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Aid to help women in Africa undermined by jargon

International donors have sought to improve the social, political and economic position of women in Africa through an approach known as “gender”. A new *Counterpoint* publication from Africa Research Institute – [*Talking gender to Africa*](#) – argues that this strategy is failing. The voices of African women have been lost.

The institutional jargon of gender programmes has been devised by foreign donor organisations. It breeds confusion and encourages misunderstanding. Standard gender terminology ranges from the ambiguous (“gender responsiveness”, “gender integration”, “gender sensitisation”) to the downright absurd (calls to “engender” development reports and policies).

According to Jackie Asiimwe, a Ugandan lawyer and women’s rights activist, “the gender language becomes lost in translation – it has remained an academic exercise and people struggle with what it means”. It is as if adoption of the correct jargon has become the end rather than the means.

Jargon fosters inaction and lip service on the part of patriarchal African governments and civil servants. Beyond the office walls of aid organisations and government ministries, few African women have heard of “gender” or are aware of its impact on their lives. Too little effort is expended in engaging African women in policy debates, or in attempting to reflect in policy their perspectives and priorities. Gender has become the preserve of the educated elite.

In Africa, the gender approach is not driven by a comprehensive understanding of the day-to-day realities of women’s lives, nor does it make adequate use of their wisdom and experience. [*Talking gender to Africa*](#) calls for the forcible dissolution of the jargon of gender, and a recognition by international donors that African women must again be placed centre-stage.

Notes to editors:

Africa Research Institute is a non-partisan think tank based in London. Our mission is to draw attention to ideas that have worked in Africa, and to identify new ideas where needed.

Talking gender to Africa can be downloaded from the Africa Research Institute website:
<http://bit.ly/o4O3Lp>

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