

GADN response to the National Audit Office Report ‘*Improving the lives of women and girls overseas*’

The National Audit Office (NAO) Report [‘*Improving the lives of women and girls overseas*’](#) (released 29.04.20) explores whether the Department for International Development (DFID) has secured value for money in improving gender equality. DFID has set some ambitious targets on gender equality in its [Strategic Vision](#) and it is important to ensure that DFID lives up to its commitments. The NAO Report is therefore welcome in holding the government to account for this work. However the Report is overly critical of what is often important work, and should not be used as an excuse to undermine innovative aid programming, particularly during the pandemic when gender equality work becomes even more essential.

The Gender and Development Network has highlighted three main reflections on the Report.

1. The NAO Report is overly critical in highlighting the way DFID gender work is planned, and misses the real problem. In our view a core strength of this work is the way that it is responsive both to local context and to evolving best practice. The work on Violence against Women and Girls, and the recognition of the importance of Women’s Rights’ Organisations have been two recent examples where DFID plans have been sufficiently flexible to respond to new evidence and learning. We are concerned that a ten year plan, as recommended in the Report (Key findings paragraphs 9 & 11 and Recommendation paragraph 22) may stifle responsive innovation and learning. The NAO Report runs the risk of criticising DFID for supporting innovative programmes because they are difficult to measure, rather than recognising that traditional evaluation techniques are no longer fit for purpose. These dilemmas around how to monitor and evaluate innovative programming are not specific to DFID, but are shared by donors and agencies across the board.
2. It should also be noted that the scope of the NAO Report is to focus only on areas for improvement, and not to highlight what the department is already doing well and should continue. The findings of the Report can therefore appear overly critical, and could lead to a skewing of precious resources towards new ideas in the Report, and away from what is already working well.
3. We agree with the NAO Report recommendation that an action plan is needed to overcome the barriers to mainstreaming gender across all of DFID’s work. (Key Finding paragraph 12 and Recommendations paragraph 22). Our view is that the good work of the gender specialists is not always reflected across the department, and that the failure by many teams in DFID to recognise the importance of gender relations can undermine the effectiveness of aid. Moreover, the need for gender analysis across DFID’s COVID-19 response is now particularly apparent. Furthermore we suggest that the Report’s recommendation for an action plan on gender mainstreaming should be extended to all aid provided by other government departments.