



What difference are Feminist Foreign Policies making to ending Violence Against Women and Girls?

An Introduction to the Relationship Between Feminist Foreign Policies, Feminist Development Policies, International Gender Strategies, and Violence Against Women and Girls



What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls: Impact at Scale

A seven-year initiative funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to scale up evidence-based, practice-informed prevention of violence against women and girls. The programme will invest £67.5 million to prevent and contribute to eliminating violence against women and girls (VAWG) by:

- Systematically designing, implementing, and rigorously evaluating a range of approaches to scaling up violence prevention efforts, translating proof-of-concept evidence into robust, large scale programmes and strategies.
- Designing, piloting, and testing new theory-driven violence prevention approaches (innovation).
- Strengthening long-term capability and capacity to deliver cutting-edge, evidence-based violence prevention programmes across the programme's grantees, the UK Government (principally FCDO), and developing country governments
- Using evidence to influence a more effective, scaled-up global response to end VAWG.

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Cover photo: Art Therapy to end violence against women in AI -Menia. Twenty five women participated in this session. © Out Productions

Layout: D.R. ink

Glossary

DAC	Development Assistance Committee
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FDP	Feminist development policy
FFP	Feminist foreign policy
FGM	Female genital mutilation
GBV	Gender-based violence
GEF	Generation Equality Forum
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, plus
NAP	National Action Plan
ODA	Overseas development assistance
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health rights
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
VAWG	Violence against women and girls
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WRO	Women's rights organisation



The Federation of Women of Sucumbíos. CARE's partner organisation Federación de Mujeres de Sucumbíos Virginia Zozaya and Amparo Penaherrera look at the pieces embroidered and produced in various art therapy workshops at "Puerta Violeta", a space that offers free care for survivors of gender-based violence. © Ana María Buitron/CARE

Summary

Feminist Foreign Policies (FFPs), Feminist Development Policies (FDPs) and international strategies on gender equality have become increasingly commonplace since Sweden launched the world's first FFP in 2014. Although there is no one definition of FFPs or FDPs and different approaches have been adopted, in general, they entail governments taking an explicitly feminist approach to foreign policy, development and or/diplomacy. Since 2014 the number of countries with FFPs or FDPs has continued to grow,¹ while countries such as the UK and USA launched policies focused on championing the rights of women, girls, and marginalised groups internationally.

In 2023, at the midpoint of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the world remains unequivocally off track to eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), despite VAWG² being a fundamental barrier to achieving the majority of the SDGs.³ FFPs, FDPs and international strategies on gender equality are therefore necessary tools to prevent and respond to VAWG across all settings, sectors and systems. It is necessary that such strategies move beyond rhetoric to create systemic, sustained change in the lives of women and girls. However, there has been limited analysis of how VAWG prevention and response is considered in existing FFPs and related strategies on gender equality, or what this means in practice.

This brief provides an introduction to the relationship between FFPs, FDPs, international gender strategies and VAWG. It summarises the framing of and commitments around VAWG in a selection of FFPs, FDPs and international gender strategies, and examines what this means for VAWG prevention and response work. It considers what is missing from existing policies and their implementation so far, and makes recommendations for donors and policy makers. The brief is informed by analysis of relevant policies and evidence, and interviews with key stakeholders from women's rights organisations (WROs), International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), multi-lateral organisations, and researchers focused on VAWG (referred to as 'stakeholders' throughout). It is intended as a starting point for further discussion on what a robust effort to tackle VAWG might look like within FFPs and international strategies for gender equality.

The brief concludes that FFPs, FDPs and related gender strategies have the potential to be influential drivers of accelerating progress on the prevention and response to VAWG. They often include commitments to increasing funding for gender equality and WROs, and can bring high level political will and engagement to gender equality and VAWG work. However, in order for them to fulfil this potential, they need to be implemented in a way that increases resources for evidence-based, transformative approaches to VAWG prevention and response that centres the needs and voices of women and girls. In addition, the full range of foreign policy levers needs to be used to address VAWG. There are also opportunities for greater tracking and accountability of their impact, and for sharing of evidence and learning between contexts where they are implemented.

1 FFP, FDP and international gender equality strategy commitments on VAWG

Canada's 'Feminist International Assistance Policy'⁴

Canada launched its Feminist International Assistance Policy in 2017. Specific commitments on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are primarily based within the core Action Area: 'gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls', including to 'address unacceptably high rates of SGBV' through 'comprehensive approaches' along with support to WROs (CAD \$150 million over 5 years to the Women's Voice and Leadership Programme⁵), a CAD\$300 million contribution to the Equality Fund,⁶ and a commitment to evidence-based programming. Gender-based violence (GBV) is referenced across the Policy's 5 remaining Action Areas, including: CAD\$650 million for sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR); support to prevent and respond to school-related GBV; strengthening SGBV prevention and response in humanitarian settings; improving access to justice for women and girls; and training police to better respond to SGBV.

Colombia's 'Feminist Foreign Policy' (upcoming)

Colombia announced its plans to develop a FFP in March 2023, in line with its commitment to achieving the SDGs, and to SDG 5 specifically.⁷ The Colombian Government has indicated the FFP will be guided by 3 principles: pacifism, in line with the Colombian Peace Agreement; intersectionality, by recognising multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination; and finally it will be participatory, by encouraging women to actively engage in decision-making processes in the public and private sphere. The main aims of the policy will be to 'promote gender equality, women's empowerment, and political participation of women in all their diversity, as well as the respect for their human rights, including those of vulnerable populations like LGBTIQ+ people, and ethnic minorities, through the mainstreaming of the gender-transformative approach'. Through its FFP, Colombia has signalled a commitment to 'promote a critical examination of inequalities, roles, social norms, and gender dynamics and stereotypes', and to 'recognise and strengthen positive norms that support equality and enabling environments for women and girls'.

France's 'International Strategy on Gender Equality, 2018-2022'⁸

France's Strategy on Gender Equality outlines 3 Guiding Principles: 'comprehensive', 'rights-based', and taking a 'gender-based (gender mainstreaming)' approach. One of five sectoral priorities is to 'guarantee women and girls' free and equal access to rights and justice as well as their protection against all forms of violence'. Included within this are the objectives of 'fighting against all forms

of VAWG; a focus on ending female genital mutilation (FGM); the political recognition of femicide; support for equal rights within the justice system; and protection of those working to fight violence. The policy also references GBV in its sectoral priority of education (through eliminating factors that prevent girls from completing school, including child marriage, early pregnancy and school-related GBV); and in its work around women, peace and security (WPS) (through 'protecting women's rights and addressing GBV in conflict and post-conflict situations'). GBV is not referenced in the Strategy's Accountability Framework.

Germany's 'Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy – Federal Foreign Office Guidelines'⁹

Germany published its FFP in March 2023. It outlines 10 Guidelines, with reference to GBV primarily housed under Guideline 1 on Peace and Security, which pledges to 'combat SGBV in armed conflicts' and 'support the survivors of violent crimes and bring the perpetrators to justice.' GBV is also referenced under Guideline 2, on Humanitarian Assistance (where the fight against SGBV is referenced as contributing to longer term gender equity, alongside Germany's commitment of €15 million since 2022 to support UNICEF to respond to GBV in emergencies and to 8 WROs to provide psychosocial services and medical assistance); Guideline 3, on human rights (through opposition to the abandonment of international policies such as the Istanbul Convention,¹⁰ work to prevent and respond to FGM in Ethiopia and Sierra Leone, and public statements and events to combat violence against LGBTIQ+ people); and Guideline 4, on Climate Diplomacy and External Energy Policy (recognising women's vulnerability to sexual violence as a result of climate change).

Mexico's 'Feminist Foreign Policy 2020-2024'

Mexico was the first country in the Global South to launch an explicitly feminist foreign policy. Framed in principles of human rights, the Policy has 5 principles, including 'combatting all forms of GBV, including within the ministry' and a commitment to 'practice intersectional feminism'. The Policy's focus on GBV is linked to a number of activities, including the launch of the Spotlight Initiative Mexico¹¹ to fight femicide domestically (alongside the UN and EU); the adoption of a certification¹² on Labour Equality and Non-Discrimination by the Mexican Foreign Ministry with the aim of having all Ministry staff certified (certification requires training in gender issues and increased awareness around preventing, addressing and punishing sexual harassment); and Mexico's co-leadership (with Canada) of the Generation Equality Forum (GEF).¹³ Mexico has also ratified ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the Workplace, which will enter into force in 2023.¹⁴

The Netherlands – 2023 (upcoming)

The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced its decision to 'pursue a feminist foreign policy' in 2022,¹⁵ based on the 'four R's' for rights (protecting women's rights, including the right to live free from violence), representation (in policy making and implementation), resources (ensuring funds benefit women), and reality check (around whether there are unintended negative consequences for women as a result of engagement or programming). Further details on the FFP, with input from broad-based consultation sessions, will be released in Summer 2023. Reporting on activities from May 2022 to 2023, the Netherlands' actions on GBV included organising the Ukraine Accountability Conference in The Hague¹⁶ (a key theme of which was addressing sexual violence in conflict, including steps taken to end impunity for SGBV as a war crime), and initiating a package of EU sanctions on individuals and organisations responsible for sexual violence and large-scale violations of women's rights.¹⁷

Spain's 'Feminist Foreign Policy: Promoting Gender Equality in Spain's External Action'¹⁸

VAWG is one of Spain's 4 priority areas in its 2021 FFP. Its stated action areas include: reaffirming Spain's commitment to the Istanbul Convention, including through public and advocacy events and promoting its ratification by other European nations; participation in the UN Group of Friends for the Elimination of VAWG and the Working Group on Violence Against Women; signing bilateral Memoranda of Understanding for collaboration on combatting GBV; fighting impunity against sexual violence, including through international courts and sanctions; and assisting Spanish victims of violence overseas. Through their framework agreement with UNFPA, Spain has supported initiatives that include the Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence,¹⁹ and the 'WE DECIDE' programme to promote policies for social inclusion, gender, and prevention of sexual violence in vulnerable populations.²⁰ VAWG is not mentioned across Spain's remaining 4 priority areas, with the exception of 'Women, Peace and Security'.

The UK's 'International Women and Girls Strategy 2023-2030'²¹

The UK's Women and Girls' Strategy is not an explicitly feminist policy, it sets out the country's vision for promoting gender equality overseas. It presents three inter-related priority themes – the '3 E's' of Educating girls, Empowering women and girls and championing their health and rights, and Ending GBV. Under the Ending GBV theme, the Strategy focuses on promoting evidence-based programming to prevent and respond to GBV, including in humanitarian settings (citing its flagship 'What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale' programme²²); amplifying the voices and leadership of women-led, youth and survivor organisations; protecting the global normative framework on ending GBV, including through ratification of ILO Convention 190; and promoting safe and inclusive online and digital spaces for women and girls.



Josee Uwizeyimana is a 28-year-old farmer. Since joining the Every Voice Counts programme, she's learnt about gender-based violence, how to tackle it and to advocate finding solutions with stakeholders, and knowing what leadership means to the community. As a result, she has become a lead representative of a youth group that advocates with the government. © Peter Caton

The USA's '2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy'²³

The USA has not developed an explicitly feminist foreign policy. Its Gender Equality Policy – along with its 2021 'Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GBV Global 2022'²⁴ – sets out the country's ambitions around gender equality and GBV. 'Striving to eliminate GBV and mitigate its harmful effects' is one of 4 strategic objectives. GBV is one of 14 priority sectors, and a cross-cutting theme. Sector snapshots do not include concrete commitments, but rather define the challenges faced and outline promising approaches for change. In the GBV snapshot, this includes: high-quality survivor-centred GBV response services; structural interventions to create, implement and enforce laws and shift harmful norms and beliefs; reducing the acceptance

of GBV and promoting gender equitable norms at the individual, household, community, and institutional level; and engaging local, women-led community influencers, WROs, and men and boys to achieve transformational change.

2 Assessing the impacts of FFPs, FDPs and related gender equality strategies on driving resources and mobilisation for VAWG prevention and response

Commitments to increase funding for gender equality

FFPs, FDPs and related international gender strategies include important commitments to increase the volume of gender-focused bilateral overseas development assistance (ODA), which is needed to increase resources for VAWG. Amongst Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries, ODA with a primary or significant focus on gender²⁵ doubled from 2014 to 2020, reaching a high of \$23 billion in 2020.²⁶ However, as a proportion of ODA overall, it remains low. 56% of screened ODA did not include any gender focus in 2021.²⁷ While commitments marked only as principal almost tripled from 2014 to 2020, at their peak they still only accounted for 12% of gender-focused aid commitments,²⁸ falling to just under 11% in 2021.²⁹ There is evidence that FFPs, FDPs and international strategies can include increased funds focused directly or indirectly on VAWG prevention and response – for example, Canada’s investment of \$650 million for SRHR programming over 3 years (triple its previous spending), and the USA’s Collective Action to Reduce GBV (CARE-GBV) programme.³⁰ Given that the majority of FFPs and related international gender strategies have been published from 2020 onwards, it is likely too early to ascertain the overall impact on levels of gender-focused aid. However, these remain important policy commitments to hold donors to.

Increasing funding for and elevating the work of women’s rights organisations, but more scope for systematically scaling up quality partnerships

The announcement of a FFP, FDP, or international gender strategy has in many cases been accompanied by an increase in funding mechanisms to support, and programmes implemented by, WROs. Funding for WROs and feminist movements has potentially significant implications for VAWG reduction, as evidence shows that strong autonomous feminist or women’s movements can play a significant role in tackling VAWG.³¹ Examples of such funds include Canada’s Equality Fund, the Netherlands’ Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women I and II mechanisms,³² France’s Support Fund for Feminist Organisations in emergency settings,³³ and the UK’s What Works to Prevent Violence granting component. One stakeholder described the positive trend of FFPs, FDPs, and international gender strategies reflecting awareness of the need to engage and elevate the work of WROs, and how this is notable in the USA’s current Strategy compared to past policies. There are also examples of donors investing in existing funding mechanisms for WROs, to support and grow these rather than setting up new initiatives, for example the UK made an investment in the Equality Fund.³⁴

However, support to and elevation of WROs also remains limited, due to limited donor appetite for engaging with smaller or less formalised organisations and the tendency of INGOs to position for funding otherwise available to WROs. Despite available guidance on the ways in which larger donors

can effectively engage and empower WROs,³⁵ donor systems continue to require a level of due diligence, reporting requirements, and (evidence of) fund management capacity that is inaccessible to the majority of WROs, while also failing to provide long term, flexible, core funding. For example, stakeholders from Afghanistan noted how rhetoric around solidarity with global feminist movements had not been matched with practical support from donors for WROs in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. INGOs continue to receive funding that is open but not accessible to smaller WROs.

As such, while there is evidence that the development of a FFP or related gender strategy is associated with a boost to funding for WROs, such funding nevertheless constituted only 2% of overall gender-focused aid in 2020, spent almost entirely in the civil society and governance and education sectors;³⁶ funding for WROs declined from 2019-20 to 2020-21.³⁷ Donor country approaches to partnering with governments can at times lead to the exclusion of explicitly feminist or historically marginalised organisations from programme design and implementation. One stakeholder gave the example of a VAWG-focused programme in Uganda, where the Government's role in selecting civil society partners to engage in programme consultation meant that WROs, LGBTQI+ and other marginalised groups were largely excluded from the process.

Increasing political will and engagement on VAWG

In addition to increased funding, FFPs and related strategies were repeatedly noted by stakeholders as having 'built conversations and commitments' around gender and, in some instances, VAWG in particular. FFPs and FDPs, alongside other national commitments to international resolutions, such as country National Action Plans (NAPs) on UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325,³⁸ were described as having 'set a baseline of understanding and ideal commitment for policymakers and practitioners'. Conceptually, use of the word 'feminist' – while controversial and potentially dangerous in many settings (see Box 1) – was cited by stakeholders from the Global South as critical to reclaiming and reframing feminism as something positive linked with the promotion of human rights. Practically, the UK and, more recently, the USA, were described as having influenced the international appetite for engaging on VAWG, with the evidence generated by the What Works programme cited as having motivated greater engagement with evidence-based programming across state and non-state actors.

FFPs and international strategies were noted as encouraging the development and adoption of national and local laws relating to VAWG, including NAPs, in addition to 'giving WROs the space to work directly on issues relating to VAWG'. While securing funding presents an ongoing challenge, stakeholders recognised that, 'at the very least, if VAWG is in a national strategy or policy framework, it means it can get funded'.

Using a range of foreign policy levers to address VAWG

It was also noted that there is potential for governments to have greater impact if they prioritise VAWG prevention in a range of foreign policy levers beyond aid and development, including diplomacy, security, trade, and climate policy. These areas are covered by Germany's policy, although it is focused on the Federal Foreign Office rather than being a whole government approach.³⁹ Sweden sought to use diplomacy and global leadership to advance women's rights under their FFP, although due to a change of government it has now been withdrawn. For example, they introduced a resolution at the United Nations Security Council in 2017 to elevate SGBV as grounds for economic sanctions.⁴⁰ Canada has introduced training for the military to raise awareness of the gendered impacts of conflict, natural disasters and emergencies.⁴¹ Canada and France also used their G7 Presidencies to advance commitments on gender, after committing to FFPs.⁴² However others have noted that there is less evidence of the impact of FFPs beyond aid and development, or of whether VAWG prevention and gender equality are being prioritised over other foreign policy goals.⁴³

Box 1 – The importance of language

Stakeholders interviewed from WROs in Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Afghanistan all emphasised the risks associated with operating as an explicitly 'feminist' organisation. One person working in Cox's Bazaar faced government and community backlash after being labelled a feminist; another from Mali recalled how their organisation was forced to remove the word 'feminist' from its title in order to formally register, only to face backlash when a media outlet mistakenly used its original name. An interviewee working in Jordan described the contradictions of having to use the language of feminism in reporting to donors, while actively removing reference to the word when implementing the project in certain contexts.

Despite these challenges, when asked whether they felt donor governments should adopt the 'feminist' label, all of these stakeholders answered an emphatic 'yes'. Use of the word feminism was described as 'important to take back the word, to show people it is something positive, it is about human rights'. INGOs using the term were noted in multiple contexts as helping to create cover and space for local organisations to engage in conversations around feminism, patriarchy, and the harmful norms that perpetuate VAWG. Encouraging use of the word was also cited as potentially helping to establish a shared vision around the aims of feminism, which would support movement building across different regions. One stakeholder from DRC noted how they are hopeful that, in the future, narratives will be centred on discussions around feminism and feminist aims – but that this is unlikely to happen when the word is still viewed with suspicion and negativity.

Others have noted that in using the term 'feminist', governments should ensure they do not relabel existing gender equality work, but seek to use transformative approaches and address issues such as intersectionality and unequal power relations including between the global north and south.

3 Gaps and opportunities for VAWG prevention and response in existing strategies

Gaps

A narrowing focus on VAWG and a trend towards mainstreaming

Almost all stakeholders interviewed observed how VAWG has increasingly been mainstreamed into broader aims around gender equality or sectoral programming. Some did not view this as inherently problematic, noting how the decision to focus on VAWG should be 'context-specific and based on the strengths of that government'. The majority, however, expressed concerns over how evidence-based VAWG work gets forgotten in sectoral programmes, and that opportunities to address VAWG within (often well or better funded) sectoral programming areas such as education, health, social protection, climate and economic development were being missed.

The shift towards mainstreaming VAWG within gender or sectoral programming, combined with the use of gender-neutral language and in some cases, hesitancy over use of the term 'feminist', was described by multiple stakeholders as depoliticising VAWG and a 'relabeling of business as usual'. As one NGO stakeholder noted, 'VAWG is often intrinsically linked to broader gender equality aims – but not explicitly'. Others noted that 'people still underestimate that VAWG is a technical skill, in a way you don't see with, for example, security sector reform experts', meaning VAWG work is often technically under-resourced. At the same time standalone work on VAWG has a narrow scope, for example, being limited to response work in emergency settings. This observation around a narrow

lens for efforts to address GBV is reflected in a number of strategies: Germany's primary commitment on VAWG is to 'tackle SGBV in armed conflicts', along with a focus on FGM prevention and response; France has committed to mainstreaming VAWG within the education sector, and supporting the Global Fund for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence; and Spain's commitments are largely limited to advocacy and tackling impunity in conflict settings. VAWG response work itself also suffers from being narrowly defined and delivered, and is often limited to emergency settings, and to conflict-related sexual violence in particular.

Lack of attention to VAWG prevention

Notable exceptions exist: the UK's What Works programme was repeatedly highlighted for its impact on VAWG prevention and on widening the evidence base around prevention, as were Canada's Equality Fund and the Spotlight Initiative. However, in general, stakeholders described what is called VAWG prevention work as 'mainly reactive, focused on some big event like International Women's Day or one-off communication pieces', which evidence shows have little to no impact on attitudes or behaviour around VAWG.⁴⁴ Commitments set out in the majority of FFPs, FDPs and related gender strategies do not reflect the evidence on VAWG prevention work as a long-term, cost-effective approach;⁴⁵ as one stakeholder noted, 'it's difficult to get donors to take that long term approach'. VAWG prevention was described as almost entirely absent from humanitarian programming (despite a small but growing evidence base on what works in such settings⁴⁶), where the template for VAWG work is typically limited to immediate response activities and often narrowly focused on conflict-related sexual violence, even in protracted crises or established camp settings.

Implementation challenges arising from donor-driven pressures

Where funding is allocated to evidence-based prevention work, the pressure to demonstrate results rapidly, at scale, and via inflexible programming approaches, was noted as often resulting in ineffective and potentially harmful implementation. One WRO stakeholder described their engagement on a donor-funded prevention programme where they felt pressure to deliver beyond a level of reach they felt comfortable with: 'we weren't being understood as an implementing partner, we were being asked to deliver scale that... [couldn't] be done effectively or without creating harm'. Prevention programming was noted by multiple WRO stakeholders as often failing to take a life-cycle approach, in that adolescent girls tend to be treated either as women or as children, without recognition of the specific behaviours and risks associated with their age.

Stakeholders from multilateral and INGO backgrounds noted that there can be a tendency for countries with FFPs, FDPs or related gender strategies to design VAWG interventions centrally, making it challenging to implement in a way that is contextually grounded, locally owned and flexible. Others noted that to address this, there needs to be investment to ensure the right skills and expertise are available at all levels of the organisation so that policy commitments can be implemented. One stakeholder compared a centrally-designed programme with a separate programme designed by national INGOs and WROs, noting how the two shared similar aims, yet the latter 'had a lot of the flexibility the other programme lacked'. Funding disbursement mechanisms often also fall short of delivering on the aims of FFPs and related strategies; stakeholders commended donor efforts to support transformative prevention approaches such as SASA!⁴⁷ and Stepping Stones,⁴⁸ but described how these programmes often struggle to allow WROs the space and flexibility to implement these approaches to full effect.

Stakeholders described response work as equating to immediate service provision through services such as one-stop-shops and shelters, without an awareness of survivor-centred good practice or a strategy for sustainability. This short-term approach became apparent in Uganda at the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, when a donor's funding for shelters came to an end, causing the majority to close as – after over a decade of implementation – the Government lacked the knowledge and skills to continue their operation.

While FFPs and related strategies were praised for contributing to national laws and policies around VAWG, stakeholders noted how programmes focused on legislative change rarely include sufficient time and budget to support their (safe) implementation once they are passed. One stakeholder described how, ‘in East Africa, once a law is passed, everyone gets comfortable and imagines the police and law are going to work wonders’. They highlighted the need for longer term work in order for service providers to internalise the values necessary to support VAWG response (and prevention) work.⁴⁹

Approaches to engaging men and boys

Numerous stakeholders – particularly those from WROs – expressed concern over donor approaches to engaging men and boys on VAWG prevention and response, describing the failure to engage men and boys alongside women and girls (as opposed to separately to, or not at all) as a barrier to tackling the norms underpinning VAWG. WRO stakeholders cited examples of where efforts to engage men without women’s involvement caused spaces for women to shrink and their needs to be decentred. They also described how VAWG programmes that do not engage men or boys at all tend to be either ineffective or risk causing backlash. As one stakeholder said, ‘men need to be involved otherwise they are excluded and think it isn’t their problem’, while another highlighted how, without men’s engagement, women’s and men’s issues can be pitted against one another, causing backlash against feminist aims. These reflections tally with existing evidence on engaging men in prevention efforts, which both discourages programming that does not include women, and finds that engaging women’s male partners and, in some cases, families, can increase an intervention’s success.⁵⁰

Monitoring impact on VAWG & accountability

Countries have struggled to effectively monitor and tell stories of impact achieved as a result of their FFPs and related strategies, and VAWG is often not consistently or adequately included in policy accountability frameworks. Stakeholders engaged in FFP analysis noted how Canada has had perhaps the most success in tracking its considerable FDP impact, having developed ambitious and intersectional monitoring tools. However they have faced significant challenges around information management.⁵¹ Sweden had committed to telling a story of impact around VAWG prevention and response, and had invested in an independent evaluation to do so.⁵² However, this was not released before the policy was withdrawn in 2022. Mexico was noted as having failed to report on progress towards achieving its (well-articulated) goals around GBV. France’s Strategy was initially praised for its accountability framework;⁵³ however, stakeholders noted how France has also struggled to tell a compelling story of impact.



Woman making herself aware about various laws regarding domestic violence through the leaflets provided by the mobile information service under P.A.C.E at community project implemented by CARE Bangladesh. This project aims to enhance the capacity of urban women migrant workers for advancement in personal, professional and community life by providing them with necessary counsel and training. Konabari, Gazipur. © Tapash Paul/CARE

In programme monitoring, stakeholders highlighted concerns around donors' common focus on scale and reach in terms of beneficiary numbers rather than transformative potential or sustainability. They described a focus on 'the ultimate end reduction of violence, without tracking other factors like whether relevant laws are being implemented, or how far views on violence have shifted'. As one person noted, 'we can share reports that capture impact in terms of red, yellow and green, but how much was related to marginalised groups? What will be sustained? If we changed attitudes, how?' This focus on scale without an accompanying focus on rights, intersectionality or sustainability was described as promoting ineffective or harmful programming, and perpetuating the depoliticisation of VAWG.

Disconnect with wider international and domestic policies and trends

A critical gap in existing FFPs and related strategies concerns the disconnect between these policies and other international policies and trends. FFP advocates have called for feminist principles to be embedded across all areas of international engagement, including aid, trade, defence, diplomacy, and immigration policy.⁵⁴ Doing so has the potential to drive increased resources and political will to addressing VAWG. However, policies in these areas can also serve to undermine commitments to tackle VAWG (and gender inequality) overseas. The links between arms sales and VAWG are well established⁵⁵ for example, but there is little evidence of governments prioritising this in their approach. Climate change is also an increasing driver of VAWG. Although there are efforts to integrate gender into climate policy, for example, through the UNFCCC Gender Action Plan,⁵⁶ there are also calls towards governments, particularly in the Global North, to move faster to combat the climate crisis,⁵⁷ and to integrate gender equality more effectively into climate policies and finance.⁵⁸ Others have noted that traditional approaches to areas such as defence and security are often built on patriarchal norms, and applying a feminist lens would require a transformative approach to dismantle these.⁵⁹

In recent years there has also been increasing backlash against gender equality and a rise in anti-gender equality movements. As stakeholders from India noted, 'this backlash against bodily autonomy – it sends reverberations across India, and the world'. It was noted that governments with FFPs, FDPs and related international strategies could prioritise countering this through their global leadership, and ensuring that their domestic policies do not undermine these efforts, for example, through support for SRHR and LGBTQI+ communities. Finally, stakeholders noted the insecurity associated with international gender policies, citing the volatility of the USA's foreign policy under Trump and Sweden's withdrawal of its FFP in 2022 as examples of such strategies being deprioritised according to shifts in political leadership, thereby undermining transformative VAWG work that typically (albeit not always⁶⁰) requires longer term engagement.⁶¹

Opportunities

Creating shared learning agendas

Stakeholders highlighted the need for more effective information sharing around FFPs, FDPs, and international gender strategies, and the growing opportunities to do this as existing policies mature. The benefits of improved information sharing were emphasised between countries with FFPs, between FFP and non-FFP countries, North-South, and South-South. One stakeholder noted how the USA's emphasis on both VAWG and promoting local ownership in its Gender Equality Strategy is relatively new, and that the USA would benefit from learning the lessons of countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands on these areas – particularly around the issue of programming flexibility. The Netherlands' plans to host an FFP-focused summit in late 2023 presents a promising opportunity for this kind of information sharing.⁶² Others referenced the UK's approach to gathering evidence and monitoring impact on What Works and hoped the UK would 'come forward as a leader to guide other countries on showing robust MEL approaches on VAWG and its potential to create a knowledge hub'.

Box 2 – Mexico, and the role of domestic and international policy in tackling VAWG

Mexico was the first country in Latin America and the Global South to develop an FFP. Mexico's FFP has been described by the International Center for Research on Women as 'pretty close' to a gold standard FFP based on consultations with feminist organisations globally.⁶³ Mexico was noted by stakeholders as having played a vocal role defending and promoting the work of feminist Human Rights Defenders in multilateral settings 'in a way that other countries aren't'. It was also described as being 'uniquely poised to promote the Women, Peace and Security agenda internationally while simultaneously expanding its protection and support of women peacebuilders' endeavours in its crime-stricken areas' through its tenure as a non-elected member of the UN Security Council.⁶⁴ This link between domestic and international focus is clear in Mexico's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, which includes a Strategic Objective to 'mainstream gender into peacebuilding and security processes in the national territory', and actions on 'promoting the training of police institutions in the prevention of VAWG, in particular SGBV' and 'create police forces specialised in the prevention, investigation and prosecution of VAWG'.

However, Mexico has come under fire from feminists within the country for the contradictions between its ambition of 'combatting all forms of GBV' with its high rates of domestic GBV and femicide, and its government's historic ambivalence to both GBV prevalence and feminism in general. As with all FFP and FDP countries, Mexico has struggled to tell a compelling story of change linked to its FFP, and continues to face significant challenges in tackling widespread VAWG domestically. Nevertheless, in setting out an ambitious, intersectional vision for FFP, Mexico signalled a departure from the notion that such policies are tools available only to wealthier countries in the Global North. That the FFP's launch intensified Mexican feminists' focus on the country's struggles with gender inequality is perhaps something other countries could learn from. As one stakeholder noted, 'now would be a good time for some soul-searching amongst donor countries about the challenges they themselves face around women's rights and equalities'.

Stakeholders from India noted how domestic conversations around FFP tend to be driven by governments in the Global North rather than governments or organisations in the Global South, and that establishing South-South communities of practice could be a useful mechanism for establishing Southern positions and voice on the topic. Linked to this, stakeholders felt having vocal champions in each country engaging around FFPs – whether from countries that have already developed an FFP related strategy or are looking to develop one – would also support more effective networking and information sharing, particularly for sub-national WROs looking to either advocate for policy change or implement FFP-backed programming.

Greater engagement with, leadership of, and investment in, WROs and organisations led by and for marginalised groups

Given the modest but significant increases in funding dedicated to localised, women-led programming, FFPs, FDPs and related strategies present an opportunity to more meaningfully engage a wider range of WROs and organisations led by and for marginalised groups. WRO stakeholders have praised donors' engagement with national governments, but also called on donors to recognise the limitations of this approach and promote a better balance of government and non-government actors: 'when government takes the lead, there is what they can and cannot do – they will not mobilise women, men and communities to end VAWG – this is work that is led and championed by women and girls'. INGO and multilateral stakeholders outlined the need to 'create better pathways to strengthen WRO

engagement', and to use existing evidence⁶⁵ on effective funding modalities for smaller and less formalised organisations to avoid always calling on 'the usual suspects' in a given context. Priming these pathways will require an investment of time, as was the case on the What Works programme, which aims to centre WROs through its innovation grants component. What Works, along with Canada's Equality Fund and the Netherlands-supported Leading from the South fund⁶⁶ – both of which were designed with extensive inputs from feminist organisations and women's funds – were cited as strong examples from which other countries could learn. Building on this, as well as consulting on funding modalities, others noted the potential to include these groups in the design and conceptualisation of an FFP or FDP overall. This would be in support of an aim for FFPs, FDPs and related international strategies moving from being focused on women and girls, to being led by those they intend to benefit.

Strengthening the evidence base on VAWG

Finally, stakeholders highlighted the opportunity to contribute to the evidence base on VAWG, including through promoting a more feminist framing of what evidence is valued and used. An ongoing lack of gender-disaggregated data was noted as a key challenge to doing intersectional VAWG programming; this issue was repeatedly raised by WROs during recent GEF processes, and is a commitment in a number of FFPs, FDPs, and related strategies.⁶⁷ Internationally focused stakeholders noted how the case for prevention work often 'leans heavily on moral arguments, without...using evidence to show it's cost-effective as well as moral'. This is despite growing evidence of the economic costs of VAWG, including through lost individual and family income, the removal of productive individuals from the workplace, and an overall impact on the economy, alongside wide-ranging social costs that include the undermining of women's empowerment, leadership, agency, ability to negotiate their safety, and the knock-on intergenerational impacts of VAWG.⁶⁸

WRO and INGO stakeholders argued that support to grass-roots organisations presents an opportunity to gather and present locally generated innovation and evidence that has historically been disregarded as 'unscientific'. As one stakeholder noted, '[local] innovation is happening and lots of evidence is coming out, but...the people who make the decisions disregard that evidence'. Another argued that, given the resourcing struggles facing the VAWG community, donors are missing an opportunity to use locally-driven research already being generated around VAWG prevention and response.

4 Recommendations for governments

- 1 Use the full range of foreign policy levers to prioritise VAWG, and align foreign policy aims for gender equality with domestic policies**, ensuring coherence across domestic and foreign policy. Increase the use of diplomacy and global leadership to support progress on VAWG, integrate evidence based VAWG prevention and response into policies such as security, defence, trade and climate change. Assess policy approaches for their impact on the rights of women and girls, and seek to integrate intersectional approaches into policy design and prioritisation.
- 2 Increase funding for standalone programming on VAWG, including, but also beyond VAWG response work.** This should build on the existing evidence base on VAWG prevention and response, recognising the proven economic and social costs of inaction and approaching VAWG prevention as a long-term, cost-effective approach, and the evidence of the effectiveness of combined prevention and response programming. Standalone VAWG programmes should take holistic approaches that seek to address multiple, intersecting

forms of violence that women and girls experience beyond sexual violence in conflict, including the most commonly experienced forms (e.g. intimate partner violence, domestic violence) and those that intersect with other key sectors for achieving gender equality (e.g. violence in schools, violence in and to/from the workplace).

- 3** **Commit to developing and implementing evidence-based, transformative approaches to VAWG prevention and response that centre the needs and voices of women and girls with a focus on sustainable impacts**, including in humanitarian and conflict settings. This should include: integrating VAWG into all foreign policy levers; allocating adequate resourcing (for both interventions and technical expertise); recognising the limitations of one-off advocacy events and awareness raising efforts in prevention work; taking a longer-term survivor-centred approach to response work; expanding response work beyond immediate support and work on conflict-related sexual violence; elevating locally-generated research that has historically been excluded from the evidence base on prevention and response; involving men and boys using language and designing interventions that recognise women and girls as overwhelmingly impacted by male violence and facilitate their leadership. Ensure there is the expertise and capacity needed to design and invest in funds that support programmes at a regional, national or subnational level based on a framework of core principles and objectives, as opposed to centrally designed programmes that can lack local ownership and flexibility.
- 4** **Increase the overall percentage of gender-focused commitments within ODA spend, and continue to build on commitments to increase the percentage of gender-focused funding going directly to WROs.** Identify and publish strategies for increasing the proportion of ODA spend which is both principally and significantly focused on gender equality. Work with WROs to establish or refine funding mechanisms that are accessible; provide flexible, long term, core funding; allow for intersectional implementation and tracking; and encourage innovation and piloting around VAWG prevention and response to build the VAWG evidence base.
- 5** **Track the implementation and impact of foreign and development policy on VAWG (standalone and as part of a mainstreaming approach)**, in line with the recommendations put forward by WROs as part of the UN Women Generation Equality Forum and Women7 processes, and as part of accountability processes built into gender-focused policies.⁶⁹ Establish opportunities to learn from the successes and challenges of existing tracking efforts, working with WROs to balance of quantitative and qualitative indicators that reflect the political and intersectional nature of VAWG and capture transformative change alongside scale and reach.
- 6** **Explore options for establishing collective learning processes, such as a FFP/FDP Community of Practice**, to facilitate North-North, South-South and North-South learning on key topics relating to VAWG (and beyond), including best practice on the use of foreign policy levers to address VAWG, generation and use of evidence, tracking and accountability mechanisms, bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality, and strategies to safeguard policy commitments over the long term. Consider identifying FFP/FDP 'champions' within interested countries.

Endnotes

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