



## **Rapid Analysis: How the UK's new International Women and Girls Strategy for 2023-2030 will deliver for women and girls in Fragile and Conflict Affected States**

The UK Government announced its new [International Women and Girls Strategy for 2023-2030](#) on International Women's Day 2023.

The strategy aims to make women and girls central to the UK's international work, with a commitment to use development assistance and diplomacy to achieve gender equality. While the new principle of supporting women's rights organisations is welcome, the limited funding announced with the strategy is lower than [the £1.9bn estimated](#) to have been cut from programs benefiting women and girls.

While the strategy is commendable in its focus on educating girls, empowering women and girls, and ending violence against women and girls, and identifies a commitment that at least 80 percent of programs funded by bilateral UK Assistance will support gender equality by 2030, it must also address the unique challenges faced by women and girls in Fragile and Conflict Affected States (FCAS).

This rapid analysis evaluates the effectiveness of the strategy in delivering for women and girls in FCAS and provides recommendations for how the strategy can be strengthened to safeguard women and girls, address the root causes of gender inequality, support grassroots organisations and movements, and ensure meaningful consultation and evaluation of implementation.

### **Addressing the Root Causes of Gender Inequality**

The strategy acknowledges the need to tackle the root causes of gender inequality, including harmful gender norms and stereotypes, to achieve sustainable change. The strategy recognises that gender inequality is perpetuated by a range of factors, including discrimination, violence, poverty, and lack of access to education and healthcare.

Achieving gender equality in FCAS requires a broader and more comprehensive investment approach than in non-FCAS settings. This is because FCAS are [characterised by persistent insecurity, weak governance, and limited access to basic services](#), which exacerbate gender inequalities and make it more challenging to address them.

[In FCAS, gender inequalities are deeply entrenched](#), and women and girls face multiple forms of discrimination and violence. They are often excluded from decision-making processes, have limited access to education and healthcare, and face barriers to economic opportunities. [The conflict and instability in these settings further exacerbate these challenges](#), leaving women and girls even more vulnerable. To achieve gender equality in FCAS, it is essential to adopt a holistic and integrated approach that addresses the root causes of gender inequalities.

The [main factors driving gender inequalities, conflict, and fragility in FCAS](#) are discriminatory gender norms, sexual and gender-based violence, weak institutions, limited access to justice and basic services, exclusion from political and economic decision-making, and a shrinking space for civil society organisations. These factors create significant challenges for achieving gender equality and require a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of gender inequality in FCAS.

However the strategy could do more to address the root causes of gender inequality in a sufficiently holistic manner. While it prioritises investment in programs that seek to promote women's economic empowerment, education, health, and political participation, it is less clear how it will address the underlying drivers of gender inequality, such as discriminatory gender norms and weak institutions.

Secondly, the Strategy's focus on promoting women's economic empowerment may be limited in FCAS, where economic opportunities are often scarce, and conflict and instability may make it challenging for women to access them.

Finally, there is a need to ensure that the Women and Girls Strategy is implemented in a way that is genuinely responsive to the needs and priorities of women and girls in FCAS. This requires meaningful engagement with local communities and civil society organisations and a commitment to supporting locally led initiatives.

According to the UK's own [What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls](#) Programme, while these are undoubtedly important factors in addressing gender inequality, they do not go far enough in challenging the underlying power structures that perpetuate gender inequality. These power structures are often rooted in deeply ingrained cultural norms and beliefs that are resistant to change and require a more comprehensive approach to address.

### **Safeguarding Women and Girls**

The strategy's commitment to acting for and with women and girls impacted by crises and shocks is a commendable aspect of the strategy.

However, there are concerns about the effectiveness of the strategy in addressing the needs of women and girls in FCAS, who face unique challenges, including increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV), displacement, and lack of access to healthcare and education.

The strategy lacks concrete funding commitments and timelines for implementation, which may limit its ability to effectively address the needs of women and girls in these contexts. Moreover, the strategy may not be sufficiently responsive to the needs and perspectives of women and girls in FCAS. To effectively safeguard women and girls in FCAS, the strategy should prioritise funding for gender-sensitive humanitarian assistance and protection measures. This includes supporting local organisations and communities in providing safe spaces, support services, and access to justice for women and girls affected by GBV.

There are several successful examples of gender-sensitive humanitarian assistance and protection measures in FCAS, such as Action For Humanity's provision of safe spaces for women and girls to receive support services such as psychosocial support and GBV prevention after the earthquake in Syria.



The Women and Girls Strategy should prioritise funding for such programs and initiatives, and ensure that they are designed and implemented in partnership with local communities and organisations.

### **Meaningfully Engaging Grassroots Organisations and Movements**

The strategy acknowledges the importance of supporting grassroots women's organisations and movements, but it does not provide a clear plan for how to do so. Funding for Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) in fragile and conflict-affected states is [crucial for promoting gender equality, advancing women's rights, and contributing to sustainable peace and development](#). Despite evidence showing the benefits of investing in women for conflict prevention and crisis response, a [lack of sufficient resources and funds has been the main challenge in implementing the women, peace and security agenda over the past 15 years](#). While development assistance for gender equality in fragile states is increasing, only a small portion of aid addresses women's specific needs. Women's organisations, which play a vital role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, are [underfunded and primarily receive short-term project support](#). They also spend a [disproportionate amount of time on donor-related activities rather than their actual work](#).

The WRO funding program provides £33m of new core and flexible funding to support WROs and movements in countries eligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA) (FCDO, 2021). Providing core, flexible multi-year funding to these organisations is a good start, but in fragile and conflict-affected states, grassroots organisations often face resource constraints, including funding and security concerns. Thus, the strategy should include specific funding commitments for addressing the gaps in capacity of these organisations and prioritise their security. Any obstacles that women's rights organisations encounter in obtaining such funding, such as complicated procedures for applying and reporting on programs, must also be recognized and addressed.

Furthermore, it is important to ensure that the strategy's delivery plan is consulted meaningfully and that processes for evaluating implementation are established, with access to flexible and multi-year funding across priority themes. The inclusion of organisations that represent the most marginalised groups is also critical.

### **Tackling Gender-Based Violence in Crisis**

The Strategy sets out to tackle gender-based violence (GBV) through the '3Es' framework that includes educating girls, empowering women and girls, and championing their health and rights. The strategy acknowledges that women and girls are at increased risk of GBV in FCAS. One of the five principles guiding the strategy's approach is acting for women and girls impacted by crises. This principle recognises the need to respond to the specific needs of women and girls in FCAS,

who are often disproportionately affected by violence and conflict. The strategy commits to providing humanitarian assistance and protection to women and girls impacted by crises and shocks, including GBV. Under Goal 2 of the strategy, the FCDO commits to supporting interventions that aim to end GBV, including providing services for survivors, strengthening laws and policies, and engaging men and boys in ending violence against women and girls.

The strategy acknowledges that interventions to end GBV must be tailored to local contexts and must be responsive to the specific needs of survivors. This is welcomed, however, as is recommended by [What Works](#), it is important to provide comprehensive services to survivors of GBV. [This could include medical, legal, and psychosocial support, which are often lacking in FCAS](#). The strategy needs to fund this work, and can further address this by strengthening referral systems and expanding inclusivity and access to services for women in all their diversity. As the What Works program notes, "Access to services that meet women's diverse needs is critical for ensuring their safety and well-being, and for promoting justice for survivors of violence."

Furthermore, the strategy recognises that GBV is often perpetuated by harmful gender norms and stereotypes, and that interventions to end GBV must address the underlying causes of this violence. The strategy commits to addressing these harmful gender norms and stereotypes through its support for education and awareness-raising campaigns, as well as its work to empower women and girls to challenge these norms and stereotypes. To go one step further, the strategy needs to lay out plans to incorporate an evidence-based approach, as is also recommended by the What Works program. For instance, the [What Works](#) program recommends the use of multi-sectoral approaches that involve various stakeholders, including women's organisations, community leaders, and government agencies, to address the underlying drivers of violence against women and girls. This approach can be applied in FCAS by engaging with religious leaders, civil society organisations, and community leaders to challenge harmful gender norms, beliefs, and practices that perpetuate GBV.

### **Investment Towards Key Life Stages**

The strategy focuses on investment towards key life stages for women and girls, with priorities including 'early childhood, foundational learning, adolescence, pregnancy and childbirth, and the transition into the labour market'. However, women and girls are vulnerable to violence and exploitation throughout their lives, including during conflicts and humanitarian crises.

For example, older women living in fragile and conflict-affected states face unique challenges that are exacerbated by and can exacerbate the difficulties of ageing. These challenges can be linked to the political, social, economic, and security



contexts of FCAS, as well as to the traditional gender roles and expectations prevalent in these societies. A [significant challenge faced by older women in FCAS](#) is the breakdown of social and community structures, which can increase their vulnerability to poverty, social isolation, and insecurity. Conflict and displacement may have led to difficulties escaping fighting, which can lead to [separation from family and social exclusion](#).

Moreover, [older women may be at increased risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse in conflict and displacement situations](#). Additionally, older women in FCAS may face challenges related to their health and well-being. They may be more susceptible to [poor living conditions and lack of support for those with disabilities](#), including a need for assistive devices such as walking frames, canes and toilet chairs. This can be aggravated by the disruption of health systems and the lack of access to essential medicines and treatment.

Lastly, older women in FCAS may experience discrimination and exclusion based on their age, gender, and social status. They may be [excluded from decision-making processes and the public sphere](#), limiting their ability to voice their concerns and participate in community life.

It is critical to address the challenges faced by women and girls impacted by crises and shocks, regardless of their age. Women in FCAS require a comprehensive approach that recognises the interplay between political, and security factors. It requires investments in health systems, social protection programs, and community-based support structures that are inclusive and gender-responsive. It also requires policies and programs that promote gender equality, social cohesion, and human rights, and that prioritise the needs and perspectives of women and girls at every age.

### **Recognising the Rollback of Women's Rights**

The strategy acknowledges that progress towards gender equality is not linear and that there is resistance to change. It recognises the need to combat the rollback of women's rights, including the undermining of women's economic rights that is taking place due to the COVID pandemic, rising cost of living crisis, and creeping imposition of austerity measures around the world. The strategy emphasises building global consensus and standing up for women's rights on the global stage, but there is a need to recognise that each country has its unique context and challenges. Thus, the strategy should focus more on tailoring campaigns to the local context for maximum impact and involve local organisations in planning, implementing, and monitoring efforts.

### **Conclusion**

While the UK government's International Women and Girls Strategy for 2023-2030 is a welcome step towards achieving gender equality, it falls short in its ability to deliver for women and girls in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS). The strategy lacks concrete funding commitments and timelines for implementation, may not be responsive to the needs and perspectives of women and girls in FCAS, and may not address the root causes of gender inequality. To effectively safeguard women and girls in FCAS, the strategy should prioritise funding for gender-sensitive humanitarian assistance and protection measures and support local organisations and communities in providing safe spaces, support services, and access to justice for women and girls affected by gender-based violence.

It is important that the strategy's delivery plan is consulted meaningfully, and processes for evaluating implementation are established, with access to flexible and multi-year funding across priority themes. With these measures in place, the strategy can better deliver for women and girls in FCAS and achieve gender equality.

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