

Caritas Australia submission to the

# **Inquiry into the rights of women and children**

December 2022



16 December 2022

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members,

RE: Inquiry into the rights of women and children, December 2022

As the international aid agency of the Catholic Church in Australia, Caritas Australia works to uphold human dignity and promote justice in partnership with marginalised communities, regardless of their ethnicity, political beliefs or religion. We support long-term development programs and emergency humanitarian programs in the Pacific, Asia, Africa and Australia. In 2021-22, Caritas Australia reached over 1.3 million people worldwide. Over 60,000 people in Australia actively support our work through fundraising and advocacy.

Caritas Australia welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation for the Inquiry into the rights of women and children. Our submission is based on over 55 years of experience in working with our development and humanitarian partners and with the communities we serve.

Across the world, women and children are disproportionately affected by poverty, food insecurity and gender-based violence. Gender inequality means that women and girls also face additional barriers to accessing education, health care and employment, and that women are often excluded from participating in decision-making at all levels. Conflict, climate change and COVID-19 have gained increasing prominence as key exacerbators of gender-based violence and inequality.

There is an urgent need to take stronger action to protect the rights of women and children worldwide. I encourage the Committee to use all mechanisms within its powers to uphold their human rights.

Yours sincerely,



Kirsty Robertson  
CEO  
Caritas Australia

## Summary of Recommendations

Informed by the experiences of our partners in twenty-five countries around the world, we make the following recommendations to strengthen Australia's international approach to upholding the rights of women and children:

- That the Australian Government reaffirms its commitment to inclusive, intersectional, and equitable development, with a clear commitment to women's leadership and the prevention of gender-based violence. In particular it should address the compounding effects of poverty, climate change, conflict and other drivers that increase women and girls' vulnerability using a range of different measures and mechanisms, including the International Development Policy.
- That the International Development Policy expands financial and technical support to Australian development NGOs and local partner organisations to strengthen capacities to support the integration of gender equity outcomes. This includes committing to:
  - 5 per cent of Official Development Assistance delivered through women's equality organisations in 2023- 24;
  - 5 per cent of Official Development Assistance to initiatives with gender equality as the primary objective, in addition to 80 per cent of initiatives with gender equality as a significant objective; and
  - Maintaining the highest sector standards in the prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment recognizing how intersecting drivers of vulnerability can exacerbate risks in the delivery of development and humanitarian programs, and supporting partners to build their capabilities.
- That the International Development Policy prioritizes addressing all forms of gender-based violence, with a focus on eliminating discriminatory social norms and practices, strengthening local mechanisms and supporting the provision of necessary services to survivors, particularly in emergency and humanitarian situations.
- That the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in partnership with Australian development NGOs co-designs a capacity strengthening program that promotes collaboration between DFAT, Australian development NGOs and other Australian Government departments and agencies (including the Department of Education; Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission; Workplace Gender Equality Agency) to strengthen policies, design, and implementation standards to prevent and address all forms of gender-based violence. The program should contain goals and indicators showing how the collaborations have effectively addressed gender-based violence.
- That the Australian Government supports development partners to enable a legal and policy environment in support of gender justice. This includes supporting local authorities, service providers and civil society groups and enhancing their capacity to eliminate discriminatory laws and practices, as well as to respond to gender-based violence in a timely and appropriate manner.
- That DFAT scale up its support to women's leadership programs, including by enhancing the Pacific Women Lead Program from 2023 to allow more women to participate and expanding the Pacific Women Lead Program model to other regions by 2024.
- That the International Development Policy recognizes the role of local communities, and the civil society organizations which support them, as key actors in tackling gender inequality and violence; and increases support for locally-led programs that address these issues including during disaster.

- That DFAT enhances support for local church-based responses to promote gender equality in countries where churches are key civil society actors.
- That DFAT continues engagement and support of the Pacific Church Partnerships Program.
- That the Australian Government, in recognition of the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and children, strengthens Australia's domestic climate policies in line with our commitment to the Paris Agreement target of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees, and meets its fair share of international climate finance targets.

## The global context for gender inequality

Gender inequality is the root cause of many injustices experienced by women and girls including violence, the exclusion of women from participation in decision-making at all levels and disproportionately low access for women and girls to educational and livelihood opportunities. It also reinforces traditional gendered roles and division of labour which results in time poverty for women and girls, further affecting women's participation in civic spaces and girls' participation in education.

Gender inequality is perpetuated by harmful social norms. Across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, our partners have told us that harmful social norms within patriarchal structures are perpetuating beliefs and practices that undermine the rights of women and children. While there are many examples of effective initiatives to raise awareness and provide education and training to address these harmful societal norms (and to affirm positive social norms such as those around identity, belonging and empathy), the harmful attitudes and practices are deeply rooted in many societies and will take significant investment as well as political and social will to address.

“Achieving gender equality and ending gender-based violence in the Pacific involves challenging entrenched beliefs and cultures of patriarchal societies. It also means challenging aspects of culture which are at odds with human rights. This is complex, highly sensitive and takes years.”  
- Caritas Oceania, 2020<sup>1</sup>

At present there are three main exacerbators of gender inequality and violence: conflict, climate change and COVID-19.

Women and children are placed at greater vulnerability in situations of conflict, emergency and humanitarian crises, including protracted crises. An estimated 70 per cent of women experience gender-based violence in humanitarian contexts.<sup>2</sup>

Women and girls are also at increased risk to the impacts of climate change, because of the increased frequency and/or severity of extreme weather events and disasters, additional social and economic pressures created by climate change, and the fact that women and girls are more likely to be responsible for collecting water and firewood, looking after the household and caring for others. However, women are underrepresented in all conversations and debates about climate change, disaster risk response and adaptation at all levels of decision making. We urge the Australian government to do more to tackle the root cause of climate change, which disproportionately impacts women and children, and to ensure their meaningful participation in, and contribution to, climate change advocacy and decision-making.

Caritas Oceania provides this example of the gendered nature of climate change and disasters: “Caritas Tonga has observed that sometimes households headed by women don't receive supplies in the first round of emergency distribution after a disaster. This may be because these households have not been captured on town registries, which places women and children in a more vulnerable situation.”<sup>3</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlights gender inequalities globally. Lockdowns and other measures aimed at controlling the spread of the virus including school and day care closures had women taking up an estimated 512 billion extra hours of unpaid childcare and domestic responsibilities. Mobility restrictions also meant that women and adolescent girls were unable to access necessary and life-saving reproductive health care products and services.<sup>4</sup> For example, Caritas Bangladesh reported that between March 2020 and July 2021, their community-based protection programs in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar were significantly

<sup>1</sup> Caritas Oceania (2020). [Submission to the Inquiry on the Human Rights of Women and Girls in the Pacific](#)

<sup>2</sup> OCHA (2021). Global Humanitarian Overview 2021 – Part 1: Global Trends - [Gender and Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Action](#)

<sup>3</sup> Caritas Oceania (2020). Ibid. To address this gap, Caritas Tonga ensures they reach the most vulnerable by asking their parish committees to provide household beneficiary lists, as the committees are part of the community and know all the families.

<sup>4</sup> UN Women (2022). [Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022](#)

disrupted, even at times completely suspended, due to COVID-19 related restrictions.<sup>5</sup> The incidence of gender-based violence also increased during the pandemic. Many women and children were more likely to be confined to the same spaces as perpetrators of violence and were less able to access support services and shelters. The 'shadow pandemic' of violence as a result of COVID-19 is partly evidenced by the sharp increase in calls to crisis support helplines in many countries.<sup>6</sup>

Australia's foreign policy and the new International Development Policy should prioritise the mainstreaming of gender equality outcomes. We welcome the reintroduction by DFAT of the commitment to an 80 per cent performance target to ensure Australia's development investments effectively address gender equality, including mandating that those investments over AUD\$3 million have a gender equality objective.<sup>7</sup> However, there is still a significant gap between ambition and implementation, with just 44.8 per cent of Australia's aid budget going towards programs which have gender equality as a principal or significant objective.<sup>8</sup>

## Gender-based violence

Violence against women and girls remains alarmingly and persistently high - every 11 minutes one woman or girl in the world is killed by someone in her family.<sup>9</sup> Globally, one in three women across their lifetime are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner.<sup>10</sup>

Women and children with disabilities experience much higher rates of violence. A United Nations study found that girls and young women face up to 10 times more gender-based violence than those without disabilities<sup>11</sup> while a World Health Organization study found that children with disabilities are almost four times more likely to become victims of violence than children without disabilities.<sup>12</sup>

Australia's new International Development Policy should prioritise the prevention of all forms of gender-based violence. It should support interventions at the systems and community level that address the root causes of violence, and strengthen strategies that respond to the compounding impacts of poverty, climate change, conflict and other fragile humanitarian contexts, as well as the intersections of gender and disability for women and girls that make them particularly vulnerable to various forms of gender-based violence. More collaboration between DFAT, Australian development NGOs, and other relevant Australian Government departments and agencies is needed.

### *Case study: Changing social attitudes to gender-based violence in Timor Leste*

Timor-Leste ranks 128<sup>th</sup> out of 187 countries on the UN Gender Inequality Index.<sup>13</sup> Gender-based violence is the largest category of crimes reported to police in Timor Leste, with 59 per cent of ever-partnered women aged 15-19 experiencing intimate partner violence at least once in their lifetime.<sup>14</sup> However, this figure only represents a fraction of real cases, as most instances of domestic violence are dealt with informally and never reported to law enforcement.

<sup>5</sup> Caritas Bangladesh, Caritas Development Institute and Caritas Australia (2022). [Learning Paper: Caritas Bangladesh Community-Based Protection Program in Cox's Bazar during COVID-19](#)

<sup>6</sup> Caritas Oceania (2020). Ibid. See page 8.

<sup>7</sup> DFAT (2022). [Australian Official Development Assistance Budget Summary 2022–23](#).

<sup>8</sup> DFAT (2022). [Question Number 82](#), Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Additional Estimates 2021 – 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Bahous, S. (2022). ['Tackling challenges head on'](#). Keynote speech by Sima Bahous, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women.

<sup>10</sup> World Health Organisation (2021). [Devastatingly pervasive: 1 in 3 women globally experience violence](#). Media release 9 March 2021.

<sup>11</sup> UN Population Fund (2018). [Five things you didn't know about disability and sexual violence](#).

<sup>12</sup> UN (2012). [Children with disabilities more likely to face violence, says UN-backed study](#).

<sup>13</sup> UNDP (2022). [Gender Inequality Index](#). Accessed 1 December 2022.

<sup>14</sup> The Asia Foundation. The Nabilan Health and Life Experiences Study – [Fact Sheet 4: Sexual Violence Against Women by Someone Other Than Their Intimate Partner in Timor-Leste](#)

Caritas Australia supports 13 local partners across four municipalities of Timor Leste to protect the dignity, safety and access to services for those most vulnerable to experiencing gender-based violence. As well as providing shelters and other support services for women and children survivors of violence, our local partners also work in the area of prevention and social behaviour change. They engage youth, church actors, and high school students in conversations and training around topics such as early marriage, healthy relationships and conflict management as well as ‘unpacking the social construct of masculinity and how it contributes to power structures and dynamics in our society today. As part of this intervention, there are men’s groups that meet regularly to discuss domestic violence in their community and develop strategies they view to be locally appropriate and relevant to create peaceful homes and harmonious families. These groups of men are influencers who advocate to other men in their communities to put an end to violence’.<sup>15</sup>

## Women’s leadership and participation

The rise of conservative or repressive regimes in many countries and the shrinking of democratic and civil space have been detrimental to the rights of women and girls. Such regimes support or have been increasingly enforcing discriminatory laws that deny women and girls their human rights, including access to basic services and the right to participate actively in all levels of decision making.

Women’s participation in decision-making is not only a human right but crucial to good development outcomes. When women are empowered, their children are more likely to attend school and have better health outcomes. Evidence also shows that when women are included in decision-making, disaster preparedness and response initiatives as well as peacebuilding efforts are more likely to be durable and effective.<sup>16</sup>

Yet in many countries, a significant lack of participation and leadership by women in decision-making is reflected at household, community and national levels. At the household and community level, we hear stories from our partners of strong leadership of women in their local communities but also stories where cultural norms deter women from participating in community consultations. Globally, women comprise only 26 per cent of national parliamentarians and 34 per cent of elected local government seats. More gender-transformative policies and programs to empower women to have active and meaningful participation in decision-making at all levels are needed.

### *Case study: Women’s leadership in disaster management leads to better outcomes*

In Caritas Tonga’s experience, ‘communities in Tonga fare better during natural disasters when women play a leadership role in early warning systems and reconstruction. Women tend to share information related to community well-being, are less concerned about political motivations when it comes to emergency food and shelter distributions, choose less polluting energy sources and adapt more easily to environmental changes. When their family’s survival is at stake, women tend to be very effective at mobilizing communities in the event of disaster. When trained and equipped with skills to lead, for example during an emergency evacuation, they are very proactive and powerful. Caritas Tonga has observed that the most successful emergency management committees are those with significant representation of women.’<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Review of Caritas Australia’s Protection Program in Timor Leste, July 2022

<sup>16</sup> Caritas Oceania (2020). Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Caritas Oceania (2020). Ibid.

## Specific issues of women and children's rights raised by our partners

### Access to Education

Access to education is a critical pathway to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Without an education, children's future employment and livelihoods remain limited, with significant socio-economic and health impacts. Yet recent data shows that there is still a huge number of children missing out on education – in 2021, 244 million children and youth between the ages of 6 and 18 worldwide were missing out on school.<sup>18</sup> Poverty and lack of access to basic needs such as water and good nutrition are key barriers to accessing education. Girls are disproportionately impacted for a range of reasons: families in poverty may prioritise the education of boys over girls, girls are more likely to have gendered roles in caring and other domestic duties leading to dropping out of school, girls may lack access to appropriate supports during menstruation, and fear of gender-based violence during travel to school in remote areas can deter girls from attending.

For example, a situational analysis undertaken for Caritas in three provinces in Zimbabwe in 2022<sup>19</sup> described these barriers to education:

'The water scarcity situation was acute [in two provinces] where children have to bring water from home for drinking at school, bring water for teachers and also for washing toilets. The situation is dire for girls when they have menstrual periods. Many children end up having their education interrupted, missing school and ultimately dropping out. In [a third province], parents and learners stressed the importance of food at the household level, as many of them go to school hungry and this affects performance. At the same time in all the districts, the children travel very long distances to school, especially those in secondary school.'

### Access to justice

Access to legal recourse for survivors of violence can be limited or even non-existent. Some of our partners, including in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Papua New Guinea, have observed that recourse to 'justice' is sometimes limited to customary or traditional processes, where the perpetrator may be required to pay a fine to the family of the survivor but otherwise avoids penalties.

In the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, community members have reported limited access to legal services and the judicial system. A study by Caritas researchers in December 2020<sup>20</sup> pointed to limited access to legal aid services due to threats from perpetrators as well as limited functionality and capacity of key legal and judicial institutions and support services, exacerbated by COVID-19. There was also limited access to support from law enforcement agencies in filing and resolving sensitive protection cases, especially cases related to sexual and gender-based violence and child protection.

In Papua New Guinea, the traditional practice of customary compensation involves payment to survivors of crimes, or sometimes their families or villages, in lieu of legal or criminal prosecution. According to the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, acceptance of this practice is widespread in the community.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> UNESCO (2022). [New measurement shows that 244 million children and youth are out of school](#). Accessed 6 December 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Gumbonzvanda, N. (2022). Gender, Child Protection, Disability and Safeguarding Audit of Zimbabwe Integrated Community Development Program, commissioned by Caritas Australia. June 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Caritas Bangladesh, Caritas Development Institute and Caritas Australia (2022). Ibid. The research methodology involved 465 quantitative surveys from men, women, boys and girls from camp and host communities, 15 Focus Groups Discussions with men and women from camp and host communities, 20 In-depth Interviews with camp and host community members and 14 Key Informant Interviews with key stakeholders and protection workers.

<sup>21</sup> Caritas Oceania (2022). Ibid.



We encourage the Australian Government to support development partners to enable a legal and policy environment in support of gender justice. This includes supporting local authorities, service providers and civil society groups and enhancing their capacity to eliminate discriminatory laws and practices, as well as to respond to gender-based violence in a timely and appropriate manner.

## **Child marriage**

‘Every year, at least 12 million girls are married before they reach the age of 18. This is 28 girls every minute. One in every five girls is married, or in union, before reaching age 18. In the least developed countries, that number doubles: 40 per cent of girls are married before age 18, and 12 per cent of girls are married before age 15. The practice is particularly widespread in conflict-affected countries and humanitarian settings.’

*- UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights<sup>22</sup>*

Child marriage (marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age) remains prevalent in many countries, particularly for girls. Factors that increase the risk of child marriage include poverty, social norms, customary laws and lack of enforcement of legislation. In some communities a girl is considered ready for marriage after she has started menstruating. Poverty and early marriage are often a vicious cycle – once a girl is married early, she often loses access to further educational opportunities along with access to the knowledge and skills to become financially independent. Early marriage is also linked to early and more frequent pregnancy and childbirth.

There is a clear need for more support for programs that address the risk factors for child marriage.

## **Overarching principles for advancing the human rights of women and children**

### **Recognising intersectionality and diversity of women’s and children’s experiences**

We recognise the diverse and intersectional experiences of women and children, including gender and gender identity, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, dis/ability, religion, migration status and socio-cultural context as well as vulnerabilities that may arise from conflict, disasters, historical injustices and intergenerational trauma. We recognise that injustice is experienced through intersecting forms of discrimination and that each woman and child will experience discrimination differently.

### **Inclusive approaches to addressing gender inequality and gender-based violence**

Addressing gender inequalities and protecting the rights of women and children must be done from a broader, inclusive and intersectional lens. This means taking into consideration the diversity of women and children’s experiences, and responding to their unique needs across varying contexts.

It is also crucial to challenge dominant forms of masculinities that perpetuate harmful and discriminatory practices against women and children, and leverage on the transformative potential of working with men and boys in addressing all forms of inequalities and promoting gender justice and children’s rights.

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<sup>22</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. [Child and forced marriage, including in humanitarian settings](#). Accessed 2 December 2022.

### *Case study: Engaging men and boys in eliminating gender-based violence in PNG*

The Centre of Hope is a safehouse located in the Madang province of Papua New Guinea (PNG). It is run by a local Catholic congregation in partnership with Caritas Australia and funded through DFAT's Church Partnership Program. Centre of Hope provides shelter and support services including counselling, case management, legal advice and community reintegration to women and children who have experienced gender-based violence. Women who access the safe house are supported to develop new livelihood skills and knowledge to increase their resilience and economic empowerment.

The Centre of Hope also supports community education and advocacy initiatives that promote gender equality and the elimination of violence against women, including utilising the Gender Equality Theology developed through the Church Partnerships Program in PNG to promote messages of gender equality.

In recognition of the importance of men and boys being part of the solution to eliminating gender-based violence, the Centre also engages men and boys to become advocates in their communities. This includes men who, through counselling and participation in programs and training run by the Centre of Hope, have undergone a transformation from being past perpetrators to advocates against gender-based violence.

“Having people talking from their experience of violent backgrounds into becoming a changed person is worth more than person talking from theoretical knowledge. This can challenge other men to believe in changes or to admit their own situation and work towards change.”  
– Sr Thecla, Director of Centre of Hope

In 2022, Centre of Hope and five other Catholic safehouses in PNG formed the Catholic Safehouse Association of PNG, with Caritas Australia's support. The Association of safehouses will continue to strengthen their capacity to address gender-based violence across the country.

## **Investing in community-led solutions and engaging key civil society actors**

Caritas believes that the most successful and sustainable programs to address the human rights issues of women and children in any community are those led by local communities themselves. We believe that decisions should be made by the people closest and most affected by the issues and concerns of the community. In the context of creating safe communities, a community-based approach recognizes that local community members, including First Nations people, are best placed to drive initiatives that address gender inequality and violence against women and children.

Australia's new International Development Policy should recognize the role of local communities, and the civil society organizations which support them, as key actors in tackling gender inequality and violence; and increase support for locally led programs that address these issues including during disasters.

### *Case study: Community-based protection in Cox's Bazar camps*

Women and girls living in the Rohingya camp and host communities of Cox's Bazar experience a range of protection issues including violence against women and children, child marriage and abduction. Field research by Caritas in December 2020<sup>23</sup> found that 69 per cent of women and 57 per cent of children from host communities were likely to have experienced violence. Within the Rohingya camp communities, 62 percent of women and 38 per cent of children had experience violence. 68 per cent of Rohingya women and girls from the camps felt unsafe moving outside their camp area, while 43 per cent felt unsafe moving around within the camp itself.

<sup>23</sup> Caritas Bangladesh, Caritas Development Institute and Caritas Australia, 2022. Ibid.

To address these risks, Caritas Bangladesh supports community-based protection programs in the camps, including a Barefoot Counsellors program, Women-Friendly Spaces and Child-Friendly Spaces. The Barefoot Counsellors program 'empowers Rohingya community members to gain knowledge and skills as volunteers to support other camp community members through activities such as psychosocial support, community engagement and awareness raising. The program reinforces the natural solidarity networks in the community through progressive capacity building of volunteers in protection and gender-based violence counselling, household visits, information and awareness sessions, and reporting.' The Barefoot Counsellor volunteers play an important role in preventing violence, trafficking and child abuse. Community volunteers are also on committees for the Women-Friendly Spaces and Child-Friendly Spaces. Researchers found that the three community-based protection initiatives are effectively engaging and involving community members, and Caritas Bangladesh is looking at how to further deepen community engagement and ownership.

In many countries, churches are key civil society actors. This is particularly the case in the Pacific, where over 90 per cent of the population identify as Christian and where the church is often the most significant civil society actor. Collectively, the mainline churches in the Pacific form the largest piece of social infrastructure throughout the region. Churches in the Pacific have extensive reach, long-established networks and a presence in locations where other actors, including police, may not be able to access. Their representatives are embedded within the community and have strong relationships at the local level. The Pacific Church Partnerships Program was developed in acknowledgement of this reach.

Church leaders can frame social issues in locally appropriate terms and with a spiritual dimension which is highly effective and influential. This is particularly important when there is a need to challenge culture and to change mindsets, for example on gender-based violence.

“Faith leaders play a uniquely influential role in determining values in the Pacific and can be a powerful transformational force to re-shape attitudes, beliefs and behaviors around gender equality. As we all know, these social norms shape and foster the context within which acts of violence against women and girls take place at a personal, family, community and societal level.”

- Dr Filimon Manoni, Deputy Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, 2020

Investment in further capacity-building of church-based actors to uphold gender equality and to end violence against women and children will ensure more effective and wider reaching impact.