

A new International Gender Equality Strategy

Palladium submission

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1. Executive summary

Palladium welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's new International Gender Equality Strategy. We are a global company which works with governments, businesses and investors to solve the world's most pressing development challenges. Palladium acknowledges that Australia is in a complex geographical and diplomatic location, wedged between the future interests of Asia and the Pacific. DFAT's new International Development Policy emphasises the bold vision of drawing on the tools of statecraft to build regional resilience. These intertwined dynamics provide a distinctive opportunity to enable transformative change for Australia's commitment and goals to address gender disparities and advancing human rights for all.

Palladium is a strong advocate for the importance of deep gender analysis and programmatic integration and has contributed foundational tools, research and resources to the international development community. We consider gender as part of a cross-cutting social inclusion approach, that recognises the intersections of gender with other social, cultural and economic inequities. We are committed to ensuring fair and respectful treatment of all our people and the communities and stakeholders where we work. Palladium believes gender equality is indispensable in strengthening the social fabric of communities, enhancing economic prosperity and nation building. We envisage a world that leaves *no one behind* wherein universal access to opportunities is upheld, safety and security are guaranteed and individuals are treated fairly and equitably within their homes and in their schools, educational facilities, workplaces and communities.

We suggest the new Gender Equality Strategy serves as a roadmap for a **whole-of-government** effort to advance gender equality, adopting an **intersectional approach** to address the inequalities and systemic biases in gender. Recognising that this is a collective commitment, the strategy should be addressed at a **systemic level** by embedding principles of gender equality across our domestic and foreign policy frameworks. This entails an elevation of gender considerations in strategic planning, policy formulation, budget allocation, capacity building and the oversight and accountability mechanisms provided through monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

We believe Australia possesses three significant advantages which both define our values and provide meaningful and inclusive approaches to advancing gender equality. Unlike others who seek to contest our regional relationships, Australia provides:

1. accredited education and training, ensuring access and equity for all;
2. a transparent, inclusive migration pathway to permanent residence in a democracy; and
3. open employment and gender-responsible trade with a first world market economy.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide this response and look forward to continuing to work with the Australian Government and its agencies, particularly the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), in the future implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy under the new International Development Policy.

Yours sincerely,



Bernadette Howlett
Executive Officer

18 September 2023

2. Discussion

Globally women, girls and individuals with diverse gender identities do not enjoy the same status, power, or access to and control over resources as men, boys and people who identify as cisgender. Entrenched structural barriers prevent women, girls and individuals with diverse genders from realising their potential. Attaining gender equality necessitates a foundational step, *the deconstruction of pervasive biases and discrimination*, that has historically hindered an inclusive workforce, community participation and equitable treatment. This is particularly apparent for marginalised women and individuals of diverse gender identities.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing recovery from the dual challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating climate crisis, the asymmetries in gender dynamics are even more acute. Increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and natural hazards only adds to this context, with Asia and the Pacific remaining the most disaster-prone regions in the world, where 2 million people have lost their lives to disasters since 1970.¹ This is forecast to continue with increasingly severe weather and evidence showing that vulnerable groups (such as women and children) are disproportionately affected in crisis and emergency. The unique vulnerabilities faced by women, girls – and others at risk of marginalisation – are complex, significant and require understanding and strategic tailored approaches.

International gender equality priorities

Palladium believes that gender equality should be a fundamental human rights principle in the delivery of all DFAT investments. It is important to note that the priorities will vary by country and region due to the diversity of cultures, traditions and development levels across continents. In today's geopolitical landscape, Palladium suggests two key priorities, noting:

1. **Education and training** plays a pivotal role in advancing equality for women and girls and fostering their economic and social development. Compounding issues – from financial constraints on cost of schooling, early and forced marriages, to sexual harassment – prohibits girls and diverse gender identities from attending and accessing education and skills opportunities. According to UNESCO, globally about 129 million girls are out of school, including 32 million of primary school age and 97 million of secondary school age².
2. **Advancing women's workforce participation** eliminating occupational segregation and tackling the gender pay gap is a crucial aspect of advancing gender equality. According to the International Labour Organisation³ (ILO), the gender gap in labour force participation was 29.2% in 2022, with female participation at 61.4% and male participation at 90.6%. One underlying condition has been the 'motherhood penalty' of child-rearing and unpaid care work, that globally has been the major driver of lowering women's labour force participation. It must also be noted that the change to economic outcomes for women and people of diverse genders must be carefully managed and executed to ensure the 'do no harm' principle is adhered to. Evidence has shown that there can be harm when gender outcomes are linked to financial gains (often through employment) and that unequal power dynamics and unjust practices continue.

The strategy needs to prioritise the commitment and shared stance on **ending Gender Based Violence** through focusing on education and prevention and response to violence and abuse. This covers sexual harassment, child and human trafficking, modern day slavery, child marriage and female genital mutilation. Addressing the issue requires a focus on prevention and how to support survivors, for example, increasing resources and capacity for safe accommodation, the provision of hotlines and other services (so that they can meet heightened demand) particularly in times of emergencies. We also

¹ [Seizing the moment: targeting transformative disaster risk resilience | ESCAP \(unescap.org\)](#)

² World Bank, [Girls' Education Overview \(worldbank.org\)](#)(updated Feb 2022), citing [Girls' education | UNICEF](#)

³ [ILO Spotlight on Work Statistics no12](#)

suggest an increase to funding for women's organisations, as evidence shows that strong women's organisations are one of the biggest factors in driving positive change.

It is important to recognise that gender inequality and pressing international issues (like the growing number of **disasters and climate change crisis**) are **interconnected** and cannot be looked at in isolation. The climate crisis isn't gender neutral. Women and girls are more severely affected by climate change because in low and middle-income countries they are more likely to work in the agriculture sector where their livelihoods and health will be impacted more by drought and variable rainfall. This puts added pressure on girls, who often have to leave school to help their mothers manage the workload. It is important that women and girls and diverse gender knowledge and expertise are incorporated into disaster prevention, response, preparedness and resilience programs.

Increased voice, leadership and political participation of women requires more representation of women at all levels of organisations and hierarchy (for both elective and non-elective roles). According to the UN⁴, while Asia-Pacific women's representation in parliaments has increased over the past two decades – from 13% of seats in national parliaments in 2000 to 20% in 2020 – it is still less than the global average of 25%. And representation is far less in parts of South and South-West Asia and the Pacific, where only 17% of seats are held by women. There is a need to understand the inherent cultural, societal and practical barriers for women's access to leaderships positions and what can be done to see more women represented at all levels of leadership and in politics. It is critical to **scale up culturally contextualised and locally-led public awareness and education campaigns**, particularly those targeted at men and boys. The pre-conditions for inclusion may need to be addressed as an initial starting point, paving safe pathways for increased access to economic and political leadership.

3. Effective approaches for achieving gender equality globally

Gender equality is not a singular issue, but a multifaceted challenge influenced by various factors, including cultural norms, economic structures, legal systems, systemic racism and historical contexts. As such, addressing it requires a holistic and nuanced approach that recognises the interconnectedness of different aspects of society. We should also seek to embed the perspectives of First Nations Australians into the strategy development.

Intersectionality is a critical framework that provides a nuanced understanding of how aspects of an individual's political and social identity intersects to create differing modes and intensities of discrimination and privilege. Considering the unique challenges and experiences faced by all individuals in terms of ethnicity, location, LGBTIQ+, disability, we cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach. The Gender Equality Strategy must be able to speak to (and complement) other cross cutting strategies, such as the Disability, Equity and Rights strategy. Based on our experience working across humanitarian crisis from Ukraine to the Pacific, we feel that it is critical to connect with the Humanitarian-Development Nexus (HDN) to incorporate gender-responsive policies and programs across the nexus to help drive positive, transformative change and support greater collaboration between HDN actors.

Engaging with and involving men and boys to be allies to address issues like gender-based violence, promote healthy masculinity and support women in leadership is also vital. Involving both women and men of diverse gender identities in gender equality approaches ensures that gender is viewed as being relational and a construct of culture. This approach emphasises the act of listening and responding to the voices of the people that gender equality programs are trying to reach.

Localisation to the country context means localised and context-sensitive commitments, priorities and implementation plans for gender equality and other elements of social inclusion will be critical to successful outcomes. For example, Palladium has been the support contractor for the DFAT-funded Vanuatu Skills Partnership program, which utilises a 'working with the grain' approach that does not mean accepting the status quo and reinforcing structural inequalities, but rather using the multiple 'grains' and being politically savvy and brokering collective local leadership to influence change processes that have local ownership and stimulus. This has allowed Partnership to affect structural change by drawing on its

⁴ SDG Indicator Data. <https://data.unescap.org/>

networks, personal relationships (at both leadership and political levels) with a nuanced understanding of the operating context to identify entry points and opportunities – ‘playing the game to change the rules’⁵.

Accessibility is a fundamental enabler of gender equality and must be planned for and resourced with a dedicated budget. The pre-conditions for inclusion must be considered to ensure gender mainstreaming occurs. This could include access to assistive technology, health care and rehabilitation and fit-for-purpose social protection.

Evidence-Based approaches and solutions to gender inequality must be informed by effective data and research. Gender disaggregated data must go further than sex-based binary, but this must be done using culturally sensitive mechanisms. It is critical to ensure that relevant programmatic approaches are incorporated into program design and implementation, such as using feminist dignity frameworks, gender transformative approaches and participatory action research, with the ability to continually learn and adapt on these. For example, the USAID-funded (and Palladium implemented) Health Policy Project (HPP) strengthened financing to respond to gender-based violence by developing and applying the ‘*GBV Program Cost Calculator: Assessing the Costs of GBV Interventions in Clinical Settings*.’ The tool analyses service delivery statistics on GBV client encounters; facility resources used to deliver GBV services and financial data. Using the GBV cost calculator, HPP conducted a costing study of GBV clinical services in Tanzania collecting data from 11 health facilities in all three levels of the health system (dispensary, health centre and hospital) in four regions. The GBV cost calculator’s estimates at the health facility level will inform cost estimates for the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare’s forthcoming Health Sector GBV and Violence against Children Action Plan.

DFAT and development partners must **transform from within**, while working with clients and partners to transform gender equality. Efforts to reduce inequalities must be led from an organisational and program delivery level. At the organisational level, Palladium is committed to creating a workplace where all employees feel valued and respected, regardless of their gender identities. We have a number of policies and procedures in place to support gender equality, both internally and externally with stakeholders. This includes a mentoring program that supports women and underrepresented groups throughout their careers. Our Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) policies also ensure the well-being of both mothers and their families through flexible and phased returns to work. With intentional approaches to draw diversity and inclusion in the workplace, in 2023, Palladium saw 50% of its most senior executive roles occupied by women compared to 0% in 2015. With 20% of those roles being occupied by BIPOC⁶ colleagues compared to 0% in 2015. More than half (53%) of our senior managers are women.

Australia can play a significant role in supporting efforts to achieve gender equality internationally by taking a multi-dimensional approach that supports gender-responsive development and humanitarian programs to address the unique needs and challenges faced by women and girls in partner countries. We applaud that the new International Development Policy now mandates a gender outcome for all investments of more than A\$3 million. However, investments of lesser value should also carry conditions and accountability that ensures they apply gender responsive, evidence-based outcomes and/or indicators with ‘**do no harm**’ principles embedded.

It is crucial to align our efforts with **Sustainable Development Goal 5**, which focuses on attaining gender equality and empowering women and girls, while also **maintain funding for existing commitments** that Australian has already made such as the Grand Bargain, ODA etc, to strengthen accountability.

Australia, as the leading regional provider of education and training, must continue to support skills and capacity building and awareness campaigns through the provision of **technical and financial support** to strengthen the capacity of **local women’s organisations and civil society groups** both domestically and in partner countries. This includes continuing to support scholarship programs, such as Australia Awards and New Colombo Plan, that emphasise gender equality and inclusion as key outcomes.

Encouraging private sector businesses and corporations, including Australian companies operating internationally, to adopt gender transformative and gender-responsive policies and practices, is also important. McKinsey Global Institute’s⁷ report on *The Power of Parity: How Advancing Women’s Equality*

⁵ The Bigger Picture: Gender and Politics in Practice (Roche et al, 2018).

⁶ Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC)

⁷ [mgi power of parity full report september 2015.pdf \(mckinsey.com\)](https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/featured-insights/Equality/2015/09/mgi-power-of-parity-full-report-september-2015.pdf)

Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth found that even incremental progress on gender equality can have big payoff. One critical step towards bridging that gender gap is to promote women's economic empowerment through partnerships with the private sector – and specifically women-led organisations. The compounding effect of engaging women in partnerships will be seen through female leadership in their supply chains, distributors and customers – and on the broader communities in which they work. For example, in Indonesia, the DFAT-funded (and Palladium-managed) PRISMA program collaborates with private companies to develop and promote agricultural inputs and services to households of smallholder farmers that have traditionally focused on male farmers while neglecting a large untapped segment of female farmers. To address the gender gap issue, PRISMA provides support to companies through market research and strategic consultancies to redesign their marketing strategies so that they can effectively target both men and women. This has led to providing such support to 32 companies (partnerships), of which 19 have incorporated changes in their marketing strategies to make them more inclusive. Further, 11 of these companies implemented activities that specifically targeted women farmers.

Policy advocacy and **diplomacy** should remain a key mechanism to drive diplomatic influence to promote gender equality as a global priority in international forums and partnerships. Using online advocacy and new-generation technology tools (to appeal to the younger demographics) portraying women and men in diverse and non-stereotypical roles creates wider awareness. This also includes the promotion of women in leadership through publicly supporting and encouraging women's participation in leadership roles within government, in local and international organisations and in other global initiatives.

4. Building DFAT capacity and knowledge

Palladium acknowledges Australia's dedication to enhancing and building the capacity of people. Investment of gender resources within DFAT, at Canberra and at Posts, should be re-affirmed through a well-trained and knowledgeable workforce that is better equipped to implement gender-sensitive programs and policies.

Sustainability through systemic change is an important aspect given that achieving gender equality is a long-term commitment. This includes collaborating with partner countries, international organisations, and NGOs on joint initiatives to advance gender equality. Ensuring that within DFAT, enabling or convening spaces are created to reduce siloing across DFAT investments and foster a learning culture within DFAT with a focus on (contextually based) best practice and knowledge management is another example. The strategy will need to embody a **localisation** model and should be open for adaptation/customisation and contextualisation depending on where it will be implemented, so long as the key principles of gender equality are maintained. To promote a localisation approach, Australia could also consider including requirements for partners to operate in ways that foster a local inclusion approach to locally, women's led/women's right's organisations. Similarly, using gender transformative and participatory approaches, via local experts and actors to develop country strategies, such as the Development Partnership Plans or new investment designs, will ensure that unequal gender norms are examined and questioned in a way that meaningfully and sensitively engages all genders.

Investing in data and research initiatives that generate evidence on gender disparities and the impact of gender-related interventions will be important to adapting existing interventions while using data and research to inform policymaking and program design. The strategy should have a robust reporting mechanism with clear indicators to track progress to ensure relevancy and effectiveness and move away from 'tick box' compliance focused gender action plans.

We understand that the gender equality strategy will endeavour to navigate complex issues and challenges related to gender inequality, social injustice, poverty and environmental sustainability. Challenges that are deeply entrenched and multifaceted. These issues have historical, cultural, economic, and systemic roots, making them inherently complex to address. It is important that Australia understands that the commitment to advancing this important strategy will require not only a long-term commitment but also time and sustained efforts to shift societal perspectives to achieve meaningful change. This will involve altering deeply ingrained behaviours, attitudes and cultural norms. Palladium welcomes DFAT's new Gender Equality Strategy and looks forward to being a partner in driving gender equality through greater access, collaboration and commitment and to creating a more equitable and inclusive world for people of all genders.