

# CARE International Submission to the World Bank Group Gender Strategy



This submission sets out CARE International's response to the [Draft World Bank Gender Strategy 2024-2023: Accelerate Gender Equality for a Sustainable, Resilient, and Inclusive Future](#), released for consultation by 30 November 2023.

The submission draws from substantial inputs across the CARE confederation, partners, and coalitions, collated over the course of 6 months. CARE has conducted coordinated responses to the WBG Gender Strategy across its global advocacy work and across the regions (Africa, Asia Pacific, and LAC), participated in consultations organised by the World Bank at national level (Rwanda, Tanzania, Morocco, Malawi), engaged during the informal dialogue phase, several IDA Fora, Civil Society Policy Forum meetings, through statements by senior leadership and coalition papers, and individually/in coalition directly with the Bank's Gender Directorate. CARE's regional and country offices have responded directly to the online survey (including offices in Malawi, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe). Through our networks, CARE has further promoted the survey with partner CSOs and feminist organisations (including through the West Africa Collective Action Lab and feminist en action initiatives).

CARE's submission provides a summary of the key themes that prevailed across the range of consultations, confederation-wide advocacy, and inputs received. It assesses the overall gender strategy's policy direction and ambition, and provides specific inputs on the scale of ambition, strategic priorities (i.e. End Gender-based Violence and Elevate Human Capital, Expand and Enable Economic Opportunities, and Engage Women and Leaders), as well as accountability and implementation. As part of this review, we have identified three game changing priorities that could help shift the dial towards [green and gender-just economies](#) with [caring economies](#) at their heart, and in so doing, position the WBG as a global leader that turns the "urgent imperative" of gender equality into break-through progress for women and girls on the path to a sustainable, resilient and inclusive future.

We trust that these inputs are helpful as you finalise the strategy, and are happy to discuss specific points in more detail. For questions and further inputs please get in touch with Mareen Buschmann, Global Advocacy Lead on Women's Economic Justice, at [buschmann@careinternational.org](mailto:buschmann@careinternational.org).

## **I. CARE's three priorities for the WBG Gender Strategy**

The WBG's Gender Strategy will be launched and implemented in a context of polycrises - in the midst of devastating conflicts and humanitarian crises, the ongoing global pandemic, and a climate emergency that has accelerated, and may be approaching the point of no return. In this context, CARE very much welcomes the new gender strategy being developed as a full new strategy with a view to match the current context of protracted crises (rather than a refresh of the previous strategy), and the extensive consultations the WBG has conducted to do so.

It is very welcome to see a strong focus on gender equality as a human right and “urgent imperative” for equitable economies, societies and political systems. The strategy rightly emphasises the disproportionate negative impact that crises of all kinds have on gender equality and women and girls’ human capital, and it touches on the intersecting nature of inequalities. This is a welcome starting point. CARE encourages the WBG to build on this with bolder ambition, and action that truly meets the scale of challenges and establishes equitable and future-proof systems – to eradicate gender and intersecting inequalities once and for all (please see below for CARE’s three key recommendations).

The current context of polycrises, spanning climate, COVID, and conflict, has set back progress on gender equality to levels that may be hard to course-correct. UN Secretary-General Guterres cautioned earlier this year that if we continue at current slowing rates of progress, [gender equality is almost 300 years away](#), whilst the World Economic Forum warns of a [gender-crisis in the world of work of unprecedented levels](#). The Gender Strategy rightly recognises these impacts. It is key to tackle the root causes of this set-back though, as only then will we be able to put in place the appropriate structures, rights and safety nets that will enable women and girls to withstand the next crisis.

Women and girls are disproportionately impacted by crises because of the structural, and intersecting, inequalities they face. This can manifest in the form of unequal societal systems, discriminatory laws and harmful social norms that perpetuate gender-based violence; [inequity in unpaid care](#) and lack of public care systems and investments; [gender-discrimination in the world of work](#), lack of social protection, barriers to finance and capital, and little or no say in shaping policies, practice and solutions in response to global crises and challenges.

The Gender Strategy thus rightly focusses on the key strategic priorities of tackling GBV, elevating human capital, fostering economic opportunities, and enabling women’s leadership. But to succeed in these areas, the Gender Strategy needs to foster systems change towards equitable structures, placing gender and intersecting inequalities front and centre across all of its work and financing, and truly ensuring women and girls have equitable power and access in decision-making, to shape policies, economies and crisis response.

CARE recommends **three game-changing priorities that the WBG should adopt to ensure its Gender Strategy will lead to ground-breaking progress for women and girls:**

- 1- Place human rights and women’s and girls’ agency at the heart of gender equality, by **fostering systemic change and building equitable structures across the gender strategy’s priorities**. This requires shifting from a focus on enabling/empowering women and girls towards centring their rights, agency, voice and leadership; investing in primary GBV responses in partnership with local women’s networks, coalitions, and women-led organisations (WLOs) working on the issues; building care economies in a way that shifts care responsibility from individual/household levels to the public sector by providing accessible and well-funded care and social systems/services and decent care jobs across child, elderly and disability care; and integrating gender equality across crisis responses and the transition to green economies by prioritising women and girls and other marginalised groups in all policy measures and financing decisions.

- 2- Integrate a **focus on gender and intersecting inequalities across its policy design, financing, implementation, measurement and accountability**. The WBG’s requirement to apply a gender lens across its work and Country Strategy Frameworks, including a focus on intersecting inequality, is welcome. In practice though, only what is measured and financed will be counted. The Bank should conduct, use, finance, and evaluate with sex-age-disability disaggregated data across its work portfolio. It should also place emphasis on implementing action to achieve the gender strategy across all financing processes and capital disbursements. The upcoming IDA21 replenishment has a particularly critical role to play in financing the gender strategy’s activities and implementation. For example, IDA21 should retain gender equality a cross-cutting issue and special theme, and include specific commitments on care and a gender-just green transition.
- 3- Increase ambition on **strengthening women’s and girls’ voice and leadership by centring the voices of diverse groups of women and girls, and the organisations that represent them**, across all decision making processes and funding decisions that will impact their lives. This includes providing flexible, multi-year funding for core operational and management costs to women-led organisations (WLOs) and women’s rights organisations (WROs) as agents of change, ensuring meaningful participation from women and girls including those facing intersecting discrimination, and supporting/financing existing feminist platforms and organisations at local levels.

With its Gender Strategy – and by integrating these three game-changing priorities – the WBG has the unique chance to set ambition high and lead by example to foster ground-breaking progress on gender equality, and beyond. Working towards equitable system change, gender-just financing and accountability, and women’s voice and leadership will pave the way towards the sustainable, resilient and inclusive future that the strategy seeks to build.

## **II. Recommendations on framing, three strategic objectives and accountability**

### **I. Scale of ambition and human rights focus**

Human rights and women’s and girls’ agency are at the heart of gender equality. CARE welcomes the proposed strategy’s focus on gender equality (rather than closing gender gaps). CARE agrees that “gender equality is a human right at the core of development”, but believes the strategy should be more explicit that women and girls are rights bearers with agency to make life choices.

Advancing gender equality is not something States should do just because it makes economic sense, but because States have legal obligations under international human rights, humanitarian law and refugee law. Women and girls therefore are entitled to enjoy the full spectrum of the rights that international law affords them at all times, including during crisis, humanitarian emergency, natural disaster or conflict. This includes, for example:

- the right to full, equal, meaningful and safe participation in decisions that impact their lives;
- the right to be protected from violence (including all forms of GBV) and to have timely access to comprehensive survivor-centred services if violence occurs;
- the right to quality and accessible sexual and reproductive health services.

Relevant binding normative frameworks must be more deliberately leveraged to hold all stakeholders accountable for centring the right to gender equality and for ending impunity when these rights are violated. This includes not only States, who bear primary responsibility for upholding and protecting human rights, but the private sector as well. As elaborated in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, business enterprises are required to comply with all applicable laws and to respect human rights, and give due regard to the different risks that may be faced by women and men in the world of work. Legal instruments like ILO Convention 190 make clear that everyone has the right to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including GBV, and this places a positive responsibility on both States and the private sector to take action to ensure workplaces are safe, workers' rights are upheld, and remedy is provided when breaches occur.

**Specifically, the WBG Gender Strategy should:**

- 1- Put in place a **stronger grounding in a human rights-based approach** to advance gender equality. This reinforces women's and girls' agency over their lives and bolsters the policy's commitment to accountability for gender results.
- 2- Ensure that **relevant binding normative frameworks are leveraged to hold all stakeholders accountable** for centring the right to gender equality, at all levels, and across the WBG's spectrum of work. This includes leveraging frameworks when rights are violated, in both the public and private sector.

## **II. Foundational wellbeing: End gender-based violence & elevate human capital**

In the midst of a context of polycrises, gender equality and women's and girls' foundational wellbeing have regressed, in some cases to historic lows. CARE welcomes the Gender Strategy's focus on addressing two of the core structural areas – gender-based violence (GBV) and human capital foundations through reliable health, education and social protection systems that work for women and girls. Ambitious action on GBV could end one of the biggest human rights violations faced by women and girls that prevents their full participation in public life, and equitable access to health, education and social protection. However, it needs to go further by driving structural change – including by providing support/funding for primary prevention, and working with those WROs and WLOs which provide expertise and access to local communities. The focus on social norms is a good starting point, and CARE encourages the WBG to address gender-discriminatory norms as a root cause for gender inequalities, both in terms of foundational wellbeing, as well as specifically related to GBV, economics, financing and human capital.

**Specifically, the WBG Gender Strategy should:**

1. Increase ambition to **strengthen implementation of GBV prevention, risk mitigation and response**, by advocating for direct funding and support for primary prevention interventions that address the underlying norms, attitudes, and behaviours that lead to GBV. Investments that scale up promising primary prevention approaches, such as [CARE Rwanda's Indashyikirwa](#), have proven to be effective in reducing intimate partner violence. Much of their success stems from their engagement of community members and couples in dialogue and activism to reject violence against women and girls and to build skills for healthy, equal relationships.

2. Integrate an explicit commitment to **end GBV and harassment in the world of work**. Ratification and implementation of the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention C190 could help reduce the risk by preventing, protecting and responding effectively to incidents of abuse, which disproportionately affect women and minorities.
3. Strengthen its **focus on shifting gender-discriminatory social norms by addressing them as a root cause of gender inequality**, particularly in the economic and financial sectors. This should be done through a focus on supporting WLOs and WROs that promote positive gender and social norms; and by amplifying the need for strategies that engage men and boys in projects to shift harmful norms and eradicate GBV and economic disparities between women and men, girls and boys.

### III. Economic Participation: Expand and enable economic opportunities

CARE welcomes the strong emphasis on expanding women's and girls' economic opportunities through action on unpaid care and tapping into the potential of jobs for the future. This is a very welcome starting point which the WBG needs to build on with increased ambition, financing, and action to establish equitable and gender-just structures that centre the priorities of diverse groups of women and girls, including those facing intersecting discrimination, and the organisations that represent them. CARE encourages the WBG to place deliberate emphasis on reaching the most marginalised first with its interventions on economic participation, and to prioritise gender equality and women leaders as agents of change across its economic and climate portfolios. This requires investment in equitable public care and social services and infrastructure, generating decent care jobs, and prioritising women and girls in the transition to green economies.

#### Specifically, the WBG Gender Strategy should:

1. Foster equitable economic systems by **building care economies in a way that shifts care responsibility from individual/household levels to the public sector** by providing accessible and well-funded care and social systems/services and decent care jobs. This includes [accelerating global commitments and targets](#) to provide [10% of public financing for care and social services](#), and to generate [80 million decent care jobs](#).
2. Whilst it is a positive notion to mobilise private sector finance for care, the gender strategy needs to **emphasise that the financing and provision of adequate care systems and services is first and foremost the responsibility of the public sector**. The private sector can and should complement these measures, for instance by instituting flexible work policies and ensuring gender-equitable practices across the value chain.
3. It is very welcome to see the WBG's focus on holistic care systems across child, elderly and disability care, which the Bank should build on by **taking specific policy commitments and setting financing targets across the care sector** – in addition to its current Childcare Initiative.

4. The focus on **cash transfers** to reach women directly is welcome and should be built on by learning from models that work and provide holistic approaches to women's economic justice and financial inclusion. Through CARE's Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) approach we have gathered valuable lessons learnt on what works and what to improve, in terms of policy measures, programming and partnerships. The WBG should build on learnings from such initiatives by funding government programmes that include those community approaches or savings group models.
5. Establish a strong **connection between economic justice and climate justice**: It is imperative to link these two areas for sustainable, gender-just and equitable development. This is especially the case in rural areas where agriculture is the primary economic driver, and rural women are the first to confront the consequences of climate change, in their domestic tasks and in (para)agricultural work. References and action relating to the nexus of gender, conflict, environment and climate crises should be further strengthened, as these crises are deeply interlinked.
6. The WBG should focus on gender equality in the transition to green economies by **prioritising women and girls and the most marginalised in all policy measures and access to financing**. This means enabling women's and girls' equitable and priority access to decent work and jobs for the future, as the current gender crisis in the world of work requires urgent action on addressing deep disparities. Recognising care and social jobs, and other low-carbon jobs, as green jobs and prioritising and funding them with this emphasis would be a good starting point.

#### IV. Leadership: Engage women as leaders

Engaging women leaders is key to achieving gender equality, and CARE welcomes the recognition in the proposed gender strategy of the need to invest in and promote women's leadership. This is critical if we are to dismantle patriarchy and oppressive power structures which stand in the way of progress on gender equality or women's full, equal, meaningful and safe participation in political and public life – and to recognise women and girls as what they are: agents of change. In crises and innovative action, [women and girls are often leading the way](#) and improving their own lives and livelihoods as well as those within their communities. States, international institutions, the private sector and all segments of society must take concrete action to challenge and transform gender norms, value systems and institutional structures that perpetuate exclusion.

CARE stresses the following:

- **Full participation** requires supporting and fully resourcing the inclusion of diverse women at all levels and stages of decision-making, in all contexts, from beginning to end.
- **Equal participation** means taking all possible steps to support diverse women's participation in all decision-making processes with the target of 50 percent.
- **Meaningful participation** means direct, substantive and formal inclusion of diverse women to influence decision-making processes. Participation or consultation without the opportunity to directly influence decisions and outcomes is not meaningful.

- **Safe participation** requires enforcing a zero-tolerance approach to any form of attack, intimidation, retaliation or reprisal against diverse women for their cooperation with the WBG. The WBG must ensure a safe and enabling environment for civil society and women leaders to engage with it, free from any restrictions or barriers.

CARE's experience working across the humanitarian and development nexus shows that targeted interventions are needed to create the conditions for women leaders to safely emerge and take on leadership responsibilities. Programmes and approaches that transform harmful social and gender norms, ensure equitable participation from women and girls, while accompanying men and boys and communities to treat women and girls equally, must be scaled up. This is particularly important in protracted conflict and long-term displacement settings where men and boys' own experiences of violence (sometimes as ex-combatants but also as victims, survivors and witnesses) combined with limited or no means to fulfil their "head of household / family" obligations can lead to trauma, frustrations, substance abuse and may further fuel a cycle of violence. Transforming harmful social and gender norms should therefore be considered a core component of any resilience building and women's leadership initiatives.

Another essential building block for women's leadership is investment in the organisations that represent and support gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, particularly at the local level. Many of these organisations are struggling to keep their doors open in the wake of COVID-19, global economic crises, increasing efforts to rollback hard-won gains for women's rights, and a history of being chronically under-resourced. Yet these local WLOs and WROs tend to be the ones who are able to reach the most marginalised groups because they are trusted and stay and deliver long after international organisations have left. Investing in the long-term sustainability of, and quality service delivery by women's organisations, is an investment in women's leadership and community resilience, which the WBG should increase. When designing policies with gender-equality at its heart, it is critical to be guided by WLO and WRO priorities – often derived from the grass-root and local levels – across an expansive range of issues, from tackling GBV, designing equitable economic systems, to ensuring women's leadership across the spectrum of humanitarian and development policy and practice.

CARE further welcomes the strategy's emphasis on focusing on locally-led solutions. When taking this approach at the country level, the Bank should create space for local initiatives that are based on local priorities, foster and support local markets, and meaningfully consult with local communities at the planning, implementation and evaluation stages of projects. Further, a locally-led approach will require the Bank to work with communities to develop accessible, effective and responsive community feedback mechanisms and learning spaces that capture what is working and ensure these approaches are replicated and ultimately scaled-up. This is a critical way to build trust, forge equal partnerships, and be more accountable to the communities the Bank works with.

#### **Specifically, the WBG Gender Strategy should:**

1. **Strengthen and invest in women's leadership and meaningful participation in decision making**, from national to global levels. It is very welcome to see a standalone commitment to strengthening women's leadership in the gender strategy. Priority should be explicitly placed on strengthening leadership from diverse groups of women, including those experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination. This includes funding women-led and

women's rights organisations as agents of change, gender institutions, as well as encouraging the development and implementation of gender equality national action plans and policies in World Bank countries.

2. **Prioritise investments that will promote the participation of women's organisations in finding local solutions** to challenges like GBV prevention, mitigation and response, designing equitable economic systems and building the care economy, and implementing programmes to counter harmful social and gender norms.
3. Improve the quality of the funding to women's organisations by ensuring that it includes **flexible, multi-year funding for core operational and management costs**, creative direct funding avenues, reduced bureaucratic hurdles and unduly burdensome application and reporting requirements, and technical support. Improve reporting, tracking and coding of investments to ensure that funding to women's organisations is more transparent and there is greater accountability to affected people.
4. **Design policy and practice with women's organisations' priorities at the heart**, across the spectrum of humanitarian, development and climate action.
5. At national and regional level, the WBG should strengthen women's voice and leadership by **financing and supporting existing coalitions and platforms that are already engaged in the issues** it works on, such as child marriage, financial inclusion, GBV (and more) and are pushing for policy change as well as fighting harmful practices.
6. Add a deliberate focus on **investing in women's and girls' leadership in emergencies, as agents of change**: In a world facing escalating crises, women and girls embody strength, perseverance, and resilience. Faced with the horrors of war or the devastation of natural disaster, women are often the first responders; holding families and communities together, carrying children to safety and keeping them fed. Women and girls are the best representatives of their needs in humanitarian crises. They have a nuanced and intimate understanding of their requirements, including the protection risks that affect them and other women in their circumstances. It is time that their unique needs and priorities are resourced and placed at the centre of every humanitarian response.

## V. Accountability and implementation

What you measure is what counts: quality gender analysis depends on the collection and use of disaggregated and intersectional data. CARE welcomes the proposed policy's requirement that a gender lens will be applied across the WBG's work, including a new focus on intersecting inequalities. A quality gender analysis is dependent on quality data, and transformative change in turn depends on the gender analysis being systematically used to inform policy, programming and funding decisions.

As the WBG faces the challenge of collecting, analysing and using sex, age and disability disaggregated (SADD) data to inform its decisions, a 2023 joint report by CARE, UN Women and Tufts University may provide some timely insights on data gaps and blind spots. [\*Sex, age \(and more\) still matter\*](#) found that over the past 10 years, the humanitarian sector has made some progress regarding collecting sex and age disaggregated data and using gender analysis to make sense of it. It is starting



to consider and incorporate disability data collection and analysis, but it remains hesitant around how to consider diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in data collection. Overall, humanitarians rarely incorporate intersectional analysis of disaggregated data. Even in the best cases of collecting, analysing, and using sex-disaggregated data, there is extremely little documentation of how this information was used to inform and improve programming. Accountability mechanisms are notably lacking and where they exist, they lack enforcement.

**Specifically, the WBG should:**

1. Provide **investment in disaggregated data analysis and use it as critical tool to implement evidence-based and impartial programming** that is able to reach and address the needs of the most marginalised. Adequate investment in relevant data disaggregation (by sex, age and disability) and tools like [Rapid Gender Analyses](#) are essential to ensure critical at-risk populations are not rendered invisible, and their specific needs are addressed.
2. Enhance the **monitoring and evaluation of the Gender Strategy by incorporating links to commitments**, such as those outlined at the Generation Equality Forum and the Beijing Declaration, as benchmarks for accountability. Additionally, the Bank should establish a collaborative pathway through the commitments to engage with WLOs and WROs, civil society, governments, and private sector and political stakeholders in implementing these measures.

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