



68th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

National Women's Alliances Submission re Australia's position on priority theme: *Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective.*

Introduction

National Women's Alliances welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to government ahead of the 68th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW68). We acknowledge the substantial contributions of the International Women's Development Agency and Hannah Robinson to this submission.

The importance of this year's theme has never been more apparent. COVID-19 has highlighted existing social and economic fault-lines and exacerbated inequality, poverty and marginalization. This backsliding on progress has occurred in a context where the effects of human-induced climate change and environmental degradation are highlighting present, and future risks. In addition, multiple and intersecting factors shape people's needs, opportunities and outcomes, including interdependent social, economic and environmental considerations. Together, these factors have transformed the landscape of social protection needs and demonstrated the importance of social protection for securing a minimum standard of living for the physical, economic and mental wellbeing of citizens.

Women's organisations, human rights organisations, feminist organisations (collectively 'CSOs') and academic institutions play a critical role in driving change and ensuring accountability for gender equality. In recent years, the space for meaningful CSO engagement in UN environments has shrunk significantly. Australia has advocated for the role of CSOs in the CSW in the past and we urge Australia to continue to advocate for an active, meaningful, and clearly defined role for CSOs at CSW. We also call on Australia to advocate for States to take measures to protect women human rights defenders and support and fund specialist women's services and feminist CSOs and networks.

We congratulate the Australian government on its history of strong support for CSO engagement in CSW and acknowledge the increase in civil society delegation nominations to three positions as a sign of the government's commitment to engaging directly with CSOs to protect women's human rights.

Priority focus for CSW68

National Women's Alliances submit that Australia's priorities at CSW68 should include the following:

1. An emphasis on making visible the multiple and intersecting experiences of discrimination, including how these shape experiences of poverty. We support Australia's strong history of advocacy in this area. We urge the Australian government in discussions and in the text of the Agreed Conclusions to:
 - a. Continue to advocate for an acknowledgment of the role of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) on individual experiences of discrimination and human rights abuses. The Australian government should support language relating to gender and avoid language which refers to sex characteristics only, except where the subject matter purely relates to biological characteristics.
 - b. Highlight, where relevant, the ongoing legacy of colonialism and its impact on individual experiences of discrimination,
 - c. Advocate for the recognition of the experiences of migrant and refugee women,
 - d. Argue for the use and retention of the phrase 'women and girls in all their diversity' in preference to any incomplete listing of various groups of women and girls,
 - e. Advocate for the inclusion of 'girls' and 'women and girls with disability' in the Agreed Conclusions, particularly in relation to text dealing with leadership and meaningful involvement in decision-making about the lives of girls and of women and girls with disability, and
 - f. Advocate for the use of the phrase 'multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination' in the text of the Agreed Conclusions.
2. An emphasis on the need for accessible gender and sex disaggregated poverty data at both the state and international level, noting the importance of intersectional, lived-experience knowledge for effective policy development. Data collection should be multidimensional (i.e.: not merely focused on income/assets, but include a range of potential areas of deprivation across social, economic and environmental dimensions) and include a focus on the following areas:
 - a. Women, older women, young women, and girls' experiences of poverty within households,
 - b. Refugee and migrant women's experiences of poverty within country,
 - c. The experiences of women and girls in rural, regional, and remote areas,
 - d. The interaction of vulnerable women and girls with financial systems, including both private financial institutions (such as banks) and social protection systems.

We urge Australia to support discussions about 'data sovereignty', particularly in the context of data relating to Indigenous women and girls.

We urge Australia's support for the strengthening of national and regional statistics offices to be resourced to collect and share this data, and for the prioritisation of this support through Official Development Assistance (ODA).

We also urge Australia to advocate for the specific inclusion of 'gender' as a descriptor in any language on data collection, noting that specifying 'sex' alone can be understood as a purposeful exclusion of people with diverse gender identities, expressions, and sex characteristics. We encourage the Australian government to be particularly mindful of this language considering the ongoing discrimination faced by people with diverse gender identities (see point 6 below), and to take a 'do no harm' approach to data collection on the specific experience of people of diverse SOGIESC.

In advocating for this data collection, Australia should emphasise that *gender* disaggregated data is required to adequately capture trends related to gendered cultural practices and norms.

3. A focus on the interaction between poverty and gendered violence, noting particularly the role of poverty in creating the conditions for (and enabling the continuation of) domestic, family, and intimate partner violence ('gender-based violence'). We recommend Australia emphasise the intersectional nature of gender-based violence, including the experiences of:
 - a. Indigenous women and girls,
 - b. Women and girls with disabilities,
 - c. Refugee and migrant women and girls,
 - d. Women and girls from regional, rural, and remote areas.
4. An emphasis on global and domestic care economies, including the role of women's unpaid care work in maintaining economic inequities. Australia should strongly advocate for policies which economically uplift and support women and girls with caring responsibilities, noting that this care load will only increase in the face of the climate emergency. Australia should advocate for the recognition, reduction, and redistribution of unpaid care and domestic work, while emphasising the need for adequate social infrastructure and social protections to enable caring by everyone.
5. An emphasis on the ongoing importance of human security issues, noting the lack of women, peace, and security as a theme in the CSW68 expert papers. Australia should particularly emphasise the importance of:
 - a. Women and girls' health in humanitarian crises, including sexual and reproductive health,
 - b. Human rights abuses in crises and conflict zones, including preventing and addressing conflict-related sexual violence,
 - c. The interrelated and compounding effects of economic, climate, and humanitarian crises on women and girls' security.
6. A strong focus on the global backlash against women's human rights and feminism in both politics and civil society. This focus should include an acknowledgement of pressure to withdraw social and legal protections from people with diverse gender identities, expressions, and sex characteristics, as well as ongoing threats to women and girls' sexual and reproductive rights.
7. Advocacy for the language of '*families*' rather than '*the family*,' to emphasise that social protections and freedoms should also apply to all families.

8. A focus on the importance of sexual and reproductive rights in reducing poverty globally, by allowing diverse women full autonomy over their bodies, including the decision of whether and when to become pregnant. We urge the Australian government to emphasise the role of comprehensive sexuality education to young women and girls' economic security, noting the need for this education to include information relevant to people with diverse gender identities, expressions, and sex characteristics.

Australia should emphasise the need for comprehensive sexuality education that goes beyond health education and explicitly includes content on reproductive freedoms, diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics. Australia should strongly advocate for comprehensive sexual and reproductive freedoms and education for all people.

We also urge Australia to use the language 'diverse women's human rights' rather than 'women's rights' throughout the Agreed Conclusions, but particularly when discussing sexual and reproductive freedoms, to protect the principle of the universality of human rights and to avoid creating a hierarchy of rights in which women's rights fall below the rights of the family, the state, and so on.

9. A firm resolve that the Agreed Conclusions should not be limited by appeals to national sovereignty or cultural relativism. Similarly, Australia should support the global applicability of the UN system of human rights. In the lead up to the Summit of the Future in September 2024, we ask Australia to push for the United Nations to conduct and report on a gendered analysis of power imbalances within UN structures and entities.
10. A focus on the impact of international financial institutions on individual experiences of poverty, emphasising the need for a gender-impact analysis of institutions. Australia should focus on the need for reform of international financial architecture in line with principles of gender responsive financing and the Sustainable Development Goals, noting particularly the impact of sovereign debt on countries in the Global South.

Australia should emphasise that sovereign debt stress entrenches inequalities within communities. As noted in the expert papers, lower-middle-income countries with debt spend more on debt service payments than social services, while low-income countries debt service payments came to "171% of social spending" (see Prof. Dr Jayati Ghosh's expert paper). This stress disproportionately impacts vulnerable women and girls, as cuts to social infrastructure and climate action increase the amount of unpaid care work needed to maintain communities (see Leia Achampong's expert paper). Australia should note that decreased spending on social protections and public services keeps women and girls trapped in gendered poverty, with fewer services available to those fleeing violence and conflict.

We encourage Australia to highlight, where relevant, the legacy of colonialism and its effect on current debt crises.

The reform of international financial architecture should include consideration of the World Bank's role as the custodian agency of global poverty data, and the need for a greater

integration of individual-level, multidimensional, gender-sensitive poverty data in its mandate. In this regard, we urge Australia to advocate for the Commission to adopt a multi-year program of work alongside the World Bank and other entities to provide clarity on an agreed approach to individual-level measurement of gender-sensitive poverty ahead of the creation and adoption of any post-2030 development framework.

11. A strong focus on global and domestic social policies which maintain economic inequity between genders, noting the continued existence of gendered pay gaps, gendered discrimination through taxation, and discriminatory or inequitable practices which result in diminished opportunities for women. We encourage Australia to emphasise the human right to social protection when advocating for the need for progressive, equalising social policies and infrastructure. Australia should emphasise the link between international financial systems and domestic spending on programs to reduce gendered poverty.

Australia should strongly emphasise the importance of the right to social protection, noting that accessible social security programs create opportunities to escape gendered poverty. Conversely, Australia should emphasise that retrogressive measures taken in relation to the right to social security help maintain the conditions that lead to gendered poverty.

Australia should emphasise that punitive welfare systems make it more difficult for women to access the broader social infrastructure, including education and training programs, healthcare, and social support for those escaping violence. In advocating for this position Australia should note that the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) recognises "the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance" and that General Comment 19 of the ICESCR Committee regarding the need for any retrogressive measures to be reasonably justified and subject to review.

12. A strong emphasis on the specific experiences of Indigenous women and girls, noting the continuing impact of colonialism. We urge Australia to strongly advocate for the specific inclusion of Indigenous voices in international human rights spaces, emphasising the importance of Indigenous women's expertise in discussions of:
 - a. Women, young women, and girls' experiences of legal systems, including experiences of incarceration and detention, acknowledging the role of traditional and customary legal systems,
 - b. Women, young women, and girls' experiences with state social protection systems and welfare systems,
 - c. Climate action and disaster relief programs and planning,
 - d. Gender-based violence,
 - e. Traditional and ancestral knowledge and expertise, and
 - f. Women, young women, and girls' experiences of multidimensional poverty, to ensure contextual and culturally relevant understandings of poverty.

We note the removal of language referencing Indigenous women in the final text of the COP28 Gender Action Plan and encourage Australia to strongly advocate for language which directly acknowledges the impact of climate change on Indigenous women and girls. We urge the government to advocate for the importance of 'free, prior and informed' consent

when raising policy issues related to Indigenous people, emphasising the particular importance of this principle in relation to land and territories and/or policy relating to climate change.

13. An emphasis that any effective climate change action must include coordinated global and State-level responses, acknowledging the outsized impact of climate disasters on women and girls (including refugee, migrant, and stateless women and girls). Australia should advocate for gender-responsive climate financing, emphasising the role of women's unpaid care work following climate disasters and extreme weather events. As above, Australia should emphasise the importance of Indigenous women's voices in any discussion of international climate action. Australia should also highlight the link between sovereign debt stress and decreased domestic spending on climate change prevention and preparedness.
14. A focus on the positive role financial institutions can play in disrupting cycles of poverty and violence, for example the use of AI by banks to identify patterns of coercive financial abuse of women¹ and measures which can be taken by banks to assist women facing the economic effects of gender-based violence.

¹ <https://www.afr.com/companies/financial-services/cba-blocking-400-000-abusive-messages-a-year-sent-with-tiny-payments-20231108-p5eihl>