

Submission to DFAT Gender Equality Strategy Consultation

September 2023



Introduction

Caritas Australia welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation for the development of DFAT's new International Gender Equality Strategy.

Caritas Australia is the international development and humanitarian agency of the Catholic Church, committed to tackling poverty in Australia and overseas since 1964. We support local organisations and communities across the Pacific, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Australia to be architects of their own development. We are a member of Caritas Internationalis, the world's second largest humanitarian network.

Gender inequality is the root cause of many injustices experienced by women and girls including violence, exclusion from decision-making and disproportionately low access to education and livelihood opportunities. Our partners tell us that harmful social norms within patriarchal structures are perpetuating beliefs and practices that undermine the rights of women and girls. These attitudes and practices are deeply rooted in many societies and will take transformative approaches, political and social will, and financial investment to address. For this reason, we commend the government on its commitment to a new International Gender Equality Strategy and urge DFAT to be ambitious in its development.

In this submission, we respond to the consultation questions DFAT has asked: What are international gender equality priorities? What are the most effective approaches for achieving gender equality globally? How can Australia best support efforts to achieve gender equality internationally? What should the government/ DFAT consider when developing the new international gender equality strategy?

What are international gender equality priorities?

The issues most commonly raised by our partners in the Pacific, Asia and Africa are:

- **Violence against women and girls** which remains persistently high. Globally, one in three women across their lifetime are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner.¹ Rates of violence are up to ten times worse for women and children with disabilities.² The new Gender Equality Strategy should prioritise the prevention of all forms of gender-based violence. This should include supporting interventions to address the root causes of violence as well as strategies that respond to the compounding impacts of poverty, climate change, conflict and humanitarian disasters. It should proactively address the intersections of gender and disability for women and girls that make them particularly vulnerable to various forms of gender-based violence.
- **Women's leadership** and participation in decision-making is not only a human right but crucial to good development outcomes. When women are empowered, their children are more likely to attend school and have better health outcomes. When women are included in decision-making, disaster preparedness and response initiatives as well as peacebuilding efforts are more likely to be durable and effective. Yet in many countries, significant barriers to women's decision-making and leadership occur at household, community and national levels. More gender-transformative policies and programs that support women to have active and meaningful participation in decision-making at all levels are needed.
- **Access to education:** In 2021, 244 million children and youth between 6-18 years old missed out on school. Poverty and lack of access to basic needs such as water and good nutrition are key barriers to accessing education. Girls are disproportionately impacted for a variety of reasons including caring and domestic responsibilities, gender roles and expectations. In our partner communities in Zimbabwe, the lack of access to clean water and sanitation is one of the biggest factors for girls dropping out of school.
- **Women's economic empowerment:** Many women and girls are still unable to own and control resources, or to access decent work or equal pay. They are limited by unpaid care work and the

undervaluing of women's labour. Women participating in economic activities also become vulnerable to various forms of discrimination and abuse.

- **Access to legal recourse** for survivors of violence are limited or non-existent in many communities. Some of our partners, including in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Papua New Guinea observed that access to justice is sometimes limited to customary or traditional processes, where perpetrators may be required to pay a fine to the family of the survivor but otherwise avoid penalties. In some cases, survivors are forced to marry perpetrators. Many cases remain unreported because of fear of shame and backlash.
- **Child marriage** remains prevalent in many countries. This is driven by factors such as poverty, social norms, customary laws and the lack of policies that protect children. Poverty and early marriage are often a vicious cycle, with girls more likely than boys to lose access to education, economic resources and opportunities. Early marriage is also linked to early pregnancy and frequent childbirth, impacting girls' reproductive health. Research by Caritas in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh showed that early marriage was perceived by Rohingya and host communities as the biggest or second biggest protection risk respectively.³
- **Support for women's health:** Women's and girl's health globally has declined as a result of the impacts of conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change.⁴ Now more than ever there is an urgent need for more resourcing and support for women's and girl's healthcare including pre-natal and maternal care, health and nutrition services, and the needs of menstruating women and girls.
- **Women and girls' are placed at greater vulnerability in situations of conflict, emergency and humanitarian crises, including protracted crises.** An estimated 70% of women experience gender-based violence in humanitarian contexts.⁵ To enable a gender responsive and equitable humanitarian response, greater investment in capacity building on gender lens programming for local humanitarian actors is needed. It is also crucial to provide rapid response funding in the immediate aftermath of an emergency to prevent it from deteriorating into a more serious crisis where women and girls will be disproportionately impacted. In past emergencies, the time taken to release funding through one mechanism, the Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP), has ranged from a couple of days to a couple of weeks. We urge DFAT to enhance its rapid response approach and mechanisms to enable faster release of initial funds in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, including through existing vehicles such as the AHP and the Emergency Action Alliance (EAA). We also urge DFAT to provide multi-year funding to address protracted crises.
- **Women and girls' are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change** because of the increased frequency and/or severity of extreme weather-related disasters, additional social and economic pressures created by climate change, and often-gendered roles such as collecting water and firewood or caring for others. We urge the government to strengthen Australia's climate policies in line with our commitment to the Paris Agreement targets on emissions and climate finance, in recognition of the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and girls.

What are the most effective approaches for achieving gender equality globally

Our experience in supporting communities over the last 59 years has highlighted the following interrelated principles and approaches for effective gender equality outcomes:

Intersectionality and inclusion: We recognise the diversity of identities and intersectional experiences of all people in the communities we work with. We also recognise the vulnerabilities that may arise from conflict, disasters, historical injustices and inter-generational trauma. Addressing gender inequalities must be done from a broader, inclusive and intersectional lens. This means considering the diversity of gendered experiences and responding to unique needs across varying contexts.

Transformative approaches: Gender equality can only be achieved through approaches that recognise the need for profound changes in power structures and systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice. Such approaches are grounded on ensuring strategic gender interests, prioritising the wellbeing of all people and focusing on changing harmful and discriminatory social norms. Engaging ‘norm setters’ such as community and religious leaders to be champions of gender equality, for example engaging church leaders with the Theology of Gender Equality, has been a key success strategy in changing these social norms. Engaging men and boys is another key enabler, through male advocacy programs or using approaches that target the whole family.

Community-led solutions: The most successful and sustainable development programs happen when the people most vulnerable to experiencing poverty and marginalisation, including women, are empowered to lead their own individual development and that of their community. In other words, it’s when decisions are made by the people closest to and most affected by the issues we seek to address. Programs that are co-developed with local communities ensures that communities have ownership, and also ensures that the program uses culturally and socially appropriate approaches and framing, and ultimately have greater effectiveness and impact.

The delivery of community-led solutions can often benefit from the support of local civil society groups. In many countries, churches are a key civil society actor. In the Pacific, for example, 90% of the population are religious and the mainline churches form the largest social infrastructure across the region. In Timor-Leste, 97.6% of the population is Catholic. Church-based organisations have the potential to play a highly influential role in changing social norms.

Localisation and partnership: Values-driven partnerships that prioritise strong reciprocal relationships with local organisations are key to creating meaningful change. Our experience has shown that mutual sharing of skills, knowledge, risk-bearing and decision-making are important elements in reaching common aims and transformative change including on gender.

- Indirect or core cost recovery is an important enabler. Building core costs such as administrative costs into program budgets allows for ongoing strengthening on gender equality such as the development and implementation of a gender equality strategy. We encourage DFAT to adopt standardised approaches to core costs recovery and have clear commitments in policies.
- Long-term investment in organisational development is critical for sustainability of programs beyond discrete projects. This helps partners to build organisational capacity, including on gender inclusiveness and mainstreaming. We encourage DFAT to support long-term organisational development and capacity strengthening, and to explicitly state in grant tenders what is and isn’t covered.
- Risk-sharing: In our changing global context, there are many risks for actors in the development sector, such as wildly fluctuating exchange rates, sharp increases in goods, or the sudden termination of funding. Currently risks are largely borne by in-country implementing partners. We ask DFAT to consider mechanisms for more balanced risk-sharing.
- Funding modalities that provide flexible and longer-term funding whilst minimising reporting requirements also support localisation.

How can Australia best support efforts to achieve gender equality internationally? What should the government/ DFAT consider when developing the new international gender equality strategy?

We urge the Australian Government to:

1. Commit to inclusive and intersectional development that prioritises women’s equality, leadership and prevention of gender-based violence, including transformative initiatives to change harmful and discriminatory norms and laws, and to enable access to opportunities for meaningful and active participation.

2. Prioritise and increase flexible support for locally-led organisations to promote gender equality and transformative approaches, and recognise the role of local communities and civil society organizations including churches and faith-based organisations as key actors in promoting gender equality.
3. Commit at least 15% of Australia’s Official Development Assistance to initiatives with gender equality outcomes as the principal objective, in addition to 80% of initiatives with gender equality as a significant outcome.
4. Address the interlinked and compounding effects of poverty, climate change, conflict, humanitarian disasters and other drivers that increase the vulnerability of women and girls.
5. Enhance rapid response approaches and mechanisms to enable faster release of initial funding to locally based humanitarian actors in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, including through existing vehicles such as the Australian Humanitarian Partnership, the Emergency Action Alliance and the Anticipatory Action pilot, to strengthen protection to women, girls and other groups at greatest risk during a disaster.
6. Strengthen Australia’s climate policies in line with our commitment to the Paris Agreement targets on emissions and climate finance, in recognition of the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and girls.
7. Through DFAT, strengthen the capability of all development actors to promote gender equality by:
 - a. Strengthening capacity building and technical expertise on gender equality within Australian aid-funded development and humanitarian programs, including by providing program partners with greater access to gender equality experts and supporting gender equality training for all staff.
 - b. Enhancing gender equality training across DFAT and other government departments to strengthen gender equality knowledge and capability and to ensure a consistent and coherent whole-of-government approach.
 - c. Adopting longer program funding cycles (e.g. five years instead of three) to enable more robust and realistic cycles of program implementation, evaluation and learning, leading to better and more sustainable outcomes.
 - d. Supporting government and civil society partners to strengthen gender equality initiatives within the humanitarian–development nexus, including multi-year funding for protracted crises.
 - e. Providing funding for organisational development, capacity building and mentoring that extends beyond direct program/project focus, including on leadership building, systems strengthening, and monitoring and evaluation on gender equality.
 - f. Encouraging risk sharing and indirect cost recovery modalities in both development and humanitarian programming, including through the provision of clear guidelines and technical support.

References:

1. World Health Organisation (2021). [Devastatingly pervasive: 1 in 3 women globally experience violence](#). 9 March 2021.
2. UN Population Fund (2018). [Five things you didn't know about disability and sexual violence](#).
3. Caritas Bangladesh, Caritas Development Institute, Caritas Australia (2022). [Learning paper: Caritas Bangladesh Community-Based Protection Program in Cox's Bazar during COVID-19](#).
4. World Health Organisation and UNICEF (2022). [Protect the promise: 2022 progress report on the every woman every child global strategy for women's, children's and adolescents' health](#) (2016-2030).
5. OCHA (2021). Global Humanitarian Overview 2021 – Part 1: Global Trends - [Gender and Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Action](#)

Appendix: Case studies

Engaging men and boys in eliminating gender-based violence in Papua New Guinea

The Centre of Hope is a safehouse located in the Madang province of Papua New Guinea (PNG). In partnership with Caritas Australia, the Centre of Hope engages men and boys to become advocates for the elimination of gender-based violence in their communities. The 'Life with Dignity' program also supports community education and advocacy initiatives that promote gender equality and the elimination of violence against women, including utilising the Gender Equality Theology developed through the Church Partnerships Program in PNG to promote messages of gender equality. These prevention measures are run in tandem with support services, including counselling, case management, legal advice, and community reintegration to women and children who have experienced gender-based violence. Women who access the safe house are supported to develop new livelihood skills and knowledge to increase their resilience and economic empowerment.

In 2022, Centre of Hope and four other Catholic safehouses in PNG formed the Catholic Safehouse Association of PNG, with Caritas Australia's support. The Association of safehouses will continue to strengthen their capacity to address gender-based violence across the country.

Changing social attitudes on gender-based violence in Timor Leste

Caritas Australia supports thirteen local partners across four municipalities of Timor Leste to protect the dignity, safety and access to services for those most vulnerable to experiencing gender-based violence. As well as providing shelters and other support services for women and children survivors of violence, our local partners also work on prevention and social behaviour change. They engage youth, church actors, and high school students in conversations and training around topics such as early marriage, healthy relationships and conflict management as well as unpacking the social construct of masculinity and how it contributes to power structures and dynamics in our society today. As part of this intervention, there are men's groups that meet regularly to discuss domestic violence in their community and develop strategies they view to be locally appropriate and relevant to create peaceful homes and harmonious families. These groups of men are influencers who advocate to other men in their communities to put an end to violence.

In 2021 Caritas Australia's Protection Program in Timor Leste established two working groups made up of representatives from our thirteen local partners. They were tasked to develop and field test two new training manuals covering the topics of understanding masculinity and healthy relationships. The working group on masculinity was led by the local partner Mane Ho Vizaun Foun (MHVF) the only men's organization working on the prevention of gender-based violence with a specific focus to design programs to encourage social behaviour change in men. The working group on healthy relationships was led by two local women-led organizations Centro Feto Haburas Dezenvolvimento (CFHD) and Fundasaun Uma PAS Baucau (FUPB) who developed a training manual on healthy relationships focused on the issues of early marriage and un-planned pregnancy.

Both these training manuals have been used by the thirteen local partners for the past one and a half years to deliver training to community groups and schools, in particular Catholic schools targeting junior and senior high school students. A total of 5,953 students participated in these trainings in the last financial year.