



Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Strategy for gender equality and women's and girls' freedom and empowerment 2025–2028

1. Point of departure and added value

This Strategy governs Sweden's development cooperation for gender equality and women's and girls' freedoms and rights, empowerment and opportunities for the period 2025–2028.

Gender equality is a matter of freedom, a Swedish core value and is fundamental to democracy and democratic development. More gender-equal societies tend to be more democratic, more peaceful and exhibit stronger economic growth. A lack of gender equality and harmful male gender roles affect women and girls as well as boys and men.

The basic premise of the Government's work on gender equality is the equal value of every individual. Sweden and Swedish development assistance should be a driving force for gender equality with particular focus on strengthening women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights and freedoms, empowerment and opportunities.

International support in this area can help strengthen women's and girls' freedom to decide over their own lives and opportunities to participate in and shape societal development on the same terms as men and boys. The right to decide over one's own body and to live free from violence, equality before the law, education, democratic participation and economic empowerment are examples of areas in which Swedish support can make a difference. For this to happen, men and boys must also be involved as agents of change.

This Strategy contributes to gender equality and women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights and freedoms as a goal in and of itself, and also constitutes a tool for broader societal development.

The Strategy should *complement* and *reinforce* other Swedish development cooperation efforts. This applies to geographical and other thematic strategies. The added value of this Strategy is its concentrated focus on gender equality.

2. Direction and objectives of Swedish development assistance

The objective of Sweden's international development assistance is to create conditions to improve the lives of people living in poverty and oppression. At the same time, development assistance is an important foreign policy tool and can help promote and preserve Swedish interests and priorities.

Development cooperation within this Strategy will be based on the Government's reform agenda for Swedish development assistance: Development assistance for a new era – Freedom, empowerment and sustainable growth (UD2023/17726), in which it is clearly stated that gender equality must be consistently taken into account. The principles specified in the Mission on the implementation and follow-up of country strategies and other development assistance strategies (UD2024/17865) will guide the implementation of the Strategy.

The Strategy covers the period from 28 May 2025 up to and including 31 December 2028. It governs the use of funds allocated under appropriation 1.1 Development assistance, under appropriation item 34 Sustainable development in appropriation directions regarding Sida for each financial year.

Sida's activities should contribute to the following four objectives:

- Greater efforts against sexual and gender-based violence, and the combating of discrimination, oppressive and harmful norms and practices
- Increased economic empowerment and equality before the law for women and girls
- Increased political and societal influence and participation in decision-making for women and girls; and
- Greater access to sex- and age-disaggregated data.

Sida is responsible for developing ways to monitor and measure the objectives within the parameters of its operationalisation of the Strategy, for example through the formulation of indicators and/or sub-objectives.

3. Activities and goal-related analysis

Well-designed development cooperation, together with other forms of financing, can underpin countries' own efforts to achieve the global Sustainable Development Goals set out in the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. These goals can only be achieved through the collaboration of the public and private sectors.

Based on the principles of development effectiveness, Sweden's development cooperation should be effective, relevant and catalytic. Through clear and realistic demands, it should strengthen long-term development with broad local ownership in countries of operation. Activities should be focused primarily on country level. Where clear added value exists, activities can be regional or global.

The Strategy should also ensure synergies between the EU's gender equality efforts in external action (Gender Action Plan, III).

Implementation of the Strategy should be transparent and demonstrate clear logic where there is an evident link between identified needs, operational focus and desired results. Sida should take particular account of the following when implementing activities.

Greater efforts to combat sexual and gender-based violence, disinformation, and oppressive and harmful norms and practices. Sexual and gender-based violence, in which men and boys account for a large majority of offenders, is a major and widespread impediment to women's and girls' enjoyment of human rights and freedoms and prevents positive societal development. This includes intimate partner violence, exploitation in prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes, harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage, honour-related violence and oppression, and female genital mutilation, as well as digital violence. This also includes norms and practices that limit women's and girls' freedom and self-determination. Sexual and gender-based violence also affects LGBTIQ people who are perceived to diverge from gender-stereotypical norms and behaviours, for example through criminalisation, punishment, attempts at 'conversion' under threat or coercion. In the wake of the increasing number of crises and armed conflicts, including in Sweden's immediate neighbourhood, violence in conflict situations is becoming more pronounced, and issues concerning Women, Peace and Security are becoming increasingly central.

Activities should therefore help combat gender-based discrimination and combat all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual violence in conflict situations, exploitation in prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes. Activities should also help combat harmful practices and norms that limit women's and girls' self-determination. Efforts to combat child marriage and honour-related violence and oppression, including that targeting LGBTIQ people, should be prioritised. Online-based violence against women and girls should be combated. Increasing global opposition to women's and girls' rights and freedoms, known as 'pushback', should also be combated. Men's and boys' responsibilities, roles and perspectives should be incorporated into these efforts. Efforts can also include support to global actors whose work aims to strengthen international legal and political agreements in this area.

Increased economic empowerment and equality before the law for women and girls.

Economic conditions often form the basis for the opportunities of women and girls to shape their own lives. Generally, women receive lower wages and have poorer working conditions than men. Women also work unpaid or within the informal economy without access to social security systems to a greater extent. Legislation, customs and social norms that restrict sexual and reproductive health and rights can also constitute substantial obstacles to the promotion of economic empowerment in practice. Legislation, including family law, prevents women and girls from inheriting land, restricts women's access to employment or gives men the right to decide whether women can work. Education and the opportunity to complete studies is important for economic empowerment. More women than men lack access to financial services, which can be a prerequisite for running a business or conducting trade.

Activities should therefore support initiatives that specifically promote women's entrepreneurship, including market access, women's access to financial services, training and entrepreneurship, as well as women's equal legal rights of ownership, inheritance and possession. Overall, activities should contribute to women's and girls' equal enjoyment of rights and equality before the law, for example through measures to amend family law, social norms and practices that limit women's and girls' economic empowerment, including through the promotion of bodily autonomy. Activities can also include initiatives that reduce the digital divide between women and girls and men and boys.

Increased political and societal influence and participation in decision-making for women and girls. In the wake of considerable backlash against gender equality in recent years, and due to a greater number of conflicts, including in our neighbourhood, new challenges and risks are emerging for women and girls, and for those who stand up for their equal value and rights. The negative trend in gender equality goes hand in hand with the global democratic backsliding. Authoritarian leaders, sometimes citing grounds of religious extremism, are working systematically to counteract both democracy and gender equality. The negative trend in democratic development and the increase in the number of conflicts prevent women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights and freedoms and equal opportunities, while their influence over their own situation is decreasing.

Activities should therefore help increase women's and girls' political and societal influence and participation. This is done, for example, by strengthening opportunities for political or civil society engagement, participation in public debate – offline and online – particularly in elections, and through activities that aim to combat hate, threats and violence against women and girls. People with a public profile such as journalists, human rights defenders and elected women politicians are especially vulnerable in

this context. Activities should support women and girls as actors and women's rights organisations and combat hate, threats and violence and censorship of women and girls.

Greater access to sex- and age-disaggregated data. To demonstrate results and the effectiveness of gender equality efforts, and to enable evidence-based analysis at global, national and local levels, facts are needed about what baseline conditions look like, what the needs are, and which initiatives that achieve the best results based on empirical studies. Sex- and age-disaggregated data is necessary to operate with an evidence-based approach. Such data reveals differences and similarities between women and men, girls and boys of different ages, and thereby how development cooperation has potential to provide the best support. By extension, empirical results can lead to more effective gender equality initiatives.

Activities should therefore actively strive for and help increase access to sex- and age-disaggregated data. The intention is to create material that can be used for needs assessments, the development of measures to be taken, and to enable evidence-based follow-up. This also contributes to the analysis of the relationship between gender equality on the one hand, and economic development and democracy on the other. In addition, digitalisation can help improve the collection of and access to relevant data. Moreover, support should also help ensure that sex- and age-disaggregated data is highlighted and used for decisions and measures that improve women's and girls' living conditions, promote their freedom and increase gender equality.

Overarching considerations for activities

The possibilities of digitalisation should be explored and utilised where it is feasible and deemed to be effective. Digital and technological development offers potential arenas that, under the right circumstances, can promote women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights and freedoms. However, hate, threats and abuse on the internet constitute a growing rights problem that hits women and girls particularly hard as well as those who work to defend their human rights and freedoms. In the long term, this represents a problem for democracy as threats and hate limit women's and girls' political participation. Due to the cross-border nature of digitalisation, these developments must be addressed through international cooperation and opportunities to help effectively should be examined in all the Strategy's objectives.

To strengthen the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of development cooperation, the effects of climate and environmental change should be regularly considered and opportunities to contribute to emissions reductions and adaptation measures should be considered in all activities. Where it is

relevant and effective to do so, one or more sub-goals on climate and environment can be included in initiatives with other primary objectives.