



National Audit Office

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## **Report**

by the Comptroller  
and Auditor General

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**Department for International Development**

# Improving the lives of women and girls overseas

## Key facts

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**2018**

year the Department for International Development (DFID) launched its Strategic Vision for Gender Equality

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**£4.2bn**

estimate of DFID's bilateral spending in 2018 (calendar year) on programmes with a gender equality focus

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**2030**

target date for delivery of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals

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- 5** number of interlinked areas of gender equality on which DFID's 2018 Strategic Vision focuses: eliminating violence against women and girls, and supporting sexual and reproductive health and rights, girls' education, women's economic empowerment, and women's political empowerment
- 66%** percentage of DFID's total bilateral spending in 2018 on programmes with a gender equality focus (up 12 percentage points from 2014)
- 33%** National Audit Office assessment of the percentage of DFID's bilateral spending which was incorrectly classified against the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee's gender equality policy marker in 2018
- 87%** percentage of programmes with a gender equality focus that met or exceeded DFID's performance expectations

## Key terms

<b>Bilateral aid and multilateral aid</b>	<p>The former is earmarked spend, usually Official Development Assistance spending (see later definition) going to specific countries, regions or programmes.</p> <p>The latter is provided as core contributions to international multilateral organisations.</p>
<b>Bilateral spending</b>	<p>Figures for bilateral spending are based on DFID's Statistics on International Development data – all figures are net of receipts and are presented on a calendar year basis.</p>
<b>Gender equality</b>	<p>The state of being equal in status, rights and opportunities, and of being valued equally, regardless of sex or gender identity and/or expression. Working towards gender equality very often (but not always) means working to improve the situation of girls and women, because they are more often affected by discrimination or a lack of opportunities.</p>
<b>Gender equality policy marker</b>	<p>Developed by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, the application of this approach allows donors such as DFID to estimate spending in support of gender equality.</p>
<b>Mainstreaming</b>	<p>Where gender equality is not the main objective, but gender considerations are fully integrated into all aspects of the programme/approach. In doing so, the different needs, priorities, opportunities and constraints faced by women, men, girls and boys are recognised.</p>
<b>Official Development Assistance</b>	<p>Official Development Assistance (ODA), often referred to as aid, is the internationally agreed criteria for funds provided to developing countries or multilateral institutions to fight poverty and promote development.</p>
<b>Social norms</b>	<p>Informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable, appropriate, and obligatory actions in a particular group or society.</p>
<b>Sustainable Development Goals</b>	<p>In 2015, the United Nations agreed its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The agenda has 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the aims of which are to eradicate extreme poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and leave no one behind.</p>
<b>Theory of change</b>	<p>A methodology which maps the assumptions which inform planned interventions. It is regarded by DFID as an "essential tool in designing and appreciating the complex network of factors which influence project outcomes".</p>

# Summary

**1** Gender inequality is prevalent across all aspects of life – in the workplace, in civic engagement, in health and in education. Worldwide, 63 million girls are out of school; women make up just 24.3% of representatives in national parliaments; and one in three women will be beaten or sexually abused in their lifetime. In 2018, globally, around 48.5% of women participated in the labour force, 26.5% behind men's participation. And women spent three times longer on unpaid care work preventing them from engaging in paid work, facing lower wages where they do obtain paid work, and facing other social and legal barriers. In 2018 the Department for International Development (DFID) spent £4.2 billion of bilateral aid (66% of its total bilateral spend) on programmes that targeted gender equality as a policy objective.

**2** In March 2018, DFID launched its *2018–2030 Strategic Vision for Gender Equality* (2018 Strategic Vision). This set out what it describes as a 'call to action' asking more of itself and of the UK government, and its multilateral and civil society partners, to help empower women and girls, recognising that gender equality is fundamental to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

**3** DFID's commitment to gender equality is long-standing. Its 2018 Strategic Vision builds on DFID's *2011 Strategic Vision for Girls and Women* and its *2007 Gender Equality Action Plan*. The UK International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014 made it a legal requirement to consider gender equality in all of the UK's Official Development Assistance expenditure. And the *2015 UK Aid Strategy* promised to prioritise the needs of girls and women throughout the government's development spending, stating "no country can successfully develop if half its population is left behind". Stakeholders told us that DFID can be considered a world leader with regard to its work to improve gender equality.

## Scope of this report

4 For DFID to assess whether it has secured value for money from its work in this area, it needs to identify its impact in improving gender equality while understanding the cost of its interventions. Having strong management arrangements will support both these elements. In this report, we examine:

- whether DFID took a robust approach to developing its 2018 Strategic Vision;
- how DFID has translated its 2018 Strategic Vision into practical action; and
- whether DFID knows what progress it is making against the aims of its 2018 Strategic Vision.

5 We set out our audit approach in Appendix One and our evidence base in Appendix Two. Appendix Three provides details of DFID's work on gender equality in Ethiopia and Nepal (see Figures 18 and 19), which we visited for fieldwork for this study.

6 As we were finalising the report, the UK government was responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. DFID was, alongside the international community, providing an immediate humanitarian response to the pandemic overseas. And it was reprioritising its work to mitigate the pandemic's health, social and economic impacts in the short and long term. Given its assessment that the impact of COVID-19 will amplify existing gender inequalities, DFID is looking to make sure gender equality is central to its response. With the pandemic still unfolding at the time of writing, this report does not consider DFID's actions.

## Key findings

### Developing DFID's 2018 Strategic Vision

7 **DFID's 2018 Strategic Vision is ambitious and wide ranging.** It builds on and extends the scope of its earlier work in this area. Specifically, it added women's political empowerment as a fifth area of focus (alongside, for example, girls' education and sexual and reproductive health and rights); included specific objectives to support the most marginalised groups and focus on interventions across women and girls' lifecycles; and promised action to improve evidence, data and progress measurement. It also, for the first time, invited the wider development community to help DFID achieve its ambitions for gender equality (paragraphs 1.3 to 1.7, and Figure 1).

**8 DFID drew on a wide range of evidence to develop its 2018 Strategic Vision.** For example, it consulted widely both internally and externally, inviting input from colleagues in the UK and overseas and from a range of external organisations involved in gender equality work. DFID commissioned and responded to findings from an external review of its implementation of its earlier strategic vision in this area. It reviewed research on what works for existing priority areas and commissioned reviews on areas for consideration in the new vision. UK-based stakeholders were generally positive about DFID's consultation process, but considered it could have done more to invite input from overseas implementing partners, civil society organisations and beneficiaries. From our discussions with implementing partners in Ethiopia and Nepal, we agree that their knowledge of the challenges faced locally could have provided a useful perspective (paragraphs 1.8 to 1.14 and Figures 3 and 4).

**9 DFID did not set up its 2018 Strategic Vision in a way which allowed it to assess overall progress and value for money.** DFID is clear that, against the backdrop of its decentralised approach to implementation through its network of country offices, its 2018 Strategic Vision aims to set a broad framework for work in this area, rather than a 'blueprint' for specific action. DFID did not intend to support its 2018 Strategic Vision with a costed plan for implementation and specific outcome measures. This was, in part, because it considered it needed more analysis to support an assessment of costs for some elements, such as its approach to 'mainstreaming'. This choice limits its ability to assess progress and consider value for money. While it completed an exercise to identify gaps in its capability, it did not assess the resources required to deliver each of its 2018 Strategic Vision's key components (paragraphs 2.9 to 2.11).

## Implementing the Strategic Vision

### **10 DFID aims to achieve the goals outlined in its 2018 Strategic Vision through a combination of programming and influencing activity.**

DFID's estimate of its bilateral spending on programmes with a gender equality focus was £4.2 billion in 2018 (an increase of 71% on 2011) across programmes that look to tackle a range of issues. Some programmes have a primary focus on gender equality, such as the Girls Education Challenge, which looks to enable 1.5 million marginalised and highly marginalised girls to access education and transition into further education, training or meaningful employment. Other programmes incorporate a focus on gender equality alongside broader goals in programmes where it is not the primary focus. For example, we saw a programme in Ethiopia which aims to increase productivity of agricultural land and therefore the incomes of 500,000 households; and secure land ownership for 6.1 million households, by certifying 14 million parcels of land, of which around 70% are jointly or individually owned by women. Alongside programming DFID has sought to lead on gender equality with other government departments in the UK (such as the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade). In the international arena, it has looked to lead on issues considered sensitive by other countries such as safe abortion and positioning itself against attempts to rollback the internationally agreed position on sexual and reproductive health and rights. DFID's success in delivering its 2018 Strategic Vision relies on it working well with other government departments and international partners without any mandate to direct their activities (paragraphs 2.2, 2.3, 2.7 and 2.8, and 3.22 to 3.25; and Figures 6 and 16).

### **11 DFID emphasises local context in programme design and implementation which limits its control over delivery of its 2018 Strategic Vision.**

DFID's decentralised approach allows a necessary focus on local challenges and consideration of its strengths relative to other donors when designing and implementing programmes. For example, we saw family planning projects in Ethiopia and Nepal which were tailored to respond to demand for different types of contraception. We have identified significant variation in spending on gender equality across the countries DFID works in, as well as within regions. Such variations might reflect varying levels of need in different populations, as well as differences in the opportunities and costs of programmes. It might also highlight a disparity in the willingness, capacity or capability of country offices to address gender inequality in their programming (paragraphs 2.4 to 2.6, and Figures 7 and 8).

**12 Successfully “mainstreaming” gender across all of DFID’s work is integral to achieving its 2018 Strategic Vision, but it has found this difficult.** DFID attempts to make sure gender equality is considered regardless of a programme’s primary objective – an approach known as mainstreaming. It has responded positively to critical findings from its internal auditors in 2016 regarding the extent of practical consideration in business cases of gender equality. Its progress has been hindered by a lack of buy-in from some staff, an absence of complete guidance and training before 2019, and some weaknesses in its quality assurance processes. Improvements to DFID’s assessment of a programme’s consideration of gender issues should mean it is better placed to identify those areas on which it needs to focus to improve mainstreaming (paragraphs 2.12 to 2.17).

**13 DFID has recognised that programmes which look to address social norms are underrepresented in its portfolio.** DFID considers tackling social norms, such as negative attitudes within communities to girls attending school, will have the most long-term impact on tackling gender equality. DFID’s decentralised operating model allows it to take a context-specific approach to tackling such issues. For example, DFID funds a project in Ethiopia to strengthen the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth so that it can better support and hold other government departments to account on gender improvement outcomes. It also complements its country-based programmes with centrally managed global programmes, such as the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence Programme, to assess the long-term impact of interventions. DFID has identified issues around the successful implementation of these programmes, including the assessment of their impact. DFID looks to take a case-by-case approach to each procurement to reflect the nature of the issue it is looking to tackle. Some stakeholders have highlighted how DFID’s approach might not help in addressing harmful social norms because, for example, activities in this area can be expensive, as they can be focused on long-term and harder to measure goals (paragraphs 2.18 to 2.21 and Figures 10 and 11).

#### Assessing progress with its 2018 Strategic Vision

**14 It has taken some time for DFID to begin setting up an approach to assessing the collective performance of its programmes.** DFID has an established approach to assessing the performance of its programmes. This shows that individual programmes with a gender equality focus, across areas such as education and economic empowerment, achieve similar levels of performance as those which do not have such a focus. It is also important DFID understands the contribution programmes make, when considered together as well as individually, to progress with its 2018 Strategic Vision. In 2019, DFID usefully started to draw together information on spending and on performance for each area of focus. It has yet to use this combined set of information to help it assess whether its priorities are being addressed and to identify where resources should be applied in the future (paragraphs 3.4, 3.15 to 3.21, and Figure 15).



**15 DFID is working to improve its oversight of the implementation of its 2018 Strategic Vision.** DFID has established a cross-department and cross-government board to oversee progress with its implementation of its 2018 Strategic Vision. Every six months it has assessed performance to date and prospects for the immediate future against objectives. But its approach lacks a long-term perspective on what constitutes progress at intervals between now and 2030 (paragraphs 2.9, 3.2 and 3.4).

**16 DFID's most recent assessment of progress and future prospects is mixed.** In September 2019, DFID identified what it described as a strong performance to date with regard to four of its seven calls to action. It assessed the other three calls to action as "at risk" (one of which included programmes focused on, for example, health issues and economic empowerment). It also assessed its work with international partners and with other government departments as performing well. However, its assessment of likely performance for the next six months against future priorities was less positive. DFID considered that five of its seven calls to action are not on track to meet its aims in that period, which it attributed to internal resource constraints and changes in the external environment. It is taking action to address the areas of concern it has identified, such as establishing priorities across government for economic empowerment work (paragraph 3.3 and Figure 12).

**17 DFID needs to make more progress in improving its estimate of spending on programmes with a gender equality focus.** DFID's 2018 Strategic Vision encourages improvements in the collection of data on gender issues, including that on spending. DFID uses an internationally recognised assessment of a programme's focus on gender issues (whether gender is the programme's principal objective, is a significant feature, or does not feature at all) to estimate spending. Our analysis shows that, for 2018, it classified 33% of its bilateral spending for that year incorrectly. As a consequence, it is likely that DFID is inaccurately assessing the degree to which its spending has a focus on gender equality. DFID has introduced arrangements to support a more accurate application of this approach (paragraphs 3.7 to 3.9 and 3.11 to 3.14, and Figure 13).

**18 While influencing is an important element in DFID's approach to implementing its Strategic Vision, its impact is hard to measure.** DFID aims to use its relationships with international organisations and other governments, individually and collectively (such as at the G7), to improve policies and programmes and to challenge the status quo around promoting gender equality. For example, using the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting to launch interventions to support girls' education; and working to make sure the replenishment of the World Bank's International Development Association strengthens commitments to gender. It has put in place an approach to support this work by establishing objectives for each of these activities against which it can assess its contribution. DFID has acknowledged that it faces challenges assessing and claiming impact from its influencing activity (paragraphs 3.22 to 3.25, and Figure 16).

### **19 DFID has made limited information about progress with its 2018**

**Strategic Vision publicly available.** DFID's annual report and accounts and its Single Departmental Plan include some coverage of progress with its 2018 Strategic Vision. But it has not published an assessment of its progress to date (as it did for each of the three years following the introduction of its 2011 Strategic Vision for Girls and Women). And while it has met with stakeholders, it has not convened an external panel of experts to challenge its performance – a process it said it would establish when it launched the 2018 Strategic Vision. DFID told us it intends to hold such a meeting in the future (paragraphs 3.5 and 3.6).

### **Conclusion on value for money**

**20** DFID's long-term commitment to improving gender equality in the face of long-standing and entrenched social norms is clear. Its current Strategic Vision for its work on gender equality, which was well researched, is ambitious – looking to achieve improvements across a broad range of issues and types of intervention over a 12-year period through its own and others' efforts.

**21** Individually, DFID's programme interventions to improve gender equality are performing well and it is widely respected internationally for its broad range of influencing activity in this area. Two years into the implementation of its 2018 Strategic Vision, DFID has in place some of the management arrangements we would expect for it to be confident about its delivery. But there are gaps. It does not have an overall long-term plan for implementation against which it can assess progress with its 2018 Strategic Vision at key points between now and 2030; it does not have a strong understanding of its spending in this area; and it has been slow to start bringing performance information together to provide an accurate picture of progress across the portfolio of its activities. DFID has recently taken positive steps to improve its oversight and understanding of performance but it needs to make significant further progress in getting better management arrangements in place before it will have a good understanding of whether it is on track to secure value for money in this area.

## Recommendations

**22** With 10 of 12 years remaining to implement its 2018 Strategic Vision, we make a number of recommendations for improvement, all of which are consistent with DFID's decentralised operating model.

DFID should:

- a** develop and publish a plan for implementing its 2018 Strategic Vision, setting out key milestones and planned achievements in the short, medium and long term through to 2030;
- b** put in place an action plan to tackle the barriers it has identified to the successful implementation of its interventions to tackle social norms;
- c** periodically review other government departments' and its international partners' contribution to the implementation of its 2018 Strategic Vision to identify opportunities for its own influencing work and for collaborative activity;
- d** put in place an action plan to tackle the barriers to mainstreaming gender issues it has identified;
- e** regularly review the accuracy of its application of the gender policy marker, to make sure its actions for improvement will lead to a better understanding of its spending on programmes with a gender equality focus; and
- f** (complementing material it publishes through the Single Departmental Plan and the Annual Report and Accounts) publish, every two years, a short report setting out its progress against its 2018 Strategic Vision and towards the Sustainable Development Goals relevant to gender equality.