

# Marie Stopes International

## International Aid (Promoting Gender Equality) Bill 2015

15 June 2015

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Marie Stopes International Australia (MSIA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee Inquiry on the International Aid (Promoting Gender Equality) Bill 2015.

This Bill will help ensure that overseas development assistance promotes gender equity and reaches the poorest and most marginalised, including the 225 million women around the world who want, but cannot access, modern contraception.

**Marie Stopes International Australia supports this Bill.** Our submission focuses specifically on the need to improve DFAT's investments in and monitoring of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and makes the following two points:

1. **Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is fundamental to gender equality, and gender equality is fundamental to a true fulfilment of SRHR.** MSIA supports this Bill's efforts to place gender equality at the heart of Australia's aid program
2. **Clear reporting of aid expenditure on SRHR is crucial to tracking the government's commitment to meeting the SRHR needs of the people in our region.** MSIA supports this Bill's efforts to strengthen reporting on the aid program's investments in gender equality.

### 1. The importance of placing gender equality at the heart of Australia's Aid Program

An aid program that more squarely targets gender issues will position Australia as a regional leader in tackling the world's most pervasive inequality. It also makes good development sense since countries with greater gender equality tend to have lower rates of poverty. One reason for this is that women are more likely to invest in their families and communities, contributing to reduced child mortality and greater levels of education.<sup>1</sup>

The United Kingdom passed its own Gender Equality Bill with strong support from both major parties and was introduced by Conservative MP William Cash. The UK Bill has similar provisions to the proposed Australian Bill and was passed in 2014<sup>2</sup>. Sweden and Norway are considering following suit with similar legislation.

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank (2007), Global Monitoring Report, p107.

<sup>2</sup> The Guardian. 2014. *Development bill to tackle gender inequality poised to become law*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/mar/04/development-bill-gender-equality-law>. [Accessed 12 June 15]

Supporting women and girls on a path to a more prosperous and secure future, an essential element would be enabling them to plan their pregnancies around their education, employment, and finances. Gender equality is vital to SRHR, and SRHR is just as important in achieving gender equality. For more than 30 years, Marie Stopes International has worked to provide women with a full range of quality sexual and reproductive health services. Voluntary family planning and reproductive choice saves lives and is essential to help women achieve gender equity, engage politically and contribute to economic growth.

Despite ambitious international and national commitments, 800 women still die every day from pregnancy or childbirth related complications<sup>3</sup>. Ninety-nine percent of these deaths occur in developing countries and most are entirely preventable.<sup>4</sup> Persistent gender inequality in a number of countries has led to the health and needs of women remaining a low priority and has enabled these deaths to continue. We believe that mainstreaming gender equality across the aid program, as the Minister has committed to doing, and as this Bill commits future Foreign Ministers to do, we will see much better outcomes for women and girls across the developing world.

We hope that an aid program that puts gender equality at the heart of what it does will invest much more robustly in sexual and reproductive health and rights. Supporting women and girls to make decisions about their own bodies – when, why and with whom to have sex, when to have children and how many children to have, is critical to health, well-being and life. Enabling women and girls to access the sexual and reproductive health services they want and need is critical to preventing the deaths of women and girls who die every day from complications of pregnancy and childbirth, not to mention the millions more who suffer from debilitating injuries, like obstetric fistula, or sexually transmitted infections. Enabling women and girls to plan their pregnancies around their education, employment, and finances is also essential to supporting their path to a more prosperous and secure future.

## **2. Improving transparency and clear reporting within Australia's aid program.**

Current approaches to measuring poverty tend to rely on household-level data which fails to identify the unique challenges faced by women and girls in developing countries. To understand the impact and effectiveness of development interventions on different segments of the population, information on a range of demographic measures needs to be captured, analysed and reported over time.

MSIA has found it difficult, over subsequent governments, to track Australia's investments in SRHR including family planning. Family planning has often been grouped with other categories, such as population policies, reproductive health, and even STD control including HIV/AIDS. The format has varied between AusAID/DFAT annual reports and Senate Estimate answers to

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<sup>3</sup> WHO. 2014. *Maternal mortality*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/>. [Accessed 12 June 15].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

questions on these issues, and it has also varied between different years of the same report and therefore it has been difficult to compare data.

As a result, MSIA have not been able to determine DFAT's expenditure on family planning for the years 2012/2013, 2013/14 or 2014/15 from publicly available documents. To ensure policy is based on evidence and that impact is measured and improved, consistent and rigorous tracking of expenditure on initiatives that contribute to gender equality is essential.

In *Making Performance Count: enhancing the accountability and effective of Australia aid* the Department commits to ensuring that more than 80 per cent of aid investments, regardless of their objectives, will effectively address gender issues in their implementation. The Department has also indicated that it has already put in place mechanisms to track gender equality expenditure and program performance on gender equality.<sup>5</sup> The Bill would therefore strengthen the commendable commitments already made by the Australian Government in this area. Requiring the Minister for Foreign Affairs to present a report to Parliament on how international aid is promoting gender equality will further increase transparency in this area. Moreover, parliamentary oversight of spending and progress made will elevate the importance of gender equality goals.

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<sup>5</sup> See Recommendation 12 of the Australian Government Response to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee report: Australia's overseas aid and development assistance program, August 2014.



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Marie Stopes International delivers quality family planning and reproductive healthcare to millions of the world's poorest and most vulnerable women.