

# A feminist approach to Australian Overseas Development Assistance?

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***Australia is in a timely position to reframe its overseas development assistance program under a feminist foreign policy approach.***

## Summary

Over the past nine years, the Australian aid program has suffered extensive budget cuts, lost significant development expertise within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) after the integration of AusAID, and seen significant reprioritisation of its objectives due to the emergence of Covid-19. Despite these setbacks, however, gender equality and women's empowerment seemingly remain important to the aid program. Why then is a feminist foreign policy needed for Australia and its aid program?

While DFAT must be commended for increasing funding for gender equality in the past decade, Australia is still *below average* compared with other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) donors when it comes to funding for projects which aim to advance gender equality as a principal or significant objective. Also, the 80% target on gender equality is one of the only development targets which consistently has not been met. The Australian aid program largely focuses on 'gender mainstreaming' as a cross cutting issue. While important, gender mainstreaming can easily become a 'tick box' exercise and get lost within broader program objectives (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015).

In 2016 DFAT created an important Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy which gave greater weight to gender equality in DFAT's programming. This is a significant achievement. While the strategy outlines three objectives, the main emphasis is given to women's

economic empowerment – whereby investment in women is portrayed as 'smart economics'. This approach to women's empowerment focuses on connections with businesses, public private partnerships and women's access to credit. While these activities have some value and DFAT was arguably constrained by the Coalition government's priorities at the time, there is scope now, with a change of government, to go beyond neoliberal framings and take a more holistic approach to empowerment.

The time is right to create a feminist aid policy which should sit under a broader feminist foreign policy (FFP) approach (informing aid as well as trade, defence and other foreign policy issues). This could be realised through Australia's overseas aid program by:

- Developing a Feminist Aid Policy and writing a new Gender Strategy which addresses the broader intersectional needs of women, girls and gender diverse individuals – particularly those who are the poorest and most marginalised.
- Recruiting more specialised gender staff and ensuring that each team within DFAT has assistance from specialist staff.
- Setting targets for funding for gender equality as a principal or significant objective, using the OECD DAC marker to go to at least 80% of projects having gender equality as a significant component, and 20% for programs which have gender equality as a principal component.
- Increasing funding for women's rights organisations overseas to at least 5% of the overseas aid budget.
- Recognising that while women's leadership and business involvement has value, there is also a need to focus on the most marginalised and poorest

women who lack access to the most basic of rights.

- Addressing women's rights, not only empowerment – including social, economic and political and civil rights. For example, expanding a narrow understanding of economic empowerment to include rights to land, safe work, social protection, access to healthcare and safety nets.
- Prioritising an intersectional approach to gender equality: including addressing the rights of LGBTIQ+ communities, adolescents, elderly women, those from ethnic minorities and women with disabilities.

## The Global Shift towards Feminist Development and Foreign Policies

While Sweden was the first country to adopt a FFP in 2014, numerous countries have followed suit, including Canada, Mexico, Germany, France and the Netherlands. This group of donors have shifted their aid programs to focus on gender equality and women's rights as an overarching goal. In particular, countries have aimed to increase funding for women's rights organisations and for programs where gender is a principal objective.

Reflections on the development of feminist foreign policies in these countries have demonstrated their worth. A FFP is not merely a matter of paying more attention to women. Rather it is an exercise in disrupting hierarchies and contesting discrimination and disadvantage. As such, the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (2021) defines a FFP as:

*“a political framework centred around the wellbeing of marginalised people and invokes processes of **self-reflection** regarding foreign policy's **hierarchical global systems**...It is a multi-dimensional policy framework that aims to elevate women's and marginalised groups' experiences and agency to **scrutinise the destructive forces of patriarchy, colonisation, heteronormativity, capitalism, racism, imperialism and militarism**”.*

The adoption of a feminist foreign policy has also enabled countries to gain a reputation of being a 'good global citizen' and for being leading change makers across the globe (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2019).

## Gender Equality in the Australian Aid Program

Gender equality has been an important objective of the Australian aid program, and has arguably grown in prominence in recent years (Aggestam et al., 2018). Despite this, Australia is below the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) country average in prioritising spending on gender equality in its aid program. In 2020, 39.8% of Australia's bilateral commitments addressed gender equality as a principal or significant objective compared with the DAC average of 44.6% (OECD, 2022). Countries that have adopted feminist foreign policies have much higher targets, such

as Canada – which has set the goal of gender investments reaching 95% of funding.

In addition, Australia's funding for women's rights organisations overseas has been extremely low. This misses a critical opportunity for driving change. Women's rights organisations have been found to be key drivers of legal and governmental change for gender equality (OECD Gendernet, 2016). In 2020, Australia disbursed just USD 16.7 million to women's rights organisations, compared with the total USD 2.3 billion recorded in OECD disbursements that year (OECD QWIDS, 2022). This represents a paltry 0.72% of the recorded aid budget going to women's rights organisations.

Despite this, within the aid program, there are some excellent examples of programming for holistic women's empowerment which DFAT can build on, such as the new Pacific Women Lead program (\$170 million, 2021-2026).

## Funding Feminism

Prior to the election, Labor committed to:

*“Gender equality and empowerment of women and girls as a key objective, including ensuring at least 80 per cent of Australia's aid investments address gender issues and tackle violence against women and children” (Conroy, 2022).*

DFAT developed their own process of assessing gender equality (through setting the 2014 Making Performance Count target of 80%). It is imperative to ensure that this 80% target is enshrined in the program and adhered to. In addition, it is important that DFAT sets targets against the OECD gender marker as these can be compared internationally and helpfully illustrate whether programs have gender equality as a significant or principal objective.

Targets should be based on OECD DAC reporting and Australia could take a comparable stance to France. In 2019-20, France dedicated a similar amount of funding to gender equality as a significant or principal objective in its aid program (42%) as Australia (39.8%). However in 2021, France developed a law that would commit to dedicating 75% of project funds to gender equality as reported to the OECD DAC by 2025 (with 20% as a principal objective) (Focus 2030, 2022).

Furthermore, even within OECD DAC reporting it is easy to overestimate the extent to which programs include gender as a *significant* contribution (Grabowski and Essick, 2020). Clear targets should be set for Australia's contribution to gender equality programming as a *principal* objective. In 2020, just 6.7% of Australia's bilateral commitments had gender equality as a principal objective. Like France, a minimum 20% target should be set. These measures, combined with a 5% commitment of funding to women's rights organisations as part of the 20 per cent principal objective, are critical to secure funding for meaningful gender equality initiatives.

## Beyond Neoliberal Feminism

It is laudable that DFAT created a 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy' in 2016. Yet, the effectiveness of the strategy towards gender equality is constrained by the fact that it is largely framed within neoliberal terms whereby investment in women is a conduit for economic growth. In this strategy and in subsequent investments, the idea of 'smart economics' is asserted – whereby women's empowerment is seen as a means to an end – for the promotion of economic growth (Chant and Sweetman, 2012). This is not a new idea and was first established in the World Bank's 2012 World Development Report. On the one hand, it is a compelling argument, as outlined in Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy:

*"Achieving gender equality around the world could increase global gross domestic product (GDP) by \$12 trillion in a single decade"* (Global Affairs Canada, 2017, p.3).

Yet, as many feminists have argued, it is essential that women's rights are treated as important goals in and of themselves – and that women's empowerment does not become merely a vehicle to further business interests (Parisi, 2020).

'Smart economics' approaches to women's empowerment focus on increasing women's economic *opportunities* and *entrepreneurship* from a wholly individualised level. While activities such as increasing women's banking linkages and inclusion in business leadership are not negative in and of themselves – the strategy for women's empowerment and gender equality can go beyond this and take a far more holistic approach. With a change of government, there is now scope to develop a new overarching feminist aid strategy and accompanying gender strategy with far more ambitious targets for gender equality that recognises the structural dimensions of patriarchy.

Economic empowerment can also focus on women's economic rights and protections. The aid program can address women's economic rights through promoting social safety nets, land rights, helping states to develop the required social protection infrastructure and through supporting trials of universal basic income and cash transfers.

In addition, structural barriers within global economies should be addressed and their impact on women better understood. For example, the growing feminisation and impoverishment of agricultural workers (Pattnaik et al., 2018) is not going to be addressed through entrepreneurship alone. Neither is the large female work force labouring in exploitative conditions in garment factories and other feminised industries (Mezzadri and Majumder, 2020) going to be addressed through business linkages. There is further scope to expand on unfair gendered divisions of labour, issues of paid parental leave, the support of carers and the state provision of accessible childcare.

In addition to economic rights, addressing women's civil, political and social rights through the aid program is essential. DFAT can continue and upscale the good work which has already been done in preventing sexual and gender based violence and in ensuring women's access to healthcare.

## Decolonising Feminism

It is critical that a feminist aid strategy does not reinforce power inequalities from the Global North to the Global South. As such, the aid program should prioritise learning from and funding local overseas women's rights organisations.

In addition, a FFP and feminist aid policy would consider what harms Australia has done and is doing in the region and how this affects the most vulnerable – particularly women. It would mean that Australia would need to consider its role in the region as a former colonial power and in recognition that Australia has a long history of settler colonialism at home. In addition, Australia is the country in the Pacific most responsible for climate change, contributing 84% of emissions in the Pacific (Dziedzic, 2022). Climate change has been well documented to have a disproportionate negative impact on women and the most vulnerable (Rao et al., 2019). The role of Australian mining companies and corporations in the region also needs to be reflected on, particularly on any negative impacts they may have on the most marginalised women in the region.

As Rosamond, Duncanson and Gentry (2022) state in their outline of what a Scottish feminist foreign policy could look like, a feminist foreign policy provides the opportunity for countries to take the lead on *global* inequality – in an attempt to address some of the harms the Global North has perpetrated. This can be done through multiple strategies, such as by addressing debt relief through the United Nations; ending tax flight from the Global North and creating new mechanisms for fair trade to replace the World Trade Organisation.

## Intersectional Feminism

Unfortunately the idea of women's empowerment is so broad that it can fail to meet the needs and promote the rights of the most marginalised women. As such, the Australian aid program, under a FFP, should take an explicitly intersectional approach. Intersectional feminism looks at the multiple forms of oppression experienced – whether that be based on race, caste, class, sexuality or gender (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectional feminism should adopt a pro-poor approach – whereby it supports women who are in greatest need. Programs must prioritise the most vulnerable women who experience multiple forms of oppression. Greater funding is needed, for example for disability rights organisations and for LGBTQI+ rights organisations. Greater assistance for girls and adolescent youth, in addition to elderly women is also needed.

## THE AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition is diverse network advancing feminist foreign policy in Australia. Convened by IWDA, its members work across a range of sectors including foreign policy, defence, security, women's rights, climate change and migration.

Feminist foreign policy is an approach which places gender equality as the central goal of foreign policy, in recognition that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. This Issues Paper Series aims to explore the opportunities and challenges for Australia in applying a feminist lens to a range of foreign policy issues, and provide practical ways forward.

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