Empowering Women
Australia’s support for gender equality and the empowerment of women
Foreign Minister Bishop meeting with school children in Burma. 8 July 2014. Photo: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
The empowerment of women and girls is one of the most effective ways to achieve higher economic growth and better living standards among the millions of people in developing countries in our region.

Gender inequality undermines economic growth, human development and poverty reduction. The evidence is clear—investing in women is not just the right thing to do—it is the smart thing to do.

As Australia's Foreign Minister, I have made the empowerment of women and girls and increasing progress towards gender equality in our region a key priority in Australia’s foreign policy and aid program. Where there are persistent challenges and slow progress towards equality, the Australian Government is investing in initiatives to enhance women's voice in decision-making, leadership and peace-building; to promote women’s economic empowerment; and to end violence against women and girls.

Empowering women showcases the achievements of women leaders around the world. Australia has supported these women through our foreign policy, economic diplomacy and aid program. I extend my congratulations to these outstanding advocates of Australia’s programs to empower women to the benefit of all members of their communities. Their achievements are a remarkable tribute to what is possible when women are empowered.

The Hon Julie Bishop MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Ambassador for Women and Girls, Natasha Stott Despoja meeting health workers at a health clinic in Jakarta, Indonesia, 17 February 2014. Photo: Joshua Estey
Contents

Ministerial Foreword 1
Women’s empowerment and gender equality 4
Amina Khatun (Neela), Bangladesh 6
Dr Anne Mwangi, Kenya 8
Vanessa Siro, Vanuatu 10
Minister Yohana Susana Yembise, Indonesia 12
Christabelle Andrews, Grenada 14
Kesha Kumari Damini, Nepal 16
Jasmin Nario-Galace, Philippines 18
Kristina Sogavare, Solomon Islands 20
Daniella Randriafeno, Madagascar 22
Ei Phyu, Burma 24
Mereia Volavola, Fiji 26
Folade Mutota, Trinidad and Tobago 28
Muthumenika Dissanayake Mudiyanselage Ranbandage, Sri Lanka 30
Dr Naomi Biribo, Kiribati 32
Madame Sitti Chihabiddine, Union of the Comoros 34
Women’s empowerment and gender equality

2015—an important year

2015 is an important year for recognising the advancement of women’s rights. Twenty years ago, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing\(^1\), the nations of the world promised to remove all obstacles to gender equality and the empowerment of women. This promise was made through adopting the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—a visionary roadmap for advancing women’s rights and equality between women and men.

International Women’s Day 2015 will celebrate the 20-year anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the tremendous progress that has been made. Since 1995, governments, civil society and the United Nations (UN) have translated the 12 critical areas of concern in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action’s promises into concrete changes. It remains a powerful source of guidance and inspiration for the work still to be achieved.

The Australian Government will seize the 20-year anniversary as an opportunity to affirm and renew its commitment to achieving gender equality.

This booklet—Empowering Women—showcases the extraordinary stories of some of the many empowered women who have been supported by Australia’s foreign policy, economic diplomacy and aid program around the world.

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\(^1\) An unprecedented 17 000 participants and 30 000 activists travelled to Beijing for the opening of the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995. They had a single purpose in mind: gender equality and the empowerment of all women. Representatives of 189 governments hammered out commitments that were historic in scope. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women’s rights. http://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/about
Critical areas of concern—Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

The 12 critical areas of concern in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are:

1. Women and poverty
2. Education and training of women
3. Women and health
4. Violence against women
5. Women and armed conflict
6. Women and the economy
7. Women in power and decision-making
8. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women
9. Human rights of women
10. Women and the media
11. Women and the environment
12. The girl child.
One of Amina Khatun’s favourite childhood memories is learning to ride a bicycle. ‘When I first started, I fell. But later I realised how easy it was. I always think of that experience and encourage myself by thinking, “Where there is a will, there is a way.” It is always possible to accomplish what you want. It just takes determination and perseverance.’

In 2008, Ms Khatun suffered an acid attack that left her fighting for her life, but she has never been a victim. Instead, she is an inspiring role model for women in Bangladesh. Today she lives by the advice she provides to other acid attack survivors, encouraging them along the way. ‘I tell them that in spite of everything, they need to think positive and keep moving forward. I tell them they can overcome any barrier in life if they develop the mental strength.’

As Group Leader for the Acid Survivors Foundation in Bangladesh, Ms Khatun provides mental support to survivors, guides them on services they can access and advocates with government to demand justice and protect their rights. She believes sharing her experience is valuable. ‘I hope to inspire other survivors to raise their voice to eliminate violence against women.’

Ms Khatun believes there has been progress towards gender equality in Bangladesh. While it used to be that only men would ride bicycles, motorcycles and drive cars, today women are doing so, even in rural areas, which Ms Khatun believes is one indicator of change.

Ms Khatun believes it remains challenging for girls to complete secondary and tertiary education, which is essential for changing people’s mindsets and the country’s social norms.
Ms Khatun is a shining example of empowerment. She never thought she would be engaged in social work or pursuing a Bachelor’s Degree in Business Administration. Her goal is to be a banker, which she believes is an admirable profession for women.

For me, women’s independence is women’s empowerment. Independence enables confidence. If women are not independent in every sphere of life, then they are not empowered. Education plays a key role as an enabler to achieving this.

Australian aid has supported the Acid Survivors Foundation to carry out its work in Bangladesh’s 64 districts. Formed in 1999, the Foundation plays a vital role in changing the lives of survivors of acid and burn violence. This work helps prevent acid violence, provides victims with holistic burn care, advances policies and legal frameworks to protect victims, improves awareness in courts and law enforcement agencies, and supports survivors to be a collective voice to demand justice and advance victims’ rights.
As a young girl, Anne Mwangi was inspired to become a doctor—to help people through health care. Her inspiration has taken her a long way. Today, Dr Mwangi works as a public health practitioner in Kenya’s Ministry of Health and has represented her government in major HIV/AIDS conferences internationally.

Years of clinical practice introduced Dr Mwangi to the reality of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections, resulting in an intense desire to become equipped to respond. Seeing HIV negative children born from HIV-infected mothers through prevention of mother-to-child transmission motivated Dr Mwangi to pursue her passion to study a Master of Medicine (Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV) at the University of Sydney through the Australia Awards program.

After completing her studies, Dr Mwangi returned to her home in Kenya to become Program Manager of the Paediatric HIV Program, which is part of the National AIDS and STIs Control Programme. Running the program involves coordinating care, treatment and support for HIV-infected children and adolescents. Dr Mwangi says the program’s biggest challenge is ‘getting children tested for HIV, as most guardians are in denial that their children could be infected.’ Faced with these challenges, Dr Mwangi sought funding to support 50 facilities nationwide to become centres of excellence for paediatric and adolescent HIV.

Empowerment means allowing girls to go to school, to make independent decisions on when to marry, who to marry, when to have children and how many to have. It also means promoting education, training and professional development for women to empower them in their workplace, the market place and in their community.
Dr Anne Mwangi in her Nairobi office in Kenya’s Ministry of Health. Anne manages the Paediatric HIV Program as part of the National AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections Control Programme (NASCOP) in Kenya. Anne was a recipient of an Australia Award and completed a Master of Medicine (Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV) at the University of Sydney in 2010. Photo: Chantalle Okondo (GRM)

Dr Mwangi gains tremendous satisfaction from seeing HIV-infected children accessing treatment. ‘This enables them to grow through adolescence and move on to live normal lives—going to school, playing, dating and even getting married.’

Dr Mwangi is involved in formulating policy, designing Kenya’s national HIV training curriculum and mentoring and training health workers. She also mentors young girls to set goals and pursue their dreams by sharing this simple message: ‘The sky is the limit. Whatever you set your heart to, do it with all your heart and believe in yourself.’ Dr Mwangi does not just share this message, she lives it. Her intention to be a policymaker, pursue a PhD and teach in a university demonstrates how she is translating this message into reality in her own life.

The Australian Government offers scholarships for international students under the Australia Awards program. Dr Mwangi graduated from the University of Sydney in 2010 with her Master’s Degree and, in 2013, presented at the Australia Awards alumni conferences in Capetown, South Africa, on her experience in managing the Paediatric HIV Program for the National AIDS and STIs Control Programme in Kenya.
From Penama Province in Eastern Vanuatu, Vanessa Siro shares her gratitude for her new economic independence. Ms Siro has been deaf since birth. Through the Vanuatu Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) program, she has significantly raised her income level, something she never thought possible. At 22 years of age, Ms Siro is building a business and a career.

In 2012 and 2014, Ms Siro undertook dress-making training. With the skills she acquired she is producing clothing to sell to local and international cruise-ship tourists. Ms Siro has also participated in fabric painting, printing, cooking and small business management training workshops.
Ms Siro’s contributions to the learning of others has been recognised. ‘I am always happy to help those who need help during training. I want to help others through the knowledge I have gained and believe this is a good way to also help me earn a living.’

With increased confidence and a desire to further develop her skills, Ms Siro participated in a cookery training module. Based on the skills she demonstrated, she has been accepted into a full qualification at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology in 2015.

Ms Siro continues to gain inspiration from the President and Founder of the Sanma Frangipani Disability Association, Mrs Dorian Naliupis. The Association works in partnership with the TVET program to support and enhance the economic empowerment of people with disability in Vanuatu.

Ms Siro is grateful for the ongoing support she receives from her parents. She is proud of her mother’s work as the in-charge nurse of the Children’s Ward at the Northern Provincial Hospital in Santo, and her father’s work as a member of the Luganville Council of Chiefs.

Concerned that violence, limited job opportunities and teenage pregnancy remain issues for many young women, Ms Siro’s message for young women is to make themselves ‘available for opportunities, to always think positively and to give everything a go.’ Ms Siro’s story is an inspiration to all women in Vanuatu.

Vanuatu’s TVET Sector Strengthening Program is funded by the Australian Government. It supports provincial economic development through targeted skill development services. TVET centres also aim to raise the economic status of women in Vanuatu through customised training and small business development services. Australian aid supports inclusion and works in partnership with disability advocacy organisations to ensure people with disability can access skills development services, including accredited training, mentoring, coaching and support for establishing and maintaining small businesses.
Appointed as Indonesia’s Minister for Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection in October 2014, Professor Yohana Susana Yembise faces a big task. As Minister, she has already identified the need to raise the profile of her portfolio across Indonesia and determine the priority women’s and children’s issues to commence work on. ‘I have to open people’s eyes to ensure issues for women and children are seen as part of our national development.’

Minister Yohana is an influential figure in Papuan education and regarded as a thought-leader in her field. In 2013 she was named by the Australian Ambassador to Indonesia as one of the highest achieving Australian Development Scholarship Alumni. Even after receiving her PhD from the University of Newcastle, Minister Yohana used to think becoming a professor was impossible.

After returning home from Australia, Minister Yohana engaged in teaching, research and community development work—on and off campus. Based at the University of Cenderawasih, Jayapura, Papua, she became Head of the English Language Centre, Vice Chairman of the Papua Research Institute, and published widely on English Language Teaching and Papuan Linguistics (Papua has 250 local languages). In June 2012, Minister Yohana achieved an extraordinary milestone when she was inaugurated as the first female Papuan professor in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education.

I am an independent woman following my natural instinct to lead.

I would like to become an “agent of change” by empowering women to be more powerful in all aspects of their lives, and to take part in national development.
Minister Yohana is the first female Papuan professor, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education. In 2014, she was appointed Indonesia’s Minister for Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection. Photo: University of Newcastle

Minister Yohana is a recognised advocate of women’s rights, spending three years as Women’s Empowerment Coordinator at the Regional Research Council of Papua. She is also writing a book about Papuan women’s rights and freedom. Her current research taps into her experiences and explores how women can make a difference in leadership positions.

A prominent Australia Awards alumnus, Minister Yohana is a shining example of how the Australia Awards program can support the development of innovative leaders in priority sectors, who can then work at the most senior levels of government to meet emerging local, regional and global challenges.
Christabelle Andrews
Communications and Education Officer,
National Marine Protected Area, Fisheries Division
Grenada

Christabelle Andrews is a Reef Guardian. A keen open-water scuba diver, she developed an all-consuming passion for the ocean at a young age. ‘I grew up with a hunger for knowledge to explore and learn everything I could. That’s why I studied marine biology.’

Empowerment for me is the ability to make a difference—to have a voice in making decisions to influence change. There is nothing more empowering than knowing that, because of your contribution, you have made a positive change.

Working closely with schools in Grenada and engaging children in environmental education so they understand and appreciate the reefs inspires Christabelle Andrews. Here she is at the Uganda Martyr Roman Catholic School, Happy Hill, St. Georges. Photo: Terrance Franklyn
If you are passionate about what you want to do, people notice your passion and they will help you. They will invest in you.

The ocean—and the protection of Grenada’s coral reefs—is now Ms Andrews’ life. Her love of marine biology and talent in graphic design merged into a dream job as the Communications and Education Officer for the National Marine Protected Area in Grenada’s Fisheries Division.

Ms Andrews also coordinates Grenada’s Reef Guardian Project, part of the Australia Caribbean Coral Reef Collaboration Project. After a learning exchange visit in 2013 to study Australia’s Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority Reef Guardian program, Ms Andrews returned home to pilot a similar program and is achieving outstanding results.

Ms Andrews works closely with communities—particularly farmers and school children—to educate and change behaviour to help protect Grenada’s reefs. She has seen many farmers respond positively after experiencing the reefs for the first time in a glass bottom boat. Ms Andrews describes their reactions as a defining moment when the farmers realised they were connected to the reefs by how they manage their farms. ‘If you can change a farmer’s perception—that is a big achievement.’ Ms Andrews’ community connection is so deep that she describes the farmers and school children she works with as ‘extended family’.

Being a young woman managing such important projects is not without challenges. At times Ms Andrews feels ‘subconscious resistance’ from people who feel threatened by new ideas. She has learned to deal with this by building relationships so people are willing, on their own, to make change.

Grenada’s Reef Guardian Project is a collaboration with the Australia Caribbean Coral Reef Collaboration Project, funded through the Australian aid program and supported by the Government of Grenada. The aim of the project is to develop and implement a Reef Stewardship Framework and resources that will enable fishers, farmers and communities to actively participate in coral reef management. Australian funding for this project ended in mid-2014, however, the Grenada Reef Guardian project continues with additional funding from other international sources.
Kesha Kumari Damini
Chairperson, National Micro Entrepreneurs Federation Nepal
Nepal

Kesha Kumari Damini is raising the voices of micro-entrepreneurs across Nepal. She is no ordinary entrepreneur. From a small village in Nepal’s western hills, Ms Damini continues her traditional profession of tailoring while organising and advocating for the rights of more than 70,000 rural micro-entrepreneurs. As a respected community leader, she inspires others to explore self-employment and overcome discrimination.

Nepal is among the poorest and least developed countries in the world—with more than 80 per cent of the population living in rural areas. Yet the country has a deep wealth of culture, landscape and creativity. In rural areas, micro-entrepreneurship is key to promoting women’s socio-economic empowerment and alleviating poverty.

Ms Damini first established a Tailoring and Training Centre after receiving entrepreneurship development training through the Micro-enterprise Development Program (MEDEP), funded in part by the Australian Government. The program also facilitated Ms Damini’s access to credit. After building her own business, Ms Damini recognised the power of organising other micro-entrepreneurs as key to her own and other women’s empowerment. She encouraged others to follow.

If I continue to share my experiences with other women, then they will not have to experience the same challenges as I did. This is why I continue this work. It is for those women.

Entrepreneurs from the program elected Ms Damini as the Chairperson of her district and later the National Micro Entrepreneurs Federation Nepal in 2006 when the national body was formed. Despite her initial hesitation about her ability to lead, Ms Damini says: ‘I was positive and tolerant—not aggressive. I think this is why they chose me.’ Ms Damini is proud to ensure there is opportunity for women’s voices to be heard in every decision-making forum she participates in.
Ms Damini’s achievements are extraordinary. She has overcome immense social discrimination as a Dalit woman, considered the lowest caste in Nepal and one systematically discriminated against. Ms Damini was illiterate before joining MEDEP, remembering distinctly that ‘I had to put my thumbprints on the forms, instead of signing like other citizens.’ This memory lies in stark contrast to Ms Damini’s life in 2014, when she was awarded the Oslo Business for Peace Award, alongside other world-leading entrepreneurs such as Sir Richard Branson.

Through MEDEP, Australian aid in Nepal supports the expansion of economic opportunities for the ultra-poor and socially marginalised who live on under US$1.25 a day. Australia has supported the program since 1998. Since inception, the program has created more than 70 000 entrepreneurs, more than 68 per cent of whom are women. It is implemented by the United Nations Development Programme and Nepal’s Ministry of Industry.
Ms Jasmin Nario-Galace is a peace educator and disarmament campaigner who is making women’s voices heard in the Philippines and around the world. Having played a catalytic role in peace processes in her home country and in global Arms Trade Treaty negotiations, Ms Nario-Galace is living proof of the importance of promoting women’s full and active participation in peace negotiations. Her proudest moment in recent years was working with a global team on a binding Arms Trade Treaty to include language relating to, and provisions for, ending gender-based violence.

As the Executive Director of the Centre for Peace Education at Miriam College, Manila, Ms Nario-Galace works to build a culture of peace through peace education and advocacy, including teacher training and curriculum development. She also runs the Secretariat for Women Engaged in Action on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (WeAct 1325) in the Philippines, a network of 37 women’s rights, human rights and peace organisations supported by the Australian Government. The network implements and monitors the Philippines National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, which promotes women’s active participation in the peace process. She was also one of three women from civil society who initiated the development of the Philippines National Action Plan.

Ms Nario-Galace cannot over-emphasise the importance of women’s contribution to peace negotiations. Women played a significant role in negotiating the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in the Philippines. Ms Nario-Galace believes that the high number of women on the negotiating teams, and in the technical working group and on the legal team, influenced the language in the agreement and the negotiation process. In future she wants to ‘add more workers to the women, peace and security vineyard.’
It is time for women to be empowered. To know that their voices count—and that they count.

Ms Nario-Galace credits her training and experience in active non-violence for her ability to find strategies to resolve conflicts with diverse people, including armed groups, local communities, country ambassadors and UN negotiators. Her advice to others working in the field is to never give up in the face of challenge: ‘Just find a way to make your arguments stronger, and always use non-violence.’

Australia has been an active supporter of peace building initiatives in Mindanao since 1996. Australia’s aid program is supporting the peace process between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.
Kristina Sogavare is making space for women’s voices to be heard in Solomon Islands. In her own words: ‘I am inspired to empower women from the passion I have to represent those who are not otherwise heard and my passion to see women equally represented in leadership positions.’

Ms Sogavare’s desire to understand how to achieve women’s equal participation in leadership led her to become Assistant to the Clerk in the National Parliament, Solomon Islands. In this role, she advises the Clerk and supports members of parliament in their work.
Empowerment to me is finding a strong voice that brings out the confidence needed to become who I really am. Empowerment for me means embracing life.

After serving as Chair of the Young Women’s Parliamentary Group, Ms Sogavare is now on the Executive Committee. As Chair, she represented the group in establishing strong relationships with the Civic Department of Parliament. She also mentored younger members working in the department.

Building on these skills, Ms Sogavare visited Australia in 2014 as part of the Australian Government’s Special Visits Program, through which she met parliamentarians and civil society groups across the country. During her visit, Ms Sogavare explored a diverse range of issues, including female representation in parliament, education, strengthening civil society and ending violence against women.

Ms Sogavare also participated in the Centre for Democratic Institutions’ Political Party Leadership Program in Canberra. This helped her understand the role political parties play in the region in strengthening and stabilising government and providing an avenue for women to participate in decision-making processes.

Ms Sogavare is studying a Graduate Diploma in Youth Development Studies at Solomon Islands National University. Being a young woman in her field has presented many challenges. Ms Sogavare cites the main ones as ‘the misunderstanding of a woman’s place in traditional society, a lack of legislative reform, and a lack of understanding of the strength and potential for women to lead.’

Despite these challenges, Ms Sogavare has seen great signs of progress in her country, including the recent passing of the Family Protection Bill and greater government and civic awareness about gender equality. During her visit to Australia, Ms Sogavare urged Australia Awards Scholarship recipients to apply what they learned in Australia to create better and stronger countries at home. She is a shining example of what a young leader in Solomon Islands can achieve.

Under the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development initiative, Australia is improving the status of women in Solomon Islands. Australia has committed $34.8 million over 10 years to activities aimed at: reducing family violence and increasing support services to survivors of violence; expanding women’s economic opportunities; and increasing effective representation of women in leadership at all levels of decision-making.
Daniella Randriafeno
Executive Secretary of Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, Government of Madagascar; Former Minister for Mining, Government of Madagascar
Madagascar

As an engineer and former Minister for Mining, Government of Madagascar, Daniella Randriafeno is on a mission to ensure the benefits of mining are shared widely in her country. She leads the National Secretariat of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, which coordinates government, extractive companies and civil society efforts to improve the transparency of mining, oil and gas companies.

When I was a little girl, I wanted to become a doctor. When I was at high school, I wanted to save people. I had a desire to improve my country and create things. I thought: “What will be the best way to achieve this goal?” When learning about engineering—using innovation and technology to realise new projects—I changed direction. I discovered that as an engineer, I could realise my dreams.

Forging a path as a female engineer in Madagascar has been challenging and Mrs Randriafeno likens it to climbing mountains. Mrs Randriafeno vividly remembers undertaking environmental assessments of mining activities with engineers and geologists, literally having to climb mountains while pregnant. ‘In a male-dominated sector, you have to prove to others that you can do the job. This is the challenge. If you can prove this, then they will respect you.’

Mrs Randriafeno is also a Professor in the Department of Mining at a polytechnical school while also researching her PhD. She can talk about mining, gender and governance issues for hours. ‘I have realised that helping manage our mineral resources better will make a huge contribution to Madagascar.’

Through her research, Mrs Randriafeno focuses on maximising the benefits from mining to ensure communities receive the most from them. She suggests that ‘women often have a way of ensuring that gains from mining companies benefit everyone in their community.’
Daniella at ‘The Super Pit’ at the Kalgoorlie Consolidated Gold Mine during the Mining Governance and Africa Down Under study tour in Australia in 2012 organised by the Australian Government through the Australia-Africa Partnerships Facility (AAPF). Daniella is Madagascar’s former Minister for Mining and is now the Executive Secretary for the country’s Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. Photo: Daniella Randriafeno

Mrs Randriafeno participated in the Mining Governance and Africa Down Under study tour in Australia in 2012, realising a long-held dream. The study tour provided a valuable opportunity to build networks and take innovative strategies back to Madagascar relating to environmental management, legal frameworks, community management and mining royalties.

Mrs Randriafeno is passionate about supporting younger women in Madagascar to achieve their dreams. To see change in her country, she says: ‘Girls and women need to be ready and prepared to make change. Women! Your country needs you!’

Australia’s International Mining for Development project provided funding and technical assistance for Mrs Randriafeno, when she was Minister for Mining, to participate in the Mining Governance and Africa Down Under study tour. A key focus was finding solutions for directing the benefits of extractive industries to sustainable development. Mrs Randriafeno’s experience included attending a conference, participating in field visits of mine sites in Western Australia and visiting leading mining and higher education institutions.
Ei Phyu is on a mission to improve the quality of education for children and young people in Burma. She is evaluating the country’s secondary school curriculum as part of the Burmese Government’s Comprehensive Education Sector Review. As a citizen, Ei Phyu says: ‘It is my responsibility to contribute to my nation. Young women would dream of the opportunities I have had—to study abroad and to work on my country’s reform process.’
Burma is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia and has some of the lowest social development indicators in the region. Ei Phyu is proud to be supporting her country’s development through the education sector. Her commitment to education is driven by a desire to see an equal playing field for women and men in Burma, as well as for people living with disability.

Ei Phyu’s fascination with linguistics led her to apply for an Australia Award to study a Master of Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers at Monash University in 2012. During her studies, Ei Phyu met people from many countries, religions and cultures. A highlight was volunteering at the Adult Multicultural Education Service in Melbourne. Extending her skills as a former teacher at an international school, Ei Phyu taught language skills to a newly arrived female student from Afghanistan.

When we have knowledge but don’t know how to apply it—or have the chance to apply it—that is not true power. Education is a source of power. If a person is more educated, they gain knowledge on how to apply it. Education is the source of empowerment.

In her spare time, Ei Phyu works with a group of Australia Awards alumni to design a community program for monastic schools that includes health and education activities. Her advice to young women in Burma is to follow their passion and instinct for learning. ‘Preparing yourself with the best education you can achieve is the best way to take advantage of opportunities when they arrive.’

The Australian Government’s Australia Awards program in Burma provides awardees with skills and knowledge to drive change. It addresses human resource gaps to help Burma and other countries to more effectively meet their development challenges.
Mereia Volavola is an impressive woman of integrity and principle who lives her life by the motto that ‘nothing is impossible.’ Mrs Volavola has been instrumental in helping women realise their potential in the business and finance sectors in Fiji and across the Pacific.

Since 2010, Mrs Volavola has been the Chief Executive Officer of the Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO). In her role, she is the primary private sector representative of member organisations spanning 14 Pacific Island countries.

Mrs Volavola has had a long career in finance and banking, including as Chief Executive Officer of the Capital Markets Development Authority in Fiji and working at the Reserve Bank of Fiji. She holds a Masters in Business Administration in Banking and Finance from the University of Wales. As a woman working in the banking sector, Mrs Volavola says: ‘I didn’t see the sector reserved as a men’s club. I was very confident going into the field and in higher positions because it was based on merit and my experience.’

The moment you connect women and provide information and assistance to make partnerships, so many things happen. It is explosive. I have to say “calm down” because women never run out of ideas.

For Mrs Volavola, growing recognition of the importance of women’s involvement in the private sector is a key driver of growth in the Pacific. She suggests that lack of information often holds women back in the private sector and sees the powerful impact that results when women have the right information and are connected to the right networks.
‘Business people are great agents for development, particularly for meeting development needs and addressing social issues,’ says Mrs Volavola, who regularly encounters many women using their own economic empowerment to support their communities. She shares countless examples of stories from these women, including a Solomon Islands woman who runs a timber company and employs female survivors of violence, and a woman from Papua New Guinea who established the country’s first micro-bank for women and girls. ‘I get feedback from other women on how I have motivated or encouraged them. If I can show women that they are equal to and as good as their male counterparts, then I am pleased.’

Australian aid in Fiji is working with private sector partners to help unlock market opportunities and facilitate inclusive economic growth to reach the most disadvantaged communities. To support this work, Australia’s Pacific Leadership Program has supported PIPSO and its mission to lead the facilitation of private sector-driven economic growth for the benefit of the region. At regional level, PIPSO advocates for the interests of the private sector and promotes policy discussion and strategies for private sector development.
Folade Mutota is a women’s rights activist and campaigner for armed violence reduction. She believes in the power of people to make change. ‘My philosophy is grounded in people’s power. I believe people have the power, the expert knowledge, the strategies and their own ways of working to solve their problems and overcome injustice.’

Gender equality would see a significant reduction in violence against women. Violence is a culmination and manifestation of the status of women in society. If we had a drastic reduction in violence, it would send a message to me that women’s rights are getting closer to being achieved.

Ms Mutota founded the Women’s Institute for Alternative Development (WINAD) in Trinidad and Tobago in 1999. Today the institute is renowned for thought leadership and innovation on women’s rights. Its core business is providing an intergenerational women’s leadership program through which girls 12 to 17 years of age are mentored by older women and undertake training to build their leadership skills. ‘When we invest in these girls, we build their social consciousness. That consciousness accompanies them into their adult lives and throughout their careers.’

The other major focus of Ms Mutota’s work is in disarmament, gun control and small arms, which brought WINAD into the UN Arms Trade Treaty process in 2000. As the Secretariat for the Caribbean Coalition for Development & Reduction of Armed Violence, Ms Mutota is recognised internationally for her leadership in reducing and preventing gun violence. She played an important role in ensuring that language on gender-based violence was included in the Treaty and continues to ensure women’s roles in peace and security initiatives are recognised by the international community.
Ms Mutota has also been working with grassroots organisations all of her adult life. From humble beginnings joining a revolutionary organisation in her youth and winning victories for low-income people in her country, Ms Mutota went about building social consciousness. ‘I feel strongly about serving people because every single person has value and untapped power. I have a responsibility to serve others so that collectively we can become stronger.’ From her own community to UN negotiating rooms, Ms Mutota is transforming her vision into reality.

As a strong advocate of a regulated and responsible arms trade system, the Australian Government, in partnership with the Caribbean Coalition for Development and the Reduction of Armed Violence, provided funding through the Direct Aid Program (DAP) to host regional workshops in preparation for UN Preparatory Committee meetings on the Arms Trade Treaty.
Ms Muthumenika is courageous. After years of suffering as a debt-ridden, single mother with three daughters, she transformed her life in part through opportunities provided under the Australian Community Rehabilitation Program (ACRP). ‘My husband went to work in the Middle East in the 1980s and disappeared. He pawned over our paddy land to go abroad and never returned. I then needed to borrow money to feed the children and some days I did not have enough.’ As a result of her husband’s debts, Ms Muthumenika lost her land and her home.

I urge every woman to become courageous. I am a living example of this. I have told my daughters to take me as an example to lead their life with dignity.

Women like Ms Muthumenika often live at the margins of their communities, excluded by poverty and traditional power structures. ‘Women’s mobility is limited and many face violence. Not many are consulted, even in household decisions.’

In partnership with Oxfam and the Australian Government, local organisation Rajarata Gemi Shakthi Nirmana Kavaya provided a small loan to Ms Muthumenika, enabling her to pay off her debts, educate her children, redeem her land and build a house. Ms Muthumenika also received training on decision-making, bookkeeping, human rights, legal awareness, domestic violence and accessing government services.

Ms Muthumenika uses her new-found confidence to engage at the community level in decision-making processes. In the past, she was openly called a beggar and her views were not respected in the community. Now people come to her for advice on issues such as accessing government services, accessing livelihood loans and dealing with domestic issues. ‘The men appreciate and respect me now.’

While Ms Ms Muthumenika’s first leadership role was as an auditor for the village group, she later became Group President of the village Samurdhi (government poverty assistance program) and President of the Women’s Rural Development Society.
Ms Muthumenika is an outstanding example of transformation. Her increased civic participation and engagement has enabled her to represent her community with local administration officials. She wants to contest in the local election, but lacks the funds to do so. ‘Women must have equal opportunity, including in politics. I am very keen to contest in the election.’

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Because of the knowledge I gained through the program, I am now playing a leadership role with more confidence. Now we know our rights and how to claim those rights.

The Australian Community Rehabilitation Program Phase 3 is a five-year (2010–15) program that tackles issues entrenching poverty and conflict in war-affected Sri Lanka. It addresses constraints to livelihood and economic development at community level while systematically addressing the causes of conflict, strengthening governance and improving service provision by the Sri Lankan Government.
As Secretary of Fisheries and Marine Resources Development in Kiribati, Dr Naomi Biribo is committed to serving her nation as a leader. Her mission is to ensure that Kiribati’s fisheries and marine resources are used sustainably so they remain healthy and productive. Daily she describes the ‘exciting and challenging’ task of brainstorming with colleagues to find solutions to improve livelihoods and generate income for people, especially those living on the outer islands of Kiribati.
Dr Biribo was appointed in her role as Secretary after completing her PhD at the University of Wollongong in Australia. Her doctoral thesis was on Kiribati’s coastal vulnerability caused by the island nation’s 32 low-lying atolls. Her research—looking at the effect of rising sea levels—was the first of its kind specifically addressing the challenges the Tarawa atoll reef islands may face. ‘The coast is a significant element of everyday life for the people of Kiribati and my research has implications for a wide cross-section of the community.’ The fisheries sector is critical to Kiribati. The country has limited options to generate domestic revenue, with fishing licences being the main source of income.

The important factor that has helped me forge new paths is the realisation that I can contribute more to my country being a leader than a follower. I have both the capacity and the opportunity to contribute to developing my country and so decided to take this leadership role.

Dr Biribo and her research have also been recognised for the potential to contribute to broader development across the Pacific. Dr Biribo was a recipient of a Prime Minister’s Pacific Australia Award in 2011, a prestigious scholarship for exceptional leaders. This gave her the opportunity to participate in a leadership development program in Australia, the learning from which she uses to influence fisheries and coastal management policy at home.

Dr Biribo notes how a growing number of women who were former Secretaries and Members of Parliament are becoming Ministers in Kiribati. ‘The increasing number of women in decision-making and leadership roles enables decisions to be more inclusive. In our culture it is the men who make decisions in the maneaba [meeting house]. But in the home, the women decide what really needs to be done.’

Under the Australia–Kiribati Partnership for Development, Australian aid in Kiribati supports improving education standards and workforce skills, strengthening economic management, and improving infrastructure, including with climate change adaptation.
Madame Sitti Chihabiddine (dubbed ‘Ms Vanilla’ by her Australian High Commission supporters) runs the only female-led export business in the Comoro Islands—a business that cultivates and exports organic, conventional and fair-trade vanilla.

The fertile volcanic soil and humid climate make the islands an ideal location to grow this rare commodity. Madame Chihabiddine suggests that her ‘business sense, confidence, boldness in taking risks and the support of colleagues and family’ have been the most important factors in the success of her business, Vaniacom.

When Australia’s former High Commissioner to Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar, the late Sandra Vegting, met Madame Chihabiddine, she was about to commence an Australia Award to undertake English language training. After completing three months of training and with renewed confidence, Madame Chihabiddine travelled to a trade show in Japan and is now exporting there. She has gone from strength-to-strength, extending her business to several Anglophone countries and achieving bio-certification in three countries with new export markets in Europe and Japan.

Success has not been confined to Madame Chihabiddine’s business, however. She has shared the benefits gained through Vaniacom with her community. Using funds from an Australian Government grant, for example, Madame Chihabiddine strengthened the Vanilla Growers’ Cooperative in her village. She secured high-quality seeds, computers to track orders and upgraded the company’s headquarters and office. Madame Chihabiddine says this is increasing the visibility of Vaniacom’s work, diversifying its crops, improving the business capacity of growers and helping build cohesion and solidarity within the Cooperative. And, for the first time, local people in Madame Chihabiddine’s village can now access the Internet in the Cooperative’s cyber café.
Madame Sitti Chihabiddine shows the Australian High Commissioner to Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar, Susan Coles, around the Vanilla Growers’ Cooperative, which the Australian Government provided support to upgrade. Photo: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

The Union of the Comoros is unique in that it is a matrilineal (property passed through a mother’s line) and matrilocal society (new families established close to a bride’s family, not the groom). Madame Chihabiddine says this gives Comorian women ‘a central place in society’. She also suggests that access to microfinance has ‘enabled many women to open small businesses and dramatically improve their income and living conditions’.

Yet Madame Chihabiddine remains the country’s only female-led business to export. Her message for other women in Comoros is to continue to pursue quality higher education, continue to take risks and to jump into the deep end. ‘International trade is not so difficult!’

The Australian Government’s Australia Awards program is aimed at addressing human resource gaps by providing awardees with the skills and knowledge needed to drive change in their home countries.