

‘A global force for good’

Four pillars for UK leadership on gender equality

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) emerges at a watershed moment for women and girls’ rights. Covid-19, the climate emergency and humanitarian crises have exposed the entrenched legacies of gender inequality, leading to disproportionate impacts on women and girls. The combined expertise of DFID and FCO leaves the new FCDO well-equipped to lead on robust policy for a sustainable, evidence-based approach to UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) with gender equality at its heart. The UK has long held an influential position on women’s rights, as a key proponent of Sustainable Development Goal 5 and now co-lead of the UN Action Coalition on Gender Based Violence. Advancing women’s rights and leadership sits at the core of what it means to be a truly global Britain.

ActionAid knows, from working with the world’s poorest people across 45 countries, what efficient and effective ODA looks like. In Autumn 2020, we will launch a report which analyses 10 years of the UK’s aid spend against its commitments on gender equality. We looked at how the UK fares against other OECD DAC donors, building on insights from development and humanitarian actors. This short paper combines this evidence with our technical expertise from working on the frontline, to provide practical recommendations to the FCDO. These focus on four key pillars that will put Britain in a global leadership position and make a lasting difference to the world’s poorest women and girls.

Pillar 1

Implement the Strategic Vision on Gender Equality across the FCDO

Several of the UK's key allies have been bold in implementing a Feminist Foreign Policy. Sweden, Canada and France have championed an approach that puts gender equality at the centre of all work, including peace and security, climate action, human rights and trade. To be sustainable, this work must draw on the experiences and leadership of women and girls. The FCDO presents an opportunity to draw from and build on the learnings from the UK's allies and exhibit global leadership in accelerating gender equality. Indeed, there is scope to better align ODA towards gender equality goals like Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5. Our analysis of UK ODA spend builds on work by Publish What You Fund on OECD DAC donors, which finds that:

- Most aid still does not aim to address gender inequality. We found that the trend has been improving in the UK since 2016
- Increasingly, aid has a partial focus on gender equality, indicating enhanced gender mainstreaming
- Aid with a primary focus on gender equality has increased, but remains relatively small
- Consistently, little aid goes towards women's rights organisations.ⁱ

DFID's highly regarded 2030 Strategic Vision on Gender Equality (SVGE) calls on the UK Government and partners to recognise the overlapping, entrenched barriers and exclusions that women and girls face in realising their rights. An important pillar for UK leadership in advancing gender equality, the SVGE should be mainstreamed across the FCDO, including in diplomatic missions and in humanitarian work, to create a step change from piecemeal disbursement and programming on gender equality. This is because gender inequality is not only a barrier to development, it is a driver of disaster risk, a predictor of conflict outbreak and all conflicts have a gender dimension. Mainstreaming the SVGE is crucial in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has triggered a reverse in [progress on SDG 5](#).

While the UK's commitment to girls' education is deeply commendable, education and empowerment have to go

Pillar 1

To ensure that women and girls' rights are prioritised, the UK Government should:

1. Ensure that every FCDO programme has a strong gender framing, from business case to end-of-project review, in line with a standard set of criteria e.g. through a new 'gender scorecard', built on the expertise of (previous) DFID and FCO gender experts and within cross-Whitehall funds. This should be appraised by WROs (women's rights organisations).
2. In the FCDO Single Departmental Plan, commit to developing an action plan for cascading the SVGE through all FCDO work in consultation with FCDO gender experts, development actors and WROs.
3. Increase targeting and spend on gender equality principal programmes that meet OECD's Gender Equality Marker (GEM); further reduce aid spend with no gender target and increase the percentage of aid directed towards WROs so that by 2024, 15% of bilateral aid spend has gender equality as a 'principal' objective (as per GEM) with an additional 75% spending on projects and programmes with gender equality as a 'significant' objective.
4. Refresh the Economic Development Strategy to ensure a broader focus on women's economic empowerment. Go beyond supporting women's entrepreneurship and job creation in a limited number of sectors and address the structural inequalities faced by women and girls, for example, by recognising and addressing unpaid care burdens.
5. Learn from the experiences of innovative pooled country and multilateral funds, like Amplify Change and Power Africa to develop new collective funding pots with the express purpose of catalysing work on gender equality. Such funds have embedded women's leadership and ensuring WRO access to funds in their approaches.

together. If implemented in line with the SVGE, the systemic barriers to girls attending, being safe in and staying in school should be addressed. Harmful social norms, violence against women and girls (VAWG), poor sanitation, livelihood insecurity and climate change have direct impacts on girls' education, as does the lack of public funding towards free and universally delivered education. Our '[Promoting Rights in Schools Framework](#)' (2011) sets out what an 'ideal' school, offering public quality education, looks like. Plan International's work on [Inclusive Quality Education](#) also maps out key investment areas that will lead to true sustainable change.

Pillar 2

Develop meaningful partnerships with local actors

Strong partnerships with local actors, including with women-led organisations and WROs, are integral to ensuring that all UK aid is effective and delivers value for money. By drawing together the expertise of DFID and FCO staff both in the UK and globally, towards integrated country business plans, the FCDO is in a strong position to support the 'localisation agenda', which is more important than ever in a Covid-19 world. The pandemic has forced a recognition of the central role played by local organisations as 'first responders', with WROs and women-led organisations often best placed to first access and then understand and address the needs of women and girls. In our experience, funding to local actors is more cost-effective and more empowering to people and economies. Yet, their leadership is consistently undervalued, lacking political and financial support.ⁱⁱ

As a Grand Bargain signatory, the UK is committed to delivering on the 'localisation agenda'. The FCDO should recognise the opportunity of working with local NGOs towards integrated work along the humanitarian and development nexus. The National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, speaks directly to this nexus and acknowledges the importance of local knowledge and contextualisation. It underscores that WROs are critical partners who need an enabling environment to participate and lead in peace and resilience building. By directing aid to local organisations – especially WROs – the FCDO ensures that programmes are locally legitimate, sustainable and help to build resilient communities and economies. Our analysis of ODA, due to be published in Autumn 2020, demonstrates clear evidence for the power of localisation and adaptability. The following two programmes are an example of this in action:

The [Start Network](#), a multi-donor pooled rapid response fund to which DFID was the largest contributor, has directed up to 60% of funds to local organisations in Bangladesh, DRC, India, and Pakistan. The Start Network also aims to significantly contribute towards Grand Bargain commitments of transparency, collaboration, flexibility and participation. These principles have allowed for innovation that enhances the effectiveness of humanitarian response. For example, START has launched a digital innovation platform, has conducted experiments using blockchain technology, and has started working with insurers. Over 230 organisations have expressed a formal interest in joining the network, demonstrating its legitimacy on the ground. Innovative pooled funds like this are better value for money than channelling funds through the UN system, because they enable the FCDO to disburse funds to countries with minimal transaction costs.

DFID's Work and Opportunities for Women (WoW) programme aims to support 300,000 women across nine countries to have improved access to higher productivity and higher return jobs, more diversified roles and/or improved working conditions. It is being delivered in partnership with three CSOs that have substantial reach and expertise in the global south. On review of publicly available documents WoW's implementation signalled a shift from a market systems approach that failed to address structural barriers faced by women, to a rights-based approach which empowered women economically. Our review suggests that the CSOs and consortium advocated for this shift and that DFID was open and flexible. As a result, WoW's programme approach appears to have moved towards addressing systemic barriers to women's economic empowerment, like unpaid care burdens, discriminatory norms and exclusion from decent work opportunities.ⁱⁱⁱ

To ensure that women and girls' rights are prioritised, the UK Government should:

1. Develop an accountability framework to ensure the FCDO is on track to deliver on the UK's commitments to localisation. Introduce measures in diplomatic missions across all ODA-eligible countries, such as:
 - Heads of Mission should have a formal induction on localisation, which should include meetings with local WROs
 - Each diplomatic mission should have staff dedicated to gender analysis of the context and of aid disbursement
 - Each diplomatic mission should have an external advisory council on effective ODA disbursement, including representatives from WROs.
2. Ringfence 25% of the ODA that goes to local responders for WROs and women-led organisations.
3. Pilot new, flexible funding models led by WROs to support the leadership of women in longer-term strategic recovery and resilience (good practise examples include the [Global Fund for Women](#), [Mamacash](#), [African Women's Development Fund](#), and the Women's Voice and Leadership Fund) and increase the share of funding allocated through localised funding mechanisms, including the [Start Network](#).
4. Mitigate the risks associated with increased funding for local organisations by investing in strong local partnerships with CSOs and WROs; this can be supported by ensuring a balance of UK-appointed and locally-appointed FCDO staff in ODA-eligible countries (where appropriate), and capitalising on the local networks of arms-length bodies such as the British Council to foster strong partnerships with CSOs and WROs in these countries.
5. Support the representation and influence of local women and WROs across the whole development and humanitarian programme cycle and within decision-making structures, including coordination spaces such as the UN cluster system.
6. Invest in locally-led institutional development and capacity strengthening initiatives such as the [SHAPE Framework](#), which strengthen the long-term capacity of local responders, including women-led and women's rights organisations.

Pillar 3

Step up efforts to end all forms of violence against women and girls

The UK has positioned itself as a global leader on preventing and addressing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). From dedicated ODA to VAWG prevention and response programmes, to the ground-breaking 'What Works Initiative', the UK's contribution should not be understated. The What Works evidence underscores the need for 'whole of community' approaches in tackling VAWG, which invest in broader gender equality and systemic change. With the UK's co-leadership of the UN Action Coalition on Gender Based Violence (GBV), the FCDO should ramp up funding for and investment in expertise around this work.

This has never been more urgent. The UN Secretary General has launched a global campaign to address how Covid-19 has unmasked "a shadow pandemic" of VAWG. Across countries there are reports of 60-775% increase in calls to

domestic violence helplines.^{iv} Violence has a detrimental impact on women's and girls' physical and mental health, on their education, on their ability to work and reach their potential. If we are to deal with this pandemic and other global crises such as climate change, conflict and global recession, women must be free from violence and oppression. Tackling VAWG through a systemic, whole of community approach is both the right thing to do and the smart thing to do.

The What Works to Prevent VAWG programme has illustrated that it is possible to significantly reduce VAWG within programmatic timeframes^v, but only with a sufficient investment of time, focus, technical expertise and funding. Key effectiveness factors include: i) a theory of change that is relevant to context and understands that gender and social change is a collective process; ii) designing interventions that demonstrate a deep understanding of relevant power dynamics; iii) sustained engagement with community leadership structures, decision makers, men and boys; iv) group based, participatory and inclusive methods, and; v) Ensuring optimal frequency of sessions over multi-year timeframes. WROs are critical partners in ensuring these factors are possible. Yet, our analysis of aid spend shows that despite an increase in funding to VAWG programmes since 2017, the percentage allocated to WROs has actually declined.

Pillar 4

Scrutinise ODA spend in partnership with WROs

Our upcoming review of ODA spend demonstrates the importance of monitoring and learning from our progress. There should be explicit measurable commitments on gender equality which should be tracked through disaggregated data at multiple scales, enabling the FCDO to show progress towards reaching the most marginalised women and girls and achieving SDG5.

A possible detractor from delivering sustainable and impactful development outcomes, would be to relegate 'development' to short-term campaigns on entrenched human rights issues, which are not informed by contextual analysis, robust theories of change or multi-year funding. These do not guarantee value for money and risk creating negative public – and global – perceptions of UK aid.

Pillar 3

To continue breaking ground on addressing VAWG, we call on the FCDO to:

1. Commit to increasing the proportion of ODA dedicated to both VAWG prevention and response programmes to a minimum of 1%, in line with key policy frameworks, and include ring-fenced investment towards research and evidence.
2. Commit to continued investment in and development of internal technical expertise on VAWG, including allocating (at a minimum) one VAWG expert assigned as a point of contact for each FCDO country office.
3. Ensure that VAWG programmes are being informed and led by the expertise of a range of specialist WROs. Ringfence a minimum of 25% of VAWG funding for WROs in country, and ensure this funding is accessible, long-term and flexible.
4. Re-affirm the UK's commitment to the Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies and make new commitments in the Road Map 2015-2021 that support engagement of women and WROs in affected communities. Embed the Gender Based Violence (GBV) Accountability Framework in all humanitarian and conflict-prevention spend.
5. Ensure UK policy and programming on girls' education becomes more equitable overall in order to enable girls to remain in and succeed at school, including by preventing and responding to violence against girls in schools and by supporting initiatives such as Girls' Clubs to better connect the most marginalised girls with essential services in their communities.
6. Support and promote international initiatives to help influence other governments to put in place a legal and policy framework that specifically addresses VAWG in school at all levels.
7. Maintain and build on DFID's robust approach to safeguarding, ensuring that frameworks and reporting mechanisms remain in place, and that progress on the commitments to root-and-branch change in safeguarding across the sector, made at the 2018 London Safeguarding Summit, are built upon.

The Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) is an example of how sidestepping critical components of transformative programming can undermine effectiveness and value for money, as recognised by the [ICAI 2020 report](#). The FCDO presents an unparalleled opportunity to invest in a process of learning from previous mergers within the UK's key allies, such as Canada, New Zealand and Sweden, and to put UK aid in the hands of organisations who are closest to the needs of the most marginalised communities, including women and girls.

Numbers are not sufficient to understand impact on women's rights. Monitoring and evaluation should incorporate a range of methodologies: quantitative, qualitative and participatory, to bring to light the impact of UK ODA. This will strengthen the Leave No-one Behind Agenda, as exclusions and barriers operate in dynamic and invisible ways that are often difficult to capture in quantitative assessments. A robust democratic framework to scrutinise ODA spending, including through the maintenance of ICAI and a dedicated select committee, is crucial to ensuring that aid disbursed by the FCDO – and by all ODA-spending departments and funds – is effecting real change for women and girls.

Conclusion

The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have emphasised that the FCDO will be a vehicle for promoting UK values abroad, including democracy, human rights, free and fairtrade and rule of law. To achieve this ambition, and to retain its position as a 'development superpower' internationally, the UK will need to draw upon both the legacies of DFID development excellence, and of the diplomatic know-how of the FCO, to create something that is more than the sum of its parts. The FCDO presents an unparalleled opportunity to positively promote women's rights and improve the lives and support the potential of the most marginalised women and girls, and truly be a force for good in the world, leaving no one behind.

ⁱ For ActionAid, the terms 'women-led organisations' (WLOs) and 'women's rights organisations' (WROs) refer to organisations that are led or predominantly composed of women in leadership positions, and who work towards advancing gender equality and supporting the needs of women and girls.

ⁱⁱ [Joint Agency Policy Brief \(2020\) Humanitarian Funding, Partnerships and Coordination in the COVID-19 crisis: Perspectives from local women-led organisations and women's rights organisations](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Start Network (2017) Shifting the Power: Introduction to Humanitarian Self-Assessment Process. [Annex 1 : Strategic Humanitarian Assessment and Participatory Empowerment Framework \(SHAPE\)](#)

^{iv} [Joint Agency Policy Brief \(2020\) Humanitarian Funding, Partnerships and Coordination in the COVID-19 crisis: Perspectives from local women-led organisations and women's rights organisations](#); and, Healthcare Assistance Kenya, Weekly National GBV Cases Analytical Report, (22 – 29 May, 2020)

^v 'Programmatic timeframes' refers to a period of at least 18 to 36 months according to evidence from What Works. See, p. 12

Pillar 4

To ensure the FCDO is learning from experience and delivering evidence-based ODA, it should:

1. Work with gender experts from (the former) FCO and DFID, from civil society, and with WROs, to develop and embed measurable commitments on gender equality within the Single Departmental Plan. These should be grounded in addressing overlapping barriers and exclusions as laid out in the SVGE and in the learnings from programmes such as What Works.
2. Develop a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEAL) framework, in consultation with WROs, that maps onto these commitments. Ensure it is multi-disciplinary, engaging quantitative, qualitative and participatory approaches and works directly with women and girls impacted by ODA in order to meaningfully include their voices in evaluating its success.
3. The FCDO should develop a mechanism to learn from allies who have undergone similar mergers and deliver positive development outcomes for women and girls and should ensure that interventions are underpinned by both DFID methodologies and robust theories of change.
4. Uphold scrutiny of aid spend by establishing a cross-departmental House of Commons select committee and retaining ICAI as a critical asset for assessing how to get the best return on investment of ODA.