

# Submission: Inquiry into the Human Rights of Women and Girls in the Pacific

July 2020



**YWCA**

Australia

Women leading change

**“There is more than one issue that is important in the region affecting women, young women and girls in the Pacific; Under representation of women in political spaces, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and Mental Health related issues, limited or nonexistence of service providers for women, young women and girls is our reality”**

**Naomi Woyengu, World YWCA Regional Coordinator -Young Women's Rise Up Leadership Program Asia and the Pacific**

**“Diverse Pacific feminist civil society alliances have so much to offer. These voices must be heard, with access to dialogue, decision making, and delegations in regional institutional spaces opened up so that the full might of resources and innovations already occurring are brought to bear and shared widely”**

**Jane Alver YWCA Life Member**

## Introduction to YWCA Australia

YWCA Australia is a leading national not-for-profit women’s organisation working towards a future where all women and girls are safe and respected with equal access to power, opportunity and resources. YWCA Australia is part of World YWCA, a global membership movement of women and young women who have been leading social and economic change in 125 countries, for over 150 years.

YWCAs around the world have a strong history of advocating for gender equality in all its forms as part of our commitment to the full realisation of the human rights of women, young women and girls.

YWCA Australia undertakes advocacy and delivers programs and services that develop the leadership and collective power of women, young women and girls; support individuals, their families and communities at critical times; and promotes gender equality to strengthen communities across both nationally and globally.

Local member associations from the YWCA global movement provide crucial support services to women and girls in the Pacific, with four YWCA member associations currently serving the region, YWCA Papua New Guinea, YWCA Fiji, YWCA Solomon Islands and YWCA Samoa.



## Key Recommendations

YWCA Australia welcomes the opportunity provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to share knowledge and provide recommendations for the improvement of the experiences of women and girls in the Pacific. We commend the government on their commitment to driving positive change for Pacific women and girls and encourage further action to support the full realisation of their social, political and economic rights.

YWCA has three key recommendations to enhance the experiences of women and girls in the Pacific:

- 1. Create a feminist foreign policy framework to guide to deliver better informed, gender-conscious, effective projects and policy in the Pacific region**
- 2. Set tangible targets for the inclusion of women and young women on decision making bodies, including on COVID-19 and climate change responses**
- 3. Facilitate the continuation of the Rise Up! young women's leadership Program with non-linear, long-term funding**

This submission will speak broadly to all Terms of Reference, but specifically reference four, and will speak to the effectiveness and success of YWCA's Rise Up! program, which has been delivered in the Pacific by World YWCA with the support of the Department.

This submission is informed by our expertise in gender equality and international women's rights, as well as consultation with World YWCA, Rise Up! program coordinators and program evaluators, YWCA members with experience in the Pacific region, and YWCA Australia staff.

## An Intersectional Approach

Women in all their diversity experience the impacts of gender inequality differently, including in the Pacific region. An intersectional approach provides a lens with which to evaluate how gender equality intersects with other forms of discrimination, disadvantage or experience. An intersectional approach not only considers experiences of gender inequality, but also how additional experiences of race, ethnicity, faith, socio-economic status, ability, sexuality, gender identity, education level, age and migration status affect individual experience.

For example although acceptance is growing across the Pacific, violence and social stigma and discrimination remain issues for LGBTIQ+ communities, in particular in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands where homosexuality is criminalised. However, dominant western perspectives around gender and sexuality are evolving and could learn from the historical experiences of several Pacific countries where ancient traditions predating colonisation reflecting a unique local perspective of sexuality and gender, such as the fa'afafine in Samoa and fakaleiti in Tonga are integral to community.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This submission has been written with an intersectional feminist approach and aims to amplify the

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Harriet (31 October 2016). [\*"Australia's marriage-equality debate reverberates through the Pacific"\*](#). The Interpreter. Lowy Institute. Retrieved 15 January 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Hopgood, Sela Jane (18 August 2017). [\*"Cooks bill puts spotlight on Pacific's anti-gay laws"\*](#). Radio New Zealand Pacific News. Radio New Zealand. Retrieved 15 January 2018.

voices of Pacific women, in particular young women, and those with lived experience of working or living the Pacific.

## COVID-19

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the Pacific, escalating the region's experiences of social, political and economic fragility. Whilst the region has seen relatively low confirmed cases of COVID-19, Pacific nations are set to experience a lengthy economic crisis which will drastically affect the safety, security, opportunities and futures of women and girls.

The region has seen foremost a torrent of job losses, particularly in the tourism industry, which extend to a wide variety of other secondary industries that support tourism in the region. The Prime Minister of Fiji has called COVID-19 'The Job-Killer of the Century'.<sup>3</sup>

Pacific experts have also raised concerns about the longer-term risks of non-communicable diseases across the Pacific, noting that trade restrictions between nations has reduced the availability of healthier foods in Pacific nations. In addition to health concerns, there's is significant concerns about food scarcity and the prices of essential foods which will significantly impact women, their children and broader family networks. In Kiribati alone, the price of rice has increased by 50%.<sup>4</sup>

Challenging economic outcomes will increase instability in the region, and with instability comes increased danger and hardship for women and girls. It is well understood that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by crises and there is little suggest the impact of COVID-19 pandemic will differ. For women and girls in the region, instances of gendered violence and their severity have increased. Women have taken on increased domestic and care responsibilities and many have lost employment, plunging their families and themselves into hardship.<sup>5</sup>

YWCA commends Minister Payne on timely action to engage in talks with Pacific Women Leaders to support women and girls, gender-responsive policy in the Pacific is critical. YWCA supports the Minister's commitment to ensure the recognition of the vital role women must play in the economic recovery of the region, encouraging measures to promote gender equality and to address the critical

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Doherty, in "Job Killer of the century: economies of Pacific islands face collapse over Covid-19", *The Guardian*, 11 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/11/job-killer-of-the-century-economies-of-pacific-islands-face-collapse-over-covid-19>.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Doherty, in "Job Killer of the century: economies of Pacific islands face collapse over Covid-19", *The Guardian*, 11 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/11/job-killer-of-the-century-economies-of-pacific-islands-face-collapse-over-covid-19>.

<sup>5</sup> "Thematic Brief| Gender and COVID-19 in the Pacific: Emerging gendered impacts and recommendations for response", May 2020, [https://pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Thematic-Brief\\_Gender-and-COVID19\\_Pacific-Women-May-2020.pdf](https://pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Thematic-Brief_Gender-and-COVID19_Pacific-Women-May-2020.pdf).

needs of women health care workers in the region. Additionally, we are encouraged by the Minister's support for Pacific women leading the region's COVID-19 response.<sup>6</sup>

Direct action and response from the Minister in these unprecedented times presents a unique opportunity for the Department to support the implementation of measures such as targets to increase the representation of women and young women on decision making bodies, in particular, gender-responsive policy to both the current pandemic and the regions ongoing recovery efforts. Such measures would not only drive change informed by regional voices but would allow young women to drive action on broader issues of concern such as gendered violence and climate change. YWCA strongly encourages that the Minister considers implementing measures to improve and facilitate leadership opportunities for women and young women across the Pacific to engage in COVID-19 response and recovery decision making.

## Regional Support and Feminist Foreign Policy

YWCA reaffirms the need for the Australian government to continue its active role in supporting and engaging with Australia's neighbours in the Pacific region. YWCA encourages the Department to continue to utilise the approach taken by programs like Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development, where Pacific women, as experts of their own lived experience and their own nations, are consulted and engaged to drive regional change.

Closer to home, YWCA encourages the creation of a feminist foreign policy framework (organisations such as the International Centre for Research on Women provide expert examples) and in doing so facilitate the introduction of a gender lens analysis on all foreign policy decisions. If we wish to see gender equality achieved for all women and girls in the Pacific, Australia must additionally work to improve our own systems and bodies at home to better deliver support to the region.

Informed by the Foreign Territory: Women in International Relations report, it is well understood that the Australian foreign policy sector has a severe gender imbalance in its own workforce. Few of the most important diplomatic postings have never been held by a woman and women do not appear in the sector's key policy-shaping activities, despite there being substantial evidence to demonstrate that gender-balanced workforces are more effective and innovative.<sup>7</sup>

When policy is not inclusive of women's input and does not seek to evaluate its effectiveness through a gender lens, it becomes an additional and unnecessary barrier to the achievement of gender equality, not only in Australia but in regions such as the Pacific.

UN Women notes that there is often a tendency to think about gender only in relation to on-the ground initiatives and not reflect how gender perspectives can be addressed in policy, planning, institutional,

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<sup>6</sup> "Standing with Pacific women during COVID-19", Media Release, Senator the Hon Marise Payne, June 4, 2020, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/standing-pacific-women-during-covid-19>.

<sup>7</sup> "Foreign Territory: Women in International Relations", Reports, Lowy Institute, last modified July 19, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/gender-australia-ir-sector#sec37196>.



and governance arrangements. Addressing gender equality holistically requires thinking about how governance mechanisms, policies and plans frame the way in which initiatives are undertaken.<sup>8</sup>

YWCA recommends that building a more inclusive and diverse Australian foreign policy sector will assist Australia in implementing Australia's own feminist foreign policy framework. This is a direct way to take action on gender equality and integrate it into all policy and planning process.

## Barriers to Gender Equality in the Region

**In the Pacific, women and girls experience significant barriers to the full realisation of their social, political and economic rights.**

**As is the case across the world, women in the Pacific are marginalised by both systemic as well as social inequalities. Women and girls in the Pacific are particularly impacted by the issues of gendered violence, climate change and a lack of leadership opportunities.**

**Women and girls in the region are calling out for change and are demanding to be the architects and leaders of the policies and projects that will affect their nations.**

### Gendered Violence

Data collated by Australian Aid and Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development notes that the rate of lifetime experience of gendered violence is experienced at higher rates for women in the Pacific region than the rest of the world. Whilst the global average for gendered violence occurrence sits at 30 per cent, the average is 79 per cent in Tonga, 76 per cent in Samoa, 73 per cent in Kiribati, 72 per cent in Fiji, 72 per cent in Vanuatu and 64 per cent in the Solomon Islands. For women and girls living with disability in the region, this data increases 10-fold.<sup>9</sup> The statistics are shocking and the personal experiences of women living in the region harrowing.

The occurrence of gendered violence not only impacts the physical, emotional and mental health of women and girls, but limits their access to opportunities, leadership positions and restricts their ability to fully participate in social and economic life.

YWCA understands that the Department is well-versed in the statistics and concerns around gendered violence in the Pacific and has delivered many programs to address these concerns and support Australia's Pacific neighbours. Despite over three decades of aid programming in the Pacific, rates for

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<sup>8</sup> "Pacific Gender and Climate Change Toolkit: Tools for Practitioners", Publications, U.N. Women, 2015, <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/toolkit%20booklet%20pages.pdf?la=en&vs=4359>.

<sup>9</sup> "Ending Violence Against Women", Australian Aid Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development", January 2020, <https://pacificwomen.org/our-work/focus-areas/ending-violence-against-women/>.

gendered violence remain high. Aid programming in the region we know is having an impact, but it does indicate a pivot is required to better educate the community to facilitate better outcomes and increase investment in primary prevention.

Informed by consultation with Rise Up! program evaluators within the YWCA movement and Pacific women, YWCA stakeholders advise that to combat gendered violence in the Pacific, the Department must consider:

- Including and engaging men, senior community members, religious leaders and local communities and families in discussions on gendered violence
- Increasing access to service providers where women and girls can seek justice or help
- Increasing the amount of women in leadership roles, facilitating women-led changes to systemic drivers of violence
- Including primary prevention education on gendered violence in Pacific school curriculums (for example the work being rolled out by the Kiribati government. YWCA Australia was involved in supporting the Kiribati Education Department in the rollout of primary prevention work)
- Increasing the investment, and focus on primary prevention community of practice support in the Pacific and the sharing and evolving of Australia's world leading work in primary prevention
- Addressing the balance of power between men and women<sup>10</sup>

## Climate Change

Climate change is a significant and growing concern for women and girls in the Pacific and it has been noted for many years by the United Nations that gender inequality and climate change are intrinsically linked.

Climate change in the region is likely to increase the number and severity of extreme weather events and disasters. This will lead to increased sea levels and coastal erosion, reduced crop yields, limit access to clean drinking water and cause coral bleaching and ocean warming, likely to result in reduced fish stocks. Climate change will have a catastrophic impact on women and girls in the Pacific many of whom are already experiencing severe economic distress.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst women and girls are more likely to be impacted by climate change, they are by virtue of their position and roles in society, in a prime position to lead their communities and regions in climate

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<sup>10</sup> Naomi Woyengu, Jane Alver, Verity Blackman and Caroline Lambert, recommendations from consultation by submission author via Survey Monkey and direct interview, June 2020

<sup>11</sup> "Pacific Brief: Gender, Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management, 2020, <https://pacificwomen.org/resources/pacific-brief-gender-climate-change-and-disaster-risk-management/>.

change advocacy and to advise on how climate change will harm Pacific communities. Young women in the Pacific region and across the world are leading this change.

In our own consultation within the YWCA movement, Pacific women have articulated their thoughts on climate change directly and with urgency. This issue will be a focus of our solidarity for the region in the lead up to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65) and align with elevating the devastating impact of bushfires and drought for women living in Australia.

Regional Coordinator for YWCA's Rise Up! Program, YWCA Papua New Guinea member and young woman Naomi Woyengu, shared six specific areas where action she believes is required to better support Pacific women and girls.

### Climate Justice considerations

1. More programs focused on preparedness in communities that are led by youth groups or local CSOs
2. Funding for areas prone to feel the impact of climate change
3. A regional learning and news hub to monitor weather patterns and help with disseminating information, with a focus on building capacity in related STEM programming for young women
4. More programs designed to educate people about how to be resilient after experiencing climate change related disasters, especially in terms of skills building and development (agriculture, fishing, etc.)
5. WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) projects that can help women during times of a climate disaster, to prevent women working for miles looking for water and putting them at risk of sexual or physical violence
6. The incorporation of traditional approaches when developing programs seeking to address climate change. Some of our (Pacific) traditional practices have proven to be effective to help.<sup>12</sup>

### YWCA's Rise Up!

**"Rise Up! is an incredible program! In the coming phase we hope to see how we can engage the family and community to also to create a support system for young women. Intergenerational shared leadership aspect of the program is yet to be fully realized."**

**Naomi Woyengu, World YWCA Regional Coordinator -Young Women's Rise Up Leadership Program  
Asia and the Pacific**

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<sup>12</sup> Naomi Woyengu, direct quote from consultation by submission author via Survey Monkey, June 2020.



To address gender inequality in the region, the Rise Up! Program was first developed in 2010 by the YWCA Solomon Islands with the support of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, World YWCA and funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. In the Pacific, the program was delivered in four provinces in the Solomon Islands, in urban and rural settlements in PNG and in rural Fiji (additional programs were delivered in Asia).

Rise Up! supports young women and girls to develop leadership and basic advocacy skills. The program serves as a safe, and relevant vehicle for women and girls in the Pacific to learn about and discuss social issues that affect them and other women and girls in their community. The program draws strength and success from its commitment to being inclusive of all religious, cultural and traditional perspectives, as well as from its hands-on approach to teaching advocacy.

The program has a unique approach, adopting a 'Train the Trainer' (ToT) model, empowering young women with the knowledge and leadership skills necessary to access their own human rights, and then to train and support other young women to do the same. Under this model the YWCA's Young Women Co-ordinators (YWCs) provide leadership training programs to young women in their communities. Those young women who receive the training then pass on the knowledge and ethos of the training to other young women in their peer group. The intended effect is an expanding network of young women in each community who have formally or informally developed their leadership skills. Through this model, the program itself provides a leadership opportunity that is driven by young women, for young women and deeply embedded within the community.

**“Before I joined the training, I felt that the community looked down on me. They said that I needed to stay quiet and not be part of decision making because I was a girl. After the training, I rose up as a leader and showed these people that I can lead, I can talk and I have a right to do something.”**

**Rise Up! Peer Educator, Honiara**

Between 2016 and 2018 researchers at Monash GPS, in partnership with the World YWCA and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) conducted research into the leadership qualities and approaches of young women in Asia and the Pacific. The purpose of the research was to understand how young women lead, what barriers they face, and the opportunities that exist to support and extend their leadership. It did so in conjunction with an independent evaluation of the DFAT funded “RiseUp!” program in which nine national YWCA offices deliver human rights training to young women. These are the main findings and recommendations from this research:



1. Young women challenge dominant approaches to leadership by leading in ways that are based upon collaborative, shared and horizontal power relationships, and in spaces that are often considered informal and private.
2. Young women see confidence as being the most important aspect of their leadership. In communities where confidence in young women is discouraged or downplayed, young women see confidence as being about the development of knowledge and skills (like public speaking) and a set of values (such as self-belief) which are often hard-won.
3. The research finds that supporting young women's leadership not only increases the knowledge, confidence and opportunities available to young women, but also has a positive impact upon gender equality and the realisation of young women's rights in the home and community.
4. Young women see the main barriers to the development of their leadership as being the masculine and ageist bias in leadership, the lack of community support and willingness to see young women as leaders (which may include backlash against them) and access to dedicated programs that support young women's leadership.
5. The main enablers of young women's leadership are the widespread promotion of young women's rights, the creation of safe spaces, the building of peer networks to allow young women to work together, the modelling of strong inter-generational leadership, and the support of local communities.<sup>13</sup>

Following the Rise Up! programs success in the region, YWCA advocates for the Department's continued support for the program. Caroline Lambert, former Director of Research, Policy and Advocacy for IWDA and a gender equality expert, was engaged by the World YWCA, along with her colleague Tess Walsh, to support the the Rise Up! Young Women Coordinators (Aye, Dazie, Gloria, MaMeau, Nirmala, Pertee and Sureka) as they created a monitoring and evaluation framework for the program. Following this work, Caroline advocates that the Rise Up! program would benefit from the continuation of non-linear, long-term funding, to enable Rise Up! to effect broader change and to enable young women to lead on regional issues.

Further support to deliver the Rise Up! program, not only provides opportunities for Pacific young women to learn, practice and engage their leadership skills, it also enables peer learning among young women to advocate effectively on issues that greatly affect their life and human rights. This advocacy experience enables young women to have improved conversations in family and community settings, extending the reach of the program. Non-linear, long-term funding allows the program the time to embed itself in the community, gaining trust and respect, but also to be flexible in its delivery and ability to respond to community need.

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<sup>13</sup> "Mobilising Young Women's Leadership in Asia and the Pacific" is a joint research partnership between Monash GPS and the World YWCA, funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. [https://www.monash.edu/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/1779075/Research-brief-Supporting-young-womens-leadership-in-Asia-and-the-Pacific.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1779075/Research-brief-Supporting-young-womens-leadership-in-Asia-and-the-Pacific.pdf)

## Summary

There are many challenges ahead, notwithstanding the global responses needed to navigate the current COVID-19 pandemic, but women and girls in the Pacific cannot wait for change.

The following three key recommendations are essential to addressing the experiences of gender inequalities by women and girls in the Pacific:

1. **Create a feminist foreign policy framework to guide the delivery of better informed, gender-conscious, effective projects and policy in the Pacific region**
2. **Set tangible targets for the inclusion of women and young women on decision making bodies, including on COVID-19 and climate change responses**
3. **Facilitate the continuation of the Rise Up! young women's leadership Program with non-linear, long-term funding**

We look forward to further work with the Department, sharing a commitment to amplify the voices, work and experiences of Pacific women and girls to address gender equality.

## YWCA Australia Acknowledges

**Women in all their diversity in the Pacific,  
for their leadership and paving the way**

**All our Y sisters working towards gender equality,  
specifically, YWCA's supporting communities across the Pacific**

**Naomi Woyengu**

**Caroline Lambert**

**Aida Rehouma**

**YWCA's CLASSY Feminist Local Action Group (FLAG)**

**Meaghan King**

**Lisa Gascoigne**

