

A group of women, likely from a Pacific Island community, are standing outdoors in front of lush green trees. They are dressed in traditional clothing, including colorful patterned sarongs and blouses. The woman in the center foreground is wearing a white blouse and has her arms crossed, looking directly at the camera. Other women are visible in the background, some smiling and others with more serious expressions.

FIRST STEPS FOR A FEMINIST FUTURE

**How the UK Government can
kickstart a real process of lasting
change for women and girls globally**

WHO IS CARE?

Founded in 1945 with the creation of the CARE Package®, CARE is a leading humanitarian organisation working with women to lead the fight to end poverty. In 2023, CARE worked in 109 countries, reaching 167 million people through more than 1,600 projects.

We put gender equality and women's leadership at the heart of everything we do. Not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the most effective strategy for achieving lasting change. We cannot overcome poverty without equal rights and opportunities. We firmly believe that when women can change their lives for the better, the world is changed for the better.

We support women's rights organisations (WROs), women-led organisations (WLOs) and other organisations/networks to make sure women can lead.

FOREWORD



As we look across the world, one thing is clear: it is still far too hard to be a woman. There is no true gender equality in any country – anywhere. Not in the home, workplace or politics. With conflict and natural disasters on the rise, women and girls disproportionately suffer the impacts.

But it doesn't have to be like this.

This is the result of decades of broken promises. A succession of leaders, in the UK and across the world, have failed to convert their rhetoric into reality. The speeches and election promises have not progressed into changes in foreign policy or development programmes. The targets have not been met – or even set.

But as I write this foreword to what I believe is a powerful argument for action, **I feel hopeful. I feel change coming.** The UK now has its most gender-equal parliament in history. That means something. It should result in more equitable policy-making here in the UK and a stronger approach abroad.

Globally, things are changing too. The leap forward in science, green technology and clean energy is taking us closer to tackling climate change. Groundbreaking moves such as the Bridgetown Initiative and the Loss and Damage Fund have demonstrated the influence of both leaders and ordinary people in forging justice-driven solutions that offer a brighter future for all.

Much of this thinking and progress is being led by women. From Malala Yousafzai to Mia Mottley, Greta Thunberg to Fei Fie Li, women are uniting in their communities and in high office to disrupt the status-quo. They're transforming economies, with social justice at the forefront, and leading their communities through conflict and climate crises. They are leading with and for people, with empathy and courage.

The new UK Government's commitment to be '**proudly feminist**'¹ suggests that it is moving with that momentum. A feminist approach to foreign and development policy means standing with women and girls to drive change, not receive it. It means funding women's rights and women-led organisations across the world. It means more than just warm words. It means clear targets and follow-through.

Linking feminism with foreign policy is not new. Sweden introduced the first 'feminist foreign policy' in 2014 to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment into practical international relations strategies. The pros and cons have been discussed and debated, the approach championed, challenged, repackaged and renamed. Now adopted in 13 countries, it has paved the way for women's greater participation in peace agreements, gender parity in governments, and billions in aid spend directed towards gender equality.

So, as the new Foreign Secretary works with the International Development Minister to define the nuts and bolts of his 'progressive realism' approach to foreign policy, we would argue that much of the groundwork has already been laid out for him, and he must simply look to the women already leading the change around the world.

Women are showing how they can transform their communities: from Abeba the politician turned women's rights leader tackling gender-based violence in Ethiopia, to Sarojini the business leader creating employment opportunities for other women in Sri Lanka.

Women in the Global South and here in the UK are world leaders. Just look at climate activists like Titilope and Ndivile – who at the same time as working with women farmers and their communities, are leading global negotiations. Read the story of Sarabajaya, the disability and inclusion rights activist and academic, taking the challenge of diversity to the heart of the UK Parliament. Anyone reading these powerful stories can be in no doubt of the value of supporting women's leadership.

We know the Government cannot build its feminist approach overnight. That's why we've used our 80 years of experience working in 107 countries to lay out the practical first steps they should take to demonstrate that it is serious about progress and realistic about how that can happen.

Women across the world cannot afford another wasted decade. By locking in success through ambitious targets; prioritising the climate crisis; structuring the Foreign Office to support women in conflict; demonstrating global leadership on women's economic justice; and mirroring the values of equality through the make-up of the UK Parliament, the new Government can effectively lay the groundwork to unlock the transformative potential of women's leadership – then begin to step aside and let it flourish.

If we are to solve humanity's problems, not exacerbate them, we have to prioritise learning from, working with, and funding women leaders. This is not a nice to have – it's essential.

Our new Government has the opportunity to be the first in UK history to forge a realistic path to a feminist future – for people, planet, and prosperity. We look forward to connecting UK decision-makers with the women leaders who are already transforming the world: together we can change millions of lives and build a better world for women, girls, and their communities.



Helen McEachern
CEO, CARE International UK

INTRODUCTION

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR LABOUR | WHY NOW IS THE TIME TO PAVE THE WAY FOR A FEMINIST FUTURE

The next five years could not be more critical for global democracies and their aspirations for international development. The success of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals hangs in the balance and ratified global treaties are in question. We face unprecedented economic challenges, and the dual threats of climate change and conflict will leave almost nowhere untouched.

As this Government steps into power, no country in the world has achieved true gender equality. Rather than moving forward, in the past decade the world has experienced a surge in anti-gender movements and anti-rights actors who have been successful in rolling back women's rights on numerous fronts, including education, sexual and reproductive health, and basic civil liberties.

This has consequences.

As our climate becomes more volatile, 80% of people displaced by climate change are women² and food insecurity affects 84.2 million³ more women than men. In 2022, around 600 million women⁴ (15% of the global female population) resided within 50 kilometres (31 miles) of an armed conflict, conditions where violence against women and girls can go up as much as 200%⁵. Conflict-related sexual violence has been allowed to proliferate alongside a disregard for international law, increasing use of arms, militarisation, and shrinking civic space. Globally, one in 10 women live in extreme poverty⁶, while the gap between men and women in the world of work is the widest since records began⁷.

It is clear that current global commitments and strategies to create gender equality aren't moving fast enough. The UN estimates⁸ that it will take 286 years to close legal gaps; 140 years for women to achieve equal representation in leadership; and at least 40 years to see equality between men and women in national parliaments.

Women and girls are trapped in a paradox.

They contribute the least to conflicts, global crises and climate change, yet are disproportionately affected by the catastrophic consequences. In addition, women and girls perform an inequitable amount of unpaid care work, which increases in times of crisis, and represents a major barrier to their rights and potential.

In the midst of this paradox, women are nonetheless rolling up their sleeves and providing meaningful leadership on a global scale. Not just in high office, but within their communities – making a difference where it matters most.

Yet their expertise is still undervalued. Despite the strong rhetoric from governments, women's and girls' organisations are chronically underfunded and under-represented in key decision-making spaces. Without the means to fulfil their transformative potential, a golden opportunity to make progress on gender equality is being missed.

The new UK Government can change this.

Over the past decade, UK aid cuts have disproportionately impacted spending on gender equality and support for women's rights organisations (WROs). Less UK aid funding is reaching the organisations we know are best placed to help end gender inequality, that can boost development outcomes for whole societies and benefit the world.

- UK aid spending that includes a focus on gender equality **nearly halved between 2019 and 2021⁹**, while overall aid spending fell by around a third.
- **Less than 1%¹⁰** of current UK bilateral climate finance has targeted gender equality specifically.
- **Less than 0.2%¹¹** of climate spend has reached women's rights organisations.

The new Labour Government's commitment to be '**proudly feminist¹²**' in its approach to international development and to **embed gender equality across all its missions¹³** could mark a turning point. This Government could be the first to map a realistic path for prosperity while simultaneously challenging the rollback on rights that women and girls have experienced over the past decade. They could pave the way to a feminist future.

Supporting a feminist future means creating an enabling environment where women and girls are the driving force of change – not the recipients.

To do this, it is essential that Labour approaches its international development policy and funding strategically. By integrating feminist approaches into all public policies, it can recognise and address the structural barriers and obstacles built into society that undermine women's and girls' rights – at home and abroad.

Why should the UK government help build a feminist future?



Efficiency: When women lead and co-shape conflict prevention, resolution and humanitarian response, the outcomes before, during and after conflict are often improved – with peace processes **up to 35% more likely to hold for 15 years¹⁴**.



Results: When women are engaged in climate response and negotiations, it results in **better disaster readiness and more stringent climate change policies¹⁵**.



Growth: When women and girls co-shape economies and equitably participate in labour markets, prosperity increases for both communities and countries. Decreasing gender gaps in employment alone has the potential to **increase global wealth by \$160 trillion¹⁶**.

CARE believes the Government can pave the way to a feminist future – one that champions women and girls in all their diversity as they lead their communities and disrupt the status quo.

To do this, it is essential that Labour approaches international development policy and funding strategically. By integrating feminist approaches into all public policies, it can recognise and address the structural barriers and obstacles built into society that undermine women's and girls' rights at home and abroad.

Taking the first steps

We recognise that meaningful change does not happen overnight. To tackle inequality and lock in hard-won development gains, the Government will need to hit reset on the UK's relations with other countries, centred around respect for the expertise of the Global Majority. CARE stands ready to connect UK policymakers with WROs and feminist innovators to establish a new network of power, one that can help to transform decades of progressive thinking into political reality.

But women and girls on the frontline of crises have no time to waste. The UK Government must take action to set the UK on the path to supporting equitable development by locking in success; prioritising where action is most urgent; building a better structure; demonstrating global leadership; and mirroring these values at home.

CARE's vision for a feminist future begins with these steps:

FIRST STEPS

- 1** **Commit to ambitious aid targets for gender equality** by setting a new target that at least 20% of the overseas bilateral aid budget has achieving gender equality as the *primary* objective. [See page 8](#)
- 2** **Prioritise a feminist response to the climate crisis** by establishing a flagship Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) gender-just climate programme to get funding directly to WROs. [See page 12](#)
- 3** **Stand with women leading in conflicts and crises** by appointing a ministerial position to lead the Women, Peace and Security agenda. [See page 15](#)
- 4** **Fight for women's economic justice on the global stage** by seizing multilateral opportunities (such as IDA21, G7 and Financing for Development Summit) to reassert the UK's leadership in advancing women's economic justice. [See page 19](#)
- 5** **Champion a gender equal parliament at home** by enacting Section 106 of the Equality Act. [See Page 23](#)

These are the building blocks that can support the Government in realising gender equality. Each step is explored in detail throughout this report, including case studies from women leading change, and further details on the commitments we're calling for from the new Government.

All parliamentarians can support these goals by engaging with CARE and its WRO partners, advocating for gender-focused policies, and amplifying the voices of women leading in their communities.

1. COMMIT TO AMBITIOUS TARGETS FOR GENDER EQUALITY



Due to the sensitive nature of her work, Abeba wishes to keep her image private. Pictured here is a meeting of a Women Lead in Emergencies group in Tigray, Ethiopia. © CARE/Sarah Easter

Meet Abeba from Ethiopia

The three-year conflict between the central Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front had a huge impact on women and girls in northern Ethiopia. As well as largescale displacement and insecurity, reports of gender-based violence (GBV), including conflict-related sexual violence, skyrocketed.

Abeba observed the work of women's rights organisations in her country and chose to move from her position in local government to be part of the change. Now Director of the Women's Association of Tigray (WAT), with a membership of 750,000 women, Abeba helps support survivors of GBV and promotes women's leadership in decision-making.

“The atrocities faced by WAT members have resulted in moral damage that will take years to heal,” says Abeba. “It was my strong belief that my membership in the organisation would contribute towards helping WAT meet its mission.”

The work that WAT undertakes is part of CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies approach, which supports women's groups to take a lead role in responding to the crises impacting them and their communities.

“WAT has a large presence at the community level, as well as well-established structures at all levels. WAT uses this position to help women mobilise and take part in the project, and to have their voices heard in humanitarian decision-making in Tigray.”

WAT as an organisation has a focus on women's participation in political decision making, as well as providing financial support to protect women from the risks that occur when a crisis strips them of their ability to earn money and support themselves.

In July, WAT led a learning event with local religious leaders, and civil society and women's groups on community-led responses to the devastating trauma impacting recovery and peace in the region. This has resulted in a joint call for action in designating Tigray a 'traumatised region' and leadership for an integrated strategy that applies trauma-informed care approaches and complementary livelihood support – because “empty stomachs have no ears”.

This is part of CARE's partnership with WAT to strengthen women's participation and leadership in Tigray's recovery, peace and security processes in support of an inclusive national peace and dialogue process.

The current picture

Gender equality is under threat. Despite commitment after commitment, whenever aid has been cut, gender equality has repeatedly been one of the hardest hit areas. Rhetoric from global governments has not translated into practice.

In the UK, aid cuts have disproportionately impacted spending on gender equality and support for women's rights organisations (WROs). Less funding is reaching the organisations we know are best placed to help end gender inequality.

CARE's research¹⁷ into 2019-2021 data* found that previous UK aid cuts impacted gender equality work and global leadership in the following ways:

- Between 2019 and 2021, aid spending which primarily targets gender equality fell by 30%, representing the loss of many programmes which were supporting women and girls.
- This fall was in line with the overall level of cuts seen to the aid budget, showing gender equality was not protected or prioritised when cuts were made.
- Overseas aid budget for violence against women and girls (VAWG) fell sharply between 2019 and 2021, from £47.2 million to £27.7 million, a decrease of 41%. This was a higher rate than general aid cuts.
- Aid spending which includes gender equality aims but does not primarily target it nearly halved between 2019 and 2021, when volumes of total aid fell by around a third.
- The proportion of this work within overall aid also fell, showing it was disproportionately affected by the cuts.
- Funding for women's rights organisations**, who play a vital role in advancing gender equality but receive only a small proportion of the funds available, continued to decrease and in 2021 was 66% lower than its peak in 2017.
- In 2016, the UK gave the ninth largest proportion of overseas aid budget to WROs among major donors. By 2021, the UK had fallen to 19th.
- Absolute volumes of UK bilateral aid to women's rights movements, government institutions and organisations continued to fall in both 2020 and in 2021.
- There was also a drop of 31.2% in the UK's funding to WROs in crisis contexts.

These figures confirm what gender equality advocates and WROs have been reporting. **UK aid cuts represent a step back from leadership on gender equality and put progress at risk** at a critical time when crises are escalating around the world.

There is both an urgent need and an opportunity for change. The new Labour Government can protect gender equality from future fiscal cuts, restore and increase funding, prioritise gender equality across the international development and humanitarian portfolios, and ensure greater support for local WROs to address ongoing crises affecting women and girls globally.

“One important message that I want to convey to the rest of the world is that Tigrayan women have faced unimaginable atrocities, which will take years to recover from. But despite this, we've seen what Tigrayan women can do if given support to start their own businesses and stand on their own feet.”

*At the time of writing, CARE has commissioned research to be published into the most recent data for 2022 records which indicate some progress on VAWG and funding to WROs – but still a continued decline of ODA spend on gender equality.

**It is important to note that the fall experienced by WROs might be higher, as data recorded by the FCDO also includes UN agencies and other institutions working on these issues.

CARE's analysis

CARE recognises that true transformation requires tackling inequality at three critical levels:

- **Agency:** Strengthening women's individual and collective power by enhancing their self-esteem, access to education and economic resources.
- **Relations:** Building equitable relationships by challenging family barriers, engaging men and boys as allies, and boosting women's involvement in decision-making and solidarity groups.
- **Structural:** Overhauling the systems, policies and laws that perpetuate inequality, ensuring women and marginalised groups have real power and influence in their homes, communities, workplaces and institutions.

Working at an agency level to support people in crisis is often the 'easy' part of aid work and has thus been the focus of most efforts to date. But the real challenge goes beyond empowering individuals – which on its own can actually put women in danger. Women and girls cannot be expected to lead, make decisions and drive change if the environment around them is not progressing to enable that action. Instead, it's about making deep, sustainable changes to the structures and relationships that perpetuate inequality. Donors, policymakers and leaders must commit to the hard work of transforming these systems, not just the easier, surface-level interventions.

CARE recognises the power of investing in local women-led groups as long-term partners. We have achieved this through:

- **Locally led programming**

CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies approach, also called 'Women Lead', empowers women in crisis-affected communities by shifting power and resources directly to them. The approach is flexible. Women define their own goals such as starting small businesses, providing psychosocial support, addressing violence, and enhancing skills including literacy and public speaking, as well as engaging with authorities to improve access to services.

- **Equitable partnerships with WROs and WLOs**

CARE's Call to Action Field Implementation project (CAFI) is a collaboration with 10 women-led organisations across diverse regions, designed to catalyse WLOs' representation and leadership in humanitarian decision-making spaces, and amplify GBV expertise and address its root causes.

- **Improving accountability to and decision-making by affected populations**

CARE's global Women Respond initiative was launched at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when women's questions and demands appeared to be absent from much of the response. Women Respond builds on CARE's [Rapid Gender Analysis](#)¹⁸ and long-standing connections with women's rights leaders and organisations. It seeks to put women's voices and experiences at the centre of response, providing unique insights into women's experiences, the evolving challenges they face, and the support they advocate for from leaders at local and global levels.

The common thread running through our approaches is flexibility and a respect for the expressed needs and wants of women and grassroots feminist movements, rather than top-down approaches to gender equality programming.

To adopt a feminist approach to international development that enables truly transformative change requires setting ambitious and specific UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding targets for gender equality, and ensuring women leaders can access those funds. We understand the Government has inherited a difficult fiscal challenge – but women and girls should not be the first to pay the price. As is demonstrated time and time again, investing in women is not just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing for governments to do to ensure impact from overseas development spend.

Solutions and recommendations

FIRST STEP

Commit to ambitious aid targets for gender equality by setting a new target that at least 20% of the overseas bilateral aid budget has achieving gender equality as the *primary* objective.

This would bring the UK in line with other progressive G7 allies including France and Canada, and futureproof gender equality aims against cuts.

There are further steps government decision-makers need to take to ensure gender equality across its international work, including:

- **Set out a plan to achieve the existing commitment from the previous Government that 80% of overseas bilateral aid budget should have *significant* focus on gender equality.**
- **Remove barriers to funding reaching local partners directly, especially WROs and WLOs.** This can be done by interrogating funding mechanisms and implementing technical changes across:
 - Procurement
 - Pre-financing
 - Cost recovery/equitable distribution of overheads
 - Forecasting requirements
 - Reporting
 - Transparency and tracking
- **Set minimum timeframes for gender equality programmes.** This should amount to at least three to five years for new investments to lock in and effect meaningful change.
- **Invest in long-term gender equality programming that is 'transformative'.** By transformative, we mean programming designed with the ambition to change the practice, policy and norms within society that have contributed to ongoing gender inequalities and that constitute clear barriers to women's and girls' access to rights. This includes:
 - **Community-based approaches:** These increase the relevance and inclusiveness of humanitarian action and international development work.
 - **Sustainable change to social norms:** Working on gender equality without investing in broader change to social norms presents clear dangers as impact will not be sustainable and can even be harmful.
 - **Engaging men and boys:** There is a need to engage men, boys and community leaders in order to address change. This cannot be an add-on and should be thoroughly integrated into any programming.
- **Implement structural and cultural changes within the FCDO** to address continuity of funding, consistency, coherence and internal coordination to enable delivery of the local leadership strategy.

2. PRIORITISE A FEMINIST RESPONSE TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS



Titilope Ngozi Akosa [centre] and Ndivile Mokoena [right] speaking at CARE International UK's 2024 International Women's Day event at Westminster, 'Why the UK needs a feminist, locally led approach to the climate crisis'. © CARE

Meet Titilope from Nigeria and Ndivile from South Africa

Titilope Ngozi Akosa and Ndivile Mokoena are leading voices in the fight for gender equality within climate justice. Both have dedicated their careers to advocating for the urgent need for a feminist approach to tackling the climate crisis. They are committed to the battle for climate policies that address the specific needs of women and other marginalised groups.

Titilope is the Executive Director of [C21st in Nigeria](#)¹⁹ and is an active member of the [Women and Gender Constituency](#)²⁰ of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), having worked in climate justice advocacy for over 15 years. Nigeria has seen an alarming rise in gender-based violence due to the climate crisis. Droughts and floods have reduced access to farmland, leaving women economically vulnerable and heightening tensions in homes.

Titilope's organisation works to amplify the voices of those affected and pushes for climate finance that supports gender equality. However, she knows that the current system does not enable these efforts. The limited finance available is often restrictive, hindering impactful interventions.

"It's not rocket science," says Titilope. "If women's rights organisations are to tackle the climate crisis, they must be supported with the funds."

Ndivile is the Gender Project Coordinator at [GenderCC, Southern Africa](#).²¹ As a gender and climate activist, she knows that women's participation in climate decision-making must go beyond token inclusion. Speaking in the UK parliament for International Women's Day, Ndivile campaigned for going beyond simply counting women's presence in meetings. Instead, she said, women's voices must be heard and their influence allowed to have a tangible impact on policy and action.

"We need to stop measuring women's participation and start measuring women's influence, if we want to see things change," says Ndivile.

Both Titilope and Ndivile called on the UK Government to recognise WROs as a 'social asset'. They recommend greater investment and flexible funding to empower local feminist movements to address the climate crisis effectively. As Titilope says, "The UK Government has the power to do it."

You can find out more about [Titilope and Ndivile's](#)²² efforts to support CARE's climate work on our website.

The current picture

It is substantially more expensive to recover from climate disasters such as famine, floods and wildfires than it is to prepare for them properly. Globally, [climate change costs \\$16 million per hour in extreme weather damage](#)²³. Lowering our ambitions to tackle climate change is a false economy, and one that will hurt women and girls the most.

The climate crisis is inherently sexist. Some [80% of people displaced by climate change are women](#)²⁴. Women and girls contribute the least to climate change but are the most affected by its impacts. Worsening droughts, floods, fires and storms exacerbate the unequal relations between women and men that have existed for generations, increasing GBV, impacting livelihoods and pulling girls out of school.

At the same time, women are powerful actors in responding and adapting to climate change – despite receiving very small amounts of climate finance. [CARE's research](#)²⁵ found that less than 1% of UK bilateral climate finance targets gender equality specifically, with only 0.2% reaching the hands of WROs. This is despite evidence that addressing climate and gender justice together is both necessary and demonstrably more effective.

CARE's research also found that gender equality is not yet being consistently applied to UK government policies guiding efforts towards a green transition. Investments in the green economy therefore risk failing to address the barriers that women and girls face in meeting the climate crisis, such as lack of access to training and education as well as unequal responsibility for care work.

CARE's analysis

There are eight ways in which climate change disproportionately impacts women:

- 1. Gender-based violence:** Globally, environmental degradation and increased competition over scarce resources are exacerbating [GBV](#)²⁶, including increases in [child marriage](#)²⁷.
- 2. Increased vulnerability:** Women can be [more likely to die](#)²⁸ in climate-related disasters due to limited mobility and social restrictions. They also face harder paths to recovery.
- 3. Economic inequality:** Women, especially in [agriculture](#)²⁹, are already disadvantaged. Climate change pushes them further behind.
- 4. Food insecurity:** Women often [eat least and last](#)³⁰ in crises.
- 5. Water scarcity:** [Women travel farther for water](#)³¹. This risks their safety and takes up a disproportionate amount of their time, detracting from other opportunities for development.
- 6. Health risks:** Climate change negatively impacts women's [sexual and reproductive health and rights](#)³².
- 7. Education:** Girls are taken [out of school](#)³³ to mitigate financial impacts.
- 8. Limited decision-making power:** Women are underrepresented in climate-related decisions at all levels, from [local communities](#)³⁴ to [UN COP negotiations](#)³⁵.

Such a clear and differential impact on women and girls proves the need for an approach for tackling the climate crisis that recognises these injustices. CARE defines climate justice as ensuring that “the poorest and most marginalised people have significantly improved their wellbeing” and can withstand climate impacts, while limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C.

Gender-just climate action recognises that climate change affects different genders in different ways and that their different perspectives and experiences should be central to climate policies and actions. Taking this approach ensures that women and marginalised groups are actively involved in planning, implementing and monitoring global and national climate efforts. It also emphasises integrating gender considerations into all aspects of climate policy and financing, allocating significant resources towards gender equality objectives.

Collaboration with WLOs, locally and globally, is essential, alongside mandating gender impact assessments to systematically track and enhance progress. This will ensure women are not left out of opportunities in the green economy including any new jobs created as we transition away from fossil fuels.

Solutions and recommendations

FIRST STEP

To commit to making the climate crisis a priority by establishing a new flagship FCDO programme on gender and climate justice, providing support for WROs to scale up solutions and increasing women’s voices and leadership roles.

A dedicated climate programme that prioritises gender justice would accelerate the FCDO’s ambition to implement climate programming that is effective and focused on those experiencing marginalisation while advancing progress on gender equality.

Other steps for ensuring a gender-just response to the climate crisis include:

- **Prioritise climate finance for women and WLOs.** Use the new ICF strategy (ICF4) to commit to at least 50% of climate finance towards adaptation, with 88% supporting gender equality. Ensure that frontline women and their organisations receive the necessary resources.
- **Advocate for climate finance goals.** Push for an ambitious new public climate finance goal at COP29 of at least \$1 trillion per year, including dedicated support for the needs and rights of women in the Global South.
- **Support ambitious national climate plans.** Ensure the UK’s Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C. Outline how this will be achieved in a gender-just way, supporting women and marginalised communities to shape the plans and encouraging other governments to do the same.
- **Ensure women’s participation in climate action.** Increase women’s participation in all aspects of climate action, from policy design to implementation and evaluation.
- **Support women’s access to green jobs.** Promote a fast, fair and permanent transition away from fossil fuels by ensuring women have access to opportunities in the green economy.

3. STAND WITH WOMEN LEADING IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS



Lami is the 36-year-old President of one of CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies groups at a refugee camp in Niger. © CARE Niger

Meet Lami from Niger

After initially joining a CARE Savings Group, Lami began taking part in the Women Lead in Emergencies project. As she grew in confidence, Lami was elected president of her group and chosen to be part of a committee to protect women and girls.

In the refugee camp where Lami lives, women and girls were facing considerable risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Women were frightened for their safety and survivors had no access to support or services. The women in her group knew that something needed to be done to ensure their safety. It was Lami who led and mobilised the women to take a stand.

“I was able to overcome my silence and I was the first to mobilise the women,” says Lami.

Lami gathered the women to go to the home of the village chief to petition him to work with others in the community to stop the violence. But the village chief wouldn't hear their concerns and they left the meeting without any action being taken.

Lami and her group didn't give up, and instead went to the local authorities, the Gendarmerie Department of Maine Soroa. As a result of their advocacy, the Department agreed to offer enhanced protection in the camp where the women lived, ensuring the women there could live in safety.

“Our voices were heard by the authorities who agreed to patrol every night to prevent men from entering our houses. This was my greatest achievement. I was not afraid or slowed down by anyone. I spoke in public and in front of everyone in order to defend our rights.”

The current picture

The number of women living in conflict zones has surged. In 2022, around **600 million women**³⁶ (15% of the global female population) resided within 50 kilometres (31 miles) of an armed conflict. This is more than double the figure from the 1990s.

Conflict impacts women in specific ways. It can lead to increased sexual violence, loss of livelihoods and worsening healthcare, resulting in higher death rates, even from preventable causes. Similar effects occur during humanitarian crises, where violence against women and girls can rise by **up to 200%**³⁷ in the worst hit countries.

Despite these challenges, women are driving change:



Women are first responders: In **Gaza**³⁸, women make up 70% of frontline health workers and 60% of caregivers. In **Niger and Burkina Faso**³⁹, local organisations are nearly twice as likely to report increased caseloads in GBV compared with international organisations, suggesting that women are more likely to report violence to local women's organisations.



Women are peacebuilders: In **Uganda**⁴⁰, South Sudanese refugee women have built conflict resolution mechanisms across traditionally opposed ethnic groups in order to work together to meet goals. In **Colombia**⁴¹, women-led groups actively rolled out measures against xenophobia toward Venezuelan migrants, improving relations at community level as well as with local authorities.



Women are advocates: In **Niger**⁴², when groups of women IDPs (internally displaced people) were excluded from receiving humanitarian aid, they lobbied district authorities to officially recognise their community. This secured services for people with disabilities and cash assistance for their community. Across conflict zones, women are advocating for systemic change, urging humanitarian actors and local governments to improve services, such as access to health, water, food and education.

Responses to conflict and crises often exclude women's voices, further marginalising them in society. **Research shows**⁴³ that women's leadership and equal participation of women, women-led groups and WROs are crucial for addressing the unique needs of women and girls in these situations. When women are included, the chances of achieving lasting peace increase, while their absence makes aid less effective and potentially harmful.

The international community recognised the importance of women-led crisis responses nearly 25 years ago with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This was formalised in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and supported by the UK Government under Labour. However, 25 years later, women's priorities remain unmet, and their voices are still ignored. This exclusion not only fails to protect women's rights but also weakens peacebuilding and crisis response efforts, leading to poorer outcomes for everyone.

- Funding to frontline women's organisations in fragile and conflict-affected areas remains at **0.2% of total bilateral aid**⁴⁴, and **only 0.09%**⁴⁵ of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) Gaza flash appeal (November 2023) went to women's organisations. **None**⁴⁶ of the UK's funding in Gaza has been ring-fenced for women's organisations.
- In 2022, only **one out of 18 peace agreements**⁴⁷ had signatures from a women's organisation. This is despite evidence showing that women's participation raises the chances of a peace agreement lasting for 15 years **by 35%**⁴⁸.



Lami and her savings group are tackling gender-based violence in the refugee camp that they live in. © CARE Niger

- There are **no funding commitments to WROs** in the UK's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP WPS), despite the plan committing to "support and champion women's rights organisations". Overall, the plan has **no dedicated budget**.

These statistics highlight the urgent need not just for targeted interventions that prioritise women's safety and leadership in conflict contexts, but for the proper and full implementation and resourcing of the Women, Peace and Security agenda at local, national and global levels.

CARE's analysis

For over 10 years, CARE has been researching women's experience in conflict and crises, starting with the conflict in Syria. Our pioneering **Rapid Gender Analysis** and **Women Lead in Emergencies** initiatives paint a unique picture of how women are leading in crisis and the support they need.

In 2024, after surveying more than 13,000 women in 15 countries (Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Colombia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen), **CARE research**⁴⁹ found that:

- 79% of women are finding ways to make communities safer.
- 71% are providing health services.
- 46% are diversifying incomes to care for their families.

CARE believes that we need to create the conditions where women can thrive as leaders, where they have support and are safe when speaking up – before, during and after conflict.

We cannot achieve long-lasting peace if we ignore women. The international community, including the UK, must shift from rhetoric to action, ensuring women's leadership and participation are adequately supported in every stage of conflict and crisis response.

Solutions and recommendations

FIRST STEP

Stand with women leading in conflict and crises by appointing a senior minister to oversee the reinvigoration of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, ensuring the UK champions this cause both across government and on the global stage.

By actively supporting and funding women's civil society and local women leaders, the UK can help break the cycle of harm caused by conflict and crises. By leveraging the 25th anniversary of the UN's Resolution 1325 alongside renewed UK leadership and accountability, we can centre women's expertise in achieving better outcomes for all.

Other steps decision makers can take to support women to lead in conflict and crisis include:

- **Fund the women leading in conflict and crisis.** The UK should ringfence funding to fully resource its National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security. Equitable, accessible and flexible funding streams would support the work and priorities of local WRO during crises. This requires increased direct funding and substantially increased contributions to the [Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund](#)⁵⁰ and other pooled funds, such as country-based pooled funds.
- **Enable women's leadership in the UK's conflict and crisis response.** As per repeated strategic commitments, the UK should mandate a gender analysis, using CARE's Rapid Gender Analysis model, as the foundation for any response to humanitarian crises or conflicts. This analysis should guide funding and monitoring decisions and be reflected upon and iterated. Additionally, all business cases in fragile and conflict-affected areas requesting UK overseas aid budget should demonstrate how they align with the four pillars of the WPS agenda, ensuring support for women's participation and leadership.
- **Leverage the UK's global roles to champion women's leadership.** Historically this is an area of strength for the UK. In the late 1990s, the UK led efforts to bring about UN Security Council Resolution 1325. With this history and its current position as penholder on Women, Peace and Security at the UN, the UK should renew and enhance its commitment to the WPS agenda by strengthening political leadership, promoting accountability and ensuring policy coherence on gender equality across all government departments and international efforts.

4. FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC JUSTICE ON THE GLOBAL STAGE



Sarojini is a Sri Lankan entrepreneur who processes coconut husks for the building industry. © CARE

Meet Sarojini from Sri Lanka

Sarojini, a 45-year-old entrepreneur from Sri Lanka, has transformed her life and the lives of others through self-confidence and sheer determination. Her business processes coconut husks into chips, which are then made into bricks and exported to China for use in the building industry.

Sarojini's journey began in the grip of extreme poverty. Her mother, struggling to raise four children, could barely make ends meet. To contribute, Sarojini started making small packets out of newspapers by moonlight after school and sold them to groundnut vendors. Eventually, she dropped out of school to support her family full-time. She married and had three children, but tragedy struck when her husband had an accident that left him in a coma for four months. With no income, Sarojini pawned her house and jewellery but soon fell into debt. She lost her home and her family was forced to relocate.

Determined to start over, Sarojini took a job preparing cement blocks, which introduced her to the building industry. As her husband slowly recovered, his work as a coconut transporter revealed an opportunity to produce coconut chips. Seeing potential, the couple secured a charitable grant to buy a coconut chip-making machine. However, they needed more funding to maintain and house the machine. Sarojini tried for five months to secure a loan, but bank managers turned her down repeatedly, asking for collateral and guarantors she didn't have.

Undeterred, Sarojini tried one last time – meeting with a female bank manager. Recognising Sarojini's entrepreneurial spirit and her role in employing other women, she approved the loan. With the funds, Sarojini expanded her business, building a shed for her machinery and purchasing more coconut husks. With additional support and training from CARE and its partner, Chrysalis, Sarojini constructed a permanent structure for her growing business.

“They couldn't understand what I had been through,” says Sarojini. “The secret to my success now? Self-confidence. My advice to banks now is to employ more women.”

Today, Sarojini employs seven women, all of whom have faced significant challenges in their lives. Her enterprise not only supports her own family but also empowers other women, enabling them to feed and educate their children. Sarojini's ambition is to expand her business to produce end products from coconut chips, creating more jobs for women in her community.

The current picture

The World Economic Forum warns of an emerging gender crisis in the world of work. The situation is described as the **worst since it began measuring gender gaps**⁵¹, reflecting how far gender equity in the workforce has regressed.

Women and girls face significant barriers to fully realising their economic opportunities, including:

- 1. Inequitable economic structures:** Gender inequalities keep women out of work, concentrated in lower-end, insecure jobs and with limited access to financial resources. **Just one in four business owners in low-income countries are women**⁵². Gender-inequitable laws and norms limit women's right to access finance or own land. This is juxtaposed with women making up the majority of workers in the informal sector, which comes with fewer legal and social protections.
- 2. Inequity in unpaid care work:** Women and girls carry out three times the amount of unpaid care work as men and boys, a disparity that worsened during the pandemic. This inequity is rooted in deeply entrenched social norms, plus under-funded public care and social services. It is essential to empower women to contribute more to economies through job creation and strengthened policies. However, without investing in care and social services or building the **care economy**⁵³ (the infrastructure and system needed to provide everyone in need of care with accessible, affordable high-quality care services) decision-makers are failing to address one of the biggest barriers to women's rights – the ability to work and earn.
- 3. The impact of polycrises:** We live in a time of 'polycrises', a context of multiple, compounding crises, often happening at the same time (i.e. COVID-19, climate change, conflicts and economic decline). This context has set back progress on gender equality around the world. In times of crisis, women act as the 'shock absorbers'. They tend to work in informal sectors with lower access to social protection. For example, during COVID-19, **women were the first to lose their jobs, and as markets recovered, the last to regain employment**⁵⁴. Many also leave their jobs to take on the uplift in care needs during crises.
- 4. Lack of focus on women's priorities and evidence of gender inequality:** Women's leadership within economic decision-making remains under prioritised. Urgent issues are not featuring in critical policies, financing and implementation. Insufficient use of sex-, age- and disability-disaggregated data further compounds the problem. When women and girls are invisible in economic analyses, policies fail to address their specific needs. Without women shaping economic decision-making and/or collaboration with WROs, the lack of experience or robust data on key gender equality issues ensures that the challenges women face continue to be overlooked.

At the same time, there is hope.

Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have turned a spotlight on the need for economic transformation. This includes prioritising aid and public spending for care and social services, so that when the next crisis occurs, women and girls are not the hardest hit. However the green transition holds further opportunity, promising to create up to 65 million new green jobs by 2030. Women and girls will only benefit from the transition to green economies if strategies and financing put gender equality front and centre. Without prioritising women and girls, the green transition could actually widen gender disparities in the world of work.



Sarojini's business produces coconut chips from the husks, which are made into bricks by another company and then exported to China for the building industry. © CARE

CARE's analysis

Economic justice and rights for women and girls are essential for ending poverty and promoting sustainable development. However, current economic systems, dominated by men, often exclude women, especially during crises and social spending cuts. This disproportionately harms women and girls, reversing progress toward gender equality.

This is a challenge that affects entire societies, not just women.

Women and girls are facing unjust economic systems and structural barriers which prevent them from fully realising economic opportunities. Persistent gender pay gaps, working in lower-end and insecure jobs, having no access to finance, or performing an inequitable share of unpaid care work are all symptoms of these gender-discriminatory structures – and remain political choices.

Gender inequality results in lower growth for everyone. Closing gaps in the world of work presents an opportunity for a more prosperous world – with the potential to **boost global wealth by \$160 trillion**⁵⁵, yet the gap is the widest it has been since records began.

Care work is the backbone of economies, enabling societies to function day-to-day and particularly during crises. Investing in this sector – including childcare, disability care and elderly care – can transform economic outcomes for women, their families and entire nations, with **quadruple returns in GDP for every pound spent**⁵⁶. Yet we continue to choose to underinvest, leading to **annual losses of billions of pounds**⁵⁷, leaving economies and societies vulnerable to future shocks, including in the face of climate change.

As the world evolves, so must our economic systems. Governments and institutions must rethink their approaches to ensure past mistakes aren't repeated and systems are truly equitable. Gender must be central to economic transformation, with a rebuilt care sector and a shift toward low-carbon jobs paving the way for equitable growth that benefits all.

The new UK Government has a unique opportunity to lead this economic transformation toward a feminist future. By **building a caring economy**⁵⁸ and **ensuring the green transition benefits women**⁵⁹, the UK can drive growth while advancing gender justice. Now is the time to exercise that leadership by prioritising economic transformation in its development policies and championing this work on the global stage.

Solutions and recommendations

FIRST STEP

Fight for women's economic justice on the global stage by integrating a strong focus on women's economic justice into the UK's own international development strategies and seizing global opportunities to reassert its leadership in advancing women's economic justice and gender equality worldwide.

This includes bringing in strong proposals for feminist economic transformation with the G7, the World Bank, the UN Financing for Development and other sustainable development platforms.

Other steps decision-makers can take to support to support women's economic justice include:

- **Work towards gender equity.** Strive for gender-equitable economic structures that integrate a gender lens across economic decision-makers. Conduct ex-ante gender impact assessments and put in place sex, age and disability disaggregated data. Ensure women (co-)lead and shape policies, implementation and financing.
- **Invest in the care economy.** Increase aid and public spending in care and social services to build the care economy. Create new decent care jobs (contributing to global targets of 85 million), boosting global GDP and reducing gender inequality.
- **Support a gender-just green transition.** Prioritise gender equality in the transition to green economies by generating meaningful green work opportunities for women as a priority. Invest in care and social jobs as green jobs and ensure women co-shape the shift to green economies.
- **Strengthen women's leadership and collaborate with WLOs.** Increase funding and collaboration with women-led and gender-focused organisations that are on the frontlines of advancing economic justice and gender equality. Increase investment for their macroeconomic priorities.

5. CHAMPION A GENDER EQUAL PARLIAMENT AT HOME



Dr Sarabajaya Kumar is a campaigner and academic who contested the GLA election as one of the only disabled women

Meet Dr Sarabajaya Kumar

Sarabajaya Kumar is a scholar-activist and a disabled woman with heritage from the Global South. She has founded several nonprofits, and is currently a Director of Impatience Ltd, which works primarily on climate justice and disability justice.

Sarabajaya is an Associate Professor at UCL in the Department of Political Science, teaching about leadership and the role of voluntary organisations in public policy. An advisor on disability and governance, Sarabajaya knows how critical diversity is to good decision-making and leadership.

In 2021, Sarabajaya contested the GLA election for the Women's Equality Party. One of 11 women selected nationally, she was the only disabled candidate to be supported by the Activate Collective. Sarabajaya is passionate about increasing disabled representation in Parliament – currently there are only nine disabled MPs. A fully representative parliament would have 156 disabled MPs, as 23% of the working-age population is disabled.

“Ensuring that d/Deaf and disabled people can contest elections and access elected office is crucial not only for representation and diversity, but also for an inclusive, effective, and well-functioning democracy,” says Sarabajaya. “Having d/Deaf and disabled people as elected representatives who can advocate for accessibility and inclusion benefits everyone.”

Sarabajaya established the [Disabled Women in Politics Network](#)⁶⁰, which is an informal cross-party community space for d/Deaf and disabled women. The network supports women's leadership – whether elected representative, activist or campaigner – by providing a platform for sharing experiences, resources and opportunities to connect with one another.

“Barriers that particularly exclude d/Deaf and disabled people from contributing to governance at all levels means that as a country, we are missing out on a huge talent pool.”

Sarabajaya is a steering committee member of [Centenary Action](#)⁶¹ – a coalition supported by CARE International UK that is campaigning for a gender equal Parliament by 2028. Currently, Sarabajaya is leading Centenary Action's campaign to re-establish an improved Access to Elected Office fund to provide financial support for the increased costs faced by disabled people contesting elections. Through Centenary Action, Sarabajaya plans to establish a global, cross-party Disabled Women in Politics Network.



Dr Sarabajaya Kumar engaging in artistic activism.

The current picture

The UK's progress toward gender equality in politics has been slow. Despite women's suffrage being over a century old, women still hold a minority of parliamentary seats. Since 1918, only **693 women**⁶² have served as MPs. Until the 2024 election, there had not been enough women MPs to fill the chamber, in comparison to the tens of thousands of male MPs throughout history.

Globally, the picture is similar.⁶³ Women hold 50% or more of cabinet minister positions in only 15 countries and just 18 countries have a woman head of state. This inequality is mirrored in global decision-making such as at COP28, where only **15 out of 133 world leaders were women**⁶⁴ – despite women being disproportionately affected by climate change.

In the UK, barriers to gender equality in politics persist. Diversity data collection by political parties is voluntary under Section 106 of the Equality Act, leading to inconsistent transparency. Some parties publish diversity data while others do not, hindering accountability and efforts to drive diversity. This inconsistency also prevents meaningful progress toward a more representative Parliament, undermining the UK's credibility as an advocate for equality on the global stage.

CARE's analysis

UK politics still does not fully reflect the diversity of its population. The July 2024 general election marked progress, with women now comprising 40.5% of MPs (up from 35% in 2019). While this is a significant step toward gender equality, women are still underrepresented given that they make up 51% of the population.

The UK has risen in global rankings for women's representation in national parliaments but the risk of regression remains. The recent increase, largely due to the Labour Party's efforts, shows that significant progress is possible. The Government has the chance to establish a legacy by achieving an equal parliament in the next election.

Gender equality in Parliament is not just about fairness. It's about improving governance, strengthening democracy and developing policies that benefit everyone. Inclusive legislatures better address the needs of women and families, reduce public disengagement and foster collaboration. Women in UK politics have been crucial in cross-party collaboration, particularly on issues affecting women. Their leadership enriches democracy and benefits society as a whole. Although all major political parties have committed to a gender-equal parliament by 2028, this will require decisive actions, not just promises.

Solutions and recommendations

FIRST STEP

Champion a gender-equal Parliament at home by enacting Section 106 of the Equality Act, so that political parties are required to publish diversity data on all candidates running for office. Ensure this is included in the next King's Speech so that transparency is already in place for any by-elections.

Making data publicly available enhances transparency, empowers voters and holds parties accountable for their diversity commitments. Mandatory reporting will drive diversity, ensuring that gender representation becomes a reality in candidate selection.

Other steps decision-makers can take to ensure Parliament is gender-just:

- **Reinstate the Access to Elected Office Fund.** Intersectionality matters, but women with disabilities face additional barriers to political participation. A dedicated funding scheme would help disabled women campaign effectively.
- **Modernise parliamentary HR systems.** Reform outdated HR structures in Parliament to support a more inclusive workplace. This includes flexible working conditions, family-friendly policies and comprehensive support systems for women MPs.
- **Promote equal opportunity in Parliament.** The Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee, led by the Leader of the House, should focus on promoting equal opportunity, preventing harassment and ensuring women are fully supported in their roles.
- **Address abuse and intimidation.** Implement stronger measures to protect women in politics from online and offline abuse, including recommendations from recent studies on abuse prevention and reporting mechanisms.
- **Develop action plans for equal representation.** Political parties should create and implement concrete action plans to achieve equal representation, addressing structural barriers that prevent women from being selected as candidates, especially at the local level.
- **Ensure policies reflect diverse women's experiences.** Legislation related to healthcare, family support, economic security and public safety must reflect the realities faced by women across different socio-economic backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

THIS IS THE MOMENT FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT.

It is a moment to recognise that applying feminist approaches to its international development work and across government as a whole is not just possible, but one of the most effective strategies for delivering sustainable change. Taking the first steps outlined in this report would be a meaningful start on that journey, a demonstration of leadership by the Government that turns rhetoric into reality.

For too long, women have been instrumentalised to suit particular agendas, but their expertise, contribution and power have been under-utilised and overlooked. The evidence cited in this report shows the origins of this stem from decades of broken promises. A reliance on old systems and thinking has failed to grasp the transformative and strategic opportunity of devolving power to women who are already building their own.

This Government has a chance to show that it will not follow in the footsteps of those past. COP29, IDA21, the G7, and the 25th anniversary of UNSC 1325 all provide significant staging posts on the road to better, more inclusive leadership from the UK.

But tackling gender inequality requires a focus on the long game. In the coming months and years, the Government needs to foster an approach that redresses the injustices that have led to the current status quo, and support those who are best placed to lead.

CARE commits to connecting a global network of women leaders with those in the UK. Together we can shape a new relationship between the UK and the Global Majority to tackle climate changes and its impacts fairly, support women leading in conflict, and transform economies.

By taking these actions, the UK will play a pivotal role in standing with women who are leading during conflicts and crises. The result will be more resilient communities, stronger peace agreements and a more just and equal world.

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