



Members of the Suco Management Committee in Viqueque in Timor-Leste. Photo: Sarah Wiles/CARE

"Sometimes our leaders forget us women who live in remote areas. Especially those of us with disabilities."

- Petronella da Cruz, a group leader through Disaster Ready in Timor-Leste

CARE Australia submission to DFAT GEDSI Branch International Gender Equality Strategy

1. Introduction

Social and cultural norms frequently restrict women's access to spaces where decisions are made, a significant barrier to women empowering themselves and having their voices heard. In response to DFAT's proposed *International Gender Equality Strategy*, CARE Australia urges the Australian government to focus on addressing structural inequality through its diplomacy, in the way it resources aid and development; and in its efforts to include women in decision-making at all levels.

This strategy could not come at a more urgent time. Unjust and unequal power relations, structures and rigid social and cultural norms, ongoing discrimination, weak laws, policies and institutions continue to perpetuate inequality and violence against women. Violence, often used to enforce unequal gender roles and harmful social norms, has increased in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic and will continue to increase amidst global instability and the ongoing climate crisis. At the same time, the space for women's civil society organisations continues to narrow, becoming the

subject of backlash and reprisals. Women who speak out are often targeted by those with power, whether formal authorities, male partners, community members or opinion leaders.ⁱ

Further, the climate crisis is exacerbating existing gender inequalities and threatens livelihoods and basic service access. Ongoing conflicts, economic turbulence and natural disasters combined with the impacts of climate change have created numerous protracted humanitarian disasters and crises globally. In the Asia region this includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar to name a few.

The Australian Government is presented with a genuine opportunity for transformative change in achieving global gender equality goals. Gender transformative whole-of-government approaches can be a catalyst for a peaceful, stable and prosperous Asia-Pacific region. To realise this, there is an urgent need to strengthen collective actions to promote gender equality across all aspects of foreign policy, utilising all tools of statecraft including *diplomacy and development*. It is critical that women, including those in rural and remote areas, are equally engaged as leaders and participants in these efforts.

CARE's submission identifies key priorities for the Australian Government in its contribution to achieving gender equality. This draws on our previous submissions to the Development Policy [process](#) and [case studies](#) provided around gender transformative programmes. From our experience achieving gender equality requires transformative change. This means addressing the structural causes as well as the symptoms of gender inequality, with the aim of achieving lasting change in the power and choices women and girls have over their own lives.

2. Advancing women's voice and leadership at all levels

The most effective approach for achieving gender equality is transforming the deep-rooted social and political structures that limit women's full and equal participation in society. In particular their equal voice and leadership in public life. Change is required in both private and public spaces (*i.e. at individual, household, community and societal level*). Women's leadership in public life and in decision-making is a catalyst for the transformative change CARE seeks at the individual, relational and structural level. Women speaking up and working collectively for social change is essential for progressing gender equality. Multi-country research shows that the single biggest factor in reducing GBV is the presence and strength of women's movementsⁱⁱ. CARE's own research shows that achieving equal voice and leadership for women requires transforming unequal power relations and the structural barriers limiting women's opportunities and meaningful participation. CARE's work in humanitarian response has also demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach in the aftermath of natural disasters as well as in development programming.ⁱⁱⁱ

Women across the Asia-Pacific are largely marginalised from leadership and decision-making processes governing their lives. Women's representation in parliaments across the region remain at some of the lowest levels in the world, with recent elections doing little to change this.^{iv} As CARE, our resources are directed to remote and disadvantaged communities, who often have limited or varying interactions with central authorities and decision-making processes. The forthcoming *International Gender Equality Strategy* should endeavour to support women's voice in decision making both at national and sub-national levels. When Australia engages with governments in the region it must reach beyond the leadership at capitol level and also seek to reach out to and listen to voices further afield in rural and remote areas, particularly women. There is significant evidence that when women's collective voice is amplified, women are successful in securing services and participating in the design and planning of investments that influence their lives. However, women's rights organisations are typically overlooked and underfunded. Research on global funding flows reveals that only 0.4% of ODA focused on gender equality is reaching feminist movements and women's rights organisations.^v

Box 1. Creating space for women's voices, including in crisis

CARE, in close collaboration with local partners, works to create opportunities for women to participate and lead, and to be respected, listened to and have influence when they do. As an example, CARE's *Women Lead in Emergency* approach facilitated registration of several women's groups in the Philippines to engage with local authorities and power-holders from a place of legitimacy. These associations have gone on to establish new partnerships and alliances in order to implement their own action plans. Further, taking an example from our work in the Pacific, women-led recovery in the aftermath of Tropical Cyclone Gita in Tonga (2019) and Judy and Kevin in Vanuatu (2023) facilitated an increase to food security through enabling access to financial services and a revitalisation of micro-farming.

Recommendations. The forthcoming *International Gender Equality Strategy* should move the Australian government one step beyond the restitution of the OECD DAC gender markers to:

- explicitly commit to benchmarks for the promotion of women's voice and leadership, with a time-bound plan to meet these and annual public reporting on progress;
- substantially increase contributions to pooled funds such as *Pacific Women Lead* and the *Pacific Feminist Fund* and include targets for funding for women-led and women's rights organisations;
- hold all aid partners, including ANGOs, UN and contractors accountable for the quality and inclusivity of diverse partnerships and collaboration with women-led and women's rights organisations.

3. Ensuring gender equality dividends through aid and trade

Free trade agreements (FTAs) can benefit economies through the opening of new markets and the free flow of trade across borders, creating economic growth and the potential to alleviate poverty. The recently released *Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040* has as its core objective the need to address trade and investment linkages between Australia and this Southeast Asia Region. However, to benefit the goals for regional stability and prosperity, economic strategy and FTAs also need to encourage economic growth that is inclusive, benefits men and women equally, and ensures safe workplaces for all. The Australian Government has the potential to scale-up gender lens investing beyond current positive investments in the *Investing in Women* and *EMIIIF* programmes.

There are clear opportunities to build women's workforce participation and economic power, increasing GDPs in the region and increasing stability. Despite rapid economic growth in the region, women in paid employment in factory or home-based workplaces and women domestic workers, face numerous barriers to achieving equality. Women often face unstable work through informal working arrangements, unequal or exploitative labour conditions, lack of access to social support mechanisms, and many experience sexual abuse and harassment. These conditions hinder women from achieving economic empowerment.

CARE has promoted industry-wide change for women in the garment industry by partnering with women workers and their organisations and advocating for better public policies and business practices that respect the rights of workers. This includes strategies to address workplace violence, including sexual harassment prevention within garment factories and coordinated global advocacy in support of the ILO *Convention on Violence and Harassment* (190) - the first international labour standard to address violence and harassment in the world of work^{vi}. Having ratified the convention in June 2023, Australia through its *International Gender Equality Strategy* should outline how this commitment can be reaffirmed. For example, demonstrated commitment to this could be a key criteria

for negotiated trade agreements with other states. Further, Australia can actively support delivery of the convention through its aid programme.

Box 2. Empowering women to raise their voice and claim their rights in the workplace

CARE Australia's Enhancing Women's Voice to Stop Sexual Harassment (STOP), in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam, 2017 - 2021, was funded by DFAT through ANCP and the Gender Action Platform. The STOP program was implemented in 40 garment factories in the Mekong region, and worked with participating factories to create workplaces where female workers could feel safe and experience less sexual harassment through the implementation of standardised reporting mechanisms and training packages. Achievements included improvements in factory workers', managers' and factories' understanding and awareness of sexual harassment, the establishment of guidelines and mechanisms to empower female workers, and contribution to national policy advocacy. The training packages have been used by Primark, VF Corp and Levis across the Mekong.

Recommendations. The forthcoming *International Gender Equality Strategy* should bring:

- greater coherence and mutual reinforcement between Australia's trade and aid strategies to progress gender equality outcomes through structural reforms;
- an impetus for scale-up of gender-lens investing initiatives;
- an explicit strategic diplomatic engagement in aid and trade negotiations to ensure gender equality dividends in line with Australia's values and commitments to international agreements.

4. Confronting and reversing a surge in gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) is the most pervasive of human rights violations, rooted in gender inequality which plays out in unequal power relations, structural inequalities and discrimination.^{vii} Rates of violence against women have exploded resulting in the most severe setback to women's rights in decades.^{viii} Prior to the pandemic, around the globe almost 1 in 3 women experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both – most of it taking place within the home or family.^{ix}

Globally, added pressures from the pandemic and economic uncertainty have seen the reported numbers of gender-based violence surge. COVID-19 containment measures created a "Shadow Pandemic", with record high levels of GBV and particularly Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).^x Displaced women and girls fleeing natural disasters, drought, famine and war are at even greater risk of violence. More than 70% of women in crisis situations have experienced one or more types of GBV, in comparison to 35% of women globally.^{xi} In crisis settings, the disruption of basic services, inability to earn a living and collapse of support systems (including remittances) has led to an increase in trafficking for the purposes of sexual or labour exploitation.^{xii} In the Pacific, women face some of the highest rates of violence in the world, with 60% to 80% of women aged between 15 to 49 years having experienced partner violence.^{xiii} In reality the numbers are likely much higher, as survivors are often hesitant to report perpetrators due to fear of further victimisation.^{xiv}

When women do report violence they are met by inadequate justice systems. Reliance on informal structures for remedies can be problematic, as community-based justice is often entrenched in patriarchal norms and systems.^{xv} In formal settings, women victim-survivors fall through the cracks or experience further victimisation within national justice systems which are also male-led and patriarchal. Global evidence backs CARE's experience: the impacts of gender-based violence have spiralling negative consequences for economic, social and political participation. Without addressing the root cause of gender inequality, development outcomes for families and the community as a whole cannot be realised.^{xvi} In CARE's work in Timor Leste and Vanuatu, we sought to embed GBV risk mitigation approaches as part of our broader programmes which resulted in increased rejection of the use of

violence, stronger advocacy for reduction in discriminatory practices against women and reduced tolerance for GBV^{xvii}.

Box 3. Centering gender equality in donor strategy

Global Affairs Canada (GAC) the Canadian government's development assistance ministry, centres women's needs at the forefront of its work. This strategic focus as a product of a broader feminist foreign policy, combined with increased provision of flexible multi-year funding, has underpinned Canada's reputation for its coherence, consistency and success as a global champion for gender equality. For instance, under its Humanitarian Pillar GAC provides support to local partners delivering in conflict zones, with flexible long-term funding allowing for the ability to plan longer term and agility to address gaps and crises as they emerge. Under GAC's Middle East Strategy, independent programme evaluations found that its promotion of sexual and reproductive health rights and combating of gender-based violence were notable successes. Canada is now considered as a leader among donors in advocating for Sexual and Reproductive Health Services in this region.^{xviii}

Recommendation. The forthcoming *International Gender Equality Strategy* should outline:

- a particular focus on reducing violence against women and girls across their lifespan in Australian Aid strategy through risk mitigation, prevention and response;
- how the Australian government will work to prevent and respond to GBV at the individual, household, community, national and global levels through both aid and diplomacy;
- greater support to feminist, women-led and women's rights organisations, youth and LGBTQI+ organisations, associations and movements, and with gender champions in cultural and religious institutions, governments businesses and peer donors
- substantially increased contributions to the *Pacific Partnership to End Violence Against Women and Girls*.

5. Listening to and addressing the needs of women and girls amidst the climate crisis

In the Asia-Pacific region, women and children are 14 times more likely than men to die or be injured in a disaster and its aftermath^{ix}. Three factors that explain why women experience the impacts of climate change more acutely than men:

Climate change amplifies gender inequality- The stresses and shocks of climate change further entrench power imbalances that underpin gender inequality. This includes the unequal distribution of care responsibilities, unequal access to resources and exclusion from decision-making which, in turn, makes it more difficult for women to adapt and respond to the impact of climate change. Additionally, when displaced by disasters or slow-onset climate events, women are more likely to face gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Women face specific barriers in having their voices heard- Social and cultural norms often present a barrier for women to contribute to important conversations because it restricts their ability to access spaces where decisions are made. Decisions of importance are often made in circles where women's perspective on climate change prevention, mitigation and coping strategies are missing.

Women are the primary providers of food, water and fuel- In many countries, women and girls are the main subsistence farmers and are responsible for feeding their families. When the effects of climate change are felt, food, water and fuel become scarce and women are forced to find alternative avenues to protect the nutrition of families and communities as a whole.

Climate change and disaster impacts are not gender neutral. There remains a lack of basic gender inclusion measures across DRR in the Asia-Pacific, as well as a lack of inclusion of people with

disabilities. Programmes must recognise and respond to the fundamental differences in how women and men of all diversities prepare for and are affected by disasters, and how disasters differently impact people with disabilities. Gender perspectives should be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision-making processes. Through our work at CARE, we see that gender responsive and disability inclusive DRR is more impactful in terms of community level preparation, response and recovery.

Recommendations. The forthcoming *International Gender Equality Strategy* should:

- promote gender-equitable responses to climate change, particularly approaches that enable women and girls to empower themselves and lead to gender transformative outcomes;
- outline how the Australian government will communicate the links between its own domestic policy choices and action on climate change and the gendered implications for the Asia-Pacific region;
- inform how a gender and disability lens will be integrated in programming that seeks to combat and adapt to climate change across the spectrum from humanitarian assistance to long-term development.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

It is important to conclude our submission with some final reflections from Petronella, a CARE project participant in Timor-Leste:

“Now it is no longer like it was in the past. In the past, it was men that had all the rights. But now, because the issue of gender has been raised, women and men have the same rights. In the past it was only men who were the kings and sat in parliament, and we women had to be in the kitchen... But now I walk around because the matter of gender has been raised. We also now have opportunities to be able to protect ourselves, to become leaders...and for us in our small group, we are also prepared to lead.”

A critical question that the future *International Gender Equality Strategy* must answer is, how will it work in partnership with women like Petronella across the region? Australia can best support gender equality internationally when it seeks to protect women’s rights and harness their knowledge and leadership. To realise this, there is an urgent need to strengthen the capacity and collective actions amongst all actors to ensure that gender equality is mainstreamed across diplomacy, humanitarian aid, recovery, reconstruction, development and peace-building efforts. Women must be equally engaged as leaders and decision makers in these efforts; with sufficient resources put towards meeting their needs and ensuring they have equal access to opportunity and resources. To ensure an overarching strategic coherence, Australia should consider adopting a feminist foreign policy in addition to its stated commitment to a First Nations foreign policy.

CARE Australia supports women around the globe to save lives, defeat poverty and achieve social justice. We work in partnership with local communities to provide equal opportunities for women that they have long been denied: the ability to earn an income, gain access to their fair share of resources, to lead and participate in decisions that affect their lives, and to be able to withstand the increasing impacts of climate disasters and other crises. As CARE Australia, we have built strong, long-term relationships with partners who work in their own communities in the South-East Asia and Pacific regions and we know that this is where we can be most effective. CARE Australia manages all programs and activities of the CARE International confederation in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu and Vietnam. In addition, CARE Australia undertakes development assistance and disaster response activities in partnership with local organisations in Tuvalu, Kiribati, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Samoa.

Submitted on 22 September 2023 to the GEDSI Branch (DFAT).

NOTES

ⁱ International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), "Intimidations and Its Impact on Engagement with the UN Human Rights System. Methodological Challenges and Opportunities", 2020, 9.

ⁱⁱ Feminist mobilisation and progressive policy change: why governments take action to combat violence against women S. Laurel Weldon & Mala Htun <https://malahtun.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/weldon-and-htun-2013-gen-and-dev.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/WomenLead_GlobalEvaluation.pdf

^{iv} <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/in-focus/csw/snapshot-of-womens-leadership-in-asia-and-the-pacific>

^v <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/where-money-feminist-organising-new-analysis-finds-answer-alarms>

^{vi} After decades of global advocacy effort, the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) was formally adopted in June 2019.

^{vii} [Safe-consultations-with-survivors-of-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf \(unwomen.org\)](#)

^{viii} [Disaster patriarchy: how the pandemic has unleashed a war on women | Women | The Guardian](#)

^{ix} [Disaster patriarchy: how the pandemic has unleashed a war on women | Women | The Guardian](#)

^x CARE International, GBV and COVID-19 Policy Brief, the Complexities to respond to the Shadow Pandemic.

^{xi} CARE, Women and Girls in Emergencies.

^{xii} WHAT WORKS TO PREVENT CONFLICT RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE REPORT | Whatworks (ww2preventvawg.org);

undoc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/HTMSS_Thematic_Brief_on_COVID-19.pdf

^{xiii} [Ending Violence Against Women - Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development](#)

^{xiv} [EUTF-Impact-of-COVID-19-November-25.pdf \(careevaluations.org\)](#)

^{xv} [GiE_Learning_RGA_LaosPDR_COVID-19_July20201.pdf \(careevaluations.org\)](#)

^{xvi} [Ending Violence Against Women - Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development](#)

^{xvii} GBV risk mitigation approaches were embedded in projects such as Leftemap Sista II in Vanuatu and Safe Motherhood Program 2 (HAMORIS) in Timor-Leste.

^{xviii} <https://ww2preventvawg.org/evidence-hub/what-difference-are-feminist-foreign-policies-ffps-making-ending-violence-against>

^{xix} <https://www.undp.org/blog/women-are-hit-hardest-disasters-so-why-are-responses-too-often-gender-blind>