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Australia's Global Ambassador for Women and Girls has a big task ahead

By Julia Newton-Howes
15 September 2011

The [announcement](#) on the 13th of September of the appointment of a Global Ambassador for Women and Girls, Penny Williams is a significant move. It demonstrates that the government is serious about putting vulnerable people, and this very often means women, at the core of Australia's foreign policy and aid program. This was one of the key commitments when the Government released its response to the Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness earlier this year, and this appointment is an important step to making the commitment a reality.

Gender inequality is an entrenched social norm around the world. Speeches by Minister [Kate Ellis](#) and Parliamentary Secretary [Richard Marles](#) at the announcement of this position yesterday, drew attention to the plethora of issues which exemplify gender inequality: sex trafficking; family violence, women's disproportionate burden as casualties in armed conflict; and their unequal outcomes in the economy, leadership and education.

Australia's aid program can and does draw attention to these issues, for example through its publication of [research](#) into gender based violence. Aid can also support specific programs to address inequality. For example, CARE is working in both Timor-Leste and Cambodia to understand and address the factors which cause girls to drop out of school at higher rates than boys.

Programs which address the barriers women face as individuals to full participation in their communities are not enough. When governments are blind to gender inequality, their policies and programs will ignore the different realities of women and men, boys and girls. When Parliaments have no female representatives, as in 6 Pacific Island Countries, their budgets and legislation are unlikely to represent the priorities or needs of women.

Change beyond the individual and her community requires more than aid funding. It requires sustained, persistent and persuasive advocacy. It requires the building of social

movements which eventually make the status quo untenable.

As Mr Marles said yesterday 'Having a dedicated Ambassador will give us a stronger voice in promoting women's rights on the world stage'. But the world stage is a large one, and it is not clear what time and resources Ambassador Williams will have at her disposal.

To avoid the risk of becoming the token women's advocate in endless international meetings, this role needs to be focused in our most immediate region of interest, the Pacific, South and South East Asia and carefully targeted on a small number of key issues. Here are my suggestions for what those key issues should be:

Promoting women's leadership: The Pacific has some of the lowest level of female representation in leadership positions in the world. If women don't have a voice in their household, community and ultimately their country, then their priorities will always be secondary issues.

Addressing Gender-Based Violence: This is an area where Australia has already built a strong foundation of research, analysis and concrete support. While Gender-based violence is an issue everywhere, it is often hidden and tacitly accepted. In the Pacific, South and South East Asia countries seem to be making little progress on even the most egregious examples such as dowry burnings and acid attacks. Beyond the research and practical assistance, Ambassador Williams can raise the profile of this issue and highlight evidence of where change is needed and examples of success.

Maternal mortality / Sexual and Reproductive Health: While data is inadequate, it appears that progress on reducing maternal mortality has been very slow. Unless women have access to adequate sexual and reproductive health services, their ability to make decisions about other aspects of their lives such as staying in school, access to paid work or simply how to space their children is severely curtailed. Globally funding to these issues has increased but remains far below what is needed. Ensuring greater attention to maternal mortality and sexual and reproductive health is a fundamental enabler of improving the status of women.

Changing attitudes to women as leaders, to gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health will require building relationships and trust with key people across the region, and a deep understanding of the challenges facing women and girls.

It's a big agenda. It is unclear whether the new position will be a full-time one. It is imperative that Ambassador Williams be given adequate time and resources to properly respond to her challenging role.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/australias-global-ambassador-for-women-and-girls-has-a-big-task-ahead20110915/>

Date downloaded: 28 May 2023



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