

A feminist analysis of Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy

Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition (AFFPC) members

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Executive Summary

AFFPC's submission on the International Gender Equality Strategy centred around a call for Australia to take an explicitly feminist approach and made a series of recommendations for how such an approach could be brought to life through practical steps.

Below we have evaluated the extent to which the strategy has responded to our recommendations.

Despite appearing to fail at the first hurdle—the strategy does not take an explicitly feminist approach nor even use the word feminist—there remains some promising signals. Of the 21 recommendations made by the AFFPC in our submission on how the strategy could take a feminist approach in practice, two have been mostly integrated, 8 integrated in part, and 11 not integrated in a meaningful way or at all.

The most glaring gap is the lack of an explicit acknowledgement that gender equality requires equality and rights for gender diverse, trans, non-binary and intersex people, with the strategy instead walking back from its 2016 recognition of the same and using the language “gender equality means equality for all people.” This is backed up by a default to binary language of “women and girls” or “men and boys” whenever specific gender identities are named, although there is a text box recognising LGBTQIA+ rights as a priority.

This has no doubt been influenced by the current political climate, the risk of backlash to both the Government and those population groups, and political calculus as we head towards a Federal election in Australia.

In releasing the strategy at all the Government showed significant political will, but this gap in will to strongly defend the rights of those most marginalised and under attack demonstrates how far there is to go if the aim is to truly identify and tackle the persistent drivers of gender inequality.

This is starkly juxtaposed with the strategies courageous and bold stance on SRHR, specifically naming comprehensive sexuality education and abortion as areas for continued advocacy. The AFFPC submission included this in its context analysis – naming these same priorities as areas of SRHR that are facing particular backlash – but did not make a specific recommendation as a thematic area, so this is a positive step in addition to those in our tally.

Following the scorecard, is a series of issue-based assessments authored by AFFPC Core Group members, in the spirit of the AFFPC Issues Paper Series:

- **Backlash** – Grant Wyeth
- **Women, Peace and Security** – Professor Jacqui True
- **First Nations Gender Justice** – Doctor Julie Ballangarry
- **All tools of statecraft** - Heather Wrathall
- **Lifespan approach** - Yumi Lee
- **Gender Equitable Climate Action** - Professor Susan Harris Rimmer

Analysis against AFFPC Submission

AFFPC submission section	Yes/no/ in part	Notes and analysis
Why a feminist approach matters		
1. The International Gender Strategy must explicitly name a feminist approach to advancing the goal of gender equality across all areas of foreign policy.	No	Some elements of feminist approach in practice but these are inconsistent and the approach is not named explicitly.
2. Commit 20% of ODA to initiatives with gender equality as the principal objective and ensure robust review and moderation of progress towards this and existing targets.	No	No new targets or costed spending commitments. Existing targets are maintained which is positive.
3. Work with local women's rights organisations, feminist movements, and allies within partner governments to develop DFAT's understanding of feminisms in the region and develop culturally appropriate ways to advance gender equality in different contexts.	Yes	Commitment to work with WROs is strong, although minus the references to feminism
A feminist approach in practice		
<u>Capability: prioritising intersectional feminist power analysis skills</u>		
4. Embed and define a feminist approach to the Strategy which is human-rights based, informed by intersectional feminist analysis and grounded in First Nations values and worldviews.	Part	Human rights grounding is evident However, strong framing through a neoliberal economic lens also foregrounds economic prosperity more than human rights. Text box on intersectionality especially disability and LBGTQIA+ (at identity level). However the only reference to First Nations people in a case study – nothing on values or worldviews.
5. Extend this approach of intersectional, power-based analysis to forthcoming strategies on disability equity and LGBTIQ+ rights, and the First Nations Foreign Policy, to ensure a coherent approach.	Part	Disability strategy is good from an intersectional lens, but we withhold final assessment until other strategies are released. Concerned to see the First Nations approach to foreign policy hasn't been explicitly mentioned given the focus on intersectionality as a principle.
6. Require all DFAT policy and program staff to upskill in intersectional power analysis, going beyond simple inclusion to include an understanding of the way that systems of power perpetuate inequality and marginalisation.	Part	Small text box on capability – reference to strengthening staff capacity and investing in more GE technical expertise + guidance
7. Use feminist analysis frameworks such as Gender at Work to inform the development of Development Partnership Plans and feminist diplomacy priorities at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels.	Yes	GEDSI analysis informing regional and country level DPPs
8. Expand funding for technical expertise in gender, disability and social inclusion across all areas of DFAT and Posts to support power-based intersectional analysis and implementation.	Part	Refers to strengthening DFAT capabilities, technical expertise and providing new guidance, but figures not specified. Outsourced GEDSI technical expertise will supplement internal technical capacity.
9. Require in-house training on the history of gender and diplomacy and gender-responsive statecraft and practices.	No	Nothing to indicate this is happening

<u>Accountability and performance: ensuring an effective and transformative approach</u>		
10. Apply existing or complementary gender equality targets to all areas of DFAT's work including diplomacy, trade and security policy, and include gender equality actions in the annual performance agreements of all Band 1-3 (including Heads of Mission) staff at Post.	No	Performance and accountability processes for ODA are significantly more advanced than other areas of foreign policy, and it is not indicated that targets have been extended. Insufficient info on whether there are any proposed accountability measures for DFAT SES
11. Report annually on progress against the International Gender Strategy, building from inputs to annual development performance reporting and incorporating frank assessment of challenges and lessons learned in making progress towards intersectional gender equality through diplomacy, trade and security policy.	Part	Strategy reporting will be via existing mechanisms + the new transparency portal. Commitment to undertake thematic evaluations welcome and should prioritise rigorous learning and adaptation.
12. Strengthen the links between high level political will and accountability for gender outcomes at all levels within DFAT, including creating a culture of learning and adaptation within a framework of long-term priorities.	Part	The strategy doesn't indicate a performance culture connected to staff responsibilities and accountabilities. Focus on evaluations could constitute culture of learning, depending on how outcomes are used to inform adaptive management and design.
<u>Partnership: applying decolonial feminist practice across all areas of DFAT's work</u>		
13. Pursue reform priorities in multilateral and regional forums to democratise the rules-based order.	No	No reference to multilateral governance reform, just use of multilateral processes to advance gender equality.
14. Undertake economic analysis of trade agreements which is informed by colonial histories to avoid further perpetuating economic disparity between countries.	No	Reference to ensuring the benefits of trade flow through to all people and seeking non-discrimination provisions and addressing barriers to women, but unclear the analysis that underpins Australia's engagement and whether historical legacies of coloniality and/or exploitation underpin
15. Explore new development programming mechanisms which advance an approach to decolonise partnership, taking steps to minimise the inherent power dynamics and amplify the strengths of local partners	Part	Includes a focus area on locally-led (not inherently focused on minimising power dynamics, but as a way to amplify the strengths of local partners). Also indicates potential new programming through the Civil Society strengthening Fund but not enough details. Commitment to partnership could have articulated a First Nations' ways of being, doing and knowing and strengthened interlinkages between this strategy and a First Nations approach to foreign policy and also demonstrated decolonial thinking.
16. Rebalance DFAT's approach to risk and compliance, recognising that under investment in local actors, who are the most effective development partners, is a critical risk in itself.	No	Risk appetite is not specifically addressed and the locally-led guidance does not indicate an approach that is characterised by a rebalancing of risk approach
<u>Resourcing: strengthening feminist movements and funding comprehensive approach</u>		
17. Commit at least 5% of ODA to be delivered through women's rights organisations (CRS Sector Code 15170), prioritising core, flexible and multi-year funding mechanisms	Part	The strategy names an intention to be a 'reliable funding partner' for WROs which is a good foundation to build on. Would have welcomed more commitment on the type of funding (core, flexible, long terms) supported by a target.
18. Affirm DFAT's commitment to advancing the rights of WHRDs, WROs, feminist and other constituency-based movements through bilateral, regional and multilateral discussions, agreements, processes and forums.	Part	Reference to "amplifying the voices of women's rights organisations in regional and global forums, including the UN" – so not DFAT advancing their rights, but a good start and likely to lead there

<u>Gender and climate</u>		
19. Undertake a co-design process with Pacific and First Nations women develop an Australian equivalent to the 2023 US Strategy, consistent with Australia's goal of co-hosting COP.	Part	The strategy elevates climate to a thematic priority for the first time, which we're counting as a win. However while locally-led priorities and First Nations integration are mentioned in the strategy, they are not specifically linked to the climate section. Likewise, the bundling of climate and humanitarian blurs the focus on climate and limits it in the UNFCCC context. This could be a jumping off point but it isn't indicated in the future directions. Also this section lacked any reference to a First Nations gendered lens on climate, which is a significant missed opportunity on the page. It should be rectified in practice.
<u>Avoiding siloes by taking a holistic and locally-led approach</u>		
20. Take a holistic and locally-led approach priority setting, working with local WROs and movements in each country and region.	Part	The strategy prioritises locally-led approaches which is welcome, but is still structured around thematic priorities, which provides challenges for local organisations whose work does not fit neatly into these themes. Cross referencing of issues across priority areas is a welcome recognition of the need to break down siloes, and we hope will translate into funding.
21. Support holistic, intersectional and collaborative approaches by supporting cross-movement solidarity between feminist, disability rights, LGBTIQ+ rights and other social movement	No	A big gap and absence in this strategy is the lack of engagement with gender beyond the binary - a step back from the 2016 strategy which explicitly recognised trans and intersex rights as part of a gender equality approach. There is a text box on intersectionality but it's not substantial, and nothing on cross-movement work.

Backlash – Grant Wyeth

For Australia's international gender policies to produce long-term positive results there is a need to recognise that agency and advancement of women and girls doesn't exist in a vacuum. The lasting success of these initiatives relies on nullifying or minimising men's resentment towards this agency and advancement – or even gaining men's support. This is not to say that women and girls need men's permission to advance – or to develop policy that placates men's negative impulses – but a recognition that men's backlash to this advancement is a locally & globally destabilising force.

There is evidence from [Bangladesh](#), [Vietnam](#), the [Dominican Republic](#), [India](#), and [Rwanda](#) that women's agency and advancement increases the risk of men's violence against them. This, of course, corresponds with the "[Nordic Paradox](#)" – where even the countries with the highest degree of gender equality maintain high rates of sexual and gender-based violence.

This resentment and backlash spirals up from the interpersonal level into powerful political forces. A central pillar of populist and authoritarian movements is their combustible masculinity and hostility towards women.

The current gender policy has little to say about this, with no references to masculinity at all. Although there are some initiatives aimed at countering gender-based violence and harmful stereotypes, this is distinct from

having a deeper understanding of men's psychology and how to advance agency and opportunity for women, girls, and gender diverse people without inflaming men's resentment.

Policy should recognise that there is an opportunity for men to gain pride and purpose from the advancement of women and girls. Women invest their capabilities back into their communities in ways that men don't. But men could – given the right psychological incentives. It's not enough to just repeat "gender equality benefits everyone" – it needs to be reflected in practical, everyday, outcomes.

Women, Peace and Security – Professor Jacqui True

The new DFAT international gender strategy opens with a strong statement by the Foreign Minister acknowledging the unprecedented oppression of women's human rights in Iran and Afghanistan; highlighting a priority on ending sexual and gender-based violence and positioning Australia as a global Women, Peace and Security leader. This is complemented by the fact that the strategy mentions gender equality as not just a national value but in the national interest.

The international strategy acknowledges the pushback on women's rights and commits to working with international partners to hold countries to account for

violating the human rights of women and girls through international legal efforts. Australia joining the international action to take the Taliban to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for its violations of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), of which Afghanistan is a party, is a case in point. However, the strategy does not outline how Australia will respond to the imprisonment of half the population of Afghanistan by the gender apartheid regime in the short and medium term through *all* its foreign policy tools. Moreover, the ICJ case may facilitate Australia's greater engagement with the Taliban without an outcome for the basic rights, needs and security of women. The AFFPC submission emphasised the importance of training on gender-responsive statecraft and practices and strengthening feminist diplomacy priorities in bilateral and multilateral engagements. Yet Australia has disbanded its funding to the UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund for Afghanistan, which supports women's human rights defenders and their organisations inside that repressive country

Despite these gaps, it is good to see Australia's increasing investment in sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) prevention and response in the Pacific, which will be vital, especially following the disbanding of USAID, which has been a strong funder of GBV prevention in this region. It is also pleasing to see the commitment to strengthening partnerships with women's rights, organizations, institutions and movements in the Indo Pacific region-- another AFFPC priority in our submission.

First Nations gender justice – Doctor Julie Ballangarry

The International Gender Equality Strategy outlines broad commitments to gender equality but fails to centre First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples. The term 'First Nations' appears ten times in the strategy: five within the Acknowledgement of Country and the five remaining mentions are in Box 5, with one in the title and another in a photo caption. This glaring omission is particularly troubling given our region is home to an estimated 270 million Indigenous peoples¹, each with distinct cultures, histories and political struggles.

Box 5 acknowledges the role of First Nations in environmental conservation through cooperation between First Nations Australians and regional partners. While the example is welcome, the strategy fails to link First Nations approaches to gender equality efforts across the policy process.

The result of the lack of focus on First Nations gender justice is that the strategy fails to uphold international obligations regarding the rights of Indigenous women and girls under the Convention on the Elimination of All

Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) is a form of discrimination that disproportionately affects First Nations women and girls². Moreover, SGBV is drastically underreported and perpetrated not only by individuals, but also by both State and non-State actors³. By the strategy not explicitly acknowledging this it is further perpetuating the structural (colonial) violence experienced by First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples that is enacted by the State.

While the Strategy acknowledges intersectionality – an inclusion that is welcome – its failure to explicitly name or centre First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples obscures their rights and erases structural challenges. Factors such as colonial histories, land dispossession, poverty, political marginalisation and cultural erosion, intersect with and exacerbate SGBV, making their exclusion a fundamental weakness of the strategy. This omission not only weakens the strategy's effectiveness and accountability but also further silences and marginalises Indigenous communities, therefore increasing vulnerability.

All tools of statecraft – Heather Wrathall, AP4D

An overarching principal of the strategy is to see gender equality integrated into all areas of Australia's foreign policy, including bilateral, regional and multilateral diplomacy, trade, development and humanitarian assistance. This is both essential and welcome.

Australia can improve coherence with the integration of gender equality across all major investments, including sectors that have historically suffered from gender exclusions such as infrastructure, transport, trade negotiations and emerging technologies.

Development cooperation programs need to engage with systemic drivers of inequality to be effective in the long term – which may include global economic systems and trade arrangements. Through the Strategy, Australia undertakes to pursue gender equality provisions in all future trade agreements and policies. This is already happening to some extent, (for example the Australia-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement includes a chapter on gender balance and economic empowerment).

In the Pacific, where climate change is viewed as the single greatest security threat, responding effectively will require gender sensitive efforts. The mutually reinforcing nature of gender equality and climate change means that efforts need to address both issues including support for more women in national parliaments and more inclusive disaster planning, response and recovery efforts. There are opportunities for Australia and the Pacific to work together to ensure

¹ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/indigenous-peoples>

² General Recommendation No. 39 (2022) on the Rights of Indigenous Women and Girls (p.13).

<https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cedaw/2022/en/149168>

³ Ibid (p.14)

prevention, adaptation and response to disasters and climate change is gender inclusive across the range of security and development agencies involved.

It will be interesting to see how greater coordination and policy coherence across different foreign policy tools is achieved in practice. There is also a need to ensure international efforts to promote gender equality align with domestic policy endeavours. This calls for a genuine whole-of-government approach that includes clear leadership, embedded governance structures and adequate investment to maximise the use of resources, leverage synergies, reduce duplication and support accountability.

Lifespan approach – Yumi Lee, Older Women’s Network

A lifespan approach is essential for addressing gender inequalities at every stage of life, from childhood to old age. Australia’s current gender equality strategy risks reinforcing cycles of disadvantage by overlooking the diverse needs of women across their lifespan, particularly older women facing economic and social insecurity.

The strategy is already nearly silent on poverty alleviation and the lack of a lifecycle approach reinforces this weakness. Across the key priority areas of the new strategy opportunities exist to better address the needs of older women.

Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: While the strategy rightly focuses on ending gender-based violence, it fails to address how it manifests differently at various life stages. Identifying and acting on age-specific interventions, such as prevention programs for adolescents, workplace protections for adults, and elder abuse safeguards for older women, are needed.

Advancing and Protecting Women’s Sexual and Reproductive Health: The strategy primarily targets women of childbearing age, neglecting younger adolescents and post-menopausal women. Naming and responding to the unique needs of (post) menopausal women would improve health outcomes across generations.

Increasing Women’s Economic Inclusion: The strategy is silent on the financial insecurity faced by older women due to pension gaps and lower lifetime earnings. Policies ensuring equal pay, affordable childcare, and pension support for older women are critical to reducing the incidence of gendered poverty.

Supporting Women’s Leadership: Barriers to leadership persist across age groups. Establishing mentorship programs, leadership training, and combating ageism in leadership roles would support women at all stages of their careers.

Integrating Gender and Social Inclusion Targets in Aid Programs: While welcoming the targets for a gender objective in programs over \$3m, it is important that DFAT maintain visibility of age-disaggregated information about the key cohorts being served by the integrated objectives and ensuring that the needs of older women are adequately included.

Gender Equitable Climate Action – Professor Susan Harris Rimmer

The Strategy includes as a priority that Australia will deliver gender equitable climate action and humanitarian assistance.

This part of the Strategy is both exhilarating and bewildering as it represents a step change from DFAT’s previous Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment strategy (2016)⁴ which did not reference climate change and made one reference to disasters. The new strategy makes 30 references to climate; 19 references to disaster (including 2 on disaster risk reduction); and 2 references to (climate) resilience.

The Strategy also states explicitly that gender equality is a human right, bringing a human rights lens to gendered experiences of climate and disasters. It is very welcome to see a deep acknowledgement that gender equality and climate action are mutually reinforcing which is why Australian development investments should address both issues.

The actions are appropriate and urgent, including embedding ‘gender equality targets and objectives in all climate, disaster risk reduction, environment, and biodiversity investments, to deliver programs that actively address gender inequalities whenever possible’.

What is bewildering is why climate and humanitarian assistance are bundled together in this priority, when the gendered impacts of climate change acknowledged in the actions are far broader than disaster impacts. Of course, the two are also linked. But the phrasing in the strategy may lead to a narrowing of implementation. Hopefully the implementation plans will clarify. Overall, this is an excellent development and a brave one, in the global context Australia is in, but one supported by overwhelming evidence of the consequences of climate impacts on Australia and our region that could rapidly reverse gender equality gains.

⁴ This new Strategy builds on the analysis and commitments made in the International Development Policy, Climate Change Action Strategy, Humanitarian Policy, and recent International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy. The International Development Policy commits to ‘gender

responsive and socially inclusive climate action’ and the Climate Resilient Communities design and Statement of Requirements commits to achieving outcomes on “gender responsive and socially inclusive climate and disaster resilience”, and outcomes that are “Gender responsive, if not transformative”.