

HOW CAN THE AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS PROGRAM STRENGTHEN ITS WORK TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY OUTCOMES?

Introduction

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has identified addressing gender equality as an important objective for all aid investments. Within this context, the first ever program-level gender analysis was undertaken of the Australian Volunteers Program between December 2018 and March 2019.

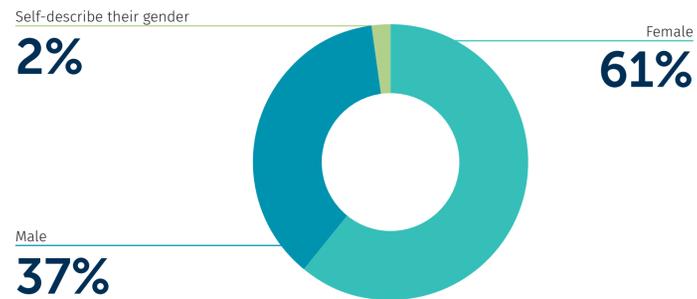
Gender analysis is a specific form of social analysis to inform actions that can be taken to address inequalities. It provides a baseline of current program performance and identifies areas to improve.

The key research question guiding the gender analysis was: How can the program strategies and implementation be adapted to strengthen gender equality in relation to the three program outcomes?

Methodology

The evaluation drew on both qualitative and quantitative research techniques, using a mixed methods approach. Data collection involved:

- Document scan, which analysed gender equality strategies, policies and practices in key program documents.
- An on-line survey of three key stakeholder groups: program staff, DFAT staff (in Canberra and at Posts), plus current and returned volunteers (deployed in the current phase). 295 complete responses were received (61% female, 37% male and 2% who prefer to self-describe their gender identity). Key informant interviews with DFAT Canberra staff and program staff were also conducted.



- The evaluation was managed by a gender equality working group consisting of program staff, and a workshop was held with program staff to shape action planning.

Key Findings

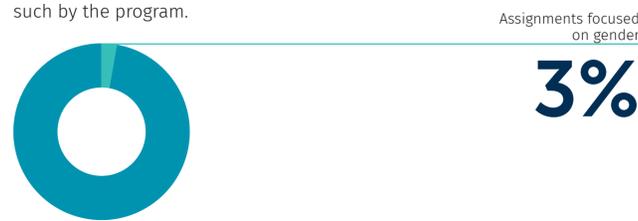
Does the program have a mandate?

92% of program staff, 86% of DFAT staff, 94% of current volunteers, and 88% of returned volunteers who responded to the survey agreed that the program has a mandate to advance gender equality in programming.

Is gender equality a priority?

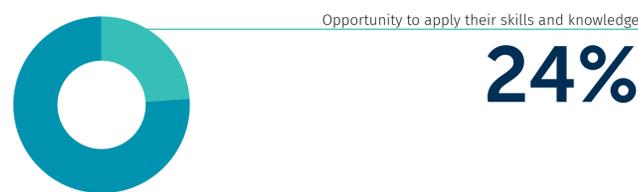
There is limited evidence of purposive attention to gender equality and women's rights in key documents and program processes and decisions. The majority of Country Program Plans refer to gender equality or women's empowerment as a cross cutting issue, without drawing out the gender equality dimensions as a priority area in itself. Partnering with women's rights organisations and organisations working for gender equality has not been prioritised in most countries.

Only 3% of total volunteer assignments focus on gender equality (as of January 2018). As of January 2019, only nine volunteer assignments focused primarily on gender equality and a further six assignments could have been classified as focused on gender equality but were not coded as such by the program.



Do volunteers have an opportunity to develop their skills?

Only 24% of volunteers believed their assignment provided an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills on gender equality to the fullest or greatest extent; 47% felt it was not possible or limited.



40% of current volunteers felt there was no possibility to further develop their knowledge and skills on gender equality in their assignments, compared to 57% of returned volunteers. More women than men (26% compared to 19%) believed their volunteer assignment offered this opportunity.



What improvements are needed?

- 37% of volunteers suggested a range of improvements to the Australian Volunteers Program planning and implementation, with similar suggestions from program and DFAT staff.

- 19% of volunteers suggested that assignment designs have more clarity and specific focus on gender equality, with tailored and meaningful objectives and actions (rather than the current generic objective which includes gender equality as well as child protection, disability and social inclusion).



- 36% of volunteers in the survey requested more training and on-going support to enable them to address gender inequalities appropriately in their assignments and in their personal relationships. Areas suggested for action included: including gender equality information in pre-departure briefings, in-country orientations and in on-going mentoring, other learning and support.



Overall, the gender analysis identified that there is a need to clarify key gender related concepts and how they apply in the program. For example, to go beyond an assumption that gender equality means having an equal number of men and women on the program (or more women), and doing more to strengthen the program's support for gender equality.

The suggested aim and key focus areas in the Gender Equality Action Plan for the Australian Volunteers Program



What gender equality means

Gender equality means that women and men and people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities enjoy equal status in society, along with girls and boys. It means that they have the same entitlement to all human rights; equal respect in the community; can take advantage of the same opportunities to make choices and decisions about their lives; and have the same amount of power to shape the outcomes of these choices. Achieving gender equality requires the promotion of equal rights, since equality between all people regardless of gender is an integral part of human rights. It also requires an understanding of – and changes in – gender relations.

Source: Juliet Hunt, ACFID Gender Audit Guide, 2019.

What's next?

The Gender Equality Action Plan was developed from the findings and recommendations of the gender analysis study. The aim of the Action Plan is for the Australian Volunteers Program to systematically work to increase attention to gender equality and women's rights across the program work to achieve gender equality and women's rights outcomes.

Seven key objectives or focus areas were identified (see diagram) to guide work in a staged way over multiple years. Specific priorities and foundational actions were identified for 2019/20 across all seven focus areas. These include consultations and engagement with partner organisations and further gender analysis in areas that were beyond the scope of the gender analysis phase.

Some initiatives and resources have been included in the 2019/20 Annual Plan.

Acknowledgements

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