

## UnitingWorld Submission to DFAT's International Gender Equality Strategy

September 2023

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is the third largest mainline Christian denomination in Australia. UnitingWorld is the aid and partnerships agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, mandated to drive relationships and collaborations with churches overseas. UnitingWorld has program collaborations in 14 countries with 23 partners, predominately in the Indo-Pacific region.

UnitingWorld's experience demonstrates that local faith actors are critical partners in promoting gender inequality, alongside feminist and women's rights organisations, youth movements, and other civil society actors. Up to 85% of people globally identify as religious. Faith is central in people's lives, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. Faith leaders and belief systems strongly influence norms and behaviours. Approaches that engage faith leaders and communities and support the re-interpretation of religious texts that have been used to perpetuate gender norms and excuse violence against women and girls are key to transforming the root causes of gender inequality.

Since 2015, UnitingWorld has led a program promoting gender equality in the Pacific, designed and implemented in close collaboration with Pacific church and community leaders, with widely acclaimed success. The novelty of this project has been the use of biblical teaching and dialog led by Pacific theologians and church leaders to challenge fundamental beliefs and attitudes towards women and girls, and to promote the rights and equality of women and girls as a Christian imperative.

Our key recommendation to DFAT in developing the International Gender Equality Strategy is:

- 1. Address the root causes of gender inequality by supporting locally driven gender equality initiatives by national and regional faith actors that are re-interpreting traditional religious texts and practices and translating human rights language into language that makes sense to faith communities.**

Appendix 1 outlines the rationale for this approach and key lessons which we believe are relevant for the new International Gender Equality Strategy.

## Appendix 1. UnitingWorld's Pacific Gender Equality Program

### Summary

UnitingWorld's Gender Equality program in the Pacific is about shifting mindsets and behaviour in community through the influence of respected leaders and Christian teaching.

Pacific churches equip their leadership to drive dialog and teach about Biblical theology that highlights the equality of men and women in order to challenge traditional views of gender and address institutionalised inequality.

### Context

There is no silver bullet to address gender inequality, and the violence and disempowerment women and girls face because of it. An issue this complex, with roots in history, culture and tradition, needs a multi-faceted approach. Directly meeting the needs of women and children affected by violence, enabling the work of women led organisations, and a discourse on women's rights all have a part to play in addressing gender inequality.

However, transforming harmful behaviours of men and boys by challenging and changing attitudes and beliefs is equally important. Our program is based on the desire of several churches in the Pacific to use their influence in society to do this through Biblical teaching on gender relations and human dignity.

### Origins

In 2012, UnitingWorld consulted representatives from the women's fellowships of four partner churches in Kiribati, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu about what mattered to them. They identified women and girls' safety, health and wellbeing, and increasing women's voice in decision-making and leadership as major priorities.

UnitingWorld supported each fellowship to design and run pilot projects in their communities based on their own strengths and priorities. When the pilots were evaluated, **a key theme that emerged was the need to challenge the perceived theological foundations for gender inequality and engage with men – especially the predominantly male church leaders – to address gender inequality.**

In dialog with our Pacific partners, we recognised that some Christian teaching, brought to the Pacific by missionaries in the 1800's, played a significant role in reinforcing gender inequalities and traditional gender roles. These understandings can be used to limit the voices and opportunities of women, justify violence towards women, and limit women's ability to leave an abusive marriage.

In 2014, UnitingWorld employed Rev Dr Cliff Bird, a respected Pacific theologian from the Solomon Islands and Rev Dr Seforosa Carroll, a feminist theologian originally from Fiji of Rotuman heritage, to support partner churches in this work. Together, they developed theological resources presenting a Biblical theology of gender equality that was written entirely from and for the Pacific context.

These resources, which include a broad framework paper, Bible studies, and facilitation guides for group workshops, have sparked important conversations across the Pacific and have been the basis of all our program activities.

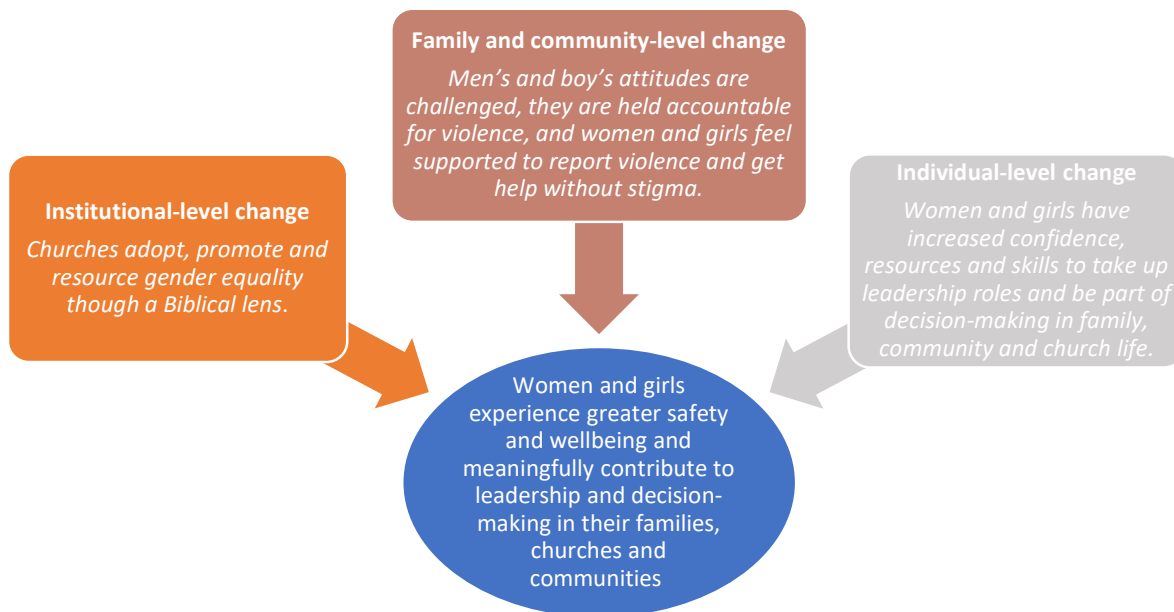
## Theory of Change

The program has a three-pronged, long-term approach to improving gender equality.

At the **institutional level**, church leaders (predominately male) engage with, adopt and promote a Biblical theology of gender equality and women in leadership. This leads to practical changes such as churches adopting Gender policies, Safeguarding and Protection Policies, Codes of Conduct and reporting mechanisms, and engaging in advocacy around gender inequality and violence.

This institutional transformation increases opportunities for women in leadership and decision-making. As church members hear about the Biblical message of gender equality and the institutional response, church **communities and families** become safer spaces as men's and boy's attitudes are challenged, they are held accountable for violence, and women and girls feel supported to report violence and access support services without stigma.

Equipping **women and girls** with leadership and life skills complements the Biblical gender equality message and gives women and girls confidence take on leadership roles, participate in decision-making in their families and churches, and report abusive behaviour. Scholarships for theological education and directly resourcing women's organisations provides further pathways to women taking on leadership roles, ensuring women's priorities are heard and transformation sustained.



## Impact

So far in Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Papua New Guinea:

### Institutional change

- Churches have contextualised and adopted a gender equality theology, in some cases overcoming divisions between and within churches, and identified gender equality as a major priority.
- Churches have established gender desks or committees, which are well-placed to drive gender programming forward.
- Churches have trained and established networks of gender advocates, run awareness raising campaigns, and piloted projects in schools and with young couples.
- Churches have developed and adopted church-wide Safeguarding and Protection Policies including complaints mechanisms and Codes of Conduct in line with local protection Laws.

### Church leaders as advocates

- Church leaders at all levels have publicly shared anti-violence and Gender Equality messages in churches and on television, radio and social media, including during Covid-19.

### Community and individual transformation

- Male church ministers and leaders have accepted a new understanding of biblical texts, and this has transformed their behaviour.

*“Back then I tried to take ownership of my wife. I was abusive. As I looked deep into the theology, it was something that transformed me: The way I see the world, the way I see my wife and my children and the way I see others...When we go out from the right interpretation of the Bible, that men and women were created in the image and likeness of God, that does not allow you to do any harm or abuse to anyone” (Methodist Minister, Fiji)*

### Regional influence

UnitingWorld’s Gender Equality Theology resources are considered “ground-breaking and important at the regional level” (Koro, 2021).

- World Vision Vanuatu, House of Sarah in Fiji and Women’s Crisis Centres in Fiji and Vanuatu have adapted/built on the resources for their own programs and services.
- The Gate’s Foundation used our partners’ experience to learn about best practices to engage faith actors on gender equality.
- Ma'a Fafine mo e Famili in Tonga used the resources to run workshops on Gender Equality and Legal Literacy from a Theological Perspective, funded by the EU and Canadian Government.
- Parts of the Pacific Conference of Church’s new Gender Status Card, a self-assessment for churches in the region, are based on this work.

*“If church leaders can change their mindset that is good. The church is very powerful, and people respect ministers and church leaders rather than normal people” (Representative of Kiribati Police, Domestic Violence Sexual Offence Unit)*

## What we have learnt and next steps

**Two evaluations and countless conversations with our church partners have stressed that a biblical approach to gender equality and addressing male violence remains key in the Pacific. This approach has gained traction where more secular ‘rights-based’ approaches, which have traditionally excluded churches, have not.**

Pacific churches need support to embed institutional change, create better pathways for women’s leadership, and share gender equality theology messaging more widely to bring about transformation in communities and families. They also need support to contextualise key messages for different audiences, including schools, bible study groups, and traditional events.

While benefitting from regional networking, the next phase of each partner’s gender equality programming will be driven by each church. UnitingWorld is currently supporting four partner churches to develop long-term gender equality strategies, building on the church’s specific context, priorities and results so far.

During the next phase we hope to support partner churches to collect evidence of church and community-wide change to verify personal accounts of transformation, through contextually relevant Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning systems.