Promoting gender justice in and through faith communities in Oceania

Stories and lessons about what is working and why

UnitingWorld
connecting communities for life

actalliance FOR GENDER JUSTICE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2023, a group of faith leaders, practitioners and volunteers from across Oceania gathered at a series of storytelling and learning events to ask: *what is already working to advance gender equality and gender justice in our region, and why? And how can we apply what is already working to our own contexts?*

Each of the following people and organisations played a key role in the storytelling and learning events, and documenting the stories, ideas, knowledge, and wisdom captured in the following pages:

- The 43 participants from seven countries who took part in the series. Each of them works or volunteers for a church, faith-based organisation or local and international NGO active in advancing gender equality and gender justice in and through faith communities and generously gave their time to reflect on their own and others' experiences.
- The representatives of the Anglican Church of Melanesia, United Church in Solomon Islands, House of Sarah, and Women at the Well who volunteered to share their experience of working in and through faith communities to prevent and respond to violence against women and children and enable women's leadership.
- Reverend Sereima Lomaloma and Ms Akanisi Tarabe, who helped shape the series and facilitated and recorded the learnings from each storytelling and learning event. Both brought vast experience and knowledge of advancing gender equality and gender justice, particularly in the Fijian context, to the series.
- Members of the ACT Alliance Pacific Australia New Zealand (PANZ) Forum, especially those who volunteered to be on the project steering committee. Each member was instrumental in sharing invitations to the storytelling and learning events within their partners and networks.
- The ACT Alliance Gender Justice Programme, which is doing important work globally on gender justice, including from a theological perspective.

This learning resource was co-authored by Reverend Sereima Lomaloma, Ms Akanisi Tarabe, Stephanie Dalton, Mia Berry, and Tanya Lee-Fenwick, based on the stories, discussion and ideas shared and generated during the storytelling and learning events.

The storytelling and learning events, and this resource, were made possible with the generous support of the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) through the ACT Alliance Gender Justice Programme. Its contents should not be taken to reflect the views of the Swedish Government.

With financial support from

Sida
SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY

Contents

Acknowledgments i

Contents 1

Introduction 2

Overview of the storytelling and learning events 5
- Background 6
- Approach 7
- Facilitators 8
- Participants 9

Snapshots of the Stories in Focus 10

What did we find out? 14
- Finding 1 – Redeeming Gender Norms: revisiting biblical interpretations and challenging culture 14
- Finding 2 – The Message is in the Messenger: gaining commitment of church leaders to create an enabling environment 17
- Finding 3 – Partnerships Matter: fostering collaboration between church, government and civil society organisations 19
- Finding 4 – Know Your Audience: community approaches and cultural sensitivity 21
- Finding 5 – Working Together: male and female advocates of change 22
- Finding 6 – Breaking the Culture of Silence: telling our stories in safe spaces 23
- Finding 7 – Language Matters: a note on communication 25

Concluding thoughts and next steps 26

Annex 1 - Participating Organisations 29

Annex 2 - Stories in Focus in full 30
- Story in Focus 1: Using Faith Approaches to Advocate for Gender Equality in the Solomon Islands, Anglican Church of Melanesia in the Solomon Islands 30
- Story in Focus 2: Transforming Harmful Gender Norms in Fiji, House of Sarah 33
- Story in Focus 3: Trauma Healing for Survivors of Abuse, Women at the Well, Fiji 36
- Story in Focus 4: Developing and Implementing a Safe Church Policy, United Church in Solomon Islands 39

ACRONYMS

ACOM	Anglican Church of Melanesia
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
GET	Gender Equality Theology
HOS	House of Sarah
PANZ Forum	Pacific Australia New Zealand Forum
PCC	Pacific Conference of Churches
SICA	Solomon Island Christian Association
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
SIFGA	Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association
SPATS	South Pacific Association of Theological Schools
UCSI	United Church in Solomon Islands
WATW	Women at the Well

INTRODUCTION

Christianity is the dominant religion in Oceania, [1] especially across Pacific Island Nations, where it accounts for about 95% of the population (with lower rates in Fiji). [2] For example, in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, approximately 97%, 93%, and 99% of the population identify as Christians, while in Fiji it is 64%. [3] As such, Christianity is at the heart of Oceania's cultures.

Oceania also has some of the highest rates of physical and sexual violence against women and girls in the world. Globally, 1 in 3 women aged 15-24 who have been in a relationship will have experienced violence by an intimate partner, and 35% of women have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. [4] Of the 11 Pacific Island countries that have used the same methodology in national research on the prevalence of intimate partner violence, the highest rates have been recorded in Kiribati (68%), Fiji (64%), Solomon Islands (64%), Vanuatu (60%), and the Republic of Marshall Islands (51%). [5]

Harm is also happening outside of the home. In addition to well-documented cases of abuse within religious institutions in Australia and New Zealand, [6][7] in recent years there have also been cases of clergy abuse reported in the media in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Solomon Islands. It is expected that many more have not been reported because of a prevailing 'culture of silence' and the reverence in which the Church is held. Calls for the development of safe church or safeguarding policies have been made because of these cases, including by the head of the Catholic Church in Fiji, Archbishop Peter Loy Chong:

> *Every Christian church must develop its own safeguarding policies, scrutinise, and train its pastors to protect women and children in the flock from sexual abuse... The churches just have to educate people, put up a policy, put conditions on pastors' work, the strategies they have to follow when dealing with children and what the repercussions could be for a wrong action. [8]*

---

[1] Oceania is a geographic area including the three Pacific Island regions of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, as well as Australia and New Zealand

[2] DFAT, Case study: Faith in Gender Equality in the Pacific, Dec 2016, www.dfat.gov.au/news/news/Pages/faith-in-gender-equality-in-the-pacific

[3] Pew Research Center, Table: Religious Composition by Country, in Percentages, Dec 2012, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/table-religious-composition-by-country-in-percentages

[4] UN Women, Facts & Figures: Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, Sept 2023, www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women

[5] The Pacific Community (SPC), Thematic Brief: Ending Violence Against Women in the Pacific, Feb 2023, https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/acf42df5-54c0-43e2-98c4-e2afefb1bce0/resource/4cf275c7-ea06-419f-845e-7b49cff21e96/download/spc-pwl_thematicbrief_evawg.pdf

[6] Commonwealth of Australia, Final Report: Religious Insitutions, vol. 16, book 1, 2017, www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/religious-institutions

[7] Royal Commission of Inquiry, Tāwharautia: Pūrongo o te Wā Interim Report, vol.1, Wellington, December 2020, www.abuseincare.org.nz/our-progress/library/v/194/tawharautia-purongo-o-te-wainterim-report

[8] W Kumar, Loy Chong: Develop Protection Policies, The Fiji Times, 9 Mar 2021, www.pressreader.com/fiji/the-fiji-times/20210309

Although many Christians claim that their faith and beliefs are divinely inspired, religion and culture are generally interdependent, with church teachings and biblical interpretations often heavily influenced by culture and influencing culture. [9] According to Le Roux, this interdependency has contributed to the continued perpetration of violence against women and girls. [10] In Oceania, patriarchal attitudes and structural violence have been ingrained and reinforced in culture and religious practice. [11] Culture is also often cited as a barrier for women's leadership in Oceania, although this is not applicable across all contexts. [12]

General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches, Rev James Bhagwan, says:

Faith leaders [and churches] play a uniquely influential role in determining values and can be a powerful source in re-shaping attitudes, beliefs and behaviours about gender equality and the acceptability of Violence against Women and Girls at the individual and community levels. [13]

In this context - where religious actors and beliefs have a pervasive influence on the values, attitudes, norms and behaviour of women and men - a proactive stance by faith-based organisations in Oceania is critical for addressing violence against women and girls. Indeed, faith actors in Oceania have been increasingly thinking about the God-given common humanity, dignity, and equality of women and men, and working to overcome practical challenges including high rates of violence against women and children and limited opportunities for women to be engaged in decision-making, including in the ordained ministry.

Additionally, as outlined by Rev Bhagwan, there is a growing shift in churches from conservative, patriarchal theology to theology that considers inclusion and equality as biblically-mandated, that advocates for women's role in leadership, and that considers violence against women and children as a sin that goes against God's intention for human dignity and relationships. [14]

---

[9] E Le Roux and S I Pertek, On the Significance of Religion in Violence Against Women and Girls, Routledge, Oxon, 2023, https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/83a55a31-29a8-485a-ac3a-b428c1709cbf/9781000811339.pdf
10] ibid.
[11] United Nations Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, Faith Based Organisations' Commitment to Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, March 2021, https://pacific.un.org/en/115362-faith-based-organisations%E2%80%99-commitment-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls
[12] I L Quay, Pacific Women's Leadership Scoping study, 2013, https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/pwl-pacific-women-s-leadership-scoping-study
[13] United Nations Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, Faith Based Organisations' Commitment to Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, March 2021
[14] J Bhagwan, The Role of Faith Communities as Agents of Social Change in Ending Violence Against Women, February 2019, www.pasifikarising.org/the-role-of-faith-communities-as-agents-of-social-change-in-ending-violence-against-women

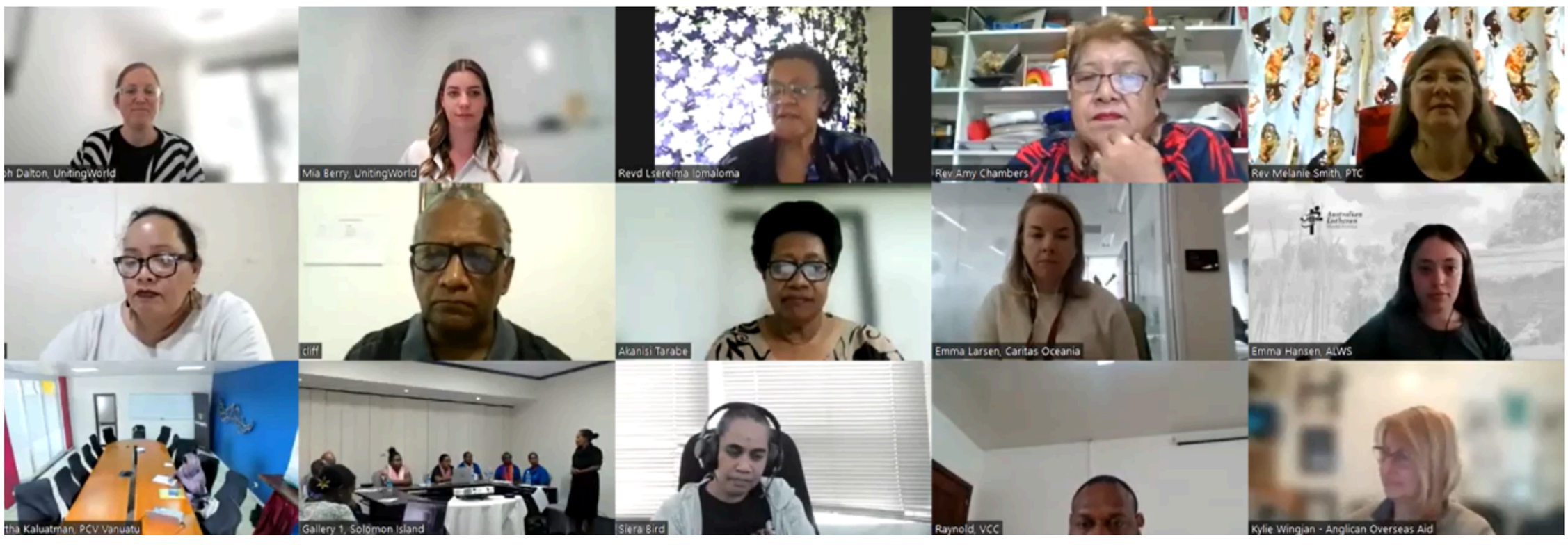
While much has been done, challenges persist and new opportunities to learn from and partner with a wide range of actors are emerging. In 2023, UnitingWorld and other members of the ACT Alliance Pacific Australia New Zealand (PANZ) Forum, with the support of the ACT Alliance Gender Justice Programme, [15] coordinated a series of online storytelling and learning events to explore and learn from how faith actors in Oceania are advancing gender equality and gender justice in the region. This report captures the stories that were shared, the knowledge and wisdom that emerged from reflection on these stories, and recommendations generated by the storytellers and participants.

Gender equality **is the equal enjoyment of rights (including safety), opportunities, resources, and rewards by all people. [16]**

Gender justice **is the systemic redistribution of power, opportunities, and access for people of all genders through the dismantling of harmful structures including patriarchy. [17]**

[15] ACT Alliance is a global network of over 140 churches and FBOs. The Pacific Australia New Zealand (PANZ) Forum comprises 10 faith-based NGO members of ACT Alliance.
[16] UNWomen, Gender Equality Glossary, 2021, www.trainingcentre.unwomen.org/mod/glossary
[17] Global Fund for Women, Frequently Asked Questions, 2024, www.globalfundforwomen.org/faqs

OVERVIEW OF THE STORYTELLING AND LEARNING EVENTS



BACKGROUND

The purpose of the storytelling and learning events was to support people from across Oceania to meet and share stories of what their churches, organisations, and communities are already doing to advance gender equality and gender justice, whether by working to make faith communities safer places for women and children or by improving access to services and information for women and girls. The main questions we set out to ask were:

- ***What is already working to advance gender equality and gender justice, and why?***
- ***How can we apply what is already working to our own contexts?***

The storytelling and learning events provided practitioners from churches, faith-based organisations and other civil society organisations a platform to consider these questions through sharing stories about their experience promoting gender equality and gender justice, particularly within communities of faith or through faith-informed approaches. Group reflection and discussion, or *Talanoa*, on these stories aimed to identify lessons about what works to advance gender equality and gender justice in the region, and why. The series also aimed to support participants to identify take-away actions for their own churches, organisations and communities.

> ***Talanoa*** **"is conversation between people, sharing ideas and talking with someone. *Talanoa* can be used for different purposes: to teach and share ideas, preach, build and maintain relationships, and gather information." [16]**

The overarching theme of the storytelling and learning series was *Promoting Gender Justice in and through Faith Communities in Oceania*. A steering committee for the series was formed and potential participants were invited to provide input into the topics they were most interested to learn about. Invitations were sent to PANZ members and their partners, and other faith actors and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Representatives of four organisations volunteered to share their stories at the learning events. Along with the feedback given by potential participants, the focus of these four Stories in Focus shaped the primary themes to be explored:

- **Theme 1** – Redeeming Gender Inequality in Church and Community: Transforming Harmful Gender Norms
- **Theme 2** – Safe Churches and Communities: Preventing and Responding to Violence Against Women and Children

The storytelling and learning events were done in a hybrid format to allow maximum participation, with a focus on storytelling, discussion and identifying follow-up actions. Facilitators Revd Sereima Lomaloma and Ms Akanisi Tarabe were engaged to encourage reflection and discussion and capture the learnings that emerged. At the end of the series, the stories, insights and ideas raised throughout the series were to be documented as a resource for participants and other actors working to progress gender equality and gender justice across Oceania.

APPROACH

The storytelling and learning events were based on a strengths-based Appreciative Inquiry approach, which aims to identify what is working well to collectively create knowledge. It builds on relationships and storytelling, both of which are relevant and important in the context of the region's cultures. Appreciative Inquiry is often used to create a trusting environment, and this "coincides with the nature of *talanoa*, which also seeks to develop trust and create an environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their stories." [17] A storytelling framework was developed to help storytellers identify and demonstrate their achievements in advancing gender equality and gender justice in their churches, organisations or communities. Churches and faith-based organisations were invited to share their stories and actions they were engaged in under the themes.

---

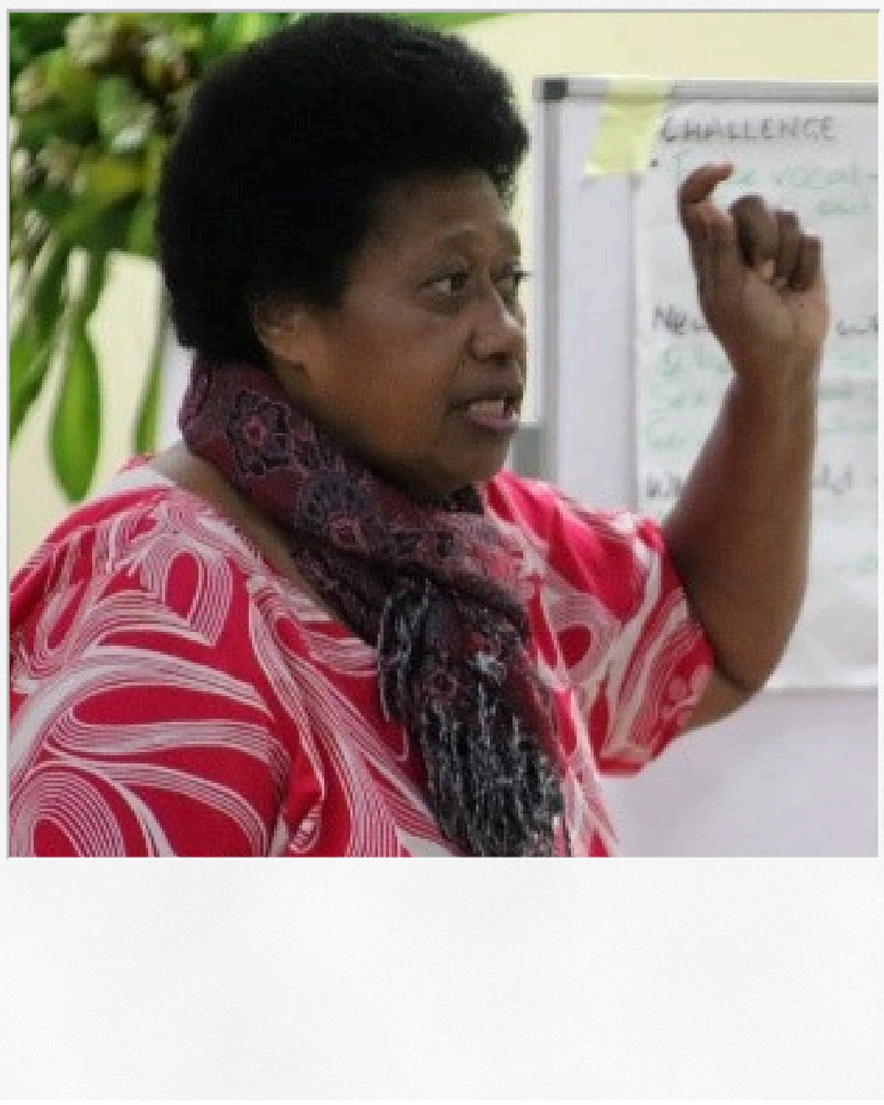
[16] M Koloto, Exploring Inclusive Education Research in Tonga Through Tongan Cultural Lenses and Methodologies, The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives, vol. 22, no. 2, 2023.
[17] ibid.

FACILITATORS

Reverend Sereima Lomaloma is an ordained minister in the Anglican Church of Polynesia, an experienced trainer and facilitator, and an advocate for gender equality and the elimination of violence against women and children in Fiji and the Pacific. Sereima is founder and Trustee of the House of Sarah, a Fiji-based NGO that raises awareness of issues around gender-based violence and provides support to women who have lived through gender-based violence. Sereima has also been Director for Women in the Ministry for Women, Fiji Government, and representative to the Safe Church Commission of the Anglican Communion.



Sereima has a Master's Degree in Social Policy and Planning in Developing Countries and has authored and co-authored resources including the 2022 report *We Are All Created Equal - Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls in Fiji's Faith Settings*.



Ms Akanisi Tarabe is an academic and experienced trainer and facilitator. Akanisi was a lecturer in Sociology at the University of the South Pacific and has authored and co-authored journal articles, book chapters, reports, training manuals, and curricula on topics ranging from culture and the Church to forest conservation. Her MA thesis titled *Re-assessing Gender Roles: A Study of Indigenous Fijian Women's Role in Funerals* used a qualitative approach to investigate the important role women play in *i-Taukei* society.

In 2018, Akanisi co-facilitated the development of the Gender and Theology Framework for the South Pacific Association of Theological Schols (SPATS).

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 43 participants (30 females and 13 males) from seven countries took part in the series.

- 27 participants (20 females and 7 males) took part in the first learning event, representing organisations in Fiji (7), Australia (5), Vanuatu (4), New Zealand (1), Solomon Islands (9) and Tonga (1).
- 35 participants (26 females and 9 males) took part in the second learning event, representing organisations from Fiji (13), Australia (7), Vanuatu (6), New Zealand (1), Solomon Islands (4), Tonga (1) and Tuvalu (1).

All organisations represented in the series are listed in **Annex 1.**

Snapshots of the Stories in Focus

Four Stories in Focus shared with participants in advance and reflected on during the events are summarised below. The full version of each story is provided in Annex 2.

Learning Event 1 – Thursday 31 October 2023

Redeeming Gender Inequality in Church and Community: Transforming Harmful Gender Norms

Story in Focus 1: *Using Faith Approaches to Advocate for Gender Equality in the Solomon Islands, Anglican Church of Melanesia in the Solomon Islands*

The Anglican Church of Melanesia's (ACOM) vision is for a safe and healthy church where there is justice for everyone, extending from its leadership to the community. To contribute to this vision, ACOM has rolled out two complementary gender equality projects. The Safe Strong Community project focused on training ordained ministers in the Dioceses of Malaita, Ysabel, Central Melanesia, and Hanuato in Gender Equality Theology (GET).

To ensure that social issues and women's empowerment were also addressed, ACOM also supports the Mothers Union women's organisation to set up gender task forces to work with church, community and traditional leaders, the government and CSOs. This Healthy, Safe, and Just Communities project started in Ysabel and has been extended to Malaita Diocese by the Bishop.

As a result of the projects, traditional and church leaders (usually men) are embracing women as leaders in the community and as change agents. This is a departure from the norm and was made possible through theological resources and training that emphasise a biblical mandate for gender equality. Revisiting traditional theology and interpretations of texts (e.g. man is boss of the house) in a different way has not only empowered women but given new understanding to men.

Church and traditional leaders' recognition of women's role as key agents of change in communities has empowered Mothers Union leaders and members to be vocal on social issues, injustices, and negative social norms. Women are confidently performing their roles as leaders in the community, as advocates and change agents on social issues.

Partnership between men and women, and the church, community leaders, government and CSOs has been effective in improving intervention services to survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Increased disclosures of domestic violence and sexual abuse cases is a consequence of women's knowledge of what constitutes domestic violence and sexual abuse but also of the collaboration with and access to intervention services available through CSOs such as SAFENET. Survivors are encouraged to report the trauma they are experiencing, knowing that there is a support network available.

Story in Focus 2: *Transforming Harmful Gender Norms in Fiji, House of Sarah*

House of Sarah's (HoS) work on challenging the prevalent belief amongst members of faith communities that women are not created equal to men began in 2015. Recognising that these traditional biblical interpretations are contributing to attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate Violence against Women and Girls, HoS rolled out its Gender and Theology program to introduce a new understanding of God's vision for human relationships that is based on equality and respect. By introducing new insights and interpretations of biblical texts, faith communities can live out the values and principles of respectful, just, caring, loving and peaceful relationships.

As a faith-based organisation, HoS's work with the Anglican Diocese of Polynesia was strengthened with the passing of a resolution by the Diocesan Synod in 2013 on zero tolerance on violence against women and girls in their homes, schools, and churches. The Resolution opened the doors for HoS to implement its Gender and Theology workshops and gender-based violence prevention programs in Anglican parishes and with other faith communities.

As a result of its work, HoS has seen an acceptance that biblical texts affirm that women and men are created in the image of God and are equal in the eyes of God. This is fundamental to the re-thinking and re-envisioning of female and male relationships and consequently on the root cause of violence against women and girls. The safe spaces provided through HoS activities have enabled survivors of violence to share their stories of violence and abuse. For communities of faith, this is encouraging and supportive. The silence around gender-based violence in the communities has been shattered as people admit that gender-based violence is happening and that they recognise its impact.





Learning Event 2 – Tuesday 3 November 2023

Safe Churches and Communities: Preventing and Responding to Violence Against Women and Children

Story in Focus 3: *Trauma Healing for Survivors of Abuse, Women at the Well, Fiji*

Women at the Well (WATW) is a ministry of the Catholic Church in Fiji to their members. Pioneered by the head of the Catholic Church in Fiji and launched in 2018, WATW is the church's response to reported increases in domestic violence and sexual abuse. With the support of church leadership, WATW gathers women and men in parishes where survivors of abuse share their stories in safe and supportive spaces, leading to healing and restoration. WATW's work focuses on ensuring that survivors of abuse are healed, relationships are restored and justice done, sending a strong message to perpetrators that the church does not condone violence and that the Domestic Violence Act 2009 will be applied to abusers.

The outreach extends from the national to the parish level, covering 36 parishes all over Fiji. Many volunteers at WATW are survivors of violence. Their lived experience of domestic violence and trauma empowers them to create supportive environments where survivors can safely tell their stories, gain legal help, and receive assurance that they are not walking alone in their journey to wholeness. Seeking new interpretations of Scriptures to transform harmful gender norms bring into focus the importance of Scripture in influencing behaviour and transformative changes.

Women have become bold and determined and are no longer silent in what WATW calls "this culture of silence". Male leaders are challenging the behaviour of their male counterparts when they are involved in supporting WATW, which indicates a change in their mindset and attitude towards women and children.

Given WATW was pioneered by the head of the Catholic Church, the endorsement of the leadership of the church was essential to enable WATW to offer this ministry to members of the faith and roll out its program in the parishes. Collaboration with government and CSO stakeholders, including the Ministry for Women, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, and House of Sarah, has supported volunteers to learn new skills and allowed WATW to extend the services they offer.

Story in Focus 4: *Developing and Implementing a Safe Church Policy, United Church in Solomon Islands*

The United Church in Solomon Islands (UCSI), through its partnership with UnitingWorld, was a pioneer in the development and roll out of Gender Equality Theology (GET) resources created by and for Pacific churches. By formally adopting GET at its General Assembly, UCSI affirmed that every person has equal dignity and value endowed by God. UCSI was also one of the first churches in the region to develop a Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct, which targets all members of the church and the community, and aligns to national legislation and protection mechanisms.

Communities of Practice in the UCSI's four regions comprising church ministers and their spouses, all trained in GET, work closely with project officers to roll out awareness activities and training on the policy. This network is making sure GET resources and the policy are not just documents on a shelf and that actions on the ground are sustainable, coordinated and contextualised whilst retaining agreed principles and theological foundations.

Changes in attitudes and behaviour towards women and children are already taking place, demonstrated in the way women and men are working together in communities, something that was not usually done before due to cultural traditions. Church members are now aware of the reporting and feedback and disciplinary processes and have used the policy as a tool to report cases of abuse. The policy and Code of Conduct have also been introduced in UCSI schools in an aim to address bullying, harassment and abuse and provide a framework to educate children on respectful relationships.

UCSI's efforts to develop and implement a safe church policy is a story of collaboration and networking with UnitingWorld, leaders of the church and the community through GET to address violence against women and children. UCSI's story also demonstrates the benefits of collaborating with other churches and networks such as Solomon Island Christian Association (SICA), Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association (SIFGA), SafeNet and non-UCSI members so that there is shared understanding of the importance of protecting children and safety for all.

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

During the storytelling and learning events, participants, and facilitators sought to identify:

- ***What is already working to advance gender equality and gender justice, and why?***
- ***How can we apply what is already working to our own contexts?***

From the stories shared, group reflection and discussion, participants and facilitators together identified that the following ideas, approaches and factors are already working to advance gender equality and gender justice.

FINDING 1 - REDEEMING GENDER NORMS: REVISITING BIBLICAL INTERPRETATIONS AND CHALLENGING CULTURE

In societies and churches across Oceania, patriarchal beliefs about gender norms, which are usually premised around women being subservient to men, are firmly ingrained. The Bible is used to reinforce patriarchy with its reference to distinct gender roles for men and women as part of the created order. The patriarchal interpretation of biblical texts is attributed to the work of early missionaries and colonisation, and demands a re-examination to truly advance gender equality. Many cultures in the region have evolved over time to include such texts as part of the culture and it is so ingrained that one cannot distinguish which part of culture was not there before. As stated in the House of Sarah's training manual *Transforming Harmful Gender Norms to Stop Violence Against Women and Girls:*

> *Two powerful factors influencing gender perspectives are culture and the Bible. Both factors emphasise the supremacy of patriarchy which is the underlying cause for gender-based violence. This training focuses on dismantling patriarchy by engaging participants to relook at cultural props and interpretations of biblical texts that are often used to justify violence against women. [18]*

Participants in the storytelling and learning series agreed these traditional gender norms are a contributing factor to high rates of violence against women and children in the region and are holding women back from taking up leadership roles. However, participants also recognised that this trend is changing as advocates and church leaders seek to redeem gender norms from both biblical and cultural perspectives.

---

[18] House of Sarah, Transforming Harmful Gender Norms to Stop Violence Against Women and Girls: Facilitators Manual, 2023, p. 1.

The biblical perspective

One of the main ways churches are seeking to redeem gender norms is re-examining traditional interpretations of the Bible that have often been used to justify gender inequality. A common approach is through theological resources that support church leaders and members to reclaim human dignity and equality to both male and female as God originally intended. One of these is the 2016 *Framework Paper: Human Dignity and Gender Equality from a Biblical-Theological Perspective:*

> *The paper presents and affirms the truth that biblically and theologically women and men are equal before God and each other. What this demands is a rereading, rethinking, reinterpretation and reapplication of biblical texts which are relevant to the relationship between women and men. Many who read this paper may find this approach a challenge, but this needs to happen if we are to (re)capture the dignity and equality which God intended for all people in the very beginning. [19]*

This emphasis on human dignity and equality has been reflected in the theological foundations of the United Church in Solomon Islands Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy, which states "every person has equal dignity and value endowed by God. God is presented in the Bible as guardian and protector of all vulnerable peoples, including children, in society and therefore in the church." [20]

All the storytellers attested to the value of this biblical approach in their contexts. For example, the House of Sarah's Story in Focus states;

> *A biblical approach to transforming gender norms has been very effective. The biggest success has been the use of Bible studies at the beginning of each day of the 3-day long workshops [on redeeming gender norms]. In Fijian communities, people are most receptive to ideas that are related to the Bible or Christian faith. It gives meaning to and magnifies the message that we are trying to convey.*

The same is affirmed by ACOM, which in its GET project emphasised revisiting traditional theology and interpretations of biblical texts, such as 'man is boss of the house'. In their Story in Focus, ACOM representatives reflected that "we saw a need to equip our church leaders and theologians with this Gender Equality Theology, because there are some biblical texts about women and men that have been misunderstood and have misled our people and culture".

During group discussion in Event 1, participants agreed with the relevance of the biblical approach, with one group summarising their discussion by stating ACOM's was a "well thought through and planned approach, based on the Bible, which is relevant for that context, that should have a positive impact".

---

[19] UnitingWorld, Framework Paper: Human Dignity and Gender Equality from a Biblical-Theological Perspective, 2016, p. 4
[20] United Church in Solomon Islands, UCSI Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy, 2020

The cultural perspective

Approaching gender norms from a biblical perspective has also seen breakthrough in redeeming gender norms as they stem from traditional cultures. Very often, people are reluctant to challenge or change norms because of culture's retributive nature. However, once people have accepted a new interpretation of a traditional biblical understanding, they have been more willing to take bold steps to consider and make changes to cultural norms as well. As cited in House of Sarah's Story in Focus, "we are also seeing increased understanding and acknowledgement that culture and tradition are not static. Changes can be made to stop the devaluing of women."

An example of this boldness to change traditions emerged in a group discussion in Event 1, where an anecdote about the Fijian custom of the fish head was shared;

> *The fish head is the most important part of the fish in the Fiji tradition and Fijian culture. The fish head goes to the head of the household. But my husband and I talked about it, and decided that we can change that. We decided to give the fish head to our youngest son. My husband no longer eats the fish head. It doesn't make the head of the family any less.... But we've made changes and it's very safe. When I tell people this story in trainings, people accept the fact that, yes, gender norms can be transformed.*

This anecdote led to one group observing in their discussion that "culture can be changed, and we can make the change in ourselves and our homes. A good example is who can eat the head of the fish - and it doesn't make a difference if the youngest is a son or daughter."

Both the challenge of confronting long-held gender norms and the transformative impact of approaching this from a biblical and cultural perspective was highlighted in the ACOM Story in Focus, shared during Event 1:

> *This was challenging at first because our theologians upheld strong traditional beliefs and cultural norms, which have been ingrained since our ancestors' time. However, when they completed the training, they acknowledged and embraced a new perspective on gender equality and are now helping to roll out this information across the Dioceses*.

Key Learning 1

Given the prevalence of Christianity and the reverence in which the Church is held across Oceania, it is appropriate and highly necessary that churches and faith-based entities engage in transforming gender norms and preventing gender-based violence.

Key Learning 2

People in Oceania are receptive to Gender Equality Theology because the approach is based on the Bible. This approach allows re-examination of biblical texts that have the tradition of supporting the devaluing of women. It encourages genuine change as it allows people to reflect on their behaviour and attitudes rather than being told how to behave.

Key Learning 3

Having new biblical insights leads people to understand that culture is a social construct, and that our beliefs and attitudes are influenced by these constructs. Knowing that parts of culture support violence, people are more willing to change their attitudes and behaviour because they now realise that culture can be transformed.

FINDING 2 – THE MESSAGE IS IN THE MESSENGER: GAINING COMMITTMENT OF CHURCH LEADERS TO CREATE AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

The four Stories in Focus that were shared during the series all attest to their relevant churches and church leaders' commitment to create enabling environments to address issues related to gender inequality, including violence against women and girls and women's leadership. Moreover, UCSI's pioneering work on developing and implementing a safe church policy was seen as critical in ensuring the sustained focus and energy of individual church leaders.

Church leadership buy-in and leadership

The Synod of ACOM endorsed and accepted Gender Equality Theology (GET) resources to be used throughout the Church, paving the way for transformative work with the Mothers' Union. The Synod of the Diocese of Polynesia passed a resolution on zero tolerance on violence against women in the church, homes, schools, and communities, opening the door for the House of Sarah to work in the Anglican faith communities in Fiji. Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, as head of the Catholic Church in Fiji, was inspired to address high rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse against women and children and laid the foundations for the Women at the Well ministry. For UCSI, the endorsement of GET and gender equality projects by the highest body of the church was equally important, as reflected in their Story in Focus shared during Event 2:

In November 2018, it was resolved in the UCSI' s annual General Assembly meeting that GET would be part of the church and a GET minister would be appointed. In February 2019, the Gender Equality Theology project officer was appointed to look after the desk.

Each of the Stories in Focus demonstrate that creating enabling environments to advance gender equality and gender justice in churches and faith communities requires the engagement of the leaders of the church and/or the endorsement of the highest decision-making body in the church. Both open doors and facilitate actions that may otherwise be challenging to bring about. Having the church leaders, ministers and clergy on board validates the authenticity and importance of the message brought into church communities.

During the learning events, participants from across the region validated the important role church leaders play in creating an enabling environment for change. During Event 1, one group identified how important it was for the "Synod of ACOM to accept and endorse GET resources to be used throughout the church." Another group of participants noted the additional importance of engaging with leaders at the Provincial level, who are well-placed to reach out to people in villages. This same group noted that it was a "good foundation to start with the church, because everyone goes to church! Target the top to make a change for everyone else - what they say and preach is a big thing for everyone."

Likewise, during Event 2, groups reflected on how leadership buy-in "played a big role in rolling out the seminars and also in making connections to government and other church networks", and setting an example of male leaders challenging behaviour, which cascaded down to local leaders.

Policies and programs

Participants also recognised, however, that transformation requires more than the support of individual church leaders and high-level endorsement. Another important enabling factor that emerged from the stories and discussion is ensuring that policies and programs are in place to entrench commitments made by church leadership.

UCSI's Story in Focus, for example, outlined how its safe church policy was being socialised and implemented within the four regions of UCSI and pilot schools to "pave the way to promote a safe church for all". It also recognized that on its own, the policy is not sufficient. For example, UCSI's representatives reflected on how the implementation of the policy is strengthened with the disciplinary processes that church workers must abide by. Moreover, the policy has given gender project teams confidence in raising awareness and running activities about preventing violence against women and children. As stated by UCSI representatives during a group discussion on their Story in Focus, "we don't have fear in conducting the program because the policy is already in place."

UCSI's implementation of its policy is a positive example of following a communal process rather than allowing the policy to be the sole responsibility of certain individuals. For example, UCSI used existing Community of Practices, comprising ministers and their spouses trained in GET, to develop and roll out the policy across regions. This created a supportive, sustainable and contextualised process.

Key Learning 4
Leadership endorsement, communities of practice, and Safe Church policies and practices create enabling environments for gender equality to flourish and be mainstreamed in churches and faith communities.

Key Learning 5
The endorsement of church leaders and/or the highest decision-making bodies of churches is important so that processes are set in motion that will enable the full participation and buy-in of local church leaders and faith communities.

Key Learning 6
Gender Equality Theology (GET) programs are an effective foundation for facilitating the development of safe church policies that are not simply a document to fulfill the requirements of external partners' obligations, but create an environment where people can safely participate and grow and in which churches respond to incidences of abuse in a way that is compassionate, just, and fosters healing for the survivor and the community.

FINDING 3 – PARTNERSHIPS MATTER: FOSTERING COLLABORATION BETWEEN CHURCH, GOVERNMENT, AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Another lesson from the learning events was how collaboration between churches and other actors is playing an important role in advancing gender equality and gender justice. Churches do not work alone, but with other churches, faith institutions, community agencies, CSOs and governments. Working with others is a natural part of Oceanic life, rooted in kinship and connectedness. Working and walking with others to address gender-based violence has proven to be a successful approach in advancing gender justice. Knowing that other people are facing the same challenges can be a source of motivation to work together for a solution, and fosters a sense of support and solidarity. Practically, it also ensures that different actors are not duplicating each other's efforts, but rather complementing them.

An example of this was seen in ACOM and the Mothers Union. The Mothers Union is an existing and well-established women's network within the Solomon Islands, which does important work in building the leadership capacity of women in the community. ACOM representatives noted that connecting with and working through the Mothers Union has been impactful, stating in their Story in Focus:

This project works with female leaders from the Mothers Union to address social issues, because we know women are key agents of change in communities. These key women have formed a gender task force to work with ACOM together with church leaders and traditional leaders... The Mother's Union is well-placed to bring about positive change. It goes right down to the community level, and there are already women in leadership positions who have clear roles and responsibilities that their members and the whole church expect them to play.

This role is also recognised by external partners. For example, in their Story in Focus, ACOM recognises how its work with the Mothers Union sees "collaboration between the Mothers Union, Government and NGO partners through SAFENET. These partners have acknowledged the role of the Mothers Union as those who work closely with people in the community".

Likewise, in relation to collaboration with the government, participants at Event 2 noted that because the UCSI Safe Church Policy is aligned with the government's Family Protection Act, "it is everybody's business. It is not a standalone policy but applicable to the wider community and aligned with other government policies and initiatives."

Another key learning that emerged through discussion at the events is that it is important for church organisations to acknowledge the scope of their capacity in gender programming, and to know when to bring in the expertise of other CSOs and government. In the case of WATW, this has led to better outcomes for both survivors of gender-based violence and the WATW volunteers themselves. When asked by a participant how they refer survivors to other services during Event 2, the founder of WATW said;

For Women at the Well, we accompany the victims and the survivors. We listen to their stories. We do not solve problems, but we refer them to specific leaders and other relevant places where they should be dealt with, like police, doctors, counsellors, and psychiatrists. That is our work at Women at the Well. Taking on board the seriousness of it [domestic violence], we know that we are also vulnerable, and we need to safeguard ourselves as women leaders who are championing this cause.

She went on to outline that when dealing with cases that involve criminal charges, WATW volunteers refer survivors to legal services and accompany the survivor during the whole process, including the court proceedings.

ACOM and WATW's collaborative approach was widely recognised amongst participants at the learning events as being instrumental to the success of their programs, for example as captured below in feedback given by one group:

A clear strength of Women at the Well is that they have a really clear vision and mission and know what role they play; that they are first responders and they create awareness and safe spaces, and then they provide referrals and link people to other forms of support.

Key Learning 7
Collaboration between churches, governments and CSOs allows for a holistic approach towards addressing gender-based violence that balances individual and community healing with justice and accountability.

Key Learning 8
Partnerships between churches, governments and CSOs enable sharing of expertise and the development of relevant policies and guidelines, enabling government and CSO personnel to better engage with faith communities, and for church workers and volunteers to provide quality first response and better engage with existing services.

Key Learning 9
Referral pathways between churches, governments and CSOs ensure that violence-prevention efforts are not being duplicated but rather are complementary and ensure that survivors will be connected with support beyond first response.

FINDING 4 – KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE: COMMUNITY APPROACHES AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Sensitivity towards community protocols and ethics is important in making sure that the message of gender equality is communicated effectively. This begins with acknowledging the appropriate entry point in the community. For example, ACOM representatives noted the importance of culture as a community entry point, saying in their Story in Focus;

> *A learning has been that for us as Melanesian people, many want to take part in the Western lifestyle, but this ignores the importance of our culture and faith which we need to respect. When the project started to train and share information on gender equality with women, they started to realise the importance of why traditional leaders from the first generation made laws on ways to bring peace in homes, along with the Bible as well.*

The House of Sarah understands that being culturally sensitive is vital for success, and this can look different depending on the context. As suggested in their Story in Focus, successful approaches include:

> *Utilising existing structures... and in collaboration with key people in local communities ensuring that participants are invited from different villages. In a parish, the clergy would be responsible for inviting the participants but in districts or provinces, the female community leader was responsible.*

On the other hand, ignoring protocols can hinder community engagement. In some places, negotiating with traditional and church leaders can be misinterpreted, especially when existing relationships do not exist or the groundwork on redeeming gender norms has not been done. One participant reflected this challenge and the need for a sensitive, contextually relevant approach when she said during Event 1 "negotiating with church and traditional leaders is not an easy task. In some places this can be seen as disrespectful."

Key Learning 10

For Gender Equality Theology to become locally owned and not seen as a Western or external concept, it must be approached through an intersectional lens that is culturally sensitive and takes cultural protocols into account. Within Oceania, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work and instead should be adapted right down to the village level, taking into account leadership structures and cultural protocols.

FINDING 5 – WORKING TOGETHER: MALE AND FEMALE ADVOCATES OF CHANGE

Another learning that emerged during the series is that changes in attitudes and behaviour towards gender equality are happening where both male and female are advocates. That is, gender equality and ultimately gender justice cannot be achieved by women alone – the presence of male advocates and leaders is essential. For example, ACOM noted that the impact on individuals and community can be attributed to the male leaders' acknowledgement of female leaders and their important role in the community. As ACOM representatives noted in their Story in Focus;

Perhaps the biggest achievement and success of this project has been male leaders seeing the importance of teamwork with female leaders. Now, we see new understanding from the male leaders. We see male leaders acknowledging and embracing the work the women are doing on the frontline, compared to the past when male leaders did not allow women to be part of the change.

This teamwork was evident in the Learning Event 1, when both men and women church leaders from ACOM and the Mothers Union shared their experiences. One group of participants noted the significance of "men and women working together to present the theology of gender" and that "today's event is an example of male advocates working alongside women."

During Event 2, another participant commented on the work of UCSI, noting "the success of using teams of men and women in the field visits, especially in very rural traditional communities… having both men and women in those contexts helps to convey those messages."

Key Learning 11
Women's participation in leadership and decision-making has improved with acceptance by the clergy and traditional leaders in some cases, showing a loosening of patriarchy which can be attributed to a transformation in thinking and attitude.

Key Learning 12
The presence of strong male advocates and visibility of men endorsing the messages of gender equality is pivotal to the acceptance of these messages amongst men in the wider church and community.

Key Learning 13
The burden of gender equality and gender justice work cannot rest with women alone; attitudinal and behavioural shifts will not occur without the active engagement of men.

FINDING 6 – BREAKING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE: TELLING OUR STORIES IN SAFE SPACES

The silence around gender-based violence in the community is starting to shatter. Women are breaking the culture of silence that fuels sexual and domestic violence by speaking out against violence, creating safe spaces to share their stories, providing healing and restoration to survivors, and building confidence through accompaniment services that assure survivors that they are not walking alone.

Telling our stories is a powerful way of dealing with abuse for survivors, as reflected on by the House of Sarah in their Story in Focus:

People are increasingly admitting that there is violence and abuse against women and children in their families, homes, and communities. HoS has created a safe space through these workshops that has allowed for people to speak up. Those who have witnessed abuse or been abused are increasingly asking for help.

Likewise, a volunteer from WATW said as she shared their Story in Focus:

The most important positive change we have seen because of our work is women daring to step out to tell their stories and be healed... perhaps the biggest success has been Fijians speaking out, as sexual abuse and domestic violence has always been a taboo subject in our communities. We dare to be bold and determined and are no longer silent in this culture of silence.

As women tell their stories, it has a rippling effect on other women who are encouraged to be bold, speak out and break their own silence.

This point was affirmed in a discussion during Event 1, with one group reflecting on the importance of "storytelling - creating space for people to share their real-life stories and experiences. It gives permission to allow other people to share their experiences and reflect."

Furthermore, participants at the event discussed that due to these cultures of silence, sometimes women do not realise that they have been abused until they hear similar stories from other women, which can trigger memories and validate their experiences. This came out when one participant shared her own story as a survivor.

Another reason women are breaking out of the culture of silence is because church programs and local volunteers can create safe spaces for women to tell their stories without being judged. In a group discussion during Event 2, participants reflected on how "the Church provides a space for people to come and share. We see the benefit of established forums/places for people to come and share their stories." Moreover, as shared by WATW in their Story in Focus;

We realised that these safe spaces for women to voice their grievances were very emotional and provided much-needed relief for those who had experienced abuse. The activities were effective for the participants as the approaches were familiar and relevant, which was a big plus.

House of Sarah reiterated the importance of carving out times and places for both women and men to listen to and share their stories; saying in their Story in Focus that "our workshops have created the space for participants to tell real stories of violence against women, which is validating for the women and creates a stronger sense of the reality of the situation." That this could continue online during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates these spaces can take different forms at different times.

Key Learning 14
The creation of safe spaces for survivors of abuse to share their stories is a vital first step in the process of healing and connection to other forms of support.

Key Learning 15
Storytelling creates a ripple effect that allows the experiences and stories of more survivors to be heard and validated, and helps break the culture of silence.

FINDING 7 – LANGUAGE MATTERS: A NOTE ON COMMUNICATION

An important aspect in the success of advancing gender equality in Oceania is how the message is communicated to members of the community. Making these messages accessible to people of different ages, abilities and levels of literacy in the community is crucial. This was discovered by House of Sarah representatives, who shared in their Story in Focus how it works well when "the trainers speak the local language, are Christians, and each have lived experiences that are relevant to the project. This means the messages they share are trusted and readily accepted by participants."

Participants also recognised how key messages are being effectively adapted to reach different age groups. One group of participants identified during Event 1 that a key strength of ACOM's work was;

The way that GET has been adapted to be more accessible at different levels of the community, so not just sitting at the level that theologians can understand, but also adapted into skits and dramas in a way that was going to be more engaging for the younger generations.

GET also requires an understanding of key concepts of sex, gender and gender equality, alongside the theological aspects, to advance gender justice. As the House of Sarah has found, contextualising key terms in local language and avoiding assumptions is equally important in communicating gender equality. They state in their Story in Focus that "we have learnt the importance of explaining that gender is socially constructed and sex is biological, so that the above assumptions are avoided."

Group discussions in Event 1 supported this point, with participants noting "the terminology used, aligned to language is important...Overcoming communication barriers in terms of 'gender' and 'sex' and also 'sin'."

Key Learning 16
Messages of gender equality need to be accessible and engaged with at all levels of society in order to create cultural shift – Gender Equality Theology cannot sit just with theologians.

Key Learning 17
Gender and sex are not distinguishable in some languages. Practitioners need to find relevant ways to describe these key concepts.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND NEXT STEPS

The transformation of cultural and gender norms that perpetuate violence against women and children and hold women back from reaching their leadership potential is gradually happening in churches and faith communities where GET approaches and programs and safe church policies are being implemented.

A key enabling factor in this fundamental shift is the deep understanding and knowledge that women and men are created, and created equally, in the image of God. This is essential to the re-thinking and re-envisioning of female and male relationships and consequently addressing the root cause of violence against women and girls and other forms of gender inequality. Guided by the new understanding, the stories shared during this series highlight how men are supporting women's role in the community as change agents, resulting in greater respect, listening to one another, and working together for enhanced safety for the vulnerable. In both ACOM and UCSI in the Solomon Islands, this is undoing years of restricted participation in church and community decision-making structures that has been doubly entrenched by tradition and culture, including the formation and theological education of church leadership who have been influential in shaping values and norms in society.

Findings from the storytelling and learning events re-affirmed that, given the prevalence of Christianity across Oceania, churches and faith-based entities are appropriate vehicles to engage in transforming social and gender norms and thereby contribute to preventing Violence against Women and Girls or Gender-Based Violence. Churches are key influencers changing attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, dismantling patriarchy and redeeming human dignity is a great challenge unless the church is part of it, because the church is usually perceived by the people of Oceania as the most supreme, God-ordained institution. This makes the church, and a biblical approach such as GET, a highly relevant and well-positioned medium to deal with gender-based violence.

However, churches cannot and should not do this work alone. Social and cultural change is enhanced when there are partnerships and collaboration amongst everyone in the community – the church, traditional leaders, CSOs, government and members of the communities. When everyone works together, there will be transformative change.

Global evidence demonstrates that violence against women and girls is preventable within years, not lifetimes. This is particularly the case if an evidence-based, whole-of-government and whole-of-population approach to prevention is advanced. [21]

Considering the rich findings and lessons that emerged from these learning events, the facilitators and participants propose the following next steps for churches, governments, and CSOs interested in taking a collaborative, contextually-relevant approach to advancing gender equality and gender justice in the Oceania region:

RECOMMENDATION 1: ADOPT GENDER EQUALITY THEOLOGY AS A CORE STRATEGY FOR PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

- Churches and faith-based organisations adopt Gender Equality Theology as a strategy for preventing gender-based violence in Oceania.
- Development partners and donor agencies support churches and faith-based organisations that implement GET as a strategy, thus supporting prevention work on Violence against Women and Girls/Gender-Based Violence.
- Funding is readily made available to theological colleges that teach the *Human Equality and Dignity in the Divine Economy* curriculum developed by UnitingWorld in collaboration with key theologians and endorsed by the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS).

RECOMMENDATION 2: DEVELOP SAFE CHURCH POLICIES USING THE PCC SAFEGUARDING FRAMEWORK

- Members of the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) use the recently adopted Safe Church/Safeguarding Framework, and lessons learned from those who have already done so, to develop and implement safe church policies.
- Development partners support any church or faith-based organisation that prioritises this work, especially in relation to "Responding to Domestic and Family Violence" under Commitment 2 of the Framework.

[21] Government of Fiji, Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023-2028, 2023, p. 12.

RECOMMENDATION 3: RESOURCE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AT ALL LEVELS

- Churches and faith-based organisations reflect on the success of the UCSI Community of Practice model and consider replication and adaptation for the future, at the sub-national, national, and regional level.
- Support and resource this approach/model to be sustainable in the long term

RECOMMENDATION 4: DEVELOP SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE

During the learning events, participants recognised that most development partners, donors and funding agencies who support the elimination of violence against women and girls prioritise support and funding towards important work on legislative changes, prevention, and the provision of services to survivors of violence. However, very few CSOS and development partners support work to do with perpetrators. Participants agreed that work amongst perpetrators of violence is important [22] and funding should be set aside to:

- Support work on perpetrators focusing on programs that will ensure that they do not re-offend and also their reintegration back to society.
- Learn from their story for future prevention work.

[22] Perpetrators' programs are referred to in Chapter III on Prevention, Article 16 of the Istanbul Convention.

ANNEX 1 – PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

Australia
Anglican Overseas Aid
Australian Lutheran World Service
Caritas Australia
UnitingWorld

Fiji
Catholic Church in Fiji (Women at the Well)
House of Sarah
Pacific Conference of Churches
Pacific Theological College (Centre for Gender and Social Justice)
Social Empowerment Education Program

New Zealand
Christian World Service

Solomon Islands
Anglican Church of Melanesia
Mothers Union
United Church in Solomon Islands

Tonga
Tonga Community Development Trust

Tuvalu
Women's Fellowship of the Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu

Vanuatu
Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu
Presbyterian Womens Missionary Union, Vanuatu
Vanuatu Council of Churches

ANNEX 2 – STORIES IN FOCUS IN FULL

Story in Focus 1: *Using Faith Approaches to Advocate for Gender Equality in the Solomon Islands, Anglican Church of Melanesia in the Solomon Islands*

OUR VISION AND HOW WE GOT HERE

The Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM) in Solomon Islands is driven by the vision of a safe and healthy Church where there is justice for everyone, from the leadership all the way to the grassroots community level. ACOM has been interested in gender equality and gender justice since 2014, when we participated in a training on Gender Equality Theology with Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA). We saw a need to equip our church leaders and theologians with this Gender Equality Theology, because there are some biblical texts about women and men that have been misunderstood and have misled our people and culture.

From 2018, through the Safe Strong Community project, we adopted these materials to train our theologians across four Dioceses - Malaita, Ysabel, Central Melanesia and Hanuato. This was challenging at first because our theologians upheld strong traditional beliefs and cultural norms, which have been ingrained since our ancestors' time. However, when they completed the training, they acknowledged and embraced a new perspective on gender equality and are now helping to roll out this information across the Dioceses.

Alongside this, ACOM has wanted to address the many issues facing communities at the grassroots level, like broken homes, injustice and corruption. We want to see justice for everyone and a safe and healthy church, and we see that women leaders, faith leaders, and traditional leaders all play a role. This led to the Churches Promoting Healthy, Safe and Just Communities in Solomon Islands project, which ACOM has been implementing since 2021.

This project works with female leaders from the Mothers Union to address social issues, because we know women are key agents of change in communities. These key women have formed a gender task force to work with ACOM together with Church leaders and traditional leaders. The project started in Ysabel Province and has now been extended to Malaita Province. We included the Gender Equality Theology materials as a resource in this project too, because we recognised that gender norms were creating a stumbling block to Church and traditional leaders supporting the important work of the Mothers Union.

CHANGES AND SUCCESSES WE HAVE SEEN

As a result of these projects, we see women who are strong and confident in their roles – both as women and as leaders in the task force. We see women working closely with male leaders. We see women being vocal and speaking up about injustice and starting to make room for change. Training in leadership roles, drama, monitoring and reporting has built up women's confidence and equipped them to conduct training and awareness in their communities and cluster villages.

We are starting to see a reduction in social issues like unwanted teenage pregnancy and drug abuse. For example, when the project started in Ysabel province, the number of domestic violence and child abuse cases were increasing. During a recent visit, we talked with SAFENET in Ysabel, and they said that Police and Ministry of Health records show that domestic violence rates are going down. However, rates of sexual abuse are still increasing. We are also seeing a positive change at the Church level. For example, while the task force started in one part of Ysabel, the Diocese and Bishop are taking ownership and planning to extend the project to other regions of the Diocese.

Perhaps the biggest achievement and success of this project has been male leaders seeing the importance of teamwork with female leaders. For a long time, the Mothers Union and women were working in isolation. Male church leaders used to ask us, 'why are these projects only for women?' Now, we see new understanding from the male leaders. We see male leaders acknowledging and embracing the work the women are doing on the frontline, compared to the past when male leaders did not allow women to be part of the change. For example, in Ysabel, when female leaders see problems in the community, they discuss these with the Chief and Church leaders and together come up with solutions, such as a new rule that activities should not end too late in the evening. Together, women, Church leaders and traditional leaders are coming together to speak out and address these issues in their communities.

Aside from this shift in the Church and community, it is also having a cultural shift. In Malaita, the traditional culture is very strong. Men are always seen as the leaders. Now, even though the culture is still important, the importance of women in their roles as Mothers Union leaders is being recognised. As social issues continue to increase in our communities, Church and traditional leaders are seeing women as the main players in the family and community, and are looking forward to working with women to address problems happening in communities.

A key strength of this project that has really contributed to its success has been working with and through the existing and well-established network of the Mothers Union and its members. Another strength has been the focus on building the capacity and skills of these women through training.

The Mother's Union is well-placed to bring about positive change. It goes right down to the community level, and there are already women in leadership positions who have clear roles and responsibilities that their members and the whole church expect them to play. It is also important for the women to work with Chiefs, Church leaders, and traditional leaders who also have responsibilities to protect people and bring safety, peace, and justice.

Another strength has been the collaboration between the Mothers Union, Government and NGO partners through SAFENET. These partners have acknowledged the role of the Mothers Union as those who work closely with people in the community. In meetings, we inform them of the strength of the project, the approach we take and the data collected in communities. When they heard about the success of our projects, they invited our theologians to train SAFENET workers and trainers on Gender Equality Theology resources. This is relevant as most people in Solomon Islands are Christians and see the value of this approach. We are also distributing IEC materials from SAFENET through our network in the community.

OUR LEARNINGS FOR THE FUTURE

A learning has been that for us as Melanesian people, many want to take part in the Western lifestyle, but this ignores the importance of our culture and faith which we need to respect. When the project started to train and share information on gender equality with women, they started to realise the importance of why traditional leaders from the first generation made laws on ways to bring peace in homes, along with the Bible as well. When we brought a theological perspective on board, it brings understanding to the trained theologians and the chiefs, because they relate to this theological perspective. If theologians misuse the Bible, that is when bad things happen. Our Church leaders saw this and encouraged us to share the materials with the theological training institutions.

We are happy with our current approach and want to take everything we have learnt out to other Dioceses and apply them to other projects.

It is time for trained theologians to have the freedom to speak right from the Bible; from a deeper understanding of the original context the Bible was written in and what that means for our current context. We recently made a statement about this during a Synod session. For theologians, they must do a Gender Equality Theology training to know how they can help make positive changes in their own congregations. We will continue to strengthen information sharing at the Diocesan level and with SAFENET and our stakeholders. Whenever we have a meeting, we need to share information effectively. We want to continue to build a network and to work together for change.

Above all, if we want to make change, we have to start with us and our faith, so others can see and change with us.

More generally, seeing the success of the projects has also given us the confidence to advocate for ordained women leaders in our church, and to remove barriers to ordained women to participate in their calling and serve across the church.

Story in Focus 2: *Transforming Harmful Gender Norms in Fiji, House of Sarah*

OUR VISION AND HOW WE GOT HERE

House of Sarah (HoS) is driven by the vision of a life free of violence for women and girls. Since 2015, we have been working towards this vision by challenging the prevalent belief amongst members of faith communities that women are not created equal to men. Women are perceived as having a secondary status and are expected to 'submit' in relationships within the household and the Church. The roots of this (mis)understanding are in the traditional interpretation of Biblical texts that has been handed down from generation to generation. This is unfortunately part of the Christian heritage.

Recognising that these received traditional Biblical interpretations are contributing to attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender-based violence, we aim to introduce a new understanding of God's vision for human relationships. This vision is of equal, respectful, just, caring, loving and peaceful relationships that will transform harmful gender norms and consequently stop violence against women and girls. By introducing new insights and interpretations of Biblical texts, faith communities can live out the values and principles of respectful relationships.

Some of the key re-interpretations are:

- Re-interpreting Genesis 1 and 2 and Ephesians 5 through a gender equality lens and re-emphasising God's plans for women and men as His image-bearers.
- A new understanding of 'helper' in Genesis 2. A careful textual analysis of 'helper' brings out a meaning that totally cancels out its usual interpretation that 'helper' refers to women/wives. This has implications on the conventional acceptance that 'helper' is a woman in the family/household dynamic.

HoS has been implementing a project on Transforming Harmful Gender Norms that perpetuate gender-based violence since 2020. Supported by the Embassy of the Republic of Germany in New Zealand and Bread for the World, we facilitate workshops in the rural communities of Fiji to share and teach these fresh Biblical interpretations. These workshops are targeted at Christian women, men and young people in both the clergy and laity. The workshops are ecumenical and include Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics, Pentecostals and Baptists. The number of workshop participants is around 25-30 people on average, with around 80-90% of participants being female.

CHANGES AND SUCCESSES WE HAVE SEEN

As a result of the workshops, we have seen an acceptance that Biblical texts can be reinterpreted to affirm God's love for all - women and men equally. Until now, most Christians only knew particular interpretations of these texts, which have been used over and over again to support patriarchal attitudes and behaviours. For the first time, participants are re-thinking the meaning of these texts, and many participants have embraced a new interpretation that women are equal to men.

We are also seeing increased understanding and acknowledgement that culture and tradition are not static. Changes can be made to stop the devaluing of women. Both changes in how we interpret biblical texts and how we see our own culture have the power to begin the process of dismantling patriarchy as a system in our society.

Another huge change we have seen is that the silence around gender-based violence in Fijian communities is being shattered. People are increasingly admitting that there is violence and abuse against women and children in their families, homes and communities. HoS has created a safe space through these workshops that has allowed for people to speak up. Those who have witnessed abuse or been abused are increasingly asking for help.

We have also seen men changing their habits in the way that they treat their wives after attending the workshops. For example, some men have shared that they have started doing more housework, which has been traditionally viewed as the responsibility of women.

We have found a Biblical approach to transforming gender norms has been very effective. The biggest success has been the use of Bible studies at the beginning of each day of the 3-day long workshops. In Fijian communities, people are most receptive to ideas that are related to the Bible or Christian faith. It gives meaning to and magnifies the message that we are trying to convey.

Another big success has been the role of storytelling in the project as a way of addressing violence against women. Our workshops have created the space for participants to tell real stories of violence against women, which is validating for the women and creates a stronger sense of the reality of the situation. For many, it is the first time that they are taking hold of their situation, naming it, and being challenged to do something about it.

Another strength of our workshops has been the interdisciplinary approach. The trainers at HoS are a team of three people with different theological and sociological backgrounds, both males and females, clergy and laity, multi-lingual, and each with academic qualifications in their fields. Their different backgrounds allow them to complement each other well. The trainers speak the local language, are Christians and each have lived experiences that are relevant to the project. This means the messages they share are trusted and readily accepted by participants.

Another strength has been utilising existing structures in the local communities and collaborating with other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

Working in collaboration with key people in local communities ensures that participants are invited from different villages. In a parish, the clergy would be responsible for inviting the participants but in districts or provinces, the female community leader was responsible. At the start of the project, we collaborated with CSOs who have expertise on gender-based violence to facilitate sessions on gender from a human rights perspective. For the last two years, we have ensured that our training team is multi-skilled with a diversity of experience to be able to resource all the sessions themselves. This is also important as we have developed our own training manual and curriculum to accompany these workshops.

OUR LEARNINGS FOR THE FUTURE

There is a unanimous voice from participants that the Church must be vigorous in its mission to end violence against women and girls. They feel that Church leaders should be speaking out against perpetrators of violence, especially since most of them are Christians.

We have learnt that a community approach to transforming gender norms must have an interdisciplinary approach with an emphasis on re-interpreting Biblical texts. This is important since church/Biblical teachings influence the formation of attitudes and early socialisation.

We have also learned the importance of unpacking the term 'gender'. Many participants do not know the meaning of the word 'gender' and it is important to not assume that participants know the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. This is because in the *i-Taukei* Fijian context there are not separate words for sex and gender like there are in English. Because of this, when we are trying to deconstruct gender norms in the *i-Taukei* Fijian context, participants have often thought we are trying to change the biological make-up of a person or transform sex norms. Hence, in our workshops we now say '*i tovo vakayalewa*' (female role/behaviour) and '*i tovo vakatagane*' (male role/behaviour) to refer to gender, and '*yalewa*' (female) and '*tagane*' (male) to refer to sex.

We have learnt the importance of explaining that gender is socially constructed and sex is biological so that wrong assumptions are avoided.

We have identified that we need more male attendance at our workshops. To encourage more men to attend, we are intending to organise separate sessions for men. We are planning for women and men to gather together on the first day, and then separately for the next two days. Young people are also an important target group, but since many of them are attending school or tertiary institutions, we need to find a good time to accommodate them. The youth are of the view that holding separate sessions for them would be positive, as they would be able to talk about issues affecting them without the presence of adults.

It is clear that youth are more open to change as they have not yet internalised traditional and cultural values to the extent of their parents and older generations.

We are also looking to include Genesis 3 in the Bible studies, as many people focus on gender roles as defined by God in the Bible, which is addressed in Genesis 3 with the fall of humankind in sin.

Story in Focus 3: *Trauma Healing for Survivors of Abuse, Women at the Well, Fiji*

OUR VISION AND HOW WE GOT HERE

Women at the Well (WATW) is a ministry of the Catholic Church in Fiji. Our vision is to see women, men and children who have gone through sexual abuse and domestic violence healed of their trauma and become beacons of light and healing in their families and communities.

WATW was started in 2018 by Archbishop Peter Loy Chong who, as shepherd of the Catholic Church in Fiji, was inspired to address high rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse against our women and children. This followed several years of reflection on how we as the Catholic Church could better respond to these problems that have plagued our nation.

The foundation of this work was the church's exhortation on *Amoris Laetitia* (the Joy of Love), which focused on meeting people where they are and bringing back into the fold people who were divorced, those in multiple marriages or from challenging homes, the LGBT community and victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. This is to affirm the move of God's love.

Archdiocese Retreat Ministry (ARM), which organises and runs retreats for men, women, youth and trainee priests, had also seen the growing concern of domestic violence and sexual abuse and brought this up with the Archbishop, requesting that the Church respond urgently.

When WATW ministry was launched, it was led by Sister Mariana Tevurega, a Marist Superior over Fiji Sisters. We conducted awareness seminars in the Archdiocese of Suva, reaching over 200 men at Men's Synod at Korolevu, 3,000 women at Women's League, Taveuni, and 2,000 Catechists in Suva and at the Women's synod. After these awareness seminars at the national level, we then moved into our parishes. At the parish level, we started group support as we were not trained professionals at that time. These were listening and empowerment sessions to those in need of help. We also made referrals to counselors in some instances.

We realised that these safe spaces for women to voice their grievances were very emotional, and provided much-needed relief for those who had experienced abuse. The activities were effective for the participants as the approaches were familiar and relevant, which was a big plus.

Awareness seminars carried out by the team and facilitators are still ongoing to the rest of the 36 parishes of the Archdiocese of Suva. People are more aware of the impact of sexual abuse and domestic violence, and have gained confidence to tell others of their painful past at any opportune time.

CHANGES AND SUCCESSES WE HAVE SEEN

The most important positive change we have seen because of our work is women daring to step out to tell their stories and be healed. To be healed means a traumatised person has walked these steps:

- Forgiven the perpetrator. This follows the commands of Jesus and results in peace of mind and improved wellbeing.
- Returned emotionally to the place of trauma and allowed the healing of Jesus in. As one dares to step into that raw, painful place and to connect with the shock, suffering, confusion, shame and stress... Jesus walks in with healing.
- Shared/told their story of abuse and healing of Jesus with others. Telling our stories reinforces our healing and liberates us. Others are touched and ministered to. There's no more room for shame.

Following this individual trauma healing, we are also seeing families getting healed, relationships restored, forgiveness extended and, importantly, justice carried out - for example, when perpetrators are convicted and go to prison.

We have also seen church leadership supporting this work. They are no longer silent but speaking out. Of course, our Archbishop is leading in this and some of the priests are great advocates.

Every woman, man and child's healing is important. The Scriptures tell us that we are to have life and life more abundantly (John 10:10). It is beautiful to see healing, restoration of relationships and justice being carried out. It is exciting to hear testimonies of what Jesus has done and is doing. Indeed, perhaps the biggest success has been Fijians speaking out, as sexual abuse and domestic violence has always been a taboo subject in our communities. We dare to be bold and determined and are no longer silent in this culture of silence.

We no longer have our heads in the sand. Pain and trauma are real. We are looking at the problem of violence and dealing with it from the roots. As individuals step out and boldly share their stories, they are healed and others around them in their families, their workplaces and their communities are also healed.

OUR LEARNINGS FOR THE FUTURE

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre has been working hard to combat these issues for nearly 40 years now, alongside our Fiji Police Force. We have seen that WATW Ministry is well placed to support these efforts given our reach in the community. Being Catholic and members of local churches, we have access to the 36 parishes of the Archdiocese of Suva and can promote our mission through platforms in the community to a population of around 83,000 people.

We have learned about the importance:

- of creating safe spaces for hurting people to share their stories of pain
- of leadership buy-in and working with others. It was exciting working together at the Archdiocese level and with other Christian Churches

We have also worked closely with the House of Sarah (Anglican Diocese of Polynesia) team, who have continuously gathered us from the different churches to equip us through seminars and workshops.

Being trained to go and serve in our parishes/churches has been a big plus. Through our partnership with House of Sarah, we have:

- understood better the causes and impacts of violence and abuse on women
- increased our understanding of the impacts of Covid-19, especially in relating to increasing rates of violence against women and children
- gained basic counseling and first responder skills
- with other churches, participated in consultations on the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls.

Another important learning was how to reinterpret traditional interpretations of the Scriptures to transform harmful gender norms that perpetuate violence against women. For example, we learnt new insights on biblical texts such as the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22). This story illustrates a chain of events that lead to a devasting act of rape. It helps us understand why we are silent about sexual violence done to us.

We have reached many people but there is still so much to do. We think the following will make the project better in the future:

- regularly coming together and getting feedback from the different parishes within our own churches
- getting together with the other churches as House of Sarah has continued to do, sharing and learning from testimonies and stories
- continued equipping of members in skills like first response and basic counselling.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not been actively engaging in our various parishes. We know we have to rise up again. In September 2023, the Catholic Church in Fiji hosted a three and a half day Catholic Youth Festival. There were almost 800 young people present. WATW took part in sharing our story. We found out that many young people are hurting, abused and wounded, and we want to reach out to them.

This is our resolve, and we are so happy to join the Gender Justice Storytelling and Learning event with you all in Oceania, to be encouraged to pick up where we left off.

Story in Focus 4: *Developing and Implementing a Safe Church Policy – United Church in Solomon Islands*

OUR VISION AND HOW WE GOT HERE

The United Church in Solomon Islands (UCSI) is a mission of God in the Solomon Islands. The role of the UCSI is to empower her members and the people of the Solomon Islands in partnership with other churches, government and development partners, to prophetically voice and work boldly to address the physical, mental, social, economic, cultural, emotional, spiritual and moral challenges that confront Solomon Islanders.

UCSI is part of the Gender Equality Theology (GET) project, a collaboration between UnitingWorld and its partner churches across the Pacific on areas such as ending violence against women and children (EVAWC), empowerment of women, healthy families, child protection and care, disability inclusion and climate change. UCSI representatives, including Rev Dr Cliff Bird and Rev Siera Bird, were part of its formation. With the support of church leaders and the UCSI Women's Fellowship, GET was formally introduced during the Women's conference in Taro, Lauru, in September 2018.

In November 2018, it was resolved at the UCSI's annual General Assembly meeting that GET would be part of the church and a GET minister would be appointed. In February 2019, the Gender Equality Theology (GET) project officer was appointed to look after the desk. The project targets all members of the church and the wider community, and aims to advance gender equality, equity, safety, and protection for children, women and vulnerable people. Through this project, UCSI hopes to achieve a safe and free environment for our children, women, men, vulnerable adults and people with special needs where they can enjoy the fullness of life.

As part of this project, the church developed and endorsed its first ever Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy in 2020. This policy commits the UCSI to protecting and safeguarding children, women and vulnerable adults from all kinds of violence and advancing the dignity of all. This is important because of the high rates of harassment, rape and violence against our women and children, and the long-term effects on their learning and well-being.

CHANGES AND SUCCESSES WE HAVE SEEN

The biggest success of the UCSI GET project has been the change in people's behavior and attitude toward the importance of providing safety for children and vulnerable people in our communities.

The development of the UCSI Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy was driven by this change in attitude and behaviour. This policy, which is now being socialised and implemented within the four regions of UCSI and pilot schools, paves the way to promote a safe church for all.

The project has established a Community of Practice for each of the four regions of UCSI. Each Community of Practice consists of GET ministers and their spouses, who the Project Officer works closely with to implement the project activities:

- New Georgia Eastern Island Region - 4 GET ministers
- Lauru Region - 3 GET ministers
- West Region - 5 GET ministers
- Tungavalu Region - 2 GET ministers

The UCSI Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy includes:

- **Theological foundations for safeguarding and protection:** every person has equal dignity and value endowed by God. God is presented in the Bible as guardian and protector of all vulnerable peoples, including children, in society and therefore in the church.
- **Guiding principles:** life is sacred, the rights of children, zero tolerance for violence, risk management, confidentiality, wellbeing and safety for all affected, and shared responsibility.
- **Commitments and standards:** on communication and use of images, recruitment, educating the church, responding to reports of harm and abuse, and involving young people and children in the life of the church.

We have been able to use our network of trained ministers and couples to successfully carry out the socialisation of the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy within the circuits of UCSI, raising awareness and supporting implementation.

Church members are now aware of the reporting and feedback procedure and are using the policy as their tool for reporting cases of abuse or harm. As a result, there has been an increase in cases reported. Our church is also partnering with SafeNet and other service providers to ensure that any cases that arise are reported to the responsible authority. This is different from our previous practices of praying over it and closing the report, because such practice won't heal the victim.

There have also been changes in how we conduct church programs and activities for our children and young people. For example, whenever we had a children's rally or youth convention, activities used to end around 12-1am, but now they end by 10 or 11 pm. We also work with the police to avoid possible risks that might happen to our children during the programs.

Another positive change that we have seen is the implementation of new disciplinary processes as part of the policy. The church is now emphasising that any person working with children is to be disciplined if he or she breaches the policy. We had a case in one of the regions, where the leaders of this community are taking disciplinary action against a leader who breached the policy. Now that the policy is being implemented, it strongly supports reporting that will lead to disciplinary action.

Lastly, through the GET project, our church leaders and members have started to see the importance of inclusiveness in various church programs. Previously, people with disabilities were always left out of various activities.

OUR LEARNINGS FOR THE FUTURE

Reflecting upon what we have been doing to provide safety for church members and the wider community, there are gaps that we need to work on in order to achieve our goal. We have learned that:

- **It is important to work with others.** Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) and Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association (SIFGA) member churches have all attended workshops on child protection and supported church enablers to go out into their individual communities to carry out awareness. Through this common understanding of togetherness, we have been able to reach out to other non-UCSI members to share the message that children are precious gifts from God, and we have a shared responsibility to provide protection and safety for all.
- **All the programs need to reach down to the community level** for people to receive firsthand information. We are training lots of our leaders, but sometimes the information is not shared and does not touch the heart of those people living at the grass roots level, especially in remote congregations and schools. The passing or sharing of information is one of the biggest challenges we face.
- **We need to use different advocacy methods or approaches to meet different groups of people.** We want to start using arts as a tool for our advocacy on safeguarding and preventing violence against women and children, because we have seen that art is a powerful tool for social change in addressing various social issues.
- **We know engaging young people in advocacy programs is key as they are the change makers.** By involving youths in creative arts, we believe that churches will always maintain or consider safety when conducting rallies or conventions.

UnitingWorld
PO Box A2266
Sydney South NSW 1235
AUSTRALIA

1800 998 122
info@unitingworld.org.au
www.unitingworld.org.au

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS RESOURCE

Permission to reproduce and transmit this material is granted, provided UnitingWorld is acknowledged as the resource originator.

Copyright 2024 UnitingWorld

UnitingWorld
connecting communities for life

actalliance FOR GENDER JUSTICE