

## Submission in Response to the Development of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade International Gender Equality Strategy

*Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples past and present.*

### About this submission

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established in 2013. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch.

Our Watch welcomes the commitment of the Commonwealth Government to develop and implement an International Gender Equality Strategy (the Strategy) and to forging Australia's role as a global leader in gender equality in both domestic and foreign policy and decision-making. This submission addresses the four questions in the invitation to consult, focussing on the relationship between gender equality and prevention of violence against women. It draws upon the evidence from *Change the story* (2021) and *Changing the picture* (2018) to inform its recommendations. These frameworks adopt the United Nations' Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women definition of violence against women, recognises violence against women as a fundamental violation of human rights, and draws attention to Australia's international treaty obligations to prevent this violence.

Our Watch would welcome the opportunity to provide further advice or assistance to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in relation to the issues outlined in this submission. Please contact Director Government Relations, Policy and Evidence, Amanda Alford at [amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au](mailto:amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au)

## Summary of recommendations

### Our Watch recommends that:

1. In addition to a distinct focus area, the Strategy should incorporate prevention of violence against women approaches throughout the strategy.
2. The Strategy include a distinct focus area on prevention of violence against women, drawing on the essential actions to address the gendered drivers of violence identified in *Change the story* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2021).<sup>i</sup>
3. In consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, the Strategy draw on *Changing the picture* (2018)<sup>ii</sup> to identify actions to address the specific and disproportionate violence against Indigenous women and girls globally.
4. The Strategy articulate a vision for a foreign policy that prioritises prevention of violence against women, establishes gender equality as a goal in all of the Commonwealth Government's international engagement, and commits to an analysis of the gendered impacts of foreign policy decisions and approaches.

### Question One: What are international gender equality priorities?

Violence against women is both a product and cause of gender inequality and both reinforce each other. Gender equality efforts should have, at their core, efforts to eliminate and prevent violence against women. There is significant consensus in the international community that examining the ways in which gender relations are structured and the social context of gender inequality is key to understanding and preventing the underlying conditions that produce violence against women.<sup>iii</sup> Further, prevention of violence against women should be addressed in all areas of Australia's foreign policy, diplomacy and programming, including peace and security, human rights, education, health, climate change, economic development, foreign trade and investment, cultural and public diplomacy, humanitarian assistance and technology.

Violence against women is recognised as a serious and widespread problem globally, with enormous individual and community impacts and social costs. An estimated 736 million women globally—almost one in three—have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both, at least once in their life.<sup>iv</sup> Violence against women is a fundamental, serious violation of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.<sup>v</sup>

Australia has continuing obligations under international human rights agreements to ensure the health, safety and equality of women, as well as a specific duty to take positive steps to eliminate all forms of violence against women. The core legal obligation that establishes this responsibility is the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), specifically General Recommendation 35 and its precursors. This explicitly identifies gender-based violence against women as a violation of human rights, and as “one of the fundamental social, political and economic means by which the subordinate position of women with respect to men and their stereotyped roles are perpetuated”. General Recommendation 35 therefore specifically identifies that violence against women is a social, rather than individual problem and both a key cause and outcome of gender inequality. It articulates

the overarching obligation of State parties to pursue all appropriate means to eliminate gender-based violence against women without delay<sup>vi</sup>.

CEDAW is supported by the *United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (1993), the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995), and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* (2007) Article 22 and CEDAW General Recommendation 39 on the Rights of Indigenous Women and Girls (2022) also create a clear duty for States to address violence against Indigenous women and girls.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also explicitly recognises the link between gender equality and violence against women. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” includes Target 5.2 “Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.”

The latest SDG data suggests that the world is failing to achieve its targets on gender equality. Achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment is integral to each of the 17 goals. This was acknowledged in the development of the 2030 Agenda, which, in addition to Goal 5, mainstreamed gender throughout the SDGs, recognising that it sits at the intersection of economic, social and environmental issues. However, further evidence also suggests that the specific issue of ending violence against women is critical to achieving the SDGs. Unless we end violence against women and girls globally, we won’t achieve at least 14 of the 17 SDGs.<sup>vii</sup>

Evidence has consistently shown that violence against women increases during times of conflict and post-conflict situations<sup>viii</sup>, and in disasters and emergencies, including pandemics such as COVID-19,<sup>ix</sup> while condoning violence against women is strongly associated with support for violent extremism,<sup>x</sup> highlighting the criticality of addressing prevention in all of Australia’s international engagements.

*Recommendation 1: In addition to a distinct focus area, the Strategy should incorporate prevention of violence against women approaches throughout the strategy.*

## **Question Two: What are the most effective approaches for achieving gender equality globally?**

Our Watch’s evidence-based framework *Change the story* determines that gender inequality sets the social context in which violence against women occurs and makes clear that the drivers of this violence are gendered. It provides evidence-based guidance on the primary prevention of violence against women – that is, to change the underlying social conditions that produce and drive this violence, and that excuse, justify or even promote it, to prevent it happening in the first place.

The gendered drivers of violence against women outlined in *Change the story* are:

- Driver 1: Condoning of violence against women.
- Driver 2: Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence in public and private life.

- Driver 3: Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity.
- Driver 4: Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

*Changing the picture* further identifies the impacts of colonisation on both Aboriginal and Torres Strait people and non-Indigenous people, as well as gendered drivers of violence that are a consequence of colonisation, as additional drivers of the specific and disproportionate experiences of violence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women face compared with non-Indigenous women.

*Change the story* makes clear that to be effective, primary prevention needs to challenge and transform these underlying social and gendered conditions that drive violence against women, as also articulated in CEDAW General Recommendation 35. The evidence also clearly outlines the importance of an intersectional approach, acknowledging the multiple and intersecting systems of sexism, racism, colonialism, classism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, homo-, bi- and transphobia, ableism and ageism, and the need to challenge and shift the corresponding systems of power and privilege, which reinforce discrimination.

*Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021-2031* and the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* make clear links between gender equality and prevention efforts, identifying the achievement of gender equality as a critical objective. The first pillar of the National Plan, Prevention, draws on and aligns with *Change the story* and Our Watch's evidence-base through its prevention objectives that aim to address the gendered drivers of violence against women (National Plan prevention objectives 1,2,5).

### **Question Three: How can Australia best support efforts to achieve gender equality internationally?**

There is an important opportunity for the Strategy to clearly articulate the relationship between broader gender inequality and violence against women, in alignment with the aforementioned Plans, and to mainstream prevention of violence against women throughout the Strategy. This will not only ensure consistency between Australia's domestic and foreign policies but will position Australia to set the normative agenda in prevention internationally.

Our Watch encourages the Commonwealth Government to integrate *Change the story* into the Strategy and to frame the Strategy's gender equality initiatives around the eight essential actions (outlined below) required to address the gendered drivers of violence and change the social context in which it occurs.

To be effective, the eight essential actions identified in *Change the story* require policy, legislative, regulatory and institutional support, as well as broad, practical, 'on the ground' implementation across societies, in all diverse settings where people live, work, learn socialise and play. As such, there is a multitude of opportunities for prevention to be mainstreamed across all Commonwealth Government's foreign policy, diplomacy, and programming initiatives. For example, in activities undertaken by the Defence Forces, working on the frontlines of communities internationally, is typically male dominated and can have entrenched cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control (gendered drivers 3& 4).<sup>xi</sup> Prevention initiatives could be further

reinforced through modelling of gender equality within the Commonwealth Departments with an international facing role, including DFAT, the Department of Defence/the Defence Forces, and the Australian Federal Police.

Our Watch identifies two key opportunities below to integrate the primary prevention evidence-base into the Strategy, whilst maintaining clear linkages to the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Girls.

### **(1) Distinct focus area on primary prevention of violence against women**

Gender equality cannot be achieved while gendered violence against women persists. Our Watch recommends that the Strategy include a distinct focus area on primary prevention of violence against women. Utilising *Change the story*, this section can articulate the four essential actions required to address the gendered drivers of violence against women and the corresponding Commonwealth Government's commitments. The essential actions are:

- Essential Action 1: Challenging the condoning of violence against women.
- Essential Action 2: Promote women's independence and decision-making in public life and relationships.
- Essential Action 3: Build new social norms that foster personal identities not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes.
- Essential Action 4: Support men and boys to develop healthy masculinities and positive, supportive male peer relationships.

*Change the story* (pp. 62-63) provides examples of initiatives that could be pursued to advance each of the essential actions, many of which can be adapted for Australia's international engagement.

The Strategy should explicitly recognise the specific and disproportionate levels of violence against Indigenous women globally and note the importance of working with Indigenous women to develop and implement strategies to address this violence. In consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, the Strategy can draw on *Changing the picture* to identify essential actions to address the specific drivers of violence against Indigenous women in Australia's foreign policy and programming. This would support Australia's adherence to UNDRIP and CEDAW General Recommendation 39, both of which create a duty for Australia to address violence against Indigenous women and girls.

*Recommendation 2: The International Strategy on Gender Equality include a distinct focus area on prevention of violence against women, drawing on the essential actions to address the gendered drivers of violence identified in *Change the story* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2021).*

*Recommendation 3: In consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, the Strategy draw on *Changing the picture* (2018) to identify actions to address the specific and disproportionate violence against Indigenous women and girls globally.*

### **(2) Address the underlying social context for violence against women by integrating prevention throughout the Strategy and by centring gender equality as a goal of Australia's foreign policy.**

Gender equality sits at the intersection of economic, social and environmental issues; therefore, ending violence against women is essential to achieve the SDGs. Addressing

the broader social context – gender inequality and other forms of structural and systemic discrimination and oppression that gives rise to violence against women – is essential to preventing violence against women. In addition to a stand-alone focus area on the prevention of violence against women, Our Watch recommends that prevention be integrated throughout the Strategy and across all sectors addressed in Australia’s foreign policy, diplomacy and programming efforts, including peace and security, human rights, education, health, climate change, economic development, foreign trade and investment, cultural and public diplomacy, humanitarian assistance and technology. We acknowledge the size and scope of this work, however, note the centrality of addressing high levels of violence against women as a priority in international policy.

In order to systematically integrate gender equality and prevention in all of Australia’s international engagement, Our Watch recommends that the Strategy articulates a foreign policy that places gender equality as the central goal in all international engagements. This approach, known by the academic community, civil society and governments as a feminist foreign policy,<sup>xii</sup> and adopted by 12 nations to date, recognises that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. It builds on the ‘human security’ approach to international relations, which prioritises human security including preventing gendered violence. This approach recognises that peace cannot be achieved and sustained without consideration of the gendered implications of trade, defence, diplomacy, development and international cooperation.<sup>xiii</sup> Our Watch welcomes the commitment under the new International Development Policy that 80 percent of development investments address gender equality. A foreign policy that places gender equality at the centre of all international engagements, that is aligned with the SDGs and *Change the Story*, and is based on the principle of intersectionality, will build on the commitments made in the International Development Policy by ensuring that all of Australia’s foreign policy, diplomacy and programming reflect a commitment to gender equality and prevention. An articulation of foreign policy that centres gender equality should also commit to ensuring gender impact analyses of all foreign policy decisions and approaches.

Our Watch recommends that in order to embed prevention of violence against women in all international engagement, the Strategy draw upon the essential actions to address the underlying social context for violence against women outlined in *Change the story*. These essential actions are:

- Essential Action 5: Promote and normalise gender equality in public and private life.
- Essential Action 6: Address intersections between gender inequality and other forms of systemic and structural oppression and discrimination and promote broader social justice.
- Essential Action 7: Build safe, fair and equitable organisations and institutions by focusing on policy and systems change.
- Essential Action 8: Strengthen positive, equal and respectful relations between and among women and men, girls and boys, in public and private spheres.

*Change the story* (pp. 64-65) provides examples of initiatives that could be progressed in Australia’s international engagement under each of these essential actions.

**Recommendation 4:** *The Strategy articulate a vision for a foreign policy that prioritises prevention of violence against women, establishes gender equality as a goal in all of the*

**Commented [PK1]:** I don't have a problem with this perse, but Our Watch does not explicitly talk about feminism except to say that cts is built on feminist theory etc

Over the years, we have challenged ourselves to articulate what it is to undertake feminist work by it's components/actions/principles, rather than use the 'overarching term'.

We have done that for a range of reasons

- People get caught up on the word not the work
- It plays into the hands of those who generate/perpetrate harmful forms of backlash
- People are more likely to take action/undertake prevention work in their own sphere of influence if we give them practical eg's of actions rather

So, I'm ok with it, but it does perhaps leave us open to come criticism

**Commented [SC2R1]:** After much discussion, we included the term Feminist Foreign Policy because there is a growing acceptance, understanding and use of the term in both academic and policy circles. This includes adoption of a feminist foreign policy by 12 other countries - Sweden, France, Canada, Luxembourg, Mexico, Spain, Germany, Libya, Chile, the Netherlands, Liberia and Columbia.

Given its growing acceptance and use, it is not a radical concept and Our Watch could defend adopting the term.

However, the concerns about the potential backlash are entirely valid and if the feeling is that the backlash would drown out our message, then it is possible to make the same essential recommendation without the word "feminist".

In this case, we could recommend the Australian Government "adopt a foreign policy that establishes gender equality as a goal in all of the Commonwealth Government's international engagement, and commit to an analysis of the gendered impacts of foreign policy decisions and approaches".

In this case, we would still be advocating for a feminist foreign policy, but just not naming it as such.

If we were to do this, we would just need to make a few minor edits to remove the brief explanation of feminist foreign policy and associated footnotes.

*Commonwealth Government's international engagement, and commits to an analysis of the gendered impacts of foreign policy decisions and approaches.*

#### **Question Four: What should the Government/ DFAT consider when developing the new international gender equality strategy?**

In addition to the above, Our Watch recommends that the Strategy would benefit from a set of cross-cutting principles to underpin and guide the Strategy and suggest the following principles:

- **Alignment with international human rights frameworks** and a focus on upholding Australia's obligations in full.
- **Integrating gender transformative approaches** that challenge and transform harmful gender stereotypes, practices, roles and unequal power relations through changing laws and policies, systems and services, and inequalities in access to and control of resources.
- **Centring intersectionality** to account for the diversity of people's experiences and identities and address the multiple intersecting systems of oppression and discrimination, power and privilege that shape the social context of gender inequality such as sexism, racism, colonialism, classism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, homo-, bi- and transphobia, ableism and ageism.
- **Incorporating all levels of the socio-ecological model** including the individual and relationship, the organisational and community, the system and institutional, and the societal levels.<sup>xiv</sup>
- **Adopting holistic approaches to achieving gender equality** that involve a continuum of interdependent and interlinked strategies over the long term and involves a whole-of-setting and whole-of-organisation approaches to reach all stakeholders.
- **Ensuring all phases of the Strategy are based on evidence**, research and evaluation, and informed by diverse lived experiences, in alignment with the statement from victim-survivors in the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.<sup>xv</sup>
- **Strengthens the gender policy machinery** by establishing processes to undertake intersectional gender impact assessments of the Commonwealth Government's international policy and programs.
- **Addressing gender inequality across the life-course**
- **Work with local women's rights organisations**, feminist movements and people with lived experience of gender inequality and intersectional discrimination to ensure locally owned approaches and avoid taking a "one size fits all" approach.
- **Engaging broadly with governments, the private sector, civil society and the community** to act on gender equality within their spheres of influence, to maximise impact and reach.
- **Commitment to engaging men** as individuals, and in peer groups, organisations, and institutions to challenge and transform gendered stereotypes and male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.



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- <sup>i</sup> Our Watch (2021). *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia* (2nd ed.).
- <sup>ii</sup> Our Watch (2018). *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children*.
- <sup>iii</sup> Our Watch (2021). *Change the story*, pg. 28.
- <sup>iv</sup> UN Women (2022). *Facts and figures: Ending violence against women*.
- <sup>v</sup> United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. (2017). *General Recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19*. UN Doc. No.: CEDAW/C/GC/35
- <sup>vi</sup> United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. (2017). *General Recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19*. UN Doc. No.: CEDAW/C/GC/35
- <sup>vii</sup> The Equality Institute (2021). *Sustainable Development Goals and Violence Against Women*.
- <sup>viii</sup> Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) (2023). *Women's human rights and gender-related concerns in situations of conflict and instability*.
- <sup>ix</sup> UN Women (2021). *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19*.
- <sup>x</sup> Melissa Johnston and Jacqui True, (2019). *Misogyny and Violent Extremism: Implications for Preventing Violent Extremism*.
- <sup>xi</sup> David Duriesmith (2023). "Transforming masculinities after scandal: the response to Australia's war crimes in Afghanistan and the possibility of change in military masculinities." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 3 (2023): 272-286.
- <sup>xii</sup> Feminist Foreign Policy is an approach that places gender equality as the central goal of foreign policy, in recognition that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. To date, 12 countries have adopted a feminist foreign policy, including Sweden, France, Canada, Luxembourg, Mexico, Spain, Germany, Libya, Chile, the Netherlands, Liberia and Columbia. In articulating a feminist foreign policy, it is important that it is informed by an intersectional analysis and involves working with local women's rights organisations to develop the Australian Government's understanding of feminisms globally (outside the traditional Western construct) to ensure culturally appropriate ways of advancing gender equality. For further information on Feminist Foreign Policy, including a definition, see Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition (2022) *Feminist Foreign Policy: An Overview*.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition (2022) *Feminist Foreign Policy: An Overview*.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Our Watch (2021). *Change the story*, p. 34.
- <sup>xv</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) (2022). *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032*: pg. 8