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## **Church Agencies Network**

### **A Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade**

#### **Inquiry into the human rights issues confronting women and girls in the Indian Ocean – Asia Pacific region**

##### **Executive Summary**

Women and girls play a crucial role in solving the most persistent development problems facing the world today. Investing in their economic potential through education, and by addressing child marriage for example, has great impact. Giving women the same access to non-land resources and services as men could increase yields on women's land by up to 30 per cent, raise total agricultural output in developing countries by up to four per cent and reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 100-150 million.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of Pacific nations identify as Christian countries, with Christianity embedded in their culture as an integral part of family and community life. This is also true of many countries in the Indian Ocean area. In rural and isolated communities the religious institution is often the social and cultural centre of community. Being able to address the human rights issues facing women and girls through an understanding of their religious worldview is an advantage that the **Church Agencies Network (CAN)** outlines in this submission. This submission also provides evidence of the positive impact for women and girls through CAN agency project case studies. CAN is comprised of 11 development agencies of Christian Church denominations in Australia, who are all members of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID). In 2011/12 CAN agencies managed more than AUD53 million in global programs to benefit vulnerable communities.

##### **Through our experience, we recommend a number of approaches that will assist in the realisation of human rights for women and girls:**

- Strengthen prevention and protection mechanisms for women and girls most at risk
- Engage church leaders and religious communities in ongoing discussions to build local ownership and momentum for gender equality
- Invest in drivers of economic empowerment (specifically education and health) to support the capacity of women and girls to participate and gain economic independence through livelihood development and small business opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> Chaaban, Jad and Wendy Cunningham. 'Measuring the Economic Gain of Investing in Girls: the girl effect dividend', World Bank 2011

- Coupling economic empowerment with training and/or sensitisation on gender equality can contribute to bringing about attitudinal change
- Create opportunities for men to demonstrate positive leadership and support behaviour through attitudinal change
- Invest in locally driven community solutions to address gender-based violence and restricted opportunities for women and girls
- Enhance awareness of rights and enable access to rights

CAN agencies are motivated to follow the example of Jesus Christ, embodying the values of justice, wholeness of life, inclusivity and care and concern for the most vulnerable. We believe in the worth and dignity of all people as children of God, created in God's image. We acknowledge that at times the relationships between religion and women's rights are ambiguous: religion may contribute to the persistence of gender ideologies that oppress women, but may also be a resource for women's struggles against gender inequality. We believe that by understanding the local interpretations of religious beliefs, and reinforcing our rights-based stance as faith-based organisations, we can influence progress towards gender equality.

**Invest in locally  
driven  
community  
solutions to  
address gender-  
based violence**

**CAN is fully committed to realising the rights of women and girls. We urge the Inquiry to support recommendations that bring about this vision.**

### **What are the Barriers and Impediments?**

In the experience of CAN agencies, the largest barriers and impediments to enhancing the human rights of women and girls are:

- Negative attitudes to women's empowerment and gender equality amongst communities, governments and key service providers
- Limited access to high quality health and education services
- Low levels of financial literacy – which result in limited opportunities for economic productivity
- Low awareness of rights, and barriers to supports for realising rights (a mixture of legal, financial and educational)
- Unacceptably high levels of violence
- Non-conducive political environment or political powerlessness

In a recent Pacific study of men's use of violence in six countries, nearly half of those surveyed admitted to using physical or sexual violence against a partner during their lifetime, ranging from 25% of men in some parts of Indonesia, to more than 80% of men in Papua New Guinea.<sup>2</sup> Across Asia and the Pacific, 21 out of 39 countries now have dedicated national legislation addressing violence against women. However, there is limited capacity or will to implement the laws and policies. Research has shown that violence against women is also an issue with significant social, economic and health costs, in addition to the human rights imperative. In Fiji, violence against women is estimated to result in a loss of 7% of GDP.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Costs of Violence, Published in 2013 by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Rao, S. "Violence against Women (VAW) is a barrier to Empowerment" paper presented at UNIFEM Regional Workshop on Strengthening Partnerships to Eliminate VAW: 3. 17-19 February 2003, Forum Secretariat, Suva

Research on the economic status of Pacific women showed that in 2010 the Pacific region lost 65% in potential human development due to gender inequality.<sup>4</sup> In PNG, the risk of death during childbirth is exceptionally high, with a maternal mortality rate of 733 per 100,000 (followed by Kiribati – 250 per 100,000). There is a direct correlation between poor maternal mortality rates and a lower percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel (which in PNG is only 53%). In developed countries (2009), 19 teenage girls in every 1000 have given birth, while across the Pacific the adolescent fertility rate is 44 per 1000 births. This high rate of premature pregnancy and motherhood pose considerable health, economic and social risks for teenage girls, preventing them from achieving higher levels of education. The region's lowest ratio of boys to girls participating in education is in PNG, at 8:1, followed by the Solomon Islands (3:1). Educated women are more likely to be employed, be involved in public decision-making, and be able to care for their own health and that of their family.<sup>5</sup>

## What is working?

CAN agencies' experience in the Indo-Pacific region has shown that enabling women to participate in financial, technical and leadership activities allows them to move closer to realising their human rights, when this is combined with awareness-raising and attitudinal changes with men and women. Linking women with others through community-or church-based networks and groups helps create resilience and trust, helping to strengthen the community and build capable and accountable community members and leaders. Our experience shows that there are a number of factors that bring about the enhancement of the human rights of women and girls:

- Mainstreaming gender into all program areas by conducting gender analyses
- Supporting grassroots programs to increase the relevance to the social context and encourage local initiatives and networks
- Focusing on the strengths and assets of women and girls in the design of approaches
- Translating rights-based language and concepts into parallel Christian principles, reducing the fear of “rights language” and creating a cultural and faith-based imperative to act
- Working with key leaders of religious traditions and other local leaders to promote behavioural change
- Recognising that discrimination occurs on many levels: it can be internalised as norms, or played out in social practices, or legalised in policy
- Including an interrelated design to acknowledge that the rights of women and girls are interrelated, whether that be access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, or leadership.
- Opening spaces for women to participate in decision-making
- Using relevant strategies for specific groups (e.g. youth, girls, men)
- Focusing on community-led behaviour change, such as working with leaders through community groups
- Changing institutional practice – encouraging women as leaders in both the church and society
- Creating specific strategies for engaging men and boys and promoting behavioural change
- Encouraging confidence in practical ways, through skills building or livelihood generation

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<sup>4</sup> “Economic Status of Women in the Pacific” Australian government research note, 2011

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

## Conclusion

The advantages of working through faith-based agencies often correlate closely with the positives associated with social capital. CAN agencies recognise the importance of bottom-up approaches that respect social context, and work through community strengths to address barriers to women and girls' realising their human rights. CAN agencies seek to mainstream gender into all program areas and have the active participation of men and women in program planning and implementation. Through our in-country partnerships and networks at we are able to provide benefits such as:

- efficient, cost effective services
- reaching the poorest
- an enabling environment where people living with poverty are valued and listened to
- igniting civil society advocacy
- long term relationships with local communities and leadership, working to support grassroots action

The human rights issues confronting women and girls in the Indian Ocean – Asia Pacific regions are significant, diverse and complex. CAN agencies work with partner churches and agencies in a wide range of ways to address these issues and enhance the experience of women and girls. Continuing gender inequalities work against the values expressed in an approach to development which focuses on human rights and the ethos of Jesus who motivates our engagement. All of our CAN work seeks to realise the elimination of discrimination against women, the inclusion of gender into policy at all levels as well as planning and implementation of all program work, and the active participation of both men and women in achieving gender equality.

The 11 agencies represented in this submission are:

**Act for Peace**  
**Adventist Development & Relief Agency - Australia**  
**Anglican Board of Mission - Australia**  
**Anglican Overseas Aid**  
**Australian Lutheran World Service**  
**Caritas Australia**  
**Global Mission Partners**  
**Quaker Service Australia**  
**The Salvation Army**  
**Transform Aid International / Baptist World Aid Australia**  
**UnitingWorld**

We welcome any opportunity to discuss this submission further.

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## **Achievements in advancing women and girls' human rights in family and sexual violence, women's leadership and economic opportunities**

### **Violence Case Study: Timor Leste Peacebuilding Project – Victim Support Services in Baucau**

Family and sexual violence is a significant barrier to the advancement of human rights of women and girls in Timor Leste. This is exacerbated by the lack of awareness among men in positions of authority, with police and traditional justice leaders mostly men. Caritas Australia Timor Leste (CATL) started working on human rights and violence against women in 1999. A shelter for women and children called *Uma Paz* was created to provide immediate refuge. CATL has been closely involved with the development of the structure, policies and infrastructure of the shelter, as well as training staff. Recognising that women in abusive relationships need economic support, CATL also supports women to set up small-scale economic activities. The linking of the shelter with an NGO providing training in economic issues is relatively unique in Timor-Leste.

In 2012/13, through Caritas Australia's women's shelter program in Timor Leste, a total of 355 women and 12 girls' survivors of violence received services such as counselling, housing and legal assistance as supported by the Australian NGO Cooperation Program. The engagement of men in addressing gender-based violence was also a focus, with 2113 men receiving education their roles in reducing violence against women. As a result, six men's self-help groups were set up to serve as positive role models for other men in the community and behaviour change has been evidenced. The project also led to an increase in the voice of women in the decision making process at village levels, as well as encouraging other women to speak out and participate in community activities. A total of 2466 women were provided with training that enabled them fuller participation in political and other community processes.

#### *Critical success factors*

- Building strong relationships with actors in the church and government meant that Uma Paz was able to access supports and resources, which can be challenging for a new and emerging organization (for example securing of a house and office space; training for staff; linkages to policy makers)
- Ensuring staff have excellent relationships with various communities, local governments and have extensive experience in responding to cases of domestic and sexual violence.
- Deep understanding of Timor Leste's traditional justice system as well as secular law, which ensures that individual human rights remain protected and not misrepresented.

Recommendation

*Approaches that link urgent service provision and economic empowerment for women affected by violence with advocacy and action for attitude change in those holding power in the community are effective in the long term, so long as the implementing organisation has the skills and relationships in place to work at the two levels.*

*Domingas, a participant in Caritas Australia Timor Leste's program who set up her own small business*



## Women's Leadership Case Study: Partnering Pacific Women for Change (PW4C)

UnitingWorld's Partnering Pacific Women for Change program is being implemented in several South Pacific countries to address gender inequality through two main avenues. First UnitingWorld work directly with the Women's Fellowship organisations within partner churches. The Women's Fellowship networks tend to be well structured and organised, spanning the sphere of church leadership to the community level. These networks tend to be the main arena in which women have a voice within the church and community. The women leaders are usually held to account and subsequently employ transparent processes and give clear, regular reporting. Examples of projects initiated by Women's Fellowships include women leading the church in the development of a Gender Policy, and then facilitating community awareness on the implications of the Gender Policy at all levels of the church, community and families (Vanuatu); programs on non-violent parenting and safe families (Kiribati); and programs on livelihoods and economic opportunities (Solomon Islands and PNG).

However, while these networks are integral in serving the church, the women are rarely invited into active participation in the leadership and decision-making of the wider church. Biblical interpretations can and are used to reinforce gender inequality and to restrict women's rights to take action in situations of domestic and family violence. These interpretations can also justify women's exclusion from formal employment, limit women's access to income and inhibit women holding positions of significant responsibility and leadership. The second avenue of UnitingWorld's program is addressing this by developing theological resources that challenge local religious beliefs concerning inequality, discrimination and violence. Rev Dr Cliff Bird, a prominent Pacific theologian is facilitating the production of these resources and will work with church leadership to develop and implement biblically based Gender Equality, Child Protection and Disability Inclusion policies.

### Recommendation

*It is always effective to work through existing institutional structures that are supported by the community (such as women's church fellowships), but women's rights can be further realised in a partnership between two faith-based organisations when advocacy for human rights is done through a biblical lens that will be firstly accepted by the local church leadership, and will then provide both the resources and the impetus to act positively for the rights of women and girls.*



*Women carry stones for the fire in preparation for the Sunday village meal*



## Economic Opportunities Case Study: Youth Engagement and Livelihoods Project (YELP)

There are many barriers to the advancement of human rights of women and female youth in Solomon Islands, including:

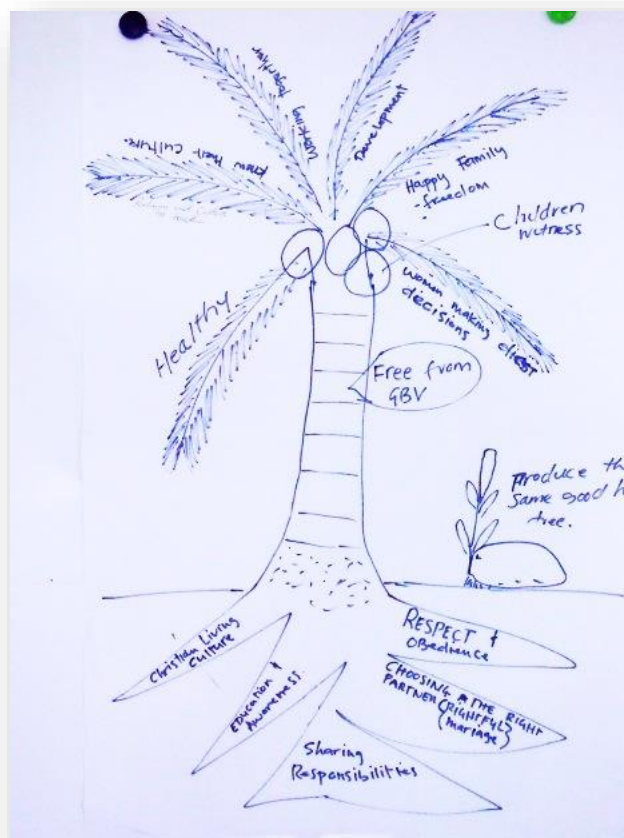
- Low levels of political leadership and resources to deal with implementing action against violence and other breaches of law and order, inversely impacting women and girls in rural areas
- Traditional norms that place greater value on boys and male leadership
- Social status that defines roles, with considerable domestic responsibilities for women and girls, and duties that bring about inequality in educational opportunity, securing jobs, starting businesses, accessing markets and building sustainable livelihoods.
- Geographic isolation that contributes to a lack of external awareness and support for female victims of family and sexual violence
- Inadequate village based skill sets to ensure transparent and sustainable management practices and financial ventures
- Many youth are finding it difficult to deal with modern life and, in particular, the demands of social change and urbanisation. These difficulties, associated with lack of employment opportunities, are expressed through behaviours that range from alcoholism and depression, to violence against others and themselves

The Adventist Development & Relief Agency's Youth Engagement and Livelihoods Project (YELP) is a positive approach to community development, supported by DFAT under the Solomon Islands NGO Partnership Agreement (SINPA) agreement. The project addresses key issues of youth livelihoods and engagement with their communities, utilising a contextualised strengths based approach. Working through 39 rural communities in Northern Malaita and Guadalcanal, the project builds on existing community structures, including church groups. In the past two years over 900 women and female youth have worked with the project, establishing 100 microfinance groups. The project links the microfinance groups with livelihood training and mentoring programs. The project has seen an improvement in how young men are relating to women. So far impact for women is increased access to formal and informal education at all levels, which is ensuring greater opportunity to secure employment or start small businesses.

### Recommendation

*Working with young people can allow easier change in attitudes towards historically fixed cultural views on gender, power and roles for women and men in a community. Helping both male and female young people to have hope for their future through establishing practical livelihood skills builds confidence.*

*Workshops enable women to vision the prosperous, equitable community they would like to see – a paradigm shift from the situations they typically find themselves in.*





## **The effectiveness of Australian programs to support efforts to improve the human rights of women and girls in the Indian Ocean - Asia Pacific region.**

We would like to acknowledge the Australian Government commitment to the 10-year \$320 million initiative to help improve the political, economic and social opportunities of Pacific women. The Australian government has also been a leader in engaging in dialogue with faith-based agencies to implement effective programs to improve the human rights of women and girls. A significant program is the Papua New Guinea Church Partnership Program (CPP). Phase I of the CPP was implemented between 2004-09, and Phase II is being implemented between 2010-16. The CPP is a partnership between seven member agencies of CAN, and seven mainline churches in PNG. Through the church networks the program has a presence in almost every PNG community.

### **Case study: The Road Less Travelled (AACES)**

Anglican Overseas Aid (AOA) is working with the Mothers Union in northern Kenya and the Afar Pastoralist Development Association in north-east Ethiopia on a five year comprehensive mother and child health program. The program has a multi-faceted approach to gender, from targeting improvements in maternal and child mortality through linking the informal and formal health services (currently over 92% of births are at home), to forming community development committees to discuss and understand the roles of men and women in the village (with a view to reducing violence). In addition the project also focuses on initiatives to increase women's health ability to engage in economic activities. These include literacy classes, business training and income generation groups, improved food security and provision of safe water and sanitation.

Anglican Overseas Aid is working in partnership with the Nossal Institute for Global Health and Australian Volunteers International to implement this project, with funding coming from the Australian government. So far during implementation of this project the Afar Pastoralist Development Association has established strong links with government health personnel. Together they have jointly delivered a vaccination program to more than 500 children of nomadic pastoralists in the remote Afar region of Ethiopia. AOA and APDA have now expanded a training program for community members by providing almost 100 health and extension workers, who, over the last 6 month period, helped support 700 safer deliveries, checked 650 women pre and post birth, vaccinated 500 infants, and taught over 2600 Afar youth - young women and girls as well as boys. Work is being done with community leaders particularly around traditional beliefs and practices that are harmful to the health of girls and women. Livelihood activities predominately for women have increased food security and income generation for local community groups. In Kenya, the Mothers Union teams have enabled 8 group committees to be more inclusive of women leaders, and to develop action plans around community priorities such as water access, latrine construction and income generation. Not only have 150 new community health workers have been trained up to promote awareness of health, primarily around women and children's needs, but local nurses have also been trained around cultural issues and community development approaches and church and age-set leaders have a greater knowledge about health and traditional practices that affect women and girls negatively. All staff are aware of gender issues in programming and many are role models around women's participation and empowerment for the community members.

#### Recommendation

*Improving women's access to adequate health services is vital. Sustainable solutions are found through working within local structures to improve women's access to health services particularly around birth. The program, as well as providing support through provision of services where essential, also increases awareness and capacity of local women and communities around women's needs and rights, and provides good role models of women as leaders and educators.*



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*Afar Community Health Worker talking with local women and traditional birth attendants about safe child birth practices.*

## Case Study: Seven CAN agencies - Papua New Guinea Church Partnership Program

Phase II of the DFAT-supported Church Partnership Program (CPP) in Papua New Guinea commenced in 2010. This program was initiated in response to the recognition of the crucial community role that churches play in PNG, and the trust and access they have to the population from political to grassroots level. The churches' extensive service delivery networks, role in education and health training, and legitimacy when speaking on social issues makes it a prime shaper of public opinion and private behaviour in relation to gender. PNG has some of the highest rates of violence against women in the Pacific. In one shelter in Port Moresby, girls under 16 make up 50% of those who seek medical attention after being raped.<sup>6</sup> Education is not a priority for daughters, and women are seldom represented at formal leadership levels or given voice at the community table.

The CPP has acted as a catalyst for churches to begin dialogue on gender. The participating churches jointly authored a 'Theology of Development', which included the statement that: "... there can be no violence, slavery, manipulation, exploitation, nor payback in a humane society. Development should focus on the family as being the foundation of a peaceful and just society." CPP established a program-wide Gender Working Group in 2011. The working group is comprised of women and men from each of the partner churches. This group has coordinated a strengths-based review of gender-related activities within church partners. With support from the CAN agencies participating in the CPP, the working group will oversee the development of a gender strategy for the churches. The program is now building on this Theology of Development, with the participating PNG churches drafting a joint statement on the equality of men and women. This is an important milestone.

Through the CPP most churches have made considerable gains in recognising the issue of gender in their congregations:

- Gender policies have been developed by a majority of churches.
- Formation of Gender Working Groups in remote areas
- Gender-based Violence training provided at all levels of the participating churches
- Increased income and autonomy provided for women through livelihood programs
- Gender mainstreaming projects conducted within formal education systems and through teacher training

### Recommendation

*Working with mainline churches' extensive service delivery networks allows the advancement of human rights for women through established providers of education and health training. The churches also bring legitimacy when speaking on social issues of human rights and gender-based violence.*

*Epe Narengmente encouraging the community at Indagen to send young women to study at a Wokmeri Trening Skul during a visit of church delegates on the 22nd of February 2013. Photo credit to ELC-PNG*



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<sup>6</sup>Childfund 2013 report "Stop Violence again Women and Children in PNG".

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