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Fixing UK ODA's Gender Gap: Bold Choices, Real Change

Research by CARE International UK and Evidence Enabled sheds new light on how UK ODA is used to fight gender inequality and the desperate need for a new approach

Introduction

Gender inequality remains a major driver of global instability and holds back economic growth. It is a litmus test for the basic rights of all citizens. It is also one of the best measures we have for whether a society's services, systems and structures are fit to foster prosperity, peace and stability.

Driving a more equal world has been a part of the UK's DNA for more than 30 years. The UK was a key signatory to the landmark Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, the most progressive and comprehensive global policy framework for advancing women's rights. Under a Labour Government, the UK helped to pioneer the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and ratified the Women, Peace and Security framework to advance women's leadership in conflict. As a generous contributor of Official Development Assistance (ODA), the UK has been considered a driver of the development effectiveness agenda, as well as setting the standard for others to follow by being the first G7 country to set and enshrine 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) on ODA.

However, latest research from CARE International UK and Evidence Enabled shows just how far behind the UK has fallen on this mission. Our research shows that the UK is at risk of critically undermining decades of global leadership and investment, if it fails to urgently reverse the deep and disproportionate cuts to support for women and girls. That is why CARE is calling on the UK Government to introduce new targets to ensure ODA reaches those who need it most and is spent as effectively as possible, delivering value for money for the British people.

In this briefing, we outline how the UK has gone off track and what can be done to turn this around, making the case for more targeted spending of the existing ODA budget.

Cover image: Kahsa, woman leader in Tigray, Ethiopia. Image © CARE/Sarah Easter

What does the latest data reveal?

> **UK ODA for women and girls is now almost half of what it was pre-pandemic.**

After the devastating cuts to the ODA budget in 2021, CARE's research revealed that very few safeguards were put in place by the previous Government to avoid a disproportionate impact on vital programming for women and girls.

Now, CARE and Evidence Enabled's research into the latest available data[1] shows that **the UK's bilateral ODA spend on gender equality has fallen year on year since 2019**.

As a result, **UK ODA for women and girls is now almost half of what it was pre-pandemic** - falling from £6.3bn in 2019 to £3.4bn in 2022.

This is the joint lowest on record since the UK began recording gender equality in 2014[2], and is disproportionate to the overall fall in the ODA budget.

This is despite the welcome move from the FCDO to almost double its spend to women's rights organisations (WROs) in 2022, and a record-breaking investment the same year for preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG), as the UK hosted the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI), and launched the second iteration of the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls Programme. Yet, even with this surge in funding, UK support for WROs is over a quarter less than its peak in 2019, representing just 0.3% of bilateral ODA. In crisis contexts, support to WROs stands at 21% less than 2019. And the UK's National Action Plan for Women Peace and Security, despite its strong focus on WROs, has no budget allocated to it.

This latest data highlights the need for the UK to adopt a more proactive and forward-thinking approach to promoting gender equality through its ODA work. By setting clear targets and ambition from the outset, rather than relying on emergency interventions and short-term political priorities, the UK can drive more sustainable and impactful change for women and girls and society at large.

[1]Using data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) and the International Aid Transparency Initiative

[2]It has dropped to the same 2015 levels at £3.4bn

What does this mean?

> **80% of people displaced by climate change are women. One in 10 women live in extreme poverty.**

Global progress on gender equality is moving backwards, not forwards – so these decisions matter. The UK's lack of prioritisation and investment in tackling gender inequality and supporting women and girls has much wider implications for the UK's strategic development priorities than just failing morally. From conflict and insecurity to the climate crisis and economic growth, gender equality is fundamental to tackling the greatest challenges we face - both at home and abroad - effectively and sustainably.

As our climate has become more volatile, **80% of people displaced by climate change are women** and **food insecurity affects 84.2 million more women than men**. In 2022, around **600 million women** (15% of women globally) resided within 50 kilometres of an armed conflict, conditions where violence against women and girls can go up as much as **200%. Globally, one in 10 women live in extreme poverty**, while the gap between men and women in the world of work is the **widest since records began**. The **UN estimates** that it will take 286 years to close legal gaps; 140 years for women to achieve equal representation in leadership; and at least 40 years to see equality between men and women in national parliaments.

Without a concerted effort to recognise and address the barriers to women and girls' equal participation in societies, our **UK foreign and development policy, including our limited ODA budget, is not being as effective as it could be:**

- Gender inequality **inhibits economic growth and stability**.
- Gender inequality **limits our ability to adequately respond to the climate crisis**.
- Gender inequality is a **key driver of violent conflicts**.

When the UK fails to properly target our policy and spending at the root causes of inequality, it fails to cement lasting change. This means our precious ODA only touches the surface, and while it may offer short term relief or support, ultimately it won't prevent these issues happening again, because it has not addressed the underlying issue of **gender inequality**.

How do we do things differently?

UK ODA alone cannot solve global gender inequality, but it can help, and in doing so it can lift up entire societies, improve economies, and reduce conflict.

That is why the previous Government committed that the FCDO would ensure at least 80% of its bilateral ODA programmes have a focus on gender equality by 2030. A percentage target can help protect the UK's commitment to gender equality and ensure effective, transformative ODA investment in the context of constrained and fluctuating ODA budget. However, the details of this target were never clarified.

We welcome the current Government's commitment to maintain and implement this important target, but we are asking them to do some things differently.

The Choice: Targeting Gender Equality

There are two ways the FCDO can mark itself as achieving this target. They can invest in programming which is primarily focused on other objectives e.g. improving nutrition or access to water, that is also marked as having a 'significant' contribution to gender equality. What is commonly known as 'gender mainstreaming'. Or the Government can invest in programming that is specifically targeted at achieving gender equality as its primary objective. It is the latter where CARE thinks this needs more attention.

The mainstreaming of gender across UK ODA programmes is absolutely essential to ensure that vital UK ODA – whether that be agricultural assistance to farmers, the creation of green jobs, or access to clean water in conflict zones – tries to meet women and girls unique needs, and does not cause any unintended harm. It ensures UK ODA programmes are designed from the outset to recognise and overcome the unequal power dynamics and potential barriers that could limit women and girls' access to services and/or participation in relief and recovery initiatives. Mainstreaming gender equality across the UK Government's development, diplomacy and climate action is critical to ensure women and girls benefit from UK ODA and can help shape solutions to future crises.

However, on its own, this mainstreaming is not enough to drive forward the change needed to tackle the root causes of inequality. Without investment specifically targeted at gender equality that changes the dynamics and pre-conditions that disadvantage women and girls – gender mainstreaming will continue to act as a sticking plaster across the UK's ODA interventions, unlikely to unlock the growth, security and prosperity stated in the Government's foreign and development policy ambitions. Investment in gender equality-focused funding is urgently needed.



◀ A meeting of a Women Lead in Emergencies Group in Tigray, Ethiopia. Image © CARE/Sarah Easter

CASE STUDY: Women Lead in Emergencies, Ethiopia

CARE's own programming is a **direct example of where investment by the UK in women's leadership has led to wider change.** In 2022, FCDO invested in CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies programme in Tigray, Ethiopia, where conflict has had a huge impact on women and girls.

FCDO invested in a programme designed to specifically build women's leadership in the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) in conflict – addressing their immediate needs, while identifying and working to address the barriers to gender equality.

By taking this approach, the programme not only improved GBV services, but had a **much wider impact**. For example, it allowed women to address preconditions to participation (like economic wellbeing) and ensured greater integration of women into post-conflict decision-making.

The results led to a 24% increase in women and girls' engagement in formal and/or informal decision-making spaces within the community, **enabling them to take action to solve problems and meet their and their communities' needs**.

The Change: Impact Far Beyond Women and Girls

CARE's research into the latest official data revealed that that while 60% of the FCDO's ODA programmes support gender equality objectives, a promising step towards their 80% target, only 10% of the FCDO's ODA has gender equality as its principal focus.

It is ODA that has gender equality as its *principal* focus that tackles the root causes of inequality and creates long-lasting transformative change. This makes UK ODA more efficient – not only because it will reach more people i.e. women and girls, but it can also have a knock-on effect of removing barriers that could affect others – particularly marginalised or discriminated groups. This is where the real change happens. That is where the UK can deliver real impact with constrained resources, and that is where the focus now needs to be.

As a first step to ensuring UK ODA is fit for purpose and transformative, the FCDO should:

- **Develop a roadmap to achieve the current target of 80% of bilateral ODA having a focus on gender equality;**
- **Commit to ensuring at least 20% of the ODA marked under this target has gender equality as its principal objective.**

This is not just about more ODA, this is about **better ODA**. Bold choices for real change.

By targeting more of our ODA specifically on programmes that prioritise gender equality, we can make the UK's ODA investment go further and have more impact. This is not just in the interests of those who care about gender equality or women and girls – it is in the interests of anyone who cares about better public spending.

Improving gender equality has long been recognised as a path to development effectiveness. Set against the backdrop of the current global context and Britain's own fiscal situation, the downward trend and deprioritisation of UK ODA investment on gender equality is short-sighted and counterproductive. While the Government works towards restoring the ODA budget, targeting more ODA towards gender equality is smart, strategic and ultimately delivers for the British people.

CARE International UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (292506).
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