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Exploring the opportunities and challenges of local cultures in working towards gender equality in Solomon Islands

LEARNING PAPER

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[Photo: Karen Young]
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1. Introduction

In February 2012, a workshop was held in Honiara, Solomon Islands as part of 'Navigating Gender and Culture: learning from local gender advocates'; a project run by International Women's Development Agency and funded by the AusAID Innovations Grants Program. This project aimed to document the knowledge and experience of local gender advocates in four (4) countries in Asia and the Pacific and enable them to speak openly about their experiences and share their knowledge and insights with others, both locally and in Australia. Another aim of the project was to better inform community development practitioners about effective approaches and tools being used by local gender advocates. It is hoped sharing this information will improve the way International Partners work towards gender equality with partner organisations or individuals. On the second day, the workshop especially addressed the work of international NGOs and issues that arise when they carry out gender equality work in Solomon Islands.

The workshop held in Honiara was titled 'Exploring the opportunities and challenges of local cultures in working towards gender equality in Solomon Islands' and was attended by 17 participants (four male, 13 female) over two days. Participants were all Honiara-based NGO or church staff whose work focuses specifically on gender equality. Sessions were co-facilitated by Doris Puiahi of Live & Learn Environmental Education (LLEE) and Joanna Brislane of International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), with Jo Crawford and Ali Capp of IWDA supporting the facilitators.

This paper aims to inform the practice of people working towards gender equality by documenting what was shared in the two day workshop held in Solomon Islands. Best efforts have been made to genuinely represent the views of participants, and IWDA acknowledges their valuable contribution to this paper and welcomes feedback from participants about this paper.

2. Gender and Culture in Solomon Islands today

The first session of the workshop was dedicated to allowing participants the space to discuss what the concepts of gender and culture mean to them and how these concepts are changing in Solomon Islands. The following major themes emerged from discussions and activities.

a) A multi-dimensional view of culture and gender

It was clear from various discussions in the workshop that both 'culture' and 'gender' are multi-dimensional concepts that cannot be easily defined. Referring to 'Solomon Island culture' or 'gender relations in Solomon Islands' fails to take into account the diversity that exists both within and between communities in Solomon Islands and disregards the significant influence that religion, culture, family, marriage, education, employment, age and wealth can all have on both gender and culture. The following participant observations speak to this:

- Religion - Christianity is not homogenous, and conceptions of gender are influenced heavily by a given denomination or doctrine. In many denominations translation of the Bible is quite literal so gender roles are heavily influenced by the idea of 'women submitting to their husbands' or acting as men's 'servants'. It is important to note that this is not the case in all churches. There is also divergence evident in the church leadership. Some churches have female clergy, and at

least one church is actively debating the issue of gender roles. However, the majority strongly disagree with the idea of women taking an active role in church leadership outside of women's fellowship groups.

- Age and family position - Gender roles change in the family according to age and position in the family. For example, one participant stated that younger girls have fewer responsibilities and given less respect than older girls and will accordingly show respect to older sisters. The interplay of gender and position in the family results in varied 'roles' in different families. As one female participant observed: '*even though I'm the eldest, I am still considered below my younger brothers. But my brothers still come to me for advice and decision-making, so it [gender roles] is changing'*. Another noted: '*in my case it is different to many because I am the first born, so my brothers look up to me and they have to ask me before they can make decisions in the family - I am the head of the family, not the males; but this very rare*'. Likewise, marital status and personal circumstances affect gender roles within the family. For example, being a single mother or widow can mean women have more authority within the home.

- Education levels and employment play a big part in determining women's status in the family. It was noted that both formal (school) and informal (community/church) education are essential for teaching young people about sharing roles and responsibilities and providing positive role models. Employment and income can have varied impacts on women's roles in the family and community. If a woman has money, sometimes her power and status increase, but in other cases it has little or no influence. One participant noted: '*There are few men in my family and all the women have jobs so the men in the family respect the women'*. However, another said '*A woman has a big role at work – she is the 'boss' – but at home she isn't seen as a 'boss'. There is no increased status within her family – she is still just a* woman'. The phrase '*hem woman nomoa'* (she's just a woman) was repeated throughout discussions. One participant said: '*maybe in some relationships, if women have work and help to make things happen, this can influence the family in terms of good living, and the man will go along with her efforts to work for the family'*. It seems that men's support in some situations is dependent on the potential or perceived benefits to men themselves, rather than on an underlying belief in equality, the consequence of which being that such support is in danger of being withdrawn should circumstances change.

b) Culture and custom

Culture refers to 'the behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group'[1]. Custom, while similar, is differentiated from culture when it is understood as representing 'a group pattern of activity transmitted from one generation to another[2]'. In Solomon Islands, the words 'custom' and 'culture' are often used interchangeably and are generally understood to mean the same thing. When discussing the many cultures that make up 'Solomon Island culture' participants easily identified various factors that influence the constantly changing concept of culture: religion, peer groups, media and communication, race and ethnicity, families, age, gender and western influence. However, comments were

[1] http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/culture?s=t
[2] http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/custom?s=t

also made that point to a tendency to see culture as something from the past that does not change. For example, one participant described culture as being '*from the forefathers and ancestors*' and another said '*before we were born, culture was already there from the very beginning'*. Custom was also described as '*traditional practices and rules; worshipping ancestors, rules around acting one way with one person and a different way with different people or in different situations – each day, having to put a different face forward'*.

As a consequence of this convergence of the terms custom and culture, any changes in culture or challenges to cultural norms, such as those necessary to achieve gender equality, are often thought to be culturally inappropriate or disrespectful. When culture and custom are seen as the same thing, they tend to be seen as constant (set) and therefore are not open to change. Promoting behaviour change can consequently be understood as going against or away from local culture/custom. This was strongly reflected in comments from various participants about the difficulty of putting the behavioural changes they promote in their work into practice in the home. Many commented that within the nuclear family unit they felt comfortable practising more equitable sharing of traditional gendered responsibilities (household chores and cooking for example). However, in front of other family or community members they felt they would be judged and seen as disrespecting custom. It was noted by one participant that '*older people are confused about how culture and gender [equality] will meet. They [say that they] are too different. Young people are not confused, but it is still hard to change and respect our elders'*.

Several participants raised the topic of 'black magic' and noted that is a significant factor in influencing current gender norms and works as a strong deterrent for behaviour change. There is a common belief that not complying with traditional gender roles and responsibilities will lead to '*punishment*'. As one participant noted, a common response to calls for greater sharing of household responsibilities is: '*if I have white skin, I can do that but because I am black, I need to respect Black Magic'*.

c) Understanding and acceptance of gender equality

When used in Solomon Islands Pijin the word gender (*jenda*) has a broad definition that encapsulates gender equality and approaches that ensures equal representation of men and women. For example, it is not uncommon to hear someone say '*waka blong yumi hem mas jenda*' (literally: our work has to be gender) to mean that they must take a certain approach in their work to ensure that men and women are both fairly represented or can both participate. This may cause confusion as it means that gender, like culture, is seen as a set rather than fluid concept. Gender is hence understood by some as men and women working together in a particular (externally influenced) way, rather than as how men and women relate to each other at a given time in a given domain. The consequence of this, in conjunction with the convergence of custom and culture, is that gender and culture are sometimes seen as being inherently incompatible. One participant noted that some people respond to their work by saying '*how is gender different if we already have gender in our culture?'* Another said, *'some people think gender will collide with culture'*. Participants also spoke about the tendency for gender equality work in the community to be presented or understood as being '*only for women*',

and the consequent impact that has on male participation. As one male participant noted, '*most people don't know what 'gender' means – most people think it is just for women'*. Another said, '*gender means women, so men don't come to women's meetings and, if they do, they are there as guests of women, and they think it is respectful not to speak'*. A female participant added,

'When they see gender they see women because only women are the advocators. But really we are working for shared responsibilities. The more the men know about gender, the more they will understand and change. We are trying to work together, with equal responsibilities between men and women'.

Semantics however is not the only reason there is resistance to increased gender equality in the community. Participants noted that '*big changes make people nervous'* and that '*it is a challenge for men to adapt because it* [gender equality] *is a big change from what they know – it is easier to change when you can see the benefits*'. Another male participant noted, '*it is challenging to adopt gender, but I accept it. If I agree with gender, I can accept it. If I don't agree, I won't accept it'*. While there are examples of support and acceptance of gender equality from men, such as those who participated in the workshop, culture is still often used to defend the status quo of a male dominated society. Even male participants, whose work focuses on gender equality, commented that if they do not follow '*cultural rules*', they are afraid that others will scold them. Female participants echoed this: '*If a female dominates in a community meeting, her brother will be ashamed of his sister. People will think that he didn't teach his sister the ways of the culture'*. Another said: '*In meetings if women always ask questions and a man is sitting there, he will think 'what is she doing? She is not following the culture. If women do that, men tend to think they are looking down on men'*. The fact that culture can act as a barrier to gender equality was acknowledged by many participants, some of whom commented that '*to bring change, we [men and women] need to break some of the norms that are oppressing women'*. Likewise, another women commented *'somebody has to step up against the normal and over time, it will be accepted. Yes, it may bring disgrace or dishonour, but this is a challenge for all of us'*.

d) Changing roles in the home and community

In discussing how gender relations have changed over time, the group agreed that some steps have been taken towards more equitable gender relations and they could easily identify areas of progress. It was also noted that this progress is limited only to certain areas. Gender relations were most commonly discussed in relation to the sharing of tasks within the home and community (i.e. the distinction between men's work [physical labour/ outside the home] and women's work [domestic chores, child rearing, preparing food/within the home]), but the education of boys and girls, formal employment, public displays of affection and bride price were also discussed.

It was evident from participant observations that the most significant progress toward gender equality has been made in the workplace. Many women are pursuing an education and gaining employment and *'in many offices women hold leadership positions, which didn't happen before'*. Women's employment is a strong indicator of cultural change in that women can now leave the home, complete their education at both secondary and tertiary levels (which often

involves independent travel within Solomon Islands or overseas), and take up employment opportunities. However, it was evident that progress is limited and must be viewed as part of a larger more complex transition in terms of gender roles and relations. In one woman's words, '*some men are involved in the housework, but…others…go to work [and] when they come home they rest while women who are working still have to do the second job of housework and cooking'*. Another stated: '*women's leadership and participation in management [can be] limited to specific women's offices, like women focused ministries, women's NGOs and church fellowship groups'*. For those women leaders in mainstream organisations, they are respected because of their role, but still face challenges. As one female participant noted:

'At work, women get respect… but it is still a fight… They need crocodile skin to deal with changing male attitudes. We go to big meetings overseas and talk about gender equality, but in fact our church is not implementing this – we pay lip service at the international level, but at national level, there is no action.'

As discussed above, culture and custom play a large part in defining what is acceptable behaviour in terms of gender roles and relations and status plays an important part in influencing changes. As male participants noted, *'I don't want my relatives to look down on me and lose his status or power in the family' and 'people will ask you…'why are you accepting this [doing housework] from your wife?' People will see this as reducing your status'*. Another participant however noted that *'if men are helping women with housework and making things more equal, they are increasing the value of women's work'* which shows that status must definitely be considered but does not always need to be seen as a challenge to gender equality.

This example highlights that steps towards gender equality are often taken at different paces in different areas of society - for example, in the workplace and the home. This results in the double burden of women being responsible for bringing income into the home as well as taking charge of child rearing, cooking and cleaning. As one woman noted, '*At work, if the lady is the head of the job, you have to have respect for her. It doesn't make any difference to my life – I still come home and have to do the housework while my husband just relaxes'*. The following comments from male participants speak to the difference between the workplace and the home:

'*My boss is a female – I have respect for her. But when I go back home, my wife must take care of household responsibility for me… when I go home, the women do everything for me - that is their role. I'm a bit scared because of my culture – I am living with relatives, and because men don't normally do this, I don't have the courage to do the housework'*.

'*At my work, the Director is a woman – I have started to change some of my attitudes. I started to help at home. I have two sisters and I always consult them in decision-making. It's not something that came out of my culture, I learned from the office and tried to educate myself. Occasionally I support my wife with two or three activities when no-one else is around, but when my brothers are around they will tease me so I don't help'*.

'Before I never helped out my wife or family, but these days I always help my wife with different responsibilities. Now I can cook and wash. It's normal in my community now. Experiences at work help me to take a different approach at home. What I've learned about gender helps me in my relationships, but if you don't experience this in the workplace, how

would you know or experience this? Sometimes I hide the work I help my wife with at home so that other people outside can't see because they might tease me'.

The varying pace of change and difference in circumstances between Honiara and rural and remote areas was also stressed by several participants. As one participant remarked: '*I get respect in my family home in town [Honiara]… but when I get back to the village, it's completely different'*.
Changes in decision making and leadership were also discussed. It was noted that in the past there was a clear male dominated hierarchy in community leadership and one participant stated that '*these days, women have the privilege to talk in public, whereas way back, women didn't have anything, they were nothing'*. While this shows some progress, it also demonstrates women contributing to decision making is still seen as a '*privilege*' rather than a right. The lack of female representation in Parliament was noted as an example of the fact that women are seen by many as being '*lower*' than men and should '*just stay in the house'* rather than play an active role in leadership. It was clear from discussions that while women are increasingly able to take part in decision-making, this participation is limited by where they live, their status in the family and community, and the subject about which decisions are being made. As one participant observed, '*men used to dominate decision making about land, even though custody of the land was passed through women - it is still like that. Women landowners can't exercise their rights over land'*. From this and other participant comments it is clear that in the many cases where women are taking part in decision making, it is because men allow them to, so women's participation is limited by men's right to decide when they can and cannot participate.

3. Challenges to and strategies for change

a) Challenges to working towards gender equality

When asked what resistance or challenges they face when working towards gender equality, participants noted that major barriers include Christianity, the *wantok* system, lack of women's active participation, competition amongst women and the difficulty of engaging men.

i. <u>Christianity</u>

As noted above, each denomination within Christianity is different, and how open to change different churches are depends heavily on their leadership and doctrine. However, participant comments reflect that it is fair to say Christian ideology and the significant influence it has on social norms often acts a barrier to gender equality. One participant noted, '*according to the church, the man is the head of the family*'.

ii. <u>The Wantok System</u>

As discussed above, it was clear from discussions that the importance of extended families and knowing one's role and responsibility within the family can act as a significant barrier to gender equality. Participants noted that the *wantok* system can be '*stressful*' and said '*we have extended family around so we have to make sure we do not go against custom…when there are so many family members watching…If [my husband] helped me they would say 'what is wrong*

with your wife? Is she lazy?' They would criticize me for not doing my job in the home'.

iii. Lack of women's active participation

Another issue that was discussed was the fact that women and young women need more than just opportunities to participate, they also need support to build their confidence and capacity to participate. It *was noted that 'you may see women participating in meetings, but women actively participating is not common'*. Other participants said:

'*Most young girls don't participate in meetings. Most of them aren't educated so they feel down and don't have the confidence – they think they don't have ideas to contribute. When the Chief makes a decision in the community, people listen and don't say anything – they have never seen any other opportunities outside of this'*.

'In communities, men give women the chance to talk but most of the women hold back because they don't have any confidence to speak out so men always dominate conversations'.

'Sometimes women's messages are passed through men (i.e. men discuss things with woman in private then represent their views in public). This can lead to distortion of women's voices and sometimes mean that women's messages are not passed on'.

iv. Competition amongst women

Jealousy is seen as '*common in the community'* and a tendency for competition rather than cooperation among women was noted by many participants. Jealousy can also present as friction between different denominations, particularly in small communities. One participant observed, '*there was an ordinary woman with good potential and leadership which led her to opportunities and this created jealousies – there was no solidarity. Potential leaders are 'spoiled' by community perception'*. Contributing factors to this lack of solidarity were noted as personal grievances, denominational differences, family/tribal/racial differences, education levels and selfish attitudes. Education came up several times and one woman shared, *'if you are very well educated, and you return and see someone less educated in a place of authority, you may feel like it undermines your work and you should have more status than she does. They should be working together but they are opposing each other'*. Another said, *'in the community everyone is all together, but then when there is a project or an initiative, people don't work together, they do different things and compete with each other to benefit personally from the project'*.

v. Engaging men

Unfortunately, the understanding of the word gender as being exclusively about women is common and has serious consequences when trying to engage men. As one participant reflected about her work, '*the community was against me when I was doing a workshop, saying "you just come here to preach women's rights" and men disagreed with me as they felt I was trying to influence the women in the community, so the barriers are up when I arrived*'. When projects are directed specifically at women, men ask 'why aren't we included?'

b) Strategies for overcoming challenges in working towards gender equality

i. Using inclusive language

As previously noted, the word 'gender' can sometimes be a barrier in itself. As one participant noted,

'*When we look at gender, we don't call it 'gender', because we want men to participate. We make it open so we can work together as a team and understand each other. You will not face misunderstanding in a community if you don't use the word gender*'.

Some people talk to communities about 'men and women working together', about 'everyone participating in decision making' or about 'family harmony and unity' for example, so as to avoid using the word gender. Some participants suggested initiating programs that have a focus on gender, but are not labelled as 'gender projects' or 'women's projects'. Participants felt this allowed space for community members to engage with the project and potentially the message, rather than being inclined to stay away because they feel the project is not relevant to them. It is not to say that the word gender can never be used and participants noted that increasing understanding about gender can be helpful, however, being mindful of potential negative reactions to the term is important. Some participants suggested, for example, starting with discussions about roles and responsibilities generally instead of starting with defining sex and gender.

Being mindful of language is also an important part of any development work in Solomon Islands. Many people not from Solomon Islands assume that as English is the national language of Solomon Islands it will be readily understood in communities. This is not always the case, and participants stressed the need to speak Pijin or local language, simplify language or use an interpreter to ensure understanding.

ii. Engaging Men

Participants noted that working in partnership with men and '*helping men to understand why it is important to share roles'* is essential to achieving greater gender equality. It was suggested that informal strategies are best for engaging men in rural communities - for example, '*if you want to engage men, don't be formal, don't have meetings, have one on one discussions'*. One participant shared that in the project she is working on a conscious effort is made to inform men about the project and its aims, even though women are the people participating directly in the project. She said:

'When men tend to talk against us, we try to challenge it – this is your wife and daughters and they can help in your family if they learn new things. We tell them to focus on working together as a team. They don't always get it but they come back later to talk about it – they won't always talk about these things at the time'.

Another suggestion was discussing roles and responsibilities in informal public forums '*to show men can do women's work and vice-versa*' so that the message is about working together rather than challenging men's status.

Finally, several participants noted that *'it is important in gender work to stress practical strategies and show men the benefits… rather than just telling them'*.

Several participants highlighted the need to involve youth in programs and consider programs that encourage boys and girls to share responsibilities from a young age. Integrating gender equality into school curriculum and into church education programs were noted as possible strategies.

iii. Working with churches

Participants also shared examples of how they have worked within or alongside the church system, and one woman noted that if you '*contextualise it then it makes it easier to raise these discussions – you have to take it back to the biblical basis because then there is no way to challenge it – the Bible sees men and women as equal'*. One participant noted,

'When I started my HIV project, I could not do awareness in the Church about HIV and sexual reproductive health. It is difficult to try and bring the Clergy, the Pastor and the elders to understand. I talk about the issues in the context of the Bible but it is hard to talk about sexuality and sex…I always refer back to the Bible saying that 'man' was created in God's image - that means both men and women are creations of God and should be valued and respected'.

The importance of respecting cultural norms (such as discussing sensitive issues, like sexual health and violence, in separate men's and women's groups) was stressed, as was the need to separate groups on the basis of age so that young people feel comfortable to contribute. The need to approach faith leaders as potential advocates and recognise their power and influence as an opportunity was also discussed.

iv. Identifying and involving community leaders and existing networks

Participants noted that it is vital to show respect for community leadership. Involving the Chief and elders can impact greatly on how supportive the rest of the community will be. They also agreed that building networks with churches is a good way of getting information down to the community level, as churches have broad reach and are well respected in communities.

v. Being mindful of your position in the family or community

Participants discussed the importance of being mindful as a facilitator of their role in the community and/or family unit. Due to the sensitivity of gender issues and the close link between gender roles and people's intimate relationships it is important to know '*your place'* and be willing to step back and allow someone else to facilitate discussion if you are not the appropriate person. As one participant noted, *'it can be difficult when you have to deal with family relationships or when you have to ask personal questions because this takes a particular skill and it can be very sensitive'*. Another said '*maybe you are not the right person to approach [the community] – it depends on your role and where you are from as to whether you can approach them… you need to know something about the culture and customs before you start that kind of conversation [about gender roles and relationships]*'.

4. How the work of International Partners is experienced by local staff

The second day of the workshop was dedicated to discussing the work of International Partners and on gathering feedback from participants about how International Partners can be more sensitive to context and more effective in their work.

a) The contribution of International Partners to work on gender equality

Participants readily identified ways that International Partners help to strengthen their work and the opportunities that working in partnership with International Partners present. Those most commonly noted were:

- Technical knowledge and expertise
- New ideas and approaches to working on gender issues
- Building the capacities of local counterparts
- Exposure to regional and international standards and best practice guidelines
- Financial and human resources
- Sense-making/alternate perspectives
- Networking and dialogue between local and international organisations
- Informing and supporting policy and legislative change.

b) Suggestions for strengthening the work of international partners

Using a mixture of drama, large and small group discussion, and anonymous feedback, participants identified areas in which the work of international partners could be improved. While the reflections below may appear to some to be a repetition of basic community development principles, the fact that participants felt the need to reiterate these points speaks volumes about the practical application of these principles and the need for greater accountability to local communities.

i. <u>Cultural awareness</u>

Despite the importance of cultural sensitivity to good community development practice, participants shared many stories of the approach and manner of International Partners being inappropriate and in some cases disrespectful.

- As previously noted, participants spoke about language and the importance of speaking Pijin or local language or using an interpreter, especially in rural areas. The use of English was sometimes acceptable with certain groups; however, International Partners still need to be wary of communicating clearly and allowing time and space for clarification.

- Participants agreed that many international partners dress inappropriately and emphasised the importance of respecting local customs around dress to show respect and build rapport. One participant said, *'if you behave properly* [dressing appropriately, attending church activities] *then people will be more open to you and accept you'*.

- The importance of hospitality to Solomon Island cultures was also noted and participants stressed the importance of being humble and gracious when offered accommodation in the village. Many International Partners refuse to be accommodated in the village due to sanitation and bedding standards which results in them just '*dropping in'* to the community. There is significant impact on building relationships and common understanding as a result of this and it can

sometimes be offensive to community members to have someone refuse their offer of hospitality. One participant summarised the sentiment well in saying,

> *'If you are from an International NGO and you want to work with us, and you want to have a good bed to sleep in then you can forget it. These people have tried very hard to make a mat for you to sleep on – maybe back home you have good things but here you need to work with us, live like us. Then you will gain the confidence of the village people'*.

ii. Recognising the diversity of Solomon Islands cultures

As noted earlier in this paper, referring to 'Solomon Island culture' fails to take into account the diversity that exists both within and between communities. It was noted that international partners 'often think that things are the same everywhere, but there are different forms of oppression and different challenges in different parts of Solomon Islands'. International Partners need to realise they are not '*bringing gender'* to communities. International Partners are working in a context that already has gender norms, relations and responsibilities, so they need to work from what exists in local contexts.

iii. Being humble and sensitive

Participants noted that international staff need to be '*humble and sensitive'* and *'admit that you don't know everything'*. They agreed that the overriding message is often '*we have money and answers'*, which implies that international partners '*can solve local issues'*. Participants stressed the importance of international partners ensuring that their manner and approach does not discount local knowledge and strength, and dismiss efforts made in the past and lessons learned from them. This quote from a drama performance is reflective of this emphasis:

> [Community member to International Partner] *'We're tired of you coming with this gender issue - we're tired of a new one of you coming each year and saying the same thing – our community hasn't seen any changes from the others, so how are you different?'*

iv. Relationship building

The approach international partners take and the emphasis they place on building relationships was noted as being of primary importance. One participant said:

> *'International partners must be approachable, friendly, understanding…sometimes their tone makes the community feel uncomfortable – tone and manner matter. Sit with people and don't talk at them, talk to them and with them. Bring people with you, build relationships, don't emphasise the distance between the presenter and audience'*.

In drama performances several groups highlighted that many international partners directly approach the community rather than going through 'the right channels' (Chief/Pastor/Elders). Participants also noted that many international partners often assume that local NGOs have good relationships with the community and do not allow enough time for relationship building. As one participant noted '*just because staff are local does not mean they have*

established strong relationships in all communities…Even when working through local partners you need to invest in building a relationship'.

v. Capitalising on Christian messages and networks

The powerful influence of the Church and the centrality of Christianity in Solomon Islands cultures were highlighted by participants. It was expressed that international partners '*could improve working with Christian messages'*. Participants were aware of policy restrictions around proselytising, however, noted that there are opportunities for international partners to engage more with the Church and its networks whilst respecting these restrictions. While it was strongly felt that international partners need to pay greater attention to the role of Christianity, it was also recognised that it can be difficult for international partners to work within the structure of existing Christian networks and organisations. Garnering genuine support and commitment from Churches takes time and requires extensive relationship building, but has the potential to be a powerful vehicle for influencing change in gender roles and relations.

vi. Avoiding approaches that blame and shame men

Approaches that '*attack men'* were labelled culturally inappropriate by participants and they spoke about the need to '*do some orientation'* so as to work out '*how best to pitch messages so there is resonance'*. It was agreed that in some cases the message international partners give to men about women's rights puts men off engaging with women's rights. In particular, didactic approaches, such as "you men should do this and that", "you must know it is bad" and "you must want to change" were seen to be very unhelpful. Assuming too much about the extent to which people want to change was seen as a common trap that international partners fall into.

vii. Having realistic expectations and timeframes

All participants strongly agreed that the timelines imposed by international partners can act as a major barrier to building relationships and common understanding, ensuring genuine consultation and participation, and strengthening the capacity of local staff and organisations. Effective work towards gender equality requires significant investment in local staff capacity building and ongoing training, and this takes time. Furthermore, behaviour change is the core of gender equality work, and changing engrained norms about gender roles and relations is a long process. Participants stressed that expectations of what can be achieved in what amount of time need to be realistic, and that understanding the context and genuine consultation with local staff is the only way to ensure this.

Not 'rushing things' and respecting that community members have their own activities and commitments is important. Acknowledging these commitments and valuing the time of participants may in practice mean providing appropriate incentives for community members to attend consultations (skills trainings, food, stipends etc.) or to holding consultations at times that suit them, rather than the international partner. Failure to respect the many competing commitments of community members and allow sufficient time for consultation has many potential negative consequences:

- Low participation in workshops/ activities
- Lack of trust/ respect from community to International Partner

- Compromised consultation processes and lack of understanding by international partner of the local context
- Lack of '*space for understanding and to ask questions'* and consequently lack of accountability of International Partners to the community.

viii. Genuine commitment to two-way accountability and quality consultation

The need for more space and time for building community understanding was also emphasised by participants. It was noted that '*there is a lot of one-way communication from international partners to the community, but not vice-versa – sometimes there is not enough opportunity to clarify, discuss, understand, and ask questions'*. Participants noted that International Partners need to provide more opportunities for communities to give feedback; there is a need for International Partners to debrief with communities about what they have learnt, and what they will do with the information they have gathered. According to participants, failure to do so leads to the perception that international partners are '*pushing their own agenda*'. In an anonymous submission, one participant said '*[international partners] usually pretend. As soon as their agenda with us is over, their real character starts to show. This is not partnership'*.

Participants also noted the importance of consciously consulting a large range of people in communities and organisations, rather than just those who are educated or hold leadership positions.

5. Support that local gender advocates need

When asked to identify the kind of support they need from international partners, participants noted the following categories as most important:

a) Investment in local staff and organisations

In many Solomon Island NGOs there is a high staff turnover, so investment in training throughout the project cycle is vital to ensuring local staff have the necessary skills and expertise to meet the many challenges of implementing gender equality programs. Participants spoke about the loss of knowledge and capacity that occurs if training is only offered in the initial stages of a project. One participant said,

'*This is perhaps one of the biggest needs we need to talk to donors about so that they allow us resources to train staff – the focus is on specific outcomes but maybe there is not enough allowance for capacity development of staff'*.

Investing in local staff was also raised in terms of the inequity in pay rates between local and expatriate staff, which may indicate a lack of proactivity on the part of international partners in explaining the reasons for disparity in this area.

b) Information sharing and networking

All participants agreed that a support network for gender advocates would be useful so that they can share resources and experience and support each other in their work towards gender equality. It was noted that there have been some attempts made in the past to create similar networks but they have failed for various reasons. One participant noted that '*a lot of committees have formed but they don't last because there is only representation from a few organisations. There is no focus for collaboration or setting up a mechanism to support the network*'. Whether such a network would exist via the internet or in-person or as a mixture of the two

was not agreed upon, however, the need for support from employers and the subsequent ability to dedicate time towards collaboration and sharing was noted. It was also agreed that having a clear agenda and being clear on the aims of such a group is vital to ensuring the group is effective and therefore sustainable.

Monitoring and evaluation was noted as a particular area of interest, and sharing appropriate and effective monitoring and evaluation resources and tools was noted as desirable. The groups discussed the difficulty of measuring behaviour change and the difficulty of translating anecdotal evidence of change into acceptable evidence of impact. As one participant shared,

'*A lot of time there is real anecdotal evidence for behavioural change, for example, one year a woman will talk to a man and can only look at his chest. Maybe the next year, she can look at his chin. She is not looking in his eyes yet, but this is a huge step for her - that's a big change*'.

The potential for a collective to advise and influence donors about the way they track change and about their expectations of outcomes was also recognised by participants.

c) Contextualising resources
Participants agreed that '*there is absolutely a need for locally contextualised best practice'* and stressed the importance of having support to adapt and contextualise good resources so they are useful and relevant. Participants felt that resource sharing was good but not sufficient in itself, and noted, '*we need a dual strategy – it is no good sharing resources if there is no capacity for adapting them'*. It was noted that such work may involve building the capacity of local staff to produce their own resources or providing guidance (perhaps in the form of a toolkit/guide) on how best to go about contextualising resources from elsewhere.

d) Support for policy influence
Participants noted that it is vital that a mechanism exists to allow them to act as a 'watchdog' for the government and to allow for coordination of input on strategies for policy change. Gender advocates felt that such a mechanism could potentially create '*a pathway for dialogue with government'* and that international partners could provide support by advocating for more structured pathways for civil society to feedback on government policies. Participants acknowledged that civil society is often invited to contribute to policy reform, however '*there is no feedback on the final document'* so it is difficult to track the progress of changes. As one woman noted, '*we never see anything that we can provide feedback on, it is only when it is already written in law that we see it. Because there is no feedback, we don't know what is happening'*.