

Our response to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Strategy on Women and Girls

by Kate Horstead, Policy Advisor

Missed opportunity for older women?

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Strategy on Women and Girls provides a clear commitment by the UK Government to support women and girls to reach their full potential until equality reaches every woman and girl. It is positive that the FCDO is putting women and girls at the centre of its work, is taking steps to provide funding for women's rights organisations at grassroots level, and will be ensuring women and girls' voices are included in decision making forums.

It is vital that this Strategy delivers for women and girls of all ages and there is definitely potential for the Government to ensure the rights and needs of older women are included. For example, we welcome the Strategy's recognition that economic and financial inclusion, recognising and redistributing unpaid care, and curbing barriers to access to essential services apply to all women across the life-course.

There are many missed opportunities in the Strategy, however, for making explicit how older women, and as a result their families and communities, will also benefit from this Strategy. Much more needs to be done.

Older women are rights holders who contribute unrecognised but critical support to their families, communities and economies through their unpaid and paid work. Overlooking older women in the Strategy and its implementation could not only undermine their rights and ability to continue contributing in the ways they would like to, but also prevent the FCDO from achieving its goal of achieving equality for all generations of women and girls.



“I don't have education or skills to generate income and raise my daughters. But all those challenges strengthen me and make me an unbeatable and fearless woman.”

Galane, 70, Ethiopia

“Of Ages” - more than a catchphrase

The FCDO needs to be far more explicit in explaining how the Women and Girls Strategy applies to older women. While the Strategy prioritises women and girls, it is less obvious how this takes into account women of all ages. Older women are consistently left out of the optics of who contributes to society, who is at risk of violence and abuse, and whose equality needs strengthening. Our rights do not diminish as we get older, but we do need to be explicit how they will be protected.

For example, in the framing of the strategy, the ‘diverse voices, knowledge and leadership of women and girls’ could easily have been followed by ‘of all ages’ to ensure the conscious inclusion of girls and women at every stage of their lives. It is crucial that older women, their rights and their roles are not overlooked in the strategy's implementation. Age International's recent report [Older women: the hidden workforce](#) showed how older women are often excluded from the informal and formal support they need, and the impact this has on them and their families.

We welcome the recognition that women and girls face heightened risks when marginalised by other factors such as disability, but this should be strengthened by including age as another risk factor. Not only is there a close correlation between age and disability, but later life can bring further layers of disadvantage from ageism, including gendered ageism, and age discrimination. We would like the FCDO to incorporate a deeper understanding of how older women experience multiple discrimination and disadvantage in its implementation of the Strategy.

The SDGs commit governments to counting unpaid care work, promoting decent work for all, and ending poverty, among many other goals and targets. The Beijing Platform for Action highlights specific challenges for older women in terms of poverty, health, violence and obstacles for them to enter the labour market. The UK must meet these commitments by ensuring older women now and in the future have access to economic justice and are able to participate equally in society, and contribute to their families and the wider community in the ways that they want to.



Principles

We welcome FCDO's commitments to a 'life course' approach, to leave no-one behind, and to recognising multiple dimensions of disadvantage in its approach to tackling poverty.

Not recognising older age as a 'key life stage', however, is itself a form of exclusion reinforcing the disadvantage many older women experience, and it goes counter to the life course approach put forward by the Government. In order for the wider goals of the Strategy to be realised, older age must be recognised as an equally key stage of life which can present specific challenges for women.

If the UK is to achieve the ambition to 'secure lifelong and intergenerational impact', older women's voice, activism and agency should be visible under each of the five principles because older women are the driving force within many of the families and communities that the Government is seeking to help.

A truly intergenerational approach must by necessity include older women, whose rights are often not realised and whose roles in unpaid and paid work are essential to their own and others' survival. To achieve the ambitions set out in this Strategy, the Government must recognise and support the contributions that older women make that underpin so many of its objectives. This would have a positive impact for women and girls of all ages, taking into account the intergenerational structures of families, communities and economies.

Empowerment of women and girls

We welcome the strategy's recognition that 'women's inclusion in the economy requires tackling micro and macro-economic, legal, environmental regulatory and social barriers'. In working out the details of what these barriers are, we expect the FCDO to apply its life course approach and fully include the experience of older women. Our recent research on older women's participation in unpaid and informal paid work highlights a number of barriers that older women face to accessing dignified and decent working conditions, social protection and financial services.

Addressing the uneven distribution of unpaid care work is key to women's economic empowerment at every stage of their lives, and research shows that older women continue to shoulder a disproportionate amount.

We welcome the Strategy's strong statement on social protection and agree that this is a necessity to ensure women of all ages, including older women, are supported in their access to economic justice: 'Effective social protection systems can underpin women's economic and financial inclusion, recognise and redistribute unpaid care and curb barriers to essential services throughout the life-course'.

Including older women in the implementation of this pillar of the Strategy would have cross-cutting impacts; Age International's Older Women: the hidden workforce report shows how older women support younger women and girls to achieve their own aspirations of continuing in education and work.

Goals

1 Drive the conversation

We welcome the commitment by the FCDO to use its standing within the UN Human Rights Council, UN General Assembly, G7, Commonwealth, OECD, and other multilateral groupings to stand up for the rights of women and girls. The life course approach embedded in the Women and Girls Strategy demands that the UK stands up for the rights of older women within these spaces as part of this work.

2 Lead by example

The FCDO's commitment to put women and girls at the centre of its operations and investment is a necessary and welcome step for implementing the Strategy. It must also make the life course approach integral to this and explicitly identify how older women's needs and rights will be addressed as a result. To help with this, monitoring of its commitments to focus bilateral aid on gender equality and increase the gender marked proportion of International Climate Finance must include data disaggregated by age in at least 10-year cohorts, as well as by gender, disability and other factors. The support to grassroots Women's Rights Organisations and movements must target women in all their diversity, including older women who experience multiple discrimination.

We expect that the External Gender Challenge Board of experts will include the representation of women in all their diversity, including older women.

3 Lead by knowledge

Data and evidence on the experience of older women in low and middle-income countries is woefully inadequate. In line with its life course approach to women and girls, the FCDO must use its investment in research on women's experiences and contributions to fill these critical evidence gaps, and ensure expertise on the intersections of ageing, gender and disability both informs its implementation of the Strategy and are built into its plans for a UK Gender and Equality Resources Gateway and its Centres for Expertise.

