

Submission of Family Planning Australia



New International Gender Equality Strategy

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Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Branch
Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
gender.equality@dfat.gov.au

Introduction

Family Planning Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade regarding a new International Gender Equality Strategy. We have a strong history of consulting with the Commonwealth on policy and programs supporting reproductive and sexual health and rights issues in Australia and in our international work in the Pacific region.

We welcome the development of a new International Gender Equality Strategy which prioritises sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as essential to gender equality, particularly in the low resource settings where Australian-led international development programs take place. We commend the commitment to gender equality in Australia's new International Development Policy and the undertaking to expand universal health coverage and support sexual and reproductive health and rights in the Indo-Pacific region.(1)

About Family Planning Australia

Family Planning Australia has been working in the Pacific for over fifteen years to improve access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services. We are accredited by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to conduct development assistance in the Pacific and work in Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. We collaborate with other family planning and health organisations in-country and promote a rights-based approach for all people to achieve sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing, and working closely with governments in the region to support the development and implementation of SRHR policy.

Recommendations

Family Planning Australia recommends that the new international gender equality strategy:

- Facilitates universal access to SRHR information, education and services, which contribute directly to achieving gender equality through improved health, social and economic outcomes.
- Supports evidence based, inclusive approaches to policy development, funding, program delivery and reporting, which are developed in consultation with local service providers and support women's leadership.
- Includes clear guidance to support effective monitoring and evaluation systems, including data collection using reliable electronic and online systems to track and report on progress.
- Fosters the development of strong relationships with, and support positive coordination between, governments, funded partners and in-country NGOs to encourage collaboration, optimise program outcomes and work collectively to address challenges.
- Supports ongoing funding for initiatives which advance gender equality, utilising effective models such as the ANCP.

- Reaffirms commitments made in global and regional agreements for achieving gender equality, and guides strategies which support achievement of those targets, including support for sexual and reproductive health and rights as an essential enabler.

1. International gender equality priorities

Advancing gender equality is a critical goal which must be pursued as part of Australia's international development work to bring about sustainable changes in improving health, social, economic and environmental outcomes globally. A rights-based approach must sit at the core of Australia's new International Gender Equality Strategy to ensure our international development work supports people of all genders, particularly women and girls.

Facilitating universal access to SRHR information, education and services contributes directly to gender equality.(2) This is recognised in a broad range of literature globally, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where SDG 5 on Gender Equality includes Target 5.6, which specifically identifies universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. (3)

Current SRHR program delivery priorities which support gender equality include:

- In-country capacity building for sexual and reproductive health care delivery, including initiatives to train the healthcare workforce, particularly nurses and midwives
- Cervical cancer prevention and treatment programs. Clinician training and community education and health promotion programs are vital and cost effective, reducing the need for treatment and ultimately saving lives. Effective prevention also reduces the need for women to travel to neighbouring countries for treatment of more advanced cases, which is currently required due to the lack of widespread cervical cancer treatment facilities in the Pacific.
- Contraception and family planning services, particularly increasing the availability of long acting reversible contraceptives, which are amongst the most effective contraceptive methods to reduce unintended pregnancies, also leading to reductions in maternal mortality and morbidity.
- Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) must be a priority as it is a vital tool to improve SRHR outcomes, such as reducing unintended pregnancy and rates of STIs. CSE also supports gender equality directly through explicit learning about gender equality, particularly in the context of examining power dynamics in relationships and identifying strategies for respectful relationships and addressing drivers of gender-based violence. CSE provision must be supported in both schools as well as outside of school settings to ensure coverage across communities for sustainable and long-term impact. (4,5)
- An example of recent effective practice is UNFPA's *Transformative Agenda for Women, Adolescents and Youth in the Pacific: Towards Zero Unmet Need for Family Planning 2018-2022*. Under this program, Family Planning Australia has delivered out of school comprehensive sexuality education training to community facilitators and peer educators in 6 countries across the Pacific. The 8-day training program presents evidence-based information on topics such as consent, healthy relationships, gender, puberty and sexual health. Building on their content knowledge, the program encourages participants to practice their skills and challenge harmful myths and misinformation about SRHR, including gender roles. Participants who complete the training are then able to facilitate discussions and education programs on these topics in their communities.

Another priority is to embed mechanisms to monitor and evaluate development initiatives in terms of their impact on gender equality. These processes may utilise existing targets, such as targets and indicators in the SDGs, to demonstrate if and how programs support gender equality. However, based on our experience working in the Pacific region, there is currently a lack of data and evidence available

in some areas. Given this, we recommend continued support of specific monitoring and evaluation work in the Pacific, such as supporting governments to improve data collection strategies and protocols, as well as the introduction of reliable electronic and online systems for data collection to track and report on progress.

Good longitudinal and qualitative data will make it possible to show behaviour change over time. Furthermore, the data should be disaggregated to allow analysis not only of population-wide trends, but also trends to specific priority population groups, such as young people, girls, women and gender diverse people, people with disabilities and Indigenous people.

2. The most effective approaches for achieving gender equality globally

A multi-strategy approach is needed to achieve gender equality globally – from program-level initiatives, such as those delivering sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education, through to supports for system-wide changes, including appropriate legal and policy frameworks, as well as funding from government and non-government sources to invest in protections for the rights of women, girls and gender diverse people.

The new international gender equality strategy must support evidence based, inclusive approaches to policy development, funding, program delivery and reporting, which are developed in consultation with local service providers and support women’s leadership. Evidence indicates that the most effective approaches for achieving gender equality:

- Use gender transformative approaches support gender equality by explicitly addressing the underlying causes of gender inequality, including negative and discriminatory legal, political, and systemic gender norms and stereotypes.(2)
- Take an intersectional, holistic and inclusive approach
- Promote leadership by women and local experts and organisations, which is responsive to immediate and emerging issues and embeds longer term ongoing positive outcomes
- Prioritise long term commitment and investment, which is most likely to have greatest impact, particularly in regions with high SRHR needs. Behaviour change takes time and long term relationship building and capacity building, which requires long term commitment on the part of funders, governments and other stakeholders.
- Supports well coordinated, strategic collaboration between stakeholders and projects in order to avoid duplication and optimise the impact of available resources.
- Use evidence based approaches, generating and utilising data and appropriate and inclusive monitoring and evaluation strategies to identify quality service delivery and program and project impacts to inform future service delivery.
- An example of successful practice is the Kamap Man Tru program in Papua New Guinea, delivered by Family Planning Australia in partnership with local NGO Susu Mamas PNG from 2015 to 2019. Targeting men and boys as agents of change, the program covered issues such as sexual health, gender-based violence, and conflict resolution. Evaluation demonstrated a significant increase in knowledge about methods of family planning, with 75% of men in the final evaluation stating they wanted their wife or partner to use family planning, compared to 55% in the baseline survey. Working with men and boys in this way was an effective strategy to positively impact gender equality and supported improved relationships and SRHR outcomes in participating communities.

Family Planning Australia also recommends the Australian government takes an active role in supporting improved coordination and analysis of program implementation data at country and regional levels, given the Australian government is ideally placed to support effective systems for gathering, monitoring and analysing the evidence base.

For example, linking water and sanitation programs with SRHR programs supporting menstrual hygiene is likely to improve access to essential hygiene systems and products, resulting in improved health, social, educational and economic outcomes for people who menstruate, thereby supporting improvements in gender equality and overall development outcomes for the whole community. As demonstrated within the ANCP program, DFAT could share information about what projects all DFAT-funded organisations are working on in a particular country or region, or area of development, so that stakeholders can better align and collaborate for more effective programs and service delivery. Such coordination would make it easier for NGOs and other stakeholders to provide more cohesive and sustainable programs which have a greater impact on gender equality.

3. Australian support to achieve gender equality internationally

Family Planning Australia recommends that DFAT continue to develop strong relationships with, and support positive coordination between, partners who are receiving funding for international development initiatives to optimise outcomes which support gender equality.

- It would be useful for DFAT to support increased funding to Pacific NGOs, recognising that they often fill gaps in Pacific health systems and have a depth of knowledge and experience as a result. Whilst there are existing systems in place for communication with government stakeholders, developing systems to consult with NGOs based in the Pacific region would further supplement those insights. Where relevant, consideration could be given to funding in-country NGOs who are contributing to gender equality, particularly those delivering programs and services alongside or as an alternative to government services.
- With increasing humanitarian crises predicted due to climate change, we also recommend DFAT work toward building relationships with in-country partners to better mobilise initiatives which support gender equality during humanitarian crises and align priorities of humanitarian work with other programs and projects outside of crisis periods to support improved preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

Family Planning Australia commends the government's commitment to the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) as it represents a good model of practice and we recommend ongoing funding through the ANCP to support initiatives which advance gender equality. This model features approaches identified as supporting effective development programs, with accredited Australian NGOs working collaboratively with in-country partners to build their capacity in specific priority areas, including of SRHR work and programs supporting gender equality more broadly. It also supports long term relationships with local NGOs embedded in communities, which contributes to ensuring effective, locally led and sustainable positive impacts on health and other social and economic benefits to people of all genders, especially women and girls.

4. Government/ DFAT considerations for developing the new international gender equality strategy

Apart from implementing the best practice approaches outlined above, the Australian government must consider key international commitments and targets currently in play which are supportive of achieving gender equality. These include:

- Australia's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are to be achieved by 2030. Globally, we are not on track to achieve these goals particularly SDG 5 on gender equality, (including Target 5.6 on SRHR) or associated SDGs which support gender equality, including SDG 3 Health and SDG 4 Education. (3)

- The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and 2030 Agenda, including the most recent commitments made at the most recent review conference, ICPD+25 Nairobi Summit in 2019.
- The Beijing Platform for Action commitments for advancing women’s rights, and outcome documents of subsequent reviews.
- The Political Declaration on Universal Health Coverage by 2030, agreed in September 2019
- Commitments to gender equality made in our region by the Pacific Islands Forum, ASEAN and APEC.

Whilst some progress has been made, significant effort is required to reach these goals. The new Gender Equality Strategy provides an opportunity to reinforce these commitments and outline clear mechanisms to guide budget decisions, including our ODA global targets, policy decisions and support for development programs which invest in programs, including SRHR services and education, which are inclusive, equitable, and effective in supporting Australia and our Pacific neighbours to achieve these targets. The government must also ensure that mechanisms to monitor and report on progress towards these targets are in place to contribute to global reports and discussions, and to clearly identify and utilise models which have been effective in bringing about change.

References

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