile enrollment units) could effectively eliminate observed gender gaps. Lessons can be drawn from the realm of education, where gender gaps in education narrow over time when costs are eased, as parents are no longer required to choose how to allocate scare resources (Evans, Akmal, and Jakiela 2020 [9]).

However, in the case where resources are constrained, and the elimination of all costs associated with ID or solutions such as mobile registrations units are not feasible when applied universally, then policymakers should use available resources in cost-effective ways, prioritizing the targeting of the left-behind population, consistent with the SDG "leave no one behind" agenda. Clearly identifying excluded populations through the steps outlined above will allow for targeted, cost-effective solutions.

It should be noted, however, that in contexts where gender discriminatory norms are strongly embedded, just removing costs or decreasing physical distance will not be sufficient, especially in light of the fact that fewer women than men articulate a demand for ID. Women are more likely than men to report that they do not need an ID card (30 percent versus 20 percent of men) and that they lack the support of relatives in obtaining an ID card (17 percent of women versus 2 percent of men) (Buvinic and Carey 2019 [4]). In these cases, financial incentives can potentially play a role to "nudge" women and their families to obtain ID, acting as an initial entry point to then expose them to the benefits that ID offers. But financial incentives alone may not ensure sustainable change: women must see the value ID adds to their daily lives to make use of identification's full range of benefits. In this regard, integrating the possession of an ID with social welfare benefits (e.g., health services, government subsidies, access to a SIM card) may also increase women's demand for ID, and do so more sustainably.

A final note of caution: at each stage of decision making, policymakers should consider potential unintended consequences. The perfect should not be made the enemy of the good, but policymakers should nonetheless act with a clear understanding that some solutions intended to bridge gender and other gaps in ID (e.g., providing ID digitally so that physical distance becomes less of a barrier) may also come with their own set of challenges. We see this in the cases of biometric ID systems and related financial services implemented in Pakistan and India, where women (particularly older women) with limited digital literacy faced disproportionate obstacles to access and use (Gelb 2018 [11]). Even when

women and girls possess sufficient skills, discriminatory social norms may impede their ability to autonomously and freely use digital technology (Borgonovi et al. 2018 [3]). At regular intervals when designing and implementing solutions, policymakers should rely on data and evidence demonstrating whether gaps in access to and use/benefits of ID systems are being effectively narrowed.

CONCLUSION

Because ID is such a powerful force for sustainable development, and indeed a necessary dimension of women's empowerment and progress toward gender equality, it is pivotal that policymakers prioritize the institution of gender-responsive ID systems. Particularly in the midst of a digital revolution, as policymakers continue to look towards digital modes of providing ID and allowing individuals to make use of its benefits, gender gaps in access to, free and independent use of, and skills surrounding digital technology will need to be kept top of mind as ID systems are designed and implemented. In the absence of dedicated efforts to address gaps in digital access, use, and literacy (as well as basic literacy and numeracy skills required for meaningful engagement with digital technology), policymakers risk the creation of well-intentioned identification systems that may nonetheless leave women and girls—and in particular the most vulnerable among them—behind.

Understanding identification from a gender perspective allows us to recognize and prioritize particularly vulnerable populations and those least likely to have access to and benefit from ID, among them girls living in polygamous households and women of certain age groups and based in certain locations. Identification isn't just critical for achieving gender equality; addressing underlying gender discrimination is essential to making sure that all people have identification and the benefits that come along with it.

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MEGAN O'DONNELL is a policy fellow and assistant director for gender at the Center for Global Development.

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