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Review

## Gender-transformative approaches in international development: A brief history and five uniting principles

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of gender-transformative approaches in the international development sector has ushered in a new paradigm for gender and development, refocusing on core feminist principles. This rise has paralleled the growth of transformative research and a strengthened emphasis on social transformations in the field of international development practice. Gender-transformative approaches aim to reshape gender dynamics by redistributing resources, expectations and responsibilities between women, men, and non-binary gender identities, often focusing on norms, power, and collective action. In this paper, we trace the history of gender-transformative approaches (1990 to March 2022); explore the breadth of applications in development described in both grey and academic literature; and identify five principles to guide future gender-transformative approaches with a focus on interventions. We hope that these clarifying principles will make the rich conceptual contribution of gender-transformative thinking relevant to a broad audience of researchers and practitioners and provide a basis for further academic debate and refinement.

### 1. Introduction

Nearly thirty years ago, the development community came together to sign the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, signalling the centrality of gender equality within development work around the globe, identifying areas for change, and initiating a gender mainstreaming objective (United Nations, 1995). This new paradigm considered the power dynamics and relationships between women and men and was labelled Gender and Development (GAD) (Rathgeber, 1990). It sought to incorporate gender perspectives into all branches of development (de Waal, 2006) and introduced gender-transformative language to the sector (Moser, 2020; Subrahmanian, 2004). A gender-focus was reiterated within the Millennium Development Goals and then again as Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (UN General Assembly, 2015). Building on a recent surge in the transformational language within gender and development spaces (Moser, 2020), it is valuable to revisit the terminology. By exploring the term's definition and operationalisation, we hope to inspire a new generation of international development researchers and practitioners as countries strive to meet the SDGs.

At their core, the goals of gender equality and women's empowerment within the development sector have sought to reform discriminatory and unequal systems and structures that perpetuate inequalities (United Nations, 1995). Rees (1998) identifies three models of gender equality: 1) equality as sameness where women are able to enter male domains; 2) equality as the equal valuation of both men and women in society; and 3) equality as transformation to new standards for gender relations. Adopting this third model of gender equality, GAD programming aimed to move beyond the practical outcomes of development programs (such as water, housing, and income) and lean into more strategic outcomes (such as redefining social norms, power structures, and attitudes) (Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1989). Within this perspective, gender-equal futures rely on a full reshaping of the fabric of society - a gender-transformation. This transformation is never fully complete and will continue to be contested and evolved into the future.

The GAD approach, however, has become largely associated with women's empowerment and has been critiqued as having lost much of its initial political and revolutionary objectives (Batliwala, 2007; Eyben, 2013; Kabeer, 2005; Rao & Kelleher, 2005). The dilution of radical empowerment goals (the rebalancing of power and privilege between women and men) into technical goals (Kabeer, 2005) placed the burden

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of change on women and their individual agency (Hillenbrand et al., 2015; Moser, 2020). While “[t]he 1995 Beijing Women's Conference developed a vision of global social transformation; the transformational promise of Beijing failed to bring about a policy shift in favour of women's empowerment” (Eyben, 2013, p. 18; as quoted in Moser, 2020). Spurred on by economic visions of progress, empowerment-focused interventions often overlooked the more difficult aspects of transformation: social norms, power relations, political engagement, and collective action (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; El-Bushra, 2000). A broader and more societal approach is therefore needed to reshape gender norms towards equality.

Within this paper, we explore the emergence of gender-transformative approaches in international development and wrestle with the concept's novelty and recent visibility. In one way, the gender-transformative discourse has emerged as a response to common critiques of “development as empowerment” and an “erosion in its translation into practice” (Moser, 2016, p. 8). However, the phrasing and language of gender-transformative approaches has much earlier roots in feminist development literature (see for example Kabeer, 1994). Batliwala (2007) argues that the ‘power’ had been taken out of empowerment and calls for “a new language in which to frame our vision and strategies for social transformation at the local, national, or global level” (2007, p.564). Feminist scholars and social justice advocates have also sought to integrate intersectionality, that is, the recognition that there are multiple intersecting and overlapping forms of social difference, tied to structures of privilege and inequality (Keddie et al., 2022, p. 2). For advocates of a gender-transformative approach, the concept has been assumed and accepted, without being specified and interrogated and requires clarity to avoid dilution. In this paper, we seek to understand the depth and breadth of interpretations of the phrase ‘gender-transformative’ within development discourse and explore if the term is truly novel or just a resurgence of an earlier discourse and proposed practice.

We define the term gender-transformative as societal transformations towards gender equalities. However, we recognise that ‘gender-transformation’ is also used by individuals who are in the process of changing their gender identities, and who may or may not identify as transgender. The term therefore can be confusing, especially in cross-cultural settings. We propose that these two uses of the gender-transformation term can co-exist, however for the purposes of this paper we focus on gender-transformation in international development and society.

In this paper, we first critically review the history and genesis of gender-transformative approaches and examine the relevant breadth of applications in development within both grey and academic literature. From this foundation, we then propose and justify five principles to guide future implementation and research. These principles are designed to support civil society organisations, researchers, and donors to operationalise gender-transformative concepts, maintaining integrity with respect to the long lineage of feminist thinking and practice.

## 2. Contextualising gender in wider transformations discourse

While the integration of gender-transformative discourses in development thinking and practice can be traced to the Beijing Platform for Action, the roots of social transformative discourses in broader society emerged much earlier. Appeals in the 1800s united women's groups, religious groups, and philosophers focused on social injustices, including slavery, women's rights, and class structures (Batliwala, 2007; Linnér & Wibeck, 2019). This was also the era of first-wave feminism, where activists leaning on religious and socialist visions of progress began the political campaign for equality through suffrage and the repeal of unjust policies related to the gender double standard (for example Butler, 1868). This parallels the origins of the concept of social empowerment (without a focus on gender) through the Reformation, Quakerism, and the Salvation Army, alongside Marxist and Socialist reformers as discussed in Batliwala (2007) and Kabeer (1994).

In more recent scholarship, transformative research practices have emerged in the last decade as a distinct research paradigm (Mertens, 2007; Sweetman et al., 2010). Transformative research seeks to advocate for social and political change through an action agenda and is often connected with social issues such as empowerment and inequality, and frequently relies on participatory approaches (Mertens, 2007; Patterson et al., 2017). Transformative research seeks to not only build knowledge but acknowledges that research itself has the potential to transform societies - both through the process and the results of research (Mertens, 2007; Mullinax et al., 2018; Sweetman et al., 2010).

Lastly, within the realm of socio-technical-ecological sustainability, the concepts of transformations and transformative change have become central (Hölscher et al., 2018; Stirling, 2014). Here, transformative change is systemic and influences the underlying paradigms and values that impact human decisions on technologies, governance, and economic structures (Fazey et al., 2018; Page et al., 2016; Patterson et al., 2017). Such change requires a diversity of values and discourses to be part of the transformation process. It recognises the tensions of having multiple systems undergoing change which may have competing sets of outcomes.

## 3. Methodology

To trace the history and application of gender-transformative language, we conducted a review of academic and grey literature, as illustrated in Fig. 1 and utilized distant and close reading techniques from the digital humanities as well as collaborative sensemaking. Distant reading is an interdisciplinary approach that uses visual and digital representations to look at large bodies of work; while close reading involves more detailed explorations of texts (Burdick, 2012; Moretti, 2013). Collaborative sensemaking involves targeted discussions to build collective sense of complex themes.

We searched Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar using the terms “gender transformative” OR “gender transformation” from 1990 to 2019 in the English language. All searches identified responses with and without hyphens. A second search was conducted in April 2022 adding literature from January 2020 to March (first Quarter) 2022. From the 740 unique papers identified, after removing duplicates from 1090, 356 were relevant to the concepts of gender-transformation in the development context. We use the term ‘papers’ to include journal articles, studies, book chapters, theses, toolkits, books, conference proceedings, and reports.

We then iteratively conducted three types of analysis, termed here content, timeline, and emergence. The content analysis involved a distant textual analysis of the sample of 356 papers with a focus on collocated terms and key phrases in titles and abstracts using the digital humanities processes on [voyant-tools.org](http://voyant-tools.org). The timeline analysis used close reading techniques to develop a detailed thematic chronology identifying three dominant streams by exploring full papers. We then undertook an emergence analysis of key theorists and foundational literature to explore the dominant streams of gender-transformative approaches which draw from distinct bodies of work. The timeline and emergence analyses were used to distil different historical trajectories of gender-transformation concepts.

Lastly, through a process of collaborative sensemaking within an interdisciplinary research team (co-authors of this paper) and building on our literature review, we identified and refined five unifying principles for development practitioners and researchers. This process involved six hour-long participatory and interactive e-discussions in which we also explored the limitations and challenges of applying gender-transformative approaches. Such challenges include the usefulness of the phrasing, risks of reductionism, and complexity of gender-related interventions.

A limitation of the study is its focus on online English-language literature, to the exclusion of potentially relevant and insightful material from a diversity of cultures and language groups. Analysis of the

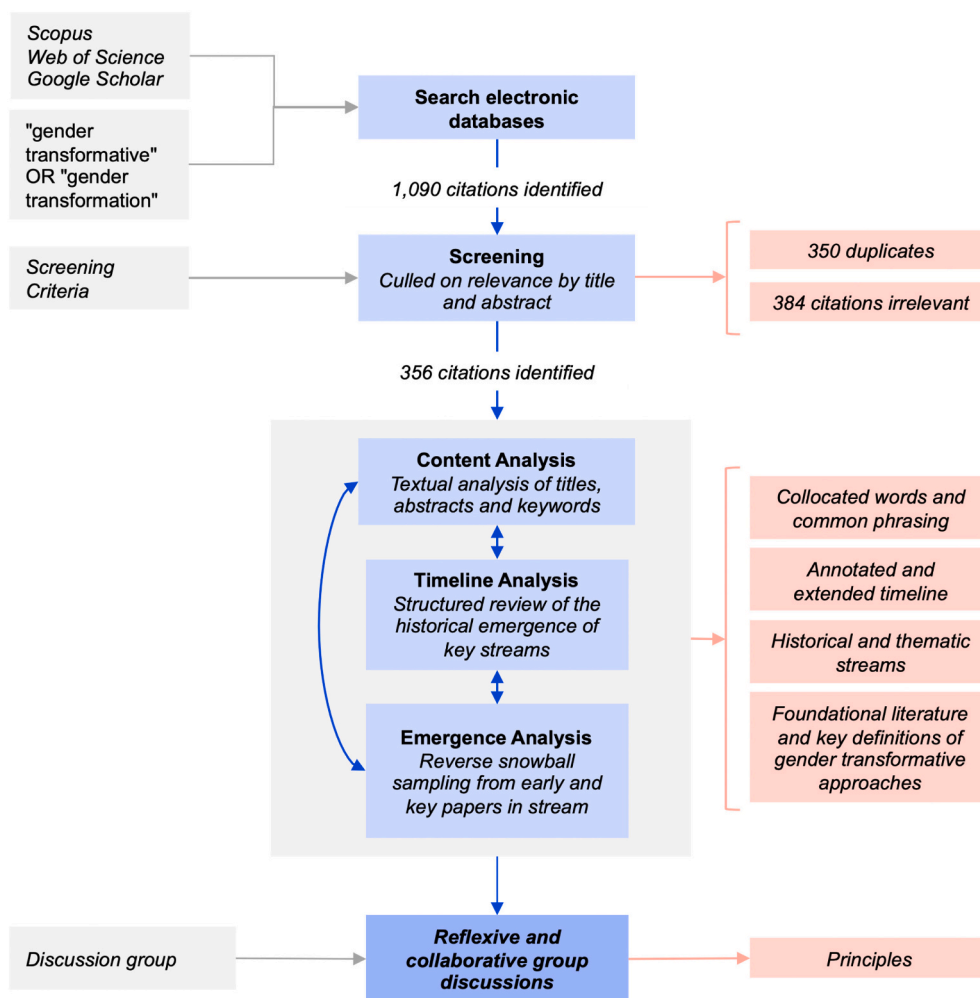


Fig. 1. Systematic review strategy and approach.

English-language literature is justified for reasons of scope and given its dominance in shaping development practice globally. Yet complementary analysis across a wider range of papers would enable both validation of findings from this study and identification of additional and contextually specific insights.

The analysis is also necessarily limited by the composition of the research team, given the importance of collaborative sensemaking in generating findings. All researchers were employed within a single applied research institute and as such shared common experiences, approaches, and values. While researchers brought different disciplinary traditions, contextual expertise, and practitioner partnerships to the analysis, findings from this study could be strengthened further by incorporating a greater diversity of perspectives. The choice to undertake analysis as an internal team process was driven by a shared interest in identifying the emergence and conceptual foundations of gender-transformation given its relevance to multiple ongoing research activities. It was also a practical decision, given the complexity of undertaking collaborative sensemaking with a team working entirely remotely across multiple time zones and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4. Three decades of gender-transformative development literature

The literature on gender-transformative development has increased exponentially over the last three decades. From the 356 papers identified between 1990 and the first quarter of 2022, only two papers were from the 1990s, 21 from 2000 to 2009, 193 from 2010 to 2019, and 140

between 2020 and March 2022. Of these, 71 % of documents were journal articles. 16 % were reports, and 4 % were book chapters; the remainder included books, conference papers and editorials. This signals a shift in terminology and uptake of transformative concepts, especially in South Africa, where a fifth of the papers (71/356) were focused. Eighty papers did not have a specific geographic focus and explored themes of gender-transformation in development more generally.

##### 4.1. Gender transform\* - key usages of the term

We found significant diversity in the definitions and usage of the term “gender-transformations”. Moser (2017, p. 223) identified seven key uses of the word ranging from “verbs to nouns to adjectives”, however, she found that the term is focused on the “idea of change”. By exploring the frequency of terms and collocates with the abstracts and titles of 356 papers using distant reading practices,<sup>1</sup> we identified the key usages of the “gender transform\*<sup>2</sup>” terminology over the last 30 years. The term “transform\*” appeared 769 times, with “transformative” being the most common iteration of the term (473 times) and transformation\* being the next most common (227 times). Additionally, we explored the top ten collocates of “gender transform\*” within the abstracts and titles as can be seen in Fig. 2. We identified that the words

<sup>1</sup> This analysis was conducted in Voyant Tools [voyant-tools.org].

<sup>2</sup> The \* symbol denotes the wide range of possible versions of the word using the truncated “transform” as a root.

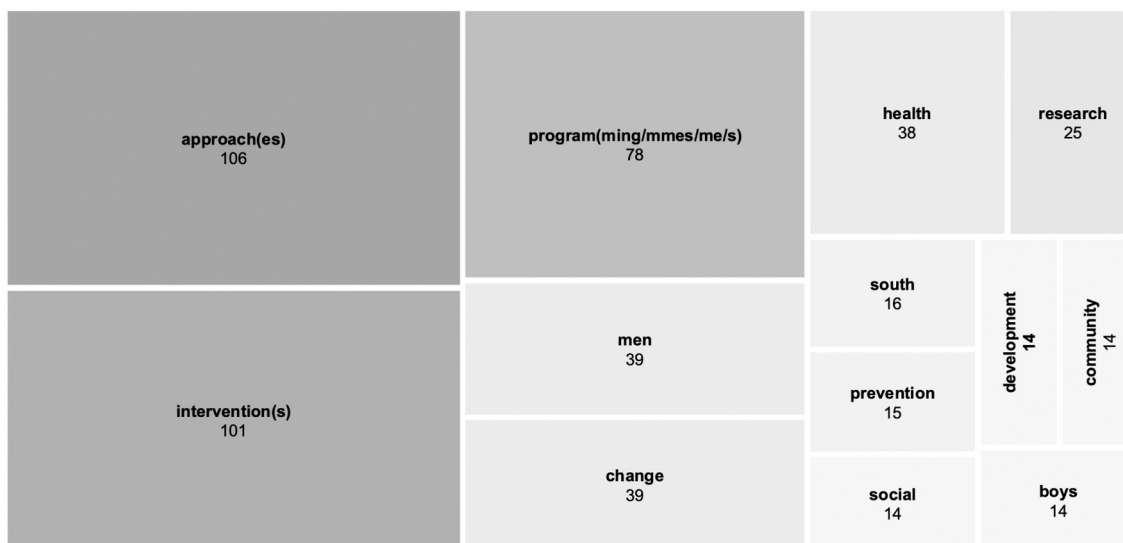


Fig. 2. Most common collocates with the term gender-transform\* in the sample (n = number of expressions within the titles and abstracts of 356 papers).

“approach”, “intervention”, and “program” with all relevant iterations are the most common usages of the phrasing.

Based on this collocate analysis, and the frequency of the terms, we have chosen to use the phrasing “gender-transformative approaches” within this article as a more inclusive phrasing than intervention, policy, or program. These approaches represent the programmatic methods that are used to foster transformation. This phrasing, therefore, functions as a shorthand for wider systemic change related to gender equality within development practice. In this article, we also adopt other terms where appropriate, such as gender-transformative change when we are referring to transformations from a philosophical perspective or to identify the ultimate goal of gender-transformative approaches.

#### 4.2. Gender-transformative research and evaluation

Although the majority of the literature described gender-transformative programming or interventions, a small sub-section of the literature described gender-transformative research (occurring four times as a collocate in abstracts and titles). Wieringa conceptualised (gender)-transformation, as a process in which “both analysis and practice are steps” (Wieringa, 1994, p. 842). Wieringa “intricately links” processes of planning, empowerment, and transformation “welded by a feminist-informed analysis” (Wieringa, 1994, p. 843). In this mindset, intervention and assessment are merged, a view shared by scholars advocating for a transformative paradigm of research and evaluation (Mertens, 2007; Murthy & Zaveri, 2016). A gender-transformative approach to research aims to increase the transformative potential of the research process (Murthy & Zaveri, 2016) moving from ‘do-no-harm’ to ‘do-more-good’ through the research methods. Focused on transformative research more broadly, Sweetman et al. (2010) clarified ten principles of transformative mixed-methods studies. The principles highlighted the difficulty in classifying research as transformative based on academic articles. Nonetheless, only four papers within our study explicitly described or adopted transformative research approaches, while a small number of papers describe their transformative research or evaluation methodologies as participatory (6), collaborative (4), action-oriented (7).

#### 5. Emergence and breadth of gender-transformative approaches

We now present the breadth of gender-transformative approaches and the key foundational literature which introduced the phrase into the gender and development lexicon. This breadth can be categorised into

three emerging streams centred around organisational, relational, and sectoral foci, as seen in Fig. 3. While there is some overlap between the streams through shared concepts and individual practitioners, the three groups represent unique categories of gender-transformative approaches. Following Fig. 3, we present a tabular summary and visualisation of the streams of gender-transformative approaches. We then discuss the roots of gender-transformative language (before 2000) before exploring each of the three streams with relation to key literature and themes (2000–March 2022).

Table 1 outlines key definitions of gender-transformation in foundational texts and the above-mentioned three groups of literature. Additionally, the breadth of this literature and relevant topics are visualised in Fig. 4 as segments (coloured by each respective stream) representing the relative frequency of topics within the literature review (n = 356). Within Fig. 4, the size of each segment is representative of the topic's frequency within the study as the number of relevant papers. Papers were coded with a single topic for simplicity. For example, ‘agriculture’ was the main topic of 15 papers within the study and all papers focused on ‘agriculture’ were situated within the sectoral stream. Fig. 4 illustrates that the relational stream was the largest within the study and contained topics such as ‘men and masculinities’, ‘HIV’, ‘intimate partner violence’ and ‘adolescents’. The sectoral stream was dominated by topics around ‘agriculture’ and ‘food systems’, while the organisational stream included a large number of studies on ‘justice’ and ‘higher education’.

##### 5.1. Foundations of gender-transformative approaches

Inspired by a broader surge of social transformations, feminists working in international development as planners, scholars, and implementers in the 1980s and early 1990s, began to identify gender inequalities in development theory and practice. These included scholars such as Srilatha Batliwala, Naila Kabeer, Sara Longwe, Maxine Molyneux, Caroline Moser, Jo Rowlands, Saskia Wieringa, and Kate Young. Spurred on by the writings of Boserup (1970), these feminists sought transformation of the social systems which perpetuated gender inequalities.

Notably, both Young (1993) and Kabeer (1994), utilized explicit transformational terminology in their writings (see March et al., 1999), planting the seeds for future applications of gender-transformation. Young (1993) introduced the concept of *transformatory potential* as an approach to explore how empowered women could transform ordinary practical needs to strategic outcomes; leveraging the phrasing of Moser



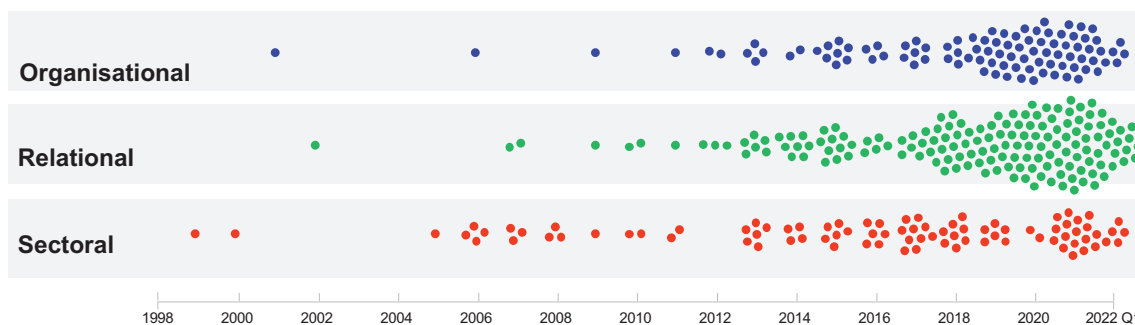


Fig. 3. Distribution of literature over time (each dot represents a paper) of the modern streams of gender-transformative development as represented in papers ( $n = 356$ ).

(1989) and Molyneux (1985). In parallel, Kabeer (1994) designed a classification system for development interventions, to identify them as gender-blind, gender-neutral, gender-sensitive or *gender-transformative* (see Kabeer, 1994; Kabeer & Subramanian, 1996; March et al., 1999). Importantly, this classification system has been frequently adapted with many potential iterations in circulation. Some of these iterations problematically place a transformative approach below and separate from ‘approaches that empower’ (for example see Gupta et al., 2003). As such, the transformative potential of social change is diluted by placing the emphasis on women, rather than society as a whole. However, for early feminist development theorists, planners and practitioners, gender transformation was a normative concept which implied that programs could influence gender equalities and become pathways for increased human flourishing.

### 5.2. Stream 1: organisational gender-transformative approaches

Spurred on by the work of Molyneux (1985) reviewing the opportunities for gender-transformations in the institutional and political realms, the first stream of gender-transformative approaches emerged in organisations and governance systems. The stream followed systemic transformations through a breadth of organisations surrounding politics, markets, culture, justice, the military, local government, microfinance, and education. Much of the politically focused literature grew out of the end of apartheid in South Africa through policies “to effect structural change regarding gender equality during the process of state transformation” (McEwan, 2000, p. 1; Rai, 2000). Aligned with this, a subset of work emerged around the deep structures and hidden values of organisations which perpetuate gender inequalities (as described in Rao et al., 1999). More recently, a focus on financial inclusion has explored structural challenges in financial institutions (Vossenberget al., 2018) – a domain which is often criticised for its less-than transformational agenda (see Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

Notably, this stream of practice tended to focus on social structures and in particular gender parity, often excluding the interpersonal dynamics which also govern gender inequalities. Approaches focused on gender-transformations within institutions spoke to the systemic and structural challenges of inequality, yet had limited focus on the experiences of individuals within the systems.

### 5.3. Stream 2: relational gender-transformative approaches

The second stream of approaches has taken a relational focus primarily within development programming in reproductive health and gender-based violence and has embraced the necessity of working with both women and men (see Gupta, 2000; Gupta et al., 2003). Within the stream, health-related studies often focused on concepts of HIV/AIDS and reproductive health (Dworkin et al., 2015; Gupta, 2000; Gupta et al., 2003; Rottach et al., 2009). Relationship-based studies focused on masculinity and gender-based violence (Barker et al., 2007; Casey et al.,

2018; Gibbs et al., 2015) explored the “links between masculinities and men’s health-related behavior, and increasingly on engaging men and boys as a pathway to transforming masculinities” (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 85). Intersectional approaches to working with men and boys have been influenced by developments in feminist scholarship and advocacy informing the public health, social work, and education fields (Keddie et al., 2022, p. 2). Transformative elements such as attitudes, behaviours, and power were crucial to the formative research and implementation of strategic gender-transformative interventions. Connections between the World Health Organization, International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) and Promundo through the early 2000s continued to build expertise within gender-transformative approaches focused on HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, and reproductive health.

Approaches focused on gender-transformations within relationships highlighted the importance of interpersonal connections within transformations at the household or relational level but were less likely to explore the systemic and structural challenges that perpetuate inequalities.

### 5.4. Stream 3: sectoral gender-transformative approaches

The third stream drew on the relational approaches to gender-transformation but was situated in the specific sectoral contexts of agriculture, fisheries, forestry, nutrition, and urbanisation. These approaches were more nuanced and sensitive to contextual systems such as subsistence livelihoods, market systems, and the environment than the relational and organisational streams. The studies described efforts to create change within a limited system often focusing on a specific sector by engaging with change at different levels within a given system (Cole et al., 2015; Kantor et al., 2015; Resurrección et al., 2019; Kruijssen et al., 2016). Such sectoral approaches were specifically championed by CGIAR within agriculture, nutrition, and resilience programming, adapting the approaches and thinking for unique development situations and objectives. Notably, this stream contained studies on fisheries, livestock, and forestry in the context of food security, food systems, value chains and livelihoods alongside studies on climate, disaster, and conflict. Additionally, Moser’s work has re-sought a transformative agenda in urban contexts with a specific focus on asset accumulation (Moser, 2016, 2017). For Moser, the transformation of urban environments and addressing inequality is inextricably linked to the transformation of gender structures and is found in the formulating of assets as instrumental objects to transformative concepts.

This stream of gender-transformative approaches tended to focus on women’s empowerment as the first step to transformation, often placing the burden of change solely on women, rather than viewing empowerment as an integrated individual and collective transformation.

## 6. Five principles of gender-transformative approaches

Drawing on this diverse genealogy of gender-transformative

**Table 1**  
Selected definitions of gender-transformative approaches.

Stream	Year	Key definitions of gender-transformation
Foundational	1993	<b>Transformatory potential</b> is “to allow the interrogation of practical needs (by women themselves)” to see how they can become or transform themselves into strategic concerns. In other words, do they have the capacity or potential for questioning, undermining or <b>transforming gender relations and the structures of subordination</b> . (Young, 1993, pg. 156)
	1996	Programs and policies fall along a spectrum of gender-blind, gender-neutral, gender-sensitive or <b>gender-transformative</b> . Such transformative approaches “...can be envisaged which may target women, men or both and which recognize the existence of gender-specific needs and constraints but which additionally seek to <b>transform the existing gender relations</b> in a more egalitarian direction through the <b>redistribution of resources and responsibilities</b> .” (Kabeer & Subramanian, 1996 p. 19)
Stream 1: Organisational	1999	“[T]ransforming the unspoken, <b>informal institutional norms</b> that perpetuate gender inequality in organizations is key to achieving gender equitable outcomes for all.” (Rao et al., 1999)
	2000	“[The] transformation of both gender <b>politics</b> and the <b>state</b> , with particular reference to the construction of <b>citizenship, governance</b> and state <b>structures</b> .” (McEwan, 2000)
Stream 2: Relational	2003	Such approaches...“seek to transform gender roles and create more <b>gender-equitable relationships</b> ... [which] seek to change the underlying conditions that cause gender inequities”. Transformative approaches involve and engage men and boys, as role models and in fostering constructive roles for them (Gupta, 2000; Gupta et al., 2003; Dworkin et al., 2015). <sup>a</sup>
	2009	“Gender transformative approaches actively strive to examine, question, and change rigid gender norms and imbalance of power...Gender-transformative approaches encourage <b>critical awareness</b> among men and women of gender <b>roles and norms</b> ; promote the position of women; challenge the <b>distribution of resources and allocation of duties</b> between men and women; and/or address the <b>power relationships</b> between women and others in the community” (Rottach et al., 2009)
Stream 3: Sectoral	2012	[aquaculture] “A Gender Transformative Approach (GTA) goes beyond just considering the symptoms of gender inequality, and addresses the <b>social norms, attitudes, behaviors</b> and <b>social systems</b> that underlie them” (Puskur et al., 2012)
	2015	[livelihoods] “Gender-transformative approaches to development, in contrast, hold a conceptualisation of empowerment that embraces its <b>feminist roots</b> . Gender-transformative change and processes of empowerment are ultimately about <b>transforming unequal power relations and the structures and norms</b> (both visible and invisible) that uphold them” (Hillenbrand et al., 2015, p. 5)
	2019	[resilience] Gender-transformative adaptation aims to “transform the <b>power dynamics and structures</b> that serve to reinforce social and gendered inequalities. Specifically, it intends to change discriminatory political, social and economic practices and the <b>patriarchal norms</b> that obstruct positive adaptation in climate change contexts...It offers a more holistic multi-dimensional approach and moves beyond programs that fundamentally hide and ignore deep-seated power relations and structures.” (Resurrección et al., 2019)

<sup>a</sup> Gupta's initial definition of the approach spectrum reads: do-no-harm, gender-sensitive, transformative approaches, and approaches that empower. Nonetheless Gupta is explicit that the approaches are not mutually exclusive and multi-pronged approaches are preferred (Gupta, 2000; Gupta et al., 2003). Following many authors in the health field (Barker et al., 2007) we combine

Gupta's top two rungs using the definition of ‘approaches that empower’ with a transformative title.

approaches and with an aim of addressing potential areas of oversight, we distilled a set of five principles with the intent to inform practitioners and researchers working in this field. To identify the principles, we examined the three streams of literature, explored foundational literature on gender-transformative approaches, and conducted a series of collaborative and reflexive group discussions based on our practice as researchers focused on gender equality in development. We also drew on additional literature from the social sciences and reflected on transformative language in the discourses of historical social-political transformations, transformative research epistemologies, and ecological sustainability.

This distillation of such complexity brings the risk of reductionism and over-simplification. Equally, clarifying principles can make complex concepts more accessible, particularly to practitioners, and also provide a basis for further academic debate and refinement. Fig. 5 captures the key inter-relationships between the five principles, noting that each principle influences, and is part of the others.

### 6.1. Principle 1. Motivated towards profound gender-transformations

The first and most foundational principle of gender-transformative approaches is to interrogate the motivation of programs. Such motivation must be towards lasting change - ideally embracing feminist ideals (Hillenbrand et al., 2015). Within the literature, gender-transformative approaches were motivated by a desire to see revolutionary changes in the “deeply ingrained nature of gender inequality” (Mullinax et al., 2018, p. 4) through both the process and the outcomes of change.

Transformative change is born from critical consciousness and a normative view of equality being beneficial to human beings (Rottach et al., 2009). Critical consciousness is an essential element in motivating such change since it affects one's ability to perceive discriminatory norms and practices in society, and the motivation to intervene in order to change these norms towards a different reality (Freire, 1970; Kabeer, 1999). Freire (1970) describes critical consciousness as a cyclical process of critical reflection and action. Illustrating this principle in the sectoral stream, Guring from Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN) affirmed that “if you want to adopt a gender-transformative approach, the first thing you need to transform is yourself” (Puskur et al., 2012, p. 7).

Feminist development scholars contend that true transformational approaches go beyond the economic or health outcomes of the welfare, anti-poverty, equity, or efficiency visions of progress (Moser, 1989). This mindset flips the traditional program theory of change upside down. In a traditional theory of change, gender equality is a tool to strengthen development outcomes. Instead, a transformative approach contends that improvements in development outcomes (which are inevitably gendered) such as sanitation, agriculture, and nutrition can be tools to reshape gender inequalities, which in turn leads to further strengthened development outcomes.

Accordingly, transformative approaches embrace the perspective that human *flourishing*, drawing from Aristotle, is the ultimate goal of development and that such flourishing demands a transformational agenda of gender equality (Kabeer, 1994; Nussbaum, 1999; Sen, 1999). Sen's approach to defining flourishing (as well-being) is in reference to people's capabilities in terms of their real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value. Furthermore, the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance (Sen, 1999). Kabeer argued that we need “transformative forms of agency that do not simply address immediate inequalities but are used to initiate longer-term processes of change in the structures of patriarchy” (Kabeer, 2005, p. 16). This agenda can come from ideological or religious beliefs but ultimately is political and structural (Batiwala, 2007), leading to longer-term and wider social transformations.

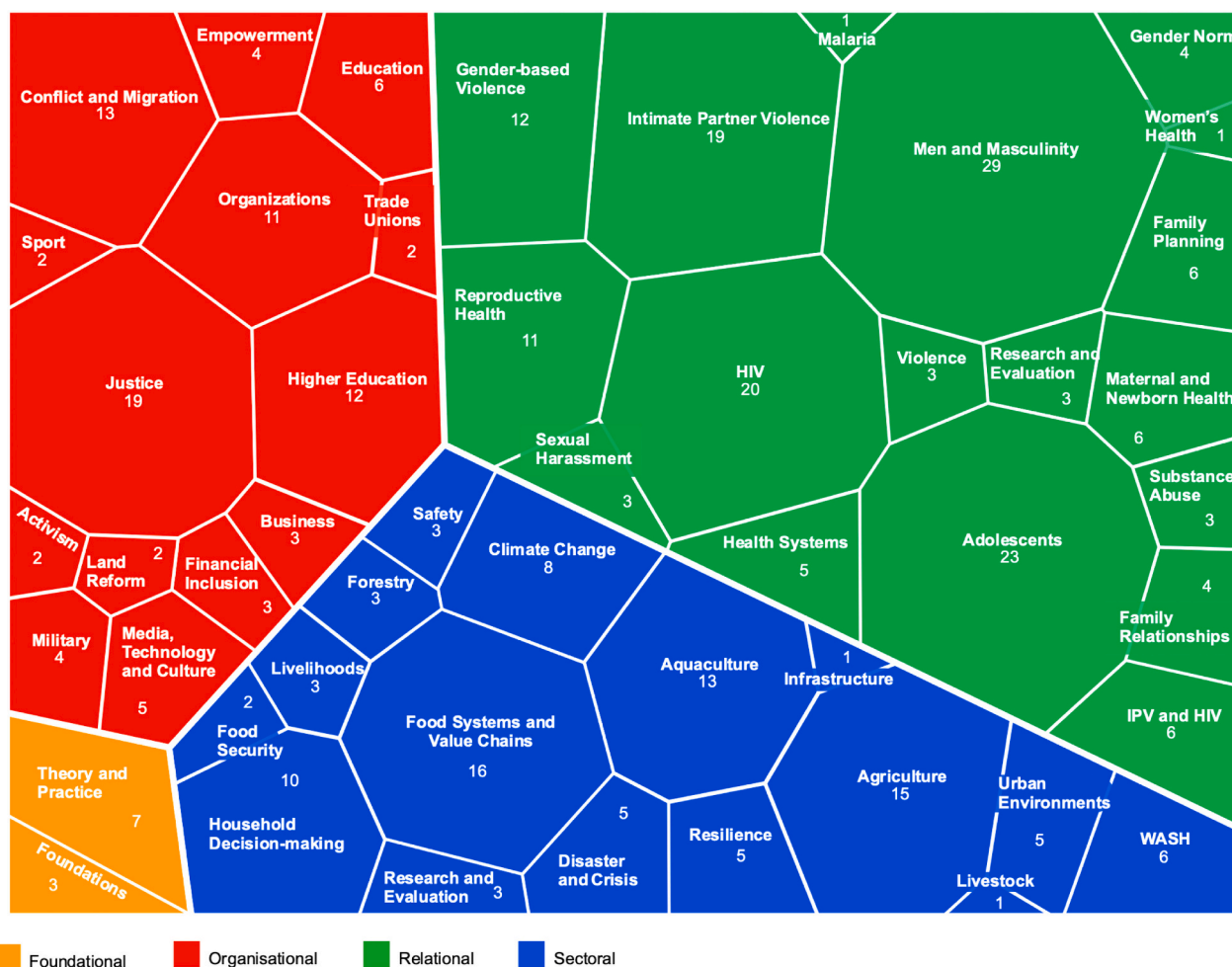


Fig. 4. Landscape map of the streams of gender-transformative literature and sub-sectors of study (n = 356 papers) Each of the four streams (foundational, organisational, relational, sectoral) is represented by a different colour and contains topics illustrated as smaller segments. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

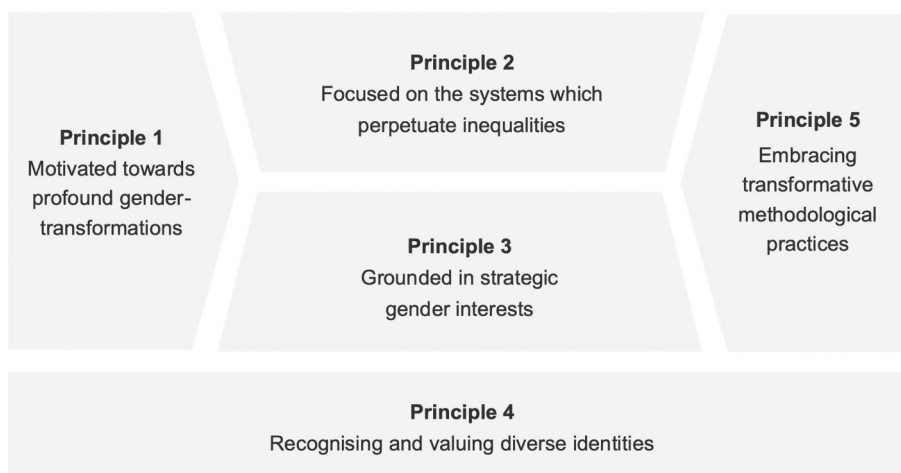


Fig. 5. Five unifying principles of gender-transformative approaches.

Applying this principle to implementation, evaluation and research requires a shared and contextualised understanding of an objective of profound gendered change for a specific program and setting; noting potential tensions with imposing a new normative viewpoint (Kabeer et al., 2011; Nazneen et al., 2014). Emergent feminist literature

understands research and evaluation as a political tool to promote social justice, empower excluded people and make visible gender and intersectional discrimination (del Moral-Espín & Espinosa Fajardo, 2021). In addition, as noted above, it requires personal and professional transformation as the first step (Nazneen & Sultan, 2014), reiterated in recent

literature on gender-transformation in the water and sanitation sector (Cavill et al., 2020). As such, practitioners need to consider the potential neocolonial implications of development work (Clisby & Enderstein, 2017; Nazneen et al., 2014). Reflections on power dynamics can also encourage contextual and localised understandings of equality (often through partnerships with local feminist organisations) while recognising the weight of diverse inequalities (Walby, 2005). Practically, teams which collaboratively conduct a gender analysis (see March et al., 1999) are given the occasion to identify opportunities, challenges, and tensions within a shared vision of human flourishing through gender-transformations.

### 6.2. Principle 2. Focused on the systems which perpetuate inequalities

Gender-transformative practice also requires a multi-level and systematic approach to address deeply rooted inequalities. The sector continues to learn from the challenges and shortcomings of a narrow focus on individual women's empowerment. Such individualised forms of change struggle to transform entire systems (Hillenbrand et al., 2015; Moser, 2020). Nonetheless, "...the goal of social change is not reform within the existing system, but radical transformation of the system itself. Social, political, and economic structures should be transformed in order to redistribute power and resources fairly" (Maguire, 1984, p. 21). With this in mind, it is important to remember that systems are made up of people; and change must be reflected across the system within individual people. For example, within the sectoral stream, the CGIAR team conceptualised five spheres for transformative change as the individual, families, communities, organisations, and wider enabling environment, intersecting with macro, meso, and micro level changes (Cole et al., 2015; Kantor et al., 2015).

This multi-level and sectoral thinking forms part of systemic approaches to transformations (Rao et al., 1999; Scoones et al., 2020). Broadly, a systems approach to research and advocacy looks for the interacting parts of a system, feedback processes, and the overall intention of the system's behaviour (Meadows, 2008). Analysing gender dimensions through a systems lens can help identify areas or entry points that can be leveraged to manoeuvre the system into a particular direction, with the ultimate goal of improving the overall behaviour of the system (Manlosa et al., 2019).

Practically, this principle means that the design of implementation, research or evaluation should explicitly consider the possible levels that are most relevant and take into account feedback loops and emergent properties in the system. A transformative approach would orient itself towards leverage points that challenge and change the mindset of the paradigm of a system (its goals, structure, rules, delays, and parameters), and ultimately, the transcending of existing paradigms (Meadows, 2008).

### 6.3. Principle 3. Grounded in strategic gender interests

In this political and structural form of transformative change, the concepts addressed in programming have strategic outcomes related to power, structures, norms, attitudes, and gender relations as seen in all three streams. These outcomes seek to meet practical development needs as pathways to address strategic gender interests (Kabeer, 1994; Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1989). While addressing practical gender needs involves changes within the realm of existing gender norms such as water provision, health care, and employment, this approach is not transformative. Contributing to strategic gender interests involves reimagining social norms, through changing status or changing power relations, particularly between women and men, or in relation to other genders. For example, within the existing literature, interventions in health, work, agriculture, environment, and asset management bridged into strategic interests. The literature highlights that transformative approaches address the causes, and not just the consequences of existing inequalities. These causes relate to the real challenges to women's rights

that perpetuate gender discrimination and are embedded in behaviours, attitudes, and cultural norms (Sandler & Rao, 2012).

One useful gender analysis framework exploring strategic interests is CARE's domains of *agency*, *relations*, and *structures* (as used in Morgan, 2014 and Hillenbrand et al., 2015). This model closely aligns with Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of empowerment in which resources lead to outcomes through agency and as supported by structures. In this model, agency is related to the individual and collective knowledge and skills, attitudes, assets, services, and actions. Relations explore the dynamics of negotiation or cooperation and expectations between people in organisations, groups, the community, market, and the home with a strong focus on assets, time, and social capital (Kabeer's domain of resources). Lastly, structures refer to the formal and informal rules that govern institutional, collective, and individual practices. Such structures include social norms, status, and recognition.

Bridging the insights into practice, gender analysis (see CARE's framework or March et al., 1999) is a significant first step in understanding the relevant aspects of agency, relations, and structures. Such analysis leverages a critical consciousness that change must occur, to explore which strategic changes are possible from a development intervention.

### 6.4. Principle 4. Recognising and valuing diverse identities

Next, these strategic outcomes should recognise the diversity of people, including with respect to their gender identities. Kabeer (1994) explains that "while gender is never absent, it is never present in pure form. It is always interwoven with other social inequalities such as class and race and must be analysed through a holistic framework if the concrete conditions for life for different groups of women and men are to be understood" (p. 65). This is highlighted within all three streams of literature, through specific attention to age, socioeconomic status, and power relations.

Drawing from intersectionality literature, transformative changes towards gender equality intersect with a range of aspects such as nationality, race, culture, religion, marital status, age, physical ability, sexuality, class, and caste (Crenshaw, 1991; Sandler & Rao, 2012). Therefore, it is important to recognise the diversity of individuals who are impacted by gender-transformative research and interventions, and meaningfully consider how all forms of oppression compound and intersect (Poulsen, 2018; Stephens et al., 2018). However, practitioners must be careful to not focus primarily on the characteristics of people (e.g. their race, class, or gender identity), but on the understanding of structural processes (racism, classism, patriarchy and cisnormality which pervade social, political and economic systems) that create and perpetuate inequalities (Bastia, 2014; Squires, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Additionally, development interventions and research can reinforce binary notions of gender, and in doing so, make invisible trans- and gender-nonconforming people and their different conceptions of family relationships. Notably, the 356 papers explored in this review primarily referred to equality between women and men. Another risk is oversimplifying intersectionality theory by relying on deficit models of identity, which fail to recognise how delineating difference can be a source of solidarity, empowerment, and resistance (Rosenthal 2016 in Fehrenbacher & Patel, 2020, p. 146).

Gender-transformative interventions can potentially be improved through incorporating an intersectional lens into design, research methods and sharing learning. There are varied analytical approaches, each foregrounding different aspects (McCall 2005 in Soeters et al., 2019). Examples in health research of quantitative methods are multi-level modelling and mixed methods approaches such as cultural consensus modelling and geospatial cluster analysis, which allow for rigorous investigation of variation among groups as well as complex interactions across levels of analysis (Fehrenbacher & Patel, 2020). Qualitative methods used across a diverse range of sectors include in-



depth interviews, case studies, and ethnography to explore participants' perceptions of the impact of different aspects of identity and social power in their lives. Multiple tools can be applied with a mixed methods approach to thoroughly examine an intersectional question in international development research and practice that aspires to be gender transformative.

While the integration of multiple perspectives and consideration of diverse needs may increase the costs and complexity of development approaches, these voices are critical to a holistic approach to gender-transformation in private and public spaces. This includes the integration of men as key change agents in transforming power dynamics, and, where possible and with appropriate approaches to 'do no harm', engaging with gender and sexual minorities. Research and interventions that affect children present an opportunity to include children's voices and consider specific measures to bolster change in both children's well-being and gender transformation ensuring appropriate practices are followed (del Moral-Espín & Espinosa Fajardo, 2021). Visibility and integration of diverse individuals into research and practice is a foundational requirement for gender-transformative approaches.

### 6.5. Principle 5. Embracing transformative methodological practices

The fifth principle is focused on the methodological approaches embedded within transformative practice as discussed previously in relation to gender transformative research. Much of the gender-transformative literature in all three streams relied on the reflexive, participatory, action-oriented, and collaborative integration of research and practice - with little distinction between the two as they became melded into one united approach. Such action-based methodological approaches are inspired by the transformative research paradigm (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2007).

One example of gender-transformative research is feminist participatory action research, in which transformative principles are embedded throughout the research process of planning implementation, and dissemination of results (Cornwall & Sardenberg, 2014; Kantor et al., 2015; Mullinax et al., 2018). Such research seeks to not only build knowledge but acknowledges that research has the potential to transform societies - both through the process and the results of research (Mertens, 2007; Sweetman et al., 2010). These processes have built coalitions across organisations and sectors, relying on feminist organisations for localised knowledge and conceptualisations of gender equality. An example of contemporary feminist coalitions is the South Asian Network for Gender Transformation that connects activists across regional borders in 'solidarities of epistemologies', which provide conversations of mutual learning across place-based differences (Desai, 2020).

Reflexivity is necessary to enable questioning of how particular familiar frames of reference (informed by our positionality) can determine how we see ourselves and others, and implications for knowledge creation. Such reflexivity requires an 'ethics of openness and vulnerability' that involves awareness of relationships and interdependence with others and being open to the uncertainty that questioning entails (Keddie et al., 2022).

Building on the existing gender-transformative literature, we draw in the parallel literature around decolonising approaches to development and research, given the increasing debate in this area and its relevance to gender-transformation. The international development sector was first established within a colonial context that privileged some races and sexes above others. It is a collective responsibility for those working in the sector now, especially those in positions of power and privilege, to dismantle the inequalities imposed by these racist and sexist systems (Worsham et al., 2021). Research conducted through 'imperial eyes' has worked to oppress indigenous knowledges and portray people in the Global South as 'the Other'. Decolonising development means "disrupting the deeply-rooted hierarchies, asymmetric power structures, the universalisation of Western knowledge, the privileging of whiteness, and

the taken-for-granted Othering of the majority world" (Sultana, 2019, p. 34). This requires active and reflective consideration of who owns research and knowledge, while avoiding perpetuating inequalities regarding whose ideas are represented. Decolonising knowledge involves the recognition of a plurality of values, practices, and knowledge, as well as "bringing to the centre and privileging indigenous values, attitudes and practices" (Smith, 2012, p. 41). Amplifying the knowledge of local actors from their own points of view can provide a rich and nuanced picture of the development context. Decolonisation and gender-transformation approaches both seek to address power dynamics in knowledge production and encourage a greater diversity of voices to be heard.

There are opportunities to integrate decolonising approaches alongside reflexive, participatory, change-focused, action-oriented, and collaborative practices of gender-transformative interventions. As such, this principle requires a shift in practice, bringing implementation, evaluation, and research much closer to one another, and designing initiatives that integrate them. By leveraging transformative methodological practices, the process of inquiry melds into the process of action.

## 7. Conclusions

In this article, we have explored the history of gender-transformative approaches; clarified the current breadth of applications through both grey and academic literature; and identified five uniting principles to support future gender-transformative research and practice. While we have confirmed that gender-transformative approaches are not novel and are based on feminist thinking and ideas established many decades ago, the practicalities of implementing such approaches continue to evolve. For instance, this paper has highlighted aspects such as decolonising research and development practice and the recognition of diversity in gender identities as continued evolutions within feminist development practice.

As shortfalls in the 'empowerment as development' models have emerged, the revived language of gender-transformation has an opportunity to critically explore broader trajectories and objectives of change within the context of international development work. Where a gender-mainstreaming approach has aimed to embed gendered thinking into development programming as a steppingstone towards improved development outcomes, a gender-transformative approach asserts that equality is both a pathway to and objective of development programming. This language seeks to reorient a new generation of researchers and practitioners to the feminist roots of gender and development. It aims not to repair the women, or change the men, but to transform the systems and structures to emancipate both men and women to create new ways of being and doing.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

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