PROTECTING GENDER EQUALITY: UK AID CUTS

May 2025

The Issue – And Why It Matters Now

Right now, the lives and rights of millions of women and girls hang in the balance. Around the world, women and girls are being pushed further into poverty, violence and silence – not because the world lacks resources, but because the political will to stand with them is crumbling. Because, too often, gender equality is seen as a 'nice-to-have', an optional 'add-on' or as something to be traded away when times are hard.

But when wars break out, it's women who flee with children on their backs. When food runs short, it's women who go hungry first. When schools close, it's girls who stay home. And when budgets are cut, it's women and girls who are left behind.

The upcoming Comprehensive Spending Review will determine the shape of the UK's aid budget for years to come – and gender equality funding is, once again, at risk.

Previous UK aid cuts administered by the Conservative Government saw gender-focused aid slashed almost in half – with 41% cut from programming to prevent violence against women and girls, and a 66% cut in funding for women's rights organisations (from its peak in 2017). Now, the Labour Government is poised to deal an even deadlier blow — reducing gender-targeted aid to zero, once again seeking savings at the expense of women and girls.

Investing in gender equality isn't just the right thing to do – it works. It can reduce the risk of violent conflict, make societies safer, communities more resilient to shock, and accelerate economic growth. As the proud birthplace of the Suffragette movement, the UK has long been a global leader in this fight – from passing the International Development (Gender Equality) Act in 2014, to tackling sexual violence in conflict, to now reaching a historic milestone with the highest number of women ever in Parliament. But that legacy is at risk. And the next climate disaster, pandemic or conflict won't wait for the UK to reverse course.

Ahead of the Comprehensive Spending Review, we urge you to stand with women and girls – who continue to lead their communities. To say that, even in times of constraint, we will not quietly walk away from the fight for global gender equality. To make clear, both individually and collectively as parliamentarians, that cutting targeted funding to women and girls is not what a UK government should stand for.

Key Statistics

The rollback on women's rights globally is underway now – and happening at pace.

- **1 billion**: The number of women and girls living in countries where gender equality was stagnating or reversing between 2019 and 2022.
- **50%**: The increase in cases of conflict-related sexual violence between 2022 and 2023.
- **84.2 million**: The additional number of women facing food insecurity (versus men).
- **2161:** The year extreme poverty among women will be ended (at current rates).
- **1 in 12:** The number of women who experience male violence in England and Wales.

Meanwhile, the UK (both under former Conservative Governments, and now under Labour) has taken steps that compound the risk of further rollbacks to women's rights and basic services.

- **46%**: The cut to UK gender-focused aid between 2019 and 2022 (against an overall budget reduction of 27%), reaching the joint lowest amount on record in 2022.
- **0.2%**: The amount of UK Climate Finance that reaches women's rights organisations.
- **£0**: The amount of UK funding in Gaza ring-fenced for women's organisations.
- **32.8 million**: The number of women and girls projected to not have access to family planning support by 2027 if UK gender-focused funding isn't protected (versus in 2019).
- **Over 1 million**: The number of women and children projected to be at risk of violence if just one flagship programme – What Works II – is ended.

Real-Life Impact

This isn't about abstract losses or numbers on a spreadsheet, though. It's about daily, human experience: a girl who no longer has a safe space to learn; a mother giving birth without medical support; a survivor of violence turned away from a shelter that's been closed. When gender-focused funding disappears, so do the basic rights and protections important to us all. That's why principal funding to gender equality – currently just 10% of all UK aid – must be protected.

What do we lose when gender equality isn't a priority?

ETHIOPIA: Women's leadership supports wider change in Tigray

In 2022, the UK government funded CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies programme in Tigray to strengthen women's leadership in preventing gender-based violence (GBV) during conflict. The programme addressed immediate protection needs and long-term barriers to gender equality. This holistic approach not only improved GBV services but also enhanced women's economic wellbeing and increased their involvement in post-conflict decision-making. As a result, there was a 24% rise in women and girls participating in community decision-making spaces, enabling them to drive solutions for themselves and their communities.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: Supporting whole communities to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG)

A UK aid-funded project in the Democratic Republic of Congo led to a major drop in VAWG by challenging harmful social norms. Through combined interventions – from training of faith and community leaders, safe spaces for conversations on the root causes of VAWG and gender inequality, and counselling for survivors – domestic violence against women fell from 69% to 29%, and non-partner sexual violence dropped from 24% to 4% in two years. Justification of physical violence among men fell from 71% to 55%. This project was part of the UK's wider "What Works" programme aimed at preventing VAWG globally.

Public Support

Budgetary decisions – across all policy areas, including FCDO spending – effectively say, out loud, what matters to the UK public. In 2024, for the first time in 14 years, Britons voted in a Labour Government on a manifesto that promised a 'progressive' approach to foreign policy – one that 'upholds human rights' and sets the stage for Britain to be a 'reliable partner' that renews focus in priority areas like 'empowering women and girls'.

And nationally-representative polling suggests that this still matters for the British public:

86% of the British public think it's important for the British Government and politicians to stand up for women and girls across the world.

72% of Britons **in Greater London** think it's important that the UK government uses its aid budget to protect women's and girls' rights around the world.

When asking our supporters how they felt about the proposed aid cuts, we heard the following:

'Long-term continuous input is much more effective in peace-building, resilience building, caring for humanity, increasing opportunities for capitalising intelligence of girls/women for potential future break-throughs to fighting societal and environmental ills. Please don't cut it.'

'There is a need for more humanity, not less.'

'Women and girls will be the first to suffer, and the worst affected. Sacrificing UK soft power for the sake of hard power is a short-sighted mistake.'

What You Can Do

Your voice matters. Parliamentarians have a unique ability to shape government action, on behalf of constituents, UK citizens and women across the world – who are already making their voices heard.

Elevate the need to prioritise gender equality within foreign and development policy **publicly**:

1. Consider proposing the subject for debate.
2. Consider submitting written questions to the FCDO – for example:
    - *To ask the Secretary of State, if his department will complete Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) before making decisions on ODA reductions.*
    - *To ask the Secretary of State, if he intends to protect women and girls from the worst impacts of ODA reductions.*
3. Through media opportunities or through social media (feel free to use this asset in any posts) – for example:
    - *As we reassess the UK aid budget, we must remain strategic: gender equality isn't optional – it's smart policy. Supporting women and girls drives health, growth and stability. Let's keep it at the heart of UK aid. #genderequality #SDG5*
    - *Even with a tighter aid budget, we can't afford to abandon the world's most vulnerable. Funding targeted at gender equality must remain a priority. Our values don't shrink when our budget does. #LeaveNoOneBehind #UKAid*

Elevate gender equality within discussions on foreign and development policy **privately:**

1. Consider leading or putting your name to joint letters urging the Foreign Secretary to prioritise gender-targeted funding within a reduced aid budget.
2. Raise the importance of support for women and girls informally with the Foreign Secretary.

CARE International UK can support on any of the above actions – if you want to learn more, or understand the potential impact of these decisions (including the cumulative impact of USAID withdrawing funding for gender equality), please get in touch with: **Laura Denham** – Public Affairs and Engagement Manager (ldenham@careinternational.org / 07399 554570).