

Submission to DFAT
A New International Gender Equality Strategy



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About CoAL

The Coalition of Activist Lesbians (CoAL) is a UN-accredited national organisation advocating for lesbian rights. We were the first lesbian-specific organisation to gain NGO accreditation both with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and with the Division for the Advancement of Women. We represented Australian lesbians at the 1995 UN 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing.

*CoAL operates within a human rights-based, women-centric, socio-ecological framework to protect lesbian human rights, and to support all Australian lesbians to participate equally in society in activities for positive social change. In particular, we emphasise that the LGBTQ)+ lobby groups do **not** represent many of our concerns, and our submission will demonstrate how they often work against lesbian human rights.*

CoAL aspires to be part of a society where respect for differences, the rule of law, and the equal dignity of all humans are shared.

To fulfil our United Nations accreditation obligations, CoAL monitors Australian, state, and territory legislation - and the public and private sectors - to ensure implementation of principles inherent in international covenants, including freedom of speech and rights to association, and networks internationally, nationally and locally, with other lesbian, women's, and general community groups.

CoAL appreciates the Australian government's commitment to becoming a world leader on gender equality and we welcome this opportunity to have input into the new International Gender Equality Strategy being prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). As advocates for lesbian rights, we will focus on international sex equality strategies aimed at lesbians.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THIS SUBMISSION

Summary

DFAT must recognise it has become sex-blind and therefore re-orient its new international gender equality strategy toward one that is sex-based. It must separate the TQ+ from the LGB, in order to be properly inclusive of lesbian women in its policy and other decision-making.

Recommendations

DFAT to:

1. consider sex-based equality priorities recommended by lesbians and other women located within individual countries.

2. include lesbian-specific organisations in consultations that guide planning, policy and decision making in a sex-based equality strategy.
3. provide aid to lesbian and women's NGOs within individual countries that aim to improve their social and economic conditions, especially for their education and reduction of harm from war, conflict, male violence and from environmental degradation.

ISSUES ADDRESSED IN THIS SUBMISSION

Sex equality

CoAL is a feminist lesbian group that advocates for the sex-based rights of lesbians. We argue for *sex* equality to be central to Australia's foreign policy, international development, humanitarian action, trade and security effort. In order to adequately address the four questions set by DFAT, this submission firstly argues for *sex*, not gender, equality.

Sex is a key consideration, as gender is a social construct that is being misused by a movement that is confusing sex with gender in order to allow men to be considered women (transwomen). Their strategy is built on and strengthens a gender ideology that is undermining women's sex-based rights and, thus, those of lesbians. For example, lesbians are no longer able to hold lesbian-only, or even women-only functions, because they are accused of, and legally, financially and personally punished for discriminating against 'transwomen' who claim to be women and lesbians. Individually, lesbians are being raped by 'transwomen' who call themselves lesbians and force themselves onto lesbians for sex.

In Australia, this has resulted in lesbians being forced back into the closet, unable to advertise ourselves and our gatherings, having to meet clandestinely (pushed back 'underground') and becoming isolated as in the 1950s before women's liberation brought about lesbian liberation. Framing DFAT's strategy as 'gender equality' is limited by being situated within a gender ideology; the phrase makes a nonsense of advocating for equality between men and women because it allows for some men to be considered as women and equal to men, which they already are. 'Transgender women', and 'transgender men', must be considered within a separate strategy that recognises their human rights without harming the rights of lesbians and other women and girls, both in Australia and elsewhere..

Australia can play a significant role in improving conditions for lesbians and other women in our neighbouring Asia Pacific region and elsewhere only if our government and other key organisations recognise the Western-centric nature of gender ideology, which is totally unable to address sex-based oppression entrenched in other countries, and also recognise how we are losing sight of the resurgence of sex-based oppression within Australia and elsewhere. For example, the Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition (AFFPC) in their 2022 submission on the new International Development Policy advocates 'Australia should adopt a feminist approach to all areas of foreign policy, including international development, adopting key lessons from the growing trend of countries embracing feminist foreign policy.' Yet their slippage between gender and sex leads them to state:

'Leading practice would be ensuring that procurement is gender equal across business ownership, including ongoing assessment and analysis of the value of procurement opportunities (i.e. including whether there are any gender differences in percentage and value of procurement to WOBs—Women-owned

businesses). Attention should also be paid to gender diversity beyond the binary, including supporting non-binary, transgender and gender diverse enterprises.’

Another example is the report by UNDP (UN Development Program) that conflates sexual orientation with gender identity and does not acknowledge that issues of concern about lesbian rights and are different from those for gay men bisexuals, and those who identify as transgender.

We argue that gender diversity is a sex-blind social construct that in this case would divert efforts to improve the position of women. Instead, DFAT needs to develop further strategies beyond those already planned of a First Nations approach to foreign policy and an International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy. Furthermore, by recognising that sex and gender are not the same issue, it needs to develop a Humanitarian Strategy and a human rights engagement strategy for LGB equality and inclusion and a *separate* one for TQIA+ whose needs are very different.

1. What are international gender equality priorities?

The government’s current Gender Equality Strategy (2016) focuses on

- women’s participation in decision-making
- women’s economic empowerment, and
- violence against women.

Key to all three strategies are:

- equal access to education
- prevention of harm from war and conflict
- environment

CoAL is alarmed to learn of the incursion of gender ideology into the Asia Pacific region under the banner of education. For example, the Asia Pacific Forum has been completely captured, to the extent that the organisation is now funding a ‘blended learning course on sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics.’ This amounts to indoctrination of a Western-centric gender ideology that weakens efforts towards addressing the most entrenched problem of sex equality, which is much more widespread than any gender identity issues and requires far greater allocation of resources. Sex-based education programs are needed that are oriented towards eliminating harm to women, including harassment of lesbians and improving understanding and acceptance of lesbian sexuality.

There is a concerning paucity of knowledge and understanding about the effects of conflict and war on lesbians and how to remedy them. A 2020 review of 26 research evaluations of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) found none that focussed on LGBT survivors (Kiss et al 2020). More funding is needed on the international incidence and effects of CRSV against lesbians and how to remedy harm.

A US study found ‘mean cancer and respiratory risks from HAPs (Hazardous Air Pollutants) for same-sex partners are 12.3% and 23.8% greater, respectively, than for heterosexual partner.’ (Collins, Grineski & Morales 2018). More research is also needed on these and other environmental risks internationally, their effects and how to reduce harm.

2. What are the most effective approaches for achieving gender equality globally?

A key focus should be on lesbian and woman-led programs that aim to change men's behaviour and attitudes, on educating men about their role in sex-base inequality and how to bring about personal and structural change in power imbalances. This should include overcoming male 'corrective' rape and other violence targeted specifically at lesbians.

3. How can Australia best support efforts to achieve gender equality internationally?

Sex equality can best be achieved by listening to the voices of women, recognising their experiences, skills and expertise and giving them significant roles in effecting social change. This must include listening to and providing equal opportunities for lesbians to participate in social change within their own countries and thus internationally.

4. What should the government/ DFAT consider when developing the new international gender equality strategy

Australia must use its diplomatic and economic resources to encourage and support lesbian led community groups to play a role in as many aspects of their country's civic activities as possible. This means leading other countries to improve acceptance of lesbians and their domestic social and economic conditions. Of course, this is best done by Australia leading by example.

Signed

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