



Ipas Submission to the Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) on the International Gender Equality Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Ipas welcomes Australian DFAT's decision to develop a new International Gender Equality Strategy and we appreciate your commitment to solicit ideas from people and organizations to inform the priorities of the strategy. We hope this submission demonstrates the importance of including access to sexual and reproductive health and rights ("SRHR"), and specifically abortion and contraception as critical elements of the new Gender Equality Strategy.

Ipas is an international organization that works in more than 20 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America to increase women's and girls' ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights, especially the right to safe abortion. We envision a world where everyone can make their own sexual and reproductive choices, and ultimately, determine their own future. We work with partners to ensure that safe abortion and contraception is widely available, to connect women with vital information so they can access safe services, and to advocate for safe, legal abortion. We strive to foster a legal, policy, and social environment supportive of every person's right to make their own sexual and reproductive health decisions freely and safely.

Access to safe, legal abortion is critical for women's and girls' (and all people who can become pregnant) health and well-being and is a fundamental human right. If people cannot safely end unwanted pregnancies, their ability to hold jobs, stay in school, exit abusive relationships, and build financial independence is undercut. People who are disabled, poor, young, lack literacy skills, or are otherwise marginalized face the most extreme barriers to realizing their SRHR. When safe abortion options aren't accessible, the most vulnerable people are the most likely to pay heavily with their health and lives. Gender equality cannot be achieved if people are unable to freely exercise this basic right, and sustainable access to safe abortion and contraception is a mark of society's equal treatment of women and girls and respect for their freedom and dignity.

However, the right to abortion is under unprecedented threat around the globe. Movements in opposition to SRHR, LGBTI rights, human rights, democracy, and gender equality have been growing, with far-right candidates winning elections and seats in government around the world.¹ These actors are diverse and well-connected, and work across religious denominations, political affiliations, and geographies. In the US, the Supreme Court made a hallmark decision to overturn the constitutional right to abortion (Roe v. Wade). That decision reversed 50 years of

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash> last accessed September 7, 2022.

progress on abortion rights and signals coming attempts to further erode rights. It is important to protect the gains in reproductive freedom that have been built over decades, and to demonstrate to Australian citizens and the international community that their government is committed to expanding human rights and freedom and will stand strong against anti-democratic forces.

We will respond directly to the questions you posed in DFAT's invitation to submit public submissions on the new International Gender Equality Strategy.

1. What are international gender equality priorities?

It is critical that sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), including safe abortion, be prioritized. SRHR are a cornerstone of sustainable development and are fundamental to addressing the shared challenges facing the region. Development outcomes in the areas of health, education, human rights, good governance, and economic development cannot be achieved without a focus on SRHR. For people living in crisis-affected areas, access to contraception and abortion are particularly crucial and can determine survival itself. According to research by the Guttmacher Institute, if all people in low-to-middle-income countries had access to modern contraceptives and health care, [unintended pregnancies would drop by 68 percent, and unsafe abortions would drop by 72 percent](#). For those facing humanitarian crises, or living in remote or restrictive communities, self-managed abortion and telemedicine play a critical role in increasing access.

Complications of unsafe abortion account for 5 – 13% of maternal deaths globally each year. Of the approximately 33 million women who have unsafe abortions annually, 97% are in the developing world (more than half of those in Asia, mostly in south and central Asia). Around 7 million are treated in hospital facilities for complications of unsafe abortions, and 40% never receive the treatment they need, putting their health and lives at risk. Ninety-one percent of deaths from unsafe abortion occur in Africa and South-Central Asia.²

When abortion is legal, available, and affordable, and contraception is accessible to all, [evidence shows](#):

- Individuals, particularly adolescents and younger women, have greater ability to obtain or continue their education.
- Women can avoid or escape unhealthy relationships and violence.
- People can obtain abortion care earlier which is safer for individuals and less costly for health systems.
- Communities experience less poverty, fewer teenage pregnancies, fewer maternal deaths, and greater opportunities for children.
- Countries experience greater economic prosperity, and there is less strain on health systems and other public resources.

In August 2023, Ipas endorsed a letter from Australian NGOs, Children by Choice, and the International Women's Development Agency to DFAT that included these suggestions for concrete actions which should be included in the Gender Equality Strategy and in Australia's international development plans. The list is excellent, and we strongly support it.

² Source: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion>

- Normalize abortion as healthcare by using the word “abortion” in official documents, speeches, and policies along with SRHR.
- Increase international funding available for SRHR, including abortion, via existing mechanisms and earmark them for SRHR.
- Invest in research and monitoring to meet the critical need for routine abortion data, which is lacking in Australia and countries in Asia and the Pacific.
- Direct Posts to include SRHR and abortion in programs and dialogues with governments.
- Provide DFAT staff in Canberra and staff at Posts with opportunities to learn more about abortion care and how to include it in their health and development programs.
- Join and be vocal in the global movement for reproductive justice, including at the political level.
- Act on the International Day for Safe Abortion, by supporting DFAT staff to attend events and reshare or share affirming content on Government social media platforms.
- Recognize that all human rights—the core of democracy itself—are under attack. Support domestic efforts to enact a Human Rights Act for Australia, and work across portfolios to maintain and strengthen human rights frameworks.

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

Providing core support to organizations that can deliver on Australia’s strategies, is the most effective approach for achieving gender equality globally. Core support strengthens organizational capacity and makes it possible for groups like Ipas to deliver on our mission of enabling access to safe abortion and contraception globally. This commitment is reflected in Ipas’s partnership with ministries of health around the world to integrate safe abortion care, postabortion care, and access to contraception in the public sector. Core funding also enables us to respond nimbly to crises and leverage unforeseen opportunities—the kinds of situations that define SRHR work. At the same time, it is increasingly difficult to secure core funding. While this is a problem for all NGOs, for an organization focused on the highly stigmatized topic of abortion, the universe of donors willing to invest in this transformative work is limited compared with most human rights, medical, and even gender equity issues. This makes core funding a key factor in our ability to have an impact on safe abortion access.

The SRHR field has experienced significant cutbacks in the past few years. The impact of COVID, opposition movements, and shifting priorities threaten gains. INGOs should still play an important role, albeit a different one than they have played in the past if we are managing toward equity. The contributions of INGOs can include:

- Curating and sharing knowledge and information so that local groups are not recreating the wheel and, importantly, can build on previous knowledge or quickly deploy this information in their local context. Without this, there is a risk that local efforts will flounder, be inefficient, and will not be able to deliver results.
- Support local partners. For example, in addition to providing financial and technical support on the issue of abortion, Ipas also supports the growth and development of local partners by providing organizational development funds and resources.
- Adding to global evidence so that the response is comprehensive on the widest scale possible

- Monitoring results at sub-regional, regional, and global levels

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

It is critically important that SRHR be an important focus for Australia, with adequate resources devoted to supporting new partners who can move this agenda forward. Reproductive justice is the human right to bodily autonomy—the right to control one’s own sexuality, gender, health, and reproduction, and to do so safely and with dignity. Without access to abortion and contraception, without vital health information, and without the power to make decisions, one cannot determine their own future. Reproductive rights, including abortion rights, are human rights. Everyone has the right to make informed decisions about their body and health. To build a world where this is possible, it is necessary to integrate abortion rights into the broader movements for health-care access, gender equity and social justice. The right to an abortion is not a standalone right. It depends upon people also having other human rights: to health, to equality, to privacy, to economic options, and to live free from violence and discrimination.

There is an opportunity for Australia to be explicit in supporting implementation of regional human rights and women’s rights instruments, such as Maputo Protocol. This adds support to the efforts of regional and local movements and honors the implementation of policies that are locally relevant.

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

Ten years ago, the prospect of Roe v. Wade being overturned would have been inconceivable to most Americans or to most people around the world. Australians reacted with horror to the decision. The time is now to be bold with a Gender Equality Strategy that clearly stands up for reproductive justice and specifically names safe abortion as a priority. The cost of ignoring this issue could be great.