



Submission by UnitingWorld

to

The Inquiry into the Human Right of women and girls in
the Pacific

July 2020

FOR THE ATTENTION OF

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
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24 July 2020

Parliamentary Inquiry into the Rights of Women and Girls in the Pacific

I write to endorse UnitingWorld's Submission to the above inquiry.

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) carries a legacy of international engagement that goes back more than 150 years, to when the three denominations that formed the UCA had strong overseas mission connections from the 1850s. We continue to hold close partnerships with the churches they planted – now independent, indigenous

[REDACTED] the Pacific and are the only Australian church that is a member of the Pacific Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific. Participation by our Pacific partners is a valued part of the Uniting Church's triennial Assembly.

The people of the Uniting Church are long-standing supporters of the Pacific, including through their donations to UnitingWorld, as the Church's aid and partnership agency, which works exclusively through church partners.

We stand by our partners now as they face the multiple challenges of natural disasters and coronavirus.

I commend the recommendations in this submission to the Committee, as steps to improve and strengthen Australia's support for the Rights of women and girls in the Pacific.

[REDACTED]
Colleen Geyer,
General Secretary,
Uniting Church in Australia Assembly

[REDACTED]



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24th July, 2020

The Foreign Affairs and Aid Subcommittee
Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Australian Parliament
Canberra
AUSTRALIA

Dear Honourable Members of the Foreign Affairs and Aid Subcommittee,

**RE: THE INQUIRY INTO THE HUMAN RIGHT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS
IN THE PACIFIC**

Warm greetings from your Pacific sisters and brothers of faith!

The Pacific Conference of Churches endorses this submission by Uniting World on this important issue of the rights of women and girls in the Pacific.

The PCC's Strategic Plan (2020-2024), recognises high rates of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and abuse in Christian homes and communities, and for the first time included clear outcomes for religious leaders and faith communities to urgently address high rates of VAWC in Pacific, using the power of faith and innovative collaborative approaches to address this issue. This remains a critical area of intervention considering the lack of a clear and coordinated regional and national response from faith leaders and faith based organisations to address VAWG; the high levels of religious practise and allegiance in the Pacific; and the widespread presence and respect for religious leaders means many women turn to their local Church community in times of difficulty or distress.

PCC is committed to leverage ou influence and unique entry points to specifically focus on rolling out a regional faith-based model and approach to advance primary prevention work and institutional change to EVAWG at national and regional levels across 15 Pacific Islands. This includes a regional mapping of faith-based responses to VAWC, gender equality and child protection; establish systems for Member Churches to monitor and report on performance of their commitments through such mechanisms such as Gender Report Card for 31 Member Churches; development and implementation of a Safe Church Policy (Zero Tolerance of VAWC in Church Communities) and Code of Conduct; development and roll out of a Pacific regional faith-based strategy to EVAWG; along with regional faith leaders convenings to

monitor and report on progress. Critical to this will be strengthening the capacity of PCC and Member Churches to increase scale up of positive practices to EVAWG, including the roll out of a regional Break the Silence Sunday Campaign to engage regional and national Church leadership on the issue of VAWG and deliver strong messages to faith communities on the necessity of education, attention and response to this issue. In addition to a specific focus on increasing the participation and access of women in Church leadership and theology.

The Pacific Conference of Churches respected role in these critical initiatives will ensure deeper acceptance on the issue to drive genuine action by Church leaders using faith-based approaches tailored to the Pacific culture and context. It will also further bolster faith-based models and approaches to EVAWG through opportunities to engage in regional convenings and learning forums and contribute to the overall Pacific evidence base on which faith-based prevention interventions hold the most promise for long-term social norms change.

We are grateful to the partnership in this crucial work with UnitingWorld, an agency of our Member Church, the Uniting Church in Australia.

In Peace



James Shri Bhagwan (Rev)
General Secretary

Executive Summary

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is the third largest mainline Christian denomination in Australia, uniquely the first to be created in and of Australia. Almost 900,000 Australians identify as our members and our network of agencies is one of the largest providers of community services in Australia.¹

UnitingWorld is the aid and partnerships agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, mandated to drive relationships and collaborations with churches overseas. UnitingWorld has program collaborations in seven Pacific countries and maintains diplomatic relationships with four more. Over 60% of UnitingWorld's program investment is in the Pacific.

Over the past five years, UnitingWorld has led a program promoting gender equality in the Pacific, designed and implemented in close collaboration with Pacific church and community leaders, with widely acclaimed success. The novelty of this project has been the use of biblical teaching and dialog led by Pacific theologians and church leaders, to challenge fundamental beliefs and attitudes towards women and girls, and to promote the rights and equality of women and girls as a Christian imperative.

*"The reality is the policies there are not working and not doing the good that we want them to do. We have to be frank with each other about that and be working very hard on these questions ... [it] is one of the key challenges. So churches are the hope on the side of these questions. They seem to be having more success than other channels, so we've got to follow that."*²

The Hon Alexander Hawke, Minister for International Development and the Pacific

We have drafted this submission in consultation with our Pacific partners and drew heavily on our experience with this project and our close relationships with community leaders across the Pacific.

We have sought to center the voices of Pacific people.

Details of those we have consulted and our credentials to make this submission are presented at the end of this document.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TOR #1: The role of civil society groups in the Pacific Islands in responding practically to domestic, family and sexual violence, and other rights issues such as gender equality

1. Christian churches in Pacific countries are key arbiters of gender roles and relationships

- Christianity is the dominant paradigm in the Pacific, it is the language of life and culture.
- Churches and Church leaders are often the first refuge/source of help for women and girls in situations of violence, especially in rural settings.
- Church teaching on violence and gender equality are drivers of behaviour. They can sustainably prevent violations of right by shifting the attitudes that justify violence and exploitation of women and girls.

2. Regional Pacific Christian organisations raise awareness and drive policy in churches

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016; and <https://unitingcare.org.au/about-us/>.

² Good Will Hunters, <https://m.soundcloud.com/user-296532637/the-right-honourable-alex-hawke-minister-for-international-development-and-the-pacific>, Dec 2019

- Regional multi-church organisations such as the Pacific Conference of Churches, and similar bodies at the national level have reach and influence. They partner with and access resources from a global network of right advocates and provide momentum for policy change.

TOR #2: The key figures and groups which advance the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific context

3. Church leaders who translate and connect rights-based concepts with Biblical teaching.

- There are several prominent leaders in Pacific Churches who are strong advocates for gender equality and the ending of violence against women, based on Biblical teaching and values.
- Examples of these are Rev James Bhagwan (General Secretary of the PCC), Rev Dr Bernard Siai (Moderator, United Church of PNG), Rev Dr Cliff Bird (United Church of Solomon Islands), Siera Bird (United Church in Solomon Islands); Rev Tevita Banivanua (Chair, Fiji Council of Churches), Rev Sereima Lomaloma (House of Sarah, Anglican Diocese of Polynesia); Rev Dr Tevita Havea (General Secretary, Free Wesleyan Church, Tonga; President of the PCC); Rev Dr Upolu Vaai (Principal of the Pacific Theological College); Deaconess Salanieta Naucabalavu (Women's Representative to the PCC; Former G.S. of the Women's Fellowship of the Methodist Church in Fiji); Rev Ikani Tolu (General Secretary of the Tongan National Council of Churches); Rev Maleta Rumaroti (Tenten) (Secretary for Church Mission, Kiribati Uniting Church); Maina Talia (Former Climate Change Secretary for the Congregational Christian Church, Tuvalu – EKT); Ps Nippy Aiong (Secretary for Christian Education, Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu); Ps Shem Tema (General Secretary of the Vanuatu Christian Council) etc etc.

4. Women's Fellowships across the Pacific churches

- Pacific churches have a parallel organisational structure for the women, and these are well organized and resourceful. Many of them are active in advancing the rights of women and girls and combatting domestic violence.
- Examples include the Presbyterian Women Mission Union of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu; the Methodist Church Women's Fellowship in Fiji; the United Church in Solomon Islands Women's Fellowship; the Reitan Ainen Kiamnatu (RAK) of the Uniting Church in Kiribati; Fakapotopotoga Fafine Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu of the EKT; Anglican Church in Melaneisa Mother's Union in Solomon Islands; House of Sarah, Anglican Diocese of Polynesia in Fiji etc.

5. Local organisations with experience and cultural nuance leading effective response.

- Local crisis centres, women's rights advocacy groups, Disability organisations etc are active across the Pacific region. They are trained, well-established and understand the underlying cultural nuances that need to be navigated with sensitivity in working for progress.
- Groups we recommend include: Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Vanuatu Women's Centre; Families Free from Violence, Tonga; Christian Care Centre, Solomon Islands; FemLINK, Fiji; the Fiji Women's Rights Movement; Institute for Mission and Research at the Pacific Theological College; and the Pacific Disability Forum and their in-country member Disability People's Organisations.

TOR #3: The engagement of these groups with Australia's Pacific Step-up

6. The Pacific Step-up meeting with the Pacific Conference of Churches was a vital first step

- Case Study 1 – PCC and PCC relationship with Pacific Step-up CPP facilitating connections with Churches across the Pacific.

7. Engagement between Pacific Step-Up and women-led faith based organisations in the Pacific is an untapped opportunity.

TOR #4: The effectiveness of Australian overseas development assistance programs in supporting human rights of women and girls

8. Australian ODA supporting programs in churches has delivered strong results for women and girls 2015-2020

- Case Study 2 – GET-IT / DFAT PWSPD

9. ODA can increase impact by supporting collaborations between Australian Church NGOs working with Pacific Churches, and between Pacific Rights-based NGOs/CSOs and Churches/FBOs

- Australian Church NGOs have proven relationships, long shared histories and common faith foundations on which to address culturally sensitive issues. They also often have a strong experience of working together for social transformation.
- Improved collaboration between organisations using the Rights-based approach and Theological approach maximises the benefits of everyone's work

TOR #5 Other

10. The lives of women and girls can be improved by addressing Climate Change through Australia's Domestic Policies and its Development Assistance Program.

- The impacts of Climate Change disproportionately effect the lives of women and girls.

Rationale for our Recommendations

Why do Christian churches and Regional Christian organisations play a crucial role in responding to domestic violence and on issues such as gender equality ?

RESPONSE: Churches and Church leaders are often the first refuge/source of help for women and girls in situations of violence, especially in rural settings.

Churches are often where women go for help. Of all the agencies/authorities from which women sought help, **the most frequently cited was a religious leader**, followed by a health centre/hospital³. This is especially true in rural and remote communities where other services are not available. It is vital that the church is part of any solution to the recognition of the rights of women and girls.

"In Methodist villages, domestic violence between husband and wife is often viewed as a problem for the church, to be addressed by the talatala [iTauki for Minister] or lay preachers. It is considered discourteous to be direct about this kind of problem, and the talatala will in all likelihood not talk about the domestic violence directly but preach instead about the religious aspect of marriage and the values underlying iTaukei protocol, such as the respect a wife needs

³ Secretariat of the Pacific Community and the Government of Solomon Islands, Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs and Ministry of Finance and Treasury, National Statistics Office. 2009

to have for her husband. Talatala tend to concentrate on reconciling the couple and are very unlikely to involve the police.”⁴ (Fiji)

Church leaders are already providing counselling and mediation support, so working with churches to train church leaders/pastors with the right skills and values to respond to situations of violence and inequality in the home leverages the existing institutional strength, reach and influence of churches. To be effective, such training and guidance must be developed by Pacific theologians, translating rights based concepts into Christian teachings.

PREVENTION: Christianity is the dominant paradigm in the Pacific. It is the language of life and culture and can influence the behaviour of individuals right across society.

Mobilising the Churches to teach and preach about the equal value and dignity of women and the wrongfulness of domestic violence has the power to bring about permanent change.

Our submission on Strengthening Pacific Relationships made the strong case for the importance of Christian churches in Pacific life. Christianity is central to the worldview and social fabric of life in the Pacific. Embedded in culture, it establishes and justifies acceptable social norms. Faith is the heart-language of its people.

“...working with Church leaders allow people to make the effort to change their attitude”⁵ Deputy Coordinator, Vanuatu Women’s Centre

High levels of church attendance and strong regard for church-based institutions mean Churches hold significant social influence. Politicians, police, farmers and market-stall owners all attend church; a cross-section of society is found in the pews each Sunday. The church is also extensively geographically networked, from the nation’s capital to the remotest village in far flung islands.

Churches have active women’s organisations, often the oldest national women’s organisations within each country; well-subscribed youth groups; Sunday schools for children and weekly gatherings for all in the church community. Other organisations cannot hope to match the Churches’ centrality, their role in society and their access to the voices and participation of Pacific people..

“[F]aith based organisations...are a key part of violence prevention work in the Pacific”⁶ – Aleta Millar, UN Women Multi Country Representative

Regional multi-church organisations such as the Pacific Conference of Churches, and similar bodies at national level, have the scale to influence change across otherwise small autonomous churches.

Regional and national ecumenical bodies provide culturally and contextually safe environments for Church Leaders to explore the theological foundations of issues such as gender equality, EVAWG and the rights of women and girls. They are also a forum for joint actions and mechanisms for coordination and accountability nationally and across the Pacific region.

“The Pacific Conference of Churches’ respected role in these critical initiatives will ensure deeper acceptance on the issue to drive genuine action by Church leaders using faith-based approaches tailored to the Pacific culture and context. It will also further bolster faith-based models and approaches to EVAWG through opportunities to engage in regional convenings and learning forums and contribute to the overall Pacific evidence base on which faith-based prevention interventions hold the most promise for long-term social norms change.”⁷ Rev James Bhagwan, General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches

⁴ Newland, ‘Villages, Violence and Atonement in Fiji’, in Biersack, Jolly and Macintyre, 2016, Gender violence and human rights : seeking justice in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, p57

⁵ Participant in UnitingWorld’s Partnering Women for Change Program Evaluation, 2019

⁶ Aleta Miller, cited by MCIF, 2016, ‘Churches to “break the silence” on gender-based violence as church leaders speak “with one voice”’, November 11

⁷ Consultation response for Submission into the DFAT Inquiry into the Human Rights of women and girls in the Pacific 15/7/2020

While individual denominations may be averse to take an open stance on controversial issues, there is significant power in the peer influence and expectations set by these regional and national bodies.

Why are Churches key arbiters of gender roles and relationships? How Church teaching on violence and gender equality shifts attitudes.

Theology gives permission for sustainable change.

Human Rights of women and girls are enshrined in UN instruments such as CEDAW but the language of Human Rights and Women's Rights often confronts Churches and their communities. It is heard to promote the individual over community and perceived as imposing secularisation on Pacific communities from outside their culture. A Marama⁸ in the Solomon Islands explains:

"I thought other church members in other regions were doing the wrong thing by allowing NGOs to raise awareness about this "Gender". But now, after looking at it through biblical theology and God's vision of Human Relationships, I see now that the Church should do more of this teaching" Marama, Central West region, Solomon Islands

. Churches speak into the spiritual and contextual "heart" language of the Pacific peoples. The bible is at the centre of Pacific worldviews. It is the foundation for the justification and acceptability of social norms and behaviours. For development approaches to be successful, the language and approaches of 'human rights' must be contextualised to the Pacific. Effective re-framing of human rights prioritises Pacific indigenous culture and Pacific Christian theology. This is also true for discussions around gender. Otherwise, we risk further entrenching negative views and increasing push-back around human rights for women and girls.

*"This is the first-time theology has been taught in relation to gender equality and human rights. It was very clear and enlightening. It was me on day one who wrote in relation to human rights [at the start of the workshop] "who invented this crazy idea?". But now I see these articles have Biblical origins. This was a very positive finding for me".*⁹ High Chief of Funafuti and member of the Congregational Christian Church (EKT) in Tuvalu

Some Churches and Faith-based organisations are now using biblical language of dignity and equality from scriptures re-interpreted by Pacific theologians. Church leaders and congregations are embracing the concepts of Human Rights and, more specifically, the rights of women, girls and children. When seen as reflecting biblical concepts and belief systems, the concepts are contextual, and communities have permission to address gender inequalities and VAWG.

*"Before I participated in the Gender Equality Theology workshop, I thought 'oh, this is just another program advocating women's rights.' To be proven wrong was an understatement... Not only did it raise awareness about violence against women and children, but the workshop provided tools and resources for theologically interpreting and identifying gender equality within Scripture and how we can apply that to our relevant contexts... This program has impacted me at a personal level and has encouraged me to address this growing issue within my Tongan community."*¹⁰ – Female Youth Participant and Theology Student, Tonga

Women have embraced this approach by churches. It frees them from oppressive interpretations of faith and gives a faith-foundation for the Church as an institution to lead change.

"I know it is a journey, but I thank God for the opportunity I have to attend the gender leadership and equality workshop. I am also experiencing changes in my husband's attitude and sharing of

⁸ title given to a Minister's wife and community women's leader in the Solomon Islands

⁹ Participant in a Gender Equality Theology training activity facilitated by UnitingWorld in Sept 2019

¹⁰ UnitingWorld, 2018, 'Theology of Gender Equality making waves in the Pacific', December 20

responsibility at home. Both of us are church leaders busy with our commitments but look forward for both of us to set and discuss and make decision.”¹¹ Female project participant, Vanuatu

Institutional Change within Churches leads to change within community

National Churches are undergoing institutional change. They are developing Church-owned Gender Equality Theology and whole-of-Church policies, Codes of Conduct, Complaints mechanisms within congregations and response protocols in line with National Protection Laws. This institutional change uses Church existing structures to effect broad scale change in support of the rights of women and girls. Preaching from the pulpit takes effective, positive messages about women and girls rights into families and communities. Change is more sustainable when informed by the core values and beliefs of the church and its members, rather than a short-term project addressing behaviour change without addressing foundational belief systems.

“Church leaders in Vanuatu have a highly influential role in guiding people’s behaviour and actions, and given that the Church reaches over 80% of the population there is tremendous potential for prevention and early intervention work”¹² – Vanuatu National Child Protection Policy 2016-2026

Who are key local CSOs, NGOs and Advocacy groups and why is it important to support them?

Strong, genuinely Pacific local and regional organisations are leading the way in crisis response and advocacy for the rights for women and girls. **The Fijian Women’s Crisis Centre** has been operating for over 30 years. It supports victims and survivors of violence and rights abuses in Fiji, provides training across the Pacific region and has supported the establishment of similar crisis centres in Vanuatu (**Vanuatu Women’s Centre**) and Tonga (**Women and Children’s Crisis Centre and Families Free from Violence**) and supported the Anglican Diocese of Polynesia to establish their faith-base **“House of Sarah”** response and advocacy centre. **FemLINK** Fiji uses radio to share the voices and experiences of women living in villages, and the **Pacific Disability Forum** supports local **Disabled Peoples’ organisations** within each country to advocate for the rights of women and girls and others with disabilities. These are just a few examples of the existing rich resources within the Pacific. They know the local context, cultures and unique approaches necessary to effectively operate for change.

“Civil society groups play a critical role in developing and monitoring the implementation of [Government] policies on ERAW for the Pacific Islands. However, for civil society’s effective response to ERAW it is important to fully understand its Pacific context. Every Pacific Islands is unique in its settings, language and population mix and in most cases are greatly influenced by its structures, and cultural norms.”¹³ Rev Noa, Gender Equality Theology Minister for the Methodist Church, Fiji

The Pacific Step-up consultation with Pacific Churches through the PCC and the developing a relationship with PCC is a vital first step

The Church Partnership Program section of the Australian Government’s Pacific Step up has shown commendable leadership in building connections with Pacific Churches. A key step was prioritising meeting with Pacific Church leaders at the Pacific Conference of Churches Pacific Church Leaders Meeting. The Churches’ priorities, concerns and desired engagement could be heard and inform the Pacific Step Up’s mode of collaboration with Pacific Churches. This approach should be a blueprint for the broader Pacific Step up engagement within the Pacific.

Case Study 1: The Reach and Effectiveness of the Pacific Conference of Churches

¹¹ 16-17 PWMU Gender and Leadership Q1 Partner Narrative Report

¹² Vanuatu Ministry of Justice and Community Services (MJCS), 2016, Vanuatu National Child Protection Policy 2016-2026, p15

¹³ Consultation response for Submission into the DFAT Inquiry into the Human Rights of women and girls in the Pacific

Earlier this year the PCC Adopted its 2020-2024 Strategic Plan “Singing the Lord’s Song in Strange Lands and Times”, based on resolutions passed at the 2018 General Assembly of member Churches.

The PCC’s Vision has justice at its core and makes specific reference to gender justice and equality as part of the Pacific Self-determination goal:

*Strengthen the prophetic voice of the church on political, economic, social and cultural self-determination; equity in gender relations; and youth empowerment within the mission and life of the church and to secular policy making bodies for dignity, peace and life in abundance for all Pacific people and creation.*¹⁴

*“This is part of PCC’s Strategic Plan (2020-2024), which recognised high rates of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and abuse in Christian homes and communities, and for the first time included clear outcomes for religious leaders and faith communities to urgently address high rates of VAWC in Pacific, using the power of faith and innovative collaborative approaches to address this issue. This remains a critical area of intervention considering the lack of a clear and coordinated regional and national response from faith leaders and faith based organisations to address VAWG; the high levels of religious practices and allegiance in the Pacific; and the widespread presence and respect for religious leaders means many women turn to their local Church community in times of difficulty or distress”*¹⁵. Rev James Bhagwan, GS of the PCC

In response to the Strategic Plan, the PCC is establishing a Gender Desk in partnership with UNWomen to lead their member Churches in:

- Strengthening gender equality and EVAWG
- Local leadership so that they become prominent leaders and advocates in tackling gender inequality and EVAWG
- Increasing participation and access of women in church leadership and theology

A key objective is to leverage their influence and unique entry points to roll out a regional faith-based approach. The model will advance primary prevention work and institutional change to EVAWG at national and regional levels across 15 Pacific Islands. It will map faith-based responses to violence against women, girls and children and establish accountability systems for Churches. This will enable Churches to monitor and report on their progress in developing and implementing Safe Churches policies, codes of conduct and response mechanisms based on a Zero-tolerance standard. This is closely aligned with Australia’s Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (PWSPD/Pacific Women) initiative.

There are significant benefits from continuing to strengthen the Australian Government’s engagement and support for regional faith-based representative organisations such as the PCC. Not only is the able to effectively coordinate Church responses broadly across the Pacific region, such an approach extends Australia’s influence and reach regionally, nationally and locally into communities. It enhances the equality of Australia’s relationship in the Pacific, and improves outcomes through regionally coordinated and contextually relevant, Pacific-devised interventions.

Deeper engagement between Pacific Step-up and women-led faith-based organisation in the Pacific is an untapped opportunity

We noted above that Churches have active women’s organisations, who have the same reach as the main church bodies. These organisations provide safe spaces for women to share together and

¹⁴ PCC 2020-2024 Strategic Plan “Singing the Lord’s Song in Strange Lands and Times” pg10.

¹⁵ Rev James Bhagwan, PCC, Consultation response for Submission into the DFAT Inquiry into the Human Rights of women and girls in the Pacific, 15/07/2020

learn together. They are the ones who best understand the root causes of the gender inequality and VAWG. They have the insight that can lead to effective change but, often without the recognised avenue for voice and leadership within the Church and community. . Pacific Step-up's impact could be increased by greater engagement with Women's Fellowship and open greater opportunity for women's leadership in driving change within and through Churches.

UnitingWorld's GET-IT program (see below) was designed by Pacific Women's Fellowships from across the Pacific region.

How effective is the Australian overseas development assistance program in supporting human rights of women and girls in Pacific?

Australian ODA supporting programs in churches has delivered strong results for women and girls 2015-2020.

Micah Australia's "Voices for Justice" campaign in December 2019 highlighted to 87 Australian politicians one innovative program as an example of the effectiveness of the Australian Aid program (see UnitingWorld's Gender Equality Theology – Institutional Transformation (GET-IT) Program, Case Study 2 below). Micah's subsequent report noted *"There was also particular interest around the UnitingWorld Gender Equality Theological resources which generated important discussions, especially where Pacific Leaders were present, about the role of Churches as agents of development and social change. MPs such as Andrew Hastie and Kevin Andrews were very interested in the theology-based tools and methodology in gender equality work in the Pacific."*¹⁶

During "Voices for Justice", Pacific Churches leaders shared with Australian Politicians their experiences of the GET-IT program, the PWSPD initiative and Gender in the Pacific.

Case Study 2: UnitingWorld's Gender Equality Theology – Institutional Transformation (GET-IT) Program funded by DFAT through the PWSPD initiative.

UnitingWorld's GET-IT project is being implemented in Vanuatu, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu and PNG (as part of DFAT funded Church Partnership Program within PNG) and is part of a 10 year strategy that seeks to:

- I. Work with Churches to review traditional Biblical interpretations of Gender that hold women as obedient, submissive and inferior. The program facilitates a process of "unlearning" the old order to embrace a theology that recognises women and girls' inherent dignity and worth as equal to men as created equally in the image of God, and equal holders of the promise of the fullness of life.

*"The system that I grew up in and the knowledge that was given to me by my parents and the leaders of the church was different - it was that women are inferior to men. It is very important to correct this understanding because women and men are same in the eyes of God. This can only be done if we go back to the roots, which is the Bible."*¹⁷ – Female Theology student, Pacific Theological College, Fiji

Prominent female and male Pacific theologians developed a suite of Gender Equality theological (GET) resources. More than 16 Churches across 8 Pacific countries have accessed the resources. A GET curriculum for theological colleges has been approved by the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools and is being implemented with six colleges across five countries.

¹⁶ Voices for Justice Summary report, 2019

¹⁷ GET-IT Project Participant, Fiji.

- II. Work with Churches to address systematic Gender inequality and violence including structural, theological, physical, sexual and emotional violence experienced by women and girls within the patriarchal structure and teachings of many Pacific Churches. This is often legacy of western missionary colonisation that accompanied the Christianisation of the Pacific.

“...the whole use of culture and religion so it’s almost like they’re interchangeable, religion has become part of the culture or some cultural aspects and some traditional practices have become part of religion and mix that up with the patriarchal nature of our societies, it’s quite lethal.” – Shamima Ali, Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, August 2016

PNG’s seven mainline Churches adopted a PNG specific Gender Equality Theology (2016) based on the GET resources. They are implementing the concepts across the Churches through a GET Community of Practice. Churches in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu recognise women’s potential as significant Church leaders and are appointing women to positions such as Theological College lecturers and Regional Superintendent Ministers for the first time. Churches developing policies and codes of conduct that address violence towards women, girls and children within the church.

Work with and through Churches as they lead their communities in this theological approach to gender equality and EAWG from a strong, Pacific contextual Biblical foundation. *“90% of people in the Solomon Islands believe in God. When a message about women comes from the Bible, their eyes are open, they feel it has more weight. And that’s why we will see a reduction in gender-based violence and increased respect for women in our society...For both the men and the women here, this message of equality and dignity is so liberating. We held a workshop to teach from the Bible about respect for women and to share what the scriptures have to say about women and men’s roles. People are very excited.”¹⁸ – Female Pastor, Solomon Islands.*

National Church leaders in Fiji and Vanuatu recorded messages condemning VAWG as “sin” and calling on people of faith to reject these behaviours. These messages aired in the public media through TV, Radio and Cinema. College lectures, devotions shared on the radio and messages preached from community pulpits are using Gender Equality Theology messages.

This project has been designed by Pacific Women’s Fellowships from across the Pacific region, works regionally and nationally through Churches and ecumenical organisations and contributes to the work of regional FBOs including the PCC, the Pacific Theological College, effectively expanding the reach of the outcomes beyond just UnitingWorld’s partners.

“I just want to put forward this comment: While other organisations and bodies in the country address the issue [VAWG], the Solomon Islands Christian Association and the Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association of Churches address the issue with the program “Gender Equality Theology”. When basing the issue with bible-based teaching, it brings the message alive to people and has power and is also convincing because it based on scriptures the importance of everyone: male /female/children. The Theological program addressed the issue by involving clergies, leaders and women so that the messages can be rolled over to each church and communities. Churches have a very excellent networking and so the messages when getting them involve can be easily get down to the rural communities. This theological program still needs a long way to go.”¹⁹ Joy Jino – SICA, Solomon Islands

¹⁸ UnitingWorld, 2019, ‘First female lecturer a win for equality’, June 17

¹⁹ Joy Jino, SICA Project Coordinator, Consultation response for Submission into the DFAT Inquiry into the Human Rights or women and girls in the Pacific, 15/07/2020

ODA can increase impact by supporting collaborations between Australian Church NGOs working with Pacific Churches, and between Pacific Rights-based NGOs/CSOs and Churches/FBOs

1) Australian Church NGOs working with Pacific Churches

Case study 2 (*above*) highlights the substantial achievements possible in achieving better realisation of the rights of women and girls in the Pacific in supporting the existing relationships between Australian and Pacific Churches. According to information gathered by the Church Agencies Network (CAN), the eleven mainline Christian denominations represented at CAN between them maintain relationships with 44 different major Pacific churches.

These relationships represent over a century of connection. Australian denomination counterparts supported many now-national Pacific churches during their early years. Together, Australian and Pacific Churches work across the development spectrum, in health, education, livelihoods and food security, WASH, poverty alleviation and disaster preparedness and emergency response. Gender equality and the safeguarding of women and girls is often both a mainstreamed cross-cutting program focus and provides core program outcomes. Addressing sensitive topics such as gender equality and safeguarding, through a theological lens and from a common faith foundation, Australian Church NGOs and Pacific Churches are forging a path together to progress the Human Rights of women and Girls.

The Pacific Step Up should maximise its investment and outcomes by working with these established networks in partnership with the Church ANGOs.

2) Pacific Rights-based NGOs/CSOs and Churches/FBOs

Better collaboration between Rights-based NGOs/CSOs and Churches/FBOs will maximise impact. Rights-based approaches to the rights of women and girls in the Pacific have been a development focus for many years, including Australian Government Aid priorities in the region, as demonstrated by the ten-year Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development initiative²⁰. Nevertheless, the Rights-based approach has had limited success, as discussed above. Rights-based CSOs and NGOs report encountering “Biblical push-back” in the Pacific to addressing rights, including the rights of women and girls. Engaging with Rights-based approaches from within Church language and faith systems allows concepts often perceived as “imposed western concepts” to be accepted as contextually relevant principles founded on deeply held biblical beliefs. Bringing together the work of Churches and Faith-based organisations and Rights-based NGOs and CSOs enables a more effective way to address the rights of women and girls.

*“It has been a challenge for us here (Methodist Church in Fiji) the experience of trying to find common ground to engage with CSOs. Churches have stood back from the space now occupied by CSOs. Churches have been the target of “education” by CSOs on human rights. The CSOs have sought permission to enter church communities to “educate.” There has been a gap between the language of the heart and that of the head.”*²¹ – Rev. James Bhagwan, GET Facilitator, Methodist Church in Fiji

Churches are not tools for delivering a development outcome. Nor are they a resource for delivering a rights-based-framework. Collaboration refers to working with Churches and regional FBOs within their systems, their faith foundations, contextually relevant to their communities and providing transformational leadership for gender equality and the rights of women and girls as the work of Christian “mission” owned by the Churches.

²⁰Delivery Strategy for the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development: https://pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Pacific-Women-Delivery-Strategy-2012-2022_final.pdf

²¹ Participant feedback, cited in Bridging the Gap Workshop Report, May 2016

Other key considerations

Australia's approach to Climate Change matters

The Pacific is experiencing the impacts of Climate Change. Impacts include increased droughts and soil salinity, changed weather patterns; rising sea temperature; rising sea levels contaminating fresh water supplies; more frequent and more intense climate-induced natural disasters; are just some impacts. Food security is compromised: home gardens are less productive; fish stocks retreat further from shore. Pacific women's assigned roles generally include responsibility for the home and family. They are more likely to increase household income through informal markets. They carry the food security burden for their families. **As a result, the impacts of Climate Change disproportionately affect women and girls.** And as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, increased stress in the family means increased violence towards women and girls.

They see Australia willing to let all of this happen rather than restructure its own economy to reduce reliance on fossil fuel intensive industries. Australia's domestic choices stand in stark contrast to its rhetoric of support to, and unity with, the Pacific. International assessments show Australia heading for an increase of 8% above 2005 levels by 2030.²²

Australia's Overseas Development Assistance must support the Pacific Islands to build resilience to the impacts of climate change they experience now and will continue to experience. It must also help build the resilience of Pacific women and girls by supporting improvements to the human rights of women and girls, through programs for social transformation that engage the Pacific Churches.

Our Credentials

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is the third largest mainline Christian denomination in Australia, uniquely the first to be created in and of Australia.

Almost 900,000 Australians identify as our members and our network of agencies is one of the largest providers of community services in Australia,²³ reaching over 1.4 million Australians across 1,600 sites.²⁴ The UCA has over 200 congregations with non-Anglo backgrounds, and services in more than 26 languages.

The UCA carries a legacy of Pacific engagement that goes back more than 150 years. The three denominations that formed the UCA (Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational) had strong overseas mission connections from the 1850s. Many of the Pacific churches of these denominations were supported in their early years by their Australian counterparts. The UCA continues to hold close partnerships with the churches they planted – now independent, indigenous denominations.

The UCA is home to large diaspora communities from across the Pacific who have made the UCA their home church since their settlement in Australia. Within the UCA, there are four 'National Conferences' from the Pacific (Tongan, Fijian, Samoan, Niue) who maintain their language and culture, and link back to their countries of origin through partnership agreements between the UCA and their church of origin.

UnitingWorld is the Aid and Partnerships agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, mandated to manage and grow the relationships and partnerships with our overseas Partner Churches in the Pacific, Asia and Africa.

UnitingWorld, on behalf of UCA, partners in aid programs with churches and their regional bodies across the Pacific. UnitingWorld has program collaborations in seven Pacific countries and maintains

²² <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/australia/>

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016; and <https://unitingcare.org.au/about-us/>.

²⁴ <https://unitingcare.org.au/about-us/>.

diplomatic relationships with four more. Over 60% of UnitingWorld's program investment is in the Pacific.

The UCA is institutionally networked into the Pacific as the only Australian church that is a member of the Pacific Conference of Churches and the Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific.

UnitingWorld has significant relationships with Christian community organisations in the Pacific. UnitingWorld is a founding member of the Church Agencies Network (CAN), a group of eleven aid agencies connected to mainline Christian denominations who promote collaboration in community development and humanitarian endeavours between churches, particularly in the Pacific. UnitingWorld is also a member of the Pacific Forum for the ACT Alliance, a network of Christian humanitarian agencies. UnitingWorld works in PNG Church Partnership Program, where seven mainline churches, their corresponding Australian Church NGO partners, the Australian and PNG Government all work together to strengthen partnership, governance, community development outcomes and service delivery across PNG.

UnitingWorld has relationships and collaborations with civil society organisations in the Pacific through its aid program with Pacific Church partners. These include the Pacific Disability Forum, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Kiribati Women and Children Support Centre, Vanuatu Women's Centre, South Pacific Conference Regional Rights Resource Team (SPC RRRT) and the Melanesian Institute, just to name a few.

Our Consultations with Pacific peoples

Our consultation included regional faith-based leaders, Church ministers and women leaders and community participants in Gender project activities. We collected input for the inquiry through the regional networks below, reviewing the feedback/learning from our Pacific partners and relevant Gender work project participants.

Networks consulted include:

- **Pacific Conference of Churches:** formed in 1961 by key Pacific Leaders, now represents 30 member Churches from 18 different countries and territories across the Pacific region and from a broad spectrum of Christian faith traditions. The Uniting Church in Australia is a member of the PCC.
- **Pacific Theological College:** established in 1965 to facilitate ecumenical academic theological education programs to the Churches across the Pacific region.
- **Pacific Partnering Women for Change Women's Fellowship Network** –This informal network began in 2012 with representatives from Church-based Women's Fellowship organisations from across four Pacific countries. It now includes women representatives from 8 Pacific nations, and representatives from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as well as Churches and nationals and regional Faith Based Organisations (FBOs).
- **Pacific Gender Equality Theology Network** – This is an informal network of Ministers and Lay leaders, men and women, who are leading their National Churches and ecumenical organisations in Gender Equality theological discussions promoting Gender Equality, the Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls (EVAWG) and the realisation of the rights of women and girls.

The recommendations below are supported by our Pacific partners' insights, our experience as an accredited aid and development agency, our identity as an agent of a significant body of Christian citizens in Australia, and above all, our long history of deep relationship with our Pacific partners.

END OF SUBMISSION