

Are all gender strategies created equal? What Australia can learn from Germany, the UK and US

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USAID Administrator Samantha Power with President of the Republic of Kosova Vjosa Osmani, May 2023

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DFAT's forthcoming gender strategy should grasp the opportunity to be world leading in its approach to gender equality. The United States, Germany and United Kingdom have each recently announced (respectively) their [Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy](#), [Feminist International Assistance Guidelines](#) and [International Women and Girls Strategy](#). Each strategy has distinct strengths and weaknesses, [outlined in our previous article](#). This blog outlines how DFAT can adopt a more feminist approach and learn from each country's gender strategy.

Ambitious and transformative policies require a strong commitment to building the internal gender capability of staff – which is a focus of both the German and US approaches – and changing internal incentives and culture. One of Germany's three objectives recognises the need for a “change and learning process” to ensure staff can implement the feminist development policy and develop a “feminist reflex”. In line with this, each mission has been required to identify an individual focal point to lead implementation and coordinate with regional colleagues.

The US outlines a clear plan for building gender expertise throughout its development work by hiring, contracting or appointing a gender advisor in their US headquarters, bureaus and country offices. The policy also commits to providing training and conducting gender analysis of development projects. For this requirement to substantially improve the expertise of staff, USAID will need to value and reward critical gender capabilities such as power-based intersectional analysis. This focus on internal incentives and cultural change will also be a critical requirement for DFAT's forthcoming strategy – which must recognise intersectional power analysis as part of everyone's job – to ensure gender and other forms of marginalisation are not viewed as competing agendas.

Outlining a decolonial approach to development in DFAT's strategy would strongly

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align with Australia's existing commitment to First Nations Foreign Policy. The terms of reference for the recently appointed Ambassador for First Nations People, Justin Mohamed, notes that he will work with other thematic ambassadors including on gender equality, human rights, and climate change to "champion First Nations approaches". Indigenous scholars have highlighted the importance of this commitment being implemented in tandem with domestic policy (such as the Voice to Parliament and treaty-making) as essential to a decolonial approach, and a contrast to DFAT's previous Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda which was seen to "speak for, rather than with" First Nations people. Australia has the opportunity to progress the international agenda in this space by integrating gender equality with First Nations approaches to development.

Australia should also seek to go beyond a "locally led" approach and embrace a decolonising framework: rather than simply replicating existing structures of development with more local actors represented, we need to reimagine these structures in ways that align with First Nations and Majority World approaches. This should include considering the views of Majority World women on the approach of linking funding opportunities according to defined thematic priorities, as outlined in research by 'Ofa Guttenbiel-Likiliki: "Creating equitable South-North partnerships: nurturing the v? and voyaging the audacious ocean Together". This research details the frustration felt by Pacific feminists struggling to find funding for their work if it does not fit into the themes pre-determined by donors, and instead calls for an approach whereby funding enables and supports the self-determined priorities of women's rights and feminist movements – the people with the best understanding of their own communities' priorities.

Despite addressing structural change (addressing laws and policies), the policies vary in their approaches to transforming the systems of power (patriarchy, colonialism, exploitative capitalism) that underpin inequality and injustice at a global level. In other words, are they seeking to help people navigate existing power structures more equally, or are they seeking to transform those harmful systems altogether? The UK policy claims to be a "leap forward for women's and girls' rights" but falls short of this ambition. By focusing mainly on women and girls as a marginalised group, rather than the systems of power which perpetuate that marginalisation, it fails to be transformative. At its worst, it represents the "add women and stir" approach to development. Increasing the representation of women in foreign policy, development work or leadership is a necessary but not sufficient step to address gender inequality. It is an approach that is interested in advancing women's empowerment mainly as a way to advance economic growth or other extrinsic goals.

DFAT's new policy should carefully analyse the full range of systems of power that

impact gender equality. Neither the US, German or UK policies question the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and gendered divisions of labour whereby unpaid and invisible reproductive and domestic work is largely performed by women. The German guidelines name economic opportunities as a core right – including access to affordable social security and health services, childcare and parental leave – but **falls short of connecting** access to these opportunities to wider systems of power.

While DFAT is unlikely to fully move away from a worldview that prioritises economic growth, the new strategy could be usefully informed by the **work of Annabel Dulhunty** who argues for a broader view of economic empowerment that is not constrained by a neoliberal capitalist framework, and focuses on women’s social, political and civil rights as ends in themselves, not just a means to growth. This could include examining the way in which market (and non-market) economies are built on unpaid care and domestic work largely performed by women and girls, and prioritising interventions which transform unequal gender norms, rebalance state-market power and take a holistic approach to gender equality that promotes wellbeing.

Civil society organisations have called for policy ambition to be matched with appropriate levels of funding. This includes commitments at the whole of aid program level, but also requires targets and incentives for ODA to be directed towards gender equality objectives. This is particularly pertinent **in Australia, where aid is projected to continue to decline** in real terms and as a proportion of GNI notwithstanding Labor’s promise in the 2023 federal budget to stop cutting aid from 2026-27.

The UK has committed to a target of 80% of programs including a focus on gender equality by 2030, and **Germany has raised the ambition** to “allocate 85% of project funding on a gender-sensitive basis (based on GG 1 in the OECD’s DAC category system) and 8% on a gender-transformative basis (based on GG 2) by 2025”. The good news for DFAT is that they have already made an **ambitious commitment** in this regard, maintaining an existing 80% performance target for programs “effectively” addressing gender equality issues, and introducing a new commitment in October 2022. With **the current rate at just 45%**, this is an ambitious and transformative commitment. However, for the commitment to be effective DFAT must ensure a rigorous and transparent application of OECD gender markers to ensure the integrity of the measure is maintained.

If Australia uses the development of a new strategy as an opportunity to learn from good practice, navigate others’ shortcomings and put our own strengths squarely at the heart of our next gender strategy, we can play a much bigger role on gender

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equality. Building on the momentum established in 2015, DFAT can and should look to its counterparts overseas for lessons and be prepared to raise the bar on its ambition.

This is the second blog in a [two-part series](#).

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