

# Submission to inform Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy

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## About Results

**Results International (Australia)** is part of a global non-partisan movement of advocates working to improve global health and end poverty. With our national network of volunteers, Results amplifies knowledge and expertise in global health and development. For more than 35 years, Results has been working with federal parliamentarians and everyday Australians to help generate the public and political will to end global poverty. Results is a partner of ACTION, a global partnership of independent organisations working to influence policy and mobilise resources to fight diseases of poverty and achieve equitable access to health.

## Summary

Gender equality is an essential foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Economies are more resilient, productive and inclusive when they reduce gender inequalities and actively support the equal participation of women in all spheres of life.<sup>1</sup> Gender has major impacts on access to health. In September, *The Lancet* reported on how improvements in health equity and gender equality positively transform societies, placing them on pathways to enduring peace.<sup>2</sup> Human rights and gender programs and community-led social accountability are vital to ensure all people have access to quality prevention and treatment services in the fight against diseases of poverty. In countries across Asia and the Pacific, inequality and discrimination faced by women and girls puts health and well-being at risk. It also has an impact on their families, communities and economies. Efforts to advance gender equality should not just focus on women and girls, but also recognise rights and challenges for LGBTQIA+ people, and the need to engage men and boys.

Over many decades, Australian advocacy and leadership on gender equality has contributed to positive movements for change. A new strategy for gender equality – that extends across Australia's work in foreign policy, international development, humanitarian action, trade and security – has great potential to enhance our partnerships and advance work towards Sustainable Development Goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. In developing an ambitious strategy for gender equality, we have an opportunity to rethink and reframe Australia's international engagement and drive positive change in systems and policy throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Results welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review. In developing a gender equality strategy, Results recommends Australia must:

1. Support women's leadership and prioritise gender
2. Fund initiatives to understand gender barriers
3. Invest in programs to improve the health of women and girls
4. Work with partners to promote accelerated action on gender equality.

## Support women's leadership and prioritise gender

Working with partners in the region, Australia should continue to develop and fund initiatives to promote women's leadership. In politics, business and community life, gender-related barriers prevent equal participation. According to the World Health Organization, women make up almost 70% of the health and social care workforce globally, but hold only 25% of senior roles.<sup>3</sup> Estimates suggest 80% of all unpaid care work is done by women in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>4</sup>

Participation and representation challenges are acute in our region. At the last election in PNG, only two female representatives were elected from 118 seats. In data from Cambodia in 2015, 70% of women were working in vulnerable employment, 77% of public sector employees were men, yet men held 85% of decision-making roles in the public sector.<sup>5</sup> In our region, 151 million youth are not in education, employment or further training: 75% of those are girls.<sup>6</sup> Through diplomacy, development programs, parliamentary visits, scholarships, bilateral exchange and investing in education for girls and women, Australia can promote change and increase opportunities.

As Foreign Minister Senator Penny Wong has said, our foreign policy must be an accurate and authentic reflection of Australia's values and interests.<sup>7</sup> Fairness and equality are key Australian values, and we should model and promote these in our international engagement. Like several other organisations in Australia's international development sector, Results believes much can be advanced by placing gender equality as a central goal in our foreign policy. Like-minded countries such as Canada, France, Germany, Sweden and Spain have feminist policy approaches in their international engagement.<sup>8</sup> In its most ambitious expression, this approach has the potential to transform the practice of foreign policy to the greater benefit of women and girls everywhere, impacting a country's diplomacy, defence and security cooperation, aid, trade, climate security and even immigration policies.<sup>9</sup> With this new strategy, Australia has an opportunity to join like-minded countries and ensure gender is genuinely at the heart of our international engagement.

Australia should recognise the distinct global challenges in health for women and girls. In many countries, high-quality and affordable sexual and reproductive health services are out of reach. Globally, women and girls make up 60% of the those around the globe with chronic malnutrition and approximately one third of women of reproductive age (15-49 years old) suffer from iron deficiency anaemia. In December last year, the Government acknowledged the stark differences in domestic health outcomes for women and girls in Australia and established a National Women's Health Advisory Council. As the important work of this Council progresses, it will be useful to consider how insights can be leveraged internationally as medical misogyny also presents global and regional problems. Systems for training, research and service delivery in health are often designed without a strong understanding of gender. Many health conditions that affect women are poorly understood; women are misdiagnosed and dismissed by health providers more often than men.<sup>10</sup> Australia should work with partners in the region and globally to focus on addressing the root causes of inequality such as harmful gender norms, stigma, stereotypes and discrimination in all its forms.

## Fund initiatives to understand gender barriers

Analysis of context and gender equality is critical for achieving sustainable results. In our region, the barriers that affect health access for women and girls are highly contextual and vary based on community perceptions, laws and institutions. Activities and interventions need to be developed based on consultation and an analysis of community strengths, human rights and gender.

Australia should advocate for and invest in gender-transformative health programming. Health programs have the potential to positively shift gender relations. Immunisation programs provide an important example of the complexity. Globally, there is no significant difference in coverage for boys and girls but in some countries of our region, gender discrimination and gender-related barriers have an indirect impact on immunisation. Social and cultural norms and the unequal status of women in many communities, reduces the chances of children being vaccinated. Women are often the primary caregiver and face multiple barriers to accessing immunisation and services. Good practice immunisation programs look at ways to engage men and promote positive health seeking behaviours. Australian leadership to increase access to the HPV vaccine should be commended, and efforts to prevent cervical cancer need to continue to be rolled out throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

In most countries, the incidence of tuberculosis (TB) is higher among men. While two thirds of TB cases globally are in men, women generally face additional barriers to care and face greater stigma.<sup>11</sup> TB treatment often exposes women to additional risks during pregnancy. We know from qualitative research and gender analysis of TB programs in our region that men will not get tested or seek treatment for fear of income loss. As caregivers, women often fail to prioritise their own health. Women who are diagnosed with diseases such as TB and HIV are sometimes excluded from their families and communities and face higher risks of violence after testing or falling ill.

As a donor, Australia has encouraged implementing partners to analyse and plan for gender in development programs. Building on this commitment, Australia's new development policy confirmed the 80% percent performance target to ensure Australia's development investments effectively address gender equality, and a mandate for investments over \$3 million to include a gender equality objective. These are important commitments, but will require monitoring, tools and guidance to ensure the policy intent is met in implementation. To genuinely focus on change in gender norms, Australia should fund programs with gender equality as their principal objective. Disaggregated data has been acknowledged as a gap in development programs for decades. Countries and implementing partners need tools and support to collect and analyse critical data.

The Stop TB Partnership, in collaboration with UNAIDS and partners, launched the first gender assessment tool for national HIV and TB responses in 2016. Since then Communities, Rights and Gender (CRG) Assessments have been conducted in PNG, Cambodia, the Philippines and Indonesia to identify barriers preventing access to TB services and propose solutions.<sup>12</sup> As part of the process, Costed CRG Action Plans help countries to budget activities to improve access. Australia should support the roll-out of effective tools and approaches, and continue to encourage partners to prioritise effective action.

## Invest in programs to improve the health of women and girls

As Melinda French Gates reiterated this month, 'we have seen over and over again that when countries actually prioritize and invest in women's health, they unleash a powerful engine for progress that can reduce poverty, advance gender equality, and build resilient economies.'<sup>13</sup> With the significant disparities and barriers faced by women and girls in health across Asia and the Pacific, Australia should fund initiatives with an explicit focus on women and girls.

The Global Financing Facility for Women, Children and Adolescents (GFF) was launched in 2015 to provide a country-led financing model focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights, newborn survival and adolescent health. Grants are co-financed by the World Bank and directed to identified national priorities. Contributing to the GFF would align with Australia's regional priorities, given the GFF's support for government and community-based initiatives in ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. GFF partners and donors include Canada, Norway, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Japan and private donors. With an initial pledge to the GFF, Australia could make an important contribution to an effective global initiative working to improve equity. This year, Côte d'Ivoire, Germany, the Netherlands and the World Bank launched a campaign to raise at least US \$800 million and put women, children and adolescents at the centre of development.<sup>14</sup> The World Health Summit in Berlin next month will provide an opportunity for leaders in global health to address future challenges for women, children and adolescents.

## Work with partners to promote accelerated action on gender equality

Australia's new International Development Policy puts greater emphasis on respectful listening, engaging civil society, locally-led solutions and transformative policy. These approaches are critical in efforts to advance gender equality.

Australia needs to continue to encourage partners to take bold action on gender. Together with like-minded countries, Australia should advocate through our position on the boards of multilateral banks, funds and UN agencies to raise the bar for gender equality. In many global forums, we are seeing a pushback and some regression against the rights of women and people of diverse genders. Climate change, conflict and other global crises will likely increase vulnerability and poor health for women and marginalised populations.

Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security is an important foundation for international engagement and action. Ongoing advocacy and support for gender equality from Australia is vital. Multilateral organisations such as Gavi, the World Health Organization, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria and the Stop TB Partnership provide funding for health system strengthening to improve policies and address barriers to services. These initiatives help to drive the transformational change necessary for gender equality, but are often piecemeal and underfunded.

COVID-19 disproportionately affected women. With so many women globally working in the informal sector and in low-paid, insecure jobs, women experienced a more significant loss of employment and income compared to men. As schools and childcare closed, the burden of unpaid care work increased

for women. COVID-19 increased gender-based violence, with reports of domestic violence surging globally during lockdown periods.<sup>15</sup>

The gender gap in food insecurity more than doubled between 2019 (49 million) and 2021 (126 million), as girls and women across the world found themselves disproportionately hit by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on livelihoods, income and access to nutritious food.<sup>16</sup> In low- and middle-income countries of the Indo-Pacific, nutrition challenges remain, despite economic progress in recent decades. Food systems and rising living costs mean that in many countries close to Australia, ultra-processed unhealthy foods are often the easiest option. These foods fail to provide essential nutrients and can be dangerously high in salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats.

Bilateral initiatives funded by DFAT to support health system strengthening, social protection and governance have been important entry points to address gender disparities in countries and communities more broadly. In the Pacific, where almost two-thirds of women and girls experience violence at the hand of a family member or intimate partner,<sup>17</sup> action and support from Australia is critical. Gender issues may not always be an immediate and visible priority for governments in our region, particularly if Australia engages primarily with senior officials in male-dominated power systems. Good practice development programs should seek out broad views and engage in consultation with marginalised populations.

Australia should support and partner with women's rights organisations in the region, and civil society organisations with a good track record on gender equality. Australia should work with partners to promote safe and creative ways to engage women in development and humanitarian programs, security activities and efforts to bolster trade. As we work towards a safer world for all – and remain cognisant of global challenges and threats – Australia needs to work with partners to uphold the rights of all women and girls.

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<sup>1</sup> OECD: [www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/](http://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/)

<sup>2</sup> Percival, V et al 2023, 'The Lancet Commission on peaceful societies through health equity and gender equality'. <https://www.thelancet.com/commission/peace-health-equity-gender-equality>

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organisation, 2021 'Closing the leadership gap: gender equity and leadership in the global health and care workforce', Policy Action paper

<sup>4</sup> Sloane, J et al 2022 'It's Time to Build a Resilient Care Ecosystem for Asia and the Pacific' November 9, 2022. The Asia Foundation

<sup>5</sup> <https://cambodia.ohchr.org/en/issues/gender-equality-and-human-rights>

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Population Fund. 'My Body is My Body, My Life is My Life: Sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people in Asia and the Pacific', UNFPA, Bangkok, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> National Press Club Address, 2023, 'Australian interests in a regional balance of power', 17 April

<sup>8</sup> OECD, 2021, 'Development Co-operation Tips Tools Insights Practices: In practice - a feminist foreign policy to advance gender equality globally'

<sup>9</sup> UN Women, 2022, 'Feminist foreign policies: An introduction'

<sup>10</sup> Williams, Amanda 2021, 'Women's pain is routinely underestimated, and gender stereotypes are to blame' The Conversation

<sup>11</sup> Stop TB Partnership, 2020, 'Gender and TB: Investment Package'

<sup>12</sup> [www.stoptb.org/prioritize-people-human-rights-gender/communities-rights-and-gender-crg-resources](http://www.stoptb.org/prioritize-people-human-rights-gender/communities-rights-and-gender-crg-resources)

<sup>13</sup> [www.gatesfoundation.org/goalkeepers/report/2023-report/#MelindaEssay](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/goalkeepers/report/2023-report/#MelindaEssay)

<sup>14</sup> Deliver the Future: <https://www.globalfinancingfacility.org/deliver-future-c%3%B4te-d%E2%80%99ivoire-germany-netherlands-and-world-bank-launch-campaign-deliver-healthier>

<sup>15</sup> Dempere J, Grassa R. 2023 'The impact of COVID-19 on women's empowerment: A global perspective'. Journal of Global Health

<sup>16</sup> UNICEF, 2023, 'Undernourished and Overlooked: A Global Nutrition Crisis in Adolescent Girls and Women'. UNICEF Child Nutrition Report Series

<sup>17</sup> Scott, Kellie, 2023 'Why the women of Papua New Guinea need men to help end domestic violence' ABC Everyday [www.abc.net.au/everyday/papua-new-guinea-women-share-experiences-of-domestic-violence/102092566](http://www.abc.net.au/everyday/papua-new-guinea-women-share-experiences-of-domestic-violence/102092566)