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Dr. Naila Kabeer delivers the academic keynote address at ISID's 2018 Annual Conference.

To Promote the Use of Gender Research: Co-Create, Connect, Capacitate

By Arjan de Haan

How research can best promote inclusive development policy and practice is perhaps the most important question we at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) continue to try to answer. This is as true for research on gender equality as it is for any other domain; in Canada, with our Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), it is a [key priority](#).

The 2018 Annual Conference of McGill's Institute for the Study of International Development on "Unpacking Women's Empowerment" provided an important opportunity to help answer this question. Minister Bibeau's policy keynote highlighted the importance of evidence for government policy. And in the concluding roundtable panel that I had the honour of participating in, the former Prime Minister of Senegal, Aminata Touré, stressed the lack of impact of gender policies in many countries, including her own. Another fellow panelist, Deirdre Kent, Director General for Development Policy in Global Affairs Canada, stressed the urgency to use the momentum provided by FIAP to make progress on gender equality, and create partnerships to do so.

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There is great value in bringing together researchers – of which some fifteen participated as speakers in this conference – with policy makers in events like this. It is also important that research results are presented in formats that policy makers can access, given their time constraints, and made publicly available using online technologies – such as the [policy briefs](#) produced by the McGill GrOW Research Series. But more is necessary to make new evidence as effective as possible for informing policy and practice; three closely connected priorities come to mind.

First, researchers can do more to get to know their audience, and our experience shows that researchers often find this very enriching. Who do we expect to read our research results? I was recently surprised to hear a physiotherapist say he constantly reads new development research. Of course, we need practitioners to be able to absorb new evidence, but in any case, I think it is worthwhile for researchers to think through more carefully whom we hope to influence with our work, and what their priorities are – even if not all research will directly respond to these.

This may be particularly important for research on gender. Many gender research meetings are populated with the 'usual suspects' – researchers and advocates, and mostly women – who broadly share the same insights and priorities. Gender research is particularly relevant for a wide set of, if not all areas of public policy and practice. More needs to be done to show how findings, for example on gender and economic growth, are relevant for fiscal policies and public expenditure management. Or how measures of women's empowerment can effectively be used to assess the impact of public policy.

Second, more can be done to support expert collaboration, and bring researchers, policy makers and practitioners together effectively. Making gender equality measures more effective, for example, may require policy experimentation. It seems important to connect researchers with

development interventions, to find out how cutting-edge knowledge can be applied to programming in ways that both strengthens interventions and enhances positive impacts on gender equality. This will require time investment, and needs to take account of incentives for researchers and practitioners, but returns may be significant.

Third, capacity is important in several ways. Development knowledge remains concentrated in the global North, and we need to continue to support – as my organisation, IDRC, does through multiple means – local leaders that are not only excellent researchers, but also equipped to engage effectively with policy makers. At the same time, practitioners also need to be trained – as Aga Khan Foundation Canada does through staff investment – to absorb relevant knowledge, and become regular readers of research, published in suitable forms.



Arjan de Haan is the [Employment and Growth Program Lead](#) at Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). He oversees the [Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women](#) program and has over a decade of experience working at the Department for International Development (DFID) and at universities in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.



Unpacking Women's Empowerment at ISID's 2018 Annual Conference

Over 175 international development researchers, practitioners and policy-makers gathered at McGill University in Montreal on March 15-16 for the 2018 Annual Conference of the Institute for the Study of International Development (ISID). The theme of this year's conference was "Unpacking Women's Empowerment: Implications for International Development Research, Policy and Practice." The event featured eighteen experts from around the world, representing the academic, public and non-profit sectors, and two very special keynote speakers - The Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau, Canada's Minister of International Development and La Francophonie, and Dr. Naila Kabeer of the London School of Economics, one of the world's foremost scholars on gender, inequality and development.

Over the course of two days, conference participants unpacked the agenda of women's empowerment in global development. Speakers, organized into four thematic panels and one roundtable session, discussed contemporary challenges and opportunities for research, policy and practice, as well as examined some of the recent evidence on empowerment initiatives in resource-poor settings. The conference also provided an opportunity to highlight ISID's current partnership with IDRC on the [Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women \(GrOW\) program](#) and the [GrOW Research Series](#).

A report highlighting outputs from the conference will soon be available for download on [ISID's website](#). Video recordings of the conference proceedings will also be available for viewing on [ISID's YouTube](#) page in mid-May.



Policy keynote speaker, Minister Bibeau, enters the conference with ISID Director, Dr. Sonia Laszlo.



Dr. Naila Kabeer delivers the conference academic keynote address.



A crowd of over 175 attendees watches the opening panel of the conference.



Q&A with Susana Martinez-Restrepo, Author and Editor of *Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment: Critical Lessons from South America*

Interview by Kate Grantham

I spoke with Susana Martinez-Restrepo about the motivation and process behind her new book, [*Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment: Critical Lessons from South America*](#). This edited collection brings together lessons from the field experiences of several researchers working in three South American countries - Peru, Colombia and Uruguay - to discuss methodological challenges and strategies to measure women's subjective experience of empowerment.

Q. Tell me about the inspiration behind the book. What was your motivation for publishing this collection of work?

In 2013, I worked on a research project that changed my life. I was evaluating the impact of the Red Unidos program on women's economic empowerment in Colombia. I went into the field in both rural and urban impoverished areas of Colombia for three weeks to accompany the people conducting the surveys and the psychologists doing the focus groups. Although I usually go into the field to supervise data gathering, this was the first time I followed so closely the work done by my team. This experience allowed me to notice some challenges in implementing specific instruments in the field. First, observing the survey process, women's responses

and the struggles of both surveyors and women revealed many problems with some of the critical *subjective measures* used to measure women's economic empowerment. The abstract questions we asked in the field were not being interpreted in the way that we originally intended (e.g. decision making, the "freedom to choose staircase"). Second, I observed how some of our instruments were biased because we allowed our *positionality* to get in the way of what low-income women define as wellbeing.

The first time I presented the study at a conference in Brazil in 2014, I met with some researchers from South American countries and asked them about their experiences implementing subjective measures. They had had the same problems in Peru and other countries, reaffirming my experience in Colombia. I asked them "why is nobody talking about these things?". So, in 2016 - thanks to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) - Laura Ramos, Johanna Yancari, Alma Espino and Martin Valdivia and I got together in this book to show our evidence, challenges and solutions to the problems we identified in our previous research work.

Q. Why the focus on South America? What is unique about studying women's economic empowerment in this context compared to other geographical regions?

By listening to 93 women during the focus groups of the Red Unidos impact evaluation and other research field experiences, both in urban and rural areas, I realized that many of our favorite and imported instruments (decision-making, for example) did not apply to the situation of low-income Colombian women. Women in Colombia are "*supermadres*" (super mothers) as Nancy Folbre has pointed out since the 1990s. As a sign of this, on a paper I wrote with UNDP for the Human Development Report, I found that, on average, women living in moderate and extreme poverty in



rural areas of Colombia sleep less, have less leisure time, and spend as much as three times on unpaid care and domestic activities compared to men.

Researchers like me have been importing (uncritically, in my opinion) measurement instruments from South Asia particularly. We can use one conceptual framework to understand and measure the concept of empowerment as a process (such as the one proposed by Naila Kabeer in 1999), but the pre-conditions, and the strategic decisions by which someone defines their goals and acts upon them to improve their wellbeing, vary according to the context or the region. In the South American context, this means that deciding between buying groceries or school uniforms are not necessarily empowering. It could actually be dis-empowering because it takes too much of women's time that could be instead allocated to paid activities while sharing household duties with their husbands or partners.

Q. In the preface for the book, you state that methodological challenges commonly prevent researchers from measuring women's economic empowerment effectively, and that, unfortunately, few researchers talk openly about these issues or address them explicitly in their work. What do you think is the reason for this longstanding silence among researchers on these challenges?

Indeed, there are many aspects that could explain our "longstanding silence." One explanation is publication standards and bias. The short length of our papers and publication bias mean that few of us will ever risk talking about the measurement problems in our work. We may sometimes include a discussion in the footnotes, but we are more likely to be published if we show significant results, and if we either reinforce or completely oppose existing assumptions and evidence from the field. There is rarely room to discuss the fact that the actual questions and variables we used might have failed to measure what they were supposed to.

Occasionally, some of those cases could be addressed in methodological papers, and in this case, we said it in this book.

Another issue is how positionality affects what we measure. First, it affects what we define as "wellbeing." Wellbeing is not the same for me as it is for a low-income woman living in the south of Bogota. For example, I think work is empowering; my work is empowering and I love it, even when I must work 18-hours a day. But the definitions attached to work are not the same for women with little education or low-quality jobs, where they are mistreated and forced to be away from their children for too many hours in dangerous settings. We discuss these issues in the book, showing how, for many women, work can also be disempowering.

Talking about our challenges and proposing new ways to measure subjective variables according to our context in the field is key, particularly for young researchers and people outside academia creating monitoring and evaluation systems.

Q. Who should read this book? Was it published with a particular audience in mind?

We wrote the book to disseminate findings of the methods that work the best, and others which we should use with caution, to measure different dimensions of women's economic empowerment. It was written such that researchers from academia, think tanks, policymakers and international organizations could gain a stronger critical understanding of women's empowerment measures in South America. I do think that the same concept could be applied to research in other regions of the world, although in the book we focus on the aspects that make South American cultures distinct. Most chapters in the book contain empirical evidence using mixed-methods research approaches, and just one uses exclusively qualitative methods.



We worked hard with non-economist peer reviewers and editors to make it as accessible as possible for audiences that do not necessarily know how to read coefficients and p-values, or are familiar with the complex jargon of economics.

Q. What new research or projects are you working on now?

I have two projects that are directly associated with the book. First, my non-profit, [CoreWoman](#), has become my innovation lab of sorts to understand how to develop and measure the competencies women need to improve their wellbeing, and "play bigger" in their jobs and in entrepreneurship. We have developed a curriculum program based on behavioral economics, developmental and cognitive psychology, linguistics and business. I sometimes feel like a psychologist! It has been fascinating to be the "on the other side," designing and implementing programs that aim at strengthening women's agency. There is so much we need to advance on the measurement side, and it starts by being closer to the field, learning by doing and even developing programs. The Africa Innovation Lab of the World Bank, run by Mark Goldstein, is managing to accomplish that mix, and I believe that they are among the best innovators in the field. We need that for South America.

Second, the book has brought a lot of attention to how we are measuring women's economic empowerment. At CoreWoman we are fundraising to launch a large-scale project to provide consultancy support to grass roots organizations, local NGOs, government agencies, and some international organizations to strengthen the way they conceptualize, design, implement and evaluate women's empowerment programs. The cool idea here is that after gathering evidence and piloting new instruments, according to the institutional capacity of organizations, we plan to develop software that will allow us to scale-up this initiative.



Dr. Susana Martinez-Restrepo is the Managing Partner and Director of Research and Development at CoreWoman. She holds a PhD in Economics of Education from Columbia University.



Launching ISID's New Women's Empowerment in Development Lab!

The Institute for the Study of International Development is pleased to announce the launch of its brand-new Women's Empowerment in Development (WED) Lab! This Lab aims to bridge the gap between academics, practitioners and policy makers in Canada and globally on issues related to women's empowerment in developing countries.

The purpose of the WED Lab is to:

- **Advance knowledge creation, dissemination and outreach** on issues of women's empowerment in global development.
- **Understand and eliminate the barriers** that prevent women in low-income countries from reaching their full potential, and from being able to fully engage with the economy, political systems, communities and the environment in which they live.
- **Understand how social and economic policy can help** in providing real development solutions to eliminate gender inequality.
- **Strengthen the evidence-base** on what works, and does not work, to empower women in developing countries.
- **Enable researchers, policy-makers and practitioners**, including CSOs and NGOs, to address global forms of gender inequality.

Learn more by visiting:

<http://womensempowerment.lab.mcgill.ca/>

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The GrOW Research Series brings together scholarly research on women's economic empowerment and growth in low-income countries, and provides a conceptual and empirical basis for policy-making. It is also the official research platform for the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program. This series is housed at the Institute for the Study of International Development (ISID) at McGill University in Montreal.

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