



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade**



# **SUBMISSION TO THE JSCFADT HUMAN RIGHTS SUBCOMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN**

December 2022

## CONTENTS

1.	CONTEXT	2
2.	REGRESSION ON WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' HUMAN RIGHTS	3
3.	DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS OF COVID-19, CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICTS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS	4
4.	ADVOCACY AND ASSISTANCE	7
5.	SELECTION OF RELEVANT REFERENCES	11

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) Human Rights Subcommittee Inquiry into the Rights of Women and Children.<sup>1</sup>

### *Terms of Reference*

Women and children continue to experience human rights violations. Recent reports of sexual violence in war-affected areas and issues such as orphanage trafficking continue to influence the lives of women and children across the world. In addition, women and children can experience abuse specifically tied to their experiences as a migrant or refugee. In light of these ongoing concerns, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) will inquire into the Rights of Women and Children with a particular focus on:

- understanding the treatment of women and children internationally and the impact of this treatment on their human rights;
- the adequacy of support services, including legal services, available to affected women and children;
- the disproportionate impact on women's education and social inclusion created by global disruptions such as COVID-19, climate change, and the Ukraine-Russia conflict; and
- any related matters.

Relative to the Terms of Reference, and the DFAT 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy',<sup>2</sup> this submission notes the international normative context for women's and girls' rights, outlines the global pushback on gender equality, with particular attention to the impacts of COVID-19, climate change and armed conflict, and concludes with examples of DFAT's contributions to the protection and fulfilment of women's and girls' human rights. While the focus is on the rights of women and girls, the examples of DFAT's international engagement also support the protection and fulfilment of the rights of children.

DFAT recognises that women and girls are not a single homogenous group and that it is necessary to acknowledge and understand their multiple identities, experiences and contexts, and address intersecting inequalities.

## **1. CONTEXT**

Human rights are at the core of the international system. The commitment to equality of rights of men and women extends from the founding Charter of the United Nations (UN) and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, through to the normative frameworks that specifically address the rights of women and girls. Of the ten international human rights treaties, women's and girls' rights are the subject of the Convention on the

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Defence\\_and\\_Trade/Womenandchildren](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Womenandchildren)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment-strategy.pdf>

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and its Optional Protocol. Also of importance are the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, Agreed Conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women, Declaration of Elimination of Violence against Women, and the ten UN Security Council resolutions on the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The Conventions on the Rights of the Child, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination are also applicable, given the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities.

In 2015, the UN Member States reinforced their commitment to women’s and girls’ human rights through the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, in which they are both transversal and a standalone goal. Sustainable Development Goal 5 is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, with targets on all forms of violence, unpaid care and domestic work, participation and leadership, sexual and reproductive health and rights, ownership and control of resources, and technology, underpinned by policies and legislation that proscribe discrimination and promote equality.

International normative commitments are essential to enable and guide action for gender equality and the human rights of women and girls, to be achieved globally. Confirmed commitments have, however, become contentious across multilateral forums, stakeholders and national contexts.

## 2. REGRESSION ON WOMEN’S AND GIRLS’ HUMAN RIGHTS

*Around the world, there is a pushback on women’s rights. That pushback is deep, pervasive and relentless... We have a fight on our hands. And it is a fight we must win – together.*<sup>3</sup>

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, 11 March 2019

In United Nations forums such as the Human Rights Council and General Assembly, gender equality and women’s rights commitments are questioned, with attempts to erase agreed language and restrict women’s and girls’ human rights and roles. Some Member States oppose references to gender and diversity, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), sexual orientation and gender identity, and women human rights defenders. This opposition occurs in relation to debates and resolutions that focus on gender equality and those that address other issues, like poverty, security, and trade.

Two examples of the regression on women’s and girls’ rights are violence and SRHR. Global estimates are that one in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetimes. In the Pacific, 60 to 80 per cent of women and girls reportedly experience such violence.<sup>4</sup> The risks and rates of violence against women and girls increase where they experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. The majority of femicides are committed by an intimate partner or family member.<sup>5</sup> Based on available data, it is predicted that child, early and forced marriage, along with trafficking in women and girls, will not be eliminated by 2030, as per Target 5.3 of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. This forecast is related, in part, to rates and risks of child, early and forced marriage having increased during the COVID-19

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2019-03-11/csw-remarks-opening-of-63rd-session>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Population Fund (2022). Violence against women - Regional snapshot 2022, <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/resources/violence-against-women-regional-snapshot-2022-knowvawdata>; World Health Organization (2021). *Violence against women prevalence estimates*, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022256>; <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/knowvawdata>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/briefs/Femicide\\_brief\\_Nov2022.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/briefs/Femicide_brief_Nov2022.pdf)

pandemic.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic was also a time of increased online recruitment by traffickers. Women and girls remain the majority of persons trafficked, and primarily for sexual exploitation.<sup>7</sup> Violence against women and girls is also perpetrated online, with technology-facilitated gender-based violence recognised as a human rights abuse. The harm done to women and girls through the internet and mobile technology derives from cyber-bullying, cyberstalking, image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexploitation, sextortion, doxing, gender trolling, hacking and hate speech.<sup>8</sup>

Alongside violence harming women and girls physically and psychologically, limited access to sexual and reproductive health information and services also undermines their rights.<sup>9</sup> SRHR are contentious issues and part of the pushback on gender equality. The backsliding on SRHR commitments commenced as soon as the Sustainable Development Goals were agreed. In the last seven years, the UN Commission on Population Development, which monitors global progress on the ICPD Programme of Action, achieved a consensus outcome on only two occasions because of pushback against commitments in Sustainable Development Goal 5. Restrictions to and denial of SRHR both negate women's and girls' bodily autonomy and reinforce restrictive gender roles that place women and girls in the domestic sphere and prioritise motherhood in their identity and perceived worth.

### 3. DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS OF COVID-19, CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICTS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

Contributing to the erosion of gender equality gains and women's and girl's human rights are COVID-19, climate change, and armed conflicts.

#### 3.1 COVID-19

COVID-19 disproportionately impacted the lives of women and girls and reversed the progress towards gender equality. The amplification of gender inequalities, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, is documented in relation to livelihoods and poverty, leadership and representation, sexual and gender-based violence, unpaid care and domestic work, and influence on and access to essential services, including education and sexual and reproductive health services.

Across the Asia-Pacific region, women are less likely than men to have received a COVID-19 vaccine, have been pushed out of the labour force more than men, assumed greater unpaid care and domestic workloads, and faced barriers in accessing government support and stimulus packages for their businesses.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Save the Children (2022). *Global Girlhood Report 2022: Girls on the frontline*, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/global-girlhood-report-2022-girls-on-the-frontline/>; United Nations Children's Fund (2021). *COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage*, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>; United Nations Children's Fund (2022). *Child marriage is a violation of human rights, but is all too common*, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>;

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. *Child and forced marriage, including in humanitarian settings*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/child-and-forced-marriage-including-humanitarian-settings>

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP\\_2020\\_15jan\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP_2020_15jan_web.pdf); Report of the United Nations Secretary-General (2020). *Trafficking in women and girls*, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/206/48/PDF/N2020648.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, S. (2020). *Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview*. Centre for International Governance Innovation, <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-overview/>; International Center for Research on Women (2018). *Technology-facilitated violence: What is it, and how do we measure it?* Washington D.C.: International Center for Research on Women, [https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2018-07-24/ICRW\\_TFGBVMarketing\\_Brief\\_v8-Web.pdf](https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2018-07-24/ICRW_TFGBVMarketing_Brief_v8-Web.pdf); NORC at the University of Chicago and the International Center for Research on Women. (2022). *Landscape Analysis of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: Findings from Asia*, [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA0027GS.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA0027GS.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights>; IPPF (2020). *Sexual and reproductive health and rights – the key to gender equality and women's empowerment*, [https://www.ippf.org/sites/default/files/2020\\_gender\\_equality\\_report\\_web.pdf](https://www.ippf.org/sites/default/files/2020_gender_equality_report_web.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Asian Development Bank and UN Women (2022). *Two years on: The lingering gendered effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific*, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/802341/lingering-gendered-effects-covid19-asia-pacific.pdf>

In terms of livelihoods, COVID-19 undermined women’s ability to fully and fairly participate in the economy, from paid employment to entrepreneurship. Women in paid employment experienced greater job losses and reductions in their working hours, than did their men counterparts. Yet, their unpaid working hours increased, as women and girls bore primary responsibility for the care of family and household members.<sup>11</sup> Labour force participation rates are lower post-, than pre-, pandemic, and particularly for young women.<sup>12</sup> Many women-owned small and medium enterprises continue to struggle to access financial services, technical expertise and technology. The disproportionate impacts stem from pre-existing inequalities in economic engagement, control of resources, access to services and financial inclusion, as well as pandemic response measures that were not gender-responsive or intersectional in their design and delivery.

Rates of violence against women and girls increased, with fear enduring as women and girls report that they feel more unsafe post- than pre-pandemic. During the pandemic, women and girls were increasingly isolated (linked to lockdowns, school closures and other physically restrictive measures), which heightened risks of gender-based violence, particularly sexual, domestic and family violence. For women and girls in crisis contexts, and those with disabilities, COVID-19 exacerbated existing and created new protection risks. The pandemic has been documented as a direct cause of an increase in the frequency of harmful practices, including female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage, with the associated increase in adolescent pregnancy.<sup>13</sup>

COVID-19 adversely impacted women’s and girls’ health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of hospitals for non-essential services, travel restrictions, overburdened health providers, delays in delivery of sexual and reproductive health supplies, and diverted resources and staff negatively impacted the quality and continuity of health services to women and girls. Health and family planning services were disrupted in at least two-thirds of the world’s countries, impacting the wellbeing and rights of millions of women and girls.<sup>14</sup> Given women’s over-representation in frontline health service provider and essential worker roles, their exposure to COVID-19 and the violence associated with the pandemic was greater than that of men.

For girls, pandemic-related school closures resulted in the suspension or cessation of their formal education. Rates of school drop-out were higher for girls, than for boys, linked to pre-existing discriminatory gender norms.<sup>15</sup> The gender digital divide and technology-facilitated gender-based violence hindered and prevented girls from continuing their education online.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> UN Women (2020). *From insights to action: Gender equality in the wake of COVID-19*, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-covid-19>

<sup>12</sup> <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/women/>; ILO Monitor on the world of work – [https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS\\_859255/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_859255/lang--en/index.htm); World Economic Forum (2022). *Global Gender Gap Report 2022*, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/>

<sup>13</sup> The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2022). *Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide)*, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/briefs/Femicide\\_brief\\_Nov2022.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/briefs/Femicide_brief_Nov2022.pdf); UN Women, *The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19*, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>; UN Women (2021). *Measuring the shadow pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19*, <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Measuring-shadow-pandemic.pdf>;

UN Women (2020). *EVAW COVID-19 briefs*, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/series-evaw-covid-19-briefs>; Report of the United Nations Secretary-General (2020). *Conflict-related sexual violence, S/2020/487*, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2020\\_487.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2020_487.pdf); Report of the United Nations Secretary-General, (2022). *Conflict-related sexual violence, S/2022/272*, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s-2022-272.pdf>;

UNFPA, UN Women, Quilt.AI. (2021). *COVID-19 and Violence against Women: The evidence behind the talk*, <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/publications/covid-19-and-violence-against-women-evidence-behind-talk>

<sup>14</sup> Trena Mukherjee et al. (2021). ‘Reproductive justice in the time of COVID-19: a systematic review of the indirect impacts of COVID-19 on sexual and reproductive health’, *Reproductive Health* 18, no. 1: 252, <https://reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12978-021-01286-6>; UNFPA (2021). *Impact of COVID-19 on Family Planning: What we know one year into the pandemic*, <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-family-planning-what-we-know-one-year-pandemic>; Family Planning 2020, *Family planning in the time of COVID*, <http://progress.familyplanning2020.org/covid>

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO (2022). *Deepening the debate on those still left behind*, <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/2022genderreport>; Save the Children (2021). *Global Girlhood Report 2021: Girls’ rights in crisis*, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/global-girlhood-report-2021-girls-rights-crisis/>

<sup>16</sup> Kore Global (2021). *Gendered impacts of COVID-19 on girls’ education and wellbeing in the Indo-Pacific*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-literature-review.pdf>; USAID (2021). *Landscape analysis of technology-facilitated gender-based violence: Findings from the Asia region*, [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00Z7GS.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z7GS.pdf)

## 3.2 Climate change

Like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change disproportionately impacts the lives of persons already subjected to discrimination that stems from socio-cultural and structural inequalities, notably women and girls, as well as persons of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. For example, violence against women environmental activists and defenders of environmental rights has been well documented, as have been the life and livelihood consequences of natural hazards.<sup>17</sup>

As women and girls are subjected to systemic discrimination and intersecting inequalities, they are disproportionately affected by disasters and climate change, including exclusion from decision-making processes and leadership roles. Women are more likely to be killed by disasters, than are men.<sup>18</sup> Women and girls who survive bear a greater workload, than do men and boys, in obtaining clean water, fuel and food, as well as meeting the health and wellbeing needs of household and community members. The increase in unpaid care and domestic work can mean that girls miss or drop out of school and women do not benefit from livelihood opportunities during recovery. Rates of food insecurity are higher among women and girls, than men and boys.<sup>19</sup> Women and girls living with disability are even more at risk, as social isolation, exclusion and dependency can hinder access to support and services that enable them to escape abuse.

While inequalities and inequities prevail, and prevent the protection and fulfilment of human rights, it is critical that women and girls, in their diversity, are not perceived, portrayed or treated as helpless victims; which they are not. Their knowledge, experiences, capabilities, insights and networks are indispensable to the survival and resilience of their households and communities. Their capabilities, networks and insights are critical for effective and equitable policies and strong, resilient communities.

## 3.3 Conflicts

For women and girls, the impacts of conflict and instability are compounded by pre-existing gender inequalities and discrimination.<sup>20</sup> Conflicts and crises also exacerbate gender inequalities and impact the lives of women and girls differently to that of men and boys. Discriminatory gender norms that exclude women from public spaces can heighten in times of conflict and instability. For example, women continue to be excluded from formal peace processes, or constitute a small minority of negotiators, to the detriment of all stakeholders.<sup>21</sup> The lack of women's participation in peace processes reduces the likelihood that provisions on gender equality and human rights will be included in peace agreements or implemented. Women's exclusion from negotiations perpetuates their socio-political marginalisation.

<sup>17</sup> Global Witness (2021). *Last line of defence*, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/last-line-defence/>;

Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Climate Change (2022). *Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change*, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/438/51/PDF/N2243851.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>18</sup> Care (2020). *Evicted by climate change: Confronting the gendered impacts of climate-induced displacement*, <https://careclimatechange.org/evicted-by-climate-change/>;  
Neumayer, E. and T. Plümper (2007). The gendered nature of natural disasters: the impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981–2002. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97 (3). pp. 551-566. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8306.2007.00563.x; Okai, A. (2022). *Women are hit hardest in disasters, so why are responses too often gender-blind?*, <https://www.undp.org/blog/women-are-hit-hardest-disasters-so-why-are-responses-too-often-gender-blind>; Paul, J (2019). 'Saving lived and saved lives: Why women matter in humanitarian crises', *Humanitarian Practice Network*, 75, <https://odihpn.org/publication/saving-lives-saved-lives-women-matter-humanitarian-crises/>

<sup>19</sup> Food and Agriculture Organisation (2022). *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022*, <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc0639en>

<sup>20</sup> UN Documents for Women, Peace and Security: Secretary-General's Reports, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un\\_documents\\_type/secretary-generals-reports/?ctype=Women%2C%20Peace%20and%20Security&cbtype=women-peace-and-security](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/secretary-generals-reports/?ctype=Women%2C%20Peace%20and%20Security&cbtype=women-peace-and-security)

<sup>21</sup> UN Women (2015). *Global study on the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325*, <https://wps.unwomen.org/>; Krause, J., W. Krause and P. Branfors (2018).

'Women's participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace', *International Interactions*, Vol 44: 6, pp. 985-1016, [https://repository.graduateinstitute.ch/record/296968?\\_ga=2.178492580.1619530192.1670407101-1465269916.1670407101](https://repository.graduateinstitute.ch/record/296968?_ga=2.178492580.1619530192.1670407101-1465269916.1670407101); <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/multimedia/2018/10/infographic-womens-meaningful-participation-builds-peace>; UN Secretary-General's Reports on Women, Peace and Security, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un\\_documents\\_type/secretary-generals-reports/?ctype=Women%2C%20Peace%20and%20Security&cbtype=women-peace-and-security](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/secretary-generals-reports/?ctype=Women%2C%20Peace%20and%20Security&cbtype=women-peace-and-security)

Women and girls are often the first to suffer from restrictions in movement and the closure of schools, medical facilities and markets. Women and girls are often the first to go hungry in the face of food insecurity, and may experience inadequate sanitary conditions and supplies, as well as lack access to sexual and reproductive health services. Rights to education are violated during periods of conflict, as witnessed in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

Sexual and gender-based violence is a deplorable feature of conflicts, including against women in leadership and public roles, women's human rights defenders, and members of civil society and grassroots organisations. During conflict, women and girls are the target of specific forms of gender-based violence, including rape, sexual slavery, forced impregnation and abortion, trafficking and intentional spread of sexually transmitted infections. In armed conflicts and crises, sexual violence is used as a weapon of war, where women's and girls' bodies are used to consolidate some men's power and violent control.

The perpetration of sexual and gender-based violence has been documented in such conflict-affected countries as Afghanistan, Ukraine and Myanmar.<sup>22</sup> Following the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, women and girls, particularly from ethnic minorities and with disabilities, as well as persons of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, experienced displacement, violence and loss of livelihoods. Acts of sexual violence and abuse, including rape, have been documented in Ukraine. In Afghanistan, women and girls have protested their exclusion from formal education, employment and public spaces since the return of the Taliban in 2021. The call for the upholding of their rights has been met with violence, with violence also used to enforce the measures that restrict women's movement, activities and dress.

Women and girls subjected to human rights violations in conflict may be denied justice, with impunity for perpetrators. Given discriminatory structures and systems prevail, women and girls encounter barriers to accessing justice, whether they are claimants, survivors, witnesses or offenders. This is especially so in accountability processes for international crimes, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

## 4. ADVOCACY AND ASSISTANCE

Equality of rights is an unfulfilled commitment of the international community and a requirement for security, stability and sustainable development. DFAT contributes to global efforts to advance gender equality and the human rights of women and girls in various ways.

An important means of making progress on gender equality and protecting the human rights of all women and girls is through **concerted, coordinated and collaborative multilateral engagement**. Australia uses a range of multilateral forums to promote international standards and norms on gender equality, including United Nations bodies (e.g. General Assembly, Human Rights Council, Security Council, Economic and Social Council, Commission on the Status of Women), economic entities (e.g. APEC, G20, OECD, WTO), and regional groupings (e.g. ASEAN, IORA, PIF). In such fora, DFAT works with likeminded countries, non-traditional allies

<sup>22</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan (2022), A/HRC/51/6, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc516-situation-human-rights-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>; Human Rights Council (2019), *Sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar and the gendered impacts of its ethnic conflicts*, A/HRC/42/CPD.4, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/regular-sessions/session42/list-reports>; Buchanan, C. (2022). *Preventing Gender-Based Violence in Myanmar*, IDEA, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/preventing-gender-based-violence-in-myanmar-CAWE3.pdf>; <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/fr/countries/asia/afghanistan>; <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/fr/countries/asia/myanmar>; UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (2022). *Update on the human rights situation in Ukraine*, 1 August-31 October 2022, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ua/2022-12-02/HRMMU\\_Update\\_2022-12-02\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ua/2022-12-02/HRMMU_Update_2022-12-02_EN.pdf); IASC GBV Sub-Cluster (2022). *Gender-based violence in Ukraine: Secondary data review*, <https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2022-05/Ukraine%20GBV%20SDR%20%2025%205%2022%20Final%20format%20amended.pdf>; <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/fr/countries/asia/afghanistan>; <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/digital-library/reports/sg-reports/>



and cross-sectoral connections, while supporting civil society contributions, to protect norms, strengthen commitments, and oppose efforts that weaken women's and girls' human rights. Both multilateral and bilateral partnerships are central to advancing gender equality, with dialogues and cooperation promoting understanding, strengthening capacities, and informing plans to counter anti-rights movements.

**International humanitarian and development assistance** is another means through which DFAT advances gender equality and the human rights of women and girls. Gender equality will be central to the forthcoming new international development policy, commissioned by the Australian Government to be finalised in the first half of 2023.<sup>23</sup>

'Investing in Women' and 'Pacific Women Lead' are two examples of Australia's partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region which address the economic impacts of COVID-19. The Investing in Women program (\$102 million, 2016-23) is a multi-country program focussed on women's economic participation as employees and as entrepreneurs, as well as private and public sector environments that promote women's economic empowerment, in Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Myanmar. Investing in Women involves collaboration with corporations and business leaders, impact investors, entrepreneurs, and advocates. In responding to the COVID-19 crisis, this program supported women's small and medium enterprises through immediate financial pressures, ensuring their continued operation and contribution to the resilience of local economies.

Pacific Women Lead is a partnership (\$170 million, 2021-26), with the Pacific Community and Pacific women's organisations to ensure that Pacific women and girls, in all their diversity, are safe and equitably share in resources, opportunities and decision-making, with men and boys. The program focuses on women's leadership, women's rights and increasing the effectiveness of regional gender equality efforts.

Another example of support to **women's and girls' contribution to the decisions and direction of their lives and communities** is the Ampify-Invest-Reach (AIR) partnership. The AIR Partnership (\$10 million, 2021 -2025) works with feminist movements to address human rights, marginalisation, and exclusion, for social change. Recognising the challenges faced by young women and girls, Rise Up! (\$6 million, 2020-2025) is a partnership with World YWCA that provides peer-to-peer leadership and advocacy training for young women, as well as creating safe spaces and supporting young women to claim their rights as part of a life-long leadership journey. DFAT contributes to the Global Partnership for Education (\$180 million, 2021-25) and its Girls' Education Accelerator, which is implemented in 30 countries, including those in the Indo-Pacific region (e.g. Afghanistan, Laos, Marshall Islands, Pakistan, and Papua New Guinea).

**DFAT works with a range of partners to prevent, respond to and eliminate sexual and gender-based violence.**

Examples include support to UN Women to strengthen gender-responsive policing in Cox's Bazar camps, including through deployment of women police officers and help desks for violence survivors. In Indonesia, DFAT supported efforts to prevent child marriage through reform of the 1974 Marriage Law, with an increase in the marriageable age of girls from 16 to 19 years, in line with the legal age of marriage for men. Australia partners with the Government of Vietnam and UN agencies (UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women) on policies and programming that strengthens prevention and response to violence against women and children. DFAT has also collaborated with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, European Union, New Zealand and UN Women on the Pacific Partnership to End Violence Against Women and Girls (2018-23). With the rise of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, Australia was a founding member of the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse. As a member of the Global Partnership, Australia has committed to advance three objectives: (i) promote shared principles on

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/development/new-international-development-policy>

preventing and addressing gender-based online harassment and abuse, with a focus on accountability by perpetrators and platforms; (ii) support programming, resources and training; and (iii) expand data, research and measurement of the prevalence, impacts and costs of such violence.

**Sexual and reproductive health and rights** is another area of DFAT engagement. Australia is a founding member of the Nexus Initiative to advocate for SRHR in UN forums, supports the provision of lifesaving sexual and reproductive health services and supplies to women and girls in conflict and crisis-affected communities, and has responded to the impacts of COVID-19 through the \$48.5 million Indo-Pacific Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights program (C-Surge). C-Surge worked with the International Planned Parenthood Federation, Marie Stopes International, Reproductive Choices, UNFPA, and UNICEF to deliver essential sexual and reproductive health services and information to populations across 22 countries in the Indo-Pacific. Services include obstetric and neonatal care, family planning, and HIV and STI testing and treatment, with supplies encompassing dignity/hygiene kits, clean birthing kits, reproductive health kits and emergency tents. The Sexual and Reproductive Health Program in Crisis and Post-Crisis Settings (SPRINT), delivered by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, provides services to communities impacted by disasters, conflict and/or COVID-19, such as those in Fiji, India, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Samoa, Sri Lanka, and Sudan.

Initiatives to enhance **women’s and girls’ resilience to climate change and disasters** include (i) the Women’s Resilience to Disasters Program, supporting Pacific women and girls in Fiji, Kiribati and Vanuatu to lead on disaster prevention, preparedness and recovery; and (ii) the Women’s International Network on Disaster Risk Reduction (WIN DRR), working across the Asia-Pacific region to strengthen women’s decision-making and leadership in the field of disaster risk reduction.

**In response to conflicts, gender equality is integrated into humanitarian responses and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is implemented.**<sup>24</sup> Under Australia’s 2021-31 National Action Plan,<sup>25</sup> DFAT consistently advocates for WPS across multilateral fora and works collaboratively through such global initiatives as the WPS and Humanitarian Action Compact, UN Group of Friends of WPS, WPS Focal Point Network, International Alliance on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict and Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies. In November 2022, Australia endorsed the Political Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict (PSVC), which was launched at the United Kingdom’s International Ministerial Conference on PSVC. Signatories to the Political Declaration have committed to accelerate action to end conflict-related sexual violence, hold perpetrators to account, end cultures of impunity, and provide comprehensive support to survivors.

Australia also implements the WPS agenda through international development assistance. A 2022-27 investment supports (i) the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund; (ii) UN Women’s Asia-Pacific Framework Towards Peaceful, Equal Societies; (iii) the Southeast Asian Network of Women Peace Mediators; (iv) establishment of a Pacific Women Mediator’s Network; and (v) the scoping of a Gender Justice Practitioner Hub to assist investigation and prosecution of persons for crimes under international law. Australia’s humanitarian assistance in turn addresses the needs and rights of women and girls in conflict contexts. For instance, Australia has provided \$65 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, including \$8 million for UNFPA for the protection of Ukrainian women and girls from gender-based violence and for the provision of sexual and reproductive health services, in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.

<sup>24</sup> Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2022). *DFAT Implementation Plan of Australia’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021-2031*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/international-relations/dfat-implementation-plan-australias-national-action-plan-women-peace-and-security-2021-2031>

<sup>25</sup> Australian Government (2021). *Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021-2031*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/second-australian-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security-2021-2031>

Across all international assistance, **DFAT has zero tolerance for sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.** DFAT has a Preventing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) Policy that outlines expectations and obligations for DFAT partners and DFAT staff. The Policy is principles-based, focusing on zero tolerance of inaction; the importance of leadership; addressing gender inequalities; pursuing a victim-survivor centred approach; sharing responsibility for this issue, and enhancing transparency and accountability. The DFAT Child Protection Policy is similarly principles based, setting clear expectations and focusing on the best interests of the child. Immediate mandatory reporting is required for any instances of suspected or alleged child exploitation and abuse related to DFAT activities. DFAT regularly engages with international counterparts to hold multilateral, non-government and commercial partners to account and to improve prevention and response efforts to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Diplomacy, partnerships, development assistance, and humanitarian action are some of the means deployed to address the pushback on gender equality and fulfil the human rights of women and girls. The breadth and depth of discriminatory social norms, structures and systems requires collective, sustained and resourced advocacy and action from government and non-government entities invested in safe, stable, inclusive and prosperous societies; all of which is predicated on equality of rights.

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