

Inquiry into the strategic effectiveness and outcomes of Australia's aid program in the Indo Pacific and its role in supporting our regional interests

Aid programs advancing women's security and leadership in the Pacific Islands Region

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The Australian aid program has, since 2012, placed a central focus on the advancement of women and girls in the Indo-Pacific region. These programs have been guided by principles of equity, participation and security, and in practical terms been strongly focussed on challenges such as improving women's participation in decision-making, and increasing women and girls capacities to resist forms of violence they may face in the home, and within their communities. In this submission, I reflect on the impact of this programming based on field work I have conducted in the Western Pacific countries of Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji since 2012. Through this work I have gained familiarity with the ways these issues are understood on the ground. I have also become acquainted with the unintended consequences that can be generated by aid programs that promote a "rights" based approach as critical to confronting the gendered discriminations that marginalise women and diminish their safety.

In the discussion that follows, I draw the committee's attention to the need for development programming that does not assume that terms like "rights", "empowerment" and "security" are concepts which easily translate across socio-cultural boundaries. My contention is that the standing of women and girls in Western Pacific countries is not improved simply because they become educated about these principles, told that they are theirs to claim, but left with the burden of making them realised in daily life without the support or understanding of their families or community. As I will show this advocacy formula can have damaging consequences. Some messages can be misconstrued, others may incline women and girls to adopt behaviour that compounds rather than alleviates their vulnerability.

An alternative approach is needed, one that allows women to demonstrate to their communities the benefits and value that accrues to Pacific Peoples generally when women live physically secure lives and can play active roles in decision-making. The idea being that women's advancement should be supported not only because that is right in principle (which of course it is), but also because this contributes meaningfully to the progression of community well-being for all. As I will show, this kind of approach harmonises more closely with socio-cultural expectations across the region. It demands higher resourcing than political principles-based advocacy, and much longer-term and sustained commitment to the assistance of participants. But it also promises a higher return through enhanced effectiveness. In the rest of this submission I identify the kinds of gendered problems that are generated by principles-, or rights-based advocacy. From here I outline how an achievement-based approach, although more resource intensive, offers more effective ways to address the challenges identified.

Securing women from violence

Violence against women occurs at extreme levels in many countries of the Pacific region. In the last 10 years a raft of in-country studies have demonstrated that between 40 and 70 percent of women living in Pacific Island countries (PICs) have experienced violence in their lifetimes, with significant

percentages of women and girls experiencing this violence as an ongoing feature of life.¹ Since the late 1980s, Australia's aid program has worked closely to support the work of local women's organisations who confront this issue. This aid focus has also been directed towards Pacific Island Governments, and seen aid programs directed to state policing and juridical authorities to progress reforms so that these agencies operate more sympathetically towards women exposed to this violence.

In addition to victim support services, women's organisations have placed a great deal of emphasis upon educating Pacific Island communities that women's human rights to security must be upheld, particularly in response to counter-claims from customary and religious leaders who may sometimes interpret such claims as an attempt to undermine communal identity, values and practices. Through this advocacy, women's groups have sought to educate every-day citizens about the need for reforms to family law and amendments to laws on physical assault to recognise the insidious nature of this violence within communities. But the carceral focus of this activity has not translated in ways that have generated a wholesale change in everyday attitudes to this phenomenon. On the one hand, it has been demonstrated that implementation of these reforms within state policing agencies and the judiciary in some Pacific states, is hamstrung by longstanding informal institutional prejudices. These incline some police and judicial officers to treat women's complaints of familial violence as of lesser consequence than the integrity of familial or marital relationships.²

In addition to, and in part, because of, this kind of prejudice, women in many Pacific Island communities often show a strong disinclination to bring complaints of violent treatment, from their spouses or other family members, to the attention of state authorities. They may instead argue that it is more appropriate for customary or religious leaders to intervene. In some social contexts, I have heard women describe the consequences of calling upon state regulatory authority to intervene in cases of violence as "too heavy", creating problems for the community as a whole, particularly if families become alienated from each other in the aftermath of this type of action. Women who ignore these communal bonds can, in many cases, be subject to criticism and censure because they are deemed to be pursuing individualised agendas that put their own self-interests above those of the community. My own research and analysis on survey's conducted with just under 300 women from Bougainville, Fiji, and with Kanak women in New Caledonia, between 2014-2015, has also shown that women tend to have rather fragmented understandings of what rights-based concepts mean for them when they reflect on their abilities to achieving safety from violence. This became clear in responses showing that women were far more likely to use the term right to describe the "rightful" behaviours they should engage in to avoid violence rather than asserting rights as a principle that is violated if they are exposed to violence from spouses or other family members.

Together this evidence indicates the difficulty of addressing the regional challenges of violence through a rights-based lens. On the one hand, the testimonies I cite above, indicate the weak institutional implementation of the principle of women's human rights to safety from family violence. On the other hand, these testimonies also indicate the fragmented ways in which the human rights principle itself becomes meaningful in women's lives. That is to say, women are much more likely to nominate strategies of "self-policing" as the key, and sometimes only, means at their disposal to manage possible exposure to gendered violence. This suggests, somewhat disturbingly, that the principle of a "right" to security, is interpreted in these everyday contexts not as an idea that encourages women's to expect protection from violence in an individualised sense, but as reminder that women's safety depends upon their adherence to norms of right(ful) gendered behaviour as these are collectively determined by the family and community.

Empowering women leaders

¹ UN Women, *Ending Violence against Women and Girls: Evidence, Data and Knowledge in Pacific Island Countries*, UN Women Pacific, Suva, July 2011

² George, Nicole. *Policing Conjugal Order: Gender, Hybridity and Vernacular Security in Fiji*. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 17:1 55-70; Melissa Bull, Nicole George and Jodie Curth-Bibb. *The Virtues of Strangers: Policing Gender Violence in the Pacific Islands, Policing and Society*. (Early view 1-16 available here <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10439463.2017.1311894>)

Similar difficulties attach to Australian aid programs designed to build the leadership ambitions of women in the region. These programs have been developed to respond to the low representation of women in institutional politics at the national level in most Pacific Island countries, and the difficulties that women continue to face in convincing voters that they have the kinds of political skills that make them electable. Leadership training programs have been duly delivered in many Pacific Island countries in response to this challenge. These focus on building the political acumen of women and girls so that they are able to understand decision-making processes and appreciate how they might legitimately make contributions to political leadership within and beyond their immediate communities. As for the issue of violence against women, programs on political empowerment and leadership for women are generally delivered in ways that similarly, place a strong emphasis on educating women about their civic rights and responsibilities and what it means to be politically empowered citizens.

But here too, efforts to educate women and girls on leadership knowledge and skills can generate unanticipated problems for program participants who look to enact lessons learned when they return to home or village environments. This is because leadership is often conferred upon women in Pacific societies, rather than claimed as an individualised right. For example, hereditary and familial pathways increase the status of some women, those from chiefly families for example, and allow them to more easily gain acceptance as “rightful” leaders than for women from lower customary ranks. Likewise, women may be more likely to be accepted as leaders through marriage to men who have already achieved that status in custom, in faith communities or as part of the local and national political elite. Women who do not have access to these types of social resources, may also be recognised as leaders if they build a record of service to their community or have achieved standing through some kind of professional employment related to community service; employment in public health care roles or in state education.

The important point in all of this that these social resources and achievements are recognised within communities as the kinds of attributes that are necessary for women to become leaders. Without these, communities may become resentful of women’s claims to leadership and interpret such behaviour as promoting an individualised or self-serving agenda rather than one that promotes community ambition. In extreme cases, women may be censured or punished for giving voice to leadership ambitions that others in the community feel are inappropriate. For their part, women and girls may feel frustrated by these types of responses too. The serious difficulties that are generated by this kind of aid programming have been observed by Dame Carol Kidu, former woman parliamentarian in the Papua New Guinea National Assembly, who has stated;

“...sometimes you just set young women up for impossible situations when they are told about all their rights, while the community hasn’t been sensitised to this type of thinking. Sometimes it can be very stark in a society going through rapid change and even result in tragedy, such as increased rates of suicide. So we need to manage the way in which we help towards achieving this agency and voice for women. It’s an issue to do with the whole community and the family”.³

These types of scenarios indicate that there has not been enough investigation of the ways that human rights advocacy “lands” in Pacific Islands communities and, as a result, little comprehension of the ways these principles become fragmented and with what effect. As I have shown, advocacy that suggests the women and girls exposure to family violence, and their limited participation in decision-making can be effectively addressed if there is greater education on human rights principles can have unintended consequences. This is particularly so when not enough account is taken of the roles and responsibilities that women are expected to shoulder as part of their relations with their family and communities. As I explain below, an alternative and more effective approach to this issue might focus on building women’s capacities for achievement in their community, in line with community expectations and goals. In the final section of this submission, I discuss a project that might be considered a model for this kind of achievements-oriented approach.

³ Kidu, Carol 2010. Interview with Ashlee Betteridge, *Devpolicy Blog*, October 29. <http://www.devpolicy.org/dame-carol-kidu-on-why-things-are-getting-tougher-for-pngs-women-20141029/>

Progressing women's advancement: an achievement-oriented approach

The World Bank funded project entitled *Inclusive Development in Post-conflict Bougainville*⁴ provides an important example of how donor-funded aid projects can adopt an achievements-based approach to women's empowerment and security while navigating the local expectations that emphasise communal advancement over individualised gain. This project was administered through grants awarded to the Autonomous Bougainville Government's (ABG) Department for Community Development and Women's Affairs (DCDWA) that began in 2011. The broad objective of the program was "to increase the provision of community-prioritized services and income-generating opportunities driven by women and women's groups in Bougainville."⁵ Practically, the program aimed to develop women's skills in all the facets of community development from project design, implementation to financial acquittal. Funding grants of between 10,000 to 50,000 Kina were made available to selected women's groups on the grounds that they were able to propose and coordinate development projects framed by an inclusive objective and demonstrating support from all of their community leaders. The projects that were proposed by women, and funded during this period, ranged from improvements to village water sources, the construction of new public school facilities and village resource centres, to the establishment of medical aid posts.

A beneficiaries study conducted by the DCDWA at the end of 2017 found a range of positive outcomes accrued to recipient communities, as well as to women directly, as a result of involvement in the scheme. Projects that improved communities' access to water, for example yielded evidence of increased school attendance because children were no longer tasked with water carrying duties for their families, as well as fewer documented cases of water borne diseases in communities that were formerly reliant upon polluted sources.⁶ The establishment of health posts increased the availability of local health care generally but was particularly beneficial for expectant mothers, particularly important in a setting where the death rate for 0-1 year olds is 55 in 1000 and maternal morbidity rates are also known to be high.⁷

The "empowerment" benefits that accrued to women as a result of their involvement in the programs were equally significant. A DCDWA-led beneficiaries study found that 8 out of 10 women who had participated reported feeling more confident in themselves and more able to speak in front of men at village meetings. Notably, women's leadership skills were also advanced with 23 women involved in the projects going on to successfully stand in Ward elections with two nominated as Community government chairs.⁸

The dual gains that were achieved by participants in this program are distinctive and noteworthy. They stand in stark contrast with the more common refrain I have encountered in many of the field-sites I have worked in, across the western Pacific region; one where women confess their fatigue with workshops that deal in political ideas but offer them little in terms of concrete possibilities for progressing transformations in their societies. Rather than emphasising the need for women to live empowered and secure lives because this accords with human rights as abstract political principles, the Inclusive Development project demonstrates to local communities how they gain collectively when these rights are respected. The concrete and tangible quality of evidence supporting the idea that women

⁴ USD 2.4 million paid to the ABG by the World Bank for the project in 2011 and a second tranche of funding from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade projected to commence in March 2018.

⁵ World Bank, 2017. *Inclusive Development in Post-Conflict Bougainville* (P125101). Update and Status Report. Located at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/982091496351208689/pdf/ISR-Disclosable-P125101-06-01-2017-1496351197304.pdf> [Accessed 4 March, 2018]

⁶ Information supplied by Department of Community Development and Women's Affairs official, Autonomous Bougainville Government, February 2018

⁷ World Bank 2016a. Papua New Guinea: Bougainville Women Come Together to Protect Expecting Moms and Babies. Projects and Operations. March 9. Located at <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/03/08/papua-new-guinea-bougainville-women-come-together-to-protect-expecting-moms-and-babies> [accessed 4 March, 2018].

⁸ Information supplied by Department of Community Development and Women's Affairs official, Autonomous Bougainville Government, February 2018

can lead and should be secure to do so, is also much more difficult for parochial figures to oppose than when the argument about advancing women's rights is prosecuted in a more abstract fashion.

Advocacy emphasising women's rights puts enticing possibilities before women, but often little more than that. The World Bank funded program titled *Inclusive Development in Post-conflict Bougainville* stands out as a particularly well-funded, sensible and successful venture that if tested in other Pacific Island contexts might reverse this trend. It requires sizeable monetary investment, and certainly is more demanding financially upon donors than workshop styled rights based advocacy. But the dividends accruing from an approach that harnesses the progression of community interests to an agenda to improve women's standing seems to be eminently suited to the socio-cultural protocols of the broad Pacific region.