

12 July 2006.

The Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir

**Inquiry into Australia's aid program in the Pacific**

Please find below Australian Reproductive Health Alliance's submission to the above Inquiry.

Yours sincerely



Christina Richards

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S AID PROGRAM IN THE PACIFIC

Submission by Ms Christina Richards, CEO, Australian Reproductive Health Alliance  
(ARHA)

*The Role of Women in Promoting Good Governance*

Good governance in Pacific Island countries can be promoted in various ways such as those advocated by the Australian Labor Party in its paper *Towards a Pacific Community*, for example:

- having Australian officials work as advisers in Pacific Island countries but also by having Pacific officials with similar functions work on secondment in Australia
- working more with Pacific leaders and local networks
- facilitate training for media organisations in Pacific Island countries in order to ensure a free and independent media
- nurturing the next generation of leaders through a Young Leaders Program, and
- establishing a region-wide exchange of officials (Sercombe 2005).

ARHA believes that gender inequality is a barrier to good governance. Women, for example, are sorely under-represented in political governance and need to have a greater voice in Pacific's Parliaments. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) women hold a mere three per cent of parliamentary seats in Oceania (UNFPA 2005).

New Zealand's Minister of Foreign Affairs Rt Hon Winston Peters said last month:

*Despite countless international, regional and national commitments to equal participation by women and men in decision making at all levels, women remain severely under-represented in parliaments and decision-making bodies across the Pacific region (Peters 2006).*

Peters went on to quote the eminent 17th century liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill who stressed that the lack of women's participation was a "hindrance to human development". Peters added:

*If Asia-Pacific nations are to maximise their potential on all fronts, politically socially and in particular economically, then the full intellectual capacity of women must be harnessed and utilised.*

There are, of course challenges to achieving greater representation of women in Pacific Parliaments. Not least is the reality that tradition and culture often explicitly excludes women from decision-making, not only at the highest levels of parliament but also at regional and local levels. Peters argued that:

*...more women MPs in and of itself will not resolve this challenge unless it is matched by an equal and similar commitment by all levels of governance and decision-making.*

AusAID could perhaps take note of NZAID which mainstreams gender and human rights through all its bilateral and regional programs. According to Peters:

*...a mainstreaming approach means that NZAID dedicates significant resources to support initiatives that seek to enhance gender equality as well as ensuring all initiatives consider and actively address gender in their design and implementation.*

As an example, NZAID has a multi-year strategic partnership with UN development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) for their work in the Pacific, which includes support for the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Women in Politics program. Despite a smaller aid budget, New Zealand also provides more financial support than Australia for the work of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) through its global multilateral and Pacific programs.

In July 2002, a symposium was held at Parliament House, Canberra, called *Political participation in the Pacific: issues of gender, race and religion*. It took the view that equal access to political participation is essential to democracy and, by extension, to political and social stability and to economic development (Thomas 2002). Gender, race and religion, however, all impact on access to equal political participation. The symposium papers highlighted

*...a widespread cultural prejudice against women's political involvement, women's political 'invisibility', the economic difficulties and often physical intimidation or violence women face in wanting to cast their own vote, let alone standing for election. In Melanesia, politics is still considered 'men's business' just as religious leadership is also considered 'men's business' (Thomas 2002).*

Religion, particularly Christianity, and the role of women are closely connected. For instance, in Vanuatu

*... in the early days of independence many members of parliament were also church pastors and today, women have almost no representation in national, provincial or municipal government because of deeply held traditional and religious beliefs that focus on men as the heads of households and all secular and sacred decision-making (Thomas 2002).*

Mainstreaming cultural analysis by making culture (including religion) a cross cutting issue in programs - including strengthening key alliances in partnerships with activists, cultural and religious leaders, artists and others - helps to mobilise communities. Fostering freedom from fear so that people can enjoy their rights requires putting people, especially women, first and working with them to increase their participation, decision-making, opportunities and choices. Changing attitudes, behaviours and laws - especially those dealing with gender relations and reproductive health - demands sensitivity to social and cultural dynamics. This work is being done in many other regions and Australia could use some of the lessons learned in fostering this dialogue in the Pacific.

Other systemic issues that make it more difficult for women than men are

- the difficulty women have in gaining political party nomination
- the growing financial cost of mounting an election campaign
- peoples' unrealistic expectations of what they wanted them to provide once elected
- intimidation and violence throughout a campaign, and
- ethnicity.

One woman who was successful in being elected to national parliament was Lady Carol Kidu of Papua New Guinea, who was elected for a second term and is now the Minister for Welfare and Social Development. (She visited Australia in 2005 to launch the State of the World Population Report 2005 in Parliament House.) Her re-election was attributed to the fact that she fought tirelessly to improve the situation of the urban poor and to provide greater opportunities for women. She did say, however, that the elections were “desperate and dishonest and they disadvantaged women enormously.”

Another woman politician is Isabelle Donald, the MP for Epi in Vanuatu. Both are the only women in their country's parliaments.

*Isabelle shows the importance of NGOs such as the Vanuatu National Council of Women and Vanuatu Women in Politics in providing the support women need in lieu of party nomination. The NGOs also helped raise women's political profile although they faced hostile opposition from both men and women. According to Isabelle the reluctance of political parties to nominate women is probably the single biggest barrier to women being elected to parliament in Vanuatu—without nomination they do not have the party machinery behind them. (Thomas 2002).*

Some of the recommendations that came out of the 2002 symposium were that

- Greater national and international support be provided for on-going formal and non formal education in good governance, political and electoral processes, and gender equality in electoral rights.
- Further research be undertaken into the role that gender, ethnicity and religion play in political processes and to find ways to ensure fair and equal access.

- Donors facilitate the equal participation of women and other disadvantaged groups in civil society and local and national government but ensuring political education for women, and requiring a gender balance in development-related projects.
- Gender sensitisation courses are a requirement of all donor-support programs. In particular these courses should be made available to leaders at all levels, provincial planners, religious and community leaders.
- The non-formal education system be strengthened; governments and non government organisations provide training programs for women and young people in leadership and assertiveness, and in the skills and knowledge required for effective participation in decision-making and decision-making bodies (Thomas 2002).

As another measure to help women enter Parliament, ARHA supports *Towards a Pacific Community* policy discussion paper recommendation for good governance relating to media, namely, ‘facilitate training for media organisations in Pacific Island countries in order to ensure a free and independent media’. One of the impediments to women getting elected is the cultural bias whereby Pacific women themselves will not vote for other women. An independent media that gives women candidates ‘a fair go’ is essential if this cultural bias is to be broken down. The example of all five women candidates in the recent Solomon Island elections failing to get elected is an example of this.

To help promote gender equality, ARHA also supports the proposal for a Pacific Women’s Centre (Sercombe 2005). Such a Centre would combine the responsibilities of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community’s Pacific Women’s Bureau and Community Education Training Centre, and the Forum Secretariat’s gender adviser. As well as serving as an important catalyst for building linkages between existing women’s organisations, it would help women play a greater role in political governance and ensure they have a greater voice in Pacific Parliaments.

### **Conclusion:**

Australia could do more to help women in the Pacific with respect to improving women’s role in good governance. As a first step, it is essential to boost funding for culturally sensitive programs to foster stronger progress towards achieving international development goals and advancing human rights especially in the areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equity and equality. If women cannot control their own fertility they will never be in a position to run for political office.

Australia must also recognise that there is an incredibly high level of gender violence that affects women’s ability to freely participate in political activity. In an effort to break down such discrimination against women, Australia could emulate NZAID that generously funds not only bilateral women’s programs but also the multilateral work of UNFPA, IPPF and UNIFEM in the Pacific.

It must also do all it can to promote a free and independent media so that women political candidates, who regularly fail to get party endorsement and must run as independents, can get their message across to potential voters.

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