

# WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND FOREIGN POLICY

Foreign policy should protect women's rights as a core part of human rights and international law. This, says Conservative peer **Baroness Helic**, is part of the route to security and prosperity for Britain.

The 2024 general election has taken place against the most difficult and dangerous foreign policy backdrop for decades.

Europe and the Middle East are experiencing violent conflicts. [More than one-third of successful coups since 2000 have taken place in the last four years](#). Atrocities are being perpetrated with impunity around the world. Wars [involve more actors, and last longer](#), and peace agreements are proving more fragile. [Mass killings are at a 20-year high](#).

Hand-in-hand with this instability is an assault on fundamental universal principles of international law and human rights – not least women's rights. For a new government seeking to strengthen Britain's security and protect British interests, pushing back against this will be a crucial matter of national security and prosperity.

Crackdowns on women's freedoms in Afghanistan and Iran are the most totemic and well-known examples of restrictions on women's rights. But women are also at grave risk in other countries around the world. The number of women and girls intentionally killed in 2022, at 89,000, was the [highest yearly total recorded in the past 20 years](#). From the US to Hungary, women's rights have been rolled back. The Office of the US Director of National Intelligence has [identified](#) women's rights as one of the norms most at risk of weakening in the next decade. The UK's Integrated Review Refresh, a government foreign policy and defence strategy published last year, [described](#) 'accelerating, well-financed and organised attacks on the rights of women and girls'. And [as the White House has warned](#), 'Wherever the rights of women and girls are under threat, so too is democracy, peace, and stability.'

Four policies could help to push back against this trend, make women safer, and in the process improve chances for peace and security around the world.

First, the new government should explore dedicating a set minimum of overseas aid and development funding to tackling gender-based violence (GBV). One in three women worldwide are affected by GBV – with greater risk for those in conflict settings or humanitarian disasters. It limits women's political participation, stops girls going to school, and holds back involvement in the economy – all of which stifle a country's long-term prospects. Yet in 2022 [only 0.2 per cent of global aid spending was targeted at GBV](#), a minuscule amount for such a widespread and serious problem. If the UK could lead the way in raising that figure, even just to 1 or 2 per cent, it could make a significant difference for women around the world.

Second, the new government should embrace and build on the UK's existing work on conflict-related sexual violence. Sexual violence is still a reality for women, men and children caught up in wars around the world, from Ukraine to Sudan to Israel and Palestine.

A new administration should make sure that the role of Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict continues to be held by a government minister with genuine personal commitment to the issue – ideally at Cabinet level. And it should build on the initiative's important work improving standards of investigation and documentation, including developing a coalition of countries to establish a new, permanent, international commission to investigate conflict-related sexual violence. This would address a serious gap in current capabilities, and collect evidence necessary to hold perpetrators to account, end the scourge of impunity, and make justice for survivors a reality.

Third, the new government should insist that every peace negotiation or mediation process with which it is involved includes women. There is strong evidence that when women and civil society are involved in negotiations, any ensuing peace is [more durable](#). The UK should offer funding and capacity building to help overcome obstacles to women's participation. The success of initiatives like the [Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth](#) programme show that perceived practical difficulties can be overcome: the inequalities and exclusions of the past should not be allowed to shape the future through inertia. Sudan – where women and civil society groups warned about the dangers of renewed conflict before the start of the current civil war – provides an immediate test case for meaningful women's participation in negotiations.

Fourth – and perhaps most importantly – women, like everyone, will be safest in a peaceful, prosperous world where the rule of law and human rights are widely respected.

Achieving such a world requires investment in diplomacy and defence. In diplomacy, so our diplomats have the necessary resources, training and presence not just to respond to events but to get ahead of them and shape them. In defence, for deterrence, so that adversaries and would-be aggressors see that the costs of conflict outweigh any possible advantage. Cutting back on overseas spending can seem tempting. But as the war in Ukraine – and the associated inflation and human costs – painfully remind us, it is far more expensive to allow crises to develop and get out of hand.

Foreign policy requires hard choices and trade-offs. But it should never become unmoored from the fundamental values and principles we believe in – and which we know make the world safer.

Nor should we forget that what happens abroad always affects us at home – a government can't just hope to focus on domestic policy and ignore the wider world. A foreign policy which seeks to protect women's rights as a core part of a wider strategy of defending human rights and international law, is not just morally right – it is the route to security and prosperity for Britain.

*The views expressed in this essay are the author's own and not those of Amnesty International UK*