

A woman in a blue shirt is shown from the chest down, working with coral rubble on a beach. The background is a blurred natural setting with green foliage and a blue sky. The foreground is dominated by a large, dark, diagonal shadow that partially obscures the scene.

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Women are underfunded in the Pacific Islands

DATA SNAPSHOT

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LOWY INSTITUTE



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Cover image: Women break coral for lime in Solomon Islands (Wade Fairley, WorldFish / Flickr)

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Key findings

- Pacific Islands women are not receiving enough development funding. Until 2021, only about 3% of all aid had gender equality as its “principal” target, below the global average of 4%, and only a quarter of all aid had gender equality as a “significant” focus, 13% below the global average.
- Australia’s financing for Pacific women’s development overshadows that of all other development partners. Australia’s total contribution is slightly below the global average of financing for women’s development, although it is expected to rise with the implementation of new targets. Aid to the sector from China is negligible.
- More than a third of aid spent in Pacific Island countries that was reported to the OECD had no assessment of investment into gender equality projects, affecting the usefulness of the data for policymakers.

Introduction

Gender inequality is a widespread and persistent problem in Pacific Island countries, yet total donor investments to address gender equality in the region fall below the global average.

This Data Snapshot uses the [Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map](#) to examine trends and development implications in Pacific gender equality financing between 2008 and 2021 (the most recent data available on the Pacific Aid Map).

The data show donors to the Pacific have been collectively less focused on gender equality than in other regions. This is set to change, given ambitious Australian targets, but it remains clear that more money is not the only answer.

Evaluations of gender equality investment in the Pacific have crystallised this fact.¹ And with results slow to bare, questions have inevitably arisen about the effectiveness of aid allocations.

A more complete and comprehensive view of gender equality financing can provide some answers to those questions. And data about the objectives underpinning financial flows into the Pacific — currently underdone — is an important piece of the puzzle for policymakers seeking to make change for women.

Gender equality aid to the Pacific is below the global average

Right across the Pacific Islands region, women are on the back foot. Pacific Island countries have the lowest level of female political representation in the world — typically, only around 7% of parliamentarians are women. This is well below the global average of 27%.² In the Pacific’s largest economies, female participation in the labour force is roughly half that of men.³ Around two out of every three Pacific Islands women and girls experience domestic violence.⁴

The challenges for Pacific women are profound and require targeted interventions. Yet gender equality investment is not solely about correcting imbalance and injustice. It also creates societal and economic opportunities for Pacific Island countries. If, for example, employment gaps for women were to close in the Pacific, the average long-run GDP per capita would be nearly a quarter higher.⁵ The development dividends are evident: addressing gender imbalances in employment benefits whole societies, spurring growth and productivity.⁶ This in a region struggling to recover from the adverse economic effects of the pandemic.

Yet despite an expanding focus from donors on empowering Pacific women, and growing recognition of the challenges faced by women and girls in the Pacific Islands, aid spent in the Pacific Islands primarily on women is below the global average.

Total official development finance (ODF) spent on gender equality by all donors between 2008 and 2021, captured by the Pacific Aid Map, was US\$13 billion, or 30% of all aid delivered to the Pacific. This seems like a big investment, but lift the hood and the details suggest otherwise.

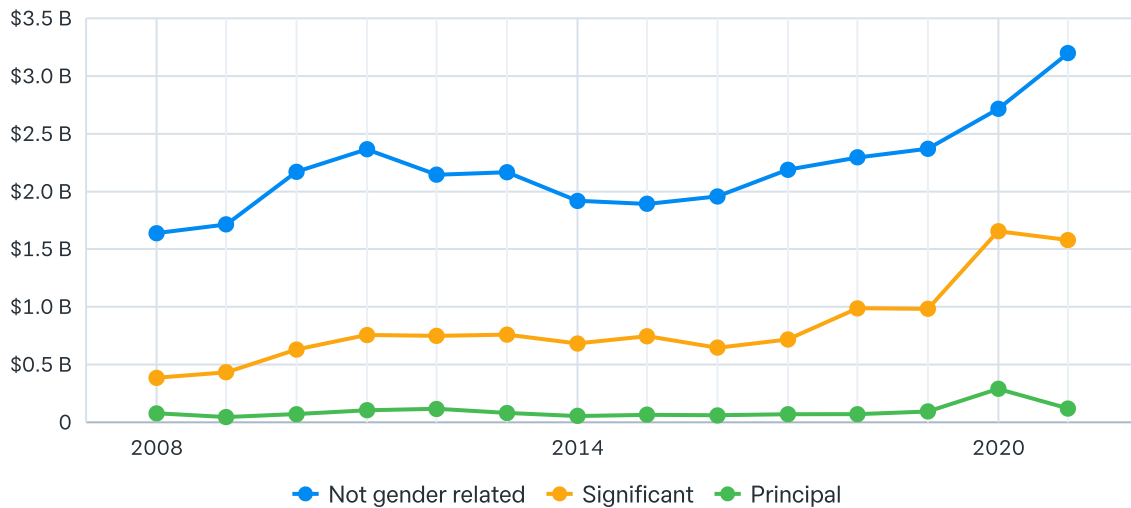
Aid where gender equality was the *primary* objective of the investment (without which the project would not go ahead — also known as a principal investment) represented on average only 3% of the total ODF disbursed across the period. These “principal” investments fell below the global average of 4%, as reported to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The average for “significant” investments (where gender equality is important but not the principal reason for undertaking the project) was 27% of total ODF — 13% below the OECD’s global average.

According to the OECD, “principal” investments are not by definition better for development than “significant” ones, but principal projects are likely to be far more transformative for gender equality.⁷ Research shows that “projects with an explicit gender focus have clearly better outcomes”.⁸ The same research argues that education projects are more likely than economic development projects to lead to better outcomes for women.

Operational decisions about where financing for women is allocated must be coupled with strategic choices about need and program effectiveness. An accurate picture of what is being spent and where — and why — would help policy-makers make better decisions.

Figure 1
Gender equality financing to the Pacific
 Total ODF spent, constant US\$ 2021

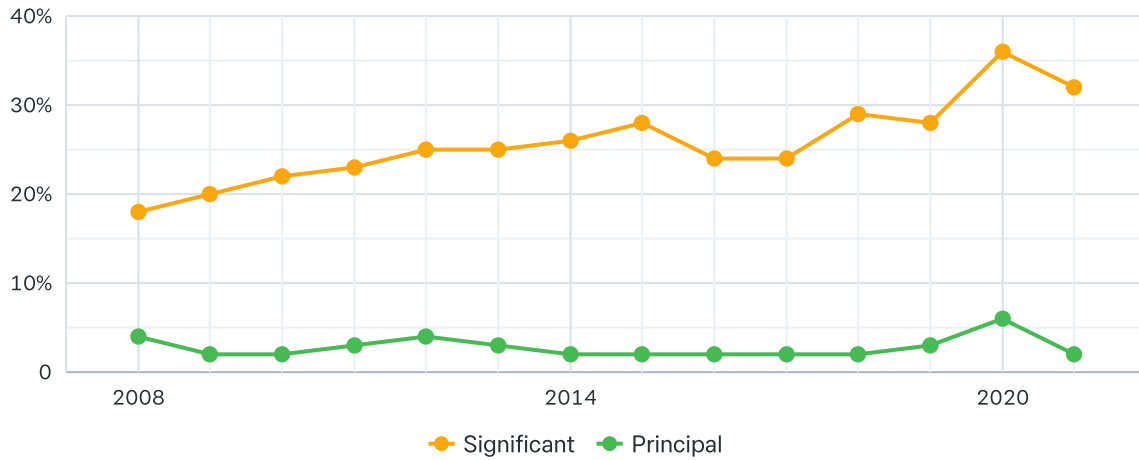


Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

Between 2008 and 2021, total donor spending on “principal” gender equality projects in the Pacific was US\$1.32 billion, with an average annual disbursement of around US\$94 million. Average annual spending on “significant” projects was \$836 million. But as a fraction of the total aid spent in the Pacific, these numbers need to rise if donors want to see more change for Pacific women.

Figure 2 shows that in 2020, “principal” investments jumped from 3% to 6% — a rise due to gender equality objectives being incorporated into Covid-19 support packages. This increase demonstrates that change is possible where there is the political will and incentives to act.

Figure 2
Gender equality financing to the Pacific
% of total ODF



Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

While spikes in gender equality financing may seem like good news, the substantial increase can be attributed to high-value loans during the pandemic from the Asian Development Bank and Japan, in which gender equality investments were incorporated into project design. Some increases can also be attributed to changes in how donors report on women-focused investments, and new performance targets.

However, targets can inadvertently incentivise donors to assign gender equality policy marker scores (as defined by the OECD) to projects even when gender equality links are tenuous. This means there is a high level of uncertainty as to how rigorously methodology is applied when targets are at play. The risk is that “ambition in these targets will lead to a deterioration in [reporting] quality...If that occurs, systematic, meaningful study of patterns in Australian gender equality aid will become very difficult.”⁹

Inaccurate reporting does not help policymakers assess whether investments are effective or distributed to the right places. With the aid community continuing to see few gains in the Pacific Islands, notwithstanding the difficulties of shifting social norms, it is important to produce an accurate picture of the region’s investments for women.

Traditional donors invest far more than non-traditional donors into women’s development

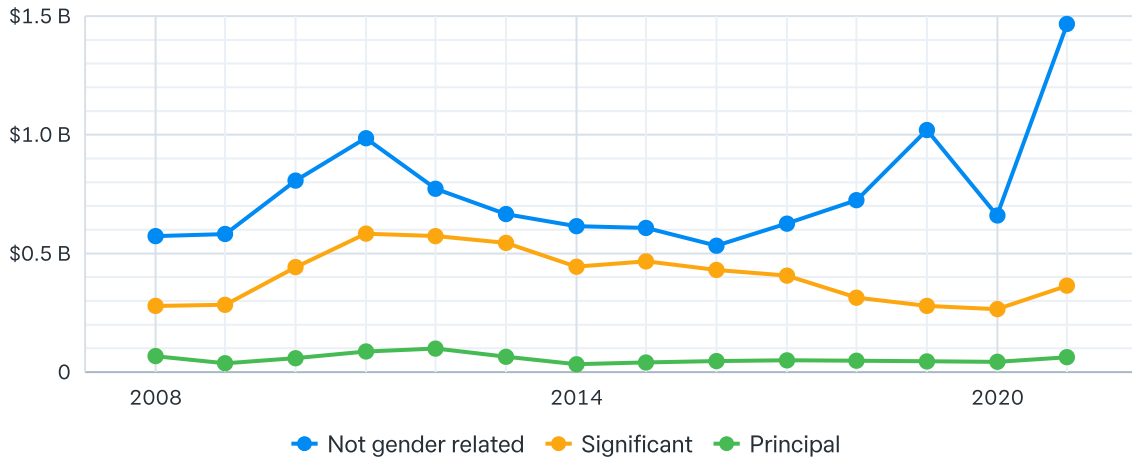
Despite large spikes in investment during the pandemic years from donors such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Japan, Australia leads the pack in terms of total Pacific aid spent on gender equality (Figure 5). While “a lower share of Australian aid projects have a gender focus in the Pacific than in the rest of the world”, Australia’s regional leadership among OECD donors is evident.¹⁰ Australia spent more than US\$6.4 billion on women’s investments between 2008 and 2021 — far more than all other development partners. In 2021–22 alone, Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) expended AU\$1.5 billion in gender equality official development assistance (ODA).¹¹

Since 2008, Australia’s contribution to “principal” projects — where gender equality is the primary objective of the investment — has slightly exceeded the current global average of 4%, hitting a high of 7% in 2008 (Figure 4), but total aid for Pacific Islands women remains below the global average. Integration of gender equality as a significant policy objective (i.e., where gender equality is mainstreamed into the design) has lifted Australian efforts to come close to parity with the current global average (34% versus 39%, respectively).¹²

Australia has reinstated a target for 80% of development investments to address gender equality. It also now requires gender equality objectives in all investments exceeding AU\$3 million. With 90% of Australia’s historical ODF project commitments worth AU\$3 million or more (2008–21), this target has the potential to more than triple equality gender financing in Pacific Island countries. Canberra’s commitment — if implemented — could increase overall financing for gender equality development by 32% across the region. Of course, what is spent is only one part of the picture — getting results is also critical.

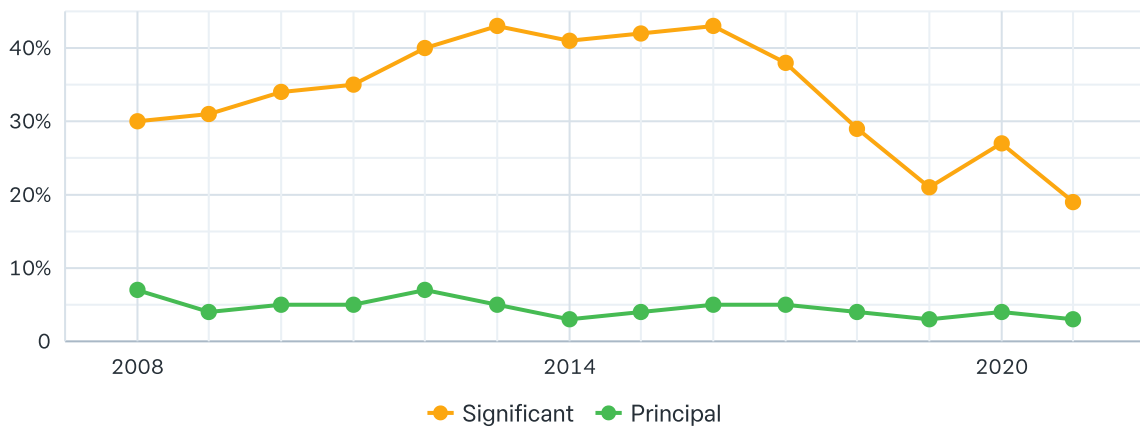
Non-traditional donors typically do not report to the OECD. The two most significant non-traditional donors in the Pacific are China and Taiwan. China’s Pacific development financing, while significant, focuses on infrastructure, loans, and security.¹³ After peaking in 2016, China’s ODF to the region has continually decreased, often targeting efforts where it can get the most geopolitical benefits.¹⁴

Figure 3
Australia's gender equality financing to the Pacific
 Total ODF spent, constant US\$ 2021



Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

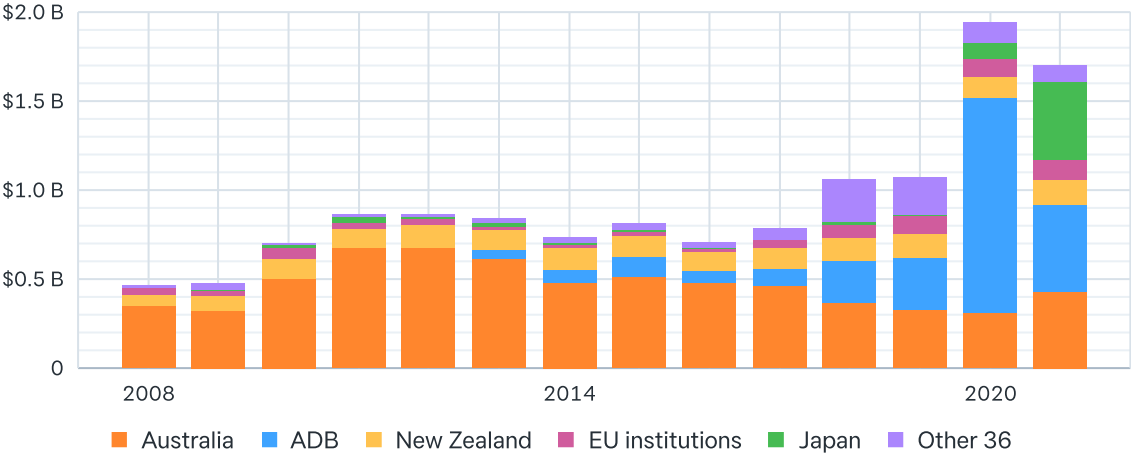
Figure 4
Australia's gender equality financing to the Pacific
 % of total ODF



Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

Nevertheless, Pacific women have benefited somewhat from non-traditional partners' aid. Between 2008 and 2021, China financed US\$9 million in gender equality investments, but out of a total US\$3.1 billion in Pacific aid from China, this is negligible (<1%). Over the same period, Taiwan spent US\$354,000 on Pacific women, out of a total US\$494 million of aid to the Pacific (0.07%). Taiwan's aid for Pacific women is comparable to China's, but not to Australia's.

Figure 5
Gender equality financing by partners
 Spent constant 2021 US\$



Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

Donors are not reporting all their data

Lowy Institute research for this Data Snapshot reveals a sizeable gap in the reporting of traditional donors to the OECD. One-third (35%) of all aid spent in the Pacific and reported to the OECD was unassessed for its gender equality objectives.¹⁵

Under-reporting matters. The OECD releases annual statistical analysis on gender equality financing based on self-reporting by all traditional donors, which assesses investments against the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) gender equality policy marker. The annual OECD report is framed as a tool for decision-makers to track their performance in relation to other donors. But partial and inaccurate information from donors produces uninformed decision-making. As a result, the OECD itself recognises that, as a toolkit, the database provides an estimation only.¹⁶

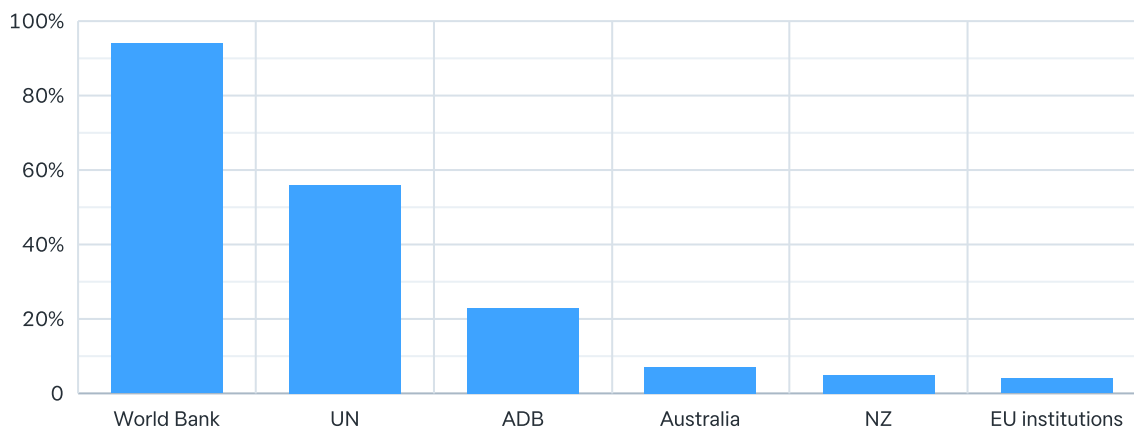
Australia had a comparatively high rate of reporting on disbursements — only one-tenth of its aid reported to the OECD had no gender equality policy markers. Of Australia's aid captured by the Pacific Aid Map, a negligible amount of the unmarked funding was potentially eligible for gender equality policy marking, causing little effect on the OECD's analysis of Australia's gender equality financing.

But DFAT cannot compensate for the poor reporting of other donors, illustrated in Figure 6. From 2008–21, 94% of the World Bank's financing reported to the OECD had no gender equality policy marker, despite effectively using the same policy marker system in-house. Similarly, more than half of the United Nations' disbursements were unmarked.

This is not to say that these projects have no gender equality-related objectives in their design. Rather, some donors — such as the World Bank — internally report using gender equality policy marking systems akin to the OECD system, but their results are not systematically reported to the OECD. This means the data may be there but not shared with the OECD.

Added to the hurdles is a key difference in data gathering methodology between the two organisations: unlike the OECD, the World Bank assesses financing *commitments* rather than disbursements, and considers the project's entire financing, not just the share allocated to women's advancement.

Figure 6
Reporting rates to OECD from traditional donors
 % of aid with no assessment of gender equality investment, 2008-2021



Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

Like the World Bank, other donors have data weaknesses due to reporting on commitments, not disbursements. New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade noted in communications with the Lowy Institute that differences in reporting methods in 2008 and 2009 affected the value of recorded investments for Pacific women, making recent data more reliable and representative, but assessing trends problematic. Indeed, the only years that New Zealand showed unmarked data were 2008 and 2009, highlighting the systemic database weaknesses related to reporting variations.

Incentives to report to the OECD on gender equality investments may be lacking for multilateral donors such as the World Bank. The OECD’s public interface for sharing gender equality policy data — and the annual statistical analysis report — includes only donor countries, not multilateral institutions.¹⁷ As multilaterals are not featured in these reports that compare country donors, there is less incentive for them to report on investments. This is concerning given the rising share of development dollars that multilateral banks contribute to the region.

While traditional donors are not reporting all their data, non-traditional donors typically report none. This means all of China and Taiwan’s projects — captured by Lowy Institute researchers using alternative forms of open-source data — had no gender equality transformation objectives assigned to them. All of China and Taiwan’s projects therefore had to have their gender equality policy objectives assessed by Lowy Institute researchers. Because of their significant contributions to the Pacific aid landscape, these two donors should support policymakers to track and assess the objectives of their financing and where it is going.

Policy recommendations

An important lesson learned is that accurate, detailed, consistent, and justified donor reporting is a critical step in successfully funding women's development. Inconsistent methodologies and performance targets can inflate results and skew real trends at the OECD, risking the chance of gender equality objectives becoming tokenistic. And if inaccuracies and gaps in reporting persist, the evidence base will remain weak, making it harder to develop effective policy for women.

Considering data gaps and the pitfalls of inaccurate reporting, this research recommends that all activities and projects reported to the OECD be self-assessed against their gender equality objective. Donors should correctly assess the gender equality objective of their projects, including justifying the assessment where the gender equality objective is not obvious, for example in port upgrades or loans. If donors were required to clearly describe the cross-cutting issues informing project design and gender equality objectives, intended beneficiaries would be more clearly identified for policymakers.

Changes to the way the OECD collects data could also help. The OECD should consider introducing an extra graded system to differentiate between less and more significant gender equality mainstreamed projects, akin to the four-tier ADB system, and running alongside the traditional 0, 1, 2 system to maintain comparability.¹⁸ To ensure policymakers take the extra step, the OECD could consider making the donor identify whether it is less or highly significant when a "significant" gender equality project is reported. Definitions of what is less or highly significant would accompany the reporting methodology. Policymakers and analysts would then better understand the level of transformation for women incorporated into the design of mainstreamed gender equality projects. Blank entries on women's investment reported to the OECD could also default to zero, incentivising accurate and full reporting.

Major donors should match their in-house reporting exactly to the OECD's system, for consistency and comparability across all major databank systems. Included would be donors reassessing all reports to the OECD from 2008, ensuring all data is comparable and complete.

Alongside these improvements to donor reporting, Pacific donors must increase their investments into Pacific women to align with global rates. Focusing on aid that has a "principal" target of gender equality will help to address the profound challenges across the region.

Conclusion

In the Pacific Islands, all traditional donors, including Australia, must recognise that meaningful contributions towards gender equality are more likely borne from projects principally targeting women.

Given the difficulties of shifting the dial on women's status in the Pacific, but noting the economic benefits of doing so, financing for "principal" gender equality projects from all donors must increase. Non-traditional donors such as China seeking to be preferred partners in the Pacific must also invest more into development priorities beyond their historical focus — in China's case, infrastructure and hard security.

While it may be considered the most mundane part of development work, accuracy in reporting is essential to change and transformation on the ground in the Pacific Islands. Donors must improve their reporting if they want to support the OECD's mission to create better policies for better lives.

Methodology

The Lowy Institute [Pacific Aid Map](#) is an analytical tool designed to improve aid and development effectiveness in the Pacific Islands region by enhancing the transparency of official development finance (ODF) flows to Pacific Islands states. The Pacific Aid Map, which primarily uses OECD and International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) data, includes information on more than 30,000 projects carried out by 82 development partners. More information on the Pacific Aid Map methodology is available [here](#).

In 2023, Lowy Institute researchers expanded the Pacific Aid Map to include more details for greater refinement of potential gender equality investments. Lowy Institute researchers then assessed the gender investment of all projects and activities that had no gender marker in this expanded version. These projects were found by filtering out all projects with a 0, 1, 2 in the “Gender” column, and therefore being left with blanks or empty cells in the “Gender” column. A five-step filtering process (see below) was then applied to the data to fill in the gaps, using the DAC gender equality policy marker system and all publicly available information.

Lowy Institute researchers consulted the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) on the methodology in 2023, and then provided the methodology, tagged data, and preliminary results for review by the region’s top five donors (Australia, New Zealand, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and Japan).

Filling in data gaps

Supplemental data was assessed by following this five-step filter process:

1. Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality)
2. Purpose Codes
 - 15170 “Women’s rights organisations and movements, and government institutions”
 - 15180 “Ending violence against women”
3. Donor agencies
 - United Nations — UN Women, CEDAW
4. Implementing partners¹⁹
5. Keyword search
 - Women, gender, equal, equity, caregiver, female, empowerment, violence

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About the author



Dr Jessica Collins is a Research Fellow in the Pacific Islands Program at the Lowy Institute. The Program focuses on contemporary challenges facing the region, including geostrategic competition, governance and leadership, sustainable economic development and Australia's relationship with Pacific countries and organisations.

Jessica has undertaken research projects on the development benefits of Pacific remittances, and trends in financing to advance women's development. She comments widely on Australia's policy in the Pacific and publishes on Pacific women's political representation, including a podcast series with influential Pacific women on politics, development, and sport. She has also worked on the [Pacific Aid Map](#) project, particularly gender analyses of development assistance, and the [Australia–Papua New Guinea Network](#). The Network builds links and understanding between Australia and Papua New Guinea through the Emerging Leaders Dialogue, seminars, networking events and analysis.

Prior to joining the Institute, Jessica completed a PhD on the resettlement of refugees from Myanmar and a master's degree in Global Development. Her Honours project involved research with Samoan communities in Australia, and her undergraduate studies focused on Pacific Island communities.

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