

Summary document

Creating Pathways For Change

the role of faith-based actors in women's economic
empowerment in Papua New Guinea





Caritas Australia acknowledges with gratitude the contributions of all those who took part in this research.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island readers should be aware that this publication may contain images or names of people who have since passed away. Caritas Australia acknowledges the traditional owners and custodians, past and present, of the land on which all our offices are located.

Showcasing local products made and grown by women at a 2023 World Food Day celebration in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, PNG. Photo: Roslyn Kuniata.

Introduction

Women play a vital role in Papua New Guinea's communities, cultures and societies. Yet they experience chronic marginalisation, exclusion from decision-making, lower access to resources and opportunities, and some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world. There are many inspiring examples of women's resilience as they navigate these complex terrains, advocate for their rights and contribute to the country's social and economic development; however, there is still much work to be done to achieve gender equality, including on women's economic empowerment.

Women's economic empowerment – including women's ability, agency, voice, power and access to resources and infrastructure to make and act on informed economic decisions – is a key part of achieving gender equality in Papua New Guinea and has intrinsic links with addressing gender-based violence. There is an extensive body of research on women's economic empowerment in Papua New Guinea. However, the body of published literature that explores the contribution of faith-

based actors on this issue is limited, despite the fact that faith-based actors represent a highly influential and trusted societal presence, provide a large proportion of health and education services, and have extensive local community networks.

To address this knowledge gap, Caritas Australia conducted a short scoping study from August to October 2023 to better understand the contribution of faith-based actors to promoting women's economic empowerment in Papua New Guinea. Our study comprised a literature review and key informant interviews. Limitations on the breadth and depth of the study mean that it should be regarded as a preliminary assessment, intended to be the precursor to further research and collaboration in this area.

For this scoping study, the faith-based actors we considered included the seven mainline churches¹ and their development agencies; religious congregations; and any institutions or services that these churches and congregations auspice including safehouses and universities.

1. The seven mainline churches in Papua New Guinea are the Anglican Church, Baptist Union, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Roman Catholic Church, The Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist Church and United Church of PNG.

What did we find?

Our key findings on women's economic empowerment and the contribution of faith-based actors in Papua New Guinea were:

Defining Women's Economic Empowerment in Papua New Guinea

- The term women's economic empowerment has many definitions but is a holistic concept that commonly encompasses these elements: the ability, agency and power to make and act on economic decisions; access to resources and opportunities for paid work; self-identity and personal freedom; and support from a social or peer network.
- In Papua New Guinea, economic empowerment initiatives often include both women and men (rather than women only) and typically focus on the concept of family and shared family goals. These approaches are culturally and contextually appropriate given the centrality of family and community cohesiveness within Papua New Guinean society.
- Women's economic empowerment can take on different meanings in Papua New Guinea. Interpretations vary from the process of assisting women to achieve financial inclusion, creating safe spaces for women to learn new skills and find courage in their shared experiences, promoting respectful family relationships where women share decision-making, or supporting women to discover their self-worth and dignity.

Barriers to Women's Economic Empowerment in Papua New Guinea

- **There are many barriers to women's economic empowerment in Papua New Guinea.** These include discriminatory social norms that cause high levels of gender-based violence and inequitable divisions of labour, oppress women's agency to participate in decision-making at all levels and place a stigma on women's involvement in certain activities, such as using mobile phones.
- Other barriers for both women and men include: poverty; low levels of education, literacy and financial literacy; limited access to electricity, mobile phone service, banking services and credit; lack of formal identification; limited road infrastructure which hampers transport; and the exacerbating impacts of climate change on these existing barriers. Social norms mean that these barriers are higher for women than men.

- **There is a need to strengthen and scale up initiatives** on: improving literacy, financial literacy, digital literacy and livelihood skills; better access to banking services and credit schemes that are accessible to women without collateral, formal ID, literacy or mobile phones; improved access to electricity and mobile phones; and safe transport and access to markets. It is essential that any initiatives take a Do No Harm approach.
- **Climate change presents a significant and growing challenge to Papua New Guinea.** Research shows that **gender equality and climate resilience are intrinsically linked** – women are disproportionately affected by climate change, yet they can be powerful agents of change if empowered to participate in climate resilience initiatives. Gender-inclusive climate resilience strategies and initiatives are essential both for maximizing Papua New Guinea's response to climate change as well as promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

Contribution of, and opportunities for, faith-based actors in promoting positive social norms:

- **Many faith-based actors are contributing to changing individual consciousness and oppressive social norms** in relation to gender equality and women's economic empowerment, through awareness and training initiatives as well as community-level advocacy.
- **Faith-based interventions on gender equality often begin with conversations using biblical/theological interpretations of gender equality.** These conversations have been strategic and effective entry points to challenge harmful social norms and have prompted positive shifts in attitudes, despite critiques in research literature which note that some theological approaches can essentialise gender roles and perpetuate traditional and binary gender stereotypes.
- Examples of transformative initiatives that have changed attitudes and behaviours include those that encourage individual and group reflection on gender 'roles' and the division of labour within households. Women have found a space for collective agency where they realise their self-worth outside of the family and gained confidence and skills. For some women this has also been a pathway to showing they are capable leaders and business owners. Workshops that provide men with opportunities to reflect on their identity and roles in society have also prompted changes towards positive masculinity.

-
- **Churches are recognized as active sites for women's social participation, collective action and leadership** at a community level, especially through women's groups. Some churches and faith-based actors also run formal programs to promote women's leadership. However, scholars also note that the patriarchal structure and/or conservative norms of some churches act to reinforce or exacerbate gender inequality.

Contribution of, and opportunities for, faith-based actors in promoting women's financial inclusion and empowerment:

- **Faith-based actors are key contributors to the provision of training on literacy, financial literacy and livelihood skills** in Papua New Guinea. However, there is a need for development pathways and initiatives (by both faith-based and non-faith-based actors) to transition people who complete these literacy, financial literacy and livelihood training programs into sustainable livelihoods and micro-enterprises. There is also a need to help them overcome the systemic barriers to accessing finance.
- **Faith-based actors have engaged with government to improve service delivery and policies**, including on gender-based violence and sorcery accusation related violence. However, the Church Partnership Program partners have recognised that the capacity of the seven mainline churches to engage with government for better service delivery is relatively untapped, hence the current phase of the program has been designed to prioritise support for advocacy by the churches.
- Opportunities may exist for faith-based actors to assess how they can support women to participate in some of the more lucrative, value-added activities within agricultural value chains, such as the sale of high value crops.
- There may also be additional opportunities for faith-based actors to facilitate the cooperation and collaboration of communities, churches and government in childcare entrepreneurship to increase accessibility of affordable and quality early childhood care and education, reduce the burden of unpaid care work, and provide employment opportunities for women.

Additional opportunities for faith-based actors in scaling up reach and impact of women's economic empowerment initiatives:

- **There is a clear need to strengthen and scale up initiatives that both transform harmful social norms and increase financial inclusion and empowerment. This will require:**
 - **Stronger coordination and linkages between faith-based actors and other key stakeholders** including government (including economic divisions of government) and other civil society actors.
 - **Greater financial investment.** Resourcing is a major challenge to scaling up initiatives on gender equality and women's economic empowerment. This was raised as an issue by almost all the key informant interview participants.
- **Faith based actors could explore their role in attracting more finance for women's empowerment initiatives.** To increase resourcing for initiatives on gender equality and women's economic empowerment, more private investment is needed to complement public investment. Barriers to private investment in Papua New Guinea include high transaction costs and small investment sizes related to the Pacific's lower population density, remoteness and nascent private markets. There could be value in exploring the role that faith-based actors could play in using their unique social capital and infrastructure in Papua New Guinea to act as an intermediary and aggregator between global investors and the many dispersed communities in Papua New Guinea who need finance.



Rugged terrain in the highlands region of Papua New Guinea. Photo: Roslyn Kuniata.

Recommendations for further research

These findings helped to identify potential topics for further research on how faith-based actors could expand or strengthen their support for women's economic empowerment in Papua New Guinea. Caritas Australia is seeking to undertake further work on some of these potential research topics in collaboration with interested partners.

1. Where are the synergies and opportunities for a more systematic and strategic collaboration between churches, other civil society actors and government on initiatives for women's economic empowerment? This research could include a detailed mapping exercise to identify existing linkages and opportunities.
2. How can faith-based actors strengthen their contribution to improving women's access to financial inclusion, especially in rural and remote areas of Papua New Guinea? This research could consider how faith-based actors can help reduce the social, cultural, resource and infrastructure-related barriers to accessing banking, and the social and cultural barriers that discourage women from owning a bank account or mobile phone, accessing credit or operating a business improving their literacy and financial literacy; using bank accounts, mobile phones and credit; or sustaining a business or livelihood.
3. How can faith-based actors further leverage their health and education networks to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment?
4. How can faith-based actors facilitate cooperation/collaboration of communities, churches and government in childcare entrepreneurship to increase accessibility of affordable and quality early childhood care and education, reduce the burden of unpaid care work, and provide employment opportunities for women?
5. How can faith-based actors provide development pathways and ongoing support to people who complete their training programs on literacy, financial literacy and livelihoods? How can they work with other stakeholders to create economic pathways out of their training programs?
6. How can women be economically empowered to access and benefit from participation in some of the more lucrative, value-added activities

within agricultural value chains, and how can faith-based actors and governments support them?

7. How can faith-based actors use their extensive physical and social infrastructure to support communities to access reliable, clean, affordable electricity?
8. What are the opportunities for faith-based actors in Papua New Guinea and Australia in attracting innovative finance with a gender/climate lens, to bring in more funding for women's empowerment projects and to resource the opportunities identified above? Such research could examine how faith-based networks could use their unique attributes to reduce the barriers currently perceived by potential private investors.
9. What are the emerging opportunities for faith-based actors to promote women's economic empowerment through gender transformative climate resilience initiatives and through gender-inclusive climate finance? In what ways can faith-based actors find convergence between theologies on gender equality and disaster resilience to promote gender transformative and climate resilient approaches to women's economic empowerment?

In each case, a follow-on question would be: how can the governments of Papua New Guinea and Australia, as well as faith-based allies in Australia, support the achievement of these goals?

More information:

The full *Creating Pathways For Change* report will be available at

<https://www.caritas.org.au/publications/reports>

To learn more about Caritas Australia's work in Papua New Guinea, visit

<https://www.caritas.org.au/about/where-we-work/papua-new-guinea>

Cover page: A woman enters a church-run rural health centre in East Sepik, PNG.
Photo: Damaris Pfendt / Caritas Australia.



A rural health centre in East Sepik, Papua New Guinea. Photo: Damaris Pfendt / Caritas Australia.

The Catholic Agency for International Aid and Development

Level 2, Building 3, 189 O'Riordan Street, Mascot NSW 2020

1800 024 413 | www.caritas.org.au



Caritas
AUSTRALIA

End poverty
Promote justice
Uphold dignity