

Submission on the new International Gender Equality Strategy

AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION
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Introduction

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition (AFFPC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a new International Gender Equality Strategy.

The AFFPC is a network of more than 200 individuals and organisations committed to advancing intersectional feminist foreign policy in Australia.ⁱ It is convened by the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) and includes supporters of feminist foreign policy working across diplomacy, defence, peacebuilding, women's rights, international development and other sectors.

The 2023 International Development Policy reaffirms Australia's commitment to advancing gender equality and the rights of people with disabilities, and the benefits of "placing gender equality at the centre of development." It further identifies the structural nature of inequality, stating "we must tackle the unequal power systems and structures that stifle economic growth and human development."ⁱⁱ

The International Gender Strategy provides the critical opportunity to connect this vision of gender equality with the systemic and transformative approaches required to get us there.

This submission outlines the case for Australia to name a feminist approach to its work to advance gender equality through the International Gender Strategy. It builds from the AFFPC submission on the International Development Policy to apply recommendations which have not yet been implemented to the context of the gender strategy. It also draws from the analysis and recommendations included in the AFFPC Issues Paper Series.

Why a feminist approach matters

Rights under attack

Gender equality and human rights are under attack on every front.

One year ago, the world watched in awe as Iranians stood up in resistance to harsh laws imposed on women following the extrajudicial killing of Mahsa Amini, but the crackdown has continued with protesters still being arrested and killed.ⁱⁱⁱ In the past year we have also seen the continued attack on women's rights in Afghanistan, with "egregious violations of human rights and pervasive gender-based violence ... targeting women protesters, women associated with the previous government, and ethnic-minority women,"^{iv} leading to calls for both contexts to be recognised as imposing "gender apartheid."^v Following the 2021 coup in Myanmar, escalating clashes and violence targeting civilians have included the use of sexual and gender-based violence, and Women Human Rights Defenders find themselves targets of arbitrary detention, torture and death with little to no access to justice.^{vi}

Anti-democratic and anti-feminist backlash are intimately connected, with "narratives and rhetoric that harden or maintain conservative patriarchal norms," with dire consequences for women, LGBTIQ+ people and marginalised groups.^{vii} These anti-rights movements are well funded: between 2013 and 2017 anti-gender movements globally received at least USD3.7 billion, 3 times the funding to LGBTIQ+ movements over the same period.^{viii}

This funding has allowed anti-rights movements to intensify their efforts to wind back progress on women's

rights and gender equality through multilateral forums. Sexual and reproductive health and rights – particularly abortion and comprehensive sexuality education – remain in the spotlight while LGBTIQ+ rights, particularly trans rights, are increasingly under attack.^{ix}

This is undermining the effectiveness and legitimacy of the rules-based order. In 2023, the 56th session of the International Conference on Population and Development was unable to reach a resolution due to Member States refusal to accept previously agreed language on Comprehensive Sexuality Education.^x Each year, anti-rights groups attempt to roll back agreements at the Commission on the Status of Women and disrupt side events focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and trans rights in particular.^{xi} This anti-trans rhetoric has even been seen amongst high-level UN officials including the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences who has used women's rights as a smokescreen for anti-trans agendas.^{xii}

And it is not just these explicit attacks on rights; equally important is the insidious and ongoing undermining of gender equality via unequal social norms and power relations that enable sexual and gender-based violence, prevent diverse women's access to leadership and participation in social and political life, undermine bodily autonomy, increase vulnerability to climate change, and impede economic justice – impacts which are felt more heavily by the most marginalised identities.

In this context, it is critical that all governments who prioritise gender equality through their foreign policy efforts stand together to hold the line. Explicitly naming a feminist approach would send a strong normative signal of Australia's stance on human rights and gender equality – positioning it amongst leading governments globally – as well as provide a framework of practical strategies to advance and defend rights across all areas of DFAT's work.

Building on the 2016 strategy and providing political will for a feminist approach

The 2016 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy took the critical step of applying a gender lens across all areas of Australia's foreign policy, including development, trade, diplomacy and security. The 2016 Strategy is grounded in the understanding that gender inequality is a result of unequal power relations, and addresses the need to transform gender norms for "women and men, as well as transgender and intersex people."^{xiii} This positions the strategy strongly in terms of best practice approaches against other international gender strategies from governments like Germany and the US.^{xiv}

While strong in these areas, the 2016 strategy has been critiqued for taking an instrumentalist approach to gender equality, and for being framed "within neoliberal terms whereby investment in women is a conduit for economic growth."^{xv} Ensuring the new strategy is grounded in a human rights-based approach will be critical to build on

the strengths and avoid the weakness of the previous strategy.^{xvi}

In the development space, the Australian Government has already made important commitments on gender equality which will contribute towards a feminist approach, including the target that 80% of programs must address gender equality issues, and the commitment that programs over \$3m must include gender equality as either a principle or significant objective. This second commitment is a landmark achievement which mirrors – and in some cases goes even further than – similar commitments made by governments who have taken explicitly feminist approaches to international development, such as Canada (targeting 95% of ODA with gender equality as a principle or significant objective)^{xvii} and France (targeting 75% of projects by 2025).^{xviii} In addition, Australia should match France's commitment that 20% of funding go to programs with gender equality as the principal objective.

Together, the previous strategy and subsequent targets provide a strong platform to increase the ambition of Australia's approach to gender equality across all areas of foreign policy. To ensure effective implementation they must be supported by a robust review and moderation process to ensure integrity and generate learning and improvement over time.

Backing these commitments with an explicitly feminist approach would demonstrate the political will, and strongly communicate to all areas of DFAT, as well as partner governments, regional platforms and multilateral systems that addressing patriarchal systems of power is not a "nice-to-do" but a critical priority for Australia. It would ensure the focus on gender equality extends beyond the development space to include trade, diplomacy and security.

Gender equality as the goal, feminism/s as the approach

While women's rights and feminist movements exist in every country, the term "feminism" is sometimes perceived by mainstream culture in countries in the region as a Western construct which does not align with understandings of the relationships between genders. In adopting a feminist approach, it is critical that Australia engage meaningfully with this concern to ensure that it is not imposing Western / Minority World understanding of feminism on partner countries, however it does not pose an insurmountable barrier to using the term.

First, the strategy should make clear Australia's goal is to progress gender equality in partnership with civil society and partner governments, not to impose a conception of feminism on other countries. Rather, we use the term feminist to describe DFAT's approach to intersectional power analysis.

Secondly, DFAT should resource and work with civil society including feminist movements in Australia and the region to grow understanding of locally owned feminisms (which may – and likely will – be plural in nature). These should draw on historical and cultural narratives which

may differ from the understanding of feminism in Minority World / Western contexts, which are often based on individualism drawn from classical liberal theory in contrast to the relational worldviews of many Majority World cultures.^{xx} For example, DFAT's support for the Pacific Feminist Forum (through the We Rise Coalition) which is deepening understanding of Pacific feminisms, and the MAMPU program in Indonesia which supported feminist movement strengthening through collective action, building on the specific historical context of feminist and political movements in Indonesia.^{xxi}

This approach will allow DFAT to better inform its work to advance gender equality through culturally appropriate strategies, informed by feminist movements and allies.

Recommendations:

1. The International Gender Strategy must explicitly name a feminist approach to advancing the goal of gender equality across all areas of foreign policy.
2. Commit 20% of ODA to initiatives with gender equality as the principal objective and ensure robust review and moderation of progress towards this and existing targets.
3. Work with local women's rights organisations, feminist movements, and allies within partner governments to develop DFAT's understanding of feminisms in the region and develop culturally appropriate ways to advance gender equality in different contexts.

A feminist approach in practice

This section provides practical steps to embed a feminist approach against the 4 outcome areas identified in the AFFPC Submission to the International Development Policy – capability, accountability, partnership and resourcing – with updated analysis and recommendations.

Capability: prioritising intersectional feminist power analysis skills

Intersectional, systemic power analysis

Taking a feminist approach to the new strategy would mean extending the analysis of gender-power relations at the individual level to the systemic. Gender inequality is underpinned by unequal power relationships based on gender; a feminist approach would extend this analysis to the systems of power which underpin inequality and injustice at a global scale – such as patriarchy, colonialism, and exploitative capitalism.^{xxii}

Frameworks like the 4Rs (Rights, Representation, Resourcing and Reality Check) adopted by FFP governments like Sweden and The Netherlands may provide a useful way to communicate a feminist approach to a lay audience, but without the attachment of the word 'feminist' they do not convey the necessary shift in power required.

Understanding a feminist approach through the framework of transforming systems of power emphasises the connection between this and other forthcoming strategies on disability equity and LGBTQIA+ rights. For example, a feminist approach transforming systems of power for disability inclusion would focus on shifting attitudes and practices across cultural, legal and structural dimensions to create the pre-conditions for inclusion. A systems of power approach would also connect this strategy to Australia's First Nations Foreign Policy, for example, via the link between the ongoing impacts of colonialism on women and gender diverse people in Australia with the impact of colonialism on development outcomes for countries in our region.^{xxiii}

Ensuring a systemic power analysis, grounded in an intersectional, human-rights based approach that accounts not only for gender, but for ableism, heteronormativity, coloniality and other systems of power, would ensure that Australia's approach is truly feminist.

Recommendations:

4. Embed and define a feminist approach to the Strategy which is human-rights based, informed by intersectional feminist analysis and grounded in First Nations values and worldviews.
5. Extend this approach of intersectional, power-based analysis to forthcoming strategies on disability equity and LGBTQIA+ rights, and the First Nations Foreign Policy, to ensure a coherent approach.

Build DFAT's technical capability across all policy areas

Power-based intersectional analysis is a critical capability that must be valued, resourced and rewarded across all areas of DFAT. The forthcoming process to draft Development Partnership Plans (DPPs) with country partners provides an opportunity to build capability by requiring intersectional feminist analysis using frameworks such as Rao and Kelleher's Gender at Work^{xxiv} and the Canadian Government's Gender Based Analysis Plus^{xxv} to be integrated into the process, including consultation and collaboration with women's rights organisations and feminist movements (as well as other relevant organisations like Organisations of People with Disabilities and LGBTQIA+ led organisations), and accountability to ensure that the findings drive resourcing and prioritisation of gender equality outcomes at the country level.^{xxvi}

In addition to DPPs, this analysis should inform feminist diplomacy priorities at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels in recognition of the need for changes across both individual and systemic / formal and informal quadrants of the Gender at Work framework. Diplomacy can be an effective and complementary strategy to development priorities, for example by building the awareness and support of individual counterparts in partner governments for gender equality priorities in their context, or by influencing regional and multilateral agreements to advance gender equality and human rights. But diplomacy is also a gendered practice, and DFAT can do

more to think creatively about gender responsive statecraft. While care must be taken to avoid the perception or reality of a neo-colonial approach, this can be achieved by taking guidance from local feminist movements as well as learning from DFAT's other diplomatic priorities, such as the efforts to abolish the death penalty.

Adequately resourcing this process will require greater investment in dedicated technical expertise in Canberra and at Posts as well as an increase in capability across all roles including development, diplomacy, trade and security. Where gender technical expertise is grouped with disability and other forms of social inclusion via GEDSI (gender equality, disability and social inclusion) advisory roles, they must be sufficiently resourced to ensure adequate attention to all areas.^{xxvii} They must also go beyond a focus on mere inclusion to understanding and ultimately seeking to transform the underlying structures of power, which perpetuate inequality and marginalisation.^{xxviii} This capability should be embedded within DFAT to strengthen internal capability and ensure systemic application across all functions of statecraft.

There are many examples of good practice to draw upon across DFAT's existing programming, including the Australian NGO Cooperation Program, and the recently launched Amplify. Invest. Reach (A-I-R) South-South feminist collaboration program.^{xxix} We can also learn from other donors who are exploring ways to incentivise decolonisation of partnership models. For example, the Government of the Netherlands program *Power of Women* (EUR 73.5m over 5 years) funds feminist movements via consortium arrangements where at least one of the leading partners must be based in the Global South. This requires organisations to demonstrate their commitment to equal and respectful partnership in order to receive funding.^{xxx}

Recommendations:

6. Require all DFAT policy and program staff to upskill in intersectional power analysis, going beyond simple inclusion to include an understanding of the way that systems of power perpetuate inequality and marginalisation.
7. Use feminist analysis frameworks such as Gender at Work to inform the development of Development Partnership Plans and feminist diplomacy priorities at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels.
8. Expand funding for technical expertise in gender, disability and social inclusion across all areas of DFAT and Posts to support power-based intersectional analysis and implementation.
9. Require in-house training on the history of gender and diplomacy and gender-responsive statecraft and practices.

Accountability and performance: ensuring an effective and transformative approach

As outlined above, DFAT's gender equality target that 80% of aid investments will address gender equality

issues, and the complementary commitment that all programs over \$3m will have a gender equality objective, strongly position it to embed a feminist approach to development. The extension of these commitments to non-ODA development finance is also a welcome move to ensure gender is consistently prioritised across Australia's development efforts.^{xxxi} The new Strategy should take the opportunity to extend these targets to all areas of DFAT's work, for example, ensuring that 80% of public diplomacy engagements include a focus on gender equality, and that trade agreements further gender equality outcomes.

Regular and transparent reporting on progress against commitments will be critical to drive accountability and improved performance over time. The reintroduction of a dedicated annual aid performance report is welcome, in particular the commitment to report on ODA channelled to women's equality organisations and institutions, and the 40% weighting accorded to the 80% target which positions gender strongly as an overall component of effectiveness.^{xxxii}

Building from these inputs, annual reporting against the International Gender Strategy combining development, diplomacy, trade and security efforts towards gender equality (and intersectional priorities like disability equity and LGBTQIA+ rights) would strengthen accountability for gender equality efforts as a whole.

Additionally, a recent review of 40 years of aid evaluations found that gaps between overall development policy and implementation on the ground. Ensuring that the high level prioritisation of gender equality translates into meaningful action requires accountability hooks at all levels, from regular Ministerial affirmation of the importance of gender equality and feminist approaches, to establishing ownership and accountability for gender commitments at all APS levels and bands, to ensuring country strategies include meaningful gender equality priorities which are implemented.^{xxxiii} This can be further enabled by balancing long term objectives with short term adaptiveness through a culture of learning and adaptation, supported by robust and participatory evaluation (and implementation of evaluation findings) and systems to ensure regular assessment and adjustment based on emerging contextual factors.^{xxxiv}

Recommendations:

10. Apply existing or complementary gender equality targets to all areas of DFAT's work including diplomacy, trade and security policy, and include gender equality actions in the annual performance agreements of all Band 1-3 (including Heads of Mission) staff at Post.
11. Report annually on progress against the International Gender Strategy, building from inputs to annual development performance reporting and incorporating frank assessment of challenges and lessons learned in making progress towards intersectional gender equality through diplomacy, trade and security policy.

12. Strengthen the links between high level political will and accountability for gender outcomes at all levels within DFAT, including creating a culture of learning and adaptation within a framework of long-term priorities.

Partnership: applying decolonial feminist practice across all areas of DFAT's work

The International Gender Strategy should be underpinned by a decolonial approach to feminism. This can be enabled by the approach to transforming systems of power – including coloniality in all its forms – described above, as well as earlier recommendations relating to DFAT's role in supporting contextually relevant feminisms in partner countries. For example, the 2016 strategy could be evaluated by a panel of experts from partners in developing countries with a decolonial lens. Posts could be encouraged to host forums in safe spaces that encourage feedback from locally engaged staff, local academics, and local leaders that reconceptualise the role of a mission.

Decoloniality should be practiced at all levels of DFAT's work to enable a truly feminist approach. This means ensuring that diplomacy is premised on equal and respectful relationships, accounting for the historical and current power dynamics between Majority and Minority World actors.^{xxxv} It would mean using Australia's power in the multilateral system to progress reform agendas that equalise power and democratise the rules-based order. The Foreign Minister's commitment to pursuing UNSC reform is a strong example of this approach which should be replicated across forums.

In trade, a decolonial approach would require negotiations to recognise the historical impact of colonisation on the economic position of different countries, and ensure that trade agreements do not further perpetuate the economic disparities between countries.

In development, changes to systems and processes are needed to minimise power imbalances between partners and amplify the strengths of local partners, including by valuing of Indigenous worldviews and approaches. DFAT should recognise that underinvestment in local actors, who are the most effective development partners, is a risk in itself. This recognition would support a shift from top down risk and compliance to a more nimble approach to program management and higher tolerance for risk in order to enable effectiveness, embracing development as an inherently political process.^{xxxvi} This includes ensuring that localisation targets are not applied as a "one size fits all" approach but recognise the diversity of partners and approaches to ensure that a range of local organisations – from unregistered or volunteer-based operations to mid-large sized regional organisations – are able to access funding with compliance requirements that is appropriate to the scale of their work.

DFAT should also expand the use of co-led programs, drawing lessons from successful programs like Balance

of Power in the Pacific, and increase diverse representation from the region – including people with disabilities – on decision making bodies drawing lessons from the Pacific Women Lead Board.^{xxxvii}

Recommendations:

13. Pursue reform priorities in multilateral and regional forums to democratise the rules-based order.
14. Undertake economic analysis of trade agreements which is informed by colonial histories to avoid further perpetuating economic disparity between countries.
15. Explore new development programming mechanisms which advance an approach to decolonise partnership, taking steps to minimise the inherent power dynamics and amplify the strengths of local partners.
16. Rebalance DFAT's approach to risk and compliance, recognising that under investment in local actors, who are the most effective development partners, is a critical risk in itself.

Resourcing: strengthening feminist movements and funding comprehensive approach

Strengthening feminist movements through funding and advocacy

There is a wealth of evidence – both globally and from Australia's own international development program – of what works to make progress on gender equality. Carefully targeted programs, implemented by local actors with lived experience of gender inequality and intersectional marginalisation, have been shown to make tangible impacts on defending and advancing rights. At the same time, there is no simple solution to achieving gender equality – change takes generations, as it requires deep shifts in the social norms which underpin and uphold inequality. Progress is not linear, and often accompanied by backlash.

The new International Gender Strategy should recognise the transformative power of feminist movements. These movements, including Women Human Rights Defenders (WRHDs), women's rights organisations (WROs) and other constituency-based organisations (such as Organisations of People with Disabilities, Youth and LGBTIQ+ led organisations), are firmly rooted in local communities, contexts and experiences, holding the deep contextual knowledge and relationships needed to affect systemic change on gender equality and other forms of marginalisation.^{xxxviii} This includes understanding the interplay between formal and informal structures, and knowing how power operates and how it can be influenced for change. The most transformative outcomes are achieved when women's rights organisations are provided with core, flexible, long-term funding – when they are funded *to be*, not merely *to do*.^{xxxix} Currently, less than 0.5% of Australia's aid budget goes to women's rights organisations.^{xl} Raising this to just 5% of aid would make a significant contribution to shifting the dial on

gender equality outcomes.

Beyond funding the strategy should outline DFAT's commitment to enshrining the value of WHRDs, WROs, feminist movements and other constituency-based organisations in multilateral agreements (such as Agreed Conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women), ensuring their protection through treaty process (such as CEDAW) and Human Rights Council process (such as the Universal Periodic Review). They should also be a priority raised in bilateral and regional diplomacy discussions. This should extend to security policy, including NATO partner discussions and Australia's intention to bid for a seat on the UN Security Council in 2029, where Australia should make gender equality (including the Women, Peace and Security agenda of the UNSC) a priority focus.

Recommendations:

17. Commit at least 5% of ODA to be delivered through women's rights organisations (CRS Sector Code 15170), prioritising core, flexible and multi-year funding mechanisms.
18. Affirm DFAT's commitment to advancing the rights of WHRDs, WROs, feminist and other constituency-based movements through bilateral, regional and multilateral discussions, agreements, processes and forums.

Gender and climate

There is an urgent need to understand the foundational impact of climate change on DFAT's mission and operations, including at the level of climate risk. Climate change will exacerbate conflict, displacement, scarcity and economic transformations.^{xli} The US with their release of the *United States Strategy to Respond to the Effects of Climate Change on Women 2023* is attempting to address:

- disproportionate impacts of the effects of climate change on women and girls; and
- empower women and girls as leaders in addressing climate change.

The US Strategy seeks to:

- Integrate efforts to advance gender equality and promote climate change adaptation, mitigation, and resilience.
- Address impacts of climate change on and advance meaningful participation of women and girls by linking climate security with the WPS agenda, preventing and responding to GBV, and promoting women's economic security.
- Empower women and girls as leaders in generating climate change solutions through policy, diplomacy, outreach, and programming.^{xlii}

It would be valuable for DFAT to translate these priorities

to the Australian policy context to meet these challenges of gendered climate impacts in our region. In light of the Australian Government's bid to co-host a UNFCCC Conference of States Parties (COP) with Pacific Governments, DFAT should demonstrate Australia's credibility by developing a gender and climate strategy, co-designed with Pacific women leaders and First Nations leaders.

Recommendations:

19. Undertake a co-design process with Pacific and First Nations women develop an Australian equivalent to the 2023 US Strategy, consistent with Australia's goal of co-hosting COP.

Avoiding siloes by taking a holistic and locally-led approach

The existing thematic priorities of the 2016 Gender Strategy – leadership, women's economic empowerment, and ending violence against women and girls – remain critical and urgent priorities for the region. However, feminist movements in the Pacific and beyond have outlined the siloing impact of narrowly defined thematic priorities, which skew the priorities of local WROs and movements by forcing them to fit into donor-defined categories in order to access funding.^{xliii}

Rather than identifying general thematic priority areas, the new International Gender Equality Strategy should take a holistic and locally-led approach, working with local WROs and movements in each country and responding to the priorities they have identified.

This should include funding for approaches like advocacy and movement strengthening which do not neatly fall into thematic categories. It should also include cross-cutting issues like unpaid care and feminist economies which underpin multiple areas of inequality.^{xliv} Whenever priorities are named, they should be based in human rights and incorporate feminist power analysis that indicates the root causes of the problem (for example, "feminist economic justice" or "right to productive resources" rather than women's economic empowerment), cover the full issue spectrum (such as funding for the prevention of gender-based violence through to response services) and address the interconnections of different issues (such as the links between bodily autonomy, comprehensive sexuality education, and GBV).

Recommendations:

20. Take a holistic and locally-led approach priority setting, working with local WROs and movements in each country and region.
21. Support holistic, intersectional and collaborative approaches by supporting cross-movement solidarity between feminist, disability rights, LGBTIQ+ rights and other social movement

Endnotes

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