

# IWDA RESPONSE TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT FOREIGN POLICY WHITE PAPER

NOVEMBER 2017

**IWDA** INTERNATIONAL  
WOMEN'S  
DEVELOPMENT  
AGENCY

Yesterday, the Australian Government released its first major foreign policy restatement in ten years. The Foreign Policy White Paper (**White Paper**), described as a “comprehensive framework to advance Australia’s security and prosperity in a contested and competitive world”<sup>1</sup> defines Australia’s foreign policy approach in Australia, the region and the world. In our [White Paper Submission](#), IWDA made the case that women’s human rights and gender equality must be at the forefront of Australia foreign policy. So how does the foreign policy white paper measure up?

The White Paper recognises the critical role of gender equality as a driving factor towards global prosperity, stability and security. IWDA welcomes this confirmation, and the naming of gender equality as one of Australia’s national values. This recognises that championing gender equality and women’s rights has been a focus of Australia’s global profile in the post-war era, contributing to development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, early leadership on gender budgeting, and current leadership on closing the gender data gap.

The White Paper also puts forward a standalone analysis of the impact of gender equality on foreign policy, most particularly as it plays out in Australia’s development assistance funding. However, taken as a whole, the White Paper is a missed opportunity to genuinely integrate gender equality as a significant factor in Australia’s foreign policy.

The dominant narrative in the White Paper, is the role of foreign policy to “advance Australia’s security and prosperity in a contested and competitive world.” Australia’s foreign policy will, in the words of the Prime Minister, be “grounded in our national foundations of freedom, equality, the rule of law and mutual respect.” Reading the White Paper, equality applies as much to the equality of nations (most particularly securing our economic advantage through the promotion of free trade) as it does to the equality of individuals (including women).

The White Paper sets an ambitious agenda to ensure that Australia’s development assistance promotes “the national interest by contributing to sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction.”<sup>2</sup> It also reaffirms the Government’s significant commitment to gender equality in Australian development assistance is important. The ‘gender box’ notes an ongoing focus on improving women’s access to education, sexual and reproductive health services, employment and financial services for women and girls, of women’s leadership in their communities and parliaments, and the work towards ending violence against women and girls.

However, the recognition of development assistance as a vital pillar of foreign policy is not matched with resourcing to realise this in practice. The White Paper does nothing to restore funding, leaving in place cuts that will see the aid budget comprising just 0.2% of Gross National Income by FY2020-2021. Policy commitments without the means to implement them are destined to remain unrealised.

The White Paper acknowledges the vital partnership between the Government and NGOs in achieving “prosperity and stability in our region through the delivery of development assistance.”<sup>3</sup> This is a welcome recognition of the sector’s expertise and local knowledge, particularly as the funding to NGOs has fallen in recent years from 14% to 11% of the Australian development budget (with for-profit suppliers seeing an increase in the funding

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. 2017. *Foreign Policy White Paper*, p v.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p190.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p108.

they receive.<sup>4</sup> In IWDA's submission to the White Paper, we went further, asserting that a gender-sensitive foreign policy would recognise not only the role of the NGO sector, but the role of women's leadership and organisations in securing Australia's national interests, including by funding women's equality organisations. The evidence is clear that local advocate organisations are key to sustained change towards gender equality.

The White Paper flags an increase in humanitarian assistance in the magnitude of \$500 million a year, but it is unclear if this is new funding or re-allocated funding. Moreover there is no acknowledgement of the critical importance of strengthening the gender dimensions of Australia's humanitarian response. Evidence tells us that women's participation and inclusion makes humanitarian assistance more effective, strengthens peacekeeping efforts, contributes to the conclusion and implementation of peace talks and sustainable peace and accelerates economic recovery.<sup>5</sup> This evidence is not integrated into the White Paper, so it needs to be brought in as the White Paper is operationalised.

The inconsistent approach to resourcing various foreign policy priorities becomes particularly evident when considering security. While development assistance is "an important aspect of Australia's contribution to global prosperity and stability," it languishes at 0.2% of GNI, with Australia currently ranked 17<sup>th</sup> among Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) members<sup>2</sup>. Contrast this with continued commitment to increase expenditure on defence to 2% of GDP, and the importance of deploying "hard power to protect our national interests."<sup>6</sup>

IWDA, and others, have urged a different approach, calling on the Australian Government to broaden the concept of security to include human security.<sup>7</sup> While the White Paper recognises that gender inequality "contributes to and often exacerbates a range of challenges, including poverty, weak governance and conflict and violent extremism."<sup>8</sup> This insight is not integrated into the White Paper's analysis of the challenges facing Australia or the defence strategies proposed in response. The Women, Peace and Security agenda is absent from the assessment of our defence interests, generally and in specific countries. For example, the White Paper's focus on Papua New Guinea promotes women's leadership but misses the vital role that women have played in the peace building process in Bougainville. Notably, it also fails to address violence against women as a profound security challenge for Papua New Guinea.

In IWDA's submission to the White Paper, we called on the Australian Government to ensure that gender analysis formed a routine part of Australia's foreign policy, including trade. The White Paper strongly asserts the vital importance of pursuing economic prosperity as a means of achieving security, and positions free trade as a primary means of achieving this. IWDA noted in our submission to the community consultation process that economic growth and women's economic advancement are not synonymous: "there is no automatic win-win between wider development outcomes and gender equality."<sup>9</sup> If Australia's foreign policy is to be consistent and coherent, policy priorities must be pursued in an integrated way, not as silos to be separately progressed. The White Paper sets out an expansive agenda for multilateral and bilateral pursuit of free trade agreements, including a reframed Trans Pacific

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<sup>4</sup>Commonwealth of Australia. 2017. *Performance of Australian Aid*, p17.

<sup>5</sup> UN Women (2015), *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325*, available at: <http://wps.unwomen.org/~media/files/un%20women/wps/highlights/unw-global-study-1325-2015.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. 2017. *Foreign Policy White Paper*, p18.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p93.

<sup>9</sup> Abigail Hunt (2016), *Five myths about women's economic empowerment*, ODI, available at: <https://www.odi.org/comment/10421-five-myths-about-womens-economic-empowerment>

Partnership, which IWDA partners in the region have expressed concerns about. There is no acknowledgement that free trade agreements can have different gender-based impacts and that Governments have a responsibility consider these in their negotiations if trade and gender equality outcomes are to be advanced.

Also largely absent from the White Paper is an analysis of opportunities for women in trade. There are brief references to the role of women's participation in the workforce and the importance of eliminating gender disparities in boosting per capita incomes. However, the chapter on Australia's economic prosperity and competitiveness makes no reference to the role of women's economic empowerment in trade, nor does the White Paper consider gender issues and barriers in its discussion of labour mobility for the Pacific and Timor-Leste. It is vital that when the Prime Minister talks about equality, he goes beyond equality of nations to conduct free and open trade to equality between women and men to participate in and benefit from economic opportunity.

The White Paper acknowledges the challenges presented by climate change to our national interest but also continues to position Australia's natural resources as a vital component of our economic prosperity. The partners that IWDA works with the Pacific point to the dangers of a fossil-fuel future, highlighting the impact of climate change on women and the vital importance of women's voices for gender equality in developing solutions and mitigating risk. With the recent adoption of the first Gender Action Plan under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the lack of attention to gender and women's leadership in addressing the profound challenge of climate change is a missed opportunity for Australia's foreign policy.

IWDA joined others in the sector in calling for greater integration of the Sustainable Development Goals into Australia's foreign policy. While the White Paper acknowledges the 2030 Agenda and the collaborative approach between government, private sector, civil society, academia and international organisations, the White Paper falls well short of integrating achievement of the SDGs into the foreign policy, positioning it instead as a framework for overseas development assistance and an opportunity for "Australia to share its experience at home with partners around the world."<sup>10</sup> Women's leadership, and the role of NGO and private sector collaboration, provides an interesting example of how the SDGs and gender equality could have been integrated into Australia's foreign policy. The SDG targets for women's leadership focus on the percentage of women in national and local government and in the private sector – requiring cooperation between multiple stakeholders and opportunities for lessons learnt in Australia and the region to be shared.

IWDA will watch with interest the steps taken by the Ministers and Departments as they move to align the funding and practices of the Department to meet the aspirations of the White Paper, and to see how the commitment to gender equality as a core Australian value manifests in our foreign policy.

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<sup>10</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. 2017. *Foreign Policy White Paper*, p88.