

DFID's Strategic Vision on women and girls

Response from the Gender & Development Network

The Gender & Development Network is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the way forward for DFID's Strategic Vision on Women and Girls. The comments below are based on consultation with our Advisory Group and relevant working groups. We have first addressed the global context. We then make recommendations for the Strategic Vision in relation to the enabling environment, the four pillars plus one and improving accountability and impact.

1. Global context

1.1 Challenges and opportunities for gender equality

Increasing attention on gender equality

Over the last two years we have experienced a welcome increase in the emphasis on gender equality in international fora, with for example a strong Gender Goal and valuable supporting language in Agenda 2030. Interest in women's economic empowerment (WEE) has been particularly marked with the convening of the High-Level Panel (HLP) on women's economic empowerment and discussions at the G20 and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

At the same time, and in dramatic contrast, we have witnessed a substantial backlash against women's rights, particularly within populist movements, and most notably from the new US administration—all of which have global implications. Sexual and reproductive rights have been the first casualty but there will likely be more to come. Never has the need for global leadership and policy coherence for women's rights been greater.

Instrumentalisation of gender equality

Alongside the benefits of a focus on gender equality come the dangers of low-quality interventions, as non-specialists start to work in the field despite very limited history of engagement with women's rights organisations or movements and little understanding of gender analysis or patriarchy. In addition, there has been an increase in the instrumentalisation of gender equality—most notably in discussion of the benefits of WEE to economic growth—leading to programmes and policies that are not truly designed to promote gender equality and women's rights or rooted in the priorities of women themselves. Welcoming, maintaining and building upon the focus on women and girls, while guarding against poor quality interventions, will be a major challenge for the Strategic Vision in the coming years.

Space for global leadership

The UK, with its strong reputation on gender equality, is ideally positioned to work with other like-minded governments to ensure that the ideals of Agenda 2030 are realised. In particular,

policy coherence between a positive agenda on gender equality and other economic development debates is overdue.

1.2 Global challenges and the context for gender equality measures

Here we have focused on some of the challenges that we contend have not yet been adequately addressed, so we have not listed areas such as conflict and crisis, which are already priorities for DFID.

Climate change

Climate change and the need for a just transition to a low-carbon world is one of the greatest global challenge we face, both in relation to mitigation and adaptation. Moreover there is a strong link between failure to address climate change and increased conflict and crisis. The importance of gender equality in the fight against climate change is stated in both the Paris Agreement and the Green Climate Fund. There are also synergies: sustainable energy and infrastructure development are critical to respond to climate change as well as to improve gender equality outcomes, in particular reducing the drudgery aspects of women's unpaid care and domestic work. The Strategic Vision should highlight the linkages between these sectoral interventions and the opportunity for gender transformative impacts.

Austerity, inequality and the decline in public services

Decades of austerity measures, with macroeconomic policies aimed at reducing fiscal deficits, continue to have an impact on inequality generally and gender inequality in particular. A crisis in the delivery of basic public services has been compounded by the recent prioritisation within aid architecture on value for money and on the number of beneficiaries “reached”, which has reduced focus on high-quality, sustainable services. Without an increase in the capacity and willingness of governments to provide these services, Agenda 2030 will not be achieved.

Migration and urbanisation

Many migrant women face insecurity and violence in their countries of origin, during transit and in host countries. The feminisation of migration also increases the need to address the insecurity that migrant women face in the workplace, including violence, discrimination, abuse and low pay, with abuses in the informal sector and the domestic work sector a particular problem. Rapid urbanisation also has implications on a range of gender equality related issues including violence against women and girls (VAWG), infrastructure provision and the informal economy, with sexual violence and harassment one of the outcomes of rapid global urbanisation.

2. Recommendations for DFID’s Strategic Vision

2.1 Enabling environment

Strengthening the enabling environment

Since the publication of the first Strategic Vision, a deeper understanding of transformative change has developed across the international community. We have witnessed a broader acceptance of the need to tackle the structural barriers to gender equality, including within Agenda 2030 itself and in the reports of the HLP on WEE. In both processes, some progress was also made in recognising the interconnectedness of different “themes”—the impact of VAWG on education, unpaid care and domestic work on WEE, and so on—and the danger

of silos. We strongly suggest that elements forming the “enabling environment” should be made more concrete in the next strategy, and suggest below areas that should be included where the UK government could play a particularly valuable role.

The macroeconomic framework

Macroeconomic policies are a critical part of the enabling environment, as noted on page 11 of the High Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment [final report](#):

Macroeconomic policies are crucial enablers of gender equality because they shape the overall economic environment for advancing women’s economic empowerment. Policy choices influence the level and pattern of employment creation, the level of unpaid care, and the resources available for governments to promote gender equality. How macroeconomic policies are designed and implemented will thus be significant determinants for accelerating women’s economic empowerment.

This work, and reports such as UN Women’s 2015 [Progress Report](#), point to major implications for policy coherence and the way economic policy is designed and implemented, some of which are outlined in the section on WEE below. Crucially, it is now widely recognised that economic growth alone will not necessarily bring about gender equality, and a more nuanced approach to fostering growth and redistributing its benefits will need to be part of any gender equality strategy. Following its pivotal role on the HLP on WEE, the UK government should ensure that the implications of this work are fully recognised and enacted.

In addition, the UK government should promote more appropriate economic policies by ensuring, as an IMF board member, that IMF loan programmes are agreed only after gender impact assessments have been conducted. Furthermore, in the negotiation of trade and investment agreements, the UK government should secure ex ante gender impact assessments and protect sufficient policy space for measures that protect and promote women’s rights.

Affordable, accessible and gender-responsive public services

Gender-responsive public services are central to the achievement of gender equality across a range of issues, whether as part of the response to women’s disproportionate unpaid care burdens, to increase women’s health and educational outcomes, or to provide decent work in sectors where women have access to jobs. Recognition of the importance of accessible, adequately funded public services, which serve the needs of all women, will need to be part of DFID’s gender equality strategy going forward. This will imply a number of developments: first, government accountability and gender-responsive budgeting are needed, particularly around decisions on austerity and public service provision; second, economic development strategies should end the privileging of fiscal adjustment and deficit reduction, employing a more nuanced approach to economic policy-making and recognising the benefits of deficit funding for example investment in social infrastructure to create employment, raise incomes and bolster tax revenues (see this excellent [ITUC report](#)); and third, social norm change is needed *within institutions* to ensure sustainable prioritisation of public services that promote gender equality.

Discriminatory social norms

As DFID has recognised, discriminatory social norms are a barrier to gender equality in every area of potential progress. DFID has the opportunity to lead interventions that can transform cultural discriminatory norms as well as deeply ingrained power imbalances. Former DFID Secretary of State Justine Greening played a very positive role showing international leadership in this area, particularly around FGM/C and EFM. This leadership should be continued, alongside a deepening and broadening of the approach. Firstly, social norms should be understood as embedded in a complex web of beliefs and values, producing systems of power and control that disadvantage women in all areas of their lives. Secondly, they must be viewed as all-pervasive and any approach to countering them must include norms and attitudes shaping gender roles and decision-making within the economy. Thirdly, there is a need to further engage in gender mainstreaming work within institutions, including within the UK government and other governments and international organisations, to address the discriminatory institutional norms that shape the way aid is prioritised and delivered.

Funding and support for women's rights organisations and movements

Women's rights organisations and movements are at the heart of positive social change on gender equality, and their strength has a significant impact on the enabling environment within which change takes place. However, they are often on the margin of civil society, with limited access to funding, and are faced with funding modalities that do not suit the long-term and challenging nature of their work. For many small, grassroots women's rights organisations, donor compliance requirements placed on intermediary funding trickles down to them, taking a toll on their capacity to innovate and grow. At a time of backlash and backtracking on commitments to women's rights, it is increasingly critical to support the work of organisations with a long-term, transformative perspective. We commend DFID's contribution to critical funding instruments such as Amplify Change and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, as well as the increased funding for DFID's VAWG programming. DFID has the opportunity to play a leading role in improving the practice of bilateral donors on this issue through its role as member of the OECD Gendernet, in particular its new working group on WROs and other ad hoc initiatives.

"Leave no one behind" and intersectional discriminations

Ensuring that the "leave no one behind" approach of Agenda 2030 be transformative for all women and girls will require an analysis that goes beyond static descriptions of "groups" of marginalised people to recognise the particular experiences, needs and priorities of people facing multiple and intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination. Representing over half the population, women and girls are not a homogenised group but are diverse according to class, age, location, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, migration and disability status, amongst other characteristics. Women belonging to marginalised groups face discrimination because of their gender and other aspects of their identity, often falling through the cracks of interventions as their needs straddle sectoral policies. Recognising the diversity of women's experiences and priorities requires meaningful engagement at all levels with women's rights organisations that address specific intersectional issues (such as disabled women's groups, for example, or women from specific marginalised ethnic groups) to ensure that an accurate reflection of intersecting inequalities in a given context is captured.

Conflict and humanitarian crises

In prioritising this area, the UK government should ensure that its approach to conflict and crisis is rooted in gender analysis across Whitehall. The gendered impact of conflict, crisis and displacement are well known and manifests in multiple ways, such as sexual violence perpetrated before and during displacement; VAWG perpetrated by an intimate partner or by someone known to the survivor; heightened risk of EFM and FGM/C in emergencies; increased risks of infection, death and violence in health-specific crises such as the Ebola epidemic due to pre-existing gender inequality and women's and girls' caring roles in society; and increased risks of violence, sexual exploitation, abuse and illness during famine or food insecurity situations. Given this increased vulnerability of women and girls to violence, abuse and discrimination in crisis and emergency situations, the UK government should prioritise women and girls in crises, ensuring that changes in policy and practice are scaled up to increase the number of women and girls reached.

Conflict and crisis also provide a further opportunity to look to the future, working in a gender-transformative way and addressing harmful social norms. The cross-Whitehall approach taken on implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and the UK National Action Plan is welcome. Further cross-Whitehall work on conflict and crises more broadly would be useful in addressing the needs of women and girls in the development/humanitarian nexus, including a stronger integration of humanitarian and development policy frameworks, such as commitments under the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies, the World Humanitarian Summit and gendering the Grand Bargain, and the 2017 Family Planning Summit.

In addition, there is an urgent need to build the capacity of implementing agencies to address the specific needs of displaced women and girls in the contexts of protracted crises. Specifically, implementing partners require support to build their skills and capacity to provide lifesaving services, conduct case management outreach and work with host communities and governments to ensure they are meeting women's and girls' needs and are not engaging in harmful practices that place women and girls at risk of violence, abuse and discrimination. Current pooled fund mechanisms have proved to be too short-lived to deliver on gender-based violence (GBV) response and prevention programming, and the UK's leadership in this area would also be welcomed.

Climate change

Responses to climate change have a major impact on the enabling environment in which gender equality efforts take place. Recognition of the links between climate change and gender equality are welcome, however there is still a long way to go to ensure that women's need and priorities are taken into account in mitigation and adaptation interventions and that they can meaningfully participate in shaping climate solutions at all levels.

Given DFID's economic development strategy focuses on key sectors such as energy, infrastructure and agriculture, there is a need to ensure both gender and climate analysis are embedded in programmatic decisions, in particular with regards to potential impacts to rural women's livelihoods and wellbeing. DFID can play a leadership role in framing and supporting the transition to a low-carbon world in a way that does not reinforce gender and other inequalities but rather creates decent work for women, reduces and redistributes the drudgery elements of their unpaid care and domestic work, and remedies the challenges women face in accessing land, credit and extension services as well as the poor recognition of their role as farmers.

2.2 Focus areas and pillars

The four focus areas in the Strategic Vision remain priorities for GADN, with some suggestions for further improvement. In addition we have suggested that women's participation and leadership should also be added as a priority area.

Violence against women and girls

We welcome much of DFID's approach so far, including the "What Works" research programme. Our concern is that levels of funding in this area should be at least maintained in line with the ICAI [report](#). DFID's focus on prevention of VAWG and support of innovative practices in this area has been crucial to the development of the field. However, in order to address the root causes of VAWG, the scale-up and expansion of this work is necessary. This will involve the mainstreaming of VAWG in broader programme work through, for example, WASH, education and economic development programmes. In addition, funding to address VAWG in humanitarian crises could ideally be provided on a longer-term basis directly to agencies with a track record of working on VAWG and adhering to international best practice, including the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines on GBV. This is necessary to further the UK's commitments to the Call to Action on the Protection from GBV in Emergencies and other humanitarian policy frameworks.

Increased support for grassroots women's rights organisations is an important component of addressing VAWG, and further focus would be welcome on supporting women's rights organisations to address social norms as a means to deliver primary prevention of VAWG. Further, support for survivor-centred, multi-sectoral responses continues to be an unmet need globally; responses should include shelters, helplines and psychosocial support. Finally, robust mechanisms are needed to ensure perpetrators can be brought to justice.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

We welcome the prioritisation of SRHR as one of the four pillars of DFID's Strategic Vision, especially given the challenging external environment, both in terms of global political and financial support for SRHR. For women and girls to lead healthy lives, and to be free to participate in social, economic and political life, they need universal access to high-quality services, information and education, as well as to conditions that allow them to realise their sexual and reproductive rights.

Moving forward, investment and programming to tackle intersecting inequalities will be essential to ensure that all girls and women, including the most marginalised, are able to realise their SRHR. Joined-up programming as well as policy coherence and alignment would further improve DFID's strategic approach and should include an intersectional and integrated approach that ties together policy agendas between SRHR, girls' education, unpaid care, VAWG and WEE, responding to the lived experiences and realities of girls and women. For example, post-primary education for girls has a significant impact on positive empowerment outcomes for girls later in life, particularly in terms of their future economic opportunities. SRHR programming must be better integrated with programming on girls' education, given that FGM and EFM are leading reasons why girls do not continue into secondary school. Similarly, the interlinkages between HIV transmission, education and VAWG are clear. Experience of intimate partner violence increases a woman's chances of acquiring HIV, while early marriage restricts young women's access to education and employment and can increase vulnerability to HIV by raising the risk of intimate partner violence. Additionally, girls who are forced into early marriage usually do not have the power to negotiate safe sex, increasing their risk and vulnerability to HIV and other sexually

transmitted infections. Ultimately, in order to enable girls and women to realise SRHR across the course of their lives, a holistic approach is required—one that understands the interlinkages between SRHR and all other aspects of women’s rights.

Given recent political shifts and the reintroduction and expansion of the Mexico City Policy, DFID’s international leadership, policy voice and support for SRHR is more needed than ever. This includes continued and increased investment in the full range of SRHR services, including rights-based family planning, for all women and girls. Particular attention should be paid to investing in maternal health and HIV prevention, both of which are leading causes of death among women of reproductive age in low- and middle-income countries and to the SRHR needs of women and girls in humanitarian settings, included in protracted crisis settings. At international events, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, DFID’s continued championing of SRHR is vital, including making the case for universal access to SRHR as crucial for gender equality.

Girls’ education

Looking first at the broader picture, it is important to ensure girls’ education programming is clearly linked to country strategies, both national and DFID, rather than being discrete pieces of work. Work on the enabling environment is also needed to facilitate and help drive demand for girls’ education. This will need to include working with boys and men to reduce violence and harassment on the way to school, redistribution of household chores and reduction of EFM, amongst other things.

Further development education programming should increase girls’ voices in the development of education initiatives and promotion of girls’ education, particularly through participatory design as well as monitoring and evaluation processes. Combined with a deeper focus on solutions to gendered barriers to education, there should also be a focus on evidence and practice related to keeping the *most* marginalised girls in school, especially girls with disabilities, married girls, young mothers, girls who migrate, child labourers and girls affected by conflict, crisis and forced displacement. This should take place alongside exploration of non-formal learning opportunities for adolescent girls who have not completed primary education. A better understanding of the barriers to transition to secondary education is also needed, including consideration of distance and the extent to which national examinations act as a gender-biased gatekeeper in some contexts, both as a result of costs and gender gaps in pass rates. Finally, secondary education has the potential to be gender transformative (see SDG target 4.7) but only if it equips girls and boys with knowledge and skills to promote gender equality through the curriculum (including textbooks), school environment and culture, staff behaviour and extracurricular activities.

Women’s economic empowerment (WEE)

Of the existing pillar areas, it is on WEE that there is most scope for improvement in DFID’s new strategy. Achieving WEE is complex, not least because of the linkages with all other areas of interventions for gender equality, and there is a danger that interventions will focus on the “quick wins” by tackling the problems facing individual women rather than addressing structural barriers.

Given the priority DFID gives to both economic development and women and girls, moving forward there is an opportunity to ensure policy coherence between these two agendas and establish a clear connection between broader economic policy and WEE (see the section on the macroeconomic framework above). Priorities should include: first, the use of fiscal policy to maximise the resources available for the promotion of gender equality, including

progressive tax regimes that do not reinforce economic or gender inequality, combined with gender-responsive budgeting and consultation with women's rights organisations to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to implement laws, policies and programmes promoting gender equality; second, consideration of the impact on gender equality of trade and investment policy as well as sectoral policies around infrastructure, energy and agriculture, including increased investment in social infrastructure, through deficit financing if necessary, to improve care provision, create decent jobs and reduce women's unpaid care burden; third, the promotion of "decent work", as the best way to ensure that increased female labour force participation translates into women's equality by ensuring jobs are empowering, and support for collective bargaining and women's collective action as vital components in promoting WEE; and finally, the adequate provision of universal social protection. The last three of these points were all reflected on page 11 of the HLP on WEE's [final report](#), which noted the need to "ensure adequate social protection, expand access to crucial infrastructure and facilitate the organization and collective voice and representation of women to set the terms of their economic engagement."

As the HLP on WEE noted, tackling women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work will need to be a major plank of WEE strategies. Having supported SDG target 5.4 on unpaid care, DFID could now play a leadership role. In addition to the Panel's recommendations, DFID could usefully do the following: first, support governments to collect good-quality data on unpaid care, including through time-use surveys, and to use a care lens in public policymaking and programming, including taxation, public finance management, social protection and decent work by, for example, ensuring that social protection is not contribution based but instead recognises women's role as carers throughout their lives; second, prioritise investment in good-quality, free, accessible public services, especially healthcare, education, childcare and elder care. For poor and marginalised women and girls, with limited access to public services and technology, and little access to private care or to flexible working, a shift of child care responsibilities from women to men will not be enough, so an increase in the provision of public services must be a major part of the solution. Third, invest in appropriate technology and infrastructure (including in water, sanitation low-carbon and decentralised energy) and design infrastructure projects in consultation with women, including from the most marginalised groups, to ensure they address context and gender-specific care requirements.

Women's political participation and leadership

There is growing evidence of the concrete development and governance gains for women and girls of all ages when more women are better supported (as individuals and collectively) to participate and lead. As such, women's political empowerment (understood as their influential participation and leadership in public life) should be seen as critical in the Strategic Vision refresh and added as a standalone pillar, not rolled into the "enabling environment". We welcome DFID's move to increase the focus on Women's Political Empowerment (WPE) within the Gender Equality Strategic Vision and in the Governance, Open Societies and Anti-Corruption team's incipient WPE theory of change.

In the future, there is a case for more and better investments in standalone and mainstreamed WPE approaches, programmes and partnerships. DFID has made important contributions to the deepening of the evidence base around women's influential participation and leadership in public life, and could usefully continue efforts to apply and deepen concrete learning and recommendations in their own practice and in influencing development partners across sector. Furthermore, women's political empowerment and leadership is a critical lens for all kinds of programming, not just "gender" or "governance"

programming. The participation and leadership of women of all ages in agricultural extension work, health service delivery, education policymaking, peace processes, and emergency response programming, for example, are all critical. This is about women continuing to move out of the predominant “recipient” or “victim” roles and into “agent”, “decision-maker” and “power-holder” roles.

Women’s political empowerment is not just about getting women into national or formal elected office; rather, it includes understanding where power and decision-making are located, and supporting women to get closer to, and have influence in, these processes and supporting programming that aims to shift the locations of power and decision-making. In this sense, it requires good political analysis, performed with a strong gendered lens, using participatory approaches. It also requires support for linkages between spaces for women’s leadership between women in formal politics, women’s movements, professional associations, faith-based organisations, community-based organisations and so on. Structural and institutional reform will also be needed, beyond the creation of a pipeline of women moving into formal politics, creating more enabling institutions, processes and working cultures, such as civil and political rights, reform of discriminatory laws, electoral and party reform, shifting sexist attitudes and practices towards women in politics.

We recommend that the Strategic Vision specifically acknowledge the role of robust partnership with women-led civil society and women’s rights organisations. Women’s rights organisations are already societal leaders and need to be supported through longer-term relationships, driven by these organisations themselves, with inclusion and diversity actively fostered within and between women’s groups and networks to broaden representation and leadership and include more marginalised women. Finally, change in women’s individual and collective abilities to participate in, influence and lead the decisions that affect their lives takes time. Long-term donor support is needed to support women’s diverse activism and leadership pathways, based on an understanding of how funded projects are intentional stepping-stones on a longer-term path or theory of change.

2.3 Accountability and impact

An increasing amount of ODA is now being delivered through other government departments. The new strategy should therefore consider how to improve the impact of aid originating across Whitehall on gender and cannot be limited only to DFID operations. At the same time, however, while DFID staff may need to provide technical advice to other departments, this should not be done at the expense of DFID’s own operations.

Recommendations for the Strategic Vision:

- A clear process of accountability and measurement of progress of all UK government departments should be implemented relative to the Strategic Vision, with consideration given to the development of a shared gender impact analysis framework to be implemented for all cross-Whitehall policy and programmatic work.
- In responding to the increased focus on conflict and crisis across DFID, more should be done to ensure that the work of CHASE and other departments is rooted in a gender analysis with gender impact assessments.
- All ODA from across Whitehall should be subject to the International Development (Gender Equality) Act of 2014.
- All UK government departments should use the OECD-DAC gender equality marker when tracking and reporting aid statistics.

- The Commonwealth Development Corporation and other private investment facilities that spend ODA funds should be subject to the same conditions and required to report on the impacts of their investments in achieving the SDGs.
- Greater policy coherence for gender equality is needed across Whitehall, including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for Business Innovation and Skills and the Department for International Trade, ensuring that all policies are commensurate with commitments on gender equality. In particular the role of the private sector in delivering development outcomes through trade, investment, job creation and financing of public private partnerships should be assessed in relation to its impact on gender equality.
- Corporate partners should be encouraged to uphold their responsibility to respect women's rights by undertaking gender-responsive human rights due diligence in relation to DFID-supported investments or initiatives, as well as their wider supply chains.

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