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The Gender and Development Network's response to the UK government's White Paper on International Development

On 20 November 2023, the UK government released its White Paper on International Development. The Paper, titled [*International development in a contested world: ending extreme poverty and tackling climate change*](#), sets out the UK's new approach to development in order to accelerate global progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It builds on the priorities outlined in the 2022 [International Development Strategy](#) as well as the objectives in the [Integrated Review Refresh 2023](#).

The White Paper seeks to dictate the UK's international development approach to the new global realities we face. The White Paper includes important political prioritisation of gender equality and the rights of women and girls, along with some specific commitments. GADN welcomes this clear prioritisation as well as the ambition to strengthen and reform the international system.

However, concerns remain about the substance of these commitments and how they will be operationalised up to 2030. To put this rhetoric into practice will require:

- A deeper understanding of how to achieve transformative and lasting change on gender equality.
- Mainstreaming ambitions on gender equality across the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as well as Whitehall.
- Resourcing for all the priority areas identified within the [International Women and Girls Strategy 2023 – 2030](#).
- Recognition of the limits of British International Investment (BII) and private financing in resourcing the White Paper's equality objectives.
- Clear and transparent accountability mechanisms.

What's in the White Paper?

The White Paper is a comprehensive document outlining some of the world's biggest challenges and the UK's seven priorities for a re-energised international development agenda. These priorities are:

1. Going further, faster to mobilise international finance
2. Strengthening and reforming the international system
3. Harnessing innovation and new technologies

4. Ensuring opportunities for all
5. Championing action to address state fragility, and anticipate and prevent conflict
6. Building resilience and enabling adaptation
7. Standing up for [its] values

While the Paper contains welcome elements and bold rhetoric on a number of key areas, there were also some missed opportunities that are examined further below.

Gender equality

There is a welcome prioritisation of gender equality in the White Paper. However, this is not always necessarily rooted in an understanding of what is needed, nor is it backed by sufficient commitments or sufficiently mainstreamed throughout the White Paper.

In the Paper's Preface, the Minister for Development – Andrew Mitchell – states: "*The UK's work on women and girls is paramount. I have always said that we cannot understand development unless we see it through the eyes of girls and women. Increasing access to education, supporting family planning and combating sexual violence is central to creating conditions for economic opportunity and growth. These rights are universal and should be non-negotiable*".

While this sentiment is admirable, the Minister focuses only on three of the five priority areas outlined in the International Women and Girls Strategy, omitting Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) and Women's Participation and Leadership (WPL). Both of these are also priorities within the [SDG 5 targets](#).

The UK's commitment to gender equality is situated under the 'ensuring opportunities for all' priority (section 6) and echoes the UK's commitments to the 'three Es', as outlined in the International Women and Girls Strategy: Educating girls, empowering women and girls and championing their health and rights and ending gender-based violence. Specifically, the Paper states that the UK will commit to the following:

International action

6.12. We will spearhead a 'Rights, Freedom, Potential' campaign building on our International Women and Girls' Strategy to promote rights, and counter rollback globally.

6.13. We will ensure that development finance reaches those left furthest behind, getting development banks to consider the needs of women and girls and to ensure progress on equality through their investments, and by championing initiatives such as the G7's '2x Challenge' which inspires investment in women to provide opportunities such as increased access to quality employment.

National action

6.14. We will change our approach to partnerships with women's rights and other local organisations so that women, girls and marginalised people can drive the change they want in their lives and communities.

6.15. We will partner with national leaders, women’s groups and other experts, to test and scale-up innovative approaches to increase women’s autonomy, increase their voice and agency, and reduce gender-based violence and female genital mutilation (FGM), including against women and girls who have been marginalised.

6.16. The UK will support LGBT rights through new programming investments, working with partners to improve protection against discrimination, including by removing discriminatory laws, reducing hate speech and violence, and improving access to services.

6.17. The UK will deliver the commitment in the International Women and Girls Strategy to ensure at least 80% of FCDO’s bilateral aid programmes have a focus on gender equality by 2030.

In addition, the White Paper includes the launch of a new global campaign on WEE through British Investment Partnership (BIP).

Achieving ambitions

In order to realise the breadth of the gender equality ambitions laid out in the White Paper, a comprehensive commitment to mainstreaming gender equality is needed across every aspect of the FCDO’s work, from global economic policy-making to peace and security. The continued pledge to address the ongoing rollback of women’s rights is welcome (commitment 6.12), however, this will need to recognise all forms of rollback across a range of political fora where the UK has a voice.

Success will require dedicated staffing and resourcing. A clear road map is needed, for example, to achieve commitment 6.17 which seeks to ensure that at least 80 percent of the FCDO’s bilateral aid programmes have a focus on gender equality by 2030. Also of concern is the significant role that the White Paper gives to BII in delivering the UK’s international development priorities. Specifically, in relation to gender equality, BII will continue to drive gender-lens investing in developing countries through its 2X Global Initiative (commitment 6.13). However, this will require a more evidence-based approach to the limitations of private funding. [Concerns](#) have already been well documented about the limitations of gender-lens investing to achieve gender equality outcomes.

The achievement of these commitments also needs to be based on an understanding of transformative change beyond “*unlocking the full potential of women and girls*” to meet other goals (section 6.5). Instead, it is important to recognise the ways in which women are already working at their full potential to sustain every aspect of society but are not yet being recognised or rewarded for their contribution.

Achieving ambitions also requires a holistic approach that adequately resources all areas of gender equality outlined in the International Women and Girls Strategy.

What the White Paper says on the five priority areas in relation to gender equality

On sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), the White Paper states: “*We will strongly defend and progress sexual and reproductive health and rights, including safe abortion, through policy, investment and diplomacy*” (commitment 6.69). This language and support of SRHR is welcome, especially the explicit reference to abortion. However, unlike the International Women and Girls Strategy, it does not make specific reference to Comprehensive Sexuality Education. While the Paper states that investment in voluntary family planning must be rooted in human rights (commitment 6.52), there is some concern that the Paper directly identifies access to sexual and reproductive health services and rights as an approach to tackling population growth and managing demographic transition. Concerns also remain about the investment and funding for flagship SRHR programmes that continue to be cut.

In relation to gender-based violence (GBV), the Paper re-commits to the ‘three Es’ from the International Women and Girls Strategy. However, there is a lack of substantial commitments to addressing the root causes of GBV, including tackling harmful gender and social norms that fuel and perpetuate this violence.

On girls’ education, the Paper reaffirms the UK government’s commitment to this area, including the International Women and Girls Strategy and the [Girls’ Education Plan 2021 - 2026](#).

The White Paper primarily recognises WPL in relation to addressing conflict (section 7.14) although there is also some recognition of this in section 5.13 as part of its climate commitments and recognition of women’s rights organisations (commitments 6.14 and 6.15).

In relation to WEE, this is only mentioned in the context of a global campaign through BIP which is concerning. This is because of mounting evidence which points to the [limits of private investment](#) in creating the ‘decent work’ or public services women and girls need to achieve their rights. Crucially, any effort to achieve WEE must materially address the structural barriers that women and girls face, especially unpaid and domestic care work.

Also noteworthy is that the Paper says: “*[t]he case for investment in social protection has never been better*” (p. 96) and commits to championing universal social protection – critical for helping realise women’s and girls’ rights – as well as signing up to the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection. However, in the Paper, social protection is not framed as part of WEE thus pointing to one of the problems of locating WEE squarely within the British Investment Partnerships Directorate (BIPD). Additionally, it is *gender-transformative* social protection that is critical for recognising the specific barriers that women and girls face.

Other areas of gender equality

In relation to climate change, the White Paper recognises the crucial role of women and girls – as well as Indigenous communities – in local adaptation efforts and for a just green transition (commitment 5.13). However, it could have gone further by reiterating the commitments in the International Women and Girls Strategy that climate finance will increasingly integrate gender equality objectives for gender-just climate action.

On Women, Peace and Security (WPS), the White Paper fails to mention and make the links to the UK's WPS [National Action Plan 2023 - 2027](#) in section 7 (Tackling conflict and state fragility, disasters and food insecurity) which is clearly a missed opportunity.

Women's rights organisations

The role and importance of women's rights organisations (WROs) in setting development priorities as well as the need for them to be sustainably funded is set out in the White Paper including in commitments 6.14 and 6.15. Also included is the UK's flagship WRO Programme, delivered through its partnership with the Equality Fund, as a potential model for partnerships with WROs and movements. The recognition of WROs and movements is a welcome addition to the Paper and reflects substantial consultation by staff within the FCDO.

Moving forward, the role of WROs must be expanded beyond just setting development priorities in their communities to one of also using their valuable expertise and insight to shape the FCDO's work through regular and remunerated [consultations](#) as part of the mainstreaming of commitments on gender equality.

Strengthening and reforming the international system

The White Paper identifies that *"[t]he countries and people that have historically been excluded from power must have a central voice in how the international order changes. The UK's historic role in the international system means we have a responsibility to help ensure it is more representative..."* (p. 24). This recognition is long overdue as the UK plays a leading role in the multilateral system and has significant influence within the Group of 7 (G7), and the Group of 20 (G20), as well as on the Boards of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), thus being able to shape decisions on global policy, including macroeconomics.

Relatedly, the Paper commits that the UK's partnerships will be guided by the principles of mutual respect and will seek to move beyond an *"out-dated 'donor-recipient' model"* (p. 29).

While it is welcome that the UK commits to strengthening and reforming the international system, it is paramount that this translates into increased policy coherence so that its role within the international system does not undermine its wider gender equality commitments and objectives. For example, this includes the UK's disproportionate role on the Boards of the World Bank and the IMF where it has been instrumental in furthering austerity conditionalities as part of loan programmes. This has had a [detrimental impact](#) on women's and girls' rights through aggressive cuts in public spending which, among other outcomes, has exacerbated their existing unpaid care responsibilities.

Locally-led development

As part of the UK's commitment to its development partnerships being guided by mutual respect (p. 29), the White Paper has a strong emphasis on locally-led development approaches. This is to ensure that initiatives are owned and led by people in their own contexts. However, the UK must go further in this regard, namely, acknowledging and undoing the ongoing legacies of

colonialism that have created the long-standing power imbalances evident in the current multilateral system. The Paper's ambition to reform the international system must therefore be rooted in such an approach and analysis if it is to be transformative.

Resourcing rights

The White Paper identifies that an additional \$3.9tr is required annually to deliver the SDGs, and resorts to the need to mobilise more private capital to low and middle-income countries to fill this financing gap. This approach has been justified by the apparent lack of public finances to fulfil development objectives and neglects the role of international financial institution (IFI) policies in limiting governments' fiscal space. Resorting to privately financing development objectives comes with [considerable consequences](#) for the realisation of women's and girls' rights with governments absorbing much of the risk and private financiers reaping much of the rewards.

There is a need to acknowledge that other policy options (at both the national and global level) are available to expand fiscal space and help fill the financing gap. For example, while the White Paper recognises the need for fairer and more effective taxation systems, it does not express support for a [UN Tax Convention](#) that was just recently voted for by the majority of UN member states earlier this month. Nor does it mention the UK's disproportionate influence on [financial transparency](#) and global tax policies, in large part due to its Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies, which means that it has a pivotal role in reforming global tax rules. Furthermore, while the White Paper stresses the importance of strengthening the international debt architecture, it continues to prioritise the G20's [Common Framework for Debt Treatments Beyond DSSI](#) as the solution for the spiralling global debt crisis. [Critics](#) have highlighted that such a framework does not include proposals for debt cancellation to those countries most in need or the mandatory participation of private creditors in debt relief efforts.

Notes:

1. For more information please contact Sophie Efangé at sophie.efange@gadnetwork.org.
2. Links to other GADN member statements in response to the White Paper can be found below:
 - [Action Aid UK](#)
 - [Care International UK](#)
 - [Oxfam GB](#)
 - [Plan International UK](#)