

The Gender and Development Network's response to the FCDO's International Women and Girls Strategy

The announcement of a new International Women and Girls Strategy

On 8 March 2023, the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) released its much-anticipated [International Women and Girls Strategy](#) that sets out its priorities and commitments up until 2030. This replaces the former Department for International Development's (DFID) [Strategic Vision for Gender Equality](#), launched in 2018. In his foreword to the Strategy, Minister for Development, Andrew Mitchell states: "Our new Strategy stands as a rallying cry for women's freedom, empowerment and prosperity".

This commitment is reflected in the UK Government's [International Development Strategy](#) that seeks to "provide women and girls with the freedom they need to succeed" as one of its four priority areas, including "targeting the long-standing inequalities that women and girls face". Also launched at the same time is a programme providing funding to grassroots women's rights organisations and movements.

What's in the Strategy?

The new Strategy is shorter than its predecessor, with five key principles guiding its approach. These include: the UK's commitments to stand up and speak out for women's and girls' rights and freedoms on the global stage and in their bilateral relationships; emboldening and amplifying the work of diverse grassroots women's organisations and movements; targeting investment towards the key life stages for women and girls; acting for and with women and girls impacted by crises and shocks; and strengthening socio-economic and political systems. The Strategy also has a strong focus on the '3Es' - Educating girls, Empowering women and girls and championing their health and rights and Ending gender-based violence. It concludes with three 'goals': Goal 1: Drive the conversation. FCDO will deliver a major global campaign; Goal 2: Lead by example. Women and girls at the centre of FCDO's operations, and investment; Goal 3: Lead through knowledge. A new Expertise, Evidence and Research Offer

While it contains some welcome elements, many challenges remain moving forwards towards implementation. Below, we examine these further.

Welcome elements in the Strategy

The Women and Girls Strategy outlines a number of welcome approaches as part of the FCDO's growing analysis and expertise on gender equality and women's rights.

1. Recognition and resourcing of women's rights organisations and movements

The Strategy contains welcome recognition that women's and rights organisations (WROs) and movements play an important role in achieving positive social change across the Global South. Historically, their work has been drastically [underfunded](#), so the WROs funding programme, announced alongside the Strategy is a valuable contribution. This programme is delivered in partnership with the [Equality Fund](#) and will provide [£33m](#) of new core and flexible funding to support WROs and movements in countries that are eligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA). With no thematic limitations, FCDO funds will support the Equality Fund's existing grantmaking, including providing direct support to WROs, feminist funds, coalitions and networks, as well as emergency funding in natural disasters and conflict zones. A further [£5m](#) is going to a consortium led by [Gender Links](#), a South African based WRO. This funding programme, totaling £38m, marks a welcome step in the UK's support for WROs and movements in the Global South. It will be important for the UK to encourage other donor governments to implement similar approaches as part of their ODA spend. Separately, the UK also [announced](#) up to £200m towards the Women's Integrated Sexual Health (WISH) Dividend programme, focused on sub-Saharan Africa.

In the past GADN has applauded the inclusion of WROs in some consultation processes, first by DFID then the FCDO. These organisations have valuable expertise and insight, and meaningful consultation with them will ensure that the FCDO's policy making reflects women's and girls' lived realities, and we hope that the expertise and political understanding of WROs will be included in all areas of the strategy as we move to the implementation stage.

2. Rollback

The Women and Girls Strategy acknowledges that progress towards gender equality is not linear and that there is resistance to change, often resulting in the rollback of hard won gains. Especially at a time of rising nationalism, corporate capture and growing [anti-rights](#) discourse globally, it is important and timely that the Strategy recognises the need to combat rollback. This should cover all areas of rollback, including the undermining of women's economic rights that is taking place as a result of the COVID pandemic, rising cost of living crisis, and creeping imposition of austerity measures around the world.

3. More focus on gender equality

The strategy comes with a commitment to include a focus on gender equality for 80 per cent of bilateral aid. The [OECD-DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker](#) is a universally approved way of measuring the proportion of official development assistance where gender equality is a 'principal' or 'significant' objective. It is not clear whether the UK commitment is for gender equality to be a 'significant' or 'principle' objective – but welcome nonetheless.

4. The importance of quality, holistic, evidence-based programming

As was also a priority within the Strategic Vision for Gender Equality, the new Strategy recognises the importance of evidence and expertise under Goal 3, although learning as well as 'leading' would be a more welcome approach. In recent years, the UK has developed a reputation for high caliber gender equality programmes, such as those on violence against women and girls, and we are pleased to see this reaffirmed in the new Strategy. However, for this level of quality programming to be continued there will need to be a renewed commitment to understanding and tackling the structural barriers that are preventing advancements on gender equality.

Challenges that will need to be addressed in implementation

While the Women and Girls Strategy sets out the UK's priorities up until 2030, it is less clear on how these will be implemented or resourced. Below, we outline some of the key challenges we see in the implementation of the new Strategy.

1. Getting the framing right

At a time when rollback is legitimated by concepts such as 'family values', language and framing are important. The term 'gender equality' used in the previous strategy has now been replaced by 'women and girls'. This framing runs the risk of perpetuating the myth that they are a 'vulnerable group' in need of extra assistance because of their own frailty. A better framing is one that recognises women and girls as actors in development whose full potential is often affected by the barriers they face in society - such as discriminatory economic policies, social norms and legislation. The new Strategy tends to focus on 'empowering' women and girls to fulfill their potential, rather than removing the socio-economic barriers that stand in their way. Although the Strategy starts with mention of the importance of addressing systematic barriers to gender equality (in reference to the [UN Beijing Declaration](#)), there is very little commitment to the well-proven approach of addressing the root causes of gender anywhere else in the Strategy document.

2. The 3Es approach and need to address all the main priority areas

Concerns remain over the '3Es' framing used in the strategy namely: Educating girls, Empowering women and girls and championing their health and rights and Ending violence. The 'Empowering of women and girls' now combines the three previous priority areas of women's economic empowerment, women's political empowerment and sexual and reproductive health and rights. This desire for alliteration risks downgrading these important areas, and it is vital that equal weighting and resourcing should be given across all five previous priorities including in dedicated staff time. Moreover, the word 'empowerment' constrains the framing and places responsibility for the problem on the deficiencies of women and girls, rather than on the barriers created by the societies within which they live. The section on women's economic empowerment, much shorter than the others, further suggests the need for a much broader understanding of what stands in the way of women's economic justice.

3. Quantity of funding

Ambition in achieving high-quality programming must, in turn, be reflected in budget allocation. There has been an estimated [£1.9m worth of cuts](#) to the UK's international gender equality work between 2019-2021. Reinstating the full amount of lost funds is vital if the UK's reputation as a 'gender champion' is to be restored. In line with former Foreign Secretary Truss' [statement](#) in November 2021 that she had "decided to restore the women and girls' development budget to what it was before the Official Development Assistance (ODA) cut". We hope to see a restoration of the development budget for gender equality.

4. International influencing

Particularly when programme resources are tight, it is essential that the UK Government use its position on the international stage to promote gender equality and women's rights internationally for example at the G7, World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and thus this is a welcome commitment. However, in doing so it needs to ensure that the messages it promotes reflect the priorities and analysis of women's rights organisations and movements. It should also work with governments that are promoting feminist development, foreign and trade policies that not only promote gender equality but would also reflect the growing calls to [decolonise](#) the UK's foreign and development policy approaches.

5. Cross-government gender mainstreaming

The Women and Girls Strategy is a cross-departmental initiative that extends beyond the FCDO across Whitehall. For gender mainstreaming to be successful, it will be essential to bring about changes in key areas like the UK's trade and investment regimes. However, concerns remain that the Strategy's implementation will be tied to the operations of British International Investment (BII). This will limit the delivery of the UK's international gender equality objectives – subsuming them under the fulfilment of its economic and security interests.

Next steps

A new strategy is an important first step and GADN welcomes the FCDO's continued prioritisation of gender equality. Under the new Foreign Secretary and Minister for Development we look forward to seeing genuine prioritisation and resourcing of evidenced actions that will tackle structural barriers, and promote gender equality both through FCDO's programme work and through its influence on the international stage.

Notes:

1. For more information please contact Sophie Efange at sophie.efange@gadnetwork.org
2. Analysis of the FCDO's International Women and Girls Strategy by GADN member organisations can be found below:
 - Care International UK: [How can the UK's new International Women and Girls Strategy drive change for gender equality?](#)
 - Womankind Worldwide: [Womankind Worldwide responds to release of UK government's International Women and Girls Strategy](#)