



Submission: A New International Gender Equality Strategy

Australian Feminists for Women's Rights (AF4WR) welcome the opportunity to provide input into the development of this strategy. We are a feminist group whose object is research-based advocacy on women's rights.

We address the four questions that DFAT has provided to guide the structure of submissions, but have rephrased these questions slightly to reflect the fact that women are oppressed not because of *gender* but because of their female *sex*. It is thus crucial that women benefit from sex-based rights and protections. The framing of questions in terms of *gender* muddies the waters, all the more because DFAT's "easy read" outline refers to "men", "women" and an unspecified "different gender". Women do not, however, have any innate gender, no more than men do, as gender is a social construct: the difficulties they encounter in most of the world has nothing to do with gender but with their sex. Men with a gender identity may also face issues but they are of a different order and in no way can be resolved by either conflating sex and gender or limiting women's rights in order to accommodate these males, as this simply impoverishes access to rights for all. Other strategies must be found that do not involve sacrificing women's rights and protections to a gender agenda.

We are further concerned that the "multi-gender" model espoused by the government is not globally intelligible. The Australian government thus risks imposing a Western-Anglo worldview on other nations in applying this framing, to the even further detriment of women for whom these conversations are at best arcane and at worst undermine their opportunity and capacity to overcome the significant material, cultural and ideological barriers they face because of the simple fact of their female sex.

1. What are international sex equality priorities?

Sadly, these priorities have not substantively changed since the government's 2016 Gender Equality Strategy was issued. That strategy focused on **women's participation in decision-making, women's economic empowerment and addressing violence against women**. These three areas remain of utmost importance, because little progress has been made on addressing them, as can be easily ascertained from [UN Women's Facts and Figures page](#). In some places and some respects there has even been significant backsliding, with the most tragic recent example being that of Afghanistan.

The case of Afghanistan also highlights the particular attention that needs to be paid to the rights of **girl children** (the girl child being, and remaining, one of the Twelve Critical Areas of Concern for Women established in Beijing in 1995). An area of particular concern is **access to education**. According to the international NGO [Right to Education](#), barriers to women and girls obtaining an education include:

- [harmful gender stereotypes and wrongful gender stereotyping](#)
- [child marriage and early and unintended pregnancy](#)
- [gender-based violence against women and girls](#)
- [lack of inclusive and quality learning environments and inadequate and unsafe education infrastructure, including sanitation](#)
- [poverty](#).

This information provided by Right to Education clearly shows how the different manifestations of barriers to equality between men and women are linked to form a systemic whole within a logic where only males count as fully human. Again, this systemic, and in 2023, frankly scandalous denial of women's access to the full realisation of human potential cannot be addressed unless we understand the origin of this denial: men refuse this access to women because they are *of female sex* and as such, considered inferior. The ubiquitous use of "gender" as a replacement for the term sex by the UN and international NGOs alike does not change this basic fact, and in fact can worsen the situation by reinforcing the very stereotypes that are foregrounded both by Right to Education and indeed by the UN treaty on women's rights: the [Convention on the Elimination on all Forms of Discrimination Against Women \(1979\)](#).

However, even with an education, women's access to economic empowerment, participation in decision making and freedom from male violence *is not enough*, as the above-referenced information from UN Women shows starkly. Education is a beginning, and is fundamentally important, but it is clearly insufficient to guarantee women's full participation in society on a footing that is equal in value and recognition to that of men. We will address two other issues raised by Right to Education: the issue of **health, including sexuality and reproductive rights**, and the impact of poor **infrastructure** (2) and (3) below respectively.

Another two areas that we consider to be of fundamental importance, and thus a great priority, for achieving equality between the sexes, relate to **conflict situations** and to **the environment**. Women and children are by far the greatest number of those displaced and otherwise impacted by wars ([75 percent of those displaced](#), for example), natural catastrophes and [the impacts of climate change](#). Yet women are the least often consulted about what to do about it, notwithstanding initiatives such as [UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security](#), which has had woefully insufficient impact on outcomes due to poor application of the directives contained in the resolution, notwithstanding the importance of its very existence.

2. What are the most effective approaches for achieving sex equality globally?

Clearly, funding of initiatives and provision of expertise are crucial. However, we also believe that a certain **shift in logic** is necessary. There has too often been an exclusive or near exclusive focus on women and girls—their behaviour, their activities, services available to them—without sufficient attention being paid at the same time to **men's attitudes and behaviour**. It is as if women simply had a tendency to be oppressed and addressing that tendency, without attention to who or what it is that is oppressing them, were sufficient. For

women to be able to occupy more space, and more comfortable spaces, in society, men have to be able to relinquish their claim to exclusivity of those spaces or control over what happens in them.

In short, sometimes the main thing women need is **for men to get out of the way** so that women have space to talk, to learn, to acquire skills, to act. This *also* means men with a “woman” gender identity getting out of women’s way. Too often, males with a gender identity are occupying spaces that women desperately need in order to address the imbalance of power and opportunity between males and females. Again, however, this gender identity issue is very largely a First World problem, and the debates are incomprehensible even to many in the West, let alone populations outside the West.

Further, for any programs targeting the rights, safety or empowerment of women to be effective, **health including sexual and maternal health** need to be key factors. Women who lack sexual and reproductive rights—such as insufficient women’s including gynaecological health education and professional support; being married off very young; lacking control over precocious or overly numerous pregnancies; not having access to support for breastfeeding; not being able to exercise choice in the face of top-down imposed contraception or sterilisation programs—are going to have difficulty participating in or benefiting from other programs aimed at enhancing their empowerment.

Further, for women who may have many young children to care for and provide for, development and other programs targeting them will be set up to fail if thought is not also given to **adequate childcare**, managed by people who are adequately resourced to provide it. These resources must include appropriate training and decent liveable wages.

If attention is not concurrently paid to **women’s health including maternal health, women’s reproductive rights and appropriate infrastructure and personnel for the care of children**, then the Australian government risks wasting millions of dollars on programs that will fail because the women they are meant to help simply do not have the time and energy to fully participate in them.

Also, if women are being engaged in various empowerment programs but their families, teachers and employers retain patriarchal attitudes, then the women are as likely to be punished for being “empowered” as to be respected. Thus, any program that wishes to bring women new opportunities also needs **to prepare their communities to accept and value these new roles taken on by women**. There is little point, for example, teaching women political and economic skills if they are still being battered by their husbands when they go home.

3. How can Australia best support efforts to achieve sex equality internationally?

Among the main obstacles to achieving the safety and security of populations and ensuring their access to meaningful enactment of their rights is **the lack of political will of governments and insufficiently developed infrastructure and democratic institutions**, leading to weak civil society and onerous day-to-day challenges for women and indeed many men.

One of the most basic of infrastructural problems is **lack of reliable data**: data that is inaccurate or lacking in detail, insufficiently sex-disaggregated (or not at all) and does not include sex-specific data such as experience of male violence and matters specific to women’s health and maternity, will provide a shaky foundation on which to base programs addressing

women's needs. Australia would thus do well to support, in the first instance, improvements in data collection about women's situation and women's needs.

As concerns **political will and democratic institutions**, it is difficult for governments of richer liberal democracies to intervene in constructive ways in such situations. **Exclusively top-down approaches are of limited use**: not only can they be perceived by governments as imperialist, but citizens also need to be equipped with the resources and tools, as well as the protections, to **effect change from the bottom up**. This is clearly not a straightforward exercise for governments, whose main interlocutors on the international stage are other governments—and large corporations. While it is sometimes possible to achieve political change for the better through quiet diplomacy and soft power initiatives, such governmental or institutional initiatives are a very slow and often weak and ephemeral way to bring about meaningful change in women's lives.

We are not experts in international diplomacy nor in the running of governments, although we do have some understanding of the immense groundwork that needs to be done by many people to effect even small shifts in the international sphere. There are, however, fairly obvious areas outside the political arena where the Australian government can work to progress equality between the sexes on a global scale, and some of these areas of activity could be indirect rather than directly aimed at women.

For example, **infrastructure**—things that can be as basic as access roads, sanitation and processing of waste—is often the biggest hurdle to effective civil society participation and most especially that of women. Investing in **infrastructure projects that remain under public or community control** as much as possible rather than primarily or exclusively that of transnational corporations seems to us to be a highly effective means of indirectly empowering women.

Other obvious areas in which the Australian government can intervene is through **support for local or international NGOs with proven track records in supporting women**. While on one level this can be a tricky area, because the NGO-isation of the world and in particular poorer countries can result in significant politicking for ownership of narratives and solutions, on another level, those best equipped to work on civil society empowerment are civil society actors.

On the political level, history has shown us that **Australia can show constructive leadership** in the human rights arena: the work of Herbert Vere Evatt in the formative years of the UN and the drafting of the Universal Declaration, or of Carmen Lawrence in heading Australia's delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, spring readily to mind. Our view as a feminist organisation with a broad commitment to social justice is that governments are at their best when they have the courage of their humanitarian convictions to go that extra difficult yard, or mile, to speak for the rights of the vulnerable. **And none are so vulnerable today as the female half of the world's population. We thus look to the current Australian government to demonstrate that courage, that human rights leadership.** Women's dignity and safety are not to be negotiated away on the international or indeed national stage by kowtowing either to political agendas of global *realpolitik* or to well-moneyed and vocal lobby groups that are far from having women's best interests at heart.

4. What should the government/ DFAT consider when developing the new international sex equality strategy?

Our answer to this question is simple: **the government/DFAT should consider the voices of women, wherever they are raised.** And in doing so, it should understand that women do not all speak with one voice and will have a variety of needs—and indeed political agendas—depending on the material and political context in which they find themselves. The Australian government needs to listen to them *all*, and listen very carefully, not just take the brightest shiniest NGO claiming to represent women in country X as “the” voice of that country’s women. Sadly, this caricatural depiction can be uncomfortably close to what happens on the ground: we have seen it time and again as organisations compete for always-insufficient time and money or for the ear of very busy government bureaucrats.

To help counter such pitfalls, and to enable active listening to a range of voices, DFAT and the government need to ensure that they are equipped with **knowledgeable and skilled personnel**, who have a deep understanding of the national/cultural areas on which the government wishes to direct its focus. This includes **excellent language skills and experience working with civil society and local communities.**

For women’s voices to be heard, men—and more powerful women—need to become better, more compassionate and more astute listeners. Our government needs to listen to women. Here in Australia and internationally.

We thank you for your attention.

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