

MSI Asia Pacific submission to DFAT's New International Gender Equality Strategy

As an Australian based NGO accredited by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) partner, MSI Asia Pacific welcomes the opportunity to engage in the consultation process for the New International Gender Equality Strategy.

MSI Asia Pacific is a member of the MSI Reproductive Choices global partnership (MSI), whose members have been providing sexual and reproductive healthcare (SRH) services for over 45 years. Our 9,000 team members worldwide work across 37 countries providing contraception, comprehensive abortion care, and maternal healthcare services wherever they're needed – from major cities to rural and hard-to-reach villages.

Since 1976, MSI has reached over 162 million people worldwide with life changing and lifesaving Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) information and services, and each year we work harder to reach more people than before. Our vision is that by 2030, no abortion will be unsafe and every individual who wants access to contraception will have it.

MSI Asia Pacific has been working in partnership with the Australian Government to ensure access to quality, equitable SRH services in the Asia-Pacific region for over two decades. With Australian support, MSI has been able to improve the lives of millions of women and girls in a region that suffers some of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.

In a context where reproductive rights are more at risk than ever before, we appreciate Australia's continued commitment to SRHR in its new international development policy and agenda. This continued support remains critical to the realisation of gender equality and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for Australia's development partners.

What are Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights?

The term SRHR encompasses the rights of all individuals to a healthy body and the autonomy to make decisions concerning their sexual activity and reproduction, free from discrimination, coercion, violence, or health risks. SRH is a human right and is an integral part of overall health and well-being, safeguarding an individual's right to access SRH services and information without discrimination. SRHR are often the target of fierce debate and pushback, both globally and locally, which is increasing through the growth in the anti-choice movement. SRH is an inalienable right that is enshrined in various international agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Program of Action, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Why is the intersection between SRHR and Gender Equality important?

Ensuring universal access to SRHR is imperative to the realization of gender equality for all. The absence of bodily autonomy threatens women, girls, and gender diverse people's ability to fully participate in political, social, and economic spheres whilst also impacting their control of their own health and wellbeing, freedom to make life decisions, and their overall agency.

Prioritising investments to support universal access to SRH services and information and reproductive rights is critical to address the barriers that perpetuate gender inequality and unequal power dynamics. Studies indicate that girls are more likely to not finish school or enroll in university due to early pregnancy and that women who are able to delay and space their births are more likely to accomplish their education and professional goals, and are more able to participate in social, political, and economic life¹. Improving access to SRH services and information, empowers individuals, particularly women and girls, to make informed choices about their bodies, health, relationships, and lives.

Key recommendations for the new international gender equality strategy

Universal access to SRHR: is an essential component of an individual's overall health and wellbeing. As a vital element of gender equality, universal SRHR leads to better health and educational outcomes whilst contributing to reducing inequality and breaking cycles of poverty. To create more equitable communities, it is imperative that all people, including women, youth and adolescents, people with disabilities and LGBTQIA+, can access non-judgmental and high-quality SRH services and information including menstrual hygiene, family planning methods, and safe abortion.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen universal access to SRHR by allocating long-term and flexible funding that supports the delivery of SRH services for all people, including safe abortion and information.

SRHR and gender equality data and research: Robust gender-disaggregated SRHR data and research are pivotal for the development of evidence-based interventions, monitoring progress against indicators, and influencing SRHR strategies. The strengthening of national health systems to collect and disseminate SRHR data enhances the capacity of national health systems to deliver targeted, evidence-based services and programs while guiding decision-making processes and policy formulation.

Recommendation 2: Support research initiatives that examine the intersection between gender equality and SRHR and invest in national health systems to promote public reporting of gender-disaggregated data to provide an evidence-base for policy and program development.

Policy and Legal Reforms: It is often women who face the health implications of not having access to SRHR services and information, and in developing countries, complications during pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of maternal death. 13% of maternal mortality is the direct result of complications from unsafe abortion, but most of these deaths are entirely preventable with access to contraception, safe abortion, and quality post abortion care. Restricted SRHR policy and legal environments limit women and girls' reproductive autonomy and access to high-quality SRH services and accurate information. This impacts their agency to make life decisions in relation to when they have children. This in turn impacts their ability to pursue educational and/or career aspirations, often excluding them from greater economic, social, and political participation throughout their life.

Recommendation 3: Advocate for SRHR policy and legal reform that advances access to safe abortion services, reproductive autonomy, enhances protection for people of diverse sexual identities, orientation, and expression and addresses harmful practices that affect women and girls, such as child marriage and sexual and gender-based violence.

¹ Adam Sonfield, Kinsey Hasstedt, Megan L. Kavanaugh and Ragnar Anderson: The Social and Economic Benefits of Women's Ability to Determine Whether and When To Have Children, <https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/pubs/social-economic-benefits.pdf>

Comprehensive sexuality education: is fundamental to establishing a more equitable society. While access to SRH services, such as family planning, is crucial, without comprehensive sexuality education, many individuals lack knowledge about contraception and human autonomy which perpetuates widespread myths and misconceptions ².

Recommendation 4: Support comprehensive sexuality education, particularly for youth and adolescents, that provides individuals with knowledge and skills to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health, challenges harmful gender stereotypes and promotes respectful communication, relationships, and consent.

Elimination of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and children: Violence against women and girls was at epidemic proportions globally and has only worsened as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. SGBV inhibits women and girls from realising their full potential. Unintended pregnancy is often linked to SGBV with many women experiencing forced sex and/or pregnancy with low rates of reporting and prosecution of perpetrators, which is then exacerbated in crisis or fragile settings³.

Recommendation 5: Invest in SGBV prevention and response programs that improve access to SRH services including emergency contraception, safe abortion, and post abortion care. Additionally, address harmful practices through education about the right to be free from violence and reproductive coercion that engage men, women and people of diverse gender identity.

Advocacy for SRHR: Domestic and international push back on gender equality and human rights by anti-choice movements is increasing. The overthrow of Roe vs Wade in 2022 has continued to have a chilling effect on the progress of the pro-choice movement; we are seeing increased amplification of anti-choice stories and events through the rise of social media and a conflation of the anti-abortion agenda with wider anti-gender and anti-LGBTQIA+, sentiments working to roll back rights particularly women's rights and gender equality.

Recommendation 6: Australia must take a strong stance to protect and uphold SRHR as it is central to the advancement of gender equality. This includes strengthening support for feminist, locally led organisations and institutions and using diplomatic and political influence to advocate for the greater protection and advancement of SRHR including access to safe abortion, women's and LGBTQIA+ rights.

Humanitarian and climate crises: have disproportionate impact on women, girls, and other marginalised and vulnerable groups. Faced with gendered discrimination, lower incomes, and reduced access to resources, women and girls bear the brunt of climate shocks and disasters. Within humanitarian and climate crises, SRH is often de-prioritised when it is needed most. The burden of tackling the impacts of the climate crises is often, unfairly, placed on those from the global south, who suffer the most from the impacts of climate change.

Recommendation 7: Ensure access to reproductive choice and SRH services to bolster the resilience of communities in the face of increased humanitarian crises and climate shocks and include the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for Reproductive Health in Australia's disaster and humanitarian response.

² UNFPA. State of World Population 2022, Seeing the unseen. The case for action in the neglected crisis of unintended pregnancy. <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/news/neglected-crisis-unintended-pregnancies-has-lifelong-impact-costs-healthsystems-billions>

³ UNFPA. State of World Population 2022, Seeing the unseen. The case for action in the neglected crisis of unintended pregnancy. <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/news/neglected-crisis-unintended-pregnancies-has-lifelong-impact-costs-healthsystems-billions>

Conclusion:

We call on Australia to increase political support and financial investment in universal access to SRHR, comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive rights which are critical to realise gender equality for all people, in particular women, girls, and people of diverse gender identities.

Promoting and prioritising SRHR within Australia's New International Gender Equality Strategy would support to progress gender equality across the region, proactively address the pushback on gender, SRHR and LGBTQIA+ rights and help build resilient communities in the face of humanitarian and climate crisis.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the New International Gender Equality Strategy. MSI Asia Pacific endorses submissions from the Australian Council for International Development, and the International Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Consortium. We remain available to discuss these recommendations or provide further information as needed.

Yours sincerely,



Ms Merewyn Foran
Executive Officer

