



MPs vote on development bill to tackle gender inequality

Bill places a duty on UK government to consider how issue can be addressed when disbursing aid to developing countries

- [Liz Ford](#)
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Father and son weed paddy fields in Muhu Rijara village, Bangladesh. The bill calls for gender considerations to be embedded into every aspect of Britain's aid spending. Photograph: Karen Robinson

MPs are poised to vote on a private members' bill that would place a statutory obligation on the UK government to consider the impact of its overseas aid spending on reducing [gender](#) inequality.

Campaigners are confident the international development (gender equality) bill, proposed by Conservative MP for Stone, Bill Cash, and supported by the international development secretary, Justine Greening, will on Friday be voted through to its final stage in the [House of Commons](#) and proceed to the House of Lords for consideration.

The bill, which has crossparty support, calls for gender considerations to be embedded into every aspect of Britain's aid spending. It also places a

duty on the secretary of state to consider how gender inequality can be reduced when disbursing development and humanitarian funds. This could, for example, include health programmes that encourage both men and women to bring their children for routine vaccinations and checkups, rather than putting the emphasis on women, and using promotion materials that show pictures of men taking childcare roles.

The bill is believed to be the first to enshrine in law a commitment to reduce gender equality through aid disbursements.

The text of the bill was drafted by NGOs, including the [Gender Rights and Equality Action Trust](#) (Great), Plan, WaterAid and VSO, along with Stone and officials at the Department for International Development (DfID).

Karen Ruimy, Great co-founder, said the organisation came up with the idea for the law about two years ago. "We thought wouldn't it be fantastic to have a law about gender equality," she said. Great contacted an enthusiastic Cash, who sits on a number of parliamentary committees focused on African countries and development, and the "dream law" was finally presented to parliament in June last year.

"In theory, gender equality should already exist, but we need to work on it every day," added Ruimy, who hopes the bill will inspire other European politicians to assess their legislation.

At the [fourth world conference on women](#), held in Beijing in 1995, "gender mainstreaming" was endorsed as a strategy to promote gender equality in UN policies and programmes. It has been adopted by other multilateral bodies, national governments and NGOs. DfID adopted the Beijing platform for action to thread gender considerations throughout its work and established gender mainstreaming as an essential pillar of its work soon after the conference.

However, despite a flurry of initial activity to promote equality, 10 years after Beijing, [an assessment on DfID's performance](#) found it had become sluggish in regard to gender equality. It was accused of focusing too much on the relatively narrow confines of the millennium development goals and not enough on the structural obstacles women face. Since coming to power, the coalition government has repeatedly committed to putting women and girls at the heart of DfID programmes, and its policies [suggest a more nuanced approach](#) to addressing inequality.

Unusually for a minister, Greening attended the committee stage of the private members' bill, telling MPs she was "personally very committed to passing the bill".

But Maria Neophytou, executive director of Great, said DfID's focus was largely down to the whim of the minister in charge. Just because the current secretary of state puts women and girls at the top of the agenda, "there is nothing to say it wouldn't be dropped in the coming years".

"The legislation places a duty on the secretary of state to consider gender equality in all decisions in how the UK spends its aid budget," she said, adding that there needed to be a fundamental rethink among all donors about how their aid impacts on gender equality.

Neophytou said she could not see any significant barriers blocking the passage of the bill, except the parliamentary timetable. "The biggest enemy is time," she said. "A lot of good stuff falls off the agenda."