

Gender Equality Partnerships: the journey so far

Advancing gender equality
in higher education
July 2024



‘Gender equality isn’t just about fairness for individuals; it’s about the quality of research, education and innovation we produce as a society. Embracing diversity is essential for excellence in all these areas.’

Dame Athene Donald, an outspoken champion of women in science. Previously Director of Cambridge University’s Women in Science, Engineering and Technology Initiative and the university’s first Gender Equality Champion.



Foreword

Education should be a pathway to opportunity regardless of gender. This is critical for ensuring all young people can develop their talents, which in turn can lead to fairer, more representative societies.

Unfortunately, as Helen Mott highlights in her *Gender Equality in Higher Education: Maximising Impacts report*¹ for the British Council, gender equality issues exist in every education system across the world. Women face unequal access to education and resources. There is subject segregation in traditionally male-dominated areas, as well as significant female underrepresentation in education leadership roles. Colleges and universities can also be places where gender-based violence is common. After graduation, women often find it more challenging to pursue careers.

So how can we redress the balance?

As Helen Mott notes, as the ‘incubators for the thought leaders and social leaders of the future’ institutions are well placed to enable environments ‘where norms for gender equality are practised and modelled, and where the voices and ideas of women are valued and raised up’.

It is precisely this goal – to empower institutions around the world to take action – that led to us to develop our Gender Equality Partnerships grants initiative. Through small grants of £25,000, we support higher education and TVET providers in the UK and around the world to develop equitable, collaborative partnerships that address specific gender equality priorities.

Informed by global research, these include addressing female underrepresentation in leadership roles, tackling subject segregation especially in STEM, creating equal pathways to employment, and addressing gender-based violence to ensure safe learning environments for everyone.

Launched in 2021, as part of the British Council’s flagship Going Global Partnerships programme, the Gender Equality Partnerships initiative has grown from just five partnerships between the UK and three other countries, to a thriving global network of 70 collaborative projects, spanning 120 institutions and 12 countries.

Three years on from the launch, this review has been undertaken in order to take stock of the learning from the Gender Equality Partnerships. It demonstrates that we have already instigated significant change, demonstrated by the sheer range of impact across the world – from tackling sexual and gender-based violence on university campuses in Indonesia through new

national training materials, to providing safe spaces for female leaders in Jordan to explore their personal experiences, leading to new leadership networks.

The review also points to the ingredients for success, which include the emphasis on equitable partnerships, where institutions draw on each other’s knowledge, experience and expertise to achieve shared goals. The projects take different perspectives into account and open up new avenues of learning. The programme also provides a flexible global framework that recognises local contexts, enabling partners to develop approaches tailored to their specific challenges.

It also draws on the British Council’s vast knowledge and experience of delivering education programmes all over the world, made possible through our extensive networks and the trust-based relationships we have developed over many years of working with governments and institutions overseas. It aligns with our efforts to mainstream gender equality within all our programmes and projects – reflecting the priority we place on supporting women and girls to succeed.

While we have come a long way since 2021, we are continually learning and adapting, to ensure this initiative not only reflects the ever-changing nature of gender inequalities globally, but also to ensure a continuous cycle of learning and improvement.

We would like to thank everyone who has been involved in the Gender Equality Partnerships journey. We also invite those who are yet to be a part of it, to join our collaborative network for change and help build more inclusive, equitable education around the world.

Maddalaine Ansell,
Director Education, British Council

¹ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/gender-equality-higher-education-maximising-impacts>



Gender Equality Partnerships: the journey so far

Gender Equality Partnerships at a glance

Grants of up to **£25,000** to support partnerships between the UK and other countries, addressing gender inequalities and driving systemic change in higher and further education.

£1.7 million

in grant funding

70 partnerships

addressing gender inequalities

120 institutions

collaborating internationally

12 countries

partnering with the UK

Four priority themes

The prevention of violence against women and girls with a particular focus on higher and further education institutions as safe spaces for women

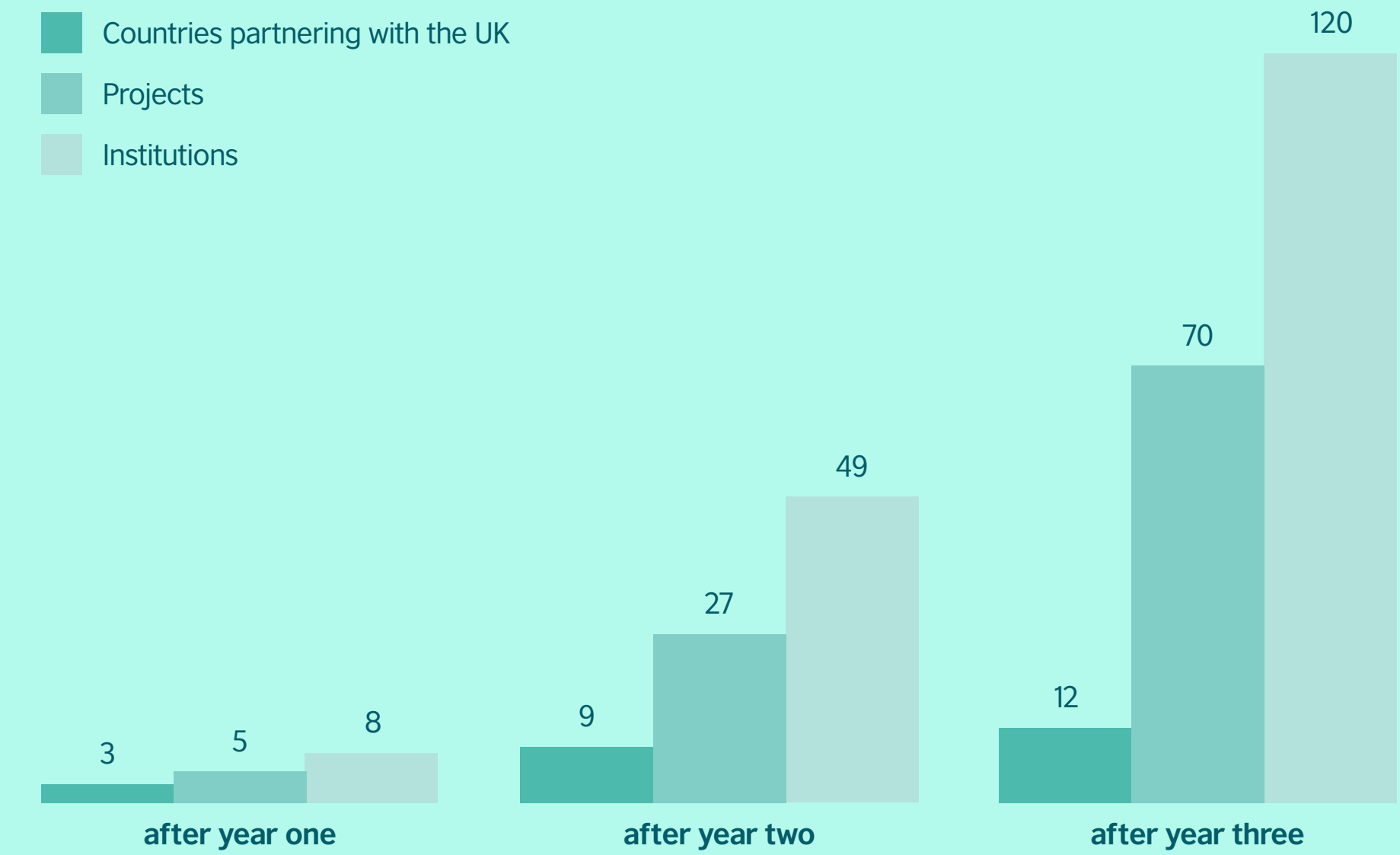
Enabling access and tackling subject segregation, particularly in the area of STEM including encouraging STEM-related learning

Addressing women's underrepresentation in higher and further education leadership

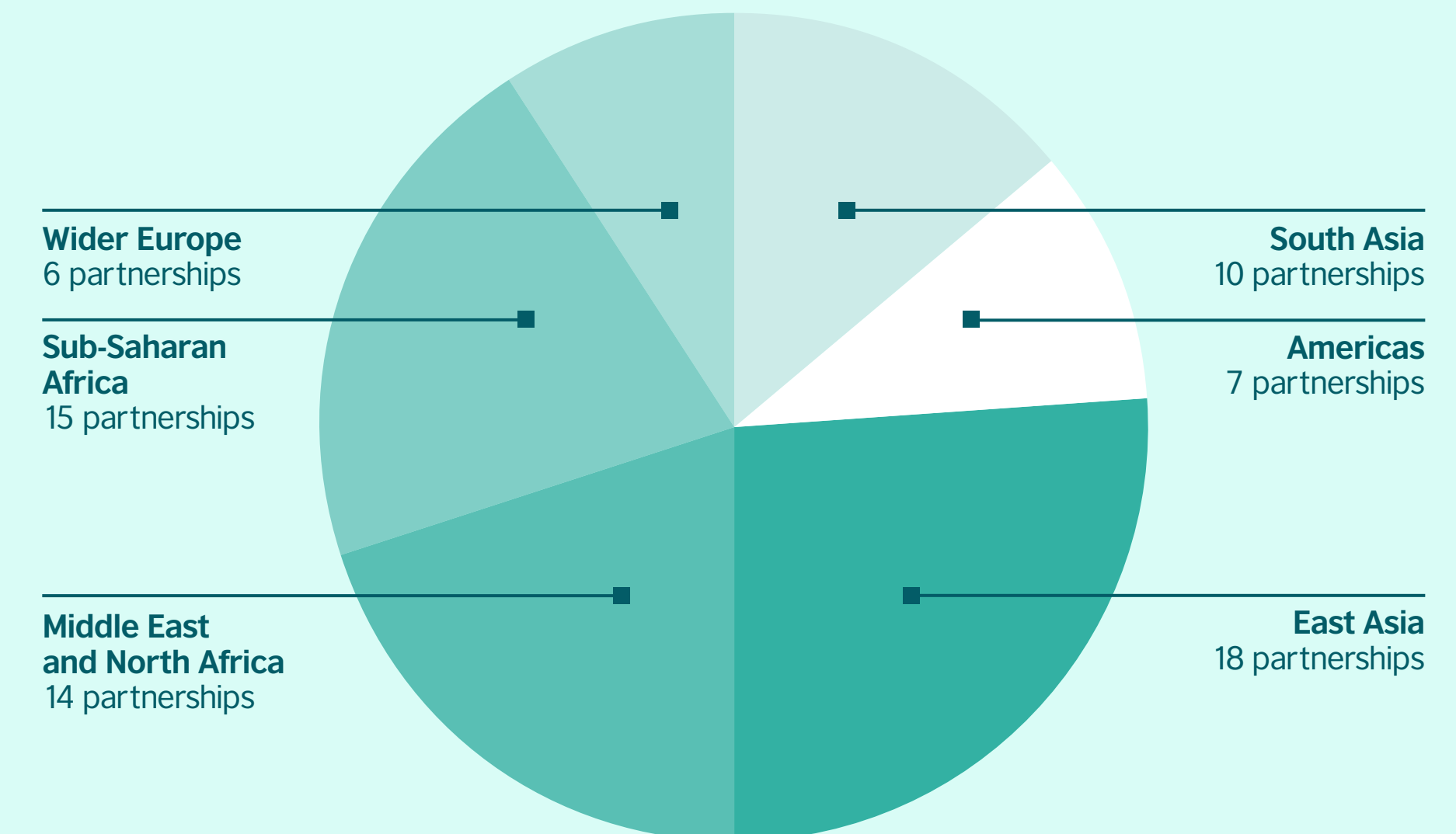
Strengthening pathways into employment for women graduates from further and higher education

A growing community

Countries partnering with the UK
Projects
Institutions



A global community



Gender equality in higher education: the global picture

Gender Equality Partnerships is a direct response to the barriers and inequalities women face in higher education systems globally, including unequal access, subject segregation, underrepresentation in leadership, more challenging employment pathways and gender-based violence.



‘Higher education can perpetuate gender inequalities.’

Helen Mott, researcher in gender equality and women’s rights

The global picture

In her March 2021 report for the British Council *Gender Equality in Higher Education: Maximising Impacts*, gender equality researcher Helen Mott outlines the global yet contextual nature of inequalities and barriers women face within higher education globally and provides evidence, dialogue and insights alongside reflections and recommendations to facilitate change.

She states:

Despite higher education systems being a driver for the promotion of equality and empowerment, the evidence shows that they also reproduce discrimination against women, often ‘by default rather than design’. Action is required within higher education institutions to transform discriminatory gender norms – such as unequal domestic burdens falling upon women and bias in assessment, recruitment and promotion – as well as to address the practical barriers in the here and now that disproportionately affect women because of their place in society. Effective policies to address structural barriers (e.g., maternity, paternity, flexible working) are not in place for higher education institutions or research bodies in many parts of the world.

Her findings are driven by global statistics from over 300 research documents, which highlight the significant barriers and challenges women face within higher education and employment pathways.

Despite 52 per cent of women globally completing higher education compared to 48 per cent of men, women do not gain equivalent personal or professional advantages. They remain underrepresented in positions of power and leadership in higher education, while men disproportionately hold senior roles, receive more opportunities, and higher discretionary payments.

In Nigeria, only seven per cent, or 12 of 170, university vice-chancellors are women. Of over 1,000 universities in India, there are less than 70 women vice-chancellors. Globally, of the top 200 universities – while showing a significant 34 per cent increase from five years ago – still less than a quarter are led by women.²³⁴

In STEM fields, crucial for innovation and economic advancement, women are consistently marginalised, and their contributions undervalued. According to the World Economic Forum’s *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*,⁵ women comprise only 29.2 per cent of the STEM workforce in 146 nations evaluated. In Viet Nam, women make up 37 per cent of STEM graduates. And in Bangladesh, women represent 20 per cent of STEM graduates. Figures for women in STEM leadership roles fall sharply, representing only 29.9 per cent of senior workers and only 12.4 per cent in chief executive roles.

² <https://theconversation.com/nigerias-women-vice-chancellors-i-know-what-its-like-to-be-one-and-why-there-are-so-few-216013>

³ <https://www.aiu.ac.in/documents/meetings/Zonal%20Meet%202023-24/Women%20Conference/AIU%20Brochure%202023.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/03/top-university-rankings-women-leadership>

⁵ <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023>



‘Only seven per cent of women choose to study engineering, manufacturing and construction, compared to 22 per cent of men. Of the students pursuing careers in information, communication and technology fields, 28 per cent are women and 72 per cent are men.’

The World Bank⁶



Furthermore, sexual and gender-based violence is prevalent in all societies and is a significant issue within universities. Globally, nearly one in three women aged 15 or older have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or a non-partner in their lifetime.⁷ Almost 62 per cent of students and employees at 46 European universities and colleges have experienced gender-based violence to some extent.⁸ This violence not only reflects but also reinforces broader societal gender inequalities, creating hostile environments that deter women from entering, remaining in and progressing through higher education.

The role of higher education providers

It is becoming clearer that higher education institutions themselves have a key role in addressing the global gender disparity.

Universities and colleges are vital for social and economic growth and are instrumental in generating the ideas and skills to tackle climate change, poverty and other global challenges. These challenges can only be tackled effectively if research and solutions are accountable to and for all people and populations. Women are disproportionately affected by global challenges⁹ because, globally, women face gender inequality, gender bias and gender discrimination. The intersections of age, disability, race/ethnicity and culture, religion and belief, sexual orientation and socio-economic background impact on these inequalities further.

The role and importance of higher education institutions in addressing gender inequalities is, perhaps, best summed up in Helen Mott’s report:

Higher education institutions are and should be important for gender equality. They are the incubators for the thought leaders and social leaders of the future. The creation of higher education institutions and systems where norms for gender equality are practised and modelled, and where the voices and ideas of women are valued and raised up, are some of the most powerful tools available to society for accelerating progress towards the equality and empowerment of women and girls everywhere. When harmful, rigid social gender norms are challenged, and gender equality is promoted, the full realisation of equal rights for people of all genders and gender identities becomes achievable.

⁶ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/improving-pathway-school-stem-careers-girls-and-women>

⁷ <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/data-stories/seeking-help-for-gender-based-violence>

⁸ <https://universitetslararen.se/2022/12/16/gender-based-violence-common-in-the-higher-education-sector/>

⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2019-enaresfrzh>



The British Council's role in advancing gender equality

Our Gender Equality Partnerships initiatives is at the core of the British Council's commitment to mainstreaming gender equality throughout our work in higher education.

As part of our flagship Going Global Partnerships programme, it supports our goal to enable inclusive, internationalised higher education globally, driven by our core values of equality, diversity and inclusion.



‘The Going Global Partnerships programme is unique and specialised at connecting universities and research teams across the globe. It’s all about making connections and growing together.’

Brenda Giles, Programme Director Going Global Partnerships, British Council



Going Global Partnerships: supporting inclusive, internationalised higher education

Much of the British Council’s work in higher education focuses on providing opportunities for the UK higher education sector to connect and collaborate with other countries.

A key part of this is our **Going Global Partnerships** programme, which plays a pivotal role in providing and facilitating innovative research funding, by empowering and investing in partnerships and collaborations between institutions in the UK and other countries.

Going Global Partnerships supports international collaboration between education providers, research organisations, sector bodies and policymakers to strengthen higher education in five core areas.

- **Enabling research** – supporting research, knowledge and innovation collaborations to address local and global challenges and promote inclusive growth.
- **Internationalising higher education and TVET** – supporting systems, institutions and individuals to benefit from internationalisation, including enabling transnational education and system alignment.
- **Strengthening systems and institutions** – improving the quality and efficiency of higher education and TVET institutions and systems.
- **Enhancing learner outcomes** – addressing the qualities of the global graduate, including soft skills, employability and community outcomes.
- **Increasing equality, diversity and inclusion** – making higher education and TVET more accessible, equitable and accountable.

‘We engaged over 300 participants. They were so happy! They wanted more questions, more interventions, just more!’.

Professor Angela Lee, University College of Estate Management.
Project: Levelling up STEM! Towards gender equality in the pathways to Jordanian higher education and employability.

Gender Equality Partnerships is an important intervention, as it provides opportunities for higher education institutions to undertake projects that focus on gender equality and enables collaborations that explore the commonality, as well as the diversity, of issues globally, all while drawing on learning, good practice and experience of the UK and the targeted countries.

It also responds directly to the challenges identified in Helen Mott’s *Gender and Higher Education: Maximising Impacts* report, and enables the British Council to leverage its significant networks and influence within the higher education sector to get the issues of gender equality squarely onto the agenda.

Gill Cowell, Head Gender Equality,
British Council

Gender Equality Partnerships: mainstreaming gender

As part of Going Global Partnerships, our **Gender Equality Partnerships** grant initiative is a core way the British Council is investing in equality and equity that not only improves equality within higher education, but has the potential to contribute to the equality and empowerment of women and girls everywhere.

It also forms a key part of Going Global Partnership’s gender mainstreaming activities, which has an ethos to provide a consistent global programmatic approach, but at the same time understanding that cultural foundations, expressions and impacts of gender inequality are contextual.

Our Gender Equality Partnerships grants enable cultural and academic exchange, and an opportunity to share experiences, find similarities and explore differences. They enable partners to draw on each other’s experience – be it theoretical or practical – to create solutions that are responsive to the localised need, yet can still be shared at national or global levels and contribute to a truly internationalised solution to gender inequality.



Gender Equality Partnerships: a closer look

The Gender Equality Partnerships initiative is designed to encourage innovative approaches, promote long-term, institutional change in higher education and encourage collaboration between disciplines and countries – all to help advance gender equality, not just in higher education, but in wider society.



Aiming for lasting impact

Through joint projects, Gender Equality Partnerships aims to achieve a range of strategic outcomes, including empowering women in political, social and economic spheres, improving employability outcomes, and increasing women's participation in leadership positions and STEM fields.

By addressing gender barriers and promoting inclusivity, the initiative seeks to create safer, more equitable learning environments and nurture a lasting impact in higher and further education.

A focus on equity

Central to the initiative's ethos is the value of equitable partnerships, where all collaborators contribute and benefit mutually. This focus on equitable partnerships between the UK and other countries is particularly relevant amidst growing recognition of the need for global co-operation to tackle pressing issues such as climate change, pandemics and economic and gender inequality.

Gender Equality Partnerships champions shared ownership of the research or project agendas, supports opportunity to amplify voices from historically marginalised regions, and fosters sustainable solutions that address the needs of diverse communities worldwide. The grant structure requires and encourages open dialogue and the equitable distribution of funds and responsibilities with partner institutions in participating countries. The initiative aims to challenge unequal power dynamics and foster genuine collaboration towards shared goals.

Committed to sustainable development

Gender Equality Partnerships supports the requirement that all UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) considers gender equality,¹⁰ while contributing to key priorities set out in the Sustainable Development Goals and the UK's international development strategies.¹¹

Through ODA alignment, the initiative requires partnerships to address development challenges and benefit low-income and vulnerable populations. This means grant applicants should articulate how their proposals will contribute to economic development and social welfare, with a focus on areas relevant to local challenges and Sustainable Development Goals. By ensuring ODA eligibility and demonstrating a clear pathway to impact, the initiative aims to drive positive change where it matters.



¹⁰ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/9/contents/enacted/data.htm>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-governments-strategy-for-international-development>



‘The project has given such potential for young female researchers to get involved with future research.’

Professor Paola Wood, University of Pretoria. Project: From Liverpool to Africa: an international knowledge exchange conSortium to inform policy cHAnge and Promote womEn in science (SHAPE).

‘We hoped that the mentors would benefit as well as the mentees and the data shows this to be the case.’

Dr Paul Stokes, Sheffield Hallam University. Project: Peru Mentora STEM: advancing women in STEM via mentoring.



‘What the British Council provides is unique funding; there aren’t many grants in the UK that support global collaboration.’

Professor Angela Lee, University College of Estate Management. Project: Levelling up STEM! Towards gender equality in the pathways to Jordanian higher education and employability.

Innovative design

Given the diverse and highly contextualised nature of the causes, barriers, intersections and solutions relating to gender equality in higher education, they cannot be addressed through one singular approach.

Gender Equality Partnerships is designed to be flexible enough to address the multiplicity of challenges women face in higher education, no matter where they are located. This is informed by the guiding principle of the wider gender awareness and mainstreaming work of Going Global Partnerships, which aims to ensuring a consistent message and approach to gender that can be contextualised to the differing needs in different regions.

Guided by Helen Mott’s report, discussions with country colleagues and work with both internal and external gender experts, the Going Global Partnerships team shaped an initiative that would not only enable countries to address the very specific and contextual issues that required their attention, but to do so in a collaborative way, where working in partnership would underpin the success of each enterprise.

Focusing on the key priorities set the framework – it located the local within the global, highlighting and prioritising the key areas that needed to be acknowledged and addressed within higher and further education.

Encouraging partnerships to focus on diversity and creativity helped to ensure true accountability and innovation. Ensuring flexibility meant that research, plans and activities would be relevant and meaningful to the women and men directly involved and could support potential impact across all levels.

Four priority themes

Gender Equality Partnerships address four priority themes.

These themes were shaped by various inputs, including the findings of Helen Mott’s report, the knowledge of colleagues and partners, and the everyday and ongoing experiences of women in higher education.

These themes are:

- The prevention of violence against women and girls with a particular focus on higher and further education institutions as safe spaces for women.
- Addressing women’s underrepresentation in higher and further education leadership.
- Enabling access and tackling subject segregation, particularly in the area of STEM including encouraging STEM-related learning.
- Strengthening pathways into employment for women graduates from further and higher education.



There is something special in the co-creation approach that Gender Equality Partnerships grants enable and encourage. These projects are designed by individuals, by teams, and are generally working directly with women and girls at points throughout their education and employment journeys.

Yet, the impact and potential impact is not just at this individual level, but at the institutional level. Because of the work and commitment and enthusiasm and resilience of the individuals involved in these projects, policies are being written and implemented, learning materials are being created and updated, access is being opened, and safe, inviting, empowering spaces are being created.

Brenda Giles, Programme Director
Going Global Partnerships, British Council

Why small grants?

Delivering collaborative research grants of up to £25,000 is one of the most effective ways to support gender mainstreaming and transformation efforts.

Firstly, the grants empower institutions in both the UK and targeted countries to address pressing gender equality challenges through collaborative research initiatives. Providing funding directly to research collaborations ensures the projects are driven by the needs and priorities of diverse communities, leading to more contextually relevant and impactful outcomes.

Secondly, the grants help to promote the mainstreaming of gender equality principles across various sectors and disciplines. Supporting research and action projects focused on key themes, such as violence prevention, leadership representation, career pathways and STEM education, contributes to gender mainstreaming across academic discourse, policy development and institutional practices.

Lastly, the grants serve as catalysts for transformation, by fostering innovative approaches to addressing gender inequality. Encouraging interdisciplinary and intersectional research collaborations stimulates new ideas and methodologies that challenge existing norms and promote more inclusive and equitable practices.



The essence of Going Global Partnerships is in the name – partnership and collaboration. We see our role to facilitate and empower these partnerships for mutual benefit. The Gender Equality Partnership grants are designed to do just that, asking applicants to explicitly outline the learning and benefits for all partners involved. This methodology helps bring to the fore the multidirectional relationship between expertise and knowledge.

Brenda Giles, Programme Director
Going Global Partnerships, British Council



Assessment criteria

Going Global Partnerships shapes its eligibility and thematic criteria for all grant-funded institutional partnerships based on the British Council's unique understanding of the UK higher education sector and the relationships it has built with overseas partners. This, in turn, has shaped the criteria and selection processes for Gender Equality Partnerships, with input from teams and gender advisers around the world, mirroring the UK sector as much as possible, while also reflecting regional context and variance.

One of the wonderful things since the start of the initiative is seeing the growth in the applications presented. The breadth and scope of creativity of ideas to empower women and create spaces grows year on year, and with that the awareness of gender inequality grows with it.

Brenda Giles, Programme Director
Going Global Partnerships, British Council

Participating countries

The Gender Equality Partnerships initiative is designed to be as far reaching as possible, while taking budgetary restrictions into account. The aim is that anywhere the grants are needed should be able access this crucial funding.

As the initiative continues to develop and grow, the regional needs, similarities and differences become clearer, helping to create a network that can ensure rich global representation and diversity. Participating countries are selected each year based on factors, including an individual country's interest to take part in the initiative. This is balanced with country priority areas, resources available in-country, the UK sector demand and interest, as well as the local teams' current capacity to manage a grant call.

Application, review and selection

In awarding the grants, decisions are guided by central principles established by the British Council. Colleagues based across the globe have been involved in every stage of the process, from design to delivery.

As the initiative has developed, there has been continual learning. Criteria clarity has been improved, and support and advice for applicants have been enhanced. This has led to an increased understanding of the objectives of the initiative, evidenced in the quality of applications and the intentions to address local-global issues in meaningful ways. The initiative has also been responsive to suggestions and opinions around areas of improvement, particularly via focus groups with local delivery teams and grant holders.



Addressing four priority themes

Gender Equality Partnerships addresses four priority themes, to be reflective of and responsive to the barriers and challenges and inequalities women face globally.

Distribution of projects across the priority themes

11%

The prevention of violence against women and girls with a particular focus on higher and further education institutions as safe spaces for women

23%

Strengthening pathways into employment for women graduates from further and higher education

30%

Enabling access and tackling subject segregation, particularly in the area of STEM including encouraging STEM-related learning

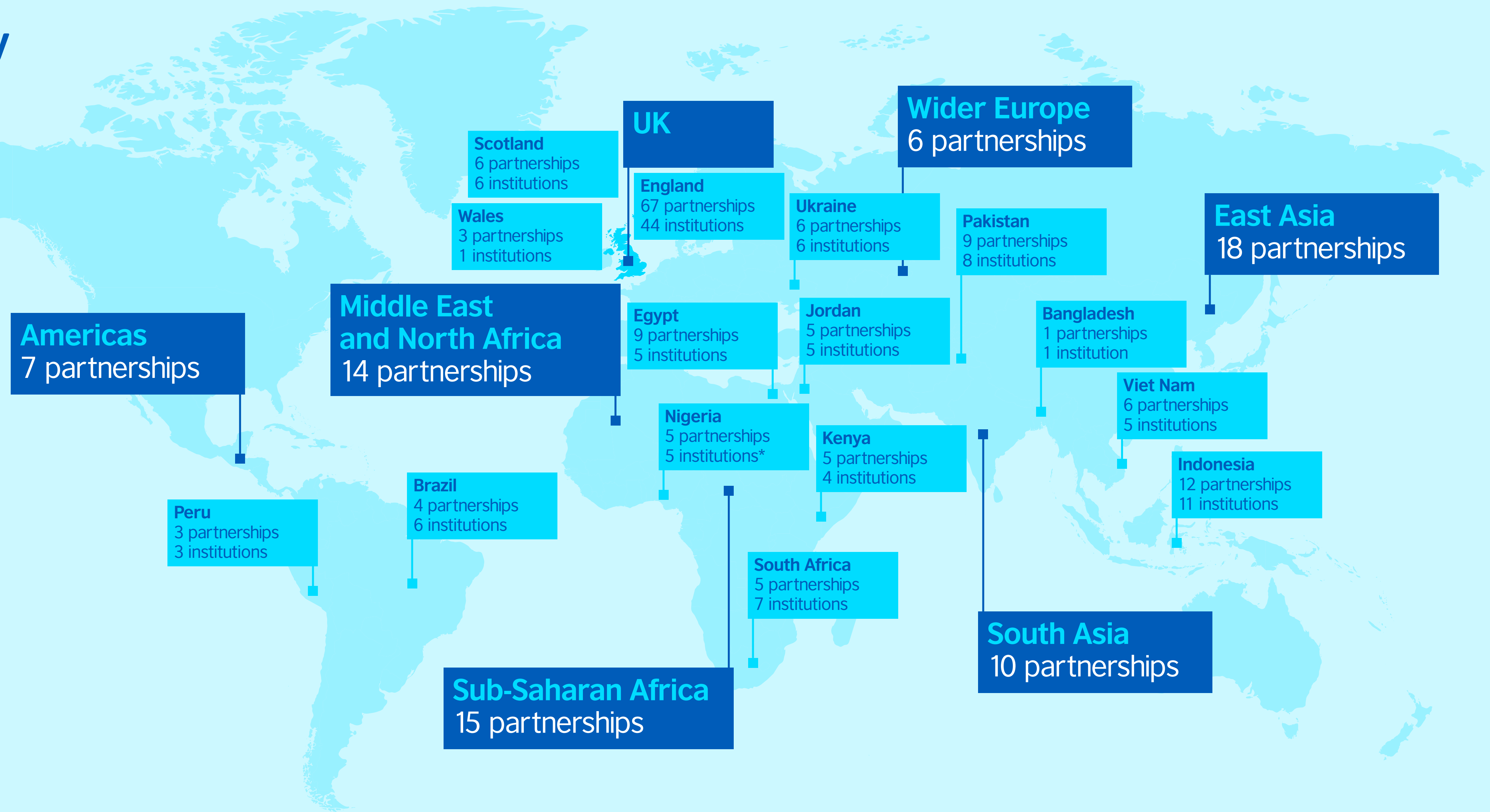
36%

Addressing women's underrepresentation in higher and further education leadership



The global reach of Gender Equality Partnerships

Since 2021, Gender Equality Partnerships has connected 120 institutions in the UK and 12 other countries.



*Plus a further 3 institutions in trilateral partnerships.



Gender Equality Partnerships: the journey so far

An overview of Gender Equality Partnerships projects

2021–22 grant call

UK-Indonesia

Institutions	Project
Aston University, Universitas Airlangga	Preventing sexual violence on university campuses in Surabaya

UK-Peru

Institutions	Project
University of Sheffield, Otra Cosa Network	For women, with women: exploring gender inequalities in vocational training and employment

UK-Viet Nam

Institutions	Project
Aston University, Vietnam National University Hanoi	Design and evaluation of leadership training for female students in higher education institutes in Viet Nam
University of East Anglia, VinUniversity	Lived experiences of gender and sexual minorities in higher education in Viet Nam
Birmingham City University, Vietnam National University Hanoi	EnPOWER: enabling progression of women researchers



An overview of Gender Equality Partnerships projects

2022–23 grant call

UK-Bangladesh

Institutions	Project
Open University, Rajshahi University	Access, barriers and gender equality in STEM education at a Bangladeshi university

UK-Egypt

Institutions	Project
Coventry University, Arab Academy for Science, Technology, and Maritime Transport	Transferring the experience of Higher Education Academy fellowships from UK to TNE partners: pathway for empowering female academics in the higher education sector in Egypt

Heriot-Watt University, Nile University	NA-NB Net: unblocking the equality pipeline in mechanical engineering
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University of Bath, Cairo Univesity	Collaborative and comparative transformative pedagogic research: towards gendered equity in STEM
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University College of Estate Management, British University in Egypt	Gender, education and career: improving transitions for women from higher education to employment in Egypt
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University of Nottingham, Nile University	A better society with balanced gender equality in engineering
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UK-Jordan

Institutions	Project
University of Strathclyde, Middle East University	Leadership in higher education: empowering women in Jordan

University College of Estate Management, Philadelphia University	Furthering gender equality in Jordanian higher education and leadership via societal and structural changes
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University College of Estate Management, Hashemite University	Levelling up STEM! Towards gender equality in the pathways to Jordanian higher education and employability
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UK-Nigeria

Institutions	Project
Aston University, Lagos State University	Preventing sexual violence on university campuses in Nigeria: a case Study of universities in Lagos State

University of Lincoln, African Development Institute of Research Methodology	Women underrepresentation in Nigerian higher education leadership
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Northumbria University, Ahmadu Bello University	ARe-SuRe – gender diversification of construction industry workforce: attracting, recruiting, supporting and retaining women graduates
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UK-Pakistan

Institutions	Project
Aston University, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad	Creating safer and more inclusive university campuses in Pakistan

University of Warwick, Fatima Jinnah Women University	Bridging the gender gap: creating women leaders through mentorship and coaching programme in Pakistan
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University of Gloucestershire, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad	Improving gender equality in Pakistan higher education leadership and decision making
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Middlesex University, Lahore College for Women University	Gender equality and enhancing employability for women in academia and other sectors in Pakistan
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University of Southampton, Lahore University of Management Sciences	Promoting gender equality in Pakistan higher education: how to break the ceiling while having caring responsibilities
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The University of Lancaster, Centre for Law and Justice	Gendered pathways to prosperity: breaking the boundaries to further education and employment among Dalit minorities in Punjab, Pakistan
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UK-Peru

Institutions	Project
Sheffield Hallam University, Universidad Nacional de San Agustín de Arequipa	Mentora STEM: advancing women in STEM via mentoring

De Montfort University, Universidad de Piura	Empowering women in STEM: a transatlantic project
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UK-Nigeria-South Africa

Institutions	Project
Liverpool John Moores University, Lagos State University, University of South Africa	Addressing women's underrepresentation in higher education leadership in Nigeria and South Africa

UK-South Africa-Nigeria

Institutions	Project
Liverpool John Moores University, University of Salford, University of Pretoria, University of Johannesburg, University of Port Harcourt, University of the Western Cape	From Liverpool to Africa: an international knowledge exchange consortium to inform policy change and promote women in science



An overview of Gender Equality Partnerships projects

2023–24 grant call

UK-Brazil

Institutions	Project
University College of Estate Management, University College London, University of Plymouth, Education Endowment Foundation, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Universidade Estadual do Maranhão, Universidade de Brasília	Challenging prejudicial attitudes and structures for career equality for women graduates in Brazil
Burton and South Derbyshire College, Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia	Digital girls from the Fluminense Federal Institute
Oxford Brookes University, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul	Cross-cultural exploration of gender and parenthood perceptions and practices in higher education: a Brazil-UK comparative study

UK-Egypt

Institutions	Project
Coventry University, Arab Academy for Science, Technology, and Maritime Transport	Establishing female academic networks: a pathway for better addressing and managing women under-representation in senior leadership ranks in Egyptian universities
University of Central Lancashire, Arab Academy for Science, Technology, and Maritime Transport	EmpowerHER: advancing women in STEM higher education and careers
Brunel University London, Arab Academy for Science, Technology, and Maritime Transport	DigitAll empowerment: towards the development of a seamless network of female students, academics and practitioners to foster women's participation in STEM

UK-Indonesia

Institutions	Project
University of Warwick, Universitas President	EMPOWER-SI: empowering women in STEM in Indonesia
Edinburgh Napier University, Universitas Katolik Widya Mandala Surabaya	Empowering Indonesian women in STEM: building resilience through network, advisers and role models
University of Northampton, BINUS University	Empowering female students and graduates enhancing skills and expanding opportunities: learning from UK and Indonesia
Cardiff Metropolitan University, BINUS University	Gender equality networks for Indonesia and the UK in sustainable STEM-AI education
Anglia Ruskin University, Universitas Indonesia	Improving women's employability through data driven modelling-AI data science skill's enrichment: a UK-Indonesia collaborative approach
University of Portsmouth, Universitas Brawijaya	Addressing the demand and supply side barriers to women's education and employment in STEM sectors in Indonesia
City of Glasgow College, Politeknik Negeri Batam	Next steps in gender equality in STEM
University of Exeter, Universitas Syiah Kuala	Removing subject segregation and gender bias in STEM by enabling makerspace and FabLab access in university
Aston University, Universitas Sebelas Maret	Addressing gender gap within female university graduates in entering industries: an economic, cultural and legal approach
City, University of London, Universitas Udayana	Gender equality and Law: transnational learning and co-producing research with students

UK-Jordan

Institutions	Project
University of the West of England, Applied Science University	Empowering women's leadership in higher education: developing an inclusive mentoring framework
Glasgow Caledonian University, German Jordanian University	Fostering career opportunities for women graduates in Jordan and advancing gender equity in leadership across UK

UK-Kenya

Institutions	Project
Open University, Riara University	Project HERizons: career pathways for women graduates in Kenya
King's College London, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology	Breaking down barriers: unveiling the hidden challenges to achieving true gender equality in STEM education and leadership in Kenya
University of Warwick, Kenyatta University	Prevention of violence against women and girls with a particular focus on higher and further education institutions as safe spaces for women
University of Nottingham, KCA University	Prevention of gender-based violence: the challenge for Kenyan universities
The University of Lancaster, Kenyatta University	Gender equality for employability through entrepreneurship in STEM



An overview of Gender Equality Partnerships projects

2023–24 grant call

UK-Nigeria

Institutions	Project
York St John University, Kaduna State University	Gender and leadership in higher education: promoting gender inclusive language to advance the representation of women in leadership through collaboration with diverse stakeholders
Northumbria University, Obafemi Awolowo University	From B2B - From blueprints to boardrooms: empowering women's journey into construction workforce and leadership in further and higher education

UK-Pakistan

Institutions	Project
University College of Estate Management, International Islamic University Islamabad	Ensuring a safe transition from higher education to empowerment for women in Pakistan through eliminating violence and creating safe learning spaces
Cardiff Metropolitan University, Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar	CyberHER: bridging the gender gap in cyber security through inclusive pathways
Cardiff Metropolitan University, National University of Sciences & Technology	Partnership in equality for UK-Pakistan women in robotics & AI

UK-South Africa

Institutions	Project
University of Lincoln, The University of the Witwatersrand	Exploring pathways to equality: understanding gender disparities in South African higher education
University of Plymouth, University of Cape Town	Inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility: advancing gender balance in the South African construction industry
London Metropolitan University, Mangosuthu University of Technology	Advancing gender equality in the built environment through gender-responsive higher education and digital skills development

UK-Ukraine

Institutions	Project
University of Cambridge, Kharkiv National Medical University	EmpowerHER: advancing women's leadership in medical higher education
University of Leicester, Kremenchuk Mykhailo Ostrohradskyi National University	FEMPLOYEE: advancing gender equality and women's leadership in STEM education – a transversal approach to empowerment and inclusion
University of Bedfordshire, Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics	A career roadmap for women's leadership in higher education in Ukraine
Kingston University, Lviv Polytechnic National University	Open a new leader in yourself
University of Reading, National University of Life and Environmental Sciences	Supporting women's leadership in education
University of Hull, Mariupol State University	Fostering women's leadership in Ukrainian academia. An intersectional and culturally responsive perspective

UK-Viet Nam

Institutions	Project
London South Bank University, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education	Making gender equality matter in school: teaching for gender equality in Viet Nam
University of Northampton, Ha Noi National University of Education	Prevention of violence against women and girls so as to build safe-spaces for women in educational universities in Viet Nam
University College of Estate Management, Can Tho University	Cultivating awareness, resources and equality for educators in Viet Nam

UK-Brazil-Nigeria

Institutions	Project
University of the West of Scotland, University of Abuja, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro	Advancing Black and minority ethnic women in higher education leadership

UK-Egypt-Nigeria

Institutions	Project
University of Wolverhampton, Ain Shams University, Baze University Abuja	Gender equality and women educational leaders in the built environment

UK-Indonesia-Viet Nam

Institutions	Project
London South Bank University, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education	STEM-Power



Impact stories

The following case studies demonstrate the diverse approaches and impact being supported by Gender Equality Partnerships.



Leadership in higher education: empowering women in Jordan

Partners:

- Middle East University (MEU), Jordan
- University of Strathclyde, UK

The context

In Jordan, higher education faces significant gender disparities. Although women's participation in higher education is significant, with female students comprising about 55.6 per cent of university attendees, this does not translate into women's economic participation, which stands at only 15 per cent.

Female representation among teaching staff of the 37 higher education institutions remains low, with only five per cent at higher academic ranks. Leadership positions are predominantly held by men, with only four female university presidents to date. Additionally, female representation on university boards has historically been minimal.

This project aimed to address these disparities, by empowering women in higher education to develop strong leadership capabilities and increase skills, confidence and expectations of leadership opportunities and progression.

Celebrating female leadership

The partnership organised a leadership conference to give female researchers in Jordan a platform to celebrate female leadership through the approach of storytelling. This emphasis on personal narratives created a safe space for the women to share their journeys, aspirations and challenges.

Through workshop sessions, participants were encouraged to articulate their leadership stories, paving the way for a collection of diverse narratives. At the same time, they created bonds of trust, respect, shared experience and friendship.

Harnessing the power of poems and stories

Conference participants embraced the unconventional approach of using poems and stories to express their experiences and perspectives, sharing stories of discrimination, harassment and gender stereotyping.

There was also a focus on sharing key achievements, strengths, skills and attributes and, crucially, how they had identified and overcome challenges and barriers to their leadership progression.

The creation of a 'safe space to talk' allowed women to voice their concerns and aspirations freely, marking a significant departure from traditional academic discourse.

Examples of poems from project participants.

I do teaching
More importantly I care
Doing this I lead



Hard worker women
Lives her job and family
Active researcher



Knowledge Ambassador
Skills Improver
Optimistic and lover



Leader by acting
I teach with love and passion
Enthusiastic



مستمع جيد
معلم وطالب علم
مرشد وناصح

Ambitious, determined.
Honest, hardworking.
Hoping to make a difference.



When we share our stories, we're not just talking – we're lifting each other up and finding common ground, creating solidarity and shared understanding. Storytelling not only empowers women to voice their experiences but also validates their perspectives, paving the way for meaningful dialogue and action towards gender equality and empowerment.

Sharon Elliott,
Gender Adviser

It is common across many cultures and countries that the issues affecting women are not prioritised, and, often, women's voices are less likely to be considered or heard in decision-making. It is also widely recognised – from work globally on gender equality issues – that women's movements, women's collective action and collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders are crucial in driving change. This understanding is reflected centrally in the British Council's theory of change for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls with dialogue, collaboration and collective action at its core.

Gill Cowell, Head Gender Equality,
British Council

Network approach for professional recognition

Inspired by the success of peer networks at Strathclyde University, the partnership adopted a similar approach in Jordan, to support participants for professional recognition. The structured network activities aimed to address academic challenges and foster collaboration among peers. The networks in Strathclyde are a systemic approach to personal and professional development, some informal,¹² some more formal and structured.

At the first network meeting in June 2023, 56 participants, including 36 from MEU Jordan and 20 from other institutions in Jordan, developed strategic priorities for the next six months, focusing on mechanisms for sharing experiences, mentoring support, and identifying leadership training opportunities.

A WhatsApp group was set up to facilitate ongoing support between meetings, ensuring continuity and cohesion. Six subsequent network meetings have been scheduled, highlighting the dedication to sustained progress and development.

Impact and future directions

The conference and network meetings sparked strategies and solutions to existing challenges, signalling the potential for transformative change in gender equality within higher education in Jordan. The shared experience fostered a sense of solidarity among participants and highlighted the importance of visibility in empowering female educators and inspiring students.

Ensuring equitable partnership

The project epitomised equitable partnership through collaborative decision-making and mutual learning between Strathclyde University and Jordanian counterparts. Personal connections and shared values underpinned the success of the collaboration, demonstrating the importance of human connections in driving meaningful change.

Reflections and future collaboration

As the project looks to the future, challenges such as leadership transitions and regional disruptions underscore the need for resilience and adaptability. The value of continuous support, genuine relationships and structured planning cannot be overstated in sustaining momentum and fostering long-term impact.

¹² https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/resilient-learning-communities/strathclyde-leadership-in-learning-and-teaching-network-a-reflective-case-study.pdf?sfvrsn=8be3dd81_6



Empowering women in STEM: a transatlantic project

Partners:

- Universidad de Piura (UDEP), Peru
- De Montfort University (DMU), UK

The context

In Peru, where social and economic disparities often intersect with gender inequalities, PRONABEC (National Scholarship and Educational Credit Program) scholarships play a pivotal role in promoting social development and gender equality in higher education.

Notably, 73 per cent of these scholarships are awarded to individuals living in extreme poverty, while around 55 per cent are allocated to women, as a proactive step by the Peruvian government to support access to education for female students.

Directly supporting women who had benefited from the PRONABEC scholarships, this project took a bold and intersectional approach to address the multifaceted barriers faced by women in STEM fields, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Through a combination of mentorship, skills development, and intercultural exchange, the project sought to amplify the voices of women in Peru who had entered higher education through the PRONABEC scheme, by creating a supportive ecosystem where women could thrive and overcome the challenges they face in pursuing their academic and professional aspirations.

Activity-based approach

To address the challenges faced by women in Peru, especially in pursuing careers in STEM due to societal and economic factors, the project aimed to provide a global perspective to participants, through workshops and exchanges designed to build their intercultural awareness and confidence. Participating in such activities would also help to improve their English – a skill the women had identified as crucial to their professional development.

The workshops, delivered by Women in STEM Entrepreneurship Peru (WISE), covered entrepreneurship basics, soft skills development and discussions on gender issues. The project integrated expertise from both institutional partners – DMU and UDEP – as well as WISE, leveraging their respective strengths to empower participants.

Peer-to-peer relationships were developed to encourage more international perspectives, help undo preconceived assumptions, build self-awareness and confidence and enhance language skills. Providing practical experiences and insights into different cultures helped to enrich the learning process.



‘The project shows that it is possible to empower women beyond just those you have direct access to – if you look for those opportunities. It doesn’t require as much work you think. Take that first step, and encourage others to do the same.’

Dr Bunmi Ibrahim, project lead,
De Montfort University, UK

Project activities were designed in collaboration with the women, to ensure they were practical as well as theoretical, and didn’t pose an additional burden. The process also provided a chance for the women to get their business cases for their own business model peer-reviewed and supported.

Participants expressed increased confidence, knowledge and self-esteem. They appreciated the opportunity to engage with diverse perspectives and develop practical skills relevant to their career progression and business opportunities.

Ensuring equitable partnership

Both partner institutions were involved in all decision-making processes to ensure inclusivity, and selecting a Peruvian organisation to deliver the skills development helped to strengthen and shape two-way collaboration.

Sustainability and future collaboration

The project aims to secure funding for future iterations and to disseminate the model to empower more women globally. Sustainability and scalability are key considerations, with plans to expand the project’s reach and impact. The collaborative efforts of DMU, UDEP and WISE demonstrate a commitment to empowering women in STEM fields. By addressing gender disparities and providing practical skills and support, the project aims to create lasting impact and inspire future generations of women in STEM.

Sharon Elliott,
Gender Adviser

When collaborating with women, especially those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, it is crucial to avoid adding another layer of burden or obligation. This project integrated practical tools that would benefit the women without imposing ‘extra work’ on them. For instance, instead of merely imparting knowledge, learning was delivered through the processes of developing a business proposal – a task relevant to their goals and aspirations. This allowed the women to engage meaningfully in the programme, fostering skill development and empowerment without adding further pressure or stress.





Reflection

There are many different approaches to empowering women. These case studies have been selected to demonstrate the effectiveness of Gender Equality Partnerships in enabling different project approaches that best suit the partners' needs.

The previous two projects work directly with women researchers and use empowerment methodologies to address their project goals. Both prioritise the equitability of the partnership and cultural exchange. While one adopts trusted practices from the UK to deliver the activities, the other uses knowledge and skills from the partner country. The key is that whenever the collaboration is equitable, the learning is in both directions.

While these projects use mentoring, training and network development to increase access, skills and confidence for women, the following project demonstrates another approach – providing training and mentorship, but engaging and leveraging the support of decision-makers to influence priorities, resources and policy.



Empowering women in higher education leadership in Nigeria

Partners:

- The University of Lincoln, UK
- African Development Institute of Research Methodology (ADIRM), Nigeria

The context

Nigerian higher education, like many systems worldwide, grapples with persistent gender disparities, particularly in the representation of women in STEM fields and leadership positions.

Recognising the urgent need to dismantle these barriers and foster inclusivity, this project engaged senior leadership in conversations around gender equality, with the aim of bringing about systemic change and paving the way for a more equitable and diverse academic landscape in Nigeria.

Engaging senior leadership

Key to the success of the project was the ability to engage with the Committee of Vice-Chancellors (CVC) and senior government officials in Nigeria, made possible due to relationship building from previous projects. This collaboration provided access to Nigerian universities and created a cohesive programme that could easily be translated into national action and policy.

The visibility of senior leadership engaging with gender issues raised the profile of the issues, the training, seminars and end-of-project conference on leadership and gender equality (which became part of the CVC@60 celebrations) encouraging impressive registration for the trainings and conference.

Additionally, the 12 partner vice-chancellors nominated a total of 36 gender and EDI champions (3 from each university) who would receive additional training to be the focal points for information and engagement across universities, departments and staff as well as give input into focus meetings and workshops. The Office of Committee of Vice-Chancellors also invited higher education policy makers to be part of the project with some participating in the advisory board.

Leveraging social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook groups and LinkedIn enhanced outreach efforts, leading to more than 2,300 registrations from different academics and administrators across more than 60 Nigerian higher education institutions to be involved in the research and focus groups.

The subsequent week-long capacity development programme saw robust participation, with over 400 academics attending. The involvement of senior leadership, including vice chancellors, was instrumental in connecting with universities and fostering mass awareness.

Sharon Elliott,
Gender Adviser

Engaging senior leadership in women's leadership projects can be transformative, laying the foundation for widespread participation and impactful change. When senior leaders, including vice-chancellors and government officials, actively endorse and support such initiatives, they send a powerful message of commitment and importance. Their involvement not only lends credibility but also mobilises resources and networks, facilitating broader engagement at all levels of the institution. By championing women's leadership projects, senior leaders inspire others to join the cause, fostering a culture of inclusivity and empowerment. Their leadership can set the tone for organisational priorities, driving systemic change and creating opportunities for women to thrive and lead.



In the higher education sector, there can be resistance to interventions that address gender inequalities as not important, necessary or creating an unfair advantage for women. It is important, therefore, to create space to explore the understandings and expectations of different stakeholders, including women, men, leaders and influencers, and to include them in identifying and delivering solutions. This can help to create a shared understanding of the different experiences of men and women and how that leads to different outcomes, what can be done to address the imbalances and what resources and opportunities are needed to close the gaps and work towards a more equal outcome.

Gill Cowell, Head Gender Equality,
British Council

Addressing pushback and gender dynamics

While the project saw significant engagement, there were challenges, particularly regarding gender dynamics. Initial pushback arose during champion selection, where 70 per cent were women, which gave the impression to some men that the project was not for them. By switching the language from 'equality', which was associated with issues 'for women', to 'equity', which was more greatly associated with justice, value and inclusion, men felt better able to engage with the programme.

Role of institutional champions

Another key success factor was the appointment of institutional champions. Selecting champions from each university enabled contextual representation and created a direct line of communication through all university levels. The champions themselves received a three-day induction, to equip them with the necessary skills to promote awareness within their institutions. While predominantly women, these champions acted as catalysts for change within their institutions, promoting awareness and engagement at all levels. Their advocacy helped bridge the gap between senior leadership and grassroots engagement, facilitating effective implementation of project objectives.

Insights from the 60 Years in Leadership Conference

The 60 Years in Leadership Conference provided a platform to delve into various issues surrounding gender equality and leadership. The discussions highlighted the importance of addressing systemic barriers and fostering inclusive environments within higher education. Governmental leaders actively engaged in these discussions, signalling a commitment to advancing gender equality agendas.

Research collaboration opportunities, project sustainability and future directions

The project's success has paved the way for potential research collaborations, particularly in setting up equality, diversity and inclusion centres and exploring sustainable leadership models. The collaboration with Lincoln University and the Committee of Vice Chancellors opens avenues for future partnerships and knowledge exchange, benefiting both Nigerian and UK institutions. There are already plans for the gender leadership conference to be an annual event, hosted by each participating university.



Reflection

This final project demonstrates the flexibility of Gender Equality Partnerships grants, by blending the lived experiences of women with empirical data.

In a sector where quantitative data often reigns supreme and results-based funding dictates research priorities, the importance of collecting women's experiences as evidence cannot be overstated.

Empirical data, often prized for its objectivity and measurability, tends to overlook the nuances and complexities of lived experiences. Yet, these experiences are invaluable sources of insight, offering unique perspectives that quantitative metrics alone cannot capture.

Indeed, in a world where women's voices have historically been marginalised or silenced, collecting their experiences as evidence becomes not only a matter of equity but also of enriching the depth and breadth of research.



Bridging the gender gap in Pakistani higher education

Partners:

- Warwick University, UK
- Fatima Jinnah Women University, Pakistan

The context

Born directly from women's experience, this project aimed to address the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within Pakistani higher education, by cultivating women leaders through a mentorship and coaching programme. Recognising the unique challenges faced by women academics in a predominantly male-dominated environment, the project sought to empower women to overcome barriers to leadership through targeted capacity-building and networking opportunities.

The project stemmed from a recognition that sustainable change in gender equality requires organic growth and institutional ownership. Warwick project lead Professor Shaheen Sardar Ali's role as Rector at the National Academy of Higher Education (NAHE) and Fatima Jinnah project lead Dr Azra Yasmin's involvement in a women's university consortium provided the foundation for collaboration. The critical need for a mentoring programme emerged from conversations and consultations with women academics. This project was shaped by personal experience and by listening to the voices and aspirations of them women themselves.

Exchange expectations

The project aimed to foster reciprocal learning between Pakistani and UK stakeholders, with a focus on translating research findings into actionable policy recommendations. Workshop content, informed by participant feedback and contextual insights, centred on personal and professional development, with a specific emphasis on gender dynamics within leadership roles. The intention was to disseminate scholarly reflections to inform broader institutional practices beyond the project's duration, to create direction for change and evidence the demand.

Promoting equitable partnerships

Ensuring equitable partnerships involved transparent communication, mutual respect and acknowledgment of contextual nuances. Despite diverse backgrounds and hierarchical structures, the partners prioritised inclusive decision-making processes with cultural sensitivity. Challenges included navigating power differentials and addressing implicit biases, which required ongoing dialogue and reflexivity.

Transformative journeys

Workshops were carefully crafted to provide a safe space for participants to share experiences and explore diverse leadership styles. The project introduced practical themes such as institutional governance, mentoring techniques and conflict resolution to address specific challenges identified through participant consultations. Mentor training emphasised self-reflection and collaborative learning, fostering a cohesive mentorship network. Participants kept reflection diaries to capture their transformative journeys, personal growth and the insights they had gained.



Gender Equality Partnerships grants stand out from other awards due to a recognition of the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives into research. The collaborative nature of these grants alongside the priorities we hope to address, encourages a holistic approach that blends lived experiences with empirical evidence. Gender Equality Partnership Grants can enable researchers to unearth deeper truths and foster more inclusive and impactful outcomes.

Brenda Giles, Programme Director
Going Global Partnerships, British Council

Unintended outcomes often hold unexpected value, and this project has been fortunate to experience such a positive development. The project set out to assess the gaps and barriers of female leadership in Pakistan with the intention to produce research, develop policy briefs and to institutionalise mentorship programmes. The coming together of women – often from diverse groups who might not otherwise obviously interact – developed bonds and relationships which led the organic development of a supportive and informative network: a network which not only supports the individual women involved but brings additional influence to the arguments presented in policy briefs.

Sharon Elliott,
Gender Adviser

Diversity and intersectionality

The diversity of participants enriched workshop discussions, fostering cross-cultural understanding and solidarity. Challenges related to class and ethnicity underscored the importance of creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and collaboration. Navigating age and career disparities within mentorship relationships offered opportunities for intergenerational learning, with senior mentors providing valuable guidance and junior participants bringing fresh perspectives. The residential workshop facilitated invaluable networking opportunities but posed logistical challenges, particularly for participants with caregiving responsibilities. Lessons learned emphasised the importance of flexible scheduling and inclusive arrangements to accommodate diverse needs.

Unexpected outcomes

Organic networking among participants led to the formation of a proactive support network, transcending institutional boundaries. Making use of digital platforms, participants continued to engage in knowledge-sharing and collaborative initiatives beyond the workshop's conclusion.

Cross-cultural learning

The project offered unexpected learning opportunities for the delivery team, prompting reflection on personal biases and assumptions. The collaborative nature of the project fostered mutual learning and professional growth among team members. While the project initially focused on women mentors, insights from mixed-gender programmes highlighted the importance of male engagement in fostering gender-inclusive leadership cultures. Future iterations aim to integrate male perspectives to address systemic barriers more effectively.

Sustainable futures

Moving forward, the project aims to institutionalise mentoring programmes within Pakistani higher education, harnessing policy advocacy and stakeholder engagement to sustain impact beyond the project's lifespan. Dissemination efforts will focus on translating project outcomes into actionable policy recommendations, with a view to mainstreaming gender-inclusive practices across the sector.



Spotlight on violence against women and girls

A key priority for the Gender Equality Partnerships is the prevention of violence against women and girls, with a key emphasis on higher and further education institutions as safe havens for women.

That said, gender-based violence and sexual violence is complex and personal, and the threat of violence is as damaging as the violence itself. We can empower women and engage communities, but unless we work to change the underlying behaviours, the threat still endures.



‘One thing that the capacity building has helped me is never to hide my voice at the slightest hint of sexual harassment. Also, talking to the opposite sex about some signs of harassment that they may not think is a big deal’.

Professor Ayo Ayodele,
Lagos State University

Violence against women in higher education has been identified as an urgent global predicament. It is a risk, concern and critical challenge for all those involved in higher education who need to take a step up for accountability and safeguarding. Sexual and gender-based violence persist in all societies, both causing and resulting from gender inequality. The occurrence of violence against women in higher education institutions reflects and supports gender inequality in the immediate higher education context but also more widely in society. Sexual harassment and violence are prevalent in higher education and form a core concern for many women managing their decisions to enter, remain, or progress in higher education environments as teachers, researchers or learners.

From **Helen Mott’s** report *Gender Equality in Higher Education: Maximising Impacts*

Addressing the balance

While empowerment programmes for women have formed the majority of Gender Equality Partnerships projects to date, progress is being made in supporting partnerships that address violence against women.

From funding just one project to address violence against women in its first year, Gender Equality Partnerships has gone on to fund six such projects. And while the numbers are small, the impact can be life changing.

Aston University: paving the way

Since 2021, Aston University has collaborated on three Gender Equality Partnerships projects to address sexual violence on university campuses in Indonesia, Nigeria and Pakistan.

In Surabaya, Indonesia, a collaboration with Universitas Airlangga led to a comprehensive study on sexual violence incidence, policy evaluations, the development of educational materials and the establishment of a national support network. Among the many long-term benefits of the project, the national network will continue to share the outcomes of the partnership beyond its lifetime, and the online training packages will be shared with educational institutions throughout Indonesia. For Aston, an increased understanding of the Indonesian education system has also supported new grant applications.

In Nigeria, a partnership with Lagos State University has yielded significant outcomes, including a mentoring programme to empower women, policy evaluations and extensive knowledge sharing, which have all helped to raise awareness and encourage dialogue on sexual violence. By maximising collaborative partnerships, inclusive practices and innovative engagement strategies, the project has successfully empowered women, challenged sexual violence and fostered lasting change within Nigerian university communities.

In Pakistan, Aston’s partnership with Quaid-I-Azam University used listening exercises with university leaders to assess existing policies, which informed a comprehensive report on safety and inclusivity on Pakistani campuses. Focus groups with students and staff across various universities generated insights culminating in a scientific report on safety and inclusion, alongside educational materials to empower students and staff.

Despite cultural challenges, these projects successfully engaged diverse stakeholders, prioritising representation and meaningful contributions from under-represented groups.



‘The project has been invaluable in helping our understanding of sexual violence and violence against women in the Nigerian context.’

Dr Olawunmi Oni-Buraimoh,
Lagos State University of Science
and Technology

‘The awareness against sexual violence was huge. The project has had a significant impact on senior university leaders and the higher education community.’

BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights
Nigeria representative

Taking it forward

Building on the successes of Aston’s projects, four more partnerships to address sexual violence received funding in 2023.

The University of Warwick is partnering with Kenyatta University, in Kenya, to work towards the prevention of violence against women and girls, with a particular focus on higher and further education institutions as safe spaces for women.

The University of Nottingham is partnering with KCA university, in Kenya, to deliver a project that seeks to empower women and girls in higher education institutions to identify and mitigate situations and signs of gender-based violence, such as assault, harassment and abuse.

The University of Northampton and Hanoi National University of Education, in Viet Nam, are working to prevent violence against women and girls and to build safe spaces for women in educational universities in Viet Nam.

And the University College of Estate Management is working with the International Islamic University Islamabad, in Pakistan, to ensure a safe transition from higher education to empowerment for women in Pakistan.

Feelings of fear and/or exclusion on campuses limits access of women to education (they may underperform due to these feelings or may be deterred from applying to university in the first place or be deterred from coming to campus and attend classes altogether if they do enrol). For women specifically, this fear may be attributed to a range of discriminatory behaviours including misogyny and sexual violence. Education is an important vehicle for social mobility, particularly for vulnerable groups and low-income populations. Creating safer and more inclusive university campuses, therefore, will contribute to equal access to education for women and other under-represented groups.

From the **Safe Campus in Pakistan** website

Creating spaces for women to come together is critical. This can provide the opportunity for women to share their experiences and build connections, reflect and identify the issues they face and the changes that they want to see for themselves and for others, strategise and plan their approaches to influencing change and draw motivation and support from working together. It is a critical process in building women’s own confidence and support to speak out – and take steps to make change and engage with other stakeholders to do this. It’s really heartening to see that the Gender Equality Partnerships have enabled these spaces to be created in the higher education sector and have laid the foundations for transformative change in the sector.

Gill Cowell, Head Gender Equality,
British Council



Learning, celebrating and sharing

Connecting with and hearing from those who have been involved in the initiative has not only generated areas of learning on how to strengthen Gender Equality Partnerships, but offers a chance to celebrate and share the successes and impact of partnership projects.



‘The impact was beyond what we expected. The unity we witnessed was beyond description. The workshops shocked us to the level of commonalities and shared stories and the sisterhood that came from this is beyond words’.

Dr Mina Beigi,
University of Southampton

‘This has opened new research opportunities and partnerships which we didn’t expect’.

Irene Samy Fahim,
Nile University

What makes the programme really special is how it brings people together, and institutions together, strengthens their bonds, and supports them along the way. This means that the research and actions they take truly represent the rich diversity of perspectives involved.

Brenda Giles, Programme Director
Going Global Partnerships, British Council

Learning from participants

Post-project delivery discussions have offered a thought-provoking opportunity for participants to reflect on their journey, share project details, and delve into the intricacies of their work.

During these sessions, participants discussed the process, design, outcomes and impact of their projects, while also reflecting on their personal growth.

These discussions have proved to be fruitful and rewarding, often sparking insightful reflections on collaboration, potential collaboration and individual contributions. Many participants were surprised by the scope and impact of their projects, leading to profound realisations about the depth of their potential influence.

Learning from the delivery team

Hearing from members of the Going Global Partnerships team, which manages Gender Equality Partnerships, has provided key insights into what went well, what could be improved and what impact, or potential impact, they see on the ground.

The British Council works in different ways and through different relationships in each of the countries involved in the initiative. In some countries, the grants strengthened existing partnerships, while in others, new partnerships were forged.

In Jordan, partnership activities have inspired one member of the Going Global Partnerships team to advocate more strongly for gender mainstreaming approaches and activities. She is aiming to share the success story more widely and has been able to link a network developed through a Gender Equality Partnerships project with other gender activities, such as leadership recruitment.

In Nigeria, team members commented on the current prevalence of gender equality conversations within the higher education sector and noted that by delivering the Gender Equality Partnerships projects, they were able to provide input, demonstrate commitment and maximise the conversation and, in doing so, highlight the British Council’s commitment to gender equality and increase further our position as a trusted partner with expertise and value.



‘For me, it was a new experience to look at gender inequality. I was surprised at how deep rooted and global the issue is.’

Dr Muhammad Qasim,
University College
of Estate Management

Learning from gender experts

Sharon Elliott is the Going Global Partnership’s gender consultant, who has supported the project on its journey to develop its gender mainstreaming commitments. Specialising in gender and higher education, she has also previously worked as a grant-maker. Here she responds to a question about her thoughts on Gender Equality Partnerships:

We’ve been doing some great work through Going Global Partnerships to mainstream gender in our projects, with our partners and colleagues and in our processes. For example, we have created practical toolkits, undertaken targeted gender consultancies and updated our monitoring and evaluation systems to enable more qualitative indicators and outcomes to capture the real impact of our gender mainstreaming work. I think, however, the grants offered through Gender Equality Partnerships provide a particularly influential opportunity to create impact. What is so refreshing about these grants is that they invest directly into research collaborations and capacity development opportunities; we’re not just funding projects; we’re igniting real change at multiple levels.

Putting cash into the hands of those who are deeply committed to advancing women’s opportunities and breaking down barriers amplifies their impact and validates their cause. Putting cash into the hands of people who may not have previously prioritised gender engages more people in more ways with the fight for gender equality and equity. Gender Equality Partnerships does both. While many of the grant holders are personally dedicated to gender equality, some are less experienced and have been surprised by the breadth, scale and impact of inequalities and the barriers women face – the raised awareness of these grant holders was mainstreaming in action.

I find the collaborative nature of these projects inspiring, and in many, I have witnessed wholly equitable partnerships that have fostered ongoing relationships and learning. My most memorable involvement has been facilitating post-grant group meetings, where grant holders shared insights and celebrated successes. Witnessing their realisation of the wider potential impact of their work was incredibly rewarding. I felt that many left the meetings inspired by the work of others and by what they and the women they worked with had achieved themselves. I sensed a real energy for scaling-up and pressing forward.

There is still space for improvement, of course, and I believe that Going Global Partnerships has an appetite to learn and improve. But these are mostly logistical improvements, to address timescales, paperwork necessities and support processes. The opportunity to create an active network of past and current grant holders is an opportunity that shouldn’t be missed.

Most notably, and the key learning I hope others take away from this initiative, is what was evident in all the conversations I had: regardless of the theme or priorities of the project or research, providing safe spaces for women to come together to be heard and to inspire each other is where true transformation occurs. Solidarity, action plans, policies and networks that emerge from these spaces have the potential to drive significant change, but the individual empowerment of women feeling heard is immeasurable.



Gender Equality Partnerships: the journey so far

Continuing the journey

From funding five projects between the UK and three countries in 2021–22, to funding 42 projects in 11 countries in 2023–24, Gender Equality Partnerships continues to grow, and we are now ready for the next stage of the journey.



Gender Equality Partnerships has created a unique space for collaboration, not just between the project partners, but between and across the projects, regardless of where they are based.

Brenda Giles, Programme Director
Going Global Partnerships, British Council



Developing stronger networks

Based on feedback from partners, colleagues and the wider sector, the next immediate objective is to strengthen the networking component of Gender Equality Partnerships.

The initiative has now supported 70 projects between 120 partner institutions, and bringing these people and institutions together to learn from each other, to share experiences and best practice and to create the power that comes from a shared voice, is our next priority.

What we can look forward to

A snapshot of projects from the 2023–24 funding round.

1. Cardiff Metropolitan University is collaborating on three projects to address women in STEM and employment pathways across robotics, AI and cyber security.

In Pakistan, they are partnering with the Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar to deliver the CyberHER: Bridging the Gender Gap in Cyber Security through Inclusive Pathways project and with the National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad to deliver the PIE (Partnership in Equality) for UK-Pakistan Women in Robotics & AI project.

In Indonesia, they are partnering with Bina Nusantara University on the GENIUS: (Gender Equality Networks for Indonesia and the UK in sustainable STEM-AI education) I project. This project will use a diversified approach that includes organising STEM-AI robotics workshops and women in STEM-AI talks in Indonesia, alongside establishing the GrowTogether mentorship programme for one-to-one female mentorship in STEM-AI fields. There will also be community outreach, to promote education through STEM-AI robotics workshops, women-led research and innovation projects in STEM-AI fields, and awareness-raising about gender equality through social media.

2. Lancaster University is partnering with Kenyatta University Nairobi, Kenya, to deliver the Gender Equality for Employability through Entrepreneurship in STEM (GEEES) project.

This project will draw upon the experience and findings of previous digital training programmes to stimulate sustainable entrepreneurial thinking in scientists to develop a co-creation mentorship programme and a project to encourage wider stakeholder engagement and participation.

The grant will enable the partners to expand the roll-out of their toolkit and to integrate it within the curriculum of selected universities and colleges, with the aim of increasing representation of women and underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship training and raising awareness of the potential economic and societal benefits of gender diversity in STEM.

The project also aims to collaborate with industry partners and government agencies to create a supportive ecosystem for women in STEM entrepreneurship, as well as facilitating networking and mentoring opportunities.



3. Northampton University is partnering with Bina Nusantara University in Indonesia to deliver the Empowering female students and graduates enhancing skills and expanding opportunities: Learning from UK and Indonesia project, and with Hanoi National University of Education to deliver the Prevention of violence against women and girls, so as to build safe spaces for women in educational universities in Viet Nam project.

In Viet Nam, work will focus on raising awareness and developing skills and appropriate attitudes towards gender-related issues for all groups, prioritising the experiences of minority groups. The target audience of the project includes students, lecturers and staff from ethnic minority groups, the LGBTQ+ community, people from all age groups and religions, and people with disabilities.

Amongst other activities, the project will develop training materials on gender-related knowledge, gender equality and skills, to prevent and respond to gender-based violence for female students at universities, and will roll out training to 1,000 female students at five universities of education in Viet Nam to improve their understanding of gender, gender equality, and how to prevent and respond to violence.

4. London Metropolitan University is partnering with the Mangosuthu University of Technology, KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa, to deliver the Advancing Gender Equality in the Built Environment through Gender-responsive Higher Education and Digital Skills Development project.

Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) is located in the township of Umlazi, in Durban's eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, which is characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment, inequality and crime. Census data also illustrates that the majority of unemployed young people in Umlazi are women.

The project will use a number of mechanisms to target women and encourage welcoming and empowering environments within the built environment industry (comprising the architecture, engineering and construction disciplines), which is highly unequal and lacks diversity in terms of gender, age and social background. The partnership will undertake an analysis of the current curriculum and environment, to help shape a gender-responsive curriculum, pedagogy and environment, and plans to undertake training and awareness raising activities, while developing capacity in digital skills.

And with the fourth call for grant applications already underway, we are looking forward to funding even more innovative and passionate projects that address the challenge of gender inequality in higher and further education.



The idea for Gender Equality Partnerships was born at a British Council office in 2021, with a decision to invest in targeted interventions that would complement our work on gender mainstreaming, demonstrate our own organisational commitment and support the higher education sector globally to do the same. The energy and inspiration from both the British Council team and the higher education partners has ensured that Gender Equality Partnerships has thrived and sown some important seeds of change.

Gill Cowell, Head Gender Equality,
British Council



Closing observation

The Going Global Partnerships team is deeply inspired by the remarkable contributions, imaginative ideas and unwavering resourcefulness of the institutions and individuals that have brought Gender Equality Partnerships to life.

We take immense pride in the initiative we have cultivated and the platform it has provided for women's voices to be heard. Our heartfelt gratitude goes out to all who have played a part in shaping this inspiring initiative.