



# Voice and agency: Jeni Klugman on the World Bank's gender empowerment report

By Jeni Klugman and Ashlee Betteridge  
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Each year, almost one in five girls under 18 in developing countries give birth. More than one in three women have experienced violence, the vast majority committed by husbands and boyfriends. Data from 33 developing countries reveals that almost one third of women cannot refuse sex with their partners and more than 41 percent say they could not ask their partner to use a condom. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 32 million fewer women have access to the Internet than men, and even though girls and women are increasingly completing school and university, their work options remain limited.

These are just some of the facts that jump out from [Voice and Agency: empowering women and girls for shared prosperity](#), a major new report by the World Bank that highlights some of the persistent deprivations faced by women and girls throughout the world, and emphasizes the value of empowerment.

Ashlee Betteridge spoke to the World Bank's Jeni Klugman, who led the report, on the sidelines of the Canberra launch, which was jointly hosted by the Development Policy Centre and ANU Gender Institute. You can listen to a full podcast of the event, including Jeni's presentation of the report's key findings, [here](#).

*Ashlee: I wanted to start by asking you about the significance of this report. It has certainly attracted attention, with Hillary Clinton [speaking](#) at the US launch. Could you tell us a bit*

*about why it is so important?*

Jeni: I think it is important because of the intrinsic importance of these issues, about which not enough is known globally. So for example, we know that domestic violence is a problem, but typically it has not been very well quantified. We know a bit about the profile of the kind of people who face some of the disadvantages we are talking about, but again this is not necessarily very well understood in terms of the correlates and the drivers of deprivation.

So I think [this report] has empirically added to our knowledge in this area. I think it is also important because we have tried to be quite practical in it, and to look at the policy implications, so as to come up with relevant implications for folks who are interested in different kinds of policies and programs, including development agencies like DFAT and the World Bank.

I guess finally, but not least, it is important for institutions like the World Bank, that are not necessarily traditionally very active in some of these areas, to be getting more engaged and to recognise both the magnitude of the problems but also the relevance of them to our own work.

*Ashlee: Some of the issues in the report, like violence, have perhaps more traditionally been talked about from a human rights framework. This report seems to really put forward the economic argument as well. Do you think that that's going to be something that resonates more with policymakers and governments?*

Jeni: I think that's a very good point. A number of these issues have been around for long periods of time and, as we note in the report, they have been prohibited under [CEDAW](#) and some of the international conventions that have been around for decades.

At the same time, they haven't necessarily gotten the traction with more mainstream ministries, and so [with this report] agencies like the World Bank, which works with finance ministers and treasuries around the world, are now better equipped when we do talk about the economic costs.

So for example, on the cost of violence and the prevalence of violence—I think one in three women affected is a very large figure, but when you say it is also 1.5 to 3 per cent of GDP, that also gets people's attention.

*Ashlee: As you have been travelling and talking about this report, has the reception largely been positive?*

Jeni: It has been great. Actually, one of the slides that I have is on the media reception, but from practitioners and development agencies, I think there is a lot of interest both in the

substance of the work and some of the new empirical findings we have in the demographic and health data, for example, but interest in the implications for their work as well.

So we have been really happy with the reception. We do hope that it will have a bit of shelf life and will be relevant for folks who work in this area for some time to come.

*Ashlee: That's good to hear. You mentioned the G20 discussions and we also have the discussions going on around the post-2015 agenda. Is it an aim to influence those discussions through this report?*

Jeni: Yes, it is all very relevant. And the violence discussion is very relevant to the post-2015 discussion because that has emerged as being very prominent on that agenda.

The G20, kind of less directly so. Although some of the themes that we address in the report around kinds of disadvantage and overlapping disadvantage and the economic costs will hopefully have some resonance. And there are a number of G20 countries that are covered in the report as well.

*Ashlee: You mentioned that the World Bank has not perhaps looked so much at these issues in the past, is this publication part of an increasing push there?*

Jeni: The Bank has been looking at gender for some time, but not necessarily very much at issues around voice and agency. So it as an area I think of increasing relevance and interest, but the Bank needs to work out also how it is going to respond and follow up.

*Ashlee: In this region, what do you think are some of the most important actions for countries to take?*

Jeni: I am not an expert on the Pacific, but what comes across from a number of country contexts is the importance of changes in norms and attitudes. So for example, reducing the acceptability of violence.

A surprising number of women actually think it is okay to be beaten by their husbands, so until that norm is altered through working in the community, working with men and boys as well as working with girls and women themselves, things are not likely to change. I think there have been some interesting innovations in Papua New Guinea, for example, with more concerted efforts on the legal reform side and with magistrates, and increasing numbers of prosecutions.

So I think that the increasing interest in the area and the increasing recognition by governments is encouraging. We need to watch this space and hope that it will transpire into differences on the ground.

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Ashlee Betteridge was the Manager of the Development Policy Centre until April 2021. She was previously a Research Officer at the centre from 2013-2017. A former journalist, she holds a Master of Public Policy (Development Policy) from ANU and has development experience in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. She now has her own consultancy, Better Things Consulting, and works across several large projects with managing contractors.

Link:

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