

Submission for the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's new International Gender Equality Strategy

(Public submission)

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Australia's new International Gender Equality Policy needs to highlight the intrinsic importance of women's empowerment and the urgent need to address the persistent social, economic, and political gender-based inequalities that women still face today. **Australia needs to demonstrate leadership in our region and globally in systematic change to address gender bias and restrictive norms.**

In this submission we acknowledge that gender is a social construct, and a continuum. However, the focus of this submission is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations (UN) and particularly SDG 5 which aims to "achieve gender equality and **empower all women and girls**".

Gender equality should not be seen as an 'add-on' to health and development interventions but rather as a state that **fundamentally shapes and determines health outcomes and well-being for everyone**. Public programs need to embed gender into every aspect, using gender as the underpinning focus for policymaking, design, implementation, and evaluation. Australia needs to develop evidence-based policies that we and other nations and their leaders can use to guide gender transformative change.

A key message this policy should convey is that **we can no longer sit in "a deafening silence"; we need to drive change**¹. In my research in Bangladesh, I asked a woman about the value of a woman's contribution to decision making and she said, "A little less, isn't it? *Because they are girls*"². I look forward to the day when that is no longer the response.

Australia's new gender equality strategy needs to be grounded in a human rights-based approach. Gender Equality was embedded into international human rights law by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and yet progress remains slow. A human right approach would include strengthening the capabilities of government or "duty bearers" to commit to gender equality, ensuring community awareness of our rights, and empowering and enabling everyone to claim their rights.

Gender equality is a prerequisite for health and wellbeing for all. Gender is one of the most significant contributing factors and social determinants for health across the lifespan, yet **gender is often not fully considered in health**³. The 2015 "Gender equality, norms, and health" *Lancet* series, highlighted the continued low effort and impact that had been achieved at this intersection, despite compelling evidence that gender equality improves health and wellbeing⁴.

Summary of key of messages:

- **Embed gender transformative change in all programmatic approaches**
- **Place women's empowerment as a right and goal in itself**
- **Fund research and programs that promote gender equality**
- **Support expertise in gender research**
- **Generate robust data and evidence for best practice in gender transformative approaches**

What are international gender equality priorities?

To place women's empowerment at the forefront as a fundamental right and goal in and of itself

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals aim to leave no one behind; however, vast differences between men and women remain. Empowerment is key to reversing this and can be described as being

¹ Lane R. Sarah Hawkes: shining a gender lens on global health. *The Lancet*. 2019;393(10189):2385.

² Kirkwood et al Women's participation in household decision-making in rural Bangladesh: Qualitative findings from Shonjibon Cash and Counselling Trial baseline process evaluation Preprint DOI [10.31235/osf.io/nzwuf](https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/nzwuf) Aug 2022

³ Heise L, Greene ME, Opper N, Stavropoulou M, Harper C, Nascimento M, et al. Gender inequality and restrictive gender norms: framing the challenges to health. *The Lancet*. 2019;393(10189):2440-54.

⁴ Darmstadt GL, Heise L, Gupta GR, Henry S, Cislighi B, Greene ME, et al. Why now for a Series on gender equality, norms, and health? *The Lancet*. 2019;393(10189):2374-7.

the process by which people expand their ability to make strategic life choices⁵. Sustainable Development Goal 5 focuses on gender equality and aims to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere. However, achieving gender equality is also integral to all the 17 goals. **Women's empowerment should be seen as a fundamental goal and valued as an end in itself, not just as a tool for achieving other objectives.** Empowering women is a necessary and critical step in achieving gender equality.

To recognise and address the link between gender inequalities and health outcomes

Gender inequality has health-related consequences that disproportionately affect women. Women in low and middle-income countries endure significantly more gender inequalities, and these lead to worse health outcomes and to higher rates of neonatal and under-five mortality. The gender-based disadvantages start when young women are reliant on the male earner to seek treatment or obtain medicine, cannot access family planning, or do not have agency to make decisions about when and how many children to have. The most common cause of death for girls aged 15-19 years is pregnancy-related complications, and the primary reason for not seeking care is the cost⁶. There are **recognised causal pathways between women's empowerment and health outcomes**, however, several systematic reviews^{7 8 9}, demonstrate that we need more robust data and rigorous methodology to demonstrate the best way forward.

To improve women's nutrition and food security

Women experience poor nutrition disproportionately more often than men; sixty per cent of those with chronic hunger are female. Research has shown that women in nearly two-thirds of 141 countries surveyed experienced more food insecurity than men. Women have different nutritional requirements during pregnancy and there are sociocultural influences on nutrition, making gender inequality a cause and consequence of malnutrition. This situation is evident by differences in the intrahousehold allocation of food, where in South Asia a woman's lower social status and lack of bargaining power within the household can see women eat least and eat last¹⁰. A large and growing body of literature has described that **gender inequity is a major contributing factor to ongoing food and nutrition insecurity**, thus highlighting the need to promote gender equality to achieve adequate nutrition for all. Much evidence supports women's empowerment as a central component in addressing malnutrition and improving maternal and child nutritional status.

To eliminate gender-based violence

Gender-based violence against women and girls is a major public health challenge. Gender-based violence occurs across all nations and socioeconomic levels but is more widespread when women lack education, financial independence, and decision-making power. Young girls are at risk when forced into early marriage. Globally, in 2020, data revealed that **650 million girls had been married before 18 years of age**, equating to one in five young women, adversely affecting the lives of twelve million girls each year⁶. The highest rates of early marriage are found in Sub-Saharan Africa (38%), South Asia (30%) and Latin America (25%). A report from the United Nations on gender equality states that many countries today have no legislation on gender-based violence or sexual harassment, and 37 countries exempt perpetrators of rape if they are married to the victim¹¹. This report also described that almost one in five women had in the last 12 months experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner, though these figures are vastly

⁵ Naila Kabeer, Resources, agency, achievements: reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment, *Development and Change*, 30 (3) 1999

⁶ Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies: Taking stock of maternal health. United Nations Children's Fund; 2019 2019.

⁷ Harris-Fry H, Shrestha N, Costello A, Saville NM. Determinants of intra-household food allocation between adults in South Asia – a systematic review. *International Journal for Equity in Health*. 2017;16(1):107.

⁸ Santoso MV, Kerr RB, Hodinott J, Garigipati P, Olmos S, Young SL. Role of Women's Empowerment in Child Nutrition Outcomes: A Systematic Review. *Advances in Nutrition*. 2019;10(6):1138-51.

⁹ Cunningham K, Ruel M, Ferguson E, Uauy R. Women's empowerment and child nutritional status in South Asia: a synthesis of the literature. *Maternal & Child Nutrition*. 2015;11(1):1-19.

¹⁰ Harris-Fry H, Shrestha N, Costello A, Saville NM. Determinants of intra-household food allocation between adults in South Asia – a systematic review. *International Journal for Equity in Health*. 2017;16(1):107.

¹¹ Turning Promises into Action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. New York, NY, USA: UN Women; 2018.

underreported⁶. If a female child is born into poverty, she is more likely to be forced to marry at a young age, and therefore not receive an education, give birth at an early age and is at higher risk of birth related complications and intimate partner violence.

To recognise, reduce, and redistribute women's unpaid work burden

Women experience a greater burden of domestic labour and care work. This is worse in low and middle-income countries where for example, collecting water and fuel or exposure to solid fuel smoke for cooking has an extremely adverse effect on health for women and children. Globally women do two and half times more domestic and unpaid care work than men, with the highest ratio being in South Asia, where women do six and half times more^{12 13}. The International Labor Organization's "5 Rs of decent care work": include recognising, reducing, and redistributing this workload and increase the rewards and representation of paid care workers. A *UN Women* Report recently highlighted the fact that the global economy depends on the unpaid and underpaid work primarily carried out by women, care work is treated like a limitless commodity – used without cost or consequence.

To keep girls in school

When girls receive an education, they gain knowledge and confidence, they are less likely to marry young, will delay having children, but have healthier children when they start their families, and experience better health across the lifespan. Educated girls are more likely to be employed and be able to earn income and financial independence. They are more likely to be able to participate in decision making, build better futures for themselves and their families. Educating girls is a powerful tool for empowerment and health.

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

Gender transformative approaches

We need to move beyond gender sensitive approaches and start to address the root cause of gender-based inequities. Gender transformative approaches aim to transform harmful gender norms, roles, and relations through the inclusion of strategies to foster progressive changes in power relationships between men and women¹⁴.

The gender integration continuum begins with being gender blind through to being gender aware through to gender transformative. Our goal should be gender transformative approaches, to achieve better outcomes (see the figure follow).

We need to be the champions of gender transformative change by way of:

- **Multiplicity:** to affect outcomes beyond the specific health outcome of focus
- **Sustainability:** to show measured change at the individual, community, and institutional level that will lead to effective change.
- **Spreadability:** to address gender discriminatory attitudes and behaviours that harm health and either directly or indirectly effect change to individuals beyond the intervention
- **Scalability:** to be expanded or replicated to a larger geographical region or population¹⁵

We need to measure gender transformative change by:

- **Agency:** individual or collective capacities, attitudes, critical reflection, assets, actions, and access to services
- **Relational:** intrahousehold and beyond, the dynamic embedded within relationships between people in the home, marketplace, community, groups, and organisations

¹² Turning Promises into Action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. New York, NY, USA: UN Women; 2018.

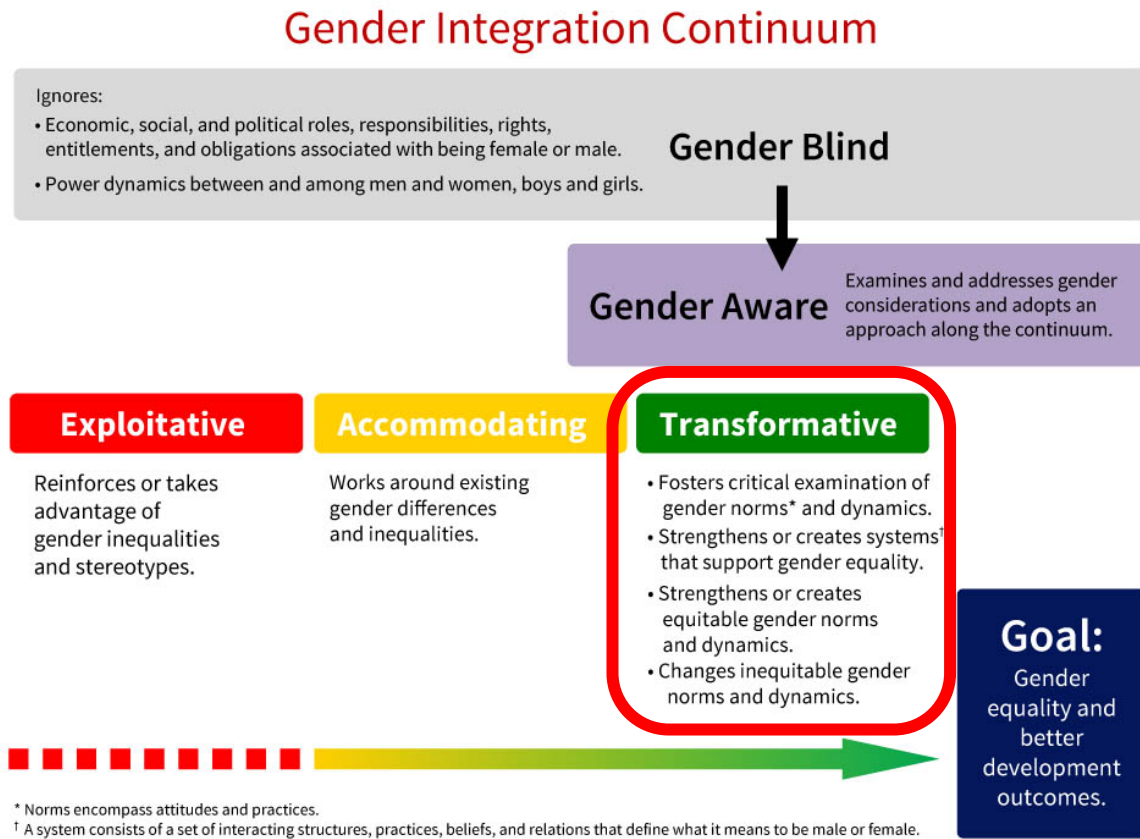
¹³ Unpaid Care Work and Women's Economic Empowerment Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; 2017.

¹⁴ Rosemary Morgan "Gender Analysis within Health Systems Research in LMIC", JHSPH, 2023

¹⁵ Jhpiego / Johns Hopkins Gender Transformative Approach Course, July 2023

- **Structural:** informal or formal institutions rules and practices ¹⁶

Gender transformative approaches need to be **co-designed** incorporating a participatory action methodology inclusive of individuals, community, and local organisations, strengthening local leadership and capacity.



Source: Interagency Gender Working Group, 2009; updated 2019.

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

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy aimed at integrating a fundamental gender perspective into all aspects of policy, program development, implementation, and evaluation. Gender mainstreaming seeks to ensure that the needs, priorities, and experiences of women and men are considered and addressed in all areas of society, including governance, education, healthcare, employment, and beyond. Here are key aspects of gender mainstreaming:

Gender integrated into all policy: Australia can urgently adopt gender mainstreaming through integrating gender into all levels of policy (government, international agreements, organisational). Beginning from the planning stages through to implementation and monitoring. There is still an urgent need to place gender firmly in the design, methodology and implementation of public health policy. Moreover, programs and policies should empower women as a central tenet and not only a means to achieve other development and health outcomes. Empowering women should be an intrinsic goal in itself.

¹⁶ Martinez and Wu 2009, Morgan 2014

Incorporating Gender Analysis : Gender mainstreaming begins with a gender analysis, which involves assessing how policies, programs, and initiatives impact women and men differently. It examines gender roles, norms, and inequalities to identify potential gender disparities.

Research-based evidence is critically needed that will lead to the design, implementation, and eventually scale-up of the most effective interventions to improve women's empowerment. Future research should carefully select project-specific women's empowerment indicators in context-specific ways and use a longitudinal study design to analyse pathways of impact. Then implement this evidence into structured action.

Generating robust data: SDG 5 aims to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” and the data suggests that we are not on track, however we do not have enough data. Only 48% of the data needed to even monitor SDG 5 is collected. We need to collect better and more data that is both sex-disaggregated data and intersectional and thus includes income, age, disability, gender identity, race, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, migratory status, geographic. Researchers, policy makers and programmers need to work together to form a consensus to then address the lack of data and generate better data to inform better policy and programme decisions and investment.

Inclusive Decision-Making: encourages the participation of women and men in decision-making processes, involving women in leadership roles and ensuring that women's perspectives are heard and considered in policy and programs. Programmers should use inclusive strategies working with men, women, boys, and girls to advance gender equality for all. Men and boys must play a vital part in solving gender inequality.

What should the government consider when developing the new international gender equality strategy?

- **Fund research** that helps researchers, programmers and policy makers access the appropriate tools and resources that are needed to undertake and embed gender transformative approaches. We want the change but how do we go about it? DFAT should expect all recipients of research/program funding to explicitly address gender from design and inception to implementation in every program
- **Create Gender expertise** – build and support our gender focused researchers/policy makers/experts
- **Generate and contribute to evidence** for best practices for programmers and policy makers when assessing women's empowerment in all interventions that aim to empower women in low and middle-income countries.
- **Generate evidence for best practices** for programmers and policy makers when assessing and integrating women's empowerment in public health interventions in particular for women in low and middle-income countries. Evidence on the association between women's empowerment and many health and development outcomes is inconclusive, mainly due to poor research methods, thus reiterating the need to clearly define and measure women's empowerment from programmatic inception.

Gender equality is when people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. Gender equality is a fundamental human right and prerequisite for the health and wellbeing for all. However, gender inequality persists globally, and many challenges remain, with women disproportionately bearing the burden of poor health. To achieve gender equality, we need to adopt a gender equitable approach, this includes addressing gender inequalities that limit a person's ability to access opportunities to achieve better health outcomes, education and economic opportunities based on their gender. We welcome this opportunity to contribute to Australia's new **International Gender Equality Strategy**. The University of Sydney is a research-intensive institution with a proud history of global leadership in education and research, and we at the Sydney School of Public Health look forward to working with DFAT and advancing gender equality globally.