

SOLOMON ISLANDS COUNTRY SUPPLEMENT



1 BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

This paper is a supplement to *Violence against Women in Melanesia and East Timor: Building on Regional and Global Promising Approaches*, which addresses the issue of violence against women in the whole region.. The main report describes all promising approaches identified by the team from across the region, and proposes, through a series of recommendations, an action plan relevant to all countries studied. This supplement provides more country-specific information on Solomon Islands, permitting a more nuanced approach to proposed solutions. The main report and the Solomon Islands report, when read together, provide a comprehensive picture of promising approaches for addressing violence against women, recommendations relevant for all countries and specific direction for where to focus efforts in Solomon Islands.

The process began in 2007, when the Australian Agency for International Development's (AusAID) Office of Development Effectiveness identified violence against women as a major barrier to development in the region, with serious effects not only on the health and welfare of the women experiencing violence, but on their families, communities, and countries (AusAID Office of Development Effectiveness 2007). Following a review of international lessons learned, visits of four to nine days were carried out by the international evaluation team to each of the five countries in the region (East Timor, Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu) during September and October 2007.

Interviews and focus group discussions using a set of participatory exercises were carried out with policymakers, service providers, users of the services, civil society groups and community members. These were continued by locally recruited researchers, except in East Timor, where there was a shortage of qualified individuals, but a number of recent studies.¹ Selection of the potentially promising practices to be reviewed was made in collaboration with AusAID Post personnel and local activists. Local advisory groups of prominent individuals were established in each country to provide feedback and direction to the evaluation team, to encourage ownership of the review's findings and to help promote and implement its recommendations. (Annex 1 lists advisory group members for Solomon Islands.)

In all, more than 120 persons were consulted in Solomon Islands, including 40 through individual interviews and more than 80 in focus groups. (Annex 2 lists the organisations consulted.) Regional recommendations on the four theme areas (access to justice, support services for survivors, prevention, and multisectoral coordination) were developed during a workshop in Port Moresby in March 2008, involving the local researchers and representatives of the advisory groups from all the countries.²

¹ The local researchers in Solomon Islands were Salote Austin and Caroline Laore.

² Solomon Islands was represented by Josephine Kama, on behalf of the Department of Women's Affairs, and Chief Justice Albert Palmer.

This is not a situational analysis, nor is it a comprehensive or complete listing of all the good things happening in Solomon Islands. Many inspiring examples of work are underway in all parts of the country on violence against women, but only those brought to the team's attention could be covered. The study examined lessons learned and examples of promising interventions that could be scaled up, or applied in other countries. It focused as much as possible on women's own experience of violence, and what does or does not help them in terms of protection and prevention.

2 SITUATION OF WOMEN AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Violence against women is rife; it exists and we can no longer ignore the fact that it is occurring. There must be zero tolerance for men's violent behaviour. (Ethel Sigimanu, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs)

As in all the countries included in the study, violence against women was considered to be a serious and common problem in Solomon Islands. Domestic violence (physical, sexual and emotional abuse by an intimate partner or family member) was mentioned by most respondents as the most common form of violence against women. However, many forms of sexual violence are increasingly common, including:

- > child sexual abuse by family members (incest)
- > commercial sexual exploitation of girls (particularly related to the logging and fishing industries) (Box 2.1)
- > sexual violence during armed conflict (the tensions of 1998 to 2003)
- > gang rape of girls, often by young men.

Violence against women is exacerbated by the pervasive poverty and low status of women with respect to men. Solomon Islands is amongst the least-developed countries in the world, ranked by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as 129 out of 177 countries in the human development index (UNDP 2007). It does not yet figure in the gender-related development index. Of the many who live in poverty, women and children are the most powerless and the most affected. Maternal mortality is high, estimated to be 130 per 100 000 live births. Women's health is compromised by widespread gender-based violence, both in times of peace and armed conflict, and by traditional practices that negatively impact women's health.

Women's participation in public leadership positions is almost non-existent in Solomon Islands. None of the 50 members of Parliament are women, making Solomon Islands one of only a few countries with this situation. The evaluation team met with a group of leaders in the women's movement to discuss gains and challenges in the area of violence against women, starting in 1983 with the creation of the

National Women's Council. During the 1990s, Solomon Islands had a fairly strong women's rights movement, but it has been greatly weakened in recent years. These are some of the most significant moments:

- > **International landmark events**, such as the participation of women from Solomon Islands in the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing (1995).
- > **Government initiatives**, mostly as responses to advocacy efforts of the women's movement, and including the creation of the first Ministry for Women (1993) and a National Plan for Women (1998).

BOX 2.1: COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN SOLOMON ISLANDS*

Because the logging is in the village, the children aren't safe. (housekeeper in a logging camp, Makira Province)

In early 2006, community members from Makira Province began noticing problems after logging companies arrived in the area. Leaders approached the Christian Care Centre (CCC) with concerns about the amount of time children were spending in logging camps and the number of girls who had become pregnant and who were receiving money for sex with loggers. In response, the CCC instituted the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) project, designed to strengthen understanding of the nature and extent of the problem and to raise awareness about child exploitation and child abuse. Through meetings and interviews with more than 1000 community members and leaders and 370 children in six villages, the CCC uncovered stories of different types of exploitation and abuse of children. A report on the project's findings noted that:

- > child prostitution was the most prominent type of exploitation in every village visited—the report's 25 stories of prostitution involved 36 children ranging in age from 13 to 15, including a 14-year-old girl who was exploited by two different men on different occasions
- > early marriage and the sale of children into marriage by parents or third parties—the report includes 12 stories of girls marrying before age 15 or being sold into marriage, most to foreign loggers
- > a range of cases involving child sexual abuse or attempted sexual abuse
- > young boys are used as *solairs* to arrange for meetings with young girls or carry messages for loggers in exchange for money or alcohol
- > children were being used to produce pornography both as subjects and participants in viewing.

The behaviour of logging company workers clearly contributes to abuse and exploitation. However, other factors were also identified, including access to money, norms around marriage, changes to traditional practices and the lack of awareness around CSEC on the part of community members. The lack of monitoring in camps means that loggers have easy access to children and are not held accountable for illegal actions.

The CCC has recommended urgent action on this issue, including raising awareness and understanding of the nature of CSEC, strengthening prevention efforts, mobilising and supporting service organisations, and engaging logging companies in raising awareness, reducing the vulnerability of children and increasing accountability.

*Source: Herbert 2007.

- > **Milestones in the creation of organisations and networks that protect the rights of women and girls:** creation of the Family Support Centre (FSC, 1997), the CCC (1998) and Vois Blong Mere Solomon Islands (VBMSI or Voice of the Women, 2003).

However, the civil conflict of 1998 to 2003, referred to in Solomon Islands as ‘the tensions’, provides the backdrop against which all current activities must be understood (Box 2.2 describes the tensions and its effect on women and girls). After a positive and enthusiastic start during the 1990s to address women’s rights and violence against women, the gains of the previous decade were virtually wiped out by the conflict. During this period, violence against women was greatly heightened with increased cases of domestic violence and sexual assault, and gang rapes by rival military organisations (used to terrorise the population and inflict harm on enemy groups). During this period, the Government of Solomon Islands collapsed and lawlessness, crime and violence were the norm.

During the tensions, especially during the period of active fighting, about May to August 2000, people had to put up with everything because they were afraid for their lives. Girls were just being picked up by the military in dark-glass cars, and no-one could say anything because they were afraid for their lives. (female activist, Honiara)

Eventually, negotiations between armed groups succeeded and, in 2003, the Government of Solomon Islands invited the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) into Solomon Islands with a mandate to restore law and order and economic development. Since then, conditions have slowly begun to return to pre-tension conditions. However, the devastating impact on the population and on civil society, including the women’s movement, is still evident. Most of the population was directly affected by the conflict and a large proportion severely traumatised.

The tension has made the violence worse. Where a man used to just beat his wife, now he beats o2 and o3, and can still go back and fight o1 again, if she’s still there.³ What I see now is that there’s no passion left. The people are just flat. There’s no energy anymore. The women’s organisations are not vibrant. They’re just sitting around talking, not doing anything.’ (female activist, Honiara)

³ This numbering system refers to multiple partnerships. In Solomon Islands, the practice has become so common that the women in a man’s life are known colloquially as o1, o2, o3, etc., according to the order in which the relationships began.

BOX 2.2: EFFECT OF THE TENSIONS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS (1998 TO 2003)*

The five years from 1998 to 2003 in Solomon Islands were marked by severe escalation of civil unrest, caused primarily by regional disparities in economic and social opportunity. Gender based violence against women and girls became entrenched. Police estimate that the number of violent incidents against women during and after the conflict has been '*hugely under-reported*'. In a March 2004 study, 85 per cent of Solomon Islanders reported that their families were directly affected by the conflict. Three quarters of women '*suffered direct personal trauma*', including rape, death of family members, threats of violence and intimidation, and being held up at gunpoint. Those responsible, whether police personnel, armed groups, or private individuals, were rarely brought to justice. Witnesses and victims seldom filed complaints, often because there was no opportunity to do so or because they feared reprisals.

Many women also observed a link between the conflict and a range of other consequences, including increased tension in their homes, domestic violence, and family breakdowns: '*Even if you are not actively involved in fighting, the tension between husbands and wives in the home increased due to the changing situation, the frustration, and tensions resulted in disagreements over trivial matters*'. In Honiara, the FSC, a key first point of contact for female victims of violence, indicated a substantial increase in the number of women seeking assistance during the conflict. Amnesty International's interviews with counsellors found that domestic violence had been exacerbated by the inaction and inability of the police to address reported cases and by women's restricted freedom of movement and opportunity to seek assistance.

Violence does not necessarily reduce once a conflict has abated. Being raped during the conflict, by police or members of armed groups, often led to stigmatisation or other social consequences for victims, particularly unmarried girls. Married victims were often required to pay 'compensation' to their husbands' families because of the shame brought on. Some women also expressed fear that a girl or woman, once known to have been raped, may be left or abused by her husband or be more likely to become a target of rape again.

*Source: Amnesty International 2004.

3 MULTISECTORAL COORDINATION

After being disbanded several years ago, the Ministry for Women, Youth and Children's Affairs is back on track and developing new activities at national and provincial levels, with support from the United Nations Development Fund for Women and other international donors. Currently, the Women's Development Division (WDD) is preparing the second Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) report for Solomon Islands, which could be an important opportunity to draw attention to women's rights issues and violence against women. The resurgence of the Ministry of Women has produced early dividends—the Provincial Council of Women in Auki is now functioning with WDD support, and the Provincial Council of Women in Gizo has just reopened with Oxfam support.

While multisectoral coordination through the WDD is weak and needs to be improved significantly, there is room for optimism. The new Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs is a well-known and respected leader. There is enthusiasm about her role and ability to galvanise and coordinate

action between Government and civil society. The immediate challenge is seizing this opportunity to strengthen the WDD's ability to coordinate activities addressing violence against women, within Honiara and beyond.

Another important WDD initiative is a population-based survey to obtain relevant information on the prevalence, perceptions and nature of gender based violence in Solomon Islands. The survey is being carried out by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community with funding from AusAID and the United Nations Population Fund. Based on the methodology developed by the World Health Organization *Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women*, this survey will provide relevant baseline data to support Solomon Islands government activities to address gender based violence.

4 WOMEN'S ACCESS TO JUSTICE

The presence of RAMSI since 2003 has gone a long way toward restoring peace and stability, which are the basic conditions for progress on women's rights. RAMSI's work across all three of its programs is guided by a number of key principles, one of which is RAMSI's commitment to advancing gender equality and empowering women in Solomon Islands.

4.1 Legal reform

The law can be valuable for reshaping expectations of what behaviour toward women is acceptable, but only if offences against women are reliably and efficiently prosecuted. Currently, the penal code is obsolete. There is no domestic violence legislation and marital rape is not a criminal offence. Statutory rape, or 'defilement', defined as 'illegal' sex, is difficult to prosecute, because according to customary law, there is no legal minimum age for marriage. This creates virtual impunity for loggers who exploit young girls. The loggers can say they have provided bride-price to the family and are legally married according to customary law.

Updating the penal code in Solomon Islands should be an urgent priority. Law reform will also give greater effect to recent changes within the police force (e.g., establishing a Domestic Violence Unit (DVU)—see below).

4.2 The formal justice system

The Solomon Islands police force was greatly weakened during the tensions, with many police officers reportedly participating in both sides of the conflict. With the help of RAMSI, a major effort has been made to rebuild the police force and regain public trust.

Given the pressing need to restore law and order generally, addressing domestic and sexual violence has not been a priority. However, a Domestic Violence Unit (DVU) was recently established in the police force and the Sexual Offences Unit (SOU) has

been revived. The DVU has developed a domestic violence policy, which includes establishing 'no-drop' procedures⁴ and mandatory arrest for offenders, as well as a 'no-tolerance' approach toward police suspected of domestic violence abuses. The new policy awaits formal approval from the police commissioner.

Like the rest of the law and justice sector, the judiciary was deeply affected by the tensions and incurred additional resource constraints restricting its capacity; it is still recovering. The courts continue to struggle with an enormous backlog of cases (some from more than 10 years ago). Urgent priority has been placed on completing the trials of those accused of corruption and violence during the tensions, and other issues have taken a back seat.

The logistical issues facing magistrates in the rural areas are particularly daunting. There are not enough police or jail facilities in these areas. Additionally, the magistrate circuits do not have adequate budgets to cover food, lodging or petrol for boats.

Judges are able to provide protection orders for women experiencing domestic violence; however, these are not necessarily respected by the police, and in practice, are difficult to enforce. According to one survivor of violence:

The police don't understand their duty. Last time I went to them, the police said, "You've got to think about it. He'll lose his job and where will you be?" I showed them my non-molestation order. I showed them my sleeve was ripped and that my arm was dislocated. The policeman looked at it and said, 'This is a useless piece of paper', and threw it away. (female client of the FSC, Honiara)

Few police officers or magistrates have been trained on domestic violence, either in Solomon Islands or abroad. Moreover, the justice system is overwhelmingly dominated by men, who share many traditional beliefs around the appropriateness of using violence against women, and this shapes the degree to which they are willing to enforce the law. A recently created Association of Women Lawyers of Solomon Islands is encouraging more women to enter law.

4.3 Community-based and traditional justice

Customary approaches generally involve compensating the injured party's family (this could be the family of the wife, if the husband is found to be at fault, but if the woman is at fault, she has to pay compensation to the husband). Then the chief will likely direct the couple to reconcile. *'The goal of law is punishment. But the goal in many rural areas is to bring peace between the families. The goal is not to punish.'* (male police officer)

⁴ Under a 'no-drop policy' (already in use for several years by the Fiji police force), once a complaint is lodged, the investigation should continue and the case sent to the magistrate, regardless of whether the woman subsequently asks to have the charges dropped. This not only takes the burden of continuing a case off the woman, but also discourages police from taking matters into their own hands and refusing to receive complaints or attempting to reconcile the couple.

Some traditional customs, such as bride-price (common in most of Solomon Islands), exacerbate the risks of violence to women. Bride-price is seen by many as conferring to a man a degree of ownership over his wife, and this is often interpreted as a license to beat her and treat her as he wishes. Most women do not feel the traditional system of justice meets their needs because it is administered by men and upholds traditional gender roles and values that favour men. In the case of rape, courts and police are more likely to favour criminal charges; however, very few women or girls report rape to the authorities because of the stigma attached to it. According to one magistrate:

There is no established principle for dealing with rape, because by custom, it is considered a taboo to talk about sexual acts about ladies. If we say Maina has been raped by David, it will cause Maina trouble. She will be embarrassed all the rest of her life. She may be subject to further assaults. She may be easy prey. It's best to settle outside the courts so that people don't have to talk about it.

4.4 Knowledge of laws and rights

The level of knowledge among community members in Solomon Islands regarding laws on violence against women and human rights remains low. An important initiative in this area is the series of community paralegal training courses targeted at women leaders, youth leaders, and teachers, run by the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT). The RRRT provides a technical advisory training program operating under the auspices of the UNDP. A single legal officer provides advice and legal awareness training on human rights issues in Honiara and in all provinces. The RRRT now has a pool of trainers who raise awareness and advocate on human rights, in particular, the CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

5 SUPPORT SERVICES FOR SURVIVORS

Women suffering violence have few avenues of support. In general, informal channels such as family members, friends, chiefs or pastors are seen as more accessible, although not sympathetic or helpful. The two main institutions providing the bulk of services for abused women and children in Solomon Islands—the FSC and the CCC—are both based in Honiara.

The FSC, founded in 1995, provides awareness-raising programs and skills training on violence against women to community groups throughout Solomon Islands. It provides legal information and facilitates referrals to and cooperation with relevant stakeholders, such as the police, the Public Solicitor's Office, the Prosecutions Office, and confidential counselling services.

The FSC used to have a community education program and a theatre group. During the tensions, however, the FSC scaled back its work, including long-term prevention efforts and theatre performances. After peace was restored, the FSC received support from AusAID through Oxfam Australia. Its leadership has recently undergone a number of changes resulting from an internal management crisis. As a result, donor funding has been greatly reduced and some core programs discontinued. The FSC currently provides onsite counselling for women, but its outreach program is no longer active. Those interviewed, however, pointed to the FSC as the source of all work on gender based violence in Solomon Islands. They respect its work, even though its operations have been reduced. Coordination among the FSC, the CCC, the police and the SOU is reportedly very good.

The Christian Care Centre, founded by the sisters of the Church of Melanesia, is the only safe haven for abused women and girls in Solomon Islands. The CCC provides counselling services and activities to occupy victims residing at the centre and conducts community awareness programs. The CCC is about 20 minutes outside of Honiara, which means women need transportation to get there. This is usually provided by the police or the CCC. Women are allowed to stay for up to two weeks (although many stay longer). Once at the centre, they are, however, isolated from their families and support networks. The majority of women return to their husbands after staying at the CCC. They are allowed to return to the CCC only a limited number of times.

Although the FSC and the CCC function well together in Honiara, they can only reach a small fraction of the women needing help. There is little formal support for women in rural areas, where the great majority of the population lives. As mentioned above, most domestic problems are settled through customary practices and other informal mechanisms.

Some survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault receive medico-legal services at hospitals. However, the health sector does not have a policy on violence against women. This is a significant policy gap. Because violence against women is a major cause of injury and ill health among women, this area should be made a priority. Integrating violence against women into health services require establishing policies and protocols and encouraging health providers to identify support needed, refer women and girls who are suffering from violence, provide training, and follow-up to ensure programs are implemented effectively. Training for doctors and nurses should be integrated into pre-service and in-service training. Violence prevention should also be integrated into community health programs, including sexuality, reproductive health and HIV prevention programs.

6 VIOLENCE PREVENTION

One core development challenge in Solomon Islands is delivering services beyond Honiara and some provincial centres. Government agencies do not yet penetrate much beyond the capital. Consequently, it is important to identify actors that can extend their reach into rural Solomon Islands, where the majority of people live, to make a positive contribution to addressing violence against women. Some organisations mentioned below have such reach and have already initiated work in this area. They have yet to realise their potential, however, and need further support.

- > **Vois Blong Mere Solomon Islands (VBMSI)** is a prominent Non-Government Organisation (NGO) promoting the rights of women. VBMSI coordinates with other women's organisations and uses radio to document and disseminate women's stories and provide information to women about CEDAW and women's rights in general. In 2006, VBMSI entered into partnership with **Fem'LINK Pacific** to document cases relating to peace and conflict, including violence against women and child abuse. VBMSI already has some reach into rural areas, but strengthening its advocacy capacity would further extend this reach and enable distribution of a greater volume of materials promoting women's rights and addressing issues of violence against women.
- > **Solomon Islands Christian Association, Federation of Women (SICA FOW)** brings together the five main church organisations from across Solomon Islands into an extensive network devoted to implementing women's development programs. The network varies in size and capacity outside Honiara. The network could be used to more robustly work to address violence against women in rural communities.
- > **Save the Children** carries out activities with youth, focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention and sexual and reproductive health in Honiara and other provincial centres. Although explicit training on violence against women is not part of this outreach, some gender sensitisation training is conducted. These programs provide entry points to engage youth on the issues of gender and violence against women and they provide a good opportunity to bring about attitudinal and behavioural change on a wide scale. More explicit efforts to deal with the issues could bolster outreach.
- > **Caritas and trauma support:** At the height of the tensions in 1998, the Roman Catholic Church helped provide assistance to displaced Malaitans in and around Honiara. One year later, the non-profit organisation Caritas launched a program of trauma support for Solomon Islanders, training approximately 80 trauma support workers over subsequent years that have serviced more than 5000 people. Trauma support workers were trained to listen to child soldiers, women and girls who were raped during the tensions and others traumatised by events. The workers apply the following philosophy: *'Unless there is forgiveness and personal healing, there is no true reconciliation.'* (trauma support worker)

This network of trauma support workers met an incredible need, although the support workers were not trained to provide formal counselling services. The support network remains even though the need for trauma support has dissipated since the tensions ended. Counsellors advise that it now provides some help to women and girls with violence-related issues, though this is on an ad hoc basis. The network stretches beyond Honiara and with additional training and resources, might now be strengthened and used to provide community outreach activities to address issues of violence against women.

6.1 Women's empowerment

Because women's status is so low in Solomon Islands, increasing their participation in political leadership positions and economic and social status at all levels must be a priority. This means strengthening women's participation and leadership in community development and economic programs, as well as their representation in national-level leadership positions, including in Parliament.

Political participation

There is recent evidence demonstrating that having more women in government has a positive impact on the provision of public goods to communities.⁵ The team is not aware of similarly rigorous research on the impact of women leaders on violence against women. However, intuitively the team would expect more women leaders (in national parliaments, local governments, senior public and private sector positions) to have a positive impact on efforts to reduce violence against women. Emerging evidence from East Timor appears to support this belief.

In 2004, East Timor's local (*suco*) councils and chiefs were given both the power and the duty of protecting women from domestic violence. A 2006 evaluation of efforts to increase women representation on the *suco* councils, and to equip them with "transformative leadership training" prior to their election onto the councils, identified some positive impacts:

Increased confidence and ability to speak up, both in the family and in the council.

Less conflict and violence in the family, attributed to their husbands paying them more respect. *'Men are happy when their wives are elected. It's a privilege for the family.'*

Some husbands more willing to share money and domestic chores with wives, thereby reducing domestic disputes and violence.

Some elected women able to raise the issue of domestic violence with their councils, as well as other women's issues, such as family planning, sanitation, children's vaccinations, school facilities, and women's sports.

⁵ Beaman, L Duflo, E Pande, R & Topalova, P 'Women Politicians, Gender Bias and Policymaking in Rural India' (UNICEF, December 2006), p. 4.

However, women's participation in public leadership positions in Solomon Islands is almost non-existent. Of the 50 members of Parliament, none are women, making Solomon Islands one of only a few countries with this situation. To successfully address violence against women, this needs to change over the long term. RAMSI provides a good opportunity for donors and the Government of Solomon Islands to work together to increase the levels of political participation by women. Some work is underway, but on a relatively small scale.

Economic empowerment

In the long run, economic empowerment of women will strengthen violence prevention efforts in Solomon Islands (as well as having many other positive development outcomes). Economic development programs in Solomon Islands, particularly those targeting women, need to incorporate education around violence against women and gender relations. If not carefully addressed, however, programs increasing a woman's access to economic resources can put her at risk of increased violence. This is particularly true in settings where a woman's status is low, because increasing her income can lead to greater conflict within the family (Koenig, Hossain et al. 1999). On the other hand, if such issues are addressed within the community and among women leaders, such programs can significantly contribute to reducing violence against women.

Community-mobilisation activities and micro-finance programs in Solomon Islands that involve education about rights and violence against women are likely to significantly reduce the levels of violence against women as well as improving repayment rates in micro-finance activities.⁶ Two current activities provide a basis from which to take this agenda forward in Solomon Islands.

- > **Rokotanikeni Association and economic empowerment of women:** The Rokotanikeni Association was established in 1999 following a study carried out by Dr Alice Pollard on the changing roles of women and men. Its primary focus is to provide economic empowerment to women from West Areare, Malaita, thereby giving them greater control over the resources necessary for advancing their families. Membership has grown to more than 500 since its inception.

The Community Sector Program (CSP), funded by AusAID, is currently reorganising its activities to concentrate on capacity-building at the ward level of the Provincial Council of Women. The CSP could provide an opportunity to strengthen women's participation in community leadership and, potentially, to engage in prevention activities for violence against women.

⁶ For example, see: Pronyk, PM & Hargreaves JR, et al. 2006, 'Effect of a structural intervention for the prevention of intimate-partner violence and HIV in rural South Africa: a cluster randomised trial', *Lancet* 368(9551): 1973–83; Kim, JC & Watts, CH et al. 2007, 'Understanding the impact of a microfinance-based intervention on women's empowerment and the reduction of intimate partner violence in South Africa', *American Journal of Public Health* 97(10): 1794–802.

7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusions

After a promising start in the 1990s to address women's human rights and violence against women in Solomon Islands, these issues were put on the back burner during the tensions. Since peace was restored, most development and emergency efforts have focused on basic issues, such as restoring law and justice institutions and economic livelihoods. However, it is clear that violence against women and girls threatens not only the health and wellbeing of individuals, but affects Solomon Islands society as a whole. Therefore, efforts to address violence against women must be integrated into the country's overall social and economic development strategy.

A great deal of enthusiasm exists around rebuilding the momentum lost and strengthening efforts to eliminate violence against women. Because the law and justice sector is so weak at present, it seems priority should be on developing community-level efforts to prevent violence and support victims. The Committees Against Violence Against Women from Vanuatu and that country's work with male advocates (emphasising outreach to local authorities, police officers, chiefs, and magistrates), could be a useful model for strengthening village-level work. Ultimately, however, the effectiveness of community-level efforts depends on national law reform.

The recommendations in the regional report on priorities for supporting anti-violence against women initiatives are all relevant for Solomon Islands. In addition, the team suggests a number of other priorities for support within Solomon Islands (described below).

Australia is well positioned to play a supporting role by systematically integrating into all of its programming, strategies to reduce violence against women through human-rights and gender-sensitive approaches.

7.2 Specific recommendations for all Solomon Islands actors

Support research dissemination: The results from the study on violence against women will provide an excellent opportunity to draw attention to the issue. Full advantage should be taken of this. Support should be made available for public awareness activities around the results, including disseminating them through formal and informal channels, community-level activities and outreach activities with churches and the Council of Chiefs, etc.

Support multisectoral coordination, both among local groups working on women's issues and interagency coordination within the government. The revival of the Ministry for Women, Youth and Children's Affairs and the preparation of the second CEDAW Report provides an opportunity to strengthen coordination and incorporate activities to address violence against women into other government ministries. Line

agencies, such as the ministries of Health, Justice and Legal Affairs, Corrections and Education, need to be involved. However, leadership from the Ministry of Prime Minister and Cabinet is also required to deliver an effective multisectoral approach. Priority should be given to activities facilitating interagency coordination among international agencies and donors.

Support legal reforms in relation to personal and domestic violence and streamlining procedures for addressing violence. This would involve:

- > developing domestic and personal violence legislation as an urgent priority
- > undertaking police training on the new legislation
- > conducting community consultation and education activities on the new legislation.

Until more comprehensive laws are in place, supporting the work of the SOU and DVU in the Solomon Islands police force may yield some gains. This support may also pave the way for more substantive legal reforms. The domestic violence policy developed by the police force provides a blueprint for new procedures to deal with rape and domestic violence. Once approved, support should be given to disseminating the policy, training police officers and magistrates around the new procedures, and underlining the need to ensure women's needs for protection and redress are met. Support should also include broader legal literacy and human rights-based training for community members, such as the work being carried out by the RRRT. Options to engage more women lawyers should be explored.

Increasing access to justice of women in rural Solomon Islands requires complementary initiatives, including:

- > Increasing the capacity of the courts to travel on circuit outside Honiara. This is expensive in Solomon Islands and would require the injection of substantial resources.
- > Simple, non-discretionary legislation allowing the police to seek restraining orders (particularly interim or urgent ones). These orders would help women seek protection in between court sittings on circuit.
- > Given the limited reach of the formal justice system, improving the links between the formal justice system and traditional and community-based justice systems may help improve women's access to better quality community justice. Because local chiefs deal with the majority of violence incidents, it is critical to involve them in a way that supports women's rights and interests. The program of male advocates implemented in Fiji and Vanuatu has succeeded in engaging male leaders as allies, including police officers and chiefs. This approach should be explored as a potentially useful model for Solomon Islands.

Providing services for survivors of violence: Clearly there is a need for strengthening organisations with a national reach that can support community efforts and spearhead advocacy efforts. The FSC is best-positioned, by virtue of its history and commitment, to fill this role. To make a meaningful difference, substantial investment is needed for core support and capacity-building. Training and mentoring by other groups in the region, such as the type of support the Vanuatu Women's Centre has received from the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, would be valuable.

Extend the reach of services into the provinces. One core development challenge in Solomon Islands is delivering services beyond Honiara and some provincial centres. Government agencies do not yet penetrate much beyond the capital. This is a key challenge for Solomon Islands, but a critical one: 85 per cent of the population live in rural areas with minimal access to services. There are no easy solutions to achieving this. Creative ways are needed to extend women's access to basic services through community-sector programs. This should include exploring whether the trauma support network supported by Caritas during the tensions could be revitalized to help address violence against women in rural areas.

Integrate attention to violence against women in the health system. The first step would be to establish policies and protocols encouraging health providers to identify, support and refer women and girls suffering violence as required. This requires training and follow-up to ensure programs are implemented effectively, and are embedded in the health system as it strengthens its reach into rural areas.

Address violence against women through primary and secondary education. Policies should be developed and implemented to prohibit sexual harassment and violence against girls in schools, from teachers or students. In addition, schools should address violence and gender equity in the curriculum.

Engage youth and men in prevention activities: Working with the youth in such groups as Save the Children provide an excellent way to address the linkages between violence against women and girls and other health and development issues, such as HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health. Efforts to integrate work on violence against women into programs for economic empowerment of women and local development should also be supported.

Support activities around communication for social change: The FSC used to have a theatre group appreciated for its work in rural areas. This program could be revived, perhaps with technical support from regional groups, such as Wan Smol Bag in Vanuatu, experienced in using communication for social change techniques for issues of domestic violence and gender with young people and rural communities. The communications work of VBMSI in radio also merits further support.

7.3 Specific recommendations for Australia

Be explicit and proactive in supporting gender equality and human rights in policy dialogue. This includes encouraging, motivating and assisting the Government of Solomon Islands to address violence against women. The upcoming nationally representative survey on gender-based violence is an opportunity to do so. Australia should support the development of a strategy to widely disseminate the study results and seize the opportunity to promote discussion among Solomon Islands stakeholders about how to improve multisectoral coordination around this issue and the recommendations in this report.

Incorporate a human rights and gender perspective into all Australian-funded activities, including RAMSI. This will reinforce Australia's efforts to maintain high-level policy discussion about the problem of violence against women in Solomon Islands. Given the extent of Australia's involvement in the law and justice sector, and the need for urgent legal reform in Solomon Islands, this should become an initial priority. Support should be available to train technical advisors and counterparts in advocating for gender equality and addressing violence against women. All program designs should include relevant gender analysis on ways to address violence against women. The access issues faced by rural and vulnerable women should be considered in all service delivery and law and justice programs.

Substantially increase support of services for survivors of violence. Women in need require many more services, particularly outside Honiara. The capacity of the Government of Solomon Islands to provide these is limited in the short and medium term. Consequently, Australia should seek to strengthen organisations with a national reach that are able to support community-based efforts and spearhead advocacy efforts.

Support shared learning and exchanges with other organisations in the region. Government agencies and women's groups need to build capacity in the area of violence against women, and exchange visits with other countries in the region could be of great value. In addition to mentor support from well-established groups such as the FWCC, opportunities to learn from groups working in similar settings (such as the Vanuatu Women's Centre), could be beneficial, particularly in assessing whether the male advocate model and Committees Against Violence Against Women could be adapted to Solomon Islands. Australia should encourage such exchanges. Australia should also work with other donors to harmonise efforts with NGOs and civil society organisations, especially to reduce the reporting burden on these groups.

Increase support for women's empowerment, political and economic, subject to efforts to minimise violence backlash by incorporating education around violence against women and gender relations in all empowerment interventions. AusAID's community development program provides a key opportunity to pursue this agenda.

ANNEX 1: ADVISORY GROUP MEMBERS

Ms Afu Billy, Regional Director, Common Wealth Youth Program
Ms Stella Delaiverata, Office for the High Commission on Human Rights
Mrs Judith Fangalasu, Director, SICA Commission
Ms Josephine Kama, Gender Adviser, Community Sector Program
Sir Albert Palmer, Chief Justice of Solomon Islands
Mr Solomon Palusi, Undersecretary, Ministry Home and Ecclesiastical Affairs
Mr George Pitakoe, Solomon Islands Planned Parenthood Association
Mrs Ethel Sigimanu, Permanent Secretary, Ministry Youth, Women and Child Affairs
Ms Josephine Teakeni, Director, Vois Blong Mere
Mrs Janet Tuhaika, Acting Director, Women's Development Division

ANNEX 2: ORGANISATIONS CONSULTED⁷

Organisation

Ministry of the Prime Minister

Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs

Government of the Western Province

Social Welfare Division, Welfare Division Office, Gizo

Gizo Hospital

Government Law and Justice Sector officials

Chief Justice of Solomon Islands

Magistrates (9 interviewed)

Police (20 interviewed in Honiara and Gizo)

Public Solicitor's office

Law Reform Commission

National Council of Women

Provincial Council of Women, Gizo

Provincial Council of Women, Auki

Family Support Centre (including interviews with staff and clients)

Christian Care Centre

Vois Blong Mere Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands Christian Association, Federation of Women (SICA FOW)

Save the Children Youth Outreach Project (Honiara and Auki)

(over 30 youth consulted)

Caritas National Training Office

Rokotanikeni Women's Association (Honiara and Auki)

Solomon Islands Planned Parenthood Association

Catholic Women's Group, Auki

AusAID Community Support Program staff

RAMSI Advisers (Law and Justice, Machinery of Government)

RAMSI, Participating Police Force

⁷ To protect confidentiality, individuals have not been named.