

HOVER FOR TEMPLATE INSTRUCTIONS

**Australian Red Cross**

**Submission on the Human Rights of Women and Girls in the Pacific**

**July 2020**

## Foreword

Australian Red Cross welcomes the Parliamentary Inquiry into the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific and the opportunity to share insights from the work we support across the Pacific to protect women and girls' humanity, safety, dignity and well-being.

Australian Red Cross is part of the world's largest humanitarian network, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement), which comprises millions of volunteers operating in 192 countries. We have over a century's experience of humanitarian action in disasters and crises and carry out all activities guided by our Fundamental Principles<sup>1</sup>. In the Pacific, the Movement is represented by 14 national societies, who each occupy a unique role among civil society actors in their respective countries as auxiliaries to their public authorities; the sub-regional office of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies in Suva; and the regional delegation in Suva and mission in Papua New Guinea of the International Committee for the Red Cross.

Australian Red Cross and the Australian Government have committed to work together to ensure the safety, dignity and well-being of those in the most vulnerable situations through a series of joint pledges agreed to at the 2019 International Conference of the Red Cross Red Crescent, including the 2020-2023 Pledge on Localisation; 2020-2023 Joint Pledge on Modern Slavery; 2020-2023 Regional Pledge on the Protection of Migrants; 2020-2023 Pledge on the Prevention of and Response to Sexual and Gender Based Violence; and 2020-2023 Domestic Implementation of International Humanitarian Law<sup>2</sup>.

The focus areas of the Australian Government's *Partnerships for Recovery: COVID 19 Development Response* align closely with our humanitarian partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), particularly with respect to enhancing locally-led, inclusive and accountable humanitarian action; recognising the centrality of communities in strengthening health security; and protecting individuals and groups who are most at risk from current and emerging threats, including sexual and gender-based violence – especially women and girls. There is also significant alignment between our humanitarian partnership and DFAT's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, including contributing to strengthened implementation of regional and multilateral frameworks and addressing the challenge to "leave no one behind" through a strong technical and policy focus on protection, gender and inclusion.

In this submission, we recommend that Australian aid to the Pacific prioritises actions to address issues that disproportionately impact women and girls, including actions to prevent, mitigate and respond to sexual and gender-based violence and other key protection concerns; and actions to ensure safe and dignified access to lifesaving sexual and reproductive healthcare for women and girls, particularly during disasters and crises. Further, we recommend that Australia work with Pacific Islands States, Pacific Regional Organisations and local civil society actors to implement commitments regarding women's leadership in disaster preparedness and response and uphold commitments to locally-led humanitarian action by recognising the key role of Pacific civil society organisations, including women-led organisations. Finally, we recommend that Australia commission an independent gender review of existing Pacific investments, particularly Pacific Step Up, to ensure the voices of Pacific women and girls are reflected in these and all future investments, and they benefit substantively from these programs.



Australian Red Cross

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.redcross.org.au/about/fundamental-principles>

<sup>2</sup> <https://rcrconference.org/about/pledges/>

## Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1	Government prioritises actions to increase awareness and address the root causes of SGBV and other protection risks that disproportionately impact women and girls, including during disasters and crises, through investment in initiatives to enhance understanding of these issues at all levels of society; peer engagement with Pacific Islands States to strengthen legislative frameworks; and support to governments and local civil society actors including women-led organisations to design and implement safe and confidential survivor-centred support services.
Recommendation 2	Government prioritises and increases investment in safe and dignified access to life-saving sexual and reproductive healthcare for women and girls, including during disasters and crises, in partnership with Pacific Islands States and local CSOs and service providers.
Recommendation 3	Government supports Pacific Islands States' commitments to increase women's representation and leadership, particularly in the context of disaster preparedness and response, including through support to women-led organisations and the elevation of women's participation and voice in disaster management policy and planning platforms at sub-national, national and regional levels.
Recommendation 4	Government encourages and embeds support for locally-led approaches and mutual partnership in its engagement with Pacific civil society actors, including funding and support to women-led organisations.
Recommendation 5	Government commissions an independent gender review of its existing Pacific investments, particularly Pacific Step Up, and ensures that Pacific gender specialists and women-led civil society groups are engaged to advise on all future investments.

## Submission

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

#### *Sexual and gender-based violence*

Women and girls' ability to live safe, dignified lives, where they can reach their full potential is significantly impeded by gender inequality. One of the most egregious forms of gender inequality, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), is highly prevalent across the Pacific. Around 60-80% of women and girls have experienced violence from a past or current partner - amongst the highest rates in the world<sup>3</sup>. The impact of violence and abuse on women and girls and their families can be life threatening and has long-lasting health, psychological, social and economic impacts. The risk of harm for women and girls, as well as persons of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE), increases during and after disasters and crises, including forms of abuse such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, early marriage and trafficking<sup>4</sup>.

Red Cross national societies throughout the Pacific work in partnership with other civil society organisations (CSOs) and government authorities at national and local levels to address the heightened risks of SGBV in disasters and crises. Through its Disaster Law program<sup>5</sup>, Red Cross works to ensure disaster-related laws and policies better include and protect those most at risk of disasters, including consideration of the needs of SGBV survivors during disasters and crises in national and local legislative frameworks and referral systems.

In response to the increased risks of SGBV during the COVID 19 pandemic, Red Cross volunteer networks across the region, including in Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu who have had to deal with the compounding impacts of Tropical Cyclone Harold, have been distributing information and awareness on SGBV prevention and response, key protection messages, where to seek support, and directing referrals to local CSOs and government services.

The role of CSOs, including women-led organisations, youth groups, disability people's organisations, and networks of people of diverse SOGIE is critical to effective SGBV prevention and response strategies. Pacific CSOs as well as local community groups, faith groups, and local service providers work directly with those most impacted by violence to provide education and awareness raising, referral to, and direct provision of, critical and lifesaving services. Their knowledge, expertise and skills are vital to informing effective policy and culturally appropriate solutions for primary prevention and response work.

Whilst there has been progress across the Pacific in increasing public awareness about SGBV and recent positive changes to legislation and policy<sup>6</sup>, there is a need for ongoing investment in understanding and addressing the root causes of this pervasive issue as well as increased investment in strengthening the quality of and access to safe and confidential services for survivors of violence, including legal/justice, health and psychosocial support services, particularly at sub-national levels.

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<sup>3</sup> UNFPA/Pacific SRO. A Transformative Agenda for Women, Adolescents and Youth in the Pacific: Towards Zero Unmet Need for Family Planning 2018- 2022 pg 22-23. <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/knowvawdata>

<sup>4</sup> IFRC. 2018. Responsibility to Protect from Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Emergencies. [https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/07/17072018-SGBV-Report\\_Final.pdf.pdf](https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/07/17072018-SGBV-Report_Final.pdf.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ifrc.org/what-we-do/idrl/about-idrl/>

<sup>6</sup> DFAT. 2019. Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Final Evaluation Report, p.34-43, 54-63. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/evawg-final-report-nov-19.pdf>

Australia has committed to work in partnership with Pacific Islands States, the Movement and communities to prevent, mitigate and respond to SGBV in disasters<sup>7</sup>. This includes actions to ensure national disaster laws and disaster preparedness and planning comprise actions to address SGBV; to promote women's leadership in disaster preparedness and response including in local disaster management committees; and to collect and analyse sex-age-disability disaggregated data in humanitarian response to inform evidence-based decision-making and programming<sup>8</sup>.

### ***Other protection<sup>9</sup> issues***

Conflict, climate-related disasters, climate-induced displacement and labour migration are increasing drivers of other protection issues impacting women and girls, particularly human trafficking and modern slavery. Cooperation between civil society and government is critical to prevention and response: governments can play a key convening role in bringing together their institutions and civil society actors, including women-led organisations, to share information and good practice and to find local, culturally-appropriate solutions for prevention and response.

Australian Red Cross encourages the Government to continue to build upon existing efforts to support Pacific Islands States to respond to human trafficking and modern slavery and the humanitarian impacts of displacement exacerbated by disasters and climate change through policy engagement, research and strategic discussions<sup>10</sup>. We encourage the Government to be guided by the protection needs identified by local CSOs through fostering peer-to-peer engagement between governments and civil society, particularly women-led organisations. This would strengthen protection frameworks across the region, ensure measures are in place to prevent the risks of trafficking and other forms of violence and abuse and enable survivors to access essential support services<sup>11</sup>.

Enhanced engagement, informed by CSO's, will assist Australia to continue to play a leadership role regionally by recognising protection risks, such as SGBV, trafficking and modern slavery, and investing in programs to address their impact on women and girls' safety, dignity and well-being in partnership with Pacific Islands States, Pacific Regional Organisations and Pacific civil society actors, including women-led organisations.

***Recommendation 1: Government prioritises actions to increase awareness and address the root causes of SGBV and other protection risks that disproportionately impact women and girls, including during disasters and crises, through investment in initiatives to enhance understanding of these issues at all levels of society; peer engagement with Pacific Islands States to strengthen legislative frameworks; and support to governments and local civil society actors including women-led organisations to design and implement safe and confidential survivor-centred support services.***

### ***Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare for women and girls***

Australia is a strong advocate for the need to support female sexual and reproductive healthcare (SRH), including during disasters and crises. This commitment must continue to be reflected in Australia's aid investment in the Pacific region and funding for life-saving services prioritised. Access to healthcare is central to women and girls' safety, dignity and well-being and directly impacts their capacity to reach their

<sup>7</sup> International Conference. 2015. Joint Action to Prevent and Respond to SGBV in Emergencies. Resolution 32IC/15/R3

<sup>8</sup> Joint ledge by Australia and Australian Red Cross. 2020-2013. Action to SGBV in Emergencies.

<sup>9</sup> Protection includes 'all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law, and refugee law. In practice this means doing no harm and ensuring the safety, dignity and well-being of all persons in disasters and crises. See e.g. Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action (2015), SPHERE Protection Principles, ICRC Professional Standards for Protection Work. 2018. IFRC Minimum Standard on Protection, Gender and Inclusion in Emergencies. 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Pledge by Australia and Australian Red Cross, Protection of Migrants Pledge No:SP330249.

<https://rcrcconference.org/pledge/protection-of-migrants/>

<sup>11</sup> Australian Red Cross. 2020. Submission in response to Australia's International Strategy on Trafficking and Modern Slavery

potential, contribute to their communities, work, attend school and participate fully in civil, political, economic, social and cultural life.

Despite progress, evidence indicates that access to healthcare remains a barrier to ensuring equality for women and girls. Of the 14 Pacific Islands Countries and Territories for which contraceptive prevalence data is available, most are under 30%. Six have a growing total fertility rate, while 10 are now experiencing increasing adolescent birth rates, contrary to decreasing global trends<sup>12</sup>. While there has been a reduction in maternal mortality across the Pacific region, Papua New Guinea continues to experience high rates of maternal mortality, due in part to low antenatal care and low coverage of skilled birth attendance<sup>13</sup>. These statistics demonstrate the importance of maintaining core funding to healthcare across the Pacific and ensuring a targeted and contextualised approach within the region.

During disasters and crises, women and girls' access to critical and lifesaving SRH can be interrupted and their needs often overlooked or de-prioritised. Research by Vanuatu Red Cross (2020) found that women and girls experience challenges managing their menstruation in a safe and dignified manner in disaster and displacement contexts. These challenges are compounded by discriminatory gender norms, societal taboos, secrecy and embarrassment around menstruation<sup>14</sup>.

Engaging with women and girls about solutions that ensure their healthcare is maintained during emergencies, and that they have a key role in decision making is essential and ultimately leads to better health gains for the whole community. As part of the Vanuatu study a consultative and solution driven dialogue with women and girls led to changes in the way in which the national water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) cluster addresses menstrual hygiene in emergencies to increase the dignity and access for women and girls and other community members, and ensure access to sanitary products that are culturally appropriate<sup>15</sup>.

Safe and dignified access to healthcare, including SRH, for women and girls should continue to be a central focus of Australia's aid investment in the Pacific. The economic, social, development and gender equality gains that Australia seeks to support cannot be achieved without it. This should include a focus on maintaining access to SRH during emergencies, engaging with women and girls on their specific needs, and ensuring they have a lead role in the design and delivery of health and WASH programs.

***Recommendation 2: Government prioritises and increases investment in safe and dignified access to life-saving SRH for women and girls, including during disasters and crises, in partnership with Pacific Islands States and local CSOs and service providers.***

### ***Promoting women's leadership***

Pacific Islands States have committed to ensuring women are able to participate equally with men in political and public life, without discrimination, including taking on leadership roles in government and civil society and contributing to the country's public and political life<sup>16</sup>. However, the percentage of women in Pacific parliaments is very low - between 0-20 percent - and around 8 percent overall for small Pacific

<sup>12</sup> UNFPA/Pacific SRO. A Transformative Agenda for Women, Adolescents and Youth in the Pacific: Towards Zero Unmet Need for Family Planning 2018- 2022, p 14-19; State of World Population 2019

<sup>13</sup> OECD/WHO (2018), Health at a Glance: Asia/Pacific 2018: Measuring Progress towards Universal Health Coverage, OECD Publishing, Paris, p 49

<sup>14</sup> VRC, ARC, JCU. 2020. *Menstrual Hygiene Management Research in Vanuatu* and Pacific Women, 'The Last Taboo: Research on Managing Menstrual Hygiene in the Pacific' <https://pacificwomen.org/research/the-last-taboo-research-on-managing-menstruation-in-the-pacific/A>

<sup>15</sup> Vanuatu Red Cross, Australian Red Cross, James Cook University. 2020. *Menstrual Hygiene Management Research in Vanuatu*

<sup>16</sup> See i.e. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) common article 3; and, Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); 2012 Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration commitment "Adopt measures, including temporary special measures to accelerate women's full and equal participation in governance reform at all levels and women's leadership in decision making."



Islands States<sup>17</sup>. Beyond disparity in political representation, research indicates gender inequality in educational attainment across the Pacific also negatively impacts potential human development<sup>18</sup>.

The result of this disparity is limited input from women in disaster preparedness and response in one of the world's most disaster-prone regions. Because disasters impact women and girls differently to men and boys, the voices of women and girls are critical to effective disaster preparedness and response. This extends to drawing on their experiences, resilience, resources and knowledge. Women and girls have specific health and hygiene needs during disasters, are often first responders and have important knowledge about the needs of their community. They also take on an additional burden during disasters, due to primary responsibilities as caregivers for children, the elderly or sick, together with cooking and household work. Given these specific needs and capacities it is critical that investment in disaster risk management includes ensuring the full participation of women, girls and persons of diverse SOGIE in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in coordination with national disaster management authorities.

To address the challenges of disasters and climate change, Pacific Islands States have endorsed the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP)<sup>19</sup>, and the Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration<sup>20</sup> that promotes a people-centred and locally-led approach to disaster preparedness and response. The FRDP acknowledges that resilience to disasters starts with empowering all persons within communities, particularly women and girls, rather than only those traditionally or culturally charged with leadership responsibilities. Australia has committed to supporting Pacific Islands States to implement the FRDP, and, through the Sendai framework, to enhance women's leadership in disaster risk reduction by endorsing the role of civil society and communities. The implementation of these commitments includes ensuring the equitable participation of women in disaster risk management system governance bodies and management committees and strengthening capacity in all aspects of disaster management, including through gender-sensitive disaster preparedness and response plans<sup>21</sup>. This includes supporting local initiatives that support women's leadership in climate action<sup>22</sup>.

These commitments have added resonance as the world responds to the COVID 19 pandemic. Like all disasters, this pandemic has significant gender implications<sup>23</sup>. Pacific women join women the world over in being at the front line of the response. Women make up the majority of health workers, and women and girls are often primary carers and responsible for household water and sanitation<sup>24</sup>. As noted above, the risk of harm for women and girls, as well as persons of diverse SOGIE, increases during and after disasters and crises<sup>25</sup> and COVID-19 is no different. Women of the Pacific will be impacted significantly by the economic downturn given their over-representation in sectors and jobs such as retail, hospitality and tourism<sup>26</sup>. Pacific women have a vital role to play in the economic and social recovery of their countries; it is imperative that they are included in leadership roles when responses to the pandemic are being developed

<sup>17</sup> Women's representation in National Parliament. Pacific. 2019 data <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>

<sup>18</sup> UNDP. 2018. Pacific Country Gender Equality Index and Human Development Indicators

<sup>19</sup> FRDP Guidelines for the Pacific. 2017-2030. [http://gsd.spc.int/frdp/assets/FRDP\\_2016\\_Resilient\\_Dev\\_pacific.pdf](http://gsd.spc.int/frdp/assets/FRDP_2016_Resilient_Dev_pacific.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Pacific Islands Forum. 2012. Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration [http://pilonsec.org/images/stories/PLGED\\_intros.pdf](http://pilonsec.org/images/stories/PLGED_intros.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Sendai Framework for Action. 2015-2030; 2020-2023 ARC and DFAT Joint Pledge Addressing SGBV in Emergencies; International Conference. 2015. Joint Action to Prevent and Respond to SGBV in Emergencies, Resolution 32IC/15/R3

<sup>22</sup> For example women's early warning early action "Women's Weather Watch" <https://www.sprep.org/news/womens-leadership-helping-rural-and-remote-communities-access-early-warning-and-disaster-information>

<sup>23</sup> CARE. 2020. Pacific Rapid Gender Analysis. <https://www.care.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pacific-RGA-FINAL-APPROVED-26March2020.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Gibson and Tyrrel. 2020. COVID-19 Three ways to support women and girls in humanitarian settings. Dev Policy Blog: <https://devpolicy.org/covid-19-three-ways-to-support-women-girls-and-vulnerable-groups-in-humanitarian-settings-20200508-1/>

<sup>25</sup> IFRC. 2018. Responsibility to Protect from Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Emergencies. [https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/07/17072018-SGBV-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/07/17072018-SGBV-Report_Final.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> DFAT Joint Statement. 2020. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/news/media-release/joint-statement-co-convenors-meeting-pacific-women-leaders-australian-foreign-minister-and-minister-women-marise-payne-and-samoan-deputy-prime-minister-and-minister-natural-resources-and-environment-fiame-naomi-mataafa>

and that the pandemic response considers the specific needs and capacities of women and girls<sup>27</sup>. Australia also has obligations to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions<sup>28</sup>.

***Recommendation 3: Government supports Pacific Islands States' commitments to increase women's representation and leadership, particularly in the context of disaster preparedness and response, through support to women-led organisations and the elevation of women's participation and voice in disaster management policy and planning platforms at sub-national, national and regional levels.***

## **TORs (2) The key figures and groups which advance the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific context and (3) Engagement of these groups in Australia's Pacific Step up**

### ***Critical role of local actors***

Local actors are usually the first to respond in a disaster and the last to remain as part of recovery efforts. At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, States and the global humanitarian community committed to implementing the localisation agenda in humanitarian action. Subsequently, at the 2019 International Conference, Australia pledged to work together with the Red Cross to strengthen locally-led humanitarian action in the Pacific through strong advocacy and leadership and to identify and reduce barriers to localised humanitarian action, with a specific focus on: financing; reporting; capacity strengthening; coordination; and partnerships<sup>29</sup>. Hence, a key priority for Australia's future aid investment must be an increased focus on strengthening capacity of local actors including women-led organisations.

Australian Red Cross research 'Going Local'<sup>30</sup> (2017) acknowledged the need for fundamental reform in partnerships and relationships at individual, organisational and systemic levels in the Pacific to truly implement locally-led humanitarian action. It identified ongoing frustration from Pacific partners at the lack of trust in local ownership and voice, including those of women. The research highlighted there is still significant work to be done by governments and humanitarian organisations if commitments towards localisation are to be realised.

Further research on 'Protection in Local Response to Disasters'<sup>31</sup> (2018) conducted by Australian Red Cross in partnership with Humanitarian Reference Group and Humanitarian Advisory Group on protection in Pacific responses to disasters highlighted the challenges and tensions between the role of international and local actors in the Pacific, and endorsed the principle of 'as local as possible, as international as necessary'. Discussions with local authorities, community groups and civil society in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Tonga highlighted the importance of supporting a localised approach to protection and gender equality that seeks to endorse the role of local actors, with complementary support from international actors to strengthen capacity and contextualise standards. The research findings recommended international actors link with/support local protection actors to engage with and access humanitarian systems and funding opportunities and provide support in mutually identified areas such as advocacy and accountability.

The Australian Government has significant influence in the Pacific to take the localisation agenda forward. As a first step, Red Cross encourages the Government to embed locally-led humanitarian action and mutual

<sup>27</sup> IFRC. 2020. Protection, Gender and Inclusion Guidance in COVID-19 <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/document/covid-19-protection-gender-inclusion-considerations-key-messages-groups/>

<sup>28</sup> UN Security Council Resolution. 1325. S/RES/1325 (2000)

<sup>29</sup> Australian Red Cross and Australian Government, Strengthening locally-led humanitarian action with a focus on the Pacific.

<sup>30</sup> Australian Red Cross. 2017. Going Local: Achieving a more appropriate and fit-for-purpose humanitarian ecosystem in the Pacific. <https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/fa37f8eb-51e7-4ecd-ba2f-d1587574d6d5/ARC-Localisation-report-Electronic301017.pdf.aspx>

<sup>31</sup> ARC, HAG and HPC. 2018. Protection in Local Response to Disasters: Reflections and Insights from the Pacific region <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12450.pdf>



partnerships as fundamental objectives in all of its programs. Power imbalances, which continue to undermine the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific, can be addressed by supporting local women's organisations and initiatives that foster women leaders at all levels of decision making. It is important that funding mechanisms and opportunities are structured to enable and encourage local organisations, in particular those focused on women and girls, to access and receive international humanitarian funding without having to compete with international actors. Government is also well-placed to require that partner multilateral organisations act similarly.

Support to local CSOs and human rights organisations that are women-led and represent diverse and marginalised groups is central to advancing the safety, dignity and well-being of women and girls and building disaster-resilient communities. For example, in the response to Tropical Cyclone Harold in Vanuatu, prior investment in civil society and government capability following Tropical Cyclone Pam resulted in disability representation and Rainbow Coalition participation in very early assessment missions, supporting effective inclusion. In the same period, Vanuatu Red Cross also invested in increasing their geographic coverage through volunteer training in protection, gender and inclusion and establishing networks with local civil society. Consequently, it was able to mobilise very quickly for an effective community-based response when Tropical Cyclone Harold hit.

Australian civil society actors have strong capacity to play a role in working with and alongside the Government in addressing complex humanitarian issues. Foreign policy settings can support and facilitate this approach, which will resonate strongly with our Pacific neighbours, where CSOs play a fundamental role in delivering on crucial development goals that involve behaviour change (e.g. gender equality or inclusion of people with a disability). Government can facilitate peer to peer learnings between governments as an effective way of capacity strengthening and showcasing good practice in engagement with CSOs.

***Recommendation 4: Government encourages and embeds support for locally-led approaches and mutual partnership in its engagement with Pacific civil society actors, including funding and support to local women's groups.***

#### **ToR 4. The effectiveness of Australian overseas development assistance programs in supporting human rights of women and girls**

Over decades, Australia has played a key leadership role in promoting gender equality and prevention and response to violence against women and girls through its foreign policy and aid program. Building on DFAT's 2017 White Paper and Aid Policy focus on stepping up efforts to support a more resilient Pacific and endorse the empowerment of women as a top priority, noting that gender inequality undermines global prosperity, stability and security<sup>32</sup>, the Government's *Partnerships for Recovery: COVID 19 Development Response* recognises the centrality of communities in strengthening health security and the importance of protecting those who are most at risk from current and emerging threats, especially women and girls<sup>33</sup>. DFAT's Gender and Women's Empowerment strategy is also well targeted to respond to the human rights issues facing women and girls in the Pacific, including: women's voice in decision making, leadership and peace-building; women's economic empowerment; and ending violence against women and girls<sup>34</sup>.

#### **'Pacific Step Up'**

There is an opportunity for the Government to ensure that Pacific women and girls benefit more substantively and directly from this program, including by firstly undertaking a thorough gender assessment

<sup>32</sup> DFAT. 2017. Foreign Policy White Paper; DFAT Aid Investment Policy

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/aid/partnerships-recovery-australias-covid-19-development-response>

<sup>34</sup> DFAT. 2016. Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

of the current and new components of Pacific Step Up; and secondly, ensuring that Pacific gender specialists and women-led civil society groups are engaged to provide advice on future gender equality investments. Some key areas of Pacific Step Up where women and girls' voices could be strengthened include:

*Disasters and Climate Change:* As noted above, Australia can support the FRDP by endorsing commitments by Pacific Islands States regarding increasing women's leadership in disaster risk reduction through supporting local actors to undertake research and analysis of the gendered impacts of disasters and climate change to inform local solutions, including influencing national strategies and legislative frameworks.

*Infrastructure and Settlements:* The Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) is another key component of the Pacific Step Up. It is important the AIFFP is not gender neutral and potential gendered impacts are taken into account at all stages of infrastructure project development<sup>35</sup>. There is an opportunity for Australia to contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment through the Facility as well as mitigating against potentially harmful or negative consequences (such as perpetuating existing gender inequality), but this needs to be part of the framework, analysis, development, implementation and monitoring of projects. Government is encouraged to ensure participation and promote leadership of women alongside a wider gender lens across the Facility, which will require close engagement with relevant local CSOs including women's groups. It will be important to understand the specific needs of Pacific women and girls in determining infrastructure investments, which will open up economic pathways to women's empowerment and support gender equality and basic human rights<sup>36</sup>.

*Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme:* The Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) and its supporting Facility provides an opportunity to consider the gendered impact of migration for seasonal workers and families left behind. The PLS could be strengthened to mitigate negative risks for women and promote their skills development, education and economic opportunities. There is also an opportunity to consult with Pacific seasonal workers in Australia regarding leadership opportunities or supplementary training and development they receive linked to their workplace, and on return home. A positive example of skills development through migration was the initiative to train Kiribati nurses in Australia, which helped to build women's capacity and leadership skills while also contributing to the Government of Kiribati efforts to diversify its remittance base through emigration of skilled people accessing the global nursing market<sup>37</sup>.

*Women Peace and Security:* The Pacific Step Up has a focus on promoting security within the region. Australia has been a strong advocate for the women, peace and security agenda including through a National Action Plan that spans Australia's domestic and international agenda. This recognises the important role women play in peace processes, and the specific gendered impacts of conflict, including women and girls as victims/survivors of sexual violence<sup>38</sup>. Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Islands States have committed to address human security as part of the Boe Declaration<sup>39</sup> and Australia and Pacific Islands States have also made commitments under international humanitarian law that underscore measures for the protection of civilians in armed conflict. During armed conflict at any time and in any place, there is a prohibition of sexual violence as a form of violence to life and person, an outrage on personal dignity, and form of degrading treatment<sup>40</sup>. In the Pacific region, women and women-led organisations have played a central role in peace processes in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands. There is an opportunity for Australia to increase investment in the women peace and security agenda in the

<sup>35</sup> IWDA. Making Infrastructure work for Gender Equality [https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/IWDA-Policy-Brief\\_Making-infrastructure-work-for-gender-equality\\_Februar....pdf](https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/IWDA-Policy-Brief_Making-infrastructure-work-for-gender-equality_Februar....pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Dev Policy. 2019. Making the AIFFP work for gender equality <https://devpolicy.org/making-the-aiffp-count-20190708/>

<sup>37</sup> DFAT. 2014. Kiribati Australian Nursing Initiative, Independent Review <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/kiribati-australia-nursing-initiative-independent-review>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/office-women/australias-next-national-action-plan-women-peace-and-security>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>

<sup>40</sup> Geneva Conventions (1-IV) art 3 (1) (a) (c); Additional Protocol I, art 75 2 Additional Protocol II, art 4.

Pacific region through endorsing the States' commitments and supporting women's civil society groups, including supporting women's meaningful engagement and leadership within the security sector.

***Recommendation 5: Government commissions an independent gender review of its existing Pacific investments, particularly Pacific Step Up, and ensures that Pacific gender specialists and women-led civil society groups are engaged to advise on all future investments.***