

February 28, 2017

Submission to the Hon. Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs for the White Paper on Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Proposal: Include a Female Lens in Australian Foreign Policy in 2017 and Beyond.

Dear Minister,

I the undersigned have a strong interest in developing a female perspective for our foreign policy. In my capacity as Chief Executive Officer at the Australian Woman Chamber of Commerce & Industry, and as a Ph.D. student of Foreign Policy, I appreciate your invitation to give my views for the forthcoming White Paper.

Women had the legal right to stand for federal parliament in 1902 in Australia, however, it took 111 years to appoint our first female Foreign Affairs Minister.

The Foreign Affairs portfolio includes Human Rights – which encompasses ‘gender equality’ and promotes the elimination of sexual discrimination; in 2011 the first Ambassador for Women and Girls was included. The Foreign Affairs Minister is responsible for ‘Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment strategy’, which states that:

“We will lead efforts to integrate gender equality wherever possible in high-level policy dialogues across the UN, in economic policy forums such as the G20 and in regional organisations”^[1].

Although Australia has a Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment strategy, the world sees us as significantly lagging. In the World Economic Forums Political Empowerment subindex report, Australia is ranked at number 61, from the 145 economies measured^[2] securing its position behind developing economies including, but not limited to, Burundi, Cuba and Rwanda. Moreover, Australia has continued to drop significantly since 2006 when it was ranked at 32 in closing the gender gap of female political participation^[3]. This indicates substantial regression.

It would appear not only fair but economically and politically viable to include more women in Foreign Policy in 2017 and beyond in order to ensure sustainable progress for the majority and safeguard peace within our region for current and future generations in these challenging times. It is evident that peace is not always front of mind of the current ‘leader of the free world’.

Researchers have confirmed that peace processes, which include women at the negotiation level, provide sustainable results; yet only four per cent of signatories to international peace agreements between 1992 and 2011 were women^[1]. Perhaps this is why the majority of women, of all ages, see significant obstacles for women in politics while only a minority of men, of all age groups, share that view^[2].

Women, without female leaders, experience oppression as men continue to deprive women around the globe of their safety and their ability to contribute^[3]. Thus why it is of the utmost importance to encourage implementation of sex discrimination policies and to have women in Foreign Affairs to distribute the message and drive outcomes to achieve the goals agreed to in a long list of declarations and conventions to which Australia is a signatory, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Part 1, article 1 of that convention states:

“... the term "discrimination against women" shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field^[7].

Appointing woman to powerful diplomatic posts signals a country's 'progressive' attitude^[3]. If Australia were to act on a female-friendly foreign policy, countries wishing to engage with us may reflect and contemplate relinquishing their status quo in order to deliver the outcomes advocated by APEC, OECD, the UN and many other international forums which advocate for the elimination of sex discrimination. Mr Ban Ki-moon, the former UN Secretary General, in his 2016 report stated:

“Acknowledgement of the importance of gender equality and women's social, economic, and political empowerment by States and non-State actors has not been matched by concrete policy implementation and demonstrable change on the ground. Significant and sometimes growing gender gaps and discrimination against women and girls remain across virtually all sectors and regions”^[8].

Furthermore, the political power in Foreign Affairs remains in the hands of men^[4], even though Foreign Affairs Ministers claim to prioritise gender equality in the international fora and diplomats are directed to enhance efforts that promote women's political participation^[5]. Today only 13% of incumbent Foreign Affairs Ministers within UN member economies are women.

Although women are engaged as policy experts, women continue to 'wage unique campaigns for political inclusion', for gender justice, for 'sexual democracy and for the 'right to be politically engaged'^[6] because UN goals and targets appear to be only about ticking a box^[3] for many economies around the globe, in order to acquire votes and obtain the funding necessary for political survival^[7]. Reinforcing stereotypes appears to provide the patriarchy^[8] with the unrestrained ability to differentiate between women and men to limit the power of women.

Considering Australia's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment strategy applies across all work undertaken by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, it would be of historical significance if the first female Foreign Affairs Minister in Australia confirms Australia's commitment to include women in the 2017 White Paper, perhaps even note the recent announcement made by the Foreign Affairs Minister of Sweden, the Hon. Margot Wallström, whom launched Sweden's first 'feminist foreign policy'.

Wallström stated, during her speech at Helsinki University that: “A feminist foreign policy aims to respond to one of the greatest challenges of this century^[14]. The Minister also argued that:

“We need to show that there is a link between our internal and external action and that we apply a gender perspective when we build our organisations, form our negotiating

teams and staff our missions ...What is important is that the realisation is growing, that gender equality is not a women's issue but rather a make-or-break issue. It is a make-or-break issue in itself – and for peace, security and sustainable development as a whole^[4].

Australia needs to consider a similar approach because we have a long way to go with our national and international gender agenda and we need to confirm that equality is not just a word, but instead take specific strategic actions to illustrate that we actually take sex discrimination seriously, today and in the future, and discourage future comments like those made by John Howard, a former Prime Minister of Australia, who said: "It is a fact of society that women play a significantly greater part of fulfilling the caring role in our communities, which inevitably places some limits on their capacity"^[9]. Unfortunately, Howard is not alone. The President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, addressing students at the University of Istanbul, shared his views: "A woman who refuses maternity and gives up housekeeping faces the threats of losing her freedom. She is lacking and is a half [person] no matter how successful she is"^[10]. Moreover, he said: "You cannot put women and men on an equal footing, it is against nature"^[11].

Minister, you better than I can attest to the fact that these are preposterous statements; yet another reason we need more women in Foreign Affairs. We know that women have the capacity, ability, education and legal right to participate at all political levels. Furthermore, considering research demonstrates that 'women elected officials generally sponsor more women-friendly bills than their male counterparts'^[12] it is vital that this White Paper include a strategic agenda for women in our foreign policy.

Understanding that we live in a world where economics dominates the political national and international space, one could conclude that giving the majority of the population, women, the right to participate in our foreign affairs and trade fora would be beneficial for everyone, especially considering the number of women who today run their own business around the globe. Empowering women is an important development objective on the grounds of both fairness and efficiency, which leads to growth.

Australia has signed a long list of declarations yet and copious reports released by APEC, CEDAW, the G20, the OECD, the UN, UNWomen^[13] et al. demonstrate that improvement for women has been unsatisfactorily slow, with areas of inaction and regression in every economy^[14]. Now, therefore, is the right and appropriate time to take action rather than continue with the same dialogue producing few real results.

Moreover, women's rights are human rights and there are many human rights violations occurring around the world. It is for this reason and of the utmost importance to ensure that the female voice is included in the Foreign Affairs fora. We must ensure that Australia's foreign policy includes a gender lens.

I commend this submission to you.



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