

# “That’s a bridge too far!”

## The imperative for a feminist lens on infrastructure investment.

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**International development cooperation is increasingly focused on infrastructure again. However, to achieve economic and social transformation these investments must recognise that infrastructure is not gender neutral. User priorities differ, and infrastructure choices can either bridge or deepen divides.**

**Feminist foreign policy, including a feminist interpretation of the economy, combined with human design principles, provides a framework to foreground the diversity of user patterns and needs and support infrastructure that better serves society.**

In the financial year 2021-2022, Australia budgeted \$377.8 million for overseas infrastructure investment. This equates to close to ten per cent of the \$4 billion per year aid budget being spent on this sector. Half of that share was allocated to transport sector assistance, with just under a third earmarked for energy investment, followed by water infrastructure and communications.<sup>1</sup>

This paper outlines the contribution of a feminist foreign policy analysis and approach to Australia’s future infrastructure support. It argues for a revitalised infrastructure strategy:

- that is as focused on the ecosystem implications as it is on the asset,
- which encompasses new forms of infrastructure and envisages new or more authentically implemented process that better address the needs of women and diverse groups, and deprioritises others, and
- conceptualises infrastructure as a social and economic intervention with the intent of universal benefit.

The development of a new policy for Australia’s overseas development assistance is an opportunity to re-examine the funding focus and the distribution of the professed benefits of infrastructure investment. Australia’s leadership could build a legacy of infrastructure that is explicitly gender-transformative and inclusive – materially, not just in rhetoric – and for this to be evident across the infrastructure cycle from identification to engineering design, right through to financing terms.

This kind of strategy is even more relevant now as regional governments grapple with how best to address infrastructure challenges amidst the increased pressure to more effectively target public spending in a COVID-19 environment, and in the face of mounting climate and energy stress.

### How a feminist lens matters to infrastructure design

A necessary starting point for the discussion is to address the persistent view that ‘bricks and mortar’ infrastructure is gender-neutral. New technologies such as wind turbines, green hydrogen electrolyzers and fibre optic cable - inanimate, with sophisticated science – only reinforce this view of infrastructure as largely technical or hardware focused and, by implication, bias free. From this starting point, a feminist foreign policy analysis could seem to be a considerable cognitive leap.

However, at its core, infrastructure is for human use and by human design. The environmental and social impact and safeguard assessments that are an integral, if variably implemented, part of the infrastructure development cycle acknowledge that all projects have a footprint, which may be positive or adverse.

Infrastructure is a resource, an enabler of economic participation. It reduces drudgery and saves time, and is a source of energy and power. However, at a national level, infrastructure can represent a significant proportion of

public expenditure, as well as public borrowing and indebtedness. These factors all fundamentally affect people's lives and a state's fiscal resources to meet national needs; negative consequences such as reductions in the budget available for social sector spending including social protection are typically compensated for by women's labour. This brings it squarely into the realm of feminist analysis and action.

Contemporary feminist foreign policy is less than a decade old, with the launch of Sweden's formal policy in 2014, followed by eleven other nations to date who have formally committed to adopt feminist foreign policies.<sup>ii</sup> While bilateral emphases vary, feminist foreign policy is a framework for prioritising gender equality and the rights of women and other marginalised groups, and challenging of the status quo with an understanding of patriarchal and colonial power structures. It is co-created with women's rights organisations and excluded groups, and allocates significant resources to that vision.<sup>iii</sup> This is consistent with Australia's gender equality, disability and social inclusion commitments in international development and, to a lesser extent, other areas of foreign policy. However, it represents a step change in responding to power and structural exclusion, and in recognising the diversity of women and other social groups with an intersecting stake.

There are prominent examples of DFAT infrastructure investments with objectives and some resourcing to promote gender equality, disability and social inclusion – such as the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I) in Southeast Asia, and Indonesia Australia Partnership for Infrastructure (KIAT). However, endorsement of a feminist foreign policy would raise investment performance expectations, advisory resourcing, gender budget analysis and impact assessment, and community engagement across the board, and signal to partners Australia's bolder commitment to equality. It would also be a lens on cost-benefit analysis, and a device for screening the kinds of infrastructure to invest in, and the kinds – based on who it serves and/or how it is financed – that should not proceed.

### **Weighing up the costs**

In Southeast Asia, before the onset of COVID-19, it was estimated that \$210 billion was needed for infrastructure investment, and the Asian Development Bank has estimated that \$30 billion is needed for the Pacific region.<sup>iv</sup> Taking data from the ASEAN region, Cambodia and Vietnam are estimated to spend 7.6 per cent and 6.3 per cent of their GDP on infrastructure.<sup>v</sup> Laos currently has foreign debts amounting to US\$14.5 billion, of which an estimated US\$9.5 billion was borrowed to finance railway construction.<sup>vi</sup> Infrastructure financing therefore has major implications for public expenditure allocation, constraining resources available for spending on services important for women and poorer households, such as health, education and social protection.

Debt servicing pressure is historically linked with reductions to social sector budgets, and the Women's Working Group on Financing for Development has specifically identified the erosion of women's rights through measures such as the introduction of user fees for essential services that women need<sup>vii</sup>, such as for sexual

and reproductive health. It would predictably reduce or remove financing allocations for specialised programs and social protection schemes for other groups also, including for people with disabilities, ethnic minority and Indigenous groups, and low income groups.

Additionally, infrastructure projects using public funds must provide public benefits that exceed their own cost. These benefits may be in employment, trade, innovation, education, social inclusion and access to energy.<sup>viii</sup> However, these benefits are often too narrowly focused on those that can be most easily valued in financial terms, as if what 'counts' is only what can be counted. This overlooks how some changes have seemingly small effects that, in aggregate, lead to enhanced human flourishing. For example, accessible public transport means greater economic independence for people with disabilities and better quality of life for elderly people, safe spaces for children to play improves alertness at school, more trees in poor neighbourhoods enhance health, mood and wellbeing.<sup>ix</sup>

A narrow conception of benefits leads to a failure to account for hidden costs. These may be in the form of risks to people that are negatively affected by the project, or whose needs are not taken into account, thereby excluding them from the amenity the infrastructure provides to others. This could include transport projects with extensive resettlement implications, energy projects which overlook the scope for micro-grid connections to extend last-mile infrastructure to rural communities, or digital telecommunications infrastructure with prohibitive subscription fees that is less likely to be affordable for women and other marginalised groups. In this way, there are people - often women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities - who share the public cost of projects, but do not enjoy the benefits.

With Australia having choices about the type and value of infrastructure investment to make, and not make, a gender-responsive analysis, embedded within a broader feminist foreign policy approach, could illuminate the broader and longer-term costs and benefits of these choices.

### **Recognising care infrastructure**

As Elson first observed, economies are gendered structures.<sup>x</sup> Macroeconomic policy reflects the priorities and values of the experts and policy makers that have shaped them – primarily men. Women's unpaid care work constitutes a prime example of an economic contribution – essential for household livelihood and wellbeing and labour market participation - which persists in not being recognised in national accounts and policy. The global experience of COVID-19 has underlined the default setting of women's responsibility for unpaid child and elder care, with widespread attrition in women's workforce participation as a result. Despite the pervasiveness of lockdowns and school closures, 60 per cent of the 226 countries surveyed by a UN study on the pandemic did not take any measures to address the childcare needs. Unsurprisingly, by the end of 2021, there were 19.7 million fewer formal jobs for women than before the onset of the pandemic, as compared to 10.2 million fewer for men.<sup>xi</sup> Certain categories of workers such as migrant and domestic workers would have been heavily impacted by

retrenchments, and first in the firing line, literally. DFAT has described that infrastructure investment, “drives economic growth by facilitating trade and investment, stimulating enterprise opportunities, generating employment and providing poor people with access to basic services.”<sup>xii</sup> It has recently been estimated that meeting childcare needs would add 3 trillion to the global economy by women’s bolstered economic participation. In 2022, agencies including USAID, World Bank and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have announced strategic investment in childcare.

The time is right for Australia to demonstrate leadership on the recognition of childcare as an essential form of economic infrastructure, and elevate it as stream of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sectoral investment. While child and elder care need to engage the health, social welfare, education sectors, they do also involve traditional infrastructure elements such as land zoning and acquisition and construction. Even if the scale of the public works is different to that required for connective infrastructure such as rail or road, it requires prioritisation and investment.

### **Convergence of feminist and human centred-design principles**

Globally, infrastructure and energy are among the six industries with the lowest percentage of women in leadership positions at 16 and 20 per cent, respectively, and share of women in the industry workforce.<sup>xiii</sup> Given this pattern, the prioritisation and design of infrastructure is bound to reflect men’s priorities and means. For example, an urban male car-owner may wish to see more and wider

roads, whereas a woman, trans or non-binary person using public transport for their daily commuting may wish to see well-lit and staffed metro or bus stations that are connected to other transport and service centres. These options have very different investment and operation requirements, and represent different notions of an infrastructure ‘gap’.

Human-centred rather than engineering-led design puts an emphasis on understanding user needs. Applying a feminist foreign policy lens means supporting infrastructure that demonstrates how it will meet the diversity and intersections of user needs relating to gender, disability, age, race and other drivers of marginalisation. It lends support to stance on the integration of gender-based violence and sexual harassment considerations as part of designing public infrastructure, as well as compliance with universal design principles for accessible infrastructure. For example, infrastructure that is accessible will have co-benefits for people with disabilities, the elderly and parents with young children; infrastructure that is designed with personal safety in mind will serve the groups most at risk of violence, including women and girls, people with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ communities. When considered in this light, we are clearly not talking about a minority of a population. This could become a core and non-negotiable feature of Australia’s approach to quality and inclusive infrastructure.

A feminist foreign policy approach, enunciated and in practice, would consolidate Australia’s promotion of quality and inclusive infrastructure, boost resourcing for equality, and be a defining aspect of Australia’s sectoral investment.

## **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.

# Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). (May 2021). Infrastructure Development Cooperation Fact Sheet. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/development-cooperation-fact-sheet-infrastructure.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Sweden, France, Canada, Luxembourg, Mexico, Spain, Libya, Germany, Chile, the Netherlands, Liberia and Colombia.– cited in <https://iwda.org.au/australian-feminist-foreign-policy-coalition/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Thompson, L, Ahmed, S. and Khokhar, T. (2021). Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: A 2021 Update. Washington DC: International Center for Research on Women.

<sup>iv</sup> Estimates drawn from Partnerships for Infrastructure (<https://www.partnershipsforinfrastructure.org/>) and the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific websites (<https://www.aifp.gov.au/>) respectively.

<sup>v</sup> Global Infrastructure Hub (GIH). (2020). InfraCompass 2020: Set your infrastructure policies in the right direction. Sydney: GIH. <https://infacompass.gihub.org/>

<sup>vi</sup> World Bank. 2020. From Landlocked to Land-Linked : Unlocking the Potential of Lao-China Rail Connectivity. World Bank, Vientiane. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33891> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO

<sup>vii</sup> Women's Working Group on Financing for Development. (2015). Reaction to the Outcome Document of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development: Addis Adaba Action Agenda. Cited in International Women's Development Agency. (February 2019). Making Infrastructure Work for Gender

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<sup>viii</sup> Zamojska, A and Próchniak, J. (2017). 'Measuring the Social Impact of Infrastructure Projects', Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Innovation. DOI: 10.7341/20171342.

<sup>ix</sup> Scientific American (22 June 2021), 'Trees Are Missing in Low-Income Neighborhoods'. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/trees-are-missing-in-low-income-neighborhoods/>

<sup>x</sup> Elson, D. (1993). "Gender Relations and Economic Issues" Focus on Gender. 1(3): 6-12.

<sup>xi</sup> UN Women and UNDP. (2022). Government Responses to COVID-19: Lessons on gender equality for a world in turmoil. New York: UN Women. [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Government-responses-to-COVID-19-Lessons-on-gender-equality-for-a-world-in-turmoil-en\\_0.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Government-responses-to-COVID-19-Lessons-on-gender-equality-for-a-world-in-turmoil-en_0.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Australia's assistance for infrastructure. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/development/topics/development-issues/infrastructure-trade-facilitation-international-competitiveness/infrastructure>

<sup>xiii</sup> World Economic Forum (WEF). (2022). Global Gender Gap Report 2022. Geneva: WEF. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/>