International Development Volunteering as Transformational Feminist Practice for Gender Equality

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Abstract

International and transnational commitments to gender equality require strategies that tackle root causes and prevailing attitudes that perpetuate disparities. In this article, we examine the role and impact of international development volunteers (IDV) as development actors who are well-placed for feminist transformational change, as they work in transnational spaces to influence, support, or reinforce changes in attitudes and behaviors towards gender equality and women’s empowerment (GEWE). This qualitative study analyses data collected from 45 interviews in three countries (Malawi, Kenya and Uganda) to document partner organization perspectives on relational dynamics emerging from interactions with IDVs. Partner organization staff highlighted several notable positive and negative contributions to GEWE outcomes arising from day-to-day interactions with IDVs. These interactions shaped their understandings of GEWE, enhanced confidence for GEWE programming, and provided exposure to role models who can shape alternative attitudes and behaviors to gender equality. While the study revealed varying degrees of challenges and benefits for partner organizations working with volunteers specifically on gender equality, partner organization staff highlighted contributions made by IDVs to transnational spatial relations, as well as the transformational interactions that shaped these relations. Insights provided by partner country staff members offer subaltern perspectives and rich insights into the contributions of IDVs in gender equality programming and shed new light on the challenges and opportunities for fostering transnational feminist spaces of knowledge sharing, relationship building, and alternative practices.
Keywords: Gender equality, women’s empowerment, international development volunteering, transnational feminism

Introduction

Innovations in the delivery of gender equality programming are urgently needed to meet the international commitments and priorities outlined in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2018). In addition to specific targets aiming to end all forms of discrimination against all women, advances in gender equality (SDG 5) are important for achieving all other SDGs. Evidence of the societal and economic value of women’s economic empowerment and gender equality can be found in indicators of per capita GDP, workforce participation rates, income generation, agricultural outputs, food security, and societal gains for women, their children, and their communities (United Nations, 2017). A recent World Bank report estimates that closing the wealth gap between women and men would generate $160 trillion in additional human capital wealth (Wodon & de la Briere, 2018). While evidence supporting the value of gender equality and women’s empowerment (GEWE) is clear, making progress towards goals of equality requires a range of strategies to dismantle structural and discriminatory practices, laws, and cultural norms that perpetuate inequality (Oxfam & IDRC, 2018).

Decades of research in development studies have demonstrated that tackling GEWE requires a range of strategies from immediate interventions, such as women’s economic empowerment projects, to long-term strategies aimed at transforming gender relations by changing societal attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate gender-inequitable norms and practices. Yet, development practice has been slow to adopt long-term strategies, with only marginal demonstrated progress towards changing gender relations and tackling the structural and systemic barriers to women’s human rights and gender equality (United Nations, 2019).

Turning international targets and commitments to gender equality into practical action requires partnerships from diverse actors working in transnational spaces across the local–international divide. It also requires recognition and awareness of both the potential dominant Westernized perception and imposition of gender equality, as well as the potential for new knowledge production and contributions to solidarity movements. Effective strategies must pay attention to the ways that attitudes and
behaviors change so that GEWE is prioritized and supported by all community members. To do so means to consider the change agents involved in altering perceptions and attitudes about gender norms.

One group of transnational change agents who contribute to collaborative development practice are international development volunteers (IDVs). However, despite purported contributions referenced in global practice and policy documents (Tiessen & Delaney, 2018; UNV, 2015), the evidence base to support volunteers’ contributions to GEWE programming is weak. Lack of investment into research on volunteering in development contexts has kept the contributions of this sector hidden, understudied, and undervalued (Devereux & Guse, 2012; Seelig & Lough, 2015). To adequately capture the complementary contributions of IDVs to gender equality, their roles in relational processes and changing local systems must be better articulated and measured (Buckles & Chevalier, 2012; Zuurmond, 2012).

Analysis of North–South volunteer partnership often points to neocolonial interpretations of knowledge exchange that dismiss the perspectives of overseas partner organizations and the relational aspects of volunteering. To date, only a handful of qualitative studies have investigated the complementary contributions of IDVs, pointing to the qualities such as social capital, innovation, flexibility, challenges to gender norms, improvement in human rights awareness, and building of vertical ‘bridges’ or relational networks with higher-level actors (Burns et al., 2015; Devereux, 2010).

This article extends findings from previous studies by examining spaces where gender relations can be transformed through collaborations with IDVs. Drawing from the subaltern perspectives of partner organization staff, it examines IDVs’ distinctive contributions as transnational actors engaged in GEWE change processes by examining their everyday interactions with partner organizations and communities as they work to “widen spaces for voice and action within the development process” (UNV, 2015, p. 1). It also considers the potential for IDV transnational programming to transform gender relations and facilitate relational dynamics that can lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors on deeply held beliefs about gender norms. Findings emphasize knowledge sharing, relationship building, soft-skills capacity development, and modeling of alternative approaches as the distinctive contributions that IDVs make to GEWE. As the findings will demonstrate, these contributions are viewed by partner organization staff as both positive and problematic.
Gender Equality as a Core Specialization in Organizational Theories of Change

Gender equality outcomes are central to the priorities and program models of many international volunteer cooperation organizations (IVCOs). For example, indicators of success for two of Canada’s largest IVCOs, World University Service of Canada (WUSC) and Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI), have at least one gender equality reporting outcome in their theory of change models. Reporting on program deliverables includes specific requirements of gender equality impacts across all programs. For other IVCOs, gender is explicitly cited as a cross-cutting theme, and program activities consider a mainstreaming of women’s economic empowerment and gender-inclusive policies (see CESO, 2017).

The largest and most prominent multilateral IVCO, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program, reports that approximately 75 UNVs serve as gender specialists annually (UNV Gender Report, 2017). In 2016, 116 UNVs were working specifically on gender equality assignments or projects (UNV Gender Report, 2017). In a 2016 survey of 2,900 UNVs, 691 survey respondents indicated that their assignments contributed most to SDG 5 (achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls) (UNV, 2018). More specifically, volunteers contribute to meeting the specific targets of: increasing informed-decision-making roles for women and girls, eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls, recognizing the value of unpaid care and domestic work, promoting access to positions of decision-making roles in organizations for women, and contributing to policies that support empowerment of women and girls (United Nations, 2015). As these indicators and targets demonstrate, mainstreaming gender in volunteerism programs through a broad range of initiatives reinforces the critical role of volunteerism in transforming gender roles, opportunities, and outcomes (UNV, 2010). They also demonstrate the importance of gender equality in the work of hosting partners, specifically in its relation to protection, empowerment, women’s rights advocacy, and community-centered development.

IVCOs use diverse strategies to promote gender equality in IDV programs. These strategies include: partnering with women’s organizations; selecting volunteers who have knowledge on and/or expertise in gender equality; and implementing capacity building and training in programs to share and exchange information about gender equality (Tiessen & Delaney, 2018). These strategies provide a framework to ensure gender
equality remains a priority for IDVs’ activities and that the outcomes are relevant to the settings where the activities are situated. However, according to organizational theories of change, the transnational relationships built between the volunteers and partner organization staff or community members expose individuals to alternative gender relations and open up spaces for dialogue and discussions on GEWE, thus broadening the contextual understanding of GEWE for all parties. Consequently, the measurable impacts of gender equality outcomes hypothetically result from the work of individual volunteers working together with host organizations on initiatives that can then promote changes in the attitudes, behaviors, and lived realities of community members as they negotiate the challenges of changing gender relations.

**IDVs’ Contributions to GEWE**

The primary strategies that IVCOs use to support international volunteering for gender equality cover three areas of programming: organizational capacity building, advocacy and policy, and knowledge sharing and learning. Within these three areas, several examples from different regions illustrate the global scope of IDVs’ contributions to GEWE programming in varying contexts.

Organizational capacity building can include skills training in areas such as business development, fundraising and proposal writing, or marketing and communications on GEWE programs. One example of capacity building is taken from Québec Sans Frontières (QSF), which sent a team of seven volunteers to the rural Volta Region of Ghana for a 10-week immersive program aimed at enhancing women’s empowerment in the agricultural sector. With the support of Crossroads International, the team worked with local partners to expand women’s farming practices and to generate supplemental income. Additional IDV contributions to women’s groups in a neighboring community included business management, marketing and sales, bookkeeping, group constitutions, gender equity, and organic-agriculture techniques (Anderson, 2016; Tiessen & Delaney, 2018).

Advocacy and policy-related contributions of IDV programs can involve awareness raising, promotion of human rights and ending of gender-based violence through training and advocacy work. For example, in Nepal, Canadians volunteering with the Uniterra program trained journalists and social activists to increase gender sensitization awareness
and reflect on the role of media in changing perceptions and that of investigative journalism in enhancing female representation in the tourism sector (Tiessen & Delaney, 2018).

Finally, the promotion of knowledge and learning can take many forms, including role modeling, relationship building and soft-skills capacity building. One of the perceived benefits of IDVs to learning is the potential for modeling different gender norms, thereby facilitating men’s and women’s questioning of their own perceptions of gender equality and consequently challenging preconceived notions of inclusion in development processes (Burns et al., 2015). Volunteers encourage women to access sectors usually reserved for men, and to take on new roles, especially as leaders and managers. Men and women volunteers can therefore serve as role models and inspire others to follow in their footsteps (UNV, 2016).

These examples demonstrate several of the methods and activities that IVCOs use to enhance GEWE programming. They demonstrate that IDV offers multiple activities and pathways to empower partner staff and communities, allowing them to share in their own capacities while acquiring new skills and perspectives on social norms.

While the case studies and anecdotes from IVCOs tend to showcase the positive outcomes of programs, scholarly analyses tend to emphasize the challenges, structural constraints, inequitable and racialized relationships (Perold et al., 2013), and the colonial legacies and colonial continuities (Clost, 2014; Perold et al., 2013) that maintain dependency mindsets and perceptions of superiority/inferiority. The corollary to these ingrained dependency mindsets is the actualization of a “helping imperative” (Heron, 2007) through which international volunteers can self-assign the role of “savior” in relation to the “helpless other” (Clost, 2014). Scholarship employing the lenses of postcolonialism, poststructuralism, feminism, and critical race theory has documented the role of white women serving as international volunteers in the Global South as an extension of neocolonial and neo-imperial development practices. As such, the structural constraints and discourses shaping international development practices are often replicated through IDV programs. Nevertheless, development actors from the Global South use their agency to navigate these problematic structural inequalities, though little is understood about their nuanced practices of negotiating systems of inequality and the characteristics of transnational relationships that emerge when partner organizations collaborate with IDVs.
In addition, understanding the potential of IDVs to contribute to structural transformations that support women’s empowerment and gender equality requires more systematic research across program models. A more comprehensive focus on the perspectives of partner organization and community members, as well as an emphasis on the “processes from both sides of the volunteerism relationship,” is also needed to accurately understand the effects of IDV interventions (Schech et al., 2019, p. 4). In addition, more diverse voices and balanced perspectives on GEWE in IDV interventions require a careful analysis of their impact on systemic changes, structural inequality and discriminatory practices, and barriers to GEWE. Thus, the following discussion builds on, and brings together, diverse scholarship from the areas of IDVs, critical development studies, and gender and development to help fill several of these gaps.

A Theoretical Framework for Gender Equality in International Development Volunteering

Several theoretical lenses ground the analysis for this study. The first includes a focus on partner organization voices to showcase subaltern perspectives, turning the gaze away from volunteers’ experience towards the relational dynamics between volunteers and staff of partner organizations. Second, the analysis recognizes the importance of relationships and synergistic complementarities between organizations and communities in the South and volunteers and IVCOs from the North. Using these lenses, a discursive analysis of critical feminist scholarship highlights transformational attitudinal and behavioral changes in gender equality programming that result from Global South partners’ interactions with IDVs.1

Building on a small but growing body of scholarship on subaltern perspectives on international development volunteering (Tiessen et al., 2018), this research focuses on the agency and voice of those positioned in the Global South (Chen, 2018; Loiseau et al., 2016; Perold et al., 2013; Tiessen, 2018). Prioritizing South voices as a research methodology operates on the assumption that marginalized people best know how to articulate their problems, priorities, and the results of international projects (see Narayan et al., 2000). This agency-oriented lens aims to more fully understand and communicate how Southern partners participating in IDV programs interpret their experiences within the historical, political, social, and economic realities that influence their lives.
This perspective draws upon discursive normative theory to decenter a critical analysis by privileging subaltern voices (Saffari, 2016; Tiessen et al., 2018). As a complement to critical theory, normative theory takes an individual- or agent-centered view of power where personal choice and interpretation can be used to help explain social changes (see Kanbur & Shaffer, 2007). Highlighting diverse and understudied experiences through normative discourse presents new opportunities to more deeply consider how the relational complementarity of international volunteers may enhance local efforts to strengthen GEWE.

Mapping spaces where transformations in gender relations are taking place is essential for uncovering new opportunities to build long-term and sustainable gender equality programming. Examining the ways in which volunteers and staff from overseas organizations interact, engage, and dialogue in everyday settings illuminates the impacts of these transnational relationships and how they can shape, distort, challenge, and reinforce certain framings around gender inequality and women’s empowerment. Conceptually, the capacity for IDVs to influence GEWE outcomes loosely follows Evan’s (1996) theory of synergistic complementarities and Ostrom’s (1996) notions of coproduction between local civic agents and external technical actors. Theoretically, the relational outcomes such as inspiration, trust, networks, cross-cultural understanding, and interpersonal-skills transfers are critical complements to technical development processes (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2002; Lough, 2016). Likewise, pathways from international volunteer engagement to the end goals such as gender equality depend on achieving intermediary relational outcomes, such as building mediating networks, altering gender norms through interpersonal engagement, and sharing skills through capacity-building interventions (Lough, 2016).

In addition to recognizing the importance of relationships, and employing theoretical and methodological lenses that prioritize South voices and agency, this article employs a discursive analysis of critical feminist scholarship in gender and development to consider how IDV program interventions are best situated within women-in-development (WID) and gender-and-development (GAD) models. The analysis focuses on the potential to move from WID interventions to consider how gender relations are influenced by the gendered division of labor (Moser, 1993) and the transformative changes needed to achieve gender equality (Parpart, 2014). These frameworks of analysis are important for recognizing the diverse approaches to gender equality programming and can be used...
to make sense of implementation strategies (the roles and activities of international volunteers), results (the changes that take place in gender equality measures through interventions from international volunteers), and measurement indicators (how gender equality outcomes are evaluated and inputted on a continuum of impacts).

Transnational feminism provides the analytical lens through which to consider the transformations possible through IDV programs, with emphasis on the historical and political context of the countries under examination (Perold et al., 2013; Wemlinger & Berlan, 2015). Rajan and Thornhill (2019, p. 1345) build on the rich body of literature around the unintended consequences of feminist collaboration between “Northerners” and “Southerners.” The authors point to the studies around the “characterizations of privilege as an obstacle to solidarity work that tend to insufficiently discuss how solidarity may be enhanced, even across chasms of racial, class, national and other forms of difference” (Rajan & Thornhill, 2019, p. 1347). Recognizing the diverse environmental, social, cultural, and economic landscapes in which IDVs are located sheds light on opportunities for examining varying perceptions of GEWE that are challenged, contested, and celebrated in local, national, and regional settings.

Similarly, Cadesky, Baillie Smith and Thomas (2019, p. 373) point to the importance of location in understanding how volunteering interacts with the gender norms that underpin humanitarian and development discourses and practices. Likewise, Wemlinger and Berlan (2016, p. 870) argue that the host country’s social, political, and cultural norms affect how male and female volunteers engage with certain organizations over others. Their study contends that in countries where women are more integrated into economic and political spheres, they are more likely to engage in traditional female organizations, where men tend to decrease their engagement. Further, place-based politics is complicated by IDVs’ transnational location and necessity to consider both the contextual translation of gender equality and what is considered a “Westernized” perception of gender equality (Mills & Ssewakiryanga, 2002). As Ogunyankin (2019, p. 1388) argues, “troubling the rigidity of place-based politics and identities can invaluably contribute to the creation of a new politics of knowledge production and to the attainment of social justice.” As each of these perspectives illustrates, IDVs’ contributions are embedded in diverse political and socioeconomic contexts and influence the broadening of diverse perspectives generated between partner organization staff and volunteers.
Taken together, these theoretical approaches provide new lenses to investigate and document, from a subaltern perspective, whether the complementary contributions of international volunteerism truly support global partnership arrangements that can achieve end goals of gender equality (Schech et al., 2019). Drawing upon these diverse theoretical perspectives, this article explores the benefits and challenges of promoting gender equality through IDVs, specifically in programs focused on promoting women’s empowerment, improving women’s decision-making power, understanding women’s rights, and strengthening women’s enhanced skills development. It highlights specific examples of how this change happens through the everyday interactions of IDVs in collaboration with partner organization staff and communities.

**Methods**

The data used to inform this study were collected through qualitative, semi-structured interviews with partner organization staff in three countries (Malawi, Kenya and Uganda). Fifteen interviews were carried out in each country for a total of 45 interviews. Data were collected between May and August 2018. Interview participants were purposively sampled, having met the inclusion criteria that their organizations were: (a) receiving and engaging with IDVs; and (b) having programs/projects intentionally working towards GEWE. The interviews were conducted by locally based researchers in each of these countries, including a Canadian graduate student based in Uganda, a Kenyan graduate student based in Kenya, and a Malawian research assistant living in Malawi.

The same semi-structured interview guide was used across the three countries. The interview questions covered four major themes pertaining to: (a) general experiences hosting IDVs; (b) positive impacts of IDVs on GEWE outcomes; (c) negative impacts; and (d) partners’ reflections on donor priorities and feminist foreign policies. The researchers also employed probing questions to seek elaboration on key findings, which differed across countries. The interviews were digitally recorded and saved on password-protected computers. The research team also transcribed field notes and prepared summary reports for each country.

The data were evaluated using content analysis. To make these linkages, segments of the data were coded into preexisting study themes. These themes were further refined to provide additional evidence for data interpretation and reporting. Themes that emerged in the interviews
were decontextualized and recontextualized within emergent themes of knowledge and confidence in GEWE programming, opportunities and challenges for IDVs to model inclusive and alternative gender behaviors, and possibilities for ongoing transnational relationship building.

**Findings**

Findings from the data are presented across six key categories that describe IDVs’ contributions to the promotion of GEWE: (a) everyday interactions with IDVs change partners’ perceptions of GEWE; (b) IDVs demonstrate confidence in GEWE; (c) IDVs model inclusive development practices; (d) IDVs model alternative gender behaviors; (e) IDVs introduce challenges with role modeling GEWE as transnational actors; and (f) IDVs initiate ongoing relationships and transnational flows after they return home.

A total of 15 percent of the responses specifically pointed to the relevance of everyday interactions and dialogue between volunteers and partner organization staff in shaping and influencing how gender equality is addressed in programming and in the organization, overall. More specifically, 33 percent of the responses pointed to the relevance of the volunteers’ everyday interactions with partner organization staff in shaping, influencing, or challenging perspectives on GEWE. In Uganda, for example, the widely publicized criminalization of homosexuality generated discussions between organization staff and IDVs. The partner organization’s office offered a space to discuss diverging views safely, while opening spaces for considering broader human rights violations and gender-based injustices. One participant talked about this in the context of gender issues experienced by members of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) communities. This participant pointed to the role the IDVs played in encouraging broader considerations beyond the persecution of sexual minorities to also considering how this work must be framed as one of gender equality and human rights.

Another example in Kenya pointed to volunteer engagement leading to resource access for members of the LGBTQ community so that gender-nonconforming individuals were able to find organizations that could support them. IDVs were considered important for opening dialogues about the importance of these broader considerations, as they shared examples from their home countries where gay marriage is legal and/or more socially acceptable.
Relationship building and ‘bonding’ through everyday interactions were also central to heightening the awareness of gender issues and the significance of women’s empowerment. Knowledge sharing took place through these trusted relationships formed through daily relational experiences. Partner organization staff in Kenya referred to the “leisure talk about life, women, men, and their expectations” and the opportunities that were presented to “demystify” gender norms, expectations, and relations. Another staff member from Uganda saw her relationship with international volunteers growing out of the freeness demonstrated by the volunteers as they shared their personal stories and experiences in life, allowing mutual learning opportunities.

In describing reproductive and sexual health, volunteers also contributed to broadening or changing perspectives by normalizing the use of terminology previously considered “awkward” to use in public. For example, IDVs used specific words and proper names for genitalia to reduce the stigma surrounding discussions of human sexuality and to promote “healthy relationships.” According to a participant from Uganda, these acts were directly linked to GEWE programming. Partner-country organization staff reflected on some of the challenges of doing this gender equality work in communities that may resist such open dialogue and explicit use of terminology. Overall, however, the staff considered it as good exposure for communities—particularly for children who generally lack access to much of the information that IDVs could provide.

IDVs also offered an enhanced sense of future possibilities through their everyday interactions with community members and partner staff. In Kenya, for example, staff members and volunteers discussed women’s roles in politics or in professional work contexts. These discussions were considered opportunities to introduce new options whereby women in Kenya began thinking more about, and feeling prepared for, participation in politics. As one woman from the beneficiary communities reported to the partner organization staff, “there is nothing difficult in this world even if am a woman. [I] am entitled to the same share, like a man.”

**International Development Volunteers Demonstrate Confidence in Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment**

International volunteers seemed to exude confidence in GEWE through their deep awareness of these terms and their knowledge about how to address these areas in their work. The volunteers’ heightened confidence was described as informative and valuable to the partner organizations...
and shaped the nature of the work that the volunteers were able to carry out. One staff mentioned the interactions between volunteers and community members as a kind of mentorship where the volunteers offered women moral and emotional support when they were feeling down or discouraged. According to an interview response from a Kenyan partner, the kinds of jokes and stories provided by the IDVs made women feel motivated and gave them energy to continue with their work.

The confidence exhibited through the international volunteers’ knowledge encourages partner organizations to also want to learn. First, some partner organization staff described how their own interest in women’s rights and gender equality grew as a result of their exposure to IDVs. Several instances illustrated that female staff members, in particular, desired to advance their education and develop skills following their interactions with IDVs. In Uganda, for example, staff members talked about how IDVs had influenced local young women to explore and pursue the research topics like sexual harassment. In Kenya, IDVs were considered a positive force for encouraging girls to return to school. As one respondent in Kenya noted: “The girls now will be like, ‘I want to apply for a scholarship abroad to go to school’… Their mind is opened up; they are open-minded.”

More than three-quarters of the study participants described various ways of learning together with the international volunteers. These opportunities for learning often included engagement through shared spaces, such as workshops, peer groups, and community outreach activities.

The enhanced confidence and knowledge that emerged through interactions with the international volunteers often translated into practical skills and activities tied to organizational change. Numerous learning sessions were customized and directed around sexual violence, workplace harassment, gender discrimination, and entrepreneurial development, as noted in the following quote from a staff member in Malawi: “We have deliberately had training on workplace harassment targeting women… I can confirm again that this time around our women workers can proudly talk, can proudly protect, their employment rights….”

Likewise, a respondent from Uganda noted that one of their volunteers had very, very good skills in hairdressing and make-up, and she took it upon herself to train young people on how to do makeup. And now we have some of them who are makeup artists in the community and that [is] how they find their income.
The staff member viewed this volunteer as playing an important role in “inspiring” the women in the community, transferring useful skills, and drawing upon her knowledge of local resources to enable women to build their own opportunities for economic empowerment.

Sharing and gaining of expertise on gender equality and women’s economic empowerment were meant to assist community members, especially marginalized groups of women, to be more assured and outspoken about their issues. IDVs primarily facilitated these changes through their support and encouragement, rather than through an explicit GEWE intervention. Over two-thirds of the study participants reported that they had gained a voice and became engaged in women’s rights’ promotion following their learning sessions with IDVs.

**International Volunteers Modeling Inclusive Development**

Beyond the transfer of skills and knowledge, combined with the confidence that comes from exposure to gender equality language and practices, staff members described how international volunteers modeled alternative or nonnormative attitudes and behaviors. Several examples of modeling behavior were identified in the interviews, including the consistent promotion of inclusive development, modeling of leadership for social change, nondiscriminatory behaviors and attitudes, and advocacy efforts.

First, a common theme talked about by all participants across the three study countries was the patriarchal nature of communities where power and privilege are largely held by men. As a challenge to these patriarchal norms, international volunteers worked to promote inclusive development as they engaged with partner organizations and communities. At the most basic level, challenging dominant norms involved encouraging the representation and participation of both men and women in all programmatic activities. For instance, in a refugee camp in Malawi, an international volunteer was described as leading the charge to create opportunities for women to hold positions of authority, and to champion their rights. The volunteer highlighted that all elected positions were filled by men. The community members made a decision to have both male and female nominees in order to ensure the representation of women:

> I think we also had community level elections where the international volunteer was quite instrumental together with some of the nationals to ensure that nomination was equal for men and equal for women… and are able to bring issues that affect specifically women to the attention of the management.
Furthermore, locally based women said they were motivated to be in leadership roles when they saw international volunteers acting in positions of power and actively engaging in male-dominated sectors. The significance of alternative role models was particularly important, according to one interviewee in Malawi, to some of the most marginalized members of the community. For example, young girls in refugee camps in Malawi often lack access to diverse role models, and female volunteers were seen as a positive force for fostering new opportunities for women.

IDVs were also seen as contributing to ending discrimination and advocating for change. In Kenya, an IDV advocated for a safe working environment—one that was free from sexual assault for women. The IDVs facilitated the sharing of ideas and strategies, which, in turn, led to positive thinking that changed people’s mindsets. An example provided by a Kenyan interview participant captured this well: “I can see that women in my organization [realize that] a woman [is] entitled to the same share like a man....” A partner organization staff member from Uganda remarked that even when programs were brought into rural communities, the international volunteers continued “speaking out against violence against women and gender differences in different spaces.” In Malawi, international volunteers came up with innovative ideas that emphasized community inclusion in the design of programs that contributed to GEWE, including the introduction of nutrition education and alternative dishes.

Aside from encouraging and modeling leadership and advocacy elements, IDVs sought diverse representation in their work. Some volunteers went to great lengths to include all genders in program activities. A case in point was Kenya, where volunteers requested non-participating people of a missing gender to get involved in their activities when project participants belonging to only one gender were present; this was to ensure a gender-balanced event, and “they can even ask someone to come to stay in the meeting just to make sure there is gender balance.”

About a quarter of the study respondents indicated that IDVs fostered inclusivity by encouraging the formation of boys’/men’s groups that became “safe” spaces for the discussion of gender roles, relationships, and responsibilities. One of the key questions asked by many host members was how to deal with empowered women, since local community men thought that their women were progressing too fast and that the men were not able to keep up. These boy/men groups helped to explore ways of dealing with the changing gender expectations, including the gaining
of control and power by local community women. As described by a participant from Malawi:

...we observed that the boys were missing out because there wasn’t anybody mentoring them. When they come to school it’s all about girls, mentors come for girls, other organizations coming for girls, all the role models just for girls, so we said no, boys should be included so they came in and they are those father groups they come and meet the boys... that was introduced by one of the volunteers.

One strategy for including men and boys and increasing their involvement in gender equality initiatives, as one Kenyan participant noted, is to ensure there are male IDVs who can also serve as role models and encourage discussions about changing gender roles in positive ways for the communities.

**International Volunteers Displaying Alternative Gender Behaviors**

Several examples of alternative gender behaviors were identified in the interviews. Some of the interview respondents noted that IDVs displayed different expectations of who pays for meals, opting to share the cost of a meal equally between men and women rather than expecting men to pay. This notion challenged their normative expectations of gender. A second example included references to the minimal gender division in roles and activities carried out by IDVs. For instance, an interviewee from Uganda observed that IDVs performed gender-nonconforming roles, as they “performed chores they liked without minding the cultural restriction.” For example, female volunteers comfortably played football and watched television, while male volunteers took on cooking and childcare roles. In another example in Malawi, the interviewee shared an experience of a male IDV cooking lunch for everyone. The Malawian interviewee reflected on the surprise of all the women in the community who were “amazed that this person [man] can actually do this.”

By carrying out household chores and transgressing locally based ideas of gender norms and gender-appropriate activities, IDVs challenged the norms of traditional roles of men and women in partner communities and modeled a different kind of gender behavior. At first, one interviewee found this behavior to be amusing, but with time, community members became interested and began having conversations about other gender dynamics and different gender roles. This exchange of perspectives and
knowledge sharing encouraged partner organization staff to reflect on their own gender norms and to reflect on the international volunteers’ views and actions on gender rights and expectations. Some partner organization staff members began to see value in men and women working together and having a shared work and family life. The change in attitude towards transgressing gender norms was captured in this reflection from Kenya:

It’s not really about what a man can do, or a woman can do. We can collaborate and just do everything together without having to think this is specified for a man or this is for a woman.

As this example demonstrates, the changed attitudes and behaviors emerged in part through the observations; however, it was the nature of casual exposure, and the subsequent conversations and discussions that emerged from these observations, that led to open-mindedness, curiosity, and, with time, attitude and behavior changes.

In Kenya, partner organization staff commented on the exposure to negative gender dynamics shared by international volunteers as central to changing attitudes. For one program in Kenya, the staff engaged in men’s empowerment to end violence against women. The staff talked about the opportunity presented by international volunteers who engaged in conversations with local community members about reasons for ending violence against women and opportunities that can be presented to men and women when women are valued, roles are shared, and equality of opportunity is made a priority.

Aside from influencing host-member attitudes on GEWE, international volunteers’ gender behaviors also appeared to affect local practices. Examples from the study highlighted how a few community members, especially men, began changing their behaviors and acting more respectfully and being more supportive towards women. An example is drawn from Malawi, where a community leader took on some household chores that his wife had always performed. This really surprised and impressed his children: “And the kids would be so happy. They would be like ‘Wow! Our dad, our chief has cooked nsima [staple food] for us’....”

**Challenges with Role Modeling**

Several challenges associated with IDV behavior and role modeling were also mentioned. As one Kenyan interview participant noted, rural
community members may see IDVs as negative role models who may engage in activities “against our culture,” or they may be seen in a negative light (such as seeing a female IDV smoking a cigarette).

Additional concerns included perceptions that IDVs may be seen as “interfering with their traditions by emphasizing women’s equality and empowerment,” such as this example from a man in Kenya: “We have had situations whereby some of them [rural community members] feel like ‘I think your empowerment is interfering with our culture’.” The interviewee went on to explain that most of these concerns are raised by male community members who may be resisting changes that will result from gender equality.

Participants also gave several examples of international volunteers who generate conflict in their communities. For example, disagreements occurred over hosting international volunteers. Men were often willing to host IDVs in their homes, while women were less inclined. This disagreement created intra-household conflict. Concerns identified by women included the additional work burden and housework that often fell on women when international volunteers came to stay in their homes. Women expressed concerns that the volunteers, particularly female volunteers, would not provide the expected help with chores. One Kenyan interviewee reflected on concerns she heard from other women in the community who were uncomfortable with a female IDV hanging around with the husbands and not helping the women in the kitchens. She expressed a concern that the IDVs, especially female volunteers, were able to get close to their husbands while engaging in “male activities” like watching television and politicking.

### Ongoing Relationships and the Potential for Long-Term Transnational Flows

Some international volunteers continued to provide support to the partner organization after the international placement had ended. The transnational relationship was seen as an asset to the partner organization staff. For example, partner organization staff in Uganda reported that after a volunteer returned home, she followed up with the work she had started and expanded it into a large project to support them. In this example, the IDV’s contributions were seen as valuable advocacy initiatives that demonstrated ongoing commitments to the partner organization’s work.

Another example in Uganda demonstrated the initiative of a volunteer who contributed to a sexual-assault policy during her placement. After
the volunteer returned home, she continued to consider what else could be done to create justice for girls who were being harassed. Her ideas translated into a research article and, after a few years, in the creation of a program to end violence and sexual harassment of girls in Ugandan plantations.

These examples show how host organizations valued the IDVs’ transnational mobility as a means to further the work through additional investments into research and discussion outside the country. They also demonstrate how the relational dynamics between host organizations and IDVs have the potential to form a basis for longer-term global connections that directly feed into sustained partnerships to address overarching global development goals.

Discussion and Conclusions

As indicated in the findings from our field work, partner organizations highlighted a variety of changes that emerged alongside IDV contributions to GEWE programming. This suggests that IDV has significant potential to transform gender relations through everyday interactions, building of confidence in GEWE programming, and modeling behavior that fosters changes in gender norms.

Broadened perspectives on GEWE began with increased intercultural exposure between IDVs and staff members. Because international volunteers are often placed in low-income areas and have direct relationships with community members, often living and working alongside local populations, the communication and exposure have the potential to alter attitudes, behaviors, and actions. As one interview participant in Kenya confirmed, “The biggest impact I would say is the intercultural exposure.” In addition to altered perspectives, findings demonstrated additional opportunities for intercultural learning that often seemed to enhance feelings of self-worth among female staff in partner organizations.

Findings also indicate that the exposure to IDV values and approaches can be linked to increased confidence among partner staff members on gender-related issues—particularly when speaking about sensitive topics like gender-based violence, sexual behaviors, or family planning. The impact of international volunteers in-country was identified as building relationships and opening up spaces for dialogue that were not otherwise available. This “bonding” opportunity was seen as crucial for enhancing the capacity of locally based staff to carry the work of GEWE forward.
These findings highlight the importance of the interpersonal and intercultural interactions that take place between volunteers and partner staff members, which are a key component of the IDV value proposition. The recognition of the unique space occupied by IDVs as transnational actors who have direct relationships with community members is an important entry point for considering the everyday interactions and spatial significance of the IDV–partner organization or community relationship. In many instances, the development of relationships between IDVs and staff members of partner organizations was associated with long-term engagement to tackle key issues, such as sexual and reproductive rights, or open new perspectives on LGBTQ rights and resource needs. These relationships can influence the confidence of partner organization staff with GEWE programming and shape new ways of modeling gender roles and attitudes. In addition, ongoing formal and informal interactions between partner organization staff and community members were associated with long-term positive impacts on GEWE, even after the volunteers returned home.

The continuing commitment and support provided by IDVs (through transnational flows) after they returned home was considered among the partner organization staff as a highly valuable and important means of sustained promotion of GEWE over time. These transnational partnerships continued after the in-country placement ended, with ongoing commitments by volunteers to support GEWE initiatives upon their return to their home countries. The benefits to volunteer engagement, therefore, extended beyond their immediate assignment to enhance cultural, social, and economic benefits that were not previously available.

The focus on GEWE that arises from IDVs’ interactions with partner organization staff members, and by extension the recipient communities, is an opportunity for modeling alternative attitudes and behaviors, as well as for demonstrating alternative masculinities/femininities and inclusive approaches to development. However, in addition to the benefits that emerged from exposure and dialogue, changes in gender expectations and responsibility (e.g., shared family work) may free up time for women to pursue their life goals, including engaging in paid work for economic gains. These findings sheds light on additional possibilities for transformational feminist development strategies through IDV programs, whereby strategic gender issues can be addressed in tandem with practical development strategies for women’s social and economic empowerment.
While international development volunteering has great potential to enhance GEWE, recognizing the barriers to gender equality is an important—and often missed—opportunity for shaping new ideas and innovative solutions to GEWE programs. Beyond merely targeting women for economic-empowerment programs, IDVs play an important role in shaping how partner organizations understand power dynamics, gender relations, and root causes of inequality. Strategies designed to alter power dynamics are needed to maintain long-term success in GEWE programs. Some of the sustained impacts of IDVs involved in GEWE programming were evident in several examples, including the village chief in Malawi who took on new responsibilities in his household, sharing the workload with his wife and consequently changing societal expectations of the gender division of labor. As a result of his influential leadership position in the community, the chief contributed to changing attitudes and behaviors more broadly. The IDVs’ contributions to alternative masculinities and the role modeling of alternative behaviors in support of gender equality, when adopted by a local leader, was linked to the gaining of respect and admiration from the community and from within the family.

Alongside potential gains, findings imply that care should be taken to avoid disrespecting local cultures when international volunteers try to entice host-community members to adopt a different way of life. Although these changes promoted may be consistent with human rights standards and values of equality, interventions should be matched with a deliberate engagement with existing policies and social norms in the host country and community. Sensitization around these potential challenges need to be prioritized by the volunteers, their sending IVCOs, and the host organization in order to strengthen long-term positive impacts around GEWE.

While important opportunities for transforming gender relations are noted, several additional concerns about the impact of GEWE programming on gender relations remain, including concerns emerged from IDV programming that is perceived by partner communities as “leaving men and boys behind.” The findings reinforced the challenges and resentments associated with excluding men and boys from conversations about gender equality. Across the interviews, participants asserted that engaging men and boys was central to achieving GEWE goals and priorities, promoting women’s rights, and, simultaneously, maintaining social cohesion.

Another challenge highlighted the negative reactions that partner organization staff had towards female IDVs who transgressed gender norms. This challenge raises concerns about the best way to resolve
concerns when IDVs’ behaviors are perceived as culturally insensitive. Specific examples include female volunteers who smoked, drank alcohol, chewed *kaat* (a natural stimulant), or wore clothing that was culturally inappropriate for certain settings. These concerns were most often considered problematic in rural areas and were often discussed in relation to the need to bring the recipient communities in line with the values of the partner organization staff. Partner organization staff were therefore generally supportive of the diverse gender roles performed by IDVs but recognized that sensitization and awareness were needed in the communities where they were to facilitate broader impacts in support of gender equality programming.

Further research into the intersectional differences between partner organization staff, community members, and volunteers would strengthen the transnational progress towards GEWE. Additional research could further investigate how these intersectional differences shape, and are shaped by, everyday interactions and relationship building between IDVs and local populations. Particular attention to the relational complementarity of IDVs in GEWE work could also include an analysis of the broader implications of IDVs’ contributions to national policies, as well as strategies to promote gender equality in social, economic, political, and environmental contexts.

By pulling together the voices and experiences of staff at partner organizations who have worked with IDVs, this research allows us to better understand the impact IDVs have made on GEWE programming from subaltern perspectives. While some risks and challenges were identified, IDVs’ overall contributions were seen as positive and effective in matching the organizations’ mandates and priorities in programs geared to improve GEWE.

Our findings reinforce the significant role played by IDVs as transnational actors who participate in everyday activities and shape ideas and attitudes about gender equality through modeling behaviors, as well as through their intentional initiatives designed to enhance GEWE. Partner organizations frequently highlighted how the impacts of IDVs emerged from the coproduction of ideas and were generated through the meaningful discussions that take place in transnational spaces. Thus, the findings demonstrate the critical importance of human interaction between IDVs and partner organizations in shaping GEWE programming and outcomes. The ideas emerging from these reciprocal relationships were a valuable contribution to GEWE. Findings suggest that volunteers, host
organizations, and their staff each benefitted mutually, as they gained exposure to alternative gender relations.

All told, the transnational relationships cocreated through IDVs and their local partnerships bring a valuable complement to GEWE programming in the context of international development which may be more difficult to achieve with less relational forms of development intervention. However, our findings also raise several concerns and challenges that were identified by partner organizations which require more careful attention, particularly efforts to better prepare and sensitize IDVs to cultural differences, and to minimize problematic experiences through enhanced efforts to more fully engage men and boys in GEWE programming.

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NOTES

1. We define transformational gender equality programming as strategies that move beyond targeting women for development interventions to a more careful examination of what is required to change and transform the structures, norms, and practices that perpetuate gender-based inequalities that affect women’s lives.
2. Gender equality programming must be inclusive of diverse gender needs and priorities, including those of women, men, and individuals who are trans.
This article is specific to development programming focusing on women’s rights and development barriers through a gender lens—a prevailing focus in development programming. We recognize that additional studies are also needed to explore under-examined insights into other groups’ needs, rights, and experiences of development interventions, particularly for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) communities. Our research was open to exploring the efforts of development organization partners working in different areas of gender equality programming. However, most of their gender programs focused on women’s empowerment and enhanced participation in development.

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