



SDG 5: Progress, gaps and recommendations for the UK

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Historically, the UK government has held a reputation for putting gender equality at the centre of its international policy and has played a vital and influencing role for others. However, both the domestic and global contexts of the last few years threaten the UK government's approach to achieving gender equality and progress towards SDG 5. Structural discrimination within the economy, the long-term consequences of Covid-19, climate change and conflict are intersecting threats that are exacerbating gender inequality. Each of these disproportionately impacts women and girls, especially those facing multiple forms of discrimination.

Upholding the rights of women, girls and gender non-conforming people is vital in and of itself. And without gender equality we won't meet the SDGs. Therefore, working to centre gender equality across every SDG is necessary (including by working with men and boys and challenging gender norms). This is also an effective way to achieve gender equality and support women's and girls' rights.

Priority should be given to interventions that consider the experiences of the many women and girls who face multiple, intersecting discriminations based on class, race, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and other factors, who experience the greatest obstacles to fulfilling their rights. Lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer women and gender non-conforming people face many barriers due to development programmes that exclude them, intersectional violence and discrimination, unequal opportunities and underrepresentation. Laws and action

plans that specifically support these communities are urgently needed to ensure they benefit from the SDGs.

It is not too late for the UK government to act with intention and transparency, and through meaningful consultation with women and girls, and gender non-conforming people. This will ensure there is direct support for policies and programmes that promote the rights of women and other communities affected by gender inequality and address their needs as well as ensuring that the structural barriers to gender equality are recognised across all policies and programmes.

Reflecting on Bond's 2019 recommendations for SDG 5

To date, the implementation of Bond's 2019 recommendations has been limited. This chapter is written with reference to previous recommendations as we continue to call for greater transparency, policy coherence, monitoring, accountability, and collaboration with women's rights organisations.

By merging FCO and DFID and reducing official development assistance (ODA), the UK government has decreased its capacity to meaningfully contribute to the achievement of SDG 5 in the last three years, as demonstrated by the March 2021 Equalities Impact Assessment. This found ODA cuts were likely to have a negative impact on people who have been marginalised the most, including women and girls.⁸⁵ Despite its manifesto commitment and legal obligation, in 2021 the UK government cut ODA by approximately £4 billion.⁸⁶ A report by CARE UK and Development Initiatives suggests the cut in ODA spend on gender equality since 2021 is £1.9bn.⁸⁷ Development must not be reduced to a means of achieving changes in diplomacy, trade and defence.⁸⁸

85. Development Initiatives and Care UK for FCD0, (25 March 2021) '[Equalities Assessment](#)' [online document, accessed June 2022]

86. Ibid

87. Development Initiatives and Care UK, (25 March 2021) '[Equalities Assessment](#)' [online document, accessed June 2022]

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While the UK government now faces challenges in contributing to successfully achieving SDG 5, it has made some welcome contributions that should be acknowledged and sustained. These include renewed investment into evidence-based programmes through the initiative What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale, which signals commitment to breaking the link between violence against women and extreme poverty.⁸⁹ The UK government has also made investments towards women's economic justice and rights, including with women's rights organisations.

COVID-19, climate change and conflict

There remain significant external risks to the UK government's approach to gender equality, in policy and practice. These risks include the threat of Covid-19, climate change, and rising conflict and insecurity.

Women and girls have disproportionately felt the social, political and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. And, as with all crises, this has been most felt by the women and girls who are the most marginalised. Covid-19 cost women an estimated \$800m in lost income⁹⁰, and 47 million women and girls have been pushed into extreme poverty.⁹¹ All types of violence against women and girls have intensified, including intimate partner and domestic violence, online violence, hate crimes, and the targeting of women and girls for trafficking.⁹² Women's unpaid and community work has also increased, along with disproportionate increases in unemployment.⁹³

To deliver progress on gender equality, the climate crisis must be addressed. Climate change has severe consequences for everyone, but disproportionately impacts people who have been marginalised, particularly women and children.⁹⁴ Yet women's lack of land rights limits their opportunities to participate in, contribute to and benefit from environmental policies and programmes.⁹⁵ The impact of long droughts and heavy rain increases girls' vulnerability to violence, as deforestation means that they must go further distances to obtain firewood for fuel, for example.⁹⁶ Underlying gender inequality means the effects of climate change have multiplied the risks to women and girls. Violence against women and girls can happen anywhere, but it happens most in conflict zones. To embed a sustainable

approach to conflict prevention into the UK government's strategy, the disproportionate effects of climate change and Covid-19 must be addressed.⁹⁷

Women's rights organisations, women-led organisations and feminist thinkers and activists are providing viable, alternative propositions for recovery that can sustainably address the systemic inequalities the pandemic, climate change and ongoing conflict have exposed. Now is the time to listen to these solutions and put them at the heart of recovery to achieve SDG 5.⁹⁸

The impact of UK Government spending on policies and programmes

The reductions in ODA had a vast impact for multiple sectors, including humanitarian relief and education. The significant reduction in funding disproportionately impacted women and girls who have been marginalised the most.⁹⁹ Whilst the UK's new international development strategy commits to reinstating funding for women and girls it is unclear when and how much will be restored. The UK government has an opportunity to define this in its upcoming strategy on women and girls.

UK ODA for humanitarian programmes fell by 38% in 2021 compared to 2019.¹⁰⁰ In 2020, humanitarian programmes focusing on gender equality as a primary objective were more severely cut than those with no gender equality objectives. Compared with 2019, 39% of humanitarian spending where gender equality was the main objective was cut. Despite being one of the UK's current priorities, girls' education saw a 40% cut in funding in 2021.¹⁰¹ As a result, the Global Summit for Education fell short of its target to replenish the Global Partnership for Education.

89. IRC (2021), [What works to prevent violence against women and girls: Impact at scale](#)

90. Oxfam (29 April, 2021), ['COVID-19 cost women globally over \\$800 billion in lost income in one year'](#) [online media release, accessed June 2022]

91. UN (11 July, 2021), ['As COVID-19 Pushes 47 Million Women, Girls into Extreme Poverty, Secretary-General Calls for Upholding Reproductive Health Rights, in World Population Day Message'](#) [online media release, accessed June 2022]

92. UN Women, ['The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19'](#) [web page, accessed June 2022]

93. Gender and Development Network (March 2022), ['Lessons for a feminist Covid-19 economic recovery: Multi-country perspectives'](#) [web page, accessed June 2022]

94. Gender and Development Network (March 2022), ['Environment'](#) [web page, accessed June 2022]

95. GAPS (2021), [Now and the Future – Pandemics and Crisis: Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World and Beyond](#)

96. Ibid

97. GAPS, ['GAPS Response to Possible UK Aid cuts'](#)

98. See, for example, the Gender and Development Network's [online resources](#) and [this page](#), which includes links to both the Canadian and Hawaiian feminist recovery plans proposed by coalitions of women's rights organisations and feminists.

99. CARE International UK, ['UK Government decisions to cut UK Aid are disproportionately falling on women and girls'](#)

100. Ibid

101. The Guardian (27 April, 2021), ['Dominic Raab is challenged to admit 40% cuts to foreign aid for girls' education'](#) [online article, accessed June 2022]

Target 5.2:

Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.

The FCDO’s *Equalities Assessment* reported that UK ODA cuts would ‘reduce services available to women and girls who are subject to sexual violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH), and [its] ability to progress safeguarding objectives and championing of a survivor-centred approach’.¹⁰² This is despite the fact that incidents of sexual abuse and harassment against women are rising. For example, CARE International found that levels of domestic violence and sexual harassment of women in Yemen increased by 63% during the last five years due to the conflict there, and other forms of violence against women and girls have also risen.¹⁰³ UNFPA warned in March 2022 that a lack of funding could lead to 100,000 women dying from complications during pregnancy and childbirth.

Despite these cuts, the UK government has continued to make some investment in preventing and eliminating violence against women and girls, for example, through the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls “ and the What Works: Impact at Scale programmes mentioned above.¹⁰⁴ The UK government has also demonstrated renewed commitment to preventing violence against women and girls in conflict with the announcement in November 2021 of new funding and a global Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative conference, scheduled for 2022.¹⁰⁵

Target 5.4:

Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.

Tackling the structural barriers preventing women and girls from equal economic rights and opportunities requires significant investment in social infrastructure ‘to create decent work for underpaid carers; recognise unpaid care work; provide universally accessible social protection; and

102. FCDO, (25 March 2021) ‘[Equalities Assessment](#)’ [online document, accessed June 2022]

103. CARE International UK ‘[UK Government decisions to cut UK Aid are disproportionately falling on women and girls](#)’

104. IRC (2021), What works to prevent violence against women and girls: Impact at scale

105. FCDO (16 November, 2021) ‘[Foreign Secretary launches campaign to tackle sexual violence in conflict around the world](#)’ [online media release, accessed June 2022]

re-value care and well-being, putting them at the heart of Covid-19 economic recovery’.¹⁰⁶ In responding to the intersection of Covid-19 and women’s economic rights, it is vital the UK government considers the informal sector (and women’s over-representation within this sector) as it plans for economic recovery.

The FCDO should conduct a gender-responsive analysis of the experiences and needs of the communities in which ODA is operating so that the UK’s response addresses the diversified needs of a country’s whole population. This should assess the prevalence of informal work and the fiscal policy space of respective governments to enact social protection measures and bolster public services. Evidence-based support from the FCDO can help kickstart the process towards enabling governments to manage and fund their own universal social protection systems. Additionally, the FCDO can support women’s rights organisations to undertake rapid care analysis, time use surveys and deploy other tools¹⁰⁷ to build evidence, and support advocacy initiatives to tackle women’s unpaid care and domestic work.

Target 5.5:

Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

Women being able to express their collective and individual voice and agency is a fundamental right. And it is necessary to improve outcomes for women in all aspects of decision-making. There has been some progress towards achieving target 5.5 as women now make up 25% of national parliamentarians¹⁰⁸, up from 11% in 1995. However, this still falls significantly short of national and global targets. Women still face widespread discrimination in entering politics and holding political offices. For women’s full and effective participation to be meaningful, the UK government must engage with under-represented communities and civil society organisations to better understand their experiences and expertise. Consulting and engaging in this way will develop FCDO expertise on the rights and needs of groups that have been marginalised. Priority should be given to meaningfully consulting with women and girls so that their lived realities are at the forefront of policymaking.

106. Women’s Budget Group (2022), [Centring care in Covid-19 economic recovery: a five-point care package](#)

107. For example, Oxfam (2021), [Care Policy Scorecard: A tool for assessing country progress towards an enabling policy environment on care](#)

108. UN Women, ‘[Facts and figures: Women’s leadership and political participation](#)’ [web page, accessed June 2022]



Target 5.6:

Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

The proportion of UK ODA provided to sexual and reproductive healthcare has declined since 2019.¹⁰⁹ In 2021, less than 1% of ODA was spent on sexual and reproductive healthcare, with a decrease of £80.3 million compared to 2019. While funding towards sexual and reproductive healthcare had increased between 2016 (£86 million) and 2019 (£252 million), current data suggests a reversal of this upward trend, with £156 million reported in 2020 and disbursements more than halved in 2021 compared to 2019 (£124 million).¹¹⁰ Some of the most notable cuts in 2021 include a reduction in funding of 85% to UNFPA and of 83% to UNAIDS. Marginalised women and girls living in conflict affected countries will be the hardest hit by these cuts, and they will significantly impact progress towards target 5.6.

Target 5.c:

Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

Increased funding mechanisms are not the only tool to achieve SDG 5. Improved legislation and policies are equally fundamental for reaching this goal. As an executive board member of the IMF, the UK could and should use its influence to support a strong gender equality strategy. An open letter from civil society¹¹¹, however, suggests a number of shortfalls in the development process of the IMF's gender strategy, such as the lack of consultation with civil society organisations and women's rights organisations. Beyond the IMF's gender strategy, there is some concern around the UK government's international development strategy.¹¹² Women and girls appear as a priority within the strategy, but the government's approach has been to silo particular aspects of women's rights instead of 'mainstreaming' gender equality

across all of its development work, including conflict, climate and health. To fulfil Target 5.c, the UK government must take a holistic approach to legislation and policies that impact women and girls who have been marginalised.

To achieve SDG 5, the UK government should:

1. Meaningfully engage with women's rights organisations to offer other forms of support to, and protection of, these organisations and women and girl human rights defenders. Guarantee funding for gender equality and the rights of women and girls by increasing the provision of accessible, flexible long-term funding.
2. Ensure gender is mainstreamed across other programmes and funding streams, from programme design to implementation. This can be done by dedicating budgets for women's and girls' rights and gender equality, building staff capacity, and developing and monitoring gender-transformative indicators across all programmes and strategies.
3. Commit to gender-sensitive responses in conflict to address the immediate needs and concerns of women and girls, who will be disproportionately impacted by conflict and at further risk of gendered violence.
4. Develop and publish context-specific gender strategies for all countries where the UK engages in foreign affairs and has development priorities in order to set strategic directions and reinforce the importance of gender equality commitments across all contexts.

109. CARE International and Development Initiatives (2022), [UK leadership on gender equality globally: learning from past lessons on where the UK should invest for women and girls](#)

110. Ibid

111. Bretton Woods Project (24 January, 2022), '[Civil society letter to the IMF Board to call for open consultation on upcoming Gender Strategy](#)' [online, accessed June 2022]

112. GAPS, '[GAPS Response to Possible UK Aid cuts](#)'