



15 June 2015

Mr David Sullivan
Committee Secretary
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
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Re: Senate inquiry - International Aid (Promoting Gender Equality) Bill 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the senate inquiry into the proposed *International Aid (Promoting Gender Equality) Bill 2015*.

Our comments have been made in the context of our work in the region.

For further information, please contact:
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Yours sincerely

Ann Brassil
CEO

Family Planning NSW

Family Planning NSW is the leading provider of reproductive and sexual health services in NSW, providing access to high quality clinical services and information. We provide information and health promotion activities, as well as education and training for doctors, nurses, teachers and other health, education and welfare professionals.

We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation, and our services are targeted to communities, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, refugees, people with disability, young people, people from rural and remote communities and LGBTIQ people.

Our work is evidence-based, and shaped by our research through the Family Planning NSW Sydney Centre for Reproductive and Sexual Health Research, our published clinical practice handbooks on reproductive and sexual health, our nationally recognised data and evaluation unit, and validated through our own extensive clinical practice.

Our international program – Family Planning Australia

Operating internationally as Family Planning Australia, we work to assist poor and disadvantaged communities in the Pacific to improve access to comprehensive reproductive and sexual health services with funding from Australian aid and private donors.

We work with family planning organisations at national and international levels and local NGOs to promote the rights of all people to achieve reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing. Our work in the Pacific includes long term capacity building of NGOs and local health systems to address areas of reproductive and sexual health need and includes clinical services, community education, resource development, professional education and assisting Pacific governments with health policy development.

Examples of our projects include training programs for nurses and health extension officers; men and boys behaviour change programs to improve health outcomes and relationships and address cultural barriers to reproductive and sexual health rights; implementing cervical cancer screening and treatment programs; and improving access to contraceptive supplies.

We also recently assisted the Fiji Nursing Association, the Reproductive and Family Health Association of Fiji and the Fiji Ministry of Health on the development of the Ministry's *Cervical Cancer Screening Policy 2015*, a first ever comprehensive cervical cancer screening and treatment policy for Fiji or for any Pacific island.

We are a signatory to the Australian Council for International Development Code of Conduct, adherence to which is monitored by an independent Code of Conduct Committee elected from the NGO community. Our voluntary adherence to the Code of Conduct demonstrates our commitment to ethical practice and public accountability. We are fully accredited with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in relation to the management of international aid projects.

Our comments

Family Planning NSW welcomes the overall intention to promote gender equality in Australia's aid budget and supports the Government's recognition of women's empowerment as one of the six focus areas of Australia's aid program. We note that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is currently required to ensure at least 80 percent of all aid investments address gender equality.

Family Planning NSW (Family Planning Australia) believe the *International Aid (Promoting Gender Equality) Bill 2015* supports the Government's existing commitment to promoting gender equality in the aid budget and reflects the Minister for Foreign Affairs' and DFAT's current policy priorities as reflected in *Making Performance Count: enhancing the accountability and effectiveness of Australian aid*.

Women and girls in developing countries disproportionately bear the burden of poverty. It has long been recognised that achieving gender equality is not only a human right and a development goal in its own right but also a means to achieve other development goals. Gender equality is a precondition for advancing development and reducing poverty, as empowering women results in wider benefit for their families and communities through improved health and productivity. Empowering women and girls to fully participate in society is essential to achieve inclusive economic growth and to reach internationally agreed goals for sustainable development.

Despite this recognition however, there has not been significant advancement in reducing gender inequality.

According to the latest progress report card on achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the Asia-Pacific region, no sub-region is expected to meet the targets for maternal, child or infant mortality and a number of other indicators. Not only did the region fail to hit the targets but also made slow progress. "One of the most important targets that will be missed, by the region as a whole as well as by each subregion, is that for maternal mortality. Indeed, of the 42 countries with data, only 7 are expected to reduce maternal deaths by three-quarters"¹.

The UN Secretary General has stated, in regard to the MDGs, that "shortfalls have occurred not because the goals are unreachable or because time is too short. We are off course because of unmet commitments, inadequate resources and a lack of focus and accountability"².

An increased focus on prioritising gender equality in aid programs and increased accountability including in aid program allocation as well as measurement and tracking of performance or lack of is required.

The *International Aid (Promoting Gender Equality) Bill 2015* would be an important tool in assisting Australia's development program help address persistent gender inequality in developing countries. The mainstreaming of gender considerations by requiring all aid decisions to include an assessment of gender impact and the obligation for annual reporting to Parliament on how the aid program is addressing gender equal would increase transparency and accountability and benefit the program overall.

¹ The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) *Making it Happen, Asia-Pacific Regional MDGs Report 2014/15*, pp 4& 9

² United Nations OHCHR (2013) *Who will be Accountable? Human rights and the Post-2015 Development Agenda*

This is an approach that is gaining strength internationally, with the government of the United Kingdom recently passing the *International Aid Gender Equality Act* (2014) with support from both major parties, and is an approach that is also being considered by Sweden and Norway.

The following comments are made specifically in relation to our work in the area of reproductive and sexual health and rights.

1. Access to reproductive and sexual health services and rights is critical to achieving gender equality

There are significant challenges faced in achieving women's empowerment and gender equality, and the Bill could be extremely useful in ensuring gender considerations are embedded into all aspects of Australia's aid program and would allow a holistic approach across policy area such as health, education, political participation and access to finance, to be addressed.

Reproductive and sexual health and rights save lives, empowers women, and lifts women and their families out of poverty. Family planning is one of the most cost-effective investments in global health and development.

Addressing the critical health needs - especially the reproductive and sexual health and family planning needs of women - is a fundamental prerequisite to development success and foundational to greater economic and social participation by women. As the United Nations Population Fund notes, "If we can reach the poorest and most vulnerable with reproductive health information and services we can save many lives and improve countless others."³

Aid funding should prioritise addressing basic barriers to women's greater economic and social participation by providing a greater level of investment in family planning programs and services, as well as programs which target cultural attitudes to sexual and reproductive rights and gender-based violence.

The involvement of men and boys in reproductive and sexual health programs should also not be ignored as the role and attitudes of men is also critical to addressing gender equality. In much of the Pacific and developing countries, men are the decision makers in many aspects of life and often exercise control over many family planning decisions. Recognition of the role of men in reproductive and sexual health and women's economic, social and political participation is important and should not be overlooked.

Requiring all aid priorities and programs, including those focussed on infrastructure, trade and private sector-led growth initiatives, to also contribute in a concrete and measurable way to improved gender equality and women's economic empowerment is vital to achieving development goals.

2. Reporting and transparency of proportion of aid budget spend on reproductive and sexual health programs is required

Parliamentary oversight of spending and progress reflects the importance of achieving gender equality and will improve transparency. Monitoring and reporting by Australia should pay special attention to the need to ensure that reporting on progress data is not aggregated such that inequalities and inequities are masked, rendering invisible parts of the population that are left behind⁴. This is especially important for disempowered women and girls as current approaches

³ United Nations Population Fund, 2010

⁴ High-Level Taskforce for ICPD "*Follow up, Review, Monitoring & Accountability of the Post-2015 Agenda*" p 2

to alleviating poverty rely on household-level data that does not identify the unique challenges faced by them.

It is currently difficult to identify Australia's investments in reproductive and sexual health and family planning in the aid program for a number of reasons, including: family planning is often subsumed or grouped into larger categories, Government reporting data formats have varied, and publicly available DFAT documents in recent years do not easily identify expenditure on family planning.

Australia has previously committed to increasing its expenditure on family planning programs in the aid budget, notably so at the Family Planning Summit in London 2012. This commitment is commendable and reflects the fundamental role such programs play in gender equality advancement and the empowerment of women. The annual reporting to parliament requirement contained within the Bill should include transparency on the detail of expenditure to programs within the aid budget including family planning and reproductive and sexual health programs.