



## **KTF Submission: Australia's New International Gender Equality Strategy - Advancing Gender Equality in Papua New Guinea**

KTF (Kokoda Track Foundation), an Australian NGO, has worked with, collaborated and supported people in remote and rural communities in Papua New Guinea (PNG) for 20 years. KTF is dedicated to improving the lives, livelihoods and futures of PNG people and communities via programs in education, health, equality and leadership. With a mere 3.6km separating our two nations, PNG and Australia are nearest neighbours who hold a special bond that was forged in the crucible of war, 81 years ago. Inspired by this courage, sacrifice, endurance and mateship, a small group of Australians set out to establish and grow a tangible pathway for Australians to *give back* to the people of PNG. To honour the sacrifices of the PNG angels and Australian and PNG soldiers, and to keep alive the spirit of Kokoda, the Kokoda Track Foundation was born on ANZAC Day in 2003 with a mission to lend a hand to our nearest neighbour. Over 20 years of working in PNG, KTF has seen the immense need for gender equality as a fundamental human right and necessary for a safe and prosperous community. KTF addresses gender inequality directly in our programming. We aim to remove barriers to participation, achieve equal opportunities and equitable outcomes for all, in order to empower and build capacity of those most vulnerable; women and girls.

### **Gender Equality in Papua New Guinea**

PNG is a nation as diverse as its landscapes, where cultures and traditions are cornerstone to people's identities. However, amid this cultural diversity lies the complexity of gender inequalities and barriers to inclusion that shape the lives of its people, particularly vulnerable populations including women and girls. PNG grapples with entrenched challenges related to women's status, gender norms, and cultural barriers. Deep-rooted gender roles often relegate women to the peripheries of society, limiting their access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Within this context, the arising of gender-based violence (GBV) and the struggle for women's leadership and political representation inhibits the path toward equality.

Power dynamics within PNG are woven with intricate gendered attitudes and decision-making patterns, with access to income and budgeting decisions often unevenly distributed. These dynamics manifest in various spheres, including household resource control and the division of labor. Often women's roles and responsibilities within households are tightly entwined with decision-making processes, leading to disparities in control over resources and limited autonomy. Capacity-building and coping mechanisms for women, ranging from economic participation to savings strategies, intersect with these dynamics, influencing the trajectory of gender equality.

Intersectionality further deepens the complexities of Papua New Guinea's journey toward equality and inclusion. Marginalised groups, with diverse identities including gender, ages, ethnicity, geographies, disabilities, and sexual orientations, navigate through multiple layers of disadvantage. The aspiration for equitable access to services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, although fundamental pillars of development, remains unfulfilled for many due to structural hurdles and the protracted nature of gender inequalities.

These markers inhibiting advancements to Gender Equality are not siloed to Papua New Guinea. However in 2021, Papua New Guinea's sobering ranking of 160 out of 161 countries on the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index (GII) serves as a stark reminder of the pervasive inequalities that persist within the nation. This index, while reflecting a snapshot in time, encapsulates the formidable challenges the country faces in its pursuit of gender equality and inclusive development. As we delve deeper into the myriad dimensions of this issue – from gender norms to political representation, from economic empowerment to access to essential services – the complex landscape of Papua New Guinea's quest for equality comes into focus.

The intricacies of leadership and formal governance, combined with ongoing challenges in protection against Gender-based Violence (GBV) and Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence (SARV), accessing legal services, and ensuring safety and security, add layers of nuance to the landscape of equality in PNG. Moreover, the protracted nature of gender disparities is magnified in crises, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled new dimensions of vulnerability especially for women and girls.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of social progress. Yet, evidently in Papua New Guinea, women and girls continue to face a myriad of challenges, including a lack of rights, GBV, SARV, Family and Sexual Violence (FSV), bride price practices, and immense vulnerability in times of crises like climate crises and tribal conflicts. Most recently from PNG, the governor Sir Peter Ipatas of Enga Province, a province racked by tribal fighting, has [appealed for Australian help](#) as the nation struggles to contain surging violence. The International Committee of the Red Cross, which is on the ground in the Enga Province, said women and girls displaced by the fighting faced being “raped in really big numbers”. Other than the displacement experienced and rampant gender-based violence, human trafficking can increase up to 20-30% during crises.

KTF's submission is seeking to highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive International Gender Equality strategy that places significant importance on the Papua New Guinean context, our nearest neighbour a mere 3.6km away.

### **International Gender Equality Priorities**

In the global context, international gender equality priorities encompass several critical areas. Ending violence against women and girls is one of the most pressing priorities which continues to affect millions of women and girls worldwide, particularly in Papua New Guinea where violence is entrenched in some parts of society. Economic empowerment is imperative for gender equality to ensure access to education and career opportunities, enhancing the agency of women and girls. Increasing women's representation and participation in decision-making processes at all levels of

government and society is paramount. Access to quality, safe and inclusive healthcare including sexual and reproductive health services including safe abortion and family planning is an important priority. Moreover, promoting equal access to education for boy and girls, especially with low enrolment rates for girls particularly in adolescence as girls responsibilities shift to caregiving and maintaining the household. In Papua New Guinea, these priorities resonate deeply as women and girls are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence and often lack access to quality healthcare and education.

### **Effective approaches for achieving gender equality**

Effective approaches for achieving gender equality globally should be reflective of the cultural context and foster localisation principles. Empowering women and girls through education and economic opportunities to increase their economic independence and decision-making power is imperative. Similarly, advocating for and implementing legal reforms that project women's rights, combat gender-based violence and promote gender equality is an effective approach. In Papua New Guinea, there is a pressing need for reform to shift ideologies of women's rights. The [PNG Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Gender-based Violence](#) is starting to shed light on this urgency. Engaging the whole community, including men and boys, in gender equality initiatives to challenge harmful stereotypes. Shifting towards a bottom-up approach and supporting grassroots initiatives that work directly with women and communities to address gender inequalities and harness local strengths. Coupled with this, funding must be ensured to reach local organisations and movements. This is not only aligning with the localisation agenda, but prioritising the rich knowledge and culture of the people and communities being impacted by development. Collaboration and partnerships with governments, civil society and international organisation to coordinate efforts, enhance transparency and to share best practices is vital to achieve gender equality. In Papua New Guinea, these approaches must be adapted to address the unique challenges posed by deeply rooted cultural practices like bride price and the high vulnerability of women and girls in times of crises, such as climate-related disasters and tribal conflicts.

### **Australia's support for gender equality and considerations**

Australia, as a committed advocate for gender equality, plays a crucial role in supporting international efforts. To address the specific challenges faced by women and girls in Papua New Guinea, Australia can provide financial support to NGOs and community-based organisations working on women's rights and advancing gender equality. Additionally, technical expertise and capacity-building support can help strengthen local initiatives and government. Australia must support research on gendered issues and collecting intersectional and multidimensional data from evidence-based policies and programs is important. Australia's diplomatic influence can further be leveraged to advocate for gender equality on the international stage particularly highlighting our Pacific neighbours, like Papua New Guinea, and seek reform to promote policies that address the unique issues faced by women and girls.

As the Australian government develops a new International Gender Equality strategy, it is imperative to consider the specific context of Papua New Guinea. Understanding the local context recognising

that gender equality priorities may differ across countries and regions and tailoring specific strategies to meet the needs and challenges of each context. In Papua New Guinea, the prevalence of gender-based violence, sorcery accusatory-related violence, bride price, and vulnerabilities women and girls experience during crises, is paramount. Similarly, the Australian Government is to be reflective of the trajectory and importance placed on considering diverse genders, whereas in Papua New Guinea LGBTIQ+ rights are considered illegal. Inclusivity and acknowledging intersectionality is key, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of marginalised groups are included, particularly women, girls and people with disabilities. A long-term commitment, understanding that achieving gender equality requires commitment and reflective budget of this focus. Establishing clear benchmarks and indicators to measure progress and holding Government and all stakeholders accountable for their commitments. Ensuring coordination and collaboration with other government departments, civil society, local stakeholders and international partners is vital to maximise impact. Finally, being adaptable and responsive is necessary to respond to evolving challenges and emerging gender equality issues.

### **KTF's Equality Program: Project Zero in Oro Province**

KTF's [Project Zero](#) seeks to address Gender-based Violence (GBV), Family and Sexual Violence (FSV), and Child Protection in remote and rural Oro Province. In 2020, KTF responded to the significant endemic of gender-based violence which was becoming more apparent via KTF's programs and mainstreaming of gender equality approaches. One of the critical impacts of humanitarian crises, including health emergencies like COVID-19, is that women and children become less safe in their homes. However, KTF noticed significant gaps in all spheres of preventing and responding to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) including institutional capacity to respond, stakeholders working in silos and fragmented responses, lack of skilled professionals to support survivors, and most importantly awareness of the condoning of VAWG. Amid the global pandemic, access to information, referral pathways and support were more critical than ever.

In Oro Province, addressing VAWG was not a focus of the humanitarian and development context, with KTF being one of the first to seek transformation of structures enabling and impeding advances towards gender equality. Consequently, this propelled KTF to design a new project in close consultation with communities, Government, schools, health facilities and project partners to address GBV, FSV and the protection of children. Through KTF's first iteration of Project Zero, the partnership strategy has been a unique testimony of localisation, working with partners Femili PNG, Family Sexual Violence Action Committee, Papua New Guinea Counsellors Association and supporting Oro Province's first and only Safe House, and key stakeholders including the Oro Provincial Government Family and Sexual Violence Unit (FSVU), Oro Provincial Government Department of Community Development, Schools and Health facilities all collectively working towards one common goal: making Oro Province a safer place for women and girls. Over the past three years, KTF has seen significant impact in the lives and futures of women and girl survivors through a combination of preventative community education and outreach and supporting responsive service delivery. In particular, awareness raising and shifting perceived norms, upskilling first-responders on supporting survivors, advocating with key government stakeholders and gathering service providers, and providing a safe place for survivors at the Safe House where they can receive support to access counselling, justice, health and repatriation services. However, VAWG

continues to be a pressing issue and the depth and reach of Project Zero is needed across Oro Province.

Since 2020, KTF's Project Zero has:

- Supported 100+ survivors of FSV at Oro Province's only Safe House, primarily women and children survivors
- Assisted 100+ Community Leaders in undertaking FSV referral pathways training, empowering them as community advocates
- Reached over 6000+ people through FSV and GBV awareness
- Delivered the first-of-its-kind Basic Counselling Course to 24 eager participants dedicated to supporting survivors of violence ([read more about this here](#))
- Established and supported the operations of Oro Province's first two safe houses for survivors of GBV and FSV.

The recent evaluation of Project Zero highlighted the invaluable partnership and collaboration with organisations. Brian\* (name changed to protect anonymity of respondent) from Femili PNG's outreach team observed a lot of FSV in Oro upon his first visit there, in particular violence in schools. He said teachers were sexually abusing their own female students, and as a result many young girls were unable to complete their schooling. Brian says KTF's Project Zero has brought together partners working on FSV, like Femili PNG, FSVU and the PNG Counsellors Association, and ensured no one has to work in isolation. "Everyone is coming together now, which is a good sign. This is very important." Brian's colleague Stacey\* remarked that prior to Project Zero, there was no effective communication between service providers. Now there is a bridge to coordinate and communicate. Since Project Zero began its outreach and coordination program, Brian says many changes can be observed. People in communities are reporting and referring abuse. "The information we provide is allowing people to change their thinking." But Brian says there is still much work to do. Essential services are under-resourced and at capacity, and in rural and remote areas essential services are often not available. Service delivery must be strengthened, and Femili PNG is eager to continue working with KTF to support local institutions addressing FSV in Oro.

The external evaluation identified as a high priority the continuation Project Zero given the strong rationale and evident success, particularly expanding the geographical reach in Oro Province.

## **Conclusion**

Gender equality is not an abstract concept; it is a tangible and urgent need for women and girls in Papua New Guinea. KTF's submission calls for a renewed commitment from the Australian government to develop a tailored International Gender Equality strategy that addresses the ongoing crises affecting women and girls in Papua New Guinea. By aligning with international priorities, implementing effective approaches, working with local actors including CSOs and NGOs, and recognising the critical role of Australia, we can pave the way for a brighter, more equitable future for all. It is our collective responsibility to champion the rights and dignity of women and girls in Papua New Guinea and beyond.

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