

# Australia championing change: ActionAid's vision for a feminist, intersectional and ambitious International Gender Equality Strategy

Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's new International Gender Equality Strategy

September 2023



## 1. Introduction

ActionAid Australia commends the Australian Government on its decision to develop a new International Gender Equality Strategy and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

We are at a critical juncture for gender equality. Hard-won women's rights gains are increasingly under threat due to the rise in authoritarianism and anti-rights movements globally, which are underpinned by deep-seated misogyny and pose significant risks for women, LGBTQIA+ peoples, and other marginalised groups. Progress on gender equality is also being eroded by cascading global crises and rising conflict and insecurity that are hitting diverse women and other vulnerable groups the hardest and worsening poverty and inequality.

Despite these persistent challenges, diverse women are powerful agents of change and are stepping up to lead inclusive and effective solutions within their communities. ActionAid's experience shows that when women claim their rights and challenge the structures that disadvantage them, they are a powerful force in transforming their communities and working towards the realisation of a more equal, and just world.

The new International Gender Equality Strategy provides an opportunity for Australia to foster this leadership and step up as a global champion for gender equality. This submission outlines ActionAid's vision for how Australia can embed a feminist, intersectional and ambitious approach to gender equality across its foreign policy and development assistance, fostering the gender-transformative change that is critical in progressing gender equality in an increasingly insecure and unequal world.

## 2. Principles for Feminist Action and Pillars of Change

Almost 30 years on from the landmark Beijing Platform for Action, the persistence of patriarchal norms, structures and values is evident in the alarming deterioration in gender equality globally and the sustained

attacks on women's rights. UN Women's 2022 gender equality snapshot found that without investment, realising full gender equality will take over 300 years at current rates of progress.<sup>i</sup>

We cannot afford business-as-usual approaches. If we are to push forward in the face of an intensifying backlash against the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ peoples, and stem the deterioration in gender equality, new feminist, long-term, ambitious and transformative approaches are needed. The new International Gender Equality Strategy provides a crucial opportunity for Australia to lead the way in accelerating change for diverse women and girls. To be effective in fostering transformative change, the strategy should be:

### Feminist

A feminist approach means moving beyond gender equality to tackle the social, cultural and economic systems of power that underpin gender inequality from the local to international level. This includes challenging patriarchal structures through a focus on women's leadership and social norm change; tackling the historical and existing power inequities that result from colonisation by fostering local ownership and decision-making over development approaches; embedding a human rights-based approach into development initiatives; and reforming the global economic structures that continue to lock women and other marginalised groups in low-income countries into poverty and insecurity.

### Intersectional

An intersectional feminist approach acknowledges that gender does not operate alone as a basis for structural inequality. Power and privilege are experienced in different ways by different groups of women and girls at different ages and in varying contexts. Therefore, efforts to tackle the social, cultural and economic systems of power must recognise the diversity of women's experiences by interrogating and responding to intersecting forms of discrimination, including racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism and class discrimination amongst others. There is an opportunity for the new Strategy to explicitly target the intersecting forms of



discrimination faced by First Nations women, women with disabilities, young women and girls, LGBTQIA+ peoples and women living in extreme poverty.

### **Ambitious**

Given the significant threat to women's rights globally and the historical and continued injustices against women, there is an urgent need for Australia to enhance its ambition on gender equality and women's rights. Business-as-usual approaches are vastly inadequate in a context of rising poverty, the alarming push back on women's rights and systemic violence against women and girls. To redress the deterioration in gender equality, it is critical that Australia scales up its support for women's rights, including by enhancing funding for gender-transformative development and climate change initiatives, fostering reform of the international systems and institutions that entrench inequalities, and providing much needed international leadership as an advocate for gender equality. This can include large scale investments that will accelerate change for diverse women and girls and overturn the reversal of women's rights.

### **Pillars of Change**

ActionAid has identified four pillars of change that should be centred in the International Gender Equality Strategy to enhance Australia's leadership on women's rights and foster a global transition towards intersectional, feminist and transformative approaches to gender equality.

#### **Pillar 1. Centring gender equality in Australia's aid program**

While ActionAid welcomes the strong focus on gender equality and new targets in Australia's International Development Policy, the new International Gender Equality Strategy should provide guidance for ensuring effective mainstreaming of gender equality across the aid program and driving more targeted investment in gender transformative programming.

#### **Embedding a gender-analysis into systemic decision-making**

To ensure the Australia's aid program is driving gender transformative change there

is a need to embed intersectional gender analysis across all levels of strategy development and decision-making process, including regarding sectoral and country allocations, strategies and funding modalities. Gender expertise should be embedded from outset at the design of investments, which should include resourced engagement with women's rights organisations. Gender expertise should also be engaged in decision making, monitoring and evaluation processes. This could include systematic consultation with women's rights organisations in DFAT perception surveys.

Further, DFAT should ensure that any inadvertent impacts on diverse women and the realisation of gender equality from aid investments are sufficiently addressed in program plans and budgets. This should include responding to discrimination faced by women, the increased risk of violence or backlash, and addressing barriers to women's participation. Internal capacity building and guidance is needed within DFAT and implementing partners to enable gender-transformative approaches and intersectional feminist analysis by all key decisions makers across key thematic areas and at post-level.

#### **Investing in gender equality and women's rights organisations**

In 2020-21, just over 5 percent of bilateral allocable official development assistance (ODA) was directed at targeted gender equality initiatives, and approximately 0.5 percent was allocated to women's rights organisations (WROs).<sup>ii</sup> The International Gender Equality Strategy should make the case for significant investment in gender transformative programming to halt the erosion of women's rights globally and for the Government to realise the ambition outlined within the International Development Policy. This requires targeted investment in programming that has gender equality as its principal objective as well as a scaling up of investment in WROs and feminist movements consisting of coalitions, networks, and grassroots collectives.

It is widely recognised that feminist organisations, coalitions and movements are most effective in achieving change in gender relations and government policy and

practice. These movements are effective because gender equality is part of their mission and due to their strong community networks and understanding of local contexts, which are critical in addressing the social norms that underpin gender inequality. For example, ActionAid's partnership with the Pacific Shifting the Power Coalition has demonstrated that locally-led feminist coalitions are effective in transforming male-dominated decision-making spaces such as the humanitarian sector.<sup>iii</sup>

DFAT should foster women's leadership and feminist movement building by directing 20 percent of all new ODA investment to initiatives that have gender equality as their primary objective. At least 5 percent of this funding should be directed towards women's rights organisations and feminist coalitions and movements, across all regions. Funding for WROs should be provided as accessible, flexible, core and multi-year grant-funding, administered directly through post or feminist intermediaries. Core and sustained funding are particularly important for WROs and feminist movements that are chronically under-resourced.

**Proposal 1. Establishment of a feminist movement building fund**

DFAT should pilot an ambitious feminist movement building fund, with the intention of integrating this into the new Civil Society Partnerships Fund as a targeted funding window. The feminist movement building fund could provide accessible and targeted funding streams to support the growth of feminist and women's rights organisations, networks and coalitions and their efforts to advance gender equality in the Indo-Pacific region.

This could include fostering Coalitions working at sub-regional or regional level and on targeted women's rights issues as a way of bringing together people with lived experience and those with policy and advocacy expertise to enable locally-led policy engagement.

The Fund could also catalyse initiatives that strengthen the collective power, voice and agency of women living in

poverty and exclusion who may not be part of organised feminist networks.

**Fostering transformative change**

Gender transformative programming that targets the underlying causes of gender inequality is critical to progress on gender equality. ActionAid urges DFAT to strengthen its investment in initiatives that foster women's leadership and engagement in decision-making at all levels and across all programs; tackle gender norms change, including systemic violence against women; and support the recognition, reduction and redistribution of women's unpaid work.

Eliminating the gendered division of labour and the systemic devaluing of women's labour is critical to advancing gender equality. Support for diverse women's engagement in policy-making processes at the local, national and international level is also critical in fostering reform of the laws and institutions that undermine women's rights and ensuring that new policy development processes recognise and respond to diverse women's experiences, knowledge and needs.

**Technology as an accelerator of change**

The global gender digital divide results in women having less access to the internet, smartphones, and other emerging technologies. Women's lower technological literacy, particularly in low-income countries, is also marginalising women from an increasingly digitalising economy.<sup>iv</sup> As technology is an important accelerator of change that can not only drive development outcomes but also has potential to accelerate progress on gender equality, it is critical that women are not left behind in the digital transition.

Through ActionAid's work we have seen that access to technology can be game changing for women by increasing their access to information and supporting effective responses to the challenges their communities face. Women's leadership in the rollout of new technologies, including digital multi-hazard early warning systems in the Pacific, has been effective in supporting disaster preparedness and response initiatives, from the local to national level that are gender-responsive. It

has also led to greater recognition of women as respected leaders in their communities (see Appendix 1 for more information).

There is a significant opportunity for DFAT to provide targeted investment in technological innovation, including increasing access to technology for women, to accelerate and scale-up progress on gender equality.

**Proposal 2. Establishment of a gender and technology accelerator**

DFAT is encouraged to invest in opportunities for women to lead the development and implementation of new and existing technologies and their application in communities towards gender-transformative development outcomes.

An investment in gender transformative technology is an opportunity to enable women's leadership in areas where they are excluded, redress barriers they face in claiming their rights, as well as invest in building new capabilities. This could also offer an opportunity to bring together development actors and private sector partners to advance gender equality.

**Pillar 2. Australia as a champion for gender-just climate solutions**

A foundation of the new International Gender Equality Strategy should be to position Australia as a global leader in fostering gender transformative responses to climate change. The climate crisis is having a devastating impact on women's rights, due to worsening gender-based violence, increasing unpaid work and a loss of livelihoods, economic security, and biodiversity. Disruptions in healthcare and other public services during extreme weather events also impact women due to their disproportionate reliance on these services. The 2023 Gender Snapshot found that under a worst-case climate scenario, up to 158.3 million more women and girls may be pushed into poverty - 16 million more than the total number of men and boys.<sup>v</sup>

These challenges are compounded by women's widespread exclusion from climate

change decision making, which creates a vicious cycle that results in women's needs and priorities being overlooked in national plans to respond to climate and disaster risk.<sup>vi</sup> WROs and feminist coalitions and movements also face systematic exclusion from climate change funding, with bilateral and multilateral climate funding largely gender blind.<sup>vii</sup>

The new commitments around the inclusion of gender and climate change objectives in projects over \$3 million will help to mainstream both gender equality and climate change across the aid program. However, there is a critical need for scaled up funding for projects with a principle focus on gender equality and climate change, which are effective in progressing gender equality and alongside supporting women's leadership in climate adaptation and resilience building.

ActionAid's Gender Responsive Alternatives to Climate Change and Related Crises (GRACC) framework, supported by the Australian Aid Program, provides a strong methodology for integrated climate change and gender equality programming (see Annex 1 for more information, including an example of gender transformative climate programming – the Women Wetem Weta early warning system in Vanuatu).<sup>viii</sup>

**Proposal 3. Establish a gender-responsive adaptation and resilience fund**

The government should provide global leadership on gender-just climate solutions by allocating \$300 million over 4-years for a world-first gender-responsive climate adaptation and resilience fund. This could support diverse women and girls from affected communities, and their organisations, to drive integrated and gender-responsive climate solutions in their communities. It could also foster women's leadership in climate finance and loss and damage decision-making at the national and international level to ensure climate decision-making is inclusive of the experiences of women and girls on the frontlines of the climate crisis and that climate responses are targeted and

accessible to the most climate vulnerable communities.

### **Gender-responsive approaches to agriculture and food security**

Women make up 43% of the agricultural labour force in low-income countries, and in East and Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa they account for almost 50% of the farming population.<sup>ix</sup> They also play a critical role in food supply, with smallholder farmers contributing 80% of the food supply in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>x</sup> However, women farmers are disproportionately affected when climate change impacts on crop yields, undermining livelihoods and worsening hunger.

Given the links between climate change and agriculture, there is a need to embed a gender analysis into agriculture programming to ensure a strong focus on women-led small-scale farming and ecosystem-based approaches such as agroecology. This is critical to women's livelihoods across our region and offers an alternative to industrial agriculture that is often not community owed and has negative climate and environmental impacts. ActionAid's experience shows that strengthening the use of agroecology techniques among women farmers has potential to build women's resilience and foster more effective responses to climate change.

As a starting point, DFAT should update the Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment in Agriculture Guidance Note<sup>xi</sup> and invest in women-led small-scale farming and agroecology.

### **Supporting women's climate leadership through Australia's climate diplomacy**

Women's leadership in climate decision-making at all levels is critical in ensuring that climate change policy is designed to meet the needs of diverse women and other marginalised groups. Research by the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) found that at the most recent UN Climate Conference (COP27) women delegates only accounted for 35.6% of national party delegates. Further, only 20.0% of Heads of Delegation were women.<sup>xii</sup>

Australia is a strong performer in this area, with women making up over 50% of Australia's delegation at COP27.<sup>xiii</sup> The Government should build on this leadership by supporting greater participation of women in climate change decision making across our region and globally. Given the under-representation of women in government decision-making across our bilateral partners, Australia can foster women's participation by facilitating consultation with gender-machineries within partner governments as well as actively engaging with and supporting feminist civil-society.

### **Pillar 3. Embedding economic justice for women across Australia's foreign policy**

Alongside gender transformative aid and climate approaches, there is an urgent need to transform global economic rules, systems and institutions that are perpetuating inequalities between wealthy and low-income countries and undermining progress on gender equality. Australia should foster feminist economic alternatives that are focused on building more caring and equal societies and economies.

#### **Gender and trade policy**

Well-designed trade rules can play an important role in supporting gender equality and women's rights. However, current trade agreements are reinforcing and deepening discriminatory economic structures, leading to negative outcomes for women. Women are particularly impacted where trade rules stifle workers' rights, disadvantage small-scale farmers, facilitate the privatisation of public services and reduce access to affordable medicines. These rules are exacerbating gender inequities within the economy, limiting women's access to dignified work, increasing the burden of unpaid care work and deepening poverty among women.

Australia has taken important steps to improve the gender-responsiveness of its trade policy, including transitioning towards the inclusion of gender chapters in trade agreements, as well as the decision to join the Global Trade and Gender Arrangement. We also understand that DFAT is considering conducting gender impact



assessments for all trade agreements.<sup>xiv</sup> ActionAid welcomes these steps and urges the Government to ensure that gender chapters are fully enforceable under dispute resolution processes. Further, it is crucial that gender impact assessments are independent and conducted alongside wider human rights, labour rights and environmental impact assessments. It is also critical that steps are taken to remove provisions from trade agreements that are found to have a negative impact on women's rights and gender equality. If impact assessments are conducted and gender chapters are included in trade agreements without the removal of provisions that are harmful to women, there is a risk that these provisions will simply mask the limitations of the existing neoliberal trade model for progressing gender equality. Australia should embed a gender analysis into the design of trade rules in order to facilitate a genuine reorientation of agreements towards feminist economic alternatives that uphold women's labour rights and advance gender equality.

#### **Public services, sovereign debt and international tax reform**

Investment in public services and the public sector workforce is critical for the realisation of gender equality and the transition towards a care economy. The growing sovereign debt crisis is having a disproportionate impact on women and girls as it redirects public funding away from gender responsive public services and increases women's unpaid burden of care. The provision of universal public services in low-income countries is also undermined by corporate tax evasion and avoidance, and other forms of illicit financial flows, which contribute to significant resourcing gaps and obstruct the financial redistribution needed to address gender inequality.

By ensuring the International Gender Equality Strategy has a structural reform agenda which focuses on global solutions to the debt crisis and progresses international tax reform, Australia can support low-income countries to free-up vital funding for direct investment in public services and gender equality.

#### **Pillar 4. Gender equality leadership in an unequal world**

There is an urgent need for global leadership to counter the pushback on women's rights and to reinvigorate action to progress gender equality and the rights of LGBTQIA+ communities and other marginalised groups. Australia should step up as a vocal advocate on women's rights, by including gender equality in all diplomatic engagements and working with allies to champion women's rights at international and regional forums. Gender equality should be a non-negotiable principle for our diplomatic relations with zero tolerance for violations of the rights of diverse women and girls.

Australia should challenge state sanctioned violence against women, the denial of the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ peoples, and other forms of gendered oppression. ActionAid is deeply concerned by egregious human rights violations across our region. In particular, we are alarmed by what has been termed a gender apartheid in Afghanistan due to the denial of women's rights to education, freedom of movement and ability to work in most spheres. ActionAid is also concerned by the deteriorating human rights situation in Myanmar, in particular by reports of extrajudicial killings, torture and the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. The repression of the rights of LGBTQIA+ people in Uganda, and the endemic of sexual violence in conflict settings in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia also require urgent international attention.

Australia should work with the international community to use all diplomatic means available to respond to these and other egregious cases of state-based repression of women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality. Further, ActionAid Australia, as a member of the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security, endorses its submission and the call for the WPS agenda to be integrated more systematically into Australia's response to emerging crises and conflict, and appropriately resourced.

**Conclusion**

ActionAid welcomes the development of the new International Gender Equality Strategy and urges the Government to use this opportunity to foster a feminist, intersectional and ambitious approach to gender equality across its Foreign Policy. As a global women's rights organisation, ActionAid Australia looks forward to working in partnership with DFAT to drive this agenda, bringing our expertise, local networks, and partnerships with feminist civil society to progress gender equality and women's rights across our region and internationally.

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## Appendix 1.

### **ActionAid Australia's Gender Responsive Alternatives to Climate Change**

Supported by the Australian Government's Australian NGO Gender Action Platform, ActionAid's Gender Responsive Alternatives to Climate Change framework was established through a collaboration with Monash University that was focused on building an evidence base about effective responses to the gendered impacts of climate change.

The GRACC research found that when climate change responses are designed to integrate gender analysis and women's leadership they can be effective at addressing climate impacts while also driving transformative change in gender relations. The GRACC framework outlines a gender transformative approach to climate change that is focused on the valuing of women's localised and indigenous knowledge; supporting diverse women's participation in decision making at all levels; resourcing women's collective action; and addressing unequal gender norms that continue to increase climate and disaster risk.

This framework provides a strong and effective methodology for gender transformative climate solutions. More information about the research underpinning the GRACC framework is available at <https://actionaid.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Monash-GRACC-Report-Global-.pdf>.

### **Women Wetem Weta, Vanuatu**

ActionAid's *Women Wetem Weta* model in Vanuatu has supported Pacific women's leadership in developing a nation-wide early warning and information system in partnership with Digicel that now reaches 40 percent of the population – delivering multiple dividends across disaster risk reduction, gender equality, localisation and private sector engagement. More

information about the WWW approach is available at:

<https://www.undrr.org/publication/inclusive-and-accessible-multi-hazard-early-warning-systems-learning-women-led-early>

<sup>i</sup> UN Women (2022) *Achieving full gender equality is still centuries away*, warns the UN in new report, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2022/09/achieving-full-gender-equality-is-still-centuries-away-warns-the-un-in-new-report/#:~:text=At%20the%20current%20rate%20of%20progress%2C%20the%20report%20estimates%20that,achieve%20equal%20representation%20in%20national>

<sup>ii</sup> OECD DAC (2023) *Aid in Support of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Donor Charts*, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/Aid-to-gender-equality-donor-charts.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> For more information see Shifting the Power Coalition: Impact Assessment Report, 2021, <https://actionaid.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/StPC-Impact-Assessment-Report-25012263.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> UN Women (2023) The gender digital divide must be bridged to ensure we leave no one behind, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/feature-story/2023/03/the-gender-digital-divide#:~:text=The%20digital%20divide%20impacts%20gender,for%20education%20and%20financial%20independence>

<sup>v</sup> UN Women (2023) *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2023*, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2023>

<sup>vi</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited (2014) *The South Asia Women's Resilience Index Examining the role of women in preparing for and recovering from disasters*, <http://actionaid.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/The-South-Asia-Womens-Resilience-Index.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> ActionAid Australia, Oxfam Australia et al (2022) *Falling Short: Australia's role in funding*

*fairer climate action in a warming world*, <https://actionaid.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Climate-Finance-Report-Digital-V2.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> For more information on the GRACC initiative and framework see

<https://actionaid.org.au/programs/gender-responsive-alternatives-for-climate-change-2/>

<sup>ix</sup> ActionAid International (2019) *Principles for a Just Transition in Agriculture*, <https://actionaid.org/publications/2019/principles-just-transition-agriculture>

<sup>x</sup> Climate Policy Initiative and IFAD (2020) *Examining the Climate Finance Gap for Small-Scale Agriculture*, [www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Examining-the-Climate-Finance-Gap-in-Small-Scale-Agriculture.pdf](http://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Examining-the-Climate-Finance-Gap-in-Small-Scale-Agriculture.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> DFAT (2015) *Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment in Agriculture Guidance Note*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/operational-guidance-note-gender-equality-and-womens-economic-empowerment-in-agriculture.pdf>

<sup>xii</sup> WEDO, *Women's participation statistics in climate diplomacy*, <https://genderclimatetracker.org/participation-stats/quick-analysis>

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xiv</sup> The decision to conduct gender impact assessments of Australian trade agreements was reported by the Gender Equality Branch in the recent Gender Equality Strategy consultation with the Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition. However, we are not aware of any public confirmation of this decision.