



Save the Children

International Gender Equality Strategy

SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

20 SEPTEMBER 2023

About Save the Children

Save the Children works with the Australian Government, development partners and the private sector to present and promote innovative, inclusive and child focused approaches to sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific. We work closely with our Pacific neighbours in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu and have a long-standing presence and development partnership across Asia including in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Iraq, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand.

Save the Children acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work and pays respect to Elders past and present.

Submission

Save the Children welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to support the development of the new International Gender Equality Strategy. Save the Children also endorses the submission from the Consortium for International Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, of which Save the Children is a member.

Save the Children recognises the importance of gender equality in fostering an equitable, just and sustainable future and acknowledges the efforts of the Australian Government working with its partners to foster transformable change. Save the Children seeks to advance gender equality across its programming under six core principles: equality as a right, addressing root causes, holistic approaches, meaningful participation, independent and cross-cutting, collaboration and learning.¹

Save the Children's programs are designed and implemented in ways that meet organisational and donor standards for gender equality and disability inclusion and are underpinned by gender equitable and sensitive practices. We work to build staff skills and confidence and mobilise resources to address the root causes of gender inequality and ensure people with disabilities can equitably benefit from our initiatives. Programmes aim to ensure children are safe, protected, and resilient by addressing gaps in local child protection systems and school safety management mechanisms, using gender equality, disability, social inclusion and climate change adaptation lenses.

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¹ Save the Children, *Gender Equality Policy: Transforming Inequalities, Transforming Lives*, 2017. Available from https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/save_the_children_-_gender_equality_policy_june_2017.pdf

Framework for mainstreaming gender equality into policy and programming

Achieving international gender equality outcomes requires a cohesive and targeted approach by governments, the private sector and community groups. It is recommended that gender equality objectives of the new International Development Policy are operationalised within a broad framework comprising three key elements:

- Addressing the root causes underlying gender disparity and discrimination towards women and girls
- Promoting innovative and inclusive locally-led initiatives that promote the roles and rights of women and girls
- Developing a robust, financially sustainable delivery and performance structure that works within the operational capabilities of implementing agencies and partners.

1. International gender equality priorities

The formation of the new International Gender Equality strategy should be underpinned by five key guiding principles:

Equal and meaningful participation

Women and girls have the right to participate equally (and meaningfully) in all aspects of society, from economic activities to cultural and social engagements. Women and girls should be actively engaged and included in all components of decision-making processes including policies, programmes, performance management, monitoring and communications. It is recommended that children and adolescents (particularly adolescent girls) are explicitly recognised as having gendered barriers that need to be acknowledged and addressed in this strategy.

Encouraging participation will require a substantial investment to address traditional and cultural norms. Despite matrilineal systems in some parts of the Pacific, women are underrepresented in formal governance structures concerning political representation and natural resource management, and traditionally undermined by men within decision making forums.² Concerted efforts are required to facilitate, capture and integrate the voices and needs of women and girls into policies, programmes and governance structures.

Community-led and owned

Strengthen local structures and mechanisms to address gender equality issues. Challenges and opportunities in development contexts in the Indo-Pacific and beyond are inherently local and require solutions tailored to specific cultural, social and economic contexts. This includes addressing the compliance burden on community organisations to foster genuine local ownership and improve localisation, while still upholding high standards of accountability and effectiveness.

Partnerships

Prioritise and amplify the voices of local organisations dedicated to gender issues, as well as those addressing youth and adolescent concerns. By fostering robust partnerships between governments, NGOs, the private sector and grassroots organisations, we can pool resources, knowledge and expertise. This collaborative approach not only champions the cause of gender equality but also ensures that the unique challenges faced by women, LGBTIQ+ youth, and adolescents are addressed holistically and effectively.

Intersectionality

Promote interconnectedness and broader collaboration in policy and strategic initiatives through

² Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development, Cardno, *Thematic Brief, updated 2021, Women's Economic Empowerment in the Pacific*, March 2021. Available from https://pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Thematic-Brief_Pacific-Women_WEE.pdf.

engaging stakeholders across various identities, including race, class, sexuality and disability. The principle of intersectionality acknowledges that individuals experience life through many aspects of identity (i.e., race, age, disability, socio-economic status) leading to unique experiences and challenges. An intersectional approach ensures solutions are comprehensive, sustainable and relevant. This includes engaging men and boys in gender equality research and programming for change to be meaningful. Creating safe spaces for all genders to explore relationships, roles and power also provides the space to identify and address root causes for sexual and gender-based violence.

Inclusive Development

Adopt a feminist foreign policy that promotes the rights and inclusion of marginalised and under-represented groups. Structure proactive inclusion efforts so that localisation does not perpetuate existing power imbalances or discrimination.

2. Effective approaches to achieve gender equality

Key initiatives to promote international gender equality should target entrenched and systemic causes of gender disparity at community and national levels, while also presenting leadership empowerment opportunities for girls and women.

Promote fundamental human rights and children's rights

It is critical to recognise fundamental human rights including children's rights as key guiding principles underpinning gender equality policies, programs and initiatives. Save the Children continues to advocate for children's rights in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and international treaties and continues to advocate for policy and legislative reform to affect real and sustained change. This includes promoting and upholding reproductive health rights that are central to the overall life experience of a woman, from their health, survival, access to education and equitable economic engagement. More broadly, Save the Children believes all children (both boys and girls) have the right to a strong, protected and healthy environment, to a basic education, and to be free from violence and discrimination. It is recommended that all international development policies and initiatives address children's rights as a specific strategy to ensure their unique needs are met.

Address gender-based violence towards women and girls

Despite decades of gender mainstreaming efforts in the Indo-Pacific region, gender-based violence against women and girls continues as a genuine issue for concern. In Fiji, more than 15% of adolescent girls experienced physical violence.³ Over 1 in 3 girls aged between 15 and 19 experienced physical violence in Vanuatu.⁴ In Papua New Guinea, more than half of sexual violence survivors were children.⁵ Pacific communities are mostly patriarchal with gender roles entrenched through traditional ideologies, customary practices and powerful religious influences. Women and girls have the fundamental right to live free from violence, harassment and discrimination. Central to promoting gender equality is recognising the importance of engaging men and boys in changing attitudes and behaviour, and encouraging widespread and systemic change to address the different forms of abuse and violence within homes, schools and communities.

Promote and support legislative and policy reform, implementation and enforcement

Save the Children supports the strengthening of legal mechanisms that protect children from violence and enforcement structures (such as the police and the judiciary) to ensure full

³ Save the Children Australia, *Unseen, Unsafe: The underinvestment in ending violence against children in the Pacific and Timor-Leste*, 2019. Available from <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/our-stories/unseen-unsafe>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Medicins San Frontieres, *Return to Abuser: Gaps in services and a failure to protect survivors of family and sexual violence in Papua New Guinea*, 2016. Available from <https://www.msf.org/papua-new-guinea-new-msf-report-return-abuser-reveals-cycle-abuse-survivors-family-and-sexual>.

implementation of laws. National partnerships should also be strengthened to encourage reform, including the adoption and enforcement of laws criminalising sexual abuse, early/forced child marriage, forced labour, trafficking, child pornography and other harmful practices.

Build community climate leadership through investing in women and girls

Climate change exacerbates existing gender disparities and imposes additional barriers on women's ability to adapt. Women, and particularly girls, are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate related disasters and relegated to unsafe and unpleasant tasks in recovery efforts.⁶ Women's groups across the Pacific need sustained support to build resilience to the impacts of climate change including the onset of climate related disasters. This includes greater access to climate information, social protection to address needs in the immediate aftermath of natural disasters, protection from gender-based violence in relocation to temporary dwellings through displacement, and child protection (for girls specifically) who may be separated from their families. Through Save the Children's accreditation with the Green Climate Fund (GCF), Save is working closely with community groups to promote principles of gender equality in locally-led adaptation initiatives. As the first non-environmental organisation to be accredited by the GCF, Save continues to present models of community initiatives that drive gender equality and local leadership.

Ensure sustainable funding base

The Australian Government should commit to long-term funding for gender equality initiatives, ensuring continuity and stability for projects. Allocating a significant portion of development aid directly to local partners (specifically women led organisations) will ensure that they have the resources to address gender inequalities in their communities. This includes sustainable, long-term funding that supports activities and the foundational growth of organisations. The Australian Government's focus on diversifying funding bases could extend to working closely with impact investment and philanthropic entities targeted at girls' development including health, education and protection. In line with Australia's International Development Policy, it is important to ensure women and girls can participate meaningfully in the design, governance and facilitation of the Civil Society Partnerships Fund.

Strengthen justice systems for survivors of gender-based violence

The Australian Government should ensure that women and children survivors in the Indo-Pacific region have access to appropriate justice. In Papua New Guinea, it is estimated that only 6% of cases recorded by the sexual offences squad reached the national court system for reasons including inaction by an under-resourced criminal justice system, the use of alternative mechanisms outside of formal systems, particularly for compensation, limited support to vulnerable survivors throughout the reporting and justice processes and low levels of legal literacy among survivors and the broader community.⁷

There is a need to strengthen the link between gender-based violence and violence against children prevention programming, such as Save the Children's Parenting Without Violence model, and facilitate access to justice via strengthening relevant social infrastructure and capacities across the Pacific.

Removing barriers to girls' education

Greater investment in education is required to ensure all children can access a high-quality education by attending well-resourced, safe, inclusive schools with adequate supplies, teachers and appropriate facilities (such as separate bathrooms for girls with sufficient clean water for menstrual

⁶ Save the Children Vanuatu, *Harem Voes Blong Mi*, available from Save the Children Australia, 2023. Copies available via email: info@savethechildren.org.au.

⁷ Putt, J. and Dinnen, S. . *Reporting, Investigating and Prosecuting Family and Sexual Violence Offences in Papua New Guinea*. Australian National University, Canberra, 2020, p. 52.

hygiene). Only 7% of girls in the Solomon Islands complete secondary school due to social and cultural perceptions of the value of girls' education, unaffordability of school fees, not enough classrooms and teachers, and testing requirements.⁸ Access to quality education for girls is foundational for their empowerment, economic independence, and ability to participate fully in society.

Global advocacy and leadership in gender equality policy and international frameworks

Save the Children's Global Equality Policy promotes gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women and is grounded in both the CRC and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.⁹ Save the Children encourages the Australian Government to align its Gender Equality Strategy with international treaties, policies and commitments, through sustained support and endorsement of international targets such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 5 is dedicated to gender equality with a focus on girl child and women and talks to engaging men and boys to support change for gender equality and sustainable development. Through established global leadership and advocacy initiatives, Australia has an opportunity to use its position on the global stage to advocate for gender equality, challenge discriminatory practices, and promote the rights of women and girls, including women's human rights defenders.¹⁰

3. Considerations to strengthen delivery and performance framework of Gender Equality Strategy

Save the Children continues its legacy of excellence in the Indo-Pacific by integrating gender equality principles into every aspect of its performance management cycles. The Australian Government's renewed focus on building respectful partnerships across the Indo-Pacific can be realised through a strengthened focus on high quality, effective development programming incorporating the following elements:

Feedback mechanisms: Collect and communicate feedback from beneficiaries to ensure programs remain relevant and effective.

Flexibility: Design the strategy to be adaptable, allowing for changes based on feedback and evolving global gender dynamics.

Monitoring and evaluation: Establish a robust framework to assess the impact of initiatives, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement.

Clear guidelines: Ensure all gender equality initiatives come with clear, concise, and accessible guidelines. This will help stakeholders understand objectives, processes, and expected outcomes, leading to more effective implementation and collaboration.

Robust gender analysis: Undertake a comprehensive gender analysis to ensure policies and programs are informed by a deep understanding of gender dynamics in different contexts.

Feminist data collection: Emphasise the importance of feminist data collection, ensuring data is gender-disaggregated and captures the diverse experiences of all genders.

⁸ Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, Solomon Islands Government, *Annual Performance Report*, 2019. Available from: <https://www.mehrd.gov.sb/documents>.

⁹ Save the Children, *Gender Equality Policy: Transforming Inequalities, Transforming Lives*, 2017. Available from: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/save_the_children_gender_equality_policy_june_2017.pdf

¹⁰ See more broadly on actions that the Australian Government has been called upon to take to strengthen the rights of women and girls, including regionally and international from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of Australia*, CEDAW/C/AUS/CO/8, 25 July 2018. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FAUS%2FCO%2F8&Lang=en.

Data sharing: Promote the transparent sharing of gender-related data among organisations, governments, and researchers. This collaborative approach can lead to more informed policies and strategies.

Long term, sustainable funding: Invest dedicated funding for girls and adolescent-focused programming and increase funding for local women's organisations.