

Caritas Oceania submission to the Inquiry on Human Rights of Women and Girls in the Pacific

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Terms of Reference of the Inquiry

With respect to the status of human rights of women and girls in the Pacific, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, in particular the Human Rights Sub-Committee shall, in the context of the Pacific Step-up, give particular regard to:

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
2. The key figures and groups which advance the human rights of women and girls' in the Pacific context
3. Engagement of these groups with Australia's Pacific Step-up
4. The effectiveness of Australian overseas development assistance programs in supporting human rights of women and girls
5. Any related matters

Who We Are

Caritas Oceania is a strong coordinated family that promotes practical activities to Care for Creation and the Humanity of our great ocean states.¹

Caritas Oceania brings together highly diverse members from the larger and smaller islands of the Pacific. Our members are Caritas Fiji, Caritas Papua New Guinea, Caritas Samoa, Caritas Tonga, Caritas Australia, Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand and CEPAC (Caritas Pacific Islands). Together, we work on development, emergency response, climate change and peace building. Collectively, the Caritas network has a wide presence across the Pacific, with partners and programs in 20 countries.

Caritas Oceania is part of Caritas Internationalis, the world's second largest humanitarian network which collectively has more than 500,000 staff and 20 million volunteers operating through 162 national Caritas agencies in over 200 countries and territories.

Caritas Archdiocese of Suva, operating as **Caritas Fiji**, serves as the social arm of the Catholic Church in Fiji. Caritas Fiji places charity at the heart of society and associates with the poor by helping the Catholic Church in Fiji become the prophetic voice for the people who are affected by social and ecological injustices. It operates within three thematic programs, namely social and ecological justice, disaster management and gender justice. Caritas Fiji became a member of Caritas International in 2019.

Caritas Papua New Guinea (PNG) was founded in 1974 by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands (CBC PNGSI) and is the Justice, Peace, Development and Relief agency of the CBC PNGSI. Caritas PNG exists in order to play an active role in social justice, peace, human development, and emergency operations. The National Office in Port Moresby serves the 19 Caritas Dioceses and 400 parishes across 22 provinces with its clusters of 'Basic Christian Communities', schools and health services.

Caritas Samoa was founded in 2008 and became a full-fledged member of Caritas Internationalis in 2011. Caritas Samoa works in close partnership with Caritas agencies, international relief organisations and the Samoan Government's National Disaster Management Office to provide emergency disaster relief, assistance and training. Caritas Samoa also provides assistance to low income families by providing food and clothing, promotes capacity building initiatives for women and helps with the improvement of rural water supplies. Caritas Samoa also takes part in peace and reconciliation on a grassroots level by improving relations between students in schools where there is unrest. Caritas Samoa's main office in Apia has a staff of around 5 employees and volunteers to supervise their programs.

1. Caritas Oceania Forum Statement 2019: "Alone We Go Faster, Together We Go Further"

Caritas Tonga is the agency for justice, peace, development and humanitarian aid of the Catholic Diocese of Tonga and Niue in two independent nations in the South Pacific – Niue and the Kingdom of Tonga. Caritas Tonga officially became a full member of Caritas Internationalis in 2003, but has worked in the area of community-led development and climate and humanitarian emergencies in Tonga with over 30 years of experience which predates its full membership to Caritas Internationalis. In addition to a small group of staff, Caritas Tonga has over 200 volunteers to carry out the agency's activities, as well as a Secretariat and 14 Caritas parish committees in the Diocese of Tonga and Niue.

Caritas Australia is the international aid agency of the Catholic Church in Australia. Over the last 56 years Caritas Australia has worked to uphold human dignity and promote justice in partnership with marginalised communities regardless of their ethnicity, political beliefs or religion. Caritas Australia supports long-term and holistic development programs in the Pacific, Asia, Indigenous Australia and Africa. In 2019-20, working with 91 partners, we supported 65 long-term programs in 23 countries and 30 humanitarian and emergency responses in 20 countries. Caritas Australia reached over 1.52 million people directly through emergency and development programs. Over 60,000 people in Australia actively support our work through fundraising and advocacy.

Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand (CANZ) is the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference agency for justice, peace and development. CANZ works to make a difference in the lives of people living with poverty or injustice. We deliver aid, support development and work for justice around the world and at home in Aotearoa New Zealand. CANZ responds to humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters, supports integral human development, advocates for the poor and vulnerable and works to strengthen relationships with tangata whenua – the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand. At the core of our work are the relationships with each other and our partners in this work.

Introduction

One of Caritas Oceania's three key strategic priorities is to increase the participation and influence of women and youth in both community and regional initiatives, and to enable their voices to influence decision-making at local, regional and international levels. Given this, we particularly welcome this Inquiry and the opportunity it represents to strengthen Australia's engagement with our Pacific family on the human rights of women and girls in our region.

Caritas Oceania members work to support women and girls' rights and gender equality in a range of different sectors including ending violence against women and girls, ensuring gender-specific protection measures during humanitarian and emergency response to disasters, and improving access to education and livelihoods for women and girls.

Some of the issues highlighted in this submission have been identified as shared themes by multiple members of Caritas Oceania, while some issues are country specific.

The key themes of our submission are:

- On ending violence against women and girls: the need to challenge culture and strengthen the focus on prevention; and mitigating the increased risk of violence during disasters including COVID-19 and climate-related disasters.
- The importance of more interventions to address the lack of voice, participation and consultation of women and girls at many levels of decision-making.

In response to these concerns and challenges, we highlight these principles:

- The importance of community-led approaches for reaching the most vulnerable women and girls and for implementing effective, sustainable programs.
- The critical role of Pacific churches and faith-based organisations in changing culture and behaviour, and the need to strengthen engagement and support for them to do more.

Ending gender inequality and violence against women and girls

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

In the Pacific, violence against women and girls has been an issue of extremely high concern even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In some Pacific countries over 60 per cent of women have experienced violence.² Many of these women experienced violence at a young age - one study of 908 sexual and gender-based violence criminal cases in six Pacific countries found that 58 per cent of the victims were under the age of 18 and 40 per cent were under the age of 15.³

The importance of challenging culture and strengthening the focus on prevention

Achieving gender equality and ending gender-based violence in the Pacific involves challenging entrenched beliefs and cultures of patriarchal societies. It also means challenging aspects of culture which are at odds with human rights. This is complex, highly sensitive and takes years.

The need for a greater emphasis on preventing violence against women and girls through initiatives that change community attitudes and behaviour has been raised by Caritas Fiji, Caritas PNG and the Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG and Solomon Islands (CBC PNGSI).

Prevention initiatives run by Caritas members include the following examples:

- A key part of the CBC PNGSI's work to change attitudes and behaviour is providing education on respectful relationships, especially to youth, and with a focus on the spiritual component. As Fr Ambrose Pereira, Secretary of Social Communications at CBC PNGSI states, 'all dimensions including spiritual elements need to be addressed in prevention and response activities.'
- CBC PNGSI runs 3-day youth retreats where graduating secondary school students are supported to 'reflect, renew, reconcile, resolve and reconnect with themselves'. Part of this involves discussion about relationships. This is much needed - according to Marie Mondu, Development Secretary of CBC PNGSI, "In most PNG societies and families, the topic of relationships, love and sex is taboo. But it is a necessary topic for many young people to know as they explore the challenges and mysteries of adolescence".⁴ The young people receiving this training, most of whom are in their 20's and are in relationships, say they would have liked to have this information earlier in life. If equipped with additional resourcing, CBC PNGSI would like to expand their spiritual programs and focus on younger students to address this gap.
- The Centre of Hope in PNG, in partnership with Caritas Australia and funded through DFAT's Church Partnership Program, is engaging men and boys to become advocates for the elimination of gender-based violence in their communities. The 'Life with Dignity' program will also support community education and advocacy initiatives that promote gender equality and the elimination of violence against women, including utilising the Gender Equality Theology developed through the Church Partnerships Program in PNG to promote messages of gender equality. These prevention measures are run in tandem with support services, including counselling, case management, legal

2. World Health Organization, [WHO supports the end of violence against women and girls in the Pacific](#) [media release], World Health Organization, 12 December 2017.

3. E Christie, H Singh and JK Singh, [An Analysis of Judicial Sentencing Practices in Sexual & Gender-Based Violence Cases in the Pacific Island Region](#), ICAAD and DLA Piper, 2015.

4. N Akuani, [Spiritual Retreat Reminds Students of Higher Calling](#), CBC PNGSI, n.d.

advice, and community reintegration to women and children who have experienced gender-based violence. Women who access the safe house are supported to develop new livelihood skills and knowledge to increase their resilience and economic empowerment.

- Caritas Fiji is training community members across Fiji to become part of a voluntary 'First Responders network' to address sexual and gender-based violence. This initiative includes both prevention and response activities, and the involvement of male advocates. All First Responders are given safeguarding training. The program is outlined in greater detail on page 17.

These initiatives have very positive outcomes, but more could be done if more resourcing was available to church, faith-based groups and other civil society groups to undertake more prevention activities.

An important part of prevention programs to change societal attitudes to gender-based violence is the engagement of men, and as such is a key aspect of all three examples provided above. CBC PNGSI has also identified the need to engage young men who are part of gangs ('raskol' groups), made up predominantly of young men but also some young women. These groups can condone violent behaviour and abusive relationships, and young people in a group can find it hard to leave.

Gender-based violence increases during disasters, including COVID-19 and climate-related disasters

The increase in violence against women and girls during COVID-19 has been raised as an urgent issue by Caritas Oceania members. The statistics are alarming. In Fiji, the National Domestic Violence helpline recorded 87 calls in February, 187 calls in March - then 527 calls in April. Of these calls, close to 50 per cent of women reported a correlation between COVID-19 and an increase in violence.⁵ In Samoa, there has been a 150 per cent increase in helpline calls compared to the same time last year.⁶ In Tonga, during the 15 days of COVID-19 lockdown, the Women and Children Crisis Centre saw a 54 per cent increase in the number of requests for help.⁷

The nature of the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented, but sadly the increased vulnerability of women and girls during and after a disaster is not. The Pacific is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. Tonga is considered the second-most at-risk country in the world to natural disasters⁸ and the Pacific region contains ten of the fifteen countries considered most at risk of natural disasters and the effects of climate change.⁹ As documented in annual Caritas Oceania State of the Environment reports¹⁰, Pacific communities are losing their land, homes, food and water security, health, livelihoods and even lives as a result of extreme weather-related disasters exacerbated by climate change. Earthquakes are another cause of disasters.

Both COVID-19 and climate change are multipliers of existing vulnerabilities. As noted by UN Women, 'evidence shows that during and after disasters, levels of gender-based violence often increase. After two tropical cyclones hit Tafea Province in Vanuatu in 2011, the Tanna Women's Counselling Centre reported a 300% increase in new domestic violence cases'.¹¹

Recommendation: Increase support for locally-led programs to prevent and respond to gender-based violence during COVID-19 and other disasters.

COVID-19 is itself compounding the impacts of climate-related disasters. Amelia Ma'afu, Director of Caritas Tonga, is concerned that COVID-19 has taken the focus of attention at the cost of people impacted by Tropical Cyclone Harold, which caused widespread destruction in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga in April 2020. Less than a month from the upcoming cyclone season, people made homeless by TC Harold are still living in tents and under tarpaulins. "People are now wrapped up in fear of COVID-19 at the expense of preparing for cyclone season."

5. Hon. M Vuniwaqa, [Official Statement by the Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation at the Workshop on Addressing Domestic Violence and Gender Justice during COVID-19](#) [transcript], 25 August 2020

6. UN Women, [Across the Pacific, crisis centres respond to COVID-19 amid natural disasters](#), 10 June 2020.

7. Ofa Guttenbeil-Lilikiki, [Ofa Guttenbeil-Lilikiki and Konnie Yoifa – How do you address gender based violence in the Pacific?](#) [interview], Good Will Hunters, 21 June 2020.

8. United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security, [World Risk Report 2016](#), UNU-EHS, 2016.

9. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response](#), DFAT, 2020.

10. Caritas State of the Environment for Oceania reports, available at <https://caritas.org.nz/state-environment>

11. UN Women, [Pacific Gender and Climate Change Toolkit](#), UN Women, 2015.

In an example of the gendered nature of climate change impacts, Caritas Tonga has observed that sometimes households headed by women don't receive supplies in the first round of emergency distribution after a disaster. This may be because these households have not been captured on town registries, which places women and children in a more vulnerable situation. To address this gap, Caritas Tonga ensures they reach the most vulnerable by asking their parish committees to provide household beneficiary lists, as the committees are part of the community and know all the families.

In another example from Tonga, during a drought or a significant disaster it is not uncommon that families will ask children to ask their neighbours for water. Generally this is accepted however it becomes a protection issue particularly at night and particularly for girls. Caritas Tonga staff during a field visit have witnessed a young girl going from house to house at night asking for water, to four houses. This example illustrates not only the importance of a communal water supply which provides protection, but also the gendered impact of climate-related disasters.

For this reason, Caritas Tonga embed gender sensitive practices throughout their disaster relief and preparedness programs, to ensure they target and safeguard the most vulnerable including women and children. As an example, Caritas Tonga have monitored the access of women and girls to water, and have implemented a number of water projects with the safety of women and girls in mind. They worked with village Caritas committees to ensure that there is adequate lighting; a power source to refill the tanks; constant monitoring to ensure refilling and adequate supply; and that people have adequate containers for carrying water so that the water is managed conservatively.

Recommendation: Support the implementation of gender mainstreaming and gender sensitive practices across broader development and humanitarian programming.

In the Carteret Islands, where Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand partners with community organisation Tulele Peisa, climate change and rising sea levels are forcing more and more Carteret Islanders to leave their atoll homelands. Already, one hundred people from their population of 1,700 have relocated to Tinputz in Bougainville, using land gifted by the Catholic Church in Bougainville. The Carteret Islanders have a matrilineal society, but the tradition of passing land from mothers to daughters will be broken when families are forced to abandon their ancestral lands. Women are also disproportionately impacted in other ways. According to Ursula Rakova, Executive Director of Tulele Peisa, "Women and children are the most vulnerable in terms of diet, intake of food".¹² She also said, "Women are affected because they have to work longer hours during the day... They have to tend to their families, make sure the family has enough to eat. If we need to think about planning for those communities we really need to look at how we can benefit the women and children, to sustain their lives."¹³

We ask the Australian government to do more to tackle the root cause of climate change, which disproportionately impacts women and girls. Australia has a unique opportunity as it considers new strategies in light of COVID-19 to invest in climate-friendly systems that will simultaneously respond to post-COVID economic recovery efforts, future-proof our economy against increasing climate shocks and protect our shared climate. We ask the Government to use this opportunity to strengthen Australia's domestic climate policies in line with our commitment to the Paris Agreement target of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees.

Recommendation: Strengthen Australia's domestic climate policies in line with our commitment to the Paris Agreement target of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees, especially when developing any new domestic policies as a response to the COVID-19 recovery.

12. Caritas Oceania, [Caritas State of the Environment Report 2016](#)

13. J Valentish, [Grassroots game changers will take centre stage at the All About Women festival](#), 2 February 2018, Sydney Morning Herald.

Participation and decision-making by women and girls

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

In many areas of the Pacific, women are not well represented in decision-making processes. Their voices are not being heard and their stories are not being told. Yet evidence shows that the participation of women increases the effectiveness of humanitarian outcomes and reduces gender inequalities.¹⁴

In Caritas Tonga's experience, communities in Tonga fare better during natural disasters when women play a leadership role in early warning systems and reconstruction. Women tend to share information related to community well-being, are less concerned about political motivations when it comes to emergency food and shelter distributions, choose less polluting energy sources and adapt more easily to environmental changes. When their family's survival is at stake, women tend to be very effective at mobilizing communities in the event of disaster. When trained and equipped with skills to lead, for example during an emergency evacuation, they are very proactive and powerful. Caritas Tonga has observed that the most successful emergency management committees are those with significant representation of women.

As documented in Caritas Oceania State of the Environment reports, sometimes communities as a whole are not properly consulted about initiatives that affect their community. When communities are not properly consulted, the whole community suffers, however women and girls are often disproportionately affected.

In 2016 Caritas reported that women in West Papuan villages affected by the huge Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate were finding it difficult to get clean water, especially in the dry season. 'Traditionally, they got water from sago trees, but many had been cut to make way for large scale oil palm, rice or sugar cane plantations. Other natural water sources have gone too. "Women must walk very far to fetch water while carrying their babies on the back. It was very hard for them and most of their time were spent in finding clean water and also doing domestic work," said Veronika Triariyani Kanem of SKP Merauke. Wells built in some areas have not solved the problem. "Most wells were very dirty, had no water in them or were neglected by the community." Local assistance and education about how to keep wells clean and maintained was needed.'¹⁵

In both Fiji and Samoa, Caritas members have observed that one of the barriers to community participation and informed consultation is the lack of access to information translated into local languages.

On a positive note, there are also some affirming examples at the community level of how strong women's networks are promoting and upholding women's participation and empowerment.

In Kiribati, the Teitioningaina (Catholic Women's Association) implements a program called Kiribati Health Champions, supported by Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This brings women together to share knowledge on traditional foods, food preparation and nutrition. When COVID-19 forced Kiribati to close its borders and start preparations for a COVID-19 awareness programme, the Kiribati Health Champions immediately offered its core group of active Health Champions to raise awareness in the communities of South Tarawa, a

14. UN Women, [The Effect of Gender Equality Programming on Humanitarian Outcomes](#), 2015.

15. Caritas Oceania, [Caritas State of the Environment Report 2016](#)

community with a population of approximately 70,000 people in 6,063 households. As Caritas Aotearoa NZ explains:

'In less than 24 hours they were able to organise 31 Health Champions who were trained under the KHC programme and had become experienced, highly skilled nutrition communicators to carry out the important work of raising awareness in the community. They were briefed by the Public Health Department and provided with Kiribati handouts, posters and careful messages including demonstrations on proper hand-washing techniques and social distancing recommendations. In their first week, 15 teams visited over 275 households for around 30 minutes each. Families were provided with brochures with proper handwashing techniques and distancing guidelines and they were given time to have any questions answered At the end of their second week, the original 15 Health Champions had reached 791 households - just under 14% of the entire South Tarawa population.... [To meet demand] the KHC program doubled their numbers with the help of "Junior Health Champions." A total of 31 programme graduates, all who have been trained but who have limited experience in delivery, were teamed up with a Health Champion and began their work in the third week.' Caritas Aotearoa NZ estimates that 1,500 households were covered each week with the help of the Junior Health Champions.

In Samoa, all traditional villages have women's committees which have taken on the role of looking after the health of community members and the cleanliness of the surrounding environment. Examples of their activities include regular check-ups on all babies and infants in the village to ensure vaccinations are up to date, and monthly visits to each family or household to ensure their environments are kept clean. Since the 1990s, the activity of these women committees had diminished. However as a result of the measles epidemic in 2019 when over 60 children died from measles due to low vaccination rates, there has been a renewed focus on the role of the women's committees. The Samoan Government has recognised the importance of empowering and resourcing the women's committees to undertake public health roles in their communities.¹⁶ The government is also encouraging non-traditional villages to have women's committees.¹⁷

However, while there may be strong women's leadership at the local level, this does not necessarily translate to the national or political level.

In Samoa, while there are strong local women's networks, women represent about only 5 per cent of matai (chiefs) in villages and even fewer are on local councils.¹⁸ As a person must be recognised as a matai by their village to run for election for a parliamentary seat, women's access to parliamentary representation is severely restricted.¹⁹

In Tonga, women's participation in decision-making is strongest at the village level, as every village council has a women's council. However women's participation, and unity between the genders, is weaker at the district level, and even weaker at the national level, as there isn't a mechanism to bring the women's councils together. The only avenue for bringing women together in this way has been the UN's Mock Parliament for Women, held every couple of years with the support of the Speaker of Parliament, though currently impacted by COVID-19.

Lack of female representation in politics is an issue across the Pacific - only 8.8 per cent of Pacific parliamentarians are women.²⁰ There are currently no female parliamentarians in PNG or Vanuatu.

Over the last decade, the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Program (PWSPDP) has worked to strengthen women's leadership and improve the political, economic and social opportunities of Pacific women. Funding for this 10-year program is set to expire in 2021-2022 and we understand an evaluation of

16. Government of Samoa, [National Measles Response and Recovery Appeal](#), 6 December 2019.

17. Caritas Samoa (personal communication), October 2020.

18. M Meleisea, M Meredith, I Chan Mow, SA Lauano, H Sasa, R Boodoosingh and M Sahib, [Political Representation and Women's empowerment in Samoa](#), vol. 1, Centre for Samoan Studies, 2015.

19. MA Siu-Maliko, M Beres, C Blyth, R Boodoosingh, T Patterson and D Tombs, [Church Responses to Gender-Based Violence Against Women in Samoa](#), New Zealand Institute for Pacific Research, 2019.

20. Pacific Women in Politics, [National Women MPs 2020](#), Pacific Women in Politics, n.d.

the program is being finalised. To continue supporting women's leadership and participation in the Pacific, we recommend a renewal of the PWSPDP, along with support for other new innovative forms of funding targeting this issue. We also recommend measures to increase local church engagement in the PWSPDP to ensure that local churches are part of the dialogue on this initiative and engaged to explore the role that they can play.

Recommendation: Promote women's leadership in the Pacific by renewing the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Program, and supporting other new innovative forms of funding targeting leadership and participation by women.

Recommendation: Engage churches and faith-based organisations to identify and implement measures to increase local church and faith-based community engagement with the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Program, to ensure that local churches and faith-based organisations are part of the dialogue and able to explore the role that they can play.

Country-specific issues

Increasing women's access to education and income opportunities

Caritas members in PNG and Samoa have raised women and girls' access to education as a concern.

CBC PNGSI have raised the lack of gender parity for education in PNG, where the education of boys and young men is prioritised over that of girls and young women.²¹ DFAT reports that only about half of all primary school-aged children attend school, and that fewer girls than boys attend.²² Of the girls enrolled in primary school, only half go on to attend secondary school.²³ Catholic agencies in PNG are helping to increase access to education for girls, including by providing safe, shared accommodation for girls to attend secondary school, but more support such as more scholarships and fee support for girls is needed.

In Samoa, access to education at the secondary level and beyond is limited for both women and men, especially for those from remote locations. Caritas Samoa recognises and commends the important role of the Australian Pacific Technical College (APTC) in providing opportunities for vocational training, including for those who couldn't complete their schooling. They encourage the APTC to continue strengthening strategies to encourage women's enrolment especially for women in remote areas and from very low income families. They also recognise the opportunities and benefits provided by the Seasonal Worker Program.

Women's economic empowerment is also an issue in some Pacific countries. Across the region, men outnumber women in paid employment (outside the agricultural sector) by approximately two to one, and males typically earn 20 to 50 per cent more than women because they work in jobs attracting higher salaries.²⁴

To address this, Caritas Samoa has previously implemented a 'Women Empowerment' program with the support of Caritas Australia and DFAT. They identified that the wives of untitled men are at a disadvantage: these women have very little or no voice in their villages, and largely stay home to look after children while the husbands work. Within this program, these women took part in training on income generating activities such as sewing and elei. Caritas Samoa then provided sewing materials to help them start a sewing business to generate income.

21. J Edwards, [Gender and Education Assessment, Papua New Guinea: A review of the literature on girls and education](#). Report prepared for the Australian High Commission, PNG and the Education Capacity Development Facility, 2015.

22. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [DFAT Country Information Report Papua New Guinea](#), DFAT, 2017.

23. Human Rights Watch, [PNG country page - Events of 2019](#), HRW, n.d.

24. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [Development Assistance in the Pacific: Pacific Regional - Empowering women and girls](#), DFAT, n.d.

Sorcery Accusation Related Violence in PNG

Belief in sorcery or witchcraft (the belief that one person can use magical or supernatural powers to harm another person) is widespread in some areas of PNG. This means that 'misfortune, accidents, business failures, sickness and death are commonly believed to have been deliberately caused by certain individuals through the use of supernatural powers, rather than resulting from natural causes'.²⁵ The belief in sorcery is used to 'give an answer to a situation especially during times of loss and grief'.²⁶

Accusations of sorcery can sometimes result in violence against the accused and/or the family of the accused. In the worst cases, victims of Sorcery Accusation Related Violence (SARV) have been tortured and/or killed in horrifying circumstances. Other types of harm include stigmatisation, being subjected to threats, living in fear of violence, banishment from the community, property damage, ongoing homelessness, forced imprisonment and psychological trauma.²⁷

Women, men and children of all ages have been accused of practicing sorcery, however women may be particularly impacted by SARV for a number of reasons.

The gendered nature of SARV varies from region to region. Research by the Australian National University's Overcoming Sorcery Accusation Related Violence research program has found that in Enga province, 90 per cent of all the accused are women, whereas in Bougainville province, 84 per cent of the accused were men.²⁸ In the National Capital District in and around Port Moresby, the gender split was roughly equal. In Enga where most victims are women, there were more incidents involving killing, burning and sexual violation, whereas in Bougainville where most victims are men, there were more incidents involving property damage.²⁹

In recent times SARV has spread to new areas of PNG where it did not traditionally occur. The most prominent example is in Enga, where 'a new narrative about a sanguma spirit that is said to possess certain women and leads them to eat the hearts of others, who then become sick or die' has been introduced.³⁰ Bishop Donald Lippert from the Catholic Diocese of Mendi has observed that "in the Southern Highlands, SARV is on the increase and has become something that was never part of traditional culture.... It is a complex issue and a terrible atrocity that now, in many cases, has a very perverse sexual aspect to it".³¹

When women are displaced and made homeless as a result of SARV, it is generally harder for them to set up a new life due to the broader gender inequality issues existing in PNG. For this reason, many of the ANU's Overcoming Sorcery Accusation Related Violence research program's case studies of ongoing displacement involve women. There are no specific places set up for survivors of SARV and often they go to places set up for survivors of gender-based violence, however these are not set up for long term stays.

Another aspect of SARV where gender may have an influence is in the area of criminal justice prosecutions. Evidence suggests that there are more successful prosecutions of SARV cases when those accused of sorcery are men.³²

The response to tackling SARV has and will continue to involve people from all sectors including the PNG Government, community leaders, church leaders, NGOs and researchers and academics. The ANU research team have found that successful cases of SARV prevention occur when there is strong leadership from within the community taking action against SARV. Village leaders and immediate family members are most likely to be involved, and church leaders, police, village court officials and extended family members are often also involved.³³

25. M Forsyth and R Eves, 'The Problems and Victims of Sorcery and Witchcraft Practices and Beliefs in Melanesia: An Introduction', in M Forsyth and R Eves (eds), [Talking it Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia](#), ANU Press, Canberra, 2015.

26. N Akuani, [United Against PNG's 'Sanguma'](#), CBC PNGSI, n.d.

27. M Forsyth, P Gibbs, F Hukula, J Putt, L Munau and I Losoncz, [Ten Preliminary Findings Concerning Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in Papua New Guinea](#), Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper No. 80., Development Policy Centre, ANU, 2019.

28. M Forsyth (personal communication), 22 October 2020.

29. M Forsyth et al., [Ten Preliminary Findings Concerning Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in Papua New Guinea](#)

30. M Forsyth et al., [Ten Preliminary Findings Concerning Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in Papua New Guinea](#)

31. The National, [Bishop of Mendi highlights sorcery-related violence in Highlands](#), 20 August 2020.

32. M Forsyth et al., [Ten Preliminary Findings Concerning Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in Papua New Guinea](#)

33. M Forsyth et al., [Ten Preliminary Findings Concerning Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in Papua New Guinea](#)

Given the role of churches in providing spiritual support to communities, church leaders are strongly placed to address the beliefs in supernatural powers that underpin SARV. In December 2019, the PNG Council of Churches released a National Strategy for Churches to Address Sorcery Accusation Related Violence. They are also involved in the implementation of PNG's National Action Plan on Sorcery and Witchcraft Accusation Related Violence.

Examples of recent church interventions on SARV include the following:

- On 18 August 2020, CBC PNGSI hosted an online forum on SARV to help raise awareness and support discussion and engagement on this issue. The forum involved around 60 participants including three Bishops, Catholic priests, Religious, representatives from the government, social, health, environmental and legal sectors, and the media.
- The first International Day Against Sorcery Accusation Related Violence on 10 August 2020, launched by missio (the International Catholic Mission Society of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Germany) was strongly supported by the Diocese of Mendi and was marked by peaceful demonstrations. In Mendi, around 3,000 people - women, men and children from different denominations and walks of life - were involved in a peaceful march against SARV.³⁴
- A panel discussion on sorcery and witchcraft on 5 August 2020 was broadcast over Trinita FM 98.1, the Catholic Radio Service of the Archdiocese of Mt. Hagen in the Western Highland Province.³⁵
- Interventions before or during a funeral, and the five-point plan of the Catholic Church in Simbu, as described by Fr Philip Gibbs.³⁶
- Direct intervention in specific situations. In one example, six women in a village of the Upper Karinj Pastoral Area were accused of sorcery after the unexpected death of a school student. A team of six representatives from the Diocese of Mendi immediately went to the village, and found that people were already heating the metal plates to burn the six accused women. "Our team members did not hesitate to confront those who appeared to be conducting this spectacle. The younger men spoke threatening words to the members of the team who showed no fear and answered all of these objections from the perspective of our Catholic faith", said Bishop Lippert. At one point one of them said that this was a 'spiritual' problem. Fr Robert spoke up and said that spiritual problems are to be handled in the church. He made them understand that what they were planning to do was the work of the devil! After a long, heated argument the leaders backed down, and the attitude of the leaders began to shift from belligerence to shame. The women were saved. Some of the team members have been following up to make sure that the women will be safe for the long term."³⁷

We commend the Australian Government for the support it currently provides for research and other measures to tackle SARV in PNG, and encourage the government to continue and strengthen this critical support.

Recommendation: Caritas encourages the Australian government to strengthen its support for measures to end Sorcery Accusation Related Violence in PNG, including supporting churches to carry out the National Strategy for Churches to Address Sorcery Accusation Related Violence.

34. The National, [Bishop of Mendi highlights sorcery-related violence in Highlands](#); M Ben, [First international day against witchcraft & sorcery](#), CBC PNGSI, n.d.; R Ewert, [First International Day Against Sorcery Accusation Violence aims to raise awareness](#), ABC Pacific Beat, 10 August 2020.

35. CBC PNGSI, 'A panel discussion focusing on Witchcraft and Sorcery in PNG' [Facebook post], 18 August 2020.

36. P Gibbs, 'Practical Church Interventions on Sorcery and Witchcraft Violence in the Papua New Guinea Highlands', in M Forsyth and R Eves (eds), [Talking it Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia](#), ANU Press, Canberra, 2015.

37. L Jenal and D Lippert, [A Voice for the Voiceless](#), CBC PNGSI, n.d.

The impact of women's lack of land ownership in Tonga

Under Tonga's land tenure system, only men can own and register land. Women can lease but not own land. Caritas Tonga has witnessed the problem this creates particularly in the aftermath of disasters with households headed by women, including widows. In such instances, women have been unable to secure bank loans to rebuild their house after a disaster because they did not own the land. This removes their access to safe shelter, increases the vulnerability of the women and their children and has major ramifications. Often in situations where women are unable to provide adequate shelter for their children, they may be forced to separate their children amongst extended family members, or forced to take certain types of work which may put them at greater risk of abuse.

Strengthening Australian aid programs in supporting the human rights of women and girls

TOR1: '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'

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

Support community-led approaches to upholding the human rights of women and girls

Caritas believes that the most successful and sustainable programs to tackle gender inequality and violence are those led by local communities themselves. We believe that decisions should be made by the people closest and most affected by the issues and concerns of the community. Programmatically it is also known as 'localisation', where local communities and organisations are supported to design and lead their own solutions.

An example of a community-based protection initiative tackling gender-based violence is Caritas Fiji's First Responders network.

Caritas Fiji's First Responders program trains and supports volunteers to work together in their communities on community-led solutions to sexual and gender-based violence.

Volunteers first attend a 3-day workshop where they are trained and able to network with other volunteers and with local NGO support staff from their region. The First Responders are supported by local churches and communities; for example, some parishes have provided designated spaces which First Responders can use to provide support services or as an office. Some of the First Responders are selected for further training, including the opportunity to attend counselling training at a technical college. This approach of supporting local volunteer-driven networks enables a far greater impact than could be otherwise achieved.

So far this year, Caritas Fiji has run a 3-day workshop in each of the Central, Northern and Western divisions, with about 65 people at each workshop. The workshop had broad participation from representatives from interfaith denominations, including priests and pastors from different churches and faith-based organisations, as well as representatives from government and other civil society organisations. Approximately a quarter of the participants were men. To host the workshops, Caritas Fiji worked with multiple stakeholders including the Catholic Church, other church denominations, and women's groups including the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre.

This was the first time such workshops had been run by from a faith-based perspective in Fiji, and so generated significant interest. The Fijian Minister for Women, the Hon. Mereseini Vuniwaqa, attended all three workshops, as did the Archbishop of Suva, Peter Loy Chong.

Recommendation: Strengthen support for community-led initiatives to end gender-based violence and inequality by increasing the accessibility of funding for local communities and organisations, including churches and faith-based organisations, to lead these initiatives.

Support churches and faith-based organisations in the Pacific to strengthen their role in achieving gender equality

TOR1: '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'

TOR2: 'The key figures and groups which advance the human rights of women and girls' in the Pacific context'

TOR 3: 'Engagement of these groups with Australia's Pacific Step-up'

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

The role of churches and faith-based organisations in the Pacific in responding to the human rights of women and girls

"Violence against women and girls including sexual offences is rooted in gender-based discrimination, social norms, cultural attitudes and gender stereotypes that perpetuate such violence. Therefore, I believe that faith-based organizations are a very powerful player in really getting this message across and leading a national conversation to influence the public discourse on the root causes and contributing factors of violence against women and girls in Fiji ... you have immense power and reach to influence thoughts of the followers in order for them to ditch abusive and violent behavior."

- Hon. Mereseini Vuniwaqa, *Fijian Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, August 2020* ³⁸

"Faith leaders play a uniquely influential role in determining values in the Pacific and can be a powerful transformational force to re-shape attitudes, beliefs and behaviors around gender equality. As we all know, these social norms shape and foster the context within which acts of violence against women and girls take place at a personal, family, community and societal level."

- Dr Filimon Manoni, *Deputy Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, 2020* ³⁹

Churches and faith-based organisations have a critical role to play in upholding the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific, especially in changing behaviour and challenging culture.

With over 90 per cent of people across the Pacific identifying as Christian, faith is central to the lives of Pacific peoples and churches play an important role in Pacific societies. People respect Church leaders and listen to what they say. Church leaders can frame social issues in locally appropriate terms and with a spiritual dimension which is highly effective and influential. This is particularly important when there is a need to challenge culture and to change mindsets, for example on gender-based violence, sorcery accusation related violence, or the practice of payment of compensation for crimes.

Churches in the Pacific also have extensive reach, long-established networks and a presence in locations where other actors, including police, may not be able to access. Their representatives are embedded within the community and have strong relationships at the local level, so are best placed to ensure targeting of at-risk women and girls. For all these reasons, churches and faith-based organisations are key community and development partners in the Pacific and in addressing the rights of women and girls.

38. Hon. M Vuniwaqa, [Official Statement by the Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation at the Workshop on Addressing Domestic Violence and Gender Justice during COVID-19](#) [transcript], 25 August 2020

39. F Manoni, [Remarks at the Pacific Partnership – Partner Launch](#), 23 July 2020. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat website, n.d.

As part of the Archdiocese of Suva, Caritas Fiji is well placed to offer a theological element in their work to end violence against women and girls, and to engage church leaders. Caritas Fiji note that “Priests and leaders are being encouraged to open up discussion on this from the pulpit. This is important because it has been taboo for our culture to talk about sexual and gender-based violence. But the Church is making sure it’s being spoken about”. Within their network, Caritas Fiji have two priests who are psychologists and can run cultural training for their First Responders network.

The Heads of Churches from across the Pacific, including Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, have joined together to speak out collectively on this issue. In one example, they featured in a short video calling out gender-based violence as a sin. In Fiji, this was played on TV during primetime news every night for the three weeks leading up to and through the 16-Days of Activism, as well as before every film shown in 16 cinemas across Suva, Lautoka, and Nadi.⁴⁰ Archbishop Chong has also spoken about this issue frequently in the media⁴¹, which Caritas Fiji believes is particularly helpful in getting the message across to other male leaders in the community.

The ‘Life with Dignity’ program in PNG, implemented by Centre of Hope in partnership with Caritas Australia and DFAT’s Church Partnership Program (described on page 6), includes the establishment of a Catholic Safe House Association to ensure that provision of support services align with government standards, to ensure that these services are recognised by government, and to build the capacity of safe houses run by Catholic organisations.

In its work to end gender inequality and violence, CBC PNGSI encourages the approach of synodality, which literally means ‘to walk together’, and promotes cooperation and networking amongst all relevant groups. Fr Ambrose from CBC PNSI explains: “It is not merely discussing the issue but deciding on points of action and working together to put them into practice. The issues of abuse and violence have to be dealt with across all our commissions - education, youth, family life, social communication, etc. Our Holy Father Pope Francis in his recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* highlights the fact that instead of coming together we are breaking up. The present COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that we cannot work in isolation, that we are all in it together.”

These examples illustrate how churches and faith-based organisations are contributing to efforts to end gender-based violence and gender inequality. At the same time, it has been recognised that churches have the potential to do much more to harness their position of social influence.

For churches to reach their potential as key actors in tackling gender inequality, more training and support is needed to train church leaders at all levels to address gender inequality issues and challenge culture. Some priests and church representatives hold the same attitudes and mindsets that we are trying to change in the community. CBC PNGSI cites an example related to the traditional Papua New Guinean practice of customary compensation. This involves payment to survivors of crimes, or sometimes their families or villages, in lieu of legal or criminal prosecution. Acceptance of this practice is widespread in the community, including amongst church representatives. In this particular example, there was a female survivor of sexual assault whose family accepted financial compensation from the perpetrator’s family, instead of taking legal action. When asked, a priest from the area said that it was ‘part of culture and how matters are handled to prevent them getting out of control’. CBC PNGSI believes this type of situation could be prevented with the provision of training for church leaders that draws from spiritual teachings and theology.

Recommendation: Strengthen engagement with Pacific churches and faith-based organisations as key actors in tackling gender-based violence and inequality.

40. Anglican Communion News Service, [Fijian churches unite to “Break the Silence” on violence against women](#), 16 November 2017. Anglican Communion Office.

41. I Danford, [Archbishop Peter Loy Chong condemns men who use the bible to make women ‘submit’](#), Fiji Village, 11 September 2019; K Tadulala, [Religious groups should help reduce domestic violence: Archbishop](#), FBC News, 26 November 2019.

Recommendation: Support Pacific churches to develop and implement training programs that harness theological and spiritual elements to equip church leaders to tackle gender-based violence and inequality, and to challenge societal attitudes, both within the church and also in the broader community.

Finally, in considering the key figures and groups which advance the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific, we note that tackling gender inequality and violence shouldn't just be left to the 'labelled' organisations. As Caritas Tonga Director Amelia Ma'afu states, "it's everybody's business, not just those organisations with direct mandates." Gender mainstreaming and gender sensitive approaches must be embedded throughout all community development programming.

Summary of recommendations

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

Caritas encourages the Australian Government to adopt the following recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of Australia's overseas development assistance programs in supporting the human rights of women and girls:

- Strengthen engagement with Pacific churches and faith-based organisations as key actors in tackling gender-based violence and inequality.
- Support Pacific churches to develop and implement training programs that harness theological and spiritual elements to equip church leaders to tackle gender-based violence and inequality, and to challenge societal attitudes, both within the church and also in the broader community.
- Strengthen support for community-led initiatives to end gender-based violence and inequality by increasing the accessibility of funding for local communities and organisations, including churches and faith-based organisations, to lead these initiatives.
- Increase support for locally-led programs to prevent and respond to gender-based violence during COVID-19 and other disasters.
- Support the implementation of gender mainstreaming and gender sensitive practices across broader development and humanitarian programming.
- Promote women's leadership by renewing the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Program, and supporting other new innovative forms of funding targeting leadership and participation by women.
- Engage churches and faith-based organisations to identify and implement measures to increase local church and faith-based community engagement with the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Program, to ensure that local churches and faith-based organisations are part of the dialogue and able to explore the role that they can play.
- Strengthen Australia's domestic climate policies in line with our commitment to the Paris Agreement target of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees, especially when developing any new domestic policies as a response to the COVID-19 recovery.
- Strengthen Australia's support for measures to end Sorcery Accusation Related Violence in PNG, including supporting churches to carry out the National Strategy for Churches to Address Sorcery Accusation Related Violence.