

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rewarding Women's Political Empowerment? the Effects of Gender Equality on Foreign Aid Allocation

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality has long been recognized as a principal goal of socio-economic development for developing countries. Nonetheless, little is known about whether foreign aid donors take gender egalitarianism into account and reward recipient countries with better gender equality performance. This study leverages a panel dataset of African countries and the case of Uganda to empirically examine the impact of women's political empowerment on aid allocation. The results show that an increase in the number of female cabinet members in core positions is positively associated with increased foreign aid. Furthermore, multilateral non-state donors are more likely than bilateral state donors to reward improved women's political empowerment by allocating more gender-specific aid. These findings are robust across various model specifications and after accounting for potential endogeneity. This study reveals the complex dynamics in the aid-gender equality nexus, demonstrating that improved gender equality can serve as a rewarding signal for foreign aid.

1 | Introduction

Gender equality is a vital component of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and has long been recognized as a principal goal of socio-economic development for developing countries (Xu et al. 2024). It is pivotal to achieving better human development outcomes by granting women equal opportunities to expand their freedom of choice and action (Narayan-Parker 2002). As investing in gender equality can produce positive socio-economic outcomes for recipient countries and enhance aid effectiveness, some international donors opt to incorporate gender mainstreaming in their aid allocation strategy (Jackson 1996; Cheema and Maguire 2001; Sjöstedt 2013). Specifically, the “DAC Guidelines for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development Cooperation” manifested that Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members have adopted gender equality as a

new development objective. These guidelines call for integrating gender equality into policy formulation, planning, evaluation, and decision-making within development cooperation programs (OECD 1999). Likewise, multilateral non-state donors, such as the World Bank, have incorporated women's equal rights protection as one indicator in the Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA), which informs eligibility for International Development Association (IDA) borrowing (World Bank 2011).

Do donors reward recipient countries with good performance in improving gender equality? While gender mainstreaming in aid strategies may contribute to women's socio-economic progress, it is unclear whether or to what extent donors value improvements in gender equality in recipient countries when making aid allocation decisions. This study investigates the political dimension of gender equality and ascertains the impact of

women's political empowerment on the Official Development Assistance (ODA) flows to African recipients.

The African Continent serves as a critical context for this study because it has experienced entrenched gender inequality while adopting affirmative policies to close gender gaps across its regions. Although integrating women into the public sector, particularly high-level political positions, remains challenging (Pat O'Connor 1994; Snyder et al. 1995), several African countries, such as Rwanda and Ethiopia, have recently observed a tremendous advancement (World Economic Forum 2019). However, whether foreign aid responds to such advancements in women's political empowerment remains underexplored. To address this gap, this study draws on a panel dataset covering all African countries from 1966 to 2014 and finds a positive association between female cabinet members and ODA allocation. In particular, multilateral non-state donors allocate more gender-specific aid in response to women's political empowerment than bilateral state donors.

This study contributes to the foreign aid literature in two ways. First, the findings advance the understanding of determinants of aid allocation by exploring whether donors respond to the enhanced women's political empowerment in African recipients. While existing studies have extensively discussed the impact of foreign aid on local sustainable development (Ndikumana and Pickbourn 2017; Milazzo and Goldstein 2019; Xu et al. 2024), the extent to which donors reward recipients promoting women's political empowerment is inadequately studied. This study seeks to fill the gap by investigating the reverse relationship between women's political empowerment and foreign aid allocation. It highlights three pathways—the signaling effects of democracy and good governance, gender-specific policy priorities, and diversified sources of foreign aid, through which donors respond to improved gender equality.

Secondly, this study highlights the heterogeneities among donors, as bilateral and multilateral actors hold differing priorities regarding aid determinants, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of global aid allocation dynamics. Existing studies demonstrate that multilateral non-state donors are responsive to recipient merits and more likely to reward achievements in human development (Burnside and Dollar 2000; Neumayer 2003; Dollar and Levin 2006). However, few studies have empirically compared how bilateral and multilateral aid may respond differently to women's political empowerment. This study contributes to bridging this gap by examining donor heterogeneities in response to women's political empowerment.

2 | Debates Over Gender Equality and Foreign Aid Allocation

The determinants of foreign aid allocation remain complex (McKinlay and Little 1977; Schraeder et al. 1998). Existing studies extensively discussed how the self-interests of donors pertaining to geopolitical intentions affect aid allocation (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Berthélemy 2006). Nonetheless, donors may not be exclusively egoistic. A growing number of donors have proposed gender mainstreaming aid strategies that

incorporate gender equality in recipient countries as one of the core priorities (Engberg-Pedersen 2016). Yet, existing studies are inadequate in understanding whether and how donors may value gender equality and thus alter aid flows. Donors who prioritize gender equality may either opt to allocate aid to help countries close gender gaps or reward those with good performance in achieving gender egalitarianism (Berthélemy 2006; Hoeffler and Outram 2011; Kleemann et al. 2016; Annen and Knack 2021). In other words, need-based aid often targets countries with substantial gender disparities, whereas merit-based donors may reward improvements in gender equality.

Existing studies reveal mixed findings on whether donors respond to recipient countries' needs or merits. On the one hand, some studies contend that aid flows into areas with the strongest demands (Hoeffler and Outram 2011). Recipient countries with severe gender gaps in education and health likely attract more aid (Bush 2011; Dreher et al. 2015). At the micro-level, public health and education aid can reduce maternal mortality and scale down gender gaps in youth literacy (Riddell and Niño-Zarazúa 2016; Pickbourn and Ndikumana 2016), which subsequently benefits women's life quality and personal development. Once countries with considerable needs to close domestic gender gaps receive aid, they may obtain better opportunities to tackle gender hierarchy.

On the other hand, donors may reward recipient countries' merits, such as good governance (Berthélemy and Tichit 2004; Berthélemy 2006; Kleemann et al. 2016). These studies echo a strand of literature about aid selectivity that donors target countries with stable political regimes and good governance records (Burnside and Dollar 2000; Dollar and Levin 2006; Brazys 2010; Hicks and Maldonado 2020; Annen and Knack 2021). A conducive institutional environment and good policy quality in recipient countries suggest potential success of aid project implementation, thereby amplifying aid efficacy (Burnside and Dollar 2000).

Recipient countries with a high level of women's empowerment may imply good governance and attract more aid. When women gain access to politics, female politicians may bring good changes to policymaking (Paxton et al. 2007). Gender socialization theory indicates that women are more concerned about the safety and care of others and are less likely to be corrupt due to a higher inclination toward risk aversion (Davidson and Freudenburg 1996; Swamy et al. 2001; Bauhr and Charron 2020, 2021). Therefore, recipient countries that enhance gender equality by increasing women's representation in parliaments or legislatures may attract more aid (Annen and Asiamah 2023). Dreher et al. (2015) provide empirical evidence indicating that recipient countries with higher women's parliament representation tend to receive more foreign aid. This effect is even more pronounced when donor countries have greater representation of female ministers responsible for development.

However, some studies find that governance quality is not positively associated with aid allocation, and corrupt governments even receive more aid (Alesina and Weder 2002). Although female politicians may behave differently from their male counterparts and bring good governance, existing research indicates that women may not always be effective change agents

as restricted by their small numbers, and they are socialized to adapt to masculinity to protect their political careers (Alhassan-Alolo 2007; Koch and Fulton 2011; Horowitz et al. 2015).

Furthermore, scholars argue that some electoral autocracies take advantage of women's rights reforms to secure reputational benefits from the international or domestic communities (Tripp 2019; Bush and Zetterberg 2021; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022). Adopting gender quotas comes with low political costs, and some scholars consider it as "window dressing" or "autocratic genderwashing" (Goetz 2002; Valdini 2019; Donno et al. 2022; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022; Bjarnegård and Donno 2023). Incorporating marginalized social groups into the legislature does not need to liberalize the whole political system, and promoting gender equality may deflect the focus away from the more severe abuse of electoral integrity and human rights, which strengthens the survival of autocratic regimes.

In summary, existing studies about gender equality and aid allocation mainly hinge on the impact of foreign aid on alleviating gender inequality in recipient countries. The extent to which merit-based logics influence aid allocation remains underexplored. We still know little about whether and to what extent donors may intentionally reward recipient countries for improved gender equality by providing more aid. Moreover, empirical results remain mixed on the extent to which women's political empowerment serves as an indicator of governance quality in recipient countries. When women attain high-level political positions, they may be socialized into the existing male-dominated power structures and choose to collude with male political elites. In some electoral autocracies, incorporating women into political leadership may also serve as a strategic tool to send out positive signals to the international community in exchange for more aid, an issue often referred to as "autocratic genderwashing."

In addition, existing studies primarily focus on the gender composition of national legislatures in donor countries—mainly advanced industrial countries—rather than the situation in recipient countries (Breuning 2001; Hicks et al. 2016; Fuchs and Richert 2018). We still know little about whether improved gender equality within recipient countries contributes to more conducive governance conditions for foreign aid.

Lastly, much research focuses on women's legislative power in aid allocation while ignoring female executive power representation in recipient countries (Siaroff 2000; Breuning 2001; Lu and Breuning 2014). Women's executive representation in the cabinet may differ from their representation in legislatures (Liu and Banaszak 2017). Women in cabinet positions are more visible to the external audience than their legislative counterparts. Such visibility stems from the limited size of cabinets and the need for strong support from party elites to appoint female cabinet members in parliamentary systems (Warwick and Druckman 2006; Krook and O'Brien 2012). This visibility, combined with their significant influence over agenda setting, budgeting, and lawmaking (Stapenhurst 2008; Atchison and Down 2009; O'Brien et al. 2015; Annesley et al. 2019), positions female cabinet members to advance female-friendly policies (Atchison and Down 2009; Atchison 2015). Donors thus prioritizing gender mainstreaming in aid allocation may favor

recipient countries with greater women's representation in executive leadership.

3 | Theoretical Framework: Women's Political Empowerment and Foreign Aid Allocation

Although gender equality is a multifaceted concept (World Economic Forum 2024), we mainly focus on women's political empowerment, as equality in this dimension is more challenging to achieve and pivotal to reducing inequality in other aspects (UNDP 2013). Sundström et al. (2017) conceptualize women's political empowerment through three dimensions: the choice to make impactful decisions in essential aspects of daily lives ensured by fundamental civil liberties, the agency to engage in open discussion and civil society organizations, and the participation of women in formal political positions. The representation of women in the cabinet underscores the political participation dimension of women's political empowerment. This study proposes three pathways through which women's political empowerment affects foreign aid allocation: the signaling effects of democracy and good governance, gender-specific policy priorities, and the diversified sources of foreign aid.

First, increased women's political empowerment can signal improvements in democracy and good governance in recipient countries, thereby attracting donors who seek to reward such progress. In the post-Cold War era, aid conditionality on democratic reforms of recipient countries has become more solid (Dunning 2004; Bearce and Tirone 2010). As democracy and gender equality have become bundled norms that reflect liberal, inclusive, and modern democratic principles (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Bush 2011; Donno et al. 2022), donors have increasingly valued gender equality in aid allocation. Given that the high level of women's political empowerment signals inclusiveness, liberty, and compliance with international norms of protecting women's rights (Finnemore and Barnett 2004; Swiss 2012), recipient countries may be willing to do so to establish international reputations for democracy, thus exchanging for more economic resources (Bush 2015; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022). Such recipient countries that rely on foreign aid strategically use gender quotas to signal their commitment to enhancing liberal democracy and thus get rewarded by international donors (Bush 2011; Bush and Zetterberg 2021; Bush et al. 2024).

The increasing number of appointed female cabinet members indicates the efforts of recipient countries to tackle gender inequity in the inherent patronage politics. Cabinet nominations are made behind closed doors, and women are usually excluded from the existing male-dominant networks (Bjarnegård 2013). Sub-Saharan African countries primarily use ministerial positions with centralized political power as patronage appointments to secure the support of politicians who represent ethnic constituencies (Arriola and Johnson 2014). In this sense, involving a growing number of women in the cabinet may challenge the traditionally ethnic-based masculine leadership. Donors may interpret such actions as credible commitments to domestic political equity and reform and regard these efforts as tremendous progress.

Furthermore, women's representation in the cabinet can signal improved governance capacity, which directly relates to donors' concerns about aid efficacy. Scott and Steele (2011) identify an "anticipatory reaction" phenomenon in allocation aid, suggesting that donors, as strategic actors, calculate aid efficacy and look for cues to determine whether recipients have the potential to meet their expectations (Burnell 2005). Women are more risk-averse than men, as voters "hold female elected officials to a higher standard" and pay extra close attention to female politicians (Croson and Gneezy 2009; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2018). They enjoy a relatively high level of accountability and are less likely to engage in corruption than their male counterparts (Stockemer and Sundström 2019; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2019; Bauhr and Charron 2020). Thus, female core cabinet members can imply good governance in recipient countries to some extent, which may lower the risk of rent-seeking in the implementation of aid projects (Dietrich 2013). Outcome-oriented donors aiming to maximize aid efficacy may be willing to allocate more aid to those countries. Therefore, we propose the first hypothesis:

H1. *Aid-recipient countries with more high-profile female politicians in the cabinet are more likely to attract foreign aid.*

Second, women's political empowerment may lead to the prioritization of gender-specific policy agendas, which may increase aid from donors who share the same policy priorities as those in recipient countries. Gender can affect the psychosocial development of individuals, as women possess different life experiences compared with men. Gender socialization arguments suggest that the feminine identity makes women see themselves as caregivers and view family health and safety as the top priority (Davidson and Freudenburg 1996). For instance, the elected female leaders in Indian Village Councils invest more in public goods that directly benefit women (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004). Once women take a senior position with enormous political power, they are likely to take policy priorities that are different from those of their male counterparts and tend to support pro-social policies and services that can benefit women more (Gilligan 1993; Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2007; Atchison 2015; Enns-Jedenastik 2017; Mechkova and Carlitz 2021; Dahlum et al. 2022).

Admittedly, the increase in female parliamentary representation can bring more legislative attention to women's concerns and raise the issue salience regarding women's interests on political agendas (Clayton and Zetterberg 2018). Nevertheless, the presence of women in cabinet positions is also crucial for promoting female-friendly social policies. In parliamentary democracies, policies often originate in the cabinet, and governments are more influential in the legislative process (Atchison and Down 2009). In this sense, if women take on cabinet positions, they will be well-positioned to advocate for policies favorable for women (Atchison 2015).

Therefore, as female politicians represent women and tend to allocate resources to projects aligned with gender-specific priorities, donors with a particular focus on women's development are more likely to allocate aid to African countries with relatively high women's representation in the cabinet. Given that

female leaders care more about social issues, particularly women's development, foreign leaders may make the most use of aid to promote local women's development. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. *Aid-recipient countries with more high-profile female politicians in the cabinet are more likely to attract more gender-specific foreign aid.*

Third, enhanced women's political empowerment in recipient countries may boost multilateral aid. Apart from bilateral state donors, multilateral non-state donors, including the United Nations, the World Bank Groups, and other regional development banks, also take an active role in global foreign aid allocation. However, multilateral non-state and bilateral state donors receive incentives differently when allocating aid (Findley et al. 2017). Political and strategic factors dominate the direction of bilateral foreign aid, as it is closely connected with donors' foreign policy setting and represents the self-interests of a single country (Schraeder et al. 1998; Alesina and Dollar 2000; Dreher et al. 2008). In contrast, when delegating the responsibility to international organizations, states may lose some control of aid allocation in exchange for burden sharing (Milner and Tingley 2013). As state-to-state tactics do not directly deliver multilateral aid, multilateral aid features less sovereignty identity and is less politics-oriented than bilateral aid (Martens et al. 2002; Milner 2006). Neumayer (2003) argues that UN agencies emphasize the human development needs of recipient countries, and multilateral actors are relatively less driven by geopolitical factors.

Meanwhile, as multilateral aid values good policy and institutions in recipient countries (Burnside and Dollar 2000), women's executive representation in those countries can help enhance aid efficacy. For instance, the World Bank advocates that women's empowerment in aid-recipient countries enhances aid efficacy, and the protection of equal rights for women has been incorporated as one indicator in its CPIA (World Bank 2011). CPIA is a rating system and a substantial component of the performance-based allocation system of the IDA, in which policies for social inclusion and equity are one of the dimensions used to assess countries' eligibility for IDA borrowing.

Some scholars argue that multilateral aid can be as political as bilateral aid (Gartzke and Naoi 2011; Dreher et al. 2009). Powerful donors may direct multilateral aid to reflect the self-interests of bilateral state donors (Kilby 2006; Kersting and Kilby 2016), making it an instrument to generate income for a donor's domestic economic groups (McLean 2015). Nevertheless, multilateral aid on average is less political than bilateral aid (Dreher et al. 2022). Thus, given the unique aid allocation criteria and policy priorities, multilateral non-state donors may behave differently compared with bilateral state donors regarding the improved women's political empowerment in the cabinet. Accordingly, the above discussions lead to the following hypothesis:

H3. *Aid-recipient countries with more high-profile female politicians in the cabinet are more likely to attract foreign aid from multilateral non-state donors than bilateral state donors.*

4 | Research Design

4.1 | Data

We focus on African recipient countries for three reasons. Firstly, Africa is one of the ideal aid allocation destinations to observe changes in aid flows responding to women's political empowerment, particularly gender-specific aid. Given that Africa has long experienced intricate and persistent gender inequalities, even slight improvements in women's political empowerment are likely to attract the attention of donors. Secondly, although Africa is underdeveloped overall, some Sub-Saharan African countries have made significant efforts to close gender gaps and adopt affirmative policies to incorporate more women into parliament or cabinet. However, the relationship between aid allocation and the progress in women's political empowerment in these recipient countries has not been sufficiently investigated. Thirdly, focusing on Africa provides an opportunity to examine a relatively homogeneous region in terms of historical and socio-political contexts. This commonality allows for a more controlled analysis of how international aid interacts with women's political empowerment across countries.

This article collects a panel dataset covering all African Countries from 1966 to 2014. The period is determined by data availability, as the core independent variable is sourced from the WhoGov dataset (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020), covering the period from 1966 to 2021, while the AidData dataset for the dependent variable is only updated until 2014. The longer period allows for greater variations in key variables over time. Supporting Information S1: Figure A1 in the Appendix suggests that the number of female core cabinet members began to rise around 1975, and it became more pronounced after the 1990s. The unit of analysis is country-year, as the theory primarily examines how the international community collectively responds to the increased women's political empowerment in recipient countries, which contrasts with the donor-recipient dyadic level analysis that examines the bilateral interactions between recipients and donors. In other words, by using an aggregated measurement of aid allocation, this study mainly focuses on the features of the recipient sides rather than the donor-recipient interactions that may influence aid flows.¹

4.2 | Variables

4.2.1 | Dependent Variables

To examine the hypotheses, we use a set of dependent variables. The first dependent variable is “the total amount of ODA in constant dollars” from AidData's Core Research Release Version 3.1 (Tierney et al. 2011).² We use aid disbursement and the measurement of aid is aggregated at the country level while further splitting donors into bilateral state and multilateral non-state donors, creating “ODA from bilateral state donors in constant dollars” and “ODA from multilateral non-state donors in constant dollars.”

Moreover, we include data on ODA serving gender-specific policy objectives, which the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS) has marked. The OECD-DAC provides a consistent

framework for coding ODA with a focus on gender equality. CRS-gender aid includes both significant and principal funding. “Principal means gender equality was an explicit objective of the activity and fundamental in its design. Significant means gender equality was an important, but the secondary objective of the activity” (OECD 2020). Specifically, the analysis utilizes the “total amount of CRS-Gender ODA in constant dollars” to measure the ODA that targets gender equality as a “principal objective” or “significant objective.” We further differentiate the sources of CRS-Gender aid from state donors and multilateral non-state donors. The analysis takes the natural log of all dependent variables to avoid skewness of the distribution, and their measurements are aggregated at the country level. Supporting Information S1: Figure A2 in the Appendix shows the trends of different types of ODA allocated to Africa.

4.2.2 | Explanatory Variables

Our key independent variable is the “number of female core cabinet members” from the WhoGov dataset (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020), which measures the extent of women's political empowerment in African recipient countries. WhoGov covers 177 countries from 1966 to 2021, including information about the number of female cabinet members who take on core positions. These core positions include cabinet ministers, prime ministers, presidents, vice prime ministers, vice presidents, members of the politburo, and members of a military junta. Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of female core cabinet members in Africa in 1966, 1989, and 2014, respectively, which suggests a substantial spatial and temporal variation of female core cabinet members within the African countries.

We control for a set of covariates that potentially affect aid flows and the progress of women's political empowerment in recipient countries. First, we control for the “regime type” of African recipient countries, as democratic governance can reinforce human development, and mature democracies are more likely to receive more aid (Cheema and Maguire 2001). Data on regime type is from the Polity IV (Marshall and Jaggers 2002), which measures the extent of democracy in a given recipient country, ranging from −10 (autocracy) to +10 (full democracy).

Second, we include a binary variable of “post-Cold War” to capture the influence of the end of the Cold War on aid allocation and democratic reforms (Dunning 2004). The end of the Cold War marked a crucial watershed, significantly altering the determinants of aid allocation afterward. The post-Cold War era has seen the rise of democracy promotion as a core element of foreign policy strategy (Burnell 2000). In this sense, the end of the Cold War may condition the effects of female core cabinet members. Therefore, we examine whether the effects are conditional on the end of the Cold War in Section D of the Supporting Information S1: Appendix. We code “post-Cold War” as 1 for the period after 1990; otherwise, 0.

Third, we consider whether recipient countries experienced “civil wars” as an unstable domestic environment can affect the success of aid project implementation and women's opportunities to engage in politics. Civil war refers to “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory

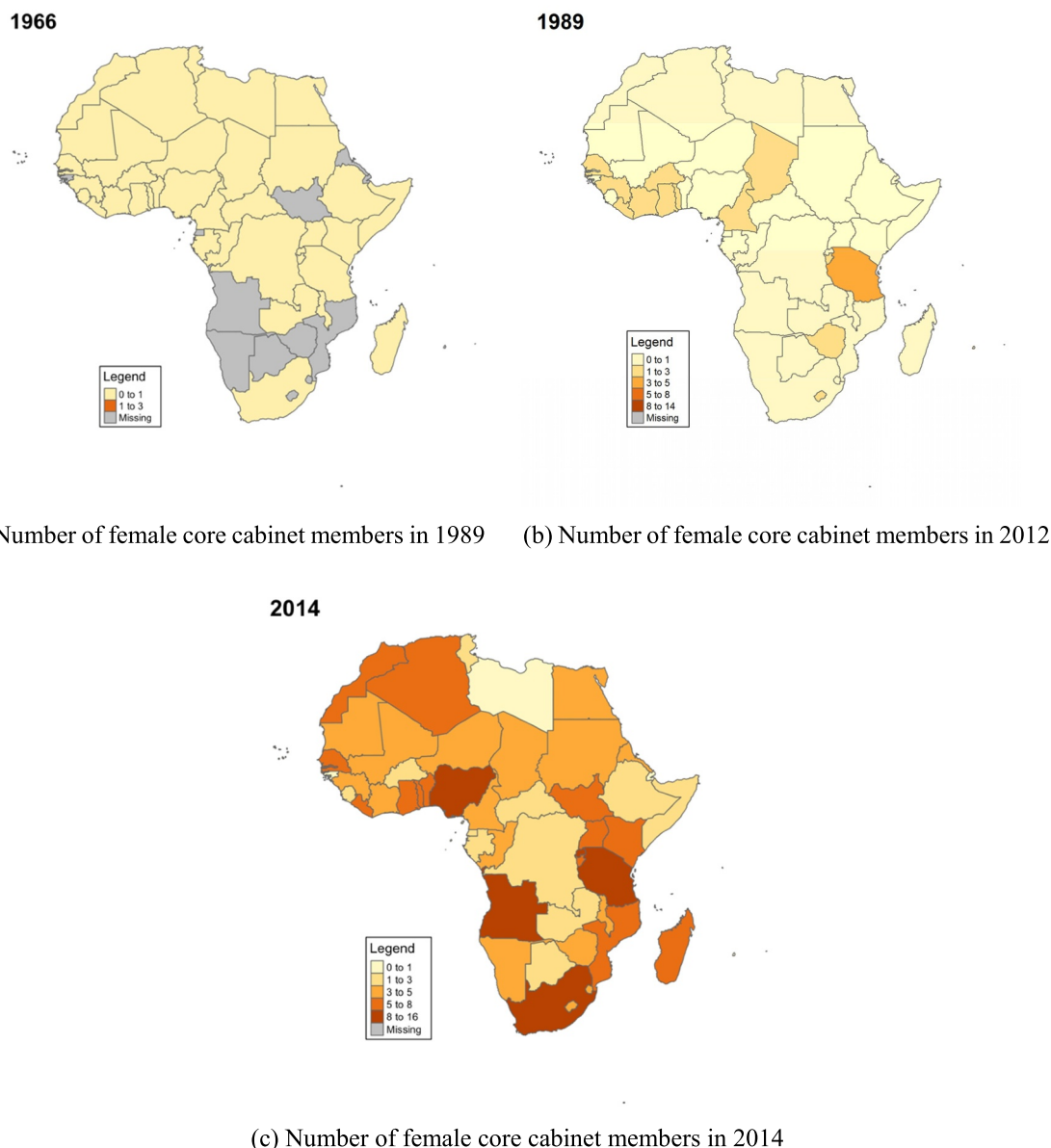


FIGURE 1 | Changes in the geographic distribution of female core cabinet members in Africa. *Data Source:* WhoGov dataset.

where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year” (Gleditsch et al. 2002). The data come from UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 21.1 (Kreutz 2010).

Fourth, we control for the “*duration of colonization*.” Existing research indicates that colonial connections may affect aid allocation (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Fuchs et al. 2014; Chiba and Heinrich 2019), while colonial legacy is also significant in shaping the developmental trajectories of recipient countries (Montgomery 2017). The data on colonial duration are from the Colonial Dates Dataset (COLDAT) version 2.0 (Becker 2019), which provides detailed records of colonial periods for African countries paired with their respective colonizers. For each country, we determine the duration of colonization by identifying the earliest start year and the latest end year of colonial rule across all colonizers. This approach

allows us to capture the total period during which a country was under colonial influence, irrespective of the number of different colonizers.

Fifth, we control for the “*fertility rate*.” We concede that it is equally plausible that aid can be targeted toward recipient countries with low women’s empowerment, and the fertility rate reflects gender inequality to some extent (Caprioli 2005). Countries with low women’s status usually have higher fertility rates, and heavy caregiving burdens may restrict women’s participation in public life. Donors may therefore target aid to improve the quality of life of children and women living in such places. The data about fertility rates come from the World Development Indicators (WDI).

Sixth, we include additional gender-specific variables, including the “*access to public services distributed by gender*” and “*access to state jobs by gender*.” These two variables measure the extent to

which access to public services (e.g., order and security, primary education, clean water, and healthcare) and state jobs are distributed equally by gender, reflecting other dimensions of gender equality. The data are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (Sundström et al. 2017).

Moreover, we control for “*regime corruption*.” Corruption levels in recipient countries may influence both women’s involvement in politics (Watt 2024) and donors’ aid allocation decisions, given their relevance to good governance. The data also comes from the V-Dem Project (Sundström et al. 2017).

Lastly, we include the “*GDP per capita*” and “*total population*” of all African recipient countries. Both data are from the WDI (World Bank 2022). We take the natural log of these two variables in a given year to address distributional skewness. Supporting Information S1: Table A2 in the Appendix presents descriptive statistics for all variables.

4.3 | Modeling Strategy

We use two-level linear mixed-effects models as the primary modeling strategy. Mixed-effect models can account for unobserved “common shocks” that occur in specific years and unobservable factors arising from the individual recipient country that may drive the observed impacts. Meanwhile, mixed-effect models assume that unobserved characteristics follow a probability distribution (i.e., random effects). The model is specified as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_0 + \beta^T X_{i,t-1} + \mu_{0i} + \mu_{1i} + e_{it} \quad (1)$$

where, i indices the country, and t indices the year. Y_{it} refers to the aggregated aid amount for country i in year t . $X_{i,t-1}$ is a

vector of explanatory variables; μ_{0i} and μ_{1i} are country and year specific residuals (random effects) to capture mean differences across space and time, and e_{it} is error term that is assumed to be normally distributed. All explanatory variables are lagged by 1 year to avoid simultaneity bias, except for the variables “*duration of colonization*” and “*post-Cold War*.”³

5 | Empirical Results

5.1 | The Main Effects of Women’s Political Empowerment on ODA Allocation

Figure 2 displays the mixed-effects regression results. In Model 1, the dependent variable is the log of the total amount of ODA allocation. The coefficient for the number of female core cabinet members is positive and statistically significant at the 99% confidence interval, which provides evidence for Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, Models 2–3 disaggregate the ODA into bilateral and multilateral ODA allocations, respectively. We also find the positive effects of women’s political empowerment on bilateral and multilateral ODA allocation to African recipient countries. That is, the greater the number of female core cabinet members in African recipients, the more likely bilateral state or multilateral non-state donors are to distribute ODA to those countries.

Turning to Hypothesis 2, we further disaggregate the dependent variables into specific policy domains. We investigate whether women’s political empowerment in African recipient countries can particularly affect gender-specific aid flows targeting women’s development as a principal or significant objective.

The results in Model 1 of Figure 3 reveal that the number of female core cabinet members is positively associated with the total

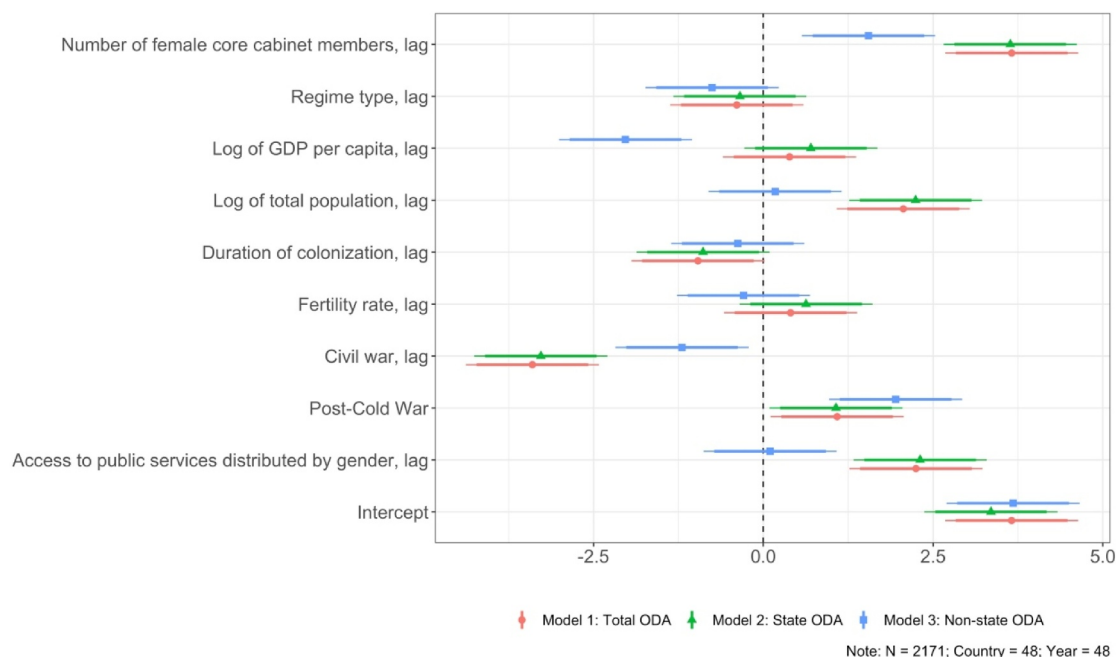


FIGURE 2 | Mixed-effects regression results: ODA. Supporting Information S1: Table D1 in the Appendix reports the full regression results corresponding to Figure 2.

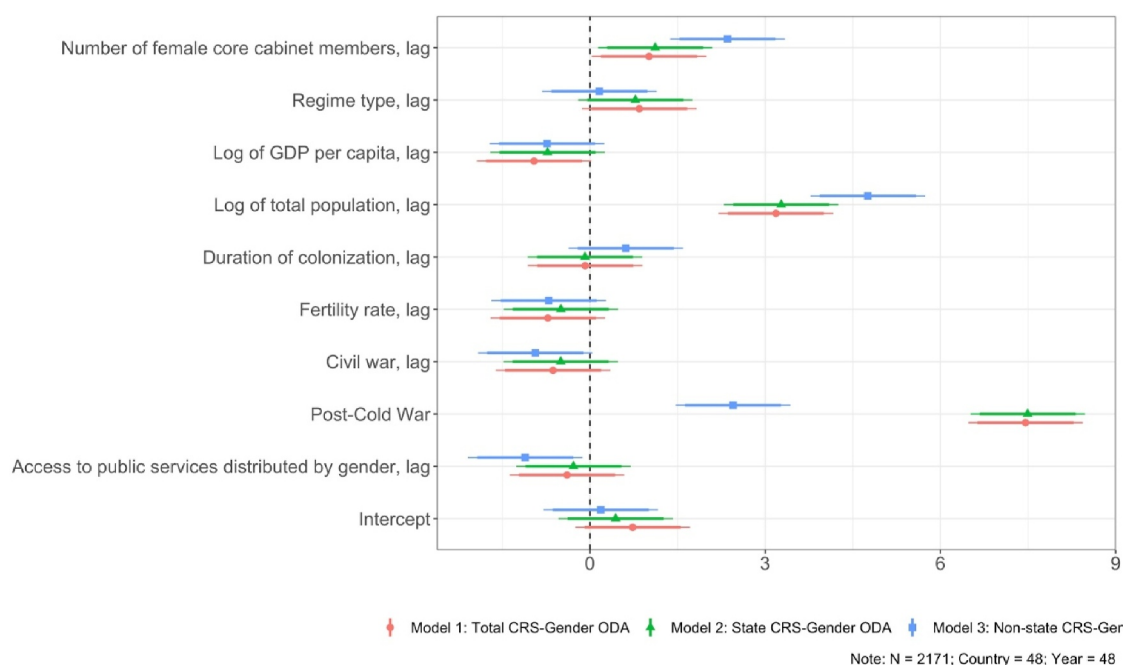


FIGURE 3 | Mixed-effects regression results: CRS-Gender ODA. Supporting Information S1: Table D2 in the Appendix reports the full regression results corresponding to Figure 3.

amount of gender-specific ODA. Regarding the heterogeneous sources of gender-specific ODA, we also find evidence that the coefficients for the number of female core cabinet members are positive and statistically significant at the 95% and 99% confidence intervals in Model 2 and Model 3, respectively. These findings suggest that a positive relationship between the increase in female core cabinet members and the likelihood that both bilateral state and multilateral non-state donors allocate more gender-specific aid. Yet, the estimated magnitude of multilateral non-state donors is larger than that of bilateral state donors, thus implying that multilateral aid may be more responsive to women's political empowerment in recipient countries. These findings resonate with Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3.

For robustness checks, Supporting Information S1: Tables B1 and B2 in the Appendix control for access to state jobs by gender and regime corruption. Supporting Information S1: Tables B3 and B4 use the percentage of female core members in the whole cabinet as an alternative independent variable. Supporting Information S1: Tables B5 and B6 use OECD data as an alternative dataset, and Supporting Information S1: Tables B7–B10 include two- and three-year lags of the core independent variable. The results are consistent with the main findings in Figures 2 and 3. Supporting Information S1: Tables B11 and B12 include squared terms of the independent variables, with no strong evidence of non-linear effects. More details are shown in Supporting Information S1: Tables B1–B12 of Section B in the Appendix.

5.2 | Discussion: Mitigating the Endogeneity Issue

While our findings support the theory, the observed relationship between women's political empowerment and aid allocation remains correlational rather than causal due to the nature of

observational data. The potential endogeneity issue may weaken the credibility of our models. On the one hand, selection bias may arise if certain characteristics of recipient countries make them more likely to receive aid. On the other hand, reverse causality is also a significant concern. Although the improved women's political empowerment in recipient countries can bring more ODA, foreign aid may also create a favorable environment for enhancing local women's political empowerment.

We use two approaches to mitigate endogeneity concerns. Section C in the Appendix shows the full discussion of the technical details and results for both methodological approaches. First, we utilize a panel matching method for causal inference (Imai et al. 2023) to mitigate the risk of treatment selection bias. In doing so, we can better capture the effects of the number of female core cabinet members in African recipient countries on foreign aid allocation. Compared with linear regression models with mixed effects, this method “clarifies the sources of information used to estimate counterfactual outcomes” (Imai et al. 2023, 603). It can estimate short-term and long-term average treatment effects. We find some causal evidence that recipient countries with enhanced women's political empowerment are more likely to receive gender-specific ODA from multilateral non-state donors (see Supporting Information S1: Figures C1 and C2).

Second, we use the seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) model to account for the potential endogeneity due to reverse causality. SUR accounts for the endogenous interdependence between the correlated errors from two equations that model foreign aid and women's political empowerment, allowing us to capture the correlations between these linked processes. We admit that foreign aid can have reverse effects on women's political empowerment in recipient countries. However, the results of Supporting Information S1: Tables C1 and C2 show that improvement of women's political empowerment in recipient

countries can attract more ODA from both bilateral state and multilateral non-state donors, especially CRS-gender ODA from multilateral non-state donors.

5.3 | Case Illustration

While recipient countries with higher levels of women's political empowerment tend to receive more foreign aid, different types of donors respond differently—particularly in the allocation of gender-specific aid. The case of Uganda illustrates why multilateral non-state donors, compared to bilateral state donors, are more responsive to improved women's political representation in recipient countries. Uganda is a highly aid-dependent country, and it has been devoting substantial efforts to enhance domestic women's political empowerment. Its constitution, enacted in 1995, allows disadvantaged groups (women and people with disabilities) to participate in national and local government elective politics. Uganda also pioneered the introduction of reserved parliamentary seats for women in 1989 and diffused gender quotas to other countries in this region later. Moreover, in a more high-profile executive position, Wandera Specioza Kazibwe from Uganda was Africa's first female vice president from 1994 to 2003 (Tripp 2001), highlighting its efforts to promote women in high-profile political roles. As shown in Supporting Information S1: Figure A4 in the Appendix, the number of female core cabinet members in Uganda has significantly increased since the 1990s and reached higher levels after 2000. This upward trend in female representation within Uganda's core cabinet coincides with a period of rising ODA allocated to Uganda in Supporting Information S1: Figure A5, notably marked by sharp growth during the late 1990s and 2000s.

However, as Uganda's most prominent bilateral donors (Lister et al. 2006), the U.S. has signaled a cautious stance toward women's political representation in Uganda. While Supporting Information S1: Figures A6 and A7 in the Appendix show a sharp rise in ODA from the United States (U.S.) to Uganda starting from the early 2000s, with contributions exceeding 40% by the 2010s, this increase is attributable to the launch of PEPFAR in 2003. The program channeled substantial bilateral funding to address the AIDS crisis in high HIV-burden countries, rather than reflecting Uganda's progress in women's political empowerment. A report by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2017 shows that gender inequality in political participation remains pervasive in Uganda. Even though Uganda is a remarkable practitioner of promoting women's political participation in Africa and women have obtained chances to get into high-profile government positions, it does not represent that Uganda has already closed the gender gap in women's political empowerment. The report indicates that “although the participation of women and people with disability in the political sphere is high, in part because of mandatory quotas, their capacity to influence policy and affect decisions has remained limited.” (USAID 2017, 49). In other words, the U.S. case suggests that bilateral state donors may view the increasing representation of women in high-profile political positions as largely symbolic and not indicative of substantial policy change, as they are more concerned with the

overall level of women's political empowerment. Nevertheless, donors are heterogeneous, and the interpretations drawn from the U.S. case may vary across bilateral actors.

In contrast, multilateral non-state donors seem more responsive to the changes in women's political empowerment in recipient countries. One possible explanation lies in their preference for General Budget Support (GBS), particularly among institutions such as the World Bank, regional development banks, and the European Commission that underscore good governance and policy quality in recipient countries (Clist et al. 2012). Multilateral donors place significant emphasis on ensuring harmonization and alignment with recipient countries, the accountability of recipients, and their public finance management capacity, which are critical for the successful implementation of GBS. In this sense, as female politicians are often perceived as more accountable and more likely to advocate for female-friendly social policies, the presence of women in high-profile political positions in recipient countries may send positive signals to multilateral non-state donors.

Uganda has significantly benefited from budget support. Between 1998 and 2012, the country received USD 5.36 billion in direct budget financing (Aziz et al. 2016), and it reached a high amount of nearly USD 700 million in total budget support in the 2006 fiscal year (European Commission: Directorate-General for International Partnerships 2022). Notably, the Partnership GBS began in Uganda in 1998, and an increasing number of donors used budget support as part of their aid portfolios to varying extents between 2000 and 2003 (Lister et al. 2006). Among all GBS partners of Uganda, the World Bank is the biggest contributor. Uganda was the first recipient of a World Bank Poverty Reduction Support Credit (PRSC), which marked the first fully unearmarked Partnership GBS to support Uganda in 2001. In terms of Supporting Information S1: Figure A4 and the joint evaluation report (European Commission: Directorate-General for International Partnerships 2022), from the late 1990s to approximately 2006, there was a period of overlap between the rise in female core cabinet members in Uganda and the increase in budget support.

The World Bank's PRSC values the importance of country-owned policies and sound institutions for aid delivery, such as a stable macroeconomic framework and commitments to reforms (World Bank 2005). Uganda has kept aligned with the World Bank's advocacy for gender mainstreaming in planning and budgeting, notably through the implementation of Gender Responsive Budgeting. This commitment has been further reinforced by the development of supportive domestic policies that create an enabling environment for gender equality initiatives. The Ministry of Finance has demonstrated its capacity for public budget management and planning by mandating that other relevant governmental entities address gender issues via the budgeting process. Above all, the harmonization and alignment of spending preferences with donors, the strength of recipient countries' financial systems, and high levels of governmental accountability help strengthen the trust between donors and recipient countries, which increases the likelihood of receiving greater aid allocations from multilateral donors.

6 | Conclusion

Previous studies have extensively discussed the impacts of foreign aid on socio-economic development in recipient countries. We take a different perspective by exploring whether the progress of gender equality in recipient countries influences aid decisions of donors (Jackson 1996; Cheema and Maguire 2001; Sjöstedt 2013). We thus shift the analysis from a need-based perspective to a merit-based one by evaluating the performance of recipient countries in pursuing good governance values. Specifically, we argue that women's political empowerment in recipient countries matters in attracting foreign aid. When more women in recipient countries assume high-profile positions in the cabinet, it signals good governance practices in the recipient country and subsequently strengthens donors' confidence that aid implementation will be a success. Given the pro-social policy priority of female politicians, gender-specific ODA favors recipient countries with improved women's political empowerment. We also find that donors reward African recipient countries with enhanced women's political empowerment, and multilateral non-state donors are more responsive than bilateral state donors.

Our research has two main policy implications for both recipient and donor countries. First, for recipient countries—particularly those in low- and middle-income contexts—we highlight that strengthening governance quality remains essential for achieving the SDGs amid institutional and resource constraints. As gender equality can enhance competitiveness in the global aid market, integrating it into public administration reforms is not only normatively desirable but also strategically beneficial for securing external resources. A visible commitment to women's political empowerment can help build greater trust with donors and position recipient governments as credible partners in development cooperation.

Second, for donor countries, while notable progress has been made in some recipient countries, lasting change requires engagement in long-term efforts to address the structural barriers that hinder women's political empowerment in recipient countries (Gore 2021). This includes sustained investment in capacity building, aligning with the broader objectives of aid effectiveness and inclusive development. Additionally, donor countries should expand the reporting scope of gender-specific aid and adopt harmonized approaches for measuring gender-specific practices across bilateral and multilateral channels (Gulrajani and Craviatto, 2024). These steps would improve data quality and strengthen the evidence base for assessing global allocation on gender equality.

Considering the limitations of our study, we identify several directions for future research. First, future studies may expand the analysis beyond OECD donors and African recipients. This research focuses on OECD countries as bilateral state donors. However, emerging economies such as China and India have been rapidly increasing their aid to Africa and other countries. These emerging donors have distinct starting points, goals, and principles in providing aid compared with OECD countries (Jing et al. 2019; Zhao and Jing 2019). Hence, future studies can conduct a disaggregate donor-recipient dyadic level analysis to compare the responses of emerging donors and traditional

OECD countries to the gender composition of recipient countries. It is also essential to examine whether these findings are consistent in recipient countries outside Africa.

Second, given the possibility of “autocratic genderwashing”, it may be hard for donors to differentiate the genuine purpose of recipient countries and allocate aid to those who have genuinely committed to improving gender equality. Whether good governance in recipient countries as a product of improved gender equality can be valued by donors and affect aid disbursement to recipients needs further examination. In fact, promoting gender equality follows a tapered and irregular trajectory (Webster et al. 2019). Donors may be cautious about progress in recipient countries due to the intricacies associated with sustaining consistent gender equality. Future research could further analyze whether and how “autocratic genderwashing” in recipient countries may influence global aid flows.

Third, future research could advance the measurement of gender-specific aid and investigate the causal effect of women's political empowerment in recipient countries on foreign aid allocation. While we employ panel matching methods and the SUR model, we acknowledge that these methods cannot fully address endogeneity issue. Moreover, the OECD gender-specific ODA classifications are limited in reporting scope and lack a harmonized application of gender-marking criteria across bilateral and multilateral channels. Future studies could leverage natural experiments to better establish causality and to improve the measurement and quality of gender-specific aid data.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Practice Impact Statement

This research shows that improved women's political empowerment in recipient countries helps attract more foreign aid by signaling good governance. The findings suggest that integrating women's political empowerment into public administration reforms is not only normatively desirable but also strategically beneficial for boosting a recipient country's competitiveness in the global aid market. As a result, recipient countries may be incentivized to prioritize gender equality to secure foreign aid, particularly from multilateral non-state donors.

Endnotes

¹ The full list of all donors is provided in Supporting Information S1: Table A1 in the Appendix.

² In the robustness checks, this study considers aid flows from the OECD dataset. However, the OECD dataset on gender-specific aid only covers the period from 2000 to 2021.

³ Supporting Information S1: Figure A3 in the Appendix visualizes the correlations among variables, suggesting no multicollinearity concerns.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting Information S1: pad70033-sup-0001-suppl-data.docx.