



**The Fred Hollows
Foundation**

ACN 070 556 842

Level 2
61 Dunning Avenue
Rosebery NSW 2018

Locked Bag 5021
Alexandria NSW 2015
Australia

Tel + 61 2 8741 1900
Fax + 61 2 8741 1999

Donation Line
1800 352 352

Email: fhf@hollows.org
Website: www.hollows.org.au

Committee Secretary
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

15 June 2015

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to Senate Inquiry into the *International Aid (Promoting Gender Equality) Bill 2015*

For over 23 years, The Fred Hollows Foundation has been working with governments and communities around the world to end avoidable blindness and improve the health of Indigenous Australians. The Foundation is inspired by the work of the late Professor Fred Hollows (1929-1993). Fred was an eye doctor, a skilled surgeon of international renown and a social justice activist. The Fred Hollows Foundation is a medium sized Australian non-profit non-government organisation and has charitable status.

The Foundation recognises that:

- Gender inequality is a pervasive source of poverty, social exclusion and disempowerment.
- Gender inequality limits the contribution that women can make to improving health and social development more widely.
- Women are overrepresented amongst the world's blind (greater than 60% of people living with avoidable blindness and severe vision impairment are women) and visually impaired and face unique barriers to accessing eye health services.
- Reducing gender inequality is an essential part of reducing poverty, discrimination and avoidable blindness.
- Gender equity measures are critical in order to achieve gender equality.

There is considerable evidence that simply increasing economic activity fails to recognise the specific historical and cultural bases for gender inequality; and in some cases, may exacerbate the problem. Given this, The Foundation supports the intent of the proposed Bill; which seeks to improve the focus on gender equality within Australia's aid program. It is, however, unclear how the provisions of the proposed Bill interact with other non-statutory guidelines and directives governing the things that Commonwealth aid officials need to consider when making decisions about official development and/or humanitarian assistance.

There would be value in the Bill incorporating a definition of 'gender equality'.

As drafted, clause 4(1) & (2) of the Bill directs all Commonwealth aid officials (including the relevant Minister) to consider the impact of any assistance on gender equality when making decisions on official development assistance and on providing humanitarian assistance. The Bill does not, however, make it clear that the consideration should be done with the intent of actively making decisions that promote or support

gender equality. Without this additional provision, the Bill does not provide any direction or imperative for Commonwealth aid officials to do more than simply consider the impacts of decisions on gender equality.

The Foundation notes that there are also no implications if a Commonwealth aid official fails to do the things prescribed. For example, it is not clear if a decision by a Commonwealth aid official in relation to the provision of official development assistance or humanitarian assistance would be considered invalid if there is evidence that the official failed to consider the impact on gender equality prior to making the decision—and whether the decisions of aid officials would be open to any form of appeal on the basis of their impact on gender equality.

Clause 5(1) of the draft Bill requires the Minister to report in relation to each financial year to both Houses of Parliament on how the Commonwealth has used international aid to promote gender equality. The scope of this report should be expanded to include decisions in relation to Australia's international aid that have been assessed as having a neutral or negative effect on gender equality. As all decisions about international aid are anticipated to involve some consideration of gender equality, there would be considerable merit in the Parliament and Government providing more transparent reporting of the gender considerations of all international aid decisions.

On behalf of The Fred Hollows Foundation I express our thanks for the invitation to provide comment on this important Bill.

Yours faithfully



Brian Doolan
Chief Executive Officer