

Mainstreamed but sidelined: Global funding for gender equality

POLICY BRIEF

GRACE STANHOPE

May 2026

LOWY INSTITUTE

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Cover image: Closing of the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women held in Conference Room 4 at United Nations Headquarters on 21 March 2025. (UN Women/Flickr)

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This report is produced by the Lowy Institute's Indo-Pacific Development Centre, which receives financial support from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Responsibility for the views, information, or advice expressed in this report is that of the author. The contents of this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Lowy Institute or the Australian government.

Published 6 May 2026

31 Bligh Street
Sydney NSW 2000

lowyinstitute.org
+61 2 8238 9000

Version 2026-05-04.A6A8B94

Contents

Key findings	4
Executive summary	5
What is the problem?	5
What should be done?	5
Introduction	6
Half the sky is falling in	7
Keeping SDG 5 alive	8
Missing in action on the front lines	11
How the twin tracks diverged	13
From mainstreaming to upstreaming	15
A funding target and a coalition	16
Conclusion	18
Recommendations	19
Acknowledgements	20
Annex	21
Notes	22

Key findings

- Basic rights and wellbeing outcomes for women and girls globally are regressing or stalling. Cuts to foreign aid and a growing hostility towards gender equality programs risk eroding hard-won gains and turning the trend into a crisis.
- Rising international aid for gender equality has disguised a stagnation of targeted funding for core issues such as healthcare, education, physical safety, and legal rights. This funding gap is widest in conflict zones and disaster-affected areas, where women and girls are often the most at risk and the least supported.
- The most effective solution is to “upstream” gender equality aid directly into international development funding of core sectors, rather than treating it as an add-on. Anchoring this approach with a clear funding commitment would help protect these programs and deliver better outcomes for the world’s most vulnerable women and girls.

Executive summary

What is the problem?

Gender equality is central to sustainable development and is a crucial enabler of global security, stability, and prosperity. Yet progress is stagnating or regressing across much of the developing world, especially in core areas related to basic needs, access to essential services, personal safety, and women's rights. Meanwhile, international support is collapsing amid political opposition to gender equality initiatives and steep cuts to foreign aid by a number of donors, most notably the United States.

Despite this pullback, several donor countries, including Australia and key European nations, retain strong policy commitments to supporting international gender equality. These states need to strengthen their political will in order to rejuvenate international cooperation on gender equality in line with their own stated values and strategic interests.

What should be done?

In previous decades, donor countries directed significant development finance towards gender mainstreaming — the process of integrating gender equality goals into development investment strategies. However, this growth has disguised critical gaps that now require urgent correction. Globally, just 2.3% of total aid annually is spent principally on ensuring women's access to healthcare, education, nutrition, sanitation, shelter, safety, and rights — of which more than half is set to disappear in aid cuts. Most spending for gender equality is instead directed to gender mainstreaming, essentially absorbing the funding into infrastructure and other economic projects. While mainstreaming is important, it has effectively sidelined focus on the most acute challenges to gender equality, particularly in humanitarian settings and fragile contexts. As foreign aid for gender equality shrinks, it is vital to refocus on the fundamentals where aid is most needed.

Alongside sustained mainstreaming, a concerted effort is required to “upstream” gender equality aid by increasing spending in sectors that target the most urgent risks to the most vulnerable women. Those core sectors include primary needs such as sanitation, nutrition, fundamental healthcare, primary education, women's rights, safety in conflict and disaster zones, and protection from gender-based violence. To operationalise this effort, a funding target for principal gender equality objectives would need to be established, anchored by a coalition of developed and developing states, with an explicit focus on core sectors. The humanitarian sector presents a key starting point where the greatest need meets the most severe funding gap.

Introduction

At the international level, development assistance is a primary policy lever for promoting gender equality. Since the adoption 30 years ago of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action — a landmark UN resolution for achieving gender equality — the “mainstreaming” of gender financing has driven the increased integration of gender equality objectives into development programs.¹ A virtual consensus on the importance of gender equality, exemplified by the unanimous adoption of UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 in 2015, has existed at the global level until recently. However, a political backlash in the United States and some parts of Europe has begun to erode international support.² Foreign aid budgets are being slashed by major donors, with total global aid projected to fall by 37% by 2027 given dramatic contractions from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Canada, and several smaller European and Asian donors.³ Aid for gender equality has been singled out by the United States and the Netherlands. The result is that resources available for gender equality are being decimated, compounding a financing gap already in the hundreds of billions of dollars annually.⁴

The consequences are already visible. Cost-cutting reforms to the multilateral system, such as the potential merger of UN Women and the Population Fund, risk weakening the global architecture.⁵ In 2025, the United States cancelled projects designed to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in Guatemala, support adolescent girls in slums in the Democratic Republic of Congo, operate maternal care programs in Afghanistan, and fund reproductive healthcare in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and Kenya.⁶ The Trump administration’s expansion of the Mexico City Policy means reproductive healthcare will be obstructed globally, with implications even for programs not funded directly by the United States.⁷ These are the kinds of frontline interventions where aid is most directly lifesaving and the funding gap is most acute.

Despite this faltering in resolve, most donor governments remain committed in principle to gender equality, and there is a broad-based constituency for action encompassing states from all regions and levels of development. Amid weakening progress on gender equality and steep aid cuts, this paper argues that the path forward requires a strategic shift. International efforts promoting gender equality have become excessively focused on mainstreaming approaches with an emphasis on the downstream economic dimensions of gender inequality. The focus must shift upstream, to core gender equality interventions targeting the most acute challenges facing the most vulnerable women and girls. A funding target offers a compelling mechanism to rebalance.

Half the sky is falling in

Gender equality is a fundamental human right. It is also instrumentally important as an enabler of global economic development, security, and stability. Gender equality in employment, education, health, law, finance, and digital access has been shown to support economic growth in developing countries.⁸ The International Monetary Fund treats gender equality as “macro-critical”, noting that reduced gender disparities are associated with higher economic growth and productivity, greater social stability, and lower income inequality.⁹ Women’s empowerment is demonstrably correlated with reduced rates of conflict, and the participation of women as negotiators and signatories to peace agreements is linked to the durability of peace settlements.¹⁰

Yet outcomes for women and girls have stagnated or regressed since the Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹ Much of the deterioration has occurred at the core level of basic needs, essential services, and personal safety. Gender gaps have widened in the prevalence of food insecurity.¹² Rates of extreme poverty have plateaued for women at a higher level than for men.¹³ Women’s agency over sexual and reproductive health decision-making has regressed in many countries.¹⁴ Intimate partner violence has decreased by just 0.2% globally in the past two decades.¹⁵ In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, political violence targeting women and rates of conflict-related sexual violence have risen, while women’s participation as negotiators in formal peace processes has stalled at less than 15%.¹⁶ In least developed countries, rates of adolescent births are rising.¹⁷ Climate crises are elevating the risk of child marriage and female genital mutilation.¹⁸ Together, these trends illustrate deterioration in conditions for women and girls in core sectors most dependent on targeted, lifesaving aid.

Beyond these core areas, progress has also been eroded in political representation at the cabinet or ministerial level as well as at local and national government levels worldwide.¹⁹ Gender disparity has worsened in internet and smartphone access, especially in least developed countries, and climate-driven displacement, education, and care burdens have increased, especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.²⁰ SDG5 is one of four sustainable development goals for which not a single target or indicator is on track to be achieved.

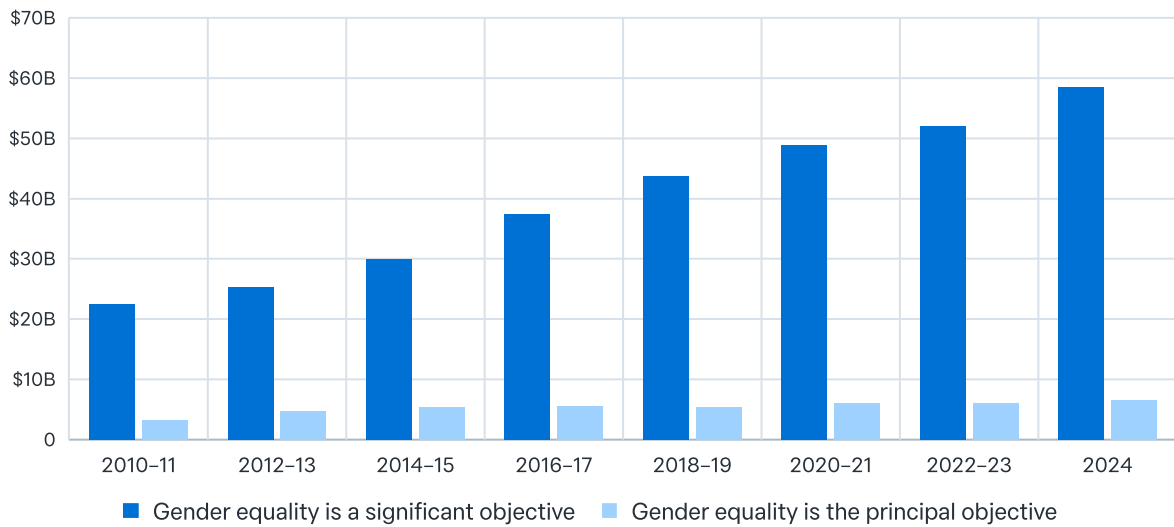
Keeping SDG 5 alive

At first glance, the global funding picture for gender equality can seem encouraging. The doctrine of mainstreaming gender finance has driven increased integration of gender equality objectives into development programs. But this headline growth is misleading, driven almost entirely by growth in spending that targets gender equality as a secondary objective. In fact, the data shows that this paradigm has sidelined the fundamentals of gender equality.

The trend is evident in the official development assistance (ODA) spending of donors in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC), a club of mostly rich donor countries that abide by an agreed set of standards.²¹

The OECD-DAC uses two categories to track gender equality in ODA. Projects where gender equality is the primary objective are allocated a "principal" score. The test for a principally focused project is existential: whether the project would have been undertaken without the gender equality objective.²² Examples include funding for reproductive healthcare services, women's rights organisations, or women's shelters. Projects that incorporate gender equality as a secondary objective alongside other goals (such as poverty alleviation, climate change mitigation, or disability inclusion) are allocated a "significant" score. Examples include a school construction project that ensures adequate sanitation facilities for girls, a transport project that provides extra lighting for women's safety, or a labour participation program that recognises unpaid care burdens. Although an imperfect equivalence, spending in the significant category is taken here to approximate mainstreaming.

FIGURE 1
Mainstreaming accelerates while core funding stalls
 Development Assistance Committee bilateral allocable disbursements, constant 2023 US\$

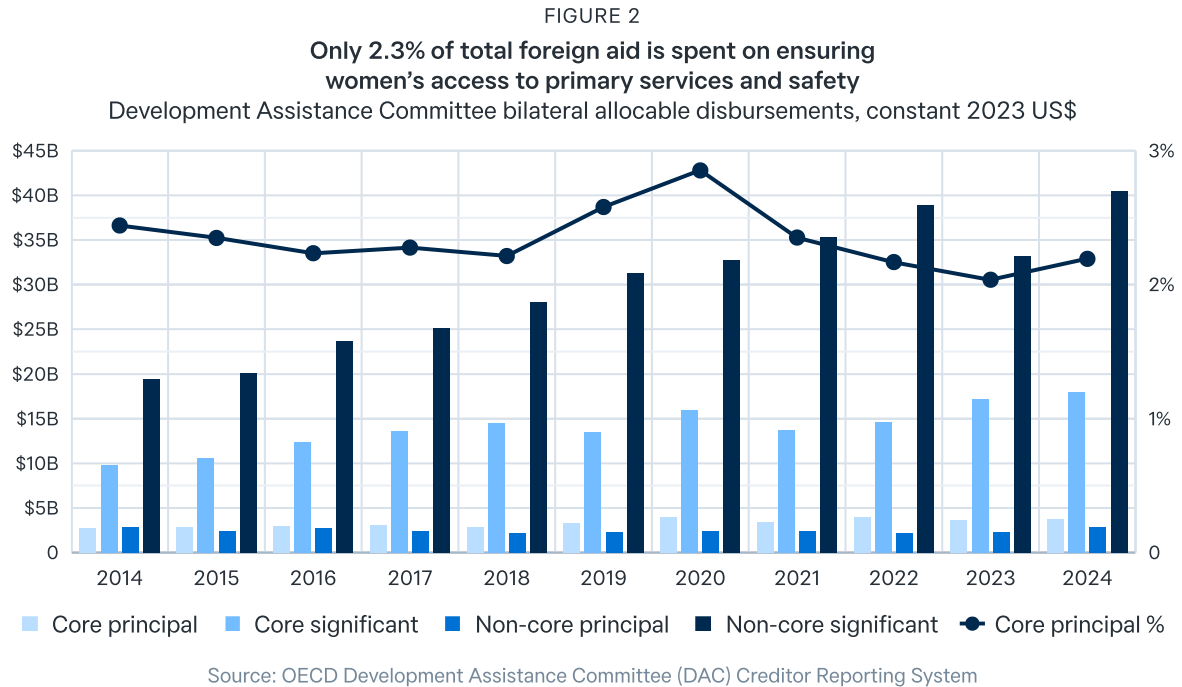


Source: OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Creditor Reporting System

As is clear from Figure 1, there has been a rapid and sustained increase in ODA reported as integrating gender equality as a significant objective. The volume has more than tripled in real terms since 2010, from US\$25 billion to US\$65 billion in 2024. Much of this growth has occurred in non-core or downstream sectors, such as transport, energy, public finance management, and business services. By contrast, this growth has not been accompanied by a proportional increase in principal ODA, which remains a minor component (4%) of ODA provided. Funding for ending violence against women and girls, and direct funding to women’s rights organisations, together account for less than 1% of total ODA.

This divergence is most evident where it is needed the most: in supporting women’s access to essential services, personal security, and freedoms. In this paper, core sectors are those which address primary needs such as sanitation and nutrition, basic services such as fundamental healthcare and primary education, safety in conflict or disaster zones and from gender-based violence, and women’s rights.²³ There is no question that gender equality is essential across every sector, and there are valid arguments to include a much wider array of activities. This deliberately narrow selection is an imperfect attempt to grapple with urgent resource constraints and to identify where ODA — as opposed to other public or private finance — is most important.

In all, just US\$3.3 billion annually, or 2.3% of global foreign aid, is spent principally on gender equality in core sectors (see Figure 2). Given announcements of impending funding cuts, this amount is likely to halve by 2028.



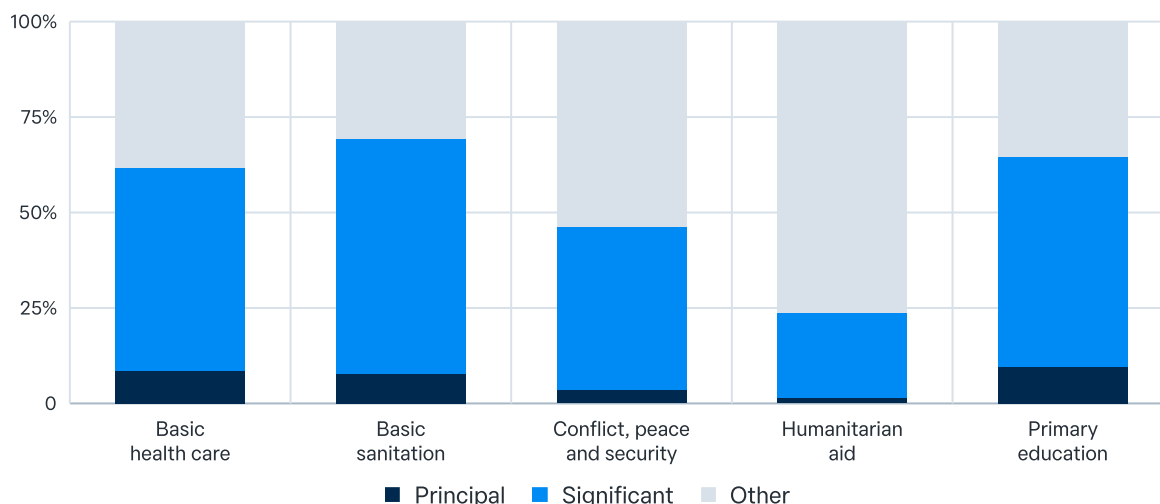
Missing in action on the front lines

A sample of five sectors reflects this dynamic. These sectors — basic health-care; basic sanitation; conflict, peace, and security; humanitarian aid; and primary education — were selected to illustrate the “upstream” or “pointy end” of ODA, where aid is fundamentally lifesaving or fulfils basic needs.

FIGURE 3

Core sectors lack principal gender focus

Development Assistance Committee bilateral allocable disbursements, 2013–23 cumulative, constant 2023 US\$ (millions)

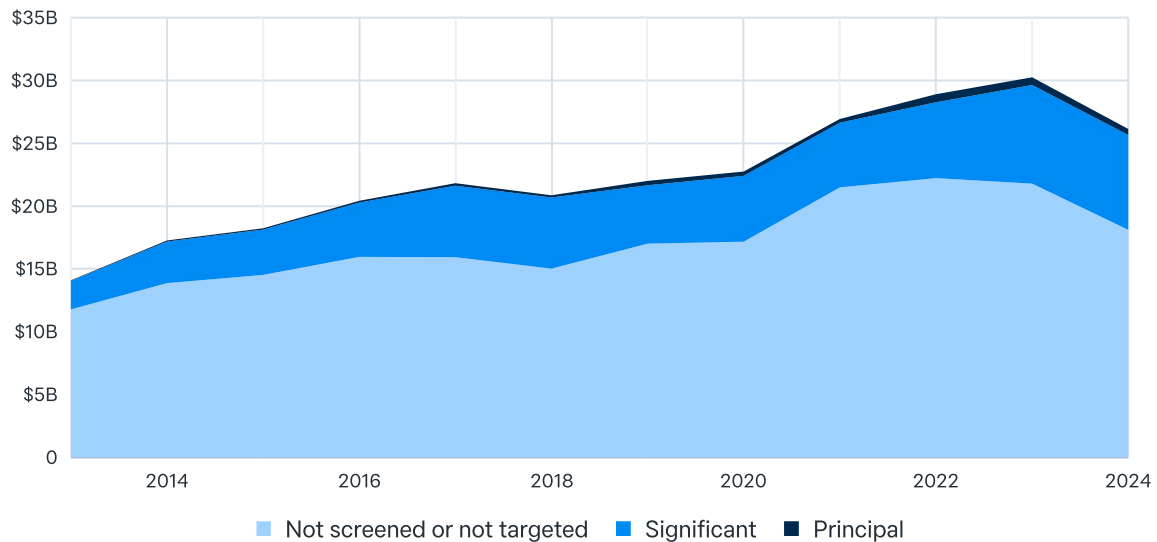


Source: OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Creditor Reporting System

Evidence clearly shows gendered challenges in each of these sectors, with disproportionate impacts and burdens felt by women and girls. Despite living longer than men, women spend 25% more of their lives in poor health.²⁴ Girls and women are more likely to be responsible for fetching water.²⁵ In 2024, there was an 87% increase in verified instances of conflict-related sexual violence.²⁶ Women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men in natural disasters.²⁷ And despite much improvement, girls are still less likely than boys globally to be enrolled in primary education.²⁸ However, across these sectors from 2013 to 2023, only 6% of disbursed ODA was reported to target gender equality as the principal objective (see Figure 3).

The humanitarian assistance sector is particularly striking for its lack of gender equality aid.²⁹ Despite overwhelming evidence that conflict and disasters disproportionately affect women and girls, ODA provided in humanitarian crises performs poorly against gender equality markers.³⁰ From 2013 to 2024, just 1.2% of humanitarian aid was targeted primarily for gender equality, and the volume in fact dropped in 2023 and again in 2024 (see Figure 4). The share of humanitarian spending with significant gender equality objectives (22%) was also much lower than the average for all sectors (32%). Beyond the humanitarian sector, ODA to extremely fragile and conflict-affected countries also tends to have a low focus on gender equality. For example, Afghanistan received a substantially lower share of gender equality aid from 2021 to 2024 (34%) than the global average (43%).

FIGURE 4
Gender equality funding barely registers in emergencies
 Development Assistance Committee bilateral allocable disbursements in humanitarian sector, constant 2024 US\$



Source: OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Creditor Reporting System

How the twin tracks diverged

The “twin tracks” of mainstreaming and targeted activities were designed to work in harmony, both essential to a comprehensive gender equality agenda. Structural factors underlying the political economy of gender equality funding explain how the twin tracks began to diverge, and why a fresh approach is needed to move beyond mainstreaming.

Mainstreaming requires no additional allocation of aid, making it palatable for domestic donor country politics and shielding it from budget cuts. However, the flexibility that underpins its wide adoption by donor governments can also threaten its integrity. Incentive structures within donor organisations have led to inflated or superficial reporting that often does not reflect the true intentions or impacts of activities.³¹ Mainstreaming has attracted criticism for its procedural or technical rather than political focus, and its lack of conceptual clarity.³²

Instances of mission creep — the gradual and often unintentional expansion of a project beyond its original scope — illustrate this evolution. Across 2019–22, 26% of projects with a significant gender equality objective also targeted climate adaptation, compared to 13.5% of projects with a principal gender equality objective. The incidence of coupled objectives (gender and adaptation) grew sharply over that time to reach 34.1% of projects in 2022. In some interpretations, this is a positive evolution that shows donors are actively considering the well-evidenced intersection of climate and gender. A less generous reading concludes that aid activities are being overloaded with targets beyond what is reasonably achievable, diluting impact in any of the nominated policy areas.

The overreliance on mainstreaming is reinforced by the popular “smart economics” approach in gender equality and development policy, championed by the World Bank.³³ The theory seeks to build momentum and action for women’s empowerment on the basis that women as a workforce and consumer class are underutilised economic resources.³⁴ While the smart economics framework has been effective in elevating the issue of gender equality to a central public policy imperative, it directs resources for gender equality towards labour and financial sectors, unintentionally shifting focus away from core, non-economic sectors.

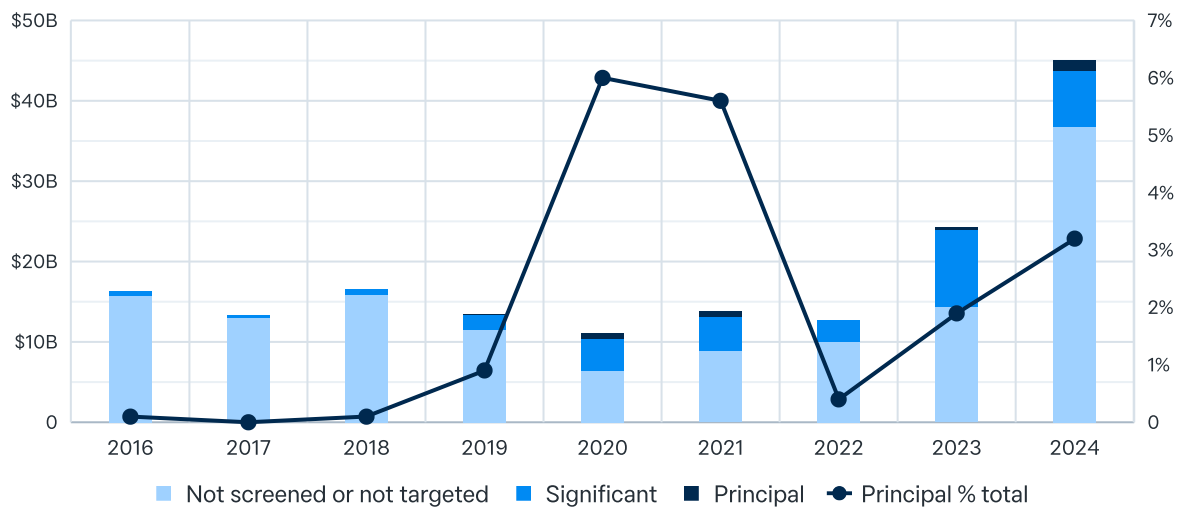
The mission has, to date, failed to incorporate emerging or non-traditional development assistance providers outside of the DAC. South–South development cooperation, a framework for collaboration and knowledge exchange between developing countries, rarely involves an explicit focus on gender equality, and even newer DAC donors are less than half as likely to

provide gender equality aid as more established, traditional donors.³⁵ A major exception appears to be recent announcements by China, the world’s largest non-DAC donor.³⁶

A focus on gender equality is also missing in non-ODA development assistance (non-concessional loans, export credits, blended finance, and private sector instruments) provided by traditional donors. Non-ODA development finance records very low volumes of gender equality integration, especially in the principal category (see Figure 5). Large-scale non-ODA public health programs with gender equality mainstreaming saw an increase in 2020–21, but this growth was not sustained. Where we do see integration through private sector mobilisation and non-concessional public finance, it is reliably concentrated in more commercially oriented sectors such as transport and financial services, and in middle-income economies.

There is good reason for this; these mechanisms are revenue-seeking, and therefore ill-suited to upstream activities that do not directly generate profit.³⁷ Innovative financing and gender lens investing can contribute to a fairer financial system and enhance women’s economic empowerment, but remain marginal and indirect tools when it comes to the most acute challenges and fragile contexts.

FIGURE 5
Development finance flows miss the mark
 Other official flows and private sector instruments disbursed by Development Assistance Committee, constant 2024 US\$



Source: OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Creditor Reporting System

From mainstreaming to upstreaming

A revitalised international gender equality movement should shift from a focus on mainstreaming to “upstreaming” — where aid is targeted to the fundamentals of women’s personal security and freedom. This is not to advocate for a restricted definition of gender equality, but to ensure scarce aid flows are laser-focused on need and impact.

As ODA budgets contract and political support wanes, impact and effectiveness are paramount.³⁸ Even progressive donor governments have proven sensitive to domestic pressure on gender equality aid. Unfavourable media coverage of spending on overseas gender initiatives immediately preceded Canada’s November 2025 cancellation of its feminist foreign policy.³⁹ The Netherlands, until recently a champion of feminist foreign policy, announced it would cease funding for women’s rights and gender equality aid from 2027, in explicit deference to “relevance for the Dutch taxpayer”, though limited funding is now available to 2030.⁴⁰

Increasingly restricted flows of ODA are therefore best directed to well-evidenced, high-impact interventions, minimising political exposure to socially conservative backlash while maximising defensible results.⁴¹ Studies show that the single most important and consistent factor driving gender equality policy change is feminist advocacy, often directly enabled by international funding for domestic women’s rights organisations.⁴² While actual causality in aid effectiveness is notoriously difficult to determine, evidence suggests that health and education are generally among the top sectors for effective interventions, and that activities targeting “upstream” issues such as gender-based violence, maternal mortality, and girls’ education are associated with improved “downstream” outcomes such as women’s political representation and economic empowerment.⁴³ A project focused on a single, well-defined goal is more likely to deliver better development outcomes and stronger political returns than one stretched across multiple objectives where impact is diluted and difficult to measure.⁴⁴

Upstreaming need not mean abandoning mainstreaming, which remains an important policy tool. But achieving success for international gender equality, and navigating a pathway through budget cuts, backsliding progress, and political resistance, will require an increased focus on core issues for the most vulnerable women and girls.

A funding target and a coalition

A funding target has already been proposed many times over by feminist advocates and policy analysts.⁴⁵ A goal to increase principal spending to, for example, 10% of total bilateral ODA is one option. Alternatives include a relative progression (for example, a commitment to increase principal spending by a specified amount annually or double it within five years) or an absolute volume goal, such as the 2005 G8 Gleneagles pledge for total foreign aid. Public annual reporting against the chosen metric would be an essential component to ensure accountability.

Within the high-level funding goal should be a commitment to direct most of that increase to core sectors. A precedent can be found in the international climate finance architecture, where the New Collective Quantified Goal includes a sub-goal for climate adaptation. This two-tiered approach would entrench upstreaming in sector allocation as well as an increase in availability of principal funding.

The most obvious forums for operationalising the upstreaming mandate would be the OECD-DAC or the United Nations. However, given the DAC's relatively exclusive membership, a group of states beyond its current roster would likely ensure more enduring political viability. The United Nations might previously have been another natural home for this initiative, but with the future of global multilateralism far from certain, an issue-based coalition is the more realistic structure for cooperation.

Recent events, such as the 70th Commission on the Status of Women in New York in March 2026 and the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Feminist Foreign Policy in Paris in October 2025, have demonstrated ongoing, albeit weakened, appetite for international gender equality action from a wide range of states.

There is precedent for gender equality coalitions in the uptake of feminist foreign policies, first championed (and then abandoned) by high-income donor countries such as Sweden and Canada but sustained by Global South countries such as Liberia, Colombia, and Mexico.⁴⁶ Australia, Brazil, Nepal, and Mongolia are among those who have expressed an interest in feminist foreign policy and are members of the Feminist Foreign Policy Plus Group at the United Nations.

An initial grouping of supportive states could include DAC members Australia and Spain, both currently at the forefront of international efforts. Australia has maintained a long-standing focus on gender equality, releasing an International Gender Equality Strategy in 2025 with renewed energy and objectives. In early

2026, Spain launched a Feminist Cooperation Strategy and will host the fifth Ministerial Conference on Feminist Foreign Policy later this year.

The deliberate emphasis on international gender equality by China, especially since the retrenchment of the United States in this space, is a signal that for Beijing at least, it remains an issue worth promoting even (or perhaps especially) in the absence of its erstwhile Western champions. China’s development program has historically emphasised its “non-interference” principle as a point of difference from Western donors. But in 2025, President Xi Jinping announced an additional US\$10 million donation to UN Women, set aside US\$100 million in a fund for development projects for women and girls, and launched the Global Centre for Women’s Capacity Building.⁴⁷ Inclusion of China in a gender equality coalition would expand access to financial resources and likely ease concerns among other developing country members.

Inclusion of South–South and other emerging forms of cooperation would allow for broader participation and a more inclusive model. The principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities in international law — a mechanism whereby nations must address environmental damage, but only based on their economic capabilities — could provide a basis for emerging donors to contribute within their means. The growing localisation agenda, which shifts decision-making from international actors to local communities, also presents an opportunity for developing country governments to formalise a demand signal as recipients, by setting targets for donors in development partnership strategies.

A funding target could be introduced initially in the humanitarian assistance sector, suitable for several reasons. First, this sector is presently one of the worst-performing, and any increase in principal spending would have high impact. Second, humanitarian spending has been partially protected from USAID budget cuts and is therefore better financed relative to other ODA sectors. Third, the humanitarian space is more populated with non-traditional and emerging donors, including non-DAC and philanthropic actors, presenting an opportunity to engage with a broader set of development assistance providers.

Conclusion

The international system for funding gender equality is fractured. Impressive headline figures disguise a hollowed-out core. Underinvestment in a global public good such as gender equality is not only a development failure but a profound foreign policy risk. Women's safety, health, and rights underpin the global stability and security that all nations depend upon.

There are strong policy and political cases for shifting resources upstream, towards the core sectors where needs are most acute and funding has been most neglected. A tiered funding target, backed by a broad coalition of states, would entrench this rebalancing and provide accountability. Doing so is both the most effective path to maximising impact for gender equality and the most pragmatic and principled response to the budget cuts and political backlash now threatening decades of progress.

Recommendations

- Upstream gender equality development projects to core sectors that fulfil basic needs in humanitarian, fragile, conflict-affected, and least-developed country contexts alongside continued investment in mainstreaming efforts.
- Introduce a target for principal gender equality funding. A target set in the form of a proportion of ODA, relative growth, or absolute volume — with the lion's share set aside for core sectors — would safeguard funding for essential services, personal safety, and the rights of women and girls.
- Initially introduce a funding target in the humanitarian sector, where the need is most acute, the politics less volatile, the donor base broader, and the financing safer.
- Build a coalition of forward-leaning states beyond the OECD-DAC, with non-traditional and emerging donors as well as recipients.

Acknowledgements

This report is produced by the Lowy Institute's Indo-Pacific Development Centre, which receives financial support from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

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The author wishes to thank Roland Rajah, Mihai Sora, Clare Caldwell, and Ian Bruce for editorial and design contributions, as well as anonymous peer reviewers for their engaged and constructive comments.

Annex

List of core OECD sectors and corresponding codes.

Sector	Code
Basic drinking water supply	14031
Basic drinking water supply and basic sanitation	14030
Basic health care	12220
Basic nutrition	12240
Basic sanitation	14032
Civilian peace-building, conflict prevention and resolution	15220
Emergency food assistance	72040
Ending violence against women and girls	15180
Facilitation of orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility	15190
Family planning	13030
Food assistance	52010
Household food security programmes	43072
Human rights	15160
Immediate post-emergency reconstruction and rehabilitation	73010
Material relief assistance and services	72010
Participation in international peacekeeping operations	15230
Primary education	11220
Reproductive health care	13020
Social protection	16010
STD control including HIV/AIDS	13040
Women's rights organisations and movements and government institutions	15170

Though arguably not an immediately lifesaving intervention, ODA for women's rights has been included on the grounds that evidence shows it is the single most important factor for reducing violence against women.

Notes

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About the author



Grace Stanhope is a Research Fellow in the Lowy Institute's [Indo-Pacific Development Centre](#) working on the [Southeast Asia Aid Map](#), a tool that tracks and analyses foreign aid and development finance flows to Southeast Asia from 2015 onwards.

Grace joined the Lowy Institute from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in 2023 and previously worked as a sub-editor in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery. She holds a Bachelor of Politics, Philosophy and Economics and a Bachelor of Development Studies from the Australian National University.

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