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## About RiseUp! Young Women's Leadership and Advocacy Initiative in Asia-Pacific (RiseUp!)

Supported by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the YWCA's RiseUp! young women's leadership model is a peer-to-peer approach that is led by young women, for young women, and supports them to claim their rights as part of a life-long leadership journey. RiseUp! provides peer-to-peer leadership and advocacy training to young women and supports them to build knowledge, skills and networks to take action on issues that are important in their lives, such as violence against women and girls, sexual and reproductive health and rights, climate justice and gender equality. It creates safe spaces for young women to build knowledge and confidence, challenging the human rights violations and negative attitudes that are barriers to the full realisation of their leadership capabilities. Through this, RiseUp! supports young women leaders to work together, share their knowledge and leadership with others, and inspire all young women to use their voices and act together for social change.

## The RiseUp! Approach to Consultations for DFAT's new International Gender Equality Strategy

The RiseUp! leadership model utilises three key approaches:

- **Peer-to-peer leadership and advocacy training** for young women to build knowledge, skills, and networks to advocate on important issues in their lives.
- **Creating safe spaces for young women (and women of all ages)** to build confidence, share knowledge and inspire all young women to use their voices and advocate together for social change.
- **Implementing intergenerational leadership** and supporting young women to claim their rights as part of a life-long leadership journey.

**These approaches were embedded into the RiseUp! consultations** for DFAT's new International Gender Equality Strategy (the Gender Equality Strategy) to **ensure that the opportunity was part of young women's leadership journey by raising awareness of the priorities in their lives and the lives of young women in their communities.** In addition, **women leaders of all ages were engaged in intergenerational dialogue** in line with the RiseUp! approach, **providing valuable insight into the Gender Equality Strategy consultations and sharing their knowledge and priorities** with young women leaders. **Safe spaces were created in both consultations by providing the consultation prompts ahead of discussions** to enable all participants to meaningfully contribute to conversations; **respecting confidentiality** and ensuring that no personal details or stories were shared during conversations; **respecting the input of all** and facilitating conversations through **active listening**, summarising key points and continuously providing space to ensure each person was heard accurately; **actively building on key points and conversation** to ensure that each person was able to provide their perspective on key priorities and recommendations for the Gender Equality Strategy.

Consultations for the Gender Equality Strategy took place in two parts<sup>1</sup>:

1. Consultation with 11 RiseUp! Young Women Leads in the Asia-Pacific region
2. Consultation with 2 YWCA Women Leaders; a Young Woman Lead (who participated in Consultation 1); Professor Katrina Lee-Koo Director, Monash University Gender, Peace and Security, who has undertaken extensive research on the RiseUp! Leadership Initiative; and Dr Suchi Gaur, World YWCA Director Global Engagement and Impact.

## Outcomes of RiseUp! Consultations for DFAT's new International Gender Equality Strategy

Conversations during the consultation process were organic, moving between questions as the discussion built. Outcomes have been grouped here in line with DFAT's four prompting questions.

### 1. What are the gender equality priorities you see over the next 5-10 years?

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#### 1. Changing harmful social norms to ensure safety and security.

Young women discussed the challenges faced by harmful social norms- women are **"afraid to speak freely, they are dominated by their husband, father, uncles"**. Young women in all five countries agreed that young women, girls, and women of all ages continue to be subjected to unequal standards such as more **restricted freedom of movement** than their male siblings or family members, **restricted freedom to voice their priorities, opinions**, and to **make decisions** about their own lives including **if and when to marry**, and **employment opportunities**. Discussions also touched on these **harmful social norms and unequal power dynamics as the foundation for gender-based violence** in the home, in the community, and during conflict and crises.

Violence against women increases in times of conflict, with the importance of young women understanding self-care and mental health issues seen as a priority. Of note, **early marriage is used by some families as a way of protecting young men from joining guerilla groups**. This presents a different perspective on early marriage as a protective mechanism used by families for girls, however, **girls and women are still caught in the middle of armed groups and families'** coping strategies to protect their sons.

RiseUp! research findings confirmed the prevalence of violence against women and girls as a key priority, stressing the specific ways young women are affected, including the prevalence of **early enforced marriages as a result of crises**; young women disproportionately experiencing street harassment, and intimate partner violence (including young women who are not married and not living with intimate partners). Research also highlighted that **living in cultures of patriarchy stops women from leading, feeling safe, and speaking up on issues** that they are affected by due to fear of experiencing violence.

#### 2. Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

Discussion of SRHR included both knowledge of young women's sexual and reproductive rights, and how to **safely access appropriate, stigma-free services**. Discussion included the need for intersectionality and

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<sup>1</sup> The names of women leaders have been withheld to ensure their confidentiality in the consultation process as part of RiseUp!'s commitment to creating safe spaces.

the **specific challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ communities, rural and remote communities, and young women living with disabilities**. It was noted that where one or more of these identities intersect, the challenges faced are multiplied. Across all five countries, young women stated that there was a concentration of programs and services in urban areas and not enough in rural and remote areas.

SRHR is also a **priority for women of all ages, including knowledge and services for women experiencing menopause**. The **intersections of crises (climate crisis, economic crisis, and conflict) on SRHR** were also discussed, including the impacts on menstrual health and hygiene, access to SRHR products and services, and the lack of opportunity to gain essential knowledge of SRHR delivered through civil society programs.

### 3. Safe and affordable access to technology and bridging the gender digital divide (including the rural and urban divide)

Young women stated the **absolute necessity of access to safe technology for all women, stating “cell phones have gone from a luxury to a necessity”**. The conversation looked at **access to technology from several perspectives including connectivity to essential services** (especially online education when crises prevent young women from attending education face-to-face) and **connection to online communities**. There was discussion of the **additional physical barriers to access faced by rural and remote young women, and young women in all their diversities, as well as the social barriers faced by LGBTQIA+ communities** who face huge risks in connecting with the online local or global LGBTQIA+ community. In many countries, young women in remote areas have to walk to the tops of mountains to get internet access, not only severely restricting access but often placing them at higher risk of encountering violence from male community members. In addition, **technology was seen as an effective way to engage young women in discussions on gender equality, citing the digitisation of RiseUp! training as a good example of this**. Young women can engage in training remotely on a safe platform created by YWCA and only for use by YWCA members. For many young women, however, **victim blaming is prevalent when they experience abuse online, stopping them from telling an adult and gaining support**.

### 4. Education, vocational training, and decent employment.

Young women in all five countries prioritise education, training and decent employment. In Bangladesh, **access to education for girls was seen as a preventative to child marriage**, as well as **child marriage stalling girl's education opportunities**. This became an even more pressing priority in countries where conflict has significantly reduced employment opportunities available to young women - **“even those who are secondary educated cannot find employment – they are desperately waiting for opportunities. They have so much potential”**. It was specifically noted that **young women in rural areas with no or limited access to education or vocational skills have no choice but to “become farmers and get married. Decision-making for women is limited – there is no opportunity for gender equality”**. In addition, many women have no paid work and are expected to participate in the informal economy (farming and selling homegrown/homemade goods at local markets). **Women who are in paid work are not receiving the same pay as their male counterparts**. Inflation and increasing commodity prices are affecting women, making equal pay for women an ever more urgent priority. The young women emphasised the importance of allocating resources and offering support or opportunities for vocational and skills-oriented training for their peers.

**Young people are leaving villages to seek economic empowerment in cities or abroad when they can**. “In villages, only the grandparents and little ones are left. Education has been disturbed and there are limited opportunities for young women to find jobs, leading to an **increased risk of trafficking and exploitation”**.

## 5. Increasing women's representation in leadership roles.

Young women in all five countries agreed that **women of all ages are underrepresented in leadership**, particularly in decision-making and political leadership – however young women's representation is extremely low. **Women's engagement in decision-making and issues that affect their lives in political spaces at national, district, and community levels is seen as a way to address harmful social norms and redress long-standing patriarchal societies.**

## 2. What do you see as the most effective approaches for achieving gender equality?

### 1. Investment in leadership, intergenerational leadership

Research led by Katrina Lee-Koo (Monash University) highlighted that leadership training gives knowledge and confidence for women to take up opportunities. During research for RiseUp! women leaders in a range of roles were interviewed. All had done some kind of formal leadership training either funded by the Australian government, an NGO or another international organisation. These interviews led to the powerful insight **"Not every woman who comes through a leadership program will be in a leadership role, but all young women in leadership positions have gone through formal leadership training"**.

Further, Dr Suchi Gaur from World YWCA positioned leadership as much more than training **"Leadership is not service delivery, but investment in a journey"**, citing examples of women leaders who had been part of the RiseUp! model and are now holding leadership positions across the World YWCA and beyond.

**Intergenerational leadership is key to this approach.** Research also found that peacebuilding is being reconceptualised in the RiseUp! model as intergenerational leadership requiring sustained partnerships over generations, not only during conflict but also in preventing conflict and the aftermath of conflict.

### 2. Intersectionality

Young Women Leaders in all five countries see **intersectionality as the key approach to achieving gender equality**. **"Gender equality cannot move forward if there is no intersectionality"**. Intersectionality was understood as inclusion in programs and in the community/society of women of all ages, the inclusion of women from all castes and classes, accessibility for women living with disabilities, and inclusion of gender diversity. Engaging young women advocates and role models is seen as a strong approach to ensuring inclusion **"When the community sees young women role models and young women talking about such topics (as priorities mentioned above), it is empowering to other community members"**. Further, inclusion in the home was seen as a foundation for young women to become advocates in the community **"When a woman is valued in her family, she becomes a woman who can speak up on other issues. Women's participation in parliament has increased. Women's opinions are valued."** Taking a co-created approach (as young women have experienced in RiseUp!) with women of all ages was also seen as effective. **"Creating a safe space for all women together to raise awareness about what gender equality is and the need to have solidarity among ages. Having discussions and consultations with all women is important, there is no "one size fits all – we must bring all voices together"**.

### 3. Change in informal or private spaces

Katrina Lee-Koo (Monash University) shared that one of the most effective approaches to change is the work done in informal and private spaces. **"We might see governance changes and laws enacted, but it is the work**

young women do with communities and schools that really make a major difference. For example, schools are an enormous protective mechanism against early enforced marriage. Strong family support enables access to education and services". This work in informal spaces includes a commitment to localisation and co-creation, as top-down or service delivery models can actually leave women and girls less empowered and less likely to meet leadership outcomes.

All young women agreed that **"women can't achieve gender equality by themselves"**. Engaging men and boys in conversations with women and girls was seen as an effective approach if it was facilitated well. **All young women see this as the most effective approach to challenging harmful social norms that do not allow women to participate equally in the home, community, education, workplace, political life and other leadership roles.**

### 3. Micro funding

Funding smaller grant amounts directly to young women is one of the most effective approaches to enabling a localised and co-created response to gender equality priorities. Dr Suchi Gaur shared, **"Young women know best what they need.** We help them to reduce the risk, but there also must be trust in them, not only in us as organisations. When young women have ownership of funds, their impact is much wider than formally agreed. **There is a need to let go of financial power.** There is a need for decolonising funding. For feminist funding".

### 3. How can Australia best support gender equality internationally?

#### 1. Australia can be a lot bolder around defending human rights defenders

Australia can make sure that **gender equality principles are embedded across different departments,** especially those that may not consider gender as a priority, such as security and defence. In countries where women's rights are eroded, Australia can do more.

#### Combatting anti-rights campaigners

Anti-rights campaigners entering women's spaces is a critical issue that must be addressed. **Women are not safe to speak or lead on the issues that are of utmost priority,** especially sexual reproductive health rights and gender-based violence. Civil society is coming together to address this, but governments must do more to stop anti-rights campaigners entering women's spaces.

#### Technology and Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV).

The speed with which technology is progressing makes it difficult for civil society to keep pace. Advocacy needs to progress with policymakers to go beyond digital literacy and to talk more about TFGBV and AI. Scams and fake images generated by AI are having hugely detrimental impacts on women and girls, but it is not being addressed.

#### Holding governments to account

**Enacting women's rights in law** is an approach that is needed to ensure gender equality. "Even though we have to speak up and tell our stories, there are no laws to protect women's rights – we know every country has their own issues due to gender equality. Each country must put laws in place to do this". **Young Women would like to see Australia support the enactment of laws and hold governments to account through regional and bilateral mechanisms.** Conversations, strategies, and approaches need to be intersectional, and human rights for all should be at the core of decisions.

There needs to be more financial and political investment for young women and women in the areas of self-care, mental health, and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and in the creation of safe spaces.

## 2. Strengthening the inclusion and meaningful participation of young women in strategies and mainstreaming across international programs as well as within government

APAC is the most youthful region in the world, with 25% aged between 15-29. **Ensuring young women in all their diversities (including young women with disabilities) are specifically and intentionally included in language, approaches and monitoring of gender equality is crucial.** This includes a commitment to intersectionality amongst women of all ages – having young women without an intersectional approach is not enough.

Gender mainstreaming is still being seen as a tick box across departments and ministries. **A more robust gender analysis should be applied to all program development across departments and ministries.** Focussed gendered impact analysis should ensure that the impact of action on different genders is understood and prioritised to create policies in each sphere of work (such as defence and security)- not just health, education, climate, and those seen as gendered issues.