

Submission of Family Planning NSW

Inquiry into the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific

May 2020

Family Planning NSW welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade regarding the 'Inquiry into the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific'.

This submission focuses on the importance of family planning services in the Pacific and their role in advancing the human rights of women and girls, the need for the implementation and delivery of comprehensive sexuality education to address gender equality and gender-based violence, and the requirement for sustainable funding directed at family planning services in the Pacific.

About us

Family Planning NSW is the leading provider of reproductive and sexual health services in NSW and Australia. Our mission is to enhance the reproductive and sexual health and rights of our communities by supporting all people to have control over and decide freely on all matters related to their reproductive and sexual health. We have been operating for over 90 years, working with communities across NSW, Australia and in the Pacific.

Internationally, we operate as Family Planning Australia and are accredited by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program. We work across nine countries in the Pacific, implementing gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, contraception, comprehensive sexuality education, disability, and cervical cancer prevention programmes.

Recommendations

Family Planning NSW recommends that the Australian Government:

1. continues to support civil society-led family planning services in the Pacific to meet the needs of women and girls and advance their sexual and reproductive health and rights
2. supports Australian civil society organisations through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program as a way to assist Pacific civil society organisations to provide services that improve the human rights of women and girls
3. invests in health and education services to ensure the infrastructure gains made through the Pacific Step-up are able to be realised for women and girls
4. invests in community and school-based comprehensive sexuality education programmes in the Pacific Islands, including for students and other people with disability
5. continues to fund Australian overseas development assistance programs that promote gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls in the Pacific, and access to family planning services.

Key points

Family Planning NSW works closely with governments and civil society organisations to advance the human rights, in particular the sexual and reproductive health and rights, of women and girls in the Pacific. We strongly affirm the need for ongoing support and funding to ensure that the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls in the Pacific are met, particularly within the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our key points, in relation to the inquiry *Terms of Reference*, are outlined below:

1. The role of civil society groups in Pacific Islands in responding practically to domestic, family and sexual violence, and other human rights issues

Sexual and reproductive health is a fundamental human right as enshrined in multiple international agreements that Australia has signed onto, including the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the International Conference on Population and Development.(1,2) Even as recently as 6th May 2020, Australia signed onto the joint international statement on “Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Promoting Gender-responsiveness in the COVID-19 crisis”.(3) As per these commitments, women and girls have the right to access reliable, safe and effective methods of family planning, health care and protection, education and information relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights.(2)

The role of civil society groups

Civil society groups, including family planning services in the Pacific, play a crucial role in advancing the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls through enabling access to health care, contraception, education, and support for reducing levels of domestic, family and sexual violence. These groups have in-depth knowledge and understanding of the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls and facilitate sustainable community engagement and participation with family planning services.

Family planning services, led by civil society groups, are often seen as ‘safe zones’ and have a vital role in bridging the unmet need for family planning in the Pacific while also offering health services, such as cervical cancer screening and comprehensive sexuality education. In many parts of the Pacific, civil society groups are the only advocates for access to family planning services that enable women and girls’ broader health and social needs to be met. Family planning services are also critical areas for women to be screened and referred to family violence support centres. Governments must continue to support civil society organisations who play a key role in realising and advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights.(4)

Given the Pacific experiences many natural and other emergencies, it is essential we create resilience in sexual and reproductive health services to protect the rights of women and girls and promote gender equality. In the Pacific, 68% of women report having experienced gender-based violence, a form of gender inequality that directly impacts on women and girls’ reproductive and sexual health.(5) In times of crisis, women and girls may be likely to be at higher risk of intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic violence.(6)

Continuity of care for family planning and other sexual and reproductive health services is critical to ensure the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific are met.(6) Given the essential nature of family planning services, there is a need for ongoing funding and support to ensure the continued operation of these services.(4) Evidence shows that most women will access family planning services during their lifetime; these services offer unique opportunities for the identification and provision of a supportive response for women who have experienced gender-based violence and other sexual and reproductive health and rights violations.(7)

Recommendation one: The Australian Government continues to support civil society-led family planning services in the Pacific to meet the needs of women and girls and advance their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

2. The key figures and groups which advance the human rights of women and girls’ in the Pacific context

Australian civil society organisations are best positioned to support direct engagement with women and girls and influence access to health services. With the support of the Australian NGO Cooperation Program, Australian civil society organisations are able to work with in-country organisations to provide sexual and reproductive clinical services, peer education networks and offer links to other referral services.

Internationally, Family Planning Australia works closely with many civil society organisations in the Pacific to address the human rights of women and girls, including:

- Cooperative Café Timor
- Papua New Guinea Family Health Association
- Reproductive and Family Health Association of Fiji
- Samoa Family Health Association
- Solomon Islands Planned Parenthood Association
- Susu Mama Papua New Guinea
- Tonga Family Health Association
- Tuvalu Family Health Association
- Vanuatu Family Health Association

Through our programs, we have developed the capacity of many of these organisations to deliver contraception, cervical cancer and comprehensive sexuality education services over the past 12 years. With our support, over 14,000 women and girls benefit each year from the above organisations' services, ensuring they have control over and decide freely on all matters related to their sexual and reproductive health throughout their life.

Family Planning NSW is also a member of the Asia Pacific Alliance for sexual and reproductive health and rights. The Asia Pacific Alliance is a network of national, regional and global civil society organisations that advocate for the fulfilment of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all persons in the Asia Pacific region. These networks are integral to ensuring the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific are upheld.

Recommendation two: The Australian Government supports Australian civil society organisations through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program as a way to assist Pacific civil society organisations to provide services that improve the human rights of women and girls.

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

Australia's Pacific Step-up aims to build a Pacific region that is secure strategically, stable economically and sovereign politically, however, without enabling infrastructure, like health care and education, bricks and mortar infrastructure projects have the potential to further exacerbate gender inequality. The Step-up focuses on financial and structural development of the Pacific region and uses funds that have been redirected from programs that focused on health and education. Without health and education development programs, improvements in hard-infrastructure allow people who already have opportunities to take advantage of Step-up initiatives, leaving many women and girls behind.

Enabling infrastructure including sexual and reproductive health services and education programs provides an opportunity for Australia to ensure the Step-up program invests in women and girls, instead of putting them at risk or disadvantage.

Recommendation three: The Australian Government invests in health and education services to ensure the infrastructure gains made through the Pacific Step-up are able to be realised for women and girls.

4. The effectiveness of Australian overseas development assistance programs in supporting the human rights of women and girls

Through the support of the Australian NGO Cooperation Program, Australian civil society organisations are able to invest in the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific. Our projects in the Pacific promote the rights of women and girls to make informed decisions and have control over their sexual and reproductive

health. Ongoing Australian overseas development assistance programs through sexual and reproductive health civil-society organisations are essential to increase the resilience of the Pacific to become self-sufficient to support and uphold women and girls' human rights.

Contraception

Women and girls have a right to be able to decide freely and responsibly on the number, spacing and timing of children. However, unmet need for family planning in the Pacific is twice as high as in Australia and is among the highest in the world.(8,9) In Vanuatu, 30% of women and girls face an unmet need for family planning services, often due to regular stock-outs.(8,9) Our *Contraception Choices* project builds partnerships, supports clinical services, and provides education and training regarding contraceptive options. Since 2015, we have supported over 15,000 women and girls to safely access contraception in Vanuatu and educated over 9,000 young people through community awareness programs.

Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer is one of the most common cancers affecting women in the Pacific; however, it is almost entirely preventable through cervical screening.(10) Our *Stop Cervical Cancer* project implements comprehensive cervical cancer prevention, screening and control programs within the context of local health systems within the Pacific. Since 2010, we have provided cervical cancer prevention, screening and treatment training to over 200 clinicians, preventing more than 14,500 cervical cancer-related deaths in the Pacific.

Comprehensive sexuality education

Currently, little comprehensive sexuality education is available in the Pacific.(11) Comprehensive sexuality education is a crucial early intervention strategy for ensuring the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls (as well as boys) are recognised and advanced. Evidence shows that comprehensive sexuality education improves health outcomes, reduces gender-based violence and can improve gender equality.(12) Our projects in the Pacific build the capacity of local health educators to provide comprehensive sexuality education to their communities with the overall aim of empowering people to make informed decisions about their own sexual and reproductive health and exercise their sexual and reproductive health rights. School-based comprehensive sexuality education is also needed to provide widespread regional benefit and behaviour change to address human rights.(12)

Recommendation four: The Australian Government invests in community and school-based comprehensive sexuality education programmes in the Pacific Islands, including for students and other people with disability.

Recommendation five: The Australian Government continues to fund Australian overseas development assistance programs that promote gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls in the Pacific and access to family planning services.

Conclusion

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are fundamental for women and girls' full participation in society. In the Pacific, the human rights of women and girls must be upheld to promote gender equality and shared decision making. The Australian Government should prioritise supporting countries in the Pacific to implement measures to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and access to family planning services. Australian investment in the Pacific to reduce sexual and gender-based violence and increase the social impact of women can ensure the sustainability of development programs and increase the resilience of communities. Support from the Australian NGO Cooperation Program is critical so that Australian civil society organisations can continue to support the Pacific and promote women and girls' human rights. Australia can be proud of our advocacy for gender equity in the Pacific.

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