

Submission to Gender Equality Strategy Review September 2023

The Australian government must continue and grow support and resources for spaces for organising and connecting women and girls, focused on learning and participating together and provide resources for a coordinated movement of Pacific feminists. Pacific feminist civil society organisations demonstrate the value of regional and global coalitions and cooperation. The lessons for building solidarity apply regionally as well as nationally, so investment in supporting diversity and holding space is still required. This coordination is an ongoing effort to ensure that all feel included and heard and that the space reflects all participants and makes room for difference.

Advocacy at the global and regional level as a strategy must continue, to counteract the situation of shrinking civil society spaces. Resources are required to organise formal and informal spaces for mobilising and advocating for change. It is also crucial to end siloes. The inclusion of LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, feminists, and indigenous, ethnically diverse, urban, rural, young, older and non-feminist women can give a voice to marginalised women, girls and non-binary folk. Civil society organisations and diverse alliances hold dialogue with the intention of all voices contributing to the ultimate outcome, and with space to hear different positions. These groups need to continue to have a space at the table at meetings, and Australia can hold open that space and ensure civil society dialogues continue at the regional institutional fora.

It is important for activities to take an intersectional approach to be effective and donors and INGOs engaging with Pacific CSOs need to understand the existing levers and barriers to inclusion – for example of people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) or people with disability in the region. Sharing lessons transparently) and building capacity can aid the growth of a larger supportive cohort to amplify voices at the regional and global level. Women and people with diverse sexual orientation and gender diversity or people with disability who feel unable to get traction from their national governments can use the benefit of regional-level dialogue to find partners, raise concerns and have regional institutions place pressure on their governments to implement change.

Australia can build on its membership of The Pacific Islands Forum (PIFS) and other regional institutions in the Pacific to include diverse civil society . Despite the fanfare of civil society inclusion in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism this, at times, appears to merely result in

lip-service inclusion of Pacific civil society's gender and diversity focus. The continual advocacy for the involvement of a breadth of actors and activities in the gender equality civil society space pushing governments to make the regionalism agenda an *inclusive* agenda is important. Updating the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration in 2023 for recognition of all diversities is a part of this effort.

Regional alliances being formed are a timely mechanism for civil society to engage collectively with the region on gender issues. To ensure greater cooperation and collaboration, regional institutions must embed steps to keep spaces open for diverse and inclusive civil society organisations to remain at the table and Australia can advocate for this.

The refresh of the Gender strategy is a political opportunity for ensuring an intersectional approach to gender and an end to silos. A diverse and inclusive civil society needs to be heard as they bring voices to the table of men, women, and non-binary folk. The call to action is finding strategic ways to overcome institutional barriers to participation.. For example, at the Triennial meeting of Women Ministers in Fiji in 2017, for the first time Pacific feminists were invited to take a seat at the decision-making table and advocate for their recommendations.

Giving resources and time to hear the voices of the full diversity of Pacific feminist civil society will help organise and amplify organisations' and individuals' engagement. Spaces need to be resourced and created to be heard directly; not spoken about by regional organisations but rather being able to tell their own stories. The lesson for regional institutions is to drop the 'us and them' stance, and see that sufficient formal space is provided by regional organisations, so that feminist CSOs can be a key part of meeting the gender equality goals.

An intentional supporting of feminist alliance building can accelerate progress on gender equality. In terms of engagement with other states or regional institutions, Pacific feminists are now engaging in multiple ways. However, the work is not over. The interaction and formation of strategic Pacific feminist alliances aims at the self-creation of spaces where such spaces did not previously exist in order to enhance the prospects of moving forward on gender equality. However, the mere increase in feminist alliances and regional gender declarations is not a sign the work is finished. Members of regional alliances have found some room being made at formal decision-making tables, but the agendas of states and civil society are in some respects still far apart. Transgender rights, for example, are central to Pacific feminist alliance agendas but are not translating to regional institutional agendas. Disability rights and equity needs to be

at the heart of the debates on gender and climate and development, not siloed to health or meeting of OPDs but in ALL meetings. Further civil society voices must be heard in the breadth of areas dealt with by Pacific regional institutions, not marginalised.

The practical reality is that a non-intersectional approach does not meet the rhetorical promises of ensuring all walk together and no one is left behind. The regionalism agenda is accountable to all Pacific peoples in all their diversities. To be truly inclusive, future formal frameworks must consider how inclusive they are of all regional actors, and understand which impacted voices are not being heard. A sharper focus is required from regional institutions and states to ensure that the development of future Pacific regional roadmaps includes meaningful participation from civil society, and to achieve SOGI and disability inclusion in the Pacific by 2030. The best pathway to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and delivering on gender equality is through broad-based and inclusive regional fora and discussions that provide space for inclusive civil society – and space for civil society to be inclusive. Only then will there be a full leveraging of the ‘leave no one behind principle’ from the SDGs, to end marginalisation by adequately addressing human rights of the full diversity of women in Pacific regional programs and initiatives.

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