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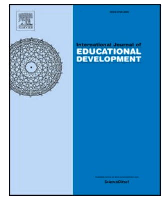

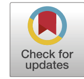

"Like an invisible hand": Gender in university cooperation for international development in Spain

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ABSTRACT

International development cooperation has been strongly influenced by gender mainstreaming. Recently, feminist cooperation and aid policies have emerged in different countries, calling for a change in approach. In Spain, universities are important actors in international development, not only by ratifying their commitment to the 2030 Agenda, but also by leading projects and educational actions towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Nevertheless, the gender perspective has sometimes been neglected or poorly implemented in higher education cooperation activities. This article analyses the experiences of cooperation projects in different Spanish universities, identifying their potential and limitations. The results show existing barriers to the integration of a gender perspective. Several opportunities and strategies for overcoming these barriers are addressed in order to move towards Spain's ambitious commitments of feminist cooperation.

1. Introduction

The last decades have entailed remarkable transformations in the "geographies of development" (Sanahuja and Tezanos Vázquez, 2017). After the limited impact of the Millennium Agenda (Amin, 2006; Briant Carant, 2017), the development paradigms are undergoing a crisis of legitimacy, while new geopolitical needs emerge. The post-2015 scenario represented a new juncture marked by the transnationalisation of development and the reorganization of inequalities on a global scale, which brought to the table the complexity and multidimensionality of development as a global problem. The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are intended to be a new political commitment to a global framework for action in the international development arena, overcoming past criticisms while responding to current global needs and challenges.

Spain has recently launched a Sustainable Development Strategy (Gobierno de España, 2021) as a legal foundation for implementing the 2030 Agenda. There has also been an in-depth reform of cooperation legislation, culminating in a new Law on Cooperation for Sustainable Development (Gobierno de España, 2023). It is therefore a key moment for the epistemological and applied field of international development in Spain, with a brand new legal framework that invites researchers and practitioners to imagine and rethink development models and implement new forms of cooperation.

This article addresses two strategic areas that the 2030 Agenda has placed at the forefront: the gender perspective (GP) and the role of higher education (HE). Feminist organisations and gender studies were among the most vocal in criticising the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Not surprisingly, the 2030 Agenda's turn towards sustainability was an opportunity to reframe gender issues (Briant Carant, 2017). On the other hand, HE was overlooked by the MDGs, which focused only on primary and secondary education. Tertiary education has gained prominence on the 2030 Agenda, in part because of the important role universities play as generators of knowledge, training and innovation (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021).

The following sections will present the argument that gender issues have been repeatedly addressed in development studies. Nevertheless, the question of their relationship with HE and the role of universities in international development remains largely unexamined. This study analyses the implementation of the gender approach in higher education institutions (HEIs) by focusing on the experiences of development projects within the post-secondary education space. Through a qualitative approach, this paper identifies the potential of such development projects, while also highlighting the barriers and challenges perceived by project leaders at different levels.

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2. Review of the literature

2.1. Gender and international development: from women to feminism

The inclusion of gender in international development has a long history (Kabeer, 2015; Razavi and Miller, 1995 for a detailed review). The first international development paradigms were developed without taking into account women and their specific needs, or if they were included at all, they were constituted exclusively as a vulnerable group or reduced solely to the role as caregivers. In the 1970s, as a result of the failure of developmentalism, the growing presence of women in international organizations and the pressure of their demands, the Women in Development (WID) approach was born. This approach was based on policies for equity, efficiency, poverty reduction and women as human capital. The advances of the WID approach were important, but very limited, and were strongly criticized by the Global South. All this, together with the expansion of the understanding of gender as a complex of economic, emotional and power relations (Connell, 2014), forced a shift towards a new approach in the late 1980s: Gender and Development (GAD), which focused on the inequalities that result from gender relations and the power structures that perpetuate them. The Fourth International Women's Conference in Beijing (1995) consecrated this approach, proposing a dual strategy to address gender inequalities: gender mainstreaming and specific actions for empowerment (Carballo de la Riva et al., 2019). Gender has thus become a central concern for development academics, agencies and NGOs, and is now an essential part of the development lexicon (Schnable et al., 2020).

Although the MDGs included a specific goal on gender equality (MDG3), the framework has long been criticised by gender experts and feminist organisations. Firstly, because it worked with a narrow notion of equality, focusing on indicators of access to basic needs, while neglecting other more political, social and economic dimensions (Briant Carant, 2017). Furthermore, the MDGs lacked synergy with each other, with "vertical and horizontal boundaries" in place that prevented a "more complex thinking about structure, agency and context in addressing inequality" (Unterhalter, 2012, p.253). Finally, the MDGs omitted important issues such as "reproductive health, governance, conflicts, economic growth and employment" (Fukuda-Parr, 2016, p.3), as well as "class and other differences among women" (Kabeer, 2015, p.202).

In Spain, both WID and GAD strategies have been incorporated into the policy framework[3] of Spanish cooperation over the last decade. However, these advances at the strategic level have been compromised in practice by the so-called "lost decade" of cooperation (Macías and Atienza, 2019). First, a drastic reduction of official development assistance since 2008, which has particularly affected gender and reproductive health-oriented projects (Espinosa, 2014). Second, a gradual invisibilisation of gender as a priority sector, due precisely to the desire to make it a comprehensive approach (AECID, 2014). Third, the lack of gender mainstreaming in cooperation practice. Most of the projects evaluated in 2016 omitted gender, and those that incorporated it did so with a very low amount of gender indicators (Jimenez, 2016). Therefore, although gender was well established in the rhetoric and strategy of Spanish cooperation at the time, its implementation was still an open question.

The post-2015 scenario offered new opportunities to put gender equality at the centre of the global agenda, as the SDGs represent a significant shift from the limited MDGs in terms of the gender approach. SDG5 include a specific target to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," while gender equality is mainstreamed in 13 other SDGs, which include gender equality commitments and targets (United Nations, 2015). Moreover, the shift in approach to North-South relations leaves a clear message regarding gender: inequalities are not only the product of poverty or certain cultural traditions, but patriarchy is also at work in industrialized capitalist societies and through the policies of neoliberalism. Responsibility is therefore (re)focused on all countries and their gender policies. The 2030 horizon also concretizes the shift towards an agenda more focused on the perspective of power and the inclusion of empowerment in all its dimensions: health, sexual and reproductive rights, economic resources, legislative change, etc. Finally, as Fukuda-Parr (2016) points out, participation has been encouraged with the will to include more women's voices in the process of creating and designing the agenda.

At the same time, in recent years, several countries such as Sweden, Canada, Norway, France, and Mexico have declared a shift in their foreign and assistance policies toward feminism, thanks to a favourable global context, a receptive public influenced by feminist mobilizations, personal values, and the willingness of political leadership (Gill-Atkinson et al., 2021). Spain has again aligned its national agenda by pushing a reform of the Spanish Cooperation Law (Gobierno de España, 2023) and a new Action Plan (Gobierno de España, 2021), and feminism has been incorporated as one of the hallmarks of the Spanish international development and foreign policy. Even though some feminist policies fall short on defining what they mean by "feminism" (Tiessen, 2019) -as it is the case of Spain-, they use the term to explicitly differentiate themselves from the previous WID and GAD approaches, by emphasising the transformative connotations of feminism over 'gender', which has become a term "diluted, denatured, depoliticised, included everywhere as an afterthought" (Cornwall et al., 2004, p.1).

Thus, it is a propitious moment, both internationally and in Spain, for the confluence of discourses on gender equality and international development, with the emergence of new and celebrated feminist rhetoric that aims to overcome the limitations of previous approaches.

2.2. Higher education: a key actor for international development agenda

Since the 1990s, universities in Spain have been important actors in cooperation for international development, as places of training, learning and social transfer. Linked to their social mission and the availability of specialized human capital, universities in Spain have been engaged in a wide range of activities, both in their home countries and throughout the global South: awareness-raising, research, technical assistance, development projects, scholarships, student mobility, among others (see Unceta, 2007 for a detailed review). Spanish universities have created solidarity structures -units, departments- that, although their institutional affiliation may vary, manage and promote volunteer programs, awareness-raising extracurricular courses, mentoring, service-learning, sustainability actions, and international cooperation (Ortega et al., 2013). The cooperation budget is mostly self-financed by HEIs and its objective is to reach 0.7 per cent of the total budget of the universities. Universities represent around the 0.4 per cent of the Spanish official development assistance (ODA) budget, investing between 9 and 14 million euros yearly.[4]

This rather idiosyncratic role that HEIs have played in Spanish development cooperation has been particularly highlighted and called for in the 2030 Agenda. First, tertiary education is included for the first time in SDG4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015).

[3] The Second Master Plan of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) (2006–2008) incorporates the approach to structural inequalities and is committed to gender equity. It also incorporates the dual strategy -mainstreaming and empowerment-, which has been maintained in consecutive plans to date. The Gender in Development Strategy is another key document for the consolidation of the GAD approach. We refer to (San Miguel Abad 2019; Carballo de la Riva et al. 2019; Espinosa, 2014), on gender equality in Spanish cooperation.

[4] According to data provided by the University Cooperation for Development Observatory, for the last available period 2007–2020.

If the MDGs focused on access to primary and secondary education, the shift to lifelong learning has made it possible to conceptualize the educational process as a whole and to include HE -including technical, vocational, and university training-in the development goals (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021; Hernández Tristán, 2019). Second, the 2030 Agenda also consolidates universities as critical partners and a driving force in advancing the SDGs. Specifically, HEIs are called to take action within four domains: education and capacity building, research and innovation, operations and governance, and external leadership (SDSN, 2020). Similarly, McCowan (2019) categorises the potential contribution of HEIs to the SDG, through the teaching of the framework, the production of knowledge, the promotion of public debate and awareness, the provision of services, and the embodiment of the SDGs' principles within the institution themselves.

Previous research has shown how universities can contribute to international development (for a comprehensive review, see McCowan, 2019). At the individual level, they can provide capacity building (Gómez Torres, 2018), help develop skills and attitudes among younger generations (Vázquez de Francisco, 2018), and ultimately enable individuals to pursue their agency freedom (Chankseliani et al., 2021). At the institutional level, international development can bring prestige and marketing positioning to universities while enabling capacity building within them (Vázquez de Francisco, 2018). For partner countries and institutions, international development can benefit from applied research that helps them to address their needs and solve social problems (Chankseliani et al., 2021). Following the latter, universities and their professionals identify with a combination of two approaches in addressing their potential to contribute to international development. On the one hand, an instrumental approach based on human capital theories. On the other, a humanistic/holistic approach based on human rights, capabilities, and liberation theories (Chankseliani et al., 2021).

The role of HEIs in international development is becoming increasingly acknowledged by development agents. Nevertheless, it is often assumed to be a "straightforward and automatic" process (McCowan, 2019, p. 214). Conversely, numerous and complex limitations exist to the potential of HEIs in relation to the SDGs. These include limited access and poor quality of education, as well as competition and commercialisation dynamics (McCowan, 2019), among others.

In terms of gender, the ratification of the 2030 Agenda by Spanish universities implies their commitment to gender equality, although this is a much-underexplored area. Spanish universities have consolidated and well-established equality departments, policies and plans (see Pastor Gosálbez et al., 2020 for a review). Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go in terms of the articulation between cooperation policies and equality policies in universities, which have followed parallel rather than intersecting paths in HE (Molina Bayón, 2018). In the most recent report on higher education cooperation (OCUD, 2019), gender is one of the most frequently mentioned markers of importance, particularly in projects developed in South America and sub-Saharan Africa. However, the fact that projects indicate that gender will be considered does not necessarily mean that it will be effectively taken into account. Monitoring research is scarce, so little is known about the difficulties of integrating this perspective and the resistances encountered in practice. Even less is known about evaluation, which tends to focus on project formalities rather than policy impact. On the other hand, the achievement of objectives and procedures related to the GP is rarely critically evaluated. Therefore, there may be a certain misalignment between project objectives and project practice.

Thus, the link between universities and international development is currently strong in discourse and strategic planning, but still empirically elusive (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021), especially in Spain, where the cooperation crisis has systematically limited the actions of universities in practice. The aim of this research is to go beyond the discursive domain and provide empirical evidence on how gender is considered in the practice of international cooperation projects in Spanish universities.

3. Methods

The research carried out for this paper fills the gap between the declarative level and the implementation of international development policies within universities. Since its launch in 2021, it has particularly focused on the GP. The methodology used in this study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to explore a wide range of data: official datasets reported by universities to the University Cooperation for Development Observatory, interviews with project leaders, experts and technical staff, an online survey administered to project leaders, observations of activities and follow-ups, and focus groups with students from different Spanish universities. All participants gave permission to record the interviews and focus groups and were always informed of the research objectives and actions during the fieldwork, in accordance with ethical guidelines.

Specifically, this article reflects on the experiences and challenges faced by development projects that reported working towards SDG5 and/or incorporating a GP. A sample of 174 projects from six Spanish universities was approached, first through an online survey and then through individual interviews with project members (from now on project leaders), and a review of the project documentation and the calls through which they were funded. The projects were diverse in terms of the types of actions and disciplines, and the way in which they introduced the GP, as for some it was the main objective of the project and for others it was secondary. This study used qualitative thematic analysis to explore the reflections and experiences of project leaders. The methodology follows an inductive coding strategy that allows themes to emerge from the data. The following sections identify the potential and limitations of university development projects in terms of gender/feminist approaches.

4. Results

The projects from our sample were diverse in terms of typology (training and educational courses, interviews and visits, workshops, technical assistance, etc.), and area of knowledge (psychology, philology, communications, physics, tourism, engineering, geography, etc.). What they did have in common is that they declared incorporating the GP in some way. The projects that declared including the gender approach as a priority mostly worked with women, youth, LGBTIQ+, and associations related to those groups. On the other hand, projects that stated including gender as a secondary approach, were those carried out in partnership with schools, tourism associations, universities, indigenous communities, and other local organizations.

This research has identified a particular profile among project leaders: the majority were women, university professors and/or researchers with little to moderate experience in international development and cooperation. Instead, their expertise in gender was diverse: some were highly engaged scholars specialized in gender studies, other's background was from social sciences/humanities with a general understanding of gender but no specialization, and finally some scholars coming from more technical disciplines. In terms of motivations, all the leaders interviewed were enthusiastic about implementing a gender approach and determined to do so, regardless of the difficulties. In the following sections, opportunities and challenges identified in their experiences are discussed.

4.1. *Potential: exchange of resources, knowledges, and values*

This research has identified the potential of university cooperation projects as expressed by the people leading them and informed by their experiences. This section explores some of the common potential highlighted during the interviews.

The project leaders noted that the impact of the projects was twofold. On the one hand, the role of the university and the project was to provide various kinds of resources to their partners in the global South. The most

common was the "provision of material, technical, and economic support". Another kind of resource was "the transfer of expertise and knowledge", but also the generation of employment and income in the places where they worked. Mobility was also seen as a potential, through visits by professors or members of associations and students from the global South. Regarding gender, most of the leaders saw potential in promoting women's presence and participation in the projects. On the other hand, the impact of the project was seen not only in the "giving" but also in the opportunities and benefits they "received" from participating in the project. The most emphasized was that the projects provided a "practical field", which allowed for "implementing real actions in a territory, and being able to see the effect of your implementation", which was reported to be "very gratifying and necessary".

The feeling that the university is quite disconnected from the real world and that knowledge is too theoretical was common, as one leader noted: "The university culture is very closed in theory. And it's okay to go beyond that". The opportunity to "apply contents" that were rather taught from "a theoretical perspective in the classes" was "super motivational for the students and even for the teachers", and they saw the potential to provide this in the cooperation projects.

Another type of benefit seen in the projects was the opportunity for mobility for university staff and students. By participating in the projects, they were able to travel to other places and have easier access to field sites where they could develop their research. In fact, one of the projects aimed to build North-South research partnerships to develop joint research between students from different countries. Finally, a less common but also present benefit was the opportunity to raise awareness among students, as this project leader expressed: "To understand yourself and your perspective and your life and to stop being the centre of your world and to see different perspectives and different worlds".

On the other hand, the project's potential was found to be more complex when examined from a GP. One of the main roles of universities in international development is to provide with expertise and specialized knowledge. Although this was found to be true in terms of the disciplines that each project focused on, gender expertise was less common among the projects. The willingness to incorporate a gender approach was often driven by the personal motivation of the researcher, but not always accompanied by expert orientation or self-learning about gender and international development. Even those leaders who had backgrounds in gender studies were not trained in the specifics of international development.

A common theme that emerged from the project leaders' responses to the question of gender potential was the possibility of providing gender role models for women and girls from the global South. They explained how the mobile female students and researchers could become "example" and "inspiration" of a "different mentality" for "local women and girls who can get used to the idea that there are other ways of possibly evolving and seeing life". It is worth noting that the reference to gender role models was linked to a very specific idea of progress and success for women, in line with a rather limited vision of women's empowerment:

> When they start seeing models of girls their age who are studying, who do not have children by their own choice, and who are not married because they do not feel like it [...] I think this is very important because it will open their perspective. [...] I believe that this can do more than many other things that are much more theoretical or even academic.

Finally, this ideal of informal value transmission should not be overestimated, as some leaders believed that "it can be more significant in terms of results than the project actions themselves".

As argued throughout this section, several potential outcomes were identified by project leaders, who particularly emphasized a dual beneficial impact, the opportunity to apply knowledge and to conduct field research. However, this potential was found to be highly nuanced when viewed through a gender lens.

This study has also identified barriers and challenges from the experiences of project leaders. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network proposes three types of barriers to the SDG's implementation in universities: personal, organizational, and external (SDSN, 2020). Following this approach, the next sections address the barriers and challenges identified by this research, with a particular focus on gender and feminist perspectives.

4.2. Personal barriers: mindset, approach, and feminist identification

Several personal barriers were identified, including narrow attitudes and approaches to gender equality and ambivalent feminist identifications among project leaders. The first barrier is related to certain mentalities and ideas about women and inequalities. Some leaders showed traces of an evolutionary view of societies, associating the oppression of women with "backwardness". As one project leader shared, "some tribes are more advanced, others are very unadvanced… I mean they follow traditions and are very little permeable to changes that come from outside. [...] They very closed, they are anchored in the past". Traces of paternalism were also present in the leaders' opinions, as some of them expressed the feeling that poverty and cultural traditions prevented women from "even seeing inequalities", and therefore they were "not ready to fight for their rights at this point". One project leader stated: "These women are so lost in other problems that culturally and socially are being thrown at them every day, that they can't see this [the need for gender equality]". Another project leader declared that "to make a woman see that she can find another job, maybe right now is impossible because they are not at this point. But the next generation, the girl who went to class will see that maybe it has another point". This line of thinking demonstrates a somewhat limited perspective on gender equality, which tends to view women and girls as mere beneficiaries of development initiatives rather than active participants in the process. This approach aligns with the traditional view of women's roles espoused by WID.

The last personal barrier identified in relation to gender is an ambivalent identification with feminism. Although all leaders were enthusiastic about implementing a gender approach, complexity emerged when asked about the new feminist framework for development and cooperation. On the one hand, some leaders saw shared values in feminism and cooperation, such as "the intention of transforming situations of inequality and a different way of seeing and doing things". Others expressed confusion or lack of knowledge about what exactly a feminist approach means. One project leader wondered "I do not know if we would fulfil the theoretical bases of this feminist cooperation because I do not know the precepts, but it would not be far from a feminism of equity", while another stated: "I also don't know exactly what we want to talk about when we talk about feminism nowadays". Such confusion seemed to be rooted in the perception that feminism (and theories of gender) "have evolved in a very complex way and you should devote all your research to understanding the concept of gender, femininity and new feminist concepts and movements". Finally, a less common but also present idea was that feminism and cooperation for international development are actually not very compatible, as this project leader elaborated:

> It's good to have some light [feminism] to enlighten you, right? But a light that argues with itself all the time ends up being the ultimate darkness. [Feminism] cannot be incorporated here [in cooperation]. Because the discourse has become such a big snowball, and the reality [of cooperation] is small. It's too complex, it is too difficult, it is too full of contributions.

Thus, feminist identifications were diverse in terms of how the leaders felt close to the gender approaches in cooperation and, specifically, to feminist cooperation. Such identifications also had an influence on the kind of gender approach that projects adopted. In the next section, we will explore this and other organizational barriers.

4.3. Organizational barriers: gender approach, project dimensions, legitimacy, and resistances

A second set of barriers are organizational and institutional, focusing on policies, leadership, and resources (SDSN, 2020) that can facilitate or constrain the implementation of gender and feminist frameworks within the cooperation work of universities.

As explored in the previous section, the gender approach of the projects was influenced by the personal mindset of the project leaders. However, it was also related to the institutional domain in the sense that the projects always interact with university policies, funding requirements, and other organizational forces. Formally, gender appeared in the majority of the calls for proposals reviewed in this study, as they included a request to mention if and/or how projects will address gender. However, the way in which this requirement was made varies (a check box, a specific section in the form, an interview with the technical staff, etc.), as did its importance in the evaluation (the majority of calls included it as a merit, while for a minority it was mandatory). On the other hand, this article focuses on what happened beyond the formalities and instead looks at the experiences of the project leaders. In doing so, it has identified several challenges regarding the way in which the gender approach was addressed in practice.

First, leaders thought that despite their projects addressed and took gender into account, the approach was “not at all systematized”. Gender seemed relevant for the project formulation and in establishing its aims and target beneficiaries, but they did not have a systematic way of taking it into account in further phases of the project cycle such as implementation and evaluation. As this project leader shared: “sometimes we say that we work on issues that seem to have a gender perspective, but how do we work on it? And how exactly do we assess it? […] It seems to be cross-cutting and we incorporate it, but we don’t do it systematically”. In particular, when asked about monitoring and evaluation, the project leaders stated that they had not worked it out beyond what was required by the calls, which usually was making explicit the number of men and women who participated in the projects. In terms of evaluation, the lack of long-term outcomes was a concern for some projects, as this leader explained: “We shouldn’t evaluate the project when it’s finished and that’s enough, but evaluate it after five years, see what remains… right?”.

Another common notion identified in the responses of project leaders was that the gender approach was only of interest to them and not to their partner institutions in the global South, who “didn’t care about it, neither it was a concern, nor did they see it as important, they didn’t understand it”. Others saw this lack of interest as more generalised, as it “can happen within the same cooperation team, with the institution that is receiving you, or the community”. Related to this perceived lack of commitment was the belief that gender and feminism were a “foreign” language in the countries and among the people they worked with, and that “there was a gap in translation and understanding when talking about gender disparity, women can work, women can study… When we use the same language in a different context it’s not really understood”. In the words of one project leader:

> They [project beneficiaries] will not even see it as a gender approach, but simply as an improvement of their life conditions. I don’t know if they have already reached the concept of gender, this is more like our language.

This perception influenced the scope and ambition of the project’s objectives, which were rather limited in terms of a gender/feminist approach on the grounds of “being realistic”. This project leader acknowledged that “our project is not to reach gender equality, this is unthinkable now with this project. [name of the town] is as far away from this concept as many countries and cities in Africa”. In fact, most of the projects in this study focused on increasing women’s access and participation and promoting income-generating small businesses, which is more in line with WID approaches than GAD or feminist frameworks.

Second, the scale of the projects emerged as a common theme in the limitations expressed by the leaders of the projects, as “university projects are very small projects, in terms of budget, and in terms of dedication”. In terms of budgets, the amount of money that the University can fund was limited, as this project leader explained:

> You get part of the costs like the plane tickets, but you don’t get another part which is the accommodation, food, etc. And therefore you try to limit your trip in a way that you are not overloaded with costs. […] Moreover, it has to be done on vacation days. I compact it in a week, two at the most.

Time therefore appeared to be an important constraint: “When you arrive [to the field] you find the situation as it is, and you must adapt. Sometimes you don’t have enough time. There are factors which are difficult to control, because you have very limited time and limited resources as well”.

Limited time and resources were found to affect not only projects in general, but also the successful implementation of specific gender-related strategies, as access to women tend to be more difficult and required more time, dedication, and specialized resources. This project leader explained her experiences regarding this issue: “When we tried to talk to women in the project it was always more difficult. They are more shy, more reserved, and they wouldn’t speak. We tried to interview the female employees, but we couldn’t because their boss was the only available translator, for example”. Another project leader commented on the difficulty of pursuing female interlocutors within the constraints of time: “It’s hard to say okay, so I’m going to come back to this family three times until Maria is there, right? It’s not always possible, well… it’s almost never possible”.

Associated with this perception was a particular discourse about the project’s outcomes being limited and small in a similar way. One project leader acknowledged that “if we wanted to apply it well, we would have to be there for a whole year”. Another commented on the limited outcomes of their project: “the implementation of the project will not transform society, far from it”. Emphasizing the “little things you can do” and that “this is better than nothing” was identified as a particular rhetoric among the project leaders.

A third identified barrier involved a legitimacy issue directly related to gender, as some female leaders shared concerns about “not being taken seriously” or “having to earn their place” in the development of the project. One of them shared how “you have to work hard as a woman to gain trust. It takes me two weeks to do what could be done in an hour”. Another leader explained similar challenges regarding legitimacy:

> We had to really push. That’s something we couldn’t understand. Are we women? Are we young? Are we not the people in power? Are we not professors here? So is that why we have to be really loud about what we want to do and what we are here for?

A final organizational barrier identified was a resistance to gender and feminist approaches within the HEIs. One project leader shared the perception that “people are still very reluctant to gender issues, even within the university. It’s like they don’t see it, they don’t understand, it’s like a drag… I see it at the department dinners. It’s something that has no urgency, that has no need”. Another leader pointed towards resistances among her own colleagues: “Sometimes they [the team] don’t even understand the work you are doing. They wonder… why do we need her? A colleague said: ‘but if she only talked to people!’ I got this comment”.

However, leaders also reported having strategies to overcome such resistances. The most common one was to avoid being clear about the need for a gender approach:

> I prefer doing things, trying to manage and bring the situation towards a situation of more equality, rather than trying to say it explicitly, right? […] There are fewer resistances. And in fact, I find

that people don't even notice it. When they realize, it has already happened, that's it. Women have already been able to speak, they have had their space, etc.

Similarly, other leaders shared how they tried to implement the GP indirectly and through small actions, in a way "that is not noticed": "If you start saying like… the gender perspective is the best… No. It must be started in a more indirect way, through small things…". Another project leader reported a similar strategy: "I didn't tell them "look, now this…" No, I was simply doing it. You know? Like the invisible hand of the market, like an invisible hand. I was doing it and managing it [the gender-sensitive actions]".

This section has addressed the most common organizational barriers expressed by project leaders, which are closely related to the limitations and challenges of implementing a gender approach in the practice of international development cooperation in universities. These barriers need to be considered in relation to the external factors, which are discussed next.

4.4. External barriers: uncertainty and safety

A final kind of barriers can be found externally, as development projects occur in complex social, cultural, political, and economic contexts which can discourage the successful implementation of a gender approach. The main external barriers identified in this study were the relationship with partner institutions, political conflict and security issues.

Project leaders unanimously identified uncertainty as a major constraint on their projects. Uncertainty can take many forms, which we will explore in this section. First, those related to lack of understanding with the partner institution: "The biggest difficulty has been the countries with which you reach an agreement, they always agree on paper. Yes, yes, yes… And when you're there, there are situations that can be tense". Another project leader reflected on similar incidents: "We had many unpleasant incidents with the institution that hosted us. All the previous meetings were great, but when we actually arrived we found ourselves in a bit of trouble, with logistical problems".

Second, unpredictable situations that affected not only travel opportunities but also the development of the projects themselves. One project leader reported how political conflict affected their project: "High level of uncertainty. In the beginning, we wanted to visit some other projects, but we couldn't because they were in the [conflict] zone, which was not really recommended". The global pandemic also affected many projects, as the leaders: "had to come back on the last outgoing flights".

Finally, a less common difficulty, but relevant because of its relationship to gender, was the feeling of safety for female project leaders, which was reported as important, although not always noticed by their male colleagues: "We were always thinking about safety because when we were walking we were like, ok, is this area safe? And he [male colleague] didn't understand why we were so focused on safety".

External barriers and challenges can be grouped under the broad idea of uncertainty, and the project reported similar experiences in this area, with gender not being very relevant in this case. Security, on the other hand, was reported less and only by female leaders and seems to be more relevant in terms of gender.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This research provides a distinctive focus on Spanish cooperation, given the country's rather unique behaviour in this regard. Despite a sustained increase of ODA by members of the Development Assistance Committee's (DAC),[5] Spain is known for its "negative singularity" in terms of its low and inconsistent contributions over the past decade (Macías and Atienza, 2019). This places it below the average and far from the 0.7 % UN target.[6] However, at the same time, while ODA dedicated to gender equality "has dropped after a decade on the rise" as a global trend, Spain currently "stands out for having the [second] largest share of projects dedicated to gender equality" (Williams and Hedman, 2024, p.3).

This paper has addressed the topic of university cooperation for international development, an area of HE that is often overlooked and given less prominence, yet such third stream activities are critical to achieving the SDGs (McCowan, 2019), and a distinctive feature of the Spanish cooperation system. The analysis has made it possible to identify opportunities and challenges in the practice of university-led development cooperation projects, with a special focus on gender and feminist approaches, and based on the experiences of project leaders.

The main opportunities identified were a two-way impact of cooperation projects, the possibility to have an applied field for teaching and research purposes, and the mobile female students and researchers as role models. The main challenges can be grouped into three dimensions: personal (mentalities and divergent feminist identifications), organizational (gender approach, project dimensions, legitimacy, and resistances), and the external (logistics and security). Despite these challenges, many identified ways of addressing them and highlighted new opportunities for improved performance.

Project leaders defined their projects as having a two-way beneficial impact. Their discourses combined the instrumental and humanistic domains suggested by Chankseliani et al. (2021) in exploring the contribution of HE to local, national, and global development. While the arguments regarding the benefits to the home institution and students aligned with the humanistic / holistic dimension (e.g. awareness and critical thinking), the potential for partners in the global South was more instrumental (e.g. transfer of resources, knowledge, and skills).

Mobility was another commonly cited potential, although it was more often seen as a benefit for scholars and students of the home institution. The global South was not so easily seen as a partner in this mobility, but rather as a "destination" for researchers and students to develop their projects. Therefore, as Tangelson (2014), mobility as a potential benefit of international development projects in HE should be seriously reconsidered from a global perspective to address who really benefits from such mobilities.

The findings of this research suggest a vision of the global South as a "field" in which to develop teaching and research activities, rather than seeing the international cooperation projects as real opportunities for social -and gender- transformation. These results add to previous research suggesting that the link between HE cooperation and international development is strong for teaching and capacity building, but weaker for research and innovation (Howell et al., 2020). This research contributes with relevant data on the GP, which did not seem to be the subject of innovation, but rather relied on the good intentions of the project leaders. Therefore, although the potential of HE to build networks and transnational partnerships is repeatedly emphasized in discourse (SDSN, 2020), this and other research has shown how traditional donor-recipient relationships are reproduced in practice, as well as assistencialist approaches (Hernández Tristán, 2019). Similarly, others have problematized capacity building and transnational academic partnerships (Adriansen and Madsen, 2019; Allen, 2014). Thus, higher education cooperation for international development cannot be addressed without considering issues of coloniality (Shahjahan and Morgan, 2016), which are currently at the centre of the academic

[5] According to OECD-DAC data available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/official-development-assistance-oda.html

[6] According to OECD-DAC data available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/official-development-assistance-oda.html

debate.

This research provides new insights about how the potential contributions of universities to international development -teaching, research, public debate, public service, and embodiment, as defined by McCowan (2019)- are highly mediated by gender, an underexplored perspective. First, the specialized human capital that universities can provide tends to be compartmentalized along disciplinary lines. Gender expertise, on the other hand, is not always guaranteed in the implementation of gender/feminist approaches, let alone gender related to international development. Resources, training, and consultancy should be considered by universities to fill this gap. Interdisciplinary teams could also be a benefit to projects and the implementation of gender and feminist approaches.

Second, the personal and organizational barriers identified by this research, such as mindsets and the small scale of projects, can enormously limit the ambition of project outcomes and result in narrow approaches to gender being implemented in practice. Classical development approaches have been widely criticized from a gender and feminist perspective, particularly from the global South (see, Kabeer, 2015; Rowlands, 1997; Mohanty, 1991; Lugones, 2016; Icaza and Vázquez, 2016; Connell, 2014), but such criticism has not always translated into changes in practice. As this research has shown, paternalism is still present in the project drivers, as is the promotion of a rather narrow and homogeneous idea of success for women. As argued by Castellsagué (2023), such a linear path to educational attainment is fraught with discontinuities for women, and more diverse notions of success should be explored. While issues of coloniality have been discussed either from the perspective of HE (Shahjahan and Morgan, 2016) or from the perspective of gender (Lugones, 2016), little has been said about how both areas are related. This research is unique in that it provides insights into how the two are intertwined in the practice of cooperation within HE.

Thirdly, this study has shown the existing gap between the normative level and the practical level of policy implementation within the universities. Formally, the gender approach seems to be well established in cooperation, as universities include the need to address the gender approach in their calls for project proposals. In practice, however, there are many barriers. Project leaders identified explicit and implicit resistance to the gender approach among their colleagues and partners, which they perceived as complicating their efforts to include such an approach in their projects. At the same time, they also seem to have informal strategies to overcome such resistance. Project leaders felt that they had to do it "unnoticed", "indirectly" and without mentioning the words "gender". In a development arena where "gender" seems to be a well-established buzzword (Schnable et al., 2020), such challenges are particularly noteworthy. This study's results reveal how the resistances usually emerge during implementation and informally, which it makes it difficult not only to identify them, but also to support project leaders in overcoming such barriers.

Finally, the potential of HE to provide cutting-edge research and innovation should also apply from a gender and development perspective. At the moment, however, the projects that universities are leading still seem to be driven by mixed WID-GAD approaches, rather than engaging with the new feminist frameworks which are much more ambitious in terms of social transformation, representation and sustainability. This study has shown an uneven engagement with the feminist framework, which, despite its recent promulgation, has already led to ambivalence among scholars implementing gender and development projects in practice (Tiessen, 2019). It remains to be seen how the barriers and challenges identified in this study can be addressed by the new framework to enable and promote the principles of feminist cooperation, such as sustainability, transformation, accountability, reflexivity, to name a few. The establishment and integration of the new and ambitious feminist framework is a challenge for HEIs in the coming years.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alba Castellsagué: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Alba Castellsague reports financial support was provided by Spain Ministry of Science and Innovation. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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