Submission to inform the development of the Australian Governments new Gender Equality Strategy

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for the opportunity to let me have my say in the conceptualisation of the new Strategy. I have worked for decades on the cause of, and solutions to, exclusion and marginalisation, in sectors as diverse as public health behaviour change research to infrastructure and governance, from a development perspective. One of the great lessons for me in my public health research was the value of reading across disciplines and applying innovation from one sector to another.

Public health had to adapt to the complexity of human behaviour change as a result of the HIV epidemic. Our previously limited thinking, that somehow the only solution would come from medicine, was no match for such an epidemic. It forced us to work in multi-disciplinary teams, to read each other's literature and understand the value of each other's technical disciplines. Achieving this insight allowed us to understand the complexity of human behaviour and create multilevel and strategic solutions to ensure that people could change their behaviour in culturally acceptable ways, in order to protect themselves from HIV. It was a critical mass where the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. It is from public health, and this period in our history, that the concept of 'creating and enabling environment for sustainable change' was conceived. We had to grapple with complexity at all levels, in diversity cultural contexts and adapt our processes to deal with that.

This is the kind of 'critical mass' and grappling with complexity, we now need to surmount the intractable, but not impossible issue of gender inequality.

Looking forward

You have stated that Australia wants to be a global leader in gender equality, and I see parallels with the challenge presented to public health to think more broadly and embrace diversity, in this global challenge of gender inequality, and its solutions. If Australia wants to lead this, then we need to understand the past, borrow from other disciplines and adapt their lessons to our own issues. We need to use all of the tools at our disposal, and take a higher order, more strategic view of the challenge.

We need to think bigger: more of the same will not be enough.

Challenges with the status quo

The current strategy has several challenges and this has limited its ability to guide a process towards gender equality. The first being the **language** used. Looking back historically we know the reasons for the WID to WAD to GAD progression. All of these concepts had their time, and under feminist critique, were adapted and improved. But from GAD to GEWE is problematic, and the influence of 'smart economics' is partially to blame. The acronym **GEWE** (Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment) is problematic because the specification of 'women's empowerment' returns the concept to a WID/WAD type of language, re-problematising women over gender roles, and maintaining the near universal belief that when we speak of gender, we only mean women: not men and certainly not people of non-binary gender. We have therefore limited ourselves to a white, western, and imported understanding of women, women's organisations and communities in need of development, imposing our view of how gender equity processes should look, in a sadly recolonising fashion. Likewise, we have created the ever more elaborate acronyms from **GSI** to **GESI** to **GEDSI** in a spiralling of imported concepts, when one would do. What is also problematic is the conflation of women, gender and GEDSI by DFAT staff, particularly for staff at post. It is confusing, and GEDSI has become a proxy for women, or gender only, to its detriment. Even GEB has kept its acronym, though people now refer to it as the 'GEDSI branch'.

I used to provide the inhouse gender training for DFAT, and I taught about GEDSI in the simplest way I know. In public health we treat all **social variables** in the same way whether they are scalar or diverse. For example: the sex scale goes from male to intersex to female; the gender scale goes from masculine through androgynous to feminine; or non-scalar but diverse categories such as ethnicity, religion, language, where

there are multiple complex possibilities. These types of scales and diverse concepts can be completely inclusive of all available concepts in the category in each context, and public health programs attempt to use them to ensure appropriate contextual targeting of public health messages.

For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccine messaging for older migrant communities in Australia, who were not getting vaccinated. Success of messaging is monitored, and while there are general messages, the MEL tells us where to target messaging for specific communities for which the general messaging is unconvincing. Social variables are treated equally, and the MEL tells us where we need to adapt and focus messaging.

As it currently stands, using GEDSI in development does not signify a series of equal social variables, but a collection of mismatched concepts Which is why it is so confusing: 'gender equality' is a goal (leading to or the impact we wish to have), disability is one category (with many subcategories), and social inclusion is the process (or series of equity processes and tools) by which we expect to achieve the goal or impact we seek. While teaching about gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) to DFAT staff, invariably then, they would notice that: **IF**, gender, disability, ethnicity etc are all social variables and 'social inclusion' as a series of equity processes that seek to counter-act exclusion or marginalisation, with the goal of equality in all areas of marginalisation, **THEN** "why do we not call it all Social Inclusion? Or just 'Inclusion'?" Why indeed.

In restricting ourselves to this confusing language of GEDSI we are limiting ourselves in our disciplinary focus and missing valuable opportunities to achieve both gender equality and equality in other areas such as disability, ethnicity and so on.

The Strategy should transition from GEWE to a full Inclusion Strategy.

Engaging with methods and meaning from only one Discipline

Engaging only with feminist intersectional feminist approaches as a starting point for the flawed concept of GEDSI instantly identifies gender (read women) as the priority social variable, leaving people whose primary source of exclusion or marginalisation is disability, or ethnicity, or caste and so on, are considered secondary or unimportant, regardless of the context. This is not to diminish the importance of gender as a source of exclusion, rather, to acknowledge that the intersection of multiple forms of identity can also cause exclusion, and for marginalised people, they may not experience gender as the primary source of their marginalisation. If we only engage with intersectional feminism as a starting point, we limit our ability to deal with these other social variables in the most contextually appropriate way.

We need to step away from a solely intersectional feminist approach to access higher order language and tools that will enable us to make sustainable change to all forms of exclusion.

This is certainly true in Sri Lanka, for example, where ethnicity, religion and language combined are the strongest predictors of marginalisation and exclusion, followed closely by caste and/or social class. Disability is also a strong predictor of exclusion and gender is the lesser of the social variables causing exclusion. Sri Lanka was the first country in the world to elect a female Prime Minister. Therefore, starting with the assumption that gender, or more accurately being a woman, is the greatest cause of exclusion is a projection of colonial development that privileges a white, western, feminist perspective over the contextual reality, and will therefore be unsustainable and ineffective.

It was for this reason, that after years of work on various strategic reviews and program designs for AHC Sri Lanka and the Maldives, that we agreed to write an 'Inclusion Strategy', rather than a Gender Strategy (that is really a women's strategy) or even a GEDSI Strategy. This Inclusion Strategy embraces the complexity of the context, and responds to the contextual need. In order for this to be possible, we needed to find a way to ensure that these diverse forms of marginalisation had a common language to speak to one another in a coherent way, and maximise the benefit of all activities, for all marginalised people rather than wasting money on multiple, siloed programs.

The only common language shared by these diverse social variables is human rights: there is the overarching UN Declaration of Human Rights and a myriad of others including:
- The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and so on

The purpose of the using this language is that all forms of social exclusion can be dealt with on equal footing, allowing us to adapt and be responsive to each country context, without privileging one, imported perspective over another contextually pressing need.

In order to have the impact we seek we need to treat non-binary gender as one of many contextually important social variables on the same footing and in a common language.

Working in this way allows all sources of marginalisation to benefit from activities in others, while also reducing resistance to change in gender roles: if people feel they can also benefit, they buy-in, and support genuine inclusion. This approach also acknowledges the flow on effects of NOT dealing with the most pressing forms of exclusion has detrimental gendered impacts.

Employing the example of Sri Lanka again, it was not for gender or disability that Tamils went to war, but for the marginalisation of Hindu, Tamil speaking Tamils, from a Women Peace and Security perspective, ignoring the marginalisation caused by exclusion on the basis of these these the social factors of ethnicity, religion and language, has had, as ever, a profound and disproportionate impact on the safety and wellbeing of women and children, despite the fact that women were treated as equals within the Tamil Tiger hierarchy and fought alongside their men.

We cannot continue to pretend that working on this one issue of women's inequality is the only thing that is important for women. They are not disconnected individuals, they are people with multiple complex identities and social roles, who live with husbands and partners of all genders, in families consisting of all genders, in communities, and in workplaces and structural level constraints to their access to voice and agency. More importantly, the partner governments that we have more frequently rule over collectivist cultures, where a focus the individual is inappropriate.

To create an enabling environment for sustainable change we must use the tools available to us at all levels, commencing with the super-structural level. Almost all the countries we work in are signatories to these treaties, though most have failed to implement them – including Australia. However, these Human Rights related conventions and treaties allow us an entry point to both put pressure on, and support partner governments, to live up to the commitments embedded in those international human rights agreements. This supports the structural work of changing laws and policies that increase access and agency for women and other marginalised people. In addition to such structural work, we then have to work on the transformation of the harmful and restrictive gender roles and social norms that reinforce and perpetuate traditional forms of exclusion and marginalisation.

Transformative change is therefore a multilevel and strategic suite of activities that must be achieved, before we can ask women and other marginalised people as individuals to step beyond the traditionally harmful gender roles and social norms without risk of social sanction or violence for transgression of the usually heavily enforced social boundaries.

Transformation

Ironically perhaps, we have allowed 'smart economics' view of empowerment that preaches self-actualisation, to push aside some of the truly great feminist scholarship, from feminist economists in the 1970s in southern India, who accurately defined genuine 'empowerment'. What we currently have in the GEWE strategy is not genuine empowerment, and the majority of our gender aid programming is focused on women's advancement without transformation.

This evidence demonstrates that when women gain increased resources including income, employment and other resources such as human capital (education, skills, training); financial capital (loans, savings); social capital (networks, relationships, mentors); and physical capital (land, machinery, tools, inventory) this is **women's economic advancement.**

Women's economic empowerment requires that they also possess the social power and ability to make decisions and control the use of these newly acquired resources. To increase women's power and ability to use them, programs must therefore integrate strategies to transform the underlying structural gender role and social norms that reinforce and perpetuate gender inequality and violence against women. Put more simply:

Empowerment = Advancement + Transformation

Any intervention looking to advance women's situation, must spread its focus from women to gender roles to a broader understanding of the diversity of roles of men and women and people of diverse gender

identities within the family, and the community. We must devise culturally appropriate strategies that will result in the advancement of women along with strategies that will **transform gender norms in the context** to allow women (and people of diverse gender identities), the power and ability to make decisions and control the use of these resources without the risk of violence. This is the same for all other forms of exclusion.

Do No Harm

This is term that has currency in a number of sectors, yet means different things in each sector. ANU/IWDA's Do No Harm research proved the feminist theory of the 1970s. In order to 'do no harm', projects that seek to improve the situation of women need to consider that: a woman will likely have a male partner; she will be part of a family and a community, and that the contextually relevant social and structural transformative change work needs to be done with her male partner, the family and community before, or while also, focussing on her advancement, or risk provoking violent censure for the transgression of existing cultural gender roles and norms from her partner, family and community.

The future Strategy must therefore insist on the importance of transformative change as a priority in order to Do No Harm.

We should be mainstreaming inclusion and transformative change and targeting activities that impact on the groups that are traditionally excluded from voice, agency, leadership and decision making and opportunities for genuine empowerment. We should be normalising the inclusion of the voices of those traditionally excluded from decision-making and leadership in the context so that better decision are made and better leaders emerge who reduce their exclusion and amplify their inclusion. For targeted activities we should be supporting the women's groups and feminist groups and disabled people's organisations, and religious and ethic and groups of diverse languages, castes and/or social classes as is appropriate to the context. And, we should take advantage of our strength in convening dialogues with partner governments, CSOs, NGOs and INGOs in ways that are responsive to the contextual needs.

Programming based on a genuine contextual analysis rather than replicating imported notions

A Political Economy Analysis (PEA) is not sufficient to surface marginalisation because its focus in politics and economics. Nor is it sufficient to simply add a 'C' for culture to the title and investigate questions of culture, because the sectoral domain of those who perform these analyses remain their same and their understanding of social and cultural factors are limited. To truly understand what is necessary to achieve social and cultural behaviour change, anthropologists and people with strengths in qualitative social sciences methods must work in teams with PE analysts to truly grasp the complexity of the social and cultural barriers to, and enablers of, behaviour change to a more inclusive society. (This is a discussion in itself and for another forum). Specifically, they need to identify the discourses that both marginalise and included women, people of non-binary gender, people with disabilities, of non-dominant ethnicities, religion etc. Contradictory discourse always exist in a society, so we can always find exceptions to the rules, and we need to understand how they operate, the circumstances under which they fail and succeed, and then use that knowledge to deconstruct the harmful and restrictive gender roles and social norms (barriers), and promote the positive and exceptions to the norms (enablers) in language and meanings that are appropriate to the context. We then promote reframed discourse with existing cultural meaning, through whatever means are appropriate in the context, be that radio, social media such as Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram, newspapers or other means. Shareable content as the capacity to have exponential influence. **We need to create the messaging, disseminate it, monitor and evaluate it, and then target where we see pockets of resistance to the positive behaviour change we seek, towards equality on the basis of gender, disability, ethnicity etc as is relevant in the context.**

How transformation happens

One important note about multilevel strategic change is that in order to create an enabling environment it must be done in the right order in every context and at all levels. The evidence demonstrates that the process of transformation can only occur in this order, and cannot succeed without these steps at all levels.

1. **Voice and Agency:** normalise women participating, speaking and acting on their own initiative
2. **Decision-making and leadership:** define the qualities of good decision making and leadership at all levels, when people start to focus on the qualities not the person, it is much easier to put non-traditional leaders in position. And we absolutely MUST insist on collaborative and inclusive decision making. Nothing About Us Without Us must sit alongside Do No Harm as a crosscutting theme.
3. **Prevention of violence:** once these first 2 things are done, women and other marginalised people ask for this themselves. If we are to achieve genuine economic empowerment, these 3 steps must be the precursor to any advancement program for women and other marginalised people to be safe to step outside traditional norms without fear of social sanction or violence
4. **Economic Empowerment:** Once these transformative elements are engaged, advancement activities are safe to proceed, and in a transformed context they happen more easily. It is a lot of groundwork, but it delivers a sustainable result.

The more you do it in a country the more it benefits the whole society and all programming.

Each Post should have transformative change messaging as a core function of the Human Development section, with expanded coms functions.

Each development program within a Post will benefit, and each program can then target its own coms messages for transformative change where the general ones aren't work, just as described above for public health messaging.

You've asked 4 questions and the answer to each is the same: COMMIT

1. Commit time, money and resources. What we have done so far doesn't usually make it out to the Posts and their activities, and so we fail.
2. Make Inclusion Training compulsory for ALL DFAT STAFF: for entering Graduates; for all staff, leaders and management. ALL Staff, with Annual refresher courses as part of the Diplomatic Academy offerings.
3. Place KPIs in ALL staff ToRs and make primary and annual refresher training essential for promotion, and especially prior to posting and development assignments. It is unfair to expect people to practice GEDSI OR Inclusion without training. This dooms them to fail and so they avoid it
4. **Write an Inclusion Strategy that focusses on transformative change.** Mainstream inclusion of all contextually relevant social variables that indicate exclusion into all DFAT work -it can be done.
5. Targeted activities for intractable issues like GBV prevention, or disability inclusion, though these things will also be mainstreamed.
6. NEVER allow Advancement programs that have no transformative elements. They are likely to Do Harm.
7. Engage with men ALWAYS. And when you say gender, mean gender: not women or binary gender. The support of the other half the planet is necessary to achieve gender equality and the message is easier when they see that you are truly talking about equality for all types of exclusion. It's un-Feminist to propose an alternative hierarchy that disadvantages marginalised people who are NOT women.
8. Conduct contextual analyses prior to program design IN CONSULTATION with partners governments, INGOs and local NGOs with a focus on qualitative techniques.
9. Some cultures do not produce good results from surveys. Understand that and get anthropologist to define the barriers to and enablers of transformative change in that culture.
10. Use that to both mainstream and target your deconstruction of harmful gender roles and social norms and your promotion of more culturally appropriate positive models that promote positive behaviour change.

Thanks again for the opportunity to Contribute my 10cents worth…this feels like value for money!

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