



**Submission to the 56th Human Rights Council Report
on Civil Society and International Solidarity**

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Lead Author

Madeleine Clark, Senior Policy Officer

Equality Rights Alliance

The Equality Rights Alliance (ERA) is Australia's largest network of organisations advocating for gender equality, women's economic security, women's leadership, and recognition of women's diversity. We are advised by our 70 members, who are national-level or expert NGOs with a focus on the impact of policy or service delivery on women.

ERA often takes on a leadership role in promoting international engagement in Australian civil society, particularly among national-level gender policy organisations. ERA's international engagement typically centers around the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) processes. This submission focuses on ERA's engagement in the international gender space.

The International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) endorses this submission. ERA thanks IWDA for their advice, expertise, and contributions to this document.

Submission

Introduction

ERA is one of six National Women's Alliances (NWAs) funded to advise the Australian federal government's Office for Women. Each NWA receives approximately AUD\$312,000 annually on three-year contracts. Their remit is to build infrastructure and relationships to facilitate community consultation on gender equality, and then feed that information to the Federal government through Departmental consultation processes and Parliamentary advocacy.

The NWAs consist of:

- Equality Rights Alliance – focusing on women and girls' economic security, women and girls' leadership and international engagement;

- The National Women's Safety Alliance – focusing on responses to gender-based violence;
- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance;
- The National Rural Women's Coalition;
- Women With Disability Australia; and
- Harmony Alliance - focusing on the needs of migrant and refugee women and girls.

The NWAs have a range of different legal and membership structures, but all operate outside of government in the community sector, with some auspiced by larger NGOs and others using stand-alone legal structures. ERA's international engagement is often informed by the expertise of the other NWAs.

Has your organization expressed international solidarity issues through cross border local, transnational, international, or regional solidarity networks?

ERA is auspiced by YWCA Australia, who are part of the World YWCA network. World YWCA organisations have a presence in over one hundred nations, sharing a commitment to delivering social and economic change for women and girls. Additionally, many of ERA's member organisations are part of international networks, such as the Australian chapters of the Soroptimist International Movement and Zonta International, or organisations with strong ties to regional and global feminist movements, such as IWDA.

Is some form of assistance (for example, funding or legal aid) made available to your organization when pursuing international expressions of international solidarity issues?

As with many other Australian civil society organisations, ERA's access to international spaces is primarily mediated through the Australian government. The government does facilitate some engagement in international human rights processes. For example, Australian Official Development Assistance (ODA) can be used by civil society organisations outside Australia who receive funding from the

Australian Government (either directly or through intermediary partners) to support their participation in international forums and to fund international solidarity work.

The funding available to the NWAs is primarily intended for use in domestic advocacy, and specific permission must be granted to use funding for international activities. There is little or no funding available for attendance at international events for organisations who are not part of the NWA system. We note that the NWA system does not include organisations representing some populations, most notably LGBTI+ populations, while other groups are included only tangentially (e.g.: older women and young women and girls).

The federal government offers some limited opportunities for advocates to engage in international gender equality processes including:

- Funding annually for two NGO representatives to attend the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW);
- Authorising National Women's Alliances to use their funding to attend CSW. This usually equates to no more than one representative and does not include all Alliances attending every year; and
- Funding for the production of a CEDAW Shadow report.

Where NGO representatives are included on government delegations, they are required to represent the official Australian position and are generally not permitted to advocate for alternative positions while participating in the international event. We are aware of one Indigenous candidate who was offered a position on an Australian delegation, but whose offer was revoked when she indicated that she might need to take a contrary position to the government on some issues. While Australia has federal laws preventing the use of gag clauses in federal funding contracts, in practice these are easily bypassed.

There is generally no State funding available for participation in regional processes or events, and Australian gender equality-focused NGOs tend not to engage in these spaces unless they operate in the international development and/or international feminist movement sectors. There is also no funding available for

training and capacity building to support participants or build communities of practice. Knowledge transfer is reliant on NGOs independently funding such work, and on individuals with experience and knowledge remaining in their roles for extended periods, which is unfortunately uncommon.

It is very difficult to find evidence of the extent to which community advocacy is reliant on unpaid work provided by its mostly female workforce. However, anecdotal evidence of this practice abounds. The National Women's Alliances (including ERA) are an identified example of this problem. The most recent evaluation of the NWAs found that:

“a key consequence of NWAs’ limited funding is the NWAs heavily reliance on the unpaid labour from the women’s sector. This work is largely provided by volunteer workers, paid employees working longer hours than they are remunerated for, and donated staff time from the auspicing agencies. [...] To allow Alliances to succeed in informing policy and decision making, and to future-proof the voice of under-represented women in government, greater funding is required.”¹ [emphasis per original]

Underfunding and insufficient staffing creates the perfect conditions for community organisation’s reliance on unpaid work, with knock-on effects on women’s economic security through ‘lost’ income for hours of unpaid work. This combination of heavy workloads and low resources means Australian feminist advocates often have limited capacity to seek out connections with international groups. Instead, civil organisations tend to focus on responding to domestic issues and advocating for funding to maintain domestic programs. These limitations mean that when opportunities for international engagement do emerge, support can often only be provided to senior staff, creating challenges for intergenerational leadership and succession planning.

¹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Global Institute for Women’s Leadership and the Office for Women, *Evaluation of the National Women’s Alliances Model* (2023), 13, <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/evaluation-national-womens-alliances-model>.

ERA notes recommendation 62 from the recent Report of the Secretary-General for CSW68, which states: *“To perform their critical functions, women’s organisations, including movements of women living in poverty, require reliable and flexible multi-year funding.”* We also note the observation in recommendation 46 that: *“Significant gaps in financing for women’s organizations [...] limit their active engagement in strengthening accountability and demanding action for women living in poverty.”*

As policy advocates focused on women’s economic empowerment, ERA lacks adequate financing to effectively connect Australian women’s economic issues with those faced by women and girls around the world. We require further funding to perform deeper analyses of the global power structures of international finance institutions, trade policies, and neoliberal economic policies which underpin economic inequality in Australia and internationally.

Additionally, this limits opportunities for international solidarity on the gendered aspects of climate change. These issues are deeply felt by women in Asia and the Pacific as well as in Australia, who face the impacts of increasing and worsening fires, floods, droughts, cyclones, and other extreme weather events resulting from global heating. The ways in which these events impact people differently based on their gender are increasingly understood internationally, but rarely discussed in domestic Australian policy contexts. This provides a key opportunity for Australian advocates to learn from feminist movements in the region. At the same time, Australia’s contribution to global heating, as the country with the highest per capita emissions in the world, requires Australian advocates to amplify the calls of global feminist climate movements and use their locational power to hold the Australian Government accountable. The lack of support for domestic feminist movements to engage in international solidarity precludes greater action on this front.

As a result of our limited funding, ERA currently concentrates its international engagement on sending a single representative to CSW for four years in every five. We do not attend CSW in review years, using our limited funding to send a representative to the regional consultation in Bangkok instead. ERA also participates in or leads the production of CEDAW shadow reports. We note that

funding for the CEDAW shadow report in 2023/24 was significantly increased to AUD\$100,000, which will be adequate to produce one report from members of the NWAs and to subsidise (but not cover) the cost of another shadow report from organisations without links to the NWAs. This funding was significantly more generous than that allocated to other human rights processes, such as the UPR, where funding was closer to AUD\$30,000, despite arguably covering a broader range of issues. We note that the funding for the CEDAW shadow report is provided by a different federal department to the funding for other shadow reports.

Which measures could facilitate your organization to engage more with States, regional, and international organizations (including the UN) to better express international solidarity?

Greater and more secure financial support from the Australian government would allow ERA to more actively engage with our international networks, including at UN events. As noted above, current grant arrangements with the Australian government (in keeping with broader sector underfunding) do not allow ERA to fully engage in international opportunities. Specific funding for feminist movement strengthening and coalition building across Australia, Asia, the Pacific and beyond would further enable international solidarity along the lines of IWDA's Feminist Movement Strengthening Framework, which outlines 5 key elements of feminist movement strengthening:

1. Connection to constituency.
2. Leveraging diversity.
3. Co-developing an intersectional, feminist analysis of issues.
4. Investing in relations of trust.
5. Collaboratively realising a common vision for change.

Beyond financial access, Australian advocates require stronger training, skills exchange, and mentorship related to international human rights processes. Australian human rights literacy is inconsistent, with no national Human Rights Act or Charter and limited understanding of international human rights procedures.

While the Australian government has a strong history of engagement in the development of international human rights treaties and processes, this legacy has not always translated into domestic knowledge. Although Australia does fund training and engagement with human rights mechanisms (including CEDAW) through ODA for feminist organizations outside Australia, limited support is available domestically. Increased, accessible training for young Australian activists and civil society experts would assist in the development of a local (and possibly regional) community of practice, which in turn would create a path for ongoing future engagement between Australian feminists and the international community. We note that while many international groups provide training, this support is often targeted at advocates in the Global South.

Physical access to international processes is also a barrier to participation. The majority of gender relevant events are held in Northern hemisphere countries, particularly in New York and Geneva. Travel to these locations from Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island nations is generally expensive and long, increasing the time commitment required from individuals. Within Australia, travel times and costs to access international travel for women in rural and remote areas, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living on country² are an additional barrier to participation. Rotating venues to include southern hemisphere locations and adding online access with the opportunity for genuine participation would help address these issues.

A further barrier is the generally poor level of accessibility for people with disability in New York, and the unsuitability of many official UN venues for Indigenous women, people who have experienced trauma, are neurodivergent, or do not speak English. A review of the suitability of UN spaces for people facing such barriers would be useful, while rotating venues to different countries would allow the use of commercial premises which are often required by local laws to meet higher disability access standards.

² Country is a term often used by Australian First Nations peoples to describe the lands, waterways, and seas to which they are connected.

Other barriers to participation relate to physical and mental safety. We routinely advise young women and LGBTI+ activists to choose both their type of participation and their candidates carefully, as participation in events such as CSW exposes participants to individuals and organisations who are openly homophobic, racist, or otherwise professing positions which are directly contrary to the UN Charter of Human Rights.

We have witnessed attendees be subjected to harassing behavior by conservative activists, including one incident where a group of young women sitting on the floor against a wall were physically boxed in by a group of much older activists, who moved chairs in front of the young women and then sat in the chairs to prevent their removal. The trigger for this behavior appeared to be that the young women were wearing tee-shirts with the phrase: "I am a woman, I have rights." UN security personnel reacted to this incident by advising the young women that their clothing was in breach of the rules against wearing political slogans.

Better training for UN security personnel on recognising and responding to harassing and threatening behavior, as well as the development of policies relating to the provision on trauma-informed and safe working environments, is urgently needed. A system for responding to delegates and other participants who act in a manner inconsistent with the UN Charter of Rights is also required.

Recommendations to the Independent Expert on Human Rights and International Solidarity on supporting civil society in the expression of international solidarity.

ERA recommends that the Independent Expert review current United Nations processes regarding the hosting of both CSW and CEDAW events. As noted above, scheduling CSW in New York means that members of civil society from outside the United States face exorbitant travel and accommodation costs, making full participation close to impossible for many groups. The focus of CSW68 on women and girls' experiences of poverty is a timely reminder of the economic barriers faced by activists on low and middle-incomes and those in developing countries. Hosting future sessions in southern hemisphere states, for example, would allow a

greater number of women from the Asia and Pacific access to international networks. Although ERA works within a higher-income state, sending one staff member to CSW uses a significant portion of our annual budget.

Additionally, United States visa requirements mean that important voices are excluded from in-person advocacy, including women with criminal convictions. We note that this particularly effects groups who are already underrepresented in Australia, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. As of 2021, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander constituted 37% of the Australian female prison population, despite only being 2% of Australia's total population.³ These women's voices are needed in international spaces, and current visa conditions make many events completely inaccessible. The combination of these conditions and a lack of easily accessible domestic funding leaves smaller Australian community organisations at a clear disadvantage.

We recommend that the United Nations encourage states to permit and assist community sector organisations and domestic stakeholders to use mixed funding mechanisms, such as ODA funding, in cases where doing so would strengthen international feminist solidarity. We additionally recommend that the United Nations encourage states to investigate the best mechanisms for establishing flexible, multi-year funding for feminist community organisations ongoing international engagement.

³ Howard-Wagner, D, and Brown, C. *Increased incarceration of First Nations women is interwoven with the experience of violence and trauma* (August 6th, 2021), in the Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/increased-incarceration-of-first-nations-women-is-interwoven-with-the-experience-of-violence-and-trauma-164773>.