



SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY
INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS
OF WOMEN AND GIRLS
IN THE PACIFIC

JULY 2020

Just as women across the globe, including in Australia, continue to advocate for their human rights, women in the Pacific are also striving to have their rights recognised and voices heard.

The need to advocate for the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific was broadly recognised by Pacific leaders at the August 2012 meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum. At this meeting, Pacific leaders recognised that despite some progress, including in girls' education, overall advances in gender equality have been slow.¹ In particular, the Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration² acknowledged that formal women's representation in the political sphere is extremely low, rates of violence against women are high and that opportunities for women's economic opportunities are limited. In this declaration, Pacific leaders also directly acknowledged the high 'personal, social and economic cost' of gender inequality in the Pacific and that improved gender equality would make 'a significant contribution to creating a prosperous, stable and secure Pacific'.³

Australia shares the vision of change reflected in the 2012 Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration.

Cardno is a long-term development partner of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and its predecessor agencies. Over the last two decades, Cardno has delivered over 90 Australian Government-funded aid programs in 20 countries in the Indo-Pacific region. These programs currently include the Women's Leadership Initiative and a significant component of Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*), including the Fiji Women's Fund, Balance of Power and Pacific Girl initiatives.

This submission reflects key lessons learned by Cardno through this work as to the most effective approaches for promoting the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific. It is critical for Australia's engagement and investments going forward to be based on the evidence and lessons learned from these experiences.

Lessons learned on the most effective approaches to promote gender equality in the Pacific

1. The promotion of women and girls' human rights in the Pacific must be locally led

The actors best able to navigate the complex cultural, political, economic and social context in each Pacific Island country in order to promote

genuine change are those from and fully immersed in those contexts. Local actors have the deep contextual knowledge, relationships and networks necessary to identify entry points for change.⁴ Likewise, they have the legitimacy to exploit those entry points; legitimacy that can rarely be achieved by external actors.⁵ As in many parts of the world, gender is a deeply cultural concept in the Pacific. Any challenge to gender norms by outsiders can provoke strong feelings related to cultural, social and national identity, creating barriers to perceived 'foreigners' or 'foreign organisations' attempting to impose their views.

This means that it is essential for Australia to support **local actors** in the Pacific to '**set and drive**' the agenda.⁶ A growing number of Australian-funded programs are demonstrating the efficacy of this approach, which is consistent with the principles of partnership emphasised in the Pacific Step Up and Australia's new development policy, Partnerships for Recovery.

Unfortunately, it is still uncommon for Australian development programs to be locally led, although DFAT is in the process of initiating a 'localisation agenda', which Cardno fully supports. In our experience, many initiatives do not sufficiently value local contextual knowledge, stakeholder engagement and related skills within their senior management. More often, at the leadership level, program management functions, such as financial management and procurement, are prioritised and typically filled by 'international' experts. While these functions are fundamental to protecting Australian taxpayer funds (including from fraud risks and upholding safeguards, such as child protection), local contextual knowledge and associated skills are also essential for achieving desired program outcomes and realising value for money from Australian aid spend. Sometimes, local personnel are put in leadership roles and valued for their contextual knowledge and relationships, but then penalised for not having perfect written English or knowing how to submit reports to DFAT in exactly the right format.

Accordingly, there is a role for donors and contractors to establish management structures that value contextually-specific strategic thinking, relationships and dialogue, while also ensuring personnel, procurement and other requirements are met. In other words, if we want Australia's development initiatives to be locally-led, we need to deliberately create enabling environments and build teams that can make this happen.

¹ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, (2012), 'Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration', Forum communiqué, 43rd Pacific Islands Forum, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 28- 30 August

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ Developmental Leadership Program, 'The Bigger Picture. Gender and Politics in Practice', February 2018, pp 4-7 <https://res.cloudinary.com/dlprog/image/upload/OhaeavMcDNAPXBJxsfRdEiSpKQCfO6Xu6OWRhaz.pdf>

⁵ *ibid*, p4

⁶ *ibid*, p4

The *Pacific Women* program (see Box 1), for example, one of the largest gender equality initiatives in the world, uses a co-leadership model in its Support Unit which recognises the value of local leadership and embodies the spirit of partnership between Australia and the Pacific. Tara Chetty, a Fijian woman, is the Co-Lead for Partnerships. Her focus is on building relationships and networks with women leaders and stakeholders in the 14 Pacific Island Countries with which the program works. She has many years' experience working with women's rights organisations in the Pacific and thus brings a depth of understanding, credibility, relationships and networks. Leonie Whyte, an Australian woman, is the Co-Lead for Programs. Her focus is on ensuring that the program is effective in terms of planning, budgeting, financial management, risk management, monitoring and reporting. She brings many years' experience in managing Australian development programs in the region. Together they bring the perfect blend of leadership and skills needed to steer Australia's most significant investment in gender equality in the region.

The Balance of Power program (see Box 2) was deliberately designed by DFAT to be locally led, given the inherent socio-cultural complexity of progressing gender norm change in the Pacific. Cardno supported the establishment of the program, beginning with an intentionally non-conventional recruitment strategy, specifically designed to test for the deep motivation and political intelligence needed to drive social change. Once the team was in place, it was critical to ensure that they were supported by a range of technical personnel who could help them translate their vision into practice and support them meet donor accountability requirements. Technical personnel included international, short-term staff to draft plans and reports, develop monitoring frameworks and establish financial management

Box 1 *Pacific Women*

Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*) is the largest and most far-reaching investment in addressing gender inequality in the Pacific region. *Pacific Women* supports 171 gender equality initiatives implemented by 164 partners across the 14 supported countries. Implementing partners include recipient country governments, multilateral organisations, international and national non-government organisations and civil society organisations. *Pacific Women* assists women's groups across the Pacific to plan and implement gender equality activities that are simply not possible without Australian assistance.

Pacific Women focuses on four outcomes:

- Women and women's interests, are increasingly and effectively represented and visible through leadership at all levels of decision making.
- Women have expanded economic opportunities to earn an income and accumulate economic assets.
- Violence against women is reduced and survivors of violence have access to support services and to justice.
- Women in the Pacific will have a stronger sense of their own agency, supported by a changing legal and social environment and through increased access to the services they need.

Cardno is contracted by DFAT to deliver a strategic, consistent and coherent gender equality portfolio of activities. Cardno's Support Unit, based in Suva with a sub-office in Port Moresby, designs and implements technical approaches for each of *Pacific Women's* outcomes, promotes knowledge sharing, provides convening support and managing risk through stakeholder engagement.

www.pacificwomen.org

Box 2 *Balance of Power*

Balance of Power (BOP) is a stand-alone program supported by Cardno within the *Pacific Women* portfolio of initiatives. BOP's aim is to enhance the legitimacy of women's leadership through social norm change, contributing to a 'better balance' in women's and men's leadership roles and opportunities.

Building on significant research and lessons learned on promoting gender equality in the Pacific, BOP takes an innovative approach to supporting Pacific Island countries achieve their stated objectives of inclusive and effective leadership. The investment interrogates the deeply entrenched social norms that define and legitimise leadership – across multiple spaces and institutions. It is led and managed by highly skilled Pacific Islanders, acknowledging that social norm change is best articulated and driven by local actors. The investment takes a 'thinking and working politically' approach, which among other things, seeks to convene and understand the interests of, diverse stakeholders, with a focus on influencing and incentivising power-holders and norm-changers. The program is a multi-country investment, with implementation of the program tailored to each country context.

BOP aligns with Australia's foreign policy pursuit of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, as well as a demonstration of Australia's desire to deepen and nuance its engagement with Pacific Island countries through the 'Step-up' agenda. BOP has reframed its aims to explicitly respond to the new COVID-19 global reality and associated national and regional policy settings, with a specific focus on increasing recognition of the legitimacy and broad-based value of women's leadership in crisis management.

procedures. As such, the team has a mix of local and international personnel, but the **leadership team is wholly local – they drive the program** and make the decisions, with the support of others as needed.

This distinction is crucial. Already, Balance of Power is seen and accepted as a local initiative, driven by well-known and respected individuals from the local community. It is not perceived as a donor-driven, foreign ‘intervention’. This is particularly important in the case of gender programming, given the complexity of promoting norm change on issues that are so deeply, culturally entrenched.

The Fiji Women’s Fund (see Box 3) is another example of the promotion of local leadership. The purpose of a ‘women’s fund’ is to raise funds for distribution to women’s organisations and movements, many operating at the grassroots level. The Fiji Women’s Fund was developed under the umbrella of *Pacific Women* but has been designed to become a wholly independent, non-for-profit entity registered in Fiji. While the Fund draws on the knowledge and experience of women’s funds from around the world, it is led by Fijian women and fully geared towards local ownership, including its governance structures, management processes, communications and visibility.

2. An ‘ecosystems’ approach is required to change gender norms in the Pacific

The ultimate goal of all gender programming is changing negative social and cultural gender norms such that women and girls may fully enjoy their human rights, whether that be the right to education, the right to work or the right to life. The key question is how norm change can be achieved. Based on our experience in the Pacific, the most effective approach entails:

- facilitating an ‘ecosystems’ approach whereby broad-based networks of alliances and influencers are established
- reinforcing the ‘ecosystem’ by supporting a ‘learning culture’ in which reflection and the sharing of learnings between actors and countries are encouraged.

An ecosystems approach recognises that there is no single body, organisation or individual that can alter gender norms on its own. Rather, a whole array of actors, working at all levels (from the community to the national level, within both formal and informal institutions) is required. An ecosystems approach is achieved where diverse, locally legitimate actors employ fluid approaches, constantly assess the environment for entry points and adapt accordingly. In many cases, local women’s movements and organisations have worked to build ecosystems to drive change over decades, such as for the enactment of domestic violence legislation, the right to vote or equal pay. This has been done through forming alliances wherever possible, including with churches, businesses, governments and influential individuals.

Donors have a role to play in facilitating an ‘ecosystems’ approach by supporting a diverse range of partners in ways that enable flexible adaptation so that opportunities can be leveraged as they arise. *Pacific Women* supports 164 partners across the Pacific including governments, civil society organisations, churches and private sector organisations. It also engages with a wide range of other actors, including regional organisations, the United Nations, academia and women’s movements. Given this breadth and the duration of Australia’s commitment (10 years from 2012), *Pacific Women* has been able to help shape this ecosystem and, in some instances, strengthen the collective power,

Box 3 Fiji Women’s Fund

The Fiji Women’s Fund is a stand-alone initiative designed to establish an independent local entity that provides funding and support to local women’s groups, organisations and networks throughout Fiji to contribute towards the transformation of gender equality norms.

Outcomes to be achieved by the end of the program in 2022 are:

- Women’s groups, organisations, or networks supported by the Fund are empowered and have improved capacity (knowledge, skills, resources and relationships) to contribute to transformative change that improves women’s lives.
- Women’s groups, organisations, or networks supported by the Fund are more influential at different levels (individual / systemic and formal / informal) and are contributing to transformative change in women’s lives.
- The Fund has transitioned to an independent local entity and has secured funding from donors, private sector and local philanthropy.

The Fund contributes to the Fiji Government’s key strategies that promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Fiji, including the National Women’s Plan of Action and the Pacific Leaders’ Gender Equality Declaration (2012) and Sustainable Development Goals 2030.

www.fijiwomensfund

influence and leadership of its actors. The Balance of Power program consciously seeks to **build on intrinsic momentum for reform** by establishing strategic relationships with local partners who are motivated, or can be incentivised, to drive change. The Fiji Women's Fund also plays a pivotal role of 'connector' to encourage and contribute towards building an ecosystem that includes its diverse partners, government agencies, regional institutions and academia.

Likewise, donors can play an important role in facilitating the development of a learning culture and convening actors across social and national divides to share knowledge, lessons, approaches and success stories. Encouraging and supporting a learning culture, with regular reflection, review and changes in direction where needed, is essential in an area as complex as the changing of social norms. *Pacific Women* has had some notable successes in this regard. For example, the *Pacific Women* 2019 Annual Learning Workshop in PNG brought together almost 300 people from over 100 organisations (including partners, Government authorities, NGOs and academic institutions) to share research findings, outcomes, tools and approaches. No other gender equality event in the Pacific brings together this volume or diversity of actors, creating space for learning, innovation and the brokering of new relationships and coalitions for collective action.

Donors equally have a role to play in facilitating sufficiently flexible program frameworks such that programming approaches and activities can be adjusted in response to learning. This includes providing sufficient funds for monitoring, evaluation and learning activities. More importantly, it is up to donors to create a risk-tolerant, non-punitive environment, which is a critical pre-requisite for genuine and honest reflection, learning and improvement.⁷

3. To influence gender norm change in the Pacific, long-term vision and commitment are required

While Australia has long publicly acknowledged the unacceptability of gender-based violence, one in six Australian women still experience physical or sexual violence by a current or previous partner.⁸ Within Australia, national, state and community-level initiatives continue to pursue a range of prevention strategies, strengthened responses by the police and courts, improved data collection and analysis and shifting of attitudes, biases and norms.

Similarly, in the Pacific, changing social and cultural norms relating to violence against women and girls, as well as other aspects of gender equality, is a

multi-faceted and long-term endeavour. To lend genuine support to this process, a long-term perspective must be taken by Australia, extending well beyond a typical four-year aid project cycle. Rather, Australia's needs to ensure that successive programs in the Pacific, whether they be gender-focussed or take a gender mainstreamed approach, leverage the gains and learnings, as well as the relationships, of earlier programs.

Pacific Women was a ten-year commitment made in 2012. The relative longevity of this program has enabled partners to expand their activities, learn from the results and trial new approaches based on those learnings. Since 2012, for example, *Pacific Women* partners have provided gender-based violence crisis services to over 100,000 women and girls. Building on this experience, with Australian support, partners have had the opportunity to test a range of new, contextually relevant approaches to reduce community tolerance to violence against women, including through faith-based approaches, working with family units and targeting men and male leaders. These approaches are showing evidence of reduced rates of violence against women and children. Another significant outcome of *Pacific Women* has been the independent flourishing of women's support groups throughout the Pacific, collaborating to formulate violence against women prevention and support strategies and services. There is also evidence that, through *Pacific Women's* work, private sector companies are realising the productivity benefits of employing women and this is increasing women's participation in the workforce. These achievements of *Pacific Women* to date and many others not listed here, are significant. However, these should be seen as the starting point for further support and engagement, to build upon over the coming decades. **The rich learnings and relationships fomented through *Pacific Women* need to become the foundation of Australia's ongoing and long-term commitment to the promotion of women and girls' human rights the Pacific.**

4. The commitment to women and girls' human rights must be holistic

Just as fundamental human rights are considered 'indivisible', so too are the core elements of Australia's gender equality engagement in the Pacific, that is: women's economic empowerment; ending violence against women; and women's leadership.⁹ A key lesson learned from Cardno's and others' experiences in the Pacific is that the promotion of one element of women and girls' human rights, without the others, will have limited impact. Working with female parliamentary candidates to

⁷ Developmental Leadership Program, 'The Bigger Picture. Gender and Politics in Practice', February 2018, p10

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story, 2019, p vii

⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy, February 2016, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/gender-equality/Pages/gender-equality>

improve their electoral prospects, for example, will have limited impact if the norms permitting violence against women who participate in such activities are not simultaneously addressed. Likewise, the impact of women's economic empowerment initiatives in the Pacific will be limited where there is no parallel support of women's leadership within, for example, business or vendors' associations.

A study commissioned by *Pacific Women* found that some initiatives aiming to empower women economically were linked to an increased risk of domestic violence for some participants.¹⁰ Since women's economic empowerment challenges unequal gender norms, it can lead to men using violence against women to reinforce their power.¹¹ This demonstrates that elements of gender equality cannot easily be segmented by theme or topic – for a donor's or a program's convenience. Underlying all these elements is gender inequality and the social and cultural norms that perpetuate and legitimise these things. Accordingly, **regardless of the specific gender issue at hand, norm change must be at the heart of how it is tackled.**

5. Stop preaching to the converted, reach the 'unusual' suspects

Many gender initiatives can end up engaging the same groups of people and fail to reach new audiences, particularly outside of city capitals. Change needs to not only be locally led, but local actors **need to engage with those that are not the 'usual suspects'**, using influencing strategies that are subtle, adaptive and culturally savvy. For

example, the Balance of Power leadership team has diverse backgrounds and therefore, diverse networks. The Vanuatu Country Manager, Wilson Toa, is male. Therefore, he is able to have conversations with a range of other men in politics, churches and in traditional and government leadership positions that women would not be able to access given prevalent cultural norms in Vanuatu.

Similarly, the Fiji Women's Fund proactively aims to reach 'unusual suspects', particularly groups located in rural and remote parts of Fiji, working in diverse fields. These range from the Striders Women's Rugby Club in the Suva-Nausori corridor to the Naitasiri Women in Dairy Group, focused on calf rearing and improving milk production. The Fiji Women's Fund also ensures that it is supporting and engaging people living with disabilities and LGBTQI and gender non-conforming people.

Conclusion: our key message

Cardno has learned a lot along the journey over many years of supporting gender equality initiatives in the Pacific. We firmly believe that Australia has a significant role to play in supporting the women and girls of the Pacific and there is a rich basis of understanding, evidence and experience that can help inform its ongoing efforts and partnerships. Protecting and advancing the human rights of women and girls is too important to leave to chance. The informed, considered and committed efforts of Australia will go a long way to supporting this critically important cause.

¹⁰ IWDA, 'Do No Harm: Integrating the Elimination of Violence Against Women in Women's Economic Empowerment Programming: Briefing Note', June 2018, <https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/Do-No-Harm-Research-to-Practice-Briefing.pdf>

¹¹ *ibid*, p4