
**INQUIRY INTO THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC FOR AUSTRALIA'S FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
DEFENCE AND TRADE**

SUBMISSION

30 JUNE 2020

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
DEFENCE AND TRADE**

INTRODUCTION

International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) is the leading Australian agency entirely focussed on women's rights and gender equality in Asia and the Pacific. IWDA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australia's foreign policy. The impacts of COVID-19 are deeply gendered, and any response to the pandemic – both the immediate response and longer term efforts – must take into account the ways in which the pandemic is impacting diverse women and girls across health, economic and social dimensions.

IWDA has welcomed the central commitment in *Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response* to “protecting the most vulnerable, especially women and girls,” as a cross-cutting priority for Whole-of-Government international response. The wide ranging implications of COVID-19 across all aspects of Australia's international engagement presents a critical opportunity to reconceptualise our approach, aligning our goals of human rights, gender equality and the global rules based order within a cohesive, feminist policy framework.

This submission will outline the **implications of the COVID-19 crisis for Australia's foreign affairs, defence and trade policy** (TOR1), provide evidence to support this analysis via the **impact of COVID-19 on human rights** (TOR3) in Asia and the Pacific and **threats to the global rules based order** (TOR2), making recommendations as to the **policy and practical measures required for an ongoing national framework for resilience** (TOR 5) throughout.

1. IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA'S FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE POLICY

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on diplomacy, trade and development are dramatic, and will require immediate alterations in practice to account for closed borders, suspension and/or reformatting of multilateral forums, and the wide-ranging impacts of a global economic downturn. International development cooperation will play an even more important role, as countries struggle to respond to an increased demand for social protection and public services while state revenue falls. The UNDP Human Development Report has noted that for the first time in 30 years human development is on track to decline in 2020.¹ To protect against such backsliding in the human condition, the leadership of Australia and other countries is paramount. Protecting decades of development gains will require us to step up the implementation of our commitments to gender equality, human rights and the global rules based order; commitments Australia has made in both the Foreign Policy White Paper and the newly released international development policy *Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response*.²

COVID19 has thrown into sharp relief the limitations of a zero-sum, security mindset approach to foreign policy and international development. Australia cannot pursue its own national interests in isolation from others, or maintain a conception of national security divorced from the understanding of the human security of all people. Not only have these approaches never worked for women or marginalised groups, the multifaceted nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the deep interconnections between societies and nations and at the same time exposed the cracks within our economic, social and political systems. This moment of significant flux provides an opportunity for Australia to commit to a process of reconceptualising our approach to foreign policy, towards one that centres human security and works towards a flourishing and peaceful region, underpinned by a feminist approach.

Recommendation 1: By 2022, adopt a feminist foreign policy framework to guide Australia's international response to COVID-19 covering trade, diplomacy, defence, security to ensure Australia's resilience and that of our region.

The crisis has specific policy implications for Australia's international development cooperation. The implications of COVID19 touch on every aspect of society; while the immediate, humanitarian health and economic shocks are most obvious, the long-term social and economic implications may, in many cases, be even more severe than the direct impacts of the virus itself. COVID-19 has demonstrated that in effect, poverty itself is a comorbidity, increasing exposure to and risks of the virus for individuals and their communities. The

¹ UNDP 2020a, UNDP 2020c

² DFAT 2017, DFAT 2020

enablers of recovery are, therefore, also the foundations of resilience. Holding on to decades of improvements in global development outcomes and continuing to build on them is critical both for the immediate response and recovery, and to ensure that all countries and people can be resilient and better manage their impacts in the future.

The potential of the crisis to undermine decades of progress on development gains and human rights points to the need for Australia's response to the pandemic to prioritise both the immediate humanitarian need, while not losing sight of the longer term impacts of the pandemic. To date, DFAT has been forced to fund its response to the most significant global health crisis in living memory from its pre-existing budget allocation. While some initial funding has been reallocated from programs such as scholarship and exchanges which are unable to be conducted due to travel restrictions, this is entirely unfeasible as a longer term strategy. This bind will inevitably force DFAT to make cuts to long term, effective and essential programs in areas such as preventing and responding to violence against women, or ensuring equal education opportunities for girls, in order to fund the immediate crisis. Far from being separate competing issues, these long term development challenges are deeply connected to national, regional and global prospects of long term economic recovery.

Providing new and additional funding for the immediate response to the COVID19 crisis is the only way to ensure that long term development gains are not wound back, and Australia's neighbours in Asia and the Pacific are able to rebuild gender equal societies into the future.

Recommendation 2: Invest \$2bn of new funding between 2020/21 to 2023/24 into Australia's contribution to international COVID-19 response and recovery.

Recommendation 3: Protect investments in critical ongoing development priorities such as preventing and responding to violence against women, women's leadership, sexual reproductive health and rights, and climate justice.

2. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC.

2.1 Economic rights

While Pacific countries have so far escaped severe health impacts from COVID-19, the economic effects of the crisis are already impacting on human rights. Drops in tourism revenue and remittances are likely to exacerbate poverty and inequality in ways that, if left unchecked, could reverberate for years, and possibly decades, to come.³ For example Palau, Vanuatu and Fiji rely on tourism for about 40% of their GDP, and Tonga is depends on income from remittances at a similar rate.^{4, 5} In addition to the direct impact on livelihoods through job losses, the global economic slowdown will place increased demand on public services at a time where government revenue is declining and nations are taking on greater debt. Historically, the pressure to reduce debt has led governments to adopt 'austerity measures', which cut or privatise essential services; this poses significant risks for nations' ability to provide social protection and public services such as health, education and care required to respond and recover to COVID-19.

The impacts of austerity policy are felt more strongly by women, as care responsibilities shift from the state to the home, and those in precarious socio-economic positions fall further through the cracks.^{6, 7} Research in the UK found that since 2010, women had borne 86 per cent of the cost of austerity policies imposed by the British Government in the wake of the global financial crisis.⁸ During the Asian Financial crisis (1997-99), cuts to the Indonesian health budget saw a fall in the number of antenatal and postnatal check-ups and an increase in unattended births.⁹ A key priority for Australia's international response to the COVID-19 crisis must be to support nations in Asia and the Pacific to design recovery policies based on equality and inclusive growth, by maximising domestic revenue and supplementing gaps with targeted ODA support. As a key middle power,

³ Damon, Williams, and Barker-Perez 2020, pp 5

⁴ Ratha et al. 2019

⁵ Damon, Williams, and Barker-Perez 2020

⁶ Gender and Development Network 2018

⁷ OECD 2007, pp 237

⁸ Stewart 2017

⁹ Stavropoulou and Jones 2013, pp 21

Australia should use its expertise in multilateral engagement to push for debt cancellation, as a critical element of freeing up state revenue to support global COVID-19 response and recovery.

Recommendation 4: Australia should use its influence as part of G20, IMF, and Paris Club to push for permanent cancellation of all foreign external debt repayments for all developing countries in need due to be made until end of 2021. This should apply to all bilateral, multilateral and private creditors.

Recommendation 5: Australia should openly support and champion the establishment of a multilateral framework on sovereign debt restructuring under UN auspices to help prevent the emergence of future debt crises.

At the individual level, women are also particularly vulnerable to the economic impacts of COVID-19, representing a high proportion of those in insecure and informal sectors.¹⁰ In Timor Leste 75-90% of vendors in the municipal and local markets are women.¹¹ IWDA partners in Timor Leste and Papua New Guinea are reporting that the closure of public spaces such as market places is impacting heavily on rural women who rely on income from selling produce. Findings of IDM research conducted earlier this year in two provinces of the Solomon Islands highlights the gender disparities in access to workplace entitlements. The study found that 33.7% were men eligible for work-related contributions to social security, or benefited from paid annual or sick leave compared to 11.9% of women.¹²

Women's ability to engage in paid work is closely connected to the disproportionate amount of unpaid care performed by women. Across Asia and the Pacific, women perform four times more unpaid care work than men.¹³ Research conducted by IWDA partner Voice for Change found that in Jiwaka Province, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, women's daily burden of unpaid domestic work was so unrelenting that interviewees likened it to slavery.¹⁴ The closure of paid care-providing facilities and schools has increased women's burden of unpaid care. Further, many people across Asia and the Pacific lack access to electricity and piped water; fewer than 60% of the population in most Pacific countries are covered by electricity services, and levels of household piped water are as low as 8% in Myanmar and 9% in Papua New Guinea.¹⁵ The additional handwashing required to prevent COVID-19, coupled with more people eating meals at home during the day, is increasing the burden for women who are responsible for collecting water and fuel.

Recommendation 6: Engage with local women's organisations to jointly develop COVID-19 response plans to ensure that they address the specific needs and concerns of women.

Recommendation 7: Conduct gender analysis of all COVID-19 response interventions to ensure that they support the needs of women and promote gender equality.

Recommendation 8: As part of COVID-10 response, invest in programs aimed at changing the norms underlying gendered roles and responsibilities related to paid and unpaid work.

Recommendation 9: As part of COVID-19 recovery, prioritise investment in infrastructure and technology which reduces the labour and time required for unpaid care and domestic work.

¹⁰ UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific 2020, pp 7; ILO 2018

¹¹ Our Voice 2020

¹² IWDA, Australian National University, and World Food Program (Forthcoming)

¹³ Addati et al. 2018 pp. xxx

¹⁴ Voice for Change 2013 pp. 29

¹⁵ World Bank 2017. Pp 14-15

Box 1: The gendered impacts of COVID-19 within the household

Data collected prior to COVID-19 using the Individual Deprivation Measure (IDM) further highlights the ways in which diverse men and women stand to be impacted by COVID-19. The IDM is a gender-sensitive measure of multidimensional poverty that assesses 15 key dimensions of life, disaggregated by sex, age, disability and geography.

IDM data collected in Fiji found that 91% of women reported exposure to fumes from cooking and heating compared to 65% of men, and women experienced health problems related to exposure to harmful fumes at a higher rate and a greater severity than men. Women in rural settlements travelled up to 90 minutes a day to access water.¹⁶ Requirements for frequent handwashing, as well as the additional cooking and cleaning required while children are kept home from school and other family members are required to isolate at home will increase these impacts.

Findings of IDM research conducted in two provinces of the Solomon Islands earlier this year indicate significant gendered differences in people's ability to access public health information. 40% of women were classified as 'most deprived' on the educational attainment dimension, meaning they have no schooling or incomplete primary schooling, compared to 24% of men, with older women most likely to be illiterate. Further, data showed women were less likely than men to own or have access to television or radio, and were significantly less likely to have participated in any local decision making process in the previous 12 months.¹⁷

2.2 Right to freedom from violence

UNFPA has projected that a 6 months lockdown period could lead to 1 million additional cases of gender based violence globally.¹⁸ The Pacific already has high rates of gender based violence (GBV). In Timor-Leste 59% of ever-partnered women between the ages of 15-45 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.¹⁹ In Papua New Guinea, it is estimated that over two-thirds of women have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.²⁰

On top of these already high figures, early reports from the Pacific indicate that gender based violence has increased since the start of the pandemic, consistent with findings from other countries.²¹ Fiji recorded a six-fold increase in the number of calls to its national domestic violence hotline between February and April, with nearly 50% of those calling reporting a correlation between COVID-19 and increased violence.²² IWDA partners in Papua New Guinea have raised concerns that food insecurity and dramatic increases in the cost of fuel and communications may be contributing further to the increase in GBV; previous research in PNG has found a connection between financial disagreements and violence.²³ Additionally, reports indicate an increase in public violence related to accusations of sorcery in the highlands.²⁴ While some IWDA partners have recorded an increase in the number of women accessing their services, others have reported lower numbers, likely due to restrictions on movement and closure of public transport services. The UN has called on all governments to prepare for and take urgent action to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19.²⁵

Recommendation 10: Ensure that fully funded commitments to prevention and response to gender based violence are included in all Australian supported responses to COVID-19.

¹⁶ Fisk and Crawford 2017. Pp 53

¹⁷ IWDA, Australian National University, and World Food Program (Forthcoming)

¹⁸ UNFPA 2020b

¹⁹ The Asia Foundation 2016

²⁰ Darko, Smith, and Walker 2015

²¹ UNDP 2020b

²² UN Women 2020

²³ Thomas, Kauli, and Rawstorne 2017.

²⁴ Eastern Highlands Family Voice et al. (Forthcoming)

²⁵ Our Voice 2020

Recommendation 11: Provide additional funding to meet the increased demand on EVAW services, and support them to remain open where safe to do so, or to adapt service provision to be delivered through alternative means.

Box 2: Case Studies on GBV in Papua New Guinea

The following case studies are drawn from a forthcoming submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women by IWDA partner organisations Eastern Highlands Family Voice, Wide Bay Conservation Association, Voice for Change, and family and sexual violence case management centre Femili PNG. These stories outline the increased violence experienced by women in Papua New Guinea during COVID-19, as well as challenges in access to health, justice and other services due to the lockdown and unavailability of public transport.

- *Lack of work has increased the number of men who gamble in public places such as the river or road blocks where women face harassment daily. In the Highlands, Banz is one of the only central business hubs for both formal and informal economies. When lockdown began, men and women around the area lost their main source of income and resorted to taxing pedestrians on their way through town. Women and girls pass through the area and face increased harassment, however, due to their need for food they are unable to avoid the road. Police have done nothing to prevent this harassment and allow gambling for community members to pass the times.*
- *In the Highlands, Voice for Change observed that police have been busy managing COVID-19 responses and have therefore been less responsive to reports of violence against women, delaying victims' access to justice. The cessation of police services outside of COVID-19 response has prevented C.K., a victim of various forms of violence, from accessing justice. C.K. (49) was in her house when a 13 year old boy tried to rape her during the COVID-19 lockdown. Being able to escape, C.K. reported her experience to the village leaders and they convened on April 16th 2020 to discuss the situation. Instead of disciplining the perpetrator, they allowed him and his family, including his brothers, mother and aunt, to physically assault C.K. in front of the community. C.K.'s community laughed as she was assaulted and labelled her a prostitute. Following this event C.K. has been continuously discriminated against and is unable to seek justice because the police stations services are on hold.*
- *In the Highlands, most evening medical emergency cases cannot be attended due to lockdown or curfew hours. In March, a woman in the Highlands was stabbed in the ribs by her husband during a fight at home. She was rushed to the hospital but it was closed due to the state of emergency and she had to seek medical care in the home of a nearby nursing aid. She has recovered and the community leaders have ordered the husband to pay compensation for her injuries, however he has threatened to kill his wife instead. The community is concerned because there are no medical centres available for more serious injuries and the police stations are closed.*

2.3 Sexual and reproductive health and rights

More than half of the global unmet need for contraception – where women want to delay or prevent pregnancy but are not using any method of contraception – is in Australia's neighbouring countries in Asia and the Pacific.²⁶ Prior to COVID-19, the Pacific had one of the highest rates of unmet need, and little progress has been made over the past 20 years.²⁷ As a region, the Pacific has a young demographic, with 56% of the population being under the age of 25, and yet young people face multiple barriers to accessing SRHR information and services, contributing to high rates of teenage pregnancy in the region.²⁸ Reports from SRHR service providers indicate that client numbers are declining the pandemic due to inaccessibility, reduced community engagement, or fears of infection, along with increased stigma towards health care providers and

²⁶ Sedgh, Ashford, and Hussain 2016; Guttmacher Institute 2017

²⁷ UNFPA Pacific Sub Regional Office n.d.

²⁸ Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) n.d.

clients.²⁹ Supply chain disruptions due to border closures and travel restrictions have further impacted availability of services.³⁰ Travel restrictions including closure of public transport is particularly impacting on rural women and girls' ability to access services,³¹ and gender norms around care responsibilities, decision making and access to money further hinder women's ability to access services.³²

Recommendation 12: Ensure that sexual and reproductive health services are prioritised and recognised as essential health care services

Recommendation 13: Provide additional funding support to ensure SRHR services can remain open where safe to do so, or pivot their service delivery models, and provide support to communities to access these services.

2.4 Right to freedom of association

Across both Asia and the Pacific, closing space for civil society is a serious concern, as leaders respond to or attempt to ward off a health crisis with strict enforcement of lockdown measures. Prior to COVID-19, 6.15 billion people were already living in countries where space for civil society is obstructed, repressed or entirely closed.³³ While physical distancing has proven to be essential in stopping the spread of the virus, there are concerns about the proportionality of measures and the risk that marginalised groups will be further targeted. Human rights groups have raised concerns that governments are using the cover of COVID-19 to erode civil liberties. For example, the arrest of a journalist in Cambodia under COVID-inspired emergency legislation for correctly quoting the Prime Minister's own words on COVID-19 has been widely condemned,³⁴ and human rights groups in Fiji have raised concerns about surveillance measures and the right to privacy.³⁵

In addition to the role that civil society organisations play in delivery of essential services, they act as a critical check against unfettered state power. Civil society organisations can hold governments to account for the proportionality of their COVID-19 emergency restrictions to ensure that marginalised groups or human rights defenders are not unduly targeted, and scrutinise public spending to ensure accountability to tax payers and protect against corruption.³⁶ In the recovery phase, the role of civil society will be crucial in ensuring that nations are able to build back better, by providing a link between government and the most marginalised citizens, and ensuring a climate just recovery. Evidence shows that women's rights organisations are the most critical factor to countries adopting progressive policy (more important than factors such as the ideology of the government or number of women in parliament) and have catalysed enduring change through the "institutionalisation of feminist ideas in international norms."³⁷ Providing core, flexible and multiyear funding to diverse women's rights organisations will be critical to ensuring that COVID-19 response and recovery policies meet the needs of diverse women and girls and can set countries on a path towards greater gender equality.

Recommendation 14: Prioritise core, flexible and multi-year funding to civil society and women's rights organisations to enable them to support COVID-19 response and recovery.

²⁹ Church, Gassner, and Elliott 2020

³⁰ UNFPA 2020a

³¹ Church, Gassner, and Elliott 2020

³² Wenham, Smith, and Morgan 2020

³³ CIVICUS 2019, pp. 6

³⁴ Hunt 2020

³⁵ Fiji CSO Alliance for COVID-19 Humanitarian Response 2020

³⁶ Rick 2020

³⁷ Htun and Wheldon 2012

3. THREATS TO THE GLOBAL RULES BASED ORDER

In addition to the human rights impacts, closing civil society space is a key factor in upholding the global rules based order. The ability of civil society and women's rights organisations to monitor government actions and hold duty bearers to account is critical, and moves by states to close civic space or erode civil liberties under the guise of responding to COVID-19 raise significant concerns.

The global rules based order was already under threat prior to COVID-19, and now travel restrictions, health concerns, and a global economic slowdown are likely to accelerate many of these trends, and may even be exploited by actors who have vested interests in undermining global multilateralism. In 2019 CIVICUS raised concerns about the international rules based order and found that "[n]ational sovereignty ... is being reasserted and used as an excuse to override international agreements" while the institutions which uphold these agreements are being undermined through both rhetoric and a lack of funding.³⁸ In November 2019, civil society organisations were restricted from observing negotiations of the UNESCAP meeting conducting the 25 year regional review of progress against the Beijing Platform for Action, a regressive move against transparency.³⁹ These restrictions have a significant impact on the rights of women and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, as conservative and religious actors are taking advantage of multilateral processes to undermine past agreements on women's human rights (particularly for transwomen and all LGBTIQ people) and stymie progress towards gender equality.⁴⁰

COVID-19 has already exacerbated existing trends towards self-interest and nationalism at the expense of others in the global system. Moreover, the crisis has led to cancellation and delays to critical international forums for gender equality, including the 64th meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, and the planned Generation equality forums in Mexico and France celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, widely accepted as the high watermark for international agreements on women's rights. While some UN meetings such as the High Level Political Forum in July, have been moved online, IWDA and other civil society groups have raised concerns about how civil society participation will be supported.⁴¹

Australia has long championed the rules based order through its multilateral engagement, and the Foreign Minister's speech outlining Australia's continued commitment to the multilateral system is an important step.⁴² In a global environment where progress on gender equality and women's rights is met with increasing backlash, the engagement of civil society, especially feminist movements and women's rights organisations, must be a top priority. However, Australia's current security and economic alliances may not be sufficient for maintaining this global system, and we should take this opportunity to strengthen alliances with those who support democracy, multilateralism and gender equality. This reinforces the argument for Australia to commit publicly to an international COVID-19 response aligned to feminist foreign policy approaches, grounded in the global rules based order and multilateral system.

Recommendation 15: Continue to use Australia's global influence and role in multilateral forums to champion space for civil society and gender equality issues.

Recommendation 16: Resource multilateral bodies to ensure that they prioritise the engagement of civil society in multilateral forums by: consulting with civil society on access requirements and safety concerns, especially for women human rights defenders; providing financial and technological assistance to global south women's rights organisations; and prioritising transparency and inclusivity.

³⁸ CIVICUS 2019, 12–13

³⁹ Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) 2019

⁴⁰ Shameem 2017

⁴¹ Women's Major Group 2020

⁴² Payne 2020

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: By 2022, adopt a feminist foreign policy framework to guide Australia's international response to COVID-19 covering trade, diplomacy, defence, security to ensure Australia's resilience and that of our region

Recommendation 2: Invest \$2bn of new funding between 2020/21 to 2023/24 into Australia's contribution to international COVID-19 response and recovery.

Recommendation 3: Protect investments in critical ongoing development priorities such as preventing and responding to violence against women, women's leadership, sexual reproductive health and rights, and climate justice.

Recommendation 4: Australia should use its influence as part of G20, IMF, and Paris Club to push for permanent cancellation of all foreign external debt repayments for all developing countries in need due to be made until end of 2021. This should apply to all bilateral, multilateral and private creditors.

Recommendation 5: Australia should openly support and champion the establishment of a multilateral framework on sovereign debt restructuring under UN auspices to help prevent the emergence of future debt crises.

Recommendation 6: Engage with local women's organisations to jointly develop COVID-19 response plans to ensure that they address the specific needs and concerns of women.

Recommendation 7: Conduct gender analysis of all COVID-19 response interventions to ensure that they support the needs of women and promote gender equality.

Recommendation 8: As part of COVID-19 response, invest in programs aimed at changing the norms underlying gendered roles and responsibilities related to paid and unpaid work.

Recommendation 9: As part of COVID-19 recovery, prioritise investment in infrastructure and technology which reduces the labour and time required for unpaid care and domestic work.

Recommendation 10: Ensure that fully funded commitments to prevention and response to gender based violence are included in all Australian supported responses to COVID-19.

Recommendation 11: Provide additional funding to meet the increased demand on ERAW services, and support them to remain open where safe to do so, or to adapt service provision to be delivered through alternative means.

Recommendation 12: Ensure that sexual and reproductive health services are prioritised and recognised as essential health care services

Recommendation 13: Provide additional funding support to ensure SRHR services can remain open where safe to do so, or pivot their service delivery models, and provide support to communities to access these services.

Recommendation 14: Prioritise core, flexible and multi-year funding to civil society and women's rights organisations to enable them to support COVID-19 response and recovery.

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