

Policy Brief

Promoting gender equality through Australia's International Development Program

Gender inequality is the root cause of many injustices including violence, exclusion from decision-making and disproportionately low access to education and livelihood opportunities. Our partners across the Pacific, Asia, Africa and the Middle East tell us that harmful social norms within patriarchal structures perpetuate discriminatory beliefs and practices and undermine human rights. These attitudes and practices are deeply rooted in many societies and will take transformative approaches, political and social will, and financial investment to address.

Our partners' priority issues on gender equality

The issues most commonly raised by our partners are:

- **Violence against women and girls** which remains persistently high. Globally, one in three women across their lifetime are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner.¹ Rates of violence are up to ten times worse for women and children with disabilities.²
- **Women's leadership** and participation in decision-making is not only a human right but crucial to good development outcomes. Yet in many countries, significant barriers to women's decision-making and leadership occur at household, community and national levels.
- **Access to education:** Poverty and lack of access to basic needs such as water and good nutrition are general barriers to accessing education, but girls are disproportionately affected due to gender roles, expectations and responsibilities such as care and domestic duties.
- **Women's economic empowerment:** Many women and girls are still unable to own and control resources, to access decent work or equal pay. They are limited by unpaid care work and the undervaluing of women's labour. Women participating in economic activities also become vulnerable to various forms of discrimination and abuse.
- **Access to legal recourse** for survivors of violence are limited or non-existent in many communities. Access to justice is sometimes limited to customary or traditional processes.
- **Child marriage** remains prevalent in many countries and is driven by poverty, social norms, customary laws and the lack of policies to protect children.
- **Support for women's health:** There is an ongoing need for more resourcing and support for pre-natal and maternal care, health and nutrition services, and the needs of menstruating women and girls.
- **Women and girls' greater vulnerability in situations of conflict, emergency and humanitarian crises, including protracted crises.**³ To enable a gender responsive and equitable humanitarian response, greater investment in capacity building on gender lens programming for local humanitarian actors is needed. It is also crucial to provide rapid response funding in the immediate aftermath of an emergency to prevent it from deteriorating into a more serious crisis, and to provide multi-year funding to address protracted crises.
- **Women and girls' greater vulnerability to the impacts of climate change** because of the increased frequency and/or severity of extreme weather-related disasters, additional social and economic pressures created by climate change, and gendered roles such as collecting water and firewood or caring for others.

Principles and approaches for promoting gender equality

Our experience in supporting communities over the last 59 years has highlighted the following interrelated principles and approaches that are important in promoting gender equality outcomes:

Intersectionality and inclusion: We recognise the diversity of identities and intersectional experiences of all people in the communities we work with. We also recognise the vulnerabilities that may arise from conflict, disasters, historical injustices and inter-generational trauma. Addressing gender inequalities must be done from a broader, inclusive and intersectional lens. This means considering the diversity of gendered experiences and responding to unique needs across varying contexts.

Transformative approaches: Gender equality can only be achieved through approaches that recognise the need for profound changes in power structures and systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice. Such approaches are grounded on ensuring strategic gender interests, prioritising the wellbeing of all people and focusing on changing

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harmful and discriminatory social norms. Engaging 'norm setters' such as community and religious leaders to be champions of gender equality, for example engaging church leaders with the Theology of Gender Equality, has been a key success strategy in changing these social norms.

Community-led solutions: The most successful and sustainable development programs happen when the people most vulnerable to experiencing poverty and marginalisation, especially women, are empowered to lead their own individual development and that of their community. In other words, it's when decisions are made by the people closest to and most affected by the issues we seek to address. In doing this, local communities often benefit from the support of local civil society groups. In many countries, churches are a key civil society actor. In the Pacific, 90% of the population are religious and the mainline churches form the largest social infrastructure across the region. Church-based organisations have the potential to play a highly influential role in changing social norms.

Localisation and partnership: Values-driven partnerships that prioritise strong reciprocal relationships with local organisations are key to creating meaningful change. Our experience has shown that mutual sharing of skills, knowledge, risk-bearing and decision-making are important elements in reaching common aims and transformative change.

Recommendations

We urge the Australian Government to:

1. Commit to inclusive and intersectional development that prioritises women's equality, leadership and prevention of gender-based violence, including transformative initiatives to change harmful and discriminatory norms and laws, and to enable access to opportunities to meaningful and active participation.
2. Prioritise and increase flexible support for locally-led organisations to promote gender equality and transformative approaches, and recognise the role of local communities and civil society organizations including churches and faith-based organisations as key actors in promoting gender equality.
3. Commit at least 15% of Australia's Official Development Assistance to initiatives with gender equality outcomes as the principal objective, in addition to 80% of initiatives with gender equality as a significant outcome.
4. Address the interlinked and compounding effects of poverty, climate change, conflict, humanitarian disasters and other drivers that increase the vulnerability of women and girls.
5. Enhance rapid response approaches and mechanisms to enable faster release of initial funding to locally based humanitarian actors in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, including through existing vehicles such as the Australian Humanitarian Partnership and the Anticipatory Action pilot, to strengthen protection to women, girls and other groups at greatest risk during a disaster.
6. Strengthen Australia's climate policies in line with our commitment to the Paris Agreement targets on emissions and climate finance, in recognition of the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and girls.
7. Through DFAT, strengthen the capability of all development actors to promote gender equality by:
 - a. Strengthening capacity building and technical expertise on gender equality within Australian aid-funded development and humanitarian programs, including by providing program partners with greater access to gender equality experts and supporting gender equality training for all staff.
 - b. Enhancing gender equality training across DFAT and other government departments to strengthen gender equality knowledge and capability and to ensure a consistent and coherent whole-of-government approach.
 - c. Adopting longer program funding cycles (e.g. five years instead of three) to enable more robust and realistic cycles of program implementation, evaluation and learning, leading to better and more sustainable outcomes.
 - d. Supporting government and civil society partners to strengthen gender equality initiatives within the humanitarian–development nexus, including multi-year funding for protracted crises.
 - e. Providing funding for organisational development, capacity building and mentoring that extends beyond direct program/project focus, including on leadership building, systems strengthening, and monitoring and evaluation on gender equality.
 - f. Encouraging risk sharing and indirect cost recovery modalities in both development and humanitarian programming, including through the provision of clear guidelines and technical support.

References:

1. World Health Organisation (2021). [Devastatingly pervasive: 1 in 3 women globally experience violence](#). 2. UN Population Fund (2018). [Five things you didn't know about disability and sexual violence](#). 3. OCHA (2021). Global Humanitarian Overview 2021 – Part 1: Global Trends - [Gender and Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Action](#)