

## **GAPS response to the launch of the UK's International Women and Girls Strategy**

### **1. Introduction**

GAPS welcomes the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) publication of the International Women and Girls strategy. This strategy is an opportunity to meaningfully implement commitments to women's rights and gender equality across the triple nexus of development, peacebuilding and humanitarian response. The external crises of Covid-19, increasing conflict and insecurity and rising climate change have intersected with internal UK Government decisions on decreasing Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and de-prioritising gender equality, leading to a rollback for the rights of women, girls and LGBTQI+ persons. As this strategy importantly recognises, there is a need to drive commitment to gender equality and reverse this rollback. For this to happen, the UK Government must drive action and provide funding to match policy commitments with practice.

Gender equality cannot be achieved in isolation. For the successful implementation of the Women and Girls strategy there must be clear policy coherence. The strategy should be implemented in parallel with the recently published National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security, the International Development Strategy (IDS), the Integrated Review (IR) as well as domestic commitments including the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy. This strategy is a unique opportunity to transform policy discourse on women and girls and LGBTQI+ people into practical action and change for gender equality and women's rights globally. GAPS recognise and value our consultative relationship with the UK Government and see the implementation of this strategy as an opportunity to sustain and strengthen this.

### **2. Initial Reflections on the Women and Girls Strategy**

#### **a. Funding**

GAPS have consistently advocated through consultation with the FCDO on the importance of providing funding commitments within the Women and Girls strategy. Funding the implementation of this strategy is increasingly challenging in the context of substantial and ongoing cuts to the UK's ODA with £1.7 billion worth of ODA cuts expected by March 2023, impacting both bilateral and multilateral spending. The Equalities Impact assessment published in 2022 found that the UK ODA cuts had a severe and disproportionate impact on women and girls, this was multiplied by the lack of transparency throughout the process impacting long term relationships and community level trust. Further, the recent ICAI report on the UK's approach to Peacebuilding indicated that funding instability directly impacts peacebuilding efforts. This strategy is an opportunity to rebuild trust between the civil society sector, Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), and the UK Government.

GAPS welcomes the commitments and intention indicated in this strategy to directly fund WROs through the £38 million allocated to the Equality Fund which is currently in its second

year of implementation. This is important progress for ensuring WROs are recognised as experts and drivers of the changes needed in their communities. However, in the context of continued cuts to ODA, this funding is not enough and will limit gender-transformative change if it is not extended and increased. The UK Government must commit to increasing direct, long-term, core, flexible funding to enable local and grassroots WROs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), including youth-led organisations, to undertake their vital work. This type of flexible funding enables WROs to respond to their self-identified community needs even when the external environment changes.

#### **b. Approach**

GAPS were pleased to feed into consultation sessions for this strategy and acknowledge the sustained collaborative approach intended for the strategy's implementation. As recommended during the consultation process, we are concerned that the 'three E's approach' risks pre-empting and siloing efforts under a 'women and girls' approach rather than appropriately addressing the root causes of gender inequality or the structural barriers that marginalised women and girls face, as well as the impact of gendered dynamics on drivers and experiences of conflict and instability. We recognise the extension of the three E's to detail the importance of championing the health and rights of women and girls but are still concerned that this will encourage an isolated approach to gender equality.

GAPS is pleased to see synergy between the IDS and the Women and Girls strategy with emphasis on partnerships. This approach prioritises meaningfully engaging with WROs in FCAS to ensure that the design and delivery of programmes are locally led by those who understand the context best. It is crucial that the FCDO outlines details on how it intends to institutionalise, monitor and evaluate meaningful consultation and participation and ensure it includes meaningful engagement with diverse civil society, WROs and CSOs so that their perspectives inform agendas. This approach must include adolescent girls too so that their views and needs are not overlooked. To ensure that strategic partnerships developed during the implementation period of this strategy are meaningful, GAPS recommends adopting principles of solidarity and accompaniment of CSOs/WROs, by building mutual, equal, respectful, and committed partnerships with WROs/CSOs and focusing on strengthening each organisation's capacities.

#### **c. Women, Peace and Security**

GAPS is the UK's network for advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Therefore, GAPS priorities focus on the pillars of the WPS agenda: participation, protection, prevention and relief and recovery. The UK Government's commitments to WPS are detailed in the recently published NAP, whilst GAPS welcome reference to the NAP within the Women and Girls strategy we recommend that the FCDO detail how the two strategies will work together in both policy and practice to advance gender equality and women's rights in conflict affected countries. The FCDO must fund and detail how it will consult with WROs and CSOs and involve women, girls and LGBTQI+ persons as part of a coherent conflict prevention approach. Conflict prevention can only meaningfully happen through engaging and investing in WROs as they have the expertise to identify the changes and solutions needed in their contexts. GAPS encourage this approach that responds to women and girls' concerns rather than a securitised response. The Women and Girls Strategy and WPS NAP in collaboration also provide the potential for the UK to take a gendered approach to understanding conflict drivers, dynamics and experiences.

### **3. Implementation and looking forward**

Whilst GAPS recognise the Women and Girls strategy as ambitious for advancing gender equality the proof of the strategy's success will be in its implementation. As set out in this response the FCDO must:

- advance a collective and intersectional approach to gender equality in coherence with the IDS, the IR, the WPS NAP and domestic policies on gender equality
- enable the meaningful participation of WROs, WHRDs and CSOs across the triple nexus as it is their expertise that will drive change and inform agendas
- prioritise addressing the root causes of gender inequality through participatory intersectional and context-based analysis to ensure the UK's approach is conflict preventative rather than security responsive
- provide core, long-term, flexible funds to WROs and CSOs and remove bureaucratic barriers associated with procurement, proposals, and grant management, especially for those living in Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations.

We welcome that GAPS members were included in consultations as part of this strategy process and we look forward to continuing to build these relationships with Government and provide support and scrutiny on the implementation of this important strategy. In the future, we also hope that post-consultation and in anticipation of published policy, these documents are shared with the civil society sector and WROs so that we can respond accordingly.