

Gender mainstreaming – what is it and what have we learnt?

A resource for policy makers

The Minister for International Development has committed to mainstream gender equality across the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office as part of the department's response to aid cuts.

Based on decades of experience of gender mainstreaming, this briefing looks at lessons learned that should be taken into account as a new approach to mainstreaming is developed. This includes insights on the need for leadership, prioritisation, dedicated resources and technical expertise as well as the importance of combining mainstreaming with projects specifically supporting the advancement of women's rights and targeting the barriers to achieving gender equality.

1. Introduction


In February 2025, the UK Government [announced](#) that Official Development Assistance (ODA) would be cut from 0.5% to 0.3% of Gross National Income (GNI). The Gender and Development Network (GADN) is particularly concerned that these cuts come at **a time of crisis where there is a rollback of women and girls' rights internationally**, further exacerbating substantive gaps (see Box 1). We know from past experience that cuts like this have a [disproportionate](#) and detrimental impact on women and girls in all their diversity and risk the loss of decades worth of expertise from both within government and beyond.¹

Baroness Chapman, Minister for International Development, has confirmed the government's support for gender equality and stated that the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) will 'integrate and mainstream' support for women and girls. A new approach to gender equality within the FCDO that ensures it is genuinely prioritised across the department is welcome. But GADN and our members remain concerned that **this approach will fail unless 'standalone' projects, specifically designed to tackle the structural barriers to gender equality, are protected as part of the new strategy.**

¹ CARE UK's report highlights that women living in poverty and crisis contexts will miss out on healthcare, girls will not be supported to access education and there will be more deaths that could have been prevented


This briefing, produced jointly with Genderflection who have specialist experience in gender mainstreaming, examines some of the lessons learnt over the last decades about what works in gender mainstreaming. It provides guidance on the need for resources, technical expertise, accountability mechanisms and commitments for clear political prioritisation. Decades of experience by women’s rights activists attest to the need for both standalone, targeted support for women and girls in all their diversity, as well as integrating gender mainstreaming approaches into the broad body of government spending, programmes, policies and international influencing. To ensure that this work does not lose its overall political goal to achieve women’s rights and gender equality, it should also be informed by ‘activists, women’s organisations and projects promoting women’s and girls’ rights.’²

Box 1: Gender Equality in 2025³




134 years to equality

At the current rate, it will take until 2158 for women to achieve full gender parity, roughly five generations from the 2030 target.



1 in 10 in poverty

Millions of women in extreme poverty, limiting their opportunities for independence.




1 in 3 face violence

Gender-based violence is a global crisis, yet many legal protections are weak or unenforced.


Less than one-third in power

Women hold only 27.2% of parliamentary seats and 35.5% of local government positions, limiting their influence on decision-making.



3 times more unpaid work


Women perform 3 times more unpaid care and domestic work than men, impacting their opportunities.



Global setbacks and the need to #AccelerateAction

CLIMATE CRISIS

80% of those displaced by climate change are women



ROLLBACK ON RIGHTS

Nearly 40% of countries have experienced **stagnation or decline** in gender equality between 2019 and 2022

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

244 million women lack internet access compared to men

² GADN (2015) [Untangling Gender Mainstreaming](#)

³ From the Equalities Resource Hub which hosts a curated collection of best practice resources on gender and equalities at <https://equalitieshub.org>

2. What is gender mainstreaming?

The 1997 agreed [conclusions](#) of ECOSOC defined gender mainstreaming as:

*The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including **legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels**. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an **integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in political, economic and societal spheres** so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. **The ultimate goal is achieving gender equality.***

Put simply, gender mainstreaming is an approach that takes into account **the interests and concerns of women, girls, men and boys in policy making**, as set out in the Beijing Platform for Action to which the UK is a signatory.⁴ The approach recognises that women, men and gender diverse groups have different needs and priorities, as well as experiences of intersectional discrimination, resulting in unequal access to and control of power, resources, human rights and institutions, including the justice system. Gender mainstreaming aims to take these factors into account when **designing, implementing and evaluating policies, programmes and projects, so that policies do not increase inequality, but support the achievement of human rights and gender equality**. Thus, [gender mainstreaming](#) is a *tool* for achieving gender equality.

3. Why do we need it?

Public policy making is not neutral. It is largely done by, and based on, the needs of dominant groups in society who make decisions regarding public policies and services, without fully considering the needs and situations of *all* final users. This [may lead](#) to inappropriate solutions and an inadequate allocation of public funds.

Gender issues are relevant to all policy areas, even those where it may seem less obvious, as they may contain hidden aspects of gender inequality. For example, in public health policies, provision may focus on men's health needs as the norm and so underestimate the importance of access to reproductive healthcare including contraception, abortion services and maternal care. Public transport policies that ignore women's specific safety concerns will reduce accessibility for women and girls, with knock on impacts on their ability to travel to work or school. Schools designed without adequate sanitation facilities will deny girls access to education for several days per month.

⁴ First introduced at the UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, gender mainstreaming is a strategy for gender equality policy in the [Beijing Platform for Action](#), a framework for addressing gender equality and advancing women's rights across 12 critical areas of concern. The UK became a signatory in 1995 and is obliged to report against these 12 areas under the [UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)

Gender mainstreaming ensures that **policy-making and legislative work is of higher quality and has a greater relevance for society**, because it makes policies respond more effectively to the needs and concerns of all citizens – women, girls, boys, men and gender diverse groups, including taking into account how these groups are affected by compounded and intersecting discriminations and disadvantages on the basis of gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, disability and so on. The twin track approach of (i) targeted support to diverse women and girls, as well as (ii) more broadly including mainstreaming actions, helps reduce the risk of reinforcing or exacerbating existing inequalities. Critical to this is **undertaking a gender analysis as a first step** which helps to assess the current situation. A [gender analysis](#) is an analytical process to examine the different experiences, priorities (interests), capacities and inequalities between women, men, girls and boys, which may otherwise be invisible. These inequalities may manifest in (but are not limited to) access to, and control over, resources, different roles and responsibilities, power relationships and different barriers and opportunities. Gender analysis can reduce the likelihood that decision-making is based on gendered assumptions and stereotypes. The process of conducting a gender analysis helps identify inequalities facing diverse groups, as well as the wider mechanisms or structures that perpetuate them and is the starting point for designing actions to redress these.

Ultimately, gender mainstreaming aims to **makes public interventions more effective, ensures resources are allocated efficiently and ensures that inequalities are not perpetuated**. While it requires initial investment, gender mainstreaming aims to reduce workload over the longer term, through smarter planning and resourcing leading to more effective and sustainable services and policies. Better results mean the creation of a more socially just and sustainable society. This is relevant not only for the FCDO's role in formulating policy and practice, but also for its role in influencing other bilateral donors.

4. Why do we need standalone initiatives alongside gender mainstreaming strategies?

It is important to remember that gender mainstreaming is a long-term strategy, which takes time to integrate across all policies and programmes in a consistent manner but has the potential to create considerable positive social change. It requires a thoughtful approach and needs to include strategies to address the current global context which is undermining hard won achievements by women's rights movements.

There is wide consensus about the effectiveness of a dual approach towards gender equality, **combining gender mainstreaming, alongside specific measures for the advancement of women for more effective results**. [The strategy implemented in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) includes a stand-alone goal - SDG5 - on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, as well as the mainstreaming of gender-sensitive targets in other goals.

Standalone initiatives specifically focus on women's and girls' priorities and the structural barriers that they face, and so address the different opportunities, rights and

outcomes between women, men and gender diverse groups. This may also help to advance short term wins, alongside a longer-term gender mainstreaming strategy. They are vital in yielding useful learning and expertise to feed into gender mainstreaming approaches. A dedicated hub of staff with gender expertise is also essential for effective mainstreaming. It is therefore crucial to continue to invest in standalone initiatives alongside gender mainstreaming.

5. How do we put gender mainstreaming into practice?

For a gender mainstreaming strategy to be effective, it requires **political commitment and a legal framework**. The latter is provided through the UK's International Development (Gender Equality) [Act 2014](#) which makes it mandatory that all UK ODA should consider how it can contribute to reducing gender-based inequalities.

The design and implementation of an effective strategy requires the representation of both women and men in policy-making and ensuring a gender perspective in developing policy content and programme design. To achieve **effective results**, the **right conditions** need to be in place (such as gender expertise, budgetary resources and stakeholder involvement), and the **relevant methods and tools must be** utilised (such as gender analysis, gender equality training for staff, gender sensitive monitoring and evaluation processes). These elements are elaborated further below.

5.1 Building blocks for gender mainstreaming

- A strong **political will** for gender equality integration in policies and programmes from the government, as well as amongst cross-party allies.
- Visible leadership and high-level support for gender equality from political leaders and senior management within the FCDO must be a **strategic priority**, not just a technical add-on.
- A successful gender mainstreaming strategy which needs to include **concrete objectives and targets**, operationalised through **incentive structures** (which has helped garner traction in the past within UK Government departments).⁵
- A gender mainstreaming **action plan** to accompany the strategy, which includes a clear **accountability framework** and **adequate conditions** such as experienced staff

⁵ In 2007, DFID introduced incentives on gender equality within its senior management bonus scheme as part of the Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP). This initiative aimed to reward efforts by senior staff to promote gender equality and track their progress through performance objectives. Senior managers were required to set personal performance objectives related to gender equality issues and submit a one-page report outlining their achievements. Whilst there was some controversy about the scheme as a number of staff saw it as unfair that senior staff were rewarded for work that was being delivered at a lower level and unethical in that senior leaders were receiving an incentive for something that DFID should be championing as a matter of course, the scheme was effective in both galvanising action and providing a rich source of data on successes, gaps and challenges. See Social Development Direct's [report](#) on the first year of the GEAP.

and resources to implement the work and methods and tools with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and realistic timeframes.

5.2 Conditions for gender mainstreaming

- Commit to develop and sustain **institutional capacity and resources**, including identifying resource needs at the policy or programme design stage and allocating dedicated trained staff and gender experts to support gender analysis, staff training, policy and programme implementation and monitoring and evaluation.
- **Undertake meaningful consultation and create feedback mechanisms with actors from women's movements** (including women's rights organisations, feminist activists, and academics) which will help ensure their perspectives and expertise are drawn upon to inform policy and programmes and review emerging learning.
- **Ensure involvement of policy stakeholders** throughout the policy cycle or programme process, ideally through formal groups such as task forces. This is essential in order to hear from and integrate considerations based on their experiences and perspectives.

5.3 Methods and tools for gender mainstreaming

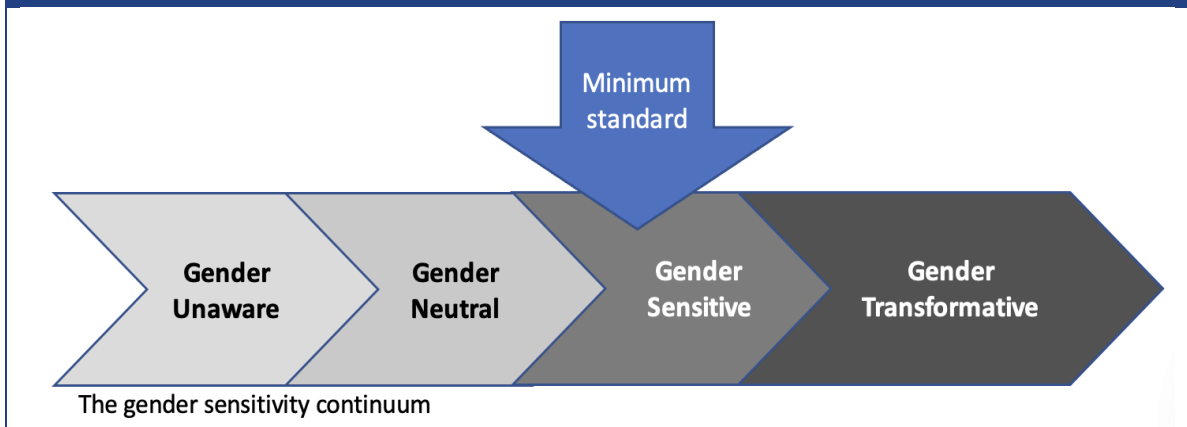
Whilst gender equality issues should be integrated into all stages of policy making, it is **particularly important to consider them at the planning stage**, when it is crucial to understand and analyse the differing needs, priorities, perspectives of and opportunities for, women, men and gender diverse groups, using for example, gender analysis tools. Then at the design stage and through subsequent phases of the policy or programme cycle, useful tools include: the Gender Sensitivity Continuum (see Box 2), gender audits and gender sensitive impact assessments.

Some of the key methods and tools are outlined in this list:

- **Ensure that a gender analysis is undertaken** or integrated into context analyses or political economy analyses. It is vital to examine the different experiences of women, girls, men, boys and gender diverse groups. It is not enough to collect sex disaggregated data – this needs to be analysed from a gender perspective. Use this analysis to inform your policies and programmes so that you respond to the identified needs and priorities of women, girls, men, boys and gender diverse groups. A range of strategies may be required to target different groups.
- **Undertake risk assessments** which take into account the potential risks to women, girls, men, boys and gender diverse groups. Any work on gender equality may lead to a backlash so identify strategies to mitigate this in both gender mainstreaming and standalone initiatives. This means listening to the perspectives of those directly impacted by the issues.

- Decide if your policy or programme is aiming to be **gender sensitive** as a minimum, which helps to improve women's daily conditions or **gender transformative**, which aims to improve their position in society through addressing some of the underlying causes of gender inequality (see the **Gender Sensitivity Continuum Tool** in Box 2 below).
- **Monitoring, evaluation and learning** – think about how your monitoring, evaluation and learning activities will analyse changes for women, girls, men and boys and gender diverse groups and how you are analysing power structures and gender relations. **Capturing data and documenting good practice will help to adapt processes and policies** as learning emerges and make gender mainstreaming work more effective in the long run.

Box 2: Gender Sensitivity Continuum⁶



The Gender Sensitivity Continuum Tool helps to assess policies and programmes to **identify gaps in approach and how they can be strengthened**. It is a continuum because a range of both internal and external factors can move progress forwards or impede progress and take it backwards. In addition, elements of a programme or policy may fall within different categories along the continuum. However, to ensure meaningful change for securing the rights of women and gender diverse groups, policies and programmes should be **gender sensitive as a minimum**. As outlined above, whilst this is a **sector minimum standard**, it is also **enshrined in law** through the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014.

This tool can be used to assess policy or programmes at different stages to identify where they fall along the continuum, in order to determine required actions and allocate resources to strengthen the intervention to maximise benefits and impact. Box 3, below, further explains the implications of the continuum.

⁶ The Gender Sensitivity Continuum Tool was adapted by Kanwal Ahluwalia and Elanor Jackson from various tools in the sector and has been reproduced by [BBC Media Action](#).

Box 3: Gender Sensitivity Criteria ⁷		
Gender criteria	Assessment of policy or programme	Implications of not considering gender equality issues
Gender unaware	<p>The specific issues affecting diverse groups of women are not identified at policy or project design stage. They may only refer to issues affecting 'people,' 'communities,' 'youth,' 'clients,' 'audiences' etc, rather than breaking these groups down by sex or gender identity as a minimum, and ideally other intersectional factors (e.g. age, ethnicity, (dis)ability, sexual orientation etc).</p> <p>There is no gender analysis of the wider context, so it is not clear how diverse women and men or gender diverse groups are differently affected by a particular policy area or issue(s) the policy or programme is seeking to address.</p>	<p>Missed potential to identify and address inequalities. Risk of policy or programme not reaching or impacting intended groups and not achieving its aims and objectives.</p> <p>Potential to further entrench or exacerbate existing inequalities at individual and systemic level.</p>
Gender 'neutral'	<p>The differential needs of women and men are identified in the project or policy documents or by stakeholders but are not addressed in the programme or policy document.</p>	<p>As above.</p>
Gender sensitive	<p>A robust gender analysis has been undertaken to understand the different barriers facing diverse women and men and gender diverse groups using sex or gender identity disaggregated data. Specific solutions to address the needs and concerns of different groups of women and gender diverse groups are included in the policy document and programme activities <i>and</i> outcomes. There is a focus on improving their practical needs to improve their condition in their everyday lives.</p> <p>Practical gender needs are needs identified by women that do not challenge their socially accepted roles. These needs relate to fulfilling their productive, reproductive and community roles and responsibilities, which include basic, practical necessities such as housing and basic services, water provision, health care, income earning for household provisions and food. Having access to smartphones or the internet, for example, provides women access to a means of communication but does</p>	<p>Starts to address 'gender gaps' but tends to overlook longer term systemic issues and structures (such as patriarchal inheritance rights or misogyny amongst law enforcement agencies or judiciary staff) that maintain gender inequality.</p>

⁷ The Gender Sensitivity Continuum Tool was adapted by Kanwal Ahluwalia and Elanor Jackson from various tools in the sector and has been reproduced by [BBC Media Action](http://www.bbc.com/news/health-2016-05-16).

	not, however, automatically change their relative position to men.	
Gender transformative⁸	There is an attempt to challenge the root causes of gender discrimination by, for example, addressing discriminatory gender norms, stereotypes and unequal power relationships between diverse women and men and gender diverse groups. Activities focus more on strategic needs that improve their position in society and challenge traditional gender roles and structural inequalities. This work is overtly more political and it requires longer timeframes and investment in order to achieve and sustain change.	

Gender transformative policies, sometimes referred to as gender-responsive policies⁹ must take *both* practical and strategic needs into account to be effective. A [policy](#) that addresses only one aspect of gender inequality may lead to incomplete or ineffective outcomes. For example, a policy that only focuses on increasing women’s access to healthcare (a practical gender need) but does not challenge the social norms that prevent women from accessing healthcare (a strategic gender need) will fall short of achieving true gender equality.

6. Next steps and useful resources

When it was adopted 30 years ago as part of the Beijing Platform for Action, gender mainstreaming represented an important recognition that gender equality was relevant to all policy decisions and interventions. Since then, its success in implementation has been mixed and there are important lessons to be learnt moving forward. Some of these have been outlined in this briefing but there are many other examples included in the resources listed below. If the FCDO is serious about mainstreaming gender equality across the department then these lessons must be heeded, particularly those on the need for leadership, prioritisation, dedicated resources and technical expertise, and the importance of combining mainstreaming with projects specifically targeting the barriers to gender equality.

⁸ Note on language - several bilateral funders and others development actors use the term gender responsive instead of gender transformative.

⁹ UNESCO [explains](#) that it refers to a policy or program which fulfils two basic criteria: a) gender norms, roles, and relations are considered and b) measures are taken to actively reduce the harmful effects of gender norms, roles, and relations—including gender inequality.

Further resources

British Council (2018) – [Guide to Addressing Gender Inequality](#)

Created by the British Council's Gender and Inclusion Team to provide technical input in specific areas related to gender equality and empowering women and girls and supports a broad range of activity, including business development, programme design, programme delivery, research and capacity building.

European Institute for Gender Equality - [Platform on Gender Mainstreaming](#)

Useful information on tools and methods for integrating gender mainstreaming into policy making.

Eyben, R. and Turquet, L. (2013) '**Feminists in Development Organisations: change from the margins**'

This book shows how feminists can build effective strategies to influence development organizations to foster greater understanding and forge more effective alliances for social change.

Government of Canada – [Mainstreaming of a Gender Perspective](#)

Outlines the importance of mainstreaming and how to do it using Gender-Based Analysis (GBA).

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) – [Tool on Gender Mainstreaming](#)

Includes tools and principles as well as case studies.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – [Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Implementing Gender Equality 2023](#)

A resource to help governments, parliaments and judiciaries implement the *OECD Recommendation on Gender Equality in Public Life*. It contains self-assessment tools to guide governments and other decision-making institutions in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their policies, mechanisms, and frameworks for gender equality, and in setting priorities for improvement.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls](#): DAC Guidance for Development Partners

This guidance document outlines DAC members' current practices on gender mainstreaming, highlights successful examples and provides checklists. There are sections on addressing leadership, policy and strategy; analysis and design; programme implementation; financial resources; monitoring and evaluation and what is needed in relation to human resources, capacity, accountability and incentives.

UNICEF (2024) – [Institutionalizing Gender into Social Protection Policy](#)

The importance of raising awareness amongst policy makers; reforming institutional norms and practices and unleashing the potential of women's and girls' organisations.

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The Gender and Development Network is the largest network of UK-based NGOs and experts advocating for gender equality and the rights of women and girls in all their diversity internationally. We collaborate with feminists and feminist organisations based in the Global South, amplifying their analyses and priorities to our network as well as UK and global policy-makers. We work to hold the UK government to account for its impact, from both present and historical actions, on the rights of women and girls across the world. In everything we do, we aspire to feminist, anti-racist and decolonial principles and practices.

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Genderflexion provides consultancy services to actors working in international development to help improve the quality of their work on human rights and social justice, with a specific focus on women's and girls' rights and gender equality. For more information see <https://www.genderflexion.org.uk>

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