



## The Asia Foundation

### DFAT Gender Strategy Consultation – Submission from The Asia Foundation

#### *What are the most important things we should work on?*

##### Advance gender-transformative approaches

Covid-19's profound impact on gender roles exacerbated existing gender inequalities and resulted in the regression of hard-won gender equality gains. This situation adds renewed urgency to DFAT's elevated institutional commitment to an intersectional gender equality strategy. Crucial here is ensuring that all DFAT investments are gender responsive and able to address intersectional injustice and embrace complexity. This includes the strict requirement that partners conduct robust, intersectional gender equality and inclusion analyses and action plans at the beginning of each project, matched with appropriate budgetary resourcing. Within DFAT, it will be important for staff to receive training on the application of intersectional gender equality approaches in their work, including gender-responsive approaches to monitoring, evaluation, and learning and accountability measures. A gender opportunity analysis would be one means to build on internal gender strengths and address challenges and issues.

Programmatically, we see the following issues and opportunities as being essential to work on:

First, addressing the persistently low rates of female political leadership and participation. Rising governance challenges and the retrenchment of democratic values in several countries underscore the critical importance of investing in women's leadership. It is also deeply concerning that women's political participation remains so low in the Indo-Pacific region. While there has been a welcome investment in women's networks and movements, there needs to be a greater investment in women's formal political voice, leadership, and agency. This requires a coordinated, multi-country approach and a multi-pronged strategy to increase the number of women candidates in local and national elections. Also vital is supporting women's leadership once elected, to ensure they have access to networks, training, and mentoring to ensure their success.

Secondly, there is a significant gender gap in female labor force participation and entrepreneurship and women in management and leadership roles. Fostering women's entrepreneurship and leadership in the workforce is vital to sustained, inclusive economic development. Crucial here is a lifecycle approach that invests in girls' education across the region, including STEM education and skill building. At the next stage of the cycle, it is important to support women entrepreneurs to start or pivot to green businesses where access to finance remains a significant barrier. Investing in a pro-women's green procurement policy would support women in building green businesses and forging successful business partnerships. Supporting women's access to and retention in STEM careers and leadership positions is likewise important for women's positioning for the Future of Work and economic prosperity in the region. When thinking about the Future of Work through a feminist lens, there needs to be a centering on choice, mobility, and agency for women and all genders. Also crucial is prioritizing support for women's engagement in financial and economic policy-setting institutions, such as national banks, trade

institutions, credit institutions, and financial regulatory bodies, to ensure a gender perspective can be integrated into all operational and policy decisions. This will enable informed and decisive engagement from a cross-section of women in economic roles as workers, entrepreneurs, and regulators across sectors.

Third, the Indo-Pacific is the most unequal region globally regarding unpaid care. Women perform four times more unpaid care than men. This situation erodes women's economic participation, security, and well-being and erodes the ability of countries to achieve sustained, inclusive economic development and prosperity. Transformative change requires addressing the crisis of unpaid care work, which largely falls on women, by enhancing collaboration and joint learning among government and NGO actors; promoting norm change; gathering in-depth care data that captures unique community-level perspectives; catalyzing new care models and innovations; and funding grass roots organizations to realize change across communities and countries. Paid care is one of the fastest-growing economic sectors and represents a substantial source of employment worldwide. Investing and addressing existing gaps in care services could generate almost 300 million more jobs worldwide. What is particularly important is more funding and financing for promising and proven care delivery models, especially in eldercare and disability care. Investment in childcare delivery models is also needed in many countries. Also vital is more research on care migration and the intersections of care and climate impact to inform programs and interventions.

Fourth, a crisis of gender-based violence is profoundly impacting women, girls, the LGBTQI+ community, and those with non-binary identities across the region, including trafficking in persons, online violence, and intimate partner violence. GBV must be understood as a profound human rights abuse that undermines governance and economic progress and should be addressed holistically and across all programs. This includes a dedicated focus on the prevention of and response to GBV (including access to sensitive justice processes) and integrating an intersectional assessment of GBV risk and appropriate response into all development programming. Crucial here is going beyond "do no harm" in supporting robust primary prevention, norm change, and trauma-informed response services. It also means addressing GBV in conflict settings, including the need for holistic approaches such as the Nabilan program in Timor Leste and wrap-around support such as access to health care and SRHR services. Greater investment in coordinated global south-led research on critical GBV issues and interventions and the incidence of online violence would contribute to more timely and effective programs and emergency response.

Fifth, "sticky" norms that perpetuate rigid gender roles and responsibilities also limit women's political, economic, and social participation. Gender norm transformation should be a key component of development programming, whenever possible. Engaging men and boys as allies and beneficiaries of normative change is critical. Investing in youth-led models of gender norm change that engage different genders in meaningful dialogue and programs on gender norms in schools and communities are essential to influencing a new generation's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. It is understood that patriarchy and harmful gender norms result in as significant damage to boys and men as to girls, women, and non-binary persons. Investing in promising models such as Gender Lab in India, as a feminist youth-led organization, for adaptation and scaling across other countries would make a material difference to the lives of many in the region.

Sixth, more attention to an Indo-Pacific-informed approach to advancing women, peace, and security in the region. With the number of regional conflicts, investing in women's networks for peacebuilding is crucial. For instance, supporting women from Myanmar working in Thailand to build resilient movements for achieving a just peace in Myanmar. Investing more in mental health support for women at the frontlines of responding to conflicts and climate change is also vital.

Finally, there is limited representation of women and girls in leading and implementing resiliency to climate change. Expanding women and girls' roles in devising, implementing, and leading solutions to climate change will yield more durable results and bolster women's voice and agency in all facets of their lives. Women's leadership roles in a just and equitable energy transition will help create a sustainable future for all. Women's leadership in risk reduction to mitigate the impact of emergencies will contribute to saving lives and building long-term resilience in communities. Supporting women's climate diplomacy to translate their experience at the local level to national, regional, and global policy will result in more effective climate policies and climate finance commitments. There is also a need for more South-led global research and data on the nexus of gender and climate change to ensure analysis and recommendations come from the countries and communities most affected by climate change. For instance, a multi-partner Gender and Climate Hub research network could work with local and global civil society, practitioners, governments, and international organizations to advance gender-inclusive climate-impact approaches and inform climate financing. Also important here is drawing on research to inform and catalyze investments in promising approaches and those with the potential for adaptation and scaling.

### ***What is the best way to do this?***

#### *Action-oriented convenings with funds to support promising approaches*

Fund action-oriented convenings on critical issues such as the care economy and women's climate leadership that engage a cross-section of government, civil society, and private sector representatives at the country and regional levels. Ideally, such convenings would be held on the eve of regional events such as APEC, the G20, and ASEAN to influence the priorities of countries in the region. There is then an opportunity to translate regional-level agenda-setting to national-level action. Ensure that such convenings are backed by funds to support promising approaches and models and to maintain momentum for recommended actions and research. Invest in global South-led researchers and research institutions.

#### *Flexible funding to women's, youth, and feminist networks and movements*

Direct flexible funding for capacity development of feminist movements and local leaders/solutions and support diverse and quieter voices to be heard, represented, and welcomed at the table in addressing different inequalities. Critical here is including perspectives and voices of women with intersectional identities. Contribute to exchange programs for local women leaders and networks to learn from other regional leaders, in concert with these approaches, support capacity building for the justice sector and law enforcement to respond sensitively to gender-based violence against women, girls, and LGBTQI+ communities.

#### *Campaigns to address harmful gender norms*

Investing in awareness campaigns to challenge societal norms at a multi-country and regional level is vital to gain traction in addressing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors perpetuating gender inequality.

Awareness campaigns are also needed to improve women's access to quality healthcare services, including reproductive health services, family planning, and maternal care.

#### *Regional STEM fund*

Commit to a regional STEM fund that can facilitate STEM scholarships to girls and young women at secondary and tertiary education levels. Support community-based online initiatives that provide women and out-of-school girls access to STEM education and vocational training.

#### *Flexible fund for women's green entrepreneurship*

Create flexible mechanisms to support women entrepreneurs to start or adapt to green businesses and to access networks, coaching, training, and finance to sustain and grow their enterprises.

*Cultivate partnerships for gender justice.* Work with and through multiple actors including Government, NGOs, and businesses—in particular, those who understand the local context and share the same mandate/interest with DFAT, including through shared values and common ground around globally defined rights and norms. Build enduring partnerships with institutions that extend beyond project cycles.

#### ***How can we help other countries with gender equality?***

##### *Foster an Implementation focus.*

Encourage governments to go beyond formulating policies to focus on implementing and monitoring policies. Additionally, encourage governments to prioritize engagement and cooperation with CSOs and women's organizations.

##### *Encourage greater investment in girls' education and women's skill-building, especially in STEM.*

Motivate governments to prioritize investments in girls' and women's education at all levels. This includes efforts to reduce gender-based barriers to education, improve the quality of education, and promote STEM education for girls. Vital here is supporting initiatives to build women's skills and leadership and contribution to decision-making processes.

##### *Elevate opportunities for women's voice and leadership locally and nationally.*

Encourage governments to promote women's leadership, representation, and participation in governance at national and sub-national levels and in intergovernmental multilateral and bilateral bodies that define governance priorities. This includes women's climate leadership. Support countries to study the policy gaps and mainstream gender equality in relevant legal reforms.

##### *Cultivate partnerships and dialogues that model localization*

Foster partnerships and engage in dialogue to ensure that interventions are tailored to the local context and address the specific needs of women and girls.

#### ***What else do we need to think about in the strategy?***

##### *Gender analyses and training*

We applaud DFAT's commitment that all \$3 million+ new investments will have an objective specifically focused on gender equality. To ensure that this commitment results in significant advances, we suggest

requiring and funding gender analyses as part of program design and ensuring that the quality of the gender analysis in the design is a weighted criteria in grant and contract selection.

#### *Integrate DFAT strategies*

Ensure the integration of the gender strategy with DFAT's other strategies and think about how Australia will lead by example. This includes a commitment to contextual and local engagement to define what specific issues to pursue and ensure that all DFAT officials with grant/contract oversight responsibilities prioritize moves toward gender equality as a critical outcome of DFAT investments. Crucial here is providing the necessary training internally to fulfill those responsibilities as part of DFAT's investment in its development capability.

#### *Mainstream intersectionality*

Commit to intersectional approaches. Apply the principles of disaggregated data, inclusion assessments, and action plans to ensure the inclusion of other vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities and LGBTI+ populations, recognizing that their challenges and needs may be unique.

#### *GBV as a cross-cutting issue*

GBV is a regional and global emergency that requires engaging the whole of society. It is crucial to address not just the symptoms but the causes, including harmful gender norms and attitudes to power that perpetuate violence.

#### *Long-term interventions and funding*

There is a need for greater collaboration among donor agencies, governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector to have a comprehensive approach to promoting gender equality. The focus should be on long-term interventions with sustained funding and support to drive lasting change. Building flexible support for women's and feminist movements to strengthen and sustain their infrastructure for mobilizing and organizing is essential. Australia is ideally placed to assume a convening role in facilitating exchange of experience and identifying opportunities for enhanced coordination of activities and investments.

#### *Targeted support where there is sustained conflict and repression*

Flexibility in the strategy to allow for targeted support for civil society organizations in countries where there is sustained conflict or repression, including Afghanistan and Myanmar. Such support could sustain vital initiatives to support girls' and women's education, economic security, networks, and agency, thus sustaining their active hope for a brighter future.