

DFAT gender equality strategy consultation

1. What are international gender equality priorities?

Achieving gender equality is critical to the fulfilment of human rights for all. It is also an enabler for poverty eradication and broader development outcomes across health, social, economic, and environmental domains and is a central component of humanitarian action. Yet, women's rights are continuously under threat globally, exacerbated by the compounding impacts of global health crises, climate change, and rising conflict. HelpAge International commends UN Women's latest Gender Snapshot for highlighting the importance of leaving no one behind, including older women, in the pursuit of real progress on gender equality.¹

An intersectional perspective that considers the unique challenges and opportunities faced by older women in all their diversity must be adopted. The demographic shift towards an ageing global population is undeniable. Women aged 65 and above already account for 55.7% of the global older population, and this proportion is projected to grow substantially by 2050, primarily residing in low and middle-income countries (LMICs), including countries affected by conflict and/or the climate emergency.

Despite their significant presence, older women often remain marginalised in gender equality policy discussions and excluded from Official Development Assistance (ODA). The data reveals a stark disparity, with older women receiving minimal attention from donors in gender equality spending, despite 27% of females worldwide being aged 50 and above.²

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have not fully articulated the unique challenges faced by older women, leading to inadequate policies and support systems that fail to uphold their rights or address their specific needs. They fail to consider how older women are negatively impacted by gendered ageism, the intersectionality of age and gender bias and discrimination, with far-reaching consequences.³

¹ UN Women & UNDESA (2023). Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2023

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2023>

² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.

³ HelpAge International (2022). Older women's lived experiences of gendered ageism

<https://www.helpage.org/silo/files/older-womens-lived-experiences-of-gendered-ageism.pdf>

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Moreover, older women outlive men by an average of 5 years (3 in South-East Asia and 6 in Western Pacific), yet a greater proportion of those years are spent in ill health or with a disability.⁴ Economic insecurity is a pressing concern, with women more likely to bear unpaid caregiving responsibilities, engage in informal work, live alone, and experience widowhood. The experience of widowhood, particularly among older women, is marked by distress and significant challenges, including depression, increased mortality risk, and changes in social and family relations. In South Asia, widows, in particular, face legal discrimination, social invisibility and cultural marginalisation. These factors, combined with career interruptions, part-time employment, and lower earnings, result in inadequate pension and social protection benefits in older age. Universal access to pensions remains a distant reality for many women.

Older women remain economically active, particularly in LMICs, and evidence shows they are still doing significant amounts of work – both paid and unpaid.⁵ The unpaid care that older women do supports the economic empowerment of younger generations of women and girls, but often creates barriers for older women to access their own economic rights. This unpaid work often goes unrecognised and is invisible, leading older women to be excluded in policies or programmes that aim to support carers and this may mean they do not benefit from the reduction, redistribution and reward of unpaid care and cannot sustain this work. For older women who do remain economically active, it is often driven by economic necessity, as they are less likely than older men to receive a pension, but also the need to remain active, fulfilled and connected, and to avoid dependency. In addition to experiencing discrimination based on their gender, older women also experience specific discrimination based on their age, being regarded as less capable, one of the barriers contributing to shorter working lives.⁶ Older women in all their diversity must be supported to continue to do the work that matters to them.

⁴ HelpAge International (2023). Achieving gender transformative Universal Health Coverage fit for an ageing world <https://www.helpage.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Achieving-gender-transformative-UHC.pdf>

⁵ Age International, Who Cares? Why older women's economic empowerment matters to the Sustainable Development Goals <https://www.ageinternational.org.uk/policy-research/publications/older-womens-work/>

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Older women often face barriers in accessing essential services that cater to their needs and rights, including sexual and reproductive health.⁷ They encounter high costs and physical barriers that disproportionately affect them. Ageist assumptions, such as the misconception that older women are not sexually active and are not at risk of sexual violence, weaken health systems' support for post-menopausal sexual health. Gender-based violence remains pervasive throughout life, significantly affecting their economic well-being, physical and mental health, and agency. Older women are particularly at risk of discrimination in critical areas, including access to food and income security, inheritance rights, property and land control, civic engagement, and political representation.⁸ Moreover, older women with disabilities often endure compounded discrimination and human rights violations stemming from ageism, sexism, and ableism. In humanitarian settings, these issues are all intensified, as any normal structures that might enhance safety and stability are disrupted.

Data gaps also result in older women's exclusion from policy and programme implementation. Many census, administrative and household surveys overlook older women or directly discriminate against them by using age caps. For instance, SDG indicator 5.6.1 measures the proportion of women aged 15-49 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use, and reproductive health care. Humanitarian needs assessments often lack a focus on older people, and therefore overlook the different experiences of older age groups and the opportunity to take a gendered approach to providing assistance to older people⁹. The absence of data on violence against older women is a critical issue, as surveys often do not collect information on this age group. For instance, a WHO report on sexual and intimate partner violence found that out of 392 estimates, only 66 included women over 49.¹⁰ Surveys typically start gathering data from age 15 or 18 and stop at 49, despite violence against women having no age limit. This data gap results in inadequate protection measures and limited victim support services, as well as a scarcity of prevention programmes. Where

⁷ HelpAge International (2023). Achieving gender transformative Universal Health Coverage fit for an ageing world <https://www.helpage.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Achieving-gender-transformative-UHC.pdf>

⁸ HelpAge International (2022). Older women's lived experiences of gendered ageism <https://www.helpage.org/silo/files/older-womens-lived-experiences-of-gendered-ageism.pdf>

⁹ HelpAge International (2022). Out of Sight, Out of Mind <https://www.helpage.org/resource/out-of-sight-out-of-mind-technical-report/>

HelpAge International If Not Now, When? (2020) <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/humanitarian-action/if-not-now-when/>

¹⁰ WHO (2013). Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/85239/9789241564625_eng.pdf;jsessionid=E39F0A117B7D71D2436E2A739923A5BD?sequence=1

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data is collected, it is frequently grouped into broad categories like 50+, 60+, or 65+, thereby obscuring the diverse experiences and unique challenges faced by older women at different ages.

To address these challenges, we must develop comprehensive, human rights-based policies that support older women's rights, including their engagement in the workforce, lifelong learning, social protection, health and care, and the development and enjoyment of innovation and technological change. These policies should facilitate the reconciliation of employment and care work throughout life.

It is imperative to recognise the central role that older women play in providing care to younger generations and their peers and playing important roles in promoting peace and conflict resolution. Their invaluable contributions, often invisible, deserve recognition and support. Older women must be engaged as vital stakeholders and rights holder in our journey towards sustainable development and gender equality. We cannot achieve our global goals if we leave them behind.

HelpAge conducted a rapid analysis of data on gender-targeted ODA spending by members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC). In 2021, only 6 percent of DFAT's international development budget was allocated to targeted gender equality programmes, with 0 percent specifically directed towards older women. To provide context, across all OECD DAC donors for that year, only 0.1% of donor expenditure on gender equality was directed towards older women.

If the Australian Government is truly committed to achieving gender equality and preserving hard-won gains, HelpAge urges a significant investment in gender transformative programming that is actively addressing unequal power relations, harmful gender norms, and discrimination faced by women globally. This requires directing 20 percent of all Official Development Assistance (ODA) to initiatives with gender equality as the principal objective. Additionally, we recommend employing an intersectional approach targeting marginalised women and girls, including older women and those living with disabilities.

2. What are the most effective approaches for achieving gender equality globally?

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Effective approaches for achieving gender equality globally require a multifaceted approach that recognises the complex challenges faced by women and girls across different contexts and age groups. Such strategies encompass several key elements:

Advancing a life-course approach is essential. This approach acknowledges the complex interactions that we have with the people, environments, and structures around us, shaping and influencing our lives. To advance gender equality effectively, policies and programmes must address the specific needs and uphold the rights of women and girls at every stage of life. It is crucial to acknowledge that older women not only constitute a substantial and expanding demographic due to the global ageing population and feminisation of ageing but are also vital stakeholders and rights holders. Consequently, policies and programmes should deliberately focus on the distinct challenges faced by older women, including economic insecurity, health disparities, and the necessity for comprehensive social protection. Additionally, investment in lifelong learning is paramount to empower women and girls through education, vocational training, and skill development opportunities, unlocking their potential at every age.

Elevating women's leadership should be a central pillar of any strategy aimed at achieving gender equality. This involves ensuring equal representation of women in leadership positions across all sectors, including health leadership and decision-making roles. Promoting the active participation of marginalised older women in decision-making processes at all levels of society is crucial. This participation extends beyond political leadership to encompass involvement in economic, social, and cultural spheres. Investment in leadership development programmes that equip women and girls of all ages with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to take on leadership roles is crucial. Mentorship, training, and networking opportunities can help women overcome barriers and reach their full potential.

Effective approaches should prioritise the voices and experiences of women and girls of all ages, emphasising local solutions that address the specific challenges they face within their communities. This involves listening to and engaging with older women to understand their unique needs. Recognising the intersectionality of women's experiences is critical. Women's lives are shaped not only by their gender but also by other factors such as age, disability, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Approaches must consider and address these intersecting

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identities and barriers. This involves listening to and engaging with intergenerational groups of women and girls, to understand the unique needs of women at different stages of life.

Collaboration with women's organisations, including Older People's Associations that include older women in leadership positions, and other organisations that represent diverse women and girls, is instrumental in amplifying women's voices and driving change. These organisations have strong community networks and an understanding of the local context, making them essential partners in addressing systemic factors and power imbalances contributing to gender inequality. Furthermore, supporting intergenerational approaches and grassroots initiatives led by women and girls of all ages often leads to innovative solutions. Supporting and funding these initiatives can have a significant impact on local communities and contribute to broader gender equality goals.

3. How can Australia best support efforts to achieve gender equality internationally?

HelpAge recognises the critical role of women's rights organisations, particularly in their understanding of local contexts and their ability to address systemic factors and power relations underlying gender inequality. There is strong evidence that sustained advocacy by women's rights organisations has been the primary contributor to new laws, policies, and programmes to combat violence against women globally.

To support these efforts, we recommend directing a minimum of 5 percent of bilateral ODA towards frontline women's rights organisations across all priority regions, including Older People's Associations with a focus on women's rights. This funding should be accessible, flexible, core, and multi-year grant-based, delivered through intermediaries, including organisations representing diverse women and girls, with specific targets set for organisations representing older women.

4. What should the government/ DFAT consider when developing the new international gender equality strategy?

HelpAge welcomes the government's decision to reinstate the '80 percent performance target,' ensuring that at least 80 percent of all development investments effectively address gender equality. Additionally, the

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requirement for investments exceeding \$3 million to focus significantly on gender equality alongside their primary objectives is commendable. However, it is essential to specifically ensure the inclusion of older women in all gender equality initiatives, except in cases where the focus is exclusively on specific age groups, such as the sexual health of women of childbearing age or early childhood interventions.

We would be supportive of decisions to invest in increased technical capacity within DFAT to support the implementation of these new policies, transparent reporting on progress and mainstreaming of age perspectives. We recommend that DFAT report annually on progress towards the 80 percent target and the commitment for programmes over \$3 million to have a gender equality objective, with gender, disability, and age-specific targets. Additionally, conducting an annual, independent assessment of gender equality progress is essential to ensure accountability and improve performance in this critical area.

Furthermore, we urge DFAT to expand funding and technical expertise for gender, disability and age inclusion analysis of all country and regional response plans and new funding initiatives across Australia's international development cooperation programme, including resourcing to implement the findings of this analysis. Adequate resourcing of its central Gender Equality Branch is also imperative to ensure the effective development and implementation of the new international gender equality strategy.