



POLICY BRIEF

Strengthening Australia's Efforts to Address Gender Inequality

KEY POINTS

- Achieving gender equality is critical to the fulfilment of human rights for all. It is also an enabler of development outcomes across health, social, economic, and environmental domains and is a central component of humanitarian action. The inextricable link between gender equality, peace and stability makes gender equality central to the achievement of all other aspects of Australia's international development cooperation and foreign policy.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has eroded development progress and exacerbated inequality – including gender inequality and other forms of intersectional marginalisation – around the world. As our region grapples with the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, we urgently need to protect and restore hard-won human rights gains. We also must act on the opportunity to reset the social norms and systems of power that have upheld inequality and marginalisation.
- Australia has been at the forefront of efforts toward mainstreaming gender equality in international development. But as other nations adopt more ambitious policies and targets, including feminist foreign and international development policies, political leadership is needed to ensure that Australia maintains credibility as a leader on gender equality around the world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Frame gender equality as part of the core purpose of Australia's international development cooperation.
2. Expand DFAT funding and technical expertise for gender, disability and social inclusion analysis of all country and regional response plans and new funding initiatives across Australia's international development cooperation program, including resourcing to implement the findings of this analysis.
3. Apply the twin track approach to social inclusion by resourcing dedicated initiatives for women and LGBTIQ+ people, people with disabilities, children and youth, and First Nations while ensuring mainstreaming across all programming.
4. Re-establish the practice of setting targets for gender equality across the development cooperation program by:
 - a. Reinstating the gender performance target that 80% of aid investments address gender issues in their implementation (measured through DFAT's Aid Quality Check process);
 - b. Committing 15% of ODA to initiatives with gender equality as the principal objective, and 80% of ODA to initiatives with gender equality as a significant objective, following the lead set by Canada (measured against the OECD DAC Gender Marker);
 - c. Committing 5% of ODA to be delivered through women's equality organisations and institutions (measured against the OECD DAC CRS Sector Code 15170 – noting that activities against this code contribute to the proportion of ODA with gender equality as the principal objective).

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Build on prior investments in gender data to scale up the availability of individual-level, gender-sensitive and multidimensional poverty data, and support the capacity for all development actors to use the data.
6. Ensure all participating Departments – DFAT, Defence, Home Affairs, Australian Federal Police and the Australian Civil-Military Centre – are mandated to fully resource, implement and report on their commitments as part of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.
7. Integrate the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security with domestic policy agendas, such as the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, Wiyi Yani U Thangani, and the Uluru Statement from the Heart.
8. Resource and enable collaboration with civil society for ongoing, collaborative and action-oriented contribution to the deliverables of the National Action Plan and the broader Women Peace and Security Agenda. This collaboration must include resourcing to engage with diverse groups to strengthen implementation and support government accountability and responses to emerging crises.

GENDER EQUALITY MATTERS FOR DEVELOPMENT

GENDER EQUALITY IS A HUMAN RIGHT

Globally, the achievement of gender equality is held back by social norms and systems of power that perpetuate marginalisation and inequality for women and people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. This has significant consequences for development outcomes. Women are underrepresented at all levels of political participation, particularly in the Pacific.¹ Women are systematically excluded from and underrepresented in the formal economy and earn less than men, and consequently bear a disproportionate share of poverty and disadvantage.²

Globally, 217 million women lack access to contraception and the fulfilment of their sexual and reproductive health and rights.³ Women, girls and people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression are most at risk in disasters and humanitarian emergencies, exacerbated by the impacts of climate change.⁴ Prioritising targeted women's rights and gender equality initiatives, including in humanitarian responses, is critical to ensuring human rights as well as broader development outcomes.

PROGRESSING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH COVID-19 RESPONSE, RECOVERY AND RESET

The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities within and between communities, societies and nations. UNFPA has estimated a 43 per cent increase in maternal mortality, and a 40 per cent increase in the unmet need for modern family planning methods in 2020 alone, as a result of disruptions caused by the pandemic.⁵ Women accounted for 38.9 per cent of total employment before the COVID-19 crisis (2019) but made up 47.6 per cent of employment losses in 2020.⁶

Across Asia and the Pacific, women perform four times more unpaid care work than men, and the closure of paid care-providing facilities and schools has only increased this workload, restricting women's ability to engage in paid work and contributing to burnout and exhaustion.⁷ Around the world, rates of gender-based violence have increased since the start of the pandemic, due to "[p]re-existing toxic social norms and gender inequalities, economic and social stress caused by the pandemic, coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures."⁸

Responding to the gendered impacts of the pandemic is imperative.

This disruption also provides an opportunity for transformation, resetting the social norms and systems of power that uphold and perpetuate gender inequality.

Australia's international development cooperation can play a critical role in supporting work to transform harmful gender norms, progress women's rights, and improve development outcomes for all.

GENDER, EMERGENCIES AND HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Disasters and other emergencies have specific and substantial impacts on women and people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. These impacts are exacerbated by climate change.⁹ Emergencies substantially increase the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, early marriage and trafficking.¹⁰ Sexual and reproductive healthcare during emergencies, including provision of safe and dignified menstrual hygiene management, is lifesaving.¹¹ Addressing the needs of women and people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression during emergencies can be achieved by adopting an intersectional approach to disaster preparedness, risk reduction, response and recovery.

GENDER, PEACE AND SECURITY

Gender equality is a predictor of peace and stability. States with lower levels of gender equality tend to have higher likelihoods of inter- or intra-state violence, higher levels of perceived or actual corruption, and lower trust in government.¹² State fragility and violent ascensions to power can also see rapid erosion of women's rights and freedoms, as witnessed in the recent return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, where two decades of progress was eroded in a matter of months.

The severe humanitarian crisis has also seen a rapid rise in girls being sold into early marriage and women (and children) overrepresented among the displaced.¹³ In Myanmar, prominent women human rights defenders have been targeted, including Thin Thing Aung, the founder of the Women's League of Burma and Mizzima News.¹⁴ Women also face the use of rape and violence as a weapon of war, including in Myanmar, where there is a well-documented history of the Tatmadaw using sexual violence, particularly against ethnic minorities, and women's rights groups have received reports of sexual assault against the women protestors who have been detained.

Women play a critical leadership role in resisting conflict and building peace.

The Asian Development Bank cites gender inequality as the most significant factor in its classification of nine Pacific states as fragile, and recommends gender equality initiatives as the most effective intervention to improve regional stability.¹⁵

When women are involved in peace process, the resulting agreements are 35 per cent more likely to last for 15 years.¹⁶ Decisions taken by diverse groups are more likely to reflect the needs of the people impacted, making these decisions better informed and more capable of delivering better results. Supporting women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders is critical to laying the foundations for peace and stability in fragile and conflict-affected states. Investing in women's leadership across all areas of development, peace and security will lead to better development outcomes.

STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIA'S EFFORTS TO ADDRESS GENDER INEQUALITY

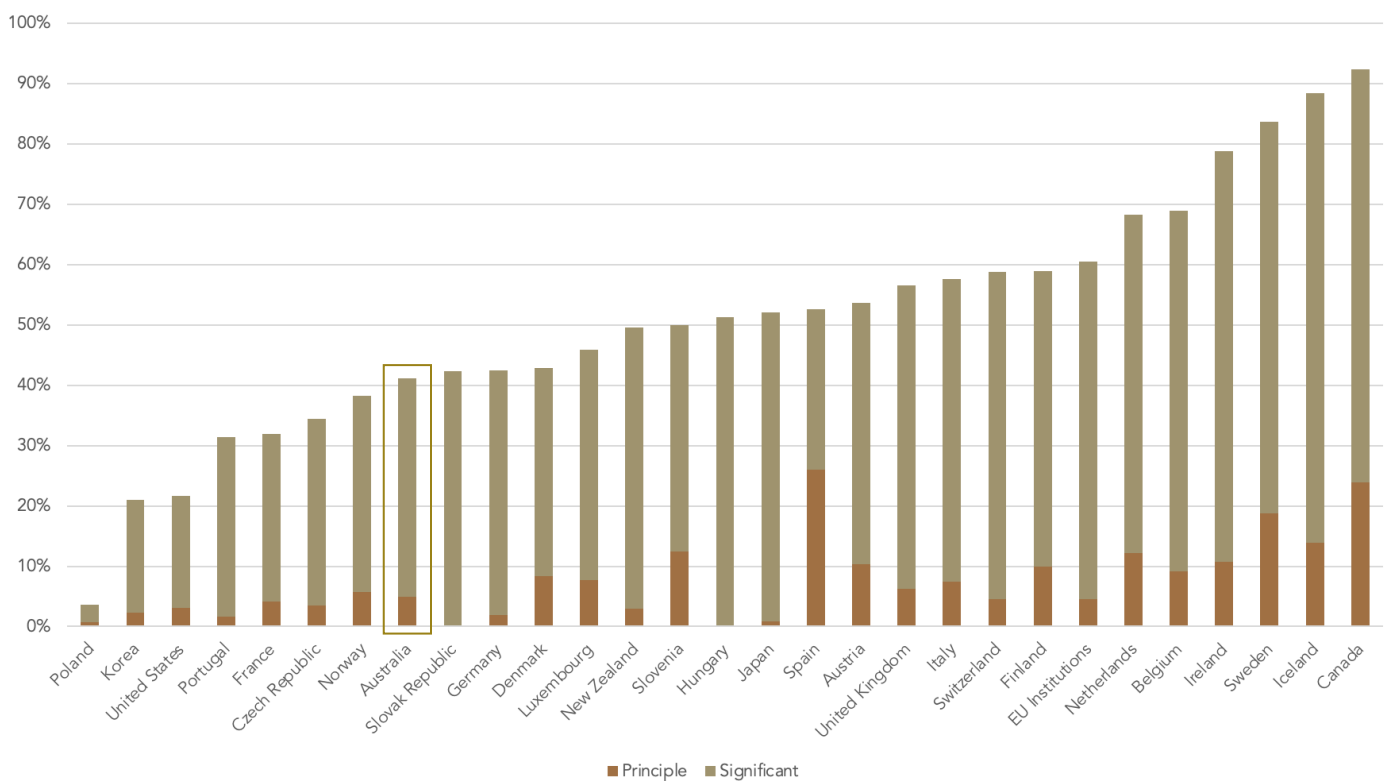
CURRENT PERFORMANCE ON GENDER EQUALITY MEASURES

Australia has been a world leader in championing gender mainstreaming in development cooperation, and in dedicated programming to progress gender equality. Initiatives such as Pacific Women Lead are critical to promote women's leadership and support local women's rights and feminist organisations to sustain action on gender equality and other intersecting forms of marginalisation. The 2014 target requiring 80 per cent of Australia's aid investments to effectively address gender in their implementation was an effective mechanism for raising the bar on gender mainstreaming across the development program, despite not being achieved in full. In this context, the decision in Partnerships for Recovery to abandon any target on gender equality has undermined the effectiveness of Australia's international development cooperation. This is especially concerning given the gendered impacts of the pandemic.

Last year's Federal Budget allocated an estimated \$1.3 billion of Australia's ODA towards initiatives focused on gender equality. However, this equates to just 41 per cent of Australia's bilateral allocable aid, placing us in the bottom third of OECD donors on this measure [see figure 1 below].¹⁷ Just 5 per cent of this funding is dedicated to initiatives with gender equality as their principal focus, and less than 0.5 per cent towards women's rights organisations.¹⁸ In comparison, Canada leads this ranking with 92 per cent of ODA directed towards gender equality initiatives overall, and 24 per cent towards programs with gender equality as their principal focus. This comes in the context of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy, which frames its development efforts in terms of feminist principles and sets a target of 95 per cent of ODA to be invested in gender equality initiatives.¹⁹

Greater political will and resourcing for the prioritisation of gender equality is urgently needed if Australia is to keep pace with the efforts of likeminded donors and is to maintain credibility as a leader on gender equality and development.

FIGURE 1: Percentage of ODA focused on gender equality in Bilateral Allocatable Aid 2018-2019 average



Source: OECD DAC, "Aid in Support of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment," March 2021, pp 4; annotation added

GENDER, DISABILITY AND INTERSECTIONAL MARGINALISATION

DFAT has developed policies on gender equality and other forms of marginalisation. Partnerships for Recovery recognises the importance of gender equality and social inclusion to the effectiveness of its work.²⁰ Understanding the way that gender interacts with other factors in social inclusion, such as age and disability – also known as intersectional analysis – is critical to effective development practice.

Intersectional analysis is a way of thinking, not merely a checklist of identity characteristics. When looking at gender equality initiatives, the intersectional analysis asks us to consider which women are benefiting, and why. In the disability space, it prompts us to consider whether women with disabilities may face different barriers to inclusion than men with disabilities or think about the ways that having a disability impacts upon children compared to adults. Toolkits and frameworks can be helpful to provide scaffolding for this approach, but ultimately intersectional analysis is something that must be practiced and refined on a continual basis – and this requires resourcing, both financial and technical.

Inclusive development is merely the first step; ultimately, the goal of development should be to support efforts to transform the systems of marginalisation which underpin exclusion. Going beyond inclusion means transforming the social norms and structures of power that perpetuate inequality and marginalisation. These initiatives must be led by the communities most impacted. Just as progress on gender equality requires dedicated focus as well as mainstreaming across other priorities (the “twin track approach”), Australia’s international development cooperation program must dedicate resources and expertise to address gender inequality among First Nations people, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people, ethnic minority groups, children and young people.

“We need to transform our overall thinking, rather than just seeking to place First Nations people within existing structures.”²¹

– James Blackwell, Indigenous International Relations Scholar, writing on DFAT’s Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda.

It is difficult to assess DFAT’s current performance on social inclusion. Outside of gender equality, and to a lesser extent disability inclusion, information is not routinely published by the Department on funding for implementation and technical advice on social inclusion.²² Increasingly, technical skills are being bundled into GEDSI (gender equality, disability and social inclusion) advisory roles. While there is clear benefit to mandating the provision of intersectional analysis and advice, there is a risk that without sufficient resourcing, these roles become overburdened. These roles must also be supported by dedicated resourcing for other social inclusion priorities in their own right, in line with the well-established twin track approach to inclusion.

Intersectional gender analysis must be supported by individual-level, gender-sensitive, disaggregated data. Most international poverty data is measured at the household level, meaning that differences in access within households are not captured. Additionally, data that looks only at economic measurements is insufficient to understanding the extent to which people’s rights are being fulfilled across health, education, water and sanitation, safety and other factors. Australia has invested in developing Equality Insights, a survey tool that captures individual-level, gender-sensitive and multidimensional data and makes analysis by social group possible.²³ Scaling up the availability of this data and the capacity for development actors to use it should be ongoing priorities.

AUSTRALIA'S COMMITMENT TO THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

Australia is a strong international actor on Women, Peace and Security, championing the agenda through international and regional forums, such as the ASEAN-Australia Women, Peace and Security Dialogue. Australia's second National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security was released in April 2021, applying across DFAT, Defence, Home Affairs, Australian Federal Police and the Australian Civil-Military Centre. The NAP is grounded in human rights principles and is based around four key outcomes:

- support women and girls' meaningful participation and needs in conflict prevention and peace processes
- reduce sexual and gender-based violence
- support resilience, crisis response, and security, law and justice sector efforts to meet the needs and rights of women and girls, and
- demonstrate leadership and accountability for the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Unlike Australia's previous NAP, the current plan delegates responsibility for budget and implementation to the relevant departments. This approach risks fragmented and inconsistent implementation. While the NAP's commitments to working with civil society is welcome, it must be fully resourced to support meaningful engagement and dialogue. This agenda should become embedded in Australia's approach to emerging conflicts and crises, ensuring timely analysis and targeted strategies to advance women's rights, peace and security through Australia's response efforts. Civil society in Australia and overseas, including women's rights organisations, can contribute significant expertise and grounded experience to this pursuit.

Over its 10-year lifespan, Australia's second NAP will have to contend with diverse challenges, including climate change-induced disasters, increased displacement and forced migration, pandemics, and cybersecurity. These challenges increasingly blur the lines between international and domestic policy. Given the link between human security for women at the individual level, and security at the national and international levels, Australia's efforts on Women, Peace and Security will be strengthened by integrating the NAP with domestic policy agendas, such as the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, the recommendation of Wiyi Yani U Thangani and the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Grappling with the legacy of colonial violence against First Nations people in Australia and connecting this to a need for ongoing peacebuilding will be critical for fulsome implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

APPROACHING GENDER EQUALITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE AS INTERSECTING CRISES

Climate change exacerbates existing gender inequality, restricting women's control over and access to natural resources like water and food; hindering access to education; increasing early and forced marriage and violence against women; and impeding women's participation in decision-making processes.²⁴ An integrated approach is needed to address climate change, gender equality and interlinked crises, which would drive more effective responses for the most marginalised and climate-affected populations, particularly women and girls.

DFAT's Climate Change Action Strategy 2020-2025 recognises the need for responses to climate change that support gender equality and sustainable development.²⁵ Australia has also invested in research into gender-responsive climate responses, which found that integrated approaches to climate change that drive transformative change in gender relations must value women's localised and traditional knowledge; support women's participation in decision making; resource women's collective action; and, underpinning the first three approaches, address unequal gender norms.²⁶ These findings should be mainstreamed into DFAT programming and policy work on climate change and seek to harmonise and drive more consistent gender equality programming across the development, humanitarian and security divides.

ENDNOTES

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